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Reading a Film: Character Interiority in Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* (1989) and its Film
Adaptation (1993)

Film is an audio-visual medium; as such it 'shows'—rather than 'tells'—what is happening from an outside perspective. Geoffrey Wagner consequently suggests that in film, "we cannot see what we cannot see; in fiction we can" (183). George Bluestone similarly postulates that film "can lead us to *infer* thought [but] it cannot show us thought directly" and therefore "the rendition of mental states—memory, dream, imagination—cannot be as adequately represented by film as by language" (47). Film theorists and narratologists have thus maintained that film, as opposed to written works of literature, is inherently less well equipped to handle and represent character interiority—that is, to delve into a character's mind to reveal their thoughts, dreams, fantasies, memories, as well as emotional and psychological states. However, more recent analyses have demonstrated that there are indeed various "cinematic types of consciousness representation" (Alber 265) that closely mirror novelistic techniques for character interiority.

Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* (published in 1989 to critical acclaim), coupled with its film adaptation of the same title (1993; dir. Wayne Wang), presents us with one such example. A series of interconnected first-person narratives, Tan's novel focuses on the relationships between four young Chinese American women and their Chinese-born mothers from childhood through to adulthood. The film, too, centers on these eight women's past and present as well as the intercultural and intergenerational conflicts that arise as a result of clashing Chinese and Western

worldviews. Most importantly, the film very accurately transports the individual struggles, hopes, and motivations of each character. This essay thus argues that through various techniques—such as voice-over narration, as well as specific editing choices in cinematography and sound—Wang’s 1993 film adaptation manages to retain the same level of character interiority as Tan’s novel.

By virtue of being written in the first-person perspective of seven separate protagonists, character interiority is present throughout every aspect of the novel itself: thought processes (“I always imagined” [Tan 20], “I realize” [Tan 26], “The Moon Lady! I thought” [Tan 80]), emotions (“‘That’s okay,’ I say and I really mean it” [Tan 26], “instead of being grateful, I was hurt” [Tan 211]), memories (“I had always assumed” [Tan 27]), inner struggles and confusion (“I felt I had raced to a big turning point in my life” [Tan 210], “Why had he sent the check with the papers? Why the two different pens?” [Tan 211]) are explored in depth. As these quotations show, the characters’ inner voices are not quite interior monologues (which would represent the “chaotic, irregular and associative character of human thought processes” [Alber 280]); rather, each protagonist tells their story, both present and past, in an orderly fashion, providing the reader with context and explanations for the situation at hand as well as their recollection of the past. This interweaves memory and fact, personal and national history, conflict, love, (romantic) relationships, and the (dis)continuity between cultures and generations. It highlights how subjective, fractured and episodic memory can be, and raises questions of how reliable an account really is. Establishing character interiority through writing is arguably as close as it is possible to get to a true replication of a person’s inner voice—this type of representation of the protagonists’ inner lives is therefore quite convincing.

The interrelated narratives as well as the interweaving of past and present in the novel create two different kinds of unity: reminiscent of a series of short stories, each chapter—focalized

through one of the characters and consisting of that person's account of their past and present—can be read as a stand-alone vignette; yet their interconnectedness reveals that the novel as a whole is also a carefully constructed narrative of its own. Across its 330 pages, three generations of women, and a time period of almost a decade, the novel jumps back and forth between the mothers' and the daughters' narration, as well as the more distant (the mothers' mothers') past, the more recent past, and the present; it therefore employs complex non-linear storytelling and character development. Its form at once replicates the themes of the book (e.g., memory, dynamic interpersonal relationships and struggles, coming to terms with your personal, familial, and cultural past) and challenges traditional ideas of how stories should work.

The film adaptation of *Joy Luck Club* is widely regarded as being “a very close approximation of the original text” (Green 224). However, if the original narrative structure (as outlined above) already poses challenges for the reader, it is even more difficult to replicate in a comprehensible way once compressed into a two-hour film. This in turn means that editing is of crucial importance: while Wang's film adaptation seems to be, for the most part, a direct transposition—meaning the “novel is given directly on the screen with a minimum of apparent interference” (Wagner 222)—of its source material in terms of its overall plot, certain departures were made from the original text. This is justified given that “changes are *inevitable* the moment one abandons the linguistic for the visual medium” (Bluestone 5). In this case, the film constructs a narrative that is held together slightly differently than the novel: a narrative framing device is introduced in the form of a dinner party happening in the film's present-day, and all memory and flashback sequences depart from and return to this present at various, structurally relevant points (i.e., when moving on from one person and delving into a new character's perspective and mind) throughout the film. While neither the novel's original structure nor that of the film are linear,

Wang's reorganization of the narrative in this way allows for greater unity—the central designing principle of a film; the degree to which all relationships between a film's elements are clear and systematically interwoven (see Bordwell & Thompson)—as well as more immediate coherence.

Editing is crucially important in *The Joy Luck Club* to comprehend how the flow of the narrative moves into a character's mind and memory. To retain a maximum of the novel's character interiority, several techniques are cleverly combined during these scene transitions between the present-day (i.e., the narrative frame of the dinner party that all storylines depart from and consistently return to) and the more recent as well as more distant past as seen through the eyes of the film's various protagonists. A first point of interest here is the cinematography of these transitions: the shift in narrative focus from one person's perspective into another person's memories is represented visually through the camera's cut from the person who the narrative was previously focalized through and a pan over to the next person; once there, the camera moves from a long or a medium shot (where the actor's full body is visible at a distance, or their head and torso are in the frame) to a close-up of that same character (where only their head is visible); see figures 1–2. The character that the camera focuses on in these instances usually wears a pensive expression, eyes cast downwards or offscreen, indicating (without having to tell) the spectator that they are lost in thoughts.

Shortly thereafter, it cuts to this same person, usually in a similar position as before, except we have now clearly entered a memory sequence: present-day Lindo, for instance, thinks about June's twin sisters as abandoned children at the Mahjong table, and then becomes the child version of herself (see fig. 3)—we experience her past with her, and, more importantly, through her. This, in the same manner as the novel, highlights the subjectivity of memory. Another example is Anmei rubbing a barely visible scar on her neck during the present-day party scene right before her

younger self does the same thing half a century ago back in China (see fig. 4); this puts added emphasis on the recollection of past moments that this character is experiencing. Even if these transitions did not have any other indication as to the change in time that is occurring—such as the voice-over narration that this essay will explore shortly—these visual cues alone already implicitly focus the narrative on each new character and make it clear where exactly the film moves from the present-day into a character’s mind.

Subjective cinematography plays a vital role in establishing the inner lives of the characters on screen even outside of these transition scenes. Lindo’s memories from the time just after her arranged marriage, while they are not the only examples of this kind of camera work, offer two striking instances of this. Here, the camera “announces itself as an artistic instrument [that] can go anywhere, see anything” (Bluestone 15) and yet chooses to occupy a first-person point of view, literally giving us the vision of the protagonist and her world. The camera captures the first glimpses of Lindo’s husband in an approximation of the things Lindo first sees of him: his shoes, the bottom of his robe; then, suddenly, his face once the red veil is quite abruptly removed from her head (see fig. 5). A similar technique is used with eyeline matches (see Bordwell & Thompson)—a cut that shows a shot of a person looking offscreen (e.g., young Lindo looking to the side; see fig. 6) followed by a point-of-view shot of what she is looking at (the mole on her husband’s back, foreshadowing the plan she develops to escape her arranged marriage). Giving us the impression that we are occupying a character’s gaze and seeing what they are seeing brings us closer to the character’s thought processes even without verbal rendering of these thoughts.

In addition to the visual continuity editing as outlined above, the film’s use of sound during these transitions is subtle but quite telling: both diegetic and non-diegetic mood music plays a very important role to register the feelings of the characters and to get the viewer emotionally invested

in the story. Diegetic sound signifies any voice, music, or sound effect presented as originating within the film's world (e.g., the loud and swelling voices during the cocktail party hinting both at June's inner emotional turmoil and at the fact that she is ultimately still surrounded by her loved ones). Nondiegetic sound, in turn, is sound represented as coming from a source outside the space of the narrative. June being emotionally torn between her past (her mother) and her future (her twin sisters in China) is a good example for this: while the film transitions from flashback back to the present-day afternoon of her party, the score continues to swell dramatically, bridging the divide between June's recollection of her past and present and connecting these two instances in time (see fig. 7). Considering that the filmic genre of *The Joy Luck Club* can be classified as a melodrama (derived from Greek *mélōs*, 'song', and French *drame*, 'drama'), the score in general—not just during scene transitions—is an important aspect that should not be neglected when looking at the movie through the lens of character interiority, as it highlights important emotional moments for individual characters in a subtle yet meaningful way. Watching any given scene without the accompanying score would diminish the viewer's ability to gather a character's emotions. To sum up the techniques outlined above, the film thus employs “external simulations of internal states” (Alber 266) through facial expressions, bodily positions, and the use of music.

Finally, arguably the most obvious—and most important—technique in keeping the loss of character interiority minimal is the film's use of voice-over narration, closely mimicking the way that the novel is told in various characters' voices through their first-person perspective. Voice-over narration is a form of nondiegetic sound—sound that is represented as coming from a source outside the space of the narrative (see Bordwell & Thompson). In this case, the voice-overs are consistently spoken by the character whose mind we inhabit in each scene, and who appears on screen at the same time. These voice-overs do not take the form of interior monologues enacted at

the auditory level, nor do they come from the perspective of an omniscient narrator; rather they are what can variously be described as “narrated monologue” (Dorrit Cohn, qtd. in Alber 278) or “free indirect discourse” (Alber 279). As such, the voice-over narration in *The Joy Luck Club* is the closest approximation to the characters’ actual thoughts and feelings in the way that they were written down in the novel. Narrated in the past tense (again reminiscent of the novel), it also explains and contextualizes what is happening on screen at any given moment: “I realized for the first time they wanted me to take my mother’s place,” June tells us as she takes a seat at the table with her aunties to play a game of Mah-jong (see fig. 8); “Until that night, I didn’t believe I was a prodigy,” she narrates as we witness her ten-year-old self walk on stage at a piano recital (see fig. 9). During transitions into a flashback or memory, this is especially helpful as it gives a clear reason for connecting the present-day to a character’s backstory: Lindo (see fig. 2) for instance starts her recollection of her past by musing about June’s twin sisters (“To lose a mother so young, to wonder why...”) and proceeds to connect this to her own childhood (“Even to this day I wonder how my own mother could give me up”). Voice-over narration infinitely expands our understanding of this film by emulating the novel’s written renditions of the characters’ inner voices, thought processes, and emotions—because these are not often externalized or openly communicated between the characters themselves—and firmly centers the exploration of the protagonists’ intercultural, intergenerational, and individual struggles within the narrative. Considering the complicated non-linear structure of the story and its being condensed into a two-hour film, it also aids continuity and effectively recreates the effect of storytelling for the viewer.

Ultimately, the representation of character interiority can take a multitude of forms, not all of which are employed in Wang’s film adaptation of *The Joy Luck Club*: one could, for instance, further explore how filmmakers make use of captions or subtitles to simulate the internal processes

of a character's mind (consider BBC's *Sherlock*) or to simultaneously render thoughts that contrast the spoken dialogue in a scene (e.g., the balcony conversation in Woody Allen's *Annie Hall*). Still, the film adaptation of *The Joy Luck Club* demonstrates the overlaps between novelistic and cinematic strategies for the representation of consciousness and interiority: as examined in this essay, facial expressions and bodily positions, subjective cinematography and visual continuity editing including eyeline matches, the use of music, and voice-over narration are used to faithfully reproduce the type of narration employed in the novel. In conclusion, *The Joy Luck Club* as a novel/film pairing not only shows that it is possible to adequately and convincingly represent the inner lives of characters on screen—and thus indeed retain character interiority across different mediums; it also highlights how close an adaptation can come to capturing the essence of its source material.

Appendix



Fig. 1 Ying-ying transitioning into memory.



Fig. 2: Lindo transitioning into memory.



Fig. 3: Cut to a younger Lindo in her memory sequence; in a similar position as in fig. 2.



Fig. 4: An-mei touching the scar on her neck, in the present-day and as a child.

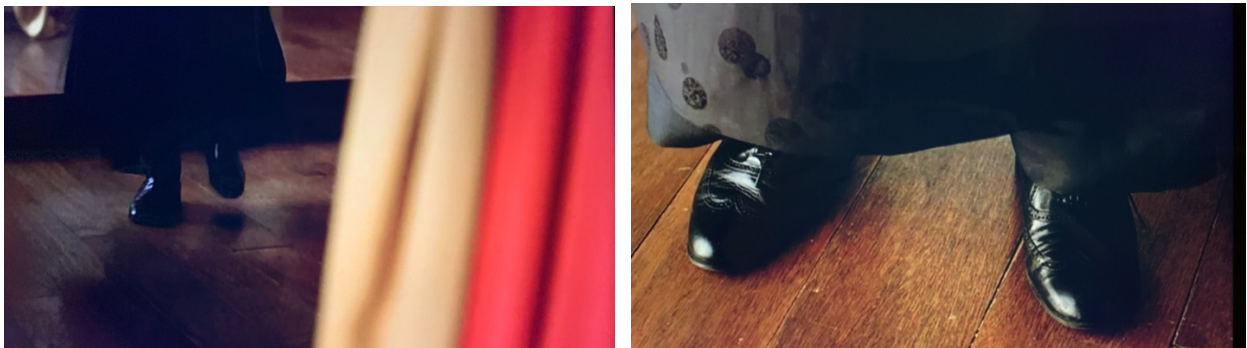
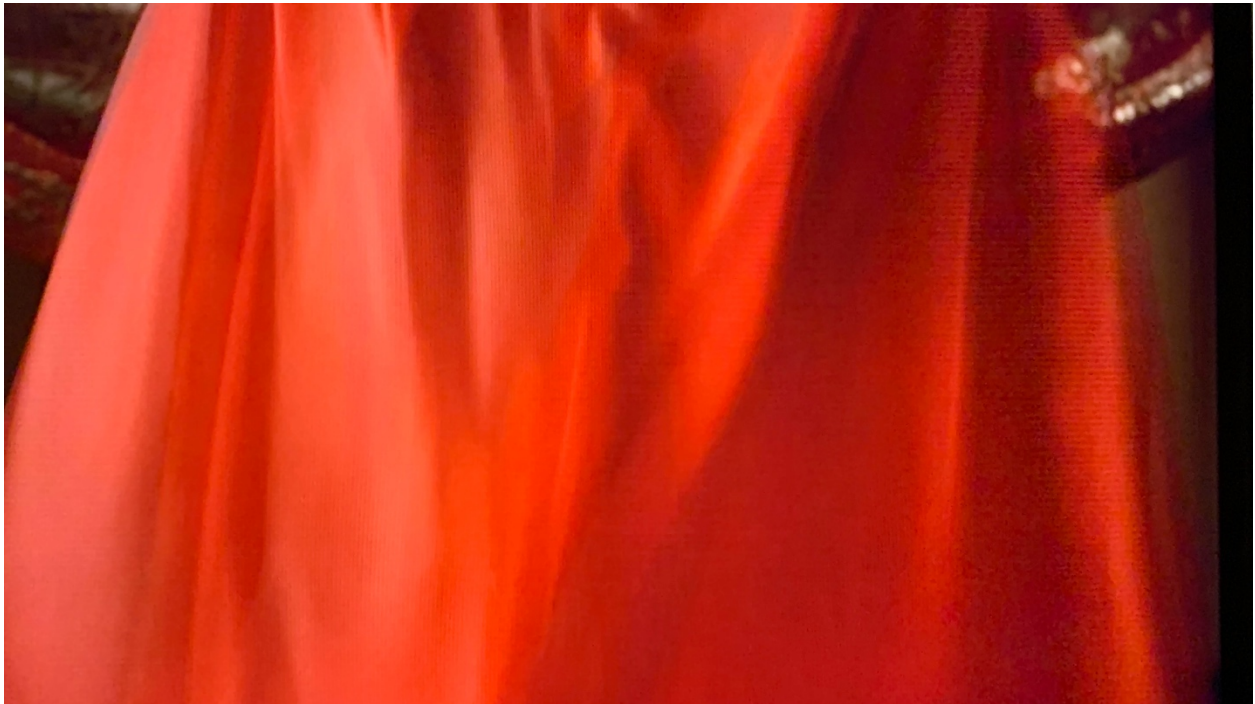


Fig. 5: The camera emulating young Lindo's first glimpse of her husband.



Fig. 6: The camera emulating young Lindo's view of the mole on her husband's back.



Fig. 7: June returning from flashback to present, while music accompanies the transition.



Fig. 8: June: "I realized for the first time they wanted me to take my mother's place."



Fig. 9: June: "Until that night, I didn't believe I was a prodigy."

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