Spatial intimacies: negotiating place in four films by Wong Kar-wai

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This thesis is presented for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy of The University of Western Australia

Discipline of English and Cultural Studies
School of Social and Cultural Studies

2011
Abstract

This thesis explores the representation of intimate geographies in four films by Hong Kong auteur, Wong Kar-wai. Providing an in-depth examination of Chungking Express (1994), Happy Together (1997), 2046 (2004) and My Blueberry Nights (2007), I interrogate the manner in which Wong appropriates the themes of place and travel to portray complex articulations of emotion. In so doing, I consider Wong’s construction of a cinema of spatial intersection that resides on the threshold of memory and desire.

By situating Wong’s cinema within interstices, this thesis proposes an alternative reading of his oeuvre that shifts the focus of critical attention away from popular theorisations that frame Wong’s films in relation to the socio-historical context of contemporary Hong Kong. Specifically, I argue for a re-mapping that locates meaning within the intimate gestures of each film, as opposed to larger narratives – such as the Sino-British handover in 1997 – that exist beyond the cinematic frame. Accordingly, this thesis marks a significant scholarly shift from temporality to spatiality and from politics to aesthetics. Although these categories cannot be easily extricated, I prioritise a reading of Wong’s cinema through visual details that shed light on how space is produced and traversed cinematically.

Both drawing on and contributing to the rich body of scholarship on Wong’s cinema, this thesis not only privileges a comprehensive reading of each film narrative on its own merits, but also scrutinises the spatial motifs that compose a shared cartography that joins the films despite their diverse locales. This approach provides new ways of negotiating film space that do not merely move architecture and setting to the forefront of analysis, but also engage with the architecture of cinematic space and the manner in which cinematography contributes to the creation of place.

In exploring four specific films as a collective, this thesis opens an avenue to considering the multiple ways in which Wong engages with space through the intertwined lens of travel. Chapter one begins this journey by taking the viewer through the alleys and streets of Wong’s native Hong Kong in Chungking Express. Offering an in-depth analysis of the manner in which Wong connects urban space with constructions of memory and dreaming, I examine the film’s production of an emotional geography that is depicted on a
filmic map of Hong Kong that shifts and unfolds with the characters’ psychological states. The analysis of *Happy Together* in chapter two focuses on Argentina, a space that Wong imagines as an unknown terrain that defies mapping. This foreign topography provides fertile ground for negotiating the tumultuous love story at the centre of the film, thereby joining geography and desire in an articulation of love in exile.

Through its examination of *2046*, chapter three shifts between the reconstructed past of 1960s Hong Kong and the future projections of the imaginary time/space of 2046. On the border of memory and nostalgia, the exploration of travel in the film is bound up with a private erotic journey that utilises space and architecture as motifs of erotic expression. Finally, chapter four negotiates Wong’s cinematic traversal of America in *My Blueberry Nights*. Drawing on the diverse artistic, filmic and musical influences that Wong utilises to construct his vision of the United States, it considers the role of cultural intertextuality in mediating place.

In attending to the geographical specificity of each film, I explore how the spatial intricacies are mediated through the presence of a travelling object that functions as a symbolic compass. Utilising the various aeroplanes in *Chungking Express*, a souvenir lamp in *Happy Together*, the female characters’ cheongsams in *2046* and the postcards in *My Blueberry Nights*, I zero in on the detail of each film’s *mise en scène* to examine how objects are not inert commodities, but are inscribed with narratives and, more specifically, play an important role in mapping the geographical and psychological spaces of the films.
# Contents

Abstract iii  
List of Illustrations vii  
Acknowledgements ix  
Declaration xi  

**Introduction**  
Cinematic Travels, Journeys of Longing: Locating the Cinema of Wong Kar-wai 1  

**Chapter One**  
Mapping the Boundaries of the Filmic Imagination: Emotional Geographies in *Chungking Express* (1994) 29  

**Chapter Two**  
The Exile of Love: At the Crossroads of Desire in *Happy Together* (1997) 79  

**Chapter Three**  

**Chapter Four**  

**Conclusion**  
A Final Passage Through Emotion and Desire 217  

Bibliography 223  
Filmography 243
List of Illustrations

Introduction

1.1. Fragments of desire (“I travelled 9,000 km to give it to you”) 3
1.2. Constructing an emotional geography in martial arts form (*Ashes of Time*) 16
1.3. Whispering secrets in architecture (*In the Mood for Love*) 19
1.4. The significance of mundane objects: Ngor’s hidden glass (*As Tears Go By*) 26

Chapter One

2.1. Private dreams in public spaces: Faye’s paper aeroplanes (*Chungking Express*) 37
2.2. Lovemaking and flight (*Chungking Express*) 40
2.3. Romantic break-up/spatial breakdown (*Chungking Express*) 43
2.4. “…just 0.01 cm between us.” (*Chungking Express*) 48
2.5. Marking public space (*Chungking Express*) 50
2.6. Revealing the everyday spaces of Hong Kong (*Chungking Express*) 53
2.7. Suspended within a dream space (*Chungking Express*) 63
2.8. Coping with a broken heart: Cop 663’s monologues of loss (*Chungking Express*) 66
2.9. The romance of aeronautical travel (*As Tears Go By*) 67
2.10. Faye’s oneiric trace (*Chungking Express*) 73

Chapter Two

3.1. Gazing at the Iguazú Falls lamp (*Happy Together*) 84
3.2. An illegible map equates to impossible love (*Happy Together*) 92
3.3. Imaging the future: Devil’s Gorge (*Happy Together*) 95
3.4. “How does Hong Kong look upside down?” (*Happy Together*) 96
3.5. “You see better with your ears.” (*Happy Together*) 104
3.6. Love in transit (*Happy Together*) 106
3.7. At home with Fai and Po-wing (*Happy Together*) 111
3.8. A dance of love (*Happy Together*) 117
3.9. A close-up of the Iguazú Falls lamp (*Happy Together*) 120
3.10. Drenched in sadness (*Happy Together*) 123

Chapter Three

4.1. 2046: Representing “the love memories...in the past.” (*2046*) 132
4.2. The cheongsam: A gather in the folds of memory (*2046*) 135
4.3. Memories of So Lai-chen (*In the Mood for Love*) 136
4.4. The uncanny return of So Lai-chen (2046) 140
4.5. The cheongsam as architectural motif (2046) 142
4.6. The void (2046) 143
4.7. Embedding secrets (2046) 146
4.8. Reimagining blood and tears (2046) 151
4.9. The voyeuristic gaze (2046) 157
4.10. Journeying into the past, travelling to the future (2046) 161
4.11. Longing and the passage of time (2046) 162
4.12. A dream of lost love imagined in black and white (2046) 166

Chapter Four

5.1. Edward Hopper's Nighthawks (1942) 177
5.2. Recalling Hopper: The exterior view of Earnestine & Hazel’s (My Blueberry Nights) 180
5.3. Framing spatial and emotional divisions (My Blueberry Nights) 182
5.4. “I didn’t make it past the front door.” (My Blueberry Nights) 185
5.5. “…and the dream was over.” (My Blueberry Nights) 187
5.6. Postcard from Arizona (My Blueberry Nights) 189
5.8. The blueberry pie close-up (My Blueberry Nights) 194
5.9. Writing postcards, inscribing desire (My Blueberry Nights) 203
5.10. Gesturing towards the road movie genre: Leslie’s Jaguar (My Blueberry Nights) 209
5.11. The final kiss (My Blueberry Nights) 212

Conclusion

6.1. Representing scent (Midnight Poison commercial) 219
6.2. Fragments of time (Midnight Poison commercial) 220
Acknowledgments

At times the writing of this thesis appeared to reflect the unpredictable working methods employed by Wong Kar-wai. Slow and protracted periods of writing, improvisation, obsession and an unwillingness to let go – elements that have become synonymous with the making of a Wong Kar-wai film – were just some of the characteristics that defined the trajectory of my doctoral project. I am deeply indebted to my supervisor, Tanya Dalziell, for bravely accompanying me throughout this process. Her unwavering support, patience, kindness and good humour over the past five years have enriched every aspect of my thesis. There are not enough words to describe how much I have appreciated her critical engagement and generosity of spirit.

I am thankful for the guidance and mentorship offered by the academic staff in the English and Cultural Studies department at The University of Western Australia, especially Steve Chinna, Tony Hughes-d’Aeth, Van Ikin and Shalmalee Palekar. I was fortunate to have been supervised by Daniel Brown during my Honours year and to have received his ongoing support throughout my candidature. The love of cinema that he shared with me throughout my Honours project was influential in delineating the parameters of my current research. I also extend my gratitude to Ines Bortolini, Linda Cresswell and Hui Chuin Poa for their administrative support.

This thesis was completed with the assistance of a University Postgraduate Award for which I am most appreciative. The Graduate Research School and the School of Social and Cultural Studies both played an important role in the development of my research through their assistance with the financing of overseas research trips. During two of these trips I took advantage of the resources at the Hong Kong Film Archive and I thank the staff working there for their help and assistance. I also extend my gratitude to the librarian staff at The University of Western Australia for assisting with sourcing overseas books and films. I would particularly like to thank Azra Tulic in the Scholar’s Centre for her help throughout my candidature.

I was fortunate to have had the ongoing companionship of my friends and family who, each in their own unique way, made some of the more exhausting aspects of writing a thesis more bearable. For this I thank Glenda Boon, Stacey Fox, Joanna Fedson, Chris Lenney, Emily Lynch, Sanna Peden, Moira McFarlane, Adam Nichol, and Coll van de
Velde. Lee Von Kim deserves a special mention for her friendship and her invaluable assistance with the final stages of formatting.

I extend my thanks to Dr Joanne Taylor for her support and encouraging words, which aided in sustaining the project.

I am extremely grateful to my Hong Kong family who have taken such great care of me during my trips home and for offering constant support and encouragement throughout my candidature. The finer details of this thesis owe much to the input of Jo Ho, Pearl Lai, Nydia Pereira and Eveleen Wong. I am particularly grateful to Lily Ho, whose boundless enthusiasm for the project spurred me on, and to Brenda Tsao for her invaluable assistance with translation and resources.

Finally, I am indebted to my mother, Denise van de Velde. The word “support” is inadequate to describe her dedication to helping me throughout the thesis process. It is no exaggeration to state that her love, intellect and eccentric sense of humour have ably carried me through the writing of this thesis. I dedicate the words written within to her.
Declaration

The thesis is my own composition, all sources have been acknowledged and my contribution is clearly identified in the thesis.

This thesis does not contain work that I have published, nor work under review for publication.
Introduction

Cinematic Travels, Journeys of Longing: Locating the Cinema of Wong Kar-wai

The reason I went into filmmaking had more to do with geography than anything else. I was born in Shanghai, but my parents moved to Hong Kong when I was five years old. People in Hong Kong don’t speak the same dialect as people in Shanghai, so I was not able to talk with people there; I couldn’t make any friends. And my mother, who was in the same situation, often took me to the movies because it was something that could be understood beyond words. It was a universal language based on images.

- Wong Kar-wai

As with any travel effect, cinema, a nomadic archive of images, became a touching map of personal views. A museum of emotion pictures. A haptic architexture. A topophilic affair. A place for the love of place. A site of close picturing for undistanced emotion.

- Giuliana Bruno

To celebrate the 60th anniversary of the Cannes Film Festival, Gilles Jacob, the festival’s president, commissioned an impressive selection of contemporary filmmakers to produce short films inspired by the space of the film theatre. Collectively titled To Each His Own Cinema (2007), each of the 33 films provides a personal exploration of the various spaces in which motion pictures are publicly projected and viewed, conjuring up different moods and experiences across disparate time periods and geographies. Despite the divergent approaches to capturing the space of the film theatre, the central strand that threads together many of the three-minute short films is the representation of the motion picture

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3 In addition to Wong Kar-wai, the final line-up of directors includes an enviable list of filmmakers from Asia, Europe and the United States such as Jane Campion, Atom Egoyan, Hou Hsiao-hsien, Claude Lelouch, Wim Wenders, Gus Van Sant and Zhang Yimou.
theatre as a site of contemplation, possibility and reverie – an architecture of dreams and desires. As an accompaniment to each film, all the directors involved supplied a short statement to shed light on their interpretation of Jacob’s theme. In setting the tone for his short film, “I travelled 9,000 km to give it to you”, Hong Kong filmmaker Wong Kar-wai put forth the following reflection: “Cinema can be the citric scent of a peeled orange, the touch of warm skin through a silk stocking; or simply a darkened space bathed in anticipation.” In undertaking a journey through Wong’s cinematic oeuvre, the film theatre, filtered with flickering light and heightened expectations, is the first stop on this filmic itinerary that moves through exterior geography and interior space.

Magnifying Wong’s poetic conceptualisation of cinema, his short film centres on the enigmatic relationship between a man (Fan Chih Wei) and a woman (Farini Chang Yui Ling) within the setting of a film theatre. Although the title of Wong’s short film alludes to a line of dialogue from Jean-Luc Godard’s *Alphaville* (1965), Godard’s film – which is screened in the fictional movie theatre – is relegated to the background of Wong’s short narrative and is not privileged by the film camera. Significantly, the lack of visual emphasis on the film that the characters are watching shifts the focus onto the details of the space they share and their tactile exchanges and interactions. Within the theatre, which is illuminated by the soft light cast off the cinematic screen, Wong fleetingly reveals intimate gestures in the pockets of darkness: the light creating shadows on the man’s face as he watches the woman separate an orange in half, his hand slipping between her thighs before she pushes him away, the gentle caress of their hands and a final ambiguous embrace that alludes to both desire and resistance. Wong’s reference to cinema as “a universal language based on images” is emphasised in the evocation of an intimate space uninterrupted by spoken communication, and relying predominantly on visuals to develop meaning.

Taking the place of dialogue and the absent images of Godard’s film is a series of Chinese-character intertitles that are superimposed over the action and provide another temporal layer to the narrative: “The year I met her…I felt an unusual desire, recurring, strong and citric…Forever. It was a hot summer afternoon in August.” Here, the film theatre is portrayed as an eroticised site in which memory and longing are fused; however, it is one that is laden with tension and emotional abstraction. Enshrouding his characters in darkness, Wong highlights a mode of filmic desire that is predicated on simultaneous revealing and withholding. The fragmented glimpses of the characters’ body parts – which obscure a cohesive view beyond the fleeting shots of hands, thighs, feet and the man’s shadowed face – produce a visual rhythm that intimates a lack of fulfilment within the

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movement of the shadows. The suspension of desire is woven into the fabric of the
 cinematic frame, locating the viewer within a filmic architecture of shifting emotions, views
 and tempos that are built on an aesthetic that oscillates between lush saturation and
 concealment.

![Figure 1.1. Fragments of desire (“I travelled 9,000 km to give it to you”)](image)

The ambiguous relationship between the couple is exemplified in the unique
configuration of the film theatre as a site that dwells within a liminal space caught between
the screen and the reality existing beyond the walls of the theatre. This liminality instils a
sense of travel within a space that is neither temporally nor geographically fixed, but
determined by ephemerality and transition – a site of journeying that moves with the
images projected onto its screen. As Giuliana Bruno writes, “Cinema is a house: a home of
voyages, an architecture of the interior, it is a map of shifting atmospheres.”

The fluid cartography of the film theatre, which is constantly transformed according to the film that
is projected onto its screen, is conceptualised by Wong as a landscape that resides in the
margins. Exemplifying the state of the in-between, this space is utilised as a physical
metaphor for the unspoken rift in the characters’ formation of desire. Within the cocooned
twilight atmosphere of “I travelled 9,000 km to give it to you”, Wong suggests that the film
theatre transcends its function as a site in which films are projected to become a sensual
space on the threshold of recollection and desire.

As film theatres are the spaces in which Wong’s works are originally screened, his
short film arguably reveals his own impressions of film viewing as an experience of arousal,

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and concomitantly discloses what he attempts to achieve with his cinema as something that moves and emotes. In particular, this minute contour in the map of Wong’s cinematic oeuvre highlights his interest in exploring spaces which manifest as intersections and interstices, crevices and margins, and which exist as traces and whispers – spaces that accord with Laurent Gutierrez and Valérie Portfaix’s description as being “between inside and outside, public and private…a blurred soft zone, a pli that allows for slippage, leakage, displacements and re-placements.”7 Perhaps more significantly than the other filmmakers involved in To Each His Own Cinema, Wong’s short film does not function merely as a project that is ancillary to his larger body of cinematic work, but succinctly distils many of his filmic preoccupations within its three-minute time frame. Indeed, at the 2008 screening of To Each His Own Cinema that I attended as part of the annual Alliance-Français French Film Festival in Perth, Western Australia, no indication was given of the identity of the director of each film until its conclusion; however, the marks of Wong’s filmic style were evident in the film’s visual and spatial textures, its disjointed framing and its construction of desire through a lens of nostalgia. As a companion piece to Wong’s feature length films, “I travelled 9,000 km to give it to you” serves as a microcosm that touches on what I argue in this thesis are the enduring themes of Wong’s cinema: desire and space, travel and memory. Through an examination of four carefully selected films – Chungking Express (1994), Happy Together (1997), 2046 (2004) and My Blueberry Nights (2007) – I enlarge on these themes in the chapters to come and also draw on other filmic examples from Wong’s oeuvre in the subsequent sections of this introductory chapter in a conscious attempt to acknowledge the intersections and exchanges between individual films.

Given the thematic similarities and aesthetic repetitions that run through Wong’s oeuvre, the in-depth focus on these four films corresponds to the central interest of this thesis: the cinematic representation of intimate space. Rather than looking at all of Wong’s films to date, and running the risk of re-tracing the same physical places and merely surveying his work, each film offers a different geographical space for analysis. While Chungking Express presents a contemporary incarnation of Hong Kong in the mid-1990s, 2046 offers views into the region’s past and a dystopian future. In contrast, the journeys to Argentina in Happy Together and the United States in My Blueberry Nights mark a departure from the familiarity of Wong’s home city. By dedicating each chapter to an individual film, this thesis scrutinises the manner in which Wong cinematically imagines and responds to distinct locations. By juxtaposing films that take different places as their setting, I consider Wong’s construction of a filmic cartography of affect that draws together his films despite

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their divergent settings, thereby arguing for a reading of his cinema that places geographical space at the forefront. Carving out a space between journeying, reminiscing and longing, intimate space is imagined as a cinematic juncture.

Inside/Outside: Wong Kar-wai and Chinese Cinemas

As a filmmaker working predominantly within Hong Kong, Wong’s films are a product of a cultural space that is itself at a margin. Falling within a transnational geographic space designated in contemporary film theory as Chinese cinemas, films produced in Hong Kong are on the periphery of a wider network that encompasses the People’s Republic of China, as well as Taiwan and diasporic Chinese communities. Attempting to locate Wong’s films within this complex geographical web, which also extends to wider global concerns, is at the centre of a wide range of critical studies interrogating his cinema. Most notably, Stephen Teo, film scholar and author of a book-length study of Wong’s cinema published in 2005, begins his examination by positing the following questions: “How do we understand Wong Kar-wai as a Hong Kong film-maker? How do we reconcile Wong’s global standing with his local roots? Can Wong’s art be said to be both local and global at the same time?” The question of situating Wong’s cinema within the slippery boundaries of local and global is also at the heart of Hong Kong’s complex historical and cultural identity, which has impacted on the reception and examination of the majority of films produced in the region.

Far from presenting a straightforward example of national cinema, which is commonly understood to encompass the cinema of a specific country, Hong Kong films are marked by a deeply complicated history with Mainland China and Britain that is defined

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8 I will refer to Hong Kong interchangeably as both a city and a region throughout the remainder of this thesis.
9 See Sheldon Hsiao-peng Lu, ed., “Historical Introduction: Chinese Cinemas (1896-1996) and Transnational Film Studies,” in Transnational Chinese Cinemas: Identity, Nationhood, Gender (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 1997), pp. 1-31 and Yingjin Zhang, Chinese National Cinema (New York and London: Routledge, 2004). Although Lu and Zhang delineate Chinese cinemas as dealing with the same hybrid space of the Mainland, Hong Kong, Taiwan and the Chinese diaspora, Lu prefers the term “transnational”, while Zhang utilises “national.” For the purposes of my analysis, I have appropriated Lu’s situation of Chinese cinemas as “transnational” as it attends to the multiplicity of imaginations that inform Chinese cinemas. Indeed, Zhang concedes towards the end of his study, on page 296, that, “Chinese cinema – as exemplified by film production, distribution and exhibition in the mainland, Hong Kong, Taiwan and overseas – has definitely exceeded the model of a national cinema. Locally situated, regionally connected, transnationally imagined and globally circulated, Chinese cinema has entered the new millennium with a cosmopolitan outlook, a flourish of transnational imaginaries, an urgent sense of crisis and an eagerness to compete in the era of globalization.” For an analysis of issues surrounding the labelling of Chinese culture under the term “transnational” see Chris Berry and Mary Farquhar, China on Screen: Cinema and Nation (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006). It should also be noted that some scholars use the term “Chinese-language cinema” to designate the films also covered by “Chinese cinemas.” For example, see Sheldon H. Lu and Emiie Yueh-Yu Yeh, eds., “Introduction: Mapping the Field of Chinese-Language Cinema,” in Chinese Language Film: Historiography, Poetics, Politics (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2005), pp. 1-24.
by cultural and political contestation and oscillating sentiments of ambiguity and anxiety, connection and kinship. To provide a very brief historical outline, the region’s political estrangement from the Mainland began with the British defeat of China in the second Opium War in 1842, following which Hong Kong was handed over to Britain by China and consequently became a British colony. Poised between Britain and Mainland China, Hong Kong was, and some would argue still is, imagined as a space of transit and, in distinct contrast to the Mainland, as a city with no definable cultural identity. With Britain’s 99-year lease of the New Territories ceasing in 1997, the region’s relationship with British colonialism and Chinese nationalism was rendered doubly complex with the signing of the Sino-British Joint Declaration by British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and Chinese Premier Zhao Ziyang on 19 December 1984. The long negotiations over the details of the transfer of sovereignty on 1 July 1997 proposed a new state of postcoloniality that would subvert conventional ideas of decolonisation. Rather than ensuring the end of 155 years of British colonial rule and the creation of an independent nation in Hong Kong, the city’s unique process of decolonisation produced a situation in which the city was definitively returned to Chinese sovereignty as a Special Administrative Region. However, Hong Kong was to operate under an arrangement characterised by Deng Xiaoping as “one country, two systems.” This political agreement instigated what is arguably one of the most significant chapters in the history of Hong Kong – a period of apprehension and uncertainty captured in Han Suyin’s definition of the city as living “on borrowed time in a borrowed place.”

Significantly, the anticipation of the political shift from Crown colony to Special Administrative Region functions as either an overt or a subtle theme in many Hong Kong films made in the period leading up to the handover. Not merely confined to the political sphere, the impact of the Joint Declaration on the Hong Kong film industry was twofold. On one level the mutations of Hong Kong’s political identity and the impending change in

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12 Han quoted in Ackbar Abbas, *Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), p. 142. For a discussion of the social and cultural impact of the Joint Declaration, see Natalia Chan Sui Hung, “Rewriting History: Hong Kong Nostalgia Cinema and Its Social Practice,” in *The Cinema of Hong Kong: History, Arts, Identity*, eds. Poshek Fu and David Desser (Cambridge, UK and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 253-254. For a political insight into the handover process, see David Wen-wei Chang and Richard Y. Chuang, *The Politics of Hong Kong’s Reversion to China*, foreword by Hungdah Chiu (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998). It should be emphasised that it is not my intention to reduce the history of Hong Kong to one event; however, for the purposes of establishing my argument it is necessary to foreground the importance of the pre-handover period.
13 For a broad discussion on how the handover is incorporated in Hong Kong films, see Gina Marchetti, *From Tian’annmen to Times Square: Transnational China and the Chinese Diaspora on Global Screens, 1989-1997* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006), pp. 5-9. In this section, Marchetti also touches on the impact of the events at Tiananmen Square in 1989 on the representation of Hong Kong-Mainland relations in Hong Kong cinema.
sovereignty resulted in a number of filmmakers utilising cinema as a space to negotiate the construction of a local identity, the city’s relationship with the West and, most importantly, the impact of what Teo has referred to as the “China syndrome.” On another level, the Sino-British agreement and the fin de siècle mood that it engendered also increased the level of scholarly interest in the colony’s film production, prompting a variety of monographs, book collections and articles with Hong Kong cinema as their focus.

The rise of filmic texts seeking to delineate a sense of self unique to Hong Kong before the city’s reversion to the Mainland altered critical approaches to Hong Kong, with many scholars emphasising that to simply situate Hong Kong films under the label of Chinese cinemas would reinforce historical narratives bound up with cultural displacement and the confusion of identity formation. Sheldon Lu defines Hong Kong as a member of “Modern China”; however he argues that to:

…reduce the history of…Hong Kong to that of the Mainland is to suppress [its] cultural and political specificity…Hong Kong’s cultural identity seen through its cinema is at once an identification with and distancing from the Mainland. In the ‘grand narratives’ of Mainland cinema, the identity of Hong Kong is omitted, elided, and erased. Hong Kong does not fit in the world-historical scheme of China.

As Lu points out, the notion of Hong Kong belonging to the Chinese nation-state, either in reality or in a cinematic context, fails to address the intricacies of Hong Kong’s cultural identity and the ideological problems still associated with the region’s assimilation with China. The tensions implicit in Hong Kong’s imagining of identity precipitated a space where conventional binaries – such as east and west, tradition and modernity, and history and futurism – do not meet, as some critics suggest, but collapse. Poshek Fu and David

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14 Stephen Teo, *Hong Kong Cinema: The Extra Dimensions* (London: BFI, 1997), pp. 207-218. On page 207, Teo describes this “China syndrome” as “colouring perceptions of kinship and cultural affinity with undertones of political anxiety and fear.” His chapter entitled “Reverence and Fear: Hong Kong’s China Syndrome” provides a detailed examination of how this sentiment has been interpreted in Hong Kong cinema.


17 Lu, “Historical Introduction,” pp. 12-15. See also Yingchi Chu, *Hong Kong Cinema: Coloniser, Motherland and Self* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003), p. 137. Rather than situating post-1970 Hong Kong cinema within the wider lexicon of Chinese cinema, Chu argues for reading Hong Kong film productions through the lens of the “quasi-nation”, which attends to the region’s historical relationship with both Mainland China and Britain: “Hong Kong films have told the story of a distinct and organic community in Hong Kong, where geopolitical territorial boundaries and this ‘nation’ have been imagined, defined and formed through the triangular relationship between the coloniser, the motherland and self.”
Desser best articulate this dilemma in their introduction to *The Cinema of Hong Kong: History, Arts, Identity*:

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 presents a theoretical conundrum. The accepted model of national cinema seems hardly to apply to the Hong Kong situation – a Chinese community under British rule, a cinema without a nation, a local cinema with international appeal. Perhaps a postmodern model is more appropriate – a transnational cinema, a cinema of pastiche, a commercial cinema, a genre cinema, a self-conscious, self-reflexive cinema, underground in a nation, multiple in its identities…Subject to censorship by British rule and sensitive to the behemoth that is the Mainland, Hong Kong cinema has always found itself in a precarious state of flux, of crisis, of being a cinema in search of an identity.18

The perspectives forwarded by Lu and Fu and Desser in their respective studies are by no means simply accepted in scholarship as an accurate assessment of Hong Kong-Mainland relations. A contrasting view is proposed by Yingjin Zhang, who, in *Screening China: Critical Interventions, Cinematic Reconfigurations, and the Transnational Imaginary in Contemporary Chinese Cinema*, argues that Mainland China, Hong Kong and Taiwan “see themselves more or less ‘unified’ by their common legacy of Chinese history, culture, and language.”19 This point notwithstanding, my approach to Wong’s films attends to the nuances and specificities of Hong Kong’s cultural space and I am at pains to avoid conflating Hong Kong and Mainland China.

Importantly, it was in the particular political climate that Fu and Desser outline that Wong began his career as a filmmaker. Certainly, much extant scholarship seeks to locate Wong’s films outside the cinematic frame and within socio-political discourses that relate to the unique historical context of Hong Kong.20 To this end, emotions of trauma,
contradiction, homelessness, dislocation, displacement and confusion have been transposed onto Wong’s films in such a fashion that many readings are a process of excavation whereby scholars have unearthed the political layer apparently embedded within his cinema. Of the nine feature films that Wong has made thus far, six take Hong Kong, in either its contemporary or historical guise, as their setting: *As Tears Go By* (1988), *Days of Being Wild* (1990), *Chungking Express*, *Fallen Angels* (1995), *In the Mood for Love* (2000) and *2046*. *Happy Together*, although set predominantly in South America, does not disentangle its ties from Hong Kong by featuring characters from the region, and *Ashes of Time* (1994), Wong’s martial arts film set in the Song dynasty in China, has been interpreted by a number of critics as an allegory of Hong Kong’s political situation in the shadow of the looming handover. Only *My Blueberry Nights*, Wong’s most recent film set in America and featuring English dialogue, has escaped a reading that includes references to 1997.

By tracing the anxieties leading up to the handover through the details of Wong’s cinema, scholars such as Ackbar Abbas, Lisa Odham Stokes and Michael Hoover, and Curtis K. Tsui have constructed a mapping of Wong’s cinema that blends film narrative and national allegory. Abbas, in particular, laid the foundations for reading politics through Wong’s cinema with *Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance*. In this book-length study, Abbas argues that Wong’s films visually engage with what he terms 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.”

According to Abbas, Wong, as well as other Hong Kong filmmakers such as Stanley Kwan and Ann Hui, are behind a cinema that is able “to find means of outflanking, or simply keeping pace with, a subject always on the point of disappearing – in other words, its task is to construct images out of clichés.” More explicitly, they were assigned with the responsibility of capturing Hong Kong and of making sense of the transition and uncertainty bound up with the handover deadline via their filmic imagery.

While Abbas imagines the handover period as manifest in the visual discontinuities and disjunctures in Wong’s screen imagery, literally embedding the anxiety associated with the “China syndrome” into the texture of his films, other scholars have turned to narrative elements and specific objects in the films’ *mise en scène* to construct an argument for the

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22 Abbas, *Hong Kong*, p. 25.
presence of a political consciousness. Specifically, critics and scholars have argued that the overt use of clocks and other markers of time, such as the expiration dates of tinned goods in *Chungking Express*, relate to the anxious countdown to 1997.24 Characters’ nomadic adventures outside Hong Kong – such as Yuddi’s (Leslie Cheung) journey to the Philippines in *Days of Being Wild*, Faye’s (Faye Wong) wanderlust and desire for California in *Chungking Express* and the Argentinean holiday and eventual exile of Fai (Tony Leung Chiu-wai) and Po-wing (Leslie Cheung) in *Happy Together* – have been read as references to the decision of many Hong Kong people to leave the region in the advent of the handover for new homes in, among other countries, Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom and the United States.25

Providing a contrasting critical interpretation, Rey Chow has criticised the manner in which Hong Kong’s socio-historical reality has been conflated with film narratives created in the lead-up to the handover. In particular, she zeroes in on:

…the tendency, whenever a non-Western work is being analyzed, to affix to it a kind of reflectionist value by way of geopolitical realism – so that a film made in Hong Kong around 1997, for instance, would invariably be approached as having something to do with the factographic ‘reality’ of Hong Kong’s return to the People’s Republic of China.26

Not merely limited to reading the clocks featured in the *mise en scène* of Wong’s films and the movements of his characters, even dialogue in the form of the repeated plea to “start over” in *Happy Together* and the professional killer’s (Leon Lai) voice-over in *Fallen Angels*, “I do not know who these people are and I do not care, soon they will be history”, are entangled within political analyses of Wong’s films, attaching factographic meanings to film situations disconnected from the actual event of the handover.27 As Julian Stringer writes:

…but with Hong Kong now positioned between its existence as a postcolonial global city and its destiny as part of the Chinese nation-state, Wong’s films have come to bear the burden of historical representation. Whenever audiences and commentators seek to account for the meaning of new times in Hong Kong they invariably scour his work looking for clues.28

27 Wright, “Wong Kar-wai.”
David Bordwell takes this point even further and argues that, “To treat these lovelorn films as 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 characteristic dilemmas, moods, and moves.” Significantly, Bordwell’s reclaiming of the “romance” in Wong’s cinema proposes a strong shift away from popular readings that were published both before and after the handover.

Responding directly to this assertion by Bordwell, Chris Berry and Mary Farquhar propose that, “the opposite is also true. To abstract these films so resonant with Hong Kong’s condition from their origins risks losing sight of their local meaning.” The convincingness of Berry and Farquhar’s point notwithstanding, this thesis is concerned with stripping back the political layer that has been attached to Wong’s cinema. Although such arguments are indeed convincing and my project owes much to this foundational work, I am interested in further exploring the marginality of Wong’s cinema in order to illuminate the intimate narratives that are juxtaposed to larger political and historical concerns. Therefore, at the introduction of each chapter I succinctly trace the socio-political avenues that have previously been taken to reading each film and use these arguments to foreground a parallel interpretation that is bound up with my intimate exploration of his films. Wong’s cinema is clearly engaged with the effects of history and memory; however, rather than tie these conceits to the event of the handover, I examine the manner in which these themes work within the film narratives themselves. Indeed this thesis proposes to look at another texture in this filmic imaginary and explore the spaces that exist between these socio-political discourses. This study’s interest in spatial intimacies literally intervenes into this map by journeying into cracks and recesses. In other words, in acknowledging the scholarly importance of the presence of grand historical narratives in Wong’s cinema, this thesis is concerned with journeying down a divergent path and exploring the intimacies of each film.

**Spatial Intimacies and Emotional Geographies: Inscribing Place in Cinema**

As part of his exploration of Chinese cinemas, Zhang turns to Jan Nederveen Pieterse’s distinction between territorial culture and translocal culture as a starting point for engaging with films from Hong Kong. In so doing, he sets forth the following mapping from Pieterse’s work:

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30 Berry and Farquhar, p. 42. This view is set within the context of their allegorical reading of the post-1997 mood of *In the Mood for Love*. 
The conclusion that Zhang draws from this set of binaries is that, “Hong Kong culture is a translocal culture, exogenous, diffused, and heterogenetic in nature, characterized by movements of diasporas and migrations, and replete with images of crossroads, borders, interstices, networks, brokers, and strangers.” Although this thesis does not purport to offer a reading of Hong Kong culture per se, the elements that compose the list for a translocal culture provide a base for thinking about the space that Wong has predominantly responded to in his cinema. Indeed, the substitution of “crossroads, borders, interstices” for “locales, regions” gestures towards the transient spatial coordinates that I seek to chart within Wong’s films. Specifically, in mapping what I refer to as “spatial intimacies”, I engage with the intertwined construction of place and space. This engagement is itself a theoretical interstice that considers the juncture at which physical places and architectures interact with intangible and emotional spaces such as memory and desire – two of the overarching themes that draw together the films examined in this thesis. Moving beyond a simple study of the locations and settings of Wong’s films, I join constructions of landscape and topography to the characters’ intimate narratives and explore how emotions are mapped cinematically.

Intimacy in the context of Wong’s cinema has previously been analysed in Marc Siegel’s essay, “The Intimate Spaces of Wong Kar-wai.” At the crux of Siegel’s argument is the proposal that, “Far from depicting the impossibility of intimacy in a global context, Wong’s films propose new kinds of intimacy. His films even suggest that intimacy is linked to creating images.” The encounters that Siegel particularly focuses on are those that occur in public, thereby shifting intimacy away from the private realm and privileging

“spatial transformations effected by globalism.”\textsuperscript{34} While Siegel intimates that this idea extends to all of Wong’s films, his analysis stems from a reading of \textit{Happy Together} that examines spaces of queer identification – what he refers to as a “sexual ghetto.”\textsuperscript{35} Although the details and nuances of \textit{Happy Together} are at the centre of Siegel’s essay, it does, nonetheless, provide a useful starting point for reflecting on intimacy and space in the context of Wong’s film imagery in the chosen visual texts of this thesis. Indeed, Siegel quotes a diary entry by cinematographer and collaborator Christopher Doyle in his \textit{Happy Together} shooting journal:

\begin{quote}
I don’t know what to call our ‘trademark’ shots in English. In Chinese we say ‘kong jing.’ They’re not your conventional ‘establishing shots’ because they’re about atmosphere and metaphor, not space. The only thing they ‘establish’ is a mood or a totally subjective point of view. They are clues to an ‘ambient’ world we want to suggest but not explain.\textsuperscript{36}
\end{quote}

Doyle’s transformation of the establishing shot from one that sets up location to one that indicates mood articulates an evocative conflation of space and affect whereby the cinematography is implicated in imagining not only the spatial coordinates, but also the emotions invested in these spaces. Although Siegel introduces this line of thought that connects emotion, space and film imagery, it is, understandably, limited to an interpretation of \textit{Happy Together}, and few scholars have extended a reading of space in Wong’s films to examine a cartography of feeling. Therefore, this thesis proposes to broaden an emotional reading that details the visual and spatial intricacies of other select films in Wong’s oeuvre by drawing on theories of emotional geographies, thereby constructing a cinematic language of affect that finds expression in intimate spaces.

This approach involves a rethinking of how emotions can operate in a spatial context. In \textit{Feeling in Theory: Emotions After the “Death of the Subject”}, Rei Terada argues that “emotion encompasses affect, passion, and pathos” with emotion residing within the psychological realm and affect drawing in physiological characteristics.\textsuperscript{37} Although Terada’s study does not consider emotion as a spatial phenomenon, the specificity of her employment of affect and physiology within the matrix of emotion is utilised in this thesis to highlight the displacement of the affectual onto geographical sites. Indeed, the idea of creating an emotional geography is necessarily complex and illusive, and is unsurprisingly

\textsuperscript{34} Siegel, p. 288.
\textsuperscript{35} Siegel, p. 284.
the subject of a limited range of scholarship. In their introduction to *Emotional Geographies*, Liz Bondi, Joyce Davidson and Mick Smith pose the question: “how can we represent that which lies beyond the scope of representation?” Similarly, David Bell and Gill Valentine have noted that while “class, gender and ethnicity” have played a role in “shaping social, cultural and economic geographies, sexualities were largely left off the geographical map.” Irrespective of Bell and Valentine’s specific interest in mapping sexualities, their point is also valid in the formulation of geographic emotions, which were, until recently, overlooked in the discipline of geography. This can be attributed to the fact that although the concept of an emotional attachment to a specific place is entirely comprehensible, it proves difficult in terms of mapping in a discipline that often relies on the fixity and certainty of cartographic indices. That being said, the new avenue into emotional geographies is sensitive to the manner in which, to quote Bondi, Davidson and Smith:

…there remains a common concern with the spatiality and temporality of emotions, with the way they coalesce around and within certain places. Indeed, much of the symbolic importance of…places stems from their emotional associations, the feelings they inspire of awe, dread, worry, loss or love. An emotional geography, then, attempts to understand emotion – experientially and conceptually – in terms of its socio-spatial mediation and articulation rather than as entirely interiorised subjective mental states.

While Bondi, Davidson and Smith provide a useful foundation for the socio-spatial conception of emotional geographies, the essays that make up their collection predominantly possess an anthropological approach to place. This is amended in their second edited collection entitled *Space, Place and Emotion*, which also features the editing perspective of Laura Cameron, in which they broaden their examination of emotional geographies beyond anthropological studies to creative writing and poetry, as well as artworks and installations; however, the integration of emotional geographies into the map of cinema is, unfortunately, not given any critical attention.

Notably, visual and environmental studies scholar Bruno has addressed the lack of scholarship on the intersection between cinema, emotion, architecture and geography with her two individual, yet theoretically complementary, book-length studies, *Atlas of Emotion:*

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40 See Mick Smith, Joyce Davidson, Laura Cameron and Liz Bondi, “Introduction: Geography and Emotion – Emerging Constellations,” in *Emotion, Place and Culture* (Farnham, UK and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2009), p. 3. Smith, Davidson, Cameron and Bondi write that, “Unfortunately, emotions have often been deliberately excluded from, or habitually suppressed within, many geographical discourses, especially those which understand geography as an attempt to provide objective, narrowly scientific, and quantitative models of the world.”
41 Bondi, Davidson and Smith, p. 3
Journeys in Art, Architecture, and Film and Public Intimacy: Architecture and the Visual Arts. Both books are equally concerned with integrating affect into the map of cinema by drawing out “the motion of emotion – that particular landscape which the ‘motion’ picture itself has turned into an art of mapping.” Bruno expands on this idea further:

The motion picture, with its fabric and folds of moving images, circulates an affective architecture: emotion comes into place in fluctuating cultural geography...A palpable imprint is left in this moving landscape; in its folds, gaps, and layers, the geography of cinema...holds remnants of what has been projected onto it at every transitio, including the emotions...From the art of memory to the emotional maps of film...we experience, on topophilic grounds, an architecture of inner voyage, a geography of intimate space.

Bruno’s approach to film is one that attends to the textures and details of the cinematic image and utilises the visual characteristics of the medium as an avenue to explore movement, landscape and affect. This is an intersection that is particularly pertinent in analysing Wong’s films and, although she makes only a passing reference to his work, her conceptual approach underpins the examination of filmic space and emotion in this thesis. Specifically, I propose that Wong utilises architectures and landscapes to interrogate emotions of desire and longing. In this sense, the parameters of emotion within this thesis revolve around a complex interweaving of love, lust, betrayal and yearning expressed through locations and sites within the diegesis of the films, as well as the space of the cinematic frame delineated by the cinematography. The approach to emotion in Wong’s cinema is therefore concerned not only with the expression of the characters’ mental states through actions and dialogue, but also with visualising emotion within the texture of the films themselves.

Take, for example, Wong’s transformation of the martial arts genre in Ashes of Time. Whereas previously filmmakers and cinematographers were intent on meticulously capturing the details of the fight sequences, fetishising the movement of every choreographed attack and assault, Wong turns martial arts imagery into a blur by utilising his characteristic step-printing technique. Rather than merely altering the visual form associated with the genre, the blurred and erratic vision of Ashes of Time is concerned with expressing the interior life of the characters – a cinematic exteriorisation of emotion. As Esther Yau writes:

45 See chapter one for a detailed explanation of the use of step-printing in Wong’s cinema.
Experimenting with cinematography (film speeds, filters, lighting, and focus) and ways to visualize space and movement, Chris Doyle and Wong Kar-wai collaboratively assembles a different kind of cinematic visuality—one in which seductive images, erotic sensations, and electronic music combine to subtend the repeated motifs of loneliness, longing, and memory.\footnote{Yau, p. 10.}

Significantly, the problem of representing “interiorised subjective mental states” in the theoretical domain of emotional geographies is not an issue in the film medium, which has the capacity to manipulate time and space to present interiorised and affective spaces through the physical landscape.\footnote{See Cathy Greenhalgh, “How Cinematography Creates Meaning in Happy Together (Wong Kar-Wai, 1997),” in Style and Meaning: Studies in the Detailed Analysis of Film, eds. John Gibbs and Douglas Pye (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), p. 196. Greenhalgh argues that, “In Kar-Wai’s films mise-en-scène is not coordinated by traditional rules. Space cannot be viewed simply as physical space to be organised for the camera.”} In Wong’s cinematic oeuvre, the nexus of emotion and geography is the cinematic image—the textured surface where interior and exterior, architecture and affect, meet and unfurl.

\textbf{Figure 1.2.} Constructing an emotional geography in martial arts form (\textit{Ashes of Time})

\section*{Architecture and Image: Delineating the Cinematic Frame}

Interestingly, critical work dealing with visuality in Wong’s cinema has tended towards a lens that references MTV and music video aesthetics. For example, Evans Chan argues that \textit{Chungking Express}, in particular, displays “postmodern pastiche stylistics, which are part MTV affectations and part retro fantasy.”\footnote{Evans Chan, “Postmodernism and Hong Kong Cinema,” in Postmodernism and China, eds. Arif Dirlik and Xudong Zhang (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2000), p. 298. See also Justin Clemens and Dominic Pettman, Avoiding the Subject: Media, Culture, and the Object (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2004), p. 131; Ken Dancyger, The Technique of Film and Video Editing: History, Theory, and Practice (New York:} 

MTV as a signifier to describe Wong’s film aesthetics takes its cue from the extended musical sequences, experimental cinematography and editing techniques that feature in his work, it also intimates a “style over substance” approach that suggests that Wong’s imagery is predominantly driven by aesthetics and is concerned with surface over depth and that plot and character development are ancillary to the imagery. Serving as a counterpoint to these sentiments, long-term collaborator William Chang Suk-ping, who has worked as art director and editor on many of Wong’s films, commented in an interview that:

I edit the same way I design. I go by emotion and a sense of rhythm…Moments in life are like that…memory is essentially ephemeral and so are relationships. It is in this context that one should look at all my ‘techniques’, be they jump-cuts, freeze-frames, opticals, slow motions, or inter-cutting between black and white and colour.49

Chang’s conscious tying of affect to the construction of cinematic images bespeaks the evocative joining of feeling and visuality in Wong’s cinema, which I focus on in this thesis in light of the minimal scholarly attention it has received.

In Turbulence and Flow in Film: The Rhythmic Design, Yvette Bíró considers an early sequence in Happy Together that details the break-up of the film’s protagonists. This scene is filmed in black and white and is intercut with a colour image of the Iguazú Falls. She argues that:

The sequence of images is not governed by the logic of events or motivated directly by emotions. Bits of the story float around in suspension driven along by their sensuous, enigmatic, and evocative energy. Wong Kar-wai does not offer an explanation; he is not afraid to sidestep the main channel of the narrative, and is wont to insert extraneous material that leaves the viewer time to grasp correlation. He works with visceral, freely surging associations. His world is made round by its multiplicity and the mysteries of anticipation.50

While Bíró contends that the scene is not motivated by emotions, I propose the opposite and suggest that the trajectory and the ordering of narrative in Wong’s cinema are principally aligned with the shift in the characters’ subjective feelings. To this end, the sensual sequences in his films are themselves products of feelings, desires and longings that insert ambiguity and uncertainty into the films’ chronology and develop with the

49 Chang quoted in Greenhalgh, p. 209. See also Mary Jane Amato and J. Greenberg, “Swimming in Winter: An Interview with Wong Kar-wai.” Kabinet 5 (2000) <http://www.kabinet.org/magazine/issue5/wkw1.htm> (accessed 17 July 2006). In this interview Wong reflects on his inclusion of MTV-style techniques in As Tears Go By: “…the stop motion effect is very popular in MTV, so I just try to do that. Then afterwards, I think that this kind of effect can show different feelings.”
characters’ journeys. Moreover, the scene in Happy Together that Bíró refers to also emphasises the manner in which geography is implicated in the characters’ emotional lives and that its representation is embedded in the cinematic image. As Bruno argues, “…film is a modern cartography: its haptic way of site-seeing turns pictures into an architecture, transforming them into a geography of lived, and living, space.” Accordingly, the sequencing and editing of Wong’s film imagery contributes not only to a representation of geography, but also the emotions that inhere within spaces.

Interestingly, of the two book-length studies that examine Wong’s cinema – Teo’s Wong Kar-wai and Peter Brunette’s Wong Kar-wai – it is Brunette’s that takes a greater interest in film imagery and aims to illuminate the “graphic expressivity” of “time, love, and loss” in Wong’s oeuvre. Teo, on the other hand, is more concerned with shifting the critical focus onto Wong’s little acknowledged literary influences. While Brunette offers great insight into the visual vocabulary of Wong’s films, commenting on the manner in which “blatantly expressive techniques are used…to indicate interior psychological states”, I propose to take his assertion further and link it into my critical interest in emotional geographies, thereby drawing together space and affect through the film image. Although Abbas’s Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance is particularly engaged with visuality, cinema and spatial narratives, the emotional aspect to these constructions is not a primary feature. Indeed, Zhang’s account of Abbas’s work registers what Zhang, drawing on a critique levelled at Abbas by Gordon Matthews, refers to as a:

…rather elitist preference for the space of abstraction (the purely visual or, better still, something beyond the visual) over other types of private and public spaces…[a] preference for the abstract (or theoretical, hence ‘universal’ or ‘global’) over the quotidian (or everyday, hence particular or local) that provoked Matthews to criticize him for neglecting local Hong Kong experience.

While I do not purport to offer an in-depth examination of local Hong Kong experience, this thesis does intervene into constructions of the local and everyday by attending to the real spaces and geographies represented in Wong’s films. In so doing, the exploration of an affective geography through film imagery is grounded in concrete examples, such as Chungking Mansions in Chungking Express and the Iguazú Falls in Happy Together. From this perspective, architecture and the physical landscape are important visual motifs that inform my examination of Wong’s cinema. Significantly, in Carla Marcantonio’s reflection on the final screen moments of In the Mood for Love, she comments on the manner in which

53 Brunette, p. 53.
54 Zhang, Screening China, pp. 258-259.
“Angkor Wat becomes a character in the film” and how “the film’s protagonists – now absent from the screen – are upstaged by its passageways and the stone structures that have, for the most part, withstood the test of time.” ⁵⁵ Rather than separating the characters and the architectures they inhabit and move through, I propose that they are inextricably linked. The final scene in In the Mood for Love, in which Chow Mo-wan (Tony Leung Chiu-wai) whispers his secret into a hole in the ruined architecture of Angkor Wat before covering the hole with mud and departing, emphasises the role that physical spaces play in Wong’s cinema, serving as repositories for desires and betrayals and framing the characters’ intimate narratives. This reading of emotion through space and architecture runs throughout this thesis, but is especially pertinent to chapter three’s examination of 2046, which particularly takes its cue from the spatial motifs of In the Mood for Love. However, while In the Mood for Love has received an abundance of academic interest and scholarly interpretations, the architectural details of 2046 have yet to gain the same attention. In concentrating on 2046, as opposed to In the Mood for Love, this thesis engages with the complex spaces and temporalities of the former that are not present in the latter film.

Despite the focused interest in architectural spaces in this project, I also venture into spaces of abstraction, as while I am concerned with the real architectures that Wong charts and records in his film imagery, I am equally interested in the manner in which the unique and expressive visual techniques in his films constitute what I argue is a cinematic

architecture. This requires a consideration of architecture that goes beyond buildings and material structures and offers an examination of the components that structure and organise the terrain of cinema. Indeed, in the introduction to *Informal Architectures: Space and Contemporary Culture*, Anthony Kiendl argues that, “The role of building sets in film has obvious analogies to architecture, and the ability of film to construct through light, sound, and movement also provides it with architectural qualities.” Due to Wong’s working methods, which predominantly rely on location shooting, I do not consider set building in this thesis; however, Kiendl’s allusion to light, sound and movement gestures towards my reading of cinematic architecture. Specifically, I argue that the interaction of colour, light and shade and the textures in the *mise en scène*, as well as the layered soundscapes that are composed of dialogue, voice-over narration and musical interludes, comprise the architectural design of the cinematic frame. These aspects are particularly important to Wong’s cinema as he uses the foundational materials of film to comment on and enlarge perceptions of both tangible, exterior places and intangible, interior spaces.

Providing a further explication of the relationship between architecture and film, Mark Lamster writes that:

> Filmmakers, with the help of production designers, art directors, location managers, and countless other members of cast and crew, insert architecture into their films. On a practical level, architecture sets a scene, conveying information about plot and character while contributing to the overall feel of a movie. In more discreet ways, filmmakers can use their cameras to make statements about the built – or unbuilt – environment, or use that environment to comment metaphorically on any of a variety of subjects, from the lives of the characters in their films to the nature of contemporary society.

Lamster’s statement is important, as in delineating the link between the distinct visual practices of filmmaking and architecture he does not conceive of merely one architect (the director), but expounds on the manner in which cinema, as an architectural endeavour, is a collaborative project. Certainly, this thesis acknowledges Wong’s status as an auteur; however, rather than attributing all elements of the film production to his influence alone, I also acknowledge his collaboration with various cinematographers – Andrew Lau Wai-keung, Doyle, Lai Yiu-fai, Kwan Pung-leung and Darius Khondji – and with art director and editor, Chang. Maria Pramaggiore and Tom Wallis also take this view and posit that,

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“Ironically, while Wong has earned an international reputation as an auteur...critics reveal
the fact that the distinctive visual style for which he is known results from collaboration
between director and cinematographer.”59 Without detracting from Wong’s significant
input into the visual aesthetic of his films, it is important to signpost the limitations of the
static conception of film authorship. As Yvonne Tasker posits, “the idea of the filmmaker
typically involves more than just the director, suggesting an individual or team involved in a
creative vision which includes production, writing, editing and sometimes performing.”60
Therefore, although I often refer to the films being the creation of Wong, my thesis
recognises that his films are not the product of a singular vision, but one that bears the
marks of collaboration.

Looking at the film image as a form of architecture also requires an active response
to what Antoine de Baecque and Thierry Frémaux refer to as reclaiming “the materiality of
the source.”61 This is one of the central ideas that underpins Christian Keathley’s study on
cinephilia in which he explores:

…what Paul Willemen has dubbed ‘the cinephiliac moment’: the fetishizing of
fragments of a film, either individual shots or marginal (often unintentional)
details in the image, especially those that appear only for a moment...characterized in part by a particular viewing strategy, what I call
(borrowing a term from historian Wolfgang Schivelbusch) ‘panoramic perception’:
this is the tendency to sweep the screen visually in order to register the image in its
totality, especially the marginal details and contingencies.62

Although cinephilia is a separate area of film studies with which I do not directly engage,
the concept of “panoramic perception”, which attends to marginal details and gestures, is
central to my reading of Wong’s films and the particular concern of this thesis with
disentangling the visual codes and the registers of the architecture of cinema. Proposing a
variation on Bruno’s “cinematics of architectural passages” that unfold in “geographic
fragments in which spatial representation is fractured and jarred...at home in the interstices
of intervals, recesses, gaps, voids, pauses, and transitions. We dwell in ellipses and
eclipses”, I bring together architectural and spatial metaphors of cinematic travel with the
process of reading the film image.63 While this thesis both reviews and wanders through the

60 Yvonne Tasker, ed., “Introduction: Authorship and Contemporary Film Culture,” in Fifty Contemporary Filmmakers
(London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 2-3. For Doyle’s perspective on his collaboration with Wong and
Chang, see Jamie Hook, “In the Mood for Du-Ke Feng: A Conversation with Wong Kar-wai’s
61 De Baecque and Frémaux quoted in Christian Keathley, Cinephilia and History, or The Wind in the Trees
62 Keathley, pp. 7-8.
intimate spaces of Wong films, which often manifest as minor, unexpected cracks in the physical geography, panoramic perception as a mode of vision that focuses on the marginal also replicates this movement through interstices by looking beyond surface representations.

The viewing process entailed in panoramic perception has been expanded significantly through recent developments in the viewing of films with the introduction of DVD and Blu-ray technologies. Whereas previously watching a film was an event confined to the cinema, the advent of video (VHS) brought movies into the home. However, DVDs have taken this phenomenon even further, supplying viewers with special features such as audio commentaries, exclusive interviews, deleted scenes and interactive essays, thereby forming an entirely new layer and depth to the architecture of each film. Perhaps more evocatively for my analysis, many DVDs allow films to be viewed in an intimate manner so that the viewer is able to not only pause, rewind, fast-forward and skip through scenes, but also zoom in on minor visual characteristics. Indeed, my examination of Wong’s films is particularly indebted to the changes in viewership brought about by this technology. Furthermore, my being an English-language speaker with a limited knowledge of the Cantonese dialect, which is the main language in many of Wong’s films, does not, as one might first think, restrict my examination of his cinema, but can be an advantage in some unexpected ways. Overcoming the barrier to comprehending verbal language without the aid of subtitles has been crucial in sharpening my critical gaze so that subtitles and intertitles do not detract from the viewing experience but, rather, draw attention to the visual architecture of Wong’s films. This was particularly borne out by my critical examination of My Blueberry Nights in which I had to make a conscious effort to attend to the film’s mise en scène when the obstacle posed by comprehending dialogue in a foreign language was removed. That being said, I am also aware that my requirement of working with translated material can detract from the subtleties of the Cantonese dialect that lend meaning to Wong’s films. However, my central focus on the visual production of cinematic space relies more heavily on the aesthetic and cinematographic aspects of his work. While I am not diminishing the importance of verbal communication in Wong’s films, it is the visual language that is at the heart of my analysis.

Finally, the conception of film as architecture provides a variation on the concept of building static structures, for cinema implicitly creates an architecture that moves, and the idea of mobility itself is crucial to the production of a film narrative. In choosing to analyse four specific films from Wong’s oeuvre, I have grouped together a selection that collectively deals with moving imagery as a carrier of emotion; however, these films have
other more evocative resonances relating to movement, thereby intertwining architecture and passage, travel and emotion.

**A Travelling Cinema: Making Maps With Emotional Compasses**

During a 1997 interview conducted by Jimmy Ngai, Wong disputed Ngai’s suggestion that the films he had made up to and including *Fallen Angels* “marked the first stage of [his] career” and instead claimed that, “To me, all my works are really like different episodes of one movie.”64 Interestingly, this point was reiterated in an interview with Edward Gargan conducted the same year in which Wong said, “I would say that in fact I’m making a very long film...And each of my individual films is like one of the scenes of that long film.”65 Although I accept that Wong’s statements about his films are often playfully contradictory and misleading, I also believe that they can provide evocative paths into an analysis of his films. Indeed, scholars who have grouped different parts of Wong’s “very long film” into cinematic diptyches and triptychs have appropriated this rather poetic conceptualisation of his cinema as fragments of an evolving web.66 Although many critics have joined *Chungking Express* and *Fallen Angels*, due to the fact that the narrative of *Fallen Angels* was originally the third part of *Chungking Express* and they both take Hong Kong in the mid-1990s as their settings, Teo has offered a number of variations and groupings. Pulling together the overlapping stories and historical time frames of *Days of Being Wild*, *In the Mood for Love* and *2046*, he uses the term the “love in the sixties” trilogy, based on a comment by Wong, to refer to those films collectively.67 He has also described the resonances between *Happy Together*, *In the Mood for Love* and *2046* as constituting a “romantic trilogy” in which:

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66 See Jason Bellamy and Ed Howard, “The Conversation: Wong Kar-wai.” *Slant Magazine* <http://www.slantmagazine.com/house/2011/04/the-conversations-wong-kar-wai/> (accessed 19 May 2011). Ed Howard comments that Wong’s films “seem part of a coherent larger universe. He returns again and again to his familiar stock company of actors, who often reappear from film to film playing the same characters, or variations on the same characters, or different characters with shared names. His films are linked in countless ways; that line about the expiration date is repeated in *Fallen Angels* (1995), which includes a character made mute by an accident involving expired pineapple. Similar repetitions and echoes recur throughout his filmography. It’s hard to think of another contemporary director whose films are quite so thematically consistent or as intricately interwoven with one another...By the time Wong gets to *2046*, the effect is dizzying, a wild patchwork of references and vignettes that swirl in a vibrant color wheel around the same story that Wong has been telling over and over again throughout his career, a story of missed connections, longing and desire, unresolved dramas. Wong’s characters are often haunted by their pasts, so it’s appropriate that the films – and especially *2046* – are also haunted by the past, by the films Wong has already made and the characters he’s already created.” See also Ma, p. 134 and Martha P. Nochimson, *World on Film: An Introduction* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), p. 349.
All three films are about the impossibility of coming together. Either because there is something in society that militates against it – social norms that frown upon homosexuality and extra-marital affairs, for example – or because there is something in each of us that stops us from achieving true union and communication; something that has to do with our nature and our environment.68

Finally, he describes *Days of Being Wild*, *Happy Together* and *In the Mood for Love* as the “Latin trilogy”, gesturing towards the use of Latin music and the influence of Manuel Puig’s narrative conceits in those films.69 Rather than taking the reader on a tour through all of Wong’s films – a journey that has already been completed by both Brunette and Teo in their individual studies – or retracing the routes made by other scholars, the travel agenda for this thesis chooses four destinations that have yet to be mapped together. Notably, the 2005 publication date of both Brunette and Teo’s books means that *My Blueberry Nights* has yet to be integrated into a study of Wong’s cinema, and this thesis proposes a new configuration that includes an examination of Wong’s most recent, and arguably most overlooked, film.

The use of the word “destinations” is important as the four films under analysis – *Chungking Express*, *Happy Together*, *2046* and *My Blueberry Nights* – are all concerned with the interconnections between space, place and journeying in far more explicit and compelling ways than the travels in Wong’s other films. Although there are references to journeys – such as the ferry ride to Lantau Island in *As Tears Go By*, Yuddi’s trip to the Philippines to meet his estranged mother in *Days of Being Wild* and the final scenes in Angkor Wat in *In the Mood for Love* – I contend that these crossings and voyages are merely a footnote to the action. In contrast, travel in the four films selected for this thesis is crucial to their meaning.

In *Virtual Voyages: Cinema and Travel*, Jeffrey Ruoff writes that, “Travel and movement are central to fiction film, with the journey among its most common narrative tropes…cinema is the art of travel.”70 Certainly, cinema itself inscribes a visual language of travel; however, I argue that what draws together these four films by Wong into a cinematic tetralogy is the manner in which they not only utilise travel and movement as tropes, but also set forth an itinerary of desire that journeys into geographical sites, as well as the recesses of memory and emotional spaces. One could put forward a case that these themes are present in all of Wong’s nine films to date; however, I argue that these four films in particular explore these motifs in individual and exciting ways. As previously emphasised, the tetralogy examined in this thesis represents the considered approach to

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69 Teo, *Wong Kar-wai*, p. 11.
geography that Wong has set in motion by capturing different filmic journeys throughout his career thus far. While *Happy Together* and *My Blueberry Nights* engender a geographical passage overseas and away from his home base of Hong Kong, *Chungking Express* and *2046* portray more complex journeys within Hong Kong itself, moving between different temporalities, memories and subjectivities. Regarded together, they open an avenue to examine the manner in which Wong utilises architecture and space as visual motifs to negotiate emotion, memory and desire, constructing a cinema of travel and spatial intersection that resides in thresholds, gaps and architectural hollows. Films that are regarded as companion pieces have been avoided in order to provide as diverse a selection of geographical spaces as possible. Accordingly, mapping these films as a collective is key to viewing how Wong cinematically realises emotion through space without falling into the trap of repeating other journeys.

In *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*, historian James Clifford conceptualises travel as:

> …an increasingly complex range of experiences: practices of crossing and interaction that troubled the localism of many common assumptions about culture. In these assumptions authentic social existence is, or should be, centered in circumscribed places…Dwelling was understood to be the local ground of collective life, travel a supplement; roots always precede routes.\(^{71}\)

Travel, which in the context of Wong’s oeuvre indicates the movement between scenes in his one long film, is notably concerned with “practices of crossing and interaction.” What I aim to achieve with the movement of my analysis between the four films examined in this thesis is a form of cinematic travel that pulls together the threads of desire and place. Travel and movement are therefore viewed through a lens of affect. As Bruno posits, “The meaning of emotion…is historically associated with ‘a moving out, migration, transference from one place to another’…Cinematic space moves not only through time and space or narrative development but through inner space.”\(^{72}\) She later expands on this line, writing that, “Travel is one of the ways in which the barrier between interior and exterior is broken, as it blurs their rigidly defined architectures. As a liminal space between interior and exterior, cinema is the architecture of an ‘in-between’ – traveling architecture.”\(^{73}\) Accordingly, within this thesis the motif of travel serves as a nexus for the sustained interest in journeying between physical architectures and intimate spaces.


In the process of mapping the emotional geographies that are embedded within the journeys in each film, I examine the manner in which Wong inserts into his films objects that function as symbolic compasses. In his analysis of the presence of objects throughout Wong’s films, Luke Robinson argues that:

…many of the objects which feature in Wong Kar-wai’s films are commodities, and the relationships which they negotiate are similarly commodified…In a Marxist sense these relationships are commodified, for the fundamental desires of those involved are alienated in their material surroundings, rather than expressed directly. The consequences are manifested in these characters’ lack of awareness of their environment, their unwillingness to make decisions, and their tendency to treat other people as if they were as interchangeable as objects.74

Whereas Robinson seeks to articulate the use of objects as communicative devices that connect Wong’s characters, I deal with the manner in which objects chart and trace the spaces of his films. This approach specifically ties in with my interest in visuality and the textures of the cinematic frame, thereby focusing on the small details within each film’s *mise en scène* – the crucial, and sometimes understated, characteristics of Wong’s filmic narratives.

For example, a glass in *As Tears Go By*, a pearl earring in *Days of Being Wild*, a basket of eggs in *Ashes of Time* and a video camera in *Fallen Angels* all gesture towards the manner in which relationships in Wong’s films are mediated through commodities. In the intricate web of tangled associations in each film, where strangers brush up against one another and yet fail to unite, these objects are not merely inert products, but are inscribed with silent

narratives in which Wong reveals how an unassuming object can disclose secrets and emotions that have yet to surface. The motif of the “travelling object” features as early as *As Tears Go By* when it is used as a poetic device that communicates desire and connection. As a farewell gesture before she departs Mong Kok for Lantau Island, Ngor (Maggie Cheung) leaves Wah (Andy Lau) a note: “I made a meal for you in the kitchen. I also bought a few more glasses. I knew they’d all get broken sooner or later, so I hid one of them. One day, when you need that glass, give me a call and I’ll tell you where it’s hidden.” While the hidden glass bespeaks Ngor’s affection for Wah, it is also the object that results in the consummation of their desire. When Wah finds the glass, his feelings for Ngor become apparent and he travels to Lantau to find her. The glass is therefore an object that both moves and emotes, and it is these small gestures and fleeting moments that are embedded in the circulation of the goods and commodities that I utilise to join emotion and space.

Chapter one begins this journey by taking the viewer through the alleys and streets of Wong’s native Hong Kong in *Chungking Express*. Using the various aeroplanes that appear in the film – manifesting as real aeroplanes flying above the cityscape, toy aeroplanes that traverse domestic space and paper aeroplanes that are propelled from open windows onto the street below – I offer an in-depth analysis of the manner in which Wong connects urban space with constructions of memory and dreaming. In so doing, I examine the film’s production of an affective geography depicted on a filmic map of Hong Kong that shifts and unfolds with the characters’ psychological states. The motif of the aeroplane plays an important role in traversing the boundaries between private and public, interior and exterior, and carving out a liminal space for desire and romance.

The analysis of *Happy Together* in chapter two focuses on Argentina, a space that Wong imagines as an unknown terrain that defies mapping. Using a souvenir lamp that pictorially represents the Iguazu Falls, the protagonists at the centre of the film attempt to navigate the Argentinean landscape while also negotiating the extremes of their relationship. I argue that the foreign topography provides fertile ground for negotiating the tumultuous love story of the film, thereby joining geography and desire in an articulation of love in exile. Juxtaposed to the complicated intricacies of romantic love, the lamp serves as a silent observer of the film action, projecting views of a landscape that is re-imagined as a utopian space of union as the film seeks to comprehend desire through mappings of place.

Through its examination of *2046*, chapter three shifts between the reconstructed past of 1960s Hong Kong and the future projection of the imaginary time and space of 2046. On the border of memory and nostalgia, the exploration of travel in the film is bound up with a private journey that utilises space and architecture as motifs of erotic expression. The journey back to the 1960s is in part facilitated by the female characters’
cheongsams, which gesture towards the film’s specific temporality as well as its erotic subtext. Regarded by Wong as an “echo” of *In the Mood for Love*, *2046* replaces the atmosphere of languid and repressed romance in the former film with a wanton and sexually liberated attitude. Indeed, Doyle provocatively stated in an interview with *Sight & Sound* that *2046* is “a follow-up to *In the Mood for Love* – in the first film they hesitate, this time they fuck.” Although Doyle’s comment simplifies the complex narrative intersections between the two films by suggesting that *2046* is a sequel, his statement does draw attention to the abrupt emotive transition that I argue is bound up with the themes of decay and ruin.

Chapter four travels further afield and negotiates Wong’s cinematic traversal of the United States in *My Blueberry Nights*. Drawing on the diverse artistic, filmic and musical influences that Wong utilises to construct his vision of America, this chapter considers the role of cultural intertextuality in mediating place. In this film, this exploration of the sights and sounds of the American cultural landscape is cleverly relayed through the sending of postcards – objects that traverse space while also delineating, and providing an insight into, the characters’ emotional trajectories. Wong’s use of the touristic postcard literalises the passage through the geographical landscape and mobilises a pilgrimage into the cultural narratives of Americana.

Finally, the conclusion takes a slight detour by exploring Wong’s involvement in the visual culture of advertising. Utilising one of Wong’s most recent television commercials for the Christian Dior fragrance Midnight Poison, it reflects on how his cinematic language, which fuses affect and image, translates to the advertising medium. In the process, I consider the manner in which Wong’s work outside feature films functions within the overlapping and entangled web that defines his cinematic oeuvre of desire.

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Chapter One

Mapping the Boundaries of the Filmic Imagination: The Emotional Geographies of *Chungking Express* (1994)

I write as a director, not as a writer. So I write with images. And to me, the most important thing about the script is to know the space it takes place in. Because if you know that, then you can decide what the characters do in this space. The space even tells you who the characters are, why they’re there, and so on. Everything else just comes bit by bit if you have a place in mind. So I have to scout locations before I even start writing.

- Wong Kar-wai

The city plan is both a rationalization of space and of time; its streets, buildings, bridges and roads are also temporal indices. It permits us to grasp an outline, a shape, some sort of location, but not the contexts, cultures, histories, languages, experiences, desires and hopes that course through the urban body. The latter pierce the logic of topography and spill over the edges of the map.

- Iain Chambers

Introduction

Wong Kar-wai’s fourth film, *Chungking Express* (1994), arose at an emotionally heightened stage in the post-production of *Ashes of Time* (1994). Creatively exhausted by the demands of shooting on location in Mainland China, Wong took a break from editing his deconstructed *wuxia* film to shoot a narrative that would capture the free aesthetic and mood of a low-budget student project. To this end, *Chungking Express* went through all stages of production in under three months – the shortest production time of any of Wong’s films to date. Significantly, *Chungking Express* is also the film that launched Wong’s unique style of filmmaking into the international spotlight, while also establishing the distinctive film language of his oeuvre that has subsequently been appropriated by other

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The film’s expressive use of colour, hyperkinetic hand-held camerawork and rhythmic editing, conscious blurring of genre conventions, eclectic soundtrack, sense of urban ennui, and quirky, introspective voice-overs – film elements that are also employed to varying degrees in Wong’s previous films – were conceived as trademarks of the Wong Kar-wai mode of filmmaking.

From a structural perspective, Chungking Express furthered Wong’s interest in narrative deconstruction and intersection following Days of Being Wild (1990) and Ashes of Time. The film is split into two parallel narratives that occasionally overlap and feature crossover characters and Hong Kong locations. Throughout Chungking Express, Wong utilises a number of film genres, playing with film noir conventions, gangster motifs, policiers themes, romance and comedy; however, I will approach the film as an unconventional urban romance for reasons that will become obvious with my outline of the plot.

The first vignette follows a lovesick cop, He Qiwu, who is referred to as Cop 223 (Takeshi Kaneshiro). The viewer is introduced to him after he has been dumped by his girlfriend, May, and is desperate to either resume their relationship or fall in love with another woman. The night preceding his 25th birthday he attempts a ritualistic and symbolic purging of his feelings for May by eating 30 cans of pineapple (May’s favourite fruit) before venturing out to a bar where he vows to fall in love with the first woman he sees. This woman, clothed in a trench coat and wearing a blonde wig and sunglasses, is a heroin trafficker (Brigitte Lin) who has been double-crossed in a smuggling deal by her male boss and a group of Indians she has employed who live in Chungking Mansions. Following a chaste night in a hotel during which Cop 223 eats chef salads and the heroin trafficker sleeps, Cop 223 leaves in the early morning and goes for a run in the rain. When he clips his pager to a fence, conceding that no one will contact him, he receives a message from the heroin trafficker wishing him a happy birthday. In the final scenes of the first vignette, it appears that Cop 223 has mended his broken heart after receiving the heroin trafficker’s unexpected message, while she achieves the ultimate act of revenge by murdering her boss.

The second vignette follows another heartbroken cop (known as Cop 663 and played by Tony Leung Chiu-wai) who has recently been cast aside by his flight attendant girlfriend (Valerie Chow) after he followed the ill-conceived romantic advice given by the manager of the Midnight Express (Piggy Chan Kam-chuen). As one of the uniformed

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4 Peter Brunette, Wong Kar-wai (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2005), p. 45. The widespread international recognition of the film can in part be attributed to the support of filmmaker Quentin Tarantino who chose Chungking Express as the first film to distribute under his Rolling Thunder production company in the United States. The mimicry of Wong’s style can be seen in Western films and media, but most prominently in Hong Kong cinema. Examples include Blacky Ko’s Days of Being Dumb (1992), Stephen Chow’s From Beijing with Love (1994) and Jeffrey Lau’s films, The Eagle Shooting Heroes (1993) and Chinese Odyssey 2002 (2002). For an insight into films that copy and recycle Wong’s filmic conventions, see David Bordwell, Planet Hong Kong (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000), pp. 266-267.
police officers patrolling the streets of Lan Kwai Fong, he begins an unlikely association with the free-spirited Midnight Express shop girl, Faye (Faye Wong). She instigates their strange bond by using a key, which his ex-girlfriend has left behind at the shop, to break into Cop 663’s apartment. Upon each visit to his home, Faye gradually transforms it into her own space of play in which she alters the details of his daily life by introducing new food products and home wares, and by placing sleeping pills in his drinking water. When Cop 663 eventually catches her in his apartment, he asks her out on a date. While he is waiting for Faye at the California bar, the Midnight Express manager arrives and informs him that she has left for the real California (Faye’s dream destination), and gives Cop 663 a letter that is actually a handmade boarding pass. Following an interval of one year, Faye returns to Hong Kong as a flight attendant and discovers that Cop 663 has bought the Midnight Express. The film ends on an uncertain, yet optimistic, note when Cop 663 asks Faye the destination of the boarding pass, which he had been unable to read. After she replies that she cannot remember, she starts making a new boarding pass and he tells her to make the destination wherever she wants to take him.

This short synopsis should impress upon the reader the significance of place and location in understanding the plot of the film, as any attempt to orientate oneself within the narrative of *Chungking Express* cannot be divorced from the representation of specific locations in the city, such as Chungking Mansions, the Midnight Express and the California bar. Indeed, *Chungking Express* is deeply situated in the urban milieu of mid-1990s Hong Kong to such an extent that Wong has claimed in various interviews that the region itself is the central protagonist of the film. While I am hesitant to wholly agree with this assertion because it fails to recognise the impact of the film’s characters, the importance of the Hong Kong locations is unquestionable. The sites of the city are not utilised merely for contextual scene setting or backdrop, but to establish an intimate portrait of the region, what I will refer to as a filmic map. This intimacy is facilitated by the working conditions of the crew, in that the film was shot guerrilla style on the streets of Hong Kong with hand-held cameras, using available light sources only, and without obtaining relevant location permits. Eschewing the correct legal avenues for location shooting, the roaming camerawork of cinematographers Andrew Lau Wai-keung and Christopher Doyle traverses

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6 See Brunette, p. 116. In a 1995 interview with Brunette, Wong revealed his working methodology for the film: “I sat in the coffee shop writing during the day, and then shooting at night. We didn’t have any permits, we didn’t have any setups, we just went to places we already knew well. We worked like hell, like thieves, and it was fun. So the working style already dominated the look of the film.”
streets, decrepit buildings, seedy bars, shops, dai pai dongs, markets and the tiny apartments that form a part of the region’s topography.7

In particular, Chungking Express features three Hong Kong districts: Tsim Sha Tsui on the Kowloon Peninsula, and Lan Kwai Fong and SoHo (South of Hollywood Road) on Hong Kong Island. The choice of location is very specific as the first narrative is centred predominantly in and around Chungking Mansions in Tsim Sha Tsui, and the second narrative focuses on the SoHo area, which runs parallel to the Mid-Levels Escalator. The Midnight Express, a late-night takeaway food counter in Lan Kwai Fong, is the location that connects the two narratives. What is significant about the use of these locations is that Wong avoids presenting easily recognisable architecture to construct a sense of place in favour of filming a selection of everyday sites in Hong Kong that purportedly correspond to his own movements within the city during the 1990s.8

Wong’s filmic assemblage of everyday sites will form the basis for this chapter’s reading of Chungking Express as it seeks to interrogate the cinematic representation of place. However, I am interested not only in Wong’s visual delineation of Hong Kong’s public spaces, but also in the manner in which the personal geographies of the film’s characters serve to connect the public and the private by joining exterior urban places with mappings of the imagination. In this sense, the sites and sights of the city are mediated through the characters’ emotions, interactions and perceptions. The opening sequence locates the viewer within the blurred interiors of Chungking Mansions before unfolding into a series of anonymous locations: a view of the roof of an industrial-style factory set against a grey sky is juxtaposed with a low angle shot that gazes skywards through the gap between two buildings. Significantly, this somewhat abstract visual representation of Hong Kong is accompanied by the voice-over of Cop 223: “You brush past so many people every day. Some you may never know anything about, others might become your friend someday.”9

By layering Cop 223’s interior monologue over the film’s initial city scenes, Wong establishes a link between place, sensation and experience. The city is rendered an affective cartography in which the processes of mapping and moving through the region’s streetscapes are bound up with emotional connections. It is for this reason that I believe it is necessary to apply caution when regarding statements that privilege the locations of the film above the characters. In contrast, Stephanie Hemelryk Donald and John Gammack

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7 Dai pai dongs are a type of casual al fresco dining unique to Asia.
8 Olaf Möller, “Chungking Express,” in Movies of the 90s, ed. Jürgen Müller (Cologne: Taschen, 2001), p. 209. According to art director and editor William Chang Suk-ping, “The scenes in Chungking Express […] are set in places that he [Wong] himself frequents, such as the ‘Midnight-Express’ Fast-Food Stand in the Lan Kwai Fong district.”
9 All of the dialogue quoted in this chapter is taken from the English subtitle track on The Criterion Collection 2008 DVD release of Chungking Express.
situate their analysis of Chungking Express alongside ideas of urban branding and posit that, “People move thorough repeated locations, performing their love stories as homage to the city rather than as a development of their own character narratives.” I suggest that, while the characters’ romantic entanglements are closely related to the sites of the city, the urban setting does not overshadow but, in fact, extends their narratives. Therefore, the locations and the characters’ emotional narratives cannot be so simply extricated.

Specifically, I argue that the characters’ emotional trajectories are essential in interpreting the pivotal concept that I will propose for this chapter, in that emotions, memories, dreams and fantasies are embedded and mapped in the film’s settings. Cop 223’s reflection on fortuitous moments of fleeting intimacy introduces the thread that draws together the film’s characters and functions as a central metaphor for this chapter’s interweaving of emotion and geography. Further, these initial views of Hong Kong – the interior of a flophouse and a sequence of unspecified city perspectives – set up Wong’s approach to capturing the city by opening a space for everyday, urban imagery. In other words, the beginning of Chungking Express reveals an interest in mapping embodied space, the inner life of the city and its inhabitants; a view that fractures the panoptic city snapshot of Hong Kong as portrayed in touristic media representations.

In order to explore these ideas, this chapter will seek to appropriate and extend the theories generated by interdisciplinary approaches to emotional geographies with the intention of analysing the complex interactions of place and emotion established in Wong’s cinematic mapping of Hong Kong. The theorisation of emotional geographies – as illuminated by Liz Bondi, Joyce Davidson and Mick Smith – aims to articulate:…how emotions help to construct, maintain as well as sometimes to disrupt the very distinction between bodily interiors and exteriors. The close connections between boundary-forming processes and emotions suggest that it may be productive to think of emotions as intrinsically relational.

For the purposes of this chapter I am interested in the disruption of the boundaries of mapped space with the projection of emotion as a phenomenon that seemingly exists beyond fixed borders and demarcations. This proposal will be fleshed out further as the chapter progresses; however, I wish to emphasise upfront that I am not utilising the word

“disrupt” as a negative description, but rather as an avenue into exploring the various subjectivities that bleed into Wong’s cinematic representation of Hong Kong.

While it may initially appear that the film is clearly split into two separate narratives, each with its own conceits and visual rhythms, I contend that it is imperative to avoid an easy, schematic reading of Chungking Express. The first vignette, filmed by Lau, is steeped in memory and nostalgia through Cop 223’s longing for the past; while the second vignette, filmed by Doyle, is predicated on a dreaming subjectivity that is realised through the strange and fantastical romance of distance between Cop 663 and Faye. However, moments of remembering and dreaming are not explored in a clear-cut or structured fashion. While memory and dream can be theorised as distinct processes, a close viewing of the film reveals that these psychological states emerge, intersect and become conflated at different intervals of the film narrative. What serves to connect the characters’ mnemonic and dreaming mappings is the manner in which their emotional states are visualised in, through and on the city; an effect that is created through the cinematographers’ careful manipulation of the film image and the representation of a spatial consciousness. Indeed, philosophy scholar Jeff Malpas elucidates that “[t]he memory and the dream are often hard to disentangle – memory provides the stuff of dream, while dream can itself be the stuff of memory. It is the image that is common to both, however, and it is the image that each supplies as the stuff of film.”

My previous reference to bleeding is significant in this context, as Wong’s filmic map of Hong Kong is fluid and unfixed by the differing emotional states that are woven into the fabric of the film image.

By exploring this emotional, cinematic geography of Hong Kong constructed in the film, this chapter also sets up a re-mapped interpretation of Chungking Express. Now that 17 years have passed since the film was cinematically released, I believe it is pertinent to review the film and engage with other meanings embedded within its narrative. Extant scholarship has been concerned largely with interpreting Chungking Express in terms of socio-political allegory and has taken the position that many of the themes and motifs of the film are metaphors for pre-1997 cultural anxiety. For instance, Peter Brunette argues that the political dimension of Chungking Express is “undeniable.” He continues: “Since Chungking Express is actually set in present-day Hong Kong, there is a clear political subtext

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to whatever happens in it."15 At this introductory stage it is crucial to emphasise that it is not the intention of this chapter to critique or rewrite the socio-political ideas associated with the film but, rather, to create a parallel interpretation that, with the benefit of a different historical reading position, concentrates on journeying down the alleys and side streets, as opposed to the well-travelled main roads, of the map of Chungking Express.

In following a new itinerary, the various aeroplane figures in the film, which range from real to newspaper to toy manifestations, will be utilised to navigate the film’s emotional geography. The symbolic and unspoken system of communication that is enabled by the different aeronautical objects is essential to understanding the manner in which space is mapped in the film. These aeroplanes move through private and public realms, carrying with them memories, desires, thoughts of escape and wistful longing, and introduce what Brunette terms a “language of aviation.”16 While maps generally perform the function of visually representing a city within an ordered schema by delineating streets, districts and suburbs – as well as sites of social, religious, recreational and memorial significance – the constant presence of aeroplanes that move through the various spaces of Hong Kong’s urban landscape further dislocate and undermine a static spatial plan. Instead, Wong’s map of Hong Kong is captured in a state of unfolding and becoming.

“Clearing the runway”: Navigating the Urban Landscape

In the second vignette, Cop 663 prepares for his date with Faye by tidying and organising his apartment before he leaves for Lan Kwai Fong. While he packs up the articles left behind by his ex-girlfriend, he reflects that this act represents “clearing the runway for another plane to land.” The repeated metaphoric connections that Cop 663 draws between flight and romance have served as the central model for interpreting the aeroplane motif in the film. For example, David Bordwell and Michelle Huang, in the same manner as Brunette, limit their individual analyses of the flight symbolism to a reading that privileges romantic symbolism at the expense of other interpretations.17 The concept of the aeroplane as an object that is implicated in romance and desire is a line of thought that I will return to later in this chapter; however, I will begin by situating the film’s aeroplanes in terms of how they are utilised spatially.18

15 Brunette, p. 51.
16 Brunette, p. 56. Although Brunette comments that, “Cop 633’s [sic] affair with the flight attendant is playfully and consistently described in terms of the language of aviation – flights, takeoffs, landings and so on...as is much else in the film”, he does not take this line of thought further in his study.
17 See Bordwell, pp. 283-84 and Michelle Huang, Walking between Slums and Skyscrapers: Illusions of Open Space in Hong Kong, Tokyo and Shanghai (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2004), p. 42.
Cop 663’s reference to “clearing the runway” indicates a positive sense of change and transformation that is achieved through metaphorical take off and flight. In *Zoomscape: Architecture in Motion and Media*, architectural historian Mitchell Schwarzer outlines the change in perspective enabled by the vertical view. He writes that, “The airplane provides a fresh way of seeing the world. Above roads and rail corridors, above walls and embankments, passengers watch buildings grow into cities and cities grow into regions.”19 The bird’s-eye view, afforded by the aeroplane’s ascent, facilitates a distanced aerial perspective that results in “a ‘remote intimacy’ with the landscape below.”20 As the perspective increases in size and scope, the details of the landscape alter so that the airborne view is similar to the panorama of a map. While providing a fresh way of seeing Hong Kong, the various aeroplanes in *Chungking Express* ironically do not adopt the panoptic, almost ethereal, viewpoint of typical flight. Wong films real aeroplanes gliding above the buildings of Hong Kong; however, the aeroplanes that the characters physically propel through immediate space create a new set of spatial connections between the urban landscape and flight. Specifically, they work to unsettle the panoramic, aerial view.

In one of the scenes that features Faye breaking into Cop 663’s apartment, she constructs a set of paper aeroplanes from old newspapers and proceeds to throw them out of the apartment window. The paper aeroplanes drift on the breeze and float past the Mid-Levels Escalator and onto the streets of SoHo below. These aeroplanes do not merely fly overhead, but move through the streets themselves. By subverting the aerial view, Faye’s paper aeroplanes promote a different mode of travel that encapsulates the boundless movement of flight while also forming an intimate relationship with the city streets below. Furthermore, these aeroplanes are not confined to public space; they also float through the characters’ private spaces. Cop 663’s collection of toy aeroplanes is used exclusively by both him and Faye as a playful method of enlivening and navigating his apartment, and, by extension, this investment in flight as a part of domestic play can be interpreted as a form of travel that allows the characters to safely navigate their own space in the world. The aeroplanes in *Chungking Express* are therefore transcendent objects that undermine the borders between public and private space.

In more explicit terms, these aeroplanes are metaphorically linked with the characters’ processes of emotional communication and narrate the manner in which their individual desires are connected to space. Faye reveals in a conversation with Cop 663 that she longs to travel and is therefore content to drift, like her paper aeroplanes, from place to place. Conversely, Cop 663 is seen playing with his aeroplanes only in his apartment. When

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20 Schwarzer, p. 127.
asked if he would like to travel, he replies that he can “take it or leave it.” The heroin trafficker has a far from whimsical relationship with aeroplanes after she loses her drug couriers in Kai Tak Airport, thereby implicitly linking her emotional journey to sentiments of escape and betrayal. Finally, Cop 223 is completely unaware of the aeroplanes that are subtly affecting urban space, as he blindly stumbles from place to place in search of requited love.

The slippage between the drifting perspective of the film’s aeroplanes and the static plan of a topographical map is a useful critical avenue for considering the manner in which Wong “captures” Hong Kong to produce his filmic map. Intriguingly, in defining his approach to filming the city for the film, Wong commented, “To me it feels like a diary or a map. All the scenes were shot according to the logic of the place. If you go to Hong Kong after seeing Chungking Express, you won’t get lost.”21 The basis for this assertion is certainly disputable, whether it is a tourist or a local who attempts to navigate the city following a viewing of Chungking Express, given Wong’s seamless juxtaposition of disparate locations. Indeed, Stephen Teo has commented that the international version of the film takes great liberty with the details of Hong Kong’s geography, to the extent that “Tsimshatsui [sic] and Central might as well be only a stone’s throw away from each other.”22 That being said, I argue that the idea of mapping to which Wong alludes highlights his emotive approach to charting Hong Kong through the lens of the film.

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21 Wong quoted in Huang, p. 50.
22 Teo, Wong Kar-wai, p. 54.
camera by redrafting and collapsing the boundaries of various districts and, in the process, taking routes that reflect the characters’ personal narratives.

The connection that Wong draws between maps and diaries eludes a static delineation of Hong Kong’s topography and further ruptures the notion of a map as a simple cartographic arrangement of streets, districts and suburbs. By invoking diaries, which, depending on the use ascribed to them by their owners, can be for recording impressions of the past for later reflection or for storing reminders of events that are anticipated to occur in the future, Wong introduces personal sentiments to the film’s representation of urban space in a move that resonates with Giuliana Bruno’s statement that, “A diary, after all, is a private architecture and an intimate plan.”23 Furthermore, as both maps and diaries can be utilised as creative records, they can perform a mnemonic or a fantasy function. For example, events recorded in a confessional-style diary reflect on past events, while a map will generally function as a geographical reading of space that was undertaken prior to the map being used.24 As cultural geographer Denis Cosgrove elucidates:

…the mapping’s record is not confined to the archival; it includes the remembered, the imagined, the contemplated. The world figured through mapping may thus be material or immaterial, actual or desired, whole or part, in various ways experienced, remembered or projected.25

To my mind, Wong’s conception of a map is one that not only charts space, but also traces memory, dream and emotion; a conscious slippage between the boundaries of the self and the exterior environment as poetically expressed by the film camera.

Therefore, what the aeroplane motif establishes, in its capacity as a symbolic, cartographic tool, is diverging routes and intersections on Wong’s filmic map of Hong Kong that set about shaping the wider environment portrayed on the cinema screen. At the same time, the aeroplane’s transcendent movements dismantle traditional ideas of cartography and subvert ingrained perceptions of maps as faithful and objective representations of material reality. In other words, Wong’s interconnected map/diary is a significant departure “from the ‘transparent’ view of the map as a neutral, informative transfer of external information into the simplified classificatory frame of the map space, conducted with the intention of achieving ‘an ideal correspondence of the world and its

In the introduction I referred to the manner in which various subjectivities bleed in the emotional geography of *Chungking Express*. I want to take this assertion further to consider how Wong produces a map that visually and symbolically bleeds. Undermining the notion of a map as ordered, rational and direct, Wong’s cinematic cartography floats into a realm of subjective impressions in which the cityscape is coloured by the characters’ emotional states.

**Mapping Sites of Emotion**

In his book-length study of Wong’s films, Teo makes an interesting reference to the manner in which space in *Chungking Express* “is an internal world symbolised by the claustrophobic setting of Chungking Mansion [sic].” While the symbolic connection between internal, psychic spaces and the real setting of Chungking Mansions is left largely unexplored, Teo’s comment provides a critical opening for unpacking the complexities of space and emotion in the film. To further examine the intricacies of Wong’s emotional, filmic geography, to which Teo has alluded, I will briefly turn to Bruno’s *Public Intimacy: Architecture and the Visual Arts*, an interdisciplinary study of the relationship between architecture and the visual arts. In her book, Bruno theorises the concept of “filmic site-seeing”, which “embodies a particularly mobile art of mapping: an emotional mapping.” This mapping functions as “[s]ensuously associative in connecting the local and topographical to the personal…the passionate voyage of the imagination.” Bruno’s description of “filmic site-seeing” highlights cinema’s ability to inject emotion into topographical representations that are often portrayed, to use Bondi, Davidson and Smith’s expression, as “an emotionally barren terrain, a world devoid of passion, spaces ordered solely by rational principles and demarcated according to political, economic or technical logics.” Indeed, uncovering the emotions that are embedded in places, and the private sentiments that people associate with specific locations, is not a process that can be easily captured or represented.

The “mobile” nature of the film camera, which Bruno suggests merges motion and emotion to construct an affective terrain, is embodied in the aeroplanes of *Chungking Express*, as the characters utilise the various aeronautical objects to map both the physical spaces of Hong Kong, as well as their own emotional landscapes. A clear illustration of this idea is the flashback to Cop 663 and his flight attendant ex-girlfriend when they utilise toy

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26 Cosgrove, p. 3.
30 Bondi, Davidson and Smith, p. 1.
aeroplanes as a form of erotic play before and after lovemaking. Cop 663’s voice-over states, “On every flight, there’s one stewardess you long to seduce. This time last year, at 25,000 feet, I actually seduced one.” As Cop 663 swoops and loops a miniature toy aeroplane through the space of his apartment, his ex-girlfriend, dressed in the skirt and belt from her uniform and a black lace bra, takes a can of beer from the fridge and runs through flight safety procedures as though she were on board an aeroplane. Here, their passion for one another is mediated through an unspoken, and almost unconscious, discourse of air travel. At the end of the scene his ex-girlfriend’s body becomes a makeshift landscape where Cop 663 lands his toy aeroplanes. With one plane securely landed on her bottom he navigates the curve of her back with a second plane that he places on her left shoulder. His voice-over reveals, “I thought we’d stay together for the long haul, flying like a jumbo jet on a full tank. But there was an unexpected change of course.”

When Faye mischievously invades Cop 663’s apartment, she also taps into this discourse by playfully manoeuvring his toy aeroplanes to explore the nooks of his apartment. Although she subtly alters the details of his everyday life and slowly inserts her presence by leaving items such as a childhood photo of herself pinned to his mirror, her The Mamas & the Papas album, a stuffed Garfield toy and a plethora of new home wares, it is not until he spies one of Faye’s newspaper aeroplanes flying from his apartment window that he becomes truly aware of all the gradual changes to his domestic routine. The aeroplanes are therefore used to trace not only the characters’ surroundings and their place in the city, but also the emotional space that exists between them.

Even in scenes in which there are no real manifestations of aeroplanes, the hand-held camerawork functions like a hand-propelled aeroplane that unsteadily drifts over and through Hong Kong’s urban landscape, bearing witness to and collecting the private moments of the characters. For example, when Cop 663 is left waiting for Faye at the California bar, he is filmed in slow motion as he places a coin in the bar’s jukebox. Significantly, he is visually isolated in the shot as the hustle and bustle of the bar continues around him at rapid speed. Cop 663’s melancholy and disappointment literally weigh down the space immediately surrounding him and create the impression of emotional jet lag. While Faye, the embodiment of his renewed faith in romance, flies to the real California in the United States, Cop 663 experiences the physical effects of the distance separating them in their respective time zones as he waits in a simulacra California: “Actually, she wasn’t a no-show that night. She just got the place wrong. We were in different Californias 15 hours apart.” Instances of temporal disharmony continually appear throughout the film and cleverly visualise the embedding of emotion in Hong Kong’s urban sites.32

The opening scene of the film, which features the first encounter between Cop 223 and the heroin trafficker, accentuates this fluid cartography whereby the visual look and geographical detail of the Hong Kong locations are imagined through an emotive subjectivity. The film begins in Chungking Mansions, a tired and antiquated building complex on Nathan Road in Tsim Sha Tsui.33 The building features retail businesses, residential apartments and cheap temporary accommodation, and is best known, in an almost mythical sense, for its illegal housing of immigrants from South Asia and Africa and as a minor crime hub.34 In the fleeting moments of the opening, time is visually presented as immediate and indistinct, as well as stalled and hyper-visual, as the scene shifts from the movements of the heroin trafficker stalking the interiors of Chungking Mansions to Cop 223 chasing a suspect on Nathan Road. In just under three minutes of action the dense visuals of the rapid blurred motion and kinetic colour scheme produce a decentred perspective that infuses Tsim Sha Tsui with anxiety and tension.

The heroin trafficker’s journey through the labyrinthine space of Chungking Mansions is visually distorted by the swift and unfocused hand-held camerawork which, when captured through a slow motion filter, reveals fragmented views of life inside

32 See Tony Rayns, “Audio Commentary,” Chungking Express (DVD), The Criterion Collection, 2008. Rayns provides a similar interpretation and comments that Wong’s temporally disjointed cinematic montages work “by having two timeframes within the same visual frame…[in order to capture] a particular soul state, a particular frame of mind, a particular mood or attitude, a particular feeling.”

33 See Rayns, “Audio Commentary.” Although Rayns reveals in his film commentary that, for legal reasons, the majority of the Chungking Mansions scenes were actually filmed in the nearby Mirador Mansions complex, this chapter will proceed on the basis that the film intends to represent Chungking Mansions.

Chungking Mansions. Short glimpses of an anonymous man eating rice, a girl gazing at Indian sweets in a display cabinet, and a young man leaving a liquor store create a mosaic view of the interior of the flophouse. Significantly, the presentation of these images is ruptured and on the verge of disintegration just as the images gain some form of clarity, thereby visually conveying the unstable nature of existence within Chungking Mansions that becomes increasingly evident as the film narrative unfolds.

The camerawork also hints at the precarious status of the heroin trafficker as a female Chinese national in a space predominantly occupied by men from South Asia and Africa. The camera alternates between her point of view and shots that capture her at the centre of the action, producing a disturbance in the cohesion of the film image. The effect is that the viewer is witness to not only the inner machinations of Chungking Mansions, but also the heroin trafficker’s uneasiness as she searches the building for people to transport her narcotics. This is an instance in which, to use the work of James Donald, “Psychological states are not so much caused by the cityscape, as projected onto it. The boundary between inner and outer is shown…to be blurred and uncertain.” The erratic vision of Tsim Sha Tsui is further exemplified by the stop-motion photography used to film Cop 223. The technique, which produces a stroboscopic effect that breaks vision, movement and temporality into vaguely connected fragments, emphasises the breaks in the construction of time and perception.

On first inspection, the editing techniques heighten the thrill and excitement of Cop 223 charging down Nathan Road; however, subsequent viewings reveal a more nuanced approach to reading the representation of space in the sequence. The scene that follows depicts Cop 223 desperately calling the home of his ex-girlfriend, May, from a public phone located in the Midnight Express and trying to maintain personable relations with her family. Their break-up is registered as a traumatic event for Cop 223, who pines after his lost relationship and finds it difficult to let go of the routines that he established while dating May: “We all have our habits. Mine is to wait here for May to get off work […] Sometimes I’d spend the night at May’s. So her parents wouldn’t find out, I’d climb down from the balcony. Will I ever get to do that again?” Drawing on his emotional loss, I suggest that the stop-motion photography visually conveys Cop 223’s romantic trauma, and symbolically depicts the space surrounding him as falling apart after he is dumped by May. In this sense, the chaotic impression of Tsim Sha Tsui is really a reflection of the

36 See Bordwell, p. 277. According to Bordwell the technical aspect of this aesthetic element requires “shooting action at only eight, ten, or twelve frames per second and then ‘stretch-printing’ the result to the normal twenty-four frames.”
fragmentation and breakdown of Cop 223’s sense of idealism, as his subjective response to the dissolution of his relationship becomes conflated with his surroundings.

Figure 2.3. Romantic break-up/spatial breakdown (Chungking Express)

**Dérive and the Spaces in Between**

In tracing a double landscape, that of the city and that of the characters’ emotions, the mobile subjectivity attributed to the film camera is reminiscent of Guy Debord’s situationist maps. These maps, which stem from Debord’s theory of *dérive*, subject the map-making process to different codes of classification. The term *dérive* refers to drift, or drifting, and aims to encapsulate “the pedestrian’s experience, that of the everyday user of the city. The *dérive* took place literally below the threshold of visibility.”

Debord’s maps of Paris do not provide an all-encompassing view that accurately captures the city’s topographical details, but records, in the words of landscape architect and theorist James Corner:

> …subjective, street-level desires and perceptions rather than a synoptic totality of the city’s fabric. More a form of cognitive mapping than mimetic description of the cityscape, Debord’s maps located his own play and representation within the recessive nooks and crannies of everyday life…mapping alternative itineraries and subverting dominant readings and authoritative regimes.

Street-level desires are foregrounded in one of the first shots of *Chungking Express* that films the sky from between two buildings. The low-angle shot emphasises that the details

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of Wong’s cinematic representation of Hong Kong exist between the standard markers of urban geography and reside within the cracks in the map. Like the nooks and crannies of Debord’s maps that are arranged in an esoteric and fragmented composition, the movement of the film camera travels seamlessly through and around different locations and maps Hong Kong in a disconnected series of fragments that transcend the boundaries of geography. For example, the first vignette travels from Chungking Mansions to Lan Kwai Fong and the outskirts of SoHo to Kai Tak Airport in a drifting trajectory that is more concerned with the characters’ emotional sensibilities and associations with place than geographical accuracy. The filmic map of Hong Kong is configured in fragments that, like pieces of film stock, need to be edited and composed to create meaning.

However, as Debord’s cognitive maps were conventionally represented on paper, the concept of the pedestrian experience is inadequate to theorise the mapping of space in Chungking Express. Huang, in particular, has written beautifully on the film from the perspective of walking as a way to navigate Hong Kong’s increasingly globalised space, and classifies the characters as new variations on the Baudelairean flâneur.39 Diverging from the pedestrian reading, I am more concerned with how the camera charts the movements of the characters and registers their emotions than their actual walks through the city. The act of walking, to my mind, does not capture the dynamics of movement embodied in the film: walking is limited by the presence of accessible routes, whereas the very idea of a spatial frame or boundaries is rendered irrelevant in flight. It is for this reason that my conception of drift is united with flight.

Drawing on this assertion, Wong can be regarded as a pilot concerned with establishing an alternative cartographic literacy that traces the emotional contours embedded in the landscape. Certainly, Tom Conley, the author of Cartographic Cinema, argues that mapping and filmmaking are coextensive, discursive practices and posits that, “The auteur…can also be understood to be a cartographer.”40 While mapping involves acts of delineation and, in Debord’s case, plotting personal itineraries, auteur theory is similarly concerned with deciphering the individual and personal creative style or vision of the film director.41 The first filmmakers identified as auteurs arose from the innovative French nouvelle vague of the 1960s when young directors such as Jean-Luc Godard, François Truffaut, Claude Chabrol and Éric Rohmer aimed to remove cinema from the entrenched

41 See Conley, p. 1. Conley writes that, “Like the idiolect of the geographer and cartographer, the cinematic idiom, multifaceted, is composed of signs that do not transcribe speech. Riddled with speech and writing, the cinematic image, like a map, can be deciphered in a variety of ways…cinema and cartography draw on many of the same resources and virtues of the languages that inform their creation.”
studio system associated with the cinéma de papa by adopting more flexible modes of filmmaking. These included improvised scripts, hand-held cameras, unknown stars, disjointed editing, natural lighting, and, most significantly, location shooting. Freeing the camera from the limited setting of a studio, real locations, particularly in Paris, were used to create an authentic sense of geography while also metaphorically serving as a juncture to illuminate the films’ themes of pop culture, romance and urban loneliness. Conley’s claim that auteurs share a similar methodology to cartographers is apt in this context in which physical geography, film and subjectivity are merged to forge new understandings of place and existence.

Further, one of the central ideas arising out of auteur theory, le caméra-stylo (camera-pen), is the contention that the director should utilise the camera in the same way that a writer uses his pen. Just as the writer’s pen becomes a creative extension of his or her body to express personal conceits, the camera too can convey the director’s private agendas. The intimate immediacy of pen writing is therefore appropriated as a means of personalising the cinematic experience. For Wong, the personal is made cinematic by inscribing space. As Wong commented in a 1995 interview with Brunette, which coincided with the North American release of Fallen Angels:

What we are interested in, I think, is the people and Hong Kong. Before Fallen Angels, I always chose locations because they were appropriate, and that was it. But things change very fast in Hong Kong. The locations for my first two films have disappeared already. Even in Chungking Express, my fourth film, some locations have disappeared, changed into other things…So in Fallen Angels, I was trying to include a location which I thought would disappear within a year or two, like the teahouse and restaurants where the killers went, and the place where he lives, things like that. The lifestyle of Hong Kong in certain periods…I’m trying to preserve it on film.

Although Wong made the decision to archive select elements of Hong Kong culture after he made Chungking Express, it is arguable that there was an unconscious desire during the process of location scouting and the making of the film to weave architectural memories of the city into his filmic map alongside the unfolding memories of the film’s characters. This interpretation of Wong’s statement is not intended to transpose an ethnographical exploration of Hong Kong onto the film, but is aimed at creating an avenue to link Wong’s

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44 Wong quoted in Brunette, p. 118. See also Jimmy Ngai, “A Dialogue with Wong Kar-wai: Cutting Between Time and Space,” in Wong Kar-wai, ed. Danièle Rivière (Paris: Dis Voir, 1997), pp. 85-88. In the 1995 segment of his interview with Ngai, Wong comments, “It was like I was trying to preserve something from perishing…an attempt to seal some of the existing images onto the negative, while they are still there.”
interests an as auteur, the themes of the film and an awareness of the cultural mood at the
time of filming.

In the following section I will examine the multiple ways in which memory is
conceived in Chungking Express and how Wong’s “pilotage” moves both forward and
backwards in time. Cop 223’s sorrowful sentiments concerning expiration and unnecessary
endings appear to haunt the film as the characters’ fleeting memories are juxtaposed to
sites of the city that have disappeared in recent years. Here, mapping an emotional
geography is part of a larger project that runs through almost all of Wong’s films: an
engagement with the remembered city. Although his “love in the 1960s trilogy” is most
obviously concerned with nostalgia for a remembered Hong Kong, the characters in
Chungking Express reveal an awareness of the inescapable sense of nostalgia that is bound
up with both urban living and romantic entanglements. As Cop 223 laments, “When did
everything start having an expiration date? Swordfish expires. Meat sauce expires. Even
plastic wrap expires. I’m starting to wonder: Is there anything in this world that doesn’t?”

Memories of Hong Kong

“Love You for 10,000 Years”: Time, Expiry and Personal Preservation

Chungking Express is replete with references to time and memory in the form of clocks that
literally count down the minutes of the characters’ days, expiration dates on tinned cans of
pineapple and sardines, Cop 223’s pager password of “Love You for 10,000 Years”, and
symbolic music choices such as “What a Difference A Day Makes” by Dinah Washington
and “Things in Life” by Dennis Brown. These elements all point to the forward
momentum of time; for example, the date on the can of sardines informs the heroin
trafficker that she doesn’t “have much time left” to recover the lost heroin. Additionally,
Cop 223’s obsessive collecting, and later eating, of cans of Del Monte pineapple, with an
expiration date of May 1, is also used as a measure of passing time:

We broke up on April Fool’s Day, so I took it as a joke. I’m willing to humor her
for a month. Every day I buy a can of pineapple with an expiration date of May 1,
because May loves pineapple, and May 1 is my birthday. I tell myself that if May
hasn’t come back by the time I’ve bought 30 cans, then our love will expire too.

Time is again emphasised in Brown’s “The Things in Life”, the song that provides both a
musical and symbolic arch for the first vignette, and features the following lyrics:

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45 See Christina Lee, ed., “‘We’ll Always Have Hong Kong’: Uncanny Spaces and Disappearing Memories in
the Films of Wong Kar Wai,” in Violating Time: History, Memory, and Nostalgia in Cinema (London and New
York: Continuum, 2008), pp. 124-141 and Ewa Mazierska and Laura Rascaroli, “Trapped in the Present:
46 After the Indian drug couriers abscond at Kai Tak Airport, the heroin trafficker is handed a can of
Portuguese sardines with the expiration date 1 May 1994 by a female bartender at the Wally Matt Lounge.

46
It's not everyday we're gonna be the same way
There must be a change somehow
There are bad times and good times, too
So have a little faith in what you do.

Brown’s lyrics refer to accepting change, and this alludes to the uncertainty that both Cop 223 and Cop 663 experience after their respective partners have left them. When Cop 663 is encouraged by the Midnight Express manager to start searching for a new girlfriend, he remarks, “Can’t change just like that. Have to go slow.” This line of dialogue bespeaks the sense of stagnation that saturates Cop 663’s existence after the handmade boarding pass is left at the Midnight Express by the flight attendant: “Change of flight. Your place cancelled.” Habits, rituals and compulsive repetitive behaviour, such as both cops continued presence at the Midnight Express, are favoured over change and transformation. Furthermore, in an attempt to counteract expiration, a reverence for things of the past is embedded in the film narrative. This is humorously explored in an early scene between Cop 223 and a convenience store clerk:

**COP 223:** You have any pineapple that expires on May 1?

**ASSISTANT:** What’s the date today?

**COP 223:** April 30.

**ASSISTANT:** That’s right. Think I stock outdated goods.

**COP 223:** There’s still two hours to go.

**ASSISTANT:** Nobody wants stale goods. Get a fresh can.

**COP 223:** With you people it’s always ‘Out with the old, in with the new!’ You realize what goes into making a can of pineapple? The fruit is grown, harvested, sliced – and you just throw it away! How do you think the pineapple feels?

**ASSISTANT:** Buddy, I just work here. Who cares about the pineapple? What about how I feel? I stock and restock this stuff all day. I wish it would never expire. It’d save me loads of work.

The displacement of Cop 223’s feelings of rejection onto a can of almost expired pineapple establishes a temporal anxiety that permeates the narrative and is conveyed through the clash between the introspective voice-over narration, which is steeped in retrospection, and the dynamic visuals used to represent the city.

Specifically, the film’s voice-overs are central to creating a link between the characters’ emotions and the spaces that they inhabit. As Bordwell posits, the voice-overs work to open up the characters’ private worlds: “the monologues are purely confessional,
issuing from some parallel realm, pouring out across sequences to create links and symmetries, recollections and prefigurations.” More subtly, the voice-overs mediate the shifts in subjectivity and illuminate the memories that are layered into the film narrative. The shot that concludes the opening sequence is a freeze frame that captures the chance collision between Cop 223 and the heroin trafficker. Cop 223’s retrospective voice-over states that at exactly 9:00 pm on April 28, 1994, “That was the closest we ever got – just 0.01 cm between us. Fifty-seven hours later, I fell in love with this woman.” Significantly, this monologue is the first indication that the city, as portrayed in Chungking Express, is refigured and mapped through processes of memory. Here, the present moment is “located” in the past and the characters’ voice-overs serve as a cinematic frame for their recollections.

Figure 2.4. “...just 0.01 cm between us.” (Chungking Express)

The voice-over alludes to Cop 223’s mnemonic landscape, but, most evocatively, the physical landscape is also tinged with retrospection as the freeze frame heightens the visual tension of the sequence by highlighting a frozen moment that is clearly engraved in Cop 223’s memory. In this scene, urban space is characterised by the conflict between the acceleration of time, as depicted in the intense chase scene, and the desire to hold onto and distil the present moment. Encounters are fleeting and the connections forged between people are not based on verbal communication, but on the brief physical convergence of bodies in dense space. The viewer is presented with a shifting landscape that is imbued with the melancholic awareness of the present passing from existence. Chance meetings

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47 Bordwell, p. 275.
momentarily allay urban alienation, and it is these random moments that Wong attempts to pinpoint on his filmic map.

Towards the end of the first vignette, Cop 223 spends the morning of his 25th birthday running in the rain – a means of expelling excess fluid from his body so that he does not have any left for tears. As he leaves the sports ground he clips his pager to a fence and concedes that no one will call him. Just as he walks away, his pager beeps with a birthday message from the heroin trafficker. Caught in a freeze frame with his hand placed over his heart, Cop 223’s voice-over illuminates the moment: “On May 1, 1994, a woman wishes me happy birthday. Now I’ll remember her all my life. If memories ever come in a can, I hope that can never expires. If it has to have a shelf life, I hope it’s 10,000 years.” The characters’ recollections, as revealed in their voice-overs, are used as a device to suggest that the film narrative takes place in the past; however, the concept of remembering is also woven into the visual texture of the film through the use of freeze frames and other cinematographic techniques.

Throughout Chungking Express, Hong Kong street life is portrayed via imagery that alternates between cohesion and disintegration, memory and amnesia; and, in this respect, the combined cinematographic efforts of Lau and Doyle are integral to the film’s sensitive projection of memory. The frequent use of freeze frames, rapid editing, slow motion and stop-motion photography and coloured filters renders any fixed notion of time and space as shifting and mutable. Apart from Cop 663’s flashback, featuring his seduction of the flight attendant, independent memory sequences that are distinguished from the main action of the film are notably absent. In Gilles Deleuze’s critical examination of time in cinema, he refers to the flashback as a “closed circuit which goes from the present to the past, then leads us back to the present.” Filmic flashbacks typically function as neat incisions into the film’s structure; however, in Chungking Express memory seeps into the present so that the very concept of the present time is difficult to discern. Neat incisions are replaced with minute ruptures, such as the fragments created by the stop-motion photography in the opening sequence, that are never fully mended. Philosopher Paul Ricoeur argues that memory, as constituted in imagery, reveals “the presence of the absent.” The rawness of the film’s visuals echoes Ricoeur’s statement, as the instability and incoherence of the film imagery portray a cityscape that is disconnected from linear time. The imprint of memory left on the city is one that attends to contemporary ideas of

recollection as “transitory, notoriously unreliable, and haunted by forgetting.” The film’s aesthetic establishes a mnemonic visuality that is sewn into the film, with each “cut” a fragment of the characters’ past pieced together onto the fabric of the city.

The integration of private memory and public space is again cleverly realised through the aeroplane motif. As a coping mechanism for dealing with his new single life, Cop 663 begins conversing with the objects in his apartment. One evening, while he is consoling his household objects, he uncovers the moulding United Airlines uniform of his ex-girlfriend and decides to give it some air. The next day her uniform is seen hanging on a clothesline against the backdrop of a clear, blue sky. The serenity of the shot, which is taken from an angle that makes it look as though the uniform is magically suspended in the air, is intercut by the sound of the roaring engine of an aeroplane flying overhead. The uniform is aired to help it “face reality” and stop “hiding” in Cop 663’s apartment; however, its presence emphasises the manner in which the characters leave their private marks on the urban landscape. The convergence of Cop 663’s memory, as symbolised by the air hostess uniform that has previously been seen in his flashback, and urban space, represented by a real aeroplane in contrast to the toy aeroplanes in his apartment, further stresses the alternative reading of Hong Kong’s topography by infusing public space with private emotion.

![Marking public space (Chungking Express)](image)

The delicate relationship between memory and place has recently been given critical attention whereby scholars such as Malpas have sought to examine “the way in which

places themselves serve to hold images, feelings, emotions, and experience.” An academic study edited by art historian Mark Crinson, entitled *Urban Memory: History and Amnesia in the Modern City*, theorises the new concept of “urban memory” in an attempt to disentangle the complexities of the accumulation of intangible mnemonic emotions in tactile space:

In our everyday understanding of memory the term encompasses two closely interlinked aspects: the first is of a residue of past experiences that has somehow stuck or become active in the mind, and thus in our sense of ourselves, while other experiences have been forgotten; the second is of an ability or faculty by which we recollect the past…Also common, although this is more modern, is the sense of memory as a subjective matter; one would have to modify it (memorial) or add a qualifier (collective memory) to make it look outwards from the self. ‘Urban memory’ does not yet have the same everyday understanding, though it is getting there. Urban memory can be an anthropomorphism (the city having a memory) but more commonly it indicates the city as a physical landscape and collection of objects and practices that enable recollections of the past and that embody the past through traces of the city’s sequential building and rebuilding.

In *Chungking Express*, memories are crystallised within certain spaces; for example, Cop 223 and the heroin trafficker’s first encounter in Chungking Mansions, Cop 663 and Faye’s meeting at the Midnight Express, and Faye’s playful invasion of Cop 663’s apartment that spills out onto the streets of SoHo. These memories are tied to urban space and there is the sense that they could take place only within the city landscape. The characters’ emotional experiences and recollections are what enliven and exist within the Hong Kong locations.

If Wong’s filmic map is interpreted as a topographical narrative, then it is memory that resides within the folds and layers of the map. In this way, the characters’ desire to retain the past in private mnemonic snapshots is matched by the camera’s tracing of the old architecture of the city. As Tony Rayns elucidates in his audio commentary for the Criterion Collection release of the film, “There is hardly a single glimpse anywhere in this movie of the high-tech, urban, futuristic Hong Kong that is very familiar from tourist brochures. He [Wong] has focused almost exclusively on old Hong Kong here and I think that is with a distinct nostalgic bent to it.” What is most significant about Wong’s approach to film setting is that *Chungking Express* has captured and archived areas of Hong Kong that have been drastically changed in the 18 years since the film was originally released. In some cases the locations have been relegated to mere memory; some notable examples are the Midnight Express, Kai Tak Airport, the California bar and the Bottoms Up Club. Other places, such as the Wally Matt Lounge, where the drug trafficker’s boss

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52 Malpas, p. 149.
54 Rayns, “Audio Commentary.”
55 The Midnight Express has changed hands many times since 1994. At the time of my most recent visit to Hong Kong in January 2011, it was a 7-Eleven convenience store. The old Kai Tak Airport site has yet to be
spends all his time, have moved to different areas within Hong Kong. Even locations such as the *dai pai dongs* near Central, where Cop 663 eats his lunch, are slowly being removed from Hong Kong’s urbanscape. In the same manner that a diary or an old map records the past, *Chungking Express* memorialises the urban environment of Hong Kong at a specific point in its history through the affective movements of the film’s characters.

**Places to Remember: Architecture, Intimacy and Memory**

In my view, it is the symbolic investment in aeronautical travel that allows Wong to follow, and film, paths that exist off official maps; what Rayns refers to as “old Hong Kong.” The aeroplane is interchangeably used as a symbol of romance, travel and diaspora. As I have maintained, it is an almost omniscient object that, like the film camera, floats through space and charts the characters’ emotions as they “mark” the city. M. Christine Boyer writes that the construction of the aeroplane “allowed for new orthogonal routes that passed over and through all objects, disregarding political boundaries and flowing like primordial rivers back to the sea.” In utilising the aeroplane as a navigational device that moves between aerial and ground views, and public and private spaces, the process of mapping is removed from its generally rigid and analytical context. The viewer is presented with a filmic map of Hong Kong taken from not only a vertical distance, but also one that penetrates unexpected spaces of the city and evokes the boundless motion of the aeroplane through the movement of the film camera.

By mapping the city through his own personal sites of identification, and thereby constructing an intertwined map and diary, Wong makes accessible a hidden cartography that would otherwise be obscured by Hong Kong’s iconic architecture. As Hong Kong is redeveloped; however, there are plans to use the land to build a multi-purpose complex that incorporates cruise terminals, various commercial and recreational spaces and a hotel. The California Tower in Lan Kwai Fong, which housed the California bar, was demolished in 2010. According to Rayns’ audio commentary, the scene in the Bottoms Up Club was not actually shot at the real bar; however, the signage was used to establish the setting, and another bar in Tsim Sha Tsui was used for the scene. In the late 1990s the Bottoms Up Club moved to Wan Chai on Hong Kong Island; however, the site appears to have become disused in recent years.

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56 The Wally Matt Lounge, which is purportedly the oldest gay bar in Hong Kong, has remained in Tsim Sha Tsui, but has moved to a different street and has been renamed “The New Wally Matt Lounge.”

57 Peter Cookson Smith, *The Urban Design of Impermanence: Streets, Places and Spaces in Hong Kong* (Hong Kong: MCCM Creations, 2006), p. 190. Cookson Smith writes that in 2006 only 28 licensed *dai pai dongs* were operating in Hong Kong. At that time, the Hong Kong Government desired to close them down permanently; however, this does not appear to have come to fruition.

58 M. Christine Boyer quoted in Schwarzer, p. 141.

59 See Gary G. Xu, *Sinascape: Contemporary Chinese Cinema* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2007), p. 135. In his monograph on Chinese cinema, Xu critiques the narrow visual representation of Hong Kong: “Every geographical entity in the world has its immediate associations based on the locale’s cultural background and historical specificities. Hong Kong is no exception. But in contrast to places such as New York and Paris, whose immediate associations are combinations of distinctive urban facade and historically unique material life, what Hong Kong immediately evokes is almost always a cinematic sequence: a bird’s-eye view of the breathtaking skyline of Victoria Bay cuts into a mid-range shot of a typically crowded Hong Kong street lined with store signs and ends with a close-up of a Western face previously obscured in the crowd.”
in a perpetual cycle of architectural alteration and construction, Wong’s selective mapping acknowledges that it is almost impossible to cohesively capture what is essentially an unstable topography. His reluctance to represent Hong Kong’s urban spaces through visual references to well-known buildings has been acknowledged by scholars; however, I seek to examine what effect this has beyond showing a perspective of Hong Kong that is different from that which is seen in the mainstream media.

Figure 2.6. Revealing the everyday spaces of Hong Kong (Chungking Express)

In Chungking Express, as in the majority of his films set in Hong Kong, Wong does not restrict filming to set locations that will instantly evoke the region or that are likely to possess architectural longevity. The monumental architecture of the Central district, the neon jungles of Mong Kok and Causeway Bay, the view from the Peak or shots of Victoria Harbour – sites that are constantly used to represent Hong Kong in visual media – are notably absent from Wong’s mapping. Instead, Chungking Express reveals sites that cannot be accessed through the quick glance that the tourist gaze offers. To quote Lisa Odham

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For example, the most recent cover of the Hong Kong Tourism Board’s free guide features a neon-lit image of Central. This panorama, which includes prominent buildings such as the Bank of China Tower and the Hong Kong Shanghai Bank, provides a recognisable snapshot that conforms to the tourist’s gaze. A notable filmic example is John Woo’s A Better Tomorrow (1986). The opening shot pans down from the Hong Kong Shanghai Bank, arguably one of the most iconic buildings in Hong Kong’s architectural canvas, to the protagonist (Mark Lee, played by Chow Yun-fat) on the street below. The manifestation of the building does not have any bearing on the film’s action; rather, it is used to contextualise the space in which the action takes place by referring to a building that is synonymous with Hong Kong’s “image.”
Stokes and Michael Hoover, “Wong circumscribes Hong Kong and shows, as his camera eye sees, what is there.”62 In particular, I argue that the choice of locations has implications for the themes of emotion and memory. The manner in which the film camera interacts with architecture, which is the most visual element of the city’s topography, produces an anxiety between visibility and invisibility in the film’s representation of Hong Kong; a tension that continues to draw attention to the cracks in the map.

At this stage, it is pertinent to consider Ackbar Abbas’s seminal book-length study of the cultural politics of Hong Kong, as Abbas’s analysis is grounded in an awareness of looking beyond the familiar. Specifically, *Hong Kong and the Politics of Disappearance* frames an analysis of the historical period leading up to the handover with reference to a number of cultural practices, including film, architecture, photography and literature. The third chapter of the book is dedicated to situating Wong’s pre-1997 cinema within what Abbas terms a “space of disappearance.”63 Rather than reiterate the conceits of Abbas’s study of Wong’s cinema, I will concentrate on his argument relating to architecture and how it is represented on-screen as a means of setting a foundation for further critical engagement with the affective space of *Chungking Express*.

In the book’s introduction, Abbas is keen to define exactly what he means by disappearance by stating that it “does not imply nonappearance, absence, or lack of presence. It is not even nonrecognition – it is more a question of misrecognition, of recognizing a thing as something else.”64 At the crux of this “misrecognition” – an inability to read Hong Kong’s urban identity – is its architecture, which has been utilised in most image-intensive mediums to construct a sense of place. This, as Abbas argues, is particularly the case in Hong Kong cinema:

Hong Kong films made recently, which concern themselves with the city’s present historical situation, attempt to identify the city by rendering it visible, particularly by shooting what is most visible of all, its architecture…But because architecture is seen as a purely photogenic set of objects, we get the same familiar shots of the same well-known buildings, taken from the same angles…It is as if it were necessary to hold on to the familiar for reassurance that the city is real. In any case, no identity emerges…the city is seen but not heard.65

62 Stokes and Hoover, p. 194.
63 Abbas, *Hong Kong*, pp. 1-7. Abbas’s central argument is that, following the double trauma of the signing of the Joint Declaration and the Tiananmen Square massacre in the 1980s, Hong Kong people became deeply concerned about developing a local culture, which Abbas refers to as a “culture of disappearance, whose appearance is posited on the imminence of its disappearance.” Abbas’s conception of Hong Kong as a “space of disappearance” is linked to the region’s colonial history and politics; in particular, an inability to locate a Hong Kong identity within available discourses of east and west, global and local, colonial and postcolonial.
64 Abbas, *Hong Kong*, p. 7.
65 Abbas, *Hong Kong*, p. 77. For a further discussion of the problematics of visibility in Hong Kong, see Evans Chan, “Postmodernism and Hong Kong Cinema,” in *Postmodernism and China*, eds. Arif Dirlik and Xudong Zhang (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2000), p. 303. Chan writes that, “There is a paradox in talking about Hong Kong’s visibility, which after all, is equally marked by its invisibility. Rarely is Hong Kong seen as a social-political entity with any semblance of a collective will. Always trapped in the vise of
Abbas’s assertion highlights the tendency of some Hong Kong filmmakers to utilise a “touristic” mapping of the city that relies on the repetition and recycling of images of significant architectural structures to foreground the film’s setting. The desire to delineate Hong Kong as a clearly legible urban space results in a reading that attempts to concretise and simplify the city into one image. As Hong Kong-based urban planner and scholar Peter Cookson Smith argues, monumental architecture is inherently problematic, particularly from an urban design point of view, due to the fact that these structures are “occasionally iconic but inwardly oriented landmarks with ambiguous public identity in relation to social space and the role of the street.” It follows that attempting to ascribe meaning by visually alluding to a city’s architecture does not reveal much about what lies beneath the city’s surface. What, then, can a viewer take from Wong’s lack of focus on the monuments of Hong Kong?

Bruno’s terminology of “filmic site-seeing” is significant to this portion of my analysis. “Sight seeing”, a phenomenon that generally involves tourists viewing “sights” chosen for their historical or cultural importance, is amended to highlight the film camera’s focus on “sites.” This distinction draws attention to a shift from places that are integral to establishing a city’s identity for the foreign visitor to locations that form a part of the everyday; sites that are mundanely local. However, in *Chungking Express*, Hong Kong’s everyday locations are not merely presented as the settings for the scenes; they possess great significance to the film narrative itself. As many scholars and critics have pointed out, the central sites of the film, Chungking Mansions and the Midnight Express, are cleverly joined in the film’s title. Further, in most of the scenes, the locations are highlighted by superpower politics or macro cultural discourse, Hong Kong is like a tabula rasa, an empty signifier that always drifts into narratives not of its own making.

*See P. K. Leung, “The Story of Hong Kong,” in *Hong Kong Collage: Contemporary Stories and Writing*, ed. Martha P. Y. Cheung (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 4-5. In his personal essay, Leung powerfully elucidates the problem of Hong Kong’s global image: “The question of 1997 has attracted massive international media attention, but what is presented in the dispatches of even the most experienced and renowned journalists is just an ‘internationalized’ story based on fleeting glimpses and decontextualized quotations. Hong Kong culture is conveniently or gratuitously reduced to a single image . . . the focus of attention is trained on the riotous profusion that greets the tourist’s camera lens. With these images, it is hardly surprising that people will get the impression that Hong Kong is a place without history, without culture, without dissenting views…”*


establishing shots that focus on the title of the site or its exterior façade. In lieu of “snapshot” perspectives of Hong Kong, *Chungking Express* utilises MTR (Mass Transit Railway) stations, Circle K convenience stores, seedy bars, fast-food and take-out sites, the interiors of hotels and streetscapes to establish place. In this regard, *Chungking Express* produces an intimate portrait of the city that depicts how it is navigated in day-to-day life.\(^6^9\)

I am, therefore, proposing two intertwined modes of interpreting the settings in *Chungking Express*. Firstly, the locations play a part in Wong’s preservation project that I have already outlined, as the film collates a selection of sites that form an urban, cinematic archive. Secondly, the locations are embedded in the characters’ memories and represent the spaces that dot their emotional terrains.

Significantly, the two main locations of the film represent the dynamic between visibility and invisibility, memory and amnesia, that cannot be achieved by drawing visual references to established architecture. Appropriating Chungking Mansions and the Midnight Express as the main locations is integral to creating a link between the characters’ anxieties regarding memory and change. More explicitly, these two sites literalise the central romantic and mnemonic tensions that permeate the film. The Midnight Express, which has been removed from the urban fabric of Lan Kwai Fong, represents quick exchanges, change and mutability. Its position as a take-out site that specialises in quick and easy options for late-night meals is mirrored in the shop manager’s offering of quick and easy romantic advice. After Cop 663 ponders that maybe his ex-girlfriend “does have lots of choices”, the manager consoles him, “Then put her out of your mind. You have plenty of choices too.” This statement reveals that the manager is less concerned with the past than with moving forward. This is particularly emphasised at the film’s denouement when the manager decides to open a karaoke bar and sells the Midnight Express to the hopelessly romantic and nostalgic Cop 663, who has arguably bought the shop to capture some physical trace of his relationship with Faye.

In contrast, Chungking Mansions remains a veritable ruin in Tsim Sha Tsui amongst newer, modern buildings. In a city in which architecture vanishes and sites are transformed at regular intervals, Chungking Mansions is a location that is intrinsically connected to urban memory due to the fact that it has largely escaped the gentrification that has taken place around it in Tsim Sha Tsui. As part of the urban landscape of Kowloon since 1961, Chungking Mansions possesses an architectural longevity that is

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69 Bordwell, p. 271. Interestingly, the locations in *Chungking Express* have become sites of pilgrimage for fans of Wong’s cinema and have thereby established a different economy of tourist desire. In particular, Wong’s popularity in Japan has resulted in the publication of souvenir programs which commemorate each film and which often include relevant maps charting the locations featured in the film.
rarely seen in Hong Kong for such an unremarkable building. With the massive tourist attention it now attracts, thanks in no small part to its cinematic representation in *Chungking Express*, it signifies a concrete site of memory that exists in parallel to official heritage listings.\(^70\) Writing on the site, Gary McDonogh and Cindy Wong assert that the antiquated architectural structure “evokes a tension between the old and the new, the Gothic and the ephemeral…Hong Kong people associate the building with South Asians, and stories abound about the complexities of ownership that keep this decaying building intact as newer skyscrapers are replaced around it.”\(^71\) There is a temporal oscillation that is, as already discussed, made tangible by Lau’s cinematography; however, the mythology of the building as a space that bestrides past and present also frames the representation of Chungking Mansions.

In his analysis of *Chungking Express* Teo claims that:

> Chungking Mansion [*sic*] is a virtual dimension of memory. Its space is a vivid time-filled (hence human and psychological) entity…The Mansion represents the multicultural face of Hong Kong, a global village resounding with exotic sounds and languages, and, in Wong’s eyes, the real emblem of Hong Kong.\(^72\)

Although the decision to film Chungking Mansions was centrally inspired by Wong’s “childhood memories” of living in Tsim Sha Tsui and his recollections of interacting with the diverse cultural groups who lived and worked in Chungking Mansions, the structure of the building is productively utilised to evoke memory.\(^73\) The labyrinthine interiors echo the maze-like threads of memory through which the mind must travel to summon the past. This is certainly the case in the scenes in which the heroin trafficker searches the building for the missing Indian drug couriers. The film camera closely follows her as she attempts to navigate the winding passages in a space that is almost impossible to delineate. The small rooms and long corridors that comprise the tangled connections of Chungking Mansions both reveal and conceal. As a microcosm of memory, in both the literal and metaphorical senses, the building is portrayed as fluid, unstable and paradoxical – much like the structure of memory itself. It is no coincidence that the frozen moment between Cop 223 and the

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\(^70\) For a list of declared monuments in Hong Kong, see Antiquities and Monuments Office, “Declared Monuments in Hong Kong.” GovHK Leisure and Cultural Services Department <http://www.amo.gov.hk/en/monuments.php> (accessed 9 October 2010). See also Ackbar Abbas, “Cosmopolitan Descriptions: Shanghai and Hong Kong.” *Public Culture* 12.3 (2000), pp. 769-786. In this article, Abbas examines cosmopolitanism in both Shanghai and Hong Kong and briefly looks at the “ad hoc” process of urban preservation in Hong Kong.


\(^72\) Teo, *Wong Kar-wai*, p. 53. See also “Moving Pictures excerpt (Series 6, Program 8).” *Chungking Express* (DVD), The Criterion Collection, 2008. During an interview for this episode, Wong made the following comment on Chungking Mansions: “It’s pretty much like a small, mini Hong Kong. The peoples [*sic*] living here are from different cultural backgrounds and they squeeze in a limited space.”

heroin trafficker that initiates the film is set in this space, as it is portrayed as a repository for memory and nostalgia.

While Chungking Mansions represents a space of embodied and living memory, Kai Tak Airport, which appears in a pivotal scene in the first vignette, symbolises memories of the past. Following the construction of the Chek Lap Kok Airport on Lantau Island, Kai Tak is a memory shard from pre-1997 that is embedded in the film. Significantly, this location is also at the nexus of the film’s flight symbolism. As a space that involves arrivals, departures, take-offs, landings and waiting, Kai Tak Airport represents yet another site of transience. The comings and goings of people, baggage and aeroplanes from different places in the immovable setting of the airport represent a push and pull between moving on, as is the case with the female characters who fly out of Hong Kong, and retaining the past, embodied in the lack of geographical movement by Cop 223 and Cop 663. As Augusta Lee Palmer and Jenny Lau write, “there is a sense of gender reciprocity in the airport/airplane philosophy of love elaborated in Chungking Express, in which some partners in love affairs land only in order to take off again, while others represent safe havens, waiting for someone else to land and make their lives complete.”

Intimacy and Geography

In invoking the aeroplane as a metaphor for travel and exploring the city, the slippage from conventional aerial views to subterranean flight allows a more intimate mapping of urban space that runs parallel to images commonly used to evoke Hong Kong. In Chungking Express Wong draws attention to the correlation between transitory locations, whose place within the city’s substructure is not guaranteed, and the fragile relationships between the characters in the film – the emotional arrivals and departures that punctuate their existences.

Aware of the difficulty of making connections and holding on to the present, the characters strangely gravitate to places that hold little promise of social interaction and perpetually seek refuge in outwardly insignificant and marginal settings. When Cop 223 sits outside one of Hong Kong’s many McDonald’s fast-food restaurants while forlornly eating a burger, his romantic misery and alienation are juxtaposed to a global sign that stands for

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efficiency, predictable service and quick exchanges. The equation of lost love and heartbreak with fast food is also imagined in the scenes in the Midnight Express and Cop 223’s night at the hotel with the heroin trafficker. While she sleeps fully clothed on top of the bed, he gorges on four generously sized chef’s salads in a moment that literalises the replacement of sexual intimacy with food. These sites, with their connections to late-night fast food, are symbolic of urban alienation; spaces that are replicated on a global scale and are safe havens for people who wander the streets late at night with no set destination. On the other hand, it is within these locations that the fleeting, yet emotionally significant, encounters take place.

Ironically, the settings are not those that would generally be included on an official map, and call to mind Marc Augé’s concept of a “non-place”; that is, “a space which cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity.” Unlike anthropological places that are tied to community, non-places – such as hotels, railway stations and shopping centres – are “transit points and temporary abodes” that forge a new relationship with space, described by Augé as “solitary contractuality.” The film’s association with such settings has led Peter Brooker, author of *Modernity and Metropolis: Writing, Film, and Urban Formations*, to argue that the Hong Kong represented in *Chungking Express* is an example of architect and theorist Rem Koolhaas’ term the “Generic City.” Brooker defines this urban concept as:

...a metropolis without identity or character: homogenous, serene and vacant, and though international now, the prominent type of Asian city...The ‘Generic City’ is ‘the city without history’, built upon a *tabula rasa*, upwards out of the flattened terrain of former villages or where colonialism had imposed its physical presence.

Although there is a vague element of truth in Brooker’s statement, he fails to make the connection between the choice of locations and the characters’ psychological states. By taking the aeroplane as a pivotal object in the film narrative, Wong implicitly situates his understanding of geography in a state of flux, fluidity and displacement. The film exposes a

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77 Augé, pp. 78-94.

web of memory that draws together past and present architecture from Hong Kong’s urban landscape and juxtaposes it with the private memories of the characters. In Chungking Express the sites are architectural metaphors for the fleeting encounters that occur between the characters. Further, the locations also draw attention to the passing of time that the film attempts to thematise by capturing both the characters’ private lives, as well as old buildings that have disappeared from Hong Kong’s cityscape. Ephemeral moments, such as the 0.01 of a centimetre of space that exists between Cop 223 and Faye the morning before she falls in love with Cop 663 occur in the similarly transitory space of the Midnight Express. Cop 223 and Faye’s brief meeting, although not altering their status as strangers, is stored in Cop 223’s memory and suggests that, despite the appearance of the generic, the urban palimpsest is composed of recollections that are buried between the layers: “That was the closest we ever got – just 0.01 cm between us. I knew nothing about her. Six hours later, she fell in love with another man.

As I have briefly indicated, Wong’s interest in memory as embodied in non-descript locations is particularly revealed in the focus on sites that are linked to food. In an echo of Cop 223’s humorous search for cans of pineapple with a particular use-by date in the first vignette, Cop 663 also visits a Circle K store after Faye has stood him up. Taking the boarding pass that she has made for him, which is now soggy and blurred after he dumped it in a bin, he places it in a revolving mini oven to dry. Once again, a convenience store becomes a sanctuary for the broken hearted. I contend that what these locations represent is the characters’ desire to find a space to which they can belong, one which is beyond the hold of official history and which they can appropriate as their own. The characters in Chungking Express, as in many of Wong’s films, experience a disjointed and asynchronous relationship with the wider environment. They listen to retro nostalgic music and cloak themselves in memories, they talk to themselves rather than verbalise their feelings, and they don sunglasses and raincoats to pre-empt the changes in the weather. Similarly, the characters inhabit spaces that don’t quite “fit” into official records of the region.

The encoding of these settings plays a part, I believe, in disputing the lack of memory, as distinct from history, ascribed to Hong Kong by some academics. For example, Ban Wang, the author of a book-length study on memory, history and trauma in wider China entitled Illuminations from the Past: Trauma, Memory, and History in Modern China, argues that in Hong Kong:

The accelerated turnaround and turnover of labor power, products, and services are attended by a sense of always living in the present. There is no sense of depth and embeddedness associated with memory and history…The memory traces, residues of having lived in a particular juncture of time-space as part of one’s life
intertwined with many other lives, tend to become indistinguishable from the swift
turnover of products designed for planned obsolescence.\textsuperscript{79}

Rather than simply presenting these locations as homogenous spaces, the settings are
crucial to the film’s structure and are given their own sense of importance and meaning
through repetition, parallels and mirror reflections. After Cop 663’s girlfriend leaves him,
he still continues to visit the Midnight Express after he finishes his shifts – even though he
no longer has the need to go there to buy her dinner. The retracing of his movements
before the break-up emphasises his longing to return to his past circumstances, to
recapture his romantic routine. The scenes in which the Midnight Express manager
provides Cop 663 with advice bring to mind earlier scenes involving Cop 223 when the
manager encourages him to date a waitress, who ironically shares the same name as his ex-
girlfriend, May. The heroin trafficker and Faye cross paths at a toy store, and Cop 223 and
Cop 663 both lurk around the Mid-Levels Escalator late at night. By revisiting these sites in
the film, a series of journeys that are repeated in \textit{Fallen Angels} (1995), Wong invests the
settings with their own identity and eccentric charm, thereby subverting the idea that they
are merely non-places in a global city.\textsuperscript{80} The repetition of specific locations and patterns of
movement therefore seeks to cultivate an alternative set of urban memories.

In many respects, the settings recall the locations inhabited by the wandering
romantics of the \textit{nouvelle vague}. As Barbara Mennel writes, the \textit{nouvelle vague} films were based:

\begin{quote}
…on a sense of urbanism in which conventional mores and social ties between
friends and family have disappeared. However, in the films of the \textit{nouvelle vague}
we also find that the city…appears as the setting for affective relationships
substituting for conventional family structures: coffee-houses, bars, and the street
become home.\textsuperscript{81}
\end{quote}

Wong is surely making a playful comment on the transience of urban malaise with his
constant references to convenience stores and fast-food restaurants; however, the
characters’ incessant return to these locations throughout the film reinforces their
importance and draws attention to the fact that Augé’s non-places – spaces that are
disregarded as important in terms of identity, memory and community – are in fact places
of identification for the characters in Wong’s film. As sites of unexpected human

\textsuperscript{79} Ban Wang, \textit{Illuminations from the Past: Trauma, Memory, and History in Modern China} (Stanford: Stanford

particular, contends that, “\textit{Fallen Angels} not only recapitulates Chungking’s traffic-blur tone and goof-ball
energy, it cryptically recovers a variety of stray murmurs from each of Wong’s other films.”

\textsuperscript{81} Mennel, p. 67. This can particularly be seen in Truffaut’s Antoine Doinel films (\textit{The Four Hundred Blows}
[1959], \textit{Antoine et Colette} [1962], \textit{Stolen Kisses} [1968], \textit{Bed and Board} [1970] and \textit{Love on the Run} [1979]) and
Rohmer’s \textit{Six Moral Tales} (\textit{The Bakery Girl of Monceau} [1962], \textit{Suzanne’s Career} [1963], \textit{My Night at Maud’s} [1969],
\textit{La Collectionneuse} [1967], \textit{Claire’s Knee} [1970] and \textit{Love in the Afternoon} [1972]).
connection, such locations symbolise the potential for union: they are the sites where the characters’ memories are formed and embedded. Here, the past is not visualised merely in relation to people and events, but also landmarks an embodied geography.

In “Dialectic of Deception”, an extension of his monograph Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance, Abbas argues that the “fascination of these non-places is that they are like the city’s reverse image, its negative representation.”82 This negative representation is present not only in the filming of locations that would normally go unnoticed, those that are hidden in the city’s reverse image, but also in investing these locations with narrative intent. By using these sites as the loci of the characters’ emotional geographies, Wong suggests that non-places are the contemporary sites of connection and that they are the receptacle for desires, dreams and memories.83

Urban Daydreams: Sleep Walking Through the City

Reverie on the Filmic Map

Alongside the representation of the concrete, architectural elements of the city and the characters’ recollections that are tied to these physical locations is a dreaming subjectivity. Moving further into a realm of cloistered emotion, this dreamed vision of the city unleashes the characters’ fantasies into the streets and spaces of Hong Kong. Parallel to the frenetic juxtapositions of movement and stasis that represent the contradictions of memory is a more languid cinematographic mood: a sleepwalking waltz. This atmospheric shift is best demonstrated in one of the first scenes with Cop 663 and Faye, which is filmed at the Midnight Express. She is shot behind the counter quietly gazing at Cop 663 as he drinks a cup of coffee. The scene creates a private space between Faye and Cop 663 that presents them in slow motion while the urban environment outside the space they share is pictured at double speed. The drunken slowness of their shared space is overtaken by the non-diegetic sound of a droning aeroplane engine that drowns out the natural soundscape of Lan Kwai Fong. This shared moment is surreal and stretches the temporal present of the film image so that Faye and Cop 663 are positioned outside real time. While the inhabitants of the city pass in a blur, they are confined to a suspended, dream space.84

83 See Huang, p. 32. Huang posits a similar idea and states that the characters “desire to expose the hidden corners of architectures/buildings of the city maze, de-compartmentalizing the mysterious beehive space, and mapping out a legible city for themselves.”
84 See Blair Miller, “…Simply Because You’re Near Me: Love, Chungking Express and In the Mood for Love.” Cineaction 62 (2003), p. 58. Miller writes that both Chungking Express and In the Mood for Love frame the characters to give “the impression that the individuals are living at a different speed than the rest of the modern world, their faces of glazed infatuation somehow thrusting them into a sort of suspended animation.”
Here, Cop 663 and Faye are portrayed as outside the rapid flux of the city: the first indication that they are dreamers who approach urban space with a different interior rhythm. The various aeroplanes continue to be utilised as objects of cartographic navigation; however, in this instance, the aeroplane is also integrated into the film’s sound design, thereby signalling a mode of mapping that extends beyond aesthetics and geography to the aural environment. This alternative mapping, which broadens the exploration of Wong’s filmic city as a space that is simultaneously public and private, tracks an oneiric topography that is particularly heightened by the film’s soundtrack, which allows Hong Kong to be filtered through the characters’ musical choices. Faye’s repeated playing of The Mamas & the Papas’ “California Dreamin’” is symbolic not only of her desire to travel to California to find out if it really is “sunny and warm”, but also of her general longing for other places, as seen in her playful invasion of Cop 663’s apartment. Similarly, the allusion to “romance on your menu” by Washington in her rendition of “What a Difference a Day Makes” is the unattainable object that Cop 663 pines for after his girlfriend has left. The music that the characters listen to gestures towards their innermost desires, and by filling both the public and private spaces that they inhabit with personal melodies, they project their dreams onto the city. Therefore, the intertwining of place, visual rhythm and music is the foundation for the film’s dreaming geography.

Untangling Dreams and Film

The close relationship between film aesthetics and dreams is explored by scholars such as Robert Curry and Thorsten Botz-Bornstein, whose individual critiques highlight the visual
connections between processes of film editing and the non-linear, fragmented images arising from dreams. In Curry’s philosophical article “Films and Dreams”, he writes that:

Films do invite comparison with dreams. In general our dreams simply seem more cinematic than our days. A curious, discontinuous way of unfolding characterizes films and dreams. Dreams are characterized by spatio-temporal discontinuities that are very like cuts in a film. The dream, like the film, freely leaps from one place or situation, or one position in a place or situation, to another.85

A dreaming trajectory can be seen in the film camera’s symbolic breakdown of geographical boundaries in Chungking Express, where the transportation required to travel from one district of Hong Kong to another is omitted from the final cut. However, this dreaming state is not signalled in abstract superimpositions or hallucinatory sequences that suggest a separate oneiric realm. In a similar fashion to the eschewal of flashbacks to distinguish past and present, Chungking Express realises a specific “dreamtense”, to appropriate Botz-Bornstein’s turn of phrase, which does not attempt to separate reality and fantasy.86 The characters’ dreams are not confined to the privacy of their homes at night, but involve active participation with the city. For example, the nostalgic refrain of “California Dreamin’”, which is played in almost every scene set at the Midnight Express that features Faye, displays the moulding of exterior space through Faye’s dreaming conscious – a subjectivity that Cop 663 is slowly drawn into, while, as I will discuss in further detail later, the other characters are excluded.

Botz-Bornstein provides clear parameters for his theorising of “dreamtense” as a shift away from the limitations of language to aesthetics. In his introduction to Film and Dreams he observes that, “To discuss dream theory in the context of film studies means moving from the original, clinical context within which dream theory was initially developed, to an environment established by primarily aesthetic concerns.”87 He continues this line of reasoning with his reading of the dreaming motif in Chungking Express by situating his analysis within Japanese kawaii culture.88 Taking this cute and hyperreal cultural phenomenon as a reference point for the characters’ dream states, Botz-Bornstein narrows his interpretation of the kawaii influence in Chungking Express to an:

…eminent disillusion with society as well as a psychological helplessness [that] has created a (youth) culture that engages in unspirited consumption and the creation of a commodified dreamworld…Unable to live a ‘real’ life, the characters

87 Botz-Bornstein, p. ix.
88 Simply translated, kawaii means “adorable”, “cute” or “lovely” in Japanese. Some visual examples of kawaii include Hello Kitty, Pokemon and Sailor Moon.
in Wong’s films decide to reside in a commodified dreamworld without *real* relationships.\(^{89}\)

The substitution of commodities – cans of pineapple, tinned sardines, blonde wigs and stuffed toys – for reciprocal romantic relationships and the imaginative creation of an alternative space is certainly one way of joining the representation of the city to dreams. However, I am less concerned with interpreting the film’s dreaming subjectivity through a lens of commodity fetishism than unpacking the characters’ projections of emotion onto the city and how this “commodified dreamworld” is integrated into Wong’s filmic imagining of Hong Kong.

What I believe is missing from both of these analyses of the interconnections between film and dream is a stronger discussion of the impact of sound. Dreams are highly sensory experiences which are not confined to visual stimuli, but which are often composed of soundscapes. It is the marriage of image and sound that produces the dream, just as these factors combine to make a sound film. The characters’ sense of loneliness – what Botz-Bornstein refers to as an inability to engage in real relationships – is alleviated by dreaming and the fabrication of interior worlds that replace the disappointments of external reality. The characters’ dream spaces are constructed in large part by replacing their sense of emptiness with music and private reflections. When Faye fails to arrive at the California bar for her date with Cop 663, he plays some music on the bar’s jukebox before he starts talking to beer bottles. Here, the public spaces of the city, and the objects within them, are beset with Cop 663’s most intimate sentiments.

The dreamy commodification of personal landscapes seemingly begins after Cop 663’s girlfriend leaves him and he copes by projecting his grief onto the objects in his apartment: “Ever since she left, everything in the apartment is sad. I have to comfort them all before I go to sleep.” Cop 663’s engagement in meaningful conversations with his possessions reveals a confusion between interior and exterior boundaries, as well as the need to soundtrack his experience of the city. It would appear that he can no longer listen to the empty promises of romance in Washington’s song, a piece of music that is tied to his lost relationship, so he fills his environment with conversation. His bizarre series of dialogues are, of course, not actually used to console the objects, but rather to create a monologue of assurance that Cop 663 uses to mend his own broken heart. Out of tempo with the normal speed of the city, the dream space that Cop 663 constructs enables him to engage in non-threatening relationships that do not involve a real sense of interaction, thereby enabling him to re-assert a semblance of control over his private topography.

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\(^{89}\) Botz-Bornstein, pp. 72-78. For an alternative reading of commodities in *Chungking Express* see Marchetti, “Buying American, Consuming Hong Kong,” pp. 289-313.
By displacing his feelings onto his objects, he is convinced that his bar of soap has weight issues, that one of his stuffed toys has suddenly become dirty and has been involved in fights, that his tea towel is “very emotional” and that his apartment is crying: “Did I leave the faucet running, or is the apartment getting more weepy? I thought it would cope all right. I didn’t expect it to weep this much. When people cry, you just give them a tissue. But when an apartment cries, it’s a lot of work to mop it up.” Rather than looking for rational explanations for the changes in his everyday existence, everything is viewed through the prism of his heartbreak and romantic abandonment, and he maps his own emotions onto surrounding objects, whether he is in a public space, such as the California bar, or his home. Although the viewer is let in on the joke, it takes a while for Cop 663 to realise that his everyday life is being shaped by Faye. While he shuts himself away in his apartment, maintaining a dialogue of loss, she slowly brings the city, as well as her dreaming influence, into his private space.

In effect, play and imagination, through the personification of objects, are inscribed in the spatial practices of the characters. Interacting with commodities becomes an avenue through which to communicate desire. When Faye breaks into Cop 663’s apartment, it is the process of substituting new commodities and rearranging his apartment that alters Cop 663’s perception and allows him to move on from his ex-girlfriend and embrace a new life as the owner of the Midnight Express. Further, this bizarre game evinces the desire, as well as the need, to transform the city into a space of fantasy and play. Prior to this shift, Cop 663 leads a life subject to routine and ritual. When he unwisely brings home different meal options for his girlfriend, substituting fish and chips and pizza for chef’s salads, she leaves

Figure 2.8. Coping with a broken heart: Cop 663’s monologues of loss (Chungking Express)
him, having been introduced to the desire “to try some new dishes.” Cop 663 muses that there is “Plenty of choice in men, just like food” and opts for a black coffee. The coffee may keep him awake; however, it does not prevent him from falling into a dream space.

At first, it is not clear whether Faye’s journeys to Cop 663’s apartment are merely her own dream sequences; however, when she begins to change his environment and establish her presence in his domestic space, the act of sleepwalking and transformation becomes a reality for both Cop 663 and Faye. In voice-over she muses, “I had a dream that afternoon. It seemed I was in his apartment and that I’d wake up when I left. I didn’t know you never wake up from some dreams.” Specifically, when she listens to “California Dreamin’” on his stereo while playing with his miniature aeroplanes, she creates a marriage of their separate dream states. Later she will bid farewell to Cop 663’s large white stuffed toy bear and forge a strange connection by replicating his behaviour of animating inanimate objects. Thus, Cop 663’s apartment becomes a private space of dreaming for both him and Faye. Significantly, it is her adoption of Cop 663’s language of aviation that facilitates the first sparks of a relationship and ties these two dreamers together.

Aeroplanes, Dreams and Desire

As I have previously commented, the presence of aeroplanes in the film’s *mise en scène* has been consistently interpreted through the intertwined lenses of romance and desire. In this sense, the aeroplanes have been utilised to enlarge a reading of the characters’ romantic relationships – an idea that I will appropriate and integrate into my analysis of dream, emotion and geography.

![Figure 2.9. The romance of aeronautical travel (*As Tears Go By*)](image)
Travel through flight is a symbolic, romantic thread in many of Wong’s films. Specifically, the use of aeroplane imagery began as early as *As Tears Go By* (1988), in which it is utilised to break down the geographical distance between Ngor (Maggie Cheung) and Wah (Andy Lau). While Ngor sits alone in the Lantau Island restaurant where she works, her gaze drifts outside the cinematic frame as she throws a paper aeroplane that floats off-screen. This scene cuts to a shot of a real aeroplane flying in the sky that Wah is watching from a rooftop in Kowloon. The two different manifestations of the aeroplane connect the lovers’ separate geographical spaces and stands as a representation of their psychological states; that is, their longing for union and the melancholy of parting. The dissolution of the spatial boundaries via the aeroplane suggests a dream-like connection and that the aeroplane, in its various guises, is an object that transcends reality. More evocatively, the relative silence of the scene featuring Ngor is juxtaposed to the excessive audio in the scene featuring Wah: the sound of the aeroplane comes to represent the anguish of separation.

Wong’s other films – such as *Days of Being Wild* and *Happy Together* (1997) – invoke flight by undertaking journeys that involve leaving Hong Kong for an overseas destination. However, the metaphor of flight finds its most poetic expression in *Chungking Express*, as the film does not actually leave Hong Kong. Travel by aeroplane, which generally involves the departure from one place and the arrival at another, is integrated into Hong Kong’s dense and compact urban space. The repetitive utilisation of aeroplane imagery, symbolic objects of flight and aeronautical soundscapes is not concerned with leaving Hong Kong, but encapsulates travels of the imagination. Forming a part of this imaginary travel is a romantic trajectory in which the aeroplanes signal transitions in love and emotion. When Cop 663’s ex-girlfriend tries to contact him after a long absence, she leaves a message on his answering machine: “The plane’s back in Hong Kong. Want to make reservation?” In addition, the original boarding pass that she drops off at the Midnight Express uses flight as a mode of rejection, while Faye will later make Cop 663 a boarding pass that implies a shared journey. In Wong’s structuring of Cop 663’s love story, flight and romance are intentionally joined in scenes where boarding passes represent romantic intentions and toy aeroplanes are used as foreplay.

The profound mobility of aeroplane travel is the element that positions it as a sign of transcendence and change. Alain de Botton writes in *The Art of Travel* that the aeroplane is “a symbol of worldliness, carrying within itself a trace of all the lands it has crossed, its eternal mobility offering an imaginative counterweight to feelings of stagnation and confinement.” Indeed, each time the non-diegetic sound of an aeroplane engine is heard

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in the film narrative, it can be interpreted as the romantic signifier of an arrival, a departure or the “delay” of love. In one scene, shot in the Midnight Express, Faye attempts to drink black coffee – the drink of choice for heartbroken Cop 663. Putting aside her drink, she gently closes her eyes as the roar of an aeroplane returns. The scene then cuts from the Midnight Express to a shot of Faye using the ex-girlfriend’s key to enter Cop 663’s apartment. The Midnight Express manager’s demand, “Stop daydreaming, will you?”, which is directed at both Faye and a male member of the kitchen staff, awakens Faye and reveals that the scene at Cop 663’s door is a daydream. Although the camera cuts to another location, Faye has seemingly not left the Midnight Express, and the sound of take off is therefore symbolic of the metaphorical flight of amorous dreaming; the transportation into the dream space of Cop 663’s apartment that will allow her to experience a remote intimacy with him. In this respect, the aeroplane serves as an apt metaphor for the presence and absence of romance. Specifically, dreaming through the urban spaces of Hong Kong is bound up with projected thoughts of romance whereby the transience and slipperiness of love are imagined through the movement of aeroplanes. As Huang writes, “the roar of engines…has been magically transcribed to a serenade of love.”

However, for all the allusions to love and romance in the film, Wong consistently denies the viewer romantic closure. Instead, he prefers to keep romance in a dream state of possibility/impossibility, and distances that can be erased by dreams of flight rarely take place in reality. In Chungking Express, the reciprocation of romantic feelings is as intangible as a dream that fades from the waking consciousness. Simultaneously projecting the disappointments of love and the hope of connection, this in-between state – which encapsulates both the reality of urban alienation and the desire to overcome the restrictions of this emotional response – is architecturally imagined through two locations: Cop 663’s apartment and the nearby Mid-levels Escalator. Pinpointed on Wong’s filmic map as sites of intense emotional connection, the spatial relationship between these locations portrays the conflation of public and private.

Urban Drift/City Dream

It would be reasonable to assume that the dream mapping that I have described thus far predominantly resides within interior space and is detached from the city itself; however, the aeroplane motif is again important in connecting public space to private emotions. In particular, Cop 663’s apartment is a threshold site in which airborne emotions move from the domestic interior to the urban environment. In the majority of the scenes that take

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91 Huang, p. 42.
place in the apartment, the city and the home are portrayed as porous sites with very little distinction between the two spheres. In particular, the apartment’s propinquity to the Mid-levels Escalator presents the home as a liminal space that bestrides public and private. Dreams, which are normally a private and interior phenomenon, are “propelled” and mapped onto the city by breaking down the boundaries between these separate realms. Specifically, it is Faye who ruptures these distinctions in scenes in which she throws her paper aeroplanes and shouts greetings out of Cop 663’s window at the unsuspecting travellers on the escalator.

Significantly, Hong Kong-based urban design and architectural theorists Laurent Gutierrez and Valérie Portefaix write that the Mid-Levels Escalator’s “proximity to the windows of adjacent buildings produces an enigmatic in-between space”, and go further to suggest that the escalator is “a natural extension of the apartment” where “intimacy is reversed.” They elaborate further:

Passing from inside to outside, one is in his own garden...The tendency in big cities is in the disappearance of the domestic private spaces. Cafes, restaurants and karaoke rooms become alternative places where people can get together. The Escalator becomes a refuge in the vastness of the big city. It is already home and no longer the street of the city.92

Gutierrez and Portefaix’s suggestion that the escalator, along with other public locales in the city, provides a new conception of home mirrors my previous reference to Wong’s investment in non-places as the film’s central sites. The rather poetic idea that the escalator is one’s “own garden” implies that this public space is, similar to a garden, a part of the home or an exterior room. Resting on the borders of domestic space and public space, the garden/escalator functions as the perfect repository for the characters’ floating dreams and hopes.

In Cop 663’s memory montage of him and the flight attendant sexually flirting and playing in his apartment, there is a shot that features them kissing passionately against the wardrobe in his bedroom. In the background, the curtain is pulled to reveal a section of the window through which passengers on the Mid-Levels Escalator can be seen momentarily floating past Cop 663’s apartment. The flowing, silhouetted movements of the unknown people travelling adjacent to this window hint at a travelling discourse of romance that is heightened by Cop 663’s placement of the toy aeroplanes on the flight attendant’s semi-naked body following sexual intercourse. Inevitably, the flight attendant will pass from his life as fluidly as the people move past his apartment window. In the following scene she is dressed in her United Airways uniform and is pulling a small suitcase up one of the moving

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ramps of the escalator. She leans down so that she can wave to Cop 663, who is standing at the window in his underwear. It is perhaps no coincidence that moving walkways feature largely in many airports to help passengers move easily while carrying their luggage. To this end, the scene on the Mid-Levels Escalator could easily have taken place in an airport setting.93 The juxtaposition of the flight attendant in a public space that shares a similar visual look to an airport with Cop 663 in his apartment heightens the strange tension between public and private. There is the further dimension that this scene spills from the memories of Cop 663 and could possibly verge more on the side of fantasy than be a reliable reflection of his retrospective reality.

Indeed, the lack of distinction between the apartment and the escalator within the public domain will increasingly be linked to the film’s aeroplanes in their alternative role as dreaming objects. In the first vignette, the abstract presence of aeroplanes, encapsulated in the use of Kai Tak Airport as a location, is initially aligned with betrayal; however, after the heroin trafficker books a ticket on an overseas flight, the aeroplane is re-imagined as an object of escape. It is through the aeroplane motif that the plot of the first vignette intersects with the narrative of the second vignette, as the idea of escape that is linked to aeroplanes in the first half of the film is pushed to the extreme by connecting flight with a specific form of escapism: dream travels.

The emotional fault lines on Wong’s map converge on the “floating way” of the Mid-Levels Escalator, as its architectural mobility and proximity to Cop 663’s apartment position it at the nexus of the film’s romantic encounters.94 Serving as a counterpoint to the unchanging edifice of Chungking Mansions, and as a location that simultaneously encapsulates opposing ideas of memory and amnesia, the drift of the escalator produces a divergent mapping. Specifically, it is the perfect architectural metaphor for the interplay between geography and (e)motion, to appropriate Bruno’s hybrid term, and displays how Wong utilises the sites of Hong Kong to construct a symbolic map that accords to his characters’ desires.95 For example, Faye is later seen travelling on the escalator following one of her escapades in Cop 663’s apartment, and this shot serves as a repetition of the earlier scene involving the flight attendant, thereby re-creating the flight attendant’s journey of desire. Just as the sound of an aeroplane engine is the audio signifier of the shifts in affection, the escalator functions as a visual metaphor for the fluidity of emotion.

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93 See Martha P. Nochimson, “Beautiful Resistance: The Early Films of Wong Kar-wai.” Cineaste 30.4 (2005), p. 11. Nochimson worked on the basis that the setting for the escalator scenes is a mall in a misreading that emphasises both the visual slipperiness of the location and the importance of knowing Hong Kong’s real geography in understanding the film.

94 Japanese researchers have adopted the term “floating way” to describe architectural structures that incorporate a moving component.

95 Bruno, Public Intimacy, p. 6.
As the Mid-Levels Escalator was not fully constructed and operational until 1993, *Chungking Express* is one of the first Hong Kong films to feature the escalator as a location. Stretching from Queens Road Central to Conduit Road in Mid-Levels, the escalator is literally embedded in the interconnecting streets of SoHo. It is at once part of the streetscape and yet separate from it — a moving entity that establishes a fleeting, yet monotonous, relationship with the spaces it intersects. The series of moving walkways enables a serene fluidity of space in contrast to the frenetic pedestrian experience on the streets of Hong Kong. While it is feasible to ascend or descend the escalator in a hurried fashion, it is also possible to allow the drift of the escalator to move the passenger through the city. Accordingly, the escalator pierces Hong Kong’s topography to produce a form of transportation that has its own temporality and relationship with urban space; a slower pace that coincidentally accords to the sedate space that Cop 663 and Faye first inhabit in the Midnight Express scene. The escalator can be viewed as both a functional form of transport and a space of mobile leisure. Extending the link between leisure and mobility, Gutierrez and Portefaix draw a correlation between the drift of gondolas in Venice and the escalator:

> The tempo and balance of the gondolas imitate precisely the timing and rhythm of a person walking and, like a moving walkway, travels neither faster nor slower than a pedestrian. This is what causes the particular hypnotic character of these aquatic or mechanical modes of transportation. The individual is hypnotised by the lasting impressions and the regular unfolding of the surrounding facades naturally leads one into a state of drowsiness and reverie.96

The suggestion that movement on such aquatic and mechanical modes of transportation produces a state of “drowsiness and reverie” due to the dreamlike superimposition of urban sites along the route underlines a connection between travel and dreaming. In the scene in which Faye travels on the escalator, she is presented in a reflection that weaves her image twice into the landscape so that she is at once herself, the travelling subject, and an oneiric trace that inheres in the urban environment. Furthermore, as portions of the escalator are constructed above ground level, as opposed to being directly embedded into the street, the escalator allows for a suspended experience. I suggest that, on the escalator, the elevated floating position above the streets allows for an experience that is similar to flight: the drift of the escalator matches the aeroplane’s ethereal mobility carving out a space for the city’s dreamers.

96 Gutierrez and Portefaix, “Liquid Journey.”
Having said that, I have previously implied that the dream mapping of Wong’s emotional geography is not accessible to all the characters. In particular, the heroin trafficker does not allow herself to dream. Indeed, Chungking Mansions, where she spends the majority of her time on-screen, can be interpreted as a space where people who have searched for the “Hong Kong dream” stay after they fail to integrate their dreams with reality. Huang, in her global reading of the characters’ journeys, writes that the heroin trafficker is “fatally anesthetized by the ideology of global city as a place where dreams come true, [for] dealers and dreamers alike…The path she takes to reach her global dream turns out to be nightmare, because of her optimistic reading of these global spaces [Chungking Mansion and Kai Tak] as convenient, controllable, and legible.”97 When she kills her boss and removes her blonde wig at the end of the film, the inference is that she has escaped the confines of the restrictive journey that she has been made to follow; however, the viewer is left in limbo as to her final fate.

Cop 223, whilst possessing a pining romantic subjectivity similar to Cop 663, is also denied access to the film’s dream spaces. In one scene, filmed near the escalator, he calls May’s house, only to hear a male voice on the other end of the line. In a fit of rage, he runs up the escalator yelling dramatically, “I’ll kill you, Tomokazu Miura!”98 The nocturnal scene takes place sometime after midnight, when the escalator ceases to operate. However, despite the late hour, Cop 223 is far from a state of reverie. Frantically running up the

97 Huang, pp. 33-34.
98 ‘Tomokazu Miura is a Japanese actor. This scene references an earlier comment by Cop 223 that he believed that May had wished he looked more like the Japanese movie star: “The boss here says she [May] looks like Yamaguchi Momoe. She likes that. She and I just broke up. She wished I were more like Tomokazu Miura myself.”
stationary escalator, he is not permitted to float through the urban environment like the characters in the second vignette. Burdened with the memories of his failed relationship, he is excluded from the dream journey that has literally terminated its route. It would appear that this dreaming subjectivity is limited to Faye and Cop 663 as daydreamers that can frequent the escalator when it is in operation and are “in tune” with the sounds of the city. For example, when Cop 663 arrives at the Midnight Express to ask Faye out on a date he finds that she is playing “What a Difference A Day Makes”, a song that I have previously suggested is linked to memory. As he returns her The Mamas & the Papas CD, his comment alludes to their shared oneiric language, “That music’s not your style. Here’s your CD back.”

Faye: Daydreamer/Sleepwalker/Traveller

FAYE: I’m not daydreaming.

MANAGER: That’s right. You’re sleepwalking!

In Italo Calvino’s *Invisible Cities*, the explorer Marco Polo recounts to emperor Kublai Khan tales of the cities that he has explored. In narrating his experience of the city of Chloe, he claims that:

…the people who move through the streets are all strangers. At each encounter, they imagine a thousand things about one another; meetings which could take place between them, conversations, surprises, caresses, bites. But no one greets anyone; eyes lock for a second, then dart away, seeking other eyes, never stopping.  

The sleepwalkers, as I will refer to them, of Calvino’s imaginary city reveal a particular emotional response to the anonymity of the city, whereby imagination bridges the gap between alienation and interaction. The dreams of “conversations, surprises, caresses, bites” fill the empty emotional spaces of the urban landscape and connect Chloe’s drifting wanderers. Indeed, human geographer Steve Pile asserts that, “While society may be more and more grown up and rational, the world which people inhabit is still a world of dreams…the ‘real’ world is a sequence of memories, and dreams, conscious or otherwise.”

I believe Pile is commenting on the manner in which understandings of place are deeply subjective and that human/spatial interactions are mediated through personal reflections, memories and projections. Faye, the sleepwalking subject of *Chungking Express*, cocoons herself in wistful imaginings that spill onto the streets of Hong Kong. This is

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particularly revealed when she is officially introduced in the film narrative. Before Faye and Cop 663 first lay eyes on one another, her presence is felt in Lan Kwai Fong through the reverberations of “California Dreamin’”, which is blaring from the Midnight Express stereo. However, rather than briefly making eye contact and parting, Cop 663 and Faye are drawn together.

During the first meeting between Faye and Cop 663, he manages to pierce her musical bubble and asks her if she likes listening to loud music, to which she replies, “Yes. The louder the better. Keeps me from thinking so much.” This early admission foregrounds Faye’s preference for dreaming over rational thought: a subjectivity that is captured through music. As she bops her head and sways her body to the tune of “California Dreamin’”, Faye introduces Cop 663 to a new language that is reciprocated in her adoption of his investment in aeroplane symbolism. When the film cuts to the next scene at the Midnight Express, which the viewer is led to presume is the following evening, “California Dreamin’” is still blaring from the stereo and Faye is dancing with a plastic bottle of tomato sauce in one hand and a plastic funnel in the other. The association between “California Dreamin’” and Faye continues throughout the film and appears like a recurring dream of her own making; the symbolic soundtrack to her oneiric drift.

Faye’s role as a daydreaming urban subject is magnified by the use of both diegetic and non-diegetic music in the film. Her constant playing of “California Dreamin’” as she works in the Midnight Express is complemented by Faye Wong’s own Canto-pop version of The Cranberries’ “Dreams”, renamed “Dream Person” (“Moong joong yun”). The diegetic use of “California Dreamin’” resonates with Faye’s longing to travel, and her decision to journey to California towards the end of the film is motivated by the lyrics of the song when she muses, “Watching through the window, I saw a rainy California. I needed to know if the other California was warm and sunny.” The song evokes not only another place, but also another time. Originally recorded by The Mamas & the Papas in 1965, the sound recalls the free-spirited hippie movement and its idealism that correlates to Faye’s wanderlust.

In an essay entitled “Chasing the Metaphysical Express”, David Martinez discusses the importance of the characters’ audioscapes:

In Wong Kar-wai’s films the characters create their own sound environment. They hear and above all listen to music. Music exacerbates their narcissistic impulses, brings out their natural sensuality and consolidates the fantasy worlds that they invent for themselves. Music creates pockets of fiction within the overall fiction of the story, mini-narratives for the characters.”

The musicality of dreams is emphasised throughout the film and is one of the central cinematic techniques for shaping the viewer’s perception of the urban environment. Sound leads to dreaming and music gives form and language to the characters’ desires. This idea is emphasised in the film’s final close-up of the stereo in the Midnight Express. As the image lingers on-screen, the song “Dream Person” begins to play before the credits start to roll. Although Faye appears quite nonchalant when she discovers Cop 663 renovating the Midnight Express, her feelings are revealed through this final piece of music. The shift from longing for California to the presence of a man “bursting into [her] dreary dreams” in “Dream Person” evinces Faye’s commitment to a new mode of imagining. However, the lines “I want you to be real/My heart can no longer resist” suggest that Faye will break out of her dream world and pursue a relationship with Cop 663.

In truth, Faye Wong’s “Dream Person” is crucial to narrating Faye’s emotions throughout the film. Martinez’s reference to “pockets of fiction” is interesting in this context. As a dreamer, Faye is portrayed as cut off from everyday reality. For example, she is unable to undertake her basic duties at the Midnight Express because she prefers to spend her time in Cop 663’s apartment. Her dreamy travels through Hong Kong are, as I have already suggested, aimed at achieving a strange form of romantic intimacy; however, the musical accompaniment of “Dream Person” in the scenes in which she is in Cop 663’s apartment reveals a further layer to her emotional state:

Man in my dreams  
I hold you tight for a minute  
And kiss you for hours.  
Stranger  
You stole into my heart  
And set it all awhirl.

I’ve been in love with you before  
But never felt so close to you as now  
My thoughts careen out of control  
Why have you taken me by storm?  
Bursting into my dreary dreams  
Sending shock waves in every direction.

Man in my dreams  
I want you to be real  
My heart can no longer resist  
Searching in my dreams  
At this minute I’m waiting  
To kiss you for hours.102

102 For a further discussion of the use of “Dream Person” in Chungking Express, see Brian Hu, “Pop Music and Wong Kar-wai (visual essay),” Mediascape (2011)
The song is centrally featured in a musical montage that captures Faye altering Cop 663’s domestic space over a series of visits. She introduces new goldfish to his fish tank, replaces his household objects and clothing with new items, alters the labels on his canned foodstuffs, places sleeping pills in his bottled water and deletes a message left on his answering machine from his ex-girlfriend. She even tries on his ex-girlfriend’s uniform, thereby further engaging with Cop 663’s fantasies of flight. The significance of using “Dream Person”, as opposed to “California Dreamin’”, represents a new dream trajectory in which Faye has momentarily put aside her desire to travel to California in favour of Cop 663. Further, the music highlights the cinematic imagery and produces an audiovisual moment in which Faye’s dreamy, childlike mentality becomes Cop 663’s domestic reality. The visual gag of a shot of Faye counting down the seconds on her fingers as she looks at her watch before the camera cuts to a shot of Cop 663 sleeping with his head on his dining table after consuming the drugged water emphasises the infiltration of Faye’s dreamy perspective into the life of Cop 663. On closer inspection, Cop 663 rests his head on an incomplete jigsaw puzzle of the moon that also has one of his tiny aeroplanes placed on it. In this shot, dreaming, toy planes and travel converge to create a moment that brings the characters together despite their physical distance. Wong’s filmic topography is split and sewn together, resulting in a map of the imagination.

Chapter Two

The Exile of Love: At the Crossroads of Desire in *Happy Together* (1997)

…in a land of zero degree,
with neither east nor west,
has neither day nor night,
which is neither cold nor warm,
I learned the feeling of exile.

- Wong Kar-wai¹

…and if there is an insecurity or anxiety associated with travel, it is that insecurity associated with the menace of irreparable loss. This loss can affect not only one’s monetary assets but one’s very life or sanity. Or one can simply lose one’s way, since the possibility of there being no return is always implied in travel. Every voyage is potentially a voyage into exile, a voyage to the ‘end of the night’…A positive evaluation of travel likewise occurs when the voyage is seen as an escape either in the banal urge to ‘get away from it all’ or in the Baudelairean flight from ennui.

- Georges Van den Abbeele²

Introduction

The geographical space featured in *Happy Together* (1997) is a significant transition from Wong Kar-wai’s local streets of Hong Kong to the new landscape of Argentina. Initially inspired by the novels of Argentinean writer Manuel Puig, Wong would eventually dispense with his idea of adapting Puig’s *The Buenos Aires Affair* (1973) in favour of developing his own story. Although the plot of *Happy Together* bears little resemblance to Puig’s novel, the theme of impossible love in *The Buenos Aires Affair* is maintained in the film.³ However, the anxieties surrounding romantic union are given a different expression in *Happy Together*, in

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¹ Wong quoted in *Buenos Aires Zero Degree* (1998), a documentary on the making of *Happy Together* directed by Kwan Pun-leung and Amos Lee. The film can be accessed via the special features section of the 2005 region four DVD release of *Happy Together* by Madman Films.


which impossible love runs parallel to an impossible geography. Specifically, love and exile – desire and displacement – are symbolically explored in the film through the characters’ perceptions of the unknown terrain of Argentina.

In an intriguing parallel, the tensions of relocation were also experienced off-screen, when the cast and crew were stuck overseas for four months despite a six-week shooting schedule. Following this extended period of filming in Argentina, the Hong Kong cinematic release of Happy Together took place a matter of months before the handover of Hong Kong in July 1997. Embedding the theme of exile within the love story at the centre of the film, Happy Together touches upon the issue of migration that was at the forefront of Hong Kong’s political and social climate leading up to the handover, as Hong Kong people determined whether to remain in the region after its return to the People’s Republic of China or to move overseas.

As Wong’s first film set primarily outside Asia, Happy Together certainly stands out in his cinematic oeuvre in terms of its engagement with issues of place, home and travel. To this end, scholars have predominantly interpreted the characters’ exile as a political comment that is largely concerned with anxieties of national identity in the shadow of the handover. A notable example is Lisa Odham Stokes and Michael Hoover who contend that the film “offers a reaction to Hong Kong’s then imminent return to China…The movie is Wong’s most direct political statement to date – a challenge to the ‘normalization’ of Hong Kong-Mainland relations on the eve of the handover.” They continue by stating, “Happy Together offers several possible scenarios for the reunion of Hong Kong and China: escape, lament, embrace, acceptance, and choice.” Notwithstanding the historical significance of the film’s release occurring two months before the handover, my reading of Happy Together is less concerned with a socio-historical or political analysis than with an intimate interpretation that is grounded in examining the tensions at the heart of the film’s exploration of love and desire. After all, the narrative trajectory of Happy Together moves

4 The homesickness that both the cast and crew experienced during the shoot in Buenos Aires is recorded in Buenos Aires Zero Degree.
5 Teo, Wong Kar-wai, p. 100. Happy Together was released in Hong Kong at the end of April 1997.
6 See Gina Marchetti, From Tian’anmen to Times Square: Transnational China and the Chinese Diaspora on Global Screens, 1989-1997 (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006), p. xi. Marchetti writes that in the period following the signing of the Joint Declaration, “[t]he number of those committed to leaving both mainland China and Hong Kong increased, and Chinese communities in the United States, Canada, Australia, and elsewhere swelled dramatically.”
from an image of close physicality and sexual intimacy to a complete separation: the exile of love.

In the shift from public politics to private desire, the film follows the complex relationship between a Hong Kong-Chinese homosexual couple, Lai Yiu-fai (Tony Leung Chiu-wai) and Ho Po-wing (Leslie Cheung). Shot predominantly on location in Buenos Aires, with the concluding scenes shot in Taipei, the film narrative is structured into three parts and portrays the unravelling of Fai and Po-wing’s union and the alienation of their love through a lens of geographical displacement. The first part establishes Fai and Po-wing's emotionally tumultuous relationship and portrays the consequences of their first on-screen separation, the second part focuses on their reunion, and the third part shows the aftermath of their final disunion.⁹

The film opens with a strikingly raw scene of lovemaking between the two protagonists after Po-wing suggests that they “could start over.”¹⁰ Through Fai’s voice-over the viewer learns that he and Po-wing have been together for a long time and that their relationship is beset with break-ups and reunions. They have left Hong Kong and journeyed to Argentina to start afresh. Before returning to Hong Kong, they decide that the final destination of their trip will be the Iguazú Falls. En route to the waterfall they get lost, have problems with their rental car, and Po-wing, having grown bored, ends their relationship. With no money to travel back to Hong Kong, Fai and Po-wing are forced to settle in Buenos Aires and lead separate lives. While Fai works as a doorman in a tango bar that caters to Asian tourists, Po-wing earns money as a prostitute. Although their paths cross when Po-wing frequents the tango bar with his clients, they do not interact with one another until Po-wing forces a meeting that ends in a verbal and physical confrontation. In an attempt to help Fai financially, Po-wing steals a gold watch from one of his clients and is later beaten as a result. After Po-wing has been seriously assaulted in another incident, Fai allows Po-wing to move into his hotel room so that he can care for him.

The second section of the film signals a renewed connection between Fai and Po-wing, as Fai takes on the role of carer and he and Po-wing rekindle their affection for one another within Fai’s domestic setting. This second part also introduces a third male character, Chang (Chang Chen), a traveller from Taiwan who is working in Buenos Aires to save money to continue travelling. While Chang and Fai form a platonic relationship when they both work in the kitchen of a Chinese restaurant, Fai and Po-wing’s relationship becomes increasingly strained. Accusing one another of infidelity and secrecy, Fai’s

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⁹ See Peter Brunette, *Wong Kar-wai* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2005), p. 79. The separation of the film into three parts was a conscious decision that Wong made during filming and editing.

¹⁰ All dialogue is taken from the subtitles that accompany the 2005 region four DVD release of the film by Madman Films.
surreptitious confiscation of Po-wing’s passport further contributes to the increasing tension. Finally, Po-wing abandons both Fai and their home.

In the final part of the film, Chang and Fai become close friends; however, their friendship is cut short after Chang saves money and leaves for the lighthouse at Ushuaia in Tierra del Fuego. Left alone in Buenos Aires, Fai initially fills his time with anonymous sexual encounters in public spaces, but later starts working the night shift at an abattoir. He sets aside enough money to return to Hong Kong and drives to the Iguazú Falls before he departs South America. Fai’s lonesome fulfilment of his Argentinean journey in Po-wing’s absence is juxtaposed to Po-wing’s life in Buenos Aires where he has resumed working as a prostitute and has moved into their old hotel room. The film ends with Chang’s stopover in Buenos Aires where he attempts to find Fai; however, at this stage, Fai has begun his return journey to Hong Kong. Cutting to Taipei, Fai wakes in a hotel room to hear the news that Deng Xiaoping has passed away. Later that evening he visits the Liaoning Street night market and stops by the food stall run by Chang’s family. Having spotted an image of Chang taken at the lighthouse, he pockets the photograph and catches a train through the city. The concluding sequence of the film, which is set to Danny Chung’s version of The Turtles’ 1967 hit song “Happy Together”, follows Fai’s high-speed journey as the train travels through nocturnal Taipei.

These final kinetic moments, which evoke Fai’s movement into a new chapter in his life, resonate with the film’s conscious shift from public history, encapsulated in the representation of Deng’s death, to private narrative. As Stephen Teo observes in his commentary for the region four release of the film, “Wong is showing that history moves on a parallel track together with personal lives, which move on another track.” By focusing on the axis of the characters’ personal narratives, I propose to negotiate the complexities of exile in *Happy Together* by joining the motif of journeying with desire. The characters’ decision to travel to Argentina is, I argue, part of a quest for romantic fulfilment, and the repeated plea made by Po-wing to “start over” is a discourse of desire which is specific to the film and which is intensely geographically located. Indeed, the alignment of desire with the characters’ physical and emotional trajectories through the act of travelling is the point at which my argument takes shape. Migration is bound up with desire, and the process of journeying is prefigured as a pilgrimage of longing in the search for a mutual space of understanding, compassion and love.

However, the process of journeying within the film is not represented in a straightforward manner but is aligned with the push and pull of desire. In charting the characters’ search for a space of reciprocated emotion, the film portrays desire as

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movement, utilising geography to record both the possibilities and failures entangled with this process. In the same vein as the tango, which is a significant motif in the film, desire is represented through a disorientating rhythm that plays out through flowing patterns and abrupt pauses, thereby encapsulating a system of unfolding and withdrawing. This requires traversing an ambiguous and liminal space that Anna Gibbs evocatively describes as one “of complex negotiations between bodies” that engenders “flirtation, resistance, aggression... desire.” The navigation of desire in this chapter also adopts the tango’s choreography as it attends to the dynamics of the characters’ emotional and geographical journeys.

Significantly, the act of journeying is foregrounded in the opening of the film: the first image is of Fai and Po-wing’s British passports being stamped for admission to Argentina. As the finger of an unseen customs official scans the details of Fai’s passport it pauses on the information “British National (Overseas)” before the customs official sets it aside and examines Po-wing’s passport and stamps it with the date 12 May 1995. In the next scene, Po-wing is pictured lounging in his underwear on a single bed in a hotel room. As the camera zooms in on his body, he smokes a cigarette and gazes at a cylinder-shaped lamp. Against the seedy and decrepit background of the hotel room, the luminescence of the lamp is contrasted to the other pieces of detritus accumulated on their travels: a bottle of Wai Kiki, a can of beer, an ashtray full of cigarette butts and a few Polaroid pictures. Although the characters’ passports are an important element of the film narrative in the sense that they highlight that the characters’ eventual exile was initially self-imposed, it is the lamp that will draw the focus of my analysis. Certainly, the passports are the official travel documents that allow the crossing of geographical borders and provide legal paths into foreign countries; however, the lamp possesses a far more evocative function as an object of imaginary travel. Bearing an impressionistic image of the Iguazú Falls, it is the lamp that inspires the characters’ desire to visit the waterfall. As Fai reveals in a voice-over, “Here, we had no idea where to go. Then Po-wing bought a lamp and I really liked it. We wanted to find the waterfall on the lamp. We learnt it was at Iguazú. We wanted to come home after it, but we lost our way.” After they fail to complete their journey to the waterfall at the beginning of the film, the silent presence of the lamp is visually affirmed.

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13 See Lu, “Filming Diaspora and Identity,” p. 280. Lu interprets the focus on the passports as conveying the "uncertainty of national identity."
14 *Buenos Aires Zero Degree* features footage not used in the film, including a beautiful scene in which Fai playfully poses as Po-wing takes photographs of him. The Polaroid pictures on the bedside table are the only remnants of this lost scene that portrays a warm and intimate moment in the protagonists’ relationship. For further commentary on the relationship between *Happy Together* and the lost footage featured in *Buenos Aires Zero Degree*, see Joe McElhaney, “Happy Together.” *Senses of Cinema* 10 (2000) <http://www.sensesofcinema.com/2000/cf0q/happy/> (accessed 12 May 2006).
throughout *Happy Together* and serves as a constant reminder to both Fai and Po-wing of the vast distance between the various spaces that they inhabit in Buenos Aires and their site of desire.\(^\text{15}\)

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\(^\text{15}\) See Cameron, “Trajectories of Identification.” Writing specifically on the lantern, Cameron comments that it “becomes a mocking reminder of the Argentina they had hoped to visit, as opposed to the squalid and alienating spaces they actually experience.”
wing’s South American journey and a miniature landscape that is burdened with a romantic symbolism that is disconnected from the real site it represents.

The liminal nature of the lamp positions it as an important part of the cinematic mise en scène, as it gestures towards a space that exists between domesticity and nature, as well as home and travel. By principally encoding romantic aspirations within the lamp, the film negotiates desire through travelling landscapes – both real and imagined. In this sense, desire in Happy Together can be regarded as a topographical concern that is represented in motion, on thresholds and at the margins. The move away from Hong Kong is important in this respect as it suggests that the longed for space of love is one that is unfamiliar and exotic, much like a tourist destination. However, this idea carries its own problematic limitations due to the fact that the tourist’s gaze can never really uncover the specifics of the place it seeks to understand. It is from this complex position that this chapter will examine how the film articulates and expresses desire through place and spatial relations.

By situating desire in a state of geographical flux, I seek to focus on the love story at the centre of the film. This approach is a considerable shift away from extant readings that concentrate on issues of gay sexuality. 16 At the core of analyses that look at homosexuality is the question of whether Happy Together can be considered a part of the genre of queer cinema. For instance, Marc Siegel argues that, “Happy Together is clearly a queer film not simply because it depicts a sexual relationship between two men, but because it depicts and evokes the intimate behaviours, spaces, and images of a sexual ghetto.”17 In direct contrast, scholars such as Audrey Yue and Joe McElhaney have questioned the film’s ideological commitment to representing gay identity and have claimed that the film does not actively engage with issues relating to homosexuality. 18 The issue of the extent to which Happy Together can be accepted as a representation of a gay film is undoubtedly complicated by Wong’s contradictory comments on the film, which range

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17 Siegel, p. 284.

18 McElhaney, “Happy Together” and Yue, “What’s So Queer About Happy Together?”, pp. 254-256. McElhaney argues that Happy Together “ignores homosexuality in explicit social or ideological terms”, while Yue asserts that, “Leslie [Cheung] ‘queers’ what is essentially a straight film...In Happy Together, the homophobic erasure of gay visibility has revealed the straight morality of its discourse through the oppressive force of its narrative, abjecting and displacing the ‘gay’ story onto the diegetic space of Argentina. Such a substitution of location is dependent on the concept of fixity because the narrative of gayness can be articulated only as a form of displacement, as an other outside of a heterosexual selfhood, Hong Kong.”
from stating that “Hong Kong needed to make a real gay film before 1997” to claiming that “It is not a gay film. It’s a love story about being lonely with somebody else; being happy together could also mean being happy with yourself, with your past.”

The perspective that I take in this chapter is one that neither marginalises nor privileges homosexuality. Rather, I regard the film’s representation of desire and love as emotional states that are not restricted to gay union, which naturally renders a reading of the intertwined relationship of desire and geography from a queer perspective virtually redundant. In my view, the emphasis on sexual preference does not correspond to the intricacies of Fai and Po-wing’s relationship. Excluding the opening scene, the focus of their tenuous union is on negotiating their emotional and love ties in situations in which sexual intercourse is notably absent. As Peter Brunette writes:

In any case, while not wanting to take away from the homosexual specificity of the film – and thus perhaps rob it of another kind of political force – it’s easy to see it as another film about the frustrating impossibility of all love, not only the homosexual variety. The motif of ‘starting over,’ for example – ever hopeful and yet pathetically self-deluding at the same time – will be familiar to some viewers of all sexual preferences.

Through the love story of *Happy Together*, Wong offers a model of desire that, while focusing on a gay couple, explores love as a universal emotion. By grounding his concept of desire in ideas of travel and place, and thereby aligning love and geography, Wong moves the focus away from queer sexuality to the machinations of the relationship itself, and how the experience of being unmoored in a foreign country impacts on the bonds of love. As Wong himself has commented:

You can say this is a film about a gay couple, but it is not a gay story in the normal sense because this is a love story. It can happen to a man and a woman, and I

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20 Wong quoted in Stokes and Hoover, p. 275.
21 See Christopher Doyle, “Don’t Try for Me, Argentina: A Journal of the Shooting of Wong Kar-Wai’s *Happy Together* by Christopher Doyle,” in *The Director’s Cut: The Best of Projections*, eds. John Boorman and Walter Donohue (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), p. 285 and Teo, “Audio Commentary.” *Happy Together* (DVD). This sentiment is echoed in both Doyle’s working journal and Teo’s audio commentary. Doyle wrote during filming that it felt “like this film is about intimacy, not sex.” Furthermore, Teo states that, “One indication that Wong wanted to focus on the relationship and the characters’ feelings and emotions, rather than the subject of a gay film, was the decision to show a gay lovemaking scene right at the opening. To have the erotic stuff done away with as quickly as possible, which would then leave him free to dwell on the characters. [...] *Happy Together* is not an erotic film. Wong’s romantic viewpoint is one of intimacy and connection. Not so much the idea of sexual or physical connection, but more a metaphysical one.”
22 Brunette, pp. 77-78. A complementary line of thought is offered by Teo in his audio commentary: “Clearly in the light of the connections between *Happy Together* and the two films that followed it, *In the Mood for Love* and *2046*, homosexuality in *Happy Together* is coincidental to the theme of love between couples. The film isn’t about homosexuality as a subject – it doesn’t advocate homosexual rights or deal directly with the social pressures and taboos that pertain against homosexuality in Hong Kong. It is simply about a relationship with a psycho-pathological element of where two partners find it impossible to be happy together.”
don’t want to say the film is specially for gays because I don’t think we should label all these things.\textsuperscript{23}

Thus, the exile of love, embodied in the fragmentation of the film’s central union, is explored alongside the experience of love in exile; that is, the characters’ attempts at renewing their love ties in Buenos Aires.

At this introductory stage, it is necessary to situate the relationship between love and exile in \textit{Happy Together} in relation to extant scholarship on desire. Although the concept of desire is undoubtedly inscribed with multiple and varied interpretations, within this chapter desire and love are intentionally intertwined and the “desire” that remains at the forefront of my analysis is the protagonists’ longing for reciprocated affection, shared intimacy and stability. In Kristyn Gorton’s examination of the manner in which desire is represented through popular screen culture, she draws on both \textit{Happy Together} and \textit{In the Mood for Love} (2000) as part of her analysis of melancholia and desire. Specifically, Gorton suggests that these films attempt to theorise desire through instances of melancholic repetition.\textsuperscript{24} She interprets this idea through Po-wing’s recurrent request to start over; however, I will also draw on the parallel commentary that she makes regarding movement and desire. For Gorton, the futile promise of starting over demonstrates the need for Fai and Po-wing to “first move backwards with each other” before they are able to “move forward.”\textsuperscript{25} She is, of course, referring to the necessity for the characters to assess and re-evaluate their problematic romantic past before they can even attempt to start afresh; however, her comment also intimates the peculiar movement of desire that she discusses in other sections of her book. In particular, Gorton contends that by re-examining desire:

\begin{quote}
\ldots through loss, forgetting and melancholia…desire is both an individual and social experience. Unlike a psychoanalytical model of desire which poses the question of desire in terms of the Other, and in terms of the individual, desire is figured in terms of what it does and how it moves people, in other words, it is figured in terms of movement.\textsuperscript{26}
\end{quote}

With respect to cinematic images, the emphasis “is on producing the affect of desire on the psyche rather than on resolution. What this offers the viewer is the sensation of desire – of desire as affect and of desire as \textit{movement}. It also provides a model of desire-as-process

\textsuperscript{23} Wong quoted in Edward A. Gargan, “Hong Kong’s Master of Internal Pyrotechnics.” \textit{New York Times}, 12 October 1997, sec. 2, p. 13. See also Yue, “What’s So Queer About \textit{Happy Together}?,” p. 256. Wong is quoted in Yue’s article as stating, “[w]hat I wanted to convey is a love story between two people. Love is a word that doesn’t differentiate between sexes, so one should not view the film from a ‘gay film’ angle.”

\textsuperscript{24} Kristyn Gorton, \textit{Theorising Desire: From Freud to Feminism to Film} (Basingstoke, UK and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), p. 131.

\textsuperscript{25} Gorton, p. 132.

\textsuperscript{26} Gorton, p. 137.
which enables us to focus more specifically on what desire *does* rather than what it *is.*” In her conceptualisation of emotion in movement in *Atlas of Emotion: Journeys in Art, Architecture, and Film*, Giuliana Bruno also conceives of desire as an expression of action. She writes that, “Desire is, in fact, circulation. In all senses, it moves; it is an emotion that harbors motion.” Importantly, the shift that is evident in both Gorton and Bruno’s work from psychoanalytical conceptions of desire to a model that embraces mobility is sensitive to the visual nature of the film medium as a moving image. The movement that they refer to can thus be extended beyond the sentiment of being emotionally moved to physical movement.

In *Happy Together*, the connections between movement and desire are made through a number of interlinked strands. On one level, movement and desire are represented through the geographical travels of the characters and the shift in their emotional states; however, these intertwined motifs are also conveyed formally via the cinematography and editing. Furthermore, the characters’ geographical displacement from Hong Kong seemingly occurs because Fai and Po-wing have attempted to symbolically find a new space where they can nurture their relationship. As Fai reveals in voice-over, “Ho Po-wing always says, ‘Let’s start over’ and it gets to me every time. We have been together for a while and break up often, but when he says, ‘Let’s start over’, I find myself back with him. We left Hong Kong to start over. We hit the road and reached Argentina.” Bearing in mind this vast traversal of geographical space, I will adopt Gorton’s term “desire as movement” and substitute a complementary concept: desire as migration. Importantly, this distinction attends to the specifics of the film narrative and the representation of love as a geographical imperative.

For example, when Fai and Po-wing are living together in La Boca, Po-wing convinces Fai to jog on a bridge in freezing weather. The following conversation takes place as they traverse the bridge:

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FAI:   I can’t go on!

PO-WING:  Come on! Keep moving!

FAI:   It’s cold, let’s do this tomorrow.

PO-WING:  It’s not that cold. Keep moving!
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27 Gorton, p. 139.
29 See Erin Manning, *Politics of Touch: Sense, Movement, Sovereignty* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), pp. 19-48. Manning also provides a discussion on the connection between desire and movement in *Happy Together*, however, while I seek to explore the intersection between these concepts through the cinematic textures of the film, Manning is concerned with delineating a “politics of friendship.”
Po-wing’s motivation for taking Fai outside to jog in the cold is not explained in the film; however, it can be interpreted as part of the wanderlust involved in finding a site of desire. Irrespective of the route or destination, each small journey in the film is part of a larger search for love. Fai and Po-wing’s spatial migrations attempt to enliven what has become a static map of desire that is endowed with regression and repetition, as opposed to positive movement. The paradoxical push and pull between starting over as a new beginning and starting over as re-establishing the status quo of their relationship is tied to the protagonists’ movements from place to place. The fact that Wong sets *Happy Together* in Argentina, a country with which he had little familiarity, clearly emphasises the link between a state of limbo, geographical displacement and love.

Interestingly, in his analysis of the problematics of intimacy in a contemporary society that systematically resists commitment and is predicated on “non-love”, Zygmunt Bauman utilises a spatial metaphor for love: “Without humility and courage, no love. Both are required, in huge and constantly replenished supplies, whenever one enters an unexplored and unmapped land, and when love happens between two or more human beings it ushers them into such a territory.” As exiles, Fai and Po-wing are undoubtedly traversing “an unexplored and unmapped land”; however, this statement is equally applicable to their experience of locating their site of desire. With only a lamp as their map to traverse this terrain of love, Fai and Po-wing’s longing to “start over” is rendered even more difficult.

Moreover, Catherine Belsey, in her poststructuralist study *Desire: Love Stories in Western Culture*, maintains that desire “has no settled place to be.” She continues, “…at the level of the unconscious its objects are no more than a succession of substitutes for an imagined originary presence, a half-remembered ‘oceanic’ pleasure in the lost real, a completeness which is desire’s final, unattainable object.” While Belsey’s argument is indebted to a psychoanalytical framework of desire, the conceits of which I am not interested in replicating, it also gestures towards the relationship between place and movement that I seek to analyse in regard to desire in *Happy Together*. A central line of thought that runs through Belsey’s work is that desire resides in symbolic gaps that she connects to the inability of language to function as a convincing representation of love. Using this idea as a point of departure, I suggest that desire as migration is similarly

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32 Belsey, p. 17. Belsey contends that, “…in order to speak, to ground itself at the level of the signifier, love can only quote, and preferably from a text which is virtually without origin and thus transparent. Desire alludes to texts – but in order to efface its own citationality. It thus draws attention to its elusiveness, its excess over the signifier.”
concerned with symbolic gaps; however, they occur within the landscape itself. Drawing on the idea of gaps and voids, Wendy Gan, in her analysis of the representation of romance in Wong’s oeuvre, argues that, “Wong rewrites the romance with his visual and narrative innovations, ultimately producing films that challenge the ideology of the romance film by breaking open the myth of sexual union and revealing the emptiness within.”

I propose that “emptiness” is the key word in Gan’s argument, especially in terms of the visual motifs that Wong employs in *Happy Together*. The borders and interstices that comprise the film’s landscape of desire all point to a sense of emptiness and a lack of plenitude. Specifically, the voids in the film reveal Wong’s visual vocabulary for desire that attends to its slippery and elusive nature. At the hidden core of *Happy Together* is a profound disillusionment with love that competes with the desire to believe in the possibility of monogamy and union.

Attempting to recuperate this disillusionment, the movement of desire momentarily rests in interstitial spaces – places that defy schematic and simple forms of mapping. Indeed, it is hardly a coincidence that the location that holds Fai and Po-wing’s romantic aspirations is the Iguazú Falls. Residing on the border of Argentina, Brazil and Paraguay, the waterfall is a space that literally embodies geographical transition. More evocatively the waterfall is, for much of the film, represented through the presence of the lamp – an object that also points to geographical liminality. As an object that joins the home, as a decorative object placed on display in a domestic setting, and exterior geography, as a representation of the waterfall, it encapsulates a unique symbiosis between desire, domestic space and geography. The intertwined symbolism of object and place produces another layer of the film’s projection of desire, in that the desire for the foreign destination of the waterfall is present within the space of the home on the surface of the lamp. Creating a geography-within-a-geography effect, what is promised by the lamp is yet another space of limbo that eludes the specificity of geographical coordinates. I would take this metaphor further to argue that the choice of border spaces as pivotal locations also expresses the uneasy position of desire in the film. In *Happy Together*, geography and desire are inextricably intertwined.

*34° 36' S, 58° 27' W: The Coordinates of Desire*

In one of the early scenes of the film, Fai and Po-wing pause en route to Iguazú and Fai uses the lamp as a substitute map to ask a truck driver the way to the waterfall. After they discover that they are driving in the wrong direction, Fai and Po-wing’s impending separation is hinted at by the camerawork. When Fai returns to the car and is unable to

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34 34° 36' S, 58° 27' W are the geographical coordinates for Buenos Aires.
start the engine, Po-wing demands that Fai get out and push the car. As Po-wing drives a short distance up the highway, Fai is left behind and is seen in the car's rear vision mirror standing despondently further down the road. The montage that follows pictures their hire car travelling through the barren Argentinean interior. When the camera cuts to a view through the car’s windscreen, Fai and Po-wing are never filmed within the same frame. The horizontal pan from Fai to Po-wing reveals the vast emotional distance that exists between them, despite their close physical proximity.

The failure to picture Fai and Po-wing within the same shot compositions indicates their inability to share the same space and, by extension, retain their romantic connection. More specifically, this sequence visualises the developing rift between Fai and Po-wing and uses Argentina’s open rural space to lay bare and expose their impending separation. Filmed in black and white, as is the entire first third of the film, the sequence highlights the arid and desolate nature of the pampas. Travel writer Philip Guedalla observes that the interior possesses a vast emptiness quite unlike the urban space of Buenos Aires. He writes, “There is nothing to record. It has no secrets since there are no folds in it where anything could be concealed.”35 However, despite the openness of the pampas, Fai and Po-wing are unable to read the space and find the correct route to the waterfall. The pampas is the first of a number of liminal and interstitial spaces that dot Fai and Po-wing’s unplanned itinerary, setting in motion a journey that traverses through and dwells within places that ironically point to a sense of immobilisation.

The sequence concludes when Fai and Po-wing stop on the roadside and Fai attempts to make sense of their road map. As Fai pours over the map, which is held down precariously by a liquor bottle on the bonnet of the car, Po-wing leaves the backseat of the car and walks off into the distance. This move by Po-wing signals their first break-up in the film and the sequence of shots that follow provide an insight into the manner in which the landscape is implicated in the film’s imagining of love and the protagonists’ relationship. A long shot of Fai walking away from Po-wing, who is attempting to hitch a ride, is intercut by a close-up shot of the map as a gust of wind almost blows it off the car bonnet, before cutting back to Fai with his head in his hands. The insertion of the shot of the map into the montage of their first on-screen separation delineates a symbolic link between maps, as representations of geography, and love relationships. Here, the characters’ inability to legibly read Argentina’s cartography and the violent wind that ruffles the map allude to the unstable and rootless geography of desire, as the anxieties of their relationship are transferred onto their perceptions of the landscape. An unreadable map, which translates

to a landscape that is difficult to navigate, and the failure to reach their dream destination are metaphors for the unravelling of love in the film. The closest that Fai and Po-wing get to the waterfall in this sequence is through the presence of the lamp bearing its image that rests on the back dashboard of their rental car.

Therefore, in *Happy Together* Wong suggests that traditional maps are unable to shed light on the inaccessible terrain of love and that the coordinates of desire are impossible to pinpoint. However, at this stage, the film maintains its focus on locating a space of love through the presence of the lamp and its connection to the Iguazú Falls. This focus registers desire as a physical part of the landscape and, consequently, as a destination. The search for place, embodied in the characters’ displacement in Argentina and their longing to find sites such as the waterfall, is symbolically aligned with a desire to locate a space of

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[^36]: See Robert M. Payne, “Ways of Seeing Wild: The Cinema of Wong Kar-wai.” *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media* 44 (2001) <http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/jc44.2001/payne%20for%20site/paynetextonly.html> (accessed 10 May 2006). Payne proposes a similar reading and argues that, “The flimsiness of their map as the truck rushes by implies the flimsiness of their hopes to repair their relationship. And since the map is not “geography” itself but merely a representation of geography, the image calls into question all constructs of place and the investments we make in them.”
love. However, the foreign destination complicates the characters’ search for this elusive site. Argentina is portrayed as an in-between space, a place of perpetual limbo or suspension that the characters struggle to navigate, and is represented by a confusing cartography that Christopher Doyle realises in his cinematography. Fai’s comment that concludes the sequence of their failed journey reinforces the difficulty of interpreting this landscape: “I never did find out where we were that day.”

“Where is Iguazú”?

From the beginning of the film, the redemption of Fai and Po-wing’s love is symbolically aligned with the Iguazú Falls. Even though Fai and Po-wing never reach Iguazú to complete their shared journey of desire, the waterfall haunts the characters, as well as the film’s imagery, through the representation of the souvenir lamp. Significantly, when Po-wing moves into Fai’s home in the Hotel Rivera, it is the lamp that instantly captures his attention:

PO-WING: You still have that lamp? I thought you’d thrown it away. Did you get to see the Falls?

FAI: No, did you?

PO-WING: No. I was waiting for you. We’ll go when I’m better.

FAI: We’ll see.

The warm glow of the lamp is just visible, emanating from its position on a table in the corner of the small room, and, for the duration of the film, the lamp is framed by this desolate location, its visual splendour serving as a counterpoint to the faded and damaged wallpaper and decrepit furniture.

In particular, the lamp functions as an intermediary between the spatial oppositions of the film. Moving between both urban borders and domestic space, it foreshadows the idea of placement as a gateway to desire. In Bauman’s reflection on the state of contemporary relationships, he explores the manner in which globalisation and the collapsing of geographical boundaries affect intersecting ideas of place, desire and the self. He writes that:

Human experience is formed and gleaned, life-sharing managed, its meaning conceived, absorbed and negotiated around places. And it is in places and of places that human urges and desires are gestated and incubated, live in hope of fulfilment, risk frustration and are indeed, more often than not, frustrated.37

37 Bauman, p. 102.
In *Happy Together*, human urges and desires are indeed gestated and frustrated in places, such as Fai’s hotel room and the Iguazú Falls, but, more specifically, it is within the souvenir lamp that desire resides, as Fai and Po-wing find an object to which they can ascribe meaning and which they can adopt as their map to navigate the complex path of desire. Although the home is portrayed as a space in which Fai and Po-wing’s different romantic ideologies are placed in conflict, the silent presence of the Iguazú Falls lamp gestures towards a site, both real and imagined, that bridges the gap between the intimate geography of the home and Argentina’s exterior landscape. However, the location of desire is complex because it is based on a *trompe l’oeil*, an image which appears to be real but which is, in fact, completely illusory.

Significantly, Wong claimed in an interview with *Positif* that the Iguazú Falls, as imagined in the lamp’s design, was one of the central inspirations behind the film’s love story:

> And, in looking at the picture, I saw two little men looking at the waterfall. That seemed like a beautiful story to include in my film: this idea of a man who would like to share his happiness with another by going to see the waterfall. That gave them a common goal and also helped us structure the story.38

Various scholars have addressed the symbolism of the waterfall in *Happy Together* and interpreted its presence in terms of encapsulating hopes, aspirations and ideals. A good exemplar of this line of reasoning is Brunette, who argues that, “it seems to represent a utopian point of pure idealization, forever unreachable in the real world, something like an unencumbered love between two human beings.”39 The central idea that shines through in the readings offered by both Brunette and other scholars is that the waterfall is delineated as a space that resonates more in the *imagination* than in *reality*. Certainly, this line of reasoning is maintained in the film through the focus on the lamp as an object that symbolically delivers views of Iguazú – a location that is constructed as a site where the characters’ dreams are contained. The integration of the lamp into this chapter’s analysis of *Happy Together* builds on the previous scholarship by examining the manner in which the lamp intersects with the film’s interest in intimacy and geography.

The first image of the real Iguazú Falls appears after Fai and Po-wing abandon both their road trip to the waterfall and their relationship. The colour aerial shot, which intercuts the monochromatic scene of their break-up and the subsequent scenes of Fai and Po-wing leading separate lives in Buenos Aires, appears as a projection of beauty and

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38 Brunette, p. 74.
39 Brunette, p. 74. See also Teo, *Wong Kar-wai*, p. 105 and Stokes and Hoover, p. 276. Teo claims that the waterfall is “a symbol of lost hope.” Similarly, Stokes and Hoover regard Iguazú as “an ideal and impossible imagined place where the couple can be ‘happy together’.”
serenity that is tinged with sadness. This view stands out in Wong’s cinema as a flash forward, which can be contrasted to his usual mode of analepsis and visualising the lost past. Significantly, the image, which films the centre of Devil’s Gorge, is seen again when Fai undertakes his solo journey to the waterfall at the end of the film, and it becomes clear that the first vision of the waterfall is a projection of the future. Yvette Bíró interprets this forward leap in time as presenting “…the juxtaposition of various internal/external temporal/spatial orders…As the film projects the future, it brings into focus the realm of simultaneous possibilities, demonstrating their tangible immediacy.” Here, a sense of what could have been and what is desired for the future disturbs the linear trajectory of the film, thereby introducing an alternative chronology that exemplifies the unstable movement of desire.

Figure 3.3. Imaging the future: Devil’s Gorge (Happy Together)

Filtered in deep blue tones and captured in slow motion, the movement of the water, mist and spray rising from the centre of the gorge appears as a primal force, an untouched vista that is detached from both the city of Buenos Aires and the Argentinian interior. As the camera circles the waterfall and gazes into the void at its centre, it captures the surreal and beautiful emptiness of the site. Providing another symbolic layer, the shot is accompanied by Caetano Veloso’s stirring rendition of “Cucurrucucu Paloma”, a song that details the melancholic story of a man who has been left by his lover and pines for her

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41 For a description of how the scene was shot, see Doyle, pp. 306-307.
until his death, after which he is resurrected as a dove to continue his mourning. The inescapable heartbreak and longing infused in the lyrics of “Cucurrucucu Paloma” complement the infinite majesty of the waterfall, as both the song and the image are utilised in the film to convey tales of the disappointment of love. This point particularly resonates when the shot of the waterfall is seen from Fai’s perspective at the end of the film: “I wander around for a while but I finally reach Iguazú. I feel very sad. I believe there should be two of us standing here.”

Interestingly, the slow and gentle temporality of the movements of the film camera as it circles the falls is echoed in a scene in which Fai attempts to remember Hong Kong: “I noticed that Hong Kong and Argentina...are on opposite sides of the world. How does Hong Kong look upside down?” Emanating from Fai’s memories, the image of Hong Kong depicts an urban maze of non-descript buildings, highways and cars. The sequence unfolds as though it is an everyday journey navigating the city; however, the moving image plays with perspective and is literally inverted. This scene is an important partner to the image of the falls as it serves to reinforce that desire, irrespective of its subject, is intertwined with geography. Indeed, following Fai and Po-wing’s first break-up, Fai’s plan to journey to the waterfall competes with his desire to return to Hong Kong: “Seeing him again, I didn’t want to ‘start over’. I just wanted to return to Hong Kong.”

Figure 3.4. “How does Hong Kong look upside down?” (Happy Together)

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In this sequence, the distance from Hong Kong is recalled in terms of time, not geography. Fai’s final job in Buenos Aires is in an abattoir, which enables him to “work all night, sleep all day” in order to realign his internal body clock with “Hong Kong time.” The immense geographical distance between Hong Kong and Buenos Aires collapses and it is the distance of time, as opposed to space, that is conveyed in the film. Hence, in the recollection-image of Hong Kong, the camera glides slowly through the urban landscape, delineating a warped space in Fai’s memory that is saturated with the desire for homecoming. This image correlates to the aerial shot of the Iguazú Falls: as spaces of desire, both Hong Kong and the waterfall are positioned outside real time, as their images sensuously float and haunt the film. Lovesickness and homesickness, two different forms of exile in *Happy Together*, are revealed through a painful slow motion that traverses two differing landscapes.

The unstable temporality of the flash forward that films Iguazú and the framing of the waterfall in a close-up, which does not allude to the topographical specificity of the location, portray the waterfall as a site that exists outside tangible space and time. In this sense, it is visually registered as an oneiric realm that is enlarged in the characters’ minds. By placing the shot of the waterfall so early in the film, it foretells Fai and Po-wing’s movement towards places that rest on thresholds and borders – spatial pauses that represent small gaps of possibility.

In *Architecture from the Outside: Essays on Virtual and Real Spaces*, Elizabeth Grosz presents a useful analysis of the in-between. She writes that:

> The space of the in-between is that which is not a space, a space without boundaries of its own, which takes on and receives itself, its form, from the outside, which is not its outside (this would imply that it has a form) but whose form is the outside of the identity, not just of an other (for that would reduce the in-between to the role of object, not of space) but of others, whose relations of positivity define, by default, the space that is constituted as in-between... Instead of conceiving of relations between fixed identities, between entities or things that are only externally bound, the in-between is the only space of movement, of development or becoming: the in-between defines the space of a certain virtuality, a potential that always threatens to disrupt the operations of the identities that constitute it.43

The void at the centre of Devil’s Gorge, which holds the focus of both the film camera and the characters’ imaginations, encapsulates the ambiguous potential of the in-between and is an appropriate space through which to articulate, negotiate and reconcile Fai and Po-wing’s divergent ideas of desire. Situated on a series of geographical borders, there is undoubtedly an issue with the site of desire in *Happy Together* being a physical void.

and therefore a space that lacks substance and a real sense of presence; however, it is, as I will elucidate in further depth throughout this chapter, the voids that provide the critical path for analysing desire in the film.

Given that the in-between is a space of movement and becoming in which fixed identities collapse, the waterfall and the lamp that bears its image represent spaces of romantic possibility beyond the problems of Fai and Po-wing’s relationship.

Mobilising Love and Repetitious Desires

In a revealing journal that Doyle kept during and after the shooting of Happy Together, he writes on his initial impressions of Buenos Aires and refers to the city as “a Tom Waits song.”44 Failing to initially find inspiration in Argentina, it is a mundane and everyday sight that sparks Doyle’s interest in Buenos Aires as a film subject: “Finally we get lucky with a bus disgorging passengers and turning under the derelict bridge into a vast expanse of sunset light. It’s loneliness, departure, loss incarnate. At last I have a visual theme to build on, a direction in which to explore the ‘character’ of this place.”45 Doyle’s reference to loneliness and loss in the context of place and departure is an evocative avenue for considering the interrelationship between space and desire in Happy Together. In one scene, which follows an argument between Fai and Po-wing in a hotel in Buenos Aires, Fai is filmed from behind as he runs down a city street. The movement of the jolting handheld camera transforms the scene into an over-exposed and disorientating blur of action, whereby Fai’s combined emotions of frustration, sadness and anger are visually conveyed. Through Doyle’s camera lens, the city is unanchored in a direct reflection of Fai and Po-wing’s tumultuous relationship. This scene also establishes that the feeling of exile – of being removed from one’s home country and the accompanying state of displacement – is not confined to the characters’ experiences overseas, but also extends to the disorientating extremes of their relationship.

Producing a distinct look that is subtly woven into the film, vision is slightly obfuscated and manifests in a screen image that possesses a worn and decayed aesthetic. The high grain, the overexposed shots and the alternating colour saturation – as well as the scratches, sun spots and blemishes that pass over the film’s surface – further highlight this effect, which suggests that mobility in Happy Together is bound up with a form of decomposition. Indeed, as the film progresses and unfolds, the flaws become more noticeable to the viewer and provide a visual match to the ruined locations that the characters inhabit. The film camera’s movement within Argentina’s spaces of loneliness

44 Doyle, p. 280.
45 Doyle, p. 282.
and departure converge on Po-wing’s longing to “start over” by inhabiting locations that form a part of what Bruno describes as “a geography of passage” that is littered with visual references to “nomadic architecture and restless space.” For the protagonists, starting over ironically tends to lead back to the same places, and Wong continually presents the viewer with the same exterior establishing shots of Buenos Aires – such as the obelisk in the city centre, Bar Sur and the 3 Amigos bar in La Boca – to emphasise the restless repetition of their movements. In the same vein that the screen image possesses a visual sense of ruin, the idea of love is similarly damaged and the characters’ repetitive movements within the Argentinean landscape serve as an allegory for their unfulfilled and directionless desires. In this sense, Wong privileges a specific form of motion, which ironically points to a lack of progression, to portray the characters’ fractious relationship, as it is stalled by repetitious beginnings and marked by desires that lack definite co-ordinates.

Examples of nomadic architecture – certainly a strong component in all of Wong’s films – such as train stations, the interiors of cars, bridges, cinemas, hotel rooms and border spaces are implicated in the characters’ individual searches for intimacy. For example, in a scene following Fai and Po-wing’s final break-up, Fai journeys to the dark and private interior of a cinema. Subtly provoking an encounter with another patron, this anonymous man performs fellatio on Fai in a scene that highlights the search for desire within “restless space.” However, Fai’s monologue reveals the process of regression that is bound up with this movement towards the fulfilment of his desire for physical closeness and sexual affection: ‘I didn’t pick up men in dirty public toilets. These days I use them because it is the easiest way.” Prior to this incident, Fai maintains the position that he is not like Po-wing; however, following the sequence where he actively searches the public spaces of Buenos Aires for a sexual partner, he finally concedes, “I always thought I was different from Po-wing. It turns out that lonely people are all the same.” In these scenes, Wong confuses movement and stasis, displaying the manner in which loneliness appears to hinder progress.

Significantly, the opening scenes of Happy Together raise the viewer’s expectations that the film narrative will belong to the road movie genre. The escapist mood of the genre is evoked through the establishing shots of the characters’ passports, Fai and Po-wing’s passionate scene of lovemaking in a motel room en route to Iguazú and the views of their rental car travelling through the Argentinean landscape. Road movies are often concerned with a utopian search that involves leaving behind the conventions of the home and tradition by taking off on the road. As Richard Ingersoll elucidates, “The road movie

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usually tells of an escape from the city. The car permits the characters to enjoy the liminal status of provisional freedom from the formal or moral constraints of urban situations. 

In contrast with the forward trajectory of a road movie, *Happy Together* is beset with a sense of stasis. Po-wing’s perpetual promise of starting over creates a fissure in the film’s hermeneutic drive: the characters are forever moving, yet they show few signs of progression. Rather, Fai and Po-wing’s departure from Hong Kong to start over is the catalyst for a series of beginnings, as their relationship moves in a cycle of reconciliation, tender and emotionally strained love, intense arguing and, finally, the disintegration of their union.

McElhaney interprets the constant flow of movement in *Happy Together* as Fai and Po-wing’s attempt to substitute action for expression: “They move...because they are incapable of articulating their thoughts or feelings into words or useful actions...this physicality and movement continually escapes culmination.” Expanding on McElhaney’s comment, I argue that desire in *Happy Together* is principally represented through movement and migration. Specifically, the request to “start over” is embodied in the movement to and from and within spaces that gesture towards openness and possibility. However, the characters’ dwelling in temporary locations unfortunately never results in happiness or completion. As Doyle writes in relation to the scene in which Po-wing forces Fai to join him for a jog on La Boca bridge, “The location is not just a metaphor, it’s the shadow on their loves...”

This dark trace that is cast over Wong’s representation of Argentina is particularly displayed through the characters’ inhabitation of “nomadic architecture.” In a strong echo of Wong’s films set in Hong Kong, Fai and Po-wing reside within non-places that are extremely similar to those that proliferate their home city’s urban network. As Jean-Marc Lalanne argues, “Hong-Kong is Buenos Aires and vice versa. One is at best the flip-side of the other...Nothing allows us to distinguish these different urban spaces, and all signs of Argentinean-ness in *Happy Together* are reduced to a handful of postcard images.” I propose that the lack of distinction between Argentina and Hong Kong is at the heart of

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49 McElhaney, “Happy Together.” See also Teo, *Wong Kar-wai*, p. 104. Teo argues that the characters are “endlessly mobile, which shows that happiness is forever eluding them.”

50 Doyle, p. 291.

51 Jean-Marc Lalanne, “Images from the Inside,” trans. Stephen Wright in *Wong Kar-wai*, ed. Danièle Rivière (Paris: Editions Dis Voir, 1997), p. 19. See also Brunette, p. 73 and Cameron, “Trajectories of Identification.” Brunette replicates this approach and posits that “while Spanish is the context of all that we see and hear, at least in principle, it remains in the background, utterly alien to the bizarre, totalizing core of Chinese language and culture that exclusively holds center stage and forms a kind of inviolable otherness in the heart of Buenos Aires.” Similarly, Cameron writes that, “the characters end up inhabiting interior spaces reminiscent of those in Hong Kong.”
the complexities of starting over in the film, especially in relation to the connections between travelling and desire. Fai and Po-wing’s dwelling within “familiar” locations in Argentina undermines the movement to Buenos Aires to find a new beginning and mend the fissures in their relationship. Indeed, when their journey to Iguazú does not come to fruition, Fai and Po-wing rely on sites that are generically recognisable in Buenos Aires, thereby setting in motion the inevitable disappointment associated with their repetitious behaviour.

Responding to his use of locations in Buenos Aires that are visually suggestive of Hong Kong’s urban spaces, Wong made the following comment in an interview:

One of the location managers was so mad at me…He said: ‘We have so many beautiful buildings and streets in Buenos Aires. Why do you always pick those back alleys, those poor buildings?’ I said, ‘Well I don’t know why, but maybe this is a kind of projection, that I can only project my Hong Kong experience in Argentina, and I’m trying to create my own space in that city which I can work in and I can understand.52

Although Wong reveals the rationale and mindset behind filming specific locations in Argentina, he does not comment on how these locations impact directly on the film narrative. To my mind, the locations underscore that the characters’ movements build up to a distinct lack of fulfilment. Unable to follow their map, and relying instead on a decorative object, they return to the same sights, just as they continually return to their relationship. On one level, the exterior locations that Fai and Po-wing gravitate to can be interpreted as reminders of Hong Kong. However, the transitory locations – the bars, pizza shops, pharmacies and lonely streets – only serve as non-descript geographical markers that highlight the growing distance between them, their failure to reach Iguazú and their inability to make a new beginning.

Indeed, at the end of the film, when Fai has moved on and is making his return to Hong Kong, Po-wing continues to spend his time in the tango bar where Fai had previously worked as the doorman and even goes so far as to move into Fai’s old room in the Hotel Rivera. Unable to let go of the past, Po-wing’s spatial repetition pictures him re-tracing Fai’s movements: he arranges a stack of cigarettes, mops the floor and repairs the souvenir lamp. Fai’s intimate gestures are conveyed in Po-wing’s body language, evincing the manner in which geography and mobility are bound up with the silent expression of

52 Wong quoted in Gargan, sec 2, p. 13. See also Brunette, p. 73 and Doyle, p. 286. Brunette has translated an interview with Positif in which Wong made the following comment, “…it was [as] if I had reconstituted Hong Kong in Buenos Aires…[A]t the beginning, I tried to understand Buenos Aires and its inhabitants. But I quickly realized that I didn’t have the time to open myself up.” Similarly Doyle wrote in his filming journal, “We came to Argentina to ‘defamiliarize’ ourselves by moving away from the spaces – and hopefully the preconceptions – of the world we know so well…So why do we still tend towards bars, barber shops, fast-food joints and trains? What happened to the inspirations from Manuel Puig’s structures and Julio Cortazar’s conceits? We’re stuck with our own concerns and perceptions.”
love. By residing in Fai’s home, Po-wing attempts to collapse the vast distance between them.

Passages/Borders/Voids/Gaps and the Cinematics of Movement

It is undeniable that the majority of the emotionally heightened moments that occur in Happy Together take place within borders and interstices. Tambling argues that Chang’s journey to the lighthouse at Ushuaia in Tierra del Fuego – an area that is divided in sovereignty between Argentina and Chile – highlights the film’s “interest in borders which begins with the passports and concludes when Lai [Fai] reflects that Chang has a home to return to: a home being that which has secure borders.” 53 Tambling expands this point further:

Borders take other forms, such as those between people and people’s bodies, and which are focussed in the anxieties Lai [Fai] has about sharing or not sharing a bed with Ho [Po-wing]. Borders raise the question how people can be ‘happy together’, and borders are disturbed by such a game as football which depends on going over and transgressing the other’s border; they are violated by sound which does not respect borders and which Chang is sensitive to: hearing across other people’s borders.54

For the purposes of this section, it is the geographical borders and intervening spaces, which tie in with Bruno’s concept of a “geography of passage”, that are particularly significant. In the characters’ attempts to “locate” desire, many of the scenes unfold in spaces that cannot be ascribed specific coordinates. Fai and Po-wing are filmed not only in their rental car, but also in other states of motion: on foot, in buses and in trains. For example, during a scene on a bus, Fai and Po-wing bicker as they travel to Fai’s home in La Boca to retrieve the gold watch that Po-wing has stolen from a client. The volatile nature of their relationship is reflected in both the bus ride and the shaky hand-held camerawork that films the short journey. However, a form of honest interaction unfolds in this state of motion, suggesting that residual desires are released in transit so that when Fai asks Po-wing whether he should accompany him to return the watch, it becomes clear that he still has feelings for Po-wing.

Similarly, as Fai and Chang slowly become friends, the moments that contain the most emotional resonance importantly take place in border spaces, such as the restaurant

kitchen and the alley where they play soccer. Significantly, the final scene that they share
together in the film, before Chang leaves for Ushuaia, transpires in the doorway to the
Hotel Rivera. After they shake hands and bid their final farewells, they instinctively
embrace one another. This scene highlights the ambiguities of their friendship and the
viewer is left wondering whether there is a romantic subtext hidden within this embrace.
As Fai watches Chang depart, his voice-over intimates their intense connection: “Was it
because we had become close? When I held him, all I could hear…was my own heart
beating. Did he hear it too?” Standing on the threshold of the doorway, the space
surrounding Fai also adopts a bizarre throbbing motion that visualises the pulsations of his
heart. The scene is overwhelmed by strange visual discontinuities which produce a
stuttering effect and which articulate the uncertainty of Fai’s desire. Here, the border is an
architectural metaphor for the ambiguous nature of the characters’ emotions; the
movement that is contained within this shot does not lead to fulfilment, but throbs in an
excess of energy that has no place.

In addition, this scene alludes to the link that is made in the film between sound
and desire. Fai not only feels the beating of his heart, but also hears its pulsation. As
Tambling suggests in his examination of borders in Happy Together, hearing is implicated in
the movement of desire.55 When Chang is first introduced in the film, he is pictured in the
kitchen of the Chinese restaurant. Significantly, the kitchen is seen, or perhaps more
appropriately heard, from his perspective. A close-up focuses on his face as he washes
dishes with his eyes closed. Listening to the sounds emanating from various parts of the
kitchen, he confides in voice-over, “You can tell it’s a kitchen by the sound. Listen
carefully. Some people are cooking and some people are arguing. Others are talking or
washing up.” He focuses his hearing on a conversation Fai is having on the phone in which
he arranges to bring home some food for Po-wing. It is revealed that it is Fai’s voice that
initially draws Chang’s interest: “This guy loves talking on the phone. His voice sounds
pleasant.” There is some suggestion that Chang may have feelings for Fai based on this
statement, as he will later reject the flirtatious advances of a girl working at the restaurant
on the grounds that he doesn’t like her voice. Rather, he desires “women’s voices…to be
deep and low. Actually, it depends…Anyway, what I mean is, voices that make my heart
beat faster.”

The viewer later discovers that, for Chang, hearing is his most privileged sense.
Due to a childhood illness that temporarily compromised his sight, Chang has continued to
rely on the habit of using sound to create meaning from his exterior surroundings. During
a conversation with Fai at the 3 Amigos bar, Chang offers a rationale for using hearing as

his main mode of perception: “Sometimes I think ears are more important. You ‘see’ better with your ears. You can pretend to look happy but your voice reveals the truth. You can ‘see’ everything by listening.” Chang uses this ability to symbolically break down private space by listening from a distance to the conversations of the other patrons at the bar. Discerning Fai’s emotional state, he comments, “Your voice shows you’re not happy.” Significantly, Chang also employs sound as his map to navigate Buenos Aires. After his trip to Ushuaia, he briefly returns to Buenos Aires before flying to Taiwan, hoping that he will be able to detect and isolate Fai’s voice and therefore locate him in the city.

Figure 3.5. “You see better with your ears.” (Happy Together)

Although Chang possesses the heightened ability to hear across borders, he never manages to truly hear Fai’s desires; however, he does gain access to Fai’s inner feelings. Before leaving Buenos Aires for the lighthouse at Ushuaia, he asks Fai to leave a message on his portable tape recorder that he can take to “the End of the World”:

CHANG: I’m going south to Ushuaia […] They say it’s the End of the World. I’d like to see it. You been there?

[Fai shakes his head]

FAI: There’s a lighthouse down there. Heartbroken people go there…and leave their unhappiness behind.

CHANG: Do people still do that now?

FAI: Maybe, I don’t know.

[Chang produces his portable tape recorder]
Fai is eventually left alone to leave a message on the tape recorder; however, he can only quietly sob into Chang’s recorder. Having remained stoic throughout the majority of the film, this is a pivotal scene that portrays the overflowing of Fai’s emotions. Moreover, Fai’s inability to verbally communicate his emotions alludes to the impotence of language as a communicator of desire and draws attention to the necessity to “look” or “listen” for signs of love that are not necessarily conveyed in words. In particular, this scene emphasises that in *Happy Together* desire cannot be reduced to a language and is without boundaries. When Chang takes Fai’s sadness to the lighthouse, he apparently hears nothing. In verbal terms, Fai’s desire for Chang remains silent; however, Chang’s voice-over reveals otherwise:

> In January 1997, I finally arrive at the End of the World. This is the most southern lighthouse in South America […] Suddenly I feel like going home. Even though home is far away…at the moment it feels very close. I promised Fai to leave his sadness here. I don’t know what he said that night. Maybe the recorder broke down. I can’t hear anything on the tape. Only some strange noises like someone sobbing.

As the camera circles Chang standing at the top of the lighthouse, he holds the tape recorder to his ear and listens to Fai’s barely perceptible sobs. What is significant is that at this moment, as he leaves Fai’s sadness at the End of the World, he feels close to home, thereby alluding to the closeness that has developed between them. In this instance, the space evoked through sound further emphasises the gestation of desire within abstract places that cannot be mapped.

**The Colour of Longing**

The creation of borders in *Happy Together* is not restricted to geographical passages and the movement of sound, but is also evoked in the transition of cinematographic colour. One of the most beautiful moments in the film takes place in the backseat of a taxi when Fai takes
Po-wing to stay with him at his home after Po-wing is discharged from hospital. The cut from the hospital, which is filmed in black and white, to the explosion of autumnal tones that saturate the taxi scene not only marks the transition to colour cinematography in the film, but also produces a striking visual contrast that appears to convey the characters’ unspoken emotions of warmth and tenderness. Set to Astor Piazzolla’s musical piece “Prologue (Tango Apasionado)”, Fai raises a cigarette to Po-wing’s lips as Po-wing’s bandaged hands rest in his lap. Unlike the scenes in the hire car, Fai and Po-wing are filmed within the same frame, and therefore share a mutual emotional space. As the brilliance of car headlights and street lamps pass in a blur through the taxi’s rear window, Po-wing rests his head on Fai’s shoulder in one of the most delicate and gentle gestures in the film.

Figure 3.6. Love in transit (Happy Together)

To my mind, this scene visually delineates an emotional space that is distinct from other scenes in the film. The expressive use of colour heightens the silent desire that exists between Fai and Po-wing, while the movement of the taxi hints at the film’s positioning of love as an ephemeral state.\(^{56}\) The word “prologue” in the title of Piazzola’s tango music implies the initiation of a new experience; however, the unsteady hand-held camerawork and the blur of lights out of the taxi’s rear window present the intimate scene as uncertain, unstable and one that will eventually unravel. The shift from the scene in the taxi to Fai undressing and washing Po-wing’s body in the apartment further underscores the use of

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\(^{56}\) See Audrey Yue, “Migration-as-Transition: Hong Kong Cinema and the Ethics of Love in Wong Kar-wai’s 2046,” in Asian Migrations: Sojourning, Displacement, Homecoming and Other Travels, ed. Beatriz P. Lorente (Singapore: Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore, 2005), p. 169. Yue writes that, “The taxi, as another transportation mode of mobility, also shows the comings and goings of love.”
colour. The intense red of the blanket on the bed, a jade green lampshade and the faded yellow tones of the vintage wallpaper infuse the small space with warmth, thereby producing a clear visual distinction from earlier shots of Fai sitting in the apartment in which the monochromatic and grainy texture of the imagery renders his loneliness palpable.

Specifically, the first time the viewer is allowed a glimpse of Fai’s home it is through a long shot of Fai dining alone. There is an overriding sense of stagnation and emptiness evoked in the shot, whereby Fai is relegated to the background in a compositional move that visually distances and alienates him. Significantly, this scene is preceded by a shot of Po-wing in a different space, lying in bed and wearing nothing but his underwear. Set in the seedy confines of a hotel room, with its suggestive mirrored walls and surfaces, there is a similar sense of isolation. The doubling of Po-wing’s reflection is also a perfect visual metaphor for the split in his romantic subjectivity that is encapsulated in his oscillations between wanting to remain in a relationship with Fai and longing for new and unknown experiences. The juxtaposition of these two scenes points to the relative unhappiness that they both experience when separated. Prior to the chromatic shift during the taxi scene, the absence of love literally drains the characters’ geographies; their melancholy is inscribed in black and white.

Scholars such as Brunette and Teo have convincingly regarded the impressionistic and emotive employment of colour as a visual indication of different temporalities in Happy Together.57 However, I argue that colour also functions as a visual mode of desire. In a similar fashion, Song Hwee Lim contends that the visual shifts from black and white to colour are used “to denote the change in Fai’s emotional state.”58 Extending Lim’s emotional reading of the utilisation of cinematic colour in Happy Together, I propose that the filtering of the screen image in warm reds, yellows and oranges opens up a new space of hope in the film that suggests the re-awakening of desire. Sociologist Mary Evans writes that, “‘Falling in love’…is assumed to take people out of their ordinary, everyday selves and locate them in some other, different space.”59 This idea is achieved cinematically through the change in chromatic design, thereby indicating the traversal of both geographical and emotional borders.

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57 Brunette, pp. 78-79 and Teo, Wong Kar-wai, p. 100. See also Betty O. K. Pun, “Metafunctional Analyses of Sound in Film Communication,” in Multimodal Semiotics: Functional Analysis in Contexts of Education, ed. Len Unsworth (London and New York: Continuum, 2008), p. 117 and Teo, “Audio Commentary,” Happy Together (DVD). In his audio commentary Teo states that the “black and white scenes denote flashback time – the memory in Tony’s [Fai’s] mind of his affair with Leslie [Po-wing].” Conversely, he proposes, “colour is real time or even future time” and that black and white can also be interpreted as a representation of “coolness”, while colour “denotes warmth.”

58 Lim, p.109.

The new phase in Fai and Po-wing’s relationship that is signalled by vivid colour also depicts a move to a seemingly more secure site: Fai’s “home”, a one-room apartment at the Hotel Rivera in La Boca. Seeking to reignite their love connection within a domestic context, this second third of the film proposes an alternative approach to locating love. Although Belsey argues that desire “has no place to be”, the projection of desire in Happy Together momentarily attempts to position this illusive emotion within the domestic realm. Addressing the meaning inherent in the word “home”, Rosemary Marangoly George contends that:

The word ‘home’ immediately connotes the private sphere of patriarchal hierarchy, gendered self-identity, shelter, comfort, nurture and protection…‘home’ is a desire that is fulfilled or denied in varying measure to the subjects…constructed by the narrative. As such, ‘home’ moves along several axes, and yet it is usually represented as fixed, rooted, stable – the very antithesis of travel.60

The home, which is a space that is often ideologically represented in society as both knowable and stable, provides a clear contrast to the manner in which love is represented in the film as transitory and mutable. Specifically, domestic space signifies a fleeting site of romantic possibility, offering a protective and sheltered space beyond the film’s intertwined pull of desire, movement and travel.

‘Housing’ Love: The Domestic Realm and Desire

Throughout Happy Together the characters’ acts of journeying not only bespeak the (futile) movement towards reciprocated love, but also reveal an intense relationship with the home and (be)longing. As Hamid Naficy writes in An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking:

Every journey entails a return, or the thought of return. Therefore, home and travel, placement and displacement are always already intertwined. Return occupies a primary place in the minds of the exiles…for it is the dream of a glorious homecoming that structures exile. Without that dream, the exiles would be émigrés, expatriates, refugees, and ethnic subjects.61

To be more specific, the journey into exile undertaken by each character is in some way connected to the unsuccessful reconciliation of love and domestic space.62 For example,

60 Rosemary Marangoly George, The Politics of Home: Postcolonial Relocations and Twentieth-Century Fiction (Berkley: University of California Press, 1999), pp. 1-2. It should be noted that George forwards this definition as a starting point for her analysis and does not maintain this assertion, but challenges and questions its validity.
62 The problematic relationship between home and love is emphasised in the majority of Wong’s films. In Days of Being Wild (1990), Yuddy’s (Leslie Cheung) ultimate quest is to leave Hong Kong and find his biological mother, who he discovers late in the film lives in the Philippines. The repetitive allusion to a legless
Fai’s ultimate journey is an uncertain homecoming in which he will have to confront his troubled relationship with his father, which has become strained after Fai stole money from the employer at a job that his father had arranged. On a similar tract, Chang’s personal journey is also an escape from the home, as well as a search for self-discovery and happiness before he can return to his family in Taipei: “I came on my own…I wasn’t happy, that’s why I came. I need to think things over before I go back.” Po-wing is distinguished as a perpetual wanderer who is caught in a journey which has no confirmed destination and which is endowed with a sense of homelessness and estrangement. While Fai has Hong Kong and Chang has Taiwan, Po-wing is not ascribed a particular place in the world.

Significantly, in Hong Kong culture, the home carries an important function in dispelling the transitory status that is often associated with the region. According to Helen Hau-ling Cheng, “It is often said that people in Hong Kong are always in search of security, because of Hong Kong’s refugee origin…For many Hong Kong people, security comes from a flat because it is there, visible and tangible.” For both Fai and Chang, their individual journeys are prefigured by the need to escape home, while acknowledging that home, which is doubly signified as both place and family, is an integral part of their identities. When Fai travels to Taipei and visits the market stall run by Chang’s parents on Liaoning Street, his voice-over reflects, “Finally, I could see why he’s happy running around freely. He has a place where he could always return to. I wonder what will happen when I see my father. We’ll see.” In contrast, Po-wing is seemingly unconcerned by the lack of security bound up with his travels and is characterised as rootless, preferring to drift from place to place and between sexual partners. It is this dichotomy between home and travel, stasis and movement that is key to reading the dynamics of their relationship.

Domesticity and Flânerie

In the foreword to *At Home: An Anthropology of Domestic Space*, John Rennie Short writes that:

bird – an obvious metonymic reference to Yuddy’s character – attempts to instil the inability to settle with a poetic resonance; however, it is revealed at the end of the film that this constant movement is akin to death. Similarly, in *Fallen Angels* (1995), Wong Chi-ming (Leon Lai) states, “When you live in a suitcase, you don’t need a place of your own.” The location of his apartment, which faces onto a busy highway and is opposite a MTR railway line, questions whether there is a truly private space within the city. His business partner, the female agent played by Michelle Reis, accesses Ming’s temporary “home” to clean, engage in her sexual fantasies and rummage through his personal items. Her penetration of the private realm references both Faye’s invasion of Cop 663’s apartment in *Chungking Express* and the impossibility of separating home life and triad business in *As Tears Go By* (1988). The problem with finding a personal or private space within the city is reflected in the fact that Wong’s characters generally do not have familial ties, close and stable friendships or long-term romantic associations.

The home is a nodal point in a whole series of polarities: journey-arrival; rest-motion; sanctuary-outside; family-community; space-place; inside-outside; private-public; domestic-social; sparetime-worktime; feminine-masculine; heart-mind; Being-Becoming. These are not stable categories; they are both solidified and undermined as they play out their meaning and practice in and through the home.64

Short’s description acknowledges the complexities that are inherent in reading the space of the home and serves to disrupt George’s starting definition of the domestic realm, which I have previously quoted. Furthermore, Short also alludes to the manner in which various polarities, which are often theorised as distinct entities, unfurl and become confused within the space of the home. In Happy Together the domestic realm is the place where Fai and Po-wing’s opposing ideas of romance – domesticity and flânerie – become a source of conflict.65

The spatial division between domesticity and flânerie is indicated early in the film in the scene en route to Iguazú in which Fai and Po-wing are consistently filmed in a manner that suggests that they occupy distinct and separate spaces. Certainly, the main dilemma of their relationship is that Fai and Po-wing represent two opposing spatial constructs: the fixed security of the home and the unpredictable space of the urban streetscape.

Although Fai and Po-wing manage to live happily together in Buenos Aires for a short time while Po-wing is recovering, the construct of the home is most overtly linked to Fai. Displaying the antithesis to Po-wing’s wandering, Fai is not intoxicated by the unfamiliarity of street life and, instead, finds solace within domestic space. He reflects in the second third of the film that the source of his happiness was indeed Po-wing’s dependency on him: “One thing I never told Ho Po-wing…I didn’t want him to recover too fast. Those were our happiest days.” Specifically, it is Po-wing’s confinement to the apartment that represents the perfect form of intimacy for Fai. Beyond Fai and Po-wing’s de facto arrangement, Fai’s longing for home carries a variety of meanings: home is Hong Kong, his home city and the one to which he has blood ties; home is his domestic space in La Boca that fleetingly promises reciprocated love and sexual monogamy; and home is also portrayed in the small moments of tenderness that Fai shares with Po-wing, suggesting that it is possible to be “at home” with another person.

In the second third of the film, Fai attempts to transform the space of the home into an appealing site of love for Po-wing. Undertaking the role of cook, cleaner and carer,

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65 See Lim, pp. 108-109. Although Lim’s argument stems from an analysis of the characters’ homosexuality – an issue that is not central to this chapter – the division between domesticity and flânerie is also applicable to the manner in which both Fai and Po-wing negotiate the unknown terrain of desire.
he ensures Po-wing’s comfort by maintaining a day job, going out at night to buy cigarettes, spraying Po-wing’s bed with mosquito repellent, washing his body and hand feeding him.66 George argues that although there are a number of “practices that would qualify as ‘home-making’…the basic organizing principle around which the notion of ‘home’ is built is a pattern of select inclusions and exclusions.”67 From the beginning of the film, Fai keeps his keys on a chain that he wears around his neck, thereby revealing that it is the security of home that is closest to his heart. By allowing Po-wing to access his makeshift home, Fai is really granting Po-wing exclusive rights to his affection and love.

Figure 3.7. At home with Fai and Po-wing (Happy Together)

In her analysis of the film’s cinematography, Cathy Greenhalgh refers to “the camera’s obsession with small images of possible intimacy and ‘home’ such as the steaming rice held between Lai’s [Fai’s] chopsticks.”68 The fact that the film action predominantly centres on the apartment, as opposed to the exterior sites of Buenos Aires, emphasises the film’s attachment to portrayals of the home. Indeed, within the narrative of Happy Together, there is a subtle romanticism invested in the home, particularly in the scenes portraying Fai caring for Po-wing and the scene in which Po-wing teaches Fai the tango. Creating another dimension of the home, these scenes visually imply a relationship between love and

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66 It is interesting to note that a number of scholars have read Fai and Po-wing’s domestic behaviour through a gendered lens. To my mind, drawing on gender binaries and ascribing the characters with either a male or female role is a rather simplistic and highly problematic approach that does not attend to the dynamics of Fai and Po-wing’s relationship. For a critical discussion of the limitations of a gendered reading, see Teo, Wong Kar-wai, pp. 105-109.
67 George, p. 2.
68 Greenhalgh, p. 201.
domestic space, and the combination of the characters’ displacement with the formation of a home together in Buenos Aires appears to cement a positive stage in their relationship.

Certainly, for Fai, home has very personal connotations of intimacy, as evidenced in his possession of Po-wing’s passport. The act of taking the document that will provide Po-wing with the means to travel outside their relationship is symbolic of Fai’s attempts to keep Po-wing within the confines of their domestic arrangement and under his control. Yet another instance of Fai’s controlling behaviour occurs when he purchases a surplus of cigarettes to prevent Po-wing from venturing outside their home at night. This gesture points specifically to Fai’s desperation to maintain their home and, by extension, the monogamy of their union. Po-wing intentionally and violently disrupts the order of the home on various occasions, such as when he is searching for his passport and when he unsettles Fai’s neat stack of cigarettes, and this can be interpreted as his reaction to the perceived claustrophobia of the domestic realm. It follows that, after the initial change that is instigated when Po-wing moves into Fai’s home, there is little room to start over. The action that takes place within the hotel room that is their home is at odds with the saturated warmth of the colour utilised in the cinematography, and the momentary happiness inspired by the new domestic routine of Fai caring for Po-wing is undercut by the subsequent scenes of both verbal and physical fighting. For example, the sequence in which Po-wing confronts Fai about his missing passport is composed of quick close-ups that create an erratic and disorientating montage in which Po-wing’s claustrophobia and frustration are cinematically conveyed. Here, the shift from pleasant domesticity to violence suggests an underlying disbelief in the romance with home that the film initially promises.

As their relationship starts to fall back into the previous patterns of arguing and suspicion, Po-wing is pictured alone in their home, presumably while Fai is at work in the Chinese restaurant. In this scene, Po-wing is filmed leaning over the side of the room’s small balcony, as he intently gazes at the street below. He then puts on his mustard yellow jacket and begins preening and posturing in front of the mirror. Although the viewer does not witness Po-wing leaving the hotel, it is obvious that he is preparing himself for a journey away from the domestic realm with which he has become increasingly bored. Specifically, it is the desire for new bodily experiences that prevents Po-wing from being grounded in the home. When Fai takes him back to his home, Po-wing remarks on the “nice view outside” – an indication of his restlessness within domestic space. In particular, the luminescent appearance of the lamp tends to be the focus of Po-wing’s unconscious attention, as an indication of his need to look outside and beyond the space he currently
inhabits. Po-wing’s externalisation of desire is what ultimately forces the fissures in his relationship with Fai.

Moreover, the sense of suffocation that Po-wing experiences in their home emanates from the sedate rhythm of domestic life. As Wong stated in an interview, “In this room and in their existence, there’s no progression. There’s a very routine side of their life, whereas outside the world never stops moving.” The ceaseless movement of the outside world is evoked by a repeated shot of the centre square in Buenos Aires that focuses on a large digital clock. Increasing the speed of the numbers on the clock as it registers the time of day, Buenos Aires is represented through a temporal movement that is at odds with the way in which time moves in Fai and Po-wing’s home in La Boca. Some moments, such as when Fai uses chopsticks to place a small mound of rice in his mouth, are painfully sedate and drawn out, as if to emphasise the underlying strain that their relationship is placed under. Everyday and mundane actions are given an emotional weight that dispels any notion that the home is an idealised space.

Wong’s comment in the interview also alludes to the anxiety connected to the home in terms of the film’s idea of desire as migration. As a location that appears to promise stability and protection, the home and desire are seemingly irreconcilable. If, as I have previously suggested, desire “dwells” within states of mobility, what role does the home play in this conceptual relationship? As in many of Wong’s films, the space of home is part of a hotel. This very fact undermines the stability of the construct of home and aligns Fai’s domestic space more with spaces of transit – what Alain de Botton describes as a “liminal travelling place.” Indeed, the very idea of living in a hotel brings with it a lack of rootedness, ownership, permanence and privacy. Although the room in the Hotel Rivera possesses enough space for a bed, a small living area and shower, Fai and Po-wing have to share the hotel’s communal kitchen, thereby creating a shared urban dwelling: home is a nomadic space that joins domesticity and journeying.

Subverting the idea of home as fixed and stable, the setting of a hotel ties into the consistent use of symbolic borders and interstices. It is useful to again regard Marc Augé’s theorisation of non-places, as the hotel corresponds to the “the traveller’s space” that is the “archetype of non-place.” Set in opposition to “residence and dwelling”, the act of using the hotel as the setting for Fai and Po-wing’s domestic scenes breaks down the binary opposition between rooted and enclosed ideas of home and the unsettled and transitory reality of a hotel room. As a stream of diverse people constantly inhabit hotel rooms, the

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69 Wong quoted in Brunette, p. 80.
representation of this space can never be fixed and is inherently ambiguous, as the reading of the site will depend upon the individual interpretation of each visitor. Calling into question ideas of ownership and permanence, a hotel room is often a temporary residence in the middle of a journey, but is rarely a final resting place.

Without the burden of the “fixed” meaning of home, Fai’s hotel room represents the possibility of finding a time and space that can contain the film’s transient characters; however, the promise of a union embodied in the home is tinged with futility after Po-wing’s injuries heal and he begins to look beyond this space to relieve his domestic boredom. Specifically, the anxiety that permeates Fai and Po-wing’s domestic arrangement centrally plays out in the fact that they possess incompatible ideas regarding how the home should be arranged. For example, Po-wing’s idealised domestic space is highly sexualised. When he originally moves into Fai’s home, they arrange for Po-wing to sleep on the bed and for Fai to sleep on the sofa; however, Po-wing decides to alter this arrangement and joins Fai on the sofa, positioning his body on top of Fai’s:

Fai: Why are you sleeping here?

Po-wing: I like it.

Fai: It’s too small for two.

Po-wing: It’s not. I think it’s quite comfortable.

[Po-wing bites Fai]

Fai: Why did you bite me?

Po-wing: I’m hungry.

Fai: You want the sofa?

Po-wing: What?

Fai: Then I’ll take the bed.

Po-wing: Just go back to sleep.

Fai: If you want the bed, I’ll stay here.

Po-wing: Be quiet, will you

[Fai gestures to move]

Po-wing: Hey!

Fai: OK, I’ll sleep on the bed.

[Fai moves from the sofa to the single bed and Po-wing follows him]
PO-WING: Why can’t you be nice?

FAI: The bed’s too small.

PO-WING: What do you mean? I can sleep on top of you.

After a prolonged verbal exchange, the scene ends with Po-wing spooning Fai in the single bed. In the following scene, Po-wing attempts to reconcile this spatial problem by joining the single bed and the sofa together to create a provisional double bed. Fai, who is yearning for intimacy beyond sexual activity, immediately separates the two pieces of furniture and says to Po-wing, “I’m warning you. I want no more of your games.”

Within these scenes, Wong highlights the contrasting models of desire that Fai and Po-wing individually represent. Although movement is necessarily intertwined with both models, Fai’s ideal form of love is predicated on a minimum of movement and the commitment to a specific place. He is prepared to undertake a journey to reach his space of desire, such as when he and Po-wing first embark on their trip to Argentina and later try to find Iguazú. However, his approach is clearly at odds with Po-wing’s need for constant mobility and starting over to express desire. This disparity is eloquently expressed in the dialogue that accompanies the scene in which Fai and Po-wing are lost in the pampas:

FAI: Can’t you read a map? We’re miles off!

PO-WING: So? Turn around and find the road.

Here, Fai’s preference for sticking to the map, and therefore following a clear route, is juxtaposed to Po-wing’s willingness to float with little direction through unbound spaces of emotion.

Domestic Tango: “A sad thought that can be danced”

The polarity between Fai and Po-wing as desiring and moving subjects is given expression through the motif of the tango that is subtly woven into Happy Together. In an intriguing parallel, the narrative of the tango is intimately connected to geography. As Faye Bendrups writes:

The collective mythology that conjures up tango and Argentine-ness can be directly traced to specific geographical contributors and the response to, and expression of, that space. That space is derived from physical locations and crossings between them: in particular, the empty space of the interior and the crowded urban space of the city of Buenos Aires.

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73 Bendrups, p. 100.
Bendrups’ reference to the intersection of the interior and Buenos Aires situates the tango within a nomadic paradigm and forges the creation of yet another interstice. In *Happy Together* the tango functions as a signifier of the film’s Argentinean setting, as well as providing another layer that draws on the dance’s historical narrative of passion, displacement and melancholy. Judith Lynne Hanna proposes that “[i]mmigrant experiences of a transient, isolated, and frustrated existence, life of migrants from the pampas, and the gaucho traditions, in addition to men’s fears of social, economic, and sexual failure, constitute the lore of the tango.”\(^\text{74}\) It is also interesting that, although the tango has become a dance that is generally performed by a man and a woman, the tango, in its original form, was danced by men waiting for their turn at the brothel and was considered “too disgusting in its sexual implications for women to participate in.”\(^\text{75}\)

The utilisation of the tango as a motif in a film that complicates the expression of desire in language is significant. The balance, precision and connectedness that the dance requires are bound up with the sensual articulation of emotion that cannot be encapsulated in words. As Gibbs writes, “There is an atmosphere to tango that absorbs all else into itself so that participants are relays in – rather than points of origin for – the transduction of affect into movement.”\(^\text{76}\) The traditional choreography requires that the upper bodies of the dancers maintain close proximity; however, the abrupt and staccato movements of the footwork appear to undermine the intimate connection of the upper body. Accordingly, the dance portrays two competing modes of movement in the one body: controlled stillness with moments of erratically detailed movement. The tango is therefore a perfect example of a dance that joins desire and movement, particularly as it physically enacts the melancholic confusion that can accompany desire. Specifically, the dance communicates through movement the competition between the desire for closeness and the longing to move away and retain one’s sense of self.

On a number of occasions, a professional version of the tango is performed at Bar Sur for the buses of Asian tourists who visit the bar as part of an organised tour. Although Fai works as the doorman for the tango bar, he is consistently filmed in a manner that excludes and distances him from the interior space of the bar. In the first scene set in the bar, Fai is filmed outside in the cold while Po-wing sits inside with a client. The scene reasserts the symbolic division that separates Fai and Po-wing; however, it also suggests that Fai is not compatible with the space of the tango. Po-wing, on the other hand, masters

\(^{75}\) Tambling, “Cinematic *Carmen* and the ‘Oeil Noir’,” p. 181.
\(^{76}\) Gibbs, p. 102.
the steps during his time as a male prostitute and later attempts to pass on this knowledge to Fai.

Figure 3.8. A dance of love (Happy Together)

The scene in which Fai and Po-wing perform their own version of the Argentine tango in the communal kitchen of the Hotel Rivera transforms the open space into a private milonga. The kitchen, which is usually bustling with the activity of the other hotel patrons who use it to cook, argue and socialise, is devoid of all life other than that of the protagonists. The choreography of Fai and Po-wing’s tango is not skilfully executed and can be contrasted to the earlier scenes in Bar Sur. While the Argentinean couple display the intricate footwork and physical closeness of the dance, Fai and Po-wing’s rendition is a messy convergence of body and emotion through the intimacy of touch and physical expression. Although their tango lacks skill and true artistry, this scene, which importantly takes place in another interstice that rests between public and private space, captures a moment in which Fai and Po-wing have overcome their differences. As their playful dancing transitions into passionate kissing, the viewer is privy to a fleeting moment of psychological and physical union.

Scholarly interventions into situating the tango within a spatial imaginary have principally connected the dance to public urban space. Jeffrey Tobin writes that “[t]wo images inevitably dominate…primal tango scenes. One image is of a brothel in Buenos

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77 The word “milonga” has various meanings that refer to a dance which is similar, yet choreographically distinct from, the tango, as well as a space in which dancing takes place, i.e. a dance hall or tango bar. It is invoked in this context to refer to a place for dancing.
Aires... The other image... is of a street corner in Buenos Aires.”⁷⁸ Importantly, Tobin’s conception of the tango as associated with a brothel and a street corner forges a link to Po-wing and his job as a male prostitute, as well as his role as a flâneur. There is, therefore, an interesting tension between the tango and the space in which it is enacted. Although it occurs within the space of the kitchen, which is symbolically linked with Fai and his conception of domestic love, the tango is historically a dance of the street and is therefore aligned with Po-wing. For that reason, this scene presents the most reciprocal moment in the film in which their opposing values and symbolic spaces appear to be able to mutually exist. However, as Ackbar Abbas elucidates in his concept of the “erotics of disappointment”, Wong sets up a romantic and hopeful image only to subvert the viewer’s expectations: “...in Wong’s cinema, we are never certain about what we are seeing. The image always subtly misses its mark. It misses its appointment with meaning, and turns into that characteristic Wong Kar Wai thing, the image of disappointment.”⁷⁹

The juxtaposition of the tango, a dance of passion and sex, with the banal surrounds of the kitchen alludes to the film’s interest in the possibilities of locating a space of desire within the domestic realm; however, this incongruous union of the street and domestic space is another visual indicator of the inability for the differences between Fai and Po-wing to be overcome. The mournful strains of the bandoneon in Piazzolla’s musical composition “Finale (Tango Apasionado)”, which accompanies the scene, indicate that, despite the tenderness of the moment that they share, their relationship may soon come to another end. In the following scene Fai is filmed working the door at Bar Sur. As he sits outside the bar, the film camera pans along the exterior façade of the bar, and the professional tango dancers are seen briefly through the French windows in a shot that reinforces Fai’s distance from the dance. Although he has previously attempted the tango with Po-wing, Fai continues to be excluded from this space of desire. Abbas’s reference to disappointment is crucial in this instance: Wong presents a scene that appears to create a romantic balance only to subtly undermine any hope in the following scene. With the transition from scene to scene, as well as from location to location, Wong literally shows the manner in which desire both moves and dissipates.

⁷⁸ Jeffrey Tobin, “Tango and the Scandal of Homosocial Desire,” in The Passion of Music and Dance: Body, Gender, and Sexuality, ed. William Washabaugh (Oxford and New York: Berg, 1998), pp. 79-80. See also Tambling, “Cinematic Carmen and the ‘Oeil Noir’,” pp. 180-181. Tambling provides a further understanding of the historical specificity of the tango. He writes that, “From 1869, when statistics were first kept, to 1914, three million European immigrants – mostly male, Italian and Spanish, principally – arrived in Buenos Aires, constructing a new porteño (port) society where they competed with the existing criollo society. They came to work in the hinterland, but many stayed in Buenos Aires. There were too few women for these men. The tango, an urban dance, originated, according to Borges, in the brothels of Buenos Aires in the 1880s: that is, with these new immigrant males.”

The tango notably appears one final time in a scene that intercuts Fai’s journey to Iguazú. Shifting from a shot of Fai driving through the pampas, the narrative returns to Po-wing in Buenos Aires. Leaning back on the counter at Bar Sur, a man approaches Po-wing and they begin dancing the tango. As they gracefully traverse the small performance space in the centre of the bar, the film visually introduces the memory of Fai and Po-wing dancing in the Hotel Rivera. Within this sequence, the melancholy flashback, which focuses on a happier moment in the relationship of Fai and Po-wing, transforms the choreography of the tango into a movement into memory, suggesting that, for Po-wing, desire can be located only through the intangible veil of nostalgia. Indeed, in the following scene he is filmed staring longingly at the image painted across the surface of the lamp, an object that is now portrayed as a nostalgic artefact from his failed relationship with Fai.

Off the Map: Reading Iguazú and the Souvenir Lamp

A Memento of Love

The critical work of Laura U. Marks, as featured in *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses*, provides a strong foundation for delving into the significance of the lamp. In particular, a portion of Marks’s scholarship offers a poignant discussion of the nature of objects in intercultural cinema as powerful storytellers that work to connect disparate places, as well as memory and the present. She posits that, “The heirloom, the souvenir, the mass-manufactured object contain different and incommensurable stories of ownership, fantasy, and labor depending on who looks at these objects…objects are not inert and mute but they tell stories and describe trajectories.”80 Marks’s commentary underlines that, regardless of their form and function, all objects are imbued with narratives that accumulate from various sources. Taken at face value, the lamp is a souvenir that was purchased by Po-wing to be kept as a memento of their shared journey; however, the use of the lamp as a traditional souvenir is decontextualised and subverted by the fact that Fai and Po-wing fail to reach the waterfall together. Rather, the lamp is a keepsake of a moment in Fai and Po-wing’s relationship – a hopeful period in their liaison that they feel compelled to replicate despite their problems. The movement of desire onto the lamp mobilises the characters’ longing within yet another geographical “space” that alludes to the in-between. Appearing as more than a banal domestic trinket that provides soft light in Fai’s home, the lamp is the source of the film’s hope. On the lamp’s surface, the Iguazú Falls is a miniature landscape that is enlivened by a revolving cylinder at its centre that allows slivers of light to pass over the image of the waterfall. This effect re-creates the swirl

of falling water. For Po-wing, gazing into the vista imaged on the lamp is the closest that he will get to both the waterfall and a loving relationship with Fai.

Figure 3.9. A close-up of the Iguazu Falls lamp (*Happy Together*)

The displacement from real space, captured in the actual site of the Iguazu Falls, to representation, as embodied in the lamp, reveals a state of phantasmagorical limbo. Tambling refers to the lamp as a “magic lantern” that “is the perfect image for the cinematic apparatus: giving the permission to dream and opening up the space for desire.”81 Tambling’s allusion to a “magic lantern”, a 19th century slide projector commonly used to display travel slides to produce a form of “simulated travel”, gestures towards the relationship between desire and journeying.82 However, the lamp – in a similar fashion to the magic lanterns of the 19th century – represents a form of mediated travel that is divorced from real experience. This point notwithstanding, the lamp transcends its domestic setting and provides a symbolic gateway to views of Fai and Po-wing’s site of desire. Indeed, there are two distinct scenes in which both Fai and Po-wing are filmed individually staring intently at the lamp as though they are trying to read the abstract map superimposed on the surface of this travelling object.

A sense of magic is also invoked through the rippled light of the lamp as it is projected onto the floral-patterned wallpaper of Fai’s home, infusing the cramped and derelict room with a sense of enchantment. As Rey Chow writes, “the incandescent tones of the lampshade bring to life a kind of other-worldly picture bathed in warmth and light. These visually striking images seem to imbue the love story with a kind of magic, inserting

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81 Tambling, *Wong Kar-wai’s Happy Together*, p. 36.
in the mundane reality of the documentary-like fragments a dreamlike world."\(^{83}\) The light from the lamp does provide the room with a sense of dreamy illumination; however, the domestic realm can never escape its banality and the enchantment encapsulated in the lamp does not penetrate the space of the home once Fai and Po-wing’s relationship starts to deteriorate. Rather, the fulfilment of desire is trapped within the lamp’s simulacrum. This pictorial geography resonates more within the characters’ dreams than in their lived experiences. They long to be the couple in the lamp’s image; however, they are locked out of this space and are left merely with a memento.

In most cases, a souvenir can be symbolically interpreted as a sentimental keepsake, a marker of a place or a time that becomes a tangible substitute for memory. The lamp’s position as a souvenir is interesting as, rather than being connected to a place or a time of lived experience, the lamp depicts a space that is originally unknown to the protagonists. In this sense, it is a place that is estranged from the characters’ memories, and thus promises yet another chance to start over. The lamp is, therefore, implicated in longings for the future. Writing on the attraction of souvenirs, Susan Stewart argues that:

> We might say that this capacity of objects to serve as traces of authentic experience is, in fact, exemplified by the souvenir. The souvenir distinguishes experiences. We do not need or desire souvenirs of events that are repeatable. Rather we need and desire souvenirs of events that are reportable, events whose materiality has escaped us, events that thereby exist only through the invention of narrative. Through narrative the souvenir substitutes a context of perpetual consumption for its context of origin. It represents not lived experience of its maker but the ‘secondhand’ experience of its possessor/owner.\(^{84}\)

The symbolic meaning inherent in the lamp is not connected to the context of the souvenir that Stewart refers to in *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*. Certainly, it is not related to any form of experience, authentic or “secondhand”, but is instead embedded with a nostalgic meaning that is not associated with the place depicted on the lamp, but with ideals of romantic union. The lamp clearly signifies a happier time in Fai and Po-wing’s relationship when they bought it at the beginning of their travels. Further, as it was Po-wing who bought the lamp, it initially serves as a memento and reminder of his presence.

Considering the function of souvenirs from a memorial perspective, Dallen J. Timothy provides a useful explication of the temporal ideas that are embedded within these objects:

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…souvenir meaning is difficult to measure and some souvenirs may simply function as decorative objects at home with relatively little underlying meaning. Perhaps the most widely recognized meaning of souvenirs for tourists is that they make intangible experiences tangible. Souvenirs’ physical existence assists in defining, freezing in time, and locating an ephemeral experience in extraordinary time in ordinary time and space…By bringing something home from the extraordinary place (the destination), home can become, in some small part at least, a part of the extraordinary, and experiences can be relived in routine time and space; a memorial function is, thus, created.85

Both Stewart and Timothy point to the souvenir’s capacity to distil and capture an experience that is either unrepeatable or extraordinary. However, what is particularly interesting is the specific form of temporality bound up with souvenirs. As an aesthetic suspension of space and time that freezes intangible moments, the souvenir shares the peculiar state of slow motion through which Wong portrays the real waterfall and Hong Kong. However, the lamp is not explicitly tied to a place of experience. It is not revealed to the viewer where Po-wing obtained the lamp, which perhaps accentuates the object’s symbolic meaning. Divorced from any concrete context, the lamp’s embedded meaning is centred on the protagonists’ relationship. Rather than being a mnemonic substitute for the journey to a geographical place, the lamp represents Fai and Po-wing’s idealised journey: the expectation that they will happily be together at the waterfall and perhaps return to a time of romantic fulfilment. Consequently, Happy Together both subverts and plays with conventional ideas of the semiotic function of a souvenir, in that the lamp also facilitates a projection into the future. In many respects, the lamp embodies Fai and Po-wing’s unstable oscillation between a longed-for future of new possibility and the security and fixity of experience. Filling the “void” of desire, the lamp comes to represent the hidden longings of the characters that are never directly verbalised or properly communicated. It is for this reason that my labelling of the lamp as a travelling object also intersects with the creation of a dream space that exists outside Fai and Po-wing’s reality.

In The Artificial Kingdom: A Treasury of the Kitsch Experience – a detailed exploration of the history of the acquirement, collection and display of kitsch objects and the cultural narratives and personal psychologies encapsulated in this fascination – Celeste Olalquiaga regards the symbolism of the ethereal worlds captured in the hermetic spaces of paperweights and snow globes. Rather than functioning as mere objects that fulfil an ornamental and decorative function, Olalquiaga writes that they offer the promise of a contained dream space upon which the owner can project his or her desires. She proposes that:

Just like the oneiric and mnemonic universes...souvenir paperweights evoke through visual imagery an intensity of feeling that is otherwise inexpressible: it belongs to the pre-symbolic realm of experience of the unconscious, where events organize and articulate themselves in a non-verbal language sensitive to the most subtle emotional intricacies. Fragmentary and selective, the unconscious works its messages through condensation, association and repetition, saturating our imagination with memories and dreams. ‘Dream spheres’ provide a unique medium for these evanescent recollections and fantasies, replicating in their glass and water distortions the amorphous state of half-consciousness.\(^\text{86}\)

In a similar fashion to the snow globes that Olalquiaga places under analysis, the lamp is a “dream sphere” that is the receptacle of the characters’ largely unfulfilled hopes and desires. The lamp, as opposed to the “real space” of the Iguazú Falls, symbolises the utopian aspirations of Fai and Po-wing for complete love and the hope of a lasting union. Thus, for Fai and Po-wing, who fail to journey to Iguazú, love is positioned as a frustrated desire, as it cannot transcend the object in which it is captured. The split between geography and representation is not mended, and desire and place cannot be definitively reconciled. Consequently, the characters’ imagined space of desire never develops beyond a dream space. Problematically, this dream space is soon revealed to be a bridgeless chasm that exists between reality and desire.

For example, when Fai reaches Iguazú, his experience is juxtaposed to Po-wing’s final screen moments in the film. After Po-wing disassembles the lamp and fixes the revolving cylinder, he holds it up to view the simulated fall of water. A close-up of the two little people standing on the bridge gazing into the waterfall, which is pictured in the image on the lamp, cuts away to a shot of Po-wing sobbing violently as he holds Fai’s blanket as though he is caressing an absent body. The sequence shifts to Fai standing on the bridge at the real site of the waterfall. Both Fai and the lens of the film camera become soaked in cascading water just as Po-wing’s face is wet with tears. Here, Po-wing’s desire to be with Fai arrives too late and, failing to move towards his subject of desire, he is left desolately

alone. Finally, Iguazú does not signify the supreme fulfilment promised at the beginning of the film. Although there are moments in *Happy Together* that suggest that love can be “placed” and discovered within specific sites, the scene of Fai alone at the waterfall highlights that these locations of desire are meaningless and devoid of love if they are not filled with the mutual and reciprocated longing of two people. The waterfall, in a similar vein to the home, is a site of disappointment. By clinging to the representation of an object that exists in the cracks of topography, and beyond the scope of real geography, Fai and Po-wing are unable to move beyond their current situation. Therefore, the alternative map of the lamp proves to be as esoteric and meaningless as their road map. Failing to situate and locate their love for one another and complete their journey to the waterfall, Fai and Po-wing’s relationship is destined to end in sadness.

**Alone with Memory**

The experience of exile, characterised as a “sense of ‘betwixt and between’, of being ‘here and there’…of routes over roots”, is affirmed at the end of the film when each character is left in a state of solitude and mid-journey. Although it seems probable that both Fai and Chang will return to their respective homes, Po-wing is stranded in Buenos Aires. Despite being companionless, each character retains a trace of the subject of his affection in the form of a souvenir. The Iguazú Falls lamp remains with Po-wing and is a reminder of his lost relationship with Fai, and Chang keeps a memento of Fai’s presence in the form of a voice recording. The photograph of Chang at the lighthouse that Fai takes from the market stall owned by Chang’s parents has a particular resonance: “I take a photo of Chang because I don’t know when I’ll see him again. What I do know is, if I want to see him…I know where I can find him.” Unable to successfully reconcile the relationship between place and desire or share the same emotional space, the characters are left only with the memories that they have managed to retain in some tangible form.

Here, the peculiar movement of desire that I previously alluded to, based on Gorton’s theorisations, becomes an immobile state that feeds off nostalgic memory. It is no coincidence that one of the “love songs” of the film is Frank Zappa’s “I Have Been in You”, a song that articulates desire through a lens of retrospection. The meaning contained within Zappa’s lyrics imagines the perfect moment of intimacy as a thing of the past:

I have been in you, baby
You have been in me
And we have been so intimately entwined
And it sure was fine.

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I have been in you, baby
You have been in me
And so you see we have been so together
I thought that we would never
Return from forever
Return from forever
Return from forever…

The song plays twice following the final break-up of Fai and Po-wing: first, during Fai’s cruising scene through the streets of Buenos Aires and, later, in Fai’s scene in the abattoir. Set to these sequences of alienation, the erotic mood and seductive tone of Zappa’s song is stripped of its meaning. Indeed, the erotic subtext of Zappa’s lyrics is ironically juxtaposed to the film’s action, as Fai does not make any meaningful connections in these scenes featuring random men; instead the lyrical content symbolically dwells on his lost relationship with Po-wing. Desire is therefore predicated on absence and finds expression in the longings of memory. In this sense, Zappa’s song is utilised to allude to Fai’s inner mindscape as it is juxtaposed to the loveless and empty images of his solitary life in the absence of Po-wing.

In her nuanced reading of *Happy Together*, Chow draws together memory, nostalgia and desire, and contends that:

…the object for which his [Wong’s] films are nostalgic is what we may call the flawless union among people, the perfect convergence between emotional and empirical realities – a condition of togetherness in multiple senses of the term. This is a condition which can never be fully attained but which is therefore always desired and pursued.88

Taking Chow’s argument further, this perfect union is impossible to attain because of Wong’s investment in the fulfilment of desire as something that can only be comprehended in retrospect – in the movement of memory. Michel de Certeau conceptualises memory as “a sort of anti-museum: it is not localizable.”89 Indeed, memories flow across boundaries, seeping into spatial contours that are not traceable. The migratory and shifting nature of desire in *Happy Together* is not merely confined to moving between places, but also involves temporal shifts into memory. It is for this reason that images of places such as the Iguazú Falls and Hong Kong are projected through a slow temporal lens. By prolonging their time on-screen, Wong emphasises their significance to the characters’ longing for geographical placement. As both sites are filtered through Fai’s perspective, they particularly connect to the portrayal of his character as one who prefers stillness and security.

In the final moments of the film, the viewer is placed in the middle of another journey, as Fai rides on a high-speed train through Taipei. He has cut Po-wing out of his life and does not know for sure whether he will ever see Chang again, yet the soundtrack features Chung’s cover of “Happy Together.” As the train zooms through the nocturnal cityscape of Taipei, the lyrics of the song reverberate through the city:

I can see me loving nobody but you
For all my life
When you’re with me, baby the skies will be blue
For all my life…

The image of urban loneliness contrasted to the cheerful music is the concluding reminder of Wong’s own strange love affair with melancholia and the investment in a romantic space that exists outside union and within hope. Indeed, in their collaborative essay on Wong’s status as an auteur, Timothy R. Gleason, Qi Tang and Jean Giovanetti argue that, “Wong’s films demonstrate his belief in the incompleteness of love while retaining great hopefulness that resolution can one day be achieved. According to Wong, life is filled with aggression and love, love lost and love possibilities, spontaneity and unpredictability.”

Nowhere is this sentiment explored in more depth than in Happy Together, in which the negotiation of a foreign landscape and the act of journeying inform the construction of desire. Specifically, the movement bound up with journeying defers the knowledge of love’s improbability, and the film’s reliance on mobility and migration as metaphors for the oscillations of desire is sensitive to the contradictions, confusions and inconsistencies of this emotional state. While Fai travels on the train, he takes something out of his pocket and, as he glances at it, a smile crosses his face. The viewer is not privy to what Fai is looking at, but it could very well be the photograph of Chang. This final image reinforces the presence of desire as a process of migration; a perpetual movement towards what Wong’s characters hope will finally be some form of reciprocated love.

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Chapter Three


“I think Eros is not only sex, is not only a sensation. I think…Eros is almost like a taste. Something that you cannot describe, you can feel it. It’s almost like the Japanese food *uni sashimi* that, if it is good…it makes your throat tickle.”

- Wong Kar-wai

“…eroticism is a subtle matter. ‘The pleasure of excess’ requires consciousness as well as voluptuousness. Neither space nor concepts alone are erotic, but the junction between the two is.”

- Bernard Tschumi

Introduction

The concluding part of Wong Kar-wai’s “love in the 1960s” trilogy, 2046 (2004), is a narrative and visual “echo” of the earlier films that make up his cinematic triptych: *Days of Being Wild* (1990) and *In the Mood for Love* (2000). Many influential critics and scholars have regarded 2046 as not only the end of the trilogy, but also a collective summation and Wong’s concluding filmic examination of Hong Kong’s post-handover nostalgia and history. Spanning a period from 1966 to 1970, 2046 is Wong’s final look at the Hong

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3 “Behind the Scenes of 2046.” 2046 (DVD), Sony Pictures Classics, 2006. During this interview, Wong refers to 2046 as an “echo” of *In the Mood for Love*, and I believe that this is an appropriate metaphor for the subtle ripples and repetitions that run through the trilogy. See also “Conversation with Wong Kar-wai.” *My Blueberry Nights* (DVD), Roadshow Entertainment, 2008 and Tony Rayns, “In the Mood for Edinburgh.” *Sight and Sound* 10.8 (2000), p. 17. In an interactive conversation presented by The Museum of Moving Image in April 2008, Wong made the following comment on the relationship between the three films: “*In the Mood for Love* and 2046, basically to me, are like the second part of that dream [*Days of Being Wild*].” This point is reiterated in the interview with Rayns in which Wong stated that he thinks of *In the Mood for Love* and 2046 “as one film.”

Kong of his childhood and is a melancholic meditation on the end of the 1960s – a defining decade in both Hong Kong’s history and Wong’s cinematic oeuvre, as well as his personal biography. From both a political and allegorical perspective, the film’s title refers to Hong Kong’s final year of political autonomy before it is fully integrated into the People’s Republic of China in 2047, exactly 50 years after the Handover. Deng Xiaoping’s promise of “one country, two systems”, which purportedly guarantees that Hong Kong’s political and economic systems will remain unchanged until 2047, is explored in the film’s creation of the futuristic space 2046 where “nothing ever changes.” However, the political and temporal connotations of the film’s title, while clever in their contextual links to Hong Kong’s history, give way to Wong’s continued exploration of emotion, space, memory and desire in a film narrative that simultaneously imagines spaces from Hong Kong’s faded past and a mysterious place in the future.

Although Wong has emphasised that 2046 should be regarded in its own right, the film includes numerous references and allusions to the previous two films in the trilogy that are impossible to overlook. In my analysis of the film I am interested in exploring 2046 as a single filmic entity; however, I acknowledge that to understand the film narrative in this chapter I cannot entirely remove references to the previous two films in Wong’s loosely structured trilogy. Although this chapter concentrates on specific themes and conceits that are particular to the representation of space in 2046, it will also, at poignant moments, analyse the film’s narrative trajectory and motifs in relation to Days of Being Wild and In the Mood for Love. This will allow my critique to be nuanced and specific, as well as sensitive to the intertextual links that exist between the three films.
I am of the view that it is useful to interpret the structure of *2046* in terms of acts. The reason for taking this approach is that as Wong was initially inspired by the operatic genre, it conforms with this original thought process, while also helping to organise a plot that is non-linear, fluid and, on the first few viewings, quite difficult to unravel.\(^\text{11}\) *2046* is composed of a central, nostalgic narrative set in Hong Kong in the late 1960s, an erotic science fiction story written by the film’s protagonist and a mosaic of memory shards that cut into the plot. Due to the chronologically complex nature of *2046*, it is necessary to provide a synopsis that is larger in scope and far more detailed than those provided for the films dealt with in the other chapters. For ease of summation, I will divide the film into a prologue and four acts. The critical purpose of this approach is to disentangle the structure of *2046* and lay it bare for critical analysis.

The film opens with a prologue set in 2046 – a computer-generated city of maze-like suspended railway tracks, skyscrapers and neon signs.\(^\text{12}\) An anonymous Japanese traveller (Takuya Kimura) informs the viewer of the enigmatic potential of travelling to 2046:

> In the year 2046, a vast rail network spans the globe. A mysterious train leaves for 2046 every once in a while. Every passenger going to 2046 has the same intention: They want to recapture lost memories. Because nothing ever changes in 2046.\(^\text{13}\)

Shifting to the film’s narrative present, as recollected and narrated by Chow Mo-wan (Tony Leung Chiu-wai), the film follows the escapades of Chow three years after the conclusion of *In the Mood for Love*. Having made the decision that he has no prospects in Singapore, where he is currently based, he moves back to Hong Kong. Before he leaves, he asks a woman (Gong Li) to accompany him; however, she rejects his proposal.

The first act follows Chow returns to Hong Kong at the end of 1966 to witness the Kowloon riots over the price rise of Star Ferry tickets. Living in a hotel in Wanchai and earning a menial wage writing columns for various newspapers, Chow’s personal life is taken with a string of love interests and one-night stands. Significantly, the film is structured around Chow’s encounters with four different women, and each woman can be

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\(^\text{12}\) See James Law, “2046,” in *HK LAB 2: An Exploration of Hong Kong Interior Spaces*, eds. Laurent Gutierrez and Valérie Portefaix (Hong Kong: Map Book Publishers, 2005), pp. 271-289. Law was invited by Wong to create a fictional guide to 2046 that appropriates the style and structure of a tourist guidebook.

\(^\text{13}\) All dialogue and intertitle translations are taken from the subtitles that accompany the 2005 region four DVD release of the film by Madman Films. It is important to note that although the viewer is informed that the train arrives at and departs from 2046, the global destination or destinations that are linked to 2046 are not revealed in the film.
seen as the locus of each cinematic act. However, despite any emotional attachment that he may feel towards these women, he is still nostalgic about the idealised and unconsummated love that he had with So Lai-chen (Maggie Cheung) that was lost at the end of *In the Mood for Love*.

In a nightclub on Christmas Eve 1966, Chow has a chance meeting with Lulu (Carina Lau), who also appears in *Days of Being Wild* as the love interest of both the film’s protagonist (Leslie Cheung) and his best friend (Jacky Cheung). In their brief meeting, Chow recounts how he had previously met her in Singapore and that she had taught him to dance the cha-cha. Chow also tells Lulu that she once claimed that he reminded her of her dead boyfriend. This is just the first uncanny repetition that occurs in their fleeting acquaintance, as when Chow escorts Lulu back to her hotel, he notices that she is staying in room 2046: “On my way out, I noticed a very familiar number. If I hadn’t run into her, I wouldn’t have seen that number…and I wouldn’t have written 2046.” The familiarity of the number relates to scenes in *In the Mood for Love* in which Chow and So Lai-chen meet in a hotel room with the number 2046 to work on their martial arts novel. The repetition of the number is therefore the nexus that connects all three films in the trilogy.

When, a few days later, Chow returns to the hotel to visit Lulu, he discovers that she has disappeared and decides to rent the room himself. It is subsequently revealed that her boyfriend (Chang Chen), provoked by sexual jealousy, had stabbed her to death. As room 2046 needs to be “redecorated”, Chow moves into room 2047. Not long after he moves into the hotel, he hears and spies on the hotelier’s oldest daughter, Jingwen (Faye Wong), who uses room 2046 to practise her spoken Japanese. She is in love with a Japanese man (also played by Takuya Kimura); however, due to her father’s distinct opposition to and hatred towards the Japanese, she is forced to end their relationship. Chow is a passive observer to this tragic romance, as he watches Jingwen’s deep melancholy and eventual hospitalisation when her boyfriend returns to Japan.

It is during the 1967 curfew and the Communist-instigated riots against British colonialism that Chow begins writing his erotic, science fiction story “2046”. Amidst the workers’ strikes, student demonstrations and bomb scares, he loses himself in an imaginary world “about men and women looking for love, risking everything to get to a place called

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15 The dead boyfriend to whom Chow alludes is Yuddy, the protagonist of *Days of Being Wild*, who is murdered in the Philippines at the denouement of the film.

16 See Arthur, “Philosophy in the Bedroom,” p. 6. Wong reportedly commented that Chow’s character is an extension of the anonymous gambler seen in the final moments of *Days of Being Wild*, played by Tony Leung Chiu-wai. In this closing scene Leung is filmed preparing himself for a night out in a claustrophobically small room in the old Kowloon Walled City.

17 The opposition to their union undoubtedly stems from his memories of the brutal Japanese occupation of Hong Kong during World War II and Mainland China in the early decades of the twentieth century.
The fictional space of 2046 is constructed as a parallel world in which the people from Chow’s past and present become dramatic and eroticised characters. The world of 2046 facilitates the projection of Chow’s private desires.

In September, when the economic and political turmoil settles, another woman is introduced to the film narrative to mark the second act. Bai Ling (Zhang Ziyi), a dance hostess, moves into room 2046 and attracts Chow’s attention. On Christmas Eve 1967, Chow takes Bai Ling out to dinner after she has been stood up by her date. He declares that he wants them to be “drinking pals”; however, the status of their relationship changes to that of lovers later in the film. It becomes clear that while Bai Ling is falling in love with Chow, he is unwilling to make a commitment to her and insists on paying her each time they make love. When she realises that he is still seeing other women, she refuses to see him anymore. They both move on, although Bai Ling is heartbroken.

After the split with Bai Ling, Chow enters into a friendship with Jingwen. A shared love of martial arts serials sparks off their association when, in a sincere act of kindness, Chow offers to receive letters from Jingwen’s boyfriend so that Jingwen’s correspondence can be kept hidden from her father. Later in this third act, Jingwen ghostwrites Chow’s stories in a relationship that mimics his attempt to write a martial arts novel with So Lai-chen in *In the Mood for Love*. He will spend his “happiest summer ever” with Jingwen, but her inability to reciprocate his romantic feelings feeds into a new story entitled “2047”. This narrative strand links back to the prologue and is Chow’s attempt to imagine the emotional trajectory of Jingwen’s Japanese boyfriend. However, the characterisation of Jingwen’s boyfriend is merely a veil for Chow’s own feelings. Similar to Chow’s nostalgic desire for So Lai-chen, his attraction to Jingwen is based on his inability to receive her affection. He will spend Christmas Eve 1968 with her and show a different side to his personality by allowing her to make a long distance call to her boyfriend in Japan from the newspaper office. Towards the end of the film, Jingwen moves to Japan and marries her boyfriend. Her story is the only one within the film that has a happy ending, although it significantly occurs off-screen.

In the final act of the film, Bai Ling returns to ask Chow if he will be her guarantor to allow her to work in a nightclub in Singapore. She tells Chow that she came looking for him on Christmas Eve 1969, but was unable to find him. A flashback reveals that Chow was in Singapore looking for the mysterious woman at the beginning of the film. It is disclosed that her name is Su Lizhen and that she is also known as the “Black Spider.” Originally from Phnom Penh, she is identified for her skill at gambling and for always wearing a black velvet glove on her left hand. As Su Lizhen is the Mandarin pronunciation
of So Lai-chen, she appears as a *femme fatale* substitute for Chow’s lost love.\(^\text{18}\) Chow recollects his original meeting with Su Lizhen in Singapore when he had lost all his money gambling and she offered to win it back for him. The film then turns back on itself and revisits the last meeting between Chow and Su Lizhen before he travels back to Hong Kong in 1966. Returning to the film’s present, Chow has a final encounter with Bai Ling before she leaves for Singapore. She asks why it can’t be like it was before and pleads with him to spend the night with her. He leaves and commences a taxi ride into an unknown future.

Throughout this lengthy summary of *2046* I have attempted to elucidate not only the film’s many and intersecting plot lines, but also the manner in which the number 2046 operates on different levels and is interwoven into the film narrative. Aside from being the title of the film, the number represents a calendar date and chronological marker, a fictional (extra-diegetic) place in the film’s future, a hotel room that is a clandestine meeting place in *In the Mood for Love*, a room in the mnemonic present of *2046* that is located in the Oriental Hotel and inhabited by both Lulu and Bai Ling, and, finally, the title of an erotic short story written by Chow. In a filmed interview, Wong further emphasises that, “The number 2046, to him [Chow]…represents the love memories he had in the past.”\(^\text{19}\) The number 2046, therefore, touches on a number of interconnected thematic concerns that I will explore in this chapter; namely, space, memory, desire and eroticism.

The various symbolic uses of the number 2046 reflect the film’s multilayered imagining of space, as it is experienced, remembered and fantasised by the film’s

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\(^{18}\) Chow’s voice-over obliquely sheds light on this connection to *In the Mood for Love*: “A few years ago, I fell in love with another man’s wife. Her name was also Su Lizhen.”

\(^{19}\) “Behind the Scenes of 2046.” *2046* (DVD).
characters. Drawing on the creation of the erotic parallel space of 2046 as a jumping-off point for considering the projection of desire onto place, this chapter is particularly concerned with unpacking the manner in which the fictional erotic narratives that give life to 2046 shape the visual environment of the film as a whole. Specifically, Chow’s textual inscription of the fictional space of 2046 transforms erotic desire into an architectural frame, whereby his emotions are the raw material for constructing the physical spaces of the film. In other words, Chow’s written text is the film’s visual and spatial texture. For example, 2046 opens with a shot of a suggestive void that is embedded within one of the interior spaces of Chow’s short story. This cavity, which I will subsequently consider in further detail, functions as an architectural passage into Chow’s consciousness. Providing an opening into the erotic possibilities of Chow’s imagination, the film narrative issues forth from this void. By locating Chow’s erotic fantasies within a specific space, Wong immediately establishes a link between eroticism and place. The void is a wound that appears simultaneously in the texture and structure of the film.

Significantly, 2046 features Wong’s most explicit portrayal of sexual intercourse and intimacy – apart from the opening sex scene in Happy Together (1997) – and this element of the plot has prompted a number of scholars and critics to proclaim that 2046 is one of Wong’s most blatantly erotic films. By way of illustration, in Amy Taubin’s assessment of the film she describes 2046 as “intoxicatingly erotic in its images, sounds, and rhythms.”

Much more can be added to this assertion, because although the sex scenes establish the erotic content of 2046, the link between seduction and the architectural spaces and settings of the film displays an intricate and complex conceptualisation of the erotic that is unique to 2046.

Indeed, Wong effectively displaces eroticism onto the film’s architecture and transforms what is typically an intangible concept or state of feeling into a series of visual and spatial motifs. I propose that eroticism – loosely defined by Alyce Mahon as being “not merely about sexual procreation, it is about the production of pleasure and, most importantly, is often expressed in opposition to Thanatos (its opposite, the death drive)” – is given an architectural dimension in which the boundaries of erotic desire are explored in

20 See Brunette, p. 105. In his director’s statement that accompanied the 2046 press kit, Wong made the following statement: “there is a need in all of us to have a place to hide or store certain memories, thoughts, impulses, hopes, and dreams. These are part of our lives that we can’t resolve or best not act upon but at the same time we are afraid to jettison them. For some, this is a physical place; for others, it is a mental space, and for a few it is neither.”
physical thresholds and spatial recesses. Moments of erotic arousal and sensual encounters do not take place only between the characters of the film, but spill over to create a tension within the film’s settings. Love letters passed through cracks in walls and whispered secrets echoing through the lonely passages of the train travelling to 2046 are part of the film’s cinematic approach to eroticism that is articulated through the manner in which the cinematography teases the viewer with fragmented and obscured views, dwells within crevices and plays with colour, sound and texture.

This approach to reading the film draws on ideas of the seductive nature of built environments. Architect and theorist Bernard Tschumi proposes that there is indeed a relationship between visual pleasure and architecture:

There is rarely pleasure without seduction, or seduction without illusion… Architecture is no different. It constantly plays the seducer. Its disguises are numerous: façades, arcades, squares, even architectural concepts become the artifacts of seduction. Like masks, they place a veil between what is assumed to be reality and its participants.

In 2046 the erotic is inscribed in every detail of the mise en scène, whereby the movements of the camera seek to unveil and reveal the minutiae of the film action, while also concealing and disguising a cohesive view – a mode of seduction that is intensely cinematic and relies on the camera’s interaction with space.

By situating 2046 within a specific model of eroticism that appropriates and transforms theories of erotic architecture and refigures these concepts within a cinematic context, this chapter’s analysis of the film relies on an architectural approach that peels back the various visual and audio layers of the film. Although the relationship between architecture and cinema may not appear to be instantly apparent, both mediums are equally concerned with space, structure, texture and form. As Giuliana Bruno writes in Public Intimacy: Architecture and the Visual Arts, “…architecture and film are tangibly connected. The two mediums meet on the grounds of their shared light texture, morphing into each other. Both are rendered as surfaces, screens – materials prone to absorb and cast back light.”

In this chapter I propose that the film image in 2046 is itself a form of erotic architecture composed of light, shape and sound; its intangibility – specifically its inability to be engaged with in a physical manner or through the sense of touch – thereby requires that eroticism be evoked visually and audibly. Therefore, my reading of architecture will not be confined to merely examining how space is implicated in the film’s conception of

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23 Tschumi, p. 178.
eroticism; I will also consider the textures of the film – the architecture of film space – with a specific focus on the intersection of the settings, the audioscapes, the colours of the cinematography and the costumes.

**Revealing the Erotic: Sensual Layers and Texturality**

When Chow originally returns to Hong Kong at the end of 1966, his chance meeting with Lulu is a pivotal scene that sets in motion the narrative and also establishes the aesthetic style of the film. In every shot featuring Lulu, she is pushed to the very edge of the frame so that she only inhabits, at most, half of the screen. Instead, a red velvet curtain, which initially conceals Chow from view, overtakes the majority of the screen and sets up a visual motif whereby the film’s characters are consistently placed off-centre and partially concealed. This mode of composition, which plays with Pascal Bonitzer’s concept of “deframing”, works to draw attention to the spaces that the characters inhabit, as well as the layered textures of the scenography; that is, the folds and gathers of Chow’s memory.25

![Image](image_url)

**Figure 4.2.** The cheongsam: A gather in the folds of memory (2046)

In this particular scene, Lulu’s cheongsam, which is embellished with large reflective sequins, facilitates a visual effect by which her dress reflects colour and light depending on her surroundings, and the physical setting blurs into the boundaries of the garment.26 The camera’s focus on the mirrored refractions on Lulu’s cheongsam and the gathers of red velvet in the curtains emphasise the film’s concern with texture and surface as visual seduction. Drawing on Bruno’s assertion that architecture and cinema share a common feature as surfaces, I will utilise the cheongsam, a surface that both frames the bodies of the female characters and is implicated in the film’s spatial design, as the starting

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26 For purposes of clarity, it is important to note that cheongsam is sometimes spelt “cheungsam.” In the Mandarin dialect, a cheongsam is referred to as a “qipao.”
surface through which to negotiate eroticism. In so doing, I am concerned with detaching costume design from the plot in order to embed fashion within the overall aesthetic structure of the film.27

This approach can be distinguished from readings on costuming that predominantly analyse film attire in terms of history and gender or as a visible means through which to construct character identity. For example, in Amelie Hastie’s analysis of the semiotic function of fashion in Hong Kong cinema, she considers a selection of films that “display a complex texture of history, fashion, and gender.”28 At the crux of Hastie’s argument is a focus on how structures of time are symbolised through garments, and this line of critique runs through a number of critical works on film costuming.29 Although production designer William Chang Suk-ping’s elaborate costume design is certainly crucial to credibly establishing the main temporal setting of the 1960s, the costuming in 2046 is afforded a far more symbolic role to become an important element within the film’s mise en scène and, by extension, its cinematic architecture. Specifically, I argue that the cheongsam is not merely a garment that is ancillary to the film narrative, but is a pleat or a gather in the material that comprises the film’s aesthetic.

Figure 4.3. Memories of So Lai-chen (In the Mood for Love)

27 See Giuliana Bruno, “Surface, Fabric, Weave: The Fashioned World of Wong Kar-wai,” in Fashion in Film, ed. Adrienne Munich (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011), pp. 83-105. Uncannily, a week before the submission of this thesis, this collection, which was published at the end of June in 2011, was brought to my attention. Although Bruno’s chapter also explores the intersection of fashion and architecture in Wong’s cinema, my work’s sustained interest in the visual intricacies and erotic specificities of 2046 marks a point of departure.


In Bruno’s theorisation of the intersection of architecture, fashion and film, she emphasises that, “As decor, fashion becomes embedded in architecture and in the very architectonics of the film…Architecture is conceived not merely as a set, nor is decor simply an object of set design.” She elaborates on this concept further:

Fashion ties architecture to the body metonymically, since clothing lies between the body and building. It informs architecture, for architecture itself is dressed, designed, and engaged with ornament and the lack thereof to such an extent that, in modern times, it has become an art of clothing. On the threshold of interior and exterior, fashion and architecture – and we can add, cinema – make private and social space, reversibly fashioning the body…fashion and architecture intersect with the cinema, for they are all engaged in the making of visual space.

In *2046* the construction of “visual space” centres on the cheongsam. The design of the dress provides a symbolic structure that serves as a metaphor for the restrictive compositions of the cinematic frame, as well as the claustrophobic interior settings. The cheongsam is also, and most obviously, a temporal marker; however, it denotes not only the historical period, but also the boundaries of Chow’s memories. In this sense, the mosaic of sequins on Lulu’s dress symbolically reflects Chow’s past. Not only does the garment bring back memories of the brief time that he shared with Lulu in Singapore, but also recalls the elegant presence of So Lai-chen’s fabric clad body passing through the spaces of *In the Mood for Love*. This association ties together eroticism, memory and place: the cheongsam composes a complex layering of fabric, desire, space and time.

The Fabrication of Eroticism

Various scholars have discussed in detail the cheongsam as a significant costuming choice in *In the Mood for Love*. Although it functions to highlight So Lai-chen’s svelte figure in an amazing array of vintage fabrics, it also serves to delineate the film’s temporal structure. In a film in which the shift into different days is difficult to track, the change in cheongsam design alerts the viewer to the passage of time. Paul Arthur writes that the cheongsams in *In the Mood for Love* are “[v]isually fetishized like nothing else in the film, their variations in

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30 Giuliana Bruno, *Atlas of Emotion: Journeys in Art, Architecture, and Film*. (London and New York: Verso, 2002), p. 89. In this instance, Bruno is referring to a specific film, Craig’s *Wife* (1936); however, I believe that this statement is equally pertinent to looking at film costuming in general.


successive scenes install a kind of hidden syntax or paramours’ code.” The costuming in 2046 has yet to receive the same level of scholarly intervention; however, the link to In the Mood for Love is particularly important in analysing the significance of costume design in Wong’s filmic echo. In 2046 the cheongsam maps the curves of the female form; however, it is also a symbolic object that evokes traces of So Lai-chen, transforming the female body into a site of melancholy. The adorned bodies of the female characters, inscribed with an absent presence, are abstract structures that metaphorically “house” Chow’s memories. In a similar vein to many objects in Wong’s films, the cheongsam possesses a travelling function. It not only plays a part in transporting the viewer to the film’s 1960s setting, but also provides the textural detail of Chow’s recollections.

Looking specifically at the design of the cheongsam, the most common shape and structure features a tight fitting sheath dress, side slits that are cut to the mid-thigh or sometimes higher, a high waist line, an indented hemline to accentuate the wearer’s figure, and a high, rigid Mandarin collar. These aspects of its construction make it a restrictive garment that, in the same manner as a corset, imposes physical constraint on the wearer, and a certain gait and posture are required to wear it comfortably. The cheongsams worn by Bai Ling, Lulu and Su Lizhen in 2046 demonstrate the unyielding shape of the garment, for the late 1960s saw the highest collars and the tightest fitting cheongsams.

As a symbolic garment, I propose that the cheongsam is a form of erotic and somatic architecture. In this sense, it encloses and provides an exterior, protective frame for the body; however, its structure is also concerned with presenting the female form in a subtly sexual manner. As Nicholas Wong perceptively writes:

The seductive art of cheongsam lies in the demand that it clothes the body but to reveal the eroticism of the wearer obscurely...The cheongsam half reveals and obscures the shape of a female body and forms an outer skin, or I shall say it is almost the wearer’s skin.

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34 See Hazel Clarke, The Cheongsam (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000). The cheongsam, which was adapted from the traditional Chinese robes worn by both Manchu men and women during the Qing dynasty (1644-1911), undoubtedly plays an important role in Hong Kong’s cultural identity. Its tailored production in China, most notably in Shanghai, ceased after the establishment of Communist rule when many of the tailors moved to Hong Kong. However, prior to this geographical move the adaptation of the changpao, a long robe worn predominantly by men, into the cheongsam was inspired by a fusion of both Chinese and Western fashion styles, techniques and fabrics. The garment became a symbol of Chinese feminine modernity in the early twentieth century.
The metaphorical skin engendered by the cheongsam provides an alluring veil that ties in with the use of architecture in the film. Indeed, in both *In the Mood for Love* and *2046*, the female characters’ tight and restrictive cheongsams are visually complemented by the filming of confined public and private spaces that disclose fragmented views of 1960s Hong Kong: narrow alleyways, corridors, winding staircases, street corners, tiny booths in restaurants, small and steamy noodle shops and claustrophobic interiors. These spaces mirror the limitations of movement imposed by the garment on the wearer’s body as it traverses space. The construction of the cheongsam supplements the film’s projection of eroticism, as the garment traverses the dialectic between modesty and seduction by concealing some parts of the body while offering teasing views of other parts. Although sexualised elements of the female physique – such as the cleavage, décolletage and midriff – remain veiled, the wearer’s legs are highly visible to offer fleeting views of the thighs, calves and ankles. This play on revealing and concealing, as a means to heighten suspense and the desire to see, is at the heart of the visual and spatial play on eroticism in *2046* that I will develop in this chapter.

Considering the relationship between the cheongsam in *In the Mood for Love* and concepts of the erotic, Ackbar Abbas proposes that:

> There are many variations of color and fabric, but the cheongsam always returns to a basic shape silhouette, to a stubborn structure. The variations clarify and confirm the structure; they do not depart from it. We might say that, like the cheongsam, the erotic, too, is not just the eruption of individual desire; it exists in a field where the possibilities and permutations are finite and subject to a structure… Disappointment is the realization that every desire that we want to believe is unique and original is already a repetition…Structure as repetition always asserts itself in the end, and that may be the final disappointment.37

Abbas’s analysis points to the manner in which the cheongsam is a garment that delineates the limits of eroticism. In *2046* the return of the “stubborn structure” of the cheongsam traces and affirms the margins of Chow’s erotic imagination, forming a part of the repetitions and uncanny returns that make up the architecture of Chow’s unconscious. Throughout the film, Chow’s encounters all point to the sense of stagnation that is initially imagined through the perpetual journey of the train that travels to and from *2046*. For example, Chow’s meeting with Lulu, the reappearance of the number 2046 on the hotel

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37 Ackbar Abbas, “Cinema, the City, and the Cinematic,” in *Global Cities: Cinema, Architecture, and Urbanism in a Digital Age*, eds. Linda Krause and Patrice Petro (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2003), pp. 154-155. See also Rey Chow, “Sentimental Returns: On the Uses of the Everyday in the Recent Films of Zhang Yimou and Wong Kar-wai.” *New Literary History* 33 (2002), p. 648. Chow writes that, “The gorgeous colors, patterns, and shapes as embodied by Su [So Lai-chen], meanwhile, are not exactly necessary to the action of the story. In their invariable perfection, in their almost mechanical (because impeccable) appearances, they are rather directed at some other gaze, for which the figure of Su stands like an uncanny, doll-like fetish (in the Freudian sense) for some unexpressed or inarticulate emotion – one, moreover, that belongs not to any individual character within the story but to a force outside the diegesis, structuring it.”
room door, Su Lizhen’s evocative name, the projection of characters and events from Chow’s real life into his fictitious world, the repetition of music, the sense of déjà vu engendered by the 1960s locations and the familiar configuration of the cheongsam reveal Chow’s entrapment within a limited perspective and his inability to move beyond his past. For the female characters, the “house” of the cheongsam is rendered as a prison of Chow’s memories. This is particularly the case for Bai Ling, who falls in love with Chow and is rejected in the cruellest manner possible after she fails to measure up to his unrealistic expectations.

The spectral presence of So Lai-chen is crucial to highlighting the film’s futile structure of eroticism, which is based on the residues of her restrained romance with Chow. First appearing in 2046 in the montage that introduces Chow’s erotic narrative “2046”, So Lai-chen is filmed lying provocatively on a bed while wearing a floral-patterned cheongsam reminiscent of those she wears in In the Mood for Love. She is subsequently pictured as one of the futuristic cabin attendants entering room 2046 in Chow’s fictional world. Her dress, which gives the impression of a cyber realisation of a cheongsam, is unbuttoned to reveal her décolletage and the black vinyl bustier she is wearing underneath. In a similar manner to the constant motion of the train, the apparition of So Lai-chen disrupts any sense of linear, temporal progress. Moving fluidly between different spaces of the film, her mnemonic image does not belong to a specific time or place, but floats between the film’s past, present and future. However, what is consistent is the portrayal of her figure clothed in a cheongsam, thereby reinforcing the significance of the dress as an erotic surface embedded within the film’s mise en scène.
By utilising the cheongsam to frame Chow’s memories, Wong depicts the garment as an object of haunting. This is particularly established through the reconstruction of a beautiful scene from *In the Mood for Love* in which Chow and So Lai-chen share a taxi back to their apartment building. As So Lai-chen rests her head on Chow’s shoulder, they hold hands before Chow gently leans his head towards her. In a perversion of this intimate moment in *2046*, Chow is filmed in a taxi with Bai Ling. During this scene, Chow, seemingly in an intoxicated dream state, rests his head on Bai Ling’s shoulder and places his hand on her thigh. After she removes his hand, Chow again reaches for her, this time taking her hand in his. Importantly, Wong replicates this scene later in *2046* with an oneiric recollection of So Lai-chen. Visually, the two taxi scenes are difficult to differentiate; however, the montage with So Lai-chen is accompanied by Chow’s voice-over: “Some years back, I had a happy ending in my grasp, but it’s in the past now.” The taxi scenes – a repeated visual motif in Wong’s films that I have suggested in the previous chapter evokes the fluidity of desire – are juxtaposed to reveal the emptiness at the centre of the film.

Here, the erotic is imagined through a failed repetition, and the encasement of Bai Ling’s body in a cheongsam reinforces her role as an empty object of desire, rather than a subject. Although the majority of the female characters wear cheongsams, the dress continues to be associated with So Lai-chen to the extent that the outline of the garment almost effaces the body that it encloses. The cheongsam, as a mnemonic texture, captures a semblance of So Lai-chen in the aesthetic representation of each female character; however, her presence is never fully reclaimed. As Audrey Yue writes, “These women can be likened to the part object status connoted by the fetish where they function as disassembled parts to the whole meta-text embodied by Su [So Lai-chen].” 38 The cheongsam enables a strange sense of identification, although the chasm between romantic reality and ideal is not reconciled and the women in Chow’s life are relegated to the role of “time-fillers”:

**BAI LING:** Won’t your girlfriends be missing you tonight?

**CHOW:** They’re not stuck to me! They see other men too. We just have fun together. They still need to make a living.

**BAI LING:** I don’t get it. Where does all that ‘fun’ get you? If you find the right person, why waste time on the others?

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CHOW: If I find the right person! A man like me doesn’t have much except free time. That’s why I need company.

BAI LING: So people are just time-fillers to you?

The female characters are viewed as bodyscapes in which Chow attempts to locate the missing fragment of desire. In so doing, desire is displaced onto the garment and it becomes a trace of the past that is visualised both somatically and spatially. For Chow, the women with whom he spends his time are merely another texture; another element of the architectural space that he inhabits and moves through. Indeed, prior to his first supper with Bai Ling on Christmas Eve 1967, she is framed against one of the green walls in the Oriental Hotel. Her cheongsam, which is also composed of varying shades of green, blends into the décor, with the gold sequins that dot her dress matching the gold tinsel that decorates the hallway and the flecks of decay marking the wall. Consequently, the female characters’ adorned corporeality is rendered as a façade.

Figure 4.5. The cheongsam as architectural motif (2046)

Bound up with his visualisation of the female form in In the Mood for Love, Wong establishes a series of visual signatures that are perpetuated in 2046 whereby, to quote Peter Brunette:

...body parts are focused on in a new way and with a new intensity in shots with little narrative relevance, like the lingering shot of a woman’s hand on the threshold of a door or the railing of a stairway...Often, when the couple is walking together, the camera will somewhat perversely continue to remain on their midsection rather than, more conventionally, panning up to their faces as quickly as possible to preserve normal framing...For what is being stimulated here, beyond the spectator’s own sexual desire, is his or her desire to see, always to see more, an impossible desire linked to the couple’s impossible desire for each other.39

39 Brunette, p. 90. See also Vivian P. Y. Lee, p. 33.
The dismantled and dissected views of the female characters in *2046* – such as Jingwen’s high heel-clad feet, Bai Ling’s torso and legs and Su Lizhen’s gloved hand – are mirrored in the camera’s focus on the film’s fractured architectural details. In the same manner that the female bodies are fragmented, Wong’s reconstructed Hong Kong of the 1960s is filmed predominantly through glimpses that provide an impressionistic view of the city that never amounts to a whole vision. By filming the female form and the city in an analogous style, Wong establishes a confusion between landscape and bodyscape by which the bodies of Chow’s female conquests blur into the scenography. This mode of looking does not privilege the female body, but transforms it into another surface. Indeed, in the scene that follows Chow’s passionate parting kiss with Su Lizhen in Singapore he meditates, “In love, you can’t get a substitute. I was looking for what I felt with the other Su Lizhen.” The cheongsam, which as Yue points out is a fetish object, represents a symbolic gap. Chow, failing to find another So Lai-chen, is left to reconcile the hole in the architecture of his memory.

**Embedding the Erotic in Filmic Spaces**

![Image](image_url)

**Figure 4.6. The void (2046)**

**Secrets in the Void: “Opening” 2046**

The enmeshing of eroticism, memory and romantic mourning finds expression through this symbolic lack, which is given a distinctly architectural subtext. The intersection of intangible ideas of erotic sensuality with concrete concepts of architecture and space is foregrounded from the opening sequence of the film. The first shot in the imagined space of 2046 pans back from a black void at the centre of a large object that appears to be the brass horn of a gramophone. The deep indentation in Chow’s fictional space immediately alludes to the final sequence of *In the Mood for Love* when Chow, having left Hong Kong and the possibility of romantic fulfilment with So Lai-chen, undertakes a private journey to
Angkor Wat in Cambodia. Believing that he can leave behind his lost love for So Lai-chen within the ruins of the sacred city, he whispers an unheard secret into a hole before covering it with mud and departing the ruins. His motive is previously revealed in a conversation with Ah Ping (Sui Ping-fam):

In the old days...if someone had a secret they didn't want to share...you know what they did?...They went up a mountain, found a tree...carved a hole in it...and whispered the secret into the hole. Then they covered it with mud. And leave the secret there forever.

The final montage of imagery of Angkor Wat in *In the Mood for Love* provides a poetic juxtaposition to the film’s earlier scenes in Hong Kong: the image of physical ruins, harbouring the secret of a forbidden love affair, with the metaphoric ruins of time, expressed through the film’s nostalgic details of 1960s Hong Kong. The intangible past embedded in the Cambodian ruins thereby runs parallel to the constructed and imagined past transposed on film. Although Chow appears to leave his secret hidden in Angkor Wat, in *2046* it ruptures and haunts his romantic present and resurrects the ruins of his past.

After burying his romantic history in *In the Mood for Love*, Chow’s affairs with various women in *2046* only serve to remind him of So Lai-chen’s spectral image. With each encounter he attempts to get closer to this romance of the past; however, it remains elusive. He finds aspects of So Lai-chen in each woman he spends time with, but these women amount to only fragments of her character: Su Lizhen shares her name, Bai Ling mimics So Lai-chen’s fashion for elaborate cheongsams and Jingwen reminds Chow of his time writing a martial arts serial with So Lai-chen. In other words, they create holes in Chow’s cohesive and idealised vision of So Lai-chen and will consequently never amount to a romantic whole. Although this reasoning may appear to involve a trite use of word play, *2046* explores the relationship between architecture and eroticism in such a manner that architectural porosity – in the form of holes, gaps and peepholes – is the foundation for the film’s erotic experience that begins with the void.

The story of Chow’s ritual of burial is alluded to in *2046*; however, it contains a coda that links back to his lost relationship with So Lai-chen:

I once fell in love with someone. After a while, she wasn’t there. I went to 2046. I thought she might be waiting for me there. But I couldn’t find her. I can’t stop wondering if she loved me or not. But maybe there’s no answer to that question.

In *2046* the mud-covered hole situated in the ruins of Angkor Wat is replaced by the cavity at the centre of the gramophone. This void, which reappears in various scenes and also provides the final image of the film, evocatively joins sound and image. As a gramophone’s

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horn is the means by which it transmits sound, the first shot emphasises the complementary relationship between vision and the film’s aural design.

The opening credits that follow the image of the void are accompanied by Zbigniew Preisner’s live orchestral piece “Decision – Tu ne tueras point” and the faint sound of giggles, sighs and whispers, giving the impression that Chow’s unheard secret from *In the Mood for Love* has been released from the centre of the brass horn. These whispers are actually the first sounds that the viewer hears at the beginning of *2046* and, although they are barely perceptible, their aural presence subtly overshadows the entire film. The muffled murmurs are feminine in tone and allude to the haunting presence of women in Chow’s life that overtakes the film narrative. In the prologue that follows the credits, both the Japanese traveller and one of female cabin attendants on the train, who is the image of Jingwen, are pictured bent over the gramophone, whispering their secrets into the void. In their repetition of Chow’s movements at the end of *In the Mood for Love*, Wong establishes a continued cinematic atmosphere of melancholy in which love is not openly expressed, but is confined to secrecy and private despair.

Interestingly, in his audio commentary for the region four DVD release of the film, Stephen Teo describes the various acts of whispering into the void as creating “impressions of oral lovemaking.”41 Taking this idea further, and considering my previous comments on the gramophone as an object that transmits sound, I contend that the whispers are a thwarted form of *aural* lovemaking. As affection is generally not verbalised by the characters, and is displaced into written forms such as Chow’s erotic stories and the love letters that Jingwen exchanges with her Japanese boyfriend, the expression of love in the film is not overly oral in nature. Rather, the delicate layers of sound, upon which the narrative is constructed, indicate a different form of lovemaking that relies on an increased sense of hearing. In this sense, Wong emphasises the importance of excavating the submerged details of the soundtrack beyond dialogue.

The void at the centre of the gramophone is therefore, on one level, a metonymic ear in which the characters store the desires that they are unable to communicate. Inverting the natural flow of sound from inner machinery to exterior space, sound is directed inside the gramophone. The characters’ whispers, the content of which is never divulged in the film, take the form of a sexual release whereby pent up emotions are set free. Conversely, the failure to divulge one’s secret results in emotional distress, such as that in the scene in which the Japanese traveller tries to whisper his secret to the “Jingwen” cabin attendant. During this scene, which literalises the symbolic relationship between architecture and the female body, the cabin attendant offers to be the hole into which the Japanese traveller can

41 Teo, “Audio Commentary,” *2046* (DVD).
whisper his secret. As she forms her thumb and index finger into a circle, the strange
intimacy of this act transforms the cabin attendant into an architectural form in which
desires can be hidden. However, every time the Japanese traveller leans in to whisper his
secret, she moves her hand so that he is unable to let go of his message.

Figure 4.7. Embedding secrets (2046)

As the film progresses it becomes clear that the Japanese traveller in Chow’s
fictional narrative is really a veiled representation of Chow himself: “Maybe I was getting
too involved. I started to feel that it wasn’t about her boyfriend at all. Rather, it was more
about me.” It is arguable that the message that the Japanese traveller wishes to convey is
carried over from In the Mood for Love and is intended for So Lai-chen. To this end, his
failure to ask the cabin attendant to leave with him symbolises the manner in which Chow’s
attempts at metaphorically burying his romantic melancholy are consistently frustrated. The
inability to impart this request links into a reoccurring motif whereby the mourning of lost
desire is a silent process; however, it is interestingly given expression through the
soundtrack.

In his essay on 2046, Adrian Martin poses the following question: “But what of the
images and sounds in 2046 – not only the inspired collage of musical selections but also the
dense ‘sound design’ of voices, noises and atmospheres which serves to whisk us in and
out of the film’s many zones and environments?” Although Martin does not go on to
answer this question, his correlation between sound and environment highlights Wong’s
use of audio elements to frame particular spaces. In particular, the aural environment of the
Oriental Hotel, echoing with Mr Wang’s opera music and his fights with Jingwen, is a space
that transforms private moments into public experience. Indeed, Arthur argues that,
“Wong figuratively gives voice to female subjectivity through the stunning interpolation of

The operatic arias to which Arthur alludes relate specifically to the relationship between Jingwen and her Japanese boyfriend. When he poses the following questions to her, “Can you tell me how you feel? Do you like me? Or not? I don’t know how you’re going to react. But I have to ask this anyway”, she is unable to reply. Rather, Angela Gheorghiu’s rendition of “Casta Diva” is employed to represent Jingwen’s emotional pain and entrapment. However, when confronted with the loud presence of the operatic music, which resounds through the rooms and corridors of the Oriental Hotel, Chow states, “I had assumed that Mr. Wang played it so loud because he loved opera. Actually, he didn’t want anyone to overhear his family row.” This diegetic justification is inadequate to highlight how music is utilised to communicate the characters’ sufferings and longings. By taking the arias heard in the Oriental Hotel and inserting them into his short story “2046”, Chow draws a correlation between the frisson of eroticism and acute emotional pain. The sounds and music utilised in the film form a symbolic atmosphere that gestures toward another layer of the architecture.

More evocatively, the cracks in the architecture, which Chow uses to spy on people in the hotel, also allows the sounds of lovemaking to transcend the boundaries that separate each room. The aural penetration of operatic music and sexual moaning encapsulates the erotic architectural design of the film’s spaces – an intertwining of sound design and sensual symbolism that is implicitly connected to the gramophone horn. The erotic overtones of sound, of whispering into the void and filling hollow spaces with desire, culminates in the final aural moment of the film in which a barely perceptible “shush” follows the closing credits. In this instance, the faint utterance suggests that the erotic content of the film is a whispered secret, echoing in the vacant ruin of the void. Accordingly, if the perception of sound can be interpreted as a form of lovemaking that structures the erotic content of the film, it is the gramophone that is the central site of erotic desire. Specifically, the void contains not only the amorous whispers of the characters, but also the film narrative and serves as both a physical and aural architecture.

The shot of the void, which literally bookends the visual composition of 2046, is equally indicative of the sensual meaning that is attributed to space in the film. In

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44 “Casta Diva” is taken from Vincenzo Bellini’s 1831 opera Norma. The aria narrates the heartbreak and pathos of the opera’s central character.
45 This motif is also utilised in Wong’s “The Hand” from the portmanteau film Eros (2004) – a tribute to Michelangelo Antonioni’s exploration of cinematic eroticism and desire. It is composed of three short films from three directors: Wong, Antonioni and Steven Soderbergh. In Wong’s short film a tailor (Chang Chen) waits in a bordering room to take the measurements of a prostitute (Gong Li). As he waits he is subjected to the lustful and passionate sounds of her servicing a customer.
46 See Rayns, “The Long Goodbye,” p. 22 and Teo, “2046: A Matter of Time, A Labour of Love.” Without offering further explication, Teo claims that the hole “constitutes the theoretical core of the film.” This is a view with which I completely agree. Rayns also writes, “By naming it 2046…Wong suggests that the film itself is a giant ‘hole’ into which everyone – including, of course, himself – can whisper their secrets.”
particular, the hole at the centre of the brass horn also suggests the feminine form. The intersection between the whispers, the embedding of secrets and a vaginal-like symbol resonates with ideas of the female body as a problematic site. I have previously alluded to the female form in terms of haunting and melancholia, and the void extends this metaphor by evoking burial and ruin through its association with Angkor Wat. Running parallel to the employment of the cheongsam as a symbol of mnemonic and erotic entrapment, the void emphasises the link between representations of femininity and Chow’s mental turmoil: “Maybe her answer was like a secret…that no one else would ever know.”

The motif of buried secrets certainly relates to the pasts of Bai Ling and Lulu, but is particularly pertinent in terms of the depiction of Su Lizhen. The black glove that she always wears serves as a visual metaphor for concealment and entombment. In Chow’s voice-over he reveals the significance of the glove:

She was a professional gambler. Some said she was a cheat. She always wore black. They called her Black Spider. She kept her black glove on 365 days of the year. Nobody knew why for sure. Some said her hand had been chopped off for cheating, so the glove covered up a fake hand. Nobody really knew.

When Su Lizhen is asked why she wears the glove she claims that it is a habit. Significantly, on every occasion in which it appears in the film it emphasises the level of secrecy associated with the female body that is instilled from the opening image of the void, and the sense that some narratives will forever remain hidden: “It struck me that her past was like the hand she always kept gloved – a mystery.” The mystique of Su Lizhen’s gloved hand is reinforced in an image that infiltrates Chow’s memory in which she is filmed walking away from him in Singapore. This lingering shot of Su Lizhen uncannily appears following Chow and Bai Ling’s first meal together. Rather than conventionally framing Su Lizhen’s face, the camera tracks the sway of her gloved hand: a memory that continues to materialise in Chow’s troubled romantic psyche.

Therefore, as a visual motif, secrecy is principally aligned with the feminine form. The female body is “clothed” with desire, yet is inscrutable, and the void unsubtly alludes to femininity as something that can be penetrated but never completely understood. Laura Mulvey writes that cinema has perpetuated symbolic representations “of myths associated with the female body, [which] extend the image of concealment, the container, and secrecy.” As a womb-like space of secrets, the void establishes the interwoven themes of

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47 Very little light is shed on Bai Ling’s personal history and Lulu’s past is shadowed by the death of Yuddy and her split persona as Lulu/Mimi.
48 For an alternative reading of the significance of Su Lizhen’s black glove and an overview of the fetishisation of the glove in history, see Nicolas Wong, “The Carnal Hand,” pp. 53-54.
femininity, eroticism and architecture. However, the secrecy of the void, and the ambiguous space that it fills in 2046, suggests an underlying anxiety that is bound up with ruin. Indeed, the film narrative arises from the ruins of Chow’s affair with So Lai-chen, as well as the memory of the physical ruins in Angkor Wat.

The concept of the architectural ruin, which denotes decay, absence and transience, is key to the film’s conceptualisation of the erotic. Olivia Khoo writes that:

“Ruins are remainders and reminders of things past; they provide evidence of the past, of its authenticity. The fact that ruins are by their nature fragmentary invites viewers to imagine or reconstruct a lost whole from the enduring fragment…Ruins suggest the opposite of being able to ‘start over,’ a preoccupation in Wong’s films Chungking Express and more explicitly in Happy Together, since they still invoke the endurance of the present.”

I believe that Khoo’s argument is equally pertinent to 2046 as a film that literally unfolds from the ruins of In the Mood for Love. However, while Khoo associates ruins with the present, I propose that ruins narrate the remains of the past in the present and capture memory in an irreversible process of disintegration. In this sense, the appearance of the ruin unhinges the present moment, constantly calling attention to the past, to what was and to what will never be again. By using an architectural symbol that simultaneously evokes a fragment of Chow’s personal history and the female sex to open the film, Wong sets up a visual dynamic that complicates conceptions of the erotic. In a similar manner to the symbolism of the cheongsam, the void signals the appearance of the erotic through a physical presence that is tainted as a relic of sad memory.

Significantly, the first intertitle that appears in the film reads, “All memories are traces of tears” – a reference taken from Liu Yichang’s 1962 novel The Drunkard. In 2046 memory is presented as a mournful and haunting concept, and the characters’ romantic pasts are recollected through a veil of tears – in the case of the female characters – and through deep sorrow. However, while the Chinese-character intertitle has been given this interpretation in the English translation of the film, Teo offers his own translation: “All memories are wet.” In his audio commentary, he argues that the previous translation is inadequate to convey the symbolic meaning of the intertitle and that “the idea of wetness

31 Liu’s The Drunkard was a literary source for the narrative of 2046. The narrative strand of a writer/journalist attempting to comprehend the complexities of life in modern Hong Kong can be seen in Chow’s character in 2046; however, Wong takes liberties with Lui’s novel and has devised what is essentially an original narrative. Interestingly, The Drunkard was adapted to film by Freddie Wong Kwok-Shiu and Chan Wing-Chiu in 2010. For a further discussion of the relationship between 2046 and The Drunkard see Teo, “A Matter of Time. A Labour of Love.”
32 Teo, “Audio Commentary.” 2046 (DVD).
and wet memories, like wet dreams, is really the paramount symbol that Wong is getting at. From one angle, the “wet” structure of the film is conveyed through the manner in which it follows a chronology that is fluid and constantly moving through space and time. Wetness is also realised in the rain showers that are present in a number of the film’s scenes and the repeated motif of weeping and teardrops, which connects wetness and sadness. Significantly, Teo’s interpretation crucially joins eroticism and memory as intertwined conceits that structure the film.

Sex and Tears: Situating Eroticism

This play on wet memory, which evokes a tension between melancholy and titillation, is displayed in one of the early scenes in 2046 that conveys the slippage between Chow’s reality and his fictional world. In a fantasy recreation of Lulu’s death, Chow imagines Lulu as one of the cabin attendants in 2046. Set in the imaginary Hotel 20 x 25, she is filmed embracing her boyfriend, but is later portrayed making love to an anonymous man with a shaved head and a barbed wire motif tattooed on his back. Through a peephole in the ceiling directly above the bed, her boyfriend solemnly observes Lulu and the man in the throes of passionate sex. As he silently weeps, the tears that drop from his eyes turn a shade of crimson. The camera then shifts to an abstract shot that films his shadow on the wall as he stabs Lulu in bed. At the threshold of the door to the hotel room is what appears to be a sequence of red flowered garlands. The subsequent shot of Lulu’s boyfriend, which portrays him looking back into the room, utilises the red flowers of the garland to obscure a full view of his face and body. The cascading flowers are a literal manifestation of his crimson tears and a poetic visualisation of Lulu’s unseen shed blood. Here, the sensual moment of lovemaking between Lulu and her anonymous suitor is bound to pathos and death, thereby drawing a further link to decay.

Using this scene to continue exploring eroticism in the film, I propose that Wong’s take on the erotic is far more emotionally and visually complex than scenes of sexual intercourse or nudity that are often considered erotic. Generally speaking, when the words “erotic” and “cinema” are placed together, they immediately bring to mind connotations of sex and pornography. While erotic cinema, or erotica as it is sometimes referred to, is often regarded as the artistic or cultured side of pornography, the sexual

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53 Teo, “Audio Commentary,” 2046 (DVD).
54 Significantly, 2046 offers a variation on the erotic in contrast to the sexual content represented in Category III films produced in Hong Kong. For a detailed analysis of films that fall under this classification, see Julian Stringer, “Category 3: Sex and Violence in Postmodern Hong Kong,” in Mythologies of Violence in Postmodern Media, ed. Christopher Sharrett (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1999), pp. 361-379.
element is still present in one form or another. For example, Douglas Keesey, the author of *Erotic Cinema*, a book-length survey of erotic film, locates his reading of eroticism within a theoretical framework that teeters between pornography and erotica. In his first chapter, “What is Erotic?”, he argues that, “Erotic movies are a dream world where we live out the sinful, shameless and infinitely gratifying sexual fantasies that are off-limits in real life.” According to this line of thought, erotic screen fantasies are depicted as a safe avenue through which to explore the lapse of moral codes and an indulgence in sinful behaviour. Following this argument, which links sex and transgression, the book’s chapters are divided into various sexual themes that relate eroticism to the portrayal of specific physical acts on screen: romance, nudity, homosexuality, incestuous desire, orgy, rape, sodomy, sadomasochism and fetishism.

![Figure 4.8. Reimagining blood and tears (2046)](image)

I have provided an overview of the central approach of Keesey’s book because it stands out as one of the few studies that take erotic cinema as their main topic. The foundation of Keesey’s argument is indebted to French philosopher Georges Bataille’s positioning of eroticism within a realm of taboo, transgression and violence. Specifically, Bataille regards eroticism as “assenting to life up to the point of death” and draws a connection between death and sexual excitement by placing eroticism within a “domain of violence, or violation.” Drawing inspiration from the extremes of the Marquis de Sade’s libertine narratives, Bataille’s eroticism is cerebral in nature and conceived as separate from

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58 Bataille, p. 16.
“animal sexuality” due to the ability of erotic sensation to call “inner life into play.” Depraved sexual fantasies therefore become the means through which transgressive action “suspends a taboo without suppressing it.” To return to Keesey’s cinematic context, the film screen provides a space of distanced fantasy where taboos can be suspended. However, I find this view of eroticism problematic due to its narrow scope. Although 2046 features a number of sex scenes, the real erotic detail is not ultimately located within the act of sexual intercourse itself. Accordingly, my interrogation of eroticism will depart from an oversimplified approach that is centred on sexual intercourse, nudity and sexuality.

To my mind, erotic film desire, in the context of Keesey’s approach, relies too much on generic ideas of pornography that are perpetuated through blatant representations of film sex. Similarly, his theoretical reliance on Bataille’s line of reasoning has limitations when applied in a filmic context due to the fact that Bataille is concerned with interior life and does not consider symbols or metaphors grounded in the visual culture of cinema. While Keesey’s study is of erotic film and not pornography, I do not believe that it is sensitive to the emotional intricacies of eroticism and relies on a visual rhetoric that crosses the erotic/pornographic divide.

A number of scholars emphasise the ambivalent and slippery generic distinctions between erotica and pornography and the difficulties of classification. Having said that, feminist Gloria Steinem provides a useful analysis of erotica and pornography by examining the etymology of each word. She writes that erotica “is rooted in ‘eros’ or passionate love”, while pornography is derived from porno “meaning ‘prostitution’ or ‘female captives’” and graphos referring to representation and writing. Steinem’s explication draws a line between eroticism, which is conceptualised as consensual and reciprocal, and the unequal power dynamics bound up with pornography. Furthermore, Tom Gunning contends that, “Pornography would seem rather to derive primarily from what Barthes describes as ‘the school boy’s dream,’ the desire to denude, to know, founded more in curiositas than eros.”

Chow’s recreation of Lulu’s death presents the erotic moment as one that exists in a conceptual space between aesthetic beauty and abject sorrow. Bataille writes that, “Beauty

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59 Bataille, p. 29.
60 Bataille, p. 36.
is desired in order that it may be befouled; not for its own sake, but for the joy brought by
the certainty of profaning it...Beauty has a cardinal importance, for ugliness cannot be
spoiled, and to despoil is the essence of eroticism.” My argument is distinguishable from
Bataille’s approach, as I contend that, in the context of 2046, eroticism flows in the
opposite direction: from ugliness to beauty. As the scene progresses, the tone shifts from a
voyeuristic sex scene to a macabre and expressionistic murder to an oddly poetic moment
of beauty, demonstrating the manner in which Wong destabilises the mood of intense
emotion and grief with the representation of unexpected beauty. What remains constant
within the scene, as well as in the overall logic of the film, is that every part of the frame is
aestheticised. Visual beauty is instilled in the movements of the camera, the lines of vision,
the cinematographic palette and the spaces in which the scenes take place.

Writing on the visual style of “The Hand”, Wong’s contribution to the erotic
portmanteau film *Eros* (2004), Frank P. Tomasulo comments:

Wong seems to take more delight in the sublime subtlety of his shimmering,
highly composed romantic images and subtle editing rhythms (along with the
accompanying elegant classical string music) than in the actual depiction of this
(pardon my language) hand job...Wong seems to fetishize elegant clothing, décor
(curtains, lamps, eggplant-coloured walls, flowers and vases), and languid camera
movements – mainly through highly composed shots that are held on-screen
much longer than necessary to make their narrative points, but that allow the
spectator to contemplate the thematic relevance of the ravishing imagery.

The lack of attention paid to the sexual act on-screen in favour of fetishising the
surrounding details that fill the frame is not exclusive to “The Hand”, but is a significant
element in 2046. The use of space is undoubtedly the most striking element of the scene
featuring Lulu’s reconstructed death. The peephole that provides an obscured view of the
bed below, the use of shadows as a moving architecture that leave a trace of the body on
the interior wall and the flowered garlands that conceal a full perspective of the room
emphasise the spatial dialectic between concealing and revealing – a visual motif that
extends Wong’s use of the cheongsam as a sensual garment that evinces erotic complexity.
This visual tension highlights a different model of eroticism that is privy to concepts of
architecture and space.

In the same vein as Luis Buñuel’s *Belle Du Jour* (1967) – a film that does not picture
any sex scenes despite being set in a brothel – the erotic, through the cinematic lens, is not
dependent on the representation of nudity or sex. As Gunning emphasises, cinematic eros
has little to do with the pornographic desire to denude and violate, and engages with the

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64 Bataille, pp. 144-145.
65 Frank P. Tomasulo, “Eros and Civilisation: Sexuality and the Contemporary International Art Cinema.”
*Film International* 6.6 (2008), p. 32.
“very ontology of the cinematic image” as it “partakes of the paradox of the erotic, promising fulfilment only by withdrawing.” Gunning’s essay, which distances itself from the transgressive reading of eroticism forwarded by Bataille, emphasises the importance of visual ambiguity and elusiveness. Linger ing on the décor and textual details, it is the presence of fabrics, veils, surfaces, partitions and peepholes, which construct a particular way of viewing, that is at the heart of this chapter’s architectural and spatial approach to the erotic.

**Sensual Surfaces: Viewing the Erotic Through Architecture**

As a means to cohesively join ideas of architecture, eroticism and film aesthetics, interdisciplinary scholar Christian W. Thomsen provides a useful manifesto that deals specifically with erotic architecture. Within his manifesto he raises three points that offer a theoretical bridge upon which to hinge my examination of *2046*. First, he claims that architecture of an erotic nature “conceives of all architecture as the multisensory interplay of shapes, colours, bodies, and light integrated into the network of cultural communication and tradition.” His second point contends that erotic architecture:

...plays with surfaces, layers, materials, with visual stimuli, symbols and the functions of sexual attraction between bodies, skin, surfaces and interiors. Its playfulness is expressed in a contradictory interplay of veiling and unveiling, of covering up and opening out, of luring in and fending off, of exterior and interior.

His third point touches on architecture’s effect on perception: “game play by erotic architecture is at once narrative and signal. It rouses cravings and satisfies desires. It prefers states of suspension and protraction to the direct fulfilment of a function.”

Thomsen’s points can be effectively supplemented by Anne Troutman’s analysis of the erotic space of the modern boudoir in which she situates eroticism as an intimate, architectural conceit:

Fleeting by nature – an evocation of the invisible, dynamic, and perpetual state of desire, eroticism eludes fixed definition. It could be said that the erotic dimension of architecture is the unconscious, instinctual side of our experience of form and space, implicit, and virtual. And like the unconscious, it is masked and

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66 Gunning, p. 266. See also Dudley Andrew, “L’âge d’or and the Eroticism of the Spirit,” in *Masterpieces of Modernist Cinema*, ed. Ted Perry (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), p. 126. Andrew writes, “The pornographer brazenly goes after [the spectator’s] body like a masseuse. All cineastes aim to arouse the senses, though primarily through plot, character, and visual design, not as puppeteers pulling the strings of the spectator.”


68 Thomsen, p. 13.

69 Thomsen, p. 13.
encoded…Eschewing the overtly sexual, the erotic is a state of phenomenal ambiguity, indirection, tension, and suspension, a virtual condition engendering feeling through tricks of perception.70

Pinpointing how the erotic manifests within architectural structures is not a straightforward task; however, both Thomsen and Troutman allude to how eroticism arises through the manipulation of perspective and the concept of suspension. While Thomsen engages more with the aesthetic side – referring to the interplay of shapes, colours, light, surfaces, layers and materials – Troutman provides an insight into the psychological dimension of erotic architecture. She describes the first modern boudoir as a “transitional space…an inner world, private space, close-up, intimate…one enters a world suspended between two and three dimensions, an ambiguous space in which everything is suggested and nothing is fully revealed or complete.”71 Resonances of Bataille’s description of suspension are evident in Troutman’s explication whereby eroticism is positioned between secrecy and full disclosure; however, the underlying violence of Bataille’s theories is absent here. Rather, this is a form of psychological suspension that plays with perception through simultaneously veiling and unveiling.

By merging Thomsen and Troutman’s analyses, I am concerned with adapting and refiguring their individual frameworks of physical veiling, psychological encoding and aesthetics within a cinematic context; however, my analysis naturally deviates from the concepts put forward by Thomsen and Troutman. While their work is grounded in physical space and an objectivity that is tactile and concrete, I am dealing with a medium in which tactility or sensation can be conveyed only through visual or aural means. Further, my examination of 2046 is concerned with two separate and yet interconnected architectures: the physical spaces that the characters inhabit and move through (the narrative space) and the abstract architecture of film space (the layers of sound, colour and light that fill the space of the cinematic frame).72

These two interlinked architectures are particularly conveyed in scenes in which the characters watch one another through peepholes and cracks, observe private moments from behind architectural partitions and regard one another via refracted mirror reflections and through vaporous veils of cigarette smoke. Throughout the film, cinematographers Christopher Doyle, Lai Yiu-fai and Kwan Pung-leung utilise off-centre framing, angular

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71 Troutman, p. 298.

72 See Mulvey, p. 54. This distinction between narrative and form is indebted to Mulvey’s approach to reading film space.
shots and split screens that affect the viewer’s perception to give the impression that he or she is observing the film from around a corner, behind a door or through a peephole. Writing on *In the Mood for Love*, which adopts a similar cinematographic style to *2046*, Vivian Lee points out that, “As the viewer is given the sole privilege of sharing the camera’s perspective…he/she is interpellated into a voyeuristic position as the characters’ personal and intimate secrets are revealed.” This mode of filmmaking is intercut with close-up shots that deny a full view of the action, “replacing the objective distance of the two-shot and the shot/reverse shot with a visual intimacy bordering on the erotic.” The cinematographers therefore conflate the characters’ visual perceptions with the viewer’s vision, aligning the architecture within the narrative space with that of the cinematic frame.

From one perspective, the series of unusual visual distortions and spatial imbalances that these filming techniques entail display the oddly porous and abstract nature of the film’s architectural settings and the manner in which voyeuristic desire is woven into the film. Moreover, these elements, which obscure both the characters’ and the viewer’s sight lines, suggest that, within the logic of the film, eroticism is a visual language that is demarcated by the built environment. Furthermore, Wong’s symbolic use of architecture reinforces the erotic anxiety of loss and emptiness that stems from the film’s opening vision of the void. As a structure that is symbolically poised between seduction and melancholic lack, the constellation of architecture, eroticism and vision particularly finds expression in this image.

In Teo’s interpretation of the void, he points out the connection between observation and titillation:

As I see it, firstly, the representation of the hole with the decoration around it makes it look like an eye. The hollow part is the iris and the stripes are the retinal tissues of the eye. This image suggests that we are all voyeurs indulging in a collective scopophilic instinct. Secondly, it is a sexual symbol which can be a vaginal, anal or uterus-like symbol. However, the fur-like texture surrounding the hollow form renders a very feminine look and it seems to me, therefore, that we are looking at a symbol of female sexuality. Combine this with the symbol of the eye and Wong seems to be saying that the eye is a sexual organ. Seeing is eroticised.

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73 Vivian P. Y. Lee, p. 34.
74 Vivian P. Y. Lee, p. 35.
75 Teo, “Audio Commentary.” *2046* (DVD). For a further discussion of scopophilia in *2046*, see Arthur, “Philosophy in the Bedroom,” p. 8. Arthur argues, “In contrast to Hitchcock, Wong’s play of scopophilia is divorced from physical violence but he too understands the compulsive bond between sexual craving and optical power, an exchange he translates onto a larger scale by masking or otherwise dividing portions of the CinemaScope frame such that we are always looking past foreground obstructions into a relatively narrow playing area. A secondary effect of this technique is to keep in flux our potential identification with specific characters, turning intimate interiors into cordoned-off proscenium stages, as famously occurs in melodramas by Sirk and Fassbinder.”
Although I have given a divergent reading of the opening void as an image that functions as both a metonymic ear and a vaginal symbol, Teo’s comments regarding seeing and eroticism – in the context of an architectural opening – gesture towards the manner in which the framing of the (cinematic) gaze in 2046 is aligned with sexual allure.

Figure 4.9. The voyeuristic gaze (2046)

During one of Bai Ling’s first scenes, the viewer initially observes her from Chow’s perspective as he spies on her through the wrought iron latticework that separates their respective rooms. By focusing the camera and Chow’s voyeuristic gaze on Bai Ling slowly sashaying around her room while checking her appearance in various mirrors and putting on her jewellery, Wong confirms the link between seduction and modes of viewing. Although Chow’s voyeuristic desires may initially appear to be at the centre of the erotic nature of the sequence, the framing and editing of the scene, as well as the use of different mirrored surfaces, work to disrupt any sense of a fixed perspective. The movement of the camera and the editing create splits and fissures that play into the idea of erotic suspension through concealing a cohesive perspective, as well as visually alluding to Chow’s emotional detachment. The relationship between the characters’ bodies and the film’s architecture creates a view of eroticism that does not involve reciprocal human contact, but is predicated on clandestine observation and the denial of physical touch. Significantly, the erotic moment is presented from a distance, thereby utilising the hotel’s architecture to set up physical divisions that emphasise alienation. Reinforcing the dialectic between revealing and concealing, and the representation of sexual allure via a lack of physical proximity, Wong’s construction of eroticism highlights that intimate frissons are not conveyed merely through scenes of sexual intercourse, but through spatial framing and an eroticised system of gazes.⁷⁶

⁷⁶ See Nathan Lee, p. 32. Engaging with the complexities of visual representation in 2046, film critic Lee highlights the manner in which Wong creates visual tensions and oppositions. Lee contends that, “The
Moreover, the different visual registers are utilised to divorce eroticism from sexual intercourse. Although the camera frames Bai Ling in fragments at the beginning of the film, after her relationship with Chow becomes sexual, the visual tone changes significantly. For example, one of the more graphic love scenes is filmed from an aerial perspective and features none of the architectural abstractions and visual veils that previously concealed parts of her body. The ripping of Bai Ling’s cheongsam, which occurs before they first make love and is used as an excuse by Chow to pay her, is a perfect visual metaphor for this shift in perception. Having broken the literal seams of the illusion that connect Bai Ling to So Lai-chen, Chow’s mnemonic desires are shattered. In effect, the consummation of Chow’s lust strips Bai Ling of her erotic allure. As Laura U. Marks reveals in *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media*, a study of visual erotics:

Eroticism is an encounter with an other that delights in the fact of its alterity, rather than attempt to know it. Visual erotics allows the thing seen to maintain its unknowability, delighting in playing at the boundary of that knowability. Visual erotics allows the object of vision to remain inscrutable.

This unknowability and inscrutability, while absent in the scenes of Chow and Bai Ling making love, is emphasised in Chow’s encounters with Jingwen. In particular, the Christmas Eve that Chow spends with Jingwen in 1968 is filmed in such a manner that the camera fetishises the space that separates them. As they are pictured seated at a small booth in Chow’s regular restaurant, the camera slowly pans back and forth between them. With each sideways pan the shot that precedes the movement of the camera is superimposed over the subsequent shot. The effect is a surreal doubling that results in the previous image asserting a haunting presence over the present visual. This technique, however, also possesses an erotic quality that reveals what Teo describes as a “hallucinatory style” that creates “a sense of intimacy between Chow Mo-wan and Wang Jingwen – a sort of lovemaking by illusion.” The mirrored shots produce a physical proximity that never

relationship with Bai is consummated, with physical directness and the cutting reflects this, remaining perfectly clear and keeping classical lines in sync.” He contrasts this unbroken and relatively straightforward style of cinematography and editing with other scenes in the film where “Wong fragments the space into shards, breaking up the actors in mirrors and offsetting their eye lines. They dissemble; Wong disassembles.” To my mind, Lee’s comment obliquely conceals the question of why the sex scenes between Chow and Bai Ling are filmed in such a conventional manner in contrast to the mosaic-like and fractured scenes that continuously occur throughout the film.

77 See Teo, “2046: A Matter of Time, A Labour of Love.” Teo writes that, “The whole film deals with recapturing a lost sensation, an eroticism that has dissipated into time and memory...Wong shows that the theory of eroticism is the absence or denial of sex, which is the cornerstone of *In the Mood for Love* and the recurring subject of 2046.”


79 Teo, “Audio Commentary.” 2046 (DVD).
eventuates between Chow and Jingwen, and is therefore another example of erotic desire
impinging on visual and spatial relations by utilising the camera to construct an immaterial
architecture of desire. In so doing, the camera enforces a physical closeness between them
that is impossible in reality, while also representing the confusion brought about by Chow’s
unexpected romantic feelings for Jingwen: “Feelings can creep up on you unawares. I knew
that, but did she?”

In addition, the overt presence of mirrors in the mise en scène is continually utilised as
a metaphor for spatial dislocation – a visual portrayal of the uncanny that Anthony Vidler
describes as “a representation of a mental state of projection that precisely elides the
boundaries of the real and the unreal in order to provoke a disturbing ambiguity.” More
specifically, the double vision created in the scene between Chow and Jingwen hints at the
inability for desire to be represented in a single image. In an earlier scene featuring Chow
and Bai Ling, Bai Ling is pictured in the foreground checking her hair as Chow watches
from the background. In this set of double images, Chow is strikingly in focus, while the
soft focus on Bai Ling transforms her movements into a blur. Neither their reflected
bodies nor their bodies in tangible space reveal any connection. What Wong presents to the
viewer is an image of emotional alienation that underlines Bai Ling’s unreciprocated love
for Chow. Therefore, the result of the camera techniques used in 2046 is a conscious
blurring of interior and exterior space, whereby the fracturing of romance following
Chow’s disappointing love affair with So Lai-chen and the awakening of his preference for
one-night stands and empty erotic encounters are mirrored in his environment. The void
that opens the film is visually repeated in the lingering views of architectural cracks, holes
and spatial orifices that continually highlight romantic emptiness, while his emotional
detachment is represented through the mirrored surfaces and architectural partitions that
suggest distance. Accordingly, the architectural features of the film’s spaces coalesce with
Chow’s psychological desolation.

This is an example of Mitchell Schwarzer’s theorisation of “film architecture”, which
evocatively utilises cinematography to shed light on both interior/mental space and
architectural space:

Film can reveal to us architectures that exist only in the mind, architectures
composed of sensation but also memory and imagination; and such film
architecture yields insight into the perception of real architecture. Through
changes in viewing distance and height, in the shape and size of the field of view,

80 Significantly, this is a line of dialogue repeated from In the Mood for Love when Chow tells Ah Ping of his
feelings for So Lai-chen.
81 Anthony Vidler, The Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press,
in the movement of a camera through space, and in the duration of scenes, cinema constructs alternative worlds. 82

In 2046 the trauma of lost love is symbolically inscribed in the film’s spatial crevices. Chow’s recollections are preoccupied with mending the image of femininity frozen in his memories of So Lai-chen that were previously confined to the small hole in Angkor Wat. The vision of the void, which replaces this hidden crevice in the ruins, also represents an open wound in Chow’s architecture of memory.

The Aesthetics of Erotic Decay

Mnemonic Wound, Rupture in Time

Now,
Let me tell you where you are,
a wounded city
and a traveller walking in the ruins,
too afraid to look back.
I’m afraid she’s been looking at me,
or if she’s not.

Tomorrow, it is one day more than forever.

- Lau Chi Chung 83

The void in the fictional space of 2046, while providing an opening to Chow’s erotic consciousness, is simultaneously a conduit to the past. Although travelling to 2046 is initially presented as a journey that enables lost travellers to reclaim their memories, and presumably a form of contentment that can be located only within the past, the process of travel is portrayed as a painful experience. The transition from the opening credits, which follow the image of the gramophone, is signalled by a shot of a train hurtling through a tunnel that Teo convincingly asserts is an extension of the void: “Wong treats it [the void] in the first instance as a time tunnel that sucks in travellers.” 84 However, what is striking about the scene is not the high-speed visual of the train, but the audio of anguished screams that accompanies its movement.

Here, the journey to recapture lost memories is bound up with tangible pain and sadness. 85 Indeed, when the film returns to this narrative thread in the imagined future, the Japanese traveller is filmed placing bandages over a series of unidentified injuries on the right side of his upper body. During this sequence, Chow’s voice-over frames the Japanese

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83 Lau Chi-Chung, The Only Day, trans. Fion Ko (Hong Kong: Self Published, 2007).
84 Teo, Wong Kar-wai, p. 138.
85 The audio is, in fact, a real excerpt from the public outcry that resulted from the signing in 1984 of the Sino-British Joint Declaration on the Future of Hong Kong.
traveller’s discomfort: “If someone wants to leave 2046 how long will it take? No one knows. Some people get away fairly easily. Others find that it takes them much longer. It takes great strength. And it can hurt terribly.” In the shift from the feminine whispers that are superimposed over the opening credits to the sorrowful howls, Wong emphasises the problematics of attempting to return to memories. For Chow, the passage to memory is not only tinged with the trace of tears, but is a form of trauma. Carl Cassegard proposes that the film’s journey by train “functions as a passage connecting two worlds, the shifting world of the present and the world of timeless memories…and quite beautifully captures the long and painful process of recovery from lost love.” More specifically, the train facilitates a journey into melancholy through a lens of the erotic – the sensual veil that masks the tearful traces of memory alluded to in the first intertitle. As this space of memory is conflated with Chow’s erotic impulses, the viewer is introduced to the film’s strange enmeshing of memory and pain with eroticism and sexual desire.

Figure 4.10. Journeying into the past, travelling to the future (2046)

On one level, the representation of train travel in 2046 can be interpreted as a metaphor for sexual intercourse. Teo, in particular, asserts that the image of the train cutting through space and time is evocative of “the male organ probing the female organ.” However, this overt and somewhat clichéd symbolism is overshadowed by Wong’s representation of the agony of a suspended journey. The incessant movement of the train contrasted with the lack of final destination highlights the displacement of travel in the narrative. Indeed, it is implied that the Japanese traveller, who is attempting to return from 2046, has not recaptured his memories or located his lost love. Rather, the imagined space of memory remains an enshrouded site and the train follows a frustrated route that does not lead anywhere. Erotic suspension is replaced by temporal and spatial suspension.

86 Cassegard, p. 11.
87 Teo, “Audio Commentary.” 2046 (DVD).
As the narrative of 2046 focuses on the relationship between the Japanese traveller and Jingwen, the erotic nature of 2046 shifts from the sensual recreation of scenes from Chow’s daily life to an intimate meditation on his lost relationship with So Lai-chen. Although the story is initially created to imagine the thoughts of Jingwen’s Japanese boyfriend, it becomes clear that the Jingwen android is a substitute for So Lai-chen: “I once fell in love with someone. I kept wondering if she loved me or not. The android looked just like her. I thought she might have the answer.” However, when the Japanese traveller reveals his intent by stating, “I have a secret to tell you. Leave with me”, she does not respond. His declaration, which is repeated twice in succession with no answer from the Jingwen android, establishes a strange time loop that accords with Chow’s conception of time and finds metaphoric expression through the train’s journey.

In Schwarzer’s analysis of the mode of train travel as employed in the film medium, he draws attention to how it establishes “a narrative of transition, anticipation, and arrival.” Train journeys highlight the “rhythm of architecture” and “space in motion,” displaying a distinct relationship with place through movement. However, in 2046 Wong subverts this idea by offering no views from the windows of the train and seemingly no destination or place of arrival. In one poignant scene, the Jingwen android is filmed looking out of one of the train windows. As she gazes into the hypnotic blur of colour flashing past the window, an intertitle reveals that 10 hours have passed, then 100 hours and, finally, 1000 hours. “Casta Diva,” the song that represents Jingwen’s depression, can be heard in the background, adding to the aura of melancholic longing, for, despite the time that has passed, the train continues moving without reaching a destination.

![Figure 4.11. Longing and the passage of time (2046)](image)

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88 Schwarzer, p. 35.
89 Schwarzer, p. 35.
This scene is mirrored in Chow’s writing process when he attempts to construct a
different ending to “2047” for Jingwen. As his pen remains paused above a piece of paper
and the hours pass in large blocks of time, it is clear that Chow is incapable of giving his
story the happy conclusion that Jingwen desires. In these scenes, Wong establishes the link
between time and ruin that is suggested in the film’s references to the final scenes of In the
Mood for Love. While Jonathan Hill defines ruin as “redolent of loss and the passage of
time”, Wong represents ruin as marked not only by decay, but also by repetition.90 As the
present moment disintegrates, the ruins of the past continually impinge on what remains.
Not only are the characters painfully aware of the passage of time, they are also condemned
to relive that which they want to bury. Most evocatively, the ruins of Chow’s past are
inscribed in the very texture of his writing; that is, the architecture of 2046. Two screens
that are impressed with blue neon script intriguingly frame the gramophone/void that is at
the heart of 2046. Although it is difficult to decipher the detail of the scribblings, a
sweeping pan of the screens reveals the Spanish words “Quizás, Quizás, Quizás”, thereby
constructing a link to the use of Nat King Cole’s song in In the Mood for Love. Whereas the
lines “Perhaps, Perhaps, Perhaps” symbolise the narrow possibility of romantic union
between Chow and So Lai-chen in In the Mood for Love, in 2046 the embedded presence of
these words within the architecture of 2046 is less of a promise than a harsh reminder of
loss. The use of text as a tangible residue or trace of memory confirms the construction of
2046 as a site of haunting and melancholy. Although 2046 is imagined as a place where
“nothing ever changes”, it cannot escape the emptiness of its referentiality as a space of
ruin on the threshold of decay, replete with material traces of the past.

Significantly, Martin situates Wong’s films within a narrative instinct that deals with:

…the real and agonising difficulty of moving forward – a syndrome that afflicts, all at
once, the characters in these stories, the world they represent, and the entire
‘machine’ of narrative cinema…these films most often end up being about a kind
of repetition-compulsion: going over the same ground, turning in a circle, unable
to break free.91

The hollow view into Chow’s consciousness reveals a lack of closure, compelling him to
follow the same path of experience. Hence, Wong signals the arrival of Christmas Eve each
year with Cole’s “The Christmas Song” and structures Chow’s narrative around uncanny
reoccurrences. Most notably, after Lulu is murdered, she reappears in Chow’s life in much
the same way as So Lai-chen constitutes a haunting presence that overshadows all of
Chow’s love affairs: “While I was depressed I ran into Lulu again. She was still jealous […]

91 Martin, “Point of No Return,” p. 49.
She taught me something. If you never give up, there will always be a chance.” Jean Ma perceptively comments that “the losses of love suffered by the saturnine figures in Wong’s films…point to a melancholy disposition that clings to remainders, that turns away from the closed narratives of mourning to confront the persistence of absence and loss.” By drawing together the symbolism of the void – as both a ruin that contains recollections and a structure that is evocative of sex – Wong confirms Chow’s use of erotic encounters to fill the hole/wound of absence left by So Lai-chen. Just as his secret in Angkor Wat refuses to stay buried, the past lurks in the folds of the cheongsam, the shadows of Lulu’s death and the gestures of his romantic conquests. However, the alignment of ruin and the void also points to erotic decay.

Delay and Response/Seduction and Emptiness

In Chow’s construction of the fictional 2046, Wong establishes a form of erotic critique – particularly through the figures of the female cabin attendants who work on the train and are made in the image of various women from Chow’s life:

TRAIN MANAGER: We have a range of cabin attendants. They can satisfy your every need. They will serve you devotedly. Like an intimate friend. But you must never fall in love with them.

JAPANESE TRAVELLER: Who would ever fall for an android?

TRAIN MANAGER: Who can say? Events can creep up on without you even noticing. It happens all the time.

The cabin attendants are presumably designed for both pleasure and seduction. However, the act of seduction, as Neil Leach points out in The Anaesthetics of Architecture, is problematic. Specifically, Leach defines seduction as an attempt:

…to enchant the viewer on a purely visual level and to prevent any deeper level of inquiry. Seduction can therefore be contrasted to ‘interpretation.’ Whereas interpretation strives to rupture the realm of surface appearances and inquire after some underlying truth, seduction seeks to bewitch the viewer within the enchanting world of the surface, never to look beyond. By dallying within the realm of appearances, seduction stifles any quest for meaning.93

The cabin attendants interestingly serve as a nexus that connects a number of the ideas that run through the film, serving as blank surfaces for the projection of desire, substitute love

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interests and sites of vacancy. Fulfilling the role of an “intimate friend”, the cabin attendants exemplify the link between eroticism and suspension, as it is subsequently revealed after the Japanese traveller begins to fall in love with the Jingwen attendant that the androids on the train suffer from delayed reaction. Extending the symbolism of the perpetual movement of the train, the attendants represent the sense of stasis and the failure to move on that is interwoven into the film narrative. As the train manager informs the Japanese traveller:

Do you know the Buddhist canon? The Decay of Celestial Beings? Even the immortals experience this process. Our cabin attendants are superbly designed…but there’s one problem. When they’ve served on so many long journeys fatigue begins to set in. They might want to laugh, but the smile will be too slow to come. They might want to cry, but the tear won’t well up till next day.

The affliction of the attendants with delayed reaction reinforces the difficulty of successfully aligning emotion, desire and time – an issue that plagues both In the Mood for Love and 2046. However, the apparent discomfort felt by being unable to express one’s emotions until it is too late not only is felt by the attendants, but also is a form of psychological suffering that affects all the characters in the film. For example, Jingwen starts to speak in Japanese only after her Japanese boyfriend has left Hong Kong. Her delayed response to his request for her to leave with him highlights the mood of disjointed emotional time. The critical work of the scholars I have referenced thus far in this chapter has suggested that eroticism involves a form of “suspension”; however, Wong takes this idea to the extreme so that any eroticism is subverted by the exigencies of time and the idea that erotic moments are never appreciated until they have passed. As Chow comments, “Love is all a matter of timing. It’s no good meeting the right person too soon or too late. If I’d met her in another time or place…my story might have had a different ending.” In Chow’s inability to express his emotions, Wong fuses erotic suspension and temporality in the film’s palette by means of chromatic tonality.

By signalling emotional and temporal decay in the shifts of colour, Wong adds to the film’s cinematic architecture that structures the different erotic moods. Overall, the colour palette of 2046 is dominated by red, gold and emerald tones that take on a jewel-like, incandescent appearance. These flashes of colour are juxtaposed to more neutral, dull tones of black, brown and grey and the taxi scenes, which are filmed in black and white. Notably, three chromatic moods are perceptible, and these are aligned to certain times and spaces. Emerald green is the main chromatic mood of the Oriental Hotel, as Chow’s everyday space in Hong Kong. In contrast, the erotic site of 2046 is primarily filmed with
the aid of gelled lamps that saturate many of the scenes in bright red.⁹⁴ Although the colours used to film the Oriental Hotel cannot be described as natural, in comparison with the bright, sterile, vaporous quality of the chromatic design of 2046, the Oriental Hotel is lit in a more realistic tone. Finally, the black and white taxi scenes create another chromatic space in the film.

Figure 4.12. A dream of lost love imagined in black and white (2046)

What Wong achieves with the chromatic coding of certain spaces is a subtle vocabulary of unspoken emotion as though the erotic whispers from the void have tinted Chow’s memories of his banal and empty existence. Wendy Everett writes that, “Far from being a straightforward property of the objects around us, colour is, in reality, both a physical characteristic of light and pigment and a psychological and physical sensation, both an objective and a subjective phenomenon.”⁹⁵ The psychological dimension of pigment to which Everett alludes places emphasis on how the conventional symbolism of a colour may be divorced from how it is appropriated in the film medium. This is certainly the case when viewing the taxi scenes. Black and white filters are often used to symbolise the past, taking the lead from old black and white photographs and films.⁹⁶ However, here the black and white images visually articulate the erotic anxiety at the centre of the film, in that sex is devoid of romantic fulfilment. Therefore, the monochromatic visual style of these scenes is not a mark of time, but an emotional, psychological symbol. By picturing Chow at his happiest with So Lai-chen, the earlier scene with Bai Ling appears as an

inferior substitute. Further, the monochromatic visual motif suggests that the scene is pure and untainted, in contrast with the dazzingly beautiful, yet emotionally empty, sex scenes that are presented in colour. The final image of the gramophone’s horn is also filmed in black and white, displaying the death of the film’s illusions of desire, as they are buried in the void.

Significantly, when the image of the void returns in the final scene of the film, Chow’s parting words to Bai Ling tie in with the visual symbol. He tells her, “Do you remember? You once asked me…if there was anything I wouldn’t lend. I’ve given it a lot of thought. And now I know…there is one thing…I’ll never lend to anyone.” As the camera moves towards the void, this final scene suggests that Chow’s heart, which is clearly the object that he will never lend, will remain trapped in the void, hidden with the secrets of his love affairs. The effect is that although eroticism is palpable in the film, saturating every frame with desire and longing, love remains notably absent. The only narrative thread that reaches any form of romantic fulfilment is the one involving Jingwen and her Japanese boyfriend; however, this is relegated to being an off-screen event. Although the news is related to Chow by a surprisingly enthusiastic Mr Wang, love remains unseen and intangible. Unable to suture the wound in his memory, Chow begins his final taxi ride of the film. With no companion and resting his head against the taxi door, he heads “for a drowsy future through the unfathomable night” – another journey into the void, into his memories and into sorrow.
Chapter Four


Every time we moved from state to state, we realized the sound, especially music from the radio, changed...Somehow during those trips, we decided to use music as a reference point of place because there are four chapters in 90 minutes; and I want the audience to have a sense of she’s now in this region or she’s now in that region.

-Wong Kar-wai

A postcard, typically, is mailed home from a foreign city. Place is condensed in an image, the image is authenticated by your scribbled account of being there, and this impression of another real-imagined city is stamped and posted to a distant part of the world.

- James Donald

Introduction

Coinciding with the 1995 release of *Fallen Angels*, British television series *Moving Pictures* filmed a brief feature in Hong Kong that explored Wong Kar-wai’s unique cinematic vision. Unsurprisingly, the topics of space and location were a centrepiece of the episode in which Wong claimed, “If I didn’t live in Hong Kong, my style would probably be different. The only way I can make a film in a place is I have to know the place well, and the people well, and I think I know Hong Kong well.” Although Wong’s films have tended not to deviate from the people and settings of Hong Kong through various periods, his most recent film, *My Blueberry Nights* (2007), marks a significant shift away from this environment that has predominantly defined his cinema. Unlike *Happy Together* (1997), and to a lesser extent *Ashes of Time* (1994), *My Blueberry Nights* is not merely a journey overseas, but actually fulfils the motif of “starting over” that was consistently frustrated in Wong’s sixth film. Indeed, during the production of *My Blueberry Nights* in 2006, Wong was reportedly keen to

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3 “*Moving Pictures* excerpt (Series 6, Program 8).” *Chungking Express* (DVD), The Criterion Collection, 2008.
refer to the film as a new beginning. The move to America resulted in Wong’s first English-language production, which was co-written with American crime fiction writer Lawrence Block and involved a new cinematographer in Darius Khondji, a fresh collection of actors, a different cultural backdrop and, most crucially, a new cinematic space.

Despite the promise of a number of new beginnings, it was a six-minute short film entitled *In the Mood for Love 2001* (2001), which was originally intended to be the first chapter of *In the Mood for Love* (2000), that inspired *My Blueberry Nights*. Premiering at a master class at the Cannes Film Festival in 2001, the short film has only been screened publicly on this single occasion. According to Wong, *In the Mood for Love 2001* is “about a chance encounter in a convenience store in Hong Kong between two people, played by Tony Leung Chiu-wai and Maggie Cheung, who may or may not have a relationship.”

Given the title, cast and setting, the short film can be seen as a strange echo of both *Chungking Express* (1994) and *In the Mood for Love*; however, for Wong, the short film is the true accompaniment to *My Blueberry Nights* in which “[t]he characters were the same, but the setting was now America.” Expanding his feature film beyond the limited setting of a modern-day convenience store, *My Blueberry Nights* furthers Wong’s narrative interest in travel as a structuring device that is implicated in the imagining of emotion, place and desire.

Set in various locations across North America, the film follows the journey of Elizabeth (singer and songwriter Norah Jones in her first cinematic role) when she leaves New York after discovering that her boyfriend has left her for another woman. This journey is structured into four linear episodes, and each episode is distinguished by a different geographical location and the introduction of new characters. However, Elizabeth remains the central protagonist throughout the film. Although her personal heartache sets the tone for the filmic journey, the other characters’ narratives of disappointed desire and emotional pain eventually overshadow her story.

The first episode involves Elizabeth’s serendipitous encounter with Jeremy (Jude Law), a British expatriate who runs Café Kylutch in New York’s SoHo district. Elizabeth, attempting to track the movements of her boyfriend, first calls the café and later visits in person to try to find clues to his suspected infidelity. Her meetings with Jeremy become a common occurrence, as Elizabeth drops by before closing time each night to talk to him.

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5 “Q & A with Director Wong Kar-wai.” *My Blueberry Nights* (DVD), Roadshow Entertainment, 2008. Wong commented in a 2007 interview, “I think it will be interesting to expand this story...in this city [New York], because I want to see [how] the language or the subtext or the space will change the idea and see where it will bring me to.”
and eat slices of leftover blueberry pie. Although she and Jeremy appear to foster a friendship, Elizabeth leaves unexpectedly. Unable to reconcile her feelings over losing her boyfriend, she decides to take a trip with no known destinations, although she concedes she will return to New York.

Opening in Memphis, Tennessee, the second episode reveals that Elizabeth has started working in a diner during the day and a bar at night. The journey from New York to Tennessee is not given any attention in the film, although it is revealed that she has arrived by bus and is saving money to buy a car. Her experiences on the road are recorded in the postcards that she sends to Jeremy in New York and that structure her emotional trajectory; however, this episode marks the first stage during which Elizabeth’s story fades into the background. Specifically, she becomes an observer of the tumultuous relationship between Arnie Copeland (David Strathairn), an alcoholic cop, and his ex-wife, Sue Lynne (Rachel Weisz). Arnie’s addiction to alcohol is exacerbated by his failure to let go of Sue Lynne emotionally and recognise that she has moved on. His compulsive drinking becomes gradually worse and he is finally killed in a car accident, which could also be interpreted as suicide. After his death, both Sue Lynne and Elizabeth depart Memphis.

As the third episode unfolds, Elizabeth has moved on and is working in the basement casino of the Hotel Nevada. It is here that she meets Leslie (Natalie Portman), an itinerant professional gambler. Following the theme of damaged relationships, Leslie harbours feelings of anger and resentment towards her father, the cause of which is never completely revealed to the viewer. Borrowing money from Elizabeth to get back into a game when her luck has run out, she offers Elizabeth a third of her profits if she wins or her Jaguar convertible if she loses. She loses the game and asks Elizabeth for a ride to Las Vegas. It is not until they reach Las Vegas that Leslie discovers that her father has passed away in hospital. Claiming that she cannot let Elizabeth keep the Jaguar because it was her father’s car, she admits that she won the game of blackjack at the hotel, and before they part ways, Leslie accompanies Elizabeth to buy a used car.

The fourth, and final, episode takes the film full circle as Elizabeth returns to New York. She walks past her ex-boyfriend’s apartment, which is now vacant and for rent, and then visits Café Kylutch. Jeremy has reserved a place for her at the counter and she indulges in yet another piece of blueberry pie. The final image, a kiss between Elizabeth and Jeremy, presents the first occasion on which Wong effectively ends a film narrative, rather than allowing it to reside in a state of uncertainty. Notably, the kiss completes the story with a happy ending – a sign that Wong’s lost narratives of love can possibly be reclaimed, although, importantly, in a setting that is remote from his native Hong Kong.
By offering a distinct movement away from the melancholic denouements of his previous films, this final image, in particular, signals the new beginning that Wong claimed in 2006 was bound up with the making of My Blueberry Nights. However, the limited selection of writings on the film from both film critics and scholars have tended to focus on the manner in which My Blueberry Nights recalls and revisits images, motifs and sounds from Wong’s earlier films. For example, Joshua Clover posits one of the more disparaging interpretations of the film, claiming that:

In some regard the film resembles the recent rash of J-horror recreations for the domestic market, or Michael Haneke’s American clone of his own Funny Games (2008), except there’s no single source film. Instead it goes about the heartbreaking business of transposing Wong tropes and types into an American key: a remake without an original. Hong Kong noodle shops become Downtown bakery cafés, ambience becomes decor, charged waiting becomes mere boredom. The fundamental Wong drama, between cultural circulation and rootedness, returns as mere road trip.\(^8\)

In an essay entitled “Over and Over Again? Wong Kar-wai’s My Blueberry Nights?”, Nicholas Wong is more circumspect in his assessment. Although he argues that Wong’s films in general can be perceived as the “repetition of the same explicit cinematic style on the screen” and that My Blueberry Nights is reminiscent of both the characters and themes of Chungking Express, he does concede that, “Wong is clearly aware of the links.”\(^9\) Unfortunately, Nicholas Wong does not have the space to expand on this line of thought in his essay and the dearth of scholarly attention paid to the film since its release has left My Blueberry Nights languishing in the shadow of Wong’s previous films.\(^10\)

Although the highly self-conscious decision to replicate some of the themes and motifs of his earlier films will implicitly enter into my analysis of My Blueberry Nights, this chapter will examine a question that has been surprisingly neglected in the available critical readings on Wong’s most recent film: how has the new environment of America impacted on Wong’s cinematic style? In answering this question, I am particularly interested in how

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\(^9\) Nicholas Wong, “Over and Over Again? Wong Kar-wai’s My Blueberry Nights.” Metro Magazine 158 (2008), p. 58. See also Sean Metzger and Olivia Khoo, eds., “Introduction,” in Futures of Chinese Cinema: Technologies and Temporalities in Chinese Screen Cultures (Bristol: Intellect, 2009), p. 23. Metzger and Khoo write that, “It is easy to view My Blueberry Nights as a transposition of Chungking Express…into a New York setting. Wong also provides a coda for the road movie motif of Happy Together, this time moving across North America, from New York to Memphis, to Las Vegas and back to New York. The ‘key’ of the film modulates from these previous films, but is essentially the same narrative, a reprisal of Wong’s signature themes of memory and lost love.”

\(^10\) See “My Blueberry Nights.” Rotten Tomatoes <http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/my_blueberry_nights/#reviews=top_critics> (accessed 6 May 2011). My Blueberry Nights is the only film directed by Wong to receive a rating that falls below the 50% threshold on international film site Rotten Tomatoes. Its score of 39%, with an average rating of 4.8/10, is based on reviews collated from top film critics. This is a marked contrast to Wong’s earlier films that have generally polled above the 75% mark.
My Blueberry Nights imagines the themes of desire and place. The journey for love, a motif that is embedded in many of his films, is present in My Blueberry Nights, drawing a link between space and desire; however, it is given different expression within the new location. Specifically, I argue that the filming of an American setting, as well as Wong’s play on the road movie genre by way of Elizabeth and Leslie’s road trip through Nevada, constructs a referential gaze that takes cues from the art, cinema and music of which the American cultural landscape is composed.

Strikingly, My Blueberry Nights opens with a song by Jones that details her experience of shooting the film. In a metatextual twist, Jones’s song, “The Story”, signals to viewers that what they are about to see is not an entirely new narrative:

I don’t know how to begin
‘Cause the story has been told before
I will sing along I suppose
I guess it’s just how it goes.

In his reading of Jones’s song, Nicholas Wong writes that, “The story that ‘has been told before’ refers to the story [Chungking Express] that appeared on the Hong Kong screen nearly fifteen years ago. In My Blueberry Nights, the director repackages an old story and retells it in the American setting.” The link to Chungking Express notwithstanding, my reading of this revised story that “has been told before” expands its scope beyond the intricate universe of Wong’s oeuvre and concentrates on the intertextual allusions that are woven into the film. In so doing, this chapter examines Wong’s engagement with the United States as a filmic and sonic space.

Significantly, in a 2007 interview with Tony Rayns for Sight and Sound, Wong detailed the various resources that he drew upon while transposing his Hong Kong story to a new setting. In particular, American road movies, the artworks of Edward Hopper, an art book by Sophie Calle and a random selection of music purchased while on the road combine to provide suggestive material for the film. From this perspective, the story to which Jones alludes in her song is not a singular narrative, as Nicholas Wong assumes in his essay, but a constellation of forms from which Elizabeth’s story takes shape. In Wong’s exploration of images and sounds of distinct parts of the United States, he constructs a double narrative of place and desire, whereby an exploration of America as a cinematic space runs parallel to the diegetic narrative of a journey of self-discovery. The film’s locations gesture towards the lonely diners, bars and endless highways portrayed in Hopper’s paintings and in road movies, such as Dennis Hopper’s Easy Rider (1969) and

11 See “Director’s Commentary.” My Blueberry Nights OST (Liner Notes).
Ridley Scott’s *Thelma and Louise* (1991), thereby portraying Elizabeth’s travels through select aspects of American visual culture. Moreover, the soundtrack, which is an evocative mix of songs by Cat Power, Amos Lee, Ry Cooder and Otis Redding, serves as not only a symbolic soundtrack to the emotional trajectory of the characters, but also a signifier of place during Elizabeth’s 300-day journey, in which Wong uses audio cues to establish different parts of his cinematic topography.

The symbiosis of image and sound is particularly important to the film narrative and is magnified by the presence of the series of postcards that Elizabeth sends to Jeremy. Within the film, the generally touristic postcard is utilised as a communicative device that structures Elizabeth’s journey and communicates her inner desires; however, the representation, or lack thereof, of these postcards alters the image and text construction of a stereotypical picture postcard to present a mode of correspondence that utilises moving visuals and sound. The intertwining of an aural and visual exploration of the United States introduces an original way of reading the film that examines the ability of sound to contribute to the production of a sense of place. By navigating this new environment through the lens of postcard communication, Wong emphasises his status as an outsider who utilises pre-existing texts to construct his understanding of the material space of America; however, the message that he “sends” highlights his understanding of its cinematic space and that his view of the United States is not limited by the pictorial frame, but is enlivened by musical interludes that actively seek to situate the viewer in his highly constructed space.

By joining music with cinematic views of America, I argue that the film’s soundtrack provides a variation of Noël Carroll’s theorisation of “modifying music”, which he defines as “music [which] modifies the movie. The music possesses certain expressive qualities which are introduced to modify or to characterize on-screen persons and objects, actions and events, scenes and sequences.”14 Although the music in the film plays a significant part in characterising these elements, it is more importantly a marker of place. Indeed, David Toop contends that the “unpredictable soundtracks” of Wong’s films in general constitute “an invisible architecture, an emotional backdrop that contributes strongly to subjective experiences.”15 By utilising music as the coordinates for the film’s journey of America, Wong suggests that the viewer should not only see a location, but also respond to it through what he or she hears. In this respect, Wong’s perspective on the United States is not merely a re-hashing of old stories and practised styles, but a unique

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merging of sound and imagery to construct a landscape that explores cinematic form, representations of cultural Americana and his perennial theme of desire.  

Frame and Vision: Edward Hopper’s American Landscapes

Although the first episode of My Blueberry Nights unfolds in New York, the initial sequence does little to establish the narrative within this setting. Opening with a shot of an above-ground train hurtling through the nocturnally lit city before settling on the interior of Café Kylutch in SoHo, Wong sets up an approach to location that characterises the remainder of the film whereby the film camera provides glimpses of the landscape without seeking definitively to situate the viewer within a recognisable cartography. Interestingly, Alexandra A. Seno interprets Wong’s eschewal of well-known locations as an indication of his Hong Kong background. She writes that, “Though set in America, it clearly reflects their [Wong and art director William Chang] Hong Kong sensibilities; the hyper-real tones of the settings – roadside cafés [sic], bars and casinos bathed in neon – recall the gritty Kowloon entertainment district where they set earlier films like ‘Chungking Express’.” While I agree with Seno’s point that this strategy of establishing place through seemingly unassuming locations undoubtedly recalls Wong’s filmic mapping of Hong Kong, Wong’s interview with Rayns offers a more evocative explanation that draws on the influence of the artworks of Hopper:

I know I’m not the first foreign director to make a film that looks at America. I think the way I work is quite well known: I don’t build stories, I build characters. I always have to know all about the people in the film, so even if we see this woman only in a café, I have to know where she came from, what she was doing yesterday. I need all that background. If I shoot with Tony and Maggie in Hong Kong, I can easily imagine what’s around them and what’s behind their characters. But I needed to be able to do that with my American characters too. When I look at an Edward Hopper painting, I can feel the existence of the people he shows. The question I need to ask is always, ‘What impression do I get from this face, this gesture?’

The artworks of Hopper, who is one of America’s most renowned artists, are an apt visual and cultural source for My Blueberry Nights, given the manner in which his paintings of both

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16 My employment of the word “landscape” throughout this chapter is used to delineate not only the physical space of America as it is portrayed on-screen, but also the broad cultural landscape from which Wong takes inspiration, such as artworks, film and music.


18 Wong quoted in Rayns, “The American Way,” p. 33. See also Peter Brunette, Wong Kar-wai (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2005), p. 26. According to Brunette, the influence of Hopper’s palette was also a reference point for the chromatic style of Days of Being Wild (1990) in which Wong wanted “the light to be very weak, without contrast, as in the paintings of Edward Hopper.”
urban sites and rural scenography in the first half of the twentieth century have formed an important part of America’s visual and cultural identity. However, his artworks, while characterised as quintessentially American, rarely portray the sites of well-known tourist attractions, working instead with everyday locations that could easily be classed as mundane or banal. Painting within the realist tradition, Hopper’s artworks have established a distinct view of America that focuses on everyday interiors and exteriors; namely, hotel lobbies, offices, cafés and diners, self-service automats, the façades of rural houses, the interiors of theatres, empty streetscapes and desolate gas stations.

At one stage Wong, clearly inspired by the locations featured in Hopper’s work which arguably correlate to the settings involved in Wong’s own approach to imagining place, had planned for My Blueberry Nights to be set entirely in a New York diner in a direct homage to Nighthawks (1942), which is one of Hopper’s most iconic paintings that captures three patrons and a bartender in a corner bar. Deeply atmospheric, the painting creates a narrative tension by juxtaposing the illumination of the bar with the dark urban streetscape, as Hopper distils a moment in time shared among four individuals who appear to be disconnected from one another even though they inhabit the same interior. The construction of space in Nighthawks, as well as in the majority of Hopper’s other paintings, relies on the careful composition of physical locations to express the unspoken emotional states of his subjects, taking desolate settings as metonyms to convey the sad emptiness at the heart of his subjects’ existences. Place, as portrayed through the painterly representation of architecture and localities, and space, which is encapsulated in the framing and organisation of the details within each canvas, are effectively joined in Hopper’s construction of everyday American environments, which are simultaneously architectural and emotive. Significantly, Nighthawks demonstrates that the similarities between Wong and Hopper’s individual approaches to place extend beyond symbolically mapping locations that are resonant of Marc Augé’s non-places to presenting a visual language that utilises spatial motifs to portray loneliness and isolation. Despite these evocative resonances, Wong’s plan to adapt Hopper’s Nighthawks for the film screen was

abandoned due to financial limitations; however, the New York diner setting has remained in the form of Café Kylutch.

Figure 5.1. Edward Hopper’s *Nighthawks* (1942)

In *Twentieth Century American Art*, art historian Erika Doss considers the recurrent themes of alienation and despair as they are represented in Hopper’s work. She writes that:

[Hopper]…pictured the emotional alienation of a culture increasingly defined in terms of material abundance…Sensitive to the mundane details and psychological tensions of everyday modern life, Hopper’s honest and homely paintings often centred on solitary figures in familiar settings. Deeply intuitive about the constancy of the human condition, Hopper’s abiding popularity as a twentieth-century American artist stems from his disquieting attention to timeless themes of loneliness, separation, and death, and to modernist despair about the unfulfilling promises of materialism.22

Hopper’s approach to the landscape through what Doss refers to as the appearance of “familiar settings” not only captures interior and exterior architectures, but also engages with subtle moods that evoke a psychological conception of place. Specifically, Hopper’s paintings work in such a manner that the physical architecture plays a role in framing the emotional trajectories of his subjects. Rather than functioning only as settings or locations, the places featured in his work are microcosms of spatial intimacy – painterly representations of an emotional geography. Wong’s reference to Hopper’s art in the context of imagining his vision of America reflects his own interest in uncovering the private narratives of his characters by framing them within particular locations. Indeed, the silent, psychological tension in Hopper’s artworks transposes to Wong’s cinema, in which

voice-overs are used to express private emotion, and the physical space between the characters is beset with uncertainty and ambivalence. This is particularly the case in the portrayal of the blossoming relationship between Elizabeth and Jeremy. Although it becomes clear during their encounters in New York that Jeremy looks forward to Elizabeth’s visits and that he may have developed stronger feelings for her, the viewer is reliant on Elizabeth’s voice-overs to shed light on her feelings for Jeremy. In this sense, the insularity of Hopper’s subjects finds expression in Wong’s film; however, it is cleverly mediated through the cinematic device of the voice-over.

The power of Hopper’s paintings is in their ability to portray solitary figures within enclosed spaces – images that reveal a hidden life lurking below the surface. His subjects are invariably melancholy dreamers who are trapped within their mundane existences and who are unable to transcend the banality of the everyday. Their gazes are often focused on something beyond the borders of the composition, evoking another space that is inaccessible to the viewer. In paintings such as *Morning Sun* (1952), which features a middle-aged woman sitting on a bed staring out the window as she bathes in the sun’s morning light, and *Room in New York* (1932), which focuses on a couple who, despite their physical proximity, are seemingly alienated from one another, Hopper portrays a deep malaise through the distortion of human relationships in urban space. Judith A. Barter describes this effect as “Hopper’s ability to depict the human side of modern life and represent emotional states through physical settings.”

In this sense, the broad geography of America, as encapsulated in the physical arrangement of places and borders, is not central to the intricacies of Hopper’s work. Rather, he is concerned with a psychological geography that is visualised through the spatial tensions captured by his intimately composed painterly perspective.

Although a small collection of film reviews have noted the impact of Hopper’s paintings on the visual appearance of *My Blueberry Nights*, a sustained critical examination of the role of his art in the film has yet to be undertaken. That being said, various scholars have addressed the intersection of art and film imagery in Wong’s oeuvre. Most notably,

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24 Although Hopper sometimes includes the names of the locations that are the focus of his painted scenes – for example in works such as *Manhattan Bridge Loop* (1928), *Dawn in Pennsylvania* (1942) and *Portrait of Orleans* (1950) – the topographical differences of these individual locales are indistinguishable.


Stephen Teo provides a study of the impact of the work of various artists on Wong’s film imagery. He draws comparisons between the aesthetic energy of Chungking Express and the 1910 manifesto of the Italian Futurists in which they declare that it is imperative for speed and movement to be represented on the static canvas. On a similar tract, Teo argues that Francis Bacon’s violent blurs and painterly distortions are re-imagined in the movement of the wide angled camera lens used to film the action in Fallen Angels. In his analysis of Ashes of Time (1994), Teo shifts attention away from the aesthetics of movement to the construction of place in his claim that the barren desert landscapes of the film allude to the Australian outback paintings by John Olsen. Similarly, he contends that Pierre Bonnard and Edouard Vuillard’s interior settings are linked to the claustrophobic apartment spaces in In the Mood for Love and that the dark and sombre accents of Rembrandt and Caravaggio’s palettes are alluded to in the textures and colours of the Oriental Hotel in 2046 (2004). While I find Teo’s appropriation of art to define the aesthetics of Wong’s cinema a useful approach to reading his films, my interpretation can be distinguished as I am interested in not only highlighting the visual influence of Hopper’s work; I am also concerned with how Hopper’s paintings inform the construction of space in My Blueberry Nights. This interpretation takes its cue from Angela Dalle Vache’s Cinema and Painting: How Art Is Used in Film, in which she advocates an intertextual method for examining art within cinema that attends to “thematic contrasts, iconographic similarities, and historiographic commentaries.” Therefore, I will examine how the visual references to Hopper’s paintings in My Blueberry Nights move beyond an aesthetic function and display an engagement with the environments of Hopper’s oeuvre – a melancholic view of Americana.

Relocating Hopper’s Sensibilities to Contemporary Film

Due to the mass production and dissemination of Hopper’s imagery in contemporary American culture and beyond, it is arguable that representations of his paintings possess a postcard aesthetic. In this sense, the iconography of his work – irrespective of the fact that it does not portray tourist sites – has come to inform an understanding of the architectural...
geography of America just as a conventional postcard projects a recognisable view of any particular place. Donald’s reference to the condensation of place within an image, which is quoted at the beginning of this chapter, is relevant in this context, because although Hopper’s paintings do not generally reference specific sites that can be easily located, they provide a visual trace that demarcates the mood of the American landscape – the “image” on the face of Wong’s cinematic postcard of the United States. Indeed, the adoption of Hopper’s work as a reference point for *My Blueberry Nights* is suggestive of Wong’s comprehension of the cultural space of America. As Martha Nochimson writes, “in a country whose traditions and environment he understands only as a visitor…Wong stays with his usual themes as he explores modern isolation and fragmentation in the American west…*My Blueberry Nights* allows us to see the United States from Wong’s point of view.”

By utilising Hopper’s paintings as a symbolic marker of the United States, Wong’s perspective of America is culturally mediated, thereby producing an instance in which “one traverses not so much a landscape as a text with idyllic references to scenes, memories and expressions.” For example, the film’s exterior shots of Memphis could be transplanted directly from the landscapes depicted in *Drug Store* (1927), *Early Sunday Morning* (1930), or *The Circle Theater* (1936), with their quiet, empty streets and lush deep colours, and Elizabeth’s existence of solitude could be convincingly traced to the melancholic journeys of the lone women featured in *Hotel Room* (1931) and *Compartment C, Car 293* (1938). Hopper’s images of emotional and physical architecture are utilised as the foundation for imagining the environments of *My Blueberry Nights*, as Elizabeth, on her journey through the United States, finds time to pause within the familiar interiors – bars, diners, hotels and train stations – and on the long stretches of highway that appear in Hopper’s work.

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Significantly, the visual relationship between Hopper’s oil paintings, film imagery and space has been the focus of much of the scholarship on his work. For example, Anne Hollander writes that Hopper’s artworks feature:

…the modern clothes and rooms and corners of buildings once artlessly apparent in films of the 1930’s and 1940’s, the offices and hotel rooms and lunch counters that formed the settings of much unpretentious film. Only in the last decade has this kind of material in Hopper been retrieved and reprocessed in current films.35

By retracing the generic diners and bars, casinos and roads that have appeared in American movies and Hopper’s paintings, Wong creates a nostalgia, not for actual places as he does within his Hong Kong films, but for narratives of Americana.36 Therefore, Wong is not interested in portraying America from a socio-realistic perspective, but is concerned with how its image has been perpetuated in cultural representation – an exploration of the “stories” that Jones refers to in her opening song. As Lucy Fischer writes broadly on the critical intersection between Hopper and cinema:

It is not simply the formal and theoretical parallels between Hopper’s work and the cinema (his focus on viewership, his use of the theater/life metaphor, his screenlike windows) that lead critics to make such aesthetic comparisons. Rather, it is the very content of his work: his adamant attention to the image of the popular American landscape – the cultural domain of the movies…Hopper’s art causes us to imagine that we have witnessed before sights that we have never viewed – only because his work has etched “generic” versions of them so decisively into our consciousness. This profound sense of “recognition” also doubles back on itself, making us sure we have walked the streets of Hopper’s canvasses when, in fact, we have probably not.37

In *My Blueberry Nights*, Hopper’s paintings of street scenes are, as I have previously expressed, echoed in the views of the Arcade Restaurant where Elizabeth works during the day in Memphis, as well as the surrounding architecture in Memphis and Nevada. However, works such as *Early Morning Sunday* and *The Circle Theater* not only map a view of

35 Anne Hollander, *Moving Pictures* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991), p. 385. See also Eyerman and Löfgren, p. 54. Eyerman and Löfgren write that, “The gas station ‘in the middle of nowhere’, the bare hotel room and dingy bar, the corner café and the tired, motherly waitress are the America that Edward Hopper has already put on canvas in the period between world wars. The road movie emerged out of this wide cultural constellation.”

36 What is significant about these intertextual layers is that although Wong’s vision of America’s urban landscape has been informed by his exposure to the narratives, characters and imagery of Hopper’s paintings, the visuals of *My Blueberry Nights* can also be traced to the cinema that inspired Hopper. Indeed, the overall aesthetic of the film does not gesture towards a particular period. Even though the film is set in 2006, the locations, costumes, soundtrack and the motif of the postcard do little to evoke a contemporary context and Hopper’s cinematic gaze, which focused on the Hollywood cinema of the 1930s and 1940s and which informed the creation of the environments featured in his work, is transposed to *My Blueberry Nights*.

America that Wong replicates in his film, but also gesture towards the small-town pathos that he re-creates as a backdrop to the doomed relationship between Arnie and Sue Lynne, as well as the atmosphere of melodrama and the shadowy and neon-saturated aesthetics of film noir that create a visual portent of Arnie’s untimely death. Similarly, paintings such as Automat (1927) and Nighthawks, which capture café settings that are framed by large windows, are recalled in the views of Earnestine & Hazel’s and Café Kylutch. This visual coalescence and shared architectural iconography also finds expression thematically in Wong and Hopper’s individual, yet oddly similar, explorations of the suggestion of movement and journeying on the one hand, and stasis and pause on the other. While the transitional settings in paintings such as Hotel Room, Compartment C, Car 293 and Hotel by a Railroad (1952) imply travel, Hopper undercuts this theme with tangible weight and immobility. In much the same way that the viewer is not privy to any of the bus journeys that Elizabeth professes to have undertaken in the first two episodes of the film, travel is supplanted by waiting. By capturing uneventful moments, waiting, isolation and ambivalent transition, Hopper’s paintings and Wong’s film capture the experiences and events that take place beyond the excitement of travel, a point that I return to later. More evocatively, the claustrophobia and rigidity are heightened by Hopper’s use of architecture as a framing device.

In particular, doors and windows are frequently featured in Hopper’s compositions, constructing spatial divisions that also suggest emotional tensions. In one of the first scenes set in Café Kylutch, which follows Elizabeth’s discovery that her boyfriend has left her, Khondji adopts Hopper’s framing techniques and visually highlights Elizabeth’s emotional turmoil by consistently placing the café’s front window between her and the camera. This effect, in which the camera is used to delineate the boundaries of the café and moves inside
when she is outside and vice versa, alienates and distances Elizabeth and succeeds in building a barrier to her character. For example, in one scene, Elizabeth leans against the door frame at the café’s entrance as the camera, which is positioned inside the café, frames her face through the glass. However, the scrawled red writing of daily specials and information on the café’s windows conceals the majority of her face. In this respect, Wong not only adopts Hopper’s visual vocabulary, but also transposes the artist’s keen observation of characters that are isolated, withdrawn and emotionally distant.

Furthermore, this very artistic effect creates a strange disjuncture in the cinematic gaze. To provide the viewer with audio intimacy, Wong chooses to situate his audience on the outside looking in during many of the scenes set in Café Kylutch, thereby replicating the viewing position featured in a number of Hopper’s paintings. Although the viewer can hear perfectly the nuances and details of the conversations between Elizabeth and Jeremy, they are denied full visual access to Wong’s cinematic tableau. Significantly, this effect foregrounds sound as a central means of constructing intimacy – an issue I will consider further in the subsequent section and which is also emphasised by the large amount of dialogue that *My Blueberry Nights* features in contrast to Wong’s earlier films. On a more symbolic level, by choosing to locate his characters in the constructed environments reminiscent of Hopper’s paintings, Wong establishes the frame that delineates the edge of his cinematic postcard, while also appropriating Hopper’s visual motifs of framing. However, whereas Hopper’s architectural partitions suggest only alienation, Wong’s hint intriguingly at possibility.

**Collecting Keys/Opening Doors**

Robert Silberman’s analysis of Hopper’s work engages directly with the symbolism behind the framing and composition of each painting. He argues that:

[Hopper] emphasizes a variety of frames within the picture frame to control the visual, spatial, and psychological relationship between the observer and observed...a means of establishing, simultaneously, intimacy and detachment, visual clarity and physical distance...That double movement, of opening and closing, inviting sight and blocking it, is a fundamental Hopper tactic.

On one level, the framing of doors and windows in *My Blueberry Nights* serves a similar purpose to that of Hopper’s work by highlighting spatial divisions and utilising borders as metaphors for separation and the inability to connect. For example, in a scene set in Memphis, Arnie observes Sue Lynne from behind the window of Earnestine & Hazel’s as

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38 Although *Nighthawks* – the painting that initially inspired Wong – comes to mind, this style of framing can also be seen in paintings such as *Night Windows* (1928), *Room in New York* (1932), *August in the City* (1945), *Cape Cod Morning* (1950) and *New York Office* (1962).

39 Silberman, p. 150.
she passionately kisses her new boyfriend. In this sequence, the pane of glass that literally positions them in separate spaces heightens their vast emotional distance and the division of their marriage. More specifically, the frames in Hopper’s paintings point to the blurred division between interior and exterior in both the spatial and psychological sense. According to Beatriz Colomina, “The etymology of the word window reveals that it combines wind and eye (ventilation and light in Le Corbusier’s terms). As Georges Teyssot has noted, the word combines ‘an element of the outside and an aspect of innerness.’”

Giuliana Bruno expands on this interpretation in the context of doors and contends that they “signify an architecture of the interior…Set between inside and outside, home and voyage, the door enables the transition to a different intersubjectivity.” According to Colomina and Bruno’s separate conceptualisations, the window and the door are not merely frames, but thresholds. In Wong’s film, the threshold marked by doors and windows is not only physical in its division of exterior and interior spaces, but also a symbolic border delineating the invisible line between love and hate, and the past and present.

At the conclusion of the film, when Elizabeth and Jeremy have seemingly cemented their relationship, Elizabeth’s voice-over reflects on her journey and concludes, “It took me nearly a year to get here. It wasn’t so hard to cross that street after all. It all depends on who’s waiting for you on the other side.” Although Elizabeth’s monologue refers to the street as the space that needs to be traversed, the film explores this idea through the division of architectural frames. The emotional and temporal borders encapsulated in the film’s doorways are articulated in the scenes in Café Kylutsch and Earnestine & Hazel’s where doorways are indicative of the status of relationships and the passing of love. In particular, the vision of the female characters passing through the doorways of both the café and the bar silently comments on their relationships with the male characters. For example, the movement of both Elizabeth and Jeremy’s ex-girlfriend, Katya (Chan Marshall), through the doors of Café Kylutsch symbolises both the possibility and the stagnation of romance in Jeremy’s life, and Arnie is aware of Sue Lynne’s presence each time she passes through the doors of Earnestine & Hazel’s.

During Elizabeth and Jeremy’s first encounters, Elizabeth is often pictured standing at the entrance, unsure of whether to enter or walk away, suggesting the unclear nature of her desires. Indeed, in the scene in which Elizabeth returns to both New York and Jeremy, a flashback portrays her hand holding the knob of the door to the café before letting go of

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it and walking away: “You know I came here the night I left but I didn’t make it past the front door. I almost walked in but I knew that if I did, I would just be the same old Elizabeth. I didn’t want to be that person anymore.” Imagined through Elizabeth’s memory, the door is perceived as a pivotal space that determines the characters’ fates. Similarly, after Arnie assaults Sue Lynne’s boyfriend, she instigates a physical and verbal confrontation with him at the front of the bar. After she screams “It’s over!”, the image of her walking through the door is visualised not once, but twice in succession, suggesting that it has been seared into Arnie’s memory – the final image that is inscribed in his consciousness prior to his death. Moving beyond an entryway that delineates inside and outside, the doors in the film are therefore continually inscribed with romantic connotations.

This door metaphor also finds expression in the miscellaneous keys that Jeremy has collected throughout his time managing Café Kylutch and that he stores in a glass jar on the café counter. Specifically, each set of keys contains a narrative that in some way relates to a failed or lost relationship:

**Elizabeth:** Will you tell me the stories behind those other keys?

**Jeremy:** What for?

**Elizabeth:** I just wondered how they all ended up here.

[Jeremy places the bowl in front of Elizabeth]

**Jeremy:** Pick one.

[Elizabeth picks out a set]
Those belonged to a young couple a few years ago. They were naïve enough to believe they were going to spend the rest of their lives together...

The idea of Café Kylutch as a repository for lost keys is not so subtly evoked in the café’s name, as it uses the Russian word for “key” (КЛЮЧ) as its namesake. Significantly, Elizabeth initially leaves her keys at the café in a gesture of purging the memories of her broken heart when she discovers that her boyfriend is cheating on her. However, Jeremy keeps the keys left behind by his customers so that doors, and therefore relationships, can remain open: “If I threw these keys away, then those doors will be closed forever and that shouldn’t be up to me to decide. Should it?” As Elizabeth continues to select different keys from the jar, she eventually fishes out a set of keys with a red star dangling from the keychain that reveals the story of Jeremy and Katya. Within this narrative, Jeremy details his aborted plan of running every marathon in the country and writing about it in a journal and Katya’s disappearance: “Later they were given to a Russian girl who loved collecting keys and watching sunsets. Unfortunately, she loved the sunsets more than the keys and ended up disappearing into one.” Significantly, when Katya unexpectedly visits Jeremy towards the middle of the film, the keys are the focus of her attention:

**KATYA:** You still have the keys.

**JEREMY:** Yeah...I always remember what you said about never throwing them away, about never closing those doors forever. I remember.

**KATYA:** But, sometimes, even if you have the keys, those doors still can’t be opened, can they?

**JEREMY:** Even if the door is open, the person you’re looking for may not be there, Katya.

Jeremy’s voice-over, which intercuts this scene, fleshes out his memory of Katya – a memory that he equates to “a dream.” The flashback ends with a shot of Katya turning over the open sign on the door of the café and leaving: “And then one night a door slammed and the dream was over.” Here, the closed door abruptly indicates the end of their love affair, and when Katya returns in this scene, she never passes the threshold into the café, but remains on the outside looking in.

The keys, in a similar fashion to postcards, chart and record the traversal of space and are also connected to the domestic realm. Indeed, keys can provide access to the home, provided you have the right key for the right lock, while postcards are often used as mementos to be sent back home. Within the film, Wong clearly privileges the intimate, yet public, communication via the postcards over the silent narrative within the keys, which
only Jeremy can access. Thus, when Elizabeth returns to Café Kylutch at the film’s
denouement, Jeremy has removed the keys from the jar on the counter and has, instead,
filled it with a bouquet of flowers. This act of disposing of the keys represents letting go of
the past – of both his relationship with Katya and the melancholic love stories that he has
held onto of other people’s relationships. Furthermore, this act highlights the film’s
symbolic investment in transitory encounters and a sense of hope that can be located only
by looking to the future. Postcards, unlike keys, offer the chance of a new beginning.

Figure 5.5. “…and the dream was over.” (My Blueberry Nights)

An Interstate Romance: Sending Postcards

To coincide with the 2007 release in Hong Kong of the My Blueberry Nights original
soundtrack, Warner Music Hong Kong included a set of four postcards inspired by the
film in the packaging of the compact disc. Taking stills from the film and featuring the
central cast, the postcards visually distil the most poignant moments of My Blueberry Nights:
the final kiss between Elizabeth and Jeremy; a shot of Elizabeth eating a slice of blueberry
pie that, in the style of Hopper’s paintings, is framed by one of the Café Kylutch windows;
and Elizabeth and Leslie in a diner. The final postcard is neatly divided into an image of
Elizabeth and Arnie in the Arcade Restaurant and a shot of Elizabeth and Sue Lynne at the
scene of Arnie’s death. On the back of each card is a line of dialogue from the film that
complements the still on the front. Although the inclusion of a series of postcards with the
soundtrack could be simply passed off as a clever marketing tool aimed at furthering the
circulation of imagery from the film, it also highlights a particular economy of desire bound
up with the promotion of My Blueberry Nights whereby music and film visuals are joined
through one of the film’s key motifs: postcards. In this sense, the marketing both coalesces

42 Jeremy claims that he does, in fact, attempt to return the keys to their original owners; however, the
removal of the keys symbolically speaks to the idea of letting go of the past.
with and adopts the central form of correspondence in *My Blueberry Nights* in such a manner that the relationship between postcard, soundtrack and film image permeates the extra-textual domain of the film.

In Hamid Naficy’s exploration of epistolary narratives in exilic and diasporic cinema, he divides films that deal with distanced communication – whether through letter-writing, telephone conversations, electronic mail or video messages – into three main categories that often overlap: “film-letters, telephonic epistles, and letter-films.”\(^{43}\) He describes each category in the following terms:

Film-letters inscribe letters and acts of reading and writing of letters by diegetic characters. Likewise, telephonic epistles inscribe telephones and answering machines and the use of these devices by diegetic characters. Letter-films, on the other hand, are themselves in the form of epistles addressed to someone either inside or outside the diegesis, and they do not necessarily inscribe the epistolary media.\(^{44}\)

Interestingly, in Naficy’s analysis of a selection of letter-films by Jonas Mekas he writes that, “They are episodic and repetitive and have a postcard structure. Each film builds palimpsestically, forming what amounts to a stack of audiovisual postcards or an accented flip-book.”\(^{45}\) Although it is not my intention to slot *My Blueberry Nights* into a model of interpretation designed for films that are produced through a lens of exile or to simply apply theory imagined for another film, Naficy’s conception of a film as a stack of audiovisual postcards resonates strongly with the manner in which Elizabeth’s accumulated experiences on the road come to represent a series of audiovisual vignettes that can be perceived as *cinematic* postcards that are sent from various locations in and of the United States. Substituting the still, pictorial image and written text format of a traditional postcard, Wong’s cinematic postcards are concerned with the connection between moving imagery and sound in establishing a geography of desire.

Although postcards are Elizabeth’s singular line of communication with Jeremy as she travels through America, the camera does not privilege the image on the surface of each postcard so that the material form of Elizabeth’s communication with Jeremy remains invisible to the viewer. One exception to this visual marginalisation is a fleeting shot of a postcard from Arizona propped up near the cash register in Café Kylutch.\(^{46}\) This postcard, which depicts a mountainous vista that is presumably the Grand Canyon, is saturated in blue, orange, pink and yellows tones. The unnatural and almost hyperreal application of

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\(^{44}\) Naficy, p. 101.

\(^{45}\) Naficy, p. 141.

\(^{46}\) The viewer later catches a glimpse of Jeremy holding a postcard with Nevada printed across its surface in bright yellow; however, any other details are impossible to decipher.
colour to the landscape captured in the postcard notably informs many of the views offered in the film, whereby the colours of Khondji’s cinematography appear to ooze from this image. In particular, this colour schema, which transforms the natural geography into a neon picture-postcard, informs the travelling views of Elizabeth and Leslie driving through the barren highways of Nevada and Elizabeth’s return route to New York. What this suggests is that rather than merely picturing the views on Elizabeth’s postcards, Wong intends to weave their representation into the fabric of the film. In this instance, Wong embeds postcard representation within the very structure of Elizabeth’s journey.

![Postcard from Arizona (My Blueberry Nights)](image)

**Figure 5.6. Postcard from Arizona (My Blueberry Nights)**

**Inscribing the Postcard into the Cinematic**

To my mind, Wong’s inspiration for using the postcard as both a cinematic device and a motif in the film is derived from his exposure to French conceptual artist Sophie Calle’s *Exquisite Pain (Douleur Exquise)* [1984-2003], a book that documents the creation of an art installation by the same name. During his interview with Rayns, Wong discussed his interest in Calle’s book:

> I always have books with me when I travel and I had three on these trips, all of which influenced my thinking. One was Sophie Calle’s *Exquisite Pain*, which is a kind of photo album with texts that chronicles the most unhappy days of her life from a vantage point of 15 years later. She has been stood up by a man. She keeps repeating her story to different people, and each time she tells it, it becomes less detailed until by the end it’s very vague. The book is full of things I like. At one point she wanders around an unfamiliar city, goes into a diner and orders sausage – a dish she hates! – and she doesn’t know why.47

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47 Wong quoted in Rayns, “The American Way,” p. 34. The two other books that played a part in developing the film narrative were a collection of short stories by Lawrence Block, who co-authored the screenplay for *My Blueberry Nights* and a guide to quitting addictions, the title of which Wong cannot remember.
Although a handful of scholars and film critics have drawn attention to the impact of Hopper’s paintings on My Blueberry Nights; none of the extant scholarship attempts to address the relevance of Calle’s text to the film. On one level, both My Blueberry Nights and Exquisite Pain narrativise coping with romantic loss and involve the themes of travel, emotional pain and storytelling; however, the individual projects share structural similarities that play with image and place. In order to unpack this connection, Calle’s installation and book require further explication. In the following abridged excerpt from the retrospective monograph M’as-Tu Vue, Calle reflects on the emotional genesis of her conceptual work:

In 1984 I was awarded a French foreign ministry grant to go to Japan for three months. I left on October 25, not knowing that this date marked the beginning of a 92-day countdown to the end of a love affair – nothing unusual, but for me then the unhappiest moment of my whole life. I blamed the trip. Back in France on January 28, 1985, I opted for exorcism and spoke about my suffering instead of my travels. In exchange, I started asking both friends and chance encounters: ‘When did you suffer most?’ This exchange would stop when I had told my story to death, or when I had relativized my pain in relation to other people’s. The method was radically effective: three months later, I was cured. The exorcism had worked.48

As presented in a gallery setting, Calle’s Exquisite Pain comprises a series of polyptychs that consist of colour and black and white photographic images and text embroidered onto linens of various colours. The details of the textual embroidery chronicle both Calle’s story of her personal suffering and instances of suffering experienced by other people. Viewing an excerpted version of the work in 2009 that featured nine polyptychs, as part of the elles@centrepompidou exhibition at the Musée National d’Art Moderne, Centre Pompidou in Paris, I was struck by the similarity between the presentation of Calle’s work and a postcard. However, rather than separating text and image into different sides of the same surface, they are simultaneously laid bare for the viewer’s perusal. Calle’s art book, which accompanied Wong on his road trips through American with Khondji, appropriates the form of the installation for the page, thereby marrying visuals and text to present a book divided into two parts: “Before unhappiness” and “After unhappiness.”

The event of unhappiness to which the titles allude – the literal narrative centre of the book – is the break-up between Calle and “M”, an older man whom she romantically claims she had dreamt about as a girl. Calle situates this moment of heartbreak with extreme precision: “January 25, 1985, 2 a.m., room 261, Imperial Hotel, New Delhi.”49

“Before unhappiness” is a countdown to the painful event of rejection by her lover, while

“After unhappiness” repetitiously features Calle’s account of being told by “M” that he has met someone else. In this final section Calle’s story is juxtaposed to other people’s intimate memories of the moment in their lives when they suffered most.

The structural framework for “Before unhappiness” is a visual assemblage of fragments predominantly composed of snapshots that capture the objects, moments and people Calle encountered while she was travelling through Japan. The inclusion of Polaroid images and train tickets, which provide the factual evidence of her trip, as well as her personal correspondences, endow the book with a diary-like structure. However, this pictorial – even touristic – visual journey is undercut by the final event of separation from her lover. Each photograph is marked by an official-looking red stamp setting out the number of days until unhappiness, so that every photograph functions as a retrospective countdown to the day when Calle discovers, via telephone, that her lover has replaced her. The effect of this process is that the visual poetry of each photograph is effaced by the clinical recognition that unhappiness will soon be the only emotion that Calle is capable of experiencing.

Figure 5.7. Photographic excerpt from Sophie Calle’s *Exquisite Pain* (1984-2003)
Significantly, art critic Nancy Princenthal interprets the images as being “canceled, as it were, like a postage stamp.”\(^{50}\) Princenthal’s allusion to a postage stamp is intriguing and touches upon the tension between the public and the private in Calle’s work. While the mementoes of Calle’s trip are personal and private in nature, the red stamp objectifies and depersonalises her experiences so that every object and every image are made public and placed within a hierarchy of time that points to the unhappiest moment in her life. Specifically, the stamp symbolically highlights the transition from personal to public viewing as though the traces of red ink taint the confidentiality of every image, thereby marking them with a sense of foreignness and imbuing her memories of Japan with heartbreak. This particular visual quirk, which makes private suffering public, is suggestive of the form of the postcard that Jacques Derrida describes as “a kind of personal message, a secret between us, the secret of reproduction…What I like about post cards is that even if in an envelope, they are made to circulate like an open but illegible letter.”\(^{51}\) Calle’s book, in its unflinching chronicling of the minutiae of her existence, “opens” the secrets of her heartbreak, laying bare her pain for public circulation.

“After unhappiness” presents various mutations of Calle’s tale of heartbreak as she recounts the moment of rejection in a series of vignettes over a period of three months following the break-up. Her account of the disunion varies in emotional detail and is set against the painful moments contributed by anonymous people, which cover topics such as break-ups, suicides, deaths and mourning. Calle’s account alters as the book progresses whereby the font that details her suffering becomes paler as she is distanced from the event by time. Similarly, the written details become shorter and more oblique, and demonstrate the manner in which the past shifts in memory and significance until the reader reaches the final page, which has suggestively been left blank. “After unhappiness” plays with the presence and absence of the artist by presenting Calle’s varying accounts in parallel with other stories. The pain of her break-up is thus given a different perspective by juxtaposing her personal narrative with stories of even greater pain.

Based on this summary, there are two central thematic tenors that link *My Blueberry Nights* and *Exquisite Pain*: the story of a woman who is betrayed and abandoned by a man is at the centre of both projects, and Calle’s process of dealing with the pain of love lost, through emotional distance and a gradual disengagement with one’s own suffering, is also evident in Elizabeth’s decision to travel interstate, with the consequent shift in focus to the


narratives of the film’s other characters. As Elizabeth witnesses the pain and unresolved emotions that exist between Arnie and Sue Lynne and later observes Leslie’s bitter and unexplained feelings towards her father, she becomes detached from the heartache she felt in New York in much the same way that Calle works through the pain of her break-up by cataloguing other people’s tales of suffering. From a conceptual perspective, the manner in which Exquisite Pain juxtaposes images and text is suggestive of a sequence of postcards in book form. In this respect, the book does not reveal the totality of Calle’s experiences, but offers small insights that reduce her stay in Japan to a collection of fragments and her moment of heartache to a repeated photograph of a red phone on the bedside table in her hotel room.

Formally, the relevance of a French artist’s stay in Japan to a film set in America may not be immediately apparent; however, there is an interesting correlation between the subjects of Calle’s snapshot images, which capture the details of her transient existence overseas, and the diners, bars, train stations and motels in Hopper’s paintings as they are transplanted to Wong’s spatial imaginary. The shared approach to the sites presented in both projects points towards a mode of travel that is personalised and not mediated through imagery that immediately locates the viewer within the boundaries of a particular place. Indeed, one of the criticisms levelled at My Blueberry Nights is that the film does little to conjure an easily graspable sense of place. As film critic A. O. Scott writes in the opening of his review for the New York Times:

Anyone who has been to Las Vegas, Memphis or New York – or who has received postcards from friends in those cities – is likely to find ‘My Blueberry Nights’...wildly unrealistic, even though much of it was shot on location in the real-deal U.S.A. The smoky Tennessee juke joint and the cute little Manhattan bakery-café look like theme restaurants catering to the tourist trade, and even the highways snaking through the mountains and deserts have the inauthentic glow of rental-car advertisements. Mr. Wong and his cinematographer, Darius Khondji, make America look so pretty that you may have trouble recognizing it.

What is notable about Scott’s reading of the film’s representation of America is that he considers the images of the landscape so unrealistic and “pretty” that they even surpass the highly constructed locations featured on postcards. Although traditional postcards “contain

53 A. O. Scott, “On the Road, With Melancholia and a Hankering for Pie and Ice Cream.” New York Times, 4 April 2008, sec E, p. 12. See also Ewa Mazierska and Laura Rascaroli, “Trapped in the Present: Time in the Films of Wong Kar-wai.” Film Criticism 25.2 (2000-01), p. 4. Wong’s hyperreal representation of the American landscape correlates to a point previously made by Mazierska and Rascaroli in relation to his earlier films. They write that, “The images of nature in films such as As Tears Go By, Days of Being Wild and Happy Together are so ‘sugary’ and idyllic that they display a suspicion that their author doubts their existence.”
limited text and are about known (or at least knowable) locations and identifiable places”, Wong’s cinematic postcards are not concerned with the precise details of America’s geography, but with revealing the landscape through Elizabeth’s personal journey. This is particularly evidenced when the only postcard to which the viewer is witness is one that looks blatantly unnatural and hyper-coloured, reflecting a view that is not a simple visual translation of the landscape. Indeed, the first “landscape” that the viewer witnesses in the film is the slow-motion, close-up sequence of ice cream traversing the contours of the deep reddish-purple filling of a blueberry pie. This imagery, which accompanies the opening credits and borders on the erotic in its sensual abstractness, immediately establishes an alternative view that places emphasis on aesthetic beauty and unexpected detail – a perspective that privileges the microscopic over the macroscopic. Therefore, an authentic representation of place is not paramount to Wong’s cinematic postcard. Rather, he attempts to engage with the manner in which everyday sites and sights impact on Elizabeth’s emotional journey – an approach that Wong highlights through the device of the voice-over, which marks her journey both geographically and emotionally.

Figure 5.8. The blueberry pie close-up (My Blueberry Nights)

The Travelling Voice

Dear Jeremy,

As you can see by this postcard, I’m now in Memphis, Tennessee. It took me a long time to get here. And I’m not sure how long I’ll be staying. During the day I work at a diner downtown. I haven’t been able to sleep at nights so I’ve also taken a waitressing job at a bar. It’s kind of a dive, but the tips are pretty good. Working two jobs is exhausting. But at least it keeps me busy and, most importantly, it keeps my mind away from him.

This monologue marks the first in the series of postcards that Elizabeth sends to Jeremy as she travels across America. Significantly, the postcard is not, in this first instance, signalled as an object, but is imagined through Elizabeth’s voice-over. Although Elizabeth’s monologue gestures towards the physical presence of a postcard from Memphis, the film camera does not privilege the actual object that appears to facilitate the remote connection between Elizabeth and Jeremy. Rather, the camera traces Elizabeth’s movements as she narrates her message, depicting her existence working in the Arcade Restaurant during the day and Earnestine & Hazel’s at night. This is an effect that is maintained throughout Elizabeth’s journey in which she is often filmed in the process of inscribing her messages to Jeremy; however, the images on the surfaces of the postcards are rarely seen apart from the shot of the card from Arizona. Significantly, the viewer is privy only to a postcard that is sent from a location that is not traversed on-screen, suggesting that the postcards from Memphis and Nevada do not require animatic articulation because the imagery on the front of the postcard is already embedded in the film’s imagery. Furthermore, as the postcards are symbolic of Elizabeth’s emotional journey, the images printed onto the postcards that she sends is eclipsed by her messages, which the viewer “receives” via voice-over.

Within the diegesis of the film, the postcard has a number of different registers. Firstly, it is a tactile object that traverses geography and transmits messages from Elizabeth to Jeremy. However, as the camera rarely films physical postcards, they also function on a number of distinct yet interlinked levels that deliberately intertwine vision and sound. The imagery of the postcards, as I have previously proposed, is woven into the visual fabric of the film whereby Wong’s appropriation of Hopper’s imagery and Khondji’s framing of America take the place of the absent images on the surface of the postcards. Indeed, the idea of postcard representation follows through to the visual portrayal of the American landscape in the sense that My Blueberry Nights does not create an authentic cartography, but an iconography that references other cultural texts. The production of this iconography is suggestive of Naficy’s idea of a stack of audiovisual postcards, as it gestures towards the cinematic arrangement of the American geography through a compilation of textual allusions. Furthermore, Wong’s iconography recalls the formal structure of Calle’s assemblage of visual fragments in Exquisite Pain in its gathering of geographical snapshots to create an intimate mapping that views the landscape through a personal lens. More evocatively, the film’s use of voice-over narration, in lieu of visualising the text on the postcards, is the predominant method of representing Elizabeth’s one-way communication with Jeremy. By using Elizabeth’s voice to mediate the content of the postcards, as well as to situate the viewer within each location of the film, Wong privileges sound as a marker
of geography. However, more than establishing geographical placement, the use of voice-
over plays a crucial role in narrating the message behind each postcard, thereby drawing
out an emotional geography.

Throughout Elizabeth’s trip, she never reveals to Jeremy her exact location, so
each message provides him with only a general indication of her whereabouts; however, it
does impart a strong insight into her emotional state. Rather than verbalise her emotions
to the other characters in the film in a direct fashion, Elizabeth utilises the postcards as
eational maps. The epistolary form of Elizabeth’s voice-over establishes what Naficy
contextualises as “direct access to the characters’ subjective viewpoints and emotional
states…the intimacy, immediacy, and intensity of their interiority.”55 This resonates with
Sarah Kozloff’s introduction to Invisible Storytellers: Voice-Over Narration in American Fiction
Film in which she claims that voice-overs are a form of “[c]inematic storytelling” that
possess the “capacity for creating intimacy.”56 In the same vein that Derrida’s postcards
allow “a secret between us”, Elizabeth’s voice-overs draw the viewer into her private world
that she would otherwise allow only Jeremy to access.

Indeed, as the film progresses, the postcards become artefacts of Elizabeth’s
transitory existence, charting her movement from location to location and reflect not only
the places that she has visited, but also her personal transformation: “Dear Jeremy. In the
last few days I’ve been learning how to not trust people and I’m glad I failed. Sometimes
we depend on other people as a mirror to define us and tell us who we are. And each
reflection makes me like myself a little more. Elizabeth.” Here, the unseen postcard is
given a presence through Elizabeth’s voice-over, while also establishing a central line of
correspondence to her inner subjectivity. Similarly, in her final postcard sent from
Memphis, Elizabeth reflects on Arnie’s death and the manner in which his existence was
reduced to a list of items on a bar tab. Yet again, the viewer is not provided with visual
access to the postcard; however, Elizabeth’s voice-over enlivens the absent object of the
postcard: “I always had the feeling I could say anything to you. Enclosed is a bill I created
for you in memory of our time together. I wonder how you’ll remember me? As the girl
who liked blueberry pie…or the girl with the broken heart?”57 Throughout her trip
Elizabeth experiments with a different identity in each state, subtly altering her name to
become Lizzie, Betty and Beth; however, her postcards to Jeremy allow a more intimate

55 Naficy, p. 102.
56 Sarah Kozloff, Invisible Storytellers: Voice-Over Narration in American Fiction Film (Berkeley: University of
57 Elizabeth’s act of enclosing a bill, presumably in an envelope with the postcard, also gestures towards the
subversive use of the postcard in the film.
(re-)writing of her sense of self. In this sense, Wong inserts the voiced postcard into the film narrative to record the contours in Elizabeth’s emotional landscape.

Significantly, the use of the voice-over to convey Elizabeth’s postcard correspondence cinematically accords to the very form of the voice-over as something that emanates from a different time and space. As Kozloff argues:

‘Over’ actually implies more than mere screen-absence; one must distinguish voice-over from voice-off in terms of the space from which the voice is presumed to originate. In the latter, the speaker is merely temporarily off-camera, the camera could pan around the same scene and capture the speaker. Contrarily, voice-over is distinguishable by the fact that one could not display the speaker by adjusting the camera’s position in the pictured story space; instead the voice comes from another time and space, the time and space of the discourse.

To my mind, Kozloff’s situation of voice-over narration within an alternative time and space gestures towards the travelling nature of the voice-over that is particularly realised in My Blueberry Nights. The filmic traversal of Elizabeth’s voice does not offer verisimilitude, but works to construct a cinematic space that intimates the movement of her postcards. Indeed, it is arguable that the viewer hears Elizabeth’s monologues at the point in the narrative in which Jeremy reads the very same words inscribed on the back of her postcards. Within the film, Elizabeth’s voice travels the vast distance that separates her and Jeremy, reinforcing sound as a path to intimacy, and one that is so strong that it can cinematically collapse geographical space.

Hearing Space, Locating Rhythm

According to Naficy, films that embed epistolarity into their structure through voice-over narration can be defined as “oral and acoustic texts” that privilege “sound, voice, and language” in the creation of meaning. In My Blueberry Nights, Wong interweaves the film’s musical soundtrack with the characters’ voice-over narration as a means to underline each different location in Elizabeth’s journey. Providing another dimension to Naficy’s theorisation of written correspondence as imagined through voice-over, Wong does not limit the film’s soundscape to the projection of the characters’ messages, but uses music as an accompanying signifier of place and passage. To this end, Elizabeth’s act of sending postcards to Jeremy from the various destinations on her road trip is signalled by specific pieces of music that delineate different parts of the American geography. The link between postcards and sound is particularly established through the decision to obscure the images

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58 Elizabeth uses the name Lizzy in Memphis and in Nevada she goes by the name Beth. A connecting scene that is not linked to a specific destination shows Elizabeth in a diner wearing a nametag inscribed with the name “Betty.”
59 Kozloff, p. 3.
60 Naficy, p. 120.
represented pictorially on Elizabeth’s postcards. By concealing the postcard imagery, Wong shifts the focus of attention onto the cinematic element that provides access to the postcard; that is, the film’s audio environment. For the viewer, the songs and compositions that Wong repetitively associates with a given location are bound up with sending a musical postcard that marks each place with an audio signifier or a spatial refrain. Just as a place can be represented by a specific image on a postcard – for example, the Statue of Liberty to represent New York City or the Casino Strip to represent Las Vegas – Wong attempts to align music with specific places. In his own words, “Music should be part of [the] sound of a film, and I use music as the sound of the environment.” The use of music to chart and map the geographical coordinates of Elizabeth’s journey demonstrates a way of thinking about space that is only possible through an audiovisual medium such as film. In *My Blueberry Nights*, music becomes a means for constructing Wong’s cinematic postcards.

In the compilation of the soundtrack for *My Blueberry Nights*, Wong’s choice of music to foreground the film’s locations was inspired by three pre-production road trips from New York to Santa Monica that he embarked on with Khondji, as well as his location manager and line producer: “Mile after mile, the view outside my window and the music from the car stereo synched in unexpected ways to give me my first glimpse into the landscape of Elizabeth’s heart. These trips not only shaped the story of MBN, but the soundtrack as well.” Two songs, “The Greatest” and “Living Proof”, taken from Cat Power’s 2006 album *The Greatest*, provide the aural environment for Café Kylutch in New York City; Otis Redding’s “Try a Little Tenderness” and “Looking Back” by Ruth Brown are interchangeably played in Earnestine & Hazel’s in Memphis; and the Nevada episode is represented by two Ry Cooder compositions, “Ely Nevada” and “Long Ride.” Excluding the original compositions by Cooder and an instrumental piece entitled “Pájaros” by Gustavo Santaolalla, the majority of the soundtrack is notably composed of pre-existing songs. In *Hearing Film: Tracking Identifications in Contemporary Hollywood Film Music*, Anahid Kassabian argues that compiled scores result in “affiliating identifications” that are bound up with “histories forged outside the film scene.”

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62 Wong, “Director’s Commentary.” *My Blueberry Nights* OST (Liner Notes). Wong’s commentary in the liner notes of the original soundtrack features an intimate discussion of his process of compiling music for the film.
63 Wong has interestingly included a harmonic version of Shigeru Umebayashi’s “Yumeji’s Theme”, which is the central piece of music used in *In the Mood for Love*. The version in *My Blueberry Nights*, which is performed by Chikara Tsuzuki, creates an intertextual link that weaves *My Blueberry Nights* into Wong’s filmic universe.
imagery informs the visual look of *My Blueberry Nights* – transporting cultural associations and visual motifs to the film – the music plays an important role in fleshing out Wong’s conception of space through referencing other texts and playing with intersemioticity. For example, a romantic sensibility is evoked in Memphis through the use of Redding’s “Try A Little Tenderness” and Brown’s “Looking Back.” Both songs bring to the film a bluesy world-weariness that complements the narratives embedded within Hopper’s oil paintings and the doomed relationship between Arnie and Sue Lynn. In contrast, Cooder’s compositions for the Nevada scenes have no original context, thereby emphasising the anonymity and loneliness of the desert landscape through which Elizabeth and Leslie travel.

Wong’s concern with using music to foreground place demonstrates a different approach to the musical interludes in his previous films in which songs are often used as an expression of time, such as Shigeru Umebayashi’s “Yumeji’s Theme” in *In the Mood for Love*, or as an evocation of “a purely referential, even interior world” in the style of “California Dreamin’” in * Chungking Express*. In his analysis of *Days of Being Wild*, *Ashes of Time* and *In the Mood for Love*, Nils Crompton argues that these films engender a “temporality of the refrain” – an idea that adapts Adrian Martin’s concept of the “aesthetic of repetition.” However, in *My Blueberry Nights*, Wong presents a variation on the approach to the repetition of musical interludes. Rather than utilising music as an indication of the passage of time and as a means to “disrupt linear narrative formations”, each “refrain” is bound up with the expression of a particular location. This is evinced not only in the main settings of New York, Memphis and Nevada, but also in the film’s driving sequences in which Wong delineates the anonymous travelling spaces of the Nevada desert with both Cooder and Santaolalla’s instrumental compositions. In an extension of Wong’s refusal to utilise recognisable architectural monuments to portray specific places, the music in *My Blueberry Nights* works to represent sites without relying on images that are quintessential to each state. In so doing, Wong sets about constructing his own vocabulary of space that takes its cue from music.

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67 Crompton, p. 56.
In their co-authored book *Sound Tracks: Popular Music, Identity and Place*, John Connell and Chris Gibson explore the interrelationship between music, cultural identities and geographical placement. They write that:

Music, through its actual sounds, and through its ability to represent and inform the nature of space and place, is crucial to the ways in which humans occupy and engage with the material world. Sound is invisible; music cannot be seen. Yet music plays an important role in defining our behaviour in certain locations, creating a mood or atmosphere, eliciting reactions and responses, and reinforcing roles in particular geographical situations.⁶⁸

Although the songs used to represent each location in the film do not, of and by themselves, evoke specific geographical spaces, Wong’s use of repetition reinforces a link that cements the audio-geographical relationship. For example, “The Greatest” is played a total of three times in the first episode’s scenes set in Café Kylutch, reinforcing a connection between the café and the song that exists only within the logic of the film. Indeed, at the end of *My Blueberry Nights*, when the lingering tones of the piano are heard at the opening of “The Greatest”, the viewer instantly intuits that Elizabeth is returning to the café to see Jeremy. Similarly, “Try a Little Tenderness” is repeated on three occasions during separate scenes in Earnestine & Hazel’s, and “Long Ride” is consistently played during Elizabeth and Leslie’s scenes on the road. It could be argued that the narration of the postcards and the lyrics of the accompanying music coalesce to produce the film’s emotional terrain; however, this is too reductive an interpretation, as the music not only adds to the psychological atmosphere, but also establishes a specific environment. In this sense, the film’s audio cues seek to situate the viewer within certain settings.⁶⁹

Indeed, in Ludmila Moreira Macedo de Carvalho’s analysis of music in Wong’s films, she is quick to distinguish Wong’s approach to soundtracks from the traditional tactic of utilising music as “mere ‘accompaniment’ to the image” that functions to create a specific mood.⁷⁰ Specifically, she argues that:

Film music is largely used to provide contextual information for the spectator: in the first moments of a film, whether we hear jazz beats and brass instruments or a smooth waltz accompanied by accordions, we can easily determine if we are to be 'transported' to New York city or a European turn-of-the-century setting. Wong complicates this equation by constantly shifting these codes around, inserting

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⁶⁹ See Hu, “The KTV Aesthetic,” pp. 417-418 and Martinez, p. 35. Hu writes that, “Lyrics are possibly the most distinctive feature of the use of pop songs in film. Because of their linguistic communicative ability they work in a way which is different to the traditional ‘classic’ score, which depends on emotional cues defined by culturally accepted musical grammar…Like a voiceover, lyrics can narrate directly the inner emotions of a character onscreen.” Similarly, Martinez argues that the music in Wong’s films construct “a ‘bubble’, an inner world where music expresses feelings.”
⁷⁰ Carvalho, p. 197.
ambiguity where one would normally expect security and reaffirmation. 71

By positing a slippage between the postcard as a tactile object and the postcard as a cinematic device that blends sound and image, Wong changes the manner in which the links between sound and place work in the film. In much the same way that “California Dreamin’” is used to delineate the space of the Midnight Express in Chungking Express, Wong is less concerned with manufacturing a natural soundscape than one that accords to his own desire for playful repetition, such as the persistent playing of “Try A Little Tenderness” on the jukebox in Earnestine & Hazel’s – an instance in which, to quote Yeh Yueh-yu, “music can alter, dilute, or intensify the spectator’s perceptions. Music is then capable of creating a filmic discourse of its own, depending on the type of listening it asks of spectators. In short, it transforms the cinematic space.” 72 By predominantly rendering the images on the postcards invisible to the film viewer, Wong subverts one of the central functions of the postcard as a portable marker of geography in a visual form to infer geographical movement through music. Moreover, Wong alters the manner in which postcards are implicated in discourses of tourism. As Annelies Moors writes, “Picture postcards are a strong example of the link between visual culture and tourism” that is responsible for “communicating the visual imagery” in a process that binds culture, image and identity with the “production of the nation.” 73 In My Blueberry Nights the connection between postcards and tourism is irrelevant. Although it is convincing to argue that Wong’s understanding of the locations in the film comes from an outsider’s perspective, Elizabeth does not engage with postcard communication through the economy of tourism, but appropriates the postcard within her own intimate economy of desire.

Writing Desire: Epistolary Travels in Longing

Given the contemporary setting and context of My Blueberry Nights, the sending of postcards appears to be a strange mode of correspondence for Elizabeth to use in an age that is predominantly governed by digital communication. 74 In one scene, Arnie observes Elizabeth in the Arcade Restaurant as she writes one of her messages and enquires why she chooses to connect in this way:

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71 Carvalho, p. 205
74 See Naficy, p. 132. Naficy contends that, “In today’s diasporized and technologized world, letter writing is increasingly being supplemented or replaced by the telephone, answering machine, fax, audio and video recording, audio- and videoconferencing, e-mail, and other types of computer connectivity and interactivity.”
ARNIE: Writing to your boyfriend?

ELIZABETH: No, just someone I know.

ARNIE: Why not pick up the phone?

ELIZABETH: Some things are better on paper.

Although Elizabeth’s response does not shed much light on her reasons for sending Jeremy postcards, Wong offers his own perspective on this form of non-immediate connection:

She has problems, but she [doesn’t] want to explain to people that she knows. She can only speak to strangers and Jeremy…is like a person that she can speak to so even during the trip she keeps sending postcards to Jeremy. People ask me ‘Why postcards? Why not emails or phone calls?’ I think for her she’s not looking for communication, she [doesn’t] need feedback. She just wants to express herself. She [doesn’t] expect a response.75

Wong’s idea of communicating with no expectation of a response can be interpreted as a reversal of Ackbar Abbas’s conception of “proximity without reciprocity” in Wong’s early films set in Hong Kong in which “we can be physically close to a situation or to a person without there being any intimacy or knowledge.”76 In contrast to the inescapable close proximity captured in Wong’s Hong Kong films in which high-density living forces strangers to share intimate spaces, Elizabeth’s postcards create intimacy through distance.77 Furthermore, the postcard intensifies a sense of closeness through its materiality in that it is a physical memento that can be held, touched and kept, and is therefore quite distinct from technologically advanced methods of communication that do not possess the same tactility. Accordingly, Elizabeth’s postcards allow for a tangible connection that joins her to Jeremy despite the geographical distance.

Notably it is, as Wong highlights, the postcards that reveal the stages of Elizabeth’s journey, both emotional and physical. Offering the viewer a “glimpse into the landscape of Elizabeth’s heart”, the postcards narrate that which otherwise remains unsaid in the film.78 Conversely, for Jeremy, the postcards represent a stall in communication – a fact that is humorously conveyed in a scene in which he calls every listed bar and grill located in Memphis in an attempt to find Elizabeth. Although it appears that he eventually finds her, it turns out to be a case of mistaken identity:

77 For a broad discussion of the role of letter-writing and distant correspondence in Wong’s cinema, see Blair Miller, “…Simply Because You’re Near Me: Love, Chungking Express and In the Mood for Love.” Cineaction 62 (2003), pp. 64-65.
78 Wong, “Director’s Commentary.” My Blueberry Nights OST (Liner Notes).
Good God, it’s Jeremy! Yeah, it’s me! I never thought I’d hear your voice again. Well, you see I got your postcard and this sounds ridiculous but, well I traced every Memphis bar and grill. There must be at least ninety. I know it’s crazy and I just wanted to say thanks for staying in touch. I miss you. I miss your company. I never thought I’d hear from you again! It’s not really you, is it? No, I know you don’t know me. But your name’s Elizabeth. Well, I just… wanted to say hello really, and I wanted to speak to my friend. Yeah. No no, I don’t want to order any fried chicken. Thanks. Thanks for listening. Bye.

Jeremy’s method of utilising the telephone to bridge the gap in their geographical distance is consistently frustrated. Although, as Naficy points out, “writing and receiving letters are characterized by distance, waiting, and delay, telephoning is instantaneous and simultaneous. Its live ontology obliterates spatial and temporal discontinuity”, the telephone is rendered a redundant object in the film that increases distance, as opposed to collapsing it.79 This fact is particularly emphasised through voice-over when Jeremy eventually adopts Elizabeth’s mode of communication, even though none of his postcards find her: “I began receiving postcards from her regularly. Instead of calling strangers, I decided to change my strategy. It was tiring writing the same words over and over again. But all worth it if only one of them reached her.”

Figure 5.9. Writing postcards, inscribing desire (My Blueberry Nights)

Significantly, the failure of the postcards to connect Jeremy to Elizabeth transforms the cards that he receives from her into souvenirs of her absent presence. Furthering Wong’s conception of love as predicated on absence, the postcards become objects of displacement that trace the geographical distance between Jeremy and Elizabeth. Naficy evocatively illuminates this particular characteristic of epistolarity:

Exile and epistolarity are constitutively linked because both are driven by distance, separation, absence, and loss and by the desire to bridge the multiple gaps. Whatever form the epistle takes, whether a letter, a note scribbled on a napkin, a

79 Naficy, p. 133.
telephone conversation, a video, or an e-mail message, it becomes, in the words of Linda Kauffman, a ‘metonymic and a metaphoric displacement of desire’…the desire to be with an other and to reimagine an elsewhere and other times.\textsuperscript{80}

He continues, “Epistolarity is constitutionally a discourse of desire, for it mediates between distanced but desiring subjects.”\textsuperscript{81} In \textit{My Blueberry Nights}, the “discourse of desire” engendered by postcard communication is expressed through one of the film’s musical sequences in which Cassandra Wilson’s cover of Neil Young’s “Harvest Moon” performs the role of a non-diegetic love letter. Wong’s choice to play a cover of “Harvest Moon”, as opposed to Young’s original, contemporises the song, while also alluding to the process of “covering” that is bound up with Wong’s cinematic vision of America.\textsuperscript{82} In much the same way that the visuals of \textit{My Blueberry Nights} can be interpreted as a contemporary cover of the imagery in Hopper’s paintings, the use of a cover song engages with Wong’s pastiche construction of the United States; however, the music also bespeaks the characters’ desires and longings.

Demonstrating the ability of music – much like a postcard and Elizabeth’s voice-over narration – to break down, as well as to reinforce, spatial distance, the “Harvest Moon” sequence begins with a shot of a stack of Jeremy’s postcards that, failing to reach Elizabeth, have been returned to Café Kylutch. The sequence then shifts to a series of views that follow Elizabeth’s movements before she arrives in Nevada. First pictured writing on a postcard in an unknown diner, she is then seen scribbling on yet another postcard in a train station. The sequence then transitions back to New York and offers a glimpse of the neon-saturated imagery of the Arizona postcard, followed by a shot of Jeremy reading a postcard from Nevada. This scene is intercut with a series of kinetic images that appear to be filmed through the window of a moving train, thereby further inscribing the act of travel into the rhythm of the sequence. Moreover, the implied movement of their correspondence intimates the traversal of their postcards, introducing movement into the still image of the postcard. The sequence itself establishes a clever interplay between the role of the postcard as a physical object within the diegesis of the film and its larger role as a cinematic device, whereby Wong’s cinematic postcards are imagined through the formal enactment of passage. In this instance, travel is imagined in terms of connection, and the shared aural environment serves to link Elizabeth and Jeremy within a space of longing that transcends the separate spaces that they individually inhabit. The lyrical content of “Harvest Moon”

\textsuperscript{80} Naficy, p. 101.
\textsuperscript{81} Naficy, p. 111.
not only suggests a romantic connection between Elizabeth and Jeremy, but also enlivens the distance between them:

Come a little bit closer  
Hear what I have to say  
Just like children sleeping  
We could dream this night away.  

But there's a full moon rising  
Let's go dancing in the light  
We know where the music's playing  
Let's go out and feel the night.  

Because I'm still in love with you  
I want to see you dance tonight  
Because I'm still in love with you  
On this harvest moon…  

While I have argued that the film’s soundtrack works centrally to send cinematic postcards that map Elizabeth’s journey in the film, this is a moment in which the lyrics also convey the emotional intent behind the postcards messages when the unspoken emotions of Elizabeth and Jeremy’s distant romance are expressed in the yearning lyrics of “Harvest Moon.” The song, which is played only during this scene in the film, represents a space of desire – a spatial contour that is a site of absence and longing and is symbolised by the travelling object of the postcard. In so doing, the “Harvest Moon” sequence establishes an environment in which unspoken sentiments and desires are articulated outside the film action. Residing within an unmappable space that functions as a void of desire that exists between the characters, the cinematic postcard traces the distance between Elizabeth and Jeremy.  

Although the stack of postcards on the floor of Café Kylutch at the beginning of this sequence represents the geographical gap between Elizabeth and Jeremy, it also gestures towards the idea of returning as a theme in the film. On the most simplistic level, the act of returning is not usually associated with postcard correspondence, as the general design for the textual component allows space for the addressee, but not the addressor. The small key stamp that Jeremy places on the top left-hand corner of his postcards, which anchors them to the site of the café, alters the form of this mode of correspondence and removes the ability for his postcards to circulate freely in the postal system or to become dead letters. Here, movement and correspondence converge on the motif of return.
Taking the Longest Way to Cross the Street: Travel and Distance

JEREMY: When I was little my mum used to take me to the park on the weekends. She said if ever I got lost I had to stay in one place so she'd find me.

ELIZABETH: Does that work?

JEREMY: Not really. She got lost once looking for me.

In the press kit that accompanied the film’s original release, Wong made the following statement, “I wanted to see how certain themes would translate in a different culture and landscape…2046 was about time, My Blueberry Nights is about distance.” While I have focused on the postcards as objects that both traverse and mark distance, a number of critics and scholars have interrogated the theme of distance in My Blueberry Nights through the movement of Elizabeth’s journey and have in turn concluded that the film falls under the road movie genre. One notable example is Australian film critic David Stratton, who stated in his weekly film review show with Margaret Pomeranz in 2008, that the film is “seemingly inspired by Wim Wenders with its Ry Cooder score and its road trip format.” Conversely, Jan Lumholdt claimed in a short review of the Cannes Film Festival in 2007, where the film had its premiere screening, that My Blueberry Night is not a road movie, but a film that focuses on “languid people in bars, neon-lit atmospheric ones; a trait Wong has come to perfect quite well over the years.” To my mind, the film carves out its own space that resides between Stratton and Lumholdt’s individual hypotheses. Although it is easy to categorise My Blueberry Nights as a road movie – principally by drawing on the scenes that follow Elizabeth and Leslie’s journey through Nevada – it does not conform to the conventions of the genre. However, the film does not reside merely within bars; rather, Wong uses the space of the road to further his exploration of cultural images of America, which is itself a distancing from the spaces that he has previously worked within. In My Blueberry Nights, he takes the road movie genre as a point of departure and re-inscribes the road as a space that does not entail escape, but is paved for return.

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83 Wong quoted in Totario, “My Blueberry Nights: Love Drives Full Circle.”
On the Road

In *Atlas of Emotion: Journeys in Art, Architecture, and Film*, Bruno defines voyage as “circular: a false move in which the point of return circles back to the point of departure. The beginning and the end are the same destinations.” Notably, before Elizabeth leaves New York, she passes by the apartment building of her ex-boyfriend and, from the street below, watches him and his new partner embracing through his apartment window. The framing of the couple in the soft light of the window juxtaposed to Elizabeth shadowed in darkness on the lonely street below has distinct resonances of Hopper’s visual style. It is at this moment that she is inspired to leave the city: “How do you say goodbye to someone you can’t imagine living without? I didn’t say goodbye. I didn’t say anything. I just walked away. At the end of that night, I decided to take the longest way to cross the street.” This voice-over marks the beginning of Elizabeth’s journey, which will span 300 days and will see her travel from New York to Tennessee to Nevada and back to New York. Elizabeth’s decision to take the longest way to cross the street indicates that her journey has a final destination and is not merely a trip into the unknown. This fact already distinguishes *My Blueberry Nights* from the filmic conventions of the escapist model of the road movie genre, thereby resonating with Bruno’s conception of a circular voyage.

This is not, however, the only feature that distinguishes the film from the genre in which many critics have been so quick to situate it. In the introduction to *The Road Movie Book*, Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark draw on the influential work of Tim Corrigan to propose four central features of road movies. First, the road movie “responds to the breakdown of the family unit…and so witnesses the resulting destabilization of male subjectivity and masculine empowerment.” The second feature involves the trajectory of events in the road movie whereby obstacles act upon the characters. For example, the road rage of other road users, running out of gas, a run-in with the law and a personality clash between the characters within the one vehicle have appeared as obstacles in road movies. The third element is that the characters identify “with the means of mechanized transport” to the extent that the automobile is either given a subjective identity or a spiritual symbolism. The final feature, which is linked to the first aspect, is that road movies project “a male escapist fantasy” that lacks the presence of women. Furthermore,

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89 Cohan and Hark, p. 2.
90 Cohan and Hark, p. 2.
Cohan and Hark assert that road movies are “a productive ground for exploring issues of nationhood, economics, sexuality, gender, class, and race.”

On this basis, it is difficult to place *My Blueberry Nights* in the road movie genre, as the codes that Cohan and Hark set out in their analysis are not evident in the film. *My Blueberry Nights* does not conform to these cinematic characteristics nor does it articulate any underlying values or contextual themes relating to gender, economics, class or American society. Similarly, the primal urge to explore the landscape is not given precedence in the film. Elizabeth’s road trip is not motivated by a desire to travel and make new discoveries, as she knows that the journey will eventually lead her back to Jeremy in New York. Consequently, in *My Blueberry Nights* there is neither a particular destination away from “home”, nor a social motivation to go on a journey – two motifs that appear in many road movies. Wong’s film is not concerned with the politics of freedom and oppression that arise in road movie narratives; and, most significantly, travel by car, the quintessential plot device in road movies, does not take place until the third episode when Elizabeth and Leslie drive through the Nevada desert. Wong’s overt eschewal of the conventions of the road movie genre that have been formalised in film theory is significantly connected to the fact that they fall under ideological concerns, rather than aesthetic interests. In *My Blueberry Nights*, it is the image of the road movie, as opposed to the ideological content, that Wong is focused on through his cinematic framing of the road.

Part of the mythology of road movies is imagined through the specific settings which I have already identified in Hopper’s paintings and which have been incorporated into *My Blueberry Nights*. Diners, seedy bars, petrol stations and endless roadscapes consistently appear in films of the genre to create a portrait of America. This can be seen in American cinema as diverse as Arthur Penn’s *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), Gus Van Sant’s *My Own Private Idaho* (1990) and David Lynch’s *The Straight Story* (1999). The effect of the reappearance of locations, according to Ron Eyerman and Orvar Löfgren, is that:

…the road movie often becomes a piece of Americana, a condensed version of something represented as typically American…Here America is frozen in its image, a specific form of freedom and adventure, of taste and distaste, a timeless landscape with neither significant past nor future.

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92 Cohan and Hark, p. 12. Two important examples of road movies that deal with ideological issues are Dennis Hopper’s *Easy Rider* and Ridley Scott’s *Thelma and Louise*. *Easy Rider* utilises the road as a space of transgression and rebellion against the moral conservatism of the 1960s. *Thelma and Louise* updates the genre by subverting masculine claims to the open road, while freeing women from the domestic realm and feminine roles. Within each film, the landscape and the road represent a space where problems that are too taboo to be addressed within society can be explored. Both journeys, which begin as an escape, lead to self-discovery against the panoramic backdrop of highway landscapes and county towns.

93 Eyerman and Löfgren, p. 68.
By maintaining the locations that dot the itineraries of road movies but bypassing the traditional conventions associated with the genre, Wong fractures the “timeless landscape” and replaces unknown adventure with yet another “cover.” It is perhaps no coincidence that Eyerman and Löfgren’s language recalls that which I have previously invoked to describe postcards. The condensed and frozen image of the road movie ties in with the constellation of images used to frame Wong’s view of America, integrating Hopper, road movie aesthetics and postcard iconography.

Figure 5.10. Gesturing towards the road movie genre: Leslie’s Jaguar (My Blueberry Nights)

The minimal role of automobiles in the film is particularly interesting in this context. Elizabeth spends much of her time working non-stop to save money to buy a car; however, when she finally purchases a car of her own in Las Vegas, it signals the end of her journey when she drives it back to New York. Having said that, the film includes a pivotal scene in which Leslie proposes to Elizabeth that if she loses her money playing poker, she will give Elizabeth her Jaguar as compensation. While Elizabeth is deciding whether to make the deal, the camera seductively glides over the body of the car, simultaneously evoking the visual language of both the road movie genre and of advertising in an extremely conscious way. The eroticisation of the car’s contours and shiny surfaces, which reflect the gaudy neon lights of the Hotel Nevada, creates a brief moment of automobile lust that suggests that Wong is invoking the spiritual and sublime identification with the automobile often projected in road movies. On the other hand, the symbolic attention given to the car within this scene is fleeting. The importance of Leslie’s Jaguar is connected to her father, and, in this sense, it functions as a memento mori of his absent presence. Despite this significance, the car does not play a major role in the film’s narrative and appears almost as an afterthought – a belated and unconvincing signifier of the genre. Instead of a sustained interest in the road movie genre, the viewer receives a postcard of
the road movie – a snapshot of a film genre that has distilled its main elements and conceits. In this sense, the fleeting presence of road travel in the film ties in with Wong’s exploration of visual America.94

Interestingly, the scene that opens My Blueberry Nights is not of a car but, rather, features the shot of an above-ground train cutting through the cityscape, creating an odd continuation of Wong’s previous film, 2046, as though the imaginary train travelling from 2046 has been displaced into contemporary New York. Although the shot could be interpreted as yet another self-referential moment in Wong’s cinema, it also suggests the act of travel in a highly conscious way. This image of the train is repeated later in the film; however, the repetition of the kinetic shot functions more to allude to travel in an abstract sense than to actually facilitate movement. In much the same way that the train in 2046 appears to be caught in a continuous loop that strangely evokes stasis, the juxtaposition in the same scene of the image of the train and of Jeremy in Café Kylutch underlines Jeremy’s lack of movement within the diegesis of the film, as well as his confinement to the space of the café. However, the film’s general disinterest in picturing movement is not confined to the representation of Jeremy. Notably, it is not until the third episode of the film in Nevada that Wong chooses to film Elizabeth in the process of journeying. Prior to this, the distance that she has travelled is revealed through intertitles that record the distance travelled and the number of days that have passed since she commenced her journey. The dialogue reveals that Elizabeth has travelled by bus to get to both Memphis and Nevada, but this time on the road is excluded from her journey as it is represented on-screen. Wong chooses to privilege the metaphorical travel of Elizabeth’s personal journey through the narrativisation of her postcards that bespeak her eventual return to both New York and Jeremy.

The Ultimate Return

In David Laderman’s analysis of road movies, he proposes that the road is not only “an essential element of American society and history, but also a universal symbol of the course of life, the movement of desire, and the lure of both freedom and destiny.95 The cyclical movement of desire that sees Elizabeth return to New York at the end of the film to begin a relationship with Jeremy falls within a trajectory of longing that is promised every time Jeremy sets a place for Elizabeth at the counter in Café Kylutch. The ritual of preparing for Elizabeth’s arrival sets in motion a rehearsal of her return. For Jeremy, the hope of

94 Brereton, p. 101. While directors in various geographical contexts have adapted road movie conventions, road movies originated in the American cultural landscape of the sprawling frontier portrayed in early Hollywood westerns.
95 Laderman, p. 2.
Elizabeth’s arrival is encapsulated in the fact that he continues to serve blueberry pie while she is away, even though she is seemingly the only one who consumes it. In this context, the blueberry pie, which I have previously situated within the film’s hyperreal aesthetic, is bound up with ideas of romantic return, operating as an object that encapsulates the possibility of the romantic narrative of “happily ever after.”

The focus on the blueberry pie at the beginning of the film, as well as its inclusion in the title, establishes it as an important symbolic and narrative device. To begin with, Jeremy employs blueberry pie as a metaphor for the impossibility of finding a reason for everything when it comes to matters of the heart:

**ELIZABETH:** Guess I’m just looking for a reason.

**JEREMY:** Well, from my observations, sometimes it’s better off not knowing and other times there’s no reason to be found.

**ELIZABETH:** Everything has a reason.

**JEREMY:** It’s like these pies and cakes. At the end of every night the cheesecake and the apple pie are always completely gone. The peach cobbler and the chocolate mousse cake are nearly finished. But there’s always a whole blueberry pie left untouched.

**ELIZABETH:** So what’s wrong with the blueberry pie?

**JEREMY:** There’s nothing wrong with the blueberry pie. It’s just people make other choices. You can’t blame the blueberry pie. It’s just no-one wants it.

[Jeremy gestures to throw the pie in the rubbish bin]

**ELIZABETH:** Wait! I want a piece.

The scene that follows this verbal exchange captures Elizabeth very carefully and deliberately taking a small forkful of pie and dipping it into the large scoop of ice cream on her plate before placing it in her mouth. After she proclaims that the pie is “not bad”, the colourful and liquid close-ups of ice cream running through valleys of pie appear again. So begins a small ritual that sees Elizabeth return to the café for her slice of blueberry pie before the café closes.

On one level, the blueberry pie symbolises missed opportunities in love and how people can be overlooked. In this respect, it echoes Cop 633’s lament in *Chungking Express* after his girlfriend has left him for another man: “Maybe she does have lots of choices.” From Elizabeth’s perspective, her choice to have a slice of pie arises from a sense of melancholic identification, as the fate of the pie echoes her predicament of being left on
the shelf by her boyfriend. On the other hand, as it is Jeremy that opens Elizabeth up to the “romantic possibilities” of indulging in a piece of pie, it is also another take on Wong’s recurrent metaphor of food and love whereby food is a substitute for romance. During her last visit to the café before she embarks on her journey, Elizabeth gorges herself on pie before falling asleep with her head on the counter bench. The intense grief she feels at being left for another woman is partly alleviated by indulging in pie. She later writes on a postcard to Jeremy, “If I was an addict, I’d choose blueberry pie as my sobriety chip.” However, blueberry pie is also a distinctly American dessert that Wong has utilised as a signifier of the setting, and taking this pie as a central motif not only resonates with the American palette, but also alters the very palette of his cinematic approach to romance. The close-up shot of the pie that reappears throughout the film emphasises that it is ideas of Americana that Wong is placing under the microscope for cinematic examination. Notably, it is not only the pie that receives this treatment, but also the romantic union that the pie symbolises.

The highly composed and dramatic kiss between Elizabeth and Jeremy which concludes the film and which is intercut with the blueberry pie image is crucially a reappearance of the earlier scene in which Elizabeth falls asleep in the café. In this first scene, the camera frames her head resting on the counter in an extreme close-up, and a dot of whipped cream can be seen on her upper lip. As Jeremy motions to lean over her, the camera cuts back to the close-up of Elizabeth’s face as it becomes momentarily concealed by a shadow. When the shadow is lifted, the whipped cream has been removed from her lips, intimating that Jeremy has surreptitiously kissed her. This first whisper of a kiss ties in with Wong’s preference to enshroud intimate encounters in mystery and to withhold a clear view of the romantic moment. In contrast, the final kiss repeats the framing of
Elizabeth’s head on the counter with Jeremy leaning over to kiss her; however, the shot is taken from an aerial perspective that narrows the field of view and seemingly magnifies their embrace. There is a sense of awkwardness and a certain discomfort bound up with this shot, which is realised through the close-up framing, the strange positioning of the characters’ bodies and the return of the blueberry pie close-up. In filming the kiss in this manner, Wong crosses the line of intimacy, revealing too much and taking the metaphor too far. Elizabeth’s final line, which reflects on crossing the street, seemingly compounds the clichéd and saccharine element of the denouement.

It could be convincingly argued that many of the negative accounts of the film were in response to this ending and its blatant and unsubtle romanticism. However, the intense framing of this final scene implicitly draws attention to the construction of *My Blueberry Nights*, suggesting that Wong is attempting to fashion an homage to the conventions of the romance genre. Writing on this genre, Diana Holmes argues that:

> The basic narrative structure of romance – on which innumerable variations have been played – is that of meeting, negotiation of a series of obstacles both internal (psychological and emotional) and external (social and material), leading to a dénouement that may be happy (the couple united) or unhappy (separation and loss).97

Certainly, as it is represented in mainstream American cinema, the romance narrative of *My Blueberry Nights* tends to lead to the former conclusion of a happy denouement – a fact that I believe Wong is highly aware of in his construction of the film’s final scene. As Rob Lapsley and Michael Westlake contend, “Romantic films with their basic structure of boy meets girl, boy loses girl, boy gets girl…testify to the saturation of contemporary culture with the myth of romance.”98 With Wong being completely self-aware of its conventionality, the final moment works within the logic of the film as an exploration or “covering” of cultural narratives of America. This idea converges with the replaying of Jones’s song “The Story”, which works to bring the viewer back to the first moments of the film, therefore returning not only to the visual images of the pie, but also the audio environment and the concept of telling stories. Knowingly rehearsing a view of popular romance, this final scene in particular equates union with plain old romance, taking its cue from fairy tales. As Holmes writes, “Fairy tales, their origins lost in time, mutate as they

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travel through centuries and shifting cultures, but continue to make the discovery of mutual, passionate love the condition of living happily ever after.” Holmes is outlining in her explication of the enduring nature of romance narratives is essentially a return. As she later expands, “Old legends from the oral tradition were taken up and reworked to fit different cultures and different historical moments, so that the same story was told in numerous versions. Jones sings that the story “has been told before” and Wong cleverly acknowledges this fact by appropriating, blending and juxtaposing different elements to construct his own version of romance in an American mould.

Indeed, by utilising America as its setting, *My Blueberry Nights* reverses the model of desire that viewers have come to expect from Wong’s films. Rather than following characters who share the same enclosed and claustrophobic spaces of the city and who, despite this proximity, are unable to connect, the vast American landscape surprisingly brings people together. This reversal posits America as a strange space of resistance to the Wong Kar-wai approach to love that Robert M. Payne has previously argued entails:

…refusing to give his films happily-ever-after endings, Wong encourages his characters—and his audience—to re-think their individual identities and thus become better equipped to seek out more satisfying relationships in both the personal and interpersonal realms. So, although unrequited love acts as a motivating issue throughout his canon, Wong appears to be as critical of romance movies as he is of action films.

*My Blueberry Nights* presents an entirely different perspective. The route of Elizabeth’s road trip takes a circular form as it moves from north east to south to west and then back to the north-east coast of America. Given that the final destination of the journey is a space of happiness and reciprocated desire, the travel motif in Wong’s cinema reaches an alternative conclusion in the film. By taking Elizabeth on the road in a story with a linear structure and narrative closure, *My Blueberry Nights* is Wong’s most conventional approach to storytelling on film. Indeed, the final kiss between Elizabeth and Jeremy signals a departure from Wong’s previous films that end with romantic uncertainty. The journey for love so often thwarted in Wong’s cinematic oeuvre is finally fulfilled in the American context. This is simply because it needs to be realised in this fashion. Indeed, if the interest of this film is with images of America, then the Hollywood kiss, signalling closure, is by necessity the final cinematic image Wong sends by means of his postcard aesthetic. As Wong commented in an interview in 1997, “It’s just like in the film when the girl kept writing

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99 Holmes, p. 5
100 Holmes, pp. 5-6.
postcards to her friend – this is me writing postcards to American cinema.” Here, return is not just a narrative conceit that witnesses Elizabeth’s journey back to New York, but a formal return to the romances of Hollywood and an exploration of the cultural space of America.

102 Clarence Tsui, “From a Distance.” South China Morning Post, 30 December 2007, sec. 2, p. 1.
Conclusion

A Final Passage Through Emotion and Desire

[The] script is only a part of the process – it’s only the foundations. It is only a blueprint…If a script is good enough then you should be a writer – make it into a novel. Cinema has certain qualities and it’s the image. And sometimes this image [has] its own breathing or tempo. It has to linger…

- Wong Kar-wai

The road of cinema is the road of emotions. It cannot follow the logical progression of an essay. The first impact, the language of the image, is emotion.

- Francesco Rosi

The final destination of the filmic journey through Wong Kar-wai’s oeuvre that I wish to take in this thesis is a short case study of a commercial for a Christian Dior fragrance that illuminates and extends the ideas put forward in this project. Given that the chapters preceding this conclusion focus on Wong’s feature film work, offering a summation by way of examining a television commercial he directed for the Dior perfume Midnight Poison, which originally aired in 2007, may at first blush appear somewhat odd or tangential. However, my interest in exploring a shorter work by Wong is in fact a return – to appropriate a theme from My Blueberry Nights (2007) – to the introductory chapter of this thesis and its reflection on Wong’s short film, “I travelled 9,000 km to give it to you” from

1 “Australian Interview with Wong Kar-wai Part 6 of 6 (online video).” You Tube, 14 July 2007 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ISU5l7u0vce4&feature=related> (accessed 8 February 2010).
3 Wong’s skill in illuminating the rhythms and gestures of longing, the choreography of yearning and the emotions behind the subtest glance, and subsequently transforming these elements into a visual language of desire, has unsurprisingly been an attractive quality for the advertising industry. Certainly, the increasingly slippery boundaries between filmmaking, television media and advertising have been instrumental in the migration of Wong’s filmic vision beyond the cinematic frame. Having directed a music video for DJ Shadow’s song “Six Days” and television commercials for companies such as BMW, Lacoste, Motorola and Philips, Wong’s style and aesthetic have transferred to smaller projects and advertising media. For an in-depth discussion of Wong’s diversification into advertising, music videos and short films, see Stephen Teo, Wong Kar-wai (London: BFI, 2005), pp. 153-159. For a full list of Wong’s commercial projects, see “Jettone Plus.” Jettone + <http://www.jettoneplus.com/> (accessed 20 August 2011). Jettone + is a division of Wong’s production company Jettone Films, which specialises in television commercials, music videos, print advertisements and film productions for global companies.
To Each His Own Cinema (2007). In deliberately mirroring an art house production and a commercial advertisement, and articulating yet another small fragment of Wong’s oeuvre, I wish to draw attention again to the manner in which emotion and desire are at the heart of the ontology of the imagery in Wong’s work.

Opulently filmed and saturated in the blue tones of a full moon, Wong’s advertisement for Midnight Poison stars French actress Eva Green and features a narrative that captures her as she rushes to arrive at an aristocratic ball. First pictured attending to her appearance in front of a series of mirrors, the camera follows her journey down spiralling staircases, through an underground train station and eventually to the mansion where the ball is being held. Her movements are registered by the shifting hands of a clock that counts down to midnight, just prior to which she arrives on the balcony overlooking the ball and then swings on a rope over the ball attendees who are watching from below. In a similar fashion to “I travelled 9,000 km to give it to you”, Wong infuses the one-minute time frame of his commercial with sensuality. The advertisement’s constant focus on Green’s body and her somatic expressions, such as the act of dressing, her consciousness of the tactility of her midnight blue gown and the manner in which she touches her body, are cleverly reflected in the sweeping pans of the camera in such a manner that Wong merges bodily movement and camera mobility. In this sense, the light caress of the perfume on her skin is echoed in the kinetics of the cinematography, thereby aligning scent and motion.

Although Wong’s Midnight Poison advertisement could be easily dismissed as yet another commercial that capitalises on the reputation of both its director and star actress to simply sell a product and a brand, I propose to take seriously Wong’s interest in scent and image in this advertisement. Intriguingly, Wong’s conscious intertwining of cinematic visuality and scent is alluded to in his description of “I travelled 9,000 km to give it to you”, which I originally quoted in the introductory chapter: “Cinema can be the citric scent of a peeled orange, the touch of warm skin through a silk stocking; or simply a darkened space bathed in anticipation.” What is particularly resonant for the purposes of my conclusion is the strange alignment of the sense of smell with a medium that tends to enliven only sight

5 See Mary Jane Amato and J. Greenberg, “Swimming in Winter: An Interview with Wong Kar-wai.” Kabinet 5 (2000) <http://www.kabinet.org/magazine/issue5/wkw1.htm> (accessed 17 July 2006). The concept of branding to Wong’s cinema was hinted at as early as 2000 when Amato and Greenberg began an interview with Wong by reflecting on the manner in which he has created an entirely new genre: “…the Wong Kar-Wai film. In an industry where imitation is considered the sincerest form of profitability, Wong Kar-Wai’s devotion to his own, singular vision [is] bold and exhilarating.”
and sound. Certainly, Wong’s idea of cinema as scent lays a perfect foundation for creating a narrative aimed specifically at selling a fragrance and exemplifies a shared interest in Wong’s oeuvre to utilise moving images in evocative and emotive ways. In this sense, the Midnight Poison commercial shares with Wong’s feature-length films an interest in portraying that which would normally elude representation and be therefore defined as ephemeral or ineffable.

![Figure 6.1. Representing scent (Midnight Poison commercial)](image)

In the same manner that camera mobility is used within the narratives of his films to construct intimate spaces of emotion, Wong utilises movement in his advertisement to evoke the experience of spraying oneself with the perfume, culminating in the final hedonistic moment when Green swings from the balcony. This descent is hinted at earlier in the commercial with the disorientating aerial perspective used to film the spiral staircase, aligning the ephemeral mist of perfume on the skin with the frisson of an adrenaline rush. Significantly, the commercial does not feature an actual shot of Green spraying the perfume onto her body; rather, it is poetically alluded to through the camerawork. Before Green propels herself from the balcony, the camera focuses on a crystal orb suspended from the ceiling, which also functions as a digital clock that projects the seconds leading up to midnight, at which time the orb shatters into fragments. Following Green’s leap from the balcony, the final moments of the commercial focus on her as the crystal fragments of the orb gracefully fall around her. Arguably, in this instance Wong is attempting to convey the sensation of droplets of perfume falling on her skin – an impression emphasised throughout the commercial by means of the camera tracing the curves of Green’s figure and reinforced by the crystal droplets embedded in the fabric of her dress.
Furthermore, both Wong’s feature-length films and commercial work gesture towards visual sites for the exploration of desire. Certainly, the advertising medium itself is bound up with the generation of desire in such a manner that it replicates the theme of longing that runs through Wong’s cinema. However, in the Midnight Poison commercial, desire appears to transcend the actual object being promoted and the advertisement enacts the representation of desire as one that is spatially imagined, dwelling within recesses and minute details. On one level, the Midnight Poison commercial explicitly conjures up the repertoire of images associated with Wong’s cinema, and is particularly reminiscent of 2046 (2004) with the prevalence of mirrored surfaces used to reflect Green’s seductive performance, the presence of clocks that record the passing of time and the shot of a high-speed train zooming through the underground. Yet the Midnight Poison advertisement possesses other subtle references to 2046 beyond the inclusion of clocks and trains with its labyrinthine architectural passages, deep colour saturation, the eroticisation of the female form and, most intriguingly, its utilisation of Green’s costume as a visual theme that is reflected in the architecture and décor. Taking a cue from the design of the perfume bottle, Wong subtly sews the details of this object into the visual frames of the commercial. Indeed, Green’s midnight blue dress bears an unmistakable likeness to the design of the bottle for the Dior perfume, which is revealed at the conclusion of the commercial. The textured gathers and folds of the dress replicate not only the shape and silhouette of the perfume bottle, but also the circular staircases filmed in the advertisement and the colour scheme, thereby extending Wong’s attention to structuring the details within his mise en scène to design an all-encompassing architecture.

Figure 6.2. Fragments of time (Midnight Poison commercial)
The use of space and architecture is significant as, through the mist of perfume, Wong represents the feeling or the sensation of wearing Midnight Dior as an emotive and erotic journey, thereby integrating his own cinematic vision that utilises states of feeling, movement and space into the trajectory of capitalist desire engendered by advertising. Wearing the perfume enacts a mode of travel that, similar to Wong’s conception of desire in his cinema, involves movement, thus taking Green through various passages and routes before reaching her destination and the climax of the commercial. The soundtrack for the advertisement is also crucial to marking her journey. However, while Wong employs the image to delineate emotion, he characteristically strips the music of affective intent to use it as another frame for the visual architecture of the narrative. Indeed, the lyrical content of the excerpt from Muse’s “Space Dementia” that is used as the audio environment does not particularly correlate with the commercial’s narrative:

   Height is the one for me
   It gives me all I need
   And helps me coexist
   With the chill.

   You make me sick…?

Rather, what Muse’s song establishes is a mood that punctuates the movements of the camera, further locating meaning within the visual as opposed to the sonic. This is an interesting departure from many other perfume advertisements which, featuring little to no dialogue, use music to narrate their affective tenor. Wong’s focus on sound as a method of illuminating the visual is a deepening of his creation of an aural environment in film – a mode that integrates music into the architecture of cinema. Moreover, a reading of the Midnight Poison commercial underlines the thematic, aesthetic and sonic intersections between the sensibilities of Wong’s feature-length films and his shorter works – an area that could certainly be enhanced with further scholarly attention. The Midnight Poison commercial highlights the need to set up models that critically consider the visual intricacies and intimate themes of Wong’s work as a collective – undertaking new voyages that follow paths that highlight the embedded contours of emotion visually woven into both Wong’s films and his shorter works.

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7 See Muse, *Origin of Symmetry* (CD Liner Notes), Mushroom Records, 2001. There is some conjecture as to the first word uttered by Muse’s lead singer and lyricist, Matt Bellamy in “Space Dementia.” Although it sounds as though he is saying “H 8”, which is arguably an act of appropriating the shorthand slang for the word “hate”, the liner notes for the song booklet accompanying the *Origin of Symmetry* compact disc state that he is using the word “height.”
The final heightened moment of the Midnight Poison advertisement notably features an act of flight – a motif subtly embedded within Wong’s cinema to create a visual language used to encompass not only travel, but also desire and the shifts of emotion. It is therefore fitting to conclude with this as the final image or impression of this thesis; however, I wish to further consider the metaphor and finish with a piece of text that influenced Wong and also evokes flight. In the final part of the novella “Intersection”, the literary work that provided Wong with the inspiration for *In the Mood for Love* (2000), writer Liu Yichang describes a moment that resonates with the themes of the films explored in this thesis:

> When Chunyu Bai returned to reality from his dream world, morning had broken. He blinked, got up, and walked to the window for a breath of fresh air; the morning sun had driven the darkness away. There was a drying rack outside the window; a sparrow flew from afar and perched on the rack. After a short while, another sparrow flew from afar and perched on the rack. One bird looked at the other and vice versa. Then both birds took off, one towards the east, the other towards the west.8

This brief instance of convergence and reciprocation, of reality and dream, of travel and flight and of poetically capturing the minutiae of existence bespeaks an affective geography that is sensitive to the manner in which emotions inhere within the physical environment. In Wong’s cinema, just as in Liu’s novella, we bear witness to the dissipating traces of private narratives dwelling within the interstices of desire and the hollows of memory. But unlike Liu’s text, Wong’s approach to these themes is given a cinematic quality that draws focus to and reinforces the affective textures of the filmic image. Indeed, Wong’s comment, which is cited at the beginning of this conclusion, emphasises that film and text cannot be simply collapsed into the one medium but, like the two birds in Liu’s novella, can meet and diverge. By rehearsing acts of travelling and intersection, themes that underpin all the chapters in this thesis, I wish to leave the reader with the open thought of possibility so often engendered by Wong’s cinema – a site of dreams and narratives embedded within intimate space waiting to be portrayed.

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8 Liu Yichang, “Intersection,” in *Tête-Bêche* (Hong Kong: Block 2 Pictures, 2001), no pagination.
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226


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Filmography


“I travelled 9,000 km to give it to you.” Dir, Wong Kar-wai. Segment from the portmanteau film To Each His Own Cinema (Chacun Son Cinéma). Block 2 Pictures, 2007.


