Université de Montréal

The ambivalent identity of Wong Kar-wai's cinema

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Thèse présentée à la Faculté des études supérieures et postdoctorales
en vue de l'obtention du grade de Ph.D.
en Littérature
option Littérature et cinéma

Juin 2009

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Université de Montréal
Faculté des Arts et des Sciences

Cette thèse intitulée

The ambivalent identity of Wong Kar-wai's cinema

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Sommaire

Ayant réalisé neuf longs-métrages entre 1988 et 2007, aussi que plusieurs campagnes publicitaires, vidéo-clips, courts-métrages et projets collectifs, Wong Kar-wai est un des réalisateurs contemporains les plus importants actuellement. Issu de l'industrie cinématographique fortement commerciale de Hong Kong, Wong est parvenu à attirer l'attention du circuit international des festivals de cinéma avec son style visuel unique et son récit fragmenté. Considéré par plusieurs critiques comme le poète de la recherche d'identité de Hong Kong après 1997, Wong Kar-wai défie toutes les tentatives de catégorisation.

L'étude qui se poursuivit ici a donc pour objet essentiel de fournir une analyse attentive et complète de son oeuvre, tout en se concentrant sur les traits stylistiques qui donnent à ses films une unité. Ces caractéristiques correspondent à une certaine façon de raconter des histoires, de composer des personnages et des récits, de manipuler le temps et d'utiliser des ressources techniques de sorte que ses films offrent une identité cohérente. L'objectif est d'analyser les différents composants de ses images pour découvrir comment ses films communiquent les uns avec les autres afin de créer une identité unique.

Pour atteindre cet objectif, je pose comme hypothèse de travail que le cinéma de Wong est marqué par une structure dualiste qui permet à ses films de présenter des qualités contradictoires simultanément. La plupart de mes arguments se concentrent sur le travail du philosophe français Gilles Deleuze, qui a proposé une théorie du cinéma divisé entre l'image-mouvement et l'image-temps. Je considère que sa théorie fournit un cadre valide sur lequel les films de Wong peuvent être projetés. Tandis que ma recherche se concentre sur l'interprétation textuelle des films, je profiterais également d'une analyse comparative.

Mots-clés: Wong Kar-wai - Cinéma - Hong Kong - Cinéma Asiatique - Gilles Deleuze - Narratologie - Esthétique

Abstract

With nine feature films released between 1988 and 2007, as well as several advertising campaigns, music videos, short films and collective projects, Wong Kar-wai is one of the most important contemporary filmmakers currently working. Hailing from Hong Kong's highly commercial film industry, Wong has managed to attract the attention of the international film festival circuit with his visual style and fragmented narrative. Considered by many critics as the poet of Hong Kong's quest for identity post 1997, his cinema defies every attempt of standardization.

The main goal of this study is to provide an attentive and comprehensive study of his body of work, concentrating on the stylistics traits that make his films part of a coherent unity. These characteristics correspond to a certain way of telling stories, of composing situations and characters, of manipulating time and the use of technical resources so that his films offer a coherent identity. The objective is to analyze the different components of his images, to show how his films communicate with each other in order to create something unique.

To achieve this objective, I put forward the hypothesis that Wong's cinema is marked by a dualistic structure that allows his films to present opposite qualities at the same time. Most of my arguments are based on the thoughts of French philosopher Gilles Deleuze, whose own dualistic theory of cinema presented in his books Cinema 1: the movement-image and Cinema 2: the time-image, provides a valid framework upon which Wong's films can be projected. While the research concentrates on the textual analysis of films, I will also benefit from comparative analysis and additional disciplines.

Keywords: Wong Kar-wai - Cinema - Hong Kong - Asian Cinema - Gilles Deleuze - Narratology - Aesthetic

Resumo

Tendo realizado nove filmes de longa-metragem entre os anos de 1988 e 2007, assim como diversas campanhas publicitárias, video clipes, curtas e projetos coletivos, Wong Kar-wai é um dos cineastas contemporâneos mais importantes em atividade. Originário do ambiente fortemente comercial e competitivo que é a indústria cinematográfica de Hong Kong, Wong conseguiu romper limites atraindo a atenção do circuito internacional dos festivais de cinema com seu estilo visual único e narrativa fragmentada. Considerado por muitos críticos como o poeta da busca de Hong Kong por uma identidade pós-1997, Wong desafia qualquer tentativa de categorização.

A principal meta deste trabalho é a de fornecer uma análise completa e aprofundada de sua obra, concentrando-se sobre os traços estilísticos que fazem de seus filmes parte de uma unidade coerente. Estas características correspondem a um jeito particular de contar histórias, de desenvolver personagens e situações, de manipular tempo e aspectos técnicos do cinema de maneira que seus filmes ofereçam uma identidade. O objetivo é analisar os diferentes componentes da imagem para mostrar como seus filmes se comunicam entre si para criar algo único.

Para atingir este objetivo, eu desenvolvi uma hipótese de trabalho segundo a qual o cinema de Wong Kar-wai é marcado por uma estrutura dualista que permite que seus filmes apresentem qualidades opostas simultaneamente. A maioria dos meus argumentos será baseada no trabalho do filósofo francês Gilles Deleuze, cuja teoria sobre cinema também encontra-se dividida em duas partes, a saber, Cinema 1: imagem-movimento e Cinema 2: imagem-tempo. Eu considero que este trabalho fornece uma base metodológica sobre a qual os filmes de Wong Kar-wai possam ser projetados. Embora minha pesquisa se concentre na interpretação textual dos filmes, eu também me beneficiarei de análises comparativas e de referências provenientes de outras disciplinas.

Palavras-chave: Wong Kar-wai - Cinema - Hong Kong - Cinema Asiático - Gilles Deleuze - Narratologia - Estética

Table of Contents

Sommaire ii
Abstract iii
Resumo iv
Table of Contents v
List of images viii
Acknowledgements ix
Avant-propos x
1 Introduction 12
1.1 The cinema of Wong Kar-wai 12
1.2 Methodological framework: Deleuze’s movement-image and time-image 18
1.3 The passage from movement-image to time-image: crisis, evolution or coexistence? 22
1.4 Image, movement, time: Bergson and Deleuze 26
1.4.1 Frame, shot and montage 31
2 The perception-image: Wong Kar-wai and classical narrative cinema 35
2.1 The perception-image: the long shot 35
2.1.1 Story and discourse in narration 39
2.1.2 Transparency and self-consciousness in cinema 43
2.2 Locating the narrator 47
2.2.1 The author 47
2.2.2 From implied author to fundamental narrator 50
2.3 Manipulating time 55
2.3.1 Order 57
2.3.2 Duration 64
2.3.3 Frequency 67
2.4 Delegated narrators 69
2.4.1 Point of view and focalization 79
3 The affection-image 85
3.1 The close-up 85

3.2 The object....88
3.3 The any-space-whatever....94
3.3.1 From any-space-whatever to a space of disappearance....99
3.3.2 Hong Kong's (anamorphic) space of disappearance....103
4 The action-image: Wong Kar-wai and Hong Kong's generic cinema....111
4.1 The action-image: the medium shot....111
4.2 The action-image as generic cinema....114
4.3 Hong Kong cinema and its genres....118
4.4 Wong Kar-wai as generic auteur....122
5 The Time-image: purely optical and sonorous situations....141
5.1 Characteristics of the time-image....141
5.2 Wong's visual style and the *déjà disparu*....147
5.3 Purely optical situations....152
5.3.1 Rarefaction, or the nostalgic past....154
5.3.2 Saturation, or the modern urban....160
5.3.3 Signature style: short films, commercial and music videos....164
5.4 Purely Sonorous Situations....171
5.4.1 Rhythm, repetition and time: the case of *Yumeji's Theme*....174
5.4.2 Emotional connections: diegetic music and character composition....180
5.4.3 Latin music and cultural codes....184
6 Representing time and memory....191
6.1 Wong's cinematic time....192
6.2 From description to memory....202
6.2.1 Mirror-images and displaced identities....210
6.2.2 The powers of the false....217
6.3 Repetition and difference....220
Conclusion....228
Bibliography....234
Wong Kar-wai Fan sites....245
Wong Kar-wai's filmography....245
Feature Films....245

Collective projects....249
Short films, music videos and television commercials 250
Other films cited 252

List of images

1. Figure 1: Snapshots from *Fallen Angels, 2046, My Blueberry Nights* and *Happy Together* (pag. 38)

2. Figure 2: Snapshot from *Days of Being Wild* (pag. 60)

3. Figure 3: Snapshots from *Ashes of Time, In the Mood for Love* and *Days of Being Wild* (pag. 89)

4. Figure 4: Snapshots from *In the Mood for Love* and *2046* (pag. 90)

5. Figure 5: Snapshots from *Happy Together* and *Chungking Express* (pag. 92)

6. Figure 6: Snapshot from *Happy Together* (pag. 96)

7. Figure 7: Snapshot from *Fallen Angels* (pag. 98)

8. Figure 8: *The Ambassadors* (pag. 105)

9. Figure 9: Snapshot from *Happy Together* (pag. 109)

10. Figure 10: Snapshots from *Ashes of Time* (pag. 131)

11. Figure 11: Snapshot from *As Tears Go By* (pag. 151)

12. Figure 12: Snapshot from *Chungking Express* (pag. 152)

13. Figure 13: Snapshot from *As Tears Go By* (pag. 161)

14. Figure 14: Snapshot from *Fallen Angels* (pag. 162)

15. Figure 15: Snapshot from *My Blueberry Nights* (pag. 164)

16. Figure 16: Snapshots from *In the Mood for Love, Chungking Express, Days of Being Wild* and *Happy Together* (pag. 194)

17. Figure 17: Snapshots from *Chungking Express* (pag. 199)

18. Figure 18: Snapshots from *Ashes of Time* (pag. 209)

19. Figure 19: Snapshots from *Fallen Angels, Ashes of Time, 2046* and *My Blueberry Nights* (pag. 213)

20. Figure 20: Snapshots from *In the Mood for Love* and *2046* (pag. 223)

21. Figure 21: Snapshots from *Ashes of Time* and *In the Mood for Love* (pag. 223)

22. Figure 22: Snapshots from *Happy Together, In the Mood for Love* and *2046* (pag. 225)

23. Figure 23: Snapshots from *Days of Being Wild* and *2046* (pag. 227)

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my advisor, Tonglin Lu, as well as the professors at the Department of Comparative Literature of Montreal University, Amaryll Chanady, Eric Savoy, Jacques Cardinal and Najat Rahman, for their graceful encouragement. A big thanks also to Nathalie Beaufay and the people at CETASE; to the professors Silvestra Mariniello and André Gaudreault at the Department of Film Studies. I would also like to express my gratitude to the CAPES foundation in Brazil for the financial support to pursue my doctorate in Canada.

I am eternally grateful to my beloved husband Luiz, who never hesitated when I asked him to change his life completely so that I could follow my dream. Finally, I would like to thank my family for their unconditional support; our dearest friends, both the ones we made here in Canada and those who remained in Brazil; my cat Gaston, who literally stayed by my side throughout this entire process. Finally, a big thanks to my friend Rodrigo who, although far away, was the one person with whom I shared this experience the closest.

To my friends, who are my family

And my family, who are my friends

Avant-propos

The first Wong Kar-wai film that I ever saw was *In the Mood for Love* in 2001. At the time I didn't know anything about the film besides the movie poster with the images of Maggie Cheung and Tony Leung. I remember being as impressed by the film's lush aesthetic as by the director's mastering of time, by his ability to render a complex story from a few seemingly unimportant details. Feeling almost spellbound as I came out of the movie theater, I knew immediately that I wanted to find out more about him and the rest of his films.

At the time I was finishing journalism school and preparing to apply for a Master's Degree at the Faculty of Communication of the Federal University of Bahia, in Brazil, and Wong Kar-wai's name emerged as a topic of dissertation. It was only during the research for my dissertation that I realized the difficulties brought about by that impulsive decision: from the unavailability of his films in Brazil to the lack of bibliography, from the language barrier to my own ignorance of Hong Kong culture and cinema.

It soon became obvious to me that I needed to seriously broaden my horizons - both physically and intellectually - if I really wanted to understand Wong's cinema. That became possible in 2005 with the grant of a scholarship from the CAPES foundation and the Brazilian Ministry of Education to pursue my doctoral studies abroad. Professor Tonglin Lu was kind enough to accept my application and I left

everything - my job, my house, my family - to face an entirely new set of circumstances in Montreal.

Even though I had written an entire dissertation focused on film studies and criticism for my Master's degree, I did not have an academic background in comparative literature or cultural studies, let alone in Asian studies (let alone in a foreign language). Thus during my studies at the University of Montreal I had to start from the very beginning, and had it not been for Tonglin's immense patience and support, I don't think I would have been able to pursue such an intimidating undertaking.

It was also during this period that I became more familiarized with the cinema theory of Gilles Deleuze. I must confess that at first I didn't see how his philosophical concepts could be transported into concrete film analysis. However, the more I read Deleuze's books, the more it challenged me to see the ambiguity present in Wong's films, to the point where it seemed only natural to put them both together. In a sense, this thesis is the result of my double investigation: using Deleuze to better understand Wong Kar-wai and using Wong Kar-wai to better understand Deleuze.

In one way, even more than my academic trajectory it was my own personal experience of migration, my feelings of melancholy – *saudade* – and alienation that made it possible to understand a cinema that challenges the meaning of places and identities; a cinema that problematizes time and memory. It took me eight years and a complete change of cultural space to achieve that, but I don't think it could have been done any other way. And it was all because of one film.

1 Introduction

1.1 The cinema of Wong Kar-wai

With nine feature films released between 1988 and 2007[1], as well as several advertising campaigns, music videos, short films and collective projects[2], Wong Kar-wai has achieved something that few other filmmakers in the history of Hong Kong cinema can claim: auteur status. Furthermore, he has transcended the limits of his local origins to become one of the most important names in contemporary cinema. His films have conquered cult status all over the globe, reflecting a fascination that borders on the fanatical. His visual style has been reproduced in films, music videos and fashion editorials, while his aesthetics – along with every other topic associated with his work – have been discussed at great length on numerous Internet fan sites[3].

Part of this fascination stems from the fact that Wong stands in a unique, if not contradictory, position in the Hong Kong cinematographic industry: although his films have become cult objects in different parts of the globe, they are not popular among

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[1] *As Tears Go By* (1988); *Days of Being Wild* (1991); *Ashes of Time* (1994); *Chungking Express* (1994); *Fallen Angels* (1995); *Happy Together* (1997); *In The Mood for Love* (2000); *2046* (2004); *My Blueberry Nights* (2007). For more details about the films, see Filmography.

[2] Wong has directed one segment of the portmanteau film *Eros* (2004), co-directed by Michelangelo Antonioni and Steven Soderbergh, and one segment of the film *Chacun Son Cinéma* (2007), a collective of 33 shorts presented at the 60th anniversary of the Cannes film festival.

[3] A list of the fan sites can be found in the Bibliography.

local audiences[4]. Although his style can be considered commercial – incorporating high budgets by local standards, scored with pop music drawn from massive popular culture, using famous stars from the entertainment industry –, many critics associate his work with experimental and "art cinema", claiming that his films "work outside of the usual representational approaches that underpin classical narrative cinema" and "transcends artistic boundaries" (Wright 2002). And though firmly established in Hong Kong's culture and film industry, Wong addresses a global audience, in the sense that his multiple cultural references do not belong to a definite ethnicity, but rather present him as an "arthouse director" catering to audiences all over the world. His films have been compared to those of Jean-Luc Godard, Michelangelo Antonioni, Andrei Tarkovski, David Lynch and Quentin Tarantino (whose production company, Rolling Thunder, assured the distribution of *Chungking Express* in the United States), among other internationally acclaimed filmmakers.

Wong Kar-wai was born in 1958, in Shanghai, and moved with his parents to Hong Kong five years later. Like most of the shanghainese people who relocated to the British colony after the advent of communism in Mainland China, Wong and his family kept their own language and cultural habits, which included going to the movies to watch films in Mandarin. Wong has spoken about his memories of growing up in Hong Kong in the 1960s and how it has impacted his vision as a filmmaker, which becomes apparent in the recreation of this epoch in films like *Days of Being Wild*, *In The Mood for Love* and *2046*.

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[4] His highest grossing film in Hong Kong box offices is still *As Tears Go By,* which grossed HK $11,532,283. All of his subsequent films grossed between HK$ 6 million and HK$ 10 million, which is not considered much by industry standards, especially considering the films' budgets and all-star casts. These numbers were provided by The Internet Movie Database (IMDB).

Wong started in the entertainment industry in the 1980s, after graduating from the Hong Kong Polytechnic, where he majored in graphic design. He landed a job as scriptwriter and producer at TVB, Hong Kong's biggest television station, where he worked on two series before moving on to the film industry. He started working under the tutelage of director Patrick Tam writing scripts for action and adventure films, though Tam stated that Wong never finished an entire script by himself – the closest he got was *Final Victory* (1987), which Tam had to finish himself (Teo 2005:13). Perhaps herein lies the nature of Wong's seemingly haphazard filming practices. There are widespread rumors that the director never has a finished screenplay, but rather tends to scatter ideas which only become coherent at the editing room; that he frequently changes plots and characters in the midst of shooting; that he pitches his films to his cast and crew from nothing more than photographs, poems or songs[5].

While the stories propagated about him in the press do not always provide reliable information, they at least give us an interesting insight into Wong's method of filmmaking. Many of his films evolve from one single idea – for example, it has been publicized that Wong was planning on shooting a futuristic story about Beijing (which later became the idea for *2046*) before he went on to film *In The Mood for Love*, and that this film was supposed to revolve around the relationship between food and romance – an idea that, perhaps, sparked the project for *My Blueberry Nights* (Teo 2005:114-115).

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[5] This has apparently caused tensions between the director and some of his stars, which have been amply publicized in the press. In an interview for *The Guardian*, actor Tony Leung claims that he was tricked into playing a gay character in *Happy Together*. "Originally my character wasn't gay", he says, but when production started, the first scene was a love scene between him and Leslie Cheung. "I was surprised, but not angry". (Rose 2004)

After his directorial debut in 1998 with *As Tears Go By,* Wong directed and produced his second feature film, *Days of Being Wild* (1990). While the film was not a success at the local box office, it gained major critical recognition and received five awards at the Hong Kong Film Festival, including best picture, director and cinematographer (for Christopher Doyle). His subsequent films, *Chungking Express* (1994), *Ashes of Time* (1994) and *Fallen Angels* (1995) have all been awarded prizes at the same Festival. In 1997, *Happy Together* premiered at the Cannes Film Festival and received a prize for best director, which helped establish Wong's name internationally and marked the beginning of a long lasting relationship with the French festival. *In the Mood for Love* (2000), *2046* (2004) and *My Blueberry Nights* (2007), Wong's first English language film, all premiered there (though only *In The Mood for Love* was awarded a prize). In 2006 Wong became the first Chinese filmmaker to preside over the Festival's Jury.

Meanwhile, Wong's public image of a mysterious and somewhat eccentric filmmaker grew with each film. He became known as a perfectionist who shoots each scene from every possible angle, has no problem mobilizing crew and cast to shoot extra scenes, and takes an exceptionally long time to finish his films[6]. *2046*, his longest lasting project to date*,* took approximately five years to produce – a record by Hong Kong's fast standards –, and even so the director only stopped because he had a deadline. The film was scheduled to open the 2004 Cannes Film Festival but Wong kept working on the film literally to the last minute, pushing back the festival's

[6] During the filming of *Happy Together*, Wong has reportedly made the pop singer Shirley Kwan fly to Argentina for a major role in the film, only to leave it entirely out of the final cut of the film. (Bordwell 2000:271)

schedule[7]. After the film failed to win an award, Wong changed it once more to its known final format, causing again much speculation in the press.

In spite of his reputation as the *enfant terrible* of Hong Kong cinema, Wong managed to keep working in the midst of its highly competitive and commercial cinema, thanks unquestionably to his international recognition as a major talent. In the mid-1990s he opened his own production company, Jet Tone, which produces television commercials and music videos besides feature-length films. Wong has recently made his first feature film in the United States, *My Blueberry Nights*, which stars Hollywood actors and was financed by international companies.

Whether it is popular or experimental, superficial or complex, local or global, Wong's work is constantly transforming and challenging conventional assumptions of narrative, cinema and culture. For these and other reasons, I consider his films to be highly relevant as a topic for analysis, especially since they can be approached from many different angles: from film studies to cultural studies, from psychoanalysis to gender studies, and so on. This plurality can, nonetheless, be incredibly challenging for anyone attempting to carry out a comprehensive analysis of his cinema, which is reflected in the current state of the literature published on this subject. While one finds an increasing collection of books about Hong Kong cinema published in the last few years, ranging from theoretical compilations and social studies to "inside the industry" guides, in most of these books Wong is often treated separately, sometimes mentioned only as a footnote exception to the commercialism that dominates the local industry.

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[7] "We finished the first reel of the film just one hour before we got on the plane to Paris", says Wong in an interview for *Time* magazine (Walsh 2004).

And although book-length studies solely dedicated to Wong's oeuvre are finally starting to appear in the literary field, these seem to be preliminary works focusing only on selected characteristics of his style.

Wong Kar-wai (Lalanne et al. 1997), published in 1997 and which presents a series of articles about several individual aspects of Wong's cinema, has the merit of being the first book to consolidate the discovery of a new talent, which is a given fact by now. More recently, Peter Brunette (2005) and Stephen Teo (2005) published more complete and updated works on Wong's cinema, with the first being a sort of introductory guide to his films, while the second focuses on Wong's cinematic and literary influences. Also noteworthy are individual book-length studies on the films *Happy Together* (Tambling 2003) and *Ashes of Time* (Dissanayake 2003), which are part of a series of books about landmark Hong Kong films published by the Hong Kong University Press.

In the academy, Wong's adventurous aesthetic has provoked almost the same kind of admiration that it has generated in the general public. He earned the attention of film researchers and students with his very first film, and since then his works have been frequently shown in film classes and chosen as topic of dissertations. Few studies, however, have been completed in which this body of work is analyzed in its entirety and with the methodological discipline of film studies. In general, critics note that his visual style is based on the use of unusual camera angles, filters and saturated colors, and fragmented or fast-paced editing. These techniques are often criticized as being superficial and reminiscent of 'MTV aesthetics' and labeled as postmodern pastiche. Contrastingly, with respect to content, Wong is characterized by his

obsession with themes of time and memory; by his moments of contemplation in which there is an undeniable sense of melancholy; and by a romantic longing and desire that give his films a profoundly cerebral quality. This leads me to believe that, while most of the critics have been able to recognize the ambiguities in his films, they have not made a conscious effort to examine all of his works in light of a coherent and comprehensive framework.

1.2 Methodological framework: Deleuze's movement-image and time-image

As we just saw, Wong Kar-wai's cinema seems to be based on multiple dualisms: high art/popular, commercial/independent, visual/literary, local/global etc. My argument is that his cinema cannot be classified as only commercial or as only experimental, as merely superficial or as deeply profound, because in each case it is both (and more) at the same time. These dualisms expand to form the very structure of his cinema – in other words, they are exactly what constitute his individual style, or his poetics. In this sense, they do not represent complete opposites but complementary sides of a whole. Instead of canceling each other out, each part of the dualism exists in a symbiotic relationship with the other. Wong's cinema obtains consistency only through a series of ambiguities.

Considering that, I believe that a textual analysis methodologically rooted in film theory is in order. My analysis will be mostly based on, although not limited to,

the theories of the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze, whose books on cinema, *Cinema 1 – The movement image (1986 ; 1983)* and *Cinema 2 – The time image (1989 ; 1985)*, remain to this date among the most illuminating on the subject. Deleuze formulated his theories upon a dualism between the concepts of movement-image and time-image, which offers a valid structure upon which Wong's own dualisms can be projected. As we shall see, Deleuze's philosophy deeply resonates in every level of Wong's films, from the dualistic nature of representation to the perception of time and memory, from the opposition between the surface of the image and its meaning to the abstract qualities of the space.

While many authors have noticed the relationship between Deleuze and Wong, no one so far has attempted to elaborate these connections in a systematic way. This does not mean that I will be merely applying Deleuze's categories to Wong's films but, rather, that I will extend his taxonomy of cinematic signs and images to my own interpretation of Wong's cinema. With his theoretical structure, Deleuze not only explored new possibilities of thinking about cinema but he also extended the limits of film theory. Furthermore, I consider that a deleuzian approach will contribute as much to the study Wong's films as it will help to expand Deleuze's theory beyond the limits of European modernist cinema. However, seeing that Wong's films are rarely exemplary of any individual category and are constantly challenging the rules, I cannot see how any analysis based on a single theory would be comprehensive enough, and therefore I will draw on as many disciplines as possible in order to accomplish a comprehensive analysis.

Cinema 1 and *Cinema 2* represent a rather unique manifestation in Deleuze's career. As several authors dedicated to his work have noted (Bellour 1997 ; Bogue 2003), Deleuze had analyzed literature in his philosophical works and written entire books dedicated to authors such as Proust (Deleuze 1971) and Kafka (Deleuze 1975); he had also discussed theater (Bene and Deleuze 1979), music (Deleuze and Guattari 1973) and painting (Deleuze 1981) but, before the release of *Cinema 1* and *2*, he had rarely examined this particular art form that seemed to have fascinated him so much.

These books are also hard to classify since they do not belong to the usual array of film studies, nor are they books that use cinema to illustrate philosophical concepts; they are books about cinema and philosophy together. "It is a question of thinking cinema differently, of trying to think with cinema instead of about cinema, of writing with cinema a philosophy book" (Bellour 1997:24, my translation). For Deleuze (1991:08), filmmakers are not much different from philosophers in that both create and articulate concepts; the difference is that one uses words while the other uses images. "There is always a time, midday-midnight, when we must no longer ask ourselves 'what is cinema?' but 'what is philosophy?'" (Deleuze 1989:280).

Despite the philosophical perspective, his books display thoroughly organized analytical tools. In fact, *Cinema 1* and *2* are among Deleuze's "most architecturally conceptualised books (…) At the end of *The movement-image* there is even a glossary presenting the rudiments of a conceptual grid, with their rigorous definitions" (Bellour 1997:34). Deleuze develops an extensive taxonomy of signs and images found in

cinema[8], of which the six most important are the three manifestations of the movement-image (perception-image, affection-image and action-image) and of the time-image (opsigns, sonsigns and mnemosigns). I will discuss Deleuze's taxonomy of cinematic signs in greater detail; for the moment what is important to understand is that his main theoretical hypothesis is founded in the opposition between movement-images, which he equates with classical cinema, and time-images, which he associates with modern cinema.

In the classical system of the movement-image, the action is dominated by a sensory-motor organization of movement, that is, a system of causal motivation that links one action to the next. Time is represented in this system only mediately, that is, through the linear chain of successive events. The time-image, on the other hand, is an image that has become free from the classical narrative realism and represents time directly through the depiction of pure optical and sonorous situations. "A pure optical and sonorous situation doesn't prolong itself into action anymore, since it is no longer induced by an action" (Deleuze 1985:29).

In the next chapters I will employ Deleuze's taxonomy of signs and images not only as analytical tools to interpret Wong Kar-wai's films, but also as a theoretical framework. The text will be subdivided according to each of these signs: in Chapter 2, the perception-image, I will examine the general narrative elements of Wong's films, and more specifically the dualism between objectivity and subjectivity of the narrating agency; in Chapter 3, the affection-image, I will introduce Deleuze's concept of the

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[8] Eighteen of them, to be somewhat precise (Bogue 2003; see box on page 71). However, as Bogue explains, this number is not to be taken as final since some of the signs are equivalent and a number of them are even ignored by Deleuze himself.

any-space-whatever to analyze Wong's representation of intimate, public and imaginary spaces. In Chapter 4, the action-image, I will examine Wong's role in the context of Hong Kong cinema and how his films deal with its genre-based structure. As we move from movement-image to time-image, I will introduce the concepts of purely visual and sonorous situations to analyze Wong's visual aesthetics and the use of sound and music in his films in Chapter 5. Since the time-image is the direct representation of time, Chapter 6 will deal with Wong's representation of time and memory. Finally, I will argue that Wong's dialectical structure is a reflection of Hong Kong's own ambivalent identity as a city perched between local and global, East and West. Instead of analyzing each film separately, as it has been done before, I will focus on the common elements between them, on what makes them part of a coherent whole.

1.3 The passage from movement-image to time-image: crisis, evolution or coexistence?

Since we are contemplating the application of Deleuze's movement-image and time-image to the analysis of Wong Kar-wai's cinema, it becomes important to make a few preliminary clarifications about these concepts, especially considering the passage from one system to the other. Deleuze begins *Cinema 1* by saying "this study is not a history of the cinema" (1986:ix), but he speaks in historical terms nonetheless. According to him, the advent of the time-image can be traced to Europe, more

specifically Italy (and later France and Germany), after the devastation caused by the Second World War and other reasons which are both internal and external to cinema, as he writes:

> The war and its consequences, the unsteadiness of the 'American Dream' in all its aspects, the new consciousness of minorities, the rise and inflation of images both in the external world and in people's minds, the influence on the cinema of the new modes of narrative with which literature had experimented, the crisis of Hollywood and its old genres… (Deleuze 1986:206).

For Deleuze, the time-image is introduced by a crisis of the movement-image, when all of its rules have been pushed beyond their breaking point. Undoubtedly, even in Hollywood there have always been authors who pushed the boundaries of the movement-image, and there have always been moments of "modernity" in the classical period of cinema, but those limits were not entirely surpassed until the emergence of modern cinema. "Realism, despite all its violence – or rather with all its violence which remains sensory-motor – is oblivious to this new state of things (…) We need new signs" (Deleuze 1986:206-7). Italian neo-realism was the first movement to have forged this new system of signs, with the creation of purely sonorous and optical situations, the haphazard drifting of unmotivated but charming characters, the coming and going of situations, which finally liberated the cinematographic image from its sensory-motor organization. This way, the end of the Second World War was not only the historical point of appearance of the time-image but of modernity in cinema as a whole. Indeed, there are several moments in his books when Deleuze uses these terms

as interchangeable, as if movement-image was but a synonym for classical realistic cinema, and time-image for modern cinema.

These are, perhaps, some of the most criticized arguments of his theory, since they suggest that the passage from movement-image to time-image could be treated in terms of rupture and evolution. Even the materiality of his books, divided into two volumes, indicates that he conceived cinema as two clearly separate moments in history, the ending of one and the beginning of the other being brought about by a socio-political crisis. If this were the case, would we have to develop a new system of signs to analyze contemporary, non-European cinemas such as Wong's?

Instead, I suggest that we understand the passage from the movement-image to the time-image not as a precise historically and geographically located moment, but as the result of any moment of crisis. Cinema changes when it has to respond to unprecedented social and historical configurations, whatever they are. For specialists in Hong Kong culture, such as Ackbar Abbas, the situation of the territory in the 1980s was one of these critical moments. In the years that have followed the signing of the Sino-British contract returning Hong Kong to Chinese domain in 1997, "it has become increasingly apparent that a new Hong Kong cinema has been emerging (…), with names like Ann Hui, Tsui Hark, Allen Fong, John Woo, Stanley Kwan and Wong Kar-wai gaining not only local acclaim but also a certain measure of international recognition" (Abbas 1997:16).

However, while the concepts of movement-image and time-image remain applicable to Hong Kong 's contemporary cinema, we have yet to consider the nature

of the passage from one system to the other. Deleuze appears to see the passage from movement-image to time-image as an unquestionable evolution to be experienced by cinema. We can clearly trace the evolutionary character in his arguments: "Sometimes it is an evolution from one aspect to the other: beginning with trip/ballad films with the sensory-motor connections slackened, and then reaching purely optical and sonorous situations" (1989:4). While he signals to elaborate a neutral and objective taxonomy of the various signs and images in cinema, inspired by the work of semiotician Charles S. Peirce, it is still possible to identify a personal preference towards the time-image. Even though he refuses to acknowledge this, it becomes clear that Deleuze considers the time-image to be not only more complex, but also more essential, than the movement-image. He concludes that the time-image is the ultimate representation of cinema, one that has always existed inside the movement-image but has never been able to be fully grasped until the emergence of modern cinema. "The direct time-image is the phantom which has always haunted the cinema, but it took modern cinema to give a body to this phantom" (Deleuze 1989:41).

Perhaps the circumstances of the time forced Deleuze to insist in terms of opposites, in order to clearly demarcate the ideological differences between classical and modern cinema. Such a clear-cut distinction, however, is no longer applicable to Wong's cinema, where there is not a rupture *per se*, but rather a combination of seemingly opposite concepts. The tension between the time-image and the movement-image can no longer be thought of in terms of opposites, but as a more complex dualism. I have to agree with Suzanne Hême de Lacotte (2001) when she argues that the passage from movement to time-image is not "historical, even less chronological,

but it is of a different nature: it is natural of the cinematographic image, of its essence, to divide itself into two images"[9]. In order to understand not only Wong's cinema but also that of many other contemporary artists, it is imperative to think about the time-image and the movement-image as complementary sides of the same image, in which one is no more important or essential than the other.

1.4 Image, movement, time: Bergson and Deleuze

Before we move any further into Deleuze's theories, it is important to examine a number of the fundamental concepts described in *The movement-image* and *The time-image*, especially those of image and movement since they are at the very core of Deleuze's arguments. His philosophical point of view in the beginning of *The movement-image* is deeply influenced by Henri Bergson's work, especially in *Matter and Memory* (1911) and *Creative Evolution* (1954). Bergson's concepts of time, movement and materiality are, according to Deleuze, perfectly adaptable to the cinematographic image: "despite the rather overhasty critique of the cinema that Bergson produced shortly afterwards, nothing can prevent an encounter between the movement-image, as he considers it, and the cinematographic image" (Deleuze 1986:xiv). Bergson proposes that we no longer oppose movement as something that

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[9] *« L'image-mouvement et l'image-temps sont deux images absolument complémentaires, l'une ne peut pas être pensé sans l'autre, comme l'actuel ne peut pas être pensé sans le virtuel, le passage de l'une à l'autre n'est pas historique, encore moins chronologique, il est d'une autre ordre; il est de la nature de l'image cinématographique, de son essence, de se répartir sous forme de deux images »* (Hême de Lacotte 2001:96)

occurs only in the 'outside' physical world and image as something that occurs only in the 'inside' world of consciousness but, rather, we should think of image as movement and materiality. Deleuze also believes that cinematographic images are, at the same time, images and movement, consciousness and materiality. He goes on to explore Bergson's three theses on movement found in *L'évolution créatrice*, as they are summarized below:

1. That movement is an indivisible, heterogeneous and irreducible process, or at least it cannot be divided without changing qualitatively each time it is divided. This is a difficult concept to grasp since our own perception understands movement by reconstituting it from a succession of precise individual moments or immobile cuts/slices in space. But movement or the passage of time is more than the mere succession of precise moments – it is, essentially, what happens in between these moments. By trying to reduce movement to a succession of cuts in space we create an illusory sense of time, "the abstract idea of a succession, of a time which is mechanical, homogeneous, universal and copied from space, identical for all movements" (Deleuze 1986:01), while real movement happens behind our backs.

2. That the mistake is to reconstitute movement from immobile instants or positions, but there are "two ways of doing this: the ancient and the modern" (Deleuze 1986:04). The ancient way is to reconstitute movement from privileged instants or poses that were thought to represent the whole; the

modern way is to reconstitute movement from ordinary moments (any-instant-whatever) chosen randomly to simulate the idea of continuity. Because they are chosen randomly, these moments can be simple as they can also happen to be remarkable, but differently from the privileged moments they remain as any-instant-whatever. What Deleuze realizes, as we will see later on, is that the art of cinema relies on the very idea of the any-instant-whatever, of images that are essentially no different from any other that came before or after it but still have the ability to be singular.

3. That movement itself can only by represented by a mobile cut in the whole or in duration. Duration (*durée*) is understood as “neither given nor giveable”, “a whole that changes and does not stop changing” (Deleuze 1986:08). According to Bergson, the mistake that many scientists make is to consider the whole as given, when in fact it is a constantly changing thing, therefore open and unpredictable. In this way, real movement can only be expressed by mobile cuts that correspond to qualitative changes in the duration. Bergson’s famous example of the sugar dissolving in water remains helpful to understand this: by putting some sugar in a glass of water (and by waiting for it to dissolve or by accelerating the process by stirring it with a spoon), it is not only the sugar and the water that change qualitatively with the movement, but the whole encompassing sugar, water, spoon, glass and everything around it.

At the end of the first chapter Deleuze concludes that

> 1) there are not only instantaneous images, that is, immobile section of movement; 2) there are movement-images which are mobile sections of duration; 3) there are, finally, time-images, that is, duration-images, change-images, relation-images, volume-images which are beyond movement itself (Deleuze 1986:11).

This is where Deleuze's own theory of cinema starts to emerge, as he begins to apply these categories of images to the cinematographic medium. It is important to remember that up until this point he has agreed with Bergson's theories in all aspects but the nature of the cinematographic image. In *L'évolution créatrice* Bergson compares cinema with human perception, arguing that both produce a false idea of movement through the succession of singular images (precise cuts).

> We take snapshots, as it were, of the passing reality, and, as these are characteristics of reality, we have only to string them on a becoming abstract uniform and invisible, situated at the back of the apparatus of knowledge (…) We hardly do anything else than set going a kind of cinematograph inside us (Bergson 1954:322).

What Bergson fails to see, says Deleuze, is that the cinematographic image differs from regular human perception in that movement is already a part of its materiality, and not something associated afterwards. "In short, cinema does not give us an image to which movement is added, it immediately gives us a movement-image" (Deleuze 1986:02). According to him, Bergson's (mis-)conception of the cinematic medium prevented him from associating the cinematographic image with the movement-image. For him, it is clear that cinematographic images give us mobile cuts

in the duration, mobile because they are dynamic: they can express the idea of the constant changing and heterogeneity of the movement.

There is yet another important component to the bergsonian equation image = movement, which is image = movement = materiality. We saw earlier that, contrary to the old phenomenological concept that separated images from things, Bergson claimed that "all consciousness is something" (Deleuze 1986:57), hence image is also materiality. What is important for Deleuze is the discovery that there is no separation between a body and its actions, an object and its visible qualities, or an image and its movement. "Every thing, that is to say every image, is indistinguishable from its actions and reactions: this is universal variation" (1986:58).

If there is, indeed, no difference between things and images, and if they all exist only to the extent of their actions and reactions, what is to be said about human perception and consciousness? In other words, what separates the image from the perception of the image? Deleuze quickly identifies the existence of two categories of images, different not in nature but in behavior: one that acts and reacts immediately to another image, on all their facets and in all their parts, and one that absorbs all the action in one of its facets and reacts only *mediately* on another facet. This second kind of image is the living body and its consciousness, considered in this case as a "center of indetermination" that produces a sensible reaction.

> The thing and the perception of the thing are one and the same thing, one and the same image, but related to one or other of two systems of reference. The thing is the image as it is in itself, as it is related to all the other images to whose action it completely submits and on which it reacts immediately. But the perception of the thing is the same image

> related to another special image which frames it, and which only retains a partial action from it, and only reacts to it mediately. (Deleuze 1986:63)

The perception-image is a specialized and selective image. It is specialized because, unlike images that act and react with their entire surface, these images receive and produce actions only on a very specialized surface: the sensorial facet. It is selective because when faced with another image that acts upon it, its perceptive surface selects, retains and reacts only to certain elements, while others are discarded. "It is as operation which is exactly described as framing: certain actions undergone are isolated by the frame and hence, as we will see, they are forestalled, anticipated" (Deleuze 1986:62). In this way, perception is still inseparable from action; they are, only, different steps of the same system. As our language differentiates between nouns, verbs and adjectives, so our subjectivity is divided into perception, "selective registering of incoming movements" (Bogue 2003:35); action, which is nothing more than the delayed and mediated reaction to that which is perceived; and affection, which is the interval between the two.

1.4.1 Frame, shot and montage

As we have seen, Bergson conceives duration (durée) as an open whole in which matter tends to form individual sets, like the one containing the spoon, the glass and the sugar. These sets may seem closed and self-contained and yet they remain

connected to the open whole. Movement functions, then, simultaneously as the succession of individual moments in a closed set and the qualitative change in the open whole, "it is at the relationship between parts and it is the state [affection] of the whole" (Deleuze 1986:19). On the basis of this system (closed sets/open whole) Deleuze establishes relationships with the fundamental elements of cinema: the frame, the shot and montage.

Deleuze says, "framing is limitation" (1986:13), since the camera always delimits a portion of the world, leaving another portion unseen. Every frame refers to an out-of-field (*hors champ*), to something that is "neither seen or understood, but is nevertheless perfectly present" (1986:16). Take, for example, a shot-reverse-shot of two characters engaging in a conversation. We only see one character at a time, but the character that we do not see remains present nonetheless. If we consider the frame to be a relatively closed set, like the set formed by the glass of water with sugar dissolved in it, then we must envision a thread connecting a smaller set (a shot of the first character) to the bigger set containing what is unseen in this particular frame (a shot of her interlocutor); the out-of-field can become visible at any point, revealing another out-of-field and so on. Noel Burch (1973) distinguishes six spatial areas of the out-of-field: above or below the frame, to the right or the left, and beyond (away or behind) the camera. However, Deleuze notes that besides the relative aspect of the out-of-field, in which the unseen element can become seen at any time, there is an absolute aspect in which the out-of-field refers to the open whole whose change it expresses. The absolute aspect of the out-of-field reveals that the film is not a system completely

closed in on itself, that there's always something "outside homogeneous space and time" (Deleuze 1986:17).

The shot reproduces the same kind of relationship between a closed set and the open whole. The shot is understood in this case as both spatial and temporal, since it refers to the distance of the subject from the camera as well as to the duration of the scene. In one hand, it represents movement in a closed set (whether it is interaction between characters or a camera movement in an empty space) and, on the other hand, it shows how this movement produces change in the whole that is the film, "it is itself the mobile section of a whole whose change it expresses" (Deleuze 1986:19). Deleuze sees the shot as the intermediary between immobile cuts extending in space (represented by the frame) and mobile cuts extending in time (represented by montage). For him, the shot is the essential unity of the movement-image, which is subdivided into three parts: perception-images (the long shot), affection-images (the close-up) and action-images (the medium shot).

These shots are finally organized in the film's montage. "Montage (in one of its aspects) is the assemblage of movement-images, hence the inter-assemblage of perception-images, affection-images and action-images" (Deleuze 1986:70). Even though a film is not made of only one type of image – in fact, they are deeply interconnected and sometimes hard to separate –, Deleuze recognizes that one of them is always dominant in a film, to the point where he speaks of an active, perceptive or affective montage, depending on the preferences and particularities of the filmmakers style. He considers several schools of montage techniques, from the Soviet to the French, from the American to the German, but what is important to remember is that

in all of them montage “is always guided by a conception of the open whole or durée” (Bogue 2003:63), which in turn gives us an indirect representation of time. In the next chapters we will see how the three signs of the movement-image – perception, affection and action – are represented in Wong Kar-wai’s cinema.

2 The perception-image: Wong Kar-wai and classical narrative cinema

If the object of analysis is indeed to illuminate the conditions of existence – of production – of the text, it is not done, as people often say, by reducing the complex to the simple, but on the contrary by revealing the hidden complexities that are the secret of simplicity.
Gerard Genette, Narrative Discourse (1980:139)

2.1 The perception-image: the long shot

As we have seen previously, Gilles Deleuze divides the movement-image into three stages – perception, affection and action –, which he equates with the long shot, the close-up and the medium shot. Perception translates in classical cinema as a subjective point of view, as an object seen by an inside observer, in opposition to an objective image of the object "as it normally appears". To convey such subjectivity, the image usually suffers some sort of distortion (for example, an object seen by the eyes of a character appears blurred or in soft focus), whereas an objective image would try to conceal all traces of technical manipulation, appearing as neutral as possible. But this seemingly easy formula supposes a contrast between inside and outside that is not so easy to determine in film, since the point of view is constantly shifting from subjective to objective and vice-versa. Moreover, one could argue that an image supposed to be objective is already presented as seen "by someone", this someone being the director, the narrator or even the camera.

Deleuze notes that "the camera does not simply give us the vision of the character and of his world; it imposes another vision in which the first is transformed and reflected" (1986:74). In other words, the image provided by the camera is never completely objective because it implies a sensibility behind what we see. Pasolini associates this kind of camera-sensibility with free indirect discourse, supposing that the subjective image would correspond to a direct discourse and the objective image to indirect discourse. In the direct discourse we see the world as seen by the character; in the indirect discourse, we see the world from outside but in a way that we feel able to roughly reproduce the character's experience; in the free indirect discourse, we see the world as seen by the character but through another subjectivity. "It is, simply, the immersion of the filmmaker in the mind of his character and then the adoption on the part of the filmmaker not only of the psychology of the character but also of his language" (Pasolini 1988:175). We see what the character sees, but at the same time we also see that the camera sees him and that this encounter of two subjectivities ultimately transforms our experience of the image. Jean Mitry (1997) suggested that the cinematographic image should be considered neither as subjective nor objective but as semi-subjective: neither entirely inside the character, to the point where it becomes the character's subjective point of view, nor entirely outside of him, but *with* him, like an unidentified observer among the characters. That is why, for Deleuze, the perception-image corresponds not to the subjective camera but to the long shot, to the camera that consciously frames the subject, putting the spectator neither in the place of the subject, nor anonymously outside of him, but *being-with* him.

In Wong's films there are several moments where one can feel this camera-sensibility: for example, when the camera oscillates freely between people and objects, sometimes remaining active even after they have left the frame. Furthermore, the characters are constantly being framed from unusual angles or framed within the frame by windows, doorframes, staircase railings, mirrors etc., as if they were being observed by someone. This 'someone', however, can be the technical apparatus of the camera itself: in *Fallen Angels*, drops of blood from one of the killer's victims stain the camera lens, and in *Happy Together* the camera faces the sunlight directly. Pascal Bonitzer has developed the concept of "deframing" in order to designate abnormal framings that refer to "another dimension of the image" (Bonitzer 1982:106), or what Deleuze has called the absolute out-of-field. We recall Deleuze's argument according to which the out-of-field can either refer to the homogenous space and time of the narration or to the absolute whole of the *durée*. Such unusual frames are not homogenous or naturalized; instead, they refer to the absolute whole, to the place from which the narration is being produced (see Figure 1).

Who is behind these images? Who does this camera-sensibility refer to? Is it to Wong himself or his characters? Who narrates in his films? Is there a difference between who sees and who speaks? All of these are possible questionings raised by the perception-image, which we will discuss in the present Chapter. Before we explore them directly, however, it is important to look at the opposition between subjectivity and objectivity in narration in general, and in cinema in particular.

Figure 1: Deframings (scenes from *Fallen Angels*, *2046*, *My Blueberry Nights* and *Happy Together*, clockwise)

2.1.1 Story and discourse in narration

It is not surprising that Pasolini and Deleuze resort to linguistic analogy when speaking of the perception-image: the relationship between what is being narrated and the agency who narrates it is one of the fundamental questions of narrative studies. Aristotle and Plato already touched the subject in their classical division of the modes of dramatic representation: mimesis and diegesis[10]. Plato, in the book III of his *Republic*, distinguishes between two types of diegesis or narrative modes: he claims that the poet can either "present himself as the speaker" – what he calls *haplé* [pure] *diégésis*; or "deliver a speech as if he were someone else" – what he calls imitation or mimesis. Aristotle, in the *Poetics*, uses the same terms but with slightly different meanings[11]. For him the general category of dramatic representation is called mimesis, in the sense that art mimics or imitates reality. He then considers three possible ways to offer a mimesis: by "employing the voice of narrative without variation" (the poet as *apangellonta*), by

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[10] The term diegesis is also known as the fictional universe in which any narrative takes place. To avoid common misunderstandings between the two concepts, Gerard Genette proposed to use the French term *diégèse* to refer to the fictional universe, while the Greek word *diégésis* should remain attached to the Platonic definition (in opposition to *mimésis*): "*Diégésis*, therefore, has nothing to do with *diégèse*; or, if one prefers, *diégèse* (...) is by no means the French translation of the Greek *diégésis* [original emphasis]" (Genette 1988:18). This distinction, although useful, was not largely adopted by narratologists since it brings confusion at the level of derivatives and adjectives. For example, should *diégétique* (as well as intra- and extra-) be derived from *diégèse* or contrasted with *mimétique*? In this thesis, I will use the English word diegesis (without accents, like diegetic and mimetic) to refer to both concepts, as Wayne C. Booth (1983) has, providing that the context in which they are used be sufficient to clarify any possible ambiguities.

[11] For a detailed explanation of the differences between Plato and Aristotle's definitions of mimesis and diegesis, see André Gaudreault (1999).

"a wholly dramatic presentation of the agents" (actors as *prattontas*) or by "alternation between narrative and dramatic impersonation" (Halliwell 1987:33).

It is important to review these classical definitions because they teach us that the opposition that we find today in narratology between mimesis and diegesis is a rather modern concept, since it cannot be found (not in these terms, anyhow) either in Plato or in Aristotle. The opposition, if there is to be one, is not between mimesis and diegesis but between two possible modes of representation: with imitation (*prattontas* for Aristotle; mimesis for Plato) or without imitation (*apangellonta* for Aristotle; *haplé diégesis* for Plato). Many narratologists identify mimesis with drama and diegesis with written narrative, when originally both concepts referred to oral narrative, or at least to narrative that was performed immediately and *in praesentia* before an audience. As Andre Gaudreault writes:

> Indeed, in a time where literary works could not get a large distribution, the main poetic manifestations always already presupposed some sort of immediate physical contact between the poet (or his delegated: the *aèdes* or the *rhapsodes* who declaimed the text, or even the actors who performed it) and the public (who received the text) (Gaudreault 1999:56, my translation).

As Narratology developed from the analysis of oral to literary representation, the classical antagonism between mimesis and diegesis has given way to another, more modern opposition, between *showing* and *telling*. Percy Lubbock elaborates this idea apropos of Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*: "I speak of his telling the story, but of course he has no idea of doing that and no more; the art of fiction does not begin until the novelist thinks of his story as a matter to be shown, to be so exhibited that it will tell itself"

(Lubbock 1954:62). He believes that the story can be presented before us as "a picture gradually unrolled or a drama enacted", that is, with only so much information as "you or I might have perceived for ourselves, if we had happened to be on the spot at the moment" (Lubbock 1954:65). Hence the dominance of the scene in this novel. In Genette's vocabulary the scene corresponds, among other things, to a piece of narration where story time (what is being narrated) is (as) equivalent (as possible[12]) to narrative time (how it is being narrated), in opposition to, say, a summary, where the story of an entire century can be narrated in just a few lines. In the scene, dialogues and descriptions represent what is "viewed" through a character's perspective. By "showing" his characters from the exterior, as if he had no control over the time or the space of the drama, by allowing his characters to see and speak for themselves, the narrator simply pretends that he is transparent, and we have the sensation that the story "tells itself".

But then again, even in literary scenes containing only direct speeches it is not entirely possible to "show" events as it is in drama, for the simple reason that written narrative "is a fact of language" and "language signifies without imitation" (Genette 1980:166). "The scriptural narrator of nowadays wishes he could imitate by quoting [direct speech], but that is not enough – for that he would rather be able to open his mouth" (Gaudreault 1999:72). Therefore, the only way to suggest representation *in praesentia* is through an illusory sense of mimesis, that is, imitation of imitation. To put it in other words: since "'showing' can only be a way of 'telling'" (Genette 1980:166),

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[12] Naturally, complete isochrony is not only impossible but also undesirable and pointless, for it would give us a narrative with unchanging speed and length as big as the story's duration, like a map as big as the space it is supposed to represent.

one in which the poet pretends to be silent, its rules consist on giving the maximum amount of narrative information with the least possible distance.

This way, the question of presence and distance from the narrator becomes reduced to linguistic strategies. Concerned with this question, Émile Benveniste created another dichotomy, this time between story and discourse. Benveniste defines the story as such:

> The presentation of events occurred at a certain moment, without any intervention of the speaker in the narration. (...) Truthfully, there isn't even a narrator anymore. The events are posed as if they occurred as they appear in the story. (...) Nobody speaks here; the events seem to tell themselves (Benveniste 1976:238-241, my translation).

The discourse, on the other hand, corresponds to "every enunciation which supposes a speaker and a receiver, with the first rests the intention to influence the latter in any way. (...) The discourse employs liberally every personal forms of the verb: 'I/you' as much as 'he/she'" (Benveniste 1976:242). The discourse focuses on the subjective marks left by the enunciator in the message, which Benveniste called deitics, that is, signs in a phrase that refer it back to the time and place of its utterance, such as personal pronouns and demonstrative adverbs. Genette amplified this dichotomy by analyzing other narrative signs that refer to the enunciator's presence besides the deitics. According to him, in a narrative text there are not only the formal apparatus of communication – in Benveniste's terms, the "I's" and "you's" that denounce the presence of someone behind the story –, but other, more subtle indicators as well: "The minimal general observation, the minimal adjective a little bit more than descriptive, the

most discrete comparison, the most modest 'maybe' (…) introduce in the story a type of word that is alien to it" (Genette 1979:67).

One thing that appears clear by now is that there is no clear-cut division between the two sides of the opposition, or as Gaudreault puts it:

> A narrative work (film, novel or other) results thus from a tension between two poles: the diegetic universe (the narrated world) on the one hand and the agency responsible for this world (the narrating instance) on the other hand. (…) Every narrative is, at the same time, a discourse (from the narrating instance) and a story (from the narrated world). When the narration gives precedence to the narrated world, it is situated more toward the story whereas when it gives precedence to the narrating instance, it is situated more toward the discourse. (Gaudreault 1999:77)

Most narratives are able to shift quite freely from one extreme to another, and even in the most transparent scene all it takes is a simple "I", a brief commentary to reveal the subjectivity of the enunciator and remind us of his presence.

2.1.2 Transparency and self-consciousness in cinema

When it comes to cinema, the balance between objectivity and subjectivity of the narrative agency becomes even more complex, since cinematic narration can show events without verbally telling them. As we have seen, events represented directly have a tendency to appear transparent, as if they were happening before the audience's eyes. But this is a false impression in cinema because, unlike the dramatic representation,

filmic representation occurs *in absentia*: the images in a film are not presented immediately but are the result of previous selection and organization. They are mediated, that is, they reach the spectator through an agency (the camera, the narrator, the director) whose presence, as we saw, transforms the experience of these images.

This notwithstanding, throughout its history cinema has forged several different ways to emphasize the impression of transparency. In fact, transparency is the main feature of classical narrative cinema, which "seldom acknowledges its own address to the audience" (Bordwell 1985:160). Objective images are created by what Pudovkin (1958) has called the "camera-eye": for him, the camera should be positioned to function as the eye of an invisible observer present in the scene, so that the spectator would be able to see the story through the eyes of this 'silent witness'. According to this, any camera movement should correspond to the natural shift from the implicit observer's attention regarding the scene. Nowadays we know that the concept of the implicit observer has its own practical limitations, since there are "transparent" camera movements produced through mechanisms that empirically could never correspond to a movement of the human eye. In the end, Pudovkin's idea was not so much to produce an empirically possible implicit observer, as it was to produce an ideal one. Whatever the case, the technical apparatus should be "hidden" in a perspective that remains, if not completely transparent, at least as neutral as possible.

That means to say that in classical film narration, visual and spatial *raccords*, framing, camera movements, photography and sound score are manipulated in order to minimize the marks of the enunciation. Like in the literary scene described by Genette, the bulk of the narrative information is transmitted directly by the characters and their interactions with little interference from the narrative agency. All things seem to present themselves "as they appear" so that the spectator should not notice that there is any technical manipulation happening. His role is to concentrate on the task of following the story, without any conscious awareness of the way in which the story is being told or who is telling it.

Modern cinema, on the other hand, is known for its overt mode of narration, that is, for accentuating its own address to the audience instead of trying to conceal it. This self-consciousness translates in film as moments where the narrative interrupts the simple transmission of information to concentrate on the very process that makes this transmission possible. The spectator begins to see marks of enunciation, or traces of an author's style, for example, in camera movements that no longer reproduce the presence of an "implicit observer" but reveal the existence of an instance controlling the narrative, in unusual camera angles and music that introduces ironic commentary, or in a montage that shatters the linear and logical organization of events. For example, in the well-known French film *Last Year in Marienbad* (1961), the use of non-linear and illogical flashbacks implies not only that 'time is out of joint' but that the director is directly communicating with us.

What is unique about Wong Kar-wai's films is that they seem to be, *at the same time*, at both ends of this tension: they are examples of *extreme* transparency and of *extreme* self-consciousness of the narration. If we consider the narrative economy of his films we

will find that there is an attempt to render a casual, almost naturalistic representation of events. We follow the characters as they drift around their daily activities, in a narrative that appears to be fluid, almost random, showing nothing more than "regular individuals in daily life" (Auerbach 1968:549). The characters act without apparent causal motivations; main and secondary characters are constantly trading places, and the story is broken down into almost independent episodes. In the end, we are left with the *sensation* that these events are just happening before our eyes without any control whatsoever.

But if we look closely, we shall find that there is a lot of manipulation in the films, especially in the visual elements – odd camera movements, abrupt change of colors, lenses that distort the actor's faces – and in the editing – the endless repetition of mundane actions, the fragmentation, the lack of continuity in the narration of events. These elements remind us that there is someone behind what we see, that there is a narrative agency organizing the narrative, manipulating time and the order of events and even showing visible signs of its enunciation. This is, after all, a film we are watching. At first it might seem contradictory to assert that his films are two opposite things at the same time but, as only a close analysis of the narrative structure of the films will make clear, I argue that it is precisely through a high degree of self-consciousness in one level that the narrative can appear to be transparent in another level. In order to understand how this works, we have to investigate the double nature of the cinematic narrator. I will begin by asking one deceptively simple question: who narrates in Wong's films?

2.2 Locating the narrator

2.2.1 The author

We have seen that the "story that tells itself", as indicated by Lubbock, is essentially nothing more than a narrative strategy, since there is always someone controlling the narrative. As long as there is narration, there is a narrator: "In the most unobtrusive narrative, someone is speaking to me, is telling me a story, is inviting me to listen to it as he tells it, and this invitation – confiding or urging – constitutes an undeniable stance of narrating, and therefore of a narrator" (Genette 1988:101). This narrator can be more or less distant, more or less transparent, but he is nevertheless there, organizing the narration process and guiding us through it. The question, then, is not whether or not there is a narrator, but who (and where) is the narrator?

> Every phrase (every phrasal segment) of a written narrative can be the work, for instance, of a character about whom another character speaks (and who quotes him), of a character simply (a character in action, we could say), of a character-narrator or, still, of a narrator. And that without taking into account that, in the end, *all of these phrases can in some way be credited to the author*. (Gaudreault 1999:82, my emphasis)

It is not uncommon to associate the narrative agency with the real and concrete author of the text, since "the explanation of a work is always sought in the man or woman who produced it" (Barthes 1981:209). Even in cinema, where I am well aware that the creative agency behind Wong Kar-wai's films actually corresponds to a collective work of

writers, actors, musicians, producers, editors, photographers and many more, more often than not I find myself calling this agency simply "Wong".

As Michel Foucault said, "the name of an author is not precisely a proper name among others" (1981:283), for it bears at the same time a designation and a description. What it describes is a function, since the narrative work is always defined in function of its author: "The fact that a number of texts were attached to a single name implies that relationships of homogeneity, filiation, reciprocal explanation, authentication, or of common utilization were established among them" (Foucault 1981:284). What the name "Wong" designates, in this case, is not simply an individual but his whole body of work: it would be impossible to consider his films as an *oeuvre* without considering him an author. Therefore, when I refer to "Wong" as the name behind his films I am not referring to the biographical Wong Kar-wai, to the individual designed by that name – even though I acknowledge his existence –, but to the function it represents in relation to his films.

The author as function works just as well in literature as it does in collective media such as the cinema: when we go to the movies, the name of the director can be one of the most important (or the most important for some people) criteria for choosing the film, as important as the film's genre or the names of the stars on the poster. It is important to remember that in cinema authorship is less of a theory than a school of criticism devoted to provide filmmakers with the same kind of credibility and creative independence than that of the most revered literary authors. This is what defended *La politique des auteurs* created by the writers of the French magazine *Cahiers du Cinéma* in the 1960s. It had a few basic assumptions:

> That a film, though produced collectively, is most likely to be valuable when it is essentially the product of its director (…); that in the presence of a director who is genuinely an artist a film is more than likely to be the expression of his individual personality; and that this personality can be traced in a thematic and/or stylistic consistency over all (or almost all) the director's films (Caughie 1981:09).

Individual artistic expression was even more valorized when it happened in the midst of a strongly commercial industry, such as Hollywood, where the writers of *Cahiers du Cinéma* found most of their examples: Alfred Hitchcock, Vincent Minnelli, John Ford, Frank Capra, Howard Hawks, among others.

Therefore in cinema the author's signature is at the same time a label, a sign of coherence and consistency. Coherence, in this case, should not be confused with sameness but associated with a group of distinctive traces that make it possible to identify a style, even in cases where the author is known for his inconsequence or unpredictability. It is this assumption that makes possible an analysis such as this one: otherwise it would be pointless to compare Wong's films with one another in the manner of Antoine Compagnon's *méthode des passages parallèles* (Compagnon 1998), an analytical technique that, in order to clarify a challenging part of a particular text, gives preference to another text by the same author rather than a similar text by a different author. This method assumes that repetitions and self-references (which are, incidentally, abundant features in Wong's work) are to be treated as marks of an artist's style rather than products of chance. Coherence and complexity are, therefore, elements of interpretation that suppose an author's intentions behind his work, "if not as destiny, premeditation or preliminary intention, at least as structure, system and intention in the act" (Compagnon 1998:81, my translation).

2.2.2 From implied author to fundamental narrator

At this point it is important to clarify the concept of intention, since it is at the core of the debate regarding authorship. In traditional biographical analysis, the only possible explanation of a text lies in the author's intention (i.e., the sense of a text is what the author meant to say). This positivist perspective conceived that whenever an author writes something, he is fully expressing his intentions. In order to accurately gain access to his work, the analyst had only to search for the author's original intentions. This perspective was largely criticized by modern theoreticians who argued not only that reaching for the empirical artist's biography limited the possibilities for interpretation (in fact, it rendered analysis obsolete, reducing it to the question of finding "what the author had meant to say"), but also that searching for the exact context of production was an impossible task to begin with, since a text's meaning can change over time and transcend its author's original intentions.

In his famous essay "The death of the author", Roland Barthes declared that "writing is the destruction of every voice, of every point of origin" (1981:208). With the author gone, Barthes turned to the text itself for signs of its interpretation: "It's the language that speaks, not the author". But is it really possible to completely obliterate the author? Compagnon argues that, while the theory of the "death of the author" had the merit of promoting the reader to a more active position – "a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination" (Barthes 1981:213) –, its radicalism only dislocated the fundamental question of the author's intention. To attribute human characteristics such as intention,

knowledge and self-consciousness to the language is a way to deny the existence of the empirical author behind the text, when it is obvious that someone (either one person or many) had to send the message for it to be received. Every text must have a real historical author and interpretation is, as we have just seen, an exploration of this subject's intentions.

Ultimately, one must regard intention not as a desire premeditated by the author, as the biographical analysis does, but as structures found in the text, that is, intention in the act of creation: "An author's intention does not imply consciousness of all the details accomplished by the act of writing, nor does it constitutes a separate event which precedes or accompanies the performance" (Compagnon 1998:105). Finally, we can say that an artist's intentions are not "what he meant to say", for his final work might be completely different from his original intentions[13], but what he meant to say *by what he actually expressed*. As Compagnon says: "The intention does not precede the text, nor does it accompany it, but it is in action in the text" (1998:105).

Narratologists have spent a great deal of time and energy trying to come up with a name for this function of the author embedded in the work, this invisible agency between the flesh and blood author and its fictional creations. Wayne Booth's (1983) concept of the 'implied author' is located midway between the two extremes of the biographical analysis and the "death of the author". While "it does not deny the existence of important connections between the text's and the real author's views", it "inhibits the overhasty

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[13] Wimsatt and Beardsley, authors of the famous essay "The Intentional Fallacy" (1967), argue that the personal experience of the author is not only indifferent but also undesirable for the comprehension of the text: if we consider that the author has succeeded in expressing each and every one of his intentions, then they should be clear in the text and therefore the author's personal testimony would only be redundant. If, on the other hand, we consider that the author has failed in expressing his intentions, then his explanation would not add anything to the final sense of the text, but only to his original and unaccomplished desire.

assumption that the reader has direct access through the fictional text to the real author's intentions and ideology" (Chatman 1990:76). It considers the implied author as "the agency within the narrative fiction itself which guides any reading of it" (Chatman 1990:74). Since, by definition, an agency is "something that produces or is capable of producing a certain effect" (Chatman 1990:119), it does not necessarily have to be identical to the empirical author but it certainly is a part of it.

When it comes to narrative cinema, there seems to be a consensus about the existence of an agency responsible for the narration. "Tradition has always recognized, unanimously, the necessity (theoretical necessity, that is) of a fundamental narrative instance, responsible for all filmic narrative enunciates" (Gaudreault and Jost 1995:67). The question, then, is not if there is an agency such as the implied author in cinema, but what is the nature of such agency[14]. Christian Metz, speaking of Balázs, compared cinema's invisible narrator with the novelist:

> Béla Balázs had already shown how the film (…) was in reality closer to the novel because of the 'image-track' that an invisible narrator, very similar to the novelist and, like him, external to the facts that he narrates, unrolled before the eyes of the spectator in the very same way that the narrative of a novel aligns phrases that go directly from the author to the reader (Metz 1968:54, my translation).

Albert Laffay called this agency the "*grand imagier*":

[14] There are some film theorists who, like Barthes, negate entirely the necessity to anthropomorphize the narrating instance, preferring to attribute its function to the "narration" rather than to the "implied author". David Bordwell, foe example, argues that "To give every film a narrator or implied author is to indulge in an anthropomorphic fiction" (Bordwell 1985:62). The problems with this concept are the same that I exposed earlier: that the effort to de-anthropomorphize the narrator ends up being paradoxically more difficult to sustain than the other way around.

> This fictional and invisible character (…) who, behind our back, turns for us the pages of the album, directing our attention from the discrete index to this or that detail, slipping to us at some point the necessary information and especially putting rhythm into the chaining of images (Laffay 1964:81-82, my translation).

According to this, the 'invisible narrator' or *grand imagier* are the correspondent, in cinema, to the implied author in literature (see table 1).

LITERATURE	CINEMA
Author (writer)	Author (filmmaker)
Implied author	*Grand imagier*
Explicit narrator (optional)	Verbal narrator (optional)

Table 1

Returning to our question of who narrates in Wong's films, a short answer would go like this: it is Wong Kar-wai himself insofar as his name represents a function of the authorship exerted in his films, even though they are the product of a collective effort. In specific narrative terms, this authorship is expressed as an implied author, that is, as a fictional correspondent to his empirical being who guides the spectator's attention through the story. In cinema this agency is also called *grand imagier*, invisible narrator or fundamental narrator (*méga-narrateur*). However, cinema has more possibilities for saying, "I will tell you a story now" than the written language, since it narrates and shows at the

same time. Therefore, it seems that between the real author and the characters or an eventual explicit narrator, there is not only one but two narrating agencies, which is something exclusive to the cinematic medium. André Gaudreault believes that the *méga-narrateur* is divided into two: the *narrateur filmique* and the *monstrateur filmique*, according to the following table (adapted from Gaudreault 1999:107):

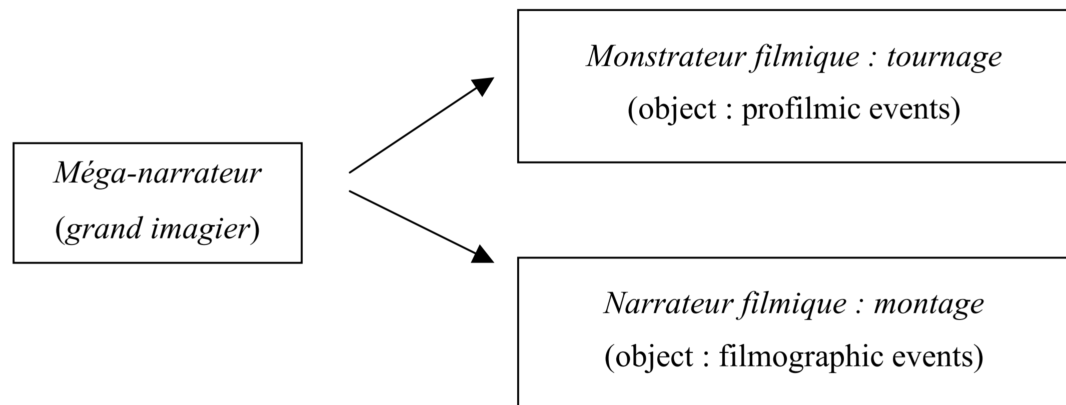

Table 2

The *monstrateur filmique* is associated with the narrating agency of dramatic representation (the *monstrateur scènique*), since his domain is what is represented directly in front of the camera. Originally, in the profilmic extract the narrator's presence tends to be more transparent. It is certainly the case in classical narrative cinema, where "[The narrator] tries to convince that, just like the camera of the monstrateur, he also is nothing more than a 'powerless' witness of the 'drama' that is produced 'by chance' in front of him" (Gaudreault 1999:115). Naturally, this does not rule out the possibility for the

monstrateur filmique of showing signs of its presence for, to recall Deleuze, the camera adds sensibility on its own: it expresses a point of view, it frames characters and objects in unusual ways, it moves differently, it controls focus.

On the other hand, in the filmographic extract – that is, in the organization of filmed events –, it is rather clear that there is a narrator manipulating the images conforming to its will. While in the novel the fundamental narrator can show signs of its presence through self-reference (the deictic "I"), in cinema it is by the manipulation of time, by changes in the order of events, by repetitions that the spectator is constantly reminded that someone is controlling what he sees. This is the domain of the *narrateur filmique*.

Gaudreault's classification enables us to understand that in cinema the function of the fundamental narrator is not fixed or uniform but it is always already multiple. The narrative instance does not belong to the montage alone, as some authors used to believe, but rather it occupies different functions in each of the filmic extracts: what it is placed in front of the camera (the profilmic) and the manipulation and coordination of frames (the filmographic). Going back to my analysis of Wong's cinema, it is particularly useful to explain why we can say that the fundamental narrator is transparent and self-conscious at the same time: being multiple, it can disguise its presence in one level, only to accentuate it on another level.

2.3 Manipulating time

Monstration is fundamentally related to the present: “we cannot have shown while showing” (Gaudreault 1999:102). Usually a profilmic event corresponds to a synchronous narration, where the time of the story corresponds to the time of the narration. However, as we have seen, a fundamental characteristic of the filmic scene is that it is always mediated, in the sense that the spectator sees images that were selected and organized by someone else before being presented to him: “The *monstrateur* always shows something that, in one way or another, has already happened”. In this sense we can say that the filmic scene is not the present but *presentified*, in the sense that it “coincides with the time of the spectator’s experience” (Metz 1968:73).

On the one hand, the *monstration* of profilmic events “has its nose stuck in the *hic et nunc* of the representation” (Gaudreault 1999:103), while on the other hand the montage is capable of breaking up this temporal continuum, of inserting past and future into the present. “It is effectively by the montage that the spectator experiences the sensation that he is not alone while he sees the story that develops in front of his eyes” (Gaudreault 1999:102). It is in the manipulation of time that the fundamental narrator produces the most noticeable signs of its presence.

In Wong’s films time is constantly being manipulated, stretched, compressed or even paused: sometimes crucial dramatic events go by so fast that they can be entirely missed, while dead-times and daily events linger on for much longer than the actual narrative information that they contain. At this point I am not interested in the representation of subjective time or the importance of time as subject matter of his films (we will discuss this in Chapter 6), but in narrative time and the different ways in which it can be handled. In his

Narrative Discourse, Gerard Genette distinguishes three categories according to which the time of the story and the time of the narration can be articulated: the order or succession of events, the duration of events and the frequency of events.

2.3.1 Order

To study the temporal order of a narrative is to compare the order in which events are presented in the narrative with the order of the same events in the story: any discrepancy between these two is called an anachronism. Seen from the moment in the narrative "present" when it happens, the event presented in the anachrony can either be in the past or in the future. The most common type of anachronism is the flashback, or analepsis as Genette calls it, the "evocation after the fact of an event that took place earlier than the point in the story where we are at any given moment" (Genette 1980:40). In classical cinema the flashback is usually introduced in the diegesis by a character's recollection, as he remembers something about himself or about another character, and the images *show* what the character *says* or *thinks*[15] – usually bringing to the surface narrative information that is needed at that point.

Typical flashbacks are rare in Wong Kar-wai's films, although there are a few. One example would be the flashback introduced by Tony Leung's character in the second part of *Chungking Express*. We learn that Cop 663 has just been jilted by his flight-attendant

[15] We can also have a prior event communicated verbally by a character (in a dialogue or writing a letter, for example) but not presented directly in images, in which case we have what Seymour Chatman called *recounting* (Chatman 1978:32).

girlfriend. After buying his usual coffee at Midnight Express, he engages in memories of how it was that they met and fell in love. His voice-over narrates: “On board every flight, there is a flight attendant you long to seduce. This time last year, at 25000 feet, I actually seduced one”, and immediately the image cuts to the couple in a love scene. In this case we go from the verbal past tense from the present of the image, in which the same characters can be represented differently by changes in clothes, visual aspect, voice or ambient, depending on the scope of the flashback.

The flashback can show events that occurred before the beginning of the narrative, or it can show events that occurred within the temporal limits of the narrative – in which case it can bridge narrative gaps or refer to events that were already witnessed, but with a different point of view. Additionally, it can introduce a short episode or, like Orson Welles’ *Citizen Kane* (1941), it can be as long as the film itself. In Billy Wilder’s *Sunset Boulevard* (1950), the main character has been killed in the first scene and narrates the story of how he ended up in the present situation.

When it represents a character or narrator’s recollection, and therefore it is justified inside the diegesis, the anachronism is considered to be relatively transparent and rarely points to the self-consciousness of the narration. However, when it is not justified it becomes clear that it is the work of a major narrating instance selecting what to show us and when. For example, towards the end of *Days of Being Wild* there is a flashback that shows a young mother handing a baby (whom we assume to be Yuddy) to a younger version of his stepmother. This flashback apparently functions to show us something that we have already inferred to by the story development. However, this flashback is not motivated by the main character Yuddy, since he could not have remembered the event at

such an early age, and especially since he does not own the point of view from which the scene is shot – he is more the object than the subject of this particular scene. It could represent the stepmother's memory, taken by the fact that she looks directly at the camera, but this would be hardly justified since she is not an active character in the story at this point. Therefore, this memory can only be coming from some place outside of the diegesis, i.e., from the fundamental narrator.

This becomes even clearer in the case of the flashforward or prolepsis, which evokes in the narrative present something that will only happen later in the story time. These kinds of temporal anticipations are much more rare than the flashback, since they cannot easily be justified within the narrative – unless, of course, the story is about characters with premonitory capabilities (as in horror films like *Don't Look Now* and *The Shining*). Because of that, flashforwards refer to the presence of a fundamental narrator that knows what is going to happen next and is in the position to anticipate the future. As with analepsis, prolepsis can be introduced verbally and represented visually. However, it is important to remember that the prolepsis must be a closed episode and the narration must return to the present after its finish – otherwise, if the narration continues linearly towards the future after the anticipation, then all we have is an ellipsis, a leap forward in the narration which omits certain events that took place in the diegesis.

The second scene in *Days of Being Wild* could be treated as prolepsis, since it advances visually images of events that will only occur later in the story. Yuddy's courtship of So Lai-chen is suddenly interrupted by images of a forest (Figure 2). The camera pans sideways, as if moving from the inside of a helicopter, revealing the film's title against the green backdrop, to the sound of slow tropical music. Why are we seeing this image?

Normally, the prolepsis functions to attract the curiosity of the spectator by showing glimpses of the near future. For example, in Sydney Pollack's *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?* (1969) the story of the dance contest is punctuated by scenes of the main character's arrest, which increases curiosity towards the moment when we actually see the protagonist shooting his dance partner. In the case of *Days of Being Wild*, however, it is much more difficult to pin down the images since they have absolutely no relation to the previous or posterior scenes in the film. It is not until the end of the film, when Yuddy goes to the Philippines, that the same image re-appears. Now we are able to recognize this image as corresponding to the character's subjective point of view from inside the train where he is killed.

Figure 2: Scene from *Days of Being Wild*

The same thing happens in the beginning of *Happy Together*: the first scene of the film shows a lengthy shot of the Iguazu waterfalls accompanied by a melancholic song. But

the characters do not reach the waterfalls until the end of the film, when Lai Yu-Fai goes there alone. These images are "shown (by the film)" before they were "seen (by the character)" (Lalanne et al. 1997:14). "The prolepsis raises a question about *how* (how has the character gotten in this situation?) or *why* ("why am I seeing these images and what do they mean?") (Gaudreault and Jost 1995:121-122). In this case, I would also add the question of *who* ("Who is showing these images to me?").

As we can see, changing the order of events is not just a narrative convention; it is also a "means of drawing attention to certain things, to emphasize, to bring about aesthetic or psychological effects, to show various interpretations of an event, to indicate the subtle difference between expectation and realization" (Bal 1985:82). In Wong's films flashbacks and flashforwards are used to complicate temporal relations, especially in relation to the people whose memories are being represented. In the first scenes of *2046*, Chow is in Singapore, where he asks a woman named So Lai-chen (incidentally, the name of Maggie Cheung's character in *In The Mood for Love*) to leave for Hong Kong with him, but she declines his offer. His voice-over says, "That was the last time we saw each other", while we see slow-motion images of the characters walking in opposite directions. We assume that they had a passionate kiss, since the woman's hair is in dissaray and she has lipstick smeared all over her face, but the actual kiss is omitted. Towards the end of the film, Chow returns to Singapore after a few years and looks for her again. When he fails to see her, he engages in memories which introduce a flashback going further back in time than the beginning of the story. It is only at this point that we learn how they met and why she was known as 'the black spider'. The flashback eventually reaches the same point from where the film began, that is, when they say goodbye. This second scene, however, is not just a

repetition of the first one since it completes it, finally showing what was missing from the first time: not only the kiss, but the black spider in tears afterwards and Chow's realization that he was still haunted by his feeling for the other So Lai-chen ("It occurred to me that what I told her was actually meant for myself. In love, you can't bring substitutes"). In this case, the main function of the ellipsis and flashbacks is not to distribute narrative information, but to contribute to the emotional description of the characters.

In most narrative films, changing the order of events does not compromise the continuity that remains ultimately motivated by action. Shifting or reversing the order of events has become a trend in contemporary cinema: for example, Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction* (1994) is divided into three intersecting episodes whose order of occurrence in the story differ from the order in which they are presented in the narrative. The last episode, for instance, returns to the first one where they overlap, in a movement that is circular rather then linear. However, even though the episodes are presented out of order, the spectator still remains capable of reordering the events in his head. That is not the case with some of Wong's films, in which the linearity of the action is profoundly disturbed, moving toward what Genette calls achrony, where we are no longer able to determine the temporal relationships between narrated events. For instance, trying to rearrange the events narrated in *Ashes of Time* in a linear mode is a frustrating task. For a start, the martial-arts saga takes place in an immemorial past with no signs of specific dates or historical accuracy. The events narrated in the film are episodic, but the temporal relations between these events are complicated to the point where we can no longer identify precisely which one happened first. There are "numerous flashbacks, flashbacks within flashbacks, shifts of viewpoint,

dislocations and elisions that have the effect of creating a fractured textual surface" (Dissanayake 2003:49).

There are four main episodes dividing the film into four intersecting narrative blocks: the first is the friendship between Ouyang Feng and Huang Yaoshi, the main characters; the second is the romantic triangle formed between Ouyang, the blind swordsman and Peach Blossom; the third is the relationship between Ouyang and Murong Ying/Yang, and the fourth is the problematic friendship between Ouyang and Hong Qi, the barefoot swordsman. All the while, Huang's memory of his lost love (a character played by Maggie Cheung) is a "continuing absence felt throughout the story" (Dissanayake 2003:48), for she is mentioned frequently but only actually appears briefly at the end.

Given their episodic nature, it seems that there is almost no causal relationship between these narrative blocks: Ouyang meets the blind swordsmen, then Murong Yin/Yang, then Hong Qi. However, inside each individual block there is an intricate temporal relationship that demands absolute focus in order to become remotely comprehensible. Indeed, more than one viewing is necessary to understand the complex relationships between the characters. Most of the action happens in and around Ouyang's hut, where he narrates some of the events himself through voice-over. His narration is marked by non-specific temporal references ("every year, this time, Huang Yaoshi comes to drink with me"; "he had stayed there a long time before"; "in a distant past, they were once best friends"). Furthermore, there are several temporal indicators in this film, such as intertitles that refer to dates and seasons ("day 5, first day of spring"), but these frequently clash with the characters' own narration of events, suggesting that they are ambiguous, if

not completely unreliable[16]. In the end these temporal indications, which are normally used to clarify and explain, here are employed to create a reality that is always already lacunary. In Chapter 6 we shall discuss how this chronological fragmentation is linked to the characters' subjective experience of time and memory.

2.3.2 Duration

"Comparing the 'duration' of a narrative to that of the story it tells is a trickier operation, for the simple reason that no one can measure the duration of a narrative" (Genette 1980:86). Genette is referring to the fact that the time needed for execution of a narrative (the time it takes to read a novel) is too personal, variable and aleatory to be taken as a valid method of interpretation. In cinema, on the other hand, the execution time (the time it takes to project a film) is universally fixed – at least in normal exhibition conditions. However, this does not make it any easier to compare the duration of narratives, since different films can narrate either centuries or minutes in its 2-hour average duration.

The only way to analyze duration is, then, not by comparing it with the story duration but by comparing different events in the same story. "The speed of a narrative will be defined by the relationship between a duration (that of the story, measured in seconds, minutes, hours, days, months, and years) and a length (that of the text, measured in lines and in pages)" (Genette 1980:88). This way, the length dedicated to the narration of a

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[16] For example, the intertitle Day six (insect plague) is followed by Day four (first day of spring) and then Day ten (autumn begins); similarly, Day 15 is referred to twice, once as warm and sunny and another as rainy.

century can be compared to the length of the narration of a single day inside the same narrative, providing us with information about the rhythm of the narration and the importance of the events therein.

For Genette, there are three main narrative rhythms regarding duration: the scene, the pause and the summary. As we have seen before, the scene corresponds to the closest thing we have from the "zero degree" of isochrony, that is, total equivalence between duration of the event and duration of the narration of this event. Most literary scenes are composed by direct discourse (dialogue), in which, as we have seen, there seems to be minimal intrusion from the narrating instance. In film we can say that the shot corresponds to the minimal unity of temporal integrity, assuming that the duration of the scene corresponds to the actual time it takes for the character to do something or to say his/her lines (Metz 1968:125).

Since the stories of most of Wong's films do not usually span over large periods of time but rather only a few days, the scene tends to be dominant over summaries or descriptions. However, it is well known that he breaks even the shot's minimal unity of temporal isochrony with his signature step-printing technique[17], in which during the shooting the actors are asked to move very slowly while the action around them is registered normally. What happens when the film is accelerated afterwards is that it renders different temporal velocities in the same frame: for example, in *Chungking Express* there are several scenes in which a character appears to move in slow motion while others around

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[17] "Some strategic scenes are shot at a slower film speed ("undercrank" in Hollywood jargon), so the action is speeded up; then, the frames are *step-printed* at a slower speed onto the finished film, so the action is restored to its real-time duration. The undercrank/step-printing method gives these scenes a haunting sense of simultaneous animation and suspension". (Payne)

him move differently. For example, there is a scene in which Cop 663 sips his drink in slow motion while people around him pass by in fast motion, indicating two opposite temporalities in a single frame.

The summary is usually employed in the case when the story spans over a long period of time, for instance in epics where the time of the story is considerably longer than the time of the narration. In cinema a frequent example of summary would be the "passage of time sequence", a montage sequence of short, emblematic images pieced together to indicate that some time has passed, in order to omit unimportant details and accelerate the narration. The narrative in *2046* makes an interesting play on the passage of time sequence, particularly in the scenes in which Chow is trying to write his science fiction story in his room. An intertitle reveals "1 hour later" and then cuts to an image of a pen close to a blank piece of paper. Other intertitles announce "10 hours later" and "100 hours later" and still we see the same image of the motionless pen. In this case, the summary is not used to accelerate the action realistically, as it would be the norm but, on the contrary, it functions to accentuate its emptiness (the fact that he could not write).

The opposite of the summary is the pause, where the narration time is considerably longer than the story time. In literature this is found mostly in descriptions or in scenes in which a character is thinking but not acting. In cinema, there are several techniques used to pause or dilate time. "For instance, a strictly descriptive camera movement over a setting in which no action occurs" (Gaudreault and Jost 1995:126). Wong has become known for his numerous contemplative scenes in which little or no action takes place, as in the scene in *Fallen Angels* in which two characters simply sit, side by side, as people rush in fast motion

in the background. This scene lasts for almost three minutes, which is a long time considering how little narrative information it contains.

In order to determine the relative importance of narrated events in Wong's films, it is best to compare different durations from one single film. Let us consider *Days of Being Wild*, for instance. The first few scenes of the film show Yuddy's courtship of So Lai-chen, which slowly builds up anticipation toward the romance between then. In the next sequence, however, they are already on the verge of separation. The entire romance (which we never know how long it actually lasted) is summarized, almost fast-forwarded to the end. While important narrative events are ellipsed, scenes in which no action proper occurs – in which Yuddy is combing his hair in the mirror, dancing, or lying on his bed – take the longest time. When So Lai-chen returns to the story after being abandoned by Yuddy, entire days are ellipsed to show only the moments in which she encounters the policeman and they talk for what seems to be hours (we see several images of the characters in the exact same place, only with different clothes on, a technique that will be used again in *In The Mood for Love*). Again, this indicates that there is, indeed, a narrating agency selecting what we see, guiding our attention and indicating that what we take as "dead time" is precisely what constitutes the main element of the narration.

2.3.3 Frequency

"An event is not only capable of happening; it can also happen again, or be repeated: the sun rises every day" (Genette 1980). Yes, the sun rises every day, but in a story it does

not need to be narrated every time it rises – most of the time a repetitive event will be narrated only once. If it is narrated more than once, it becomes a deliberate indication that the narrator would like to focus on this particular event. Schematically, we can say that a narrative, whatever it is, may tell once what happened once, *n* times what happened *n* times, *n* times what happened once, once what happened *n* times.

The first and last modes (telling once what happened once and once what happened *n* times) focus not on the repetition of individual events but on the similarity of different events. In cinema it can be represented by a montage sequence equivalent to the phrase "they went to the noodle stall almost every night". If, on the other hand, we have the other two cases – narrating *n* times what happened *n* times, or narrating *n* times what happened once –, the focus is shifted from the event to the act of repetition. Narrating *n* times what happened *n* times can be used to focus on the repetitive character of everyday actions: for example, in *In The Mood for Love* we have several different images of Chow and So Lai-chen going to the noodle stall. Combined with the fact that important narrative events are simply omitted, this strategy focuses on the fact that the characters are imprisoned in their own mundane habits. These scenes are so repetitive that the only way in which we know it is not a single action being repeated over and over is through minute details – for example, the dresses she wears are different. However, in this film there is *also* the repetition *n* times of events that happened only once. When Chow decides to leave for Singapore, he calls So Lai-chen in her office one last time and asks, in voice-over, "if I had an extra ticket, would you come with me?" Since we do not see her picking up the phone, it is not even clear if he actually said that or just imagined it while sitting alone in the hotel room. Later, the same

situation is re-played, but this time it is she who asks the question and sits alone in the room 2046.

We will focus more on the narrative and emotional effects of repetition in Chapter 6. At this point, what interests us is the fact that these images are the result of careful selection, manipulation and organization, revealing that there is, indeed, a fundamental narrator in control of what we see, whether he is more or less self-conscious. However, is the fundamental narrator the only narrator in these films? If so, why do we feel that the characters are communicating directly with us? We have seen that all narratives have a fundamental narrator, but that does not mean that there is only one narrator, or that this narrator stays the same throughout the course of the narration – the entire science of Narratology developed from the rigorous identification and classification of different levels of narration. Better than to ask "who speaks?" would be to ask, "who, among the many instances, speaks at this precise moment of the narration?" (Gaudreault 1999:82).

2.4 Delegated narrators

According to Genette, "The novelist's choice (…) is to have the story told by one of its 'characters' or to have it told by a narrator outside of the story" (1980:244). If the narrator is also a character in his own story he is called homodiegetic; if, on the contrary, he narrates other characters' stories from which he is absent, he is called heterodiegetic. Genette prefers these terms over the more common 'first-person' and 'third-person' narrators for a very simple reason: the ability of the narrator to refer to himself in the first

person has nothing to do with his relationship to the story that is being told. Grammatically speaking, "the term 'third-person narrator' is absurd: a narrator is not a 'he' or 'she'. At best the narrator can narrate about someone else, a 'he' or 'she' – who might, incidentally, happen to be a narrator as well" (Bal 1985:22). Noticing that in every narrative we may find stories embedded within stories, Genette also classifies his narrators according to levels, calling extradiegetic the narrators of the first level (that is, narrators of the main story) and intradiegetic the narrators of the second level (narrators of the stories within the story), all of which, of course, can be hetero or homodiegetic[18].

In cinema this kind of delegated narration is frequently represented by way of oral speech. In many films belonging to virtually any genre we often hear an off-screen, bodiless voice, usually uttered at the beginning and at the end of the story by someone (man, woman, child, anthropomorphic creature) who can either be a character featured in the story (homodiegetic narrator) or an external observer (heterodiegetic narrator), and who explicitly narrates either by providing commentary or by evoking the past. Depending on whether they remain more or less neutral, whether they tell the story to another fictional character or address the spectator directly, the voice-over narration can assume many different functions: from providing additional narrative information to referring to a film's literary origin (in the frequent case of novel adaptations), from increasing identification with characters to adding ironic commentary.

Despite its multiple functions and possibilities, however, the technique of voice-over narration has been criticized for almost as long as it has been used. As the history of cinema

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[18] For example, in *2046*, the Japanese character is the intradiegetic narrator of the embedded story created by Tony Leung's character, who is the extradiegetic narrator of the film.

shows, voice-over commentary has been present from the first developments of sound in cinema, and like any other sound technique it has suffered endless criticism and theoretical dismissal since then. Sarah Kozloff explains (1988) that these criticisms frequently represent unfounded prejudices: that in cinema images should always be more important than dialogue; that words only double what is already visible and therefore leave nothing for the imagination; that voice-over narration is either an oral tradition or a literary device, but is not cinematic. However, these prejudices do not correspond to what has actually been done with the voice-over in cinema over the years: yes, it is true that some films use voice-over as an easy way to cover narrative holes, fix flaws or bridge time frames which would otherwise be very expensive or difficult to represent visually, but it is also true that speech has been used creatively in conjunction with – and in opposition to – the images. This criticism seems to forget that words transmit information differently than images, and that this difference can be used for the benefit of the cinema. Not to mention that the overlapping of voice and image is not necessarily redundant or problematic. In fact, as we will see apropos of Wong's films, it can serve many important functions.

Wong's use of voice-over is remarkably abundant. Of his nine feature length films released so far, only two do not have characters speaking in voice-over: *As Tears Go By* and *In The Mood for Love*. And even in these films there is some sort of oral narration, since in *As Tears Go By* we hear Ngor's voice when Wah reads a letter that she left for him, and in *In The Mood for Love* there are written intertitles, which are, in a way, cinematic precursors of the voice-over commentary. In all the other films not only do we have a profusion of voice-over narrations, but also these monologues reveal themselves to be more prolific, and even more important, than actual dialogues. These characters communicate

more with their "intimate" voices than with their "outside" voices as some of them – like the mute character in *Fallen Angels* – never exchange dialogues. In fact, we only know that the character is mute from his voice-over explanation, since all the other characters speak mostly in voice-overs as well. We also notice that these voice-over monologues represent, for the most part, the characters' thoughts or stream of consciousness: they talk mostly about themselves, either to tell a story that happened in the past or to comment on a precise event as it occurs, resulting in a sort of intimate journal that is constructed as the characters evolve into the story.

However, differently from the first-person "diary" narration in some of Rohmer's (*Ma Nuit Chez Maud*) and Bresson's films (*Pickpocket* and *Diary of a Country Priest*), in Wong it is never clear if these voices represent the characters inner consciousness or some other degree of narration. Sometimes they use the past tense, as if they were situated in the future remembering past events (*Days of Being Wild*, *Chungking Express*, *Happy Together*, *My Blueberry Nights*), and sometimes they use the present tense, as if commenting on the events as they unfold (*Fallen Angels*, *Ashes of Time*). Sometimes they address an invisible or imaginary interlocutor (Cop 223 in *Chungking Express*), and sometimes they only speak for themselves. Most of the time they are present in the scene when the monologues appear, but sometimes they are absent from the scene in which their voices are heard (for example, Ouyang Feng narrates about other characters in *Ashes of Time*). These intimate voice-over monologues are definitively homodiegetic, but can they be considered as narration? How do they differ from what we call "the narrative voice"?

“Voice-over narration can be formally defined as oral statements, conveying any portion of a narrative, spoken by an *unseen* speaker situated in a space and time *other* than that simultaneously being presented by the images on the screen” (Kozloff 1988:05, my emphasis). Spoken by an unseen speaker: the relationship between what we see and what we hear is crucial, for it can change completely our reaction toward the image. Michel Chion calls “acousmatic” a voice whose source is not visible at the moment of its emission, in opposition to the synchronous sound to which we can assign a visible source in the diegetic field, even if it is only momentarily or partially visible. For example, in a dialogue between two characters that are alternatively shown in the diegetic space, the voice may be momentarily off-screen but it still refers to someone that is already part of the diegetic space, someone whose image will be seen eventually. An acousmatic voice, on the other hand, belongs to another place altogether, its nature “exceeding any space and any unit” (Deleuze 1989).

Wong’s voice-over monologues defy the criteria established by Kozloff and Chion: even though they come from outside of the visible frame, they do not seem to be completely acousmatic. Let us consider, for example, the first scene of *Fallen Angels* where the assassin is in the background and his assistant on the foreground. Both are facing the camera but not each other. It does not strike us as strange that, while she speaks to him in a synchronous voice, his answer is heard only in voice-over – that is, we hear his answer but we do not see his lips moving, so we naturally assume that he is only thinking his answer to himself and we, for some reason, have access to this “interior voice”, while the female character does not. Oddly enough, this impossible dialogue seems to go on for the entire

duration of the scene, leaving us to question if this voice is coming from outside or inside the diegetic space.

Voices like this are nonynchronous without necessarily being acousmatic – that is, they float between the visibility of the body and the invisibility of the source of vocal production, the mouth. At this point, Serge Daney's perspective becomes crucially important, since he considers very carefully the role of the mouth – and its visibility – in the assignment of the place of the voice. He says: "The voice doesn't seem ever to be as tangible than at the moment when it is emitted, when it leaves the body through the motion and distortion of the lips. This metonym is decisive: that which is seen (lips in movement, open mouth, tong and teeth) is what allows us to conclude the reality of what is heard" (Daney 1977:22). Inverting this situation, we conclude that the voice to which we cannot assign a mouth – even if the rest of the body remains visible – represents a certain absence, lack of reality.

The voice-over in *Fallen Angels*, as in all of Wong's films, is neither entirely inside nor outside the diegetic world, but rather "set into orbit in the peripheral acousmatic field" (Chion 1999:49). It is located outside the image, but it is an "inside" voice since it represents, or externalizes, the character's thoughts. As a voice coming from outside the diegetic field, the voice-over can be considered as part of the extra-diegetic sonorous environment of the films. But as a voice that has an intimate and direct connection with someone inside the field, it is also deeply anchored in the intra-diegetic image.

Furthermore, Wong's voice-over monologues do not try to emulate the narrating powers of the acousmatic voice. Chion calls *acousmêtre* the creature (for it is not always a

person) that owns the acousmatic voice. Being detached from a body that is no longer visible, being outside of the image, the acousmêtre exerts all sorts of power: it is everywhere, since its source cannot be immediately assigned to any visible entity in the diegetic world; it sees all (or at least it sees more than the characters in the story) and consequently it knows all, since panopticism "has been assimilated into the capacity to see internally" (Chion 1999:27). This is where resides the mystery surrounding a disembodied, phantasmagorical voice as source of both fascination and fear:

> This interdiction against looking, which transforms the Master, God, or Spirit into an acousmatic voice, permeates a great number of religious traditions, most notably Islam and Judaism. We find it also in the physical setup of Freudian analysis: the patient on the couch should not see the analyst, who does not look at him. (Chion 1999:19).

How many films feature an acousmatic narrator, a master of ceremonies of some sort, like the narrator in Welles' *The Magnificent Ambersons* (1942), who not only guides the spectator through the story but also has the power to invade, manipulate and "make things happen"? Even though we do not hear these voices constantly, that is, from the first scene to the last, but only intermittently (and sometimes very scarcely), we are inclined to believe that the voice-over narrator is responsible not only for the explicitly narrated scenes but also for the scenes where he is not speaking. "In many cases the voice-over narrator is so inscribed in the film as to seem as if he or she has generated not only what he is saying but also what we are seeing" (Kozloff 1988:45). Classical narrative cinema uses several techniques to anchor the voice-over in the image and to give the impression that the acousmêtre somehow controls the image: by showing the character in the act of narrating

(or writing a letter, giving a speech etc.), by closely coordinating the narrating with the represented action and so on. They make the spectator feel more inclined to believe that the acousmêtre is responsible for the entire narration, thus crediting him with the fundamental narrator's powers: ubiquity, panopticism, omniscience, and omnipotence.

Naturally, all it takes is the embodiment of the voice, the assignment of the acousmêtre to a visible body for it to lose most of its powers. In many fantasy, thriller, and gangster films there is a fundamental scene in which we see the acousmêtre become just an ordinary character when his/her voice is assigned to a body. This reveals that the delegated narrator always remains inscribed in, and consequently subordinated to, a major narrating agency that is the fundamental narrator. If anything, the acousmêtre is someone to whom the fundamental narrator has momentarily given the power of speech, only to keep control over the other elements of the narration. "A polyphonic grand imagier then, who concedes to its delegated narrator no more than one channel, that of the word, and who remains as the origin of the narration, without any delegation, of his images, his sounds, his music" (Gaudreault 1999:159). We have the impression that a character X is narrating and is in control of what we see, when in reality the fundamental narrator is narrating that X is narrating.

Wong's voice-over monologues, however, are not omniscient: the characters know only what they were thinking or feeling at one particular moment, and most of the time they do not know or control the outcome of events. They are not omnipresent: rare are the scenes in which a character is speaking in voice-over and is completely absent from the screen. They are not fixed either, as they constantly shift from character to character regardless of

the narrative relevance of these characters. *Chungking Express* begins with the voice-over of policeman 223, although, throughout the film, other characters share the same expressive mechanism. The same thing happens in *Fallen Angels*, where characters introduce their intimate thoughts at any given time, regardless of their place in the narrative's hierarchy. They are purely confessional and subjective: there is no possible way that other characters onscreen could know what they say.

Even though these intimate monologues cannot be credited to the imaginary instance of the fundamental narrator, they are responsible for conveying important narrative information. In many occasions there is almost an excess of information, as the characters tend to describe their own actions in detail, but sometimes they give us information that we would not have access to by looking at the image alone. In other words, while they do not control the camera, they certainly have the power to change the spectator's perception of the image, often contradicting it. In a scene in *Fallen Angels* the assassin encounters an old friend and shows him a picture of his wife and son, while his voice-over reveals that the woman and child were actually strangers whom he had paid to pose for the photograph. If we were only given the image and the on-screen dialogue, we would be as fooled as his friend is – therefore we can conclude that the character's outer (on-screen) voice is less trustworthy than his inner (off-screen) voice.

But if there isn't any material difference between the character's voice on-screen and off-screen – it is the same voice, belonging to the same person –, then why do we trust the voice-over over the voice anchored by the image? Because the voice-over *speaks directly to us*. Well, not exactly: as an inner monologue, it speaks only to himself, but we, as the spectators, somehow have straight access to it. A few technical elements contribute to

this feeling of immediacy and authenticity: first, the fact that the voice-over is virtually free from background noise, making it more intelligible and creating a feeling of intimacy such that we sense almost no distance between it and our ear. In most of the voice-over monologues in *Fallen Angels* the background noise is selective: it does not stop completely so that we only hear the off-screen voice, but it diminishes considerably (for example, in some scenes in a busy restaurant we can hear background music but not the noise coming from the restaurant). When the voice is stripped down of its reverb and background noises, its placement in space becomes problematic. It is as if the voice could not be inscribed in a concrete identifiable space, but in its own space unto itself (Chion 1999:51).

Since their monologues suggest transparency and immediacy instead of omnipresence and omniscience, Wong's characters may be considered as voice-over *speakers* rather than voice-over *narrators*. According to Chion (1982:48), the voice that says "I" establishes right away an identification process with the spectator: "To claim the spectator's identification, so that he appropriates it to a greater or lesser degree, it [the voice] must be framed and recorded in a certain way, so that this voice functions as an anchor of identification, so that it resounds in us as if it were our own voice, a voice in the first person". The I-voice is not merely a voice in the first person: different from an acousmêtre who narrates the story from some distanced place, the I-voice becomes ever more intimate the more it engages with the images – for example, when the voice is that of a character represented onscreen.

That explains why, even though sometimes we do not know the names of the characters, we can identity with them since there is a direct emotional connection. It seems

that there is nothing between them and us, as if the narration were somehow focalized by the characters, as François Jost explains: "Internal focalization supposes, on the one hand, that we experience the events as the characters experience them, and on the other hand that we have access to the inside of their heads" (1987:72). For example, in *Chungking Express* the main reason why we are able to identify with the woman in the blonde wig is her voice-over, since the character is presented at first as a villain, she does not speak much and provides almost no eye contact with the camera. It is because of what she says and does that we learn that she is running from a death sentence. In a similar way, in *Happy Together* the spectator tends to identify with Lai Yu-Fai since he is the source of the voice-over. This becomes obvious when Chan, who enters quite late in the narrative, narrates in voice-over while Ho Po-wing does not.

2.4.1 Point of view and focalization

The fundamental narrator is the generator of the discourse that creates the story, but this story can represent one or more character's point of view: "The person who sees and the person who verbalizes this vision are not necessarily the same person" (Genette 1980). Genette prefers to use the term focalization rather than point of view to avoid any confusion between seeing and knowing, for the narrator can choose to reveal more or less than the characters know (in cinema, however, the term 'point of view' predominates). Generally speaking, there are three kinds of narrative when it comes to focalization: those with zero focalization, in which the narrator knows all and controls everything; those with internal

focalization, in which the story seems to be filtered through the perspective of one (or more) characters[19]; and those with external focalization, in which the reader does not have access to the thoughts and feelings of the characters.

We can see that focalization is determined by a relationship of knowledge: the narrator either knows more or less than the characters. In cinema, however, this relationship is also determined visually, since it can *show* what the character sees and *say* what he knows. At first sight, the obvious cinematic correspondent to the literary internal focalization would be the subjective camera (technically known as point of view shot), that is, the physical visual representation of the character's point of view. It doesn't take long, however, to realize that such representation has a few practical limitations. With few exceptions[20], it is quite impractical to make an entire film with subjective camera (for one, we would never be able to see the main character). Since in cinema focalization can shift quite freely from one character to another, we have grown used to the idea that, sooner or later, the subjective point of view must inevitably adopt a more generic point of view without compromising the character's internal focalization. "Thus, shots of the character himself (the character-I) do not violate our contract with the voice (the narrating-I); neither does the presentation of scenes in which the character-I is absent" (Kozloff 1988:48).

This is why François Jost (1987) suggested a separation between visual and cognitive focal points: according to him, ocularization characterizes the relation between

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[19] In this case, the focalization can be fixed in one character all the time, it can be variable, changing from one character to another in the course of the narration, or it can be multiple, when the same event is seen trough the perspective of different characters (as in Kurosawa's *Rashomon*, where the death of the samurai is narrated successively by a bandit, the dead himself, his wife, and a lumberjack).
[20] The most well-known example in mainstream cinema is the American film noir *Lady in The Lake* (1947), in which the camera shows the detective's subjective camera all the time, and we see the character only when he sees himself in the mirror.

what the camera shows and what the character sees, while focalization determines the cognitive point of view adopted by the narration. See the table below (adapted from Gaudreault and Jost 1995:141):

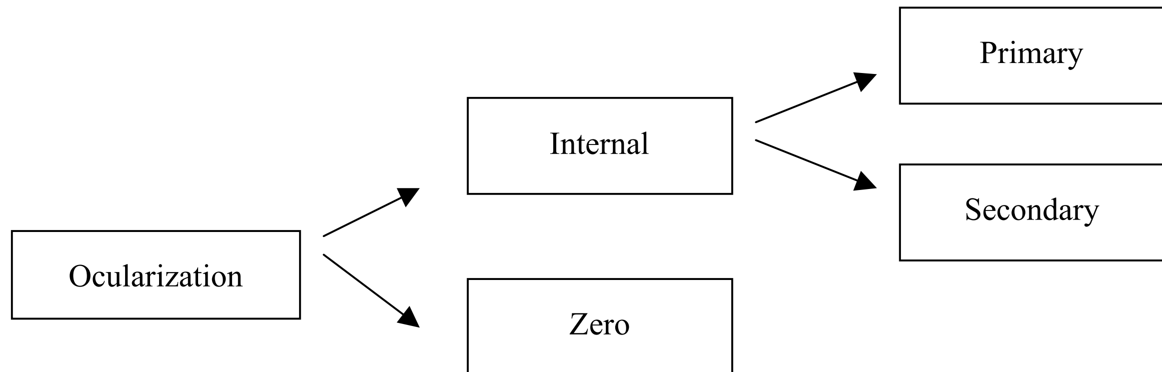

Table 3

When the camera seems to reflect what the character sees we have internal ocularization; when it is located outside of him, we have zero ocularization. Internal ocularization can be constructed immediately by manipulated images (point of view shot, out of focus images etc.), in which case it is called primary, or it can be constructed contextually by the montage, in which case it is called secondary (for example: a shot that is part of a shot/reverse shot is only understood as subjective in the context of the reverse shot).

This distinction is instructive because it separates what we know from what we see. We have seen that the voice-over monologues in most of Wong's films function to give us the characters' subjective impressions of events, as if they were expressing themselves

through speech without any mediation. Thus we can say that the verbal or cognitive part of these stories is narrated with internal focalization. The ocularization, however, is zero, for the person who sees the characters is somebody from outside of the diegetic world; is the "discours-regard du cinéaste" (Jost 1987:33). This makes it possible that "at the same moment that we are supposed to penetrate into the character's imaginary, there is is a point of view from the grand imagier who organizes the action" (Jost 1987:29).

In the Mood for Love is the exception that proves the rule. In the film there are several scenes in which the characters are seen framed by windows, doors and curtains, reflected on mirrors, as if they were being watched. These images, however, do not correspond to subjective shots – internal ocularization –, since this gaze does not belong to a character inside the diegetic world (a real spy watching them), but to the fundamental narrator. However, because in this film exceptionally there is no voice-over from the characters, we only get one side of the story, that is, the voyeuristic look from the fundamental narrator – thus the story has zero focalization and zero ocularization. That explains why, in this particular film, we remain somewhat distant from the sensibility of the characters, since we do not have direct access to their thoughts as we do in the other films. We do not know more than the characters – in fact, we know less, since we are denied information in some cases. For example, there are a lot of phone calls in the film, but we never listen to the voice coming from the other side. Considering that is it important for the story to know who called whom, this configures a conscious strategy to intensify the mysterious nature of the narration.

Finally, we can conclude that the subjective monologues found in Wong's cinema clearly exemplify his literary inspiration. Because Wong is typically seen as a visual stylist,

it is often forgotten how literary his films really are. The fragmented, minimalist structure of his narrative alludes to the short story genre; he frequently uses intertitles in which he quotes novels and short stories that inspired him[21]; and his dialogues and monologues are "highly literate and poetic" (Teo 2005:04). Teo makes an interesting analysis of Wong's literary roots, associating his narrative with authors as diverse as the Latin American Manuel Puig and Julio Cortázar, the Japanese Haruki Murakami and local Hong Kong authors like Jin Yong and Liu Yichang. What many of these and other authors who supposedly inspired Wong have in common is the use of first-person narration and stream of consciousness. Wong has declared that he was immediately impressed by Manuel Puig's fragmented style in *Heartbreak Tango*, whose structure he have been trying to master ever since (Teo 2005:38). In their literary qualities, Wong's voice-over monologues relate to what Erich Auerbach calls "*subjectivisme pluripersonnel*" (1968:532), in which the stream of consciousness is shared among several different people, and reality is what can be apprehended through the experience of these multiple personal impressions.

Although these multiple voices give an impression of fluidity and transparency of the discourse – we feel as if they were happening without any outside mediation –, there is an undeniable factor of manipulation, since the voices "out of the screen" speak from a place and a time distinct from the here and now of the transparent story. Furthermore, they interpolate directly the spectator, thus recognizing its presence. Belonging at the same time to the diegetic universe and outside of it, these voice-over monologues are the connection between the objectivity and the subjectivity of the narration. Supported by all the narrative

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[21] In *Ashes of Time* he quotes passages from Jin Yong's novel *The Eagle Shooting Heroes*, from which the film's screenplay was loosely adapted, and in *In the Mood for Love* he quotes lines from a novella called *Intersection*, published in 1972 by Liu Yichang.

techniques we have seen so far, I would argue that Wong's narrative discourse is not merely a combination of two systems but a system which is always already double: they put into action two inseparable acts of subjectivation at once, the character's and the narrator's.

3 The affection-image

3.1 The close-up

The affection-image emerges in the hiatus between the subject's first perception of the image and his action or reaction to it. As we have seen, in perceptive images different parts assume different tasks, and in the human body it is the face (eyes, nose, brows, lips etc.) that assume the function of registering various affections and perceptive stimulus. The human face corresponds to Bergson's definition of affection: "The face is this organ-carrying plate of nerves which has sacrificed most of its global mobility and which gathers or expresses in a free way all kinds of tiny local movements which the rest of the body usually keeps hidden" (Deleuze 1986:88). Therefore, according to Deleuze, the cinematographic equivalent of the affection-image is the close-up of a face, the close-up because it has the "power to tear the image away from spatio-temporal coordinates in order to call forth the pure affect as the expressed" (1986:96), and the face because it represents the locus of specialized perception.

The close-up deterritorializes the face, abstracts it from its context, thus extracting from it pure affect or quality. However, it hasn't always played that role, since in the beginning of cinema close-ups, known as 'big heads', merely amplified the image like a magnifying glass: "the close-up was merely a way of showing the audience, from closer in, what it has already seen and highlighting details which might have escaped its attention"

(Mitry 1997:70). In contemporary cinema the use of close-ups to direct one's attention to a dramatic detail or facial expression has become common currency, albeit a still very expressive one. As Jean Epstein writes:

> The close-up alters the drama through the impression of proximity. Pain is put within reach. If I stretch out my hand, I am in contact with the inner being. I can count the lashes of the suffering. I can taste the salt of its tears. Never before has a face been so close to mine. (…) There is truly no space between us: I absorb it (Epstein 1921 ; Mitry 1997:71)

Some filmmakers, however, explore the possibilities of the close-up to the limit of representability. Of all of Bergman's signature techniques, the close-up was, perhaps, the most recognizable. His fascination with the close-up can be seen in films like *Persona* (1966) and *Cries and Whispers* (1972), where the faces and hands of his characters are shown so closely that is almost becomes uncomfortable to watch. In these frequent, relentless close-ups, the viewer can almost see what the characters are thinking and feeling. Their faces are shot from every possible angle and in several different positions, abstracting the faces from their surrounding context – not only the space, but the rest of the body is also obliterated. In Bergman "the faces converge, borrow their memories from each other and tend to become mixed up. (…) The close-up does not divide one individual, any more than it reunites two: it suspends individuation" (Deleuze 1986:100).

In Wong Kar-wai's films there are several examples of affection-images in the persistent close-ups of faces in *Fallen Angels*, *Ashes of Time*, *In The Mood for Love* and *2046*, in shots that examine the characters' facial expressions so closely that everything surrounding them – space as well as time – becomes abstract (see Figure 3). Deleuze says

that, ordinarily, the face has three roles: it individualizes (characterizes an individual among others), it socializes (manifests a social role) and it communicates (ensures communication between this face and another). What close-ups like the ones found in these films do is to remove these roles: it reveals a character that has abandoned his social role, lost the ability (or the desire) to communicate and even his individuation, for the face in extreme close-up resembles any other face. As a result, the spectator becomes able to relate to the raw emotions expressed by the face independently from the film's narrative context.

According to Deleuze, the study of a face can be intensive or expressive – that is, it can provoke the question "what are you thinking?" as well as "what are you feeling?" – but he argues that any body part, for that matter, can provoke these questions, can be as intensive or expressive as the whole face. Wong is also interested in the expressiveness of fragments of the body, whether they are hands, arms, feet, legs or ankles. The close-ups of So Lai-chen's arms, hands and feet in *In The Mood for Love* function as affection-images, isolated as they are from any spatio-temporal context, expressing the character's nervousness and apprehension (see Figure 4).

Ultimately, what the close-up reveals is the mark of a fragmentation or a cut, not in the sense of something torn apart from the body to which it belonged, but in the sense that it is always already a partial object. Is it not the dialectics of desire as the "missing piece": that "in order to sustain itself as desire, to articulate itself (…), a piece must be missing"? (Zizek 2001:xviii). A fragment of the face or of the body signals that there is always something missing, notably the rest of the body or the whole that we do not see – hence the idea of absence and presence in one single shot evoked by the affection-image. This is indicative of Wong's preoccupation with fragmentation, "an aesthetic project consisting in

giving privilege to the detail over the unit, the part over the whole" (Lalanne et al. 1997:10). It seems that the only way through which one can apprehend the whole would be through its multiple pieces. However, to seek and capture a unified and integral image of the world is impossible, for the whole itself is always already fragmented. As Wimal Dissanayake notes, "fragmentation is a part of the ontology of the world, and to impose a unity and cohesiveness upon it is to violate its nature of being" (2003:120).

3.2 The object

Perhaps an even more interesting example of fragmentation is to be found in the close-ups of objects present in most of Wong's films. Gina Marchetti remarks that people function like objects or commodities in his universe (Marchetti 2000:299), but the contrary can also be argued: objects tend to acquire an importance that puts them at the same level as people. Let us first recall a scene in *In The Mood for Love* where the protagonists discover that they have been betrayed; the symbols of this betrayal are a handbag and a tie that their spouses brought them as gifts from their travels. "When they notice purses and neckties that are identical, the protagonists wonder if they themselves are not just as interchangeable and indistinguishable as objects of desire" (Blake 2003:348). In this case, objects actually function as fetishistic substitutes for people and personal relations. In *Happy Together*, for example, the couple decides to go to the Iguazu Falls after buying a souvenir lamp. Soon afterwards they break up and never reach the Falls, but the lamp remains there, sitting right in the middle of Ho Po-wing's apartment (see Figure 5).

Figure 3: Three close-ups of Maggie Cheung (*Ashes of Time*, *In The Mood for Love* and *Days of Being Wild*

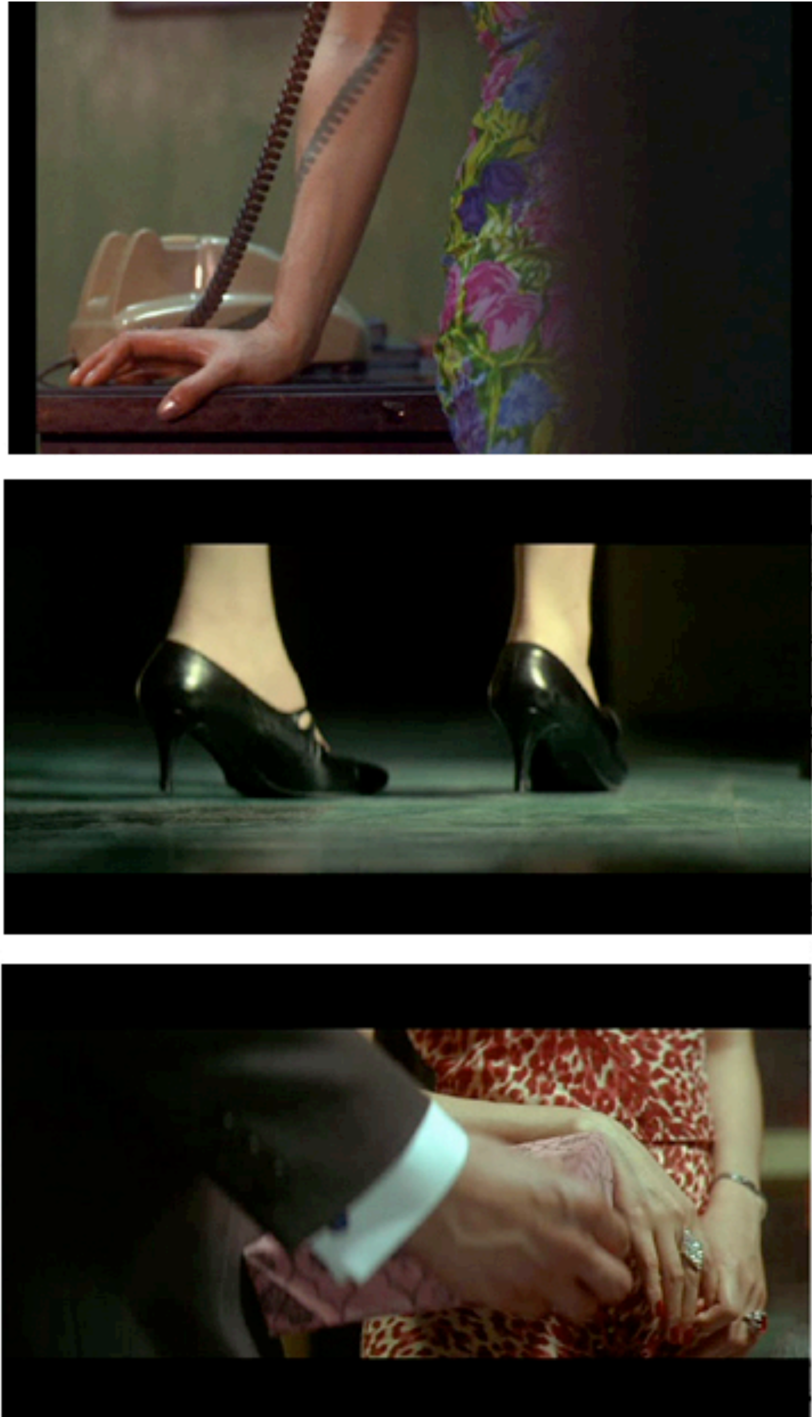

Figure 4: the expressive qualities of arms, legs and hands (scenes from *In The Mood for Love* and *2046*)

Similarly, in *My Blueberry Nights* Norah Jones' character is identified with the blueberry pie served by Jude Law in his New York Cafe. They meet after she is jilted by her boyfriend, and he compares people with pies: "At the end of every night, the cheesecake and the apple pie are always gone, but there is always a whole blueberry pie left untouched". "You can't blame the blueberry pie", he says, "It is just that people make other choices". The scene is intertwined with images of melting ice cream over blueberry pie in extreme close-up to the point where it begins to look like organic matter from inside the human body. When her character leaves unexpectedly on a road trip, he continues to bake blueberry pies for the day when she will decide to return.

The fetishistic power of objects is even more present in *Chungking Express*, where people are substituted by cans of pineapple, salads and stuffed animals. In the first story, Cop 223 decides to buy every day a can of pineapple (his ex-girlfriend's favorite fruit) with the expiration date of May first, which is the self-imposed deadline for her return. Since she has left him on April first, he decides to "let the joke run for a month". The "expiration date" theme provides a few comical scenes in which the cop argues with a convenience store employee about the feeling of the expired cans. Incidentally, not even a beggar on the street accepts the expired cans. When the deadline finally arrives and the girlfriend has not returned, he decides to eat all of the 30 pineapple cans at once. After being sick, he asks himself if there is anything that

does not have an expiration date, and concludes: “To May, I am just another can of pineapple”.

Figure 5: Talking to objects (scenes from *Happy Together* and *Chungking Express*)

Similarly, in the second story, the girlfriend of Cop 663 is symbolized by the food he buys for her at Midnight Express. At first he buys only chef’s salads, until the store manager convinces him to “give her choice” and try the fish and chips. After that, he tries a different option every night (at this point it becomes obvious that the manager is only trying to sell more food), until there is no more food to be bought. “She wanted to try something else”, he says, “Plenty of choice in men, just like in food”. As it turns out, he too realizes that people are just as exchangeable as food and other commodities. Lonely, the cop starts to talk to the objects in his apartment: he thinks that the soaked washcloth has been crying and the used soap is losing weight because of his solitude; he irons the shirt to warm it up. The girlfriend has left the key

to his apartment at the fast-food place, which gives Faye the opportunity to enter and change things around. She buys new flip-flops, bed sheets, a shirt and a toothbrush; she puts new goldfish in the fish bowl and replaces his cans of sardines.

Indeed, Deleuze notes that any object can be framed as a face, "'envisaged' (*envisagée*) or rather 'faceified' (*visageifiée*)" (1986:88), as long as it is successfully abstracted from its contextualizing space. This way, a close-up of any object can represent an affection-image by elevating it to the state of pure affection or quality. It is the case of the many objects found in Wong's films. There are bars of soap, cans of pineapple, stuffed animals, slices of pie and souvenir lamps in the material world, with real functions and ordinary connections with human beings, but there is also the stuffed animal with which a cop shares his feelings, the slice of blueberry pie that a café owner saves for a girl and the lamp which becomes a constant visual reminder of a couple's failed relationship. The fetish as a neurotic symptom exists as "a phallic object used symbolically to belie the mother's lack of a penis" (Marchetti 2000:306), but it can also be seen as something that helps fight the anxiety and restore a sense of well-being. "It is a less harmful kind of neurosis", says Abbas (1997:57). In a universe where interpersonal relationships are painful and communication oftentimes seems impossible, relationships with objects offer a less harmful option, and characters end up investing all of their emotions in them.

3.3 The any-space-whatever

We have seen that there is a large variety of close-ups: of faces, body parts and objects; of a single face or several faces; including a visible background or not. From all of these cases, Deleuze concludes that the affection-image can be expressed by any kind of object and framed in any kind of shot. What is particular to it is neither the close-up nor the face, but the total de-contextualization of an object from its spatio-temporal coordinates, raising it to the state of pure affection. Before it can be actualized in a determined state of things, incarnated in characters that exist in a given space and time – in other words, before it enters the scope of the action-image –, the affection-image is all potentiality of expression, expressed (by a face or an object 'faceified') to exist by itself, 'qualité-puissance pure', affection unconnected to any specific space or time.

This does not mean that there is no physical representation of space in the affection-image, but rather that this space loses its practical coordinates and becomes what Deleuze calls "any-space-whatever":

> Any-space-whatever is not an abstract universal, in all times, in all places. It is a perfectly singular space, which has merely lost its homogeneity, that is, the principal of its metric relations or the connection of its own parts, so that the linkages can be made in an infinite number of ways (Deleuze 1986:109).

In other words, space can also be decontextualized by itself, to the point where it becomes 'tactile', a virtual space, the site of potential possibilities. Deleuze cites

some examples of ways of constructing any-space-whatever, among them the opposition between light and shadow, black and white present in most Expressionist spaces; the contrast between actual (the state of things itself) and virtual (the possibilities that go beyond that) in the 'lyrical abstraction' of directors like Bresson and Dreyer; the explosion of colors and oneiric spaces in some Hollywood musicals; the focus on emptied, disconnected spaces and deserted landscapes of modern filmmakers like Antonioni (*Red Desert, Zabriskie Point*) and Cassavetes (*Gloria*).

It is important to keep in mind that the any-space-whatever can be abstracted without becoming completely abstract: Wong Kar-wai's films are shot not on painted canvas or virtual sets but on real locations, most of them in Hong Kong, which are identifiable as such along with all the physical elements of the city, such as buildings and streets. How, then, can any-space-whatever be extracted from such a given state of things?

First we must consider the existence of three kinds of spaces in Wong's films: there is the intimate space of houses, the public space of the city and the imagined space of evasion, all of which offer ways to formulate the any-space-whatever. The interior of apartments and hotel rooms, whether they are filled with furniture and decorative objects (such as the stepmother's house in *Days of Being Wild*, the apartments in *In The Mood for Love* and *Chungking Express*) or stripped to the bare minimum (Wah's apartment in *As Tears Go By*, Lai Yu-fai's room in *Happy Together*), constitute the space where most daily activities take place, where people eat, sleep and share the diminutive space around them. The sheer smallness of these spaces puts people in a state of constant agitation and physical contact: in *In The Mood*

for Love characters are constantly crossing each other in the corridors and moving to accommodate the others' movements, as if taking place in a choreographed dance. Space shapes the characters' actions and behavior; it closes them in, but it also offers room for individual expression. In *Happy Together*, the minuscule room where Lai Yu-fai takes care of Ho Po-wing constitutes the boundaries of the sole location where the love between the two is possible (Figure 6).

Figure 6: sharing a small space (scene from *Happy Together*)

However, while these spaces serve as mediators between interpersonal relations, they rarely constitute a familial space, in the sense of a constant and secure destination. As Linda McDowell writes, the concept of "home" conveys "familial togetherness, privacy and freedom, a sense of belonging, of security, a place to escape from but also to return to, a secure memory, and ideal" (McDowell 2003:14). In this sense few homes are portrayed in Wong's films, as most of the spaces are anonymous-

looking hotel rooms or rented apartments, which the characters occupy only temporarily. This might be because the characters are of a younger generation whose parents are missing (with the exception of the mute's father in *Fallen Angels*, who dies later in the film, all other parents are non-existent or only referred to but never shown), or because their own identities are as fluid and de-centralized as the space they occupy.

In more than one film (more specifically, in *Days of Being Wild*, *Chungking Express*, *Fallen Angels* and *Happy Together*) characters invade the private space of another, suggesting that they can become closer by taking over someone else's identity. The act of occupying the other person's house, of imprinting one's own personality into it, is seen as a way to demonstrate care and affection. However, the characters never seem to reach the emotional proximity that would be expected from this invasion of privacy, as each of the characters remains ultimately imprisoned in his or her own solitude: Yuddy lets his girlfriends into his house but never assumes any kind of commitment with any of them; Cop 663 does not realize that Faye is changing things in his apartment because he is still longing for his last girlfriend; the woman who cleans the assassin's apartment never gets close to him; Lai Yu-fai and Ho Po-wing constantly fight over their own little territories inside one single room.

Finally, we can consider the relationship between these intimate spaces of houses, apartments and hotel rooms and the public – and often chaotic – space of the city. In *Fallen Angels* the killer's apartment is framed in a way that shows a tiny window separating the bedroom from the streets where we see cars and trains moving at accelerated speed. The scene is shot in a way that accentuates the contrast between

the limited space of the bedroom and the openness of the streets, while at the same time suggesting that one space is contiguous with another: the outside is inside and the inside is outside. In a similar way, Cop 663's apartment in *Chungking Express* faces the Mid-Level escalators in Hong Kong so closely that people passing by it can see and interact with people inside the apartment as if it was one single space. The film transits freely from the local/intimate space of the house to the public/national space of the streets, from the multinational space of Chungking Mansions and its fast-food places to the transnational/global space of the airport.

Figure 7: Inside/outside space in *Fallen Angels*

3.3.1 From any-space-whatever to a space of disappearance

The fluid relationship that characters have with the space around them can be compared with Hong Kong's own status as a constantly changing space, "from a trading post in the nineteenth century to its present position as a premier financial center of Southeast Asia, from a colonial city to a global city" (Abbas 1997:03). Abbas argues that Hong Kong had always been considered a space of transience, a commercial port where everything, even the identity, is temporary. "Much of the population was made up of refugees and expatriates who thought of Hong Kong as a temporary stop, no matter how long they stayed" (Abbas 1997:04). Wong's characters are no exception, as they are also constantly moving, traveling and dreaming with a different life in a different place. Some of them originate from another place outside of Hong Kong (China, Taiwan, Macao), while most nurture a desire to go somewhere else. The policeman played by Andy Lau in *Days of Being Wild* becomes a sailor just because he likes to wander around; in this film both he and Yuddy end up in the Philippines. In *As Tears Go By* the enamored couple escapes to Lantau Island; in *In The Mood for Love* and *2046*, Tony Leung's character drifts between Cambodia and Singapore; in *Chungking Express* Faye daydreams about going to California; in *My Blueberry Nights* Norah Jones's character crosses the United States.

It is important to notice, however, that this constant movement of characters never quite corresponds to the technologically enhanced increase in flow of people and commercial goods normally associated with globalization. Wong's characters are

not exactly jet setters or citizens of the world; their travels are motivated by restlessness rather than work or necessity, and the places they go are more idealized than actual. Their places of destination are almost always unrealistic. The Philippines of *Days of Being Wild* has something of a "mythical Wild West" (Tambling 2003:02), a mixture of Spanish colonial architecture and storybook jungle. The Cambodian ruins where Tony Leung's character tells his secret in the end of *In The Mood for Love* has the same unrealistic feel. Other idealized places include California in *Chungking Express* and the Iguazu Falls in *Happy Together*. In the latter, the characters have actually accomplished the desire to travel and have reached Argentina, only to find out that they are still unhappy in the new place. For them, the desire to escape misery has been substituted by the desire to go back home, to return to one's origins.

With few exceptions (*Ashes of Time, Happy Together* and *My Blueberry Nights*), all of the films take place in and around Hong Kong, and the importance of the city space is evident. As Wong declared: "Hong Kong exists in all of my films as a character in its own right. The city, the streets and the global movement of the place can sometimes even replace human beings" (Wong 1999:26). Some critics claim that his contemporary films represent all of the elements of a "metropolis which encapsulates the rush, efficiency, and obsession with money characteristic of contemporary capitalism" (Mazierska and Rascaroli 2000:04): in other words, the frantic rhythm of everyday life, the visual, sonorous and environmental pollution, the neon lights. Fast-food restaurants, gambling houses, nightclubs, commercial centers, hotels and metro stations constitute the urban map where the characters move. Even if some of these characters live on the margins of society, we still see references to the

commercial and technological aspect of a capitalist lifestyle, such as televisions, cell phones and references to global commercial brands (McDonalds, Coca-Cola, IBM, LG).

Wong, however, does not give us a formal representation of Hong Kong in the shape of familiar images easily recognizable to the western eye. His first film, *As Tears Go By*, is centered in the gangland world of "sleazy, neon-lit Mongkok in deepest Kowloon" (Teo 2005:16), and already here he refuses to give us visual metonyms for the city (no postcard images of Hong Kong are shown). In the beginning of *Chungking Express* the mysterious woman in blonde wig, sunglasses and raincoat moves around various dingy shops in Chungking Mansions in Tsimshatsui, "a hub of small business and criminal activities and also a source of cheap hotel rooms well known for travelers and backpackers" (Teo 2005:50), where a drug smuggling operation is taking place – shoes with hollow heels are being made, electronics are taken apart, condoms are filled with heroin. She goes back and forth from the airport, where the Indian men and women disappear, to the dealer's bar where she is handed a deadline; from a bar where she meets Cop 223 to the anonymous-looking hotel room where she sleeps before finally running away. It is not by chance that Brigitte Lin's character in this film has been compared with Gena Rowland's in *Gloria* (1980). Besides the blonde hair, both characters are also running and hiding from people who are trying to kill them. Like Rowlands, Lin is also running frenetically from place to place only to spend long periods of time waiting for something to happen.

In *Chungking Express* the location, like the narrative, is unexpectedly fragmented in two: while the first episode is set in Chungking Mansions, the second is

set in Central and the area around the pedestrian escalators in Hong Kong Island. Stephen Teo argues that the English title of the film implies an unlikely conjunction of these two different places as one, “a deliberate obfuscation of space” that imparts the idea of a “unitary city”, especially for those who have never been to Hong Kong. The abstraction of the actual physical space of the city creates another kind of place, an imaginary geography in the shape of Italo Calvino’s invisible cities (Calvino 1978).

In *Fallen Angels*, locations span from Kowloon (where the femme-fatale and the mute reside) to Wanchai in Hong Kong Island, but this time the focus is more on dislocation around the city, hence the emphasis on trains, cars and buses (one important scene even shows a character’s motorcycle crossing the tunnel). Teo argues that “never before has Wong covered so much ground: gambling houses, cheap hotels, back alleyways, pubs, eateries, restaurants, street stalls, pavements, apartments, the football stadium, subway stations” (Teo 2005:93). Therefore in this film it is not the represented urban space that is abstracted, but the representation itself: the use of close-ups and wide-angle lens distorts not only the characters’ faces but also everything around them, making familiar spaces seem strangely unidentifiable.

In this sense, we can say that the Hong Kong of these films becomes almost like a state of mind, an any-space-whatever represented in the experience of the people who live in it rather than a specific geographical location. Places known for providing constant human interaction end up emphasizing the contrast between physical proximity and the characters’ emotional and social isolation – for example, characters in *Fallen Angels* are constantly crossing the same public spaces but they never meet, remaining ultimately isolated in their own loneliness.

3.3.2 Hong Kong's (anamorphic) space of disappearance

Walter Benjamin once wrote: "Anything about which one knows that one soon will not have it around becomes an image" (1983:87). The idea of capturing a space that is vanishing before one's eyes has been a problem for Hong Kong filmmakers since the early 1980s, when the Sino-British Joint Declaration was signed promising to return the former British colony back to Chinese rule by 1997. This provoked the uncanny sensation that Hong Kong's already complex cultural identity was in "imminent danger of disappearing" (Abbas 1997:07). In an interview translated by Stephen Teo, Wong Kar-wai explains that he chose his locations for *Fallen Angels* trying to "reflect the lifestyles of the Hong Kong people but which most probably will disappear in the near future" (Teo 2005:94). Indeed, most of the places where the film was shot no longer exist. But how does one represent a disappearing space?

Let us start with the opposite question: how does one *not* represent a disappearing space? According to Ackbar Abbas, "almost every film made since the mid-eighties, regardless of quality or seriousness of intention, seems constrained to make some mandatory reference to 1997" (1997:24), which explains why films that tried to tackle Hong Kong's questions of identity and disappearance too directly were never completely successful. He cites as an example Allen Fong's *Father and Son* (1981), a semibiographical story, shot in neorealist documentary style, about a working class family living in one of the government-built housing estates in the

1960s. The film clearly has Hong Kong's cultural space as subject, but the "straightforward neorealist style of filmmaking seems incapable of addressing the historical paradoxes of contemporary Hong Kong" (Abbas 1997:22). Such an elusive problem, it seems, cannot be represented straight on, or it might disappear even faster under a cluster of clichés. Instead, it is necessary to look at the problem from a different perspective.

In *"The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-analysis"* Lacan introduces the concept of anamorphosis, in which a detail of a picture that is gazed upon directly, that is, straightforwardly, may appear as a blurred spot, but when looked upon from an angle it assumes clear and distinguished shapes. Lacan's classical example is Hans Holbein's painting *Ambassadors* (1533), in which at the bottom of the picture, "under the figures of the two ambassadors, a viewer catches sight of an amorphous, extended, 'erected' spot" (Lacan and Miller 1978). However, when looked at it "awry", that is, from a vantage point or an angle, the amorphous spot suddenly acquires the shape of a skull, "disclosing thus the true meaning of the picture – the nullity of all terrestrial goods, objects of art and knowledge that fill out the rest of the picture" (Zizek 1991:91).

Figure 8: The Ambassadors (with skull in detail)

According to Slavoj Zizek, the anamorphic point of view reverses the relationship between seeing and being seen, since it is the point from which the subject stops being the one who sees to become the one gazed upon. When we look at something with an anamorphic point of view, an "'interested' view, supported, permeated, and 'distorted' by desire (Zizek 1991:12)", what we see is the detail that "sticks out" from the picture and gazes back upon us. In the state of anamorphosis,

> We no longer occupy a position that literally is diametrically opposed to the painting in which image and ground coincide, but we stand by the painting's side; we have moved to its level and look, so to speak, from

> the painting's point of view. What we see when we arrive there is an image that is not a given, that is not presented to us, but appears in the process of unfolding (Grootenboer 2005:131)

Anamorphosis seems to be a possible perspective from which to analyze the representation of Hong Kong's 'space of disappearance' in Wong Kar-wai's cinema. The problem is not given, for none of his films mentions directly the handover (or any other political or social matter), but it is nevertheless there; it "appears in the process of unfolding". In my view, it is here that resides the fundamental difference between anamorphosis and allegory, which is another perspective frequently utilized to analyze his films. Fredric Jameson coined the term "national allegory" in a controversial essay published in 1986 in which he argues that every literary or artistic work produced in a Third-world country is necessarily political: "Third-world texts, even those which are seemingly private (…) necessarily project a political dimension in the form of national allegory: the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third world culture and society" (Chow The Protestant Ethnic and the Spirit of Capitalism 2002:98). Since then, this perspective has been largely criticized by authors such as Gayatri Spivak (1999), who points out not only its generalist nature (as it considers that all Third-world and post-colonial texts speak of only one and the same thing), but also the fact that it homogenizes the complexities and ambiguities between public and private spheres. I would also add the use of allegory to the list of concerns.

Allegory and anamorphosis share the same principle that "celebrates ambiguity as the very means through which they communicate" (Grootenboer 2005:132), that is,

they both imply the existence of hidden meanings and multiple interpretations, but not all anamorphosis are allegorical. Allegory ("a contraction of *allos*, which means 'other', and *agoria*, 'to speak', (Grootenboer 2005:136) implies that the work of art never holds the key to its own meaning, but refers to other signs with which it never coincides. The choice of signs is ultimately arbitrary since, differently from the symbol, there is no relationship between the object and what it symbolizes. In other words, we must see something that is not there, since "any person, any object, any relationship can mean absolutely anything else" (Benjamin 1977:175). In anamorphosis, on the other hand, the key to interpretation is already there to be seen, hidden inside the picture.

Happy Together, Wong's first film to be entirely shot outside of Hong Kong, illustrates perfectly this argument. It was realized in 1997, year of the handover, but it does not mention directly any political context. And yet, the film is invaded by an atmosphere of incertitude towards the future that touches profoundly the exiled characters, representing a Hong Kong in danger of vanishing.

The film was shot in Buenos Aires, motivated partly by Wong's long-lasting admiration of Latin American literature, in particular of Manuel Puig (the film was initially supposed to be an adaptation of Puig's *The Buenos Aires Affair*, which was its working title for a while[22]), and partly by the desire to distance himself from the weight of the approaching Hong Kong handover. "It was a matter of escaping a situation for which I wasn't responsible, as well as the simplistic idea that dictates that

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[22] Jeremy Tambling also sees resemblances between *Happy Together* and two other novels by Manuel Puig, *Heartbreak Tango* and *Kiss of the Spider Woman* (See Tambling 2003).

a film must be made according to a major event just because it is synchronous to it", he said (Wong 1999:26). Upon arriving in Buenos Aires, however, Wong and his crew felt the sort of displacement and homesickness experienced by many exiled people, and naturally gravitated towards transient spaces like bars, fast-food joints and train stations. Suddenly, Buenos Aires looked and felt a lot more like Hong Kong, a sentiment that is visible in the film since it takes place in many of these transient urban spaces which could easily be found in any big city. "The depiction of temporary, fleeting human encounters in public spaces resonates (…) with similar images in Wong's other films – and thereby with the transient cultural space of Hong Kong", says critic Marc Siegel (Siegel 2001:280). As Wong notes: "I shot *Happy Together* far from Hong Kong, but the film only talks about it" (Wong 1999:26).

The locations, of course, evoke the social space of Buenos Aires – there are many shots of the city's historic neighborhood of La Boca, the football stadium, tango bars and even an abattoir as reference to the country's main economic activity of meat production –, but, in a more indirect way, Hong Kong is present practically everywhere else: for example, in the characters' language, in their mode of cooking, eating, working and playing mahjong. The city itself is seen only once, in the mind of the character who imagines it upside down from where he finds himself at that moment, as if one place were the direct opposite of another (see Figure 9). In a sense, the upside-down image of Hong Kong is the anamorphous spot that sticks out of the picture and stares back at us.

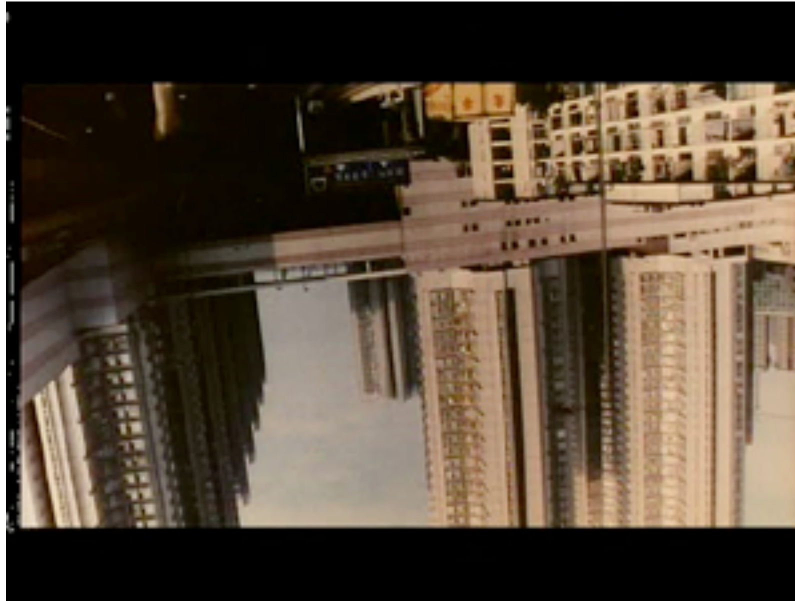

Figure 9: Upside-down Hong Kong (scene from *Happy Together*)

This explains why Wong's films, while not referring directly to the political issues of Hong Kong, *precisely* because they do not refer directly to political issues, are the ones that most successfully engage the problem. "Hong Kong cinema can intervene in political debates more effectively by problematizing the visual than by advancing direct arguments about identity" (Abbas 1997:48). According to Abbas, not only Wong Kar-wai but other Hong Kong filmmakers have developed "techniques of disappearance that responds to, without being absorbed by, a space of disappearance" (1997:08). Their films evoke "a sense of the elusiveness, the slipperiness, the ambivalences of Hong Kong's cultural space (…) regardless of their subject matter" (1997:24). By transforming the urban social space in any-space-whatever, whether it is "oversaturated with signs and images" (Abbas 1997:09) as in *Fallen Angels* or, on the contrary, emptied or deserted spaces as in *Ashes of Time*, Wong is exercising some of

these techniques, though not all of them are space related. They also include different ways of creating an atmosphere of incertitude and fluidity, of problematizing temporal and subjective experiences, and of relativizing the image itself, as we shall see in the subsequent chapters.

4 The action-image: Wong Kar-wai and Hong Kong's generic cinema

4.1 The action-image: the medium shot

The action-image begins when the affection-image of potential quality materializes in a determined context, in a state of things geographically, socially and historically defined. Affection and impulse are now properly embodied in characters, expressed through their emotions and behavior. "Everything in individuated: the milieu as a particular space-time, the situation as determining and determinate, the collective as well as the individual character" (Deleuze 1986:142). The any-space whatever becomes a milieu, which is a center of forces that acts upon the characters, presenting a situation to which they must react. The character, then, acts to change this situation, to change his/her role in the milieu, to change the milieu itself, to change his/her situation regarding other characters, and so on. The result is a new state of things, a new situation.

> The situation, and the character or the action, are like two terms which are simultaneously correlative and antagonistic. The action in itself is a duel of forces, a series of duels: duel with the milieu, with the other, with himself. Finally, the new situation which emerges from the action forms a couple with the initial situation. This is the set of the action-image, or at least its first form (Deleuze 1986:142).

The big structure of the action-image is described as S-A-S’: from an initial situation (S) to a new situation (S’) through the action (A). Deleuze also describes this structure as organic and compares the passage from S to S’ with the act of respiration, that is, a constant movement of contraction and expansion. The action-image follows a few basic rules, of which I thereby present a summary:

1. The milieu must be well defined and organized, since it is the space that produces the forces that act upon the characters. The shot organizes the way that the space is seen, “the way in which the whole incurves itself around the group, the character or the home, constituting an *encompasser* from which the hostile or favorable forces are detached” (Deleuze 1986:151). The milieu can be a pathological social jungle in which nothing and nobody can be trusted, as in the *film noir*, the natural grandness with all of its invisible forces in the Western, or the historical space in which entire collectivities are represented in the epic film. This is why the action-image corresponds to the medium shot in a film: it focuses on the characters and their actions while presenting them inside a visible and determined space.

2. Time, or the linear succession of shots, rules the passage from S to S’, “the alternation of moments of contraction and expansion, the alternations of outside and of inside, the division of the principal situation into secondary situations” (Deleuze 1986:151). Between situations, between the situation and

the challenge that provokes the action, between the space and the behavior that modifies it, there is a great gap that can only be filled progressively, through the duration of the film. This gap can be filled either with moments of progression as well as retrogression; nevertheless, anticipation towards the great final action must be built with time and small actions that lead progressively to the establishment of S'.

3. Behavior rules the characters, since it promotes the action that fills the space between S and S'. In this organic structure, the situation must "permeate the character deeply and continuously", in such a way that "the character who is thus permeated must burst into action" (Deleuze 1986:155). The situation moves the character to act out, engendering a sensory-motor scheme of behaviorism. Since in this case the characters' psychological state is represented in the exterior, it is common to have an association between objects and emotions – objects that represent emotions as well as objects that trigger emotions.

Finally, Deleuze acknowledges that since the big structure of the action-image can be defined by the S-A-S' scheme, it can also be described by its inverse, A-S-A', in which it is the action that prompts the situation, which, in turn, provokes another action. "A representation like this is no longer global but local. (…) It is no longer structural but constructed round events" (Deleuze 1986:160). Deleuze associates this structure with comedic and burlesque films in which the situation is brought about by

a single action (a misunderstanding or an ambiguous gesture), but also with detective films, which, differently from crime films, usually start with an action that leads to the deduction of a situation.

4.2 The action-image as generic cinema

It is not surprising that all of Deleuze's examples from this section appear neatly divided into cinematic genres, because the standard form of the action-image is, in fact, the structure of classical generic cinema – that is, cinema whose narrative is ruled by a constant set of directives that render a film identifiable as part of a bigger group: musical, melodrama, historical film, Western, *film noir* and so on. Deleuze also calls this form Realism, which, in this case, should not be taken as signifying "closer to real life", but as the classical structure based on the straightforward identification of spaces and subjects with themselves. This broader structure can be applied to a large number of genres, and it does not exclude documentary, fantasy or science fiction, as Deleuze proves through several examples. Realism corresponds to the basic structure S-A-S', and each cinematic genre consists on a possible variation of this familiar structure.

> Bound by a strict set of conventions, tacitly agreed upon by filmmaker and audience, the genre film provides the experience of an ordered world and is an essentially classical structure predicated upon the principles of the classical world view (…) in the genre film the plot is

> fixed, the characters defined, the ending satisfyingly predictable (Sobchack 1986:102)

Despite being one of the most fundamental concepts of literary theory, in film studies genre is usually taken for granted as a set of pre-established conventions associated only with highly commercial cinemas, and therefore critics see almost no need to discuss it in depth. This assumption of genre as a formula that restrains artistic liberty is limited, in my view, for it ignores its importance as a "powerful ideological medium" (Comolli and Narboni 1993). I am not trying to refute the fact that genres are associated with commercial practices – they are, but they also reflect movements and changes in cultural patterns, which are, in turn, defined by audience habits. After all, genres are at the center of the movie-going experience for most audiences, regulating – and being regulated by – what they want (or do not want) to see and establishing communication lines between admirers of certain generic films.

As Rick Altman, author of several books on genre, points out, cinematic genres are, at the same time, located in the author, in the reader, in the film itself, in the context of all generic films together (1999:14). They can be looked at as at least four different things:

1. *As blueprint, as a formula that precedes, programs and patterns industry production.* Along with the star-system, genres provide a sufficient amount of predictability, an important element for any commercial activity that, like cinema, requires a steady income. In an activity where producers get deals

done and overseas investments before the shooting even begins, studios need to rely on what is expected to please the audiences. Genres, like stars, "can reduce risk and promote predictable output" (Bordwell 2000:150).

2. *As structure, as the formal framework on which individual films are founded.* Films of the same genre share not only the same semantic elements but also the same syntactic structure. According to Altman (1999:89), semantic elements are what appear at the surface of the image (character types, motifs, settings, music), thus rendering it immediately recognizable. If, in the first few moments of a film, audiences hear dramatic music and see a deserted western landscape with characters dressed in cowboy outfits and holding guns, they can therefore assume it is a Western. The syntactic structure, on the other hand, is the way in which those elements are organized – or, to use Deleuze's words, the particular way in which action is shaped to promote change from an initial situation to a transformed situation. One of the syntactic structures of the Western is the re-establishment, by the hero representing a collectivity, of an endangered social or natural order. Therefore, genre-based films are heavily intertextual: they are constantly referring to their source and reproducing existent patterns, whether to perpetuate, honor or even parody the genre. "The Western respects and recalls the history of the Western more than it does the history of the West" (Altman 1999:25).

3. *As label, as the name of a category central to the decisions and communication of distributors and exhibitors*. Although genres are based on predictability, repetition and easy identification, studios rarely emphasize these characteristics when advertising their films. Rather, they tend to focus on the novelty aspect of the films, downplaying its generic nature or emphasizing its simultaneous belonging to several different genres, thus reaching more viewers with the promise of 'something for everybody'. It may seem paradoxical that the industry keeps trying to conceal what feeds its very structure, but this formula only follows the capitalist need for product differentiation and market diversification. Films may advertise their novel aspects, but the basic structure of the genre is something that remains constant.

4. *As contract, as the viewing position required by each genre film of its audience*. Based on previous experiences with that genre, the spectator knows precisely what to expect from a generic film. It is the sense of reaffirmation that creates generic pleasure. The thrill of a detective story comes from the reassurance that we will know the identity of the killer in the end, even more so when the entire film makes it seem like we won't. For a fan of science fiction or fantasy, for example, generic pleasure comes from the film's liberation from the social and scientific rules of everyday life. This liberation is 'false' in the sense that it is only apparent, since social values will always be restored in the end, but the pleasure comes precisely from the conscience of this falsehood. If it is true that "the greater the risk, the greater the pleasure of the return to

safety" (Altman 1999:155), it is even more so when the spectator has the safety net of a genre.

4.3 Hong Kong cinema and its genres

Given its association with commercial cinema, genre is one of the features most frequently used to characterize the Hong Kong film industry. In general, critics describe Hong Kong cinema as profit-driven, dependent upon Hollywood's star-system, produced quickly for immediate consumption, almost like a factory's assembly line, resulting in films that are little more than variations of a "single metanarrative" (Abbas 1997:19; O'Brien 1992) – in other words, generic. As we have seen, genres provide the amount of predictability that is necessary for the industry to maintain a steady flow of income. In a business where most films are pitched to investors before the final draft of the script is even finished, genre plays a fundamental role. As Wong himself explained: "How do you get overseas sales before the shooting even begins? You have to sell relying on either the actors of the genre – anything that is tried and proven" (In Bordwell 2000:149).

There is no denying that genres have always been a fundamental feature of the Hong Kong cinema. Its generic cinema works in short cycles: usually, when a studio releases a number of genre-based films that become successful, other studios take advantage and start practicing massively the same genre. The first studio has, then, no economic interest in the genre if it is no longer exclusively associated with it; the

solution is to create a new cycle promoting a variation on a new genre, with new stars, etc. Since Hong Kong films are shot and released so quickly, these cycles have a duration limited to approximately ten-year periods (Bordwell 2000:152), in which the quantity of sequels, spin-offs and series of a single genre reach impressive numbers[23]. Although the majority of these genres are adapted from Hollywood, some – like Westerns – were never fully accepted by local audiences, while others – like the kung fu – are unmistakably local. "Absorption of and resistance to certain Hollywood film genres suggest that Hong Kong films are part of an international film culture while they retain a collection of cultural products unique to Hong Kong" (Chu 2003:67).

For many people, Hong Kong cinema is synonymous with the kung fu genre, which is, in turn, closely associated with Chinese culture. Martial arts films started to be produced as early as the 1920s in Mainland China, until they were banned in the 1930s by the government, who perceived such films as "reactionary glorifications of feudal ways of life that hampered social progress" (Dissanayake 2003:06). After the ban, the production of these films moved to Hong Kong, where it found great success in the 1950s with the *Huang Feihung* series, generating more than a hundred episodes. In the 1970s, the genre gained added impetus with the appearance of Bruce Lee, who became one of the most recognizable Chinese stars and reached transnational fame in Hollywood. After Bruce Lee's death in 1973, Jackie Chan succeeded him in gaining international recognition, although they both had very different styles – while the first was focused on sheer physical power, the second added a comical slapstick twist to his

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[23] Bordwell (2000) notes that the revival of the historical kung-fu cycle in the 1990s produced no less than nine co-related films in three years: the series *Once Upon a Time in China* I, II, III and IV, two parodies (*Last Hero in China* and *Master Wong versus Master Wong*) and three spin-offs (*Fong Sai-yuk*, *Fong Sai-yuk 2* and *Iron Monkey*).

stunts. In the 1990s there was a revival of the genre, which, nowadays, is a globalized phenomenon, and no longer restricted to specialized cinemas and cult followings. The success of films such as Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000) and Zhang Yimou's *Hero* (2002) and *House of Flying Daggers* (2004) influenced many Hollywood productions to appropriate the style of martial arts films.

The popularity of a particular genre can, therefore, be shaped by a number of things: from market conditions and commercial strategies to social patterns and external influences. As Yingchi Chu (2003:67) explains, in the 1960s the popularity of opera films, Mandarin historical melodramas and adaptations of classical Chinese literature "reflected the impact of China's national politics in Hong Kong" , while revealing the lack of a cultural identity in local films. The 1970s saw the emergence of new genres such as satirical comedies, along with police and crime films. These changes in the popularity of the genres reflected changes in Hong Kong's political, economical and social fields:

> In 1973, the stock market crash destroyed many small shareholders, and the economic recession in 1974-5 had a drastic impact on the public's confidence in Hong Kong's economy. (…) Cynicism about authority and traditional values grew. Local film critics argue that the popularity of social satirical comedies, the police and crime genre, and strong violence in martial arts films were all a response to Hong Kong society of the 1970s. (Chu 2003:67)

From the 1980s to the mid-1990s, comedy and its sub-genres (like kung fu comedy, police comedy, action comedy, horror comedy) started to rise to the top of the box office numbers, along with a new type of police and crime films: those

featuring gangsters and triad members as heroes, represented by the success of films like John Woo's *A Better Tomorrow* (1986) and *The Killer* (1989)[24]. It was during this period that the Hong Kong cinema reached its commercial peak, with local films easily surpassing Hollywood productions at the box office[25]. In the following years, however, the number of films produced locally dropped significantly, and so did their popularity in comparison with foreign products. A number of factors contributed to this, including rises in piracy and in-home entertainment, lack of investment and the appropriation of Hong Kong genres by the Hollywood industry (Teo 1997). In order to compete with American counterparts, in the past few years Hong Kong films had to resort to the development of new genres and even higher levels of hybridization. We have seen that new genres and sub-genres are generally created from a mixture of familiarity and innovation; in Hong Kong cinema the rule of market diversification is taken to extremes, as films easily combine three or more different genres. “Virtually no Hong Kong movie would become a ‘pure’ genre piece: at the least, there would be dashes of comedy, and even intimate drama might throw in a fight or chase for the export market” (Bordwell 2000:152). Nowadays, comedy (both romantic and slapstick) and action (which includes police, gangsters and spy films as well as kung fu and swordplay) remain the most tried-and-true popular genres.

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[24] Other films in this genre are Ringo Lim’s *Prison on Fire* (1987) and *City on Fire* (1987), and Johnny Mak's *To be Number One* (1991).

[25] In 1984, 20 of the 22 most popular films in Hong Kong were local productions - the most popular foreign film that year, *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, occupied only the sixth position in the charts (Dissanayake 2003:16).

4.4 Wong Kar-wai as generic auteur

At this point, it is pertinent to say a few words about the commercial nature of Hong Kong cinema. As David Bordwell says, "Hong Kong cinema has been an industry for more than sixty years" (2000:03). Different from some post-war European or the Fifth Generation Chinese cinema, Hong Kong cinema never had any form of state subsidy. As a result, it "cannot therefore reject commercialism, which is the sine qua non of its existence. The Hong Kong cinema has to be popular in order to be at all" (Abbas 1997:21). As the norm, commercialism encloses even the so-called independent directors of the Hong Kong New Wave, which corresponds to a generation of young and diversified Hong Kong filmmakers of the late 1970s and 1980s, including Stanley Kwan, An Hui, Tsui Hark and Wong Kar-wai. Despite its name, the Hong Kong New Wave bears an essential difference from the French New Wave, in the sense that it did not present itself as a direct subversion of mainstream film practices. In other words, the Hong Kong New Wave filmmakers did not set out to make militant 'independent' or 'art' films in the way that Jean-Luc Godard and François Truffaut did, since this would have been impossible in the context of the Hong Kong film industry[26]. Nevertheless, they have found other ways to manipulate the system while being a part of it.

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[26] Hong Kong's few truly independent films are, as Abbas says, the exception that proves the rule: we have already mentioned Allen Fong's *Father and Son*, which was shot in neo-realist documentary style, with no references to generic cinema or commercial strategies for publicity and distribution; and we could add Evans Chan's *To Liv(e)* (1992), a political drama based on letters written by the protagonist to actress and humanitarian Liv Ullmann concerning Hong Kong's government policies towards Vietnamese refugees. Not surprisingly, these films failed not only to reach audiences but also to make a long lasting mark in the cinematic scene (Abbas 1997:24).

Like other directors from the New Wave, Wong is an example of an auteur who has successfully managed to preserve his artistic integrity even if his cinema does not reject generic conventions or commercialism – on the contrary, it embraces such things. His feature films have high budgets and make massive use of pop music and pop culture references, as well as of established superstars from the local world of entertainment – all of which are characteristics associated more with mainstream than independent cinema. Wong himself plays with his apparently ambiguous situation: when asked if he makes art movies, he simply answered: "I guess I'm a not very successful commercial director" (Dannen and Long 1997:52).

At first, it may sound paradoxical to associate an *auteur* known for his individual style with Hong Kong's mainstream cinema, but we must keep in mind that, at least in this particular context, commercialism does not necessarily signify a lack of artistic quality or creative control: "A certain impurity in the form of an ambiguity toward commercialism is the rule in Hong Kong cinema. But it is an impurity that can yield positive results" (Abbas 1997:21). Like many other filmmakers of his generation, Wong Kar-wai started his career working for television and writing scripts for popular movies, where he probably acquired great knowledge of how the industry works. And also like the majority of the New Wave filmmakers, Wong's films provide explorations of generic cinema. Many of the most important Hong Kong films from the past years originate from within the framework of locally popular genres: Stanley Kwan's *Rouge* (1987), for example, is a ghost film, while Tsui Hark's *Zu: Warriors from the Magic Mountain* (1983) is a kung fu film and Wong Kar-wai's *As Tears Go By* (1988) is a gangster film.

Usually, critics recognize Wong's connection with generic cinema as a form of parody, reference or tribute, as if trying to put him above the commercial aspect of generic cinema. His films are seen as "implicit tributes to the forms and conventions of genre film-making in the Hong Kong cinema" (Teo 2005:03), but never purely generic. Although I agree with this statement, I fear that it implies that Wong's association with the Hong Kong generic cinema is an optional feature of his films, when, in the contrary, they could not be any different. It is true that Wong's films are not purely generic, but they are not entirely subversive either. My argument is that Wong's relationship with generic cinema, far from limiting, is what enables us to understand him as a Hong Kong filmmaker. And as an integral part of Hong Kong cinema, Wong has the sort of 'critical proximity' that Abbas talks about, "where one is always a part of what one is criticizing" (1997:27). His relationship with generic cinema, though not always straightforward, is nonetheless fundamental and should not be ignored or reduced to parody or tribute.

Let us consider his first feature film, *As Tears Go By*. It is a consensus among critics that this is his most conventional film to date. According to Stephen Teo, it is a film that Wong "had to make in order to prove himself to the industry" (2005:15), suggesting that, like any other young filmmaker trying to become relevant in the film business, he also had to work with the genre that was the most trendy and lucrative at the time, which happened to be the triad gangster action film. This genre is based on the dual concept of rivalry (between gangs) and loyalty (between gang members), its popularity being sparked by some of John Woo's films from the 1980's, like *A Better Tomorrow* (1986) and *The Killer* (1989).

Wong had had experience with the genre while working for the production company In-Gear, where he helped with the scripts for Patrick Tam's *Final Victory* (1987) and *Flaming Brothers* (1987). *As Tears Go By* "suggests an awareness of the nature of the Hong Kong cinema that Wong sought to counteract in his subsequent works" (Teo 2005:15). This awareness can be seen, for example, in the relationship between 'big-brother' Wah (Andy Lau) and 'little brother' Fly (Jacky Cheung). The concept of brotherhood in the Hong Kong gangster film or 'yingxiong pian' ('hero-movie') follows an honor code according to which brothers are supposed to protect one another at any cost[27]. Fly is constantly getting in trouble and thus requiring help from his 'big brother', who, accordingly, is always ready to honor his protégé. Indeed, every irresponsible action taken by Fly is matched with a violent response from his opponents, generating a spiral of fight scenes that culminate with a final shootout in which both Fly and Wah get killed. In the end, Wah's loyalty to his protégé takes him to sacrifice himself in true hero fashion.

However, if it is true that *As Tears Go By* respects generic conventions, it is also true that already in his first film Wong surpasses the limits of the genre in which it is based, and not in a parodic manner. Wong managed to leave some marks of his personal style, both in the narrative and aesthetic levels. The narrative structure of action-reaction is unbalanced by the introduction of a romantic element embodied by the character Ngor (Maggie Cheung), Wah's fragile cousin from Lantau. When Wah realizes that he is in love with Ngor, it is as if a whole new spectrum had suddenly

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[27] Although the scheme of brotherhood loyalty is part of this typical Hong Kong genre, the relationship between Wah and Fly was admittedly inspired by Martin Scorsese's *Mean Streets* (1973), which suggests that Wong has always been capable of combining eastern and western influences. This is, as we will see, one of the characteristics that differentiate Wong from his New Wave contemporaries.

opened itself up for him: the possibility of leading a 'regular life' free from his obligations with his gang's moral codes. It is not by chance that the space, which for Deleuze is the element that sparks the action, is so clearly contrasting in this film: the neon-lit streets of Mongkok symbolizes Wah's gangster reality, while the sun-bathed daylight of Lantau symbolizes this whole other possibility. These two elements are so divergent that they could not be represented in the same space. There is almost no symbiosis in the way that the two plots are articulated, which is why we are left with the feeling that the film got lost between two different ideas. Perhaps an even more subversive element of *As Tears Go By* lies in the editing of the action scenes, in which movement is manipulated – accelerated and slowed down – almost until the point of disappearance. I will discuss this in more detail apropos of *Ashes of Time*, where this technique is pushed to the very extreme.

Wong's second film, *Days of Being Wild,* continues this sort of hybridism between gangster and romantic genres. Since the story is set in the 1960s, a period in which the modern gun-based 'hero-movie' was not yet popular, the gangster element derives this time from the 'Ah Fei' (or rebel youth), a genre "particularly popular in Cantonese cinema, which made its appearance following the crop of Hollywood teenage delinquent flicks influenced by the success of James Dean in Nicholas Ray's *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955)" (Teo 2005:32). Inspired by James Dean, young Cantonese actors gave life to antisocial delinquents struggling to liberate themselves from the oppression of parents and society. According to Stephen Teo, the most memorable Ah Fei movies in Cantonese cinema, such as Lung Kong's *Teddy Girls* (1969), Chor Yuen's *Joys and Sorrows of Youth* (1969) and Chan Wan's *Social*

Characters (1969) all appeared shortly before the genre went out of fashion at the late 1960s. "When the Cantonese cinema disappeared in the early 1970s, the Ah Fei genre and terminology disappeared with it" (Teo 2005:33).

Days of Being Wild's debt to this genre is no secret, since its Chinese title *A Fei Zhengzhuan* (The Story of an Ah Fei) is the same that was given to *Rebel Without a Cause* when it was released in Hong Kong theaters. In the beginning of the film, the protagonist Yuddy directly refers to the expression Ah Fei as the metaphor of a bird without legs that flies endlessly and reaches the land only when it dies. Furthermore, Leslie Cheung's physical characterization is visibly inspired by Dean's hairstyle, wardrobe and mannerisms.

But the references to the genre stop at the allusive level since, at the level of the narrative, the film is one of Wong's "mood pieces" (Teo 2005:35), meaning that the characters wander aimlessly and action is very limited. Take Yuddy, for example, whose lurking melancholia barely matches his personality. In spite of all his love conquests, he is mostly shown in bed, looking at himself in the mirror or just doing nothing at all – even the love scenes elude the action proper to show the characters lying motionless in bed. Yuddy takes action only when he decides to go to the Philippines in search of his birth mother, where he starts a fight with a group of criminals and ends up being killed in a train. It is only in these final scenes that the film could be described as belonging to the Ah Fei/gangster genre.

This explains why *Days of Being Wild* was such a local box office failure, despite enormous expectations created by a cast filled with Hong Kong's biggest stars, an enormous budget and the previous commercial success of *As Tears Go By*. As we

have seen, generic pleasure derives mostly from the reaffirmation of the familiarity of the action-image structure. Audiences have come to expect to laugh in a comedy, to see a happy ending in a romantic comedy and to experience the guilt-free thrill of violence in action films. When these expectations are not met, frustration is generated in its place. Wong's relationship with generic cinema can thus be defined by the way he deconstructs this familiarity from the inside out: he carefully raises expectations – whether in the film's publicity, title, visual style, plot or soundtrack – only to take them in a wholly unexpected direction.

Ashes of Time is, perhaps, the clearest example of this strategy. In the 1990s, the wuxia (martial arts)[28] genre was re-emerging with full force in the Hong Kong film industry after a less popular period in the 1980s. A series of successful wuxia films produced by Tsui Hark (*Swordsman*, *Swordsman II* and *Swordsman III: The East is Red*) brought the genre into the twenty first century and back into fashion. Motivated by this resurgence, Wong announced that he was interested in doing an adaptation of Jin Yung's famous martial-arts novel *Shediao Yingxiong Zhuan*, known in English as *The Eagle Shooting Heroes*. The company Scholar Film then announced the simultaneous production of two films based on Jin Yung's novel; one, directed by Jeff Lau, was supposed to be more popular and the other, directed by Wong Kar-wai, was more 'artistic'. The promise of a Wong Kar-wai wuxia film with a stellar cast and big budget created, again, great expectations in the public. The fact that the project took

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[28] The broad generic category of martial arts films can be divided into two basic terms: the wuxia refers to films including sword fights, while the kung fu refers to films containing unarmed combats only, as in the films of Bruce Lee.

two years to be completed[29], a record time for the fast-and-furious Hong Kong standards, only accentuated audiences' expectations.

On the surface, *Ashes of Time* looks like a genuine wuxia period piece: characters dress in ancient costumes, the locations are deserted and refer to ancient times and, for the first time in a Wong Kar-wai film, there are choreographed battle scenes with stunts and special effects. Wong even hired Sammo Hung, a well-known actor and choreographer of martial arts, to direct the action scenes. Another element that is typical of the wuxia genre is the presence of Brigitte Lin as a sexually ambiguous character. Lin appeared for the first time in the *Swordsman* series as 'Asia the invincible', and since then the character has appeared in almost every film of the genre, including *Ashes of Time*, where she plays the androgynous siblings Murong Yin and Yang.

Historicism plays an important role in the genre, not only determining locations and scenery but also the characters' behavior and language. "The wuxia movie is embedded in a central historical fantasy revolving around an individualistic hero who delivers the common people from oppression and tyranny, imposes order and brings justice to the nation" (Teo 2005:67). The wuxia swordsman is, in this sense, the type of heroic knight errant who would endanger his own life to defend the helpless. Wong, however, completely subverted the original novel, writing an entire new screenplay, using nothing of Jin Yung's text but the names of his main characters. He claims to have written background stories for these characters, which supposedly

[29] The film was supposed to be released in time for the Chinese New Year in 1993, but only reached theaters more than a year later, in September 1994. In the meantime Wong managed to shoot and complete *Chungking Express*, his third film chronologically but fourth in production.

happened before the actions narrated in the novel, so that *Ashes of Time* functions as a 'prequel' to the novel. As a result, the film's intricate narrative focuses more on the swordsmen's regrets and memories of lost love than on actual fights or chivalric behavior. Critics questioned Wong's intentions, saying that the characters in the film bear no resemblance whatsoever to those in the novel, and some even questioned if the film could indeed be called a real wuxia (Dissanayake 2003:81-90).

I consider it unproductive to question whether the film fully belongs to the wuxia genre or not, because both sides of the argument have a certain validity, and in any case, such an argument leads to an impasse. Just as Wong was inspired by wuxia films, he was also clearly influenced by some American Westerns such as John Ford's *The Searchers* (1956), especially by the film's cinematography and sound score. Wong "uses the limits of the genre as a discipline and a challenge" (Abbas 1997:28), taking the genre to extremes while remaining inscribed in it. Let us consider the action scenes for example. David Bordwell (In Fu and Desser 2000:114) explains that there are several ways to shoot a martial arts or sword fight scene – most notably, through distant shots and long takes that "preserve the totality of the action"; and through camera tracking that "follows" the hero as he/she fights several opponents as they enter the frame one by one, as in, for example, King Hu's classic *A Touch of Zen* (1969). The action can therefore be either accelerated to emphasize the fastness of the motion, or slowed down to dissect the fighters' techniques (for example, in most of John Woo's films).

Whether in long or medium shot, all of these techniques allow the viewer to observe the action, closely following the hero. One of the basic rules of the wuxia

genre is that the viewer should be able do identify with – and therefore cheer for – the hero during the action scenes. Well, this is impossible when one cannot see who is attacking whom and where, which is the case of the fight scenes in *Ashes of Time*. They were choreographed as traditional action scenes, but then in the editing process the images were manipulated to the point where the characters become nothing but a blur of colors and movement on the screen. They are, thus, rendered obsolete in the realistic action-image scheme. Their sole *raison d'être* becomes, instead, sensual and aesthetic, like the colors and sense of movement of an abstract painting.

Figure 10: scenes from *Ashes of Time*

A similar strategy of deception would be seen again years later in *2046*, which was announced as an existential melodrama with elements of science fiction. For the first time in his career, Wong would use special effects to create a futuristic Hong Kong where people traveled through time and interacted with androids. The result on the screen, however, is very different from what one would imagine: while the futuristic scenes may employ sophisticated computer generated effects as any other science fiction film would do, they do not portray a futuristic fictional fantasy. The only elements of science fiction are metalinguistic – Tony Leung's character is a journalist in the 1960s writing a science fiction story –, and have little or nothing to do with the formalities of the science fiction genre. The futuristic story does not revolve around science or technology but, rather, around Wong's usual themes of memory, melancholy and lost love.

"Wong's tactic has always been to appropriate the genres of the mainstream cinema and to subject them to his subjective narrative mode that ultimately subverts genre"[30]. However, while films like *Ashes of Time* and, later, *2046* may have frustrated the expectations of fans of the wuxia and science fiction genres, they fulfilled the desire of Wong's admirers, since they have come to expect precisely this sort of generic transmutations from his films[31]. In a curious way, Wong's ambiguous and dualistic relationship with generic cinema has become a genre of its own, which shows that the transformation of cinematic genres can be driven by the public and even invert previously established relations. The contract between genre and spectator is always

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[30] Teo, Stephen. *2046: A Matter of Time, a Labour of Love* (2005).

[31] In his book about *Ashes of Time*, Wimal Dissanayake provides an interesting sample of the types of mixed reviews generated by the film, ranging from excellent to very negative (Dissanayake 2003:129-138).

more complex than it seems, since when dealing with a generic film, spectators must negotiate not only their own expectations of the genre but also the film's advertisement, the critics' descriptions, and other viewers' experiences.

As Wong became more established as a filmmaker and started to attract international attention – in the shape of awards, film festivals and multinational funding –, his relationship with generic cinema also changed. He started to refer to multiple genres at one time, not limiting himself to the most popular or local genres but venturing into international topos, which also include literary influences. Apropos of *Chungking Express*, Stephen Teo says that it is "far more quantified in its generic content" than his previous films, "a sign of Wong's increasing confidence in creating the kinds of permutations in genre he had sought to do from the very start" (Teo 2005:49). Indeed, in this film we see glimpses of what could be a crime mystery, a cop-and-robber story and a romantic comedy. As the film is abruptly split into two different stories, so are the genres that it evokes.

In the first story there are two parallel plots of a cop on the beat and a woman running a drug smuggling operation. Brigitte Lin's character – a mysterious woman in a blonde wig, sunglasses and raincoat – is reminiscent of the *femme fatale* of the *film noir*. However, in this case there is no investigation, no mystery to speak of. It would only be logical according to the structure of a crime story to expect that the cop would somehow be involved in the mysterious woman's case (perhaps even be seduced by her), thus unifying the parallel plots. However, when he does meet this *femme fatale*, the fact that he is a policeman and she a fugitive criminal is not even an issue – they meet by chance in a bar and keep each other company until the next day.

The second story is a romantic comedy in content, but visually shot more like an experimental documentary, using techniques such as hand-held cameras, blurred movement and fragmented narrative. Still, as in a typical romantic comedy, spectators get emotionally involved with the characters and hope that they will end up together. Wong certainly plays up the 'likeability' of his characters, especially that of Tony Leung as the object of Faye Wong's quirky affection. It can be said to be Wong's closest approximation of a happy ending until *My Blueberry Nights*, which follows the same spirit of a young urban romance. Although, it being a Wong Kar-wai film, we can only assume that the happy ending will not last for long.

In his subsequent films, Wong turned to genres that are not traditionally local to Hong Kong cinema but, on the contrary, quintessentially western: the *film noir* in *Fallen Angels* and the road movie in *Happy Together*. This sets him apart from the generic tradition of the Hong Kong New Wave, as few other local directors draw from international genres and literary influences. As we have seen, Wong had already referred to western genres before (such as the gangster film in *As Tears go By* and the Western in *Ashes of Time*), but never as the main structure for a film. In *Fallen Angels* he follows the activities of a professional killer and his *femme fatale* assistant in the underworld of Hong Kong, mixing elements of the gangster film and the *film noir*. "In general, film noir refer to those Hollywood films of the forties and early fifties that portrayed the world of dark, slick city streets, crime and corruption" (Schrader 1986:170). Despite being considered not so much as a genre but as a closed cycle of American film history, belonging to a specific place – Hollywood – and specific circumstances – the 1930s Depression and aftermath of the Second World War –, the

characteristic mood and stylistic features of film noir still inspire contemporary filmmakers of any origin, not excluding Asian[32].

In *Fallen Angels*, most of the action happens at night, in dark and dangerous streets, tortuous corridors or dingy cramped apartments. The film emphasizes themes of the *film noir* such as moral ambiguity (the assassin shows no remorse for his victims) and sexual motivation (the woman dresses in tight vinyl clothes, moves sensually and masturbates in the killer's bed). Its English title even sounds like a *film noir*. The characters, however, do not behave like their physical archetypes: far from being cool, the assassin is quiet and uninteresting (he seems to be more motivated by laziness than by greed, lust or power); the *femme fatale* is less of a mischievous seductress and more of a platonic fetishist, although she does apparently betray and destroys the assassin in the end. As Stephen Teo (2005:89-93) has shown, the film presents a veritable parade of psychologically disturbed characters and pathetic behavior.

Happy Together, on the other hand, "may be considered to be a play on the American 'road movie', teasing the genre, first in the journey to Buenos Aires, and then in the attempts to get to Iguazu Falls" (Tambling 2003:33). Tambling characterizes the film as a 'tease' because, in spite of suggesting a lot of different places – with the main characters going from Hong Kong to Argentina, Lai's journey to the Iguazu Falls and Chang's to Ushuaia, and their return to Taiwan and Hong Kong, respectively – the film shows little actual traveling: the characters are shown

[32] Joelle Collier makes an interesting case for the definition of a genre called Noir East, the re-creation of film noir by some Hong Kong filmmakers which reflected the anxieties of a pre-1997 Hong Kong (Collier 2007).

either at their destination or stuck between places. However, if any film that takes place during a journey could be classified as a road-movie, than *Happy Together* definitely is one – especially if this journey provokes some kind of psychological or spiritual transformation in the characters. Tambling suggests that the topic of spiritual transformation is viewed with cynicism by Wong – since the two lovers never get to experience the Iguazu Falls together –, but the contrary can also be argued, especially at the film's upbeat ending, which signals that Lai finally has an open road ahead of him. Either way, this kind of doubleness is part of the film's identity as suggested already by its English title, which can be read as ironic or not.

Timothy Corrigan notes that the road-movie is a genre normally associated with heterosexual masculinity, since the journey frequently marks the bonding experience of two male friends – as attested by the novel *On the Road* (1957) and the film *Easy Rider* (1969), two landmarks of the genre – and showcases male escapism in the shape of cars, trucks or motorcycles. "Whether in traditional exaltation of machismo, or as an exploration of masculine identity crisis, the bulk of the road-movie genre seems to presuppose a focus on masculinity" (Corrigan 1991:137-60). In this sense, *Happy Together* has yet another layer or irony towards its genre, since it features homosexual men on the road – as did Gus Van Sant with *My Own Private Idaho* (1991) –, thus questioning the identity of the genre[33]. "It is as if the film was

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[33] There is an on-going debate in the domain of Queer Studies on whether *Happy Together* is indeed a "gay film" or a film about relationships unrelated to gender issues. Some critics, like Edward Lam, argue that the film is "wholly guided by heterosexual ideology" and the characters assume typical male and female roles. According to him, this is only accentuated by the fact that Wong chose an openly homosexual actor, Leslie Cheung, for the role of the unfaithful (female) partner, and an heterosexual actor, Tony Leung, for the role of the dominant (male) partner. However, it seems that there is a more complex situation in the film, since both characters are constantly exchanging moments of violence and fragility (Yue 2000 ; Lam 1998).

slyly telling the truth about the road movie as it had once been (…) cutting straight from a male love-scene to showing the two men in the car on the road" (Tambling 2003:36).

With *My Blueberry Nights*, Wong Kar-wai gets even closer to the traditional road-movie as the film is set in the United States and features many of its landmark locations – more specifically Las Vegas, New York and Memphis – as well as shots of highways meandering through picturesque mountains and deserts. Wong takes advantage of this landscape with his usual employment of saturated colors and a somewhat artificial – if only because it is so visually pleasing – cinematography, but ultimately it becomes evident that the focus of the film is not the journey so much as the emotional distance separating the main characters[34]. At first, *My Blueberry Nights* seems like an exercise of transference of Wong's style from East to West. Hong Kong noodle shops become a downtown New York Café. His characters may speak English, but they look and behave like the young urban cast from *Chungking Express* and *Fallen Angels*. The story is episodic and feels improvised as the character moves on a road-trip and meets different people, recalling the structure of *Ashes of Time* and *Happy Together*. The use of well-known songs and pop culture icons is also typical of Wong Kar-wai. He even employed for the main role Norah Jones, a popular singer with no previous acting experience, following the example of Faye Wong in *Chungking Express* and Michele Reis in *Fallen Angels*.

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[34] He declared in an interview: "At first I though I was making a road movie, but at the end it's not, because the film is not about journey, it's about the distance". Video interview available online at http://www.youtube.com/user/GoldenDragonPictures

It is evident that Wong had to make a few creative concessions when moving to Hollywood, and the result is his most conventional film since *As Tears Go By*. For example, this is the only film that has indication of how much time passed from one scene to another. It is also his only film in which the voice-over is justified through the conventions of classical narrative (the voice-over represents the “reading aloud” of post cards exchanged by the characters). Most remarkably, it is the first film in which we have a happy ending, albeit it is still an open one, as in *Chungking Express*. In this aspect, *My Blueberry Nights* leans more towards the romantic comedy than the road-movie.

However, the fact that Wong Kar-wai no longer needed (because of financial constraints) to depart from a local popular genre does not mean that he would stop doing that. *In The Mood for Love* proves that his relationship with generic cinema was never solely the fruit of working under the Hong Kong film industry, but an intrinsic trademark of his films. *In The Mood for Love* can be characterized as a re-imagination of a traditional wenyi pian, or Chinese melodrama. Although Wimal Dissanayake (1993) points out that none of the Asian languages has a specific translation for the western melodrama, in the Chinese cinema the closest term would be the wenyi pian, which “is deliberately imprecise and can refer to conventional melodramas in terms of a highly sentimental and exaggerated story usually with song numbers thrown in, as well as love stories and ‘women’s pictures’ focusing on female protagonists as long-suffering heroines” (Teo 2006:203).

The story of *In The Mood for Love* is set in the 1960s, the period when the wenyi pian was effectively prolific in Hong Kong cinema, and the film is full of

metalinguistic signs, from its nostalgic atmosphere to the women's wardrobe and the sound score. Wong even made use of Zhou Xuan's song *Huayang de Nianhua*, from the melodrama *An All-Consuming Love* (1947)[35]. But even more central to its belonging to the genre is the film's depiction of a moral dilemma, as both protagonists realize that their respective partners are having an affair but decide not to act in the same manner, despite developing feelings for each other. Tony Leung's character "exhibit[s] the classic feebleness of the wenyi male hero", while "Maggie Cheung may seem the put-upon wenyi Madonna" (Teo 2006:210). The couple's emotional sacrifice in the name of conservative social decorum is representative of the *qing*, "desire should be bound by ethics" (Teo 1997:209), and recalls Fei Mu's classic *Spring in a Small City* (1948), in which the heroine, married to a sick man, represses the desire for her ex-lover out of respect for her husband[36].

However, as one would now expect from Wong, the film is far from being a textbook exercise in reviving an old-fashioned genre. While they cannot develop a romantic relationship of their own, Tony Leung and Maggie Cheung's characters engage in a peculiar role-playing game in which they 'act out' their spouses' affair. This brings about a second layer of representation in the film in which everything is hinted at but never actually spoken, and the spectator is continuously kept guessing.

We have seen that in all of his films, from the most conventional to the most experimental, Wong uses elements from at least one mainstream cinematic genre,

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[35] *Huayang de Nianhua* is also the film's Chinese title.

[36] *In The Mood for Love* is also frequently compared with David Lean's melodrama *Brief Encounter* (1946), whose narrative structure also deals with a platonic romance between two married people (Cook 2005).

which indicates that genre is indeed an imperative consideration in the analysis of his films. More precisely, it is the key to understanding Wong's relationship with the Hong Kong commercial cinema. We have also seen that he departs from some of the most easily recognizable sets of conventions – gangster film, martial arts, melodrama, romantic comedy, road-movie, *film noir* –, only to deconstruct or subvert them, but never in a parodic or radical manner. The question that followed was then: how does he do it?

As we have seen previously, what all cinematic genres have in common is the sensory motor structure of the action-image, where movement is ruled by causality and action is matched by reaction. In the genre film, events act upon the characters: that is the S-A-S' structure at its basic form. The moment when Wong's films start to break this chain of causality, to introduce aberrant movement – that is, events which do not act upon characters, action without reaction –, and other situations that disrupt this formula, is when they stop being only generic and start being something else at the same time. In other words, it is when the movement-image gives way to the time-image, as we will see in the next chapter.

5 The Time-image: purely optical and sonorous situations

5.1 Characteristics of the time-image

As we have seen previously, the passage from movement-image to time-image happens when all of the rules of classical cinema are pushed beyond their breaking point. The sensory-motor scheme of the movement-image is then replaced by aberrant movement, that is, a movement that no longer focuses on the casually motivated sequence of events, but on the gap between them. In other words, the time-image is an image that has become free of the classical narrative realism of the movement-image. Some authors credited this image with a new kind of realism, in which the real was no longer represented but 'aimed at'. One of the most important defenders of this concept was André Bazin (1967), who praised the Italian Neorealist movement for its naturalism and lack of causality in the narration of daily events, for the use of real locations as opposed to sets, and for the employment of non-professional actors as a way to achieve formal *vraisemblance*. According to him, reality itself is not always coherent or causal; therefore a representation that intends to be realistic cannot be so.

However, as Deleuze points out, the problem with Bazin's theory is precisely the fact that he puts things in terms of reality, when it seems rather clear that this is a false controversy. When it comes to fictional representation, reality is a question of

perception and ultimately a matter of style. There is not only one way to represent reality, but several different ways to create what would be more appropriate to call *an effect of reality*, and they all depend upon the choices made by the artist in the way he organizes his material in order to achieve the desired effect. This effect is neither unitary nor fixed – it changes and evolves through history as different styles and aesthetical movements come and go. It is clear that modern cinema creates a new image, although we could not say that this image is more or less 'real' than the one created by classical narrative cinema. What it creates is, according to Deleuze, an entirely new system of signs defined by a series of characteristics, which are as follows:

1. The image no longer refers to a situation that centralizes the action, but to multiple and dispersive situations. The *fil conducteur*, the causality principle that connected the events one another in a series in the action-image, is replaced by "linkages, connections, or liaisons [which] are deliberately weak" (Deleuze 1986:207). In Antonioni's *L'Avventura* (1960) one of the main characters, Anna, disappears suddenly at the beginning of the film. The mystery, which seems at first to occupy the central causal nexus of the narrative, is gradually forgotten and never resolved. Instead, the film focuses on the emotional states of the other two characters, Claudia and Sandro. Because there is no causal motivation behind the dramatic action, chance takes its place

as the agent responsible for the chaining of events, even the most important ones.

2. The S-A-S' (as well as the ASA') scheme of the movement-image is replaced by the stroll (*ballade*), the continuous coming and going of characters for no logically motivated reason. Italian Neorealism provided various instances of wandering, as in *The Bicycle Thief* (1948) and *Rome, Open City* (1945). In fact, with time the *ballade* has become detached from the act of traveling, being expressed by the character's restless motion even if he or she is not necessarily going anywhere or does not know where to go, as in Godard's ballad films such as *A Bout de Souffle* (1960) and *Pierrot Le Fou* (1965). In Varda's *Cleo from 5 to 7* (1962) the main character wanders around the city, meeting with friends and strangers as she awaits the result of a medical exam. Instead of moving at a regular pace towards the deadline, the film divides itself into fragments or episodes, which have little or nothing to do with the (supposed) theme of the film.

3. As the situations become multiple so do the characters, who can shift from principal to secondary at any given time. In De Sica's *Umberto D* (1952), the narrative simply abandons the main character to follow a young pregnant maid in a lengthy sequence as she goes around her usual morning routine of cleaning up the kitchen. In fact, the figure of the "hero", that character around whom all

> the action is organized, ceases to exist, for he or she does not act or react to the situations any more than he/she merely observes it. The events, from the most important to the most banal, rarely concern those they happen to.

As we have seen previously, Deleuze credits the crisis of the classical cinema and the birth of the modern cinema to the new social and historical configurations brought about after the Second World War, which, among other things, encouraged the appearance of movements such as the Italian Neorealism and the French New Wave. Extrapolating the deleuzian thought beyond the limits of Europe and European cinema, a similar set of historical changes could be found in Hong Kong of the 1980s and the emergence of the New Hong Kong cinema of which Wong Kar-wai is an integral part. Indeed, save for a few differences that will become apparent shortly, many of the characteristics of the time-image are found in Wong's films, such as the fragmentation of the narrative, the substitution of causality for chance, and the dispersive nature of the characters.

Wong's narrative is made of fragmented episodes. *Chungking Express*, for example, begins with the story of policeman 223 and his attempts to get back together with his girlfriend, while, in a parallel montage, a woman in a blonde wig tries to coordinate a group of drug smugglers. Soon after these parallel stories meet – by pure chance –, the episode is abandoned and another one takes its place, with yet another policeman and another young woman. It is important to mention that there is no logical or causal preparation for this shift. There are only two brief scenes that show

the intercalation of the two episodes, but nothing that justifies or prepares the spectator for the insertion of a new story and the abandonment of the first one *in media res*. We are left with the impression that the narrative "jumps" from one story to the other, as if it was undecided about which one to follow or as if it could just as easily follow another one after that.

Another example is found at the last scene of *Days of Being Wild*, in which a mysterious character (played by Tony Leung), whom we have not seen before in the film, appears in a room getting ready to go out: he combs his hair, slowly checks himself in the mirror and finally puts decks of cards in his pockets. This fragment of narrative appears at the end of the film with no connection to the rest of the story, leaving us to wonder, who is this person? Where is he going? This is, perhaps, the announcement of a second narrative that never got to be filmed, as Wong has argued in several interviews. Whatever the explanation, the fact that this surplus image somehow stayed attached to the film acts as a reminder that the story could have continued endlessly even after the end of the film.

In all of Wong's films the characters are as fluid as the dramatic action itself; they often change positions to the point where it becomes impossible to identify main and secondary characters. In *Fallen Angels* there are several characters that command our attention at different times. It appears that the professional assassin is the 'hero' of this film, but we soon realize that he does not centralize the action around him; rather, he is floating on the surface of the story along with the other characters. In *My Blueberry Nights*, the main character goes on a trip where she meets several different

people: an alcoholic policeman, the woman he loves, and a professional gambler. At many points these secondary characters take over the action and become the forefront of the narrative, only to disappear as the protagonist continues on her trip. This fluidity, however, is not exclusive to his road-movies (*Happy Together* and *My Blueberry Nights*), where traveling characters are expected to be represented, but it has come to appear in every possible space, especially in the urban setting of the any-space-whatever where characters are constantly moving around.

However, Deleuze argues that these characteristics of the modern cinema, although important, were not sufficient to produce the new time-image. In this sense, they were only preliminary conditions. The crisis of the movement-image only reached its maximum point when its signs had been replaced by what he calls *opsigns* and *sonsigns*, or purely optical and sonorous situations: "A purely optical and sound situation does not extend into action, any more than it is induced by an action" (Deleuze 1989:18). These signs correspond to situations "to which characters, who have become seers, cannot or will not react, so great is their need to see what there is in the situation" (Deleuze 1989:128). Vision can take the place of action, rendering not only characters but also the shot immobile, or it can be exaggerated, creating a whirlpool of movements on different scales. In other words, the difference is not a matter of the image itself, but the way it is treated and presented. Deleuze notes that there are many ways to create purely optical and sonorous situations – sometimes in everyday banality, sometimes in exceptional moments, sometimes in dreams and fantasies, sometimes in subjective images and memories – but they are all related to the occurrence of "something too powerful, or too unjust, but sometimes also too

beautiful, and which henceforth outstrips our sensory-motor capacities" (Deleuze 1989:18).

In all of Wong's films there are images that do not have a direct correlation with previous or posterior scenes, images that are not motivated by action, that in one way or another seem to "float" within the narrative. Let us return to the opening scene of *Days of Being Wild*, the aforementioned prolepsis of the jungle (see Figure 2). In opposition to the more spatially and temporally defined spaces of the rest of the film, this image reads almost like a photograph. It becomes an independent entity no longer subjected to the SAS' scheme, but to which movement and action are subjected. It does not fit in a flux of action-movement with the other images but, instead, it opens itself up for the sensible world. In other words, this image is there to be felt and to be seen: a purely optical and sonorous situation. What does such an image mean in the context of Wong's cinema? In this chapter we shall investigate how Wong creates optical and sonorous situations focusing on his use of *mise en scène* and sound score, respectively.

5.2 Wong's visual style and the *déjà disparu*

Wong Kar-wai is frequently described as a visual stylist, given the importance of the treatment of the image on his films: he extensively uses bold colors, textures, odd camera angles, frames within frames, unusual filters and lenses, all of them often grouped in an editing mode oscillating between slow and languorous and fast and

jumpy. Such a personal visual style has led critics to characterize his cinema as being superficial, "a visual pastiche of deeply drenched colors and stylized camera shots" (Wright 2002). This criticism is based on the notion that the content of a film, which is the combination of subject matter and story line, is separated from its form, understood as "the structure given to the arrangement of these facts with a view to expressing what they would not be able to express without it" (Mitry 1997:337). Contrary to the invisibility of form and technique characteristic of classical narrative cinema, the stylistic trend, very popular in the so-called postmodern cinema, is frequently criticized for putting visual technique at an equal or higher level than the content of the film.

In Wong's case, the assumption that "there is only the surface, and one better not look for any significance in depth" (Ping-Kwan 2000:245) can be further reinforced by the apparent predominance of technique to the detriment of narrative unity, given that in his films visual elements tend to be very detailed and refined while the story line is often minimal and fragmented. However, I would like to argue that in Wong's cinema not only is there no such separation between form and content, style and meaning, but also, on the contrary, that his profundity can be found only on the surface. First of all, it should be clear that Wong's visual style is not a gratuitous technical flourish used to embellish his films. On the contrary, it is very organized, it appears systematically and serves a number of functions: as authorial statement, as narrative strategy, as a way to create atmosphere, to convey emotion, to promote identification with the characters and so on.

Secondly, it is precisely through a high degree of manipulation that Wong is capable of creating real images. Words like "spectacular", "exaggerated" and "superficial" are commonly used to describe Hong Kong's most popular cinema, especially its action and adventure genres. In general, Hong Kong cinema has always been characterized as highly visual, made of "unruly talk, fast-paced images of danger, hysterical behavior, and excessive sentiments" (Yau 2001:01). David Bordwell argues that Hong Kong films from the 1980s onwards became known for their "breathlessly accelerated tempo – whirlwind action scenes, conversations ever on the move, rapidly changing angles, constantly mobile camera" (2000:162), which rapidly became the norm. Films like Ching Siu-tung's *A Chinese Ghost Story* (1987) came to epitomize fastness in every sense: the characters' movements are rhythmically matched with music, there are blazing explosions of colors, fast cuts between impossibly brief shots (an average of less than two seconds per shot), and elaborate staging that relies almost completely on close-ups and medium shots. Nobody and nothing ever stays still, whether it is on the accelerated editing or on the slow motion of the action scenes.

One might possibly say that the massive reproduction of these visual formulas has reduced the cinematographic image to clichés, "visual and sonorous slogans" (Deleuze 1986:208) that permeate the inside and the outside of the image. Visuality is, indeed, the dominant discourse of post-modernity, as Fredric Jameson (1991) argues, and with the advance of photographic techniques of image reproduction, the image has become increasingly spectacular, to use Guy Debord's terminology (1992:32). If this is the case, how does a filmmaker like Wong Kar-wai differentiate himself from the

massive use of visual clichés? How can he still create when he is also responsible for the reproduction of these clichés? In other words: is there a way to extract a "real" image from the cliché?

These questionings are amplified by Ackbar Abbas's concept of the *déjà disparu*, "the feeling that what is new and unique about the situation is always already gone, and we are left holding a handful of clichés, or a cluster of memories of what has never been" (1997:25). Abbas is referring to the context of Hong Kong culture and the fact that its representation in cinema never seems to catch up with the speed of current events. Unlike the déjà-vu, that puts the cliché as something already seen and experienced, the *déjà disparu* places the problem of de-synchronization: the more images are produced to attempt to grasp a certain stream of events, the less it becomes possible and we are left with an overproduction of images without knowing what to do with them. In this context, representation tends to provoke disappearance more than to avoid it.

The solution, then, is for the image to turn back onto itself, to become self-conscious of its own transitoriness and superficiality. Let us consider the first scene of Wong's first film, *As Tears Go By*: it shows an enormous advertising billboard made out of lined up television sets, in which images of white clouds in a blue sky can be seen. This uninhabited, fluctuating and somewhat spectral optical situation suggests that "everything is already image" (Lalanne et al. 1997:14) and every image is already double, cliché reflected upon a cliché.

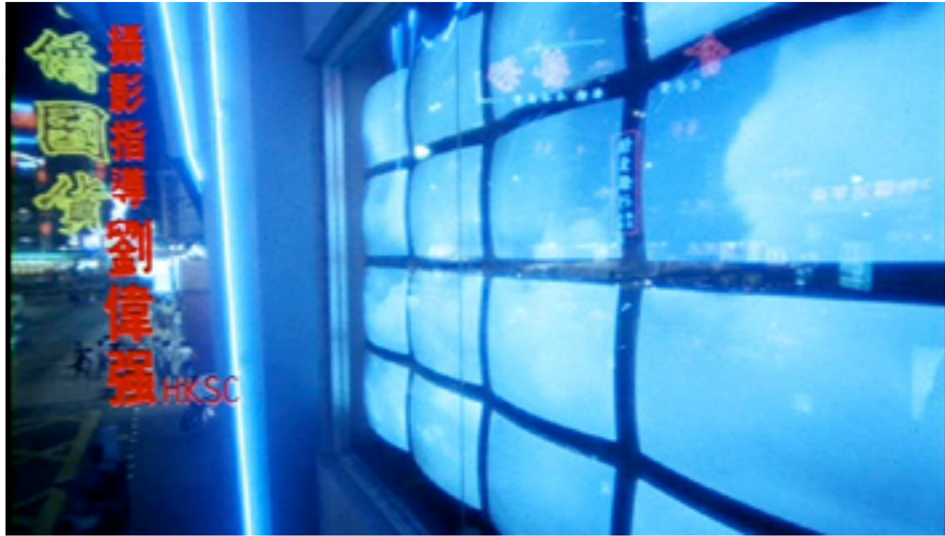

Figure 11: scene from *As Tears Go By*

Instead of trying to avoid the problem of visual representation, Wong's self-conscious image problematizes the very visual space in which image is produced. The nature of cinema "has the chance to extract an Image from all the clichés and to set it up against them" (Deleuze 1986:210); in other words, it allows for self-reflection. There is an instability in Wong's images – the colors are either too vivid or too faded, the frame is either too crowded or too empty, the shots either end abruptly or linger on forever, but there is always something more, something that transforms them from within and makes them different. In other words, Wong Kar-wai's style differs from the general norm of Hong Kong cinema not by opposing to its sheer visuality, but by producing images that not only question what is represented, but also the very act of seeing and recognizing the represented object.

Let us re-consider, for example, the fight scenes in *As Tears Go By* and *Ashes of Time*, where the characters are no more than an indistinct blur on the screen; or the scene in *Chungking Express* where Brigitte Lin's character finally removes her blonde wig. This last image goes by so fast that if the viewer blinks he might miss it. These are images that provoke the question, "what am I seeing anyway?" (Daney 1983). They push the cinematographic image towards abstraction: it seems that the more we try to see them, the faster they disappear in front of our eyes.

Figure 12: scene from *Chungking Express*

5.3 Purely optical situations

However, it should be noted that if Wong's use of visual techniques creates these purely optical situations, they are not independent of the narrative. Wong's *mise*

en scène creates atmosphere, heightens the dramatic effect of the films and, more importantly, expresses subjectivity. Purely optical situations are, above all, subjective images, visual encounters in which the character is as much a witness as the spectator, a “complicit viewer of the role he himself is playing” (Deleuze 1989:06). We saw in Chapter 4 that Wong’s narrative is not focalized through the characters but rather vocalized by them. However, we can say that the characters’ subjectivity is also expressed visually, mostly through the use of textures and colors, which transform the basic image into purely visual situations.

According to Deleuze (1989:06) there are two main ways of creating purely optical situations: rarefaction, exemplified by moments of *flânerie* when the set is emptied of people and things and dead times abound; and saturation, where, on the contrary, things happen so fast that they almost cannot be grasped all at once. I will argue that the opposition between rarefaction and saturation can be applied to every level of Wong’s visual style: long shots are followed by sudden bursts of action; muted colors are contrasted with overexposed images; the melancholy of historicity is followed by fast-paced music-video inspired montage. For analysis sake, I will consider these two modes separately, which I will call the modern urban and the nostalgic past.

5.3.1 Rarefaction, or the nostalgic past

Days of Being Wild, *Ashes of Time, In the Mood for Love* and *2046* all have in common the fact that they are not contemporary representations. While *Ashes of Time* depicts a story in a non-specific Ancient time, the other three films are set in and around Hong Kong of the 1960s. It seems that the setting of Wong's historical films, as well as the narrative, takes part in the nostalgic trend of re-visiting the past with a fetishistic vision – indeed, the attention to detail and the lush visuality of his images make it seem that everything was better and more beautiful in the past. Differently from the historical film, which strives to reach maximum historical authenticity, the nostalgia film represents "history in stylized form" (Hung 2000:256), frequently with an allegorical view. Take, for example, Stanley Kwan's *Rouge* (1987), in which the ghost of a prostitute from the 1930s returns to 1980s Hong Kong to look for her lost lover. The film contrasts past and present through the superposition of images – a theater has become a convenience store, the ghost's home is now a kindergarten –, but it soon becomes evident that past and present are not only opposite but also interchangeable, reversible even, "knocking history into strange loops" (Abbas 1997:42).

At this point it is useful to recall Fredric Jameson's concept of postmodern historicity, in which the recreation of a particular historical context does not depend (or never did depend) solely on authentic representation but, instead, on a stylistic

approach toward the past: "It being understood that the nostalgia film was never a matter of some old-fashioned 'representation' of historical content, but instead approached the 'past' through stylistic connotation, conveying 'past-ness' by the glossy qualities of the image" (1991:19). The glossy qualities of the image are unquestionably present in Wong's 1960s trilogy, which begins with *Days of Being Wild* and marks the first collaboration between Wong and cinematographer Christopher Doyle, who has worked on all of his films except for *As Tears go By* and *My Blueberry Nights*. It would be impossible to talk about Wong's aesthetic without mentioning the impressive work done by Doyle. Together they re-created a Hong Kong from the 1960s with the refinement of authentic period pieces: *Days of Being Wild* "shows us the brand of cigarettes popular at the time (Craven A); the once popular Queen's Cafe (…), the clothes and watches people wore or the cars they drove" (Abbas 1997:53).

In the Mood for Love returns to the same atmosphere of Hong Kong from the 1960s, in which it can be said that the film's lush aesthetic renders nostalgia visually irresistible. The film's color scheme is elegant and refined with rich jewel tones of reds, purples and greens, and the ambiance is baroque with overlapping textures, objects, wallpapers and textiles. And if *2046* reads so well as a sequel to *In The Mood for Love*, it is because both films have the same visual sophistication. Since in the latter film Wong had the challenge of portraying past and future at the same time, he had to fuse both of his visual signatures: the futuristic sequences are more neon-vibrant in color, while the past explores luxurious warm colors and the contrast between light and shadow.

Despite their appeal to authenticity[37], we cannot say that these films render a realistic representation of the past but, rather, that they evoke a sense of historicity filtered by imagination and memory[38]. All of them present elements that transform this seemingly realistic setting into something a-historical. For example, in *Days of Being Wild* there are unusual greenish colors that exude a tropical torpor that saturates the whole film, especially the Philippines locations, "represented by shots of seedy hotels and canteens, grimy arcades and stairways, prostitutes and drunk men" (Teo 2005:37). The overall sensation created by this film is not of historicity but of lethargy, which is represented visually through revolving fans, bodies moving slowly, skin wet with rain and sweat (there is also the use of anachronistic music in the sound score, which we will consider presently). All of these elements contribute to the film's melancholic exploration of unrequited love, lost moments and wasted time.

In speaking of *In The Mood for Love*, Rey Chow notes that from the characters' hairstyles, dresses and shoes, to the representation of everyday objects like the rice cooker and newspapers, "Wong offers glimpses of a Hong Kong that no longer exists" (Chow "Sentimental Returns: On the Uses of the Everyday in the Recent Films of Zhang Yimou and Wong Kar-Wai" 2002). But did such a place ever exist? His characters are so perfectly coiffed and dressed that they appear to "pose" inside the frame, reminding us of a high fashion photo shoot. These seem to be dream

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[37] "Reportedly, he was so intent on recreating the ambience of the 1960s that he 'hired a chef to cook Shanghai dishes for the cast and crew'; 'engaged retired Hong Kong radio announcers, now in their 70s, to record radio programs for the soundtrack featuring bits of Mandarin pop and Chinese opera'; and used quotations from a popular newspaper columnist and novelist to frame his story" (Chow "Sentimental Returns: On the Uses of the Everyday in the Recent Films of Zhang Yimou and Wong Kar-Wai" 2002:646)

[38] Wong Kar-wai has said in many interviews that he based his re-creation of Hong Kong from the 1960s from his own childhood memories.

images, an impression that is only reinforced by the emptiness of the sets. In *Days of Being Wild*, except for the two scenes at the Queen's cafe and the ending, the urban space of the city feels practically deserted; almost no people are seen on the streets besides the main characters. These locations look artificial, almost as if they were sets for a theatrical drama, especially when contrasted with the more "realistic" images of Wong's contemporary films. "The setting then is, as it were, the disproportionately extended projection of the drama symbolically expressed by its architecture" (Mitry 1997:301).

The same thing happens in *In The Mood for Love* and *2046*, where even the most public spaces (the restaurant, the office, the hotel) seem empty. Streets are dimly lit and public spaces are always framed at partial angles, never revealing the entire space at once. The cinematography of *In The Mood for Love* accentuates the aura of mystery and secrecy surrounding the couple's affair. We frequently see the characters through frames inside frames – doors, curtains, and car windows –, which give us the feeling of secretly witnessing private moments. There is one scene in which So Lai-chen goes to meet Chow in a hotel but is undecided about entering the room; the use of jump-cuts creates disjointed images (she goes up a set of stairs, then down, then up again, changing directions each time), bringing attention to the character's intimate doubts and fears. We never see her actually going up to the room; instead, there is a mock freeze-frame (she actually just stood still) of the character's back as she (possibly) leaves the room. In *2046* Wong uses actual freeze frames to heighten the sexual tension between Chow and Bai Ling (Zhang Ziyi) when they pass each other at the restaurant.

In this way, we can say that the nostalgia represented in Wong's 1960s films translates a feeling that is inherent not to a specific period of time but to his characters. Stephen Teo writes: "Wong's cinematographers [Christopher Doyle, Lai Yiu-fai and Kwan Pun-leung] are almost as adept as rendering chiaroscuro as the great Caravaggio – skillfully handling light to evoke a mysterious and imaginative world in which the psychology of the characters and their relationships could be played out" (2005:150). Paradoxically, it seems that the more beautiful and rich the images are, the more solitary and melancholic the characters feel.

In this aspect, no setting is more symbolic of melancholia than Nature itself, as we can see in *Ashes of Time*. This is arguably one of Wong's most successful films visually, as it takes full advantage of the landscape and the visual appeal of lakes, mountains, wind, sand and dust. The opening scenes show images of moving clouds, mountains, lakes, fields, rolling waves, vast sands of the desert. An intertitle reveals a quotation from a Buddhist canon: "The flag is not swaying, nor is the wind blowing. It is the human heart itself that is in tumult", which points out even more the symbolism of this picturesque scenario. However, it is not simply a question of representing in natural images the sentimental states of the characters, but rather of revealing an essential discordance between characters and the space that surrounds them. Although the film takes place in a vast desert, the characters always meet inside Ouyang's small hut; there are no signs of villages or other characters besides the main cast, with the exception of the fight sequences. Even though the names of the characters refer to directions (Malevolent East and Malicious West) and they are always referring to other places, they rarely actually move. Ouyang speaks of White Camel Mountain, his

native home and the place where he lost his love, which has since acquired a mythical aura for him. The blind swordsman also refers to a mythical place called Peach Blossom Island, where he wishes to see the peach blossoms for the last time before losing his sight. It is only later that Ouyang realizes that he was not referring to a place but to a woman.

This disparity between the openness of the desert and the enclosed spaces where the characters actually live "points to the fact that the external world is only a construction of the world of emotions" (Dissanayake 2003:38). In the end it is not the loneliness and isolation of the desert that reflects the characters' state of mind but, in turn, it is this state of their emotions that creates the physical space around them. The abstraction of space in *Ashes of Time* is what authorizes many critics to see the film as an allegory for the complexities of a modern lifestyle: "The story of the film may have taken place in a desert some ten or eleven centuries ago, but (…) it has a pointed relevance to, and finds echoes in, contemporary anxieties" (Dissanayake 2003:34).

It also happens that all the action of the film happens outside of it: characters only reminisce about things they have or have not done in the past while in the present they remain stationary. At the end of the film, after the death of Ouyang's loved one, he decides to return to White Camel Mountain, but we never see this action since it is only mentioned by the character's voice-over monologue. Like the actions, the locations used in the film are disconnected from the sensory-motor organization in which one action leads to another; characters are found less in a motivated situation and more in an abstract space of pure optical and sonorous situations.

5.3.2 Saturation, or the modern urban

From his first film Wong Kar-wai has been known to produce visually dazzling contemporary images: “we can detect the first brush strokes of pop art and MTV in Wong’s cinema, the distinguishing trademarks of mass-media kitsch that are found in his later work” (Teo 2005:24). More than the narrative (which, we have seen, is firmly rooted in the gangster/hero genre), it was the bold use of colors that called attention to Wong’s talent and made *As Tears Go By* distinguishable from other films of the same period, especially in a genre known for much more realistic *mise en scène*.

In this particular case, the color scheme uses primary reds and blues to create contrast between inside and outside, calm and violence. Such a bold and contrasting color scheme relates to the characters’ emotions, varying from indifference to unexpected explosions of violence, from love to solitude. But there is a discordant note that defies the obvious symbolism, since the cool blue of Kowloon’s neon signs impregnates all of the action scenes, while vibrant red dominates the contemplative romantic scenes (recall the red bus in the couple’s last scene). These colors eventually end up invading all visible spaces, from the streets to the inside of Wah’s small and empty apartment, and are even reflected on the characters’ faces. Most of the close-ups of Andy Lau’s face are fluorescent blue, and these scenes can be seen as a sign that Wong was determined to sacrifice realism in order to make a visual impact from the very beginning.

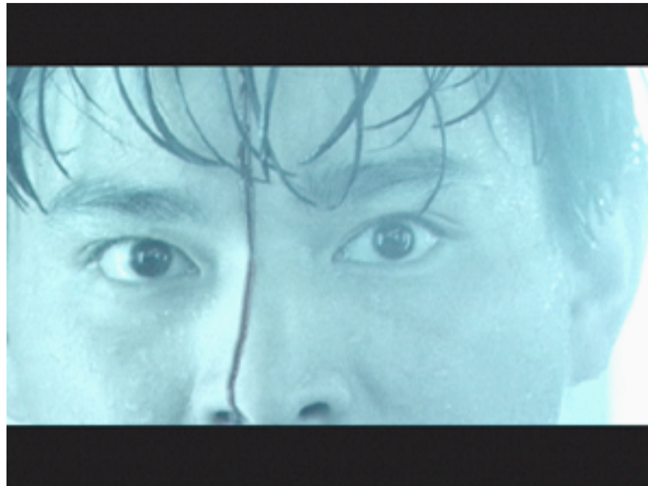

Figure 13: scene from *As Tears Go By*

The color scheme used in *As Tears Go By* – bold, saturated and neon-like – marks the beginning of an urban look that would be seen again in all of Wong's contemporary films, which include *Chungking Express*, *Fallen Angels*, *Happy Together* and *My Blueberry Nights*. In *Chungking Express* Chris Doyle used hand-held cameras, natural lighting and in-camera effects to create a visual style that Wong himself associated with student films and which reflects the fact that the film was produced fast and spontaneously. This style also suits the upbeat (by Wong's standards, anyway) rhythm of the story and its young cast of characters. Although the color palette is reminiscent of that in *As Tears Go By* – with exaggerated reds, blues and yellows –, the emphasis, on this particular case, is more on light and movement, on speed that transforms light, as in the aforementioned step-printing scenes, which transforms the background of the image in an abstract blur of pure color and movement.

The use of a similar setting later in *Fallen Angels* led some critics to accuse Wong of visual self-indulgence and the repackaging of old goods. However, while the setting apparently remains the same (the urban jungle of marginal Hong Kong), a closer analysis reveals that the film actually looks very different: there are a lot more dark colors (deep reds and black), references to fast-food and electronic products (Coca-Cola, IBM, McDonalds), interaction with hand-held cameras and superposition of media (with the home videos that the mute character makes of his father), and, more importantly, there is the use of wide-angle lenses that distort the actors' faces, emphasizing the film's theme of physical proximity but emotional distance. The 9.8mm lens makes small cramped spaces seem strangely bigger; it also makes the characters look closer when in reality they are far away from each other. Although *Chungking Express* and *As Tears Go By* both focus on the streets of Hong Kong, Chris Doyle's cinematography achieves a darker and gloomier look in *Fallen Angels*, which contributes to the depiction of characters – assassins, *femme fatales*, criminals – and Wong's recreation of the *film noir* genre.

Figure 14: scene from *Fallen Angels*

Happy Together also introduces a new visual technique in Wong's repertory, which is the contrast between color and black and white. While this type of contrast is by no means new to cinema, it is usually used as a temporal demarcation (to enclose a flashback, for example), whereas Wong uses it in a fundamentally different fashion. The beginning of the film, when the characters decide to start the romance over one more time, is entirely shot in black and white, which gives a sense of 'past-ness' for these scenes, even though they are not formal recollections but rather linear movement-images. These black and white passages are even more contrasting given the heightened use of color and light later on in the film: "gold turns into an aggressive orange and red; there is bright yellow; the blue is hallucinatory like the light we see on recovering from an anesthetic after an operation" (Teo 2005:110). Light is captured on the reflection of the lamp in the apartment walls, red in the blood on the floor of an abattoir, the brightness of the sun directly reflected on the cobblestone streets.

The same exaggeration in the use of colors is seen in Wong's second road-movie, *My Blueberry Nights*, and this time it is the American landscape of roads, mountains and desert that is explored visually. This film is filled with 'first times' in Wong Kar-wai's work: for the first time in fifteen years, the cinematography was not done by Chris Doyle but by Darius Khondji; for the first time, the film focuses on wide shots of roads, sun-drenched landscaped and open spaces; for the first time, the setting is filled with "American" and "small town" symbols: diners with waitresses in uniforms and name tags, bars with snooker tables, crossroads with hanging lights, old

convertible cars, Las Vegas and New York trademark buildings. For the first part of the film, which takes place in a New York Café, the film reproduces the neon-like color scheme of previous films, with vibrant reds, blues and yellows. The characters are always framed from outside the Café's window, which means that they are seen behind objects and hand-painted inscriptions on the glass. For the second part, which takes place in and around Tennessee and Arizona, even the daylight scenes are tinted with deep yellow tones, which resembles more a television commercial than a realistic documentary.

Figure 15: Color in *My Blueberry Nights*

5.3.3 Signature style: short films, commercial and music videos

The use of all of the techniques mentioned above create what we can now call Wong's stylistic signature, which consists of a particular way of treating the image so

that, upon his very first contact with it, the spectator is capable to say: “this is a Wong Kar-wai film”. This treatment of the image as style appeals directly to the sensibility of the viewer as it operates on a primary level, before any narrative or dramatic meaning even reaches the audience, and is associated with the sensation of affability and beauty produced by the harmony between colors and textures of the materials (characters, clothes and objects) and by the rhythmic combination between images and sounds.

This becomes evident in Wong’s short projects, television commercials and music videos, in which the narrative structure is minimal, sometimes nonexistent, but his visual and stylistic trademarks – the abundant use of different types of film granulation, scales of contrasting colors, camera angles, lenses and framings – are nevertheless present. Wong has worked on two thematic collective films: *Eros* (2004), co-directed by Michelangelo Antonioni and Steven Soderbergh about the theme of eroticism and seduction, and *Chacun Son Cinéma*, an omnibus production of 33 short films by different directors about their love for Cinema, which was presented at the 2007 Cannes Film Festival. In both of these projects it is his visual style that identifies him and sets him apart from the others.

In his segment of *Eros*, called *The Hand,* Wong seems to be aware of the impression caused by the dresses in *In The Mood for Love* as he continues to explore the visual theme of cheongsams and seduction, this time in the relationship between a prostitute and her tailor. Produced between the shootings of *In The Mood for Love* and *2046,* the episode (which, yet again, is set in Hong Kong of the 1960s) begins with images of multi-colored fabric with love scenes imprinted on them, and as the film

starts Miss Hua (Gong Li), the prostitute for whom the young tailor Zhang (Chang Chen) works, tells him to remember the feeling of being aroused by her in order to make beautiful dresses. It is not surprising that Wong's exploration of the theme of eroticism is the most subtle and discrete of the three segments: there are no explicit sex scenes (apart from what Zhang hears behind closed doors), and the sexual tension between the characters is hinted at visually by the textures and fabrics of the dresses, and by the touch of the tailor as he takes her measures.

His three-minute segment for *Chacun Son Cinéma* is less narrative, but not less 'wongian' in the sense that it continues to explore themes of love, desire and solitude. The episode is called *I Travelled 9000 km To Give It To You* and depicts a romantic encounter in a movie theater during an exhibition of Godard's *Alphaville*. The camera never focuses on the characters' faces but only on their hands, legs and feet; there is no dialogue but a few intertitles and the voices of the actors in Godard's film, and the scene seems to have been lit only by the light emanating from the screen. As the clip reaches the end Wong produces one of his most evident signs of metalanguage, as it becomes clear that his film is also a fabricated product.

Wong worked in commercials from as early as 1996, when he shot a series of short videos for the Japanese designer Takeo Kikuchi containing disparate images of actors Tadanobu Asano and Karen Mok (wearing a pink wig) in different locations. What is interesting about these commercials is that they already contain references to Wong's feature films: for example, the use of Latin music, freeze frames and jump-cuts. There is a scene in which Asano Tadanobu gets dressed in a room that is a vivid reminder of Tony Leung in *Days of Being Wild*, while the shots of him moving

hysterically while holding machine guns are references to both the assassin and the mute characters in *Fallen Angels*.

In 1998 Wong directed a three-minute commercial for Motorola, which, paradoxically, focuses on displacement and a lack of communication. The video opens with images of actress Faye Wong dialing a mobile phone and receiving no response, and moves on to images of fast moving clouds and numbers flashing on the screen, then a relatively long sequence of the same woman alone in a room reaching out her hands and looking to the horizon. The idea of displacement is reinforced by images of the woman lying down in the same position but in different locations – first in the room where she is alone, then at the restaurant where Asano Tadanobu's character is (leaving the viewer to wonder if he is the person she was trying to call earlier). There is a reference to *Chungking Express* when the male character faces a pineapple, and to the final scene in *Fallen Angels* when the two characters appear on a motorcycle. It seems as if Wong is either exploring or testing an idea that will be applied later to a feature film or, reversely, repeating or expanding a theme that was already featured in one of his films.

Recently Wong has shot commercials for well-known fashion brands such as Lacoste (in 2002, starring Chang Chen and Diane MacMahon), Lancôme (in 2007, for *Hipnôse Homme* perfume with Clive Owen) and Dior (in 2007, for *Midnight Poison* perfume starring Eva Green). His Lacoste commercial features a variation on the main theme music in *In The Mood For Love*, while the short narrative also hints at a platonic love story; the Dior commercial stars Eva Green in a Cinderella-like setting as she gets dressed for a party in a blue dress. There is an overall sensation of time

passing by, accentuated not only by close-up shots of a big clock but also by a camera that is constantly turning and twirling around the character as she descends a circular set of stairs, by the popular song that climbs to a climatic point, by the use of mirrors and crystals.

Eventually Wong extrapolated the temporal and creative constraints of the television commercial format to shoot what can be called short films: for example, the film *The Hire: The Follow* (2001) was shot as part of a BMW initiative to be released online. The campaign also had the presence of other famous filmmakers such as Ang Lee, John Woo, Guy Ritchie and Alejandro Gonzalez Iñarritu. Since the commercials were to be featured on the company's website, the directors had more time (about ten minutes each) and more creative freedom than usual (the only mandatory element was the presence of actor Clive Owen as the main character, known simply as "the driver"). It does not strike one as odd, then, that Wong's episode (the third of eight) almost doesn't feature the car – which is, of course, the product to be merchandised. Instead, it features Wong's signature voice-over monologue as the driver, assigned to follow the mysterious wife (played by Brazilian model Adriana Lima) of a famous Hollywood filmmaker (Mickey Rourke), reflects on his profession, suspicion and infidelity. The scene in which he and the wife are sitting in a bar, side-by-side and yet distant, is evocative of similar scenes in *Chungking Express* and *Fallen Angels*. This short film can also be considered to be Wong's first experience shooting in the United States with American actors, years before the release of *My Blueberry Nights*.

In 2007 Wong shot another short film, *There's Only One Sun*, this time for Philips' *Aurea* HD Flat screen TV. As he usually does in his feature films, Wong's

point of departure is a familiar genre – this time it was the spy story – only to lose its references along the way. Amelie Daure stars as a secret agent whose mission is to capture Light (the name of a character, but also the possibility that allows the film to play with colors and contrast between light and shadow) but, in order to do that, she must become blind. Missed encounters are present from the first scene, in which there is an off-screen male voice speaking in Russian, while the female character onscreen answers in French. The film expands on the futuristic look of *2046*, from the use of the song *Siboney* down to the detail of the luminescent shoes and shots of the character walking down a red corridor. The difference is that this time, instead of the mythical hole, what is at the end of the corridor (and to which the character spills her secret) is a flat screen TV.

Having said that, it becomes understandable why Wong's films are frequently associated with the style of TV commercials and music videos: you only have to substitute the hole for a television set to go from *2046* to a Philips commercial. Some critics even go as far as to say that his particular style is more suited for music videos and commercials than for cinema. Indeed, not only does Wong use pop stars and catchy songs in his films, but he also appropriates a stylistic imagery associated with the music video industry, what is commonly referred to as 'MTV aesthetics'. Even though music videos are becoming more and more heterogeneous both in style and content, there is still a consensus around some of the characteristics evoked by the term 'MTV aesthetics', as enumerated by Jean-Marc Vernier:

> Superficiality of the shot, fast rhythm of the montage, numerous and brief shots (…) heteterogeneity of décor and places (…), absence of a real uniformity of the narration, camera movements induced by the sheer pleasure of virtuosity, of visual effect and performance, saturated images and (…) an alternated montage that exploits the rhythm, the pace and prioritises the dynamic aspect of the rapport between two shots (Vernier 1986 :129-134).

The saturation in some of Wong's films, the pure sense of rhythm that emanates from this kind of music/image association, where it is the music that dictates the pace of the action, is an indication of just how well his style translates into this medium. In 2002 he actually directed a music video for the artist DJ Shadow (called *Six Day*s) that features many of his stylistic trademarks, such as the use of warm overexposed colors, odd camera angles and fast cuts. It stars Chang Chen and Danielle Graham as a couple fighting and making love in a non-linear montage of scenes in different settings, such as a water tank and an abandoned warehouse. A clock (similar to the alarm-clock in *Chungking Express*) marks the time (4:26), but the numbers keep coming back as tattoos on the woman's arm, painted on the mirror or on an incandescent lamp, a reference perhaps to the specific time when Yuddy started his romance with So Lai-chen in *Days of Being Wild*. The sheer sense of rhythm resulting from the combination of song and image can only be described as compelling. Wong's association with the music video universe has gone full circle now, as he has become a constant source of influence for music video artists[39] and has even invested himself with the persona of a rock star, wearing his dark sunglasses and being surrounded by mystery, anticipation and gossip about his unorthodox practice of filmmaking.

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[39] One example comes from the Scottish band Texas, who made a music video that reconstructed, shot by shot, scenes from *Chungking Express.* The video was directed by David Mould and features the song *Halo*, from Texas' album *White on Blonde*, released in February 1997.

The association with commercial products and popular culture could be seen as degrading for an auteur of Wong's status, but it could also be seen as an interpretation of the crisis of the movement-image, as a way to extract purely visual and sonorous situations out of the exacerbation of the image. The music video is a perfect example of saturation, with its technique of showing everything at the same time, like a feature-length preview made only of the most pregnant moments. What it creates, according to Vernier (1986 :132), is a "pulsation-image, located on the edges of the movement-image in cinema". And Wong is not alone in this trend, as Jean-Mac Lalanne points out: "The articulation of a sound score full of songs and the images that simply illustrate them (and not the other way around), as seen by filmmakers such as Lynch, Scorsese, Tarantino, originate incontestably from the music video" (Lalanne 2000 :63). We will now consider more closely the relationship between music and image in his feature films.

5.4 Purely Sonorous Situations

We have seen that Deleuze defines the time-image not only in terms of purely optical but also sonorous situations. Thus it is surprising that he devotes only the last chapter of *Cinema 2* to directly examining the use of sound in cinema – and even then, his interest seems to be directed solely toward the use of speech acts. This reflects the attitude of many authors of cinema studies in general, which only recently started paying the necessary attention to the use of sound – noise, music and voice – in cinema.

Traditionally, film music is treated as a mere "accompaniment" to the image, a concept that is reminiscent of the early developments of film sound when films were literally accompanied by a live orchestra or a single pianist/singer (Abel and Altman 2001). The truth that even the earliest "film musicians" understood is that music lends its emotional qualities to whatever image it is associated with. Any music will have an effect when juxtaposed with an image, "just as whatever two words one puts together will produce a meaning different from that of each word separately, because the reader/spectator automatically imposes meaning on such combinations" (Gorbman 1987:15). The effects of this association are generally twofold: music can either be used to reinforce or contradict what happens on screen. The mode of reinforcement, also called parallelism, is based in redundancy: violins and a full orchestra for romantic scenes, fast-paced music for action scenes, electronic sounds for science fiction and so on. The counterpoint, on the other hand, consists in the use of music not to "match" or "repeat" what is already seen on the screen, but to contradict it. Eisenstein and the soviet formalists defended the counterpoint as a way of emancipating the musical score from its dependence on the visual elements of the film[40], an idea that was also contemplated by Adorno and Eisler in their well-known critique *Composing for the Films* (1971)[41].

The classical mode of film score is based entirely in functionality, music's function being not only to reinforce the mood of a film or a particular scene, but also

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[40] "Only the use of sound as counterpoint regarding the image offer new possibilities of developing and perfecting the montage" (Eisenstein 1976:20).

[41] However, the idea that the score should be free of clichés and should run its own course independently (or even contrary) to the images, however progressive, has proved to be of little use for the purposes of narrative cinema.

to ease the spectator's path into the narrative experience: "Film music lessens awareness of the frame, of discontinuity; it draws the spectator further into the diegetic illusion" (Gorbman 1987:59). Gorbman compares traditional film music to "easy-listening" music, the kind that one would hear in department stores, elevators and doctors' offices. Both are made to be consumed but not to be closely listened to; both are subordinated to a larger context (film or convenience store) and, most importantly, both use familiar musical qualities to "lull" the spectator (or consumer) into a relaxed and untroubled mood. This is not to underestimate the musical qualities of the film score, but only to further clarify its place as secondary to the narrative.

In Wong's cinema the use of music frequently follows the classical mode of reinforcement – as an example we can mention Teddy Kwan's original score for *As Tears Go By,* in which fast-paced music is employed to create a sensation of excitement and anticipation, thus emphasizing the accelerated movement of the action scenes. However, I would like to point out that it is also used to disrupt the linearity of the image, creating a new sense of temporality. In such cases music is not dependent upon the image but, on the contrary, subjects it to its own rhythm, providing pure sonorous situations in which time is not represented indirectly through the succession of movement-images, but presented directly through the time-image. Although Wong is far more recognized for his visual style, sound and music are also among the most fundamental elements of his films.

5.4.1 Rhythm, repetition and time: the case of *Yumeji's Theme*

When it comes to analyzing a film score there are some challenges to be considered: first of all, one must make a purposeful effort to notice the music, since, as Gorbman (In Powrie and Stilwell 2006) defines, "The filmgoer is not supposed to notice or be distracted by the music, its primary role being to reinforce, intensify, or clarify narrative and emotive aspects of the story". We may notice a film score when it is a particularly bad one, for example, when an overly sentimental score ends up calling attention to the film's manipulative strategies instead of creating an intimate process of identification with the characters, or if the use of a pre-existing song calls our attention to a familiar sound, a technique that is being used ever more frequently in contemporary cinema (Knight and Wojcik 2001). Otherwise, we might become so invested in the narrative that we would be unaware of the music.

Secondly, it is difficult to verbalize the experience of musical pleasure in general, and in particular in relation to the filmic image, since they engender different sensorial responses. Most aesthetic theories explain the phenomenon of musical pleasure through the concept of "aesthetic experience" (Gorbman 1987:60), that is, a subjective experience firmly rooted in the senses. Purely musical qualities such as rhythm, harmony and melodic movement stimulate sensual responses that are different from those of the image. Chion explains that music is bi-sensorial, "a sonorous figure in the ears, and a vibration felt in the skin and the bones", while "the luminous impact of an image is punctually localised in the field of vision. Well, that which is bi-

sensorial, that which touches two senses at the same time, has bigger efficacity and immediate impact" (Chion 1995:221).

Gorbman (1987:67) also claims that "music enters to satisfy a need, to compensate for, fill in, the emotional depth not verbally representable", that is, music may help the spectator feel the mood of a scene more than images and dialogues sometimes can, since its emotional connection remains deeply subjective. That would explain why, in "objective" or non-sentimental scenes, music can often be neglected or simply forgotten without being missed. In the opposite scale, it would also explain why filmmakers such as Rohmer (*Ma Nuit Chez Maud*) and Antonioni (*The Eclipse*) would use music very sparingly to avoid any unwanted over-exageration of the emotional tone of their films.

Finally, it is also difficult for someone who is not a professional musician to appropriately identify all the musical elements in play, especially since we cannot "pause" the image and the music separately to observe how they work together. The best way to go about this, I feel, is through a detailed description of the music and the images provided by repetitive viewing (and listening), with the helpful use of silence and comparison.

Having said that, I will consider the love theme that accompanies the encounters between Chow Mo-wan (Tony Leung) and So Lai-chen (Maggie Cheung) in *In The Mood for Love.* Composed by Shigeru Umebayashi, this theme provides an atmosphere of melancholy that is most important for the emotional tone the film. Derived from an existing score (for Suzuki Seijun's film called *Yumeji*), *Yumeji's Theme* embodies the indetermination of the lovers as they repeatedly approach and

distance from each other. The music appears a total of eight times throughout the film: first when they meet, twice when they go to the noodles stall, then twice when they are together in the hotel room, twice when they are isolated but thinking about each other and one last time when they decide to go their separate ways.

The *motif* is a sentimental waltz executed by violins and an orchestra. Different from a traditional "full orchestra" interpretation of a typical Hollywood melodrama[42], the theme is not grandiloquent or robust, the orchestra acting merely as background accompaniment for the violins. The violins have a more grave tone to them, rendering the sound soft and velvety, which, along with the piece's mellow rhythm, creates a very intimate and languorous sound, albeit still sentimental. In fact, the first verse of the music is so slow that the scene must have a certain duration in order to fully embody it, thus subverting the classical rule according to which the duration of a piece of music must be determined by the duration of a scene (Gorbman 1987:76). In this case, the music is radically different from the "elastic" tune traditionally composed for film scores in small malleable pieces that can be easily cut or extended to suit a scene.

It is important to notice that every time that this theme appears, the image is in slow motion, which, along with the slowness of the music itself, provides a sense that everybody and everything – even the smoke from a cigarette – is languorously moving to the rhythm of the music, even though this music is clearly nondiegetic. Let us examine the first scene where both characters go, each on his/her own time, to the noodles stall. The camera captures So Lai-chen as she slowly descends the stairs and

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[42] As a comparative basis we used Frank Skinner's score for two of Douglas Sirk's most well-known melodramas: *All that Heaven Allows* (1955) and *Imitation of Life* (1959).

remains stationary until she returns. Then, Chow Mo-wan does the exact same movement of descending and ascending the stairs. Although the characters share the same limited space, at this point they do not exchange a single look. All of the emotional tension between them is provided by the music and the slow motion of their bodies as they pass by each other. A silent viewing of this scene confirms that, without the sentimentality of the music, there is little to no expression in this scene, since the actors' faces are not seen from the front and the slow motion by itself renders merely an odd sense of movement.

Finally, we have to consider the role of repetition, not only of the music's manifestation in the film but also of the music's own rhythm. Repetition is not an uncommon technique in film music – in fact, it is often used to identify characters and provide formal and narrative unity through the use of themes. "A theme is defined as any music – melody, melody-fragment, or distinctive harmonic progression – heard more than once during the course of a film" (Gorbman 1987:27). One clear example of theme song with this function is the one composed by Shigeru Umebayashi for *2046*, which symbolizes the whole identity of the film. *2046 Main Theme* contains, at the same time, a violin that refers to the romantic journey of the main character and some jazzy beats reminiscent of the score composed by Vangelis for the archetypal science fiction *Blade Runner* (1982). This way, the repetition of the theme song functions as an illustration of the film's overall mood, congregating different narrative elements inside one harmonic piece.

The repetitive pattern of *Yumeji's Theme*, however, is used to disrupt the linear flux of time, to break the logical chain of events of the movement-image, creating

"time inside time - or time in brackets" (Chion 1995:212). In order to fully comprehend how this happens, we must first observe how film music can influence in our perception of cinematic time.

Sound phenomena are more linear in time than images, for they are perceived in a horizontal and non-reversible vector from beginning to end (Chion 2004). If a sequence of successive images can already imply a certain degree of temporal linearity, the sensation of temporal progression can therefore be completed with the addition of a linear sound. For example, two parallel scenes taking place in different locations are easily presumed to be simultaneous if there is one harmonious sound connecting them. In music, this experience is further enhanced by the notion of rhythm. By definition, rhythm is an uniform progression in time, a constantly repeated pattern of sounds, but one in which continuity is only perceived as such through discontinuities (Mitry 1997:107). If a sound pattern is repeated indefinitely, we eventually stop noticing it. A novelty is necessary – a minor change in harmony and progression is sufficient – to assure that the rhythm maintains its flow. Again, if a film sequence has its own internal rhythm – which can be dictated by the movement of objects and people inside the scene, the movement of the camera and the succession of images – the addition of musical rhythm can build up expectation for the next moment.

> Not only musical tempo and the punctual pace of events, but also the tonal and formal system where this music is inscribed contribute to a certain *temporalization*, especially by certain phenomena such as melodic pace, harmony and range: a piece of music written in a tonal style and inside a determined framework gives way to anticipation

> about the moment when it is going to end or pause, and this anticipation is incorporated into our perception of the image (Chion 1995:208).

The rhythm of *Yumeji's Theme*, on the contrary, is extremely repetitive. There is no *crescendo*, there are almost no perceptible changes in the progression of a rather obsessive piece of music. This repetition is only accentuated by the fact that the characters are frequently doing the same actions and going to the same places[43]. Because of this, the action is not propelled forward by the sound but, instead, it creates a circular motion, since it keeps returning to the same point over and over again. This provides a sense of stationary time, of imobile movement. There is no action in such scenes, only pure duration. The overall sensation that emerges from this is that the characters are somehow trapped inside this time in brackets; this time is of a subjective nature rather than a linear succession of moments.

It is important to notice that this strategy is not exclusive to *In The Mood for Love* but exemplary of many of Wong's films. As we shall see further on, it can be achieved even with the use of a popular song, as is the case of *Chungking Express* with the repetition of *California Dreaming,* in which case it is not only the rhythm of the song that is repetitive (for the chorus in a pop song demands repetition), but also the diegetic movements that directly accompany it.

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[43] It is worth to mention that a different version of the same theme appears in *My Blueberry Nights*, which shows that repetition and intertextuality go hand in hand in his films.

5.4.2 Emotional connections: diegetic music and character composition

At this point, it is important to distinguish between diegetic music – that is, music that emanates from the visible space of the action – and nondiegetic music, or, as Michel Chion calls it, acousmatic, whose source is not visible. This distinction of the music's place of origin is important because it can change completely our perception of the music and therefore its relation to the image. Nondiegetic or acousmatic music "is the one that the spectator attributes, by elimination, to an imaginary orchestra pit or live musician that accompanies or illustrates the action and dialogues without being a part of them" (Chion 1995:189). Different, for example, from a noise or a voice offscreen – whose source is not yet visible but remains as a part of the action, the nondiegetic music comes from the "absolute offscreen" (Deleuze 1985:306), that imaginary place of the narrator. In Wong's case it corresponds mostly to the instrumental score produced by composers such as Frankie Chan (*Ashes of Time, Chungking Express, Fallen Angels*), Danny Chung (*Happy Together*), Michael Galasso (*In The Mood For Love*), Shigeru Umebayashi (*In The Mood for Love, 2046*) and Peer Raben (*2046* and the episode *The Hand* in the collective film *Eros*). By instrumental score I am referring not only to original material composed by these artists especially for the films, but also to re-orchestration of pre-existing classical music, Chinese opera and scores from previous films[44].

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[44] Traditional Beijing and Cantonese operas are present in *In the Mood for Love* with excerpts from *Si Lang Tan Mu* and *Sang Yuan Ji Zi*, performed by Tan Xin Pei, and *Hong Niang Hui Zhang Sheng,* performed by Zheng Jun Mian and Li Hang. Western opera (*Casta Diva*, from *Norma*) and pre-existing

The diegetic music, on the other hand, comes from within the diegetic field, in scenes where the characters listen to music, sing or dance. In *Days of Being Wild*, Carina Lau's character is a performer, and Leslie Cheung's character dances to the rhythm of a cha-cha song (*Maria Elena*). Jukeboxes are prominently shown in *Fallen Angels.* In *Happy Together,* the main characters dance the tango, and music also comes from radios, record players and club bands in *2046* and *In the Mood for Love*. According to Gorbman, it is an error to assume that diegetic is more realistic than nondiegetic music, because "The mood of any music in the soundtrack, be it diegetic or nondiegetic music, will be felt in association with diegetic events" (1987:23). Moreover, the line between the two is often blurred, for example, in scenes where diegetic music exits the visual space of the action but continues to be heard nondiegetically, or when a nondiegetic piece of music suddenly becomes diegetic with the appearance of a radio or a band in the background.

It is true, nevertheless, that diegetic music tends to be more intimately connected to the characters. Since it emanates directly from the scene, this kind of music represents more of the characters' subjective experiences than a commentary made by the narrator. "What music translates more finely and richly, without any other element being able to replace it in this function, is the ever-changing flux of emotions experienced by a character" (Chion 1995:225). In one of the first articles to contemplate the use of music in Wong's films, David Martinez states that his sound score "does not serve to illustrate a real and precise context, but rather, to convene a universe that is

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film scores are also present in *2046*, with *Julien et Barbara*, originally from the soundtrack of François Truffaut's *Vivement Dimanche* (1983); and *Decision*, originally from the soundtrack of Krzysztof Kieslowski's *Thou Shalt Not Kill* (1989).

purely referential, interior even" (Lalanne et al. 1997:30). In many of his films, we almost feel that the narrative stops so that characters may express themselves through music or dance.

Let us go back to the use of *California Dreaming* in *Chungking Express*, where the constant repetition of this song creates a *leitmotiv* for Faye Wong's character. The definition of *leitmotiv* is a theme employed specifically to create identification between the music and a singular character, situation or place. It is very efficient and economic: once this identification is established, all it takes is the sound to immediately transport the spectator to that specific context[45]. For example, every time we hear *California Dreaming* in the film (in a total of eight times), her character is on scene listening and dancing to it, so repeatedly that it has become difficult to listen to this song, in any context, without associating it with her image.

The song appears for the first time in the second part of the film, when the policeman played by Tony Leung is introduced to May (Faye Wong). In this scene, the music is so loud that it even obstructs the dialogue, breaking yet another rule of the traditional film score, according to which music should be secondary to any narrative source. From this moment on the song becomes a signifier for "May", so much so that, when the policeman finally realizes that she has romantic feelings for him, he plays the CD of the song that she had left in his apartment, instead of *What a Difference a Day Makes,* which was a signifier for his old girlfriend. In the end, May actually goes

[45] The remix of Massive Attack's song *Karma Koma* in *Fallen Angels* is another example, since it can be heard virtually every time the assassin makes an appearance in the film, showing a rather current trend of using a popular pre-existing music as *leitmotiv*. (Powrie and Stilwell 2006)

to the “real” California to see for herself if it was anything like she imagined from listening to this song.

As it happens with the use of *Yumeji’s Theme* in *In The Mood For Love*, *California Dreaming* is repeated incessantly in *Chungking Express* to the point where it disrupts the film’s representation of linear time, creating, rather, a circular motion. The difference in this case is that *California Dreaming* is diegetically justified, since it is the character who chooses to listen to it repeatedly, and consequently it becomes more integrated into the narrative. *Chungking Express* is all about time displacements and the malleable experience that comes with it: characters are always checking for expiration dates, deadlines and future promises, while trapped in a present full of repetitive and mundane actions. The characters’ subjective experience of time in this film is so visualized that it can be almost grasped, but this visuality is also a sonority, since it is as much materialized by the use of music as by visual techniques.

In the sonorous environments created for and by the characters, pre-existing popular songs have a special place. Each film has one or more pre-existing songs featured in the sound score, such as Frank Zappa’s rock ballads in *Happy Together*, *California Dreaming* and *What a Difference a Day Makes* in *Chungking Express*, Nat King Cole’s boleros in *In the Mood for Love* and Connie Francis’s version of *Siboney* in *2046*. There are also Cantonese versions of The Cranberries’ *Dreams* in *Chungking Express*, of Berlin’s *Take My Breath Away* in *As Tears go By*, and of The Turtles’ *Happy Together* in *Happy Together*. *My Blueberry Nights* is scored entirely by a compilation of popular songs by Ry Cooder, Cat Power and many other artists.

The use of popular music has been a part of cinema since the beginning of sound accompaniment, and from the 1960's on the use of songs – especially jazz and rock and roll – became a major way to score films. "The end of the 1950's and 1960's saw a triumph of the melody, a melody that was no longer carefully closed in a motif (…), but one that gives itself to be discovered and that does everything to be heard and memorized" (Chion 1995:139). It is also important to consider that pre-existing songs carry their own language, expression and history to the film, and spectators who already related to these songs (or the artists that perform them) can, and most probably will, relate differently to the film as well.

There are, of course, economic reasons for the use of a pre-existing song, since these songs and their performers may attract a larger audience and boost profit with CD sales. Many of the actors that work in Wong's films are pop stars in China and elsewhere, and often perform their own songs on the films' soundtracks (Carina Lau, Leslie Cheung, Faye Wong, Tony Leung, Andy Lau, Norah Jones). Before the appearance of the music video, cinema had always been a medium for the diffusion of music and celebrities, and Wong takes advantage of this practice neither by refusing nor blindly accepting it, but by largely incorporating it into his own style.

5.4.3 Latin music and cultural codes

According to Gorbman (1987), music signifies in film in three different levels: first, there are purely musical qualities of the piece as experienced by itself; second,

there are narrative musical codes, that determine emotional and cognitive suggestions according to when, where and how music is played in relation to the images; and finally there are cultural musical codes that evoke the film's genre, time or location. Film music is largely used to provide contextual information for the spectator: in just a few seconds, it can establish the film's genre, time and location, providing a sense of security and reaffirmation through the elimination of ambiguous or uncertain signs. The classical mode of film score has certainly consolidated such cultural codes:

> A 4/4 allegretto drumbeat (or pizzicato in bass viols), the first beat emphatically accented, with a simple minor-modal tune played by high woodwinds or strings, signifies "Indian territory". A rumba rhythm and major melody played by either trumpet or instruments in the marimba family signifies Latin America. Xylophones and woodblocks, playing simple minor melodies in 4/4, evoke Japan or China. (…) The hustle and bustle of the big city, especially New York, is signified by the rhythmic support of a jazz or slightly discordant major theme played by brass instruments or strings, interrupted now and then by a brass automobile-horn imitation (Gorbman 1987:83).

Wong Kar-wai complicates this equation by constantly shifting these codes around. Let us consider, for example, the use of Latin music, predominant in his 1960s trilogy – namely, *Days of Being Wild, In The Mood for Love* and *2046* – but also heard in *Happy Together* and even in his series of commercial spots for Japanese designer Takeo Kikuchi. The range of Latin songs used in the films includes Cuban Xavier Cugat's cha-cha and mambo classics from the 1940s, such as *Perfidia*, *Siboney* and *Maria Elena* (*Days of Being Wild* and *2046*); Argentinean Astor Piazolla's *Tango Apasionado* (*Happy Together)*; Brazilian Caetano Veloso's *Cucurrucucu Paloma* (*Happy Together*); as well as Nat King Cole's Spanish renditions of classic boleros

such as *Aquellos Ojos Verdes*, *Quizás, Quizás, Quizás* and *Te Quiero Dijiste* (*In The Mood for Love*). But what do these songs represent, besides a great knowledge of and interest in Latin music?

Regarding the 1960s period, Wong has said in many interviews that Latin songs were actually popular at that time in Hong Kong[46]. Although they might represent accurately what local people listened to in a specific historical context, for someone that comes from elsewhere – especially from Latin America – this particular choice of music appears to be much more exotic than the 'period' Chinese songs used more discretely in the same film[47]. If we took the music away from *In The Mood for Love* and asked a spectator who was not familiar with the film to guess what was playing in the sound score, Nat King Cole's boleros would probably not be their first choice, for a number of reasons.

First of all, because if we follow the culturally coded definition of Gorbman, these songs carry the meaning "Latin America" rather than "Hong Kong", as they evoke a certain notion of community and cultural identity that is different from that of the Chinese characters represented in the film. My understanding of a community's cultural identity passes through Benedict Anderson's concept of imagined communities, which means that communities are a cultural artifact, in other words, a production "distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined" (Anderson 1991:06). In the case of Latin music, the style of the

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[46] One such interview is provided in the special features of *In The Mood for Love's* Criterion Collection DVD, released in 2000, where Wong says: 'We had a lot of Western music in Hong Kong at that time, and most of the band musicians were from the Philippines, so there was a lot of Latin music.'

[47] Notably, *Hua Yang de Nian Hua*, a popular song from the 1930s that was also a theme song from the Chinese indigenous film *An All-Consuming Love* (*Chang Xiang Si*, 1947), and *Bengawan Solo*, a Chinese song with English lyrics recorded in the 1960s by Rebecca Pan, who also appears in the film.

songs, the rhythm, the lyrics, the language in which they are sung and the way they are performed all evoke an explicit communication of feelings that is immediately identified with Latin melodrama and sentimentality. The bolero, the rumba and the ranchera are styles in which sentimentality is taken to extremes; intimacy is created through highly dramatic lyrics and performances based on exaggerated gestures and voice. These musical styles, extremely popular in Latin America in the 1940s and 1950s, experienced a renaissance through the camp movement from the 1990s on, which means that they were recuperated by artists and filmmakers such as Pedro Almodóvar, who transformed them from something corny into something new and popular[48].

As opposed to Almodóvar's use of bolero to highlight the melodramatic sensibility of his own films, Wong uses it to contrast his dialogues and characters' subdued behavior. This is most noticeable in the use of sentimental boleros in *In the Mood for Love*. Because the characters of this film tend to speak so infrequently, these songs become central, often occupying both the material and the semantic functions of the speech: not only do we *notice* the songs but we also *listen* to what they say. It is important to consider that a popular song with lyrics, unlike the classical instrumental score, coordinates elements such as voice, language and speech. Michel Chion (1982:15) speaks of vococentrism to state the importance of the human voice in relation to other sounds: "There aren't sounds and, among these sounds, the human voice. There's the voice, and then all the rest". That is, from the moment we recognize

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[48] In his study of Almodóvar's films, Mark Allinson credits the director with recuperating the Hispanic musical heritage and transforming it into something "camp but cool" (Allinson 2001).

a human voice in a film – whether it comes from a dialogue or a song – it becomes the central point around which other sounds are organized.

If the voice is such an important part of a film's sonorous discourse it is not only because of its materiality, but also because of what is being said: after that first moment of recognition, the spectator tries to localize and, if possible, identify the voice in order to extract meaning from it. "From the speech act we usually retain only the significations it bears, forgetting the medium of the voice itself" (Chion 1999:I). This way, the meaning of the words in the songs play an important role in relation to the images: it can mark a connection (between the desire to visit California and the song *California Dreaming*), suggest ironic commentary (between the lyrics to the song *Happy Together* and the film's actual events) or, in the case of *In The Mood for Love*, express what is not verbally said. Indeed, it appears as though all the indecision and tension among the would-be lovers is expressed by the explicitly sentimental chorus of *Quizás, Quizás, Quizás*: '*Y así pasan los días / Y yo, desesperado / Y tú, tú contestando / Quizás, quizás, quizás*[49].' It is as if the song were saying something about them as well as to them, especially if we take into consideration the fact that the whole film is based on the idea of "perhaps" (perhaps they were lovers? Perhaps they wanted to go away together?). The way that the song is performed, in a different language than that of the dialogues, evoking all the dramatic elements of Latin melodrama, and in a rhythm that recalls the sensual movement of ballroom dance, accentuates even more this contrasting effect. Being a musical genre based on the

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[49] 'And so, the days go by / I, desperate / And you, you only say / Perhaps, perhaps, perhaps'

overt expression of romantic feelings, the bolero adds the melodramatic note to an otherwise subtle and subdued love story. Sound thus extends both narrative and cultural boundaries.

While one might be tempted to say that Wong makes no use of traditional or 'characteristic' pieces of music that, in other cases, might have been used to localize the story in a specific historical period, cultural origin, or cinematic genre, this is not entirely true. For example, in *Happy Together* Astor Piazzola's interpretations of traditional tango are used as a symbol of Argentina and Argentinean culture. But even in this case the use of "ethnic" music is ambiguous, since the tango is as alien to his Chinese protagonists as any other cultural symbol associated with Argentina. Before we can begin to question the validity of this cultural metonym, Wong surpasses its restrictions by closely integrating it into the story and into the characters' representations. Most of the time the tango is heard diegetically, thus falling in the category according to which they are more related to the characters and the diegetic action than the imaginary narrator. In the end, the tango (as music and dance) is used less as a cultural metonym than as a sonorous metaphor for the struggles between the two lovers. And, in this case, there is also the surprising use of Frank Zappa's rock songs (not an obvious choice), which work as a contrast for the more culturally determined tango.

This pattern is indicative of Wong's dialectical relationship with the cinema of genre, which, as we have seen, consists of raising certain traditional elements of well-known cinematic genres only to re-work and recreate them in a new fashion. By introducing familiar elements (music being one of the most easily recognizable of

them) he raises the spectator's horizon of expectation, but only to deconstruct it soon afterward. For example, the score composed by Frankie Chan for *Ashes of Time* is "inspired by Ennio Morricone's compositions for the spaghetti western, instead of the usual traditional Chinese score, supposed to give it the 'local flavor'" (Lalanne et al. 1997:30). Different from sound scores for other wuxia films like Zhang Yimou's *Hero* (2002) and Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000), which draw on traditional Chinese music with purely functional motifs (that is, music that accelerates for the action scenes and mellows down for the romantic scenes), the score for *Ashes of Time* stands out for being completely anachronistic – it reminds one of the 1980s more than Ancient China[50].

As a result of these remarks, it would not be entirely appropriate to say that Wong refuses the use of culturally or historically coded music, or music that caters to the so-called local flavor, but it would be best to say that he uses this kind of music to create his own system of cultural references, one that is global rather than local. Musical selections such as these represent different cultural influences that, juxtaposed, demonstrate the degree of heterogeneity of the references affecting the films, to the point where they defy simple cultural labels. Therefore, even though the use of Latin music might be historically authentic in a film like *In The Mood for Love* or *Days of Being Wild,* it does not represent the cultural code normally related to it but, rather, it represents Wong's own creative vision of 'past-ness' as a stylistic creation. As these well-known songs signify different things for different cultures, Wong is actively establishing relations that surpass national, cultural and generic borders.

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[50] Perhaps for this exact reason Wong decided to drop the original sound score when he re-released the film in 2008, opting instead for a more epic and functional score featuring renowned cellist Yo-Yo Ma.

6 Representing time and memory

"It is Proust who says that time is not internal to us, but that we are internal to time, which divides itself in two, which loses itself and discovers itself in itself, which makes the present past and the past be preserved" (Deleuze 1989:82)

As we have seen in the previous chapters, the technological nature of cinema calls for a manipulation of time: the enchainment of successive shots indicates the passage from past to present to future. If the isolated shot (which is associated with the movement-image) is always in the present, therefore it is the montage that expresses the passage of time, that is, the logical and causal relationship connecting one shot, or one moment, to the next. Pasolini (1988) argued that the montage transforms the present of the image into past and future, but this past and this future still appeared as present given the very nature of the cinematographic image.

For Deleuze, the relationship of the movement-image with time remains necessarily indirect, since it refers only to the illusion of time as succession of moments. "This is why the movement-image is fundamentally linked to an indirect representation of time, and does not give us a direct representation of it, that is, does not give us a time-image" (Deleuze 1989:271). The time-image, on the other hand, is not an indirect representation of illusory, chronological time but a direct presentation of transcendental Time. This direct representation is not an abstraction; rather, it begins when time is no longer subjected to movement, but when, instead, movement is subjected to time.

Deleuze is not referring to flashbacks or anticipations, which are the standard modes of temporal manipulation in film, but to shots that are in the present of the cinematographic image but in which different temporal relations coexist. “There is no present which is not haunted by a past and a future, by a past which is not reducible to a former present, by a future which does not consist of a present to come” (Deleuze 1989:37). This is why, he says, the cinematographic image is always in the present only in bad films, that is, in films that do not take full advantage of the time-image to “give us access to that Proustian dimension where people and things occupy a place in time which is incommensurable with the one they have in space” (Deleuze 1989:39). Montage gives us the experience of cinematic time – the successive shots –, but it is the time-image that gives us access to the experience of the substance of time – in the shape of what Deleuze calls recollection-images, crystal-images and mirror-images, as we shall see.

6.1 Wong’s cinematic time

Wong Kar-wai is widely known for his complex relationship with time, which at times seems compressed, other times dilated, frozen or engaged in memories and lost moments. In a famous article, critic Tony Rayns calls him a “poet of time”, arguing that “no other director since the (distant) heyday of Alain Resnais has been so attuned to the effects of time on memory, sensation and emotion” (Rayns 1995). In another article, Janice Tong argues that Wong’s cinematic rendering of time is made

possible by "complicating the materiality, or the visuality of time" (Tong 2003). It seems a consensus that his films challenge the spectators' perception of time as succession of past, present and future, but how?

First of all, it seems undeniable that the entire wongian *oeuvre* revolves around the *narrative theme* of time. The English title of most of his feature films reference time either directly (*Ashes of Time*) or indirectly (*As Tears Go By, Chungking Express*), as a date in the future (*2046*) or a period in the past (*Days of Being Wild*, *My Blueberry Nights*). Furthermore, his settings feature not only a great quantity of watches and clocks, such as the clock in the stepmother's house in *Days of Being Wild*, the alarm clock in *Chungking Express* and the big Siemens clock above So Lai-chen's workplace in *In The Mood for Love*, but also other objects that move rhythmically (the sound of shoes on the floor, a moving fan, a train, nails tapping on a desk, a ringing phone, smoke from a cigarette), almost as if to "fix" or register the passage of time. Three of his films are set in the 1960's and, as we have seen, they carry a sense of nostalgia accompanied by a melancholic representation of a Hong Kong from the past.

In all of Wong's films there is always the feeling that time is passing by and something is being lost with it. This feeling is shared by his characters, who are constantly talking about time, are obsessed with calendars, individual moments and expiration dates. Their professions seem to present an interesting contrast between velocity (gangsters on the run, cops on the beat, fast food workers) and inactivity, since they are mostly portrayed in their free time. Most of these characters work

during the night and therefore spend the day wasting time, and the narrative chooses to explore precisely these dead-time moments and daily situations in which routine, boredom and solitude abound: Yuddy combs his hair in *Days of Being Wild*, the cop drinks a cup of coffee after work in *Chungking Express*; the couple dances a tango in *Happy Together*; neighbors play mahjong and dine together in *In The Mood for Love*. Even the characters who are supposed to be more active, like the gangster in *As Tears Go By*, the assassin in *Fallen Angels* and the swordsmen in *Ashes of Time* are mainly portrayed in their daily activities as well.

Figure 16: a collection of clocks (*In the Mood for Love, Chungking Express, Days of Being Wild* and *Happy Together*, clockwise)

We can also point out that time is determinant of the characters' romantic and emotional connections. Chow's phrase in *2046* summarizes the emotional status of all of Wong's characters: "love is a matter of timing. It doesn't matter if you meet the right person too soon or too late". Perhaps this explains the lack of logical explanation between meetings and separations, and why sometimes the characters act in the most incomprehensible ways. It is timing, after all, that unites Yuddy and So Lai-chen in *Days of Being Wild*, as he chooses an arbitrary moment – three o'clock in the afternoon – to begin their relationship. "Because of you, I'll always remember this one minute", he says to her. It is also timing that postpones Faye's romance with Cop 663 for a whole year in *Chungking Express*, as it does with Izzie and Jeremy in *My Blueberry Nights*. In the latter, Izzie decides to go on road trip after a breakup with her cheating boyfriend (whom, like the betraying spouses in *In The Mood for Love*, we never see), only to return to the café where Jude Law's character is waiting for her. In a sense, *My Blueberry Nights* is an exploration of that missed kiss between Izzie and Jeremy, a whole film built around a single moment suspended in time.

In most cases, the encounters and separations originating in differences in timing lead the characters to solitude, alienation, despair and, sometimes, death. Love for the wongian subject seems like something always already gone. In *As Tears Go By* the romance between Wah and Ngor begins quite late in the story and is interrupted almost as suddenly as it began. The characters somehow seem to know that they do not have much time together, and resent the time that was wasted: when Wah leaves to help Fly one last time, there is a shot of Ngor looking at him from outside of the red bus almost in tears, as if she knew that this would be the last time she would see him.

In *Days of Being Wild* time is measured by the long periods of waiting for the other, by lost opportunities, by unreciprocated and non-declared loves. The film depicts a series of unrequited love stories: So Lai-chen and Mimi/Lulu both fall in love with Yuddy, who is violently jealous of his stepmother and obsessed with finding the identity of his birth mother, who, in turn, refuses to see him when he finally locates her. The policeman played by Andy Lau falls in love with So Lai-chen and promises to wait by the phone booth every day – but when she finally calls, he is no longer there. Yuddy's friend (Jacky Cheung) falls in love with Mimi/Lulu and also promises to wait for her when she decides to go to the Philippines to look for Yuddy. As Stephen Teo argues, "unrequited love becomes an obsession when it happens in lives that are devoid of all other ambition" (2005:34), and therefore So Lai-chen clings obsessively to a romance that she is unable to forget; the policeman waits quietly by a phone for a call that never comes and Mimi/Lulu searches desperately for her departed boyfriend.

Some love connections are the fruit of chance encounters, as those in *Chungking Express* and *Fallen Angels,* and the evanescence of relationships is reinforced by the characters' monologues in both films. *Chungking Express* begins with the following voice-over: "Every day we brush past so many people. People we may never meet, or who may become close friends". When Cop 223 passes by the woman in the blonde wig the image suddenly freezes and his voice-over says: "This was the closest we ever got. Just 0.01 of a centimeter between us. But 57 hours later, I fell in love with this woman". Later in *Fallen Angels*, the character played by the same actor has a similar opening line: "We rub shoulders with people every day. Strangers

who may even become friends or confidants". Strangers come and go; couples are formed just as easily as they are unformed. The two policemen in *Chungking Express* lose their respective girlfriends and try to find another love, though they are unable to adequately express their feelings for their prospective partners. In *Fallen Angels*, the protagonist ignores the desire that his assistant nurses for him, and instead pursues a brief relationship with another woman, who insistently tries to make an impact on the character's memory. Unluckily for her, he possesses an almost supernatural ability to forget names and faces.

The circular motion of encounters and separations is also the theme of *Happy Together*, in which a homosexual couple goes to Argentina to 'start over', but each ends up distancing himself from the other with the passing of time. In one of the couple's break-ups, Lai Yiu-Fai (Tony Leung) declares that his regrets could kill him, a phrase that could have easily been said by Ouyang Feng, Leslie Cheung's character in *Ashes of Time*. The latter rejected the only woman he ever loved (who, in revenge, married his brother) only to become dominated by regret. "The best way to avoid rejection is to reject others first", he says, recalling that the fear of rejection leads Wong's characters to extreme levels of anxiety and pain. In *In The Mood for Love*, Chow suffers because of a repressed desire for his married neighbor. In *2046* the same character is back and this time he has several affairs with different women. It seems that he has acquired Yuddy's or Ouyang Feng's famous cynicism, being the one to reject before being rejected, but that is only a façade, as he remains unhappy and haunted by the loss of his only true love.

It should be noted that this experience of the passing of time is not represented solely by narrative motifs or character presentation, but it is also rendered visible by what Janice Tong calls “the ambiguous nature of [Wong’s] images”, in which “not only does time displace the characters and locations, but also it is time itself that is ultimately displaced” (Tong 2003:49). Ambiguity can also be used to describe the experience that many critics have when trying to describe Wong’s relationship with time, which can be fast and slow at the same time, past and future together in a single image. For example, in the essay “Trapped in the present”, Ewa Mazierska and Laura Rascaroli describe *Chungking Express* as a narrative focused on the here and now of post-modern societies, where things like “past and memory matter very little” (Mazierska and Rascaroli 2000). Indeed it may seem that way at first, especially from the film’s first sequence of fast-paced images reminiscent of an action movie, but a closer analysis reveal that the characters’ experiences of time are not necessarily that of the present alone.

The first story, that of cop 223 and the Blonde, is marked by the approach of a deadline, which is a common feature of many thrillers involving cops and fugitives. Both characters are running out of time: for the woman, time is signaled by the deadline imposed by his boss/lover and for the cop, time is symbolized by the self-imposed deadline of May 1 (his birthday) to get back together with his girlfriend May. Time is expressed visually on the expiry dates of cans of pineapple and the close-up of an old-style alarm clock as it flips another minute, hour or day. Despite his efforts to make every minute count, the cop’s search is frustrated and he is shown in images that evoke the waste of time: trying unsuccessfully to reach May on the phone, obsessively

checking his phone messages, sitting alone at home or at the counter of the fast-food place. The deadline inevitably comes for both characters and with it they disappear from the face of the screen.

Figure 17: scenes from *Chungking Express*

In the second story, Wong's signature jump cuts and step-printing techniques are used to emphasize the characters' uneasiness towards the passing of time. Both Cop 663 and Faye listen to music from a different era and culture, and their attitudes

seem out-of-sync with the hectic pace of daily life in the streets of Hong Kong. In his first appearance, Cop 663 walks to Midnight Express and orders a chef's salad from Faye, who is listening to the song 'California Dreaming' at the highest volume. They engage in a conversation but can barely hear each other because the music is so loud. To accentuate the uneasiness of this moment, the scene is fragmented by close-ups (of his hand signaling her to come closer) and jump-cuts to their faces in profile, as he repeats his order in her ears (Figure 17). The linearity of the music is suddenly interrupted by another jump-cut to Faye, wearing a different outfit but doing the same movements as before.

While the jump-cut expresses temporal discontinuity (the feeling that time is out of joint), the step-printing technique stresses the fact that different elements inside the frame have different temporalities. In another scene, Faye watches from the back of the counter as the cop drinks his coffee. Everything around them moves in fast motion but they seem oblivious to their surroundings, lost in their own thoughts. This time-image is a visual representation of time as subjective experience: the image may still be in the present, but this present is always already fragmented since it contains different temporalities.

Despite the fact that the characters are "trapped in the present", there is always an evocation of lost time. This way, it is possible to say that nostalgia is not exclusive to Wong's 1960s films but it also appears in films like *Fallen Angels* or *Chungking Express*, which take place in the *hic et nunc* of the frenetic urban jungle of modern Hong Kong. Maybe it is because, as Jean-Marc Lalanne writes, "real nostalgia, *saudade*, isn't that of the past (a rather sterile feeling) but rather that of the

present, melancholic consciousness that the present is that which is always in the process of disappearing" (Lalanne et al. 1997:24-25). In *2046*, characters from *Days of Being Wild* and *In The Mood for Love* gain futuristic versions, but only to remain trapped in the past of their memories.

In this scenario it becomes hard to envision the future, which can be reached only in dreams and fantasies or, at the opposite end of the spectrum, treated with total indifference. Indeed, the characters are never aware of what might happen to them in the near future, but seem always ready to face the changes brought by the next day, even the most radical ones. Some of them live dangerously and do not seem to care if their lives are on the line. In *Ashes of Time*, the barefoot swordsman enters a fight to avenge a young woman's brother, during which he loses a finger and compromises his ability, all in exchange for a basket of eggs. In the same fashion, the assassin in *Fallen Angels* decides just as impulsively to change careers.

From this we can conclude that Wong's handling of cinematographic time reveals an attempt to capture a psychological experience of time, creating different microcosms of temporalities in accordance with each character's subjectivity, in which moments can appear to last forever and days can go by in a flash; in which the future remains something uncertain and unpredictable. Like the clocks in the famous Dali painting *The Persistence of Memory*, time in Wong's films is something malleable and fluid. I would like to argue, however, that this ambiguity is not only present in techniques like step-printing, jump-cuts or flashbacks, but it can actually be found in any image. The time-image puts the sensory-motor organization of movement in crisis,

revealing a direct representation of time that is no longer subjected to movement or the succession of shots. Wong's time-images, even those in the present of the immobile shot, represent time directly by their evocation of memory.

6.2 From description to memory

A fundamental question must be raised at this point: if the time-image is dissociated from the sensory-motor schemata, then how can one opsign be connected to another if not successively and, therefore, chronologically? Deleuze starts his own investigation by what he calls mental-images, that is, images that do not portray solely action anymore, but also meaning, thought and memory. By "mental" he does not mean images that represent character's thoughts – the affection-image already does that – but, rather, images that have as their object the abstract relations between things. In the action-image, the formation of a succession is based on the natural or habitual relations between things, where "one passes naturally and easily from one image to another, for example from a portrait to its model" (Deleuze 1986:197). In the time-image, however, the relation is abstract: it compares images which are not usually connected. The object in this case is the relation itself and not merely a succession of images. "It is an image which takes as its object, relations, symbolic acts, intellectual feelings" (Deleuze 1986:198). This is why, from its very beginning, modern cinema

featured prominently a group of mental situations: childhood memories, fantasies, dreams, nightmares, visions, hallucinations, states of amnesia, alienation and so on.

Deleuze then investigates some forms of these mental images, such as dreams and recollections. His treatment of memory is framed by a third commentary on Bergson's theory on recognition and attention. Bergson notes a distinction between two types of recognition: one that is automatic or habitual, in which the sight of an object is enough to trigger a sensory-motor recognition (for example, I see a chair and recognize that *that is a chair*); and one that is attentive, in which perception consciously pays attention to the object so as to identify its individual features (if I ask myself *how is this particular chair?*), therefore soliciting memory. In the first the object is recognized in its generality, and as we pass from one object to the next we stay in the same horizontal plane (diagram 1). In the second the object is described in its singularity, and as we pass through different planes it remains the same (diagram 2). Attentive description corresponds, therefore, to the purely optical situation or the opsign, in which it does not move horizontally from object to object, it does not extend into movement, but it enters in a circuit where it relates with layers of memory. According to Deleuze, to each actual image of the object (A, B) corresponds a virtual memory-image in the past (a, b) in increasingly deeper layers as it moves farther from immediate perception and into the past.

Diagram 1

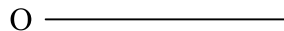
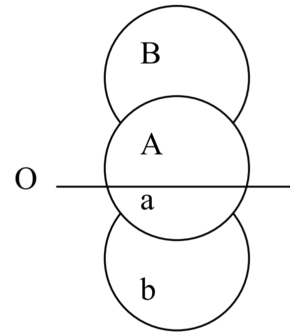


Diagram 2



In cinema, the first thing that comes to mind when speaking of representation of memory is the flashback, "a closed circuit which goes from the present to the past, then leads us back to the present" (Deleuze 1989:48). As an example, let us recall the flashback in *2046* in which Chow remembers his affair with the Black Spider. This circuit is still in the domain of the movement-image, since the virtual image (the image in the past) is always actualized, "presentified" when summoned by the perception-image (in our example, Chow's recollections). Even in sequences that tend to break the linearity of the image (dream or hallucination scenes, for example), time is still ultimately subjected to a sensory-motor organization of events. Therefore there is a latent insufficiency of the flashback with relation to the past, as if not everything could be grasped by recollection, as if something were always already lost.

In the time-image, however, actual and virtual images tend to alternate in shorter and shorter circuits until they reach a point of indiscernibility. "The indiscernibility of the real and the imaginary, or of the present and the past, of the

actual and the virtual, is definitely not produced in the head or the mind, it is the objective characteristic of certain existing images which are by nature double" (Deleuze 1989:69). In other words, the image itself has two sides, the actual and the virtual, past and present, which are interchangeable but not confused.

According to Bergson, memory is not reduced to a personal subjectivity but, on the contrary, it is a domain which encompasses subjectivity. "Time is not inside us, but just the contrary – time is the interiority in which we are, in which we move, live and change" (Deleuze 1989:82). The past preserves itself in itself as an already-been, and it is us who move toward a specific memory when we reminisce. Between the present as the most contracted form of the past (A, B) and the most dilated form of pre-existence (a, b), there are several layers or sheets of past: we have to jump into one of these circles depending on the memory we are evoking. It may seem that these sheets of past succeed each other, but they actually coexist. To illustrate that, Bergson (1911) analyzes the phenomenon of the *déjà-vu* or 'paramnesia', which happens when we are faced with the uncanny sensation of having already experienced a present moment. According to him, this phenomenon only makes obvious the fundamental structure of time, that is, that a present moment is already divided into past and future. There is, in this case, a "memory of the present", given that a memory is formed at this particular junction of present-becoming-past. This time that splits in two, "one of which makes all the present pass on" and the other which "preserves all the past", is what Deleuze calls the crystal-image (1989:81). In the crystal we see time in its pure, non-chronological state.

Deleuze argues that if time ceases to be a straight line and, instead, it forks out into different directions at the same time, then the idea of truth must also enter into crisis since mutually exclusive actions may occur at the same time. Narration takes advantage of this by creating what he calls falsifying narrations, which are usually narrations about the act of creation. This is not an attempt to say that "everyone has his/her own personal truth", but rather a narration in which the past can be false; the impossible derives from the possible, the real and imaginary coincide. Deleuze sees in the work of Alain Resnais and Robbe-Grillet the clearest example of this strategy: in *Last Year in Marienbad* there are few traditional flashbacks, or, more precisely, it is impossible to discern between false and real flashbacks. We frequently see contradictory variations of the same actions in that it is not clear which one is imaginary and which one is real: the man's memories may or may not have happened, the man and the woman may or may not have met in Marienbad before. However, more than to just show different narrative possibilities at the same time, more than to show an inside view of the author's creative process, this strategy calls attention to the multiple nature of the representation of time.

It is not by chance that Wong Kar-wai has been frequently compared to Resnais in his own relationship with time and memory. If there should be a corresponding film to *Last Year in Marienbad* in Wong's career, it would unquestionably be *Ashes of Time*, and not only because the film takes place in an unspecific, abstract past. In this film it is also impossible to distinguish between flashbacks, memory-images and other contradictory temporal indicators, as we have already mentioned in Chapter 2. Thematically, much of the film is devoted to

"explorations of memory and desire entangled with time" (Dissanayake 2003:97). The protagonists are swordsmen haunted by memories of betrayal, lost love and wasted opportunities, to the point where they drink a magical wine with the promise of erasing those memories. However, it soon becomes evident that the more they try to get rid of their regrets, the more they become trapped in them.

In this case, however, it is no longer a question of representing different subjective temporalities as it is in *Chungking Express*, but of investing the whole objective image with a sense of temporality. Memory is more than individual in *Ashes of Time*; it does not happen solely inside the characters' heads but, on the contrary, it is as if they were immersed in a "memory world" (Deleuze 1989:155) like fish in a tank. In this memory world, every image is essentially double – virtual and actual, past and present –, and not just those that are visually manipulated to translate that. Memory is invested, for example, in aberrant and ambiguous images in which "we no longer know what is imaginary or real, physical or mental" (Deleuze 1989:07); in images that stress the contrast between inside and outside, nature and human, light and shadow; in objects that are constantly dividing the frame in two: a tree, a mountain, the surface of a lake, a birdcage that occupies most of the scene while the characters' faces remain in the shadow.

Most of all, memory is invested upon the characters and their bodies, gestures and attitudes. The female characters in *Ashes of Time* are essentially memory-beings, not only because some of them only exist in the memory of other characters but also because their ethereal behavior translates memory (see Figure 18). We only see Ouyang's lost love (Maggie Cheung's character) in one of the last scenes of the film,

and during most of the sequence we see only her face, as she is reclining over a window frame while looking into the horizon – a visual cliché for "looking" into the future, except that in this case she is "looking" into the past. Her movements are minimal and languid, almost lethargic, as if her whole body were carrying the weight of the past. It is important to notice that while Wong's films may seem mostly improvised and spontaneous, they are actually made of calculated gestures and body movements. In an interview for *Cahiers du Cinéma*, Wong himself confessed that he is more interested in the "precision and emotion" contained in the actor's movements and gestures than in "precise dialogue"[51].

One of Deleuze's numerous remarks about Antonioni is that he produces at the same time a cinema of the body, which puts all the tiredness of the world into the body, and a cinema of the brain, which "reveals the creativity of the world", expressed mostly by the use of colors: "the world is painted in splendid colours, while the bodies which people it are still insipid and colourless" (Deleuze 1989:205). A similar argument could be formulated apropos of *Ashes of Time* if we only substitute Wong's movement for Antonioni's color: while the vastness of nature is expressed in aggressive movement (wind, waves), the human bodies that people this world remain motionless, weighed down by regret.

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[51] « Je regarde [mes acteurs] bouger, marcher, utiliser leur mains… À partir de là, j'agis comme un vampire. (…) Je vole à chacun un élément particulier, une démarche, par exemple, et je creuse, je l'étends jusqu'à obtenir une forme lisse » (Wong 1999:28)

Figure 18: The time-women of *Ashes of Time*

6.2.1 Mirror-images and displaced identities

It is not by chance that many of the images in *Ashes of Time*, as in the whole of Wong's work, are of crystalline reflections. Not only do we often see characters through mirrors but they are also constantly seeing themselves reflected, doubled and multiplied: Murong Yin/Yang fights his/her own reflection on the surface of a lake in *Ashes of Time;* Yuddy sees himself in the mirror in *Days of Being Wild*, as does Chow and So Lai-chen in *In the Mood for Love*; Faye sees herself reflected on the glass of the escalators in *Chungking Express* (see Figure 19). The mirror is one of the simplest models of the crystal-image, for it makes visible the co-presence of past and present in the same image. Deleuze says: "it is as if an image in a mirror, a photo, a postcard came to life, assumed independence and passed into the actual, even if this meant that the actual image returned into the mirror and resumed its place in the postcard or photo, following a double movement of liberation and capture" (1989:68).

In other words, the mirror-image is a closed circuit in which the reflection is virtual in relation to the actual character, but actual in the mirror which now leaves the character as a virtuality (especially if he is out-of-field). Thus the image can be present and past at once: "The past does not follow the present that it is no longer, it coexists with the present it was" (Deleuze 1989:79).

The mirror-image also suggests another important aspect of representation, which is doubling and its impact on subject formation. In psychoanalytical terms, the "mirror stage" (*stade du mirroir*) corresponds to the transformation that occurs when

an infant, usually from the age of six months, becomes capable of recognizing his own image in the mirror as such (Lacan 1966). In this moment, an external image of the body produces a response that gives rise to the representation of the ego. However, the fact that the image is perceived as separate from the individual indicates a fundamental lack of correspondence between self and image. Lacan refers to Rimbaud's famous phrase, "I is an other", to stress the lack of correspondence between the subject and the mental image of himself created from his mirror image. In other words, it is as if the ego were constantly trying to become this 'other' that it sees in the mirror, his reflected ideal image (the ideal-I), only to realize that this is ultimately impossible.

The amount of mirror images and reflections in Wong's films suggests that the fragmentation of the ego ("I is an other") permeates most of his characters. In general lines, we can say that the wongian subject is emotionally unstable, constantly moving from one place to another, getting involved in situations which he cannot control or to which he will not react. Indeed, nothing is permanent in Wong's films: people are in a constant state of transformation, changing places, appearance or identities. Let us recall the proliferation of characters in blond wigs in *Chungking Express* and *Fallen Angels*, and the mute's strange ability to naturally change hair color whenever he finds himself in love. In *Happy Together* Lai Yu-fai gains domination over Ho Po-wing only by hiding his passport and therefore stealing his identity. In addition, there is always something missing in most of the characters, whether a finger (*2046*), eyesight (*Ashes of Time*), or vocal ability (*Fallen Angels*).

For these individuals, the idea of fluidity and impermanence is present not only at a physical level but also, and more importantly, at a psychological level. Even the

name, which is one of the points of consistency of the subjectivity, is problematized to the point of disappearance. It is not rare to find characters without names or, on the contrary, many characters sharing the same name, which is often a source for confusion and misunderstanding. Mimi is also known as Lulu in *Days of Being Wild*, and neither is her real name. In *Chungking Express*, the two policemen are identified solely by their professional numbers, and we should note that at one point the owner of Midnight Express mistakenly calls Cop 663 as Cop 633, an error promptly noticed by one of his employees. We can even speak of total fragmentation of the self and schizophrenia as in the case of Murong Yin/Yang in *Ashes of Time*.

This atmosphere of fluidity in which many of the characters are found reflects Alvin Toffler's theory about "The Age of Transiency", in which the feeling of non-permanence in time defines the post-modern subject. According to Toffler, "philosophers and theologians, of course, have always been aware that man is ephemeral. In this grand sense, transience has always been part of life. But today the feeling of impermanence is more acute and intimate" (1970:42). Even in the most differentiated contexts, we can notice that the idea of uncertainty continues to be the most important point of connection between Wong's characters, expressed through a systematic concern with displacements, instabilities and discontinuities, which only reinforces the idea of a conflict of identity.

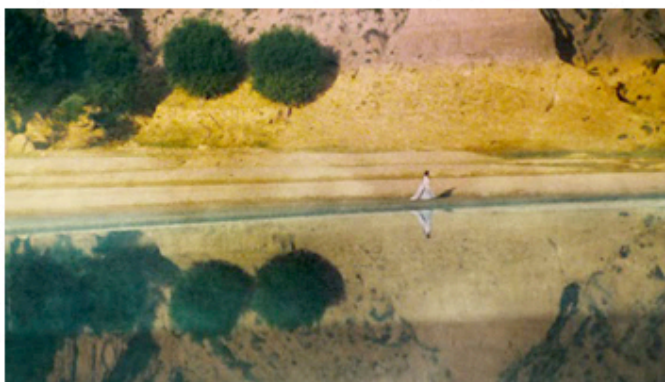

Figure 19: Mirror images (*Fallen Angels, Ashes of Time, 2046* and *My Blueberry Nights*)

Paradoxically, another outcome of the fluidity of the ego is the attempt to fix the identity. This is revealed, for example, in a search for one's origins: Yuddy tries to find his mother in *Days of Being Wild*; the mute becomes obsessed with his father's videotaped image in *Fallen Angels*; Ho Po-wing feels the need to reconnect with his estranged father in *Happy Together.* The same goes for the need to be remembered. Differently from the woman in the blonde wig in *Chungking Express*, who is trying to conceal her identity, Karen Mok's Blondie in *Fallen Angels* is desperately trying to be recognized. She asks the killer if he remembers her, since according to her they had a romance before, but when he answers negatively she bites him so that he would remember next time. "It you don't remember my face, at least you might remember my bite. I have a mole on my face. Next time you pass a woman with a mole on her face, she might be me", she says when he decides to leave her.

We can see, now, how this topic relates to the broader context of Hong Kong's own search for identity. We recall, for instance, that Ackbar Abbas utilizes the concept of disappearance in order to demonstrate the fluidity of Hong Kong's space, "from a trading post in the nineteenth century to its present position as a premier financial center of Southeast Asia" (1997:03). Disappearance, however, is not only a spatial concept but also temporal, marked especially by the signature of the Sino-British contract which reinstated Hong Kong to Chinese supremacy from July 1 1997. As Janice Tong argues:

> It is therefore not surprising to find Hong Kong as a city with an identity that is for the most part fragmented. With its return to Mainland China in 1997, instability and indeterminacy advances on its citizens. It is as though Hong Kong itself, along with its identity, is vanishing

> before the very eyes of its people. There is a rapid sense of time passing and, in this process, a calling forth towards an indeterminate future. (Tong 2003:48)

In other words, just as Wong's characters are clearly obsessed with dates and deadlines, so is Hong Kong in the wake of the 1997 transference to the promise of 50 years under the 'one country, two systems' policy. In the face of disappearance (the deadline), both experience a "last-minute search for a more definite identity" (Abbas 1997:04). This search can only be described as coexistence of anxiety (about the unknown future) and nostalgia (of a romanticized past).

What Wong seems to demonstrate through his films is that this search for stability is always already fruitless, since nothing stays the same with the passing of time. No other film advances this argument quite as sharply as *2046*, Wong's eighth feature film and the last chapter of his 1960s trilogy. The title of the film refers to the last year of the 50-year period of the 'one country, two systems' policy, although the story is set in Hong Kong of the 1960s. This puts the film in the same category of *Happy Together* in that neither of them makes any direct reference to political issues, but both address these issues indirectly through subject matter and atmosphere. If *Happy Together* tackled the disappearing space, *2046* undertakes the question of time. Both films had to distance themselves from the actual issue of contemporary Hong Kong in order to gain perspective – *Happy Together* was shot in Argentina, and *2046* is narrated from the past –, which reinforces the argument that is only by not addressing the issue directly that he manages to advance a valuable social commentary.

Wong has reportedly argued that the film is an exploration of the question of time and whether or not there are things that remain unchanged over the years. The very circumstances involving the making of the film already invoke the question of time, since it took Wong an unprecedented amount of time and energy to finish the project: the production itself took five years, but the origin of the film goes even further back if we take into consideration not only that Wong reportedly conceived the project as early as 1997, even before he started working on the story for *In The Mood for Love*, but also that the film brings back characters and themes from *Days of Being Wild*, his second feature film released in 1991 (Teo 2005:134). *2046* brings Tony Leung back as the character Chow Mo-wan from *In the Mood for Love* (who, quite possibly, is the same mysterious gambler from the end of *Days of Being Wild*). After his unsuccessful affair with So Lai-chen, Chow moves back to Hong Kong and occupies a room in a hotel where he experiences several affairs with different women, including Mimi/Lulu (from *Days of Being Wild*), the daughter of the hotel owner (Faye Wong), and a dance-hall girl (Zhang Ziyi).

Meanwhile, he writes a science-fiction story entitled 2046. In the story within the narrative of the film, the main character embarks on a train ride towards the future, "a place where one can recover lost memories because nothing ever changes". But is there such a time and place? The film seems to show that there is not. Despite the main character's attempt to re-live past experiences, everything keeps changing over time, even himself. Nonetheless, it is the past that continuously shapes his future, as the character is unable to shed the memories of his lost love. The film depicts this paradox exceptionally through the theme of delayed reactions. The futuristic train is

peopled with automatons created to 'keep the passengers warm' – which are, actually, fictional versions of the people in Chow's life. The hero starts to develop feelings for one of the androids, but a man alerts him to the fact that they suffer from delayed reactions: "If you affect them and they want to cry, it won't be until tomorrow when the tears start to flow". In a sense, it is not just the automatons but all of Wong's characters who suffer from delayed reactions, since it is not until late that the pain of loneliness and separation overcomes them. When Bai Ling (Zhang Ziyi) falls in love with Chow, he is no longer interested; when he falls in love with Faye Wong's character, she is in love with another man. We recall Chow's words once more: timing is everything when it comes to love.

6.2.2 The powers of the false

There is yet another doubling of the crystal-image to be considered besides that of actual and virtual, past and present, which is that of reality and spectacle. Many times, when we dream or when a memory is triggered, we see ourselves as somebody else, as if we were suddenly split into two individuals, "one of whom observes the other as if he were on a stage" (Bogue 2003:118). The situation of recognizing oneself as an actor playing a role speaks of the fictional or *performative* character of the ego. Since the reflected image (the ideal-I) of the subject is a fabrication, in the sense that it never fully corresponds to the actual experience of the self, the subject is then constantly playing a fictional role in his social life. In a sense, each of us plays the part

of our ideal-I in our own social lives. “The ego is a mask for other masks, a disguise under other disguises” (Deleuze 1994:111).

Wong’s characters seem peculiarly aware of this role-playing effect, as many of them behave as if they were acting, transforming each daily gesture into a sort of choreographed spectacle or performance: one needs only to remember Faye’s dance with the ketchup and mayonnaise bottles in *Chungking Express*. This is in accordance with what Deleuze calls the “powers of the false”, when “the character is reduced to his own bodily attitudes, and what ought to result is the gest, that is, a ‘spectacle’” (1989:192). It is not a question of treating the world as if it were a stage and its subjects as actors, but rather a question of coalescence of being and acting. As Bogue argues, the invention of a self also entails “a ‘becoming-other’, a metamorphic passage between identities” (2003:153).

If the real is “that which has no double” (Rosset 1979:22), then there is nothing real in Wong’s films, only doubles. In Wong’s universe there is no significant difference between false and original, the real and its double; sometimes the original is the double, or there is no original to begin with. Let us recall the episode in *Fallen Angels* in which the mute meets a woman named Charlie, who is obsessed with an ex-boyfriend. Apparently, the ex-boyfriend has left Charlie to marry a woman named Blondie, and the couple decides to go after her in a series of brief comical scenes. It is unclear whether Charlie is telling the truth or not since Blondie never appears; despite that, they “find” her elsewhere, whether in an inflatable sex toy or a man with long hair and blond highlights sitting in a restaurant. People are nothing more than time-

fillers or place-holders, exchangeable, substitutes for others or, in the case of *2046*, automatons used to please humans.

That means to say that identity in Wong's films is not only displaced but also replaced, since the characters frequently occupy the place of another or pretend to be someone else. In *Ashes of Time*, Yin speaks to Ouyang as if he was Huang, and he also pretends that she is somebody else. In *Chungking Express*, Faye becomes a flight attendant and acts exactly like Cop 663's former girlfriend. In *Happy Together*, Lai-Yu Fai tells Ho Po-Wing, "I'm not like you", and in *In The Mood for Love* the couple is constantly repeating, "We will not be like them". In reality, just the opposite occurs: the more they try to define themselves, the more they become like the others.

The couple in *In The Mood for Love* forms a pact not to behave like their spouses, but only to engage in a role-playing situation in which they pretend to be them, re-enacting their affair step by step. When they go to a Western-style restaurant and order dishes that their spouses would have, the discomfort in Maggie Cheung's character soon becomes apparent as she diligently sauces her meat with strong mustard, since that is what Chow's wife would have done. This role-playing situation is reminiscent of that in Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958). Even though these two films have not been sufficiently compared by Wong's critics, they share a similar structure. In Hitchcock's film, Scottie (James Stewart) transforms Judy into an exact copy of Madeleine (Kim Novak), only to find out that she actually is Madeleine. Therefore, it is only by pretending that he ultimately has access to the real thing – which already is not real, if we consider that Madeleine herself is an image created by her husband Gavin Elster (Tom Helmore). Likewise, in *In The Mood for Love* it is only by

pretending to be the other couple that they manage not to be like them – that is, not to succumb to their desire for each other. The difference is that in Wong's film the theme of role-playing is introduced abruptly and with no narrative explanations, so that the viewer must necessarily face a period of uncertainty (are these scenes real or illusory?) – before understanding what is happening.

6.3 Repetition and difference

The couple in *In The Mood for Love* exercises their obsession through compulsive repetition: they go to the same places, replay the same situations and do the same things over and over again. However, it is important to mention that not only are the characters' actions repetitive but also that they are represented in a repetitive pattern. As Nancy Blake observes, the amount of repetitions and doublings found in this film provides a sense of visual loop: "It is as if the film reel has skipped backward or performed the visual equivalent of an old LP getting stuck in a groove" (Blake 2003:347). As we have seen in Chapter 2, all narratives present us with repetitive facts: it is the way that repetition is treated that can bring focus to the action that is being repeated as much as to the act of repetition itself. Wong could have created a montage sequence equivalent to the phrase "the couple went to the same restaurant several times" but, instead, he chose to present several scenes of the couple at the restaurant, depicting pretty much the same thing. Why is repetition so important in Wong's composition? Can we say that he, too, suffers from repetition compulsion?

Freud theorized repetition compulsion as the phenomenon in which a person (mostly against her conscious will) engages in repetitive behavior in order to relive an action or situation, often a traumatic event (Freud 1963). In this sense, memory can be seen as just another manifestation of repetition, the constant desire to re-live the past. Repetition is closely connected with Wong's rendering of time and memory. What is the structure of *Happy Together* if not the eternal return of a situation? The couple tries to 'start over' several times, engaging in repetitive actions that seem to escape their rational control. In fact, all of Wong's characters repeat actions and movement almost mechanically in order to remember. However, even the most identical elements bring an element of variation, which, in this case, pushes the narrative forward. As Deleuze pointed out: "the eternal return does not bring back 'the same', but returning constitutes the only Same of that which becomes. (…) Repetition in the eternal return, therefore, consists in conceiving the same on the basis of the different" (1994:41). The appearance of Chang in *Happy Together*, for example, is the element of difference that allows Lai Yu-fai to break apart from his repetition compulsion.

As we have seen in Chapter 5, musical repetition – whether it is the use of repetitive music or the repetition of a particular song in the film's sound score – influences on our perception of cinematic time by creating a circular motion which introduces a break in the linearity of the image. It should be noted that visual repetition also disrupts the temporality of the image. Subjecting action to a series of repetitions is, therefore, another way to set time free from its subordination to movement. Deleuze explains that repetition does not change the object that is being repeated, but it changes

something in the subject that contemplates it. “Does not the paradox of repetition lie in the fact that one can speak of repetition only by virtue of the change or difference that it introduces into the mind which contemplates it?” (Deleuze 1994:70). For example, when we see a series AB, AB, AB, A…, in which AB is one independent element, it creates something in the mind so that after a few repetitions, we expect to see B whenever we see A. In *In The Mood for Love*, the scenes are so identical that the only way to tell the passage from one day to the next is in Maggie Cheung’s beautifully patterned cheongsams, to the point where we expect to see a different dress in order to understand the scene as taking place in a new day. However, not only does the film present the difference in the identical but also the identical in the different: there is one particular scene in which So Lai-chen and Chow are seated in the restaurant and the camera quickly establishes a typical shot and reverse shot, cutting back and forth between him and her. At one point, however, when it cuts back to her she is wearing a different dress. We understand this as a visual clue for a different occasion (they are again at the restaurant on another day), but then the dialogue carries on continuously, indicating that the characters’ actions and conversations are identical even if the days are different. Again, repetition cannot exist without difference: we only perceive the days as being *identical* because she is wearing a *different* dress.

However, repetition occurs not only inside a single Wong Kar-wai film, but it expands from one film to another. There is a wide range of doublings, repetitions and intertextual references found in all of Wong’s films: the taxi-cab signature scene is seen first in *Happy Together*, then repeated in *In The Mood for Love* and *2046* (Figure

22); the theme song from *In the Mood for Love* is heard again in *My Blueberry Nights*; Takeshi Kaneshiro's character in *Fallen Angels* does the same movement as Fay in *Chungking Express*; the same shot from an oval window is seen in *Ashes of Time* and *In the Mood for Love* (Figure 21). As we have seen, his work in short films and television commercials provide a basis for repetition, in which elements from his feature films are expanded while familiar themes are given a different treatment.

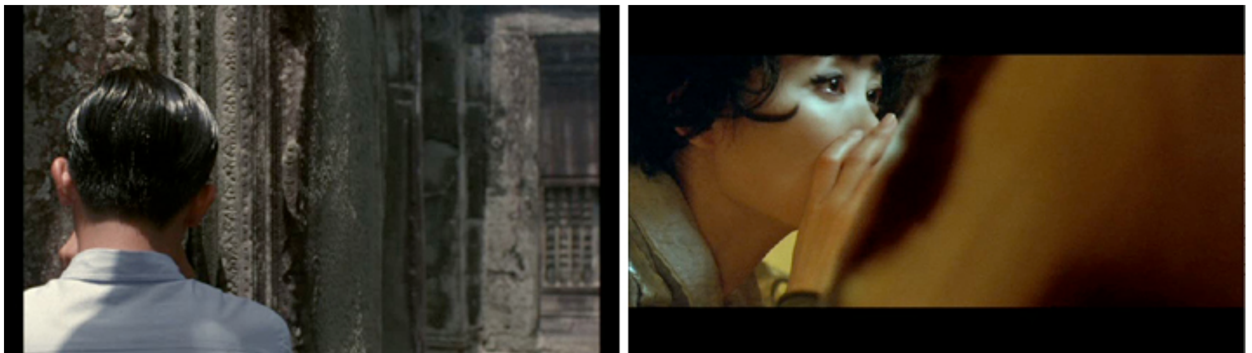

Figure 20: Telling a secret (*In the Mood for Love* and *2046*)

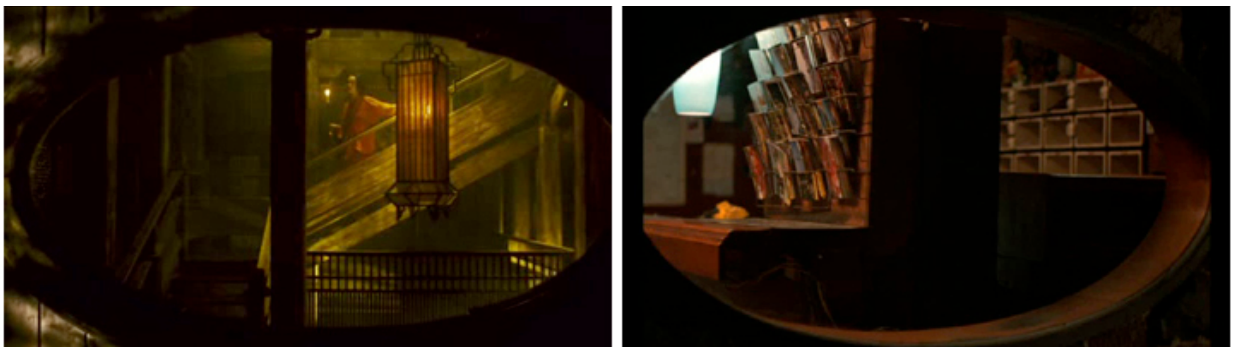

Figure 21: recurrent images (*Ashes of Time* and *In The Mood for Love*)

Ackbar Abbas suggested that Wong's films can be analyzed in two opposite ways at the same time: one in which each film is seen as the beginning of something new, refusal to repeat what came before, and another in which, on the contrary, each film makes an eternal return to the previous one, a refusal of the very idea of change. Every film, though different, is "a fragment incomplete in itself; a return to a place whose characteristics have been seen before, but only partially" (In Lalanne et al. 1997:39). There is an undeniable serial aspect to Wong's films: *Days of Being Wild* was initially conceived as a two-part film, and then later it formed a trilogy with *In The Mood for Love* and *2046*; in the same way, *Fallen Angels* can be seen as the missing third part of *Chungking Express.*

According to Stephen Teo, Wong "was clearly enamored with the practice of serialization right from the very start of his career" (2005:30). This is another connection between Wong Kar-wai and Hong Kong's commercial cinema, of which serialization and manipulation are important features as well. Just as Hong Kong films are constantly changing shapes to suit different markets, there are different versions of his films for the Asian and international markets. Most of the time the international version has fewer scenes and a different montage than the original local version (it is the case of *Days of Being Wild* and *Chungking Express*), which indicates that Wong is constantly re-editing his own work. In addition, most of his DVD releases offer behind-the-scenes material including extra scenes and alternate versions, indicating what his films might have looked like if he had kept changing them.

Figure 22: Three taxi rides (*Happy Together*, *In the Mood for Love* and *2046*)

Wong's obsession with serialization, however, does not inhere in the mere repetition of formulas but in an on-going revision of his own work. His films are continuously expanding and reverberating with one another. As Wimal Dissanayake notes, "Wong's works are connected to each other in complex and subtle ways. Wong's early films offer useful pointers to the understanding of later films, while his later films enable us to revisit the earlier works with a new eye" (Dissanayake 2003:12). In 2008 he released a new version of *Ashes of Time* called *Ashes of Time Redux*, which he produced after discovering that the original negatives of the film had almost been destroyed. Considering that the only version of the film released in DVD for the international market was of very poor quality, and perhaps motivated by the new appreciation of his film in the past few years, he decided not only to restore but to revisit the film, keeping as many of the original scenes as possible (he claims that some negatives had already been destroyed by the time he retrieved them), but also changing some important features such as the sound score, which was re-done, and the colors, which were digitally remastered.

In this sense, *2046* can be seen not only as the third part of Wong's 1960s trilogy but also as a summary of his entire *œuvre* so far, as it mixes self-references with the obsessive treatment of time and memory. In this film Carina Lau is back as Mimi/Lulu from *Days of Being Wild*, and when she meets Chow in a nightclub he immediately brings back memories of Yuddy, thus creating a sort of ellipsis between films (see Figure 20). Statements made by characters in previous films echo later on, and characters belonging to another film continue to exert impact even when they are

absent. Chow's memories are preoccupied with So Lai-chen from *In the Mood for Love*, who only appears in a memory-image of the signature shot from the back of the taxi. He then occupies the room 2046 in a hotel – the same number of the room they shared in *In The Mood for Love* – as a way to remember the affair, and has a relationship with another woman named So Lai-chen (Gong Li), which is a substitute for the real So Lai-chen (Maggie Cheung).

Figure 23: Mimi/Lulu in *Days of Being Wild* and *2046*

Conclusion

Throughout this thesis, I have attempted to demonstrate how Wong Kar-wai's cinema is based upon a dualistic structure that allows his films to be opposite things at the same time: commercial and independent, visual and literary, local and global, unique and generic, high art and popular, realistic and allegorical, deep and superficial, improvised and finely crafted. In order to better understand this seemingly paradoxical structure, I have benefited from Gilles Deleuze's approach to cinema as a dialectical system between the movement-image, represented by classical narrative cinema, and the time-image, represented by modern cinema. In this way, Deleuze's categorization of cinematic signs and images offered not only an important analytical tool but also a theoretical framework upon which Wong's films could be projected.

The biggest obstacle to analyzing such a dualistic structure is that it compelled me to create categories when his cinema clearly challenges most attempts at categorization. Therefore I must emphasize that what appeared divided in this text are characteristics that occur simultaneously in the films. While Deleuze clearly separated the movement-image from the time-image, I have argued that Wong's cinema creates movement-images as well as time-images, and one does not exist independently of the other. For instance, I have shown how Wong uses classical narrative methods to create a cinema that is at once transparent and self-conscious. His method signals the existence of a narrating instance controlling what we see, but at the same time his use

of voice-over monologues renders the narrative fluid as if it were developing naturally in front of our eyes.

In his cinema action-images are inseparable from time-images. His films remain deeply implicated within Hong Kong's generic cinema, even if they disrupt the logic of classical realist cinema. Deleuze associated the time-image with post-war modernist movements such as the French Nouvelle Vague and the Italian Neorealism, in which time is no longer subjected to movement but, on the contrary, movement is subjected to time. Wong presents modernist influences in his use of *mise en scène* and music to create purely optical and sonorous situations, characteristics which are highly praised in the film festival circuit, but at the same time he is not shy to draw from popular genres or to place capitalist brands in his films. He became known as an arthouse director, but he also directs TV commercials and music videos. His films are too unusual to be considered typical Hong Kong cinema, but at the same time too commercial to be considered avant-garde in the manner of Godard and Antonioni. He does not reject commercialism or popular culture but, on the contrary, he understands niche marketing very well and uses it to his advantage: in order to obtain the funding for *Fallen Angels*, for example, he reportedly claimed that it was a gangster movie. His cult status is reinforced by the release of commercial goods such as soundtrack CDs, booklets and souvenir programs.

What I hope to have demonstrated is that Wong's dialectic structure is not fundamentally contradictory, but it is characteristic of Hong Kong's very own cultural tension between economic exploitation and cultural identity. Ultimately, Wong's

cinema reflects the situation of Hong Kong: "Caught between East and West, between China and Britain, a crown colony with a hybrid culture, and now once again part of China but under 'one government, two systems', Hong Kong represents a theoretical conundrum" (Fu and Desser 2000:05). In other words, just as Hong Kong is multiple in its identities, from imperialism to globalism, from colony to SAR (Special Administrative Region), so is Wong's cinema, which is marked by a sort of displacement that connects all of the characters. An uneasiness makes them come and go incessantly, in a fluid movement that touches even their identities. We have seen that many characters do not have proper names but only nicknames, numbers and, sometimes, not even that. Some share the same name and most of the time this is reason for confusion or cases of mistaken identities. Sometimes they joke about this confusion, interchanging identities and assuming other people's places, and sometimes they want to reassure themselves of their own individuality – in either case identity remains as something malleable.

Just as Hong Kong is a cultural crossroad where numerous references converge, so too is Wong's cinema, as his characters are constantly moving while cultural references are being shifted. This sense of fluidity is translated into the film's medium, in its relationship with time and space, in the attention to details, in a certain atmosphere of uncertainty and melancholy, in the cyclical repetition that creates a rhythmical pattern of eternal return of the past, in the way that it problematizes the very representation of the filmic image – the blurs, the saturated colors, the non-recognizable images etc. Wong's cinema represents Hong Kong's "simultaneously postmodern and postcolonial condition as a historically and socially specific one

where present, past, and future are constantly collapsing into each other" (Berry and Farquhar 2006:41). His characters are out-of-sync with their time: paralyzed by memories of past lovers and lost opportunities, haunted by melancholy even when they live in the *hic et nunc* of contemporary Hong Kong, indifferent toward the future, lost in a never-ending present of endless moments.

There is no question that Hong Kong is a prominent character in all of Wong's films, and that social/individual identity is an important theme, albeit they are not always portrayed in an obvious or direct manner. Instead of focusing on a series of simplified allegories, Wong's social representation is found in a more complex and obtuse quest for identity in a space of disappearance. I have argued that the three categories of space present in Wong's films – the private space of houses, the public space of Hong Kong and the imagined space of evasion – offer alternatives of the concept of the any-space-whatever, where inside is confused with outside and the geographical location of the city also expresses the characters' social and psychological isolation. Wong's representation of Hong Kong's social identity becomes more direct only by becoming more abstract; indeed, it is only through abstractness that he can grasp the problem of Hong Kong's identity.

We have established that Wong's films belong to Hong Kong and therefore reflect his local identity, but this does not exclude their ability to appeal to a global audience. Just like every other aspect of his cinema, local and global are not mutually exclusive qualities but rather co-dependent ones. As David Bordwell argued, "To treat these lovelorn films as [only] abstract allegories of Hong Kong's historical situation risks losing sight of Wong Kar-wai's naked appeal to our feelings about young

romance, its characteristics dilemmas, moods and moves" (2000:280). In their most general aspect, his themes of romance and solitude appeal to a universal audience, independent of cultural origins. The visual style in which these stories are fashioned is frequently compared to that of filmmakers with the most diverse origins, which only helps to further demonstrate Wong's appeal as a global cult filmmaker.

Wong crossed his local status definitively with the release of his first English-language film in 2007. Of course, he was not the first Hong Kong filmmaker to direct a Hollywood film – John Woo had already done that in the 1990s –, but it is undeniable that he has managed to maintain most of his identity during the change, even if most of his critics were not entirely pleased with the result[52]. In any case, the fact that we can consider *My Blueberry Nights* together with the rest of his oeuvre, as we have done throughout this thesis, only attests to the fact that we cannot regard him as solely locally anymore. Just as Hong Kong has been known as a place of transit or a culture of transition, so is Wong's cinema transitioning from local to global. At this

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[52] Some of them questioned Wong's ability to render his trademark emotional monologues in English, noting that what seemed unique and exotic about him – his Hong Kong origins – seems strangely "domesticated" and unappealing in *My Blueberry Nights*. "Why does the delivery of Jeremy's monologue come off as disingenuous, whereas Kaneshiro's voiceover, in a language I cannot speak, feels poignant and poetic?", asks Sarah Silver (Silver). Critics were also disappointed with the film's apparent fragile and superficial story, especially after a dense project such as *2046*. "The fundamental Wong drama, between cultural circulation and rootedness, returns as a mere road trip. (…) Wong Kar-wai, I am trying to chase you back to Hong Kong: be a poet again", claims Joshua Clover (Clover 2008). This, however, might just be an indication of Wong's ability to not take himself too seriously – after all, he has a pattern of following an intense and difficult project (*Ashes of time*, *2046*) with a light and humorous one (*Chungking Express, My Blueberry Nights*). Regardless of that, it is still too early to dismiss the film as a minor work and, in a few years, critics might be reconsidering *My Blueberry Nights* in the light of Wong's later international works, as they did with *As Tears Go By*.

point it is still uncertain if Wong will make more international films[53] or go back to Hong Kong, where the question of 1997 is moving further away in time only to give place to new concerns about the future. We can only pose questions about what comes *after*: after he has gained international attention, after his obsession with the question of time and cultural identity, after his 1960s trilogy, after 1997. Whatever the answers might be, it will be most interesting to see what he does next.

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[53] He has reportedly been involved in a project with actress Nicole Kidman called *Lady From Shanghai*, which might or might not be a remake of Orson Welles' 1947 film with Rita Hayworth, but the constant speculation around his work makes it difficult to acquire trustworthy information.

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Wong Kar-wai Fan sites

Wong Kar-wai.net: http://www.wongkarwai.net/

In the Mood for Wong Kar-wai: http://wkwai.free.fr/

Eternal Shades of Red and Green: http://www.eternalshadesofredandgreen.com/

Wong Kar-wai Fan Site (in Italian): http://www.2046.it/

Chasing the Metaphysical Express: http://www.wkw.freeuk.com/

Wong Kar-wai's filmography

Feature Films

As Tears Go By (Wong gok ka moon, 1988), Hong Kong, 102 min.

Written and directed by Wong Kar-Wai

Producer: Rover Tang Kwok-Chow (In Gear)

Editor: Peter Cheung Pi-Tak

Sound score: Danny Chung Ting-Yat

Cinematographer: Andrew Lau Wai-Keung

Cast: Andy Lau Tak-Wah, Maggie Cheung Man-Yuk, Jacky Cheung Hok-Yau, Alex Man

Days of Being Wild (A Fei zheng chuan, 1991), Hong Kong, 94 min.

Written and directed by Wong Kar-Wai

Producers: Rover Tang, Alan Tang, Joseph Chan (In Gear)

Editors: Kei Kit-Wai and Patrick Tam Ka-Ming

Cinematographer: Christopher Doyle

Cast: Leslie Cheung Kwok-Wing, Maggie Cheung Man-Yuk, Carina Lau Kar-Ling, Andy Lau Tak-Wah, Rebecca Pan, Tony Leung Chiu Wai

Ashes of Time (Dongxie Xidu, 1994), Hong Kong, 100 min.

Written and directed by Wong Kar-Wai

Producer: Tsai Sung-lin (Jet Tone, Scholar Productions)

Editors: Kei Kit-Wai, William Chang Suk-Ping, Kwong Chi-Leung and Patrick Tam Ka-Ming

Sound Score: Frankie Chan, Roel A. Garcia

Cinematographer: Christopher Doyle

Cast: Leslie Cheung Kwok-Wing, Brigitte Lin Ching-Hsia, Maggie Cheung Man-Yuk, Tony Leung Ka Fai, Carina Lau, Charlie Young

Chungking Express (Chongqing senlin, 1994), Hong Kong, 102 min.

Written and directed by Wong Kar-Wai

Producer: Chan Yi-Kan (Jet Tone)

Editor: William Chang Suk-Ping

Sound Score: Frankie Chan Fan-Kei, Roel A. Garcia and Michael Galasso

Cinematographers: Christopher Doyle and Andrew Lau Wai-Keung

Cast: Takeshi Kaneshiro, Brigitte Lin Ching-Hsia, Tony Leung Chiu-Wai, Faye Wong Ching-Man

Fallen Angels (Duo Luo Tian Shi, 1995), Hong Kong, 90 min.

Written and directed by Wong Kar-Wai

Producer: Jeff Lau Chun-Wai (Jet Tone)

Editors: William Chang Suk-Ping and Wong Ming-Lam

Sound Score: Frankie Chan Fan-Kei and Roel A. Garcia

Cinematographer: Christopher Doyle

Cast: Leon Lai Ming, Takeshi Kaneshiro, Michelle Reis, Charlie Yeung Choi-Nei, Karen Mok

Happy Together (Chun gwong csa sit, 1997), Hong Kong, 96 min.

Written and directed by Wong Kar-wai

Producer: Wong Kar-Wai (Block 2 Pictures, Jet Tone)

Editors: William Chang Suk-Ping, Wong Ming-Lam

Sound Score: Danny Chung

Cinematographer: Christopher Doyle

Cast: Leslie Cheung Kwok-Wing, Tony Leung Chiu-Wai, Chang Chen

In the Mood for Love (Hua yang nian hua, 2000), Hong Kong, 98 min.

Written and directed by Wong Kar-Wai

Producer: Wong Kar-Wai (Block 2 Pictures, Jet Tone)

Editor: William Chang Suk-Ping

Sound Score: Michael Galasso and Shigeru Umebayashi

Cinematographers: Christopher Doyle and Mark Li Ping-bin

Cast: Tony Leung Chiu-Wai, Maggie Cheung Man-Yuk, Rebecca Pan

2046 (2004), Hong Kong, 129 min.

Written and directed by Wong Kar-Wai

Producers: Wong Kar-wai and Gilles Ciment (Block 2 Pictures)

Editor: William Chang

Sound Score: Shigeru Umebayashi

Cinematographer: Christopher Doyle

Cast: Tony Leung Chiu-Wai, Gong Li, Zhang Ziyi, Faye Wong, Takuya Kimura, Carina Lau

My Blueberry Nights (2007), Hong Kong/USA, 90 min.

Directed by Wong Kar-wai

Written by Wong Kar-wai and Lawrence Block

Producers: Wong Kar-wai, Wang Wei (Jet Tone, Block 2 Pictures, Studio Canal)

Editor: William Chang

Sound Score: Ry Cooder

Cinematographer: Darius Khondji

Cast: Jude Law, Norah Jones, David Strathairn, Rachel Weisz, Natalie Portman

Collective projects

Eros (2004)

Segment *The Hand*

Running time: 40 minutes

Written and directed by Wong Kar-Wai

Cast: Gong Li, Chang Chen, Feng Tien

Producers: Chan Wai-Chung, Jacky Pang Yee Wah (Block 2 Pictures, Jet Tone)

Editor: William Chang

Cinematographer: Christopher Doyle

Sound Score: Peer Raben

Chacun son cinema (2007)

Segment *I Travelled 9000 km To Give It To You*

Running time: 4 minutes

Directed by: Wong Kar-wai

Written by: Wong Kar-wai and William Chang

Producers: Gilles Ciment, Jacky Pan Yee Wah

Editor: William Chang

Cinematographer: Kwan Pung-Leung

Cast: Farini Cheung, Wing Fan

Short films, music videos and television commercials

wkw/tk/1996@7'55"hk.net (1996), commercial for Japanese designer Takeo Kikuchi

Running time: 7 minutes 55 seconds

Directed by: Wong Kar-wai

Cinematographer: Christopher Doyle

Cast: Tadanobu Asano, Karen Mok

Motorola (1998), commercial

Running time: 3 minutes 36 seconds

Cinematographer: Christopher Doyle

Cast: Tadanobu Asano, Faye Wong

Hua yang de nian hua (2000)

Short film made from archive images of classical Chinese films

Running time: 2 minutes 28 seconds

The Follow (2001), commercial for BMW

Running time: 8 minutes 47 seconds

Directed by Wong Kar-wai

Written by Andrew Kevin Walker

Cast: Clive Owen, Adriana Lima, Forrest Whitaker, Mickey Rourke

La Rencontre (2002), commercial for Lacoste

Running time: 1 minute

Directed and written by Wong Kar-wai

Cinematographer: Eric Gautier

Cast: Chang Chen and Diane MacMahon

Six Days (2002), music video

Running time: 4 minutes

Directed and written by Wong Kar-wai

Cinematographer: Christopher Doyle

Cast: Chang Chen, Danielle Graham

Hypnose Homme (2007), commercial for Lancome

Running time: 26 seconds

Cast: Clive Owen and Daria Werbowy

Midnight Poison (2007), commercial for Dior

Running time: 1 minute 39 seconds

Cast: Eva Green

There's Only One Sun (2007), commercial for Phillips

Running time: 9 minutes

Directed and written by Wong Kar-wai

Cinematographer: Philippe Le Sourd

Cast: Amélie Daure, Gianpaolo Lupori

Other films cited

A Better Tomorrow (Ying hung boon sik, Hong Kong, 1986). Directed by John Woo.

A Chinese Ghost Story (Sien nui yau wan, Hong Kong, 1987). Directed by Ching Siu-tung.

All that Heaven Allows (USA, 1955). Directed by Douglas Sirk.

Alphaville (France, 1965). Directed by Jean Luc-Godard.

An All-Consuming Love (Chang xiang si, Hong Kong, 1947). Directed by He Zhaozhang.

A Touch of Zen (Xia nu Taiwan, 1969). Directed by King Hu.

Blade Runner (USA, 1982). Directed by Ridley Scott.

Breathless (À Bout de Souffle, France, 1960). Directed by Jean-Luc Godard.

Brief Encounter (UK, 1946). Directed by David Lean.

Citizen Kane (USA, 1941). Directed by Orson Welles.

City on Fire (Lung fu fong wan, Hong Kong, 1987). Directed by Ringo Lim.

Cleo from 5 to 7 (Cléo de 5 à 7, France, 1962). Directed by Agnès Varda.

Cries and Whispers (Sweden, 1972). Directed by Ingmar Bergman.

Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon (Wo hu cang long, Taiwan/China, 2000). Directed by Ang Lee.

Diary of a Country Priest (Journal d'un curé de campagne, France, 1951). Directed by Robert Bresson.

Don't Look Now (USA, 1973). Directed by Nicolas Roeg.

Easy Rider (USA, 1969). Directed by Dennis Hopper.

Father and son (Foo ji ching, Hong Kong, 1981). Directed by Allen Fong

Final Victory (Zui hou sheng li, Hong Kong, 1987). Directed by Patrick Tam.

Flaming Brothers (Jiang hu long hu men, Hong Kong, 1987). Directed by Tung Cho Cheung.

Gloria (USA, 1980). Directed by John Cassavetes.

Hero (Ying xiong, China, 2002). Directed by Zhang Yimou.

House of Flying Daggers (Shi mian mai fu, China, 2004). Directed by Zhang Yimou.

Imitation of Life (USA, 1959). Directed by Douglas Sirk.

Joys and Sorrows of Youth (Leng nuan qing chun, Hong Kong 1969). Directed by Chor Yuen.

Lady in The Lake (USA, 1947). Directed by Robert Montgomery.

Last Year in Marienbad (L'année dernière à Marienbad, France, 1961). Directed by

Alain Resnais and Alain Robe-Grillet

L'Avventura (Italy, 1960). Directed by Michelangelo Antonioni.

Mean Streets (USA, 1973). Directed by Martin Scorsese.

My Night at Maud (Ma Nuit Chez Maud, France, 1969). Directed by Eric Rohmer.

My Own Private Idaho (USA, 1991). Directed by Gus Van Sant.

Once Upon a Time in China (Wong Fei Hung, China, 1991) Directed by Tsui Hark.

Persona (Sweden, 1966). Directed by Ingmar Bergman.

Pickpocket (France, 1959). Directed by Robert Bresson.

Pierrot Le Fou (France, 1965). Directed by Jean-Luc Godard.

Prison on Fire (Gam yuk fung wan, Hong Kong, 1987). Directed by Ringo Lim.

Pulp Fiction (USA, 1994). Directed by Quentin Tarantino.

Raiders of the Lost Ark (USA, 1981). Directed by Steven Spielberg.

Rashomon (Japan, 1950). Directed by Akira Kurosawa.

Rebel Without a Cause (USA, 1955). Directed by Nicholas Ray.

Red Desert (Il deserto rosso, Italy, 1964). Directed by Michelangelo Antonioni.

Rome, Open City (Roma, città aperta, Italy, 1945). Directed by Roberto Rossellini.

Rouge (Yin ji kau, Hong Kong,1987). Directed by Stanley Kwan.

Social Characters (Hong Kong, 1969). Directed by Chan Wan.

Spring in a Small City (Xiao cheng zhi chun, China, 1948). Directed by Fei Mu.

Sunset Boulevard (USA, 1950). Directed by Billy Wilder.

Swordsman (Xiao ao jiang hu, Hong Kong, 1990). Directed by King Hu.

Swordsman II (Hong Kong, 1992). Directed by Stanley Tong and Ching Siu-tung.

Swordsman III: The East is Red (Hong Kong, 1993). Directed by Ching Siu-tung and Raymond Lee.

Teddy Girls (Feihue Zhengzhuan, Hong Kong, 1969). Directed by Kong Lung.

The Bicycle Thief (Ladri di biciclette, Italy, 1948). Directed by Vittorio De Sica.

The Eclipse (L'eclisse, Italy, 1962). Directed by Michelangelo Antonioni.

The Killer (Dip huet seung hung, Hong Kong, 1989). Directed by John Woo.

The Magnificent Ambersons (USA, 1942). Directed by Orson Welles.

The Searchers (USA, 1956). Directed by John Ford.

The Shining (USA, 1980). Directed by Stanley Kubrick.

They Shoot Horses, Don't They? (USA, 1969). Directed by Sydney Pollack.

Thou Shalt Not Kill (Poland, 1989). Directed by Krzysztof Kieslowski.

To be Number One (Bo Hao, Hong Kong, 1991). Directed by Johnny Mak.

To Liv(e) (Fau sai luen kuk, Hong Kong, 1992). Directed by Evans Chan.

Umberto D (Italy, 1952). Directed by Vittorio De Sica.

Vertigo (USA, 1958). Directed by Alfred Hitchcock.

Vivement Dimanche (France, 1983). Directec by François Truffaut.

Yumeji (Japan, 1991). Directed by Susuki Seijun.

Zabriskie Point (USA, 1970). Directed by Michelangelo Antonioni.

Zu: Warriors from the Magic Mountain (San suk san geen hap, Hong Kong, 1983). Directed by Tsui Hark.