
The Child with His Camera: Mimetic Experiences in Edward Yang's *Yi Yi*

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ABSTRACT

This article traces the development of the character Yang-Yang in Edward Yang's last film, *Yi Yi*, showing that the child's strange behavior can be helpfully interpreted using the idea of mimesis as discussed by Theodor W. Adorno and Walter Benjamin. The child's mimetic practices are often misunderstood by the adults in the film, mainly because they have repressed their own compulsion to imitate others. However, the child's mimetic impulse should not be disparaged as a mere tendency to indulge in childish pranks. On the contrary, this impulse forms the basis of aesthetic experience and, more importantly, opposes a culture built on the coercive human mastery of nature. Amid a de-individualising and profit-oriented Taipei, where most adults suffer from a poverty of experience, the child's mimesis has redemptive implications.

KEYWORDS childhood, mimesis, Edward Yang, *Yi Yi*, Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin

Approaching Edward Yang's Figure of the Child

In his review of Edward Yang's cinema, John Anderson observes that the yearning for connection against the backdrop of an alienating society is the leitmotif of the director's work. The critic writes: "While [*A Brighter Summer Day*] implies a certain futility in the very quest it portrays, it also presumes a need among us for something more than tribal in the way our lives are connected to those of others" (14). For Anderson, a subtle but continual desire for togetherness permeates Edward Yang's characters. In his review of *Yi Yi (A One and a Two . . .)*, the director's last film, the critic revisits the same point: "Despite the movie's warmth and generosity, solitude is a key to *Yi Yi*. Everyone in *Yi Yi* is alone. . . . [T]he director acknowledges the unspoken, even unconscious, desire among people everywhere to escape the abstract loneliness that life has forced upon them" (94).

Anderson is correct in pointing out the abstract loneliness that characterizes the film. The main characters (NJ, Min-Min, and Ting-Ting) are troubled by things they have done in the past. They are regretful, and sometimes even remorseful, about what they think they have done wrong. Because they dwell so deeply on these feelings, they isolate themselves from society, creating a sense of loneliness in the film that is not physically but psychologically driven. Ting-Ting, the elder sister in an educated and well-off family, suffers from a sense of guilt from the very beginning. She has absentmindedly left a rubbish bag unattended, leaving her grandmother to dispose of it—she slips on the stairs and falls into a coma before she dies at the end of the film. Ting-Ting secretly confesses to her grandmother, hoping that she will forgive her. Min-Min, the mother of the family, has a nervous breakdown after the grandmother's fall. In a bedroom scene, Min-Min confesses to her husband that she cannot think of anything to say in front of her unconscious mother. She feels defeated and blames herself for not building a solid relationship with her mother in the past.¹ In the same scene, Min-Min's face is reflected by a table mirror in the bedroom. The use of this technique is repeated in another scene in which Min-Min's face is reflected again by the glass window of her office. The reflected faces symbolize an abstract and incomplete sense of self. She retreats to a monastery, perhaps trying to leave all her worldly troubles behind. She returns home at the end of the film, only after

¹ The unsustainable conversation between A-Di and his unconscious mother also reveals the fragility of their relationship. A-Di stammers in a point-of-view shot, which shows his face from the angle of the grandmother: "And what else. . . . Today. . . . Let's call it. . . . You must be tired. . . . I will try again tomorrow. That's for . . . today. . . . Okay."

her mother has died. NJ, the father of the family, runs into his old lover Sherry at his brother-in-law's wedding banquet. He becomes melancholic, as the encounter triggers the memory of a difficult time, when NJ unwillingly deserted Sherry to pursue studies in the United States. Unlike the other characters, he is often portrayed standing pensively alone before the film's camera, which suggests that the man harbors many unresolved problems.² NJ eventually reconnects with Sherry, someone he has always loved, but this time Sherry decides to leave him.

There is one character that I have not mentioned: Yang-Yang, the eight-year-old younger brother. Anderson's reading of abstract loneliness, I argue, applies to all the members of the family except the son. In fact, Yang-Yang represents a starkly different approach to life which can be taken as a potential solution to the problems faced by the other three members of the family. Instead of abstract loneliness, I argue that Yang-Yang is situated in a substantial form of solitude in which he learns to make sense of the world around him. Being alone can be understood as the beginning of a fulfilled life rather than the unhappy end of a series of mistakes and regrets. This point will be demonstrated in a close reading of a number of puzzling scenes from the perspective of mimesis.

I shall begin with a seemingly ordinary scene, where Yang-Yang uses his father's camera to take pictures in the communal area outside his home. The scene illuminates the sensuous nature of the child's everyday life, which forms the basis of his mimetic experience. When asked by his aunt why he takes pictures of empty staircases, Yang-Yang answers: "If I didn't capture what I saw, people would not believe in it." In this example, the child wants to capture an insect that he can see but others cannot. In another similar scene, when accused by the discipline master of bringing a condom to school, the child defends himself: "You just heard something," he says, "you didn't see it." It turns out that he has nothing in his pocket but a deflated balloon. When the child's aunt and the discipline master judge his behavior based on common sense and hearsay, the child defends himself by appealing to the material existence of things. Yang-Yang is reluctant to talk to his unconscious grandmother, which Min-Min perceives as disrespectful. The child cannot comprehend why he is being asked to talk to someone who cannot hear or see. Yang-Yang tells Min-Min, "What's the point? She can't see what I tell

² NJ's nascent openness to otherness can be detected in the early scenes of the film. Arriving home to run a quick errand on the day of A-Di's wedding, he suddenly forgets what he is supposed to do: "What was I getting?" NJ is often shown thinking on his own. When Sherry says she thinks of NJ every day, he replies with a twist, hinting at the more self-reflective sense of "thinking": "Think? Think. . . . We all need time to think. . . . Carefully think." NJ is always already prone to self-reflection, which is incompatible with the film's dominant "quick fix" culture. On NJ's pensiveness, see Tang's existentialist reading.

her.” His reply disturbs his mother: even if the grandmother cannot “see” what is told, she is still alive and may be able to sense that people are speaking to her through the sense of hearing or touch. Indeed, the doctor encourages Min-Min to speak even more to the grandmother in the hope of bringing her out of her coma. This makes absolute sense to the grieving Min-Min, but not to Yang-Yang. The boy seems to believe that seeing is the only channel through which knowledge can be produced. As his grandma cannot see, he argues, there is little point in speaking to her.

For Yang-Yang, believing is only possible through seeing. He does not intellectualize experiences. After hearing a domestic quarrel one night, Yang-Yang gazes curiously at his neighbor’s face the next morning. The embarrassed neighbor attempts to cover her tired face by putting on sunglasses. When Yang-Yang is told off by his father for staring rudely at others, the child replies innocently: “I wanted to know why she’s unhappy. I can’t see from behind.” This explanation confuses NJ. The child assumes that the origin of an emotion is detectable on one’s face. Although an adult may speculate on the cause of the fight based on similar past events, the child sees no need for guesswork. The face is the answer. Yang-Yang’s behavior looks strange to the adults. Instead of rushing to judgement about the neighbor’s sadness, the child must see the neighbor’s face before knowing why she is unhappy. We may say that the child is naïve for assuming that one can understand a person’s sadness simply by looking at his or her face. However, this judgement may overlook Yang-Yang’s unique logic of seeing, namely, the primacy of sensation in the constitution of the child’s knowledge.³

The Ethics of Mimesis

Before further discussion of individual scenes in *Yi Yi*, I will introduce the theoretical framework of mimesis. In the aforementioned examples, the eight-year-old’s understanding of the world is premised on his belief that the outer world is full of peculiar happenings that cannot be generalized by conceptual thinking. Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* would describe the child’s embodied understanding of the world as mimesis.⁴ Mimesis as understood in this article refers to the age-old but often undervalued

³ Yang-Yang’s body-driven thinking has received little critical attention. For a succinct account of Yang-Yang’s role in the film, see Anderson 84-94.

⁴ It is beyond the scope of this article to trace the long and complex genealogy of mimesis. Out of the multifarious meanings of the term, this article takes mimesis as a noncoercive approach to enter the world, that is, to make sense of it through the use of one’s body and creative work of art (e.g., Yang-Yang’s camera).

compulsion to seek correspondences and resemblances in the outer world. Such mimetic tendency is found in the child Yang-Yang, his experimental photography, and the film's style of editing. The film prompts the audience to rethink mimesis by going back to the fundamental motive of imitating others. In this way, mimesis refers to a dynamic and creative relationship-building between the subject and the object. Discussing the self that is motivated by mimesis, Horkheimer and Adorno write: "The inner depth of the subject consists in nothing other than the delicacy and richness of the outer perceptual world" (155-56). The constitution of the subject begins with mimesis, that is, the imitation of the multifarious sensory environment of the world. Horkheimer and Adorno prefer mimesis to what they call false projection, as whereas the former begins with the subject's imitation, the latter involves reshaping the outer world according to the subject's fantasies: "If, for [mimesis], the outward becomes the model to which the inward clings, so that the alien becomes the intimately known, [false projection] displaces the volatile inward into the outer world, branding the intimate friend as foe" (154). False projection blocks the heterogeneity of the outer world in the process of experiencing it, allowing little space to consider differences.⁵ It risks imposing the subject's conceptual unity onto the nonconceptual multitude of actual objects.

The critics continue: "If mimesis makes itself resemble its surroundings, false projection makes its surroundings resemble itself" (154). The process of making resemblances must begin with the subject—otherwise, the surroundings may succumb to distortion. The problem with false projection is the unreserved submission to conceptual thinking in understanding the world. Martin Jay argues that such thinking is not without a sense of aggressiveness and persistence for an egocentric self: "Conceptual thought can be understood as an act of aggression perpetrated by a dominating subject on a world assumed to be external to it; it subsumes particulars under universals, violently reducing their uniqueness to typifications or exemplars of a general or essential principle" (32).⁶ In contrast, mimesis moves continuously toward the nonidentical and unknown in the world without pre-emptive thinking. "Mimesis . . . involves a more sympathetic, compassionate, and noncoercive relationship of affinity between nonidentical particulars, which do not then become reified into two poles of a subject/object dualism" (32). Mimesis expands the understanding of the unknown without reducing it to a predictable object. Mimesis should be distinguished from mimicry. The latter

⁵ Adorno uses the term "nonidentical" to characterize differences. See Silberbusch 123-80.

⁶ For further discussion of the mimetic faculty and its decline with the objectification of knowledge, see Gebauer and Wulf 269-94; Jay 29-53.

is associated with identical copying and the drive for survival; it is restricted to the physical realm and has little to do with one's thinking and attitude toward others.

Mimesis refers to the subject's noncoercive imitation of the outer world. The world in which Yang-Yang dwells, however, tends to be dominated by a stratified society in which its members prefer mindless copying rather than creative imitation. NJ's colleagues at his media company are unreflective and show little respect for creativity. They invite Ota, a Japanese game developer, to their company for a business presentation on artificial intelligence. While NJ likes the project, thinking that it is innovative, his colleagues find it expensive and risky. To pacify their mean investor and rescue their jobs, NJ's colleagues resort to signing a business contract with a low-priced and less innovative game developer in Taiwan (which is a copycat of Ota's company). NJ is assigned to meet Ota to turn down his proposal over dinner. Ota, knowing that his proposal has been rejected, hints that NJ's company is not brave enough to embrace new ideas: "Why are we afraid of the first time? Every day in life is a 'first time.' Every morning is new." Ota's openness to the new echoes Yang-Yang's readiness to make sense of the world without forming preconceptions. I will come back to Ota's openness later. Suffice it to say that NJ's company is one of the examples showing how mimesis can go in a different direction, which is merely duplicative and has little space for creativity.

Lamenting the levelling effect of popular culture, Adorno once wrote: "The cultural industry is geared to mimetic regression, to the manipulation of repressed impulses to copy" (*Minima Moralia* 201). Mimesis can be understood in two ways: first, it refers to the mechanical reproduction that produces standardized taste and passive audiences. Second, it refers to men's primitive tendency to imitate others' behavior or to become like others. Adorno suggests that the latter has been repressed under the dominance of the former. The mimetic impulses have been repressed due to the rising importance of rationality in the course of civilization.⁷ The need to represent nature and make it intelligible to all requires a great deal of abstraction and generalization. The mimetic impulses—which stress sensuous proximity and immediate expression—are not fit for the job.

⁷ Gunter Gebauer and Christoph Wulf write on this decline against the backdrop of the unstoppable course of civilization: "If nature is dominant over human being in the precivilized phase of mimesis, in the course of the civilizing process human being takes over the place of nature. Human domination extends to both inner and outer nature. Instead of the general subordination of all things to magical-mythical forces as in early times, there results a new subordination to the abstract universal of a form of rationality, the power of which is ultimately totalitarian" (284). It is beyond the scope of this article to examine the decline of mimesis since the Age of Reason. What I take from Adorno here is that the innate mimetic impulses have been outpaced by mechanical reproduction.

The first mimesis in Adorno's quote can be better understood as homogenous copying—it serves the principles of economy and instrumentality, which are exemplified by NJ's profit-driven colleagues and the presentation of wedding photos in the film. The second mimesis is better understood as a tendency to seek resemblance, not domination, in the outer world.⁸

The term “manipulation” characterizes the relationship of the two opposing tendencies in mimesis, suggesting that the life in which impulses to copy are repressed is a life badly damaged. What Adorno calls “mimetic regression” leads to the standardization of taste in the process of duplication. It sacrifices individual expression for the benefit of the typical understanding of the masses. Conversely, the repressed impulses to copy refer to the innate tendency to detect similarities and correspondences in nature and the ability to behave like or become an object. Whereas mimetic regression operates on a rigid distinction between subject and object, in which the latter is appropriated by the former, the repressed impulses of mimesis can liberate the reified distinction between the subject and the object, adopting an open-ended, accepting relationship with nature.

The discussion on mimesis from the Frankfurt School critics will be taken as the theoretical underpinnings for my approach to *Yi Yi*. Mimesis is found not only in Yang-Yang's behavior but also in his photographic work and the film's editing style. Broadly speaking, the film addresses an ethical issue: how do we live with others without ignoring their otherness and without losing the true expression of our own self? In the pages that follow, the first part (“The Prelapsarian Child”) focuses on Yang-Yang's fascination with his female schoolmate and his subsequent simulation of her swimming experience. The analysis reveals Yang-Yang's blurred sense of the boundaries of the self. I will argue that such an experience of indistinction is essential for the child's exploration of the outside world and, more importantly, the attainment of happiness. The second part (“Photography and Allegory”) goes on to examine the film's most puzzling scenes, namely, the appearance of a series of photos taken by Yang-Yang that focus on the napes of anonymous people. This part of the analysis examines the complex structure of mimesis within individual photographs. These photos as a form of art do not copy reality as in traditional realist painting. What they represent is a relation, a network, a constellation of the real. I show that understanding Yang-Yang's photos requires a non-judgemental mindset that does not rush to

⁸ Gebauer and Wulf write: “An essential quality of mimesis lies in this movement toward the world. The goal is to bridge the gap between inner and outer, between sensory data and objects. . . . At the centre of the process stands a reference to the Other, who is not to be incorporated, but rather approximated” (286).

reach a positivistic conclusion about the work. It is my hope that the strangeness of these photos will be preserved in my analysis rather than tamed. In the last part (“Conclusion: Mimetic Cuts”), mimesis is studied in terms of the film’s editing and plot arrangement. The mimesis used in the editing makes the film look playful and even fantastical. However, these adjectives are by no means uncritical—by presenting modern Taipei like a dream that is filled with idiosyncratic associations, the film offers highly flexible perspectives on rethinking modern society. Edward Yang adopts mimesis at both sensuous and nonsensuous levels to rekindle a non-hierarchical link between the subject and the object. All three instances of mimesis rescue the object from being reduced to consumable things, engaging in an open, dialectical, and complex process of interaction.

I will discuss quotations from Adorno and Walter Benjamin. I am aware that they disagree on various topics. For instance, whereas Adorno has relatively little to say about film, Benjamin sees revolutionary potential in the technical aspects of film production. Adorno tends to prefer modernist works of art as a rare site where the repressed mimesis can find its true expression. Benjamin, by contrast, likes to reinterpret lesser-known texts, such as the *Trauerspiel*, to rescue them from instrumental contexts. To detail the relationship of these two critics is beyond the scope of this article. I will instead focus on the common ground that they share for my analysis, namely, treating mimesis as a critique of a de-individualising society. Not accidentally, they also see the child as the representative figure of mimesis.⁹ To understand the diversity and complexity of *Yi Yi*, I believe it is necessary to engage with the writings of both critics. They have different but related insights to offer in terms of the child’s mimetic behaviors (Benjamin), the mimetic structure of art (Adorno), and the playful and revolutionary qualities of cinema as an art form (Benjamin).

The Prelapsarian Child

At A-Di’s wedding banquet, Yang-Yang is bullied by a group of girls. Exasperated, he and NJ (who has just bumped into his old lover), sit together pensively among the preoccupied guests. Suddenly, a balloon pops, waking the father and son from their rumination. The camera cuts to a full shot of the bullies.

⁹ For Adorno, the tendency in art to not copy directly from the real world is infantile: “Artistic production that refuses to relinquish the impulse against the ossification of life and is thus truly naïve . . . has stored up in it as much naïveté as the comportment of art has of noncompliance with the reality principle, something of the childish and—according to social norms—the infantile” (*Aesthetic Theory* 427). Benjamin’s equation between mimesis and children will be discussed at length in the following section.

Yang-Yang enters from the right and pops a balloon immediately in front of them. The girls are scared and run to their parents. The child turns a balloon into a device for avenging the suffering that has been inflicted on him. There is little sense that the child's revenge is planned. Rather, it seems unmediated, nonconceptual and based on the ability to find correspondences. This film sequence marks the beginning of the child's mimetic behavior.¹⁰

Yang-Yang is attracted to a girl at school who is a prefect and a skilled swimmer. He enters an unoccupied changing room and stands at the edge of the pool where the girl is swimming. A point-of-view shot shows that Yang-Yang's gaze is fixed on the swimmer. This sequence is reminiscent of a coming-of-age story, in which a boy is sexually attracted to a girl, but Yang-Yang's motivation is more complex. After watching his classmate swim, Yang-Yang wants to imitate her swimming. He fills a sink in his bathroom and submerges his head to experience the sensation of being underwater. After some unguided practice, he eventually jumps into the same swimming pool, despite not knowing how to swim. Returning home from the pool, although completely soaked, he has a contented smile on his face. Adorno writes: "Love you will find only where you may show yourself weak without provoking strength" (*Minima Moralia* 192). We do not see muscular prowess in Yang-Yang, nor do we see the romantic cliché of the brave male rescuing the female in danger. The child shows love by showing his willingness to lose himself in imitation. If Yang-Yang had wanted to learn swimming, we would have seen him practicing the requisite physical movements, breathing techniques and so on. He swims not because of social expectations but the desire to imitate, and by imitating, he loves.

Walter Benjamin writes that as a child, he often failed to make a clear distinction between his self and the outer world. In a famous passage on catching butterflies, he writes: "The old law of the hunt took hold: the more I strove to conform, in all the fibres of my being, to the animal—the more butterfly-like I became in my heart and soul—the more this butterfly itself, in everything it did, took on the color of human volition; and in the end, it was as if its capture was the price I had to pay to regain my human existence" ("Berlin Childhood" 351). Reminiscent of Zhuangzi's (Chuang Tzu) butterfly dream, this passage describes a blurring of the boundary between the subject and the object during the child's

¹⁰ Benjamin observes that children's play is largely driven by their innate desire to seek out similarities and correspondences. Play represents the "school" for training the mimetic faculty: "Children's play is everywhere permeated by mimetic modes of behavior, and its realm is by no means limited to what one person can imitate in another. The child plays at being not only a shopkeeper or teacher but also a windmill and a train" ("Doctrine" 695).

intense engagement with nature. This affective state, whereby the mimetic child fully merges with nature, is best illustrated by the experience of having “butterflies” in one’s stomach.¹¹ When the butterfly is captured, Benjamin retrieves his selfhood (“regain my human existence”), which has been lost in the process of imitation. “The capture of the butterfly makes it possible to erect boundaries again and to secure the child’s form of human being” (Gebauer and Wulf 278). Benjamin’s reflection on his childhood is by no means identical to Yang-Yang’s underwater experience. The obvious difference would be that Benjamin’s experience involves an insect whereas Yang-Yang’s involves a girl. Moreover, whereas Benjamin perceives an interchange of identity between himself and the butterfly, Yang-Yang’s imitation seems to be relatively one-sided: the girl remains unchanged in the process. Nonetheless, the moment Yang-Yang dives into the pool without hesitation suggests that the child experiences a loss of self in the process of imitation, and the contented face he carries after returning from drowning marks a rare moment of happiness in the film—a happiness that can only happen with the child’s willingness to lose himself in the first place.

Why does Yang-Yang want to imitate the prefect girl, rather than someone or something else? The answer to this question may be found in his first encounter with the girl. Running away from his discipline master after committing a prank, Yang-Yang flees into a darkened classroom, where a film about thunderstorms and the world’s origin is being screened. A short while later, the prefect enters the classroom. Her skirt catches on the doorjamb and is pulled up. Yang-Yang, sitting next to the door, unintentionally sees part of her thigh and underwear at close range. Could this sensual encounter be the origin of Yang-Yang’s fascination with the girl? Yang-Yang’s view of the girl’s thigh, appearing at the threshold between daylight and darkness, should be understood as a complex image poised between fiction and reality.¹² Yang-Yang sits farthest from the screen—from his perspective, just like that of a cinemagoer, we see a medium shot of the girl groping for a seat. The upper part of the girl’s body is superimposed on the screen as loudspeakers transmit the narrator’s speech on the origin of thunderstorms: “The two opposing forces are attracted to each other. The attraction grows irresistibly. In one flashing moment, the two violently reunite, leading to thunder.”

¹¹ This is the result of a full engagement with the mimetic faculty, as Benjamin writes: “Early on, I learned to disguise myself in words, which really were clouds. The gift of perceiving similarities is, in fact, nothing but a weak remnant of the old compulsion to become similar and to behave mimetically. In me, however, this compulsion acted through words” (“Berlin Childhood” 374). For more on the indistinct boundary between the ego and the outer world in Benjamin’s writing, see Gess 695-98.

¹² For the significance of thresholds in the film, see Anderson 91.

The thunder and lightning depicted on the screen produce a silhouette of the girl's body. In effect, Yang-Yang sees an amalgamated image of the girl, a thunderstorm, and the world's beginning. A close-up shot shows that the child's gaze is fixed on the screen, suggesting that he is emotionally affected by the amalgamation. For Yang-Yang, the girl becomes significant the moment she enters the movie theater. She is like a mythical figure, appearing not as a person but as a thigh and a silhouette, accompanied by the sound of thunder. Her significance reaches its peak at the moment of superimposition when noise and image combine to form new meanings.

The film about nature is significant to Yang-Yang not because of its educational, scientific or aesthetic value. Rather, the child discovers a mythical meaning of the thunderstorm that is inseparable from the girl's appearance. Yang-Yang is particularly receptive to a nonconceptual mode of signification that operates like magic. The moment at which the thunder strikes imparts a mythical and immediate significance to the perfect girl. By saying the meanings produced are mythical, I refer to Yang-Yang's creative perception of the amalgamated sound-image (the girl, the sound of thunder, and the narrator's voice-over). It may not be accidental that the documentary is about thunder and the experience Yang-Yang subsequently seeks to imitate is swimming. To Yang-Yang, the girl may resemble Amphitrite (goddess of the sea and thunder). Holding his breath in water and nearly drowning himself in the pool offer a way to imitate the goddess and thereby understand her non-conceptually.

In a short essay on children's experience of colors, Walter Benjamin elevates nonconceptual perception to a spiritual level. He proposes that children do not reflect but only see. Color is "the pure expression of the child's pure receptivity" ("A Child's View" 50). An adult may see a rainbow as a colorful image superimposed on the sky. However, for a child, who is not used to analyzing things in their three-dimensional context, the rainbow marks certain boundaries in the sky (50). Children enjoy the shimmer created by the merging of different shades of colors (as in a wooden spinning top). When colors are mixed, they see them as nuances, not as a blur (50). Children do not perceive colors as disparate tools for filling empty spaces, as they might be used in a painting application on a computer. For children, colors play a far more significant role. For instance, the colors of an object are not just features or properties of the object; they cannot be isolated from the object itself, as is possible in abstract thinking. Rather, the colors appeal to something spiritual in a child, forming a basis for understanding the object. From there, children "create the interrelated totality of the world of imagination" (51). Benjamin's observation is echoed by child psychologists, who point out

that children can often grasp the form of an object, but not its structure.¹³

Yi Yi ends with the suggestion that Yang-Yang's magical existence in relation to his surroundings will soon come to an end. At his grandmother's funeral, Yang-Yang stands before her portrait and reads out his diary: "Grandma, I miss you. Especially when I see my newborn cousin, who still doesn't have a name. He reminds me that you always said you felt old. I want to tell him I am old too."¹⁴ Yang-Yang's melancholy and anxiety over names suggest that he is aware of the representational power of language. Is such an awareness a symptom of getting old? It is also strange that he decides to speak to his grandmother even though she still cannot see him speak.

What makes him change his mind? Do self-reflection and writing mark the end of Yang-Yang's mimesis? Or is the ending a sign that mimesis must look for an afterlife somewhere else, beyond the bounds of childhood? To answer these questions, we must move on to examine the artwork produced by the child.

Photography and Allegory

Yang-Yang approaches the otherness of the world not only by imitating others but also by representing their otherness in his own creative work, among which his photos of people's napes stand out as the most puzzling. One of the stills on the cover of the Criterion Collection DVD shows the back of the neck of a child wearing formal clothing. The image conveys a sense of mystery. Who is this child? What is he thinking? Why is he facing away from the camera? The DVD cover echoes similar photos of the nape appearing in the film. Most of these photos are out of focus, over- or underexposed. They are first seen on the child's desk and later discovered by NJ. In a close-up shot, NJ looks carefully at each photo. The photos would probably not seem strange if they were few in number and if they were not close-ups. However, the repetition of the same type of image is unexpected, suggesting that there is something uncanny about the experience.¹⁵ Clearly, Yang-Yang has taken these photos intentionally. Why has he photographed

¹³ Maurice Merleau-Ponty uses the example of drawing to illuminate a similar point: "[W]hen the child draws a bicycle, he reproduces a more or less coherent picture with some accentuated details, such as the pedals. The adult's depiction of the bicycle is guided by its mechanical relationship (e.g., the connection between the pedals and the rear wheel), but these links escape the child almost entirely" (149).

¹⁴ The translation is by Flannery Wilson; see Wilson 73.

¹⁵ The nape images recall Roland Barthes' notion of the "third meaning" in his reading of Eisenstein's stills. Informational and symbolic meanings aside, there is a residue or remainder in the stills that he cannot quite explain. The third meaning is that which cannot be summarized by language; it disrupts and sterilizes criticism (61). It "exceeds the copy of the referential motif, it compels an interrogative reading (interrogation bears precisely on the signifier not on the signified, on reading not on intellection: it is a 'poetical' grasp)" (53).

the nape of the neck so many times?

There are two different ways to understand the photos. It is because of the coexistence of these different readings that the photos are puzzling. The first way is to see Yang-Yang as an empirical explorer. At the funeral of his grandmother, the child speaks in front of her altar: "I want to tell people things they don't know. Show them stuff they haven't seen. It'll be so much fun. Perhaps one day I'll find out where you've gone." Yang-Yang's goal is to show people things they do not see. It is not accidental that he shows his uncle A-Di a photo of his nape, a part of his body that he does not see. The uncle asks the child: "Why did you give me a picture of the back of my neck?" The child replies: "Because you can't see it, now I am giving it to you." Photos, as conceived in the above example, serve the purpose of documentation. The camera is a tool which facilitates the capturing of scenes which I see but others do not. It transforms transient experiences into frozen moments for the musing of the viewer. It is quite impossible to deny the "truth" captured by Yang-Yang's camera. His response to his uncle can be justifiably translated to "Because you can't see the truth, now I am giving it to you." This reading is premised on the assumption that photos are direct copies of reality. By showing his uncle a photo of his nape, Yang-Yang bridges the gap between the mysterious photo and its referent in reality. His diegetic act of showing completes the circuit of representation, which is initially interrupted by the anonymous quality of the images.

The power of representation is evident in the film, which begins with one of the most important modern rituals in a wedding ceremony, taking photographs. In the course of the film, the viewer can see sporadic appearances of family photos either hanging on the wall or presented in photo frames. In his ethnographic research on rural communities, Pierre Bourdieu observes that "the photograph must only supply a representation that is true and precise enough to permit recognition" (22). The technical and aesthetic qualities of a family photo are less important than its readiness to be shared and reproduced. Buying such a photo is not proof of one's taste but rather a sign that one is part of the community (20). The content of the photo must be easily recognizable to the viewer so that it can be readily reproduced for existing or future generations. The scattered but recurring family photos in the film testify to a genealogical line that helps bind Yang-Yang's family together.

At the same wedding ceremony, however, we see moments that do not fit into the positivistic reading shown in the above examples.¹⁶ Posing rather unwillingly

¹⁶ Family photos play an important but unobtrusive role in the film. With various member compositions

in front of the camera, Yang-Yang is bullied by his cousins standing behind him. The scene suggests a mismatch between Yang-Yang and the camera that belongs to the family ritual. The child's uneasiness, in which he feels he has lost himself in the process of family photo-taking, recalls similar experiences in Franz Kafka and Benjamin.¹⁷ There is a sense of the subject being turned into an object in the process of photo-taking, thus destroying the individuality of the person being captured. Yang-Yang's uneasy face is the by-product of Adorno's repressive mimesis, which operates by the principle of instrumentality and hence the deprivation of human particularities (*Minima Moralia*). Benjamin writes: "Wherever I looked, I saw myself surrounded by folding screens, cushions, and pedestals which craved my image much as the shades of Hades craved the blood of the sacrificial animal" ("Berlin Childhood" 391). Without Benjamin's retrospective description, the viewer may not recognize the fearful state of mind behind the lavish set-up. Photography is powerful in eternalizing moments. How, though, do we read a photo in such a way that it will not be instrumentalized but will continue to maintain its own life? In my alternative reading, I would like to demonstrate that the photos, instead of being documents that serve the purpose of representing reality, challenge the power of representation by showing its blind spots and limitations.

Critics have compared the nape photos in *Yi Yi* to René Magritte's 1937 painting *La reproduction interdite* (*Not to Be Reproduced*), arguing that the back of the human subject is a symbol of resistance to identification.¹⁸ In Magritte's painting, a supposedly ordinary reflection of a man is replaced by a duplicated image of his back. Uncannily, the mirror image does not look back at the man standing before the mirror. Rather, it forms the beginning of an infinite repetition, a *mise en abyme*. The mirror image is a misfit in the traditional sense of representation. It is not strange to see someone's back *per se*, but it is strange to see someone's back when we expect to see his face instead. Magritte's painting challenges the logic of representation, disrupting the seamless relationship between an object and its mirror image. With the representational model subverted in the mirror, the painting dismantles the realist gaze, which tries to look for references in the

(including the photograph of the grandmother at her funeral), they flash up in the film up to ten times.

¹⁷ Benjamin observes a de-individualising effect in Kafka's child portrait: "There the boy stands, perhaps six years old, dressed up in a humiliatingly tight child's suit overloaded with trimming, in a sort of greenhouse landscape. He would surely be lost in this setting were it not for his immensely sad eyes, which master this landscape predestined for them" ("Little History" 282).

¹⁸ Chiang Ling-Ching discusses the symbolic meaning of A-Di's inverted marriage portrait at the beginning of the film (181). For a psychoanalytic reading of the nape photos, see Yang Xiaobin 58. For a discussion of Magritte's paintings in terms of their nonrepresentational qualities, see Foucault 15-31.

real world. Yang-Yang's nape photos are highly comparable to Magritte's painting. Although we do not see an infinite number of napes in one photo, the continuous browsing of similar photos creates the same effect: they resemble an infinite repetition of napes. They are anonymous and repetitive, like Magritte's painting, rejecting identification.

After failing to see directly into his neighbor's face to investigate the causes of her quarrel with her boyfriend, the child says to NJ: "I cannot see what you see, you cannot see what I see. Does this mean that we can only see half of everything we see, Dad?" The napes are a childish yet accurate visualization of the statement, "we can only see half of everything we see." The nape is a blind spot in a person's field of vision. Yang-Yang creatively borrows this scientific fact to visualize his worldview with his camera. In this way, the nape photos are turned into a philosophical document that suspends the representational power of the family photo. If a family photo serves the function of connecting people, the nape photos suspend human connections, exposing the heterogeneity of each subject in their understanding of the others. Whereas in a family photo everyone is genealogically bound to a pedigree so that their social identity can be defined and enriched, Yang-Yang's photos point to the peculiarity of every individual, which cannot be wired to a family tree.

We can now better understand why Yang-Yang has decided to speak to his deceased grandmother. Initially, the child's reaction to his mother's request that he speak to his grandmother is driven by sensuousness: "What's the point? She can't see what I tell her." But his speech at the funeral shows that the child's mimetic activities have developed from sensuous to nonsensuous ones. They move from the imitation of body (perfect girl's swimming) to the imitation of complex human relationship via photography. That Yang-Yang feels old looking at his newborn cousin is a mark of the end of his childhood mimesis as well as the beginning of a more sophisticated form of the same activity. It is in photography that the afterlife of mimesis is found.

The photos' lack of definite reference to real life engenders a more reflective and subtle reading about the film. They capture a mood rather than a message. In his lectures on aesthetics, Adorno observes that Kafka's fictions offer a "feeling of the world": "the synthesis of these aspects that Kafka brings about is indeed not one which tells us 'That is so'; it does not result in a conclusion, a slogan, a judgement, but rather the judgementless and, if you will, ambiguous intertwining of these aspects that really permits the work of art to incorporate that very wealth of the existent which is otherwise cut off by the logic of judgement" (*Aesthetics*, 207-08). Yang-Yang's photos are often out of focus, and the objects chosen are

considered insignificant (napes, flies, dust, shafts of light, etc.), which explains why they are often dismissed by the adults as abstract and pretentious. It is, however, immaterial that the objects or actual people in the photos cannot be identified. What the photos illuminate is a form of relatedness between subject and object. Their indefiniteness is an incredibly rich resource for recognizing the impossibility of fully understanding a human being. It is not accidental that the four different stories in the family (Min-Min, Ting-Ting, NJ, and Yang-Yang) are cognitively disconnected. They are placed together under the theme of family, but their contents are independent of each other. It is true that Yang-Yang is misunderstood by the adults, but the film is also making a broader statement about misunderstanding through the nape photos: there is a blind spot in every attempt to understand others. It is convenient to make a false projection about others, duplicating their experience according to one's wishes, but this will eradicate the uniqueness of their experience. The napes point to the inaccessibility of reading. If we try to learn from the child's imitation of the prefect girl, we can say that the only way to come to terms with the others' inaccessibility is to plunge into the dark water and be receptive to incomprehension, a sense of uncanniness that disturbs the power of representation.

Conclusion: Mimetic Cuts

Perhaps one of the most engrossing scenes of mimesis in *Yi Yi* is the cross-cutting between the romantic encounters of NJ and Ting-Ting in Tokyo and Taipei respectively.¹⁹ And yet, the mimesis we see in this sequence is not the sensuous one in Yang-Yang's swimming exercise. Nor is it the philosophical mimesis in the child's nape photos. The cross-cutting points to a more fundamental structure of the editing style which is fueled by the compulsion for imitation. The scene juxtaposes two dates, one between NJ and his old lover Sherry in Tokyo, the other between Ting-Ting and her new boyfriend Fatty in Taipei. The NJ/Sherry dialogue is superimposed on the Ting-Ting/Fatty sequence. As NJ recalls his first meeting with Sherry, the film shows Fatty trying to hold Ting-Ting's hand for the first time. "The first time I held your hand, we were at the railway crossing, going to the movies. I reached for you, ashamed of my sweaty palms." The use of

¹⁹ In Pui Chi Ng's detailed analysis, the director alludes to the repetitive pattern of life by juxtaposing the two love scenes from different times and spaces. Regardless of the nuanced relationships between individuals, there is an underlying pattern that informs our lives. My reading, premised on the mimetic quality of the cuts, looks at how each scene spills over to another to create allegorical meanings, reminiscent of Benjamin's ruins and debris.

mimesis is extraordinary. NJ's voice is not only a direct response to Sherry's, but also an allegory for what Fatty could be thinking as he reaches for Ting-Ting's hand. The temporality of the sequence becomes more complex when we realize that NJ is recalling a feeling experienced years earlier. However, because it is superimposed on the Ting-Ting/Fatty sequence, it also refers to Fatty's affective state, which exists at a different time. The two sequences are not hierarchical, and they do not lead to synthetic judgements about the stories in the film. In contrast with traditional cross-cutting, they are not bundled together as a single event. Rather, they are placed together mimetically because of the affective correspondences signified in each other's sequences.

Thus far, we have examined how mimesis operates in Yang-Yang's bodily imitation of the prefect girl and his creative work of photography. The film has documented the ways in which the child performs his mimetic activities on both sensuous and nonsensuous levels.²⁰ In the last part of this article, I will demonstrate how mimesis operates nonsensuously at the level of editing. Edward Yang conducts his playful experiments by juxtaposing images and sounds according to their correspondences, creating new structures for perceiving human relationships. Rather than offering a finished product to serve an audience that wants to take away a definite moral lesson, he gives us a network of snapshots that prompts ongoing reflections on modern life and resistance against instrumentalized or simplistic readings.

In a mimetic cut, two apparently disparate scenes are placed together in succession, with a common sound effect used as a transition. For instance, the sound of thunder connects the scene of Yang-Yang watching the documentary film about nature in the darkened room with that of Ting-Ting walking in the rain. The result is allegorical: the thunder heard in the documentary is also used to describe Ting-Ting's melancholic state. Conversely, the sound of actual rain is used retrospectively to paint Yang-Yang's mood as he sits in the theater. Such a method of editing constructs the story not in terms of a linear narrative but through similarities of characters and scenes. The sequences in the film are not self-contained; they tend to blend into each other, transforming the meaning of both. When Lili (Ting-Ting's neighbor) finds out that her mother and her

²⁰ Benjamin sees a rejuvenation of the mimetic faculty in ancient astrology, in which mimesis moves away from bodily imitation to seeking correspondences between human and nature. The primary example of this rejuvenation is language. "Allusion to the astrological sphere may supply a first reference point for an understanding of the concept of nonsensuous similarity. . . . [W]e, too, possess a canon according to which the meaning of nonsensuous similarity can be at least partly clarified. And this canon is language" ("On the Mimetic Faculty" 721).

schoolteacher are sleeping together, she screams out loud. Using the same soundbite of screaming, the film cuts to a hospital shot of a newborn baby crying in its incubator. Different characters are reconnected via similar soundbites. Such a technique is hardly possible in a traditional art form, as it seems unthinkable to put Lili's discovery of adultery and a child being born together in the same painting.

Benjamin compares the camera operator with a surgeon, who is obliged to enter the body's surface and scrutinize the internal structure of things: "The surgeon abstains at the decisive moment from confronting his patient person to person; instead, he penetrates the patient by operating. . . . [T]he cinematographer penetrates deeply into its tissue. . . . [T]he painter's [image] is a total image, whereas that of the cinematographer is piecemeal, its manifold parts being assembled according to a new law" ("Technological Reproducibility" 35). I perceive Edward Yang's method of editing as being like that of a surgeon trying to break into the superficial frameworks of individual incidents, prompting the viewer to rethink human relations from alternative perspectives. The way Edward Yang connects a self-sufficient scene to seemingly irrelevant soundbites or images recalls Benjamin's famous passage on the liberating potential of film: "Our taverns and our metropolitan streets, our offices and furnished rooms, our railroad stations and our factories appeared to have us locked up hopelessly. Then came the film and burst this prison-world asunder by the dynamite of the tenth of a second, so that now, in the midst of its far-flung ruins and debris, we calmly and adventurously go travelling" ("Mechanical Reproduction" 230). The perception of Taipei is no longer restricted to the way we perceive it with our naked eye. It is important to note that the metaphor of bombing is used to describe the creativity of the camera. The filmic experience is not merely about seeing more in terms of quantity—because the architecture is burst asunder, the viewer has the chance to examine its ruins and debris, which consist of complex mixtures of various objects, timelines, and spaces. The critic is clear about this point when he writes: "The enlargement of a snapshot does not simply render more precise what in any case was visible, though unclear: it reveals entirely new structural formations of the subject" (230).

Fatty's fate is a case in point. During his first date with Ting-Ting after breaking up with Lili, Fatty quotes his uncle's film theory, saying that people gain twice as much experience from films as from real life: "We have never killed anyone," he says, "but [thanks to cinema] we all know what it's like to kill." Toward the end of the film, Fatty kills a schoolteacher who allegedly has had affairs with both Fatty's girlfriend and her mother. Ironically, Fatty is the character who both theorizes about killing ("we all know what it's like to kill") and is

driven to commit actual killing himself. It is more ironic that the killing is not witnessed by anyone in or outside the film. Rather, it is (mis)represented in a TV news report as the endpoint of some unscrupulous romance. With a tinge of playfulness, the film inserts a five-second videogame simulation of the murder right after the news report.²¹ Excluding the primal scene of the killing, the film uses theoretical (Fatty's remarks), journalistic (the news report), and animated (the video game) angles to illuminate a deeper relationship between humans and their behavior. It digs deep into the tissues of reality, moves around its organs, articulating its complex structure ("Technological Reproducibility" 35). To qualify Fatty's remarks, we can say that thanks to cinema we indeed learn more about killing, but this is so not in terms of precision and clarity but in terms of how the event is multifariously connected to our lives.

Let us look at two more examples of mimetic editing before we close. In a hospital scene, we see A-Di and his pregnant wife having an ultrasound scan of their baby. Accompanying a close-up of the moving foetus on the screen, we hear a female voice speaking Mandarin Chinese with a Japanese accent describing the birth and development of a baby: "It begins to acquire signs of human life. It begins to think, then matures into a living entity and becomes our most devoted companion." Creating the impression that it is a nurse explaining human life to the parents, the female voice turns out to be coming from a different time-space: it is a business presentation about artificial intelligence in NJ's office. Moving part of the speech to the hospital scene makes it allegorical, suggesting that video game can be perceived as a commentary on human origins or vice versa. According to the business presentation, the market is still flooded with fighting and shooting games not because we do not fully understand computers, but because we do not fully understand ourselves. What do we not understand about ourselves? By overlapping the presentation with the ultrasound scan of the baby, the film offers a structural change in understanding the human subject, suggesting that the "secret" about ourselves can be found not in ourselves but in infancy.

²¹ For Benjamin, the artificiality in acting and editing provides room for productive play, where the film director can revolutionize the viewer's ways of seeing things. He opposes play to semblance, a relatively more stable concept which assumes the artwork to be a unified object for the viewer's contemplation: "[P]lay is the inexhaustible reservoir of all the experimenting procedures of the second [technology]. . . . [W]hat is lost in the withering of semblance and the decay of the aura in works of art is matched by a huge gain in the scope for play (*Spiel-Raum*). This space for play is widest in film. In film, the element of semblance has been entirely displaced by the element of play" ("Technological Reproducibility" 48). For a discussion of the distinction between semblance and play and its significance for understanding film, see Ross 163-75.

Such a reading is supported by the subsequent scene, where Ota, the video game developer who has prepared the presentation, is shown interacting with a pigeon that has flown into NJ's office. The pigeon sits quietly on Ota's shoulder, whose bodily movement accommodates that of the bird. Ota's mimesis makes the bird stand on his shoulder with ease. The scene presents an interplay between human beings and nature. Perhaps the limitation of fighting and shooting games is the underlying assumption that nature must be conquered or mastered at the end of the day. Such an underlying assumption creates a sense of objectification of nature, reducing the heterogeneity of the other. Conversely, from Ota's interaction with the bird, we can see that his vision of AI or video gaming is far from one of mastery over nature. Rather, he seems to suggest an interplay between humans and nature, in which the former's imitation of the latter is essential. We see this imitation in Ota and Yang-Yang, as well as in the film's ingenious style of editing. What humans have not understood about themselves is the age-old desire for correspondences; not the violence inherent in shooting games, but a noncoercive attitude toward the outer world. Ota's bodily movement epitomizes the message of the film.

By examining three different aspects of Edward Yang's *Yi Yi*, I have shown that mimesis, understood as the subject's noncoercive attitude toward the outer world, has permeated the film. My analysis began with the child's mimetic behavior and ends with the film's underlying style of imitation. I examined the child's mimetic way of thinking, the allegorical meanings of photography, and the director's mimetic style of editing. Central to my reading is the claim that mimesis is effective in undoing the hierarchical distinction between subject and object. The abstract loneliness, as pointed out by Anderson in the passage quoted at the beginning of this article, is precisely the unfortunate result of such a distinction. It is only by rereading the film from the perspective of a child that we can redeem a meaning that is not harmful to our surroundings.

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