

# Spatial Narrative of Females in Edward Yang's Films

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**Abstract:** *As one of the key Taiwan's new films, Edward Yang's films are known to portray all kinds of human natures in Taiwan's urbanization process with exquisite emotions. By combining feminism and Space Narration in films, this paper focuses on female images and investigates the specific expression of female consciousness in his works.*

**Keywords:** *space, space narration, feminism, Edward Yang*

## 1. Female, Space and Space Narrative

### 1.1 Space and Space Narration

For a long time, space has been considered "fixed, non-dialectical and immobile" as an ancient concept based on intuition and sensibility with human nature, (Molotch, 1993), for all the development of dialectics and movement can only be mirrored in the dimension of time. After the 1970s, a large-scale spatial turn (Warf, 2017) in the fields of social science and philosophy dispelled the absoluteness and non-dialectics of space with a large number of subversive ideas. French Marxist philosopher Lefebvre (Gottdiener, 1993) liberated space from the strict mathematical sense, pointing out that social space is a social product. Lefebvre believed that social space, as a physical expression of social production relations, would ultimately be "produced" by society, and would eventually replace the position of natural space. As the production relations of human society become increasingly complex, more space is being created.

Merleau Ponty stressed the spatiality of the human body. People, he argued needed to acquire the presence of space through their own bodies. Based on which, "existence is where" (Dorrance, 2002), and space requires the active participation of the body to be perceived. In filming, space is often produced by an artificial design process, making it unnatural, and the design logic behind it is to portray the characters in a better way (Magliano, Miller and Zwaan, 2001). Such film space automatically becomes an extension of the characters, and the audience may then grasp the space he is in from the perspective of the characters.

Recent studies have shown that the social and psychological attributes of space are increasingly becoming important in modern society. Space is a container that people create to unconsciously but objectively place all kinds of social relations. It exists concretely as a material space, abstractly as a carrier of social relations, and as an object that somebody participates in psychological perception (CorsinJiménez, 2003). Space naturally fits into the research category of film as a visual and expressive narrative art.

Time and space always exist in narrative works. In conventional narrative studies, people tend to focus on exploring the close relationship between time and narrative. However, space is also crucial in narrative from the standpoint of creative psychology[1-2].

As one of the natural organizational materials of all films, space has its aesthetic features and narrative functions, fully presented in this art form. From this perspective, all films should exhibit a certain spatial narrative, and this spatial narrative form in the film naturally has special characteristics (Heath, 2014). Space has a clear visual image in the film. Unlike the receiver of literature who should develop an abstract space by himself, the space image is conveyed in an intuitive and concrete audio-visual way in the film. This practice significantly reduces the capacity of the receiver to imagine space, and forces him to be more obedient attitude towards the narrators on the screen to some extent. As a result, the space narrative in the film can exert effect on the audience emotion, either directly or indirectly (Ton and Tan, 2002).

## 1.2 Female and Space

### 1.2.1 Feminism in Film

After the 1970s, the feminist movement further developed in the United States. To eliminate the "second sex", women oppression and exploitation in both political and cultural aspects of contemporary society were popular among the feminists. Early feminist critics who focused on the film field believed that whether in reality or in film, women have the desire and need for self-expression, ; besides, their subjectivity should receive more attention. For a long time, women have always portrayed as flat and one-sided images in the traditional Hollywood films. In the narrative of the films, women are rarely depicted truthfully. Instead, empty visual images of women appeared as a symbol of the opposite sex from the male perspective. The lack of female subject status is often mirrored in the lack of female consciousness at the narrative level, resulting in women only being "non male" in the film text (Johnston, 1973).

At the same time, the study of film has also progressed to a more sophisticated and scientific level. Since the establishment of Metz's film semiotics, film research has begun to incorporate more cultural studies, psychology, sociology and other fields; It is in this context when feminist film criticism theory was born. As a highly comprehensive methodology, Lara Mulvey's work *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (1973) combines the theoretical framework of feminism and psychoanalysis, becoming the foundational literature of feminist film criticism theory. Since then, the traditional female images in the screen have gradually been endowed with more female consciousness, which can be understood from two aspects, i.e., (1) inside the text, where the female characters have more self-expression, and their visual consumption object attributes of desire have been reduced (Doane, 1982); (2) outside the text, where various female images began to gain more feminine interpretations (De Lauretis, 1984).

### 1.2.2 Female and Space in Film

The film lens can create a space, which is often used consciously in the film by the narrator, hence an effective approach to express the psychology of the characters and convey the relationship among the characters. This is the space narrative of the film. It is an important theme in women's films to reject or even reverse the male "gaze" and express female consciousness; the shape and processing of film space are the powerful approaches to present this theme.

Keep the continuity of space. A continuous, real and complete space enables the film to have a real aesthetic experience and conveys the inner activities of the characters from the psychological level. Many feminist films visually construct the inward emotions of women through a slow narrative rhythm, as well as a real and dignified narrative space. In addition to *Jeanne Dillman* mentioned above, the same author's work *Anna's Journey* introduces the real-time scale into the film by retaining a large section of unedited scenes and dialogues; this is to enable the audience to put himself in a position to understand the perspective of the female characters in the film (Mulvey, 2016). Valda's *Vagabond* uses many empty outdoor scenes to display the lonely fate of the heroine without any words[3-4].

Moreover, creating a space belonging to women in the film can provide identity to women characters. In a traditionally patriarchal society, women often lack self-worth, therefore cannot find the meaning of their existence. Space can actively participate in the narrative process of arousing the self-consciousness of women.

In the film *Cleo from 5 to 7*, Cleo, the protagonist with a luxury lifestyle, ultimately recognizes the false vanity under the strain and crisis (suffering from cancer) from the outside world; besides, the false intimate relationship with numerous men prompts her to reflect about the meaning of herself. The director Walda strongly implied the change of Cleo's inner self-identity from negative to positive in terms of space arrangement: In the first half of the film, Cleo walked through the streets and alleys of the city in a confused and dissociative manner. In this space with the implication of predicament, Cleo's identity almost always changes with the person she's talking to, and could not express herself as her real self. In the last half of the film, Cleo finally gains sincere love, and the space around her becomes a lush park, with spacious and tidy streets. Cleo re-recognized the world and re-examined herself in an unprecedented manner during the process of spatial transformation from chaos to order, which includes the birth of positive female consciousness (Forbes, 2002).

Under the suggestion of the composition of the picture, women in the film tend to play characters that are potentially controlled, especially when they are in the same space as men characters. In *Rebecca* (1940) for example, there is a beautiful girl who lives in the mansion of the rich de Winter but comes from a mediocre family; the spatial relationship in this film always implies that the female recipient is

being oppressed and controlled by the male authority around the heroine. By liberating the control of space from male authority - either by completely giving space to women or by creating an equal space - women can obtain a real space for free existence and expression.

It is also vital to remove the symbolic link between space and women to minimize the women's traits of being the objects of visual desire consumption. In traditional Hollywood films, a series of unique light stands, and scenes technique are used to develop beautiful and moving female characters (Hollinger, 2013). For instance, in *Casablanca* (1942), heroine Lisa always wears gorgeous clothes and shows up with exquisite makeup, and haunts high-end nightclubs; The fiery and sexy heroine Feather in *Rio Bravo* (1959) tends to hide behind doors, forming a sharp contrast with a group of smart cowboys on the sand in the presenting film space. The female characters in traditional Hollywood are outstanding in appearance and appear in the delicate and elegant space separated from men, which undoubtedly and significantly improves their viewing capacity. It is an important link for women in the film to be processed into symbols of male desire. By eliminating the rigid connection between women and space, a consciousness of women can naturally appear in the narrative.

In addition to the shaping of space, a series of tortuous experiences of women and the changes in mentality and consciousness as a result of them, often emerge as the primary means of shaping women's consciousness. In *The Marriage of Maria Braun* (1979), the two separate and two reunions of Maria and her husband run through the film as the beginning and end. The film provides a comprehensive description of Maria's emotional and material life with a span of up to 30 years, strongly demonstrating Maria's moving character of tenacity, and loyalty to herself. In *The Piano* (1993), Ada, who refused to speak, conveyed his rebellious attitude via action and repeated this rebellion through piano lessons.

The female consciousness conveyed by space and content narrative can be a complement to the portrayal of female characters, making the two genders on the screen more realistic and natural. This true balance enables female characters to obtain their words, and provide deeper authenticity and rationality for the overall plot framework of the film, as well as promote the expression of the film[5-7].

## **2. Spatial Narrative Types of Edward Yang's Films from a Female Perspective**

### **2.1 Overview of Film Creation & Style**

Edward Yang is widely considered one of Taiwan's most accomplished screenwriters. Additionally, he is the driving force behind the "Taiwan New Cinema" movement that emerged after the 1980s. His films are situated in the immediate vicinity and center on the oddities of social situations and the many destinies of numerous small individuals in the modern metropolis. In those days, Taipei was already a sizable metropolis, in the midst of a rapid urbanization during which it was also actively participating in the globalization process. It is a significant improvement over the situation that Taiwan faced up to the 1980s, when it was isolated and oppressed. Considering that it has experienced such a radical shift, it reflects the collision of tradition and modernity, as well as the merging of indigenous and foreign elements, (Tweedie, 2013). History progression has had a significant impact, on the physical landscape, and the destiny of the people currently inhabiting this region. In the conventional structure of society, the authority of patriarchy commonly places significant limits on the power that women possess. On the other hand, the position of women in fast modernizing urban societies has greatly improved because of the fact that women presently have more economic and political power. The traditional power structures, discourse systems, and value structures are in danger of collapsing and disappearing altogether. One of the significant themes emerging throughout Edward Yang's film is the role that women are expected to play in adapting to an ever-changing world (Chang, 2017).

In many of his movies, the female protagonists are strong, independent, and un-submissive individuals. This is in stark contrast to the males, who are commonly disoriented and perplexed with no idea of their space. In his films, there is a subversion of gender authority in both modern and regional. In terms of the visual approach, his movies frequently contain lengthy views fixed in one place. It becomes a distinctive hallmark of his own particular visual style, and plays a significant part in the narrative of feminine space in the picture. The actions of the characters in these shots are often understated and performed at a moderate pace. Edward Yang wants to depict the natural flow of his characters' emotions through these photos that are partially static. In the film *Taipei Story*, A'long and A'zhen are in their bedroom, sitting on the bed together, where A'long is smoking the entire time. When A'zhen glances over at A'long sitting next to him, he cannot resist giving him a bear embrace. During the course of the two minutes, the video barely shows a few words. Even more disappointing is the lack of depth in the actions

of the characters. In such a confined and personal setting, A'zhen exhibits tiredness and stillness due to her impotence and her willingness to reconcile with reality. It is not intended to develop a delicate and emotional female character for the movie, but rather a spontaneous and autonomous psychological presentation.

Edward Yang refrain from using views of women that are spatially objectified, and manages to skillfully integrate space with shots of women. In his films, there exist extremely few extreme close-ups of the faces of the female protagonists. The ladies in close-ups are frequently shot against visually appealing ambient backdrops, and natural light is used in various ways. This demonstrates that Edward Yang supports the aesthetic notion of sincerity and naturalness in the picture and plot, and incorporates it in the spatial narrative of the feminine form. The character of Yufen Zhou, portrayed in *The Terrorist*, is a female author with problems in both her writing (career) and her marital life. Her office is a shambles, and she refuses to allow anybody else into the space where she works and lives. She keeps her door shut to the outside world. This not only acts as a visual depiction of the predicament that the character faces within the narrative of the movie, but also makes it simple for the audience to relate to the actual predicament that women face in daily life.

The feminine space in the films of Edward Yang is more dynamic, liberated, and formed by female characters. This is subsequently followed by a deterioration in the status of males and a general loss of control over the environment as well as the individuals in their close vicinity. The male characters in the movie are commonly shown as being either impotent or vulgar due to the conflict between modernity and tradition. On the other hand, women are depicted as having greater levels of autonomy, critical thinking, and adaptability to shifting social norms. In *The Terrorist*, a wall of images is pieced together to form the face of Shu'an. This face occupies and fills a print room in which males are missing. In contrast, the life of Shuan in the story is completely free of all constraints. This is in stark contrast to the wealthy individual, who lives his life troubled by doubt and confusion. Here, women develop a space for self-expression and self-assertion. In *Yi Yi*, A'ru, NJ's first girlfriend, is a more proactive position than NJ, with his share of bad luck in business world. It is the responsibility of A'ru to establish whether or not she will begin a dialogue with NJ during the first time of their reunion, as well as whether or not she will leave him in the end. In the hotel room, A'ru is standing at the center of the aisle when she reaches out and holds the hand of NJ, withdrawing into the corner. This action completes a transition in the conventional gender status of the individuals. The two protagonists are unable to fully express themselves in this scenario because of the low ceiling in the room. A'ru is the more courageous of the two, since she is the only one of the two unrestricted by the small space of the hotel room and the one willing to break the ice in their relationship[8-12].

## **2.2 Private Space Narrative**

Edward Yang has an uncanny capacity to make the interacting characters nearly one with the space in the stagnant and long shots, thereby observing the inner and spiritual aspirations of characters. This is a talent that he has developed over the course of his career. This is particularly clear in a manner that the movie portrays private sanctuaries and quarters of the people.

A private space is one that is semi-enclosed, has some level of isolation, and is limited to only a few individuals, or even just one or two. In situations like this, Edward Yang's films typically have a strong feeling of stability. In these sequences, the primary mode of communication between the characters is not via movement or conversation but rather through their senses. Traditional narrative tactics like as close-ups and close-ups, as well as front and back perspectives, are rarely used in the development of the spatial story. The structural integrity of the room, the personalities in the space, and the ambiance of the place are often better conveyed using medium and panoramic shots, which are adopted more frequently. In addition, Edward Yang incorporates a substantial amount of natural light into the design of the space. The form of the light imparts a sense of realism to the characters and settings taking place in the space. It performs an excellent job of fleshing out the characters while also providing probable logical support for the plot of the film.

The actual and sensitive space can also be used by the filmmaker to evaluate, assess and focus on the personalities of the characters in the film, as well as to explain their conduct. It progresses into a study at how female awareness develops throughout the film. A'long's first meal with A'zhen's father at his house after returning to China in *Taipei Story* is a visual expression of A'zhen's suppressed character. This scene takes place after A'long returning to China. In this scene, A'zhen's father offers his son some instructions in a strong tone, asking him to go to the kitchen and grab two bottles of alcohol. After entering the house, A'zen enters the house and walks down a dim passage before entering the kitchen.

The area is congested and small, and there is a working maid present. The arrangement of the numerous equipment in kitchens further restricts the space available for people to move around in. In this scene, the filmmakers shoot from above in order to convey the claustrophobic nature of the entire kitchen. Within the confines of this setting, A'zhen discretely pops the cork on a bottle of wine. This serene and dispassionate depiction of space brings to light A'zhen's subservient attitude and passive position in the family. It is a visual representation of the character's repressed condition and provides a compelling logical incentive for A'zhen's desire to flee to America with A'long. Furthermore, it is a visual representation of the character's repressed state.

In the previous illustration, the home is a crucial foundation for private space. It is not only the place of the characters' homes, but it is also the location of their hearts. In Edward Yang's narrative of feminine space, the concept of "home" can apply to either a rural or a modern, metropolitan context. Ah'zhen's father's home (traditional) is visually based on the ancient and gloomy architectural interiors of Taiwan before the breakup of Taiwan's sovereignty. This emphasizes the local Taiwanese vernacular and humanistic mood in the house. This house is a metaphor for the conventional patriarchal norms in Taiwanese society causing the subjugation of women's authority. In contrast to the traditional portrayal of the family, Ah'zhen's apartment, which she shares with Ah'long, may be found here. This room provides a functional setting ideal for the modern lady who lives alone in the city[13-15].

### **2.3 Public Space Narrative**

In the film directed by Edward Yang, the public sphere has little influence on the spatial story. Nevertheless, it facilitates exquisite enrichment and plot construction within the larger framework of the film's story, although it only takes up a very tiny amount of space.

Indoor or outdoor settings are both viable options for public places. They present relationships between the characters, advance the action of the story, and develop the ambiance of the movie from an objective point of view. Hence, interior and outdoor public places have important role in film in terms of showing the feminist consciousness that permeates the narrative.

Indoor public spaces such as bars, cinemas, restaurants, offices, and the like are examples of this type of space. This type of space is frequently distinguished by the highly intertwined social relations of the characters that inhabit it. The manner in which individuals are understood substantially determines where they stand in the web of social connections. In indoor public spaces that follow this pattern, the personalities and behaviors of the main characters are placed in more accessible locations. As a result, the attention of the audience is directed to a specific character in order to establish a symbolic connection between the character and the space. In *That Day, on the Beach*, the pianist Qing Wei makes a dapper entrance in the concert hall during the opening credits. The soothing tones of the piano immediately conjure up the image of a talented and self-sufficient female musician.

Outdoor public places such as streets, parks, and beaches are included in this category. In terms of appearance, being outside in nature provides a more open area than being indoors. It has the potential to be a setting that fosters freedom and inclusion naturally. This is a topic that is driven home quite well in Edward Yang's depictions of female characters. One of the most emblematic locations for the story's depiction of women's participation in public life is the beach. *That Day, on the Beach* is set there. Jiali recalls the beach on three separate occasions during her life. In terms of the story's overall progression, it gradually unfolds the events that led up to Dewei's death by suicide. It is an essential piece of evidence that the movie needs to evoke strong feelings in the viewer and build tension. In addition to this, it is symbolic of Jiali's steady transition from an image of an oppressed woman to that of an enlightened woman. In addition, there is a clear hidden significance in the way the director depicts the space of the beach, which serves as the backdrop for the scene setting. When Jiali first shows up on the beach, she is only seen in a half-dozen or so close-up shots. The topics that she discussed in her talk are similarly shrouded in secrecy. The second time through, the scene starts to get more expansive. The picture captures Jiali in its entirety, including her head. It suggests that the character has undergone some sort of change at this juncture. The final image of the beach reveals a more expansive panorama than any of the others. In the final shot, Jiali is seen walking away from the beach with her back turned. However, the figure's entire body is only visible in the upper left corner of the frame. The great majority of the picture is taken up by unoccupied spaces and landscapes. It marks the culmination of a woman's maturation and development by signifying the openness and relief of the figure at this time.

Since the location has become less private and confined while simultaneously becoming more open and free, it is only fitting that the public space should give a greater variety of inclusion for the individuals

who are now present in it. It starts to be used as a common area for people to stay. On the other hand, in Edward Yang's movies, the protagonists rarely use the public realm as a place where they may let off steam and calm themselves. When the female characters are involved, they frequently experience the same levels of strain and perplexity that the typical male roles do. Not only does this backdrop serve as a vivid entry to present the new feminine image, but it also symbolizes the true influence that the rapidly growing Taiwanese society has on every average person in the country[16-17].

### 3. Conclusion

Over the course of the last several decades, women's film has generated several works which are of great significance to the genre. Although Edward Yang is a man and a writer, he provides important perspectives on women his work with important implications historically. He presents a group of modern progressive women as having spontaneously risen against society and been awakened as a result of their actions. It not only elevates the overall creative tone and aesthetic value of contemporary Taiwanese film, but it also provides a distinctive contribution to the expression of women's awareness in cinema produced after the 1980s in China.

The intersection of female consciousness and space in Edward Yang's works is synthesized and analyzed through spatial narratives as a technique and specific female pictures as a case study in this piece of work. In the films of Edward Yang, there are several illustrations of women who are free-thinking, powerful, and unconstrained by conventional norms and expectations. In prior study on this topic, researchers focused mostly on looking at things from an aesthetic point of view. In most cases, they understood the female characters in Edward Yang's films in light of the social and urban shifts that took place in Taiwan throughout the 1980s and 1990s. This work accomplishes this goal by demonstrating a firm understanding on the critical function that space plays in storytelling. It shows how women's awareness is mirrored in the narrative process by illustrating the process of shaping and transforming women's pictures from the perspective of spatial narrative. This is done to explain the process of shaping and transforming women's images.

The classification of the many narrative space is still not as deep and extensive as it should be, which is a limitation of this study. In addition, the function of spatial storytelling in the work of Edward Yang has not been explored in detail. When considering the future of research that is connected to cinematography, it is hoped that this area will continue to make significant progress and provide additional opportunities for research and development of spatial storytelling.

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