
FILM-PHILOSOPHY

Neither Personal nor Political

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John Anderson (2005) *Edward Yang*
Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press
ISBN: 0 2520 7236 7
128 pp

Film philosophy certainly encompasses cinephilia, although this is rarely a topic of study for academics who prefer the route of "objectivity." Instead, cinephilia is historically the terrain of film critics and newspaper reviewers. I do not wish to draw boundaries between scholar/critic, objectivity/subjectivity, serious/trivial. In fact, there is much common ground between the scholar and the critic: not only do many individuals succeed in both worlds, but many terms, philosophies, and ideologies are shared in both practices. The question is how to bridge the two worlds in a meaningful way. How can critics expressing their cinephilia (or phobia) create meaningful and useful discourse for the scholar, and how can the arguments of academia inform the way critics understand their own reactions? At the root of the problem is the fact that critics typically write for mainstream print and online publications, while academics typically write dense, theoretical books published through academic publishers, for other scholars and tenure-granting committees. These divided spaces enforce certain stereotypes and binaries, and readers therefore selectively go to the spaces where they feel most comfortable; as a result, a meaningful exchange between the two worlds becomes difficult.

A new space however, has been forged in the form of new series in academic publishing houses. Shorter, more accessible books on mainstream and classic films and

auteurs are giving scholars the opportunities to infiltrate Barnes and Noble bookshelves, and are giving critics the opportunities to delve deeper into their subjects and publish with a university press. Of these new series, the British Film Institute's (BFI) Film Classics, Modern Classics, and World Directors series have been the most popular. The University of Illinois Press has a new series, Contemporary Film Directors, edited by University of Chicago professor James Naremore, which has given critics like Jonathan Rosenbaum and scholars like Judith Mayne an opportunity to combine cinephilia and critical theory in a series fruitful for both film buffs and researchers.

The task of reviewing a new entry into the series would necessarily take into account the book's usefulness, attraction, and importance for readers in both worlds. The problem with the majority of John Anderson's new "Contemporary Film Directors" volume *Edward Yang* is that it only really engages readers outside of academia. Anderson is a veteran film critic who now writes primarily for *Newsday* in New York, and it shows. His appreciation of the Taiwanese director's oeuvre is clear from his very enthusiastic plot summaries (including thorough explanations of character psychologies) and well-written commentary. Unfortunately, the book never goes beyond summary and commentary: he isolates common themes and stylistic qualities in classic auteurist fashion, but never to get to a larger point about Yang's work, Taiwanese cinema, or Anderson's own cinephilia. Anderson makes plenty of analogies. Some are good, such as his comparison of Yang's *Yi Yi* with James Joyce's *Ulysses* (87), and some less so, like his comparison of *A Confucian Confusion* with pop diva Mariah Carey (66-67). However, such analogies do not become more than simply the impressions of a well-read reviewer. There's very little synthesis or direction, let alone argument. Further, his discussions of the individual texts do not engage with the cinematic properties of the films. Except for a few isolated examples (for example on editing in *The Terrorizer*), the comments are reserved for narrative rather than formal elements - which makes Anderson's claim for Yang as "a poet of film" (1) less convincing - and ultimately makes the book no more useful than Kwok-kan Tam and Wimal Dissanayake's similar 1998 chronological survey of Yang's work in their book *New Chinese Cinema*. (1998)

As an introduction to Yang for uninitiated film lovers, Anderson's book works, but in only the most obvious ways. In the first chapter, Anderson gives a useful working biography of Yang as a Shanghai immigrant who becomes an amateur cartoonist, an American engineer, a maverick new-waver, and finally a Cannes-winning director. Anderson also situates Yang's and other "New Cinema" films in the history of Taiwanese and Chinese film.

For scholars of Taiwanese cinema, Anderson's history is overly simplistic. For example, Anderson perpetuates the view that Taiwanese cinema before 1982 was either propagandistic or simply "escapist entertainment" (13), although scholars on both sides of the Pacific are finding that pre-new wave Taiwanese cinema was in fact fraught with ideological and cultural contradictions. I do not mean to understate the extraordinary achievements of Yang and contemporary Hou Hsiao-hsien, but the Taiwan New Cinema movement was as much an economic and social phenomenon as it was political and aesthetic.¹ Anderson's biographical and historical contextualization serves primarily to give a fuller picture of Yang's importance as an innovator and cultural critic, rather than to really examine the culture of production which spawned the New Cinema, of which Yang was a central figure. It is a happy surprise though that the book includes a photograph of Yang's legendary apartment (8), which in the early 80s served as headquarters to what Anderson calls "a serendipitous tryst of geniuses" (9). The web of electrical wires and leafless trees traversing the building exterior as depicted in the photograph say magnitudes about the working conditions of the young rebels and serve as a trace of Taiwan's film history. From Anderson's book, the reader who knows little about Taiwanese cinema or Edward Yang will receive a decent introduction, but little else.

Part of the superficiality of Anderson's commentary has to do with his professed status as an outsider to Asian and Asian cinema studies. This perspective need not necessarily be a handicap: David Bordwell has written very well-argued, relevant books on Hong Kong cinema and Yasujiro Ozu despite knowing relatively little about Hong Kong or Japanese history and culture. However, whereas Bordwell sees his ignorance about cultural matters as a reason to delve further than anybody else into issues of the text, Anderson is content with his position as an American outsider. In fact, in the preface, Anderson goes as far as to write:

This book is written strictly from an American viewpoint; I am not Asian, nor can I claim particular scholarship in Asian cinema. But in approaching the work of Edward Yang, I think this may be an asset. Yang has spent so much time in the United States, and his work is so expressively informed by America, its culture, and its cultural detritus, that it is just as important for a viewer to recognize the semiotic

¹ Better short, English-language histories of the Taiwan New Cinema in accessible language and form can be found in Berenice Reynaud, *A City of Sadness* (2002); Chiao Hsiung-ping, "The Distinct Taiwanese and Hong Kong Cinemas," in Chris Berry, ed, *Perspectives on Chinese Cinema* (1991, 155-165); Kuan-Hsing Chen, "Taiwanese New Cinema," in John Hill and Pamela Church-Gibson (2000, 173-177); Abe Mark Normes and Yeh Yueh-yu, *A City of Sadness* (1994, online). Also illuminating is Olivier Assayas's documentary *HHH: A Portrait of Hou Hsiao-hsien* (1997).

importance and imperial resonance of a Yankees baseball cap as it is to know that the “three ways” of Chinese thought are Taoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism. (ix-x)

This claim is extraordinarily problematic because it suggests that because Edward Yang has spent time abroad, his films are not very Taiwanese (a claim frequently lodged against Yang by nativist critics in Taiwan), but more importantly, it assumes that what is “American” to one culture means the same to another. In other words, it assumes that Americans have sole claim on definitions of “American” culture, and that other interpretations of say, a Yankee’s baseball cap, must carry the same meaning as they do to somebody authentically “American.” This is the logic that has critics such as Anderson always referring to the title of Yang’s *A Brighter Summer Day* (1991) as a “misinterpretation” of an Elvis Presley lyric (29), when it is in fact a local “interpretation” that happens to differ from what Presley or the songwriters had originally intended. This issue arises again in Anderson’s discussion of the film *Taipei Story* (1985). For Anderson, the presence of baseball in the film connotes two things: a corrupt America, which Anderson calls “the land of baseball and gunfire” (35), and a universal “boy’s game” which “preoccupies grown men to the point of infantilization” (38). What Anderson does not include is the fact that baseball is not simply something “American” or something “infantile,” but has a historical and cultural connotation specific to middle-aged Taiwanese in the 80s. Between 1969 and 1981, teams from Taiwan won the Little League World Series nine times. For those in Taiwan at the time, baseball represented both national honor and the hope of youth. By establishing the lead of *Taipei Story* as a has-been baseball player alienated by city life, Yang shows how the nation’s faith in everything that baseball represents has been crushed by rapid modernization. This is not to imply that Anderson’s interpretation is necessarily wrong, but it is however hugely problematic for Anderson to assume that because he is an American, his conception of baseball can ideally interpret the baseball of another culture.

Anderson’s outsider perspective also leads to his generalisations about Taiwanese politics based on American conceptions of a liberal-conservative binarism, and colonisation. One of the major qualities Anderson sees in Yang’s films and others of the Taiwan New Cinema movement is that they break free from the propaganda model of filmmaking as represented by the Central Motion Picture Corporation of the conservative Kuomintang Party (KMT), whose leader Chiang Kai-shek reigned as a terrorizing despot. I would not necessarily argue against these claims, but to make heroes of Yang and his contemporaries for resisting the KMT seems to me an example of romantic western liberalism, uninterested

in the ways the new wave carved out a local cinematic identity by engaging discourses of local language, aboriginals, and other sources of political and economic colonialism such as Japan and the United States itself. This simplistic reading of Taiwan's political situation neglects the increasingly complicated place of Taiwan in the global economic and Cold War picture. As a result, Anderson's analyses of Yang's three films about global businesspeople and the Taiwanese psyche (*A Confucian Confusion* (1994), *Mahjong* (1996), and *Yi Yi* (2000)) suffer most. In praising these films, Anderson instead focuses on humanism and "universal" drama.

A final criticism is of the scattered factual errors. For example, singer Grace Chang is not Taiwanese (16) and "Lev Kulishev" is misspelled (47). These and other simple errors can confuse the reader and are especially regretful in a book from an academic press.

If Anderson's book makes one major contribution to both academics and film buffs, it is for the revealing and highly enjoyable interview between Anderson and Yang which makes up the final 22 pages of the book. Compared with other Taiwanese filmmakers, Yang is notoriously quiet and press-shy. In Taiwan, he attends few public events, whereas other famous directors such as Hou Hsiao-hsien and Tsai Ming-liang are constantly at screenings and festivals, creating a dialogue with locals about Taiwanese cinema. Therefore, relatively little is known about Yang's thoughts on his films, on the state of Taiwanese film, or about his life in general. In the interview with Anderson, Yang is particularly vocal about his dissatisfaction with the Taiwanese media and film distribution system, which he blames for the sorry state of filmmaking on the island today. Also fascinating is a full seven-page soliloquy in response to Anderson's query about the "American" influence in his work, much of which is directed against Taiwanese critics who have accused Yang of not being "Taiwanese" enough (109-116). It is an unabashedly philosophical, wordy, confusing, and emotional burst of inspired mind-clearing with references to CNN, McDonalds, the Taliban, and the World Series. Much of what Yang says about the difference between "ethnic unity" and "ethnic harmony" also challenges many of the claims Anderson makes earlier in the book, which allows the book to finally become something more like a critical dialogue rather than a sole critic's reading of several "great" films.

The interview in Anderson's book makes a terrific complement to the interview with Yang in Michael Berry's recent collection *Speaking in Images: Interviews with Contemporary Chinese Filmmakers* (2005), another book which bridges academia and the mainstream. Berry's interview focuses on Yang's relationship with his actors and crew and

Yang's ideas about Taiwanese culture. While there is certainly overlap between the two interviews, particularly on the topic of the Taiwanese film industry, Anderson's interview focuses more on Yang's biography, for example his family history, his early filmgoing experiences, and his experiences teaching film in a Taiwanese university. Yang's tone and pace talking with Anderson is also significantly different; here his responses are shorter, creating a stronger sense of a two-way discussion.

Anderson's book concludes with a filmography and bibliography. The filmography is possibly the most useful Yang filmography available in English, listing not only Chinese titles in pinyin, crew members, running times, and years, but also names of distribution companies. Most surprising is the inclusion of Yang's flash animation project *Miliku Family* which became a minor internet hit when it was released between 2001 and 2004. The bibliography, on the other hand, is limited to articles from mainstream publications. Predictably, the resources are limited to English-language publications. The only source in Anderson's bibliography that is also on Berry's bibliography is Frederic Jameson's famous postmodern reading of *The Terrorizer* from *The Geopolitical Aesthetic* (1992). For the researcher interested in English-language reception to Yang's work, particularly *Yi Yi*, his only film released commercially in the United States, Anderson's bibliography is useful in conjunction with Michelle Carey's compilation of web resources in *Senses of Cinema* (2002, online).

As I have argued elsewhere, film critics could be of most use to academia by introducing film scholars to emerging trends and talent that scholars are otherwise too busy to discover. On this front, Anderson to an extent succeeds. However, Anderson does not deliver on what I consider to be critics' other major advantage over academics: critics have first-hand knowledge of the politics of publicity, film festivals, junkets, and art houses. By being at the front-lines of world cinema, critics have insider knowledge of issues of cultural exchange and systems of distribution and exhibition, all of which are the envy of cultural studies researchers (Hu: 2005, online). A book that utilizes this perspective is another University of Illinois Press "Contemporary Film Directors" title, *Abbas Kiarostami* (2003) by Mehrnaz Saeed-Vafa and Jonathan Rosenbaum, which pits two critics of different cultural backgrounds against each other in a self-conscious discussion of Kiarostami's art and how it is understood by different audiences. Anderson's book lacks these insights because it is not very personal, a trait common to many of America's best critics, such as Rosenbaum,

Pauline Kael, and even Roger Ebert. It is, after all, private perspective and personal reflection that best conveys to the reader the secrets of cinephilia.

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