The Cinema of Wong Kar-wai: Style, Form, and Narrative Meaning

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Abstract

The following study provides detailed critical analyses of several films by Hong Kong filmmaker, Wong Kar-wai. These analyses centre most broadly upon the organisational principles that underpin Wong's stylistic and narrative systems, and examine how such intentional strategies function to generate narrative meaning and elicit particular responses from the spectator. In reaction to a body of criticism that subsumes the textual features of Wong's cinema to an overarching socio-allegorical framework, this study concentrates analysis principally upon the immediate, filmic 'surface' of the films, i.e. their primary materials of style, plot, and character. To this end, the project aims to show that allegorical interpretations are not the only means by which to disclose the richness and complexity of Wong's cinema. By attending to specifically textual features, moreover, the project seeks to situate Wong's formal procedures within demonstrable modes and traditions. Analysing the films' style, form, and narrative meaning therefore points us toward the key historical and cultural factors that bear most pertinently upon Wong's cinema.

Collectively, the main chapters serve to tackle some broad critical assumptions pertaining to Wong's oeuvre – for example, the critical perspective that casts Wong as a pure aesthete, preoccupied exclusively with stylistic sensuousness. A corollary assumption – that the erotic texture of the work 'seduces' the spectator into critical passivity – is also explicitly challenged throughout the chapters that follow. This study argues that, though Wong's films indeed furnish a palpable and sensual audio-visual design, they are not reducible exclusively to this aesthetic principle; often we find that stylistic sensuousness is explicable at the level of story action. The chapters in this study also contend that Wong's spectator, far from being seduced away from critical reasoning, is routinely challenged by textual strategies that undercut the films' sensuous style and jolt the viewer from her habitual modes of perception.

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brother Paul and my sister-in-law Tracy. This thesis is dedicated to them.

Introduction

PETER BRUNETTE: [Referring to the use of optical printers in *Fallen Angels* (1995):] Is this some kind of secret political reference to the handover of Hong Kong in 1997?

WONG KAR-WAI: No. (Laughs.) I think it's all because of the moment. I want to capture the moment.

BRUNETTE: Of people's lives?

WONG: Some kind of moment.

BRUNETTE: Or the moment of history? Do you mean this moment of history?

WONG: No no no.

BRUNETTE: Just the event?

WONG: Yes, existence at that moment.[1]

Peter Brunette is not the first critic to pursue allegorical explanations of Wong Kar-wai's stylistic procedures. Critics sensitive to Hong Kong's shifting modernity have tended to impute to the filmmaker a palpable awareness of cultural dislocation, apparently manifest at the levels of film style and narrative. For these critics, Wong's 'formal innovations' unequivocally 'point to a historical situation' that is contemporaneous with the films themselves.[2] Other critics, however, have mapped out alternative avenues of investigation. David Bordwell, for instance, offers a poetics of Wong's cinema grounded in neoformalist analysis.[3] By situating textual strategies within an overall formal context, Bordwell attempts to disclose the constructive principles that govern Wong's films. Without disregarding social functions and contexts, Bordwell also suggests that the denotative level of Wong's films is at least as important as their implicit or repressed meanings. He writes: 'This Romantic and romantic cinema, however concerned with the city in history, is centrally about being young and in love'.[4] Analysing the primary materials of story and character can elucidate a film's overall composition, exposing its formal manoeuvres and stylistic patterns. It can also familiarise us with aspects of the text seldom confronted by an

allegorical hermeneutics, the limitations of which I will presently attempt to specify.

In the chapters that follow I provide detailed critical analyses of several of Wong's films. Like the neoformalists, I pay particular heed to the functions and effects displayed by the text. By attending to the patterning of Wong's formal elements, I try to show that the films display considerable rigor and complexity in their overall formal composition. I also undertake to challenge one of the prevailing fallacies dogging Wong's cinema: namely, that he is a pure sensualist, preoccupied exclusively with the achievement of sensuous effects. As has been observed elsewhere, Wong's detractors argue that his films are 'shallow' and governed by style; fundamentally, they allege, Wong's films are 'all "surface" with no depth'.[5.] There is, moreover, a negative evaluative implication in these critics' identification of Wong's cinema with music video and fashion photography, two modes of art apparently characterised by a purely sensuous use of style. David Thomson, for example, is circumventive and equivocal in his overview of Wong's oeuvre, implying both that the filmmaker is a 'great stylist' in the tradition of Max Ophuls and Otto Preminger, and that his films are 'as lovely and empty as the standard of iconography in Western music videos and fashion magazines'.[6.] Of the 'overly stylised' *Fallen Angels* (1995), another critic remarks that the film resembles 'an overly ambitious music video'.[7.] Similarly, Scarlet Cheng writes:

> Though *Days of Being Wild* is a pleasure to watch and carries one along its melancholic, fragmented rhythm, one feels a certain emptiness after it's over. The film is more style than substance, favouring mood and mannerisms over plot and characterization.[8.]

Wong's stylistic palpability thus arouses evaluative charges of superficiality; it also triggers assumptions of narrative bankruptcy. In characterising Wong as an aesthete, his critics imply that narrative elements (i.e. the traditional locus of so-called 'depth' or 'substance') are subordinated to notions of beauty and sensuality. The following

chapters will contest this assumption, without denying that stylistic sensuousness is an indelible part of Wong's aesthetic program; rather, it will be argued that Wong's sensuous style is invariably imbricated with storytelling principles. I will also challenge the implication that Wong's style induces passivity in the spectator, 'seducing' her into critical slumber with a self-conscious and sensuous audio-visual design. (Note, for example, how Cheng in the above quotation describes the viewer as being 'carried along' by Wong's 'pleasurable' narrational style.) Rather, I argue that the films presuppose a cognitively alert spectator. Formal analysis can aid us in this undertaking. For example, exploring Wong's organisational principles can orient us to gaps, ellipses, and disjunctures in the films' narration; in this way, Wong's spectator comes into focus as an active participant in the construction of meaning, characterised by an unusually high degree of critical reasoning and inferential activity. Fundamentally, both the sensualist and the allegorical accounts of Wong's cinema are inadequate: while the allegorical critic tends to underplay stylistic matters by restricting attention to Wong's conceptual material, the critic that places Wong as a pure sensualist is apt to disregard narrative and thematic elements in foregrounding aspects of style. Finally, although this study departs from the socio-allegorical tradition of criticism, it does not seek to close off the proximate social factors that play upon Wong's cinema. Nor does it propose to wrench the films away from the aesthetic traditions that have shaped them. On the contrary, it is one of the ongoing tasks of this study to situate Wong's cinema in its various pertinent contexts.

This study assumes that Wong is the principal creative source of the films under discussion. However, it is acknowledged that these films could equally justify calls for a *politiques des collaborateurs*[9.]: the contributions of Christopher Doyle and William Chang, in particular, have been well-documented in the existing literature on Wong, especially in connection with the films' visual sensuousness. (Less attention has been afforded Wong's collaborative work with star

performers, however, a critical imbalance that I attempt to redress in Chapter 2.) Peter Brunette has advanced the critical proposition that 'Doyle and Chang are at least as responsible as Wong for the unique look that has come to be associated with his films, and even for their artistic success'.[10.] Stephen Teo suggests that Chang 'has become the mainstay of [Wong's] films, seemingly the pillar of his all-round aesthetic vision'.[11.] Notwithstanding these points of view, individual contributions cannot empirically be disentangled from the artwork. Presupposing Wong's authorial primacy does not, in any case, negate the collaborative work of other contributors. Rather, it adheres to the dominant assumption in authorial discourse, which situates the director at the peak of the creative hierarchy. Empirically, this assumption seems to be particularly well-grounded in respect of Wong, given that his films are produced under the auspices of his own production company, to say nothing of the fact that Wong claims sole authority over textual elements such as story and music, and personally picks out the cinematographer, editor, actors and so forth, with whom he wishes to collaborate.

One further assumption pertaining to authorship should be addressed. It is sometimes held that, by concentrating attention upon the formal organisation of an author's films, the critic negates against the possibility that a filmmaker's work may transmute over time. Motifs, patterns, and other recurring elements identified by the critic as authorial traits may alter, shift, or disappear from the author's subsequent work. It strikes me as not only possible that this should be the case, but also distinctly likely, given that the success of a filmmaker's oeuvre typically depends upon a principle of variation as well as constancy; yet this should not deter the critic from seeking out the formal patterns that give a film (or the oeuvre to which it belongs) its particular distinctiveness and coherence. One possibility is that the critic is able to place a particular authorial trend historically in the filmmaker's oeuvre (e.g. the use of overt symbolisation in Fritz Lang's oeuvre may be seen to recede in his American films; or Robert Altman's

fast-zoom may be considered a characteristic mainly of his 1970s films). Failing to illuminate the recurrent (stylistic or thematic) elements within an author's corpus of films, moreover, prevents the critic from acknowledging those authorial preoccupations that basically remain constant, e.g. Alfred Hitchcock's predilection for narratives hinged on the theme of guilt, or Preminger's proclivity for a maximally-legible visual presentation. Formal analysis does not negate historical change, but, on the contrary, it can indicate the historical shifts within an author's oeuvre with remarkable precision and detail. Finally, this study does not employ Wong's cinema in an 'illustrative' sense, adducing the films rhetorically to test some preconceived, overriding theory of authorship. Rather, it is the films themselves that occupy the centre of my analysis. We may in this respect distinguish between a study of an author's work and a study of authorship, with the present study being of the former variety.

With occasional important exceptions[12], much of the existing literature concerning Wong's cinema has converged on matters of social allegory. This trend is historically explicable, since contemporary anxieties surrounding Hong Kong's reversion to Chinese rule sensitised critics to allusion and allegory embedded in the local cinema. Several critics have allegorised Wong's films in terms of the 1997 handover to China. These analysts recast the films' textual 'surface' as a politicised landscape, while the artwork's material and form, it was argued, obscure a resonant allegorical subtext. Graeme Turner sums up this critical trend as follows:

> The problematics of regional cinemas such as the Asian cinema...situate film within arguments about nation formation, about post-coloniality, and about the regulation of international trade in cultural products, and in many cases will privilege such problematics over the interpretative treatment of individual film texts.[13]

Influential upon these discussions is Ackbar Abbas's notion of 'disappearance'. Abbas characterises the city of Hong Kong as an

unstable site of intersection, precariously poised between a variety of phenomena: East and West, colonialism and nationalism, the past and the future. He conceives the city as a space of disappearance, an incoherent and negative space marked by a sensation he calls 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'.[14.] The Hong Kong New Wave cinema, Abbas argues, privileges visual strategies that render fictional space ambiguous and incoherent, thereby evoking the actual city's state of disjuncture and flux. Abbas writes:

> It is not the appearance of "Hong Kong themes"…that is significant in the new Hong Kong cinema, but, rather, what I call a problematic of disappearance: that is to say, a sense of the elusiveness, the slipperiness, the ambivalences of Hong Kong's cultural space that some Hong Kong filmmakers have caught in their use of the film medium, in their explorations of history and memory, in their excavation of the evocative detail – *regardless of subject matter*. (Emphasis in original.)[15.]

Other critics expand and embellish Abbas's 'problematic of disappearance', some of whom will be discussed shortly. At a broad level, allegorical inquiries can offer instructive points of reference. Allegorising Wong's cinema situates the films within a determinate socio-historical context. Such analysis can usefully flag cultural or national exigencies possibly bearing upon the film's content. Allegory might also be apt to draw our attention to aspects of the text that elude 'internal', motivational explanation. However, as I will presently argue, allegorical accounts will often leave substantial areas of the text unaccounted for. In particular, I will suggest that this sort of analysis is fundamentally ill-equipped to deal adequately with Wong's overall corpus of films. To illustrate my claims here, I will be drawing upon aspects of Wong's debut film, *As Tears Go By* (1988); for this reason, it is necessary to briefly outline the narrative of the film.

Wah (Andy Lau) is a troubled triad gangster, groomed for success by mob bosses, but compromised by the reckless exploits of his 'little brother', Fly (Jacky Cheung). His love life is also in disarray. Unwilling to offer his girlfriend the commitment she needs, Wah breaks off their relationship. His sickly cousin Ngor (Maggie Cheung) comes to stay with him while she receives medical treatment in Mongkok. When Fly arrives badly wounded at his big brother's apartment, Wah is forced to cancel plans he has made with Ngor. Wah exacts revenge on the hood responsible for Fly's injuries. Shortly after, Ngor returns home to Lantau Island. Fly is put to work as an illegal street-hawker after Wah learns of his escalating debts. Reflecting on his feelings for Ngor, Wah follows his cousin to Lantau Island where they become lovers. A phone call alerts Wah to a further crisis involving Fly, and he hastily repairs to Mongkok. Wah is drawn into a conflict between Fly and some fellow triad members, which culminates in the two men being brutally beaten. Determined to save 'face', Fly accepts the task of assassinating a former triad turned police witness. Fly is killed in the assassination attempt, and stepping forward to complete the hit, Wah is also gunned down.

Most broadly, allegorical accounts tend to omit discussion of large-scale formal strategies. The critic will typically extrapolate local devices from a determinate narrative context, elucidating the symbolic purpose of such devices but neglecting to illuminate their patterning within an overall formal structure. Consider Abbas's analysis of visual devices in *As Tears Go By*. For Abbas, the film's use of colour, decelerated action, and oblique camera angles engenders 'a form of visuality that problematizes the visible'. He goes on to argue that, by means of an elicited sense of 'visual overload', the film can be said to represent and critique colonial space.[16.] Abbas thus argues that narratively expressive elements conceal decipherable cultural meanings. I do not intend to challenge his hermeneutic claim, the cogency of which will inevitably rely on the weight and persuasiveness of the evidence he adduces. Rather, I am concerned to suggest the

inadequacy of an approach that generally disregards formal patterning and organisation. Suppressing the immediate, filmic context of the devices' usage may allow Abbas to sharpen the focus on his own allegorical claims, but it prevents him from locating these devices within the film's overall narrational system. The reader is not supplied a sense of how *As Tears Go By* intricately varies its scenes of 'visual overload' with less flagrant, compositionally orthodox images. Nor is Abbas's approach responsive to the film's wider system of communicativeness and restrictedness.[17.] In allegorical accounts of the film, therefore, the narration's modulation of self-consciousness and epistemic access is typically unaccounted for.

Allegorical discussions of Wong's cinema have also tended to prioritise visual style over other formal elements. Abbas has sought to locate the representation of cultural 'disappearance' within the 'new cinematic images' of the Hong Kong New Wave[18.]; Gina Marchetti finds a 'commentary on contemporary Hong Kong' embedded in the *mise en scène* of *Chungking Express* (1994)[19.]; Marc Siegel speaks of 'intimate images' in *Happy Together* (1997), which, he argues, articulate private space within a global context[20.]; and Janice Tong contends that pre-handover anxieties are manifest within *Chungking Express*' oblique framing and 'disorienting' sense of motion.[21.] Sometimes the critic will appear to deviate from the visual image to broach other areas of the text, but these departures are ultimately subordinated to the primacy of the visual image. Thus, in his discussion of genre, Abbas notes that the deconstruction of generic codes in *As Tears Go By* lends the film its 'visual density'[22.]; Marchetti's emphasis on commodified objects leads her to scour the *mise en scène* for evidence; and temporality in *Chungking Express* is conceptualised by Tong in semi-visual terms, as 'images of time'.[23.]

Stressing visual representation can lead the critic to marginalise other formal elements. A non-visual parameter such as music will invariably figure peripherally in the critic's discussion, or be omitted from discussion altogether. Abbas makes no mention of music in *As*

Tears Go By, invoking MTV only in regards to its play with images. In fact, it is difficult to conceptualise the film's overall music score in a way that dovetails with the cultural analyst's preoccupations. One particular music cue is conformable to allegorical interpretation, however. The critic might posit 'Take My Breath Away' - a Cantonese version of a Western pop ballad - in analogous relation to the culturally-diverse Hong Kong subject, or as emblematic of the hybridised terrain of Hong Kong itself. Moreover, critics interested in the territory's consumption of American popular culture might be apt to treat the ballad as a commodified object, circulating around the global marketplace, 'made in China, but from a clearly American mold'.[24.] These critical emphases typically privilege political and cultural frames of reference over other pertinent contexts. For example, discussions of this sort are unlikely to locate the ballad within the film's wider system of cinematic allusion. ('Take My Breath Away' and its accompanying imagery explicitly hark back to *Top Gun* (1986), the film that provides the ballad's most familiar filmic context; more generally, *As Tears Go By* pays homage to *Mean Streets* (1973) and *Stranger Than Paradise* (1984).) Another immediate context – the recurring traits and trends that characterise an authored body of work – is also liable to be suppressed by the cultural analyst. Thus, an instance of cinematic allusion will most likely be treated independently of authorial habit or convention. Recognising the ballad's allusive function would allow the cultural analyst to emphasise the 'Americanisation' of Hong Kong's cultural products. But analysis of this sort would seldom seek to differentiate the 'pop' (*Top Gun*) and 'art' (*Stranger Than Paradise*) distinctions within this Western influence, or to explain how this distinction might be significant for Wong. In sum, for the critics discussed here, the primary frame of reference is the contemporary social and political landscape. The cultural critic endeavours to explain textual phenomena (genre, narrative, formal devices) as expressive modes commenting on this socio-political space.

An allegorical account is also unlikely to disclose the way that Wong assimilates the ballad into a larger system of narration. By attending to Wong's formal deployment of the song, however, we can better determine how the ballad performs certain narrative functions and achieves its expressive effects. As often in Wong's films, the song at first issues diegetically from a bar jukebox before assuming a nondiegetic purpose. The ballad accompanies action that, the viewer believes, will culminate in the apogee of the romance plot. Languishing in a bar in Mongkok, Wah privately acknowledges his attraction to Ngor, and buses to Lantau Island to confront her with his feelings; generic convention cues the viewer to expect a romantic encounter between the protagonists. 'Take My Breath Away' dominates the soundtrack during Wah's bus journey, and will subsequently dip in volume to underscore a stretch of dialogue when he questions an islander in regard to Ngor's whereabouts. (The islander informs him that Ngor is visiting Kowloon, the first of two generically-motivated tactics designed to postpone the protagonists' romantic union.) As Wah awaits Ngor's return at the island's pier, the song's dynamics once more fill the soundscape. At last brought together, the protagonists nervously exchange platitudes, and, as previously, the ballad cedes aural primacy to character dialogue. Unlike before, however, the song now fades out of the sound mix completely. What has motivated the ballad's expulsion from the action? The calculated repressiveness of Wong's narration provides an explanation. By alternating close views of Wah and Ngor, Wong generates the semblance of an intimate encounter, diffusing background action into apparently peripheral detail. Only gradually does the viewer become conscious of a third, hazy figure in the space behind Ngor. In a communicative turn, the narration stages a series of tense glances between the three characters, which conveys that the distant figure - subsequently revealed to be Ngor's male doctor - has accompanied her from Kowloon in an intimate, non-professional capacity. The doctor's unexpected appearance in the action, which surprises Wah as much as it does the viewer, deflates the anticipated

euphoric encounter between the protagonists, and cues the receding of the romance ballad. (This unforeseen element also functions as the sequence's second tactic to defer the protagonists' romantic union.) A subsequent passage of strained conversation unfolds without musical underscoring.

As the protagonists begin to separate, Wong invokes a narrative motif that the film has earlier established in symbolic relation to Ngor. In a previous violent rage, Wah shatters a set of glasses in his apartment; Ngor replaces the objects, telling the triad that - lest a similar rage overcome him in the future - she has safely secreted a single glass somewhere in his apartment. Stressing the object's fragility allows Wong to suggest a parallel with Ngor's own delicate and consumptive condition. For Stephen Teo, the glass symbolises 'the brittleness of their relationship'.[25.] This glass motif is invoked by Wah in our scene at the pier. Apparently resigned to go their separate ways, Wah offers a parting remark: 'I just wanted to tell you I've found the glass'. As this line of dialogue concludes, 'Take My Breath Away' is abrasively reinstated on the soundtrack, serving as punctuation for the dialogue and affirming the romantic connotation of the film's glass motif. (The song does not resume where the narration earlier abandoned it; rather, Wong returns to an earlier point in the song, the ballad's initial refrain, and allows the subsequent portion of the song to unfold again.[26.]) Hierarchically prominent in the sound mix, the ballad overlays images of Wah, now alone on the ferry back to Kowloon. Sounds of a fog horn mingle disquietingly with the romance theme, striking a discordant note that reflects the failure of Wah's mission on the island, i.e. to forge a romantic partnership with Ngor. Ensuing action plays out against the pop ballad: Wah hurls the 'personified' glass overboard in a symbolic gesture of resignation; a message appears on his pager, with the revelation that Ngor will meet him at Kowloon pier; Ngor frantically hails a bus, and, following an ellipsis, searches the pier for Wah; finally, Wah appears and leads Ngor into a phone booth where they kiss passionately. This culminating action draws our attention to the formal

precision of Wong's music use. The sequence's generic and narrative apex (the long-deferred kiss) precisely coincides with the emotional peak of the ballad (the sung refrain, 'Take My Breath Away'). It is the temporal co-ordination of these two 'climaxes' that motivates the ballad's earlier point of recommencement (its tracking back to the first chorus). Acknowledging this goal of the narration allows us to appreciate the shots of Ngor searching the pier for Wah, which not only contribute to suspense ('Will Wah show up?') but also dilate the action, enabling the climactic kiss to be synchronised with the musical refrain. Once this affective summit has been reached, the narration is able to initiate a new stage of action and the ballad recedes from the sound mix.

The task of the cultural analyst typically occludes the kind of attention to form posited above. Even visual devices are seldom explicated in terms of structural or unifying functions and effects. An allegorical account will not plot the progression of a visual motif, but instead prefers to subsume such elements to a wider social or political point. However, sensitivity to the formal patterning of a device can suggest how a film structures and achieves its particular effects. We can discover, for example, that the fractured deployment of 'Take My Breath Away' enables Wong to either augment a romantic encounter (as in the phone booth clinch) or to dissipate one (as when the doctor intrusively appears). We can also suggest that fracturing the ballad in this way allows Wong to sidestep the song's pre-existing durational constraints: action can play out without regard for the temporal circumscriptions of the song. In contrast, an allegorical account may ask us to comprehend the ballad's structural usage in *a priori* terms of postmodern fragmentation or cultural dissolution. Or such an account may omit discussion of music altogether, for as we have said, critics employing a cultural-allegorical framework will most typically assimilate the textual features of Wong's cinema, such as music, to an overriding concern with visuality. At the broadest level, the following chapters seek to demonstrate that elements treated by the cultural

critic as marginal or subservient – music, stars, genre, and narrative structure – exhibit an importance commensurate with that of Wong's visual style. The first chapter in this study, for example, focuses on the complex function that Wong affords music – an aural parameter that interacts with, but is nevertheless distinct from, a film's visual dimension.

A broad allegorical reading tends to encompass all instances of symbolism in its interpretive sweep. Every visual symbol in Wong's cinema, such an account implies, is reducible to notions of Hong Kong society and identity. Confining interpretation to such a narrow set of possible meanings both limits the breadth of analysis and negates the presence of symbolism connoting something other than social meaning. In attempting to explicate visual elements allegorically, moreover, the critic can also fail to address how visual symbols interact with other textual devices. A hypothetical case can be organised around the glass motif in *As Tears Go By*. I have suggested that the film symbolically correlates the fragile image of the glass with Ngor's feeble constitution[27]; and as Teo infers, the glass also signifies the tentative relationship between the main protagonists. Our hypothetical critic, however, might counter that the glass motif represents the frailty of pre-handover Hong Kong society. Yet such a perspective would need to play down the presence of contiguous textual cues. When Wah reveals that he has discovered the hidden glass, 'Take My Breath Away' self-consciously reclaims prominence on the soundtrack. The glass motif thus effectively cues the reappearance of the romance ballad. How can our hypothetical critic, straitjacketed by a circumscribed set of interpretations, account for this formal interaction between the visual motif and song? By seeing both elements as components of the romance plot, we can venture an explanation unavailable to the critic searching for social metaphors. My argument here is that the critic will not always be able to derive social allegory from Wong's symbolic imagery. In this respect, a purely allegorical account cannot adequately elucidate Wong's range of visual motifs. I would also suggest that the desire to

map a preconceived interpretation onto a visual motif might dim the critic's responsiveness to other, inflective textual elements.

The analyst can deemphasise overarching authorial tendencies as well. Gina Marchetti's reading of political allegory in *Chungking Express* provides an example. According to Marchetti, Wong's film is only 'ostensibly a stylish love story', concealing other issues 'beyond the surface of plot and character'.[28.] She goes on to argue that, through a careful 'choice, use, and organisation' of commodified objects, the film 'tells another story about economics and the politics of identity'.[29.] Itemising the commodities present in the film helps Marchetti build a persuasive case. But she suppresses an authorial trend when describing how Wong furnishes the objects with visual salience. 'Isolated in close-up or overpowering the characters in long shots', Marchetti claims, 'these commodities function as objects of specular contemplation'.[30.] The profit of Marchetti's thesis will be for her reader to determine; but, partly due to the circumscriptions of her analysis, Marchetti declines to characterise this compositional tactic in terms of a more general authorial tendency. Wong will often encourage 'specular contemplation' by admitting objects and details of the environment saliently into the frame. Construing close-ups of objects as fetishising or critiquing cultural commodities does not help us explain Wong's corresponding treatment of non-marketable objects. In *Ashes of Time* (1994), for instance, a bamboo birdcage revolves prominently in the foreground, blocking key characters from view; a close-up of a water glass fills the frame in *As Tears Go By*; and in one shot from *In the Mood for Love* (2000), the close framing of a lampshade obfuscates action staged in the distance. None of these objects are particularly apt for commodification. Moreover, each one performs narrative and expressive functions that Marchetti's analysis is not disposed to illuminate. In an analysis of *The Hand* (2004) in Chapter 5, I will propose a broad explanation for Wong's visual emphasis on objects that encompasses both commodities and non-commodities alike.[31.]

Central to the scheme of the cultural analyst is a preoccupation with implicit *meanings*. The critic adheres to an *a priori* formula: *x* represents *y*, where *x* is a textual element and *y* is some aspect (culture, identity, ideology) of Hong Kong society. Concentrating analysis primarily on connotations means that a diminished emphasis is afforded the kinds of *effects* engendered by Wong's formal manoeuvres. Insofar as effects are discussed by the analyst, they will typically be 'thematised' as an increment of *y*. For example, noting that Wong's handheld camera and fast-paced editing 'combine to disorient the viewer' enables Janice Tong to argue that *Chungking Express* mobilises themes of cultural instability and 'disappearance'.[32.] Perceptual and cognitive effects are thus generally folded back onto allegorical meaning. Moreover, an allegorical template can sometimes appear to obscure a film's salient effects, while the interpretive pattern it traces may strike us as unvarying or simplistic. Often, scenes will be discussed in terms of a single effect. Thus Ackbar Abbas notes that slow motion in *As Tears Go By* visually destabilises the film's fight scenes, eliciting a sense of perceptual 'bewilderment'.[33.] (He subsequently absorbs this observation into his overarching discussion of the *déjà disparu*.) This sense of bewilderment is exemplified in an action sequence involving Wah and Tony, a local hood responsible for a savage attack on Fly. Here the confrontation of the two characters triggers confusion through a combination of rapid cutting and 'smudge-motion' imagery. Complexity emerges from the deindividuation of these agents, whose bodies become opalescent and hazy; as Peter Brunette puts it, 'we have little idea of who is doing what to whom'.[34.] However, there are other kinds of effects that the meaning-centred critic tends to bypass. For example, such sequences also operate on a sensuous level, inviting the viewer to revel in a stylistic interplay of motion and light. We can furthermore speak of the scene's affective aims, which are implicit in the visual amplification of Wah's facial expression; the triad's tensed brow, in particular, is a potent site of viewer identification and empathy. Other effects will be generated by the animation of

excitement and suspense. The cultural analyst must suppress or elide these effects if they contradict - or fail to assimilate into - the governing allegorical schema.

In emphasising the 1997 situation, the critic privileges a contemporary and local context over other pertinent, though less immediate and proximate, contexts and traditions. Consider Curtis K. Tsui's explication of character in *As Tears Go By*. Tsui concentrates on the internal schizophrenia afflicting the film's protagonist. As a gangland triad, Wah displays aptitude for clinical violence; paradoxically, he also conveys tenderness in his treatment of Ngor. For Tsui, the protagonist singularly embodies love and violence, which the critic comprehends in terms of diametrically-opposed desires. Tsui claims that this aspect of character psychology symbolises the contradictions inherent in pre-1997 Hong Kong society itself.[35.] In this argument, then, characterisation is subsumed to a single, preconceived precept. However, other relevant factors can be adduced. Internally-conflicted agents are a characteristic presence in European art films, a cinematic institution which, I will argue, represents a principal point of reference for Wong's cinema. Tsui's account of character also masks the protagonist's basis in generic tradition. Wah exemplifies a standard topos from the crime thriller genre: the gangster who wants to relinquish crime but who is too far mired in its conspiracies to escape.[36.] In delimiting his analysis of *As Tears Go By* to its (admittedly pertinent) social context, Tsui neglects other, no less pertinent types of context, and disregards the film's debt to pre-existing traditions.

Two further limitations affecting socio-allegorical analysis should be mentioned. First, by centring on Wong's imputed, parochial obsession with local identity, the critic risks underplaying the films' address to a global audience.[37.] At least on a small-scale level, Wong's films routinely seek to transcend national or territorial boundaries. *As Tears Go By* buttresses its international address by incorporating Western-derived music ('Take My Breath Away'), allusion (for instance, to *Top Gun*), and speech (as when Fly declaims a line of dialogue in English).

Second, whereas the critic can provide cogent allegorical readings of individual films, the use of allegory as a critical tool will most likely prove unsatisfactory for a study encompassing a broader number of films (such as those by a particular filmmaker). Put simply, the critic's cultural analogies may fit some films better than others. If we are to understand how Wong's films operate – their internal organisation and the particular effects which they achieve – we must resist the tautological critical practice that subordinates the films themselves to an overarching, extratextual precept. (This goes as well for the encompassing view that sensuousness is the *raison d'être* for Wong's narrational style.) Only by examining how Wong organises formal and narrative elements can we begin, with a certain freedom and flexibility, to interpret the explicit and implicit meanings in the films.

This assumption undergirds the chapters that follow. At the broadest level, my study pursues two main aims: to characterise Wong's filmmaking strategies and to explain how they create meaning. To this end, each chapter takes as its principal focus a single aspect of Wong's oeuvre: music, performance, genre, narrative, and visual style. Treating each aspect singly enables us to provide detailed analyses that disclose the films' functions and effects. It also predisposes us to confront the critical commonplaces that accompany particular aspects of Wong's cinema (e.g. that Wong moulds his music score in the MTV style, or that he straightforwardly subverts genre). However, by focusing on, say, Wong's treatment of visual style, I am specifically concerned to acknowledge the presence of contiguous textual factors: indeed, part of the task of unpacking a visual tactic's effects and functions is to examine the ways it interacts with other parameters (e.g. sound) or phenomena (e.g. performance). In the following chapters, I attempt to suggest how distinct materials (for example, star performance or story events) are shaped into intentional strategies and tactics. I aim to indicate how these strategies elicit particular responses from the viewer. My proposed method of analysis does not preclude allegorical interpretation. Rather it places emphasis on the

immediate, filmic context, without negating the existence of the 'distant' cultural context prioritised by allegorical critics. Implicit in my approach is the assumption that allegorical content is always necessarily mediated by a more proximate filmic context. The viewer can only 'access' embedded meaning by first confronting the primary level of the text, i.e. its 'surface' fabric of style, plot, and character. Whereas allegorical critics tend to privilege cultural analogies at the expense of the narrative surface, my approach seeks to redress the balance without effacing the utility that allegorical readings can provide. (Similarly, though I challenge the contention that Wong's films aim purely at sensuous effects, I treat sensuousness as a fundamental aspect of Wong's aesthetic; it is the matter of degree that is at issue in this case.) Examining a film's formal procedures can also enable us to recognise the influence of certain modes and traditions. The chapters in this study thus seek to contextualise the films under discussion in another way; by examining how Wong approaches filmic conventions, for example, we can align the filmmaker with particular traditions and modes of practice.

An inventory of the study's individual chapters is in order. Chapter 1 provides a formal analysis of music in *Chungking Express*. It attempts to show how the film motivically structures and organises its appropriated songs. It moreover argues that the film's music score exceeds its sensuous effects to anchor itself in character, plot, and narrative themes. The chapter's final section asks to what extent Wong capitalises on his cast of pop stars, whose music is sometimes apt to appear on the film's soundtrack. Chapter 2 offers a more comprehensive discussion of stars and performance. Here I attempt to answer the following questions. What are the principal imperatives underlying Wong's use of stars? How can we adequately characterise Wong's predominant performance style? Is the visual dimension of Wong's aesthetic compatible with conventional 'star' compositions? In what ways will Wong appropriate and embellish a pre-established star persona? The first part of this chapter draws on a range of examples

from Wong's oeuvre; the second part offers a single case study, using the star persona of Leslie Cheung as a base.

Chapter 3 begins with an overview of Wong's genre strategies and the critical debates that attend them. It then provides a more detailed analysis of *In the Mood for Love*'s generic manoeuvres. My argument here is that the film tacitly hybridises two ostensibly antagonistic genres. In synthesising these genres, I argue, the film displays a self-consciously complex narration, characterised by repressiveness, omniscience, ellipticality, and unreliability. I also seek to establish that this complex narration places specific inferential demands upon the viewer. Narrative organisation constitutes the centre of analysis in Chapter 4. Through a discussion of *Fallen Angels*, I suggest that Wong employs 'overt' storytelling tactics to lay bare the mechanics of narrative and plot. I claim that the film's 'architectural' transparency is carefully motivated by narrative themes, characters, and action.

All four chapters stress the complex activity traced by Wong's spectator, an emphasis embellished further in Chapter 5. Here the claim is that Wong's visual style negates spectatorial passivity and undercuts claims of pure sensuousness. At the levels of composition and of editing, I argue, Wong elicits a sense of geographical confusion and disorientation that undermines the viewer's spatial assumptions. I seek to distinguish this notion of 'disorientation' from the allegorical connotations postulated above (which, we will recall, identify Wong's spatial disjunction with the *déjà disparu*). The chapter furthermore attempts to locate Wong's visual strategies within pertinent frames of reference, pinpointing the particular aesthetic traditions from which Wong's visual style is derived. In the Conclusion, I provide an overview of the study's broad areas of investigation. I also elaborate on a specific philosophical point of reference for Wong's films, invoked throughout the thesis, that I argue provides a unique and instructive context with which to comprehend Wong's predominant themes. Finally, I argue that to construe Wong's cinema solely in terms either of social allegory or pure aestheticism radically diminishes the range of pleasures

provided by the films; a more balanced perspective ought to acknowledge both the stylistic virtuosity and thematic density that intertwine throughout Wong's oeuvre.

With one exception, all the chapters feature 'case studies' of an individual film. (The exception to this rule is Chapter 2, which is obliged to extend its main case study across three films.) Taken together, these analyses aim to provide a representative overview of Wong's film aesthetic. Giving emphasis to individual examples also means that we can situate the films themselves firmly at the centre of analysis. In this sense, my study seeks to assert a contrary emphasis to that exemplified in several of the allegorical writings discussed above, where it is common for the text to be subordinated to a governing analytical schema. For instance, Abbas can announce that he 'will use [Wong's films] to pursue a particular theme: the cultural self-invention of the Hong Kong subject in a cultural space that I will be calling a space of disappearance'.[38.] Rather than map existing themes onto Wong's cinema, however, I propose that we allow the films themselves to reveal salient authorial preoccupations. A formal analysis of Wong's films, examining the patterning of motifs, tactics, and strategies across each text's macrostructure, can bring to light narrative themes that an allegorical reading might occlude. Applying this approach to Wong's oeuvre, moreover, can lead us not only to identify individual themes, but also to appreciate the extent to which the films are expressive of a coherent and consistent authorial world view.

Notes

[1.] Peter Brunette, *Wong Kar-wai*, University of Illinois Press, 2005, p.117.

[2.] Ackbar Abbas, *Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance*, University of Minnesota Press, 1997, p.33.

[3.] David Bordwell, *Planet Hong Kong: Popular Cinema and the Art of Entertainment*, Harvard University Press, 2000.

[4.] *Ibid.* p.274.

[5.] Stephen Teo and Peter Brunette delineate but do not support this position in Teo, *Wong Kar-wai*, London: BFI, 2005, pp.6-7; and Brunette, *Wong Kar-wai*, p.xvi.

[6] David Thomson, *The New Biographical Dictionary of Film*, Alfred A. Knopf: New York, 2004, p.970.

[7] Susan Morrison, '*La Haine, Fallen Angels*, and Some Thoughts on Scorsese's Children', *CineAction* 39 (December 1995), p.49.

[8] Scarlet Cheng, 'Ahfei Zheng Zhuan/Days of Being Wild', in *International Dictionary of Films and Filmmakers*, edited by Tom and Sara Pendergast, St. James Press: Detroit, 2000, p.20.

[9] Richard Corliss coins this phrase, and advances its critical virtues, in *The Hollywood Screenwriters*, New York: Avon, 1972, pp.20-3.

[10] Brunette, *Wong Kar-wai*, p.15.

[11] Teo, *Wong Kar-wai*, p.29.

[12] For example, see Bordwell, *Planet Hong Kong*. Teo's study on Wong also departs from purely allegorical readings, giving emphasis to the literary basis of the director's work.

[13] Graeme Turner, 'Cultural Studies and Film', in *The Oxford Guide to Film Studies*, edited by John Hill and Pamela Church Gibson, Oxford University Press, 1998, p.199.

[14] Abbas, *Hong Kong*, p.25.

[15] *Ibid.* p.24.

[16] *Ibid.* p.36.

[17] I am employing 'communicativeness' and 'restrictiveness' here as terms of art. The terms refer to a narration's range of knowledge, and the degree to which the narration makes this knowledge available to the spectator. Often a film's narration will fluctuate between communicating narrative information to the viewer and suppressing her knowledge of events. For further elaboration of these ideas, see David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, Routledge, 1985, Chapter 4.

[18] *Op cit.* p.24.

[19] Gina Marchetti, 'Buying American, Consuming Hong Kong: Cultural Commerce, Fantasies of Identity, and the Cinema', in *The Cinema of Hong Kong: History, Arts, Identity*, edited by Poshek Fu and David Desser, Cambridge University Press, 2000, p.290.

[20] Marc Siegel, 'The Intimate Spaces of Wong Kar-wai', in *At Full Speed: Hong Kong Cinema in a Borderless World*, edited by Esther C. M. Yau, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2001, p.288.

[21] Janice Tong, '*Chungking Express*: Time and Its Displacements', in *Chinese Films in Focus: 25 New Takes*, edited by Chris Berry, London: BFI, 2003, pp.48-9.

[22] Abbas, *Hong Kong*, p.35.

[23] *Op.cit.*, p.48.

[24] Marchetti, 'Buying American, Consuming Hong Kong', p.295.

[25] Teo, *Wong Kar-wai*, p.23.

[26.] A more elaborate example of this scoring tactic occurs in *Chungking Express*, and will be discussed in detail in Chapter 1.

[27.] In order to support this hermeneutic claim, we can relate the symbol to other story events. Ngor is explicitly associated with the glass at the level of story action. She replaces Wah's broken set of glasses, and hides one glass for him to find. Furthermore, Wah's habit of destroying glasses in anger parallels the emotional damage he routinely inflicts upon his lovers: one early scene limns his indelicate treatment of Mabel, a nightclub worker distraught by the triad's rejection of romantic commitment. As symbolised by the singular, secreted glass, Ngor is putatively exempt from Wah's misogynistic behaviour. In plot terms, moreover, Wah's discovery of the hidden glass coincides with his consciousness of Ngor as a love object, thereby compounding our identification of Ngor with the glass. As well as adducing story action, we can bolster our argument by referring outside the text to other examples from Wong's oeuvre. For example, characters in Wong's universe are sometimes apt to identify themselves with nonhuman phenomena: the mischievous mute in *Fallen Angels*, for instance, compares himself to a convenience store. The critic pursuing an allegorical hermeneutic may choose to circumvent these factors, however, since they would appear not to bear sufficiently upon issues of Hong Kong society.

[28.] Marchetti, 'Buying American, Consuming Hong Kong', p.289.

[29.] *Ibid.*

[30.] *Ibid.*, p.294.

[31.] I will also return to my example from *In the Mood for Love* in Chapter 3.

[32.] Tong, '*Chungking Express*', pp.48-9.

[33.] Abbas, *Hong Kong*, p.35.

[34.] Brunette, *Wong Kar-wai*, p.11.

[35.] Curtis K. Tsui, 'Subjective Culture and History: The Ethnographic Cinema of Wong Kar-wai', *Asian Cinema* 7:2 (1995), p.100.

[36.] Wong revives this generic trope in *Fallen Angels*, as I shall make clear in Chapter 4.

[37.] Not all such critics fall victim to this trap. Marchetti, for instance, alludes to Wong's reliance on Hollywood genres, and suggests that *Chungking Express* 'self-reflexively recognises itself as commodity for exchange within the international art film market' (Marchetti, 'Buying American, Consuming Hong Kong', p.306).

[38.] Abbas, *Hong Kong*, p.1.

1. Changing Tunes: *Chungking Express* and the Music Score

> *[I'm the] DJ of my own films.*
>
> Wong Kar-wai[1.]

In his contextual study of Hong Kong culture and society, Ackbar Abbas sets in contrast the narrative milieux of *Chungking Express* and Woody Allen's *Manhattan* (1979), arguing that 'Wong's Hong Kong is not so much a mental or psychological state as it is a visual and spatial paradox, a skewed space that the characters have to adjust to emotionally, with comic results'.[2.] But is this 'paradox', allegedly visual and spatial, discernibly aural as well? Can Wong's music score be seen to evince a correspondingly 'skewed' narrational space? Certainly when we 'hear' a Wong Kar-wai film, we are aware of a conspicuous absence of any overarching, predominant sound: the assemblage of discrete pre-existing themes, quite varied in cultural origin, period, and idiom, combine to create a soundtrack that is marked out, at least ostensibly, as unmoored and ambivalent. Yet while this musical heterogeneity dovetails easily with the allegory of cultural hybridity and diaspora that Abbas and others have argued is at the heart of *Chungking Express*, it largely floats free of social metaphor in other films by Wong (or at least, it becomes more difficult to adduce allegory as the music score's governing principle in such examples). How else, then, are we to make sense of Wong's eclectic and idiosyncratic selection of music? One possible answer is in the way Wong exploits music from different cultures to help streamline the transnational ambitions of his films. In this way, Wong's music selection becomes a shrewd strategy to augment his films' global allure. This is a viable consideration for a director whose most loyal and receptive audience is found abroad, but still it only tells us part of the story.

Invoking Wong's self-characterisation as the 'DJ' of his films is central to how we might illuminate the underlying imperatives of his music selection. Echoing the scoring practice of certain Hollywood auteurs of the late 1960s and 1970s, Wong rakes his own record

collection for personal favourites, and foregrounds these appropriated tracks in his films as a mark of 'personal' expression.[3] (This practice, which has become assimilated into the discursive armoury of auteur filmmakers, is not primarily a commercial gesture, nor is it the case that such appropriated tracks are not intricately sutured into the fabric of narrative and theme). In an important sense, this 'authoring' of the soundtrack recasts the director as 'DJ', and arguably affords him a greater command of his film's score than would be the case working with a commissioned composer (exceptions, such as the close collaboration between Orson Welles and Bernard Herrmann, are rare). Directors highlight this new freedom of musical expression by interpolating the song or theme in prominent and distinctive ways. In *Jackie Brown* (1997), for example, there is a formal pleasure taken in Quentin Tarantino's palpable exaggeration of source music, as the abrasive use of a Delphonics song is linked to the switching on and off of a car radio – such manipulations in sound design remind us of the director's bravura recycling of the appropriated song. For such filmmakers, this kind of sonic self-consciousness intensifies what Michel Chion calls 'added value', that is, 'the expressive and informative value with which a sound enriches a given image so as to create the definite impression...that this information or expression "naturally" comes from what is seen, and what is already contained in the image itself'.[4] Wong's distinctive musical selection can be situated within a postclassical tradition of auteur film scoring, which subordinates the traditional function of appropriated music (e.g. to provide temporal markers or vessels for nostalgic reverie – 'sonic time capsules', in Harlan Kennedy's phrase[5]) to a reflexivity that suggests something of the director's personal history with the song being showcased.

The extent to which Wong's music selection is bound up with authorial expressivity is further illuminated when we consider the influence of this music upon the genesis of his films. Wong commences film production armed with few definite ingredients: a schematic narrative, an assembled cast and crew, exact locations, and specific

musical fragments.[6.] According to Wong, this music invariably 'inspires something visual for me'[7.], and consequently, narrative scenarios and their dramatisation are mobilised around the expressive properties of these pre-recorded themes. In addition, Wong plays segments of his score on the set and during postproduction editing in order to establish a scene's visual and dramatic rhythm. Such extensive engagement with the music score is not without precedent in cinema history, but it is atypical and certainly much divorced from conventional practice in Hong Kong film production. Indeed, it is the norm in Hong Kong for film music to be added late in the postproduction stage, as rejection of direct sound makes the dubbing of dialogue the first priority. Another Hong Kong filmmaker to have situated music centrifugally in the filmmaking process is John Woo, and it is not incidental that his and Wong's epithets ('The Mozart of Mayhem' and 'The MTV auteur' respectively) place emphasis on a sensitivity to the film score.[8.] The titles equally suggest something of the directors' individual styles. 'The Mozart of Mayhem' evokes a formal expansiveness, dynamism, and operatic style nonetheless anchored in classical principles of organisation; 'The MTV auteur' encapsulates a negotiation between a personal impulse and a populist tendency, a contemporary aesthetic with an emphasis on form and visual fragmentation. It is worth noting that Wong's reputation as a hip, ultra-contemporary auteur often fails to chime with his predilection for anachronistic pop songs (i.e. the American pop tunes from the 1950s and 60s in *Chungking Express*). Yet these songs are revivified by their filmic context, and are allied to elements that are resolutely fashionable: beautiful performers, vivid photography, and engaging, offbeat narratives. In a review of *Chungking Express*, Geoff Andrew enthuses that 'never has "California Dreamin'" sounded so...well, like the film, so gloriously hip'.[9.] This is 'added value' in reverse, the film's narrative and visual elements inflecting the reception and meaning of a song well-known to most audiences (particularly Westerners); and the song's filmic existence then becomes assimilated into the archive of meanings and associations

that the song accrues in its cultural traverse, an archive that, in the first instance, Wong self-consciously activated and exploited.

In this chapter, I am concerned with the narrative and thematic functions of Wong's music use in *Chungking Express*. Most critical writings on the film have tended to concentrate on the film's coherence as an allegory of modern Chinese diaspora, as Hong Kong moved closer to reunification with the mainland (and this secondary level of interpretation is another way in which the film could appear a product of its time).[10.] The film's score does nothing to impair this allegorical reading (it goes some way, in fact, to sustain it). David Bordwell, however, argues that much is of interest in the narrative and stylistic unity of *Chungking Express*: 'taking [the film] as an exercise in comparative romance accounts better for its formal finesse'.[11.] This coherence between style and narrative bears out in an analysis of music in *Chungking Express*, and will be key to my discussion of the film. Examining how the film's music is formally integrated into individual sequences, as well as how it is distributed across the film as a whole, allows us to disclose both character traits and the shifting relationship among agents. As we shall see, *Chungking Express* (scored mostly with appropriated music, but also featuring two specially composed cues) exhibits a sophisticated engagement with its musical selection, assigning multiple functions to its 'wall-to-wall' score.

Romantic Overtures: *Chungking Express*

With some films, you can...carry two CDs into the studio and voila, you get all you want for your soundtrack.

Wong Kar-wai[12.]

Chungking Express splices together two narrative strands. In the first story, Officer 223 (Takeshi Kaneshiro) brushes past a blonde woman as he pursues a suspect through central Kowloon. 223, heartbroken by a failed romance, gorges on cans of expired pineapple to lament his girlfriend's departure; meanwhile, the blonde woman (Brigitte Lin) recruits a gang of Indian smugglers to ferry a shipment of cocaine out of

Hong Kong. When the smugglers make off with the drugs, the blonde woman launches a desperate search before word of the heist reaches her supplier. 223, determined to fall in love again, approaches the blonde woman in a bar, whereupon they drink whisky, rent a room, and spend a chaste night together. The next morning, the cop goes jogging and is heartened when the blonde pages him a birthday greeting. Later, the woman, unsuccessful in her hunt for the Indian smugglers, shoots dead the drug supplier. The plot of the first story culminates when 223 physically collides with Faye (Faye Wong), an action symmetrical to that of the opening scene, and ultimately signalling a shift in the film's 'interest-focus'.[13.]

The first story interweaves four main musical cues, each of which is accorded motivic association with specific characters or spaces. An uptempo, percussive Indian motif is harnessed to action involving the drug smugglers; a jazz theme accompanies the night shared by 223 and the blonde woman; electronic music is allied principally to the blonde's drug trafficking activity; and a reggae song denotes the space traversed by the western drug supplier. It is a marked feature of this story's score that characters are not only individuated by different musical themes, but also by strikingly distinct musical idioms, as the score becomes a skewed cultural and stylistic hybrid.

In the opening sequence, specially composed electronic music (by Frankie Chan and Roel A. Garcia) accompanies smudged imagery of a neon-streaked Kowloon district, through which the blonde woman and 223 will pass (each other). If the scene's stop-motion imagery visually disorients the spectator, the fast-tempo techno motif – featuring a fluctuating bass line and jarring strings that threaten to tip the melodic line into dissonance – lends little auditory stability to the action, and is keyed to evoke the pulse and exigency of the modern urban Hong Kong jungle ('Chungking Jungle' is the film's Cantonese title). We may note the way the scene is structured both narratively and musically to create a self-contained, unified episode. As narrative action, the sequence moves between three phases: it introduces the blonde woman,

inaugurates Officer 223 into the action, and finally draws the two figures together in a fleeting encounter. Musically, the score's techno composition (specially tailored to the rhythm and duration of the action) unfolds as a coherent and unified text, its coda precisely synchronised to the resolution of the scene's story action. The formal unity of the musical theme also reinforces the sense of structural coherence that we find in the action's visual treatment (i.e. the consistent presence of stop-motion, the fade-out at the scene's climax and so forth).

If the techno motif is anchored primarily to functions of unity and mood (i.e. evoking teeming activity by flirting with atonality), the reggae song – 'Things in Life', by Dennis Brown – is burdened with a greater variety of tasks. We first hear the song after coins are placed into a jukebox in a bar run by the drug supplier[14.]; the song – with its distinctive two-note trumpet intro – is embedded in the world of the fiction, though its dynamics and clarity in the sound mix endow the song with nondiegetic prominence. 'Things in Life' next appears when the blonde woman arrives at the bar in search of the drug supplier. Here, a restrictive visual composition prevents the spectator from clear recognition of the narrative space. Yet when the blonde woman asks a bartender 'where he is', a fragment of 'Things in Life' – including, most significantly, the striking trumpet hook – underscores the dialogue, and confirms for the spectator that 'he' refers to the drug supplier. The emphasis accorded the song in its first appearance (its sound level and clarity, along with a visual close-up of the jukebox) is surely a factor in Wong's subtler use of the song here. Relying principally on the tune's memorable two-note introduction to orient the spectator to the narrative surroundings, the scene establishes 'Things in Life' in motivic relation to both the drug supplier and the bar he presides over.[15.] The song then maintains a steady sound level as a visual ellipsis cuts to the blonde woman wandering Kowloon's streets, a brace of vehicles streaming past her. As the soundtrack modifies its dynamics to accommodate both the barking car horns and the blonde woman's

indifferent voiceover dialogue, the hint of cacophony is regulated by points of synchronicity between the song and the ambient noise (on occasion, the sound of the car horns roughly coincides with the trumpet melody). Narratives that conspire to keep two protagonists apart have inevitably to crosscut between them, and once the blonde woman's voiceover narration concludes, the scene switches attention to 223. The song bridges this spatial transition and fades out as 223's voiceover leads the spectator into new story action. Less than a minute in duration, this fragment of 'Things in Life' displays a surprising adaptability to the demands of the sequence: moving between different classical functions, it serves as a leitmotif for a character and place, underscores voiceover dialogue and diegetic sound, and provides continuity between parallel lines of action.

But the song also confers authorial commentary upon the blonde drug trafficker. As we shall see, *Chungking Express* dramatises the struggle of its characters to accept and embrace the forces of change (a theme that socio-allegorical critics construe as resonant with the social flux collectively experienced in the build-up to Hong Kong's return to China). The blonde woman epitomises not just a wariness of change, but a determination to conquer change. This phobic reaction bleeds into the minor details of her life, as she reveals in voiceover: 'Somehow I've started being very cautious. Whenever I wear a raincoat I put on sunglasses. You never know when it'll rain and when it'll be sunny'. Thus armed against random turns in the climate, the blonde woman seeks mastery of change by pre-empting and outstripping it. Most subtly (because the song and voiceover occur simultaneously, dividing our attention) 'Things in Life' functions in gentle counterpoint to the woman's narration. The male voice sings: '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'. While the blonde woman's voiceover belies a suspicion of change, the song urges the woman to cede her resistance to change, to capitulate to its meandering and arbitrary drift.[16.]

Wong will situate the song in a more direct interaction with dialogue when 223 meets the blonde woman in a bar. As languorous saxophone music washes wearily over the action, the blonde woman's voiceover warns: 'Knowing a person doesn't mean they'll love you. They change. They may like pineapple today and something else tomorrow'. A cut (matched aurally to an abrupt halting of the lilting sax motif) leads us into parallel action involving the drug supplier, and the opening bars of 'Things in Life' accompany the Westerner's passionate clinch with a woman. Our attention is directed to the soundtrack by narratively redundant shots of a jukebox (from which the song issues) and we hear the same lyrical fragment as in the earlier scene before the sequence returns to the blonde woman and 223. Ostensibly punctuating the main sequence with action that is narratively inessential, Wong's crosscutting marks a contrast between the Westerner's uninhibited sexual expression (his leitmotif's emphasis on a necessity for 'change' underlining the suggestion of promiscuity) and the essentially virtuous activity of 223 and the blonde woman (whose cautious voiceover equates change with emotional heartache). While crosscutting exposes contrasting activity, the soundtrack creates a dialogue between voiceover (revealing character traits) and music (discursively reacting to these traits).

The second story in *Chungking Express* begins as 223 accidentally bumps into Faye, an eccentric daydreamer who serves at a popular fast-food counter. Soon, Faye notices Officer 663 (Tony Leung Chiu-wai), a regular visitor to the counter and romantic partner to a beautiful stewardess (Valerie Chow). When the stewardess leaves him, 663 begins to talk to inanimate objects in his apartment, concerned that they are sharing in his trauma; in the meantime, Faye develops a crush on the broken-hearted cop. After the stewardess leaves keys at the counter for 663, Faye secretly enters the cop's apartment, returning regularly to tidy and refurnish the rooms. One day 663 returns to the apartment unexpectedly and catches Faye as she decorates. Suddenly alert to Faye's attentions, 663 arranges a date with the countergirl but

is disappointed when she fails to keep their rendezvous. Instead, Faye decamps to California and becomes a stewardess. When she returns, a year later, she learns that 663 has taken ownership of the fast-food counter, and agrees to give him a mock boarding pass for an imaginary flight.

While a host of thematic, narrative, and stylistic parallels connect the two parts, only one music cue straddles both stories. The jazz theme, with its slow, rhythmic drumbeat and saxophone melody, helps emphasise parallel action in the two narrative strands. It is first heard when 223 and the blonde woman meet in a bar, and is reprised when the characters spend a vestal night together (the blonde falls asleep while 223 watches television and gorges on junk food). In the second story, the jazz motif appears as 663 awaits the arrival of Faye, who, rather than keep their date, absconds to America. These rhyming situations are linked by a promise of romance that is frustrated in different ways. It is with particular irony, then, that Wong chooses the jazz idiom, with all its connotations of decadence and sexuality, to underscore the characters' essentially chaste relationships. Moreover, by establishing this motif as the film's sole musical linchpin, Wong accords its accompanying scenes special prominence; and indeed, the complexities and strains of romantic union they depict is a central theme woven not only through *Chungking Express*, but through Wong's entire oeuvre.

How else does *Chungking Express* create a sense of musical coherence between its two stories? Ackbar Abbas has suggested that the film be thought of as a 'comedy of the fetish'.[17.] Each of the protagonists, he points out, is ascribed some kind of fetishistic trait: 223's addiction to pineapple and jogging; the blonde woman's attachment to her raincoat and sunglasses; 663's penchant for female flight attendants; and Faye's preoccupation with California. Correspondingly, we may argue that the *film* makes a fetish out of its soundtrack, a fetish no less comically insistent than those ascribed the characters. The fetishised score here epitomises an engagement with

music symptomatic of the postclassical, auteur-based tradition of film scoring that I describe above. In *Chungking Express*, all of the main musical cues are subject to reprisal, and the usage of one in particular – the West Coast folk song 'California Dreamin'' – is fetishistically reiterated, dominating the soundscape in the film's second story through vigorous repetition. The music score is foregrounded in other ways as well. We may think, for example, of the numerous close-up shots of the jukebox in the Westerner's bar, which linger upon the manipulations of light created by the gleaming, revolving discs; in such shots, the jukebox is put forward as an object for aesthetic contemplation, and fetishised, essentially, as an item of both visual and sonic pleasure. Sometimes the fetishised score roots its motivation in the diegesis, and consequently Wong's characters are shown to fixate on particular musical pieces (e.g. the drug supplier's frequent jukebox selection of 'Things in Life'). If musical continuity between the film's two stories is apparently scant, it is important to observe that a certain kind of musical *treatment* (i.e. highly self-conscious and palpable) is consistent throughout both parts of *Chungking Express*.

Symmetrically, the second story is scored with four main motifs, but these are much closer in idiom than their stylistically disparate counterparts in part one. Aside from the interconnecting jazz motif, music in the second story is comprised entirely of Western and indigenous pop songs. The intricately harmonic 'California Dreamin'' by The Mamas and the Papas, and Dinah Washington's wistful ballad 'What a Difference a Day Makes', are set alongside a Cantonese-language version of 'Dreams', a song originally made popular by The Cranberries.[18.] A glance at the song titles reveals an emphasis on certain kinds of contemplation, apt for a set of characters marked out as romantic and solipsistic. Most significantly, each of the songs intersects with the film's thematisation of change and transition, and thus may be understood in relation to the conceptual use of music in the first story (i.e. the emphasis on change in Dennis Brown's reggae song). (In their evocation of change, moreover, the songs here are also

apt to bolster socio-allegorical readings of the film.) Let us consider these motifs in more detail.

Wings of Desire: California Dreamin'

When Chris Doyle (my cinematographer) asked me what this film was about, I played 'California Dreamin'' to him.

Wong Kar-wai[19.]

In the second part of *Chungking Express*, Wong Kar-wai explores different options for incorporating and showcasing popular songs. While songs can impose formal limits on the way a scene plays out, they can also provide solutions for filmmakers: difficulties in the pacing of a scene, for example, can be overcome by aligning narrative and musical rhythms. In addition, films will often exploit a song for the archive of meanings and associations accrued during its pre-cinematic existence. However, these factors sometimes present aesthetic and connotative dilemmas for filmmakers. The 1960s folk-rock song 'California Dreamin'', for example, does not automatically lend itself to filmic assimilation. Like any other song, 'California Dreamin'' possesses a structural integrity that resists pliability to the discrete formal underpinnings of a narrative sequence. Moreover, its pre-filmic appropriation by the American counterculture as an anthem for anti-Vietnam attitudes could hardly, on the face of it, add value to Wong's narrative of contemporary Chinese ardour. How, then, does Wong attempt to exploit or subordinate these formal and cultural aspects of the song?

Typically, scenes in *Chungking Express* are scored around either musical or narrative principles of organisation; therefore the song is carved into cue-like segments (which function in subordination to the narrative scene) or is allowed to retain its autonomy in the style of music video (thereby carpentering the narrative action to reflect its own formal arrangement). (We have already encountered, in the Introduction, an example of the former principle as it is manifest in *As Tears Go By*.) A more complex application of these strategies involving 'California Dreamin'' occurs at the start of *Chungking Express*' second

story. Wong introduces the song at the narrative's point of bifurcation, as the opening guitar hook bridges part one's culminating freeze-frame and fade-out. A cut follows, and Officer 663 approaches Faye at the fast-food counter. Despite suffusing the soundscape, 'California Dreamin'' resounds diegetically from Faye's stereo and its salience draws the attention of the characters ('Like noisy music?' 663 self-consciously asks).[20.] But while the song is initially foregrounded, the sequence subsequently sets about disassembling and qualifying its primacy, tampering with the song's structuring agency. Wong puts this transformation into play by distressing the song in flagrant fashion. In the middle of its flute-led middle eight, the song is made to perform a kind of sonic jump-cut which alerts us to a temporal shift in the action. (Faye is still seen swaying to the music at the counter, but subtle differences in her appearance visually confirm the flash-forward.) This ellipsis enables the scene to convey the passing of time, but the song's flute interlude is spliced against the opening verse of the song, now destined to repeat itself; while the scene vaults forward through time, in other words, the song shuttles backwards. This formal interference appears *prima facie* to enable Wong to extend the song's duration, in order, perhaps, that it may match the duration of the sequence, but this apparent motive is abruptly undercut when a character halts the song's progression on the stereo. After a stretch of unscored dialogue, Faye restarts 'California Dreamin'' at a lower sound level, and the song runs through to its resolution and the conclusion of the sequence. Given that the scene jumps forward in time, we might expect for the song to do likewise, to corroborate the action's temporal progression; but by reiterating an earlier part of the song, Wong indicates that Faye is prone to listen to the song *ad infinitum*, and thus tacitly cues us to her proclivity for routine, as well as to her habitual fetishisation of the folk song.

At certain points, music appears to govern the scene's dramatic unfolding. We realise, for instance, that despite the truncations and ruptures it undergoes, 'California Dreamin'' has been heard (albeit in

staggered fashion) from beginning to end, while the boundaries of the sequence are defined by the song's start and end points (along with accompanying symmetrical images of 663).[21.] Moreover, Wong cuts the final shots in the sequence (which alternate between Faye and 663 as she gazes after him) to accommodate the song's coda, distending images and holding gazes that might have otherwise been more economically treated. Yet the sequence also asserts independence from the structuring influence of 'California Dreamin'' in the various disturbances it inflicts upon the song's formal integrity. Neither the song nor the image track is accorded structural autonomy of the sequence, therefore: if the scene's final shots are dilated to accommodate the song's full expression, so, reciprocally, is the song stretched out (through elisions and retardations) to allow greater freedom of the narrative action. And because, in part, of the various mutilations to the song (each of which palpably bares the device of the soundtrack), 'California Dreamin'' is as salient here as it would be showcased in a music video sequence - while at the same time circumventing the formal limitations of such sequences.

The cultural and historical baggage with which 'California Dreamin'' is loaded presents Wong with a different challenge. How can the song be liberated from its legion of pre-filmic associations and undertones? *Forrest Gump* (1994), released in the same year as *Chungking Express*, appropriates 'California Dreamin'' precisely to exploit this army of connotations. As well as marking the historical period of the action, the song underscores images both of American troops in Vietnam and a commune of hippies in the U.S. It thereby evokes not only the soldiers' desire for homecoming that counter-culturists recognised in the song's refrain, but also the anti-war sentiments (and affiliation with folk-rock) represented by the hippie movement.[22.] Wong is not concerned to activate any of these associations for his modern urban romance tale, and that these meanings are effectively subdued is one measure of Wong's idiosyncratic application of the song. A significant reason that these meanings remain dormant in *Chungking Express* is because, unlike

Forrest Gump which creates a supportive context for the song's associations, 'California Dreamin'' is here abstracted from its cultural and historical attachments and to a certain extent 'defamiliarised' by alien surroundings. Moreover, Wong makes 'California Dreamin'' a musical analogue for Faye's psychology, a fallout of which shifts the emphasis from the collective to the personal: no longer does the song represent the liberation from conflict desired by a collective mass, but is rather harnessed to the goals and desires of a single character. (If, typically, song lyrics only loosely intersect with character psychology, *Chungking Express* makes the overlap much more explicit: Faye literally fantasises about departing for California, and her obsession with the song works to both reflect and nourish that fantasy.) Finally, the extramusical meaning of the song is further repressed by a receptive phenomena defined as 'reduced listening' by Michel Chion. Taking his lead from Pierre Schaeffer, Chion defines reduced listening as a 'listening mode that focuses on the traits of the sound itself, independent of its cause and of its meaning'.[23] Wong encourages this listening mode by the insistent repetition of 'California Dreamin'' in the film's second part, as Faye addictively listens to the song on her stereo (the sound's 'cause'). Much as sustained repetition of a word results in its denotative aspect being marginalized in our attention, the cyclical performance of 'California Dreamin'' inculcates the spectator to concentrate either on the textual qualities of the song or on accompanying visual and narrative information. I would argue that in this listening mode, the song's extramusical meanings share the same fate as its denotative, lyrical content: they move centrifugally to the peripheries of our attention as acoustical properties assume centre stage.

Repetition defines the usage of 'California Dreamin'' in *Chungking Express*. If the film's apparently random and miscellaneous collection of songs puts us in mind of the jukebox that the film so obsessively exalts, the serial use of 'California Dreamin'' compels us to feel that the jukebox has indissolubly jammed.[24] The song's habitual presence

may be diegetically moored to Faye's mania and stargazing, but it also makes tangible the film's surface, transcending character traits and the diegesis to perform an authorial, commentative purpose. But what exactly is the song employed to comment upon and how does it (and other music in the film) dovetail with the broader themes of *Chungking Express*? If characterisation of Wong's scoring practice in terms of the jukebox principle (or the director as DJ) bears an implicit suggestion of arbitrariness, we shall see that music in *Chungking Express* (both in terms of selection and interpolation) is, in fact, rigorously harnessed to the film's overarching themes.

Flights of Fancy

Change doesn't come that easy.

Officer 663

David Bordwell has observed that certain Hong Kong films display an indifference to the psychological development of their protagonists. Whereas Hollywood narratives typically trace an attitudinal arc of maturation in the central agent, in some Hong Kong films, Bordwell argues, the protagonist is fundamentally unchanged by story events.[25.] *Chungking Express* is exceptional in this respect because not only are characters made to undergo psychological change, but they are consumed by, and explicitly made to reflect upon, their own ambivalence towards change. This emphasis on change is one marker of an abiding theme in Wong's films: time and transition. The passage of time brings inexorable transition: circumstances will change, even when personality traits and desires remain the same. In *Chungking Express*, as throngs of Hong Kong denizens shuttle by with superhuman velocity, Wong's characters are unable to get in sync with their mercurial environment. They remain cocooned in the tegument of their own conventions, but are simultaneously beset by an urge for difference, novelty, and even departure. This embodied disquiet in the face of transition has discernible allegorical undertones, but on the level of story and plot, different attitudes toward change fundamentally define

the relationships among the principle characters. After Officer 663 substitutes his regular fast-food dinner for a change of meal, his air hostess girlfriend, apparently awakened to the virtues of change, jilts the cop to pursue romance elsewhere. 'California Dreamin'' alerts us to Faye's tendency for woolgathering, but her recurrent selection of the song belies a state of inertia; eventually, her decision to effect change and head for the exalted American state extinguishes (or at least defers) the promise of romance with the officer she pines for. (A hospital melodrama, *Healing Hearts* (Gary Tang, 2001) makes allusion to this aspect of *Chungking Express*, with its portrayal of a character perpetually spellbound by a pop ballad: 'Do you get bored playing the same song over and over?' complains Dr Ching (Tony Leung Chiu-wai). 'It's no different from playing with the same toy'.) In *Chungking Express* obsessive attachment to reassuring items of familiarity (Faye's favourite pop tune, 663's fast-food meal, the blonde woman's raincoat and sunglasses in part one) is a symptom of a phobic recoiling from change, which makes these characters critically alienated from a modern Hong Kong climate dubbed 'Asia's transit lounge' – a label that suggests a seedbed for change, with the exchange of imported and exported influences creating a steady cultural osmosis.

The label is also apt for a film that makes flight its key metaphor. References to airline travel not only pepper the dialogue and *mise en scène* (e.g. in the form of model planes, stewardess uniforms, boarding passes and so forth) but also give expression to the film's thematisation of change (and, as we shall see, music is intimately bound up in this expression). But more broadly, the metaphor of flight assumes various forms in many of Wong's films, most typically to mark fundamental polarities between characters. Of the troubled homosexual couple at the centre of *Happy Together*, Wong has remarked that the literally flighty Ho Po-wing (Leslie Cheung) is like an airplane to Lai Yiu-fai's (Tony Leung Chiu-wai) airport, referring as much to Ho's emotional restlessness as to his corporeal absences; Lai, on the other hand, is emotionally and physically grounded, and it is their basic

incompatibility that sets in motion the breakdown of their relationship.[26.] It is a dynamic that hallmarks many of Wong's central pairings. *In the Mood for Love* invests this dynamic with a bitterly ironic twist: while their respective partners defy social propriety by conducting an adulterous love affair, Chow (Tony Leung Chiu-wai) and Su (Maggie Cheung) are, to extend Wong's analogy, two airplanes struggling to get off the ground, unable to consummate their own romance and bound on a rack of duty, routine, and emotional sobriety. (We may also note that, once again, the characters that become psychologically 'airborne', i.e. achieving some kind of liberation from conventional emotional trappings, are also to undertake a literal flight away from those forces that conspire to constrain them; in this case, the spouses must travel abroad to carry out their secret liaison.) The relationship need not be romantic for Wong's flight schema to play out. Variant emotional polarities can also be represented by untamed wildness and transgression in the face of law and order. In *As Tears Go By*, the clear-headed Wah endeavours to curb Fly's daredevil misdemeanours. (In addition, the film makes air travel a prominent visual motif, as the interchange of take-offs and landings reflects the pull of internal forces at work in Wah's conflicted allegiance to Fly; and, as we noted in the previous chapter, such imagery can also be understood as a faint salute to *Top Gun*, a film to which *As Tears Go By* intermittently alludes.)

Days of Being Wild (1991) weaves metaphor around a more organic form of flight. In voiceover, Yuddi (Leslie Cheung) narrates the tale of a fabled bird born without legs, destined to fly endlessly in order to remain alive. Yuddi himself is an *Ah Fei* type, a Cantonese description for a rebellious youth (the film's local title is 'The Story of *Ah Fei*'). *Fei* is the Chinese word meaning 'to fly', and Yuddi's folk tale is clearly meant to evoke his own disaffected uprising. Yet Yuddi's attempts at meaningful rebellion end in frequent abortion. The image of a lamed bird hints toward a fundamental paralysis that, in Yuddi, transmogrifies into emotional impotence, and while the bird's inexorable flight mirrors

the protagonist's unrest, Yuddi is finally forced to concede that his existential recalcitrance has been absurd: 'The fact is that this bird hasn't gone anywhere. It was dead from the start'. As my analysis of the film in the next chapter will indicate, Yuddi's impulse to fly spreads discontent among the characters. Perceiving monogamy as an impediment to mobility, Yuddi obdurately discards a girlfriend who has suggested marriage, and takes up with the carefree Mimi (Carina Lau), a bargirl who chirrups and flutters but ultimately fails to understand her lover's complexity. And later, Yuddi dragoons his covetous foster mother into revealing his true parentage, who then tearfully tells him 'You want to fly? Now fly. Fly far away'.

Narratively, 'flight' can represent loss and abandonment. For the socio-allegorical critic, each of these films invokes Asia's 'transit lounge' and the politics of transition through an emphasis on departure. Wong's characters move in and out of Hong Kong: in *Happy Together*, Ho and Lai act out their doomed romance against the murky indoor spaces of Buenos Aires; in *Days of Being Wild*, Yuddi pursues his biological mother to Manila; the cheating spouses of *In the Mood for Love* make frequent trips abroad to carry out their affair; and in *Chungking Express*, both 663's stewardess girlfriend and Faye seek satisfaction amid the sunny climes of California. It is striking that characters in Wong's films routinely fly away from Hong Kong, and it is equally perceptible that many of the characters die or fail in their alien environments, or else return disillusioned (though not necessarily unchanged) by their peregrinations.

In *Chungking Express* the flight motif is a metaphor for change. Wong's score is intimately coalesced around the expression and embellishment of these themes, and can flesh out apparently abstract compositions. When Faye surreptitiously enters 663's apartment, 'California Dreamin'' nondiegetically sweeps over two echoic shots: in the first landscape shot, an airplane ascends into blue sky while, in the foreground, an airline uniform hangs from a clothes line; the next shot is of Faye on the apartment balcony, wistfully launching paper planes

into the air.[27.] Self-evidently, the two shots mark the distance between action (actual transportation) and reverie (imaginary transportation/imagined transformation). But the first shot in particular combines sound and image to symbolically encapsulate Faye's fantasy (of a trip to California) and foreshadow a subsequent course of action (which will engender change). The image schematises the visualisable items of Faye's daydream (airplane, stewardess outfit) as the music track furnishes the shot with more precise detail (specifying Faye's intended destination, which Wong could not straightforwardly have conveyed visually; and exploiting the song's leitmotif purpose to attach the image to Faye's psychology). And the moment also adumbrates future action, as Faye will adopt the stewardess accoutrements, board an airplane, and pursue the song's promise of 'safe and warm' mollification in California.[28.]

Air travel is also engraved upon the appearance of Dinah Washington's 'What a Difference a Day Makes' in part two of *Chungking Express*. Like 'Things in Life' and 'California Dreamin'' the song, a string-dominated ballad, meditates on change: 'What a difference a day makes/Twenty-four little hours'. Although the lyric celebrates the beginning of a love affair, in *Chungking Express* it eulogises an expired romance: 663 narrates a nostalgic flashback in which 'What a Difference a Day Makes' underscores images of the cop and his stewardess former girlfriend as they cavort sexily in his apartment. 663's voiceover sorrowfully reflects, 'I thought we'd fly all the way, like a plane with a full tank...I didn't expect it to change course'. Such inflections warp the song's refrain 'What a difference a day makes' and imbue it with the affective coloration of a lament.[29.] What is more, the characters' romance is made synonymous with flight. 663 amuses himself with a toy aircraft, transforming his girlfriend's body into a runway, while Dinah Washington's nondiegetic vocals compete with a litany of flight safety instructions that broadcast from a nearby stereo. (Had 663 paid attention to this ironic commentary, the film obliquely implies, he might have anticipated the turbulence in a relationship destined to

crash and burn). Later in the film 'What a Difference a Day Makes' is heard at the fast-food counter, after 663 learns of Faye's affections. In this context, the song's placement is purposely disorienting, because by now the spectator is well-primed to expect 'California Dreamin'' to trumpet from Faye's radio. With the displacement of Faye's trademark anthem, *Chungking Express* flies in the face of its own system of motivic association, and short-circuits the conventional folk wisdom that leitmotifs should unproblematically denote specific characters or things.[30.] If the switching of songs compels the spectator to greater sonic attentiveness, dialogue also focuses our ear: 'That song doesn't suit you', 663 is made to say, in self-conscious reflection of the spectator's own judgment. We might argue that 'What a Difference a Day Makes' here finds something like its true expression, as, at this narrative stage, 663 becomes conversant with the affection he feels for Faye: 'My yesterday was blue, dear/Today I'm a part of you dear'. This time, then, narrative context and lyrical content find harmony. Most significantly, when Faye substitutes 'California Dreamin'' with 'What a Difference a Day Makes', it suggests not only that she is inviting change, but also that important parallels link Faye and the stewardess. Indeed, in 663's apartment, we witness Faye's preoccupation with her love rival's remaining vestiges (the model aircraft, flight uniform, loose strands of hair and so forth) while both women pursue identical careers in the transport sector and even fall for and abandon the same man. These parallels assimilate neatly into the film's emphasis on doubling and identity (evident, for example, in the film's two rhyming stories and the correspondence between its male protagonists, e.g. their shared profession and titular identification by numbers); more broadly, the linking of agents instantiates an authorial preoccupation with doppelganger relations that threads throughout Wong's oeuvre. In *Chungking Express*, Faye flirts with the notion of stepping into the ex-girlfriend's identity, and briefly commandeers the Dinah Washington song that accompanies the stewardess' first appearance. But overwhelmed by the need for change, Faye discards the emotional prop

of 'California Dreamin'', repudiates the ill-fitting 'What a Difference a Day Makes', and clears the sonic runway for an unaccompanied flight to the American state she extols.

If Faye's kinship with the stewardess is defined by a sense of interchange, *Chungking Express* weaves character symmetries within and between its two stories. Parallel action, motifs, compositions, and music cues create echoic connections, even between characters who never meet. The interchange of roles is complete when Faye returns from California to find 663 the owner of the fast-food counter, while 'California Dreamin'' thunders pristinely from the former cop's stereo. Like Faye, 663 has come around to the prospect of change, and the film strikes a hopeful final note with Faye's counterfeit boarding pass: 'Where to?' she asks. 'Wherever you want to take me', 663 answers. At last in sync, the two characters can seize change by the wings, and make their future ascents together.

MTV moments and the Cantopop Kingdom

No sex. No drugs. Maybe a little rock 'n' roll.

Local pop star Edison Chen on Cantopop[31.]

Jamaican reggae, Hindi pop, American folk-rock: Wong's score is appropriately far-reaching for a festival filmmaker sensitive to cross-cultural transparency and accessibility. But what does this imply about the place of indigenous music in *Chungking Express*? Aside from a specially composed theme in part one, Chinese popular music is represented only by the Cantonese-language ballad 'Dreams' in the film's second story. Yet, in the domestic strain of marketable pop music known as 'Cantopop', Wong has at his disposal a global phenomenon that is strikingly fertile and profitably diasporan. Since Cantopop is widely considered – and dismissed as – a paradigm of pure commerce, the wide-scale economic advantages in exploiting such music are obvious and by no means overlooked by local film studios and record labels. And despite the indifference to the genre afforded by scholars and critics in the West – the description of Chinese pop as

'tackily soulful' typifies the prevailing bias – there remains a vast diasporic fan-base for the suave and androgynous idols that croon apolitical and 'hummable' laments to love.[32.] While intersecting in significant ways, the Hong Kong film and pop industries are laced with parallels. First, popular Hong Kong cinema and Cantopop songs are farragos of inter- and intra-cultural influence. Pop lyrics are in Cantonese, but the ballads bear the influence of Taiwanese, Japanese, and Western popular music in song structure and instrumentation. Second, like the local cinema in the 1990s, record companies began marketing their product toward pan-Asian audiences, with even the revered 'Four Heavenly Sky Kings' (solo idols Jacky Cheung, Leon Lai, Andy Lau, and Aaron Kwok) recording songs in the more widely-comprehended Mandarin. At the same time, indigenous Taiwanese and mainland Chinese ('Mandapop') sounds threatened to overshadow the popularity of Cantopop, much as the territory's domestic cinema would be impoverished by Hollywood's stampeding imports in the mid-1990s. A much more direct dialogue between Hong Kong cinema and the Cantopop industry obtains in relation to the star performer, who, almost without exception, straddles both media and oscillates between different facets of a shrewdly cultivated, densely intertextual persona. (The complexity of the Hong Kong star text, and of Wong's intertextual engagement with it, will constitute the focus of discussion in the next chapter.) Because Hong Kong pop stars most typically contribute songs to films in which they act, the opportunities for cross-promotion are copious, and if we often find in such films the corollary centrality of the performer, traditionally primary elements such as story and genre become pretexts on which to hang the particular talents of the showcased star.

In Hollywood, crossover performers are relatively scarce. However, recognising that a star's multivocality can address two or more exploitable audiences, studios thus make the performer the object of large-scale cross-marketing campaigns. A two-pronged marketing strategy is typically organised around a lucrative star vehicle, creating a

dynamic of interflow between the pop song (interpolated in some fashion into the film) and the Hollywood text (which is promoted in multimedia tie-ins such as soundtracks and music videos). In the early 1990s, by which time virtually all Hong Kong stars were expected to shuttle across distinct media, Hollywood mounted extensive double-marketing campaigns around crossover figures Madonna, in *Dick Tracy* (1990), and Whitney Houston, in *The Bodyguard* (1992). Although quite dissimilar genre productions, the films share some instructive affinities. First, transparency and recognition govern the performer's physical appearance. This means that, despite the presence of generic iconography (e.g. the accoutrements of a 1930s chanteuse in *Dick Tracy*), the star remains easily recognisable and does not radically diverge from the iconic minutiae of her contemporaneous image. (Hong Kong stars, in part due to the abundance of intertextual identities they assume, must be perpetually chameleonic: 'Madonna changes her image once every few years', complains one Cantopop star. 'We do it every three months'.[33.] *Chungking Express* also provides a flagrant counterpoint to Hollywood's strategy by camouflaging occasional pop icon Brigitte Lin in such opaque ornaments as wig and sunglasses). Second, in both Hollywood films the star is cast as a singer, seeking further to diminish the distance between character and performer. The star's music is thus afforded narrative licence to swell the soundtrack as scenarios woven into the story contrive the star into a performance setting; and such scenarios are moreover exploitable as extended showcases for the marketed song(s).

Unlike *Dick Tracy* and *The Bodyguard*, *Chungking Express* widens the schism between character and (pop) star. Only an audience of informed viewers will recognise that Faye Wong, the Cantopop star who plays Faye in *Chungking Express*, is the vocalist on 'Dreams' which, paradoxically, the character listens to in the film's second part. (Similarly, it requires a special kind of competency for the viewer of *As Tears Go By* to identify its star performer, Andy Lau, as the lead vocalist on 'The Price of Infatuation', one of the film's reflexive

Cantopop songs.) But for the fact that it is sung in Cantonese, to the uninformed viewer 'Dreams' is no more (or less) associated with the performer than, say, 'California Dreamin''. But if the song is not explicitly showcased in relation to the star, it is nonetheless appropriated to festoon the kind of musically-driven sequence that has accrued Wong Kar-wai the title 'MTV auteur'.

'Dreams' is appropriated almost in its entirety, suffusing the soundscape as Faye covertly revamps 663's apartment.[34.] As is preponderantly the case in music video, Wong predicates the scene's initial shots upon audiovisual parallelism. Accordingly, Faye's visual movements precisely align with the song's rhythmic pulse to generate a smooth correspondence between music and image (a procedure no doubt simplified by Wong's practice of playing music on set). Ambient sounds present an additional interface between dramatic action and the song. Of a similar scene in *Chungking Express*, in which 'California Dreamin'' is also scored to Faye's traverse of 663's apartment, Yeh Yueh-yu argues that 'reduced listening' is elicited by the subordination of ambient noise. She writes:

> Because we do not hear most of the ambient sounds, or even Faye's breathing, we experience a more direct connection with the song, and with her. As a result, another, more desirable space is opened, created solely through the reduction of our listening by the suppression of other sounds.[35.]

Ambient noise is similarly attenuated when 'Dreams' saturates the sonic field, but we may argue that the scene's few ambient sounds in fact encourage reduced listening by 'mickey-mousing' salient aspects of the song. In this way, apparently immaterial sounds are woven harmoniously into the musical structure, as when the clatter and crash of items whipped from a tablecloth lend the song a kind of ambient percussion. It is a mistake, however, to assume that such sounds have redundant narrative purpose; 'MTV-style' sequences do not immobilize plot advancement, but remain harnessed to the ordinary convoy of

meaning and narrative (and in this way are ontologically divorced from music video). While the intermittent interjections of ambient sound assert the primacy of narrative action, the duration of shots is dilated, less to visually italicise an aspect of the song than to allow the spectator opportunity to grasp some narratively significant detail. For example, when the camera lingers on Faye as she laces a bottle of water with sleeping pills, the need for narrative comprehension gains priority over audiovisual parallelism, and such moments mark the points of divergence between the visual scene and song. Meanwhile, 'Dreams' – a melodic, tonal, wholly innocuous ballad – adds value by mitigating possibly suspect or malign activity (Faye has, after all, trespassed upon 663's private residence and surreptitiously spiked his drinking water). When 'Dreams' fades at the scene's culmination and bleeds into subsequent action, the independence from music video is explicit: if music videos are organic and self-contained, 'MTV moments' in cinema must respect the principles of a broader narrative system, and are underpinned primarily by the demand for continuity and plot development.[36.]

How does *Chungking Express* thematically integrate Faye Wong's Cantopop hit? As 663 and Faye share a sanguine union at the film's climax, the camera pans to the cop's stereo, cueing the reappearance of 'Dreams', which continues to unfold beneath the credits.[37.] Although apparently allied, the characters' future is ambiguous. The cultural heterogeneity of the Cantopop genre, its tensions and incongruities, make 'Dreams' an apt reflection of the characters' own ambivalence towards place and identity, as they pursue familiarity and intimacy (the local) while in thrall of change and departure (the global). (That 'Dreams' is a Chinese recording of a Western pop ballad only reinforces this sense of ambivalence). Structurally, the song performs obliquely as a leitmotif. If 'Dreams' is assigned to augur romance between 663 and Faye, it is afforded a characteristically off-centre treatment by Wong. Hardly accompanying the two figures, the song prefigures their union when Faye infiltrates 663's private space, and reappears to obliquely

acknowledge the characters' romance at the film's climax. 'Dreams' mirrors the characters' attitudes at the end of *Chungking Express*. As such, it is a more apt theme to culminate the story (and the film) than, say, 'California Dreamin'' because it articulates a state aspired to by the characters, and finally attained by Faye and 663. As a dialogic rejoinder to the remote yearning of 'California Dreamin'', its lyrics express some kind of reconciliation between reverie and reality, while acquiescing to the knowledge that '...life is changing everyday/In every possible way'.

Music in *Chungking Express* is organised around a network of leitmotifs. In conferring multiple functions upon these songs and distributing them across the text in distinctive ways, Wong demonstrates that, despite their intrinsic autonomy, the songs can exhibit surprising suppleness. Cutting across and through stories, Wong's leitmotifs furnish seemingly fragmented, discontinuous action with coherence and unity, exposing character parallels while coalescing around a thematic disquietude towards change. In its responsiveness to narrative themes, the score generates a dialectic that is manifest not only through musical commentary upon the diegesis, but also through an interplay between songs: from 'California Dreamin'' to 'Dreams', the score maps a trajectory that parallels the psychological arc traced by the film's characters. Songs in *Chungking Express* can in this way flag subjectivities. David Martinez neatly suggests that Wong's films 'constantly flirt with the musical genre without ever slipping into it completely'.[38.] But in *Chungking Express*, Wong stages a musical of the mind, wherein songs are not merely consumed by the characters but seem to be directly wired to their interiorities; with the possible exception of 'Dreams', the songs betray an internal malaise that is not communicated between characters. Finally, its kinship with the musical bespeaks the salience afforded music in *Chungking Express*. Essentially handpicked and interpolated, *Chungking Express* generates the impression that its score has been less composed than 'authored', as

Wong writes his own paean to these personally selected songs by fetishising them in wholly reverent fashion.

Notes

[1] Quoted in Jürgen Müller, *Movies of the 90s*, Taschen, 2003, p.209.

[2] Ackbar Abbas, *Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance*, University of Minnesota Press, 1997, p.55.

[3] Quentin Tarantino accords this collagist principle a kind of fetishistic reverence. Describing the scoring of *Kill Bill* (2003), he reveals: 'We had a master recording for very few of the pieces so often I decided to go straight from my soundtrack album, not even a CD version. I liked hearing the pops and crackles and thinking, hey, that's my record, the one I bought'. Quoted in Mark Olsen, 'Turning on a Dime', *Sight and Sound* 13:10 (October 2003), p.15.

[4] Michel Chion, *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen*, edited and translated by Claudia Gorbman, Columbia University Press: New York, 1994, p.5.

[5] Harlan Kennedy, 'The Harmonious Background', *American Film* 16:2 (February 1991), p.40.

[6] Tony Rayns and Christopher Doyle, 'Don't Try for Me, Argentina', in *Projections 8*, Faber and Faber, 1998, p.155.

[7] Quoted in Laurent Tirard, *Moviemakers' Master Class: Private Lessons from the World's Foremost Directors*, Faber and Faber, 2002, p.198.

[8] See for example David Bordwell, *Planet Hong Kong: Popular Cinema and the Art of Entertainment*, Harvard University Press, 2000, p.274. These pseudonyms have been conferred upon the directors by film critics, and do not originate with the directors themselves.

[9] Geoff Andrew, 'Chungking Express', *Time Out* 1308 (September 13-20, 1995) p.75.

[10] See, for instance, Abbas, *Hong Kong*; Gina Marchetti, 'Buying American, Consuming Hong Kong: Cultural Commerce, Fantasies of Identity, and the Cinema', in *The Cinema of Hong Kong: History, Arts, Identity*, edited by Poshek Fu and David Desser, Cambridge University Press, 2000, pp.289-313; and Yeh Yueh-yu, 'A Life of Its Own: Musical Discourses in Wong Kar-wai's Films', *Post Script* 19:1 (Fall 1999), pp.120-136.

[11] Bordwell, *Planet Hong Kong*, p.283.

[12] Quoted in Jimmy Ngai and Wong Kar-wai, 'A Dialogue with Wong Kar-wai: Cutting Between Time and Two Cities', in Lalanne et al., *Wong Kar-wai*, edited by Daniele Riviere, Editions Dis Voir, 1997, p.115.

[13] Seymour Chatman proffers 'interest-focus' as a preferable term to 'focalisation', 'filter', and 'slant'; the term denotes the figure or figures in a narrative whose point of view we share (at least temporarily), and with whom we are encouraged to identify

to some degree. Seymour Chatman, *Coming to Terms: The Rhetoric of Narrative in Fiction and Film*, Cornell University Press, 1990, p.148.

[14.] Wong here revives a narrational strategy (noted in the Introduction) from *As Tears Go By*, motivating the appropriated song through a diegetic character's jukebox selection.

[15.] It is appropriate, therefore, that the song disappears from the film after the Westerner is assassinated.

[16.] Thus counterpoint in this scene is not audio/visual, but is contained purely within the soundtrack (i.e. the juxtaposition of voiceover and music which ensures the focusing of our sonic attention).

[17.] Abbas, *Hong Kong*, pp.57-8.

[18.] As with 'Take My Breath Away' in *As Tears Go By*, the 'indigenous' status of the latter song is not necessarily clear-cut, since it is a literal 'translation' rather than a stylistic overhaul of a Western composition. It presents the kind of cultural ambiguity characteristic of the film's patchwork score.

[19.] Quoted in Yeh, 'A Life of Its Own', p.126.

[20.] Motivating the salience of the score by characters in the diegesis is characteristic of Wong's music use. For example, the enveloping sounds of opera in *2046* (2004) display all the prominence of a nondiegetic score. Yet it is subsequently disclosed that the music (and its pronounced volume) is attributable to Chow's landlord, whose stereo is routinely requisitioned to drown out the din of routine family disputes.

[21.] This kind of structural unity is more typically associated with the classical score, and is identified by Kathryn Kalinak as a function often ignored by the pop score. Kalinak, *Settling the Score: Music and the Classical Hollywood Film*, University of Wisconsin Press, 1992, p.187.

[22.] 'California Dreamin'' is similarly allied to the social and historical backdrop of Vietnam in *Air America* (1990).

[23.] Chion, *Audio-Vision*, p.29.

[24.] The character of the song itself is also governed by repetition, not just in its regular AABA structure, but also in the harmonic reiterations that embroider the melodic line, e.g. 'All the leaves are brown (all the leaves are brown)/ And the sky is grey (and the sky is grey)'.

[25.] See Bordwell, *Planet Hong Kong*, pp.20-1; 183.

[26.] Wong states: '...to me, the relationship [in *Happy Together*] seems like a plane and an airport. The character Leslie Cheung plays is to me like a plane. His nature is going to land sometimes and going to take off sometimes. And the character of Tony Leung seems to me just like an airport. But sometimes, when this airport refuses to be an airport anymore and the plane has no place to land, this is the end of the relationship'. 'Asia Studios: Wong Kar-wai Exclusive Interview'.

http://www.astyle.com/interviews/members/wongkarwai.html (accessed 17/1/2002)

[27.] These two images recall a parallel juxtaposition of shots in *As Tears Go By*. Alone in Lantau Island, Ngor releases a paper plane into the air; a cut to Kowloon's night sky reveals an actual aeroplane soaring above Wah's head. Cutting on roughly parallel action here serves to underscore the physical distance between the two agents, as well as to indicate their concurrent contemplation of each other (both characters seem wistfully distracted). It also evokes the film's two distinct 'worlds', which Wah uneasily straddles. Ngor's paper construction is apt to signify the 'natural' landscape of Lantau Island (implied by shots of natural vegetation and, as the place where Ngor resides, marked as a site of benevolent femininity); in distinction, the actual aeroplane in the second shot signifies the 'technologised' urban space of Mongkok (characterised by omniscient televisions, telephones, and other electrical appliances, and – as the base of Wah's triad operations – identified as a locus of malign masculinity). Juxtaposing the two kinds of plane in this sequence thus allows Wong to assimilate a favourite authorial motif (the theme of flight) into the film's wider narrative dualism (which itself gives expression to the protagonists' conflicting desires). Moreover, this pairing of shots also recalls the bone/spacecraft juxtaposition in *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), a near-graphic match that is itself organised around the contrast between primitive 'natural' elements and modern, man-invented machinery.

[28.] Such moments reveal crucial character information. Faye's change of terrain is densely signposted by the periodic performance of 'California Dreamin'' but dialogue hardly prepares us for her departure. Wong's characters frequently turn to music or the private counsel of voiceover narration to disclose their feelings; such conduits provide a reprieve from direct communication with others in the fiction, with whom they are often out-of-sync.

[29.] Again thematic propriety governs music selection. In interviews, Wong recalls the appropriation of 'What a Difference a Day Makes' by an airline commercial some years prior to the filming of *Chungking Express*. (See, for instance, Tony Rayns, 'Poet of Time', *Sight and Sound* 5:9 (September 1995), pp.12-17.)

[30.] As exemplified by Max Steiner's famous argument: 'Every character should have a theme. In *The Informer* we used a theme to identify Victor McLaglen. A blind man could have sat in a theatre and known when Gypo was on the screen'. Quoted in Kalinak, *Settling the Score*, p.113. Wong's hoodwink also gives the lie to a sentiment expressed by one character in *Happy Together*, who says: 'You can see better with your ears'.

[31.] Quoted in Richard Corliss, 'Cantopop Kingdom', TIME.com-Asia

(http://www.time.com/time/musicgoesglobal/asia/meantopop.html)

[32.] Ivan Hewett, 'High Noon in Hong Kong', *BBC Music Magazine* 5:9 (May 1997), p.28.

[33.] Op.cit.

[34.] For informed viewers, Faye Wong's simultaneous presence on the music track and in the imagery will augment the scene's connection with music video.

[35.] Yeh, 'A Life of Its Own', p.126.

[36.] The phrase 'MTV moments' refers to MTV-style sequences in narrative film, and is borrowed from *Celluloid Jukebox: Popular Music and the Movies since the 50s*, edited by Jonathan Romney and Adrian Wooton, BFI, 1995.

[37.] It is fitting that *Chungking Express* should close with an aural and visual emphasis on music, given the way it is fetishised and exalted throughout the film.

[38.] David Martinez, 'Chasing the Metaphysical Express: Music in the Films of Wong Kar-wai' in Lalanne et al., *Wong Kar-wai*, p.31.

2. Acting Cool: Star Personae and Performance

In the last chapter's discussion of pop star performers, I identified some points of distinction between Hollywood and Hong Kong cinema. In contrast to Hollywood performers, I argued, the Hong Kong performer is encouraged to make bold strides into different media: just as Hong Kong stars from the television, fashion, and music industries are 'packaged and thrust into films by talent managers keen to use their star power in as many media as possible'[1.], so Hong Kong film stars are groomed to become fashion models, pop icons, and television guest performers. The average Hong Kong star is exceptionally prolific, displaying a productivity that is exponentially greater than that demonstrated by her Hollywood counterpart. Industrious and heterogeneous, the Hong Kong star accumulates a freight of associational baggage that not only cuts across distinct media but also traverses intra-media categories (e.g. distinct music idioms or film genres). The filmmaker that assumes the task of collaborating with an established Asian star therefore confronts a cluster of diversified or contradictory traits established by the star in previous contexts. (In this respect, we find a parallel with the host of *a priori* meanings accrued by an appropriated pop song.) It is the particular extant traits that the filmmaker chooses to appropriate, as well as those that she or he decides to discard, that are most revealing of the filmmaker's specific preoccupations and sensibilities.

In this chapter, I will attempt to elucidate the principal imperatives governing Wong's selection of stars, and to suggest how these factors intersect with the filmmaker's overarching preoccupations and ambitions. I will also examine how far Wong's visual engagement with the star conforms to conventional aesthetic practice. Through a discussion of a specific Hong Kong film star, Leslie Cheung, I shall furthermore consider the extent to which Wong provides a platform of expression (a 'vehicle') for the star's pre-established persona. My contention here will be that Wong's interplay with the star cannot be

conceptualised in terms of a straightforward 'appropriation' or 'subversion' of the star image; rather, I argue that a more complex engagement with the pre-established persona is in play. Finally, my case study around the persona of Cheung - a star whose collaboration with Wong encompasses three films – aims to chart the most significant ways in which Wong 'develops' or 'deepens' the Cheung persona within different fictional contexts.

Examining Wong's transactions within the star industry enables us to perceive the filmmaker's desire for international and domestic recognition. By studding his films with local stars that possess domestic bankability as well as pan-Asian popularity, Wong assures his films at least a modest theatrical continuance in Asian territories. It is irregular in American cinema to find a panoply of box-office stars assembled within an art film context, but the tendency in Asian cinema is for stars to cross over mainstream and art film boundaries. So prolific is the popular Asian star that forays into less commercially-viable territory pose little long-term risk to box-office popularity, and the star is in any case aware that an art film might transcend its low-key trappings to achieve a level of critical success in the international market. Despite its economic limitations, the art cinema affords the star a context in which to establish professional credibility, engage with adult themes, and demonstrate capability in complex, offbeat, and challenging roles.[2.] Exploiting the prestige of the art film, Wong attracts stars of enormous pan-Asian and diasporic appeal. But, most significantly, Wong's casting reveals adroit sensitivity to the international art cinema audience. Crucially, the performers in Wong's stable of stars – Leslie Cheung, Maggie Cheung, Andy Lau, Tony Leung Chiu-wai, Gong Li, Zhang Ziyi – had established reputations on the international film circuit before Wong worked with them, and most were seen to be associated with artistically important filmmakers and projects of high cultural merit.[3.] Of course, this is not to imply that Wong hangs on the coattails of other filmmakers' successes; indeed, following the diffusion of the filmmaker's global reputation, 'Wong Kar-wai' has become something of

a marquee name itself. Nevertheless, I suggest that the performer's degree of familiarity to an international film audience, and thus her ability to attract both distributors and viewers to the film, is a contingent factor in Wong's commerce with stars. This supposition is borne out by the legion of hugely admired local stars whose popularity Wong has not yet seized upon, putatively because their success does not extend beyond an east-Asian context. Ultimately, then, Wong's selection of stars is governed by international, rather than local, considerations.

One recurrent practice reinforces our sense that the star is a crucial component in Wong's international ambitions. Several of Wong's films manipulate the Chinese star's physicality in order to furnish allusions to Western archetypes. Although this practice recedes as Wong's films establish international critical acceptance, it is vividly manifested in the filmmaker's early work. Wong's allusiveness may be seen as a strategy for reflexivity and homage, revealing a fundamental cinephilia that I shall discuss more fully in the following chapter. It may also be understood as a familiar conduit for non-native audiences to encounter Chinese customs, values, and culture. We have already seen that, in *As Tears Go By*, Andy Lau inherits the iconography from Tom Cruise's aviator in *Top Gun*. Moreover, Brigitte Lin evokes the eponymous assassin of John Cassavetes' *Gloria* (1980) in *Chungking Express*. In both examples, the star literally embodies Wong's Western address. (Furthermore, these two iconic references – to *Top Gun* and *Gloria* - offer a neat indication of the basic schism in Wong's aesthetic sensibility, which often manifests a tension between populism and avant-gardism.)[4.] Further examples can be adduced. More than one critic has observed physical echoes between Faye Wong in *Chungking Express* and Jean Seberg in *À bout de souffle* (1960), and between Leslie Cheung in *Days of Being Wild* and James Dean in *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955). This allusionism yields very different albeit parallel experiences for native and Western audiences respectively. By employing Asian stars to invoke Western film culture, Wong

defamiliarises Western archetypes and thus, by extension, revivifies cultural clichés; the Western spectator is thereby confronted with recognisable types and tropes that nonetheless seem strikingly novel and bizarre. (We may recall here that defamiliarisation of the Western folk song 'California Dreamin'' in *Chungking Express* is also effected by unmooring its pre-established cultural associations and yoking it to an 'alien' socio-historical context.) For the native spectator, on the other hand, defamiliarisation occurs in regard to the star performer's physical iconicity, which is now transformed by Western iconography (for example, the blonde wig, sunglasses, and raincoat that quite radically alter Brigitte Lin's appearance). In a general sense, the informed viewer may find the defamiliarisation of the star's image satisfyingly invigorating (provided that the star's recognisability is not effaced altogether, the disadvantages of which I shall discuss below). In fact, to some degree Wong's allusive strategy dovetails with conventional Hong Kong filmmaking practice, which constantly 'makes over' the star's physicality within and between distinct filmic contexts. Thus Wong's predilection for articulating allusion through the star performer engenders, for both audiences, the experience of *ostranenie* ('making-strange') that derives from the collision of cultural icons.

As if to assert the Asian star's Westernisation more forcefully, Wong peppers his performers' dialogue with English words and expressions. Though these moments are localised and fleeting, they may be partly construed as a 'concession' to the English-speaking (international) spectator. Such scenes are not exclusively to be found in Wong's oeuvre, however: in mainstream Hong Kong cinema (and in Asian cinema more broadly), characters are also inclined to intone English phrases or expressions.[5.] Yet, rather than constituting an explicit appeal to a broader Anglophonic audience, such discourse in Hong Kong mainstream film tends to signify the cosmopolitanism and culturally heterogeneous environment that envelops the diegetic characters. The pervasiveness of the English language among the former British colony's inhabitants also makes Hong Kong cinema particularly apt to address

other English-speaking communities. Wong exploits this aspect of Hong Kong's society and culture to facilitate his films' international address.

As I indicated in Chapter 1, Wong seldom capitalises upon the pop music market in which the majority of his stars have a foothold. In Hong Kong's increasingly high-concept mainstream cinema, the tendency to cross-market the star's film and music identities has become standardised as an industrial norm.[6.] Typically, however, Wong eschews direct exploitation of the star's musical fan-base. Whereas a Hollywood or mainstream Hong Kong film will explicitly invoke a star's extrafilmic music identity, we have seen that *Chungking Express* sets Faye (the character) in oblique relation to Faye Wong (the pop star), whose music accompanies the female agent on screen. Given that Wong privileges an international audience, we may surmise that he recognises the limited intertextual significance of this Cantonese pop sound within the global market, where the dissemination of such music is largely 'ghettoised' in Chinatowns and other diasporic communities. This supposition also accounts for the palpable presence of Western music in Wong's films, whose English-language lyrics, Western (or Westernised) instrumentation, and idiomatic familiarity serves as a further point of recognition and identification (if also, as we have said, of 'defamiliarisation' and novelty) for the international viewer. In any event, my broad claim is that Wong rivets his films' global ambitions to the figure of the star performer. This is evident, I suggest, in Wong's recruitment of stars with international credentials, his allusion to Western culture through star iconography, and his custom of weaving foreign language into the star's dialogue.

Far from simply being passively appropriated, however, Wong's stars are instrumental in the creative development of the film. An important method of construction in Wong's narrative and expressive technique is the star's improvisations of gestures and dialogue, which embellish upon Wong's schematic story premises. Evolving a film out of improvisation frequently entails that individual scenes and entire plotlines are abandoned, as the actors' unpremeditated activity opens

up new story possibilities. As one critic observes, 'Wong's technique means that whatever he shoots on a given night can be treated as a masterly take, or as a mere rehearsal for himself and his actors'.[7.] Wong's preference for the improvisatory process surely accounts for his films' prolonged periods of gestation. But this kind of aleatory filmmaking method also yields expressive advantages. For example, the performer is afforded a creative freedom that is seldom possible in the condensed production schedules of most Hong Kong mainstream cinema; typically, the fast turnaround of mainstream product negates the possibility of sustained performative experimentation by the actor.[8.] Extending creative latitude to the performer also results in the kind of scene that would not be found in a conventionally scripted film. For example, the idiosyncratic scene in *Fallen Angels* in which the mute He Zhiwu (Takeshi Kaneshiro) administers a rubdown to a butchered pig reportedly emerged out of Kaneshiro's spontaneous improvisations.[9.] Wong's improvisatory method of working necessitates that the stars he employs provide legitimate acting skill, and not merely star presence.

Wong navigates his stars to what is essentially an understated, naturalistic style of performance. Tony Leung Chiu-wai characterises this mode of performance as 'acting without style', an echo of the 'styleless style' espoused by John Cassavetes in the American independent cinema; that is, a performance style that attempts to eradicate overt or conventional markers of 'acting'.[10.] Wong's accent on 'styleless' performance reveals a concern for an acting mode marked by behavioural subtlety. (What we find, then, is not the effacement of style per se, but rather the displacement of pronounced or visible performance by a predominantly minimalist style of acting.) In the roles of emotionally reticent or conservative individuals, Wong's stars are generally required to be expressive in subdued, introspective ways, and to convey through bodily posture and gesture what might conventionally be expressed through dialogue. In this respect, there is a strong element of silent performance to Wong's characterisations: character traits are often revealed not through the declaiming of

dialogue, but through bodily expressivity (which we might also regard as a significant, if not central, device to facilitate cross-cultural communication).[11.] This is not to say, of course, that there is no expressive or denotative outlet for the star's voice, which, aside from 'direct' spoken dialogue, is occasionally afforded salience through the device of nondiegetic narration. (We may note that this kind of narration is 'disembodied', typically accompanying images of the star performing purely bodily-physical (or 'silent') action.) Rather, Wong cultivates a performance style that involves the expression of mental states primarily through bodily signification. This mode of performance is sometimes corollary to Wong's penchant for music-driven sequences, which tend to give visual emphasis to the star's physicalisations and displace the necessity for vocal expression (sometimes to the extent that the song lyrics 'articulate' mental states, as when 'California Dreamin'' conveys Faye's fantasies of American life in *Chungking Express*). *Fallen Angels*, too, is especially self-conscious in this respect, as well as in the apparent aphonia of its protagonists: He Zhiwu is literally mute, while Leon Lai's impassive hit-man avoids verbal interaction until the film's second story is fully underway. (Postproduction sound editing, however, allows both stars to inflect their visually nonverbal performances with qualifying voiceover narrations.)

Predominantly gestural styles of performance can (sometimes very effectively) yield characterisations that are physically exaggerated or explicitly stylised. However, Wong resolutely closes off this avenue to hyperbolic performance, generally rooting the star's acting style in principles of subtlety, nuance, and authenticity. Moreover, naturalistic performance prevails even when the rest of the film seems ostentatious, as in *Chungking Express* or *Fallen Angels*, which consistently evince a self-conscious and palpable stylisation of form. This interplay between star performance and visual style requires further attention if we are to adequately characterise Wong's deployment of the star figure. (A broader examination of Wong's visual style will be undertaken in

Chapter 5.)   The following section will show how Wong's visual strategies disclose the filmmaker's ambivalence toward the pictorial conventions surrounding star performers. It will also suggest how Wong absorbs the star into his own aesthetic style; these observations will set the stage for discussion of a specific star persona, proffered later in this chapter.

Star Appearance: Visual Representation of the Performer

At the level of visual style, Wong generates an ambivalent traffic with the star performer. If one is able to detect formal concessions to the star's presence, one is equally aware of a converse strategy, which seeks to dissipate visual signification of the performer's 'stardom'. One self-conscious tactic that reveals formal awareness of the star's status is the mobilisation of a *coup de théâtre* around the figure's first appearance.[12.] *Ashes of Time*, for instance, marks the introduction of Brigitte Lin emphatically: a fast dolly-in to an angular close-up provides striking formal corroboration of the star 'entrance'. Similarly, the viewer's desire for Gong Li's introduction in *The Hand* is matched by the male protagonist's impatience to obtain a first glimpse of Gong's tragic courtesan, Hua; the anxious anticipation of viewer and protagonist is subsequently rewarded by a close legible shot of Gong/Hua. If, in narrative cinema, the close-up framing is a device germane to the introduction of a prominent character, nonetheless these scenes evince an extradiegetic subtext that heralds the appearance of a culturally renowned and revered personality.

Critics have often stressed the importance of the close-up to star construction. Frequently noted is the device's capacity to generate the illusion of intimacy, and thus potentially to animate spectatorial 'identification' with the star figure. Richard Dyer, for example, writes that close framings of the star's face disclose 'the intimate, transparent window to the soul', while Carl Plantinga describes how such compositions can function within a 'scene of empathy', converging with

a narrative context apt to communicate and elicit emotion.[13.] In many instances of the star close-up, however, more than viewer identification is at stake. As Joe McElhaney writes in regard to Ingrid Bergman and, more generally, to the Hollywood close-up of the female star, 'the primary objective' of such compositions 'is to beautify the face'.[14.] This notion, I submit, is integral to how the star functions under Wong's aegis, although it is important to point out that Wong's practice of 'beautification' tends not to be gender-specific. The important point is not simply that Wong engages classically attractive performers and accentuates their sensuality through techniques of framing, lighting, make-up, costume and so forth. Rather, the crucial point is that the star should be comprehended within the context of Wong's aesthetic program of sensuousness, in which stylistic elements such as *mise en scène*, cinematography, music, and sound effects are all coordinated. Of course, it may seem highly reductive to subordinate the star to an overall aesthetic strategy, particularly when this would seem to suggest that physical attractiveness surpasses acting skill in importance. In this view, the star's contribution is distilled to a mere aesthetic device, and, to invoke Rudolf Arnheim's wry analogy, becomes 'one "prop" among many, and like a dog or a teapot [is] required to furnish little but his appearance and presence'.[15.] My claim here is not that the embodiment of sensuousness is the only, or even the most important, service that Wong's stars provide; but I do want to maintain that it is a crucial service, and one that Wong self-consciously animates in the generation of an overall sensuous aesthetic.

The interpolation of close, aestheticised shots of the performer abets what Pam Cook calls 'the process of idealisation of stars', whereby the star is presented as an ideal figure of audience desire and/or identification.[16.] In Wong's films, images of this kind recur with frequency, furnishing tableaux in which the star is suspended in self-consciously aesthetic postures. In all probability, it is these sorts of image that critics have in mind when they equate Wong's visual style with fashion photography (and, ironically, such tableaux are in effect

'ready-made' publicity images, inviting extrapolation and circulation in a variety of promotional and fan media). Yet the invocation of fashion photography essentially posits the star as little more than a bedizened mannequin, employed in mechanical and superficial attitudinising. As I argued in the Introduction, approximating Wong's visual style to fashion photography seems also to identify the filmmaker as an aesthete, inclined to privilege notions of beauty above narrative and formal elements. In fact, just as Wong motivates the tenacious presence of 'California Dreamin'' by character psychology in *Chungking Express*, he explicitly 'attributes' his films' star tableaux to circumstances within the diegesis. In *Ashes of Time*, for instance, Wong furnishes a long-held close shot of Maggie Cheung, the *prima facie* purpose of which is to aestheticise the star's face (Fig.2.1). The duration of the shot and the precise angulation of Cheung's pose seem designed to emphasise striking facial detail; it is in every sense a 'star' composition, perspicuous, reverential, and sensuous. But narrative context dictates that we understand the characteristics of the shot as deriving subjectively from the film's male protagonist, whose nostalgic memory of the Maggie Cheung character romantically inflects the star's physical appearance. The visual 'idealisation' of Cheung is in this way narratively justified, focalised through a fictive agent's subjectivity, and thus cannot (or cannot simply) be adduced as evidence of aesthetic prettification. Apart from idealising each other, Wong's characters are also occasionally disposed to idealise themselves. Consequently they are wont to affect poses, project sensuality, and court the onlooker's gaze. (Later in this chapter, I elaborate upon this particular character type in relation to *Days of Being Wild*.) In this light, the 'idealised' star-centred composition may be seen to be motivated less by the director-aesthete than by the specific traits of characters. (At the level of acting style, moreover, the iconic poses struck by the star are a further index of gestural performance, wherein vocal expression is diminished and displaced.)

The kinds of visual image delineated in the foregoing discussion prioritise the star as the primary object of audience attention. In such examples, the star's 'stardom' is always actively invoked by formal tropes of legibility, close framing, and aestheticisation. However, in contrast to these signifiers of the star's primacy, Wong introduces into the visual style of his work conditions that play against the formal 'reverence' of the star. Often, oblique framings literally challenge the star's centrality, forcing the figure into the frame's edge and giving compositional emphasis to apparently inconsequential details of the environment. Such shots dismantle the star's traditional position at the axis of visual attention. Images that deliberately aim to obscure the iconic value of the star's physicality also attest to Wong's studied indifference to the performer's stardom. Wong's shots frequently appear calculated to frustrate the spectator's desire for transparent views of the star performer. Low-key lighting turns iconic bodies into amorphous silhouettes; or visual focus is distributed in such a way that the vivid spectacle of the star body evaporates into an obscure haze. Moreover, Wong routinely deviates from the narrational principle that film style must accommodate and prioritise the star's face. On occasion, foreground objects retard facial access to the star (Fig.2.2). Similarly, back-to-camera compositions not only deny the audience its customary pleasure in the aesthetic consecration of the star's face, but also precisely subvert the kind of classical composition afforded stars like Ingrid Bergman. The aesthetic risk in repudiating facial access to the star is that certain kinds of viewing experience - identification, empathy and aesthetic pleasure - may be sacrificed, since each of these effects are considered (by Dyer, Plantinga and McElhaney) to be engendered by the transparent human face.

Star consumption is a key determinant in mainstream cinema's compositional style. The spectator's desire to gaze at the star is satisfied by visual strategies that maximise the physical legibility of the performer. Stated simply, the star commodity is showcased by means of signature postures, close legible framings, and star-driven tableaux

that yield marketable and mythopoeic images. Charles Leary invokes this practice in describing the first meeting between Chinese stars Andy Lau and Tony Leung in the mainstream crime thriller *Infernal Affairs* (2002). For informed spectators, Leary suggests, the event parallels 'the anticipation surrounding the meeting of Pacino and DeNiro in Michael Mann's *Heat* [1995]', and eventuates in the momentary suspension of narrative progression.[17.] The extradiegetic matter of the stars' convergence, the writer implies, supersedes the parallel narrative encounter between the fictive characters, while the conventional narrative function of the two-shot is exceeded to venerate an infrequent cinematic union between two popular film idols. With storytelling apparently on hold, Leary notes, 'time stands still to allow the consumption of this image'.[18.] What Leary touches on here is the explicit conjunction of star and spectacle, and, in particular, the harnessing of formal elements to ensure that the star-as-spectacle is sufficiently dwelt upon by the spectator. Just as compositions are designed for utmost clarity, privileging the star as the primary object of audience attention, so editing technique aims at making these images straightforwardly perceptible. The rate of cutting is modulated to guarantee perspicuity, the camera's amble on the star apt for unalloyed consumption by the viewer.

Wong's visual style often functions in opposition to pictorial legibility. Aside from a characteristic compositional obliqueness, Wong's editing patterns seem predicated on challenging the spectator to process a gamut of perceptually evasive and recondite images. Commentators have observed that Wong's images perpetually 'threaten to slip from our gaze', noting how the images disorientate and refuse to 'stabilise'.[19.] (Wong's thematic preoccupation with time also finds stylistic expression here: for instance, the kinds of fleeting encounters experienced by *Chungking Express*' characters is evoked stylistically by the transient images that pass instantaneously from view.) A corollary to this ephemeral glut of images is that visual meditation on the star is radically diminished. Opaque compositions and rapid editing attenuate

the physical legibility of the star, thereby restricting opportunity for direct audience consumption of the star image. I am not claiming, of course, that Wong's images of stars are uniformly of this sort; indeed, we have already considered examples where visual representation of the star is relatively pellucid and consumable. Nevertheless, Wong's violations of star legibility are sufficiently prevalent that we may construe not only the filmmaker's sporadic indifference to spectatorial desire, but also his casual regard for the star's commodifying function (which ordinarily mandates that the star be palpably showcased). I would submit that, in Wong's aesthetic program of visual obliquity, close legible views of the star acquire greater dramatic prominence than in a film where the star is maximally salient. It may further be hypothesised that Wong's spectator more eagerly consumes legible views of the star, given the films' wider strategies of visual obfuscation. Moreover, because Wong's stars are often placed within images that refuse to 'stabilise', other, transparent views of the performer are inexorably weighted with the threat of disappearance. In other words, the possibility that the star will 'slip from our gaze' at any moment conditions our response even when the figure is represented legibly. This tendency to confer intangibility upon the star is especially pertinent in the case of Leslie Cheung, whose star image we will examine in the following section.

The formal irreverence with which Wong occasionally displays the star performer can be demonstrated by a brief look at a single shot in *Chungking Express*. This shot marks the film's final view of Brigitte Lin, and gives Lin's departure formal prominence by employing a freeze-frame device. Self-evidently, freeze-frames invite leisurely contemplation of the composition, and thus are diametrically opposed to images that refuse to stabilise. Its relative indelibility makes the device particularly apt for the process of consumption described by Leary, and, in mainstream cinema, the freeze-frame is potentially a venue for the honorific display of the star.[20.] Our example from *Chungking Express*, however, not only undermines the putative

consumability of the freeze-frame, but also disavows formal apotheosising of the star performer. In a medium close-up, the drug trafficker (Lin) darts across the horizon of the frame, throwing off the blonde wig she has worn throughout the film. Wong suspends the image precisely as the protagonist propels herself into offscreen space, the camera apparently pursuing an action with which it is unable to keep pace (Fig.2.3). As a result, the shot radically subverts the formal properties of the conventional star close-up. Lin's position almost fully outside the perimeter of the frame disrupts the orthodox convention of central figure placement, while the contour of the star's body is rendered nebulous, as if 'smudged' - a flagrant negation of the legibility principle that underpins mainstream presentation of stars.

This suspended image begets further audience frustration, derived from an abortive act of revelation represented in the shot. To elucidate this point, it is necessary to introduce another tactic that occurs in regard to the stars' 'legibility'. Occasionally, Wong calls attention to visual opacity by camouflaging the star's body. Embellishing the protagonists' costumes allows Wong to diminish the stars' recognisability. In *Days of Being Wild*, a police cap conceals all but the lower part of Andy Lau's face, reportedly to the chagrin of Lau and his supporters.[21.] (I note the star's displeasure here because it indicates that the face is commonly regarded as the chief commodity of the film star.) Sometimes this strategy is a fallout of Wong's cinematic allusiveness: in *Chungking Express*, Wong scrupulously obscures Brigitte Lin's lionised physicality with the adornments of Gena Rowlands' Gloria. Lin's appearance seems keyed to provoke dissatisfaction among audiences familiar with the star: throughout the film, her familiar mane of black hair is secreted beneath a blonde wig, omnipresent sunglasses eclipse her eyes, and a full-length raincoat veneers her athletic body, displayed in previous martial chivalry films.[22.] The unique corporeality that is integral to Lin's stardom is thus withheld from the viewer, and the informed spectator awaits the moment when the disguise will be cast off and the familiar star body 'reinstated'. The freeze-frame

described above reveals the extent to which Wong consciously affronts audience expectation and desire. It is at the moment of 'revelation', when Lin removes her disguise to claim recognition as a star, that Wong admits obliquity and abstraction into the picture. The anticipated moment of revelation, and its corollary legible exaltation of the star, is overridden by the narration's lack of communicativeness. As Christine Gledhill observes, a conventional trope of the star vehicle involves initial suppression of the star's 'full persona', but Wong here discards the culmination of this trope, namely, the unrestrained revelation and exhibition of the star's pre-established (physical) image.[23.] Even at the moment of 'revelation', then, the viewer is denied visual purchase on the star, and Lin remains, in the words of one critic, 'an almost purely iconic abstraction'.[24.]

Wong's strategies of facial obfuscation and displacement direct attention to other, physically expressive modalities of the star performer. There is a high premium placed on the signifying capacity of body parts, particularly hands, to transmit expressive information traditionally conveyed by the face. Supplanting the conventional performance site with a close emphasis on hands enables Wong to visually truncate the star's body, putting aside the kind of encompassing figure composition that Arnheim considered the 'most direct and familiar' method for expressing character 'thought and feeling' – for instance, the medium shot, which facilitates 'the play of the human face and the gestures of the body and limbs', and allows the spectator to cross-reference these expressive modalities within a single shot.[25.] Hands are consigned most expressive weight in *2046* (2004), *In the Mood for Love*, and *The Hand*, films which allude to the ostensible conservatism of 1960s Hong Kong, and which regularly displace or juxtapose the star's face with shots of the body. A major part of the point of such compositions is that the viewer is expected to infer the cultural 'display rules' that limit expressiveness on the characters' face[26.]; in other words, socially-conditioned habits of emotional suppression may engender an opaque countenance, but the

protagonists' mental states, it is implied, are inferable through less self-consciously 'censored' signifiers, such as postures, gestures, and actions.

Parenthetically, this is not to say that in these films, facial expression is uncommunicative or inscrutable. Rather, the star's face is often keyed to exhibit what James Naremore terms 'expressive incoherence', the physically perceptible collision of contrasting emotions, each competing for expression within a single agent.[27.] In Wong's films, this complexity takes the form of perceptible self-restraint, as the protagonists struggle to contain prospectively indomitable emotion states. Wong's actors must convey what Paul Ekman calls 'leakage', a deception clue transmitted through the face and other bodily expressive modes. Ekman's notion of leakage corresponds with Naremore's expressive incoherence, with conflicting emotions doing battle upon a single countenance: 'because the face is such a fast sending system...there may be affect displays which begin to emerge before ego is fully aware of them and can squelch them'.[28.] Expressive incoherence, Naremore argues, allows the actor to demonstrate 'virtuosity' by physically embodying internal conflict.[29.] Despite the aptness of expressive incoherence for performative histrionics, Wong yokes the tactic to a mode of performance characterised by subtlety and nuance. Tiny facial gestures ('micro facial displays' or 'leaks'[30.]) and discreet but loaded shifts in posture are sufficient to connote emotional incertitude. The important point is not simply that expressive incoherence is achievable within a context of performative understatement, but also that it provides a base for the star to exhibit 'virtuosic' acting skills, showcasing the performer's ability to indicate a complex layering of emotion.

Wong's emphasis on bodily expression enables exhibition of the star's performative skill. As I have argued, Wong's stars are frequently required to emphasise the gestural and behavioural aspects of character, and must therefore engage a fuller range of their bodily features than merely the expressions of the face. Moreover, the emphasis on limbs

and body parts invariably assimilates into Wong's aesthetic program of sensuousness. In *Ashes of Time*, Peach Blossom (Carina Lau) languishes astride a horse, caressing and squeezing it, her face, hands, and feet isolated by a series of cuts that function to eroticise the star's body. Thus Lau's performance is predicated on bodily expression, which in turn becomes a spectacle for the viewer's aesthetic contemplation. At the same time, assertive visual stylisation may be employed to accentuate aspects of the star's performance: for example, decelerating a back-to-camera shot of Maggie Cheung as she sashays through *In the Mood for Love*'s main tenement building not only lends expressive weight to an otherwise oblique composition, but also amplifies the qualities of grace and sensuality extant in the physical dimensions of her movement. (The concurrence of performance and postproduction techniques is also evident at the level of sound, as when Jacky Cheung's putatively bloodcurdling scream in *As Tears Go By* finds a sonic correlative in the sustained wail of a guitar chord.)

The formal device of slow-motion and the visual emphasis accorded body parts lays out images of the star that invite audience consumption. Yet given the tendency toward facial displacement and obfuscation in these examples, consumption is of a distinctly qualified sort; the prime site of recognition, i.e. the face, is not made available to the spectator. Moreover, in *Ashes of Time* the visual strategies that Wong evolves around the star cut against the grain of generic expectations. Traditionally, David Bordwell has shown, the Hong Kong action cinema puts 'the graceful body at the center of its mise-en-scène' and aims to maximise the clarity of the performer's gestures.[31.] The baseline characteristics of the Hong Kong action sequence tend not merely to make legible the physical presence of the star participant, but to visually aestheticise the star body in action. In this regard, Bruce Lee's star vehicles provide a salient example, given that they restrict spatial strategies and editing patterns that might rupture continuity of the active star body, and moreover generate aesthetic spectacle from the distinctiveness of the star's physique. Similarly, recent examples of the

Chinese *wuxia pian* (martial chivalry) film – *House of Flying Daggers* (2004), *Hero* (2002), and *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000) – furnish battle scenes in which the star is legibly engaged in combat, deriving spectacle out of the star body's performance of preternatural physical action. Decelerating the rate of motion in action sequences further allows the filmmaker to aestheticise the star's spectacular activity, and facilitates the perspicuity necessary for audience consumption of the star-oriented image.

In contrast, *Ashes of Time* unfurls its battle scenes in a flurry of rapid shots, augmented by a smudge-motion technique that renders the star's body incoherent and ill-defined. In this respect, the film deviates from the Hong Kong norm of maximum legibility, and, in one sense, reveals a closer affinity with the dominant approach to action sequences seen in Hollywood cinema. This approach, Bordwell argues, stands in contrast with the Hong Kong style. Hollywood action sacrifices expressively legible action for 'an overwhelming but loose and sketchy *impression* of physical activity', characterised by rapid cutting, a constantly mobile camera, and vague figure movement.[32.] The Hollywood method favours distanced compositions, and will seldom cut to a closer view of a character's face mid-way through the action. However, while *Ashes of Time*'s action scenes manifest a commitment to gestural indeterminacy, positing the active star body as both illegible and unrecognisable, we typically find that the swordplay activity is punctuated by close readable framings of the star in repose. Untypical of Hollywood action, these cut-ins serve as punctuation to an otherwise unrelenting barrage of movement. If the close views of faces are uncharacteristic of Hollywood action scenes (where the human participant is 'virtually never in repose'[33.]), the juxtaposition of stasis and movement finds correspondence in the rhythmic modulations typical of Hong Kong action cinema. Bordwell describes this editing strategy as the 'pause-burst-pause' pattern, in which 'moments of near-absolute stillness alternate with bursts of smooth, rapid-fire activity'.[34.] In *Ashes of Time*, the facial tableaux function not only to emphasise

facial transparency, and to interpose a regular tempo upon frantic activity, but also to anchor indistinguishable blurs of movement to a specifiable corporeality. A visual strategy is thus constructed around the performer that flies in the face of Hong Kong generic convention – a convention, that is, which traditionally mandates the transpicuous, aesthetic display of the star's physicality. The film in this way effects a striking inversion of the hierarchy of Hong Kong generic imagery: whereas battle scenes, which traditionally give emphasis to bodily dynamics, here identify the star face as the prime site of visual legibility, 'dramatic' or dialogue-based scenes, which we would expect to prioritise facial performance, invariably obfuscate, obstruct, or displace the face with other expressive and aesthetic elements (of the body or of the *mise en scène*). Both generic expectation and audience consumption, therefore, are in different ways qualified by Wong's visual commerce with the star performer. (A closer examination of Wong's generic strategies will form the basis of the next chapter.)

I have argued that, at the level of visual style, Wong's films exhibit a schizophrenic response to conventional star representation, alternately obfuscating and valorising the star performer. This visual tension also flags Wong's ambivalence about commercial priorities: there is a clear schism between the filmmaker's tendency to render the performer visually opaque and the importance that Wong places in the star's international market value. I have argued that Wong's overall style does not necessarily obscure or distress the star's performance, but often allows the star to exhibit an arsenal of performative skills, baring multiple physical modalities of expression: in this sense, the star oscillates in a schizoid visual style that is as revelatory as it is retardatory. Although visual style inflects star performance in important ways, there are, of course, other forms of interface between Wong and the star performer. The rest of this chapter attempts to elucidate the further strategies that Wong brings to bear upon the star image and to explore in greater detail some of the issues raised above,

using the persona of Hong Kong star Leslie Cheung as a specific point of focus.

Nascent Narcissism: Leslie Cheung's Pre-established Persona

A recurrent practice in Wong's filmmaking program is to cull stars from the terrain of internationally-renowned Asian cinema. This strategy, I have indicated, is motivated by considerations of production and distribution (a cast of popular stars beckons film financiers as well as local audiences), as well as by a desire for cultural cachet and critical credibility within the international marketplace. The star's cinematic history, and in particular, her association with films both pre-eminent and wide-reaching, is a factor integral to Wong's casting process. Consequently, we might expect for Wong to embrace and energise those aspects of the star's persona that have been esteemed in previous contexts. It is this assumption that I aim to investigate through analysis of Leslie Cheung's star image, appraising the degree to which Wong showcases (or provides a vehicle for) the star's pre-established persona. In general, I shall claim, Wong's traffic with star personae cannot be adequately characterised in terms of full-scale adoption or patent subversion. Activating the tensions between straightforward replaying and rhetorical undermining of the familiar star persona is, I argue, the means by which Wong effects a more sophisticated engagement with the star performer.

A prominent figure in Wong's troupe of star performers, Leslie Cheung essays leading roles in *Days of Being Wild*, *Ashes of Time*, and *Happy Together*. Like other members in Wong's coterie of stars, Cheung's initial appeal for Wong was putatively buttressed by his status as an established player in the international art film arena. Furthermore the star was closely associated with a distinguished band of Hong Kong filmmakers, including Patrick Tam and Stanley Kwan. Cheung's international reputation had burgeoned with John Woo's *A Better Tomorrow* (1986) and was consolidated, in subsequent years, by

major roles in a handful of international successes: *Rouge* (Stanley Kwan, 1987), *A Chinese Ghost Story* (Ching Siu-Tung, 1987), and *Once a Thief* (John Woo, 1991). Other considerations aside, Wong's enlisting of Cheung for a lead role in his own art film, *Days of Being Wild*, not only belied an astute sensitivity to market factors but also enabled Wong to stake his place as a filmmaker of serious artistic intent, coequal with the existing crop of Hong Kong auteurs.

Yet how far does *Days of Being Wild* parade the set of traits cultivated in Cheung's previous work? Delineating the early phase of Cheung's career - the traits and trends with which he became associated - will better enable us to calibrate Wong's level of engagement with the pre-established persona. A broadly coherent but flexible persona is established in this early period. Among those inchoate values that Cheung came to embody was an innate moral virtue and idealism, exemplified by his protagonists in *A Better Tomorrow* and *A Chinese Ghost Story*. In both films, the Cheung character is a benevolent naïf whose idealism and naivety is accredited to youthful ignorance about the true state of things. Both protagonists must endure a tortuous rite of passage designed to test moral fortitude and acculturate them to the environment's hidden realities. Ultimately, though the Cheung figure emerges with threadbare ideals, his basic moral beliefs remain undimmed. En route to this conclusion, moreover, a host of approbatory traits are demonstrated that reinforce Cheung's moral heroism (e.g. loyalty, valour, veracity and so forth).

Cheung cemented his status as a romantic leading man during this period, a progression expedited by his local popularity as a romantic balladeer. (It is worth noting that several of these films self-consciously exploit Cheung's music career, appropriating the star's pop ballads or contriving a plausible narrative context for the Cheung character to break into song.) Cheung's early romance roles established a narrative trope that would recur across the star's subsequent films, and that Wong would revive in *Happy Together*. The star's romantic heroes often test the limits of forbidden or transgressive desire: in *A*

Chinese Ghost Story, for example, Cheung's tax-collector indefatigably pursues romance with a beautiful wraith despite being cautioned by an enlightened mortal that 'ghosts and men do not mix'; and in *Rouge* transgression takes the form of familial disobedience, where Chen-pang (Cheung) rejects his parents' admonitions to abandon plans of marriage to a local courtesan. This tenacity in pursuit of personal desire points to the Cheung character's sensualist aspect. Taking the lead from Cheung's increasingly glamorous offscreen image, these early films tended to present the star as a hedonist accustomed to decadent living and excessively devoted to sensual pleasures. *Rouge*, which limns Chen-pang's privileged ancestry and depicts his inclination for drugged states of consciousness, most demonstrably articulates this aspect of the Cheung persona, but *Once a Thief* also evokes the Cheung figure's appetite for sensuous experience. In Woo's pastiche of the caper film and François Truffaut's *Jules et Jim* (1962), Cheung's thief is not a 'small-time crook' but a discriminating connoisseur and plunderer of fine art (while the moral violation inherent in the character's thievery is relativised because, as Kenneth E. Hall notes, he steals from thieves whose corruption outweighs his own).[35.] Not all Cheung's films of this period hew to this type of characterisation; in *A Chinese Ghost Story*, the Cheung figure is a penniless collector of taxes. By the end of the decade, however, the image of Cheung as a wealthy playboy gained ascendancy in the public consciousness. By this stage, Cheung's image (influenced by glamorous, romantic extrafilmic appearances) emphasised an association with privilege rather than poverty, and had tempered its self-sacrificing aspect with self-interest (e.g. the prioritising of personal pleasures in *Rouge* and *Once a Thief*).

Several other Cheung traits to emerge in this early phase are worth highlighting. The first of these was a subtle but palpable awareness of his own magnetism, which qualified his extant naivety with what Richard Corliss describes as a 'suave, cocksure' self-knowledge.[36.] Cheung's first appearance in *Rouge*, for instance, instantly establishes his confident allure as he struts past two captivated courtesans,

acknowledging their interest with a blithe, self-assured smile. The introduction of Cheung in *Once a Thief* provides another example. Cheung's effortless capacity to enthral is signified by a sketched portrait of Jim (Cheung), pencilled voyeuristically by a male street artist who, in search of a subject, has instinctively culled Jim from a nearby crowd. At the realisation of this fact, Jim hubristically seizes the artist's pencil, autographs the picture, and proudly boasts of his criminal notoriety. Both examples may be understood in terms of a reflexive acknowledgement of Cheung's celebrity, implicit both in the characters' ability to compel attention and in the celebrity act of tendering signatures. At the level of action, however, such scenes mark the Cheung figure as an exceptionally arresting presence, attractive to the gaze of both male and female subjects, and acutely sensitive to his own facility to provoke perceptual fascination.

Consistently in this early set of films, the Cheung character is shown to emerge from familial dysfunction. In *Once a Thief*, Jim is an orphan reared by a devious, Dickensian tyrant; in *Rouge*, family tensions foment when Chen-pang betrays his parents' interdictions; sibling discord rocks the family's foundations in *A Better Tomorrow*; and family structures are ominously absent in *A Chinese Ghost Story*. Though each of these films more or less inscribes in the Cheung character what one critic describes as 'a hint of sad solitude'[37], we should note that none of Cheung's protagonists is physically alone, but rather structures a separate family unit of his own design within which he attempts to integrate himself.

Days of Being Wild, Wong's first collaboration with Cheung, occurs at a stage when the star's international image is poised between two distinct genres. In the action films *A Better Tomorrow* and *Once a Thief*, Cheung had become synonymous with John Woo's idiosyncratic brand of stylised gunplay and romantic sentimentalism, proving sufficiently persuasive in the spectacular duels to establish credibility as an action hero. On the other hand, *A Chinese Ghost Story*, *A Chinese Ghost Story Part II* (Ching Siu-Tung, 1990), and *Rouge* reveal Cheung's

close identification with the genre of the fantastic, at the same time bolstering Cheung's credentials as a romantic leading man (and, in the case of the former two films, comically activating Cheung's action hero persona). Inextricably bound-up in the pre-established Cheung image, therefore, are tried and proven generic options that the judicious filmmaker may freely exploit. Does Wong exploit these options? How might his overall commerce with Cheung's pre-established star persona be characterised? Now that we have delineated the cardinal elements of the star's nascent, internationally-disseminated screen image, we can examine the extent to which these features are appropriated, recast, or discarded by Wong in his first discourse with Cheung's star persona.

Phantom Rebel: Engaging with the Pre-established Persona

Days of Being Wild begins in 1960s Hong Kong, where an apathetic playboy, Yuddi (Leslie Cheung), seduces the idealistic Su Lizhen (Maggie Cheung). When he suddenly discards her, Su struggles to come to terms with his rejection, and finds some solace in the company of a sympathetic cop, Tide (Andy Lau). Yuddi begins an affair with the brassy and acquisitive Mimi (Carina Lau), whom he treats offhandedly. His main preoccupation is with his foster mother, Rebecca (Rebecca Pan), who incurs Yuddi's resentment by refusing to reveal his real mother's identity. Finally, Rebecca acquiesces and tells Yuddi that his biological mother lives in Manila. After bestowing his treasured car on Zeb (Jacky Cheung), a lonely acquaintance, Yuddi heads for the Philippines, leaving behind a distraught Mimi. Zeb sells Yuddi's car and arranges for Mimi to pursue Yuddi to Manila. Yuddi is denied admission to his mother's estate and, seeking assuagement, picks up an opportunistic prostitute who robs him. A chance encounter with Tide, who has abandoned police work for a naval career, runs foul of trouble when Yuddi attempts to steal from a group of Filipinos. Fleeing by train, Yuddi and Tide discuss their pasts and discover they have a mutual

acquaintance in Su Lizhen. En route, Yuddi is apprehended and murdered by the Filipinos. While Mimi waits in Manila, Su stagnates in Hong Kong: the two quite dissimilar women are united only by their affection for a distant protagonist and their ignorance of his demise.

Succeeding Cheung's venerated series of fantastic and action films, *Days of Being Wild* perhaps surprisingly occupies distinct generic terrain. Significantly, Wong opts not to ply the action and ghost genres in the film. The putative desire of the international audience – to see Cheung reinstituted in trademark generic contexts – is therefore not capitalised upon. (Possibly Wong recognised that the star's presence in those earlier successes, though significant, was not the prime factor in their global acclaim.) Ostensibly a period melodrama, *Days of Being Wild* exhibits a greater affinity with the European art film than with the standardised formulas provided by genre cinema. Nevertheless I will posit that the film obliquely invokes the Cheung persona's foregoing association with genre filmmaking, embedding allusions specifically to the action and fantastic genres. By such means, *Days of Being Wild* animates a conscious and tacit address to the audience of filmgoers familiar with Cheung's previous roles.

The action-hero aspect of Cheung's persona is invoked in *Days of Being Wild*'s infrequent fight scenes. Toward the end of the film, for example, Yuddi is enmeshed in a gun fight with a gang of Filipinos, who want payment for the counterfeit passport that he has made off with. A context is thus provided for the kind of elaborate gunplay that Cheung undertakes in John Woo's histrionic films. Wong's realistically brutal action, however, is in contrast to the sensuous stagings of stylised violence in Woo's aesthetic program. The fierce conflict ultimately eventuates in Yuddi's death. In distinction from Cheung's hero in *A Better Tomorrow*, who emerges from an incessant hail of bullets weathered but triumphant, Yuddi does not display sufficient aptitude as an action hero to survive the physical trials which beset him. Moreover, when violence is precipitated by Woo's hero, it is invariably of a sort described by Carl Plantinga as 'justified violence', legitimised at the

level of narrative context, and typically motivated by themes of betrayal and revenge.[38.] In our example from *Days of Being Wild*, however, Yuddi's violence against the Filipinos is underpinned less by honourable principles than by self-serving covetousness. In this respect, the film strips away the 'heroic' and romantic nature of combat, which is so fundamentally a part of Woo's scenes of action. Finally, we have already noted that action sequences occur infrequently in *Days of Being Wild*, and insofar as this is the case, Cheung's action persona is afforded scant context for expression. What is more, whereas action heroes are largely defined by an extraordinary physical capability combined with a purposeful course of action, Yuddi is an aimless, ineffectual layabout whose disaffection is manifest in lethargy and inertia.[39.]

Wong therefore plays off Cheung's pre-established action hero persona and systematically subverts it. (At the same time, Wong puts a distance between his own work and the action-oriented filmmaking that stereotypes Hong Kong cinema.) Of course, the spectator need not be cognizant of Cheung's affiliation with the genre of 'heroic bloodshed' in order to grasp that Yuddi is no kind of action hero; but the 'informed' viewer, I would contend, is more acutely aware of the set of values that, in the figure of Yuddi, Wong undermines or leaves aside, values that Cheung has come vividly to personify in previous contexts. There is moreover a trace of playful irony to be found in the juxtaposition of Cheung's athletic action heroes and the leaden stagnation inherent in Yuddi's malaise. In its implicit contrast with Cheung's action persona, therefore, *Days of Being Wild* alerts the informed viewer that Yuddi is quite distinct from the morally righteous and purposefully active heroes that Cheung has essayed elsewhere.

Despite the realistic, 'secular' universe it evokes, *Days of Being Wild* also makes oblique reference to Cheung's ghost genre background. Cheung's fantastic films tend to posit the star as a fey mortal ineluctably attracted by a beautiful phantom. *Days of Being Wild*, however, turns this trope on its head, conferring an oblique spectrality upon Yuddi and emphasising his ability to compel and seduce.

Subverting the pedestrian genre trope (albeit at a subtextual level) allows Wong to effect a gender reversal that recasts Cheung in the conventionally female role: Cheung is now the object, rather than the subject, of thraldom. What Wong seems impelled to invoke is an androgynous feature in Cheung's image, a quality that was necessarily steamrollered in the star's heroic bloodshed films, but which would become a more central aspect of his film and stage persona in the 1990s. It is this androgyny that may account for the Cheung character's ability to command the gaze of either sex, though, it should be noted, it is not necessarily sexual attraction that motivates the gaze: the male portraitist in *Once a Thief*, for example, seems compelled to Cheung purely as an aesthetic spectacle.

In *Days of Being Wild*, Wong allusively shrouds Cheung/Yuddi in a ghostlike ethereality. This motif is carried forward through story and plot. For example, the protagonist uses a pick-up line ('You'll see me tonight in your dreams') that hermeneutically points to a transgression of everydayness and implies an ability to haunt the unconscious. Toward the end of the film, moreover, Yuddi appears in a series of flashbacks that in plot terms succeed his death, and which give rise, in a figurative sense, to the protagonist's resurrection. But it is chiefly through visual style that Wong enables us to interpret the Cheung character as an indirect referent of the fantastic. Especially pertinent in this regard is the tendency of Wong's images to 'slip from our gaze', which, we have noted, diminishes the physical legibility of the star and imbues the performer with the threat of disappearance. This seems to me particularly significant because it indicates a parallel between Wong's visual style and the ghostly nebulousness that Wong affords Cheung's persona. That is, the filmmaker's recasting of Cheung in the (implicit) role of spectre, in contrast to the role of enraptured naif, better accords with the mystifying tropes inherent in Wong's visual aesthetic.[40.] In addition to rapid and disjunctive editing, moreover, distorting shifts in focus, decentred compositions, and obfuscating banks of shadow function to augment Yuddi's enigmatic quality. (Critics

working within the socio-allegorical tradition of film criticism would doubtless recast the generic basis that I adduce for Yuddi's 'threat of disappearance', substituting it with the 'disappearance' of Hong Kong cultural space.) Overall, Wong makes no explicit attempt to instantiate either of the generic contexts with which Cheung had become identified. Yet he nonetheless reveals sensitive awareness of these contexts by alluding to the particular generic values, tendencies, and strophes to which Cheung's pre-established persona was affixed.   For the international viewer unfamiliar with Cheung's previous genre films, these delicate references are imperceptibly dissolved into plot and stylistic concerns; but the initiated viewer, aware of the Cheung persona and its generic associations, is invited to unpack these references and to appraise their significance within the context of the film's wider strategies.

Alongside allusion and subversion, Wong's transaction with the pre-established persona encompasses the 'intensification' of some extant traits. This is particularly apparent in Wong's accentuation of Cheung's trait of 'cocksure' self-regard.   We have noted that Cheung's protagonists, especially those in *Rouge* and *Once a Thief*, exhibit a good-natured but mildly hubristic awareness of their own seductive appeal. In *Days of Being Wild*, however, Wong intensifies this trait into one of blatant narcissism, giving full rein to the hint of self-obsession inscribed in those earlier agents. This is borne out by Yuddi's frequent instalment before the mirror as well as by his assumption of self-assured and sensual poses, which are as much acts of self-gratification as they are invitations to the other's gaze.   Yuddi's affectations, moreover, provide narrative motivation for Wong's visual 'idealisation' of the star performer. Just as Wong motivates *Ashes of Time*'s close aestheticised shots of Maggie Cheung through diegetic events, so Leslie Cheung's 'star' portraits in *Days of Being Wild* are made a corollary to Yuddi's narcissistic predisposition for posturing. These latter portrait shots, furthermore, constitute an unstable venue for star consumption, operating under the shadow of Cheung's obfuscating and ephemeral

presentation elsewhere in the film: the viewer is never fully assured that a legible shot of Cheung will not give way to opacity or displacement. Finally, the dual relationship of 'proximity' and 'distance', often said to characterise the spectator's experience of stars (and of film viewing in general)[41], is reinforced in the case of Cheung, whose 'proximity' is perpetually put in question by the latent threat of disappearance.

One sequence that strongly implies Yuddi's narcissism begins when Mimi performs an impromptu dance for Zeb, whose pocket radio provides scratchy musical accompaniment. The narration cuts to Yuddi's apartment where the protagonist, alone and lethargic, reclines in a characteristically languorous pose. Eventually, Yuddi sets a record spinning on a gramophone and begins to dance by himself, observing his movements in a full-length mirror. In its emphasis on amateurish musical performance, the sequence ironically invokes Leslie Cheung's and Carina Lau's pop star identities, encouraging the informed viewer to cross-reference mentally the characters' crude performance with the stars' relatively sophisticated extrafilmic stage performances. (In this respect, Wong activates another facet of Cheung's pre-established popular image but does so indirectly and parodically, a strategy later employed by Quentin Tarantino and John Travolta in *Pulp Fiction* (1994).) The sequence provides further opportunity for the star to direct performance energy into bodily expression, and subordinates or displaces verbalisations with music and/or voiceover narration. Most significant, however, is the inescapable contrast that proceeds from the two dances being juxtaposed: Mimi's activity is undertaken to provide pleasure for another individual while Yuddi's performance is engineered solely for self-gratification. Yuddi's evident pleasure in the music's rhythm is indistinguishable from his pleasure in seeing a reflection of his own form, and both sensual activities indicate the protagonist's exclusive immersion in private experience.

Intensifying the narcissism in Cheung's persona also contaminates the moral purity that the star had exhibited in earlier roles. At one

point in *Once a Thief*, Cheung's character reprimands Joe (Chow Yun-fat) for his cavalier treatment of women: 'Women need to be loved and cared for', he proclaims. Conversely, Yuddi's self-absorption engenders an indifference to the women that care for him, and who are invariably made the unwitting victims of his apathy. Emotional bonds do not figure in Yuddi's sexual relationships. The film implies that Yuddi's position of indifference yields moral ramifications because his tendency to objectify women has a negative impact on Su Lizhen and Mimi, the women infatuated with him (i.e. they are made to suffer as a direct consequence of Yuddi's apparent nonchalance). (We may also note that Wong mobilises his authorial preoccupation with doubling around the two women, whose basic affinities – e.g. their devotion to the same man – are undercut by fundamental dissimilarities in attitude and temperament.) Moreover, women are significant to Yuddi only insofar as they provide sexual and aesthetic fulfilment: in this aspect, Wong activates the inveterate sensualism in Cheung's image. However, the filmmaker intensifies this trait to exceed the playboy hedonism witnessed in *Rouge* and *Once a Thief*, where the pursuit of sensual pleasure is not inimical to the protagonists' ability to forge meaningful, emotional relationships. In contrast, Yuddi's full-scale commitment to sensate experience and narcissistic self-communion obliterates sensitivity to the emotional lives of others. More generally, 'negative' traits such as rudeness, malevolence, and disdainfulness seem coordinated to mark Yuddi as an antiheroic and possibly malign figure, especially when contrasted with the moral innocence and robustness evinced by Su.[42.]

However, *Days of Being Wild* seeks to ameliorate Yuddi's negative traits by appropriating a trend that recurs throughout Cheung's previous film roles. *Once a Thief*, for example, mitigates the Cheung character's morally-suspect actions by adducing family discord as a constitutive factor: as an orphan child as well as in adulthood, Jim is dragooned into thievery by a domineering, Fagin-like patriarch. Similarly, in *A Better Tomorrow*, the emergence of undesirable traits in Kit (Cheung) – chiefly,

bitterness, frustration, and a desire for revenge – is attributed to sibling animosity, borne from the rookie cop's discovery of his elder brother's illegal ventures. Wong co-opts this trope of family dysfunction in *Days of Being Wild*, and preserves its ameliorating function. The *raison d'être* for Yuddi's narcissistic estrangement, it is implied, is traceable to the apparent spitefulness of his foster mother, Rebecca, who persistently refuses Yuddi's appeals for information about his biological history. Just as the violations of moral propriety effected by *Once a Thief*'s protagonist are motivated by the self-serving tyranny of a surrogate parent, so Yuddi's moral apathy is anchored in filial trauma at the hands of an annihilating, emotionally-needy guardian. Moreover, Rebecca's uncharitable refusal to disclose the identity of his true parentage provokes Yuddi to go in search of his biological mother (and, by implication, to reforge the emotional bond that will attenuate his sense of alienation). In this respect, Wong appropriates the Cheung trope of familial dissonance not only to elicit sympathy for Yuddi, and to extenuate some of his less attractive traits, but also to provide the character with purposeful action. The activity of the search is a significant course of action for a protagonist that resembles Thomas Elsaesser's 'unmotivated hero', a figure more disposed toward aimless wandering than to the pursuit of goal-oriented activity.[43.] Though it will ultimately prove abortive, Yuddi's physical quest for his birth mother represents an infrequent respite from the periods of 'dead time' that dominate his spiritually-empty, playboy existence.

It is within this appropriated narrative of familial dysfunction that Wong embeds allusion to Western cinema. I have noted above that commentators are apt to find affinities between Yuddi/Cheung and the archetypal James Dean figure, most fully epitomised in *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955). (The legitimacy of this comparison is explicitly corroborated by the film's Cantonese title, *The Story of Ah Fei*, also the Chinese title given to Nicholas Ray's film.)[44.] Dean characteristics of moodiness, petulance, and estrangement are evident also in Yuddi, while domestic malcontent is thematically foregrounded in both *Rebel*

Without a Cause and *Days of Being Wild*. However, whereas it is possible (though reductive) to understand the Dean character's disaffection simply in terms of adolescent rebellion or teenage rite of passage, Yuddi's angst is more explicitly 'existential' by virtue of his slightly advanced age. (Another unmotivated hero serves as a point of comparison here - Bobby Dupea (Jack Nicholson) in *Five Easy Pieces* (1970) - an older figure whose spleenful discontent is to some extent motivated by filial dissension.) Moreover, unlike Jim Stark (Dean) and several of Cheung's earlier disengaged characters, Yuddi does not attempt to recreate the family unit by shepherding friends and lovers into traditional familial roles. A somewhat more analogous Dean counterpart exists in Cal, the protagonist in *East of Eden* (1955), insofar as he, like Yuddi, perceives the achievement of personal salvation to reside in the reclamation of a truant matriarch. At any rate, the allusive reference point for Yuddi is the prototypical Dean image, stressing male alienation and an overt machismo belying feminine sensitivity (Cheung's aforementioned androgyny is especially important in this regard). The destructive family background from which these characters emerge qualifies their display of undesirable traits and provides information with which we can recast, comprehend, and even justify their morally dubious actions. It is Yuddi's futile and ultimately fatal attempts to extricate himself from this background of family dysfunction that give rise to, in Elsaesser's phrase, 'the particular pathos reserved for beautiful losers'.[45.]

What the foregoing discussion has sought to demonstrate is that straightforward notions of the 'star vehicle' or, conversely, of the 'subversion' of the pre-established star image, are inadequate when applied to Wong's utilisation of star performers. Rather, in the case of Leslie Cheung, Wong employs a constellation of strategies that include allusion (e.g. to the star's generic associations and music career), intensification (e.g. of the star's latent narcissism), attenuation (e.g. of Cheung's action persona), appropriation (e.g. of the narrative motif of familial breakdown), and subversion (e.g. of Cheung's bewitched agent

in the ghost genre). Wong's engagement with the pre-established image is thus complex and selective, simultaneously defamiliarising and reinforcing the habituated Cheung persona. In the following section, I aim to briefly delineate Cheung's screen persona as it evolves throughout the 1990s. My intention here is to argue that Wong's further commerce with the star, in *Ashes of Time* and, in particular, *Happy Together*, both 'deepen' the star's image and counterpoint its evolution in the local mainstream cinema.[46.]

Deepening the Persona

Leslie Cheung's international visibility continued to increase in the 1990s, bolstered by his participation in films by Wong and another prominent Chinese auteur, Chen Kaige. Domestically, his box-office popularity was confirmed and consolidated by a string of commercially successful films, including *The Bride with White Hair* (Ronny Yu, 1993), *He's a Woman, She's a Man* (Peter Chan, 1994), and *The Chinese Feast* (Tsui Hark, 1995). In several respects, Cheung's career continued along a previously prepared path: for example, the star maintained his connection with the genres of the fantastic and action cinema[47.], continued to display an affinity for characters with troubled family histories, and demonstrated allegiance to local art filmmakers as well as to the mainstream cinema. However, *Days of Being Wild* inaugurated a crucial trend in Cheung's characterisations: in several of the films that follow, Cheung's characters exhibit an almost malevolent strain of narcissism. The viewer could no longer take for granted the assumption of essential moral goodness that underpinned Cheung's previous protagonists. Moreover, whereas the early phase of the star's career underscored the Cheung figure's gallantry toward women, several later films, taking their cue from *Days of Being Wild,* accommodated the quality of apparent misogyny that Wong's film fertilised in the Cheung persona.

In Chen Kaige's *Temptress Moon* (1996), for instance, Cheung's protagonist is a suave sybarite who seduces and defrauds married women, a permutation of the misogyny and moral shadiness that Cheung had cultivated in *Days of Being Wild*. As in Wong's film, ameliorating circumstances are on hand to qualify the protagonist's unsympathetic traits and to ensure that, when his death occurs, it is resonant with the 'pathos of failure'. Moreover, *Temptress Moon* positively coats the Cheung figure in glamour, palpable both in terms of visual style (e.g. the prevalent use of 'romantic' soft-focus) and in the diegetic status of the protagonist, whose reputation as the most admired gigolo in Shanghai is visibly signified by his fastidiously-groomed appearance. The 'glamorisation' of the Cheung protagonist became a recurring strategy in this period and appeared a necessary corollary to the level of celebrity that the star had by this stage attained in Chinese popular culture. Quite straightforwardly, for example, the Cheung character in *Temptress Moon* is Shanghai's 'most popular' gigolo, much as Cheung had become one of Hong Kong's most popular stars. Discernible from this, and from many of Cheung's films of this period, is an anxiety concerning the star's persuasiveness in roles that did not somehow reflect his own social standing and celebrity. Consequently, Cheung's protagonists were often increasingly affluent, socially-elevated, and/or involved in some theatrical venture (e.g. showbusiness).

As Cheung's popular image became progressively associated with glamour, Wong sought conversely to besmirch the star's physical appearance. In general, as David Bordwell observes, Wong 'dirties up pop idols, luring them into twitching and chainsmoking, and generally turns staggeringly attractive men and women into masks or freaks'.[48.] In *Ashes of Time* and *Happy Together*, Cheung's 'glamour' is displaced by seediness and physical dishevelment, deriving, in the former film, from the protagonist's manoeuvrings through an uncivilised desert landscape, and in the latter film, from the straits and hardships of lower-class street life. Physical grunginess thus flags the grim

conditions of the characters' lives. At the same time, Wong's tactics of deglamorisation are counterpointed by images that seek to aestheticise the star's physical attractiveness, and that function within Wong's sensuous aesthetic. Both *Ashes of Time* and *Happy Together* interpolate 'portrait' shots of Cheung that - in spite of the star's ostensible grubbiness - encourage the viewer to dwell on attributes of facial attractiveness, masculinity, 'hipness' and so forth.

At the level of visual style, we also find evidence of what I have called 'qualified consumption', the ostensibly legible presentation of the star that somehow problematises the viewer's visual purchase on the performer. In *Ashes of Time*, mainstream tradition is seemingly upheld by a close legible framing of Leslie Cheung's face, and the shot's suspended duration is sufficient for the star's presence to be adequately consumed by the spectator. However, at intervals Wong orchestrates the intrusion into shot of a foreground element of the set – a pellucid white curtain, apparently billowing in the breeze – that obscures and occasionally obstructs our view of the star. At the same time as the use of shot duration allows the actor's performance unbroken expression, the translucent curtain intermittently 'masks' or mediates this performance at a visual level, qualifying straightforward consumption of the star. Furthermore, this composition expressively dovetails with the spectral, ethereal quality that Wong evolves in Cheung's persona, though we can also find corresponding examples of this strategy elsewhere in Wong's oeuvre. (In *Days of Being Wild*, for instance, a long-held close shot of Maggie Cheung enables the star to exhibit performative skill through the continuous, discursively 'unmediated' recitation of a monologue, but the star's downcast posture and tresses of hair result in her face being largely obscured from view. In this instance, the viewer's attention is directed to other aspects of the star's performance, in particular the paralinguistic qualities of her speech, e.g. cadence, pitch, rhythm, timbre, etc., and their connotations of emotion or mood states.)

I have discussed above the moral ambivalence that *Days of Being Wild* confers upon Cheung's persona. Wong gives further expression to this ambivalence in *Ashes of Time* and *Happy Together*, where ameliorating traits and contextual background counterweight the Cheung character's immoral or unsympathetic actions. *Ashes of Time*'s emphasis on Cheung's negative traits is made explicit by inflecting Ouyang Feng's (Cheung) professional title with a distinctly moral valence: Malicious West. A soiled martial arts swordsman, Ouyang Feng presides over a ramshackle inn in a mythical, amoral wilderness, where he facilitates killings for those willing to pay. He is, as Wimal Dissanayake observes, 'a self-centred cynical mercenary...a self-corrupted character who is instrumental in corrupting others'.[49] The moral polarisation of the protagonist, however, is undermined in a way that elicits a qualifying degree of sympathy for the swordsman: gradually, the viewer comes into knowledge about Ouyang's past devotion to a woman (Maggie Cheung), whose rejection of him and marriage to his elder brother constitutes a traumatic experience that transforms 'him into a man of inaction, tormented by the past and burdened by memory'.[50] Like *Days of Being Wild*, *Ashes of Time* thus portrays the Cheung figure as an unmotivated and narcissistic antihero, a transgressor of morally acceptable behaviour whose malign activity may be accounted for by past familial crises. Yet, in *Ashes of Time*, Wong intensifies the latent malevolence that accompanies Cheung through *Days of Being Wild*: Ouyang Feng's morality is more wretched than Yuddi's inasmuch as his internal angst is *deliberately* externalised and weaponized, engineering human death and seeking to contaminate the moral orientation of others. Intensifying malevolence in the Cheung character is one means by which Wong 'deepens' and expands the expressive range in Cheung's repertoire of traits.

In this respect, *Days of Being Wild* serves as a Cheung intertext whose tropes Wong can adopt, subvert, or transform. For instance, *Ashes of Time* diametrically inverts the romance dynamic of the protagonists in *Days of Being Wild*: it is the Maggie Cheung figure that

now mobilises rejection and provokes emotional heartbreak, though the consequences for the Leslie Cheung character remain the same: narcissistic immobilisation. Parenthetically, I have suggested that Wong's visual treatment of Maggie Cheung in *Ashes of Time* is predicated on sensuous aestheticisation, a presentation motivated in the diegesis by Ouyang's romanticised memory of his former sweetheart. (As Maggie Cheung has remarked, 'the way Wong sees beauty, or women related to beauty, it has to be that sensual, perfect thing...'.)[51.] What we can begin to perceive is a gradual deviation from the actress's 'ordinary Hong Kong girl' persona that Wong appropriated in *Days of Being Wild*, toward the idealised, ornate, and stylised beauty that Wong would venerate in the later *In the Mood for Love*.

Happy Together plays out a gender twist on *Days of Being Wild*'s masochistic romance relationships, reinstating Leslie Cheung as the self-absorbed polygamist and supplanting Carina Lau's and Maggie Cheung's devotees with a tortured male lover played by Tony Leung. Like Yuddi, Ho Po-wing (Cheung) is characterised by a set of undesirable traits – self-centredness, laziness, irresponsibility – that have negative effects on the character that dotes on him. Ho's devotion to sensual pleasures leads him into infidelities that torment the faithful Lai Yiu-fai (Leung). (It is evident that the prototypical, 'glamorous' Cheung figure is brought low in *Happy Together*: whereas *Temptress Moon*'s protagonist is a male prostitute whose targeting of married women affords a luxurious lifestyle, Ho Po-wing's indiscriminate begging and whoring does nothing to lift him out of his squalid surroundings.) Apart from his sexual promiscuity, Ho's profligacy, recklessness, and physical violence toward his partner further stack the viewer's sympathy in favour of Lai. This identification with the ill-treated partner is augmented by a voiceover narration that provides subjective access to Lai's inner feelings. In contrast, Ho is an ambivalent figure whose regular dependence on Lai, encapsulated in his refrain 'Let's start over', may be less a signification of romantic commitment to Lai than a habitual reflex when solitary existence turns sour. Wong maintains this ambiguity by eschewing

voiceover narration that might provide communicative access to Ho's subjective attitudes and desires.

This is not to suggest that Cheung's character in *Happy Together* is undemanding of the spectator's sympathy. As in *Days of Being Wild* and *Ashes of Time*, ameliorating situations come to the rescue of Cheung's negative traits. Ho Po-wing is often shown in vulnerable positions that arouse the viewer's pity, as when he is savagely beaten by a 'trick'. Moreover, scenes depicting Ho and Lai being 'happy together' encourage an approbatory regard for the character. In distinction from the earlier films, however, Wong does not explicitly anchor the Cheung character's moral ambivalence in familial trauma. Yet the possibility of a kind of filial 'lack' is implied in Ho's emotional (and physical) dependence on Lai, which often takes the form of juvenile neediness. Following an assault, for instance, Ho convalesces under Lai's supervision, and relies on his partner to carry out ostensibly recuperative tasks such as bathing and feeding - activities that are the staple undertakings of a parent. I would suggest that Ho's quality of childlike vulnerability and dependency is essential in the elicitation of the viewer's sympathy or pathos.

This 'childlike' aspect may be traced to previous mobilisations of the Cheung persona that seek to identify the star with childhood experience.[52.] In Chen Kaige's *Farewell My Concubine* (1993) and *Temptress Moon*, for example, split time schemes juxtapose the protagonist as a youth and as an adult, a tactic that emphasises continuity (or lack thereof) in the character's attitudes and traits. Both films underscore the hangover of childlike traits in Cheung's adult protagonist, as when his volcanic rages assume the form of a juvenile tantrum, prompting the impression that the child is less evolved than transplanted into the adult identity. More generally, a number of Cheung characters are orphans, which automatically links the star with childhood loss (and constitutes one variation on the 'dysfunctional family' motif that prevails throughout his oeuvre). *Days of Being Wild*, I have suggested, marks Yuddi's narcissism off from adolescent ritual (i.e.

'teenage' angst or rebellion). But in dramatising Yuddi's attempt to reconcile with the matriarch, Wong reveals the character's regression to childhood dependency. Ho's immaturity is therefore firmly embedded in the established Cheung persona, and points to an inherent complexity in the star's image. In Wong's films, the Cheung persona is a dynamic and contradictory construct that encompasses both perverse, unsympathetic traits (e.g. narcissistic self-centredness) and qualifying or mitigating ones (e.g. childlike vulnerability). Under Wong's tutelage, therefore, the Cheung character is neither predominantly sympathetic nor predominantly undesirable, but is rather a psychologically complex figure liable to test straightforward notions of audience engagement.

In *Happy Together*, Wong plays hard and fast with the masculine personas of two culturally revered stars. The film boldly transgresses the mainstream cinema's implicit but emphatic principle that the star is presented in resolutely heterosexual terms. Nonetheless, there are demonstrable antecedents of sexual identity and orientation in Cheung's earlier work. Most explicitly, Cheung had portrayed homosexuality in the mainland-produced *Farewell My Concubine*, a film which situates its art film affinities, as well as its international ambitions, close to the surface. However, the film's conservatism is evident both in its period setting (putting sexual difference at a historical distance) and in its chaste representation of homosexual relationships. Less directly, homoerotic undercurrents accompany the male fraternity in *A Better Tomorrow*. An implicit signifier of Cheung's ideologically-deviating desire is also embedded in the star's commercial films of the fantastic, which posit a transgressive relationship between the living and the dead. Furthermore, Cheung's appearance in two mainstream comedies that draw explicitly upon themes of sexual confusion - *He's a Woman, She's a Man* and *Who's the Man, Who's the Woman* (Peter Chan, 1996) – confirmed the star's preoccupation with sexual politics and gender ambiguity.

Happy Together moreover exploits Cheung's pre-established androgyny. Theretofore, Hong Kong mainstream cinema had

endeavoured to represent Cheung's quality (of, as one critic puts it, 'diva-like grandeur'[53.]) in a way that was permissible to mass audiences. For instance, one popular comedy *All's Well, Ends Well* (Clifton Ko, 1992) organises a familiar recuperative strategy around the celebration and containment of Cheung's androgyny. The Cheung character's imputed homosexuality and effeminate comportment are initially exploited for comic purposes. Subsequently, however, the film performs a self-consciously improbable volte-face by transforming the character into a bourgeois heterosexual. The film thereby dissolves the transgressive otherness of the Cheung figure, reconstructing it in accordance with monolithic codes of normalcy.

If Cheung's sexual ambiguity is curtailed by the self-conscious conservatism of both mainstream film and (in the case of *Farewell My Concubine*) the Chinese national art cinema, it is given full expression in *Happy Together*. Rather than 'containing' or diluting Cheung's sexual difference, as had been the strategy employed by mainstream filmmakers, Wong's film confronts and explores Cheung's 'otherness'. Revealed here is both Wong's willingness to test the limits of 'acceptability' in a star persona and his desire to remove the figurative harnesses that hold back the revelation of a star's less propitious traits. (This tendency is also evident in Wong's uncovering of the socially-undesirable traits in Cheung's early persona, such as narcissism and malevolence, which previous films had not been inclined to fully investigate.) Wong's transaction with the Cheung persona also echoes Richard Dyer's notion of 'authenticity', a fidelity to the congeries of traits that comprise a persona and to the sense of the star as a 'real person', whose personal development over time is reflected in a variety of resonant film roles.[54.] By the time that production commenced on *Happy Together,* Cheung's aptness for homosexual characterisations was enhanced by an increasing emphasis on flamboyancy and camp in the star's public image. Moreover, Wong's casting of Cheung in the film also demonstrates the filmmaker's proclivity for extrapolating 'authentic' traits from an extant star image; traits, in other words, that

the more conservative mainstream cinema had been unable or unwilling to fully articulate.[55.]

One of my main preoccupations in this chapter has been to demonstrate that Wong's engagement with the star performer cannot be neatly characterised in terms of 'appropriation' or 'subversion' of the pre-established persona. To this end, I have sought through an analysis of Leslie Cheung's star image to articulate more complex modes of engagement. These modes may also be understood in terms of Wong's personal preoccupations: subduing Cheung's action hero persona, for example, sets Wong's cinema apart from both John Woo's films of heroic bloodshed in particular, and the Hong Kong action cinema in general. Similarly, intensifying Cheung's latent narcissism allows Wong to work against the received wisdom, exemplified in mainstream cinema, that the star must be 'likeable' (one index of what David Mamet calls the 'corrosive "likeability" of mass entertainment').[56.] In *Days of Being Wild*, for instance, Cheung's performance is not keyed to elicit an approbatory response; rather, Yuddi's negative traits are ameliorated by what we come to learn of the character's personal history, in distinction from any performative concessions to Yuddi's tough exterior (i.e. Cheung does not abandon his embodiment of hardened disaffection to let the audience see Yuddi's 'softer', more amenable aspect). Wong's stars are generally not as overtly sympathetic as they frequently are in the commercial cinema. In this regard, they are apt to display less socially permissible traits than might ordinarily be given expression in the mainstream, and are able to extend the limits of their persona in a way that the more conservative cinema would seldom permit. The moral ambivalence that Wong accentuates in Cheung's persona creates a complex spectator response that cannot be simply summarised in diametric terms: the Cheung character is neither sympathetic nor unsympathetic, but rather provokes a perpetual tension between these two affective poles. (The trope here finds a visual correlative in the tension between Wong's

'aestheticisation' and 'deglamorisation' of the star's appearance.) As a result, the spectator's response to the Cheung figure may be aligned with Elsaesser's sense of the term 'pathos' (i.e. wrought by the spectacle of inconsequential action and the inevitability of failure), which, in *Days of Being Wild*, *Ashes of Time*, and *Happy Together*, is elicited by Cheung's alienated, unmotivated, and ill-fated protagonist.

More generally, this chapter has attempted to demonstrate that Wong's engagement with stars embraces a number of commercial, aesthetic and intertextual considerations. I have argued that the star is made a receptacle for Wong's strategies of 'global' address, invoking Western culture and archetypes, and declaiming multilingual utterances. I have also claimed that the star is assimilated into Wong's aesthetic of sensuousness, offering up her bodily attractiveness to the camera's eroticised gaze. However, if these strategies imply that the star is passively appropriated by Wong, I have sought to demonstrate that Wong's filmmaking practice and aesthetic bears witness to the active involvement of the star performer. As I have argued, the star is an integral element in the process of characterisation, improvising actions around limned scenarios. She is also called upon to demonstrate performative skill – and not merely star presence or 'charisma' – through a range of bodily expressive modes, as well as through a type of fictive protagonist that calls for 'expressive incoherence', foregrounding the character's internal dilemmas. I have furthermore characterised Wong's visual interplay with the star in terms of ambivalence, arguing that the filmmaker oscillates between honorific and irreverent representation of the star figure. Often, I have argued, a kind of middle ground prevails whereby conventional legible images of the star are mediated or distressed by visual obfuscation, which results in a 'qualified' form of audience consumption. The prevalence of this ambivalent tactic in Wong's oeuvre is one of several features I have discussed that distinguishes the director's visual treatment of stars from that of the typical mainstream product.

We have seen that Wong's traffic with the star persona is integrally linked to his films' visual manoeuvres. For example, by intensifying Cheung's pre-established self-regard into narcissism, Wong provides the motivation (i.e. Yuddi's proclivity for posturing in *Days of Being Wild*) for the interpolation of aestheticised star tableaux. Similarly, Wong's allusion to the fantastic genre, and his tacit transformation of the Cheung figure into a spectral presence, accords with the filmmaker's penchant for visual obfuscation, fast and elliptical editing, and images that 'threaten to slip from our gaze'. Here, the pre-established generic associations of Cheung's persona intersect with Wong's ethereal visual strategies. More broadly, Wong's sensitivity to a star's generic connotations invites us to examine his engagement with genre in general. The allusions to the action and fantastic genres in *Days of Being Wild* (a romance melodrama) suggest a complex imbrication of generic categories. Yet generic iconography is sometimes stripped of its conventional function in Wong's films. In genre cinema, for example, semi-opaque curtains will typically mask a figure for the purposes of narrative suspense: consider, for example, the obscured assault that takes place on Roy Scheider's balcony in *Marathon Man* (1976), or the shower sequence in *Psycho* (1960), both of which portend sinister action but crucially withhold the identity of the assailant. In *Ashes of Time*, however, the translucent curtain billowing before Cheung's face dispenses with such suspenseful purpose (we can clearly discern Ouyang Feng through the veiled foreground), though we may detect oblique reference to the star's generic history (by the ethereal quality conferred upon his physical aspect). Does Wong's repudiation of this generic trope indicate a rejection of genre cinema altogether? The following chapter will explore in greater detail Wong's approach to generic frameworks, particularly in relation to *In the Mood for Love*. As we will see, sensitivity to a star's generic background is but one aspect of Wong's complex engagement with the conventions of genre cinema.

Notes

[1] Patrick Frater, 'Stargazing', *Screen International*: Hong Kong Special Cannes 2003 supplement, p.11. There does exist an important affinity between the two cinemas' treatment of stars, however. Like Hollywood cinema, the Hong Kong film industry relies substantively upon an established star system for institutional and economic stability; studios will pinpoint the Hong Kong film star as an integral element in the local cinema's domestic and diasporic profitability.

[2] Hong Kong film star Maggie Cheung states: 'If I had never met [Wong Kar-wai]...I would be doing parts that are a bit superficial, glamorous, empty parts. And his films are not like that, and because of his films, other directors who are a little more interesting want to work with me, give me a chance to play those difficult parts'. Quoted in Mark Morris, 'Cool Under Pressure', *The Observer* (Sunday October 1, 2000).

[3] Consider, for example, the following inventory of Asian films, all of which acquired various kinds of international success, and which preceded Wong's collaboration with the star in question. Maggie Cheung: *Police Story* (Jackie Chan, 1985), *Project A II* (Jackie Chan, 1987); Andy Lau: *Boat People* (Ann Hui, 1982), *Magic Crystal* (Wong Jing, 1986); Tony Leung: *Love Unto Waste* (Stanley Kwan, 1986), *City of Sadness* (Hou Hsiao-hsien, 1989); Gong Li: various seminal films directed by Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige, including *Raise the Red Lantern* (Zhang, 1991), *The Story of Qiu Ju* (Zhang, 1992), and *Farewell My Concubine* (Chen, 1993); and Zhang Ziyi: *The Road Home* (Zhang Yimou, 1999), *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (Ang Lee, 2000), *Hero* (Zhang Yimou, 2002). I shall detail the early career of Leslie Cheung later in this chapter.

[4] The affinity with Cassavetes is also evident in Wong's emphasis on improvised performance, which I shall discuss below.

[5] A parallel tendency is also evident in Cantopop lyrics, whose refrains are often rendered in English.

[6] To cite two recent examples, the star-driven mainstream film *Initial D* (2005) interpolates a host of songs by its star, Jay Chou, a popular Taiwanese musician, and *Infernal Affairs* (2002) exhibits a duet sung by its marquee stars, Andy Lau and Tony Leung.

[7] Stephen Short, 'A Night on the Set: Wong's Wild and Crazy Technique', *Time* (November 13, 2000), p.98.

[8] Wong seems to have been granted this level of artistic freedom at an early point in his career. His second film, *Days of Being Wild*, bears the stamp of expressive experimentation in its narrative ellipticality and visual obliqueness, while *Ashes of Time* gained notoriety for its dilated production period. Although Wong has remarked that the producer of his first film, *As Tears Go By*, 'gave me lots of freedom' (Brunette, *Wong Kar-wai*, p.3), the relative conventionality of the film's narrative and

aesthetic strategies would appear to indicate that Wong was consented less scope for 'performative experimentation' at the very start of his directing career.

[9.] Lisa Odham Stokes, 'Being There and Gone: Wong Kar-wai's *In the Mood for Love* as a Pure Mood Poem', *Tamkang Review* 33:2 (Winter 2002), p.130.

[10.] See 'Interview with Tony Leung', From *Hong Kong Panorama 2000-2001*, **http://www.tonyleung.org/news/hkpanorama1.shtml** (accessed 18/01/2002).

[11.] According to one writer, Wong explicitly compels Maggie Cheung to a performative emphasis on behavioural expressivity: 'Wong surprised [Cheung, during the filming of *As Tears Go By*] by cutting most of her lines and making her concentrate on her movements, an approach which paid off in his sultry *Days of Being Wild*...By the time of *In the Mood for Love* it was nearly all physical...'. Jonathan Romney, 'The Lady is a Vamp', *ABC: The Arts, Books & Culture Magazine from the Independent on Sunday* (26 June 2005 - 2 July 2005) p.5.

[12.] For further discussion of this tactic, see Andrew Britton, *Katharine Hepburn: Star as Feminist*, Studio Vista, 1995, p.150.

[13.] Richard Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society*, BFI: MacMillan, 1987, p.11; Carl Plantinga, 'The Scene of Empathy and the Human Face on Film', in *Passionate Views: Film, Cognition, and Emotion*, edited by Carl Plantinga and Greg M. Smith, The John Hopkins University Press, 1999.

[14.] Joe McElhaney, 'The Object and the Face: *Notorious*, Bergman and the Close-up', in *Hitchcock: Past and Future*, edited by Richard William Allen and Sam Ishii-Gonzales, London: Routledge, 2004, p.67.

[15.] Rudolf Arnheim, *Film as Art*, University of California Press, 1957, p.139.

[16.] Pam Cook, 'Star Signs', *Screen* 20:3/4 (Winter 1979/80), p.83.

[17.] Charles Leary, '*Infernal Affairs*: High Concept in Hong Kong', *Senses of Cinema* 26 (May/June, 2003) www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/03/26/infernal_affairs.html (accessed 6/10/05 16.30.) Stephen Heath has described a similar phenomena in respect of *The Towering Inferno* (1974), which marks its denouement with the coalescence of its headline stars, Paul Newman and Steve McQueen. '[A] pact of the stars much more than of the characters', Heath argues that the star moment in this instance functions as an effective facilitator for narrative closure, 'providing a resolution for the narrative, as such'. See Stephen Heath, *Questions of Cinema*, Macmillan, 1981, p.182.

[18.] Leary, '*Infernal Affairs*'. A more detailed discussion of 'idols of consumption' can be found in Richard Dyer, *Stars*, BFI: London, 1988, pp.39-42.

[19.] Janice Tong, '*Chungking Express*: Time and Its Displacements' in *Chinese Films in Focus: 25 New Takes*, edited by Chris Berry (London: BFI, 2003), p.54. See also Ackbar Abbas, *Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance*, University of Minnesota Press, 1997, p.35.

[20.] Though an anachronistic device in Hollywood cinema, the freeze-frame is still routinely utilised in Hong Kong filmmaking. Indeed, while Leary does not specifically identify this device, it is liberally employed in the *Infernal Affairs* series, and constitutes an important strategy for the process of consumption.

[21.] Fredric Dannen and Barry Long, *Hong Kong Babylon: An Insider's Guide to the Hollywood of the East*, Faber and Faber, 1997, p.105.

[22.] It is worth emphasising that oblique presentation of stars has potentially negative consequences in terms of a film's commercial success. According to Fredric Dannen, the Korean distributor of *Chungking Express* had invested in the film on the basis of Lin's involvement, but was 'crushed when he saw [the film]', complaining that the star was 'barely recognisable'. See *Ibid.*, p.51.

[23.] Christine Gledhill, 'Signs of Melodrama' in *Stardom: Industry of Desire*, edited by Christine Gledhill, London and New York: Routledge, 1991, p.212.

[24.] Howard Hampton, 'Venus, Armed', *Film Comment* 32:5 (September/October 1996), p.42.

[25.] Arnheim, *Film as Art*, p.134. Again, inhibiting visual access to the star's face can provoke both frustration, and, as Stephen Heath argues, a desire to 'see all'. The tendency of film images to fragment the body encourages the viewer to want to 'see all', a desire that 'extends not just into the appropriation of wholeness and unity but also into the desire for *everything*, all of the body, every bit'. (Heath, *Questions of Cinema*, p.184.)

[26.] In broad terms, the phrase 'cultural display rules' refers to the governing influence of social conventions upon an individual's facial expression of emotion. See Paul Ekman (ed.), *Emotion in the Human Face*, Cambridge University Press, 1982.

[27.] James Naremore, *Acting in the Cinema*, University of California Press, 1988, p.76.

[28.] Paul Ekman and Wallace V. Friesen, 'Nonverbal Leakage and Clues to Deception'. *Psychiatry* 32:1 (February 1969), p.98.

[29.] Naremore, *Acting in the Cinema*, p.76.

[30.] Ekman and Friesen, 'Nonverbal Leakage and Clues to Deception', p.98.

[31.] David Bordwell, 'Aesthetics in Action: *Kungfu*, Gunplay, and Cinematic Expressivity'. In *At Full Speed: Hong Kong Cinema in a Borderless World*, edited by Esther C. M. Yau, University of Minnesota Press, 2001, p.78.

[32.] Ibid., p.74. Emphasis in original.

[33.] Invoking a paradigmatic example of contemporary Hollywood action, Bordwell here refers to Richard Donner's *Lethal Weapon* (1987).

[34.] Ibid., p.81.

[35.] Kenneth E. Hall, *John Woo: The Films*, McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 1999, p.148. Woo's allusion to *Jules et Jim* is typical of Hong Kong cinema's appropriation

of material from diverse sources, and points to the way that art cinema techniques are assimilated into mainstream styles.

[36.] Richard Corliss, 'That Old Feeling: Days of Being Leslie'. *Timeasia.com* (Thursday, 3 April 2003).

www.time.com/time/asia/arts/article/0,9754,440214,00.html (accessed 12/11/05, 11.20)

[37.] *Ibid.*

[38.] Plantinga writes: '"Good violence" is undertaken according to a codified set of governing conventions. The hero resorts to violence only when conventional "justice" demands its use to resolve conflicts or to mete out "just" retribution'. Carl Plantinga, 'Spectacles of Death: Clint Eastwood and Violence in *Unforgiven*'. *Cinema Journal* 37:2 (Winter 1998), p.72. In *As Tears Go By*, Wong limns Andy Lau's protagonist as an 'honourable' triad by justifying his violence and curbing its extremity. Wah will avenge a vicious attack on Fly by delivering exact retribution: the hood responsible for Fly's chest wound will also be struck a decisive blow to the chest. In this way, Wah's violence is not so 'excessive' as to nullify its 'justifiability'; rather, it adheres to a traditional adage - 'an eye for an eye' - that emphasises fairness in violence. In contrast, the antagonist can profess honourable violence ('I am justified: an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth'), but is invariably shown to precipitate violent action, meting it out in ways that are excessive and underhand.

[39.] The fable recited by Yuddi, about a paralysed bird that flies aimlessly, is a terse summation of the protagonist's psychological condition. Furthermore, Wong's ascription of listlessness to Yuddi might be traced to those scenes in *Rouge* where the Cheung character languishes in a drug-addled state.

[40.] In *Happy Together*, Wong continues to mark the Cheung figure as visually diffuse and subject to disappearance. Cheung's tendency to 'slip from our gaze' is most explicitly conveyed when Ho Po-wing (Cheung) inexplicably disappears from an otherwise stable shot, prompting one pair of critics to brand him 'a ghost of a character'. (Lisa Odham Stokes and Michael Hoover, *City on Fire: Hong Kong Cinema*, New York: Verso, 1999, p.275.)

[41.] John Ellis, for instance, argues that 'though the figures, objects and places represented [in cinema] are absent from the space in which the viewing takes place, they are also (astoundingly) present'. John Ellis, *Visible Fictions: Cinema: Television: Video*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982, p.38. Christian Metz finds a simultaneous presence and absence within the medium of film itself: 'The imaginary [i.e. the signifier, the cinematic medium], by definition, combines within it a certain presence and absence'. Christian Metz, 'The Imaginary Signifier', in Robert Stam and Toby Miller (eds.), *Film and Theory: An Anthology*, Blackwell, 2000, p.410. See also the

discussion of 'distance' and 'identification' in Pam Cook, 'Star Signs', *Screen* 20:3/4 (Winter 1979/80), p.83.

[42.] The French filmmaker Oliver Assayas has observed that Chinese audiences 'see stars as semi-gods, but gods who are very accessible'. In *Days of Being Wild*, Maggie Cheung's character is 'an ordinary girl' and thus a figure with whom the Chinese audience can closely identify; as Assayas puts it, the star 'has played so many ordinary Hong Kong girls, it's part of the reason [local audiences] feel close to her'. Quoted in 'The Lady is a Vamp', ABC: *The Arts, Books & Culture Magazine from the Independent on Sunday* (26 June 2005 - 2 July 2005), p.6.

[43.] Thomas Elsaesser, 'The Pathos of Failure: American Films in the 70s - Notes on the Unmotivated Hero', *Monogram* 6 (October 1975), pp.13-19.

[44.] *Ah Fei* is the Cantonese term applied to delinquent youths.

[45.] Op cit., p.17. Elsaesser identifies pathos in the antiheroic figures of New Hollywood cinema, whose immobilisation and inexorable drive toward failure is counterpointed to the dynamism and affirmative action of the classical hero. For Elsaesser, the New Hollywood gives expression to the 'sweet poignancy of defeat' that results from futile action, a scenario apt for the elicitation of pathos. In these respects, the parallel with the Cheung figure in *Days of Being Wild* is particularly apparent; but it should be recalled that Elsaesser puts stress on the ideological symbolism of the New Hollywood cinema, linking the unmotivated hero's 'pointless' and 'useless' action to specifically American values - such protagonists, he argues, encode a 'radical scepticism...about the American virtues of ambition, vision, drive' (p.15).

[46.] The notion of a star image being 'deepened' (i.e. gradually evolved) across a series of films derives from Richard Dyer. See *Stars*, London: BFI, 1998, p.98.

[47.] In the fantastic genre, Cheung starred in *The Bride with White Hair*, *The Bride with White Hair II* (David Wu and Ronny Yu, 1993), *The Phantom Lover* (Ronny Yu, 1995), and *Inner Senses* (Law Chi-Leung, 2002); in the action genre, the star appeared in Wong's *Ashes of Time*, *Shanghai Grand* (Man Kit Poon, 1996), and *Double Tap* (Law Chi-Leung, 2000).

[48.] David Bordwell, *Planet Hong Kong: Popular Cinema and the Art of Entertainment* (Harvard University Press, 2000), p.277.

[49.] Wimal Dissanayake, *Wong Kar-wai's Ashes of Time*, Hong Kong University Press, 2003, p.36.

[50.] *Ibid.*

[51.] Quoted in Steve Rose, 'The Final Cut', *The Guardian: Friday Review* (Friday, 24 June 2005), p.9.

[52.] The trend of identifying Cheung with childhood persisted in subsequent films, most explicitly in *The Kid* (Jacob Cheung, 1999), a Chaplinesque melodrama in which a zealous executive discovers a foundling and is coerced into becoming its surrogate

father. The title of the film might refer as much to Cheung's businessman as to the illegitimate child, such is the former's incompetence in adapting to the adult demands of parental responsibility.

[53.] Joe McElhaney, 'Happy Together', *Senses of Cinema*.
www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/cteq/00/10/happy.html   (Accessed   12/11/05, 12.00.)

[54.] Richard Dyer, '*A Star is Born* and the Construction of Authenticity', in *Stardom: Industry of Desire*, edited by Christine Gledhill, London and New York: Routledge, 1991, pp.132-40.

[55.] As Wong remarks, 'If you want to make a film with an actor or actress, there must be something that attracts you. I'm trying to exploit it, the quality that they might not even be aware of themselves'. Quoted in Bryan Walsh, "We love what we can't have, and we can't have what we love". *Timeasia* 164:14 (October 4, 2004).
www.time.com/time/asia/magazine/article/0,13673,501041004-702208,00.html

[56.] David Mamet, 'On Likeability', *Film Comment* 42:2 (March-April 2006), p.22.
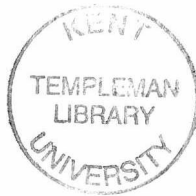
3. *In the Mood for Love* and Popular Genre

In his study of Wong Kar-wai's films, Peter Brunette observes a schism in the critical responses to Wong's use of genre.[1] On the one hand, Brunette argues, there is the 'genre camp', which contends that genre frameworks constitute an important base for the filmmaker's commercial and aesthetic concerns. Brunette cites David Bordwell as a representative of this perspective, who has argued that Wong's films 'take popular norms as points of departure'.[2] A cognate view, though not one evoked by Brunette, is proffered by Ackbar Abbas in his examination of contemporary Hong Kong culture. Abbas claims that each of Wong's films 'starts with the conventions of a popular genre – and deliberately loses its way in the genre'.[3] In distinction, Brunette posits the 'antigeneric camp', which holds that Wong exhibits an antipathy for generic structures and tends to operate independently of genre. Here, Brunette invokes Chuck Stephens' claim that Wong's 'interest in formulas...is virtually nonexistent'.[4] Another critic asserts that the filmmaker is 'more comfortable away from genre'.[5] Brunette himself appears reluctant to align himself with either 'camp', though he seems to distance himself from the genre adherents. His view that, in the films succeeding *As Tears Go By*, Wong 'begins to leave genre definitively behind'[6] would seem to indicate the author's sympathy with the antigeneric perspective.[7]

In this chapter, I attempt to demonstrate the cogency of the view that Wong's films evolve out of popular genres, and to this end I take issue with the antigeneric perspective postulated (though not necessarily espoused) by Brunette. I will attempt to demonstrate that genre is a crucial element in Wong's authorial expression. My contention will be that Wong's films often exhibit a tension between generic categories and the principle of auteurist expression. If, in this negotiation, the auteurist impulse invariably acquires the upper hand, this does not of necessity spell the expulsion of genre. Rather, what we find is a manipulation of generic codes to facilitate the filmmaker's

particular authorial preoccupations. The critical assumption that Wong repudiates genre, I argue, fails to acknowledge the way that the filmmaker bends genre conventions to fit his own authorial purposes. If we are to find utility in the notion of the 'antigeneric', moreover, we must reconceptualise it in a way that does not denote the total negation of genre. Later, in an analysis of *In the Mood for Love*, I will argue that Wong's complex layering of genres is integral to the expression of thematic, narrative, and aesthetic issues. First, however, it is necessary to establish the soundness of the critical thesis postulated by the 'genre camp', i.e. that genre is an essential artistic tool in Wong's filmmaking practice. I suggest that the filmmaker's traffic with genre encompasses three related concerns. These include the facilitation of certain commercial imperatives, the mobilisation of authorial tropes, and the expression of the auteur as 'cinephile'.

According to Wong himself, genre considerations are instrumental in the formative conceptual stage of his films' production. As Bordwell has shown, Wong displays a keen sensitivity to the marketplace's successful genres, enabling the filmmaker to entice financial supporters eager to capitalise on current generic trends: thus, for example, Wong sought financing for *Ashes of Time* in Taiwan, which at the time experienced a resurgence in the popularity of exported martial arts films; and *As Tears Go By* exploited the domestic audience's appetite for triad films featuring Andy Lau.[8.] Anchoring films firmly in established genres, moreover, lubricates assimilation into the domestic and international marketplace. To this end Wong marinates his films in recognisable generic iconography, even when this iconography seems to bear only superficially on the film's essential content. Wong is consciously guileful on this point:

> ...it's a strategy to get the film seen. Normally the distributors here in South East Asia will ask 'Do you have action in your film?' And I can say 'Yes'. 'Do you have cops?' Of course I have a cop, but my cop is quite different. 'Do you have gangsters and gun fights?' Yes I do, but it's done differently.[9.]

Wong here underlines the financial imperative of appropriating generic iconography, as well as his tendency to put these elements to unconventional use. However, there is a sense in which Wong's atypical development of familiar narrative and formal motifs is misrepresented by the 'antigeneric' critics in terms of an eradication of genre. Characterising Wong as an 'antigeneric' filmmaker in this sense prevents the critic from acknowledging the crucial role that genre plays in facilitating Wong's authorial preoccupations. For example, Brunette's apparent allegiance to the 'antigeneric camp' means that he is unable, in his own study on Wong, to examine the ways in which *2046* exploits its science fiction elements for authorial expression. Since his tentative position must hold that such generic elements are either fully absent from the film or are otherwise evoked and then discarded, Brunette fails to appreciate the importance that Wong places on the film's science fiction plot to mobilise personal themes, characterisation, and narrative organisation.

In *2046* the science fiction story is structured according to Wong's taste for parallelism. The futuristic scenes represent a secondary line of action that complements the film's primary 1960s-based plotline. Moreover, the science fiction scenes are revealed to be literally 'authored' by a diegetic character from the 1960s setting, Chow (Tony Leung), who has set about writing a science fiction novel and whose literary imaginings are reified in the form of the film's futuristic subplot. Chow's fantastic universe, furthermore, is peopled by figures that bear striking resemblance to those individuals he encounters in his 'real' life (and thus Wong ensures that the inhabitants of Chow's '2046' are essayed by the same actors as their 1960s counterparts). The science fiction line of action contributes to the principle of parallel construction that hallmarks many of Wong's previous narratives. (I undertake to investigate this aspect of Wong's storytelling, particularly in relation to *Fallen Angels*, in the next chapter.) Explicitly divided into two temporally distinct lines of action, *2046* brings to the fore affinities,

echoes, and dissimilarities between and among agents. Most significantly, the actors' assumption of dual roles activates, in explicit fashion, Wong's preoccupation with interchangeable identities. Revisited here is the emphasis on doubling that we find throughout Wong's films (e.g. the echoic plotlines in *Chungking Express*, or *Days of Being Wild*'s doppelganger relationships). However, *2046* achieves a more direct correspondence between its two echoic stories than does, for example, *Chungking Express*. In *Chungking Express*, codes of realism proper to the *policier* film entail that the two cop protagonists must be personified by distinct performers; connections between the two characters are to be implied through rhyming motifs and actions. In distinction, Wong can exploit the science fiction genre's violations of realism - agents with the same physical specificity are a familiar conceit of the science fiction universe[10.] - to explicitly denote the interchangeability of characters. The 'doubled' agents in *2046* are directly set in comparison with each other by virtue of their basically identical physicalities (setting aside differences in costume, hairstyle and so forth).[11.] In addition to generic motivation, moreover, Wong can justify this doubling strategy in terms of subjective realism (the futuristic scenes are anchored in Chow's subjectivity).

The science fiction plot in *2046*, issuing diegetically from Chow's imagination, establishes psychological traits. Chow's fictional universe is a world in which 'nothing ever changes', and gradually the viewer comes to recognise that Chow, too, is resistant to change.[12.] Chow's fantastic universe constitutes an idealised space wherein the disturbing forces of unpredictability and ephemerality are kept at bay. Similarly, the individuals that Chow encounters in his everyday life are 'cloned' in his imaginative vision and deprived of agency; that is, their actions are fully governed by Chow's imagination. The space of the imagination is where Chow can assume control of the individuals that traverse his real life, and who represent potential catalysts of change. Gradually, the haven of similitude and permanence that Chow contrives begins to seduce him away from the troubling vicissitudes of reality. 'I felt more

and more at ease in my fictional world', intones the protagonist in voiceover. Consequently, Chow becomes increasingly reclusive, and immerses himself deeper in his synthetic world.[13.] The science fiction realm in *2046* thus represents an 'inauthentic' space, a space that at once parallels Chow's real lived existence and provides retreat from it. In this regard, the science fiction plotline in *2046* comes to instantiate the theme of inauthenticity that, as we shall see, is so central to Wong's authorial concerns. (I will elaborate on this theme later in the present chapter, with specific reference to *In the Mood for Love*.)

2046 also employs science fiction iconography to elucidate themes of emotional dependency. For example, Wong introduces the figure of the android as an analogue or simulacrum of a lost love object. The film's narration here is quite complex, evolving a mise-en-abyme structure and referring intertextually and obliquely to *In the Mood for Love*. The autobiographical hero of Chow's science fiction story, Tak (Takuya Kimura), reveals: 'I once fell in love with someone. I couldn't stop wondering whether she loved me or not. I found an android that looked just like her. I thought the android might give me the answer'. Interpreting this dialogue intertextually and 'autobiographically', 'Tak' may be understood to be describing Chow's unresolved affection for Su Lizhen (Maggie Cheung) in Wong's *In the Mood for Love*. This inference 'explains' Chow's present promiscuity in terms of a fruitless search for a lost romantic object, upon which the protagonist is emotionally dependent. The generic figure of the android, moreover, is apt to connote the figurative 'replicas' of Su Lizhen (i.e. the strikingly beautiful women) that Chow subsequently pursues and seduces but which ultimately fail to satisfy him.[14.] This reading gains further credibility when Chow, in his 'real' incarnation, encounters a second woman bearing the name Su Lizhen (Gong Li), and, following an unsuccessful liaison with her, resignedly concludes: 'In love, you can't bring on a substitute. I was looking for what I'd felt with the other Su Lizhen'.

The emotional void represented by the generic android figure is furthermore accurate to the way that Chow perceives the women he seduces: for Chow, these women are inadequate manifestations of the real object of his desire, and therefore do not warrant his emotional sensitivity and commitment. But Wong shows us that these female 'stand-ins' are emotional beings too, and are not simply robotic figures enlisted to accommodate Chow's/Tak's desires. Thus the courtesan that Chow seduces and discards displays genuine romantic affection for him, and the ostensibly autonomic android (Faye Wong) surprises Tak with its authentic and unprogrammed displays of emotion. It is thematic intricacies such as these, as well as nuances of characterisation and plot, that the critic overlooks if she insists on arguing that Wong simply rejects genre. Thus the antigeneric critic, in assuming that Wong's interest in genre is barren and inoperative, can hardly begin to appreciate the ways that Wong harnesses genre to the expression of authorial themes and issues.

Genre is operative throughout Wong's films, if only for the purposes of revision and subversion. We have already seen, in the last chapter, how *Ashes of Time* at once hews to the *wuxia pian*'s convention of incorporating elaborate swordplay sequences, but subverts the culturally-established norms of such sequences at the level of visual style. *Happy Together* also evokes genre for a revisionist or subversive purpose. According to Jeremy Tambling, *Happy Together* 'may be considered to be a play on the American 'road movie''.[15.] More specifically, the film plays upon the cycle of 'queer road movies' that emerged in the American independent and mainstream cinema in the early 1990s (for example, *My Own Private Idaho* (1991) and *The Living End* (1992)).[16.] In many respects, *Happy Together*'s position within this subgenre is an unstable one. We can assume, for example, that *Happy Together* does not share the same general impetus as its counterparts in the American cinema, where the films are authored by homosexual filmmakers attempting to achieve visibility and credibility for their subject. Moreover, Wong claims that the film is not a 'queer movie'

per se, but rather a film about relationships.[17.] Correspondingly, we find both a diminished emphasis on the gay protagonists' marginalisation by the social hegemony and an absence of homophobia or sexual prejudice. Eschewing emphasis on the homosexual subject's vicissitudes within a putatively unsupportive social system is one way in which Wong distinguishes *Happy Together* from the generic tropes of American gay-themed films. The film similarly undermines tropes of the 'road movie'. The picaresque is displaced by an emphasis on stasis and paralysis, with much of the action concentrated in bars and rented apartments. The protagonists' car splutters and falters, abandoning the characters to the road without the semblance of progress. Wong also repudiates the image of the road as a site of human intersection. As Mikhail Bakhtin states, '[on the road] people who are normally kept apart by social and spatial distance can accidentally meet; any contrast may crop up, the most various fates may collide and interweave with one another'.[18.] Wong sacrifices this trope to a more claustrophobic emphasis on the two lovers and their increasing, mutual frustration.

In the context of the queer road movie, *Happy Together* makes some decidedly atypical (we might even say antigeneric) moves. Yet the film is only antigeneric in the sense that it rejects certain generic tropes; it is not antigeneric in the sense that it rejects genre altogether. Self-evidently, the film can only revise the queer road movie by evoking the genre explicitly and appropriating the relevant iconography (the car, the road, the gay couple and so forth). Moreover these generic motifs are recurrent throughout the film, although they may be developed in ways that deviate from convention. *Happy Together*, as Wong contends, may indeed be understood as a meditation on relationships in general, rather than as a study specifically of homosexual partnerships. But we should acknowledge that it is Wong's repression of certain tropes of the gay-oriented film (e.g. the reduced emphasis on hegemonic disapproval) that facilitates the wider applicability of the film's central relationship. (In other words, the heterosexual viewer finds it easier to identify with disharmony within a romantic relationship than with external

disharmony directed at the relationship itself.) In any event, the film does not function independently of generic frameworks; it is Wong's operations *within a generic context* (i.e. his appropriations, subversions, and qualifications of genre) that finally determine *Happy Together*'s degree of proximity to the conventional 'queer road movie' paradigm.

On occasion, Wong exploits his films' opening scenes to seed erroneous generic assumptions. Consider, for example, *Chungking Express*. Initially evoking the genre of the *policier*, the film introduces elements and action that undermine any assumptions we may foster of a conventional replaying of the *policier* genre. Our expectations thus destabilised, the rest of the film is infused with an atmosphere of unpredictability. Some critics have classified *Chungking Express* as a romantic comedy, and certainly this is a reasonably adequate description of the film in generic terms. But romantic comedy is what the film becomes, or rather, what it reveals itself to be; it is not the genre that the film initially evokes. Although Wong appears to abandon the *policier* genre in the course of the film, therefore, he does not abandon *genre* – rather, he switches genres, bringing the romantic underpinnings of the film's first story more centrally into play.[19.]

If *Chungking Express* abandons the narrative conventions of the *policier* film, its initial evocation of the genre is integral to our understanding of character psychology. A recognisable type in the *policier* is the cop protagonist whose single-minded dedication to his work alienates him from others and divests him of a personal life. Just as familiar is the generic scene in which the cop's self-neglect is conveyed by his penchant for ready-made meals and junk food. In *Chungking Express*, the first significant introduction of Cop 663 (Tony Leung) places the character firmly within this generic cliché, as he approaches the fast-food counter and orders the chef's special. As critical reviews of *Chungking Express* generally noted, neither of the film's two cops is seen to execute much police work. Wong's cops, then, are divested of the activity that validates their professional existence; their professional lives are revealed to be impoverished. Devoid of

police work (and, therefore, of the exclusive commitment that constitutes the cop protagonist's singular existence) the cops' social alienation cannot, crucially, be attributed to their utter absorption in police matters. The root cause of their isolation is thus not to be explained by zealous professionalism, but must reside elsewhere (ultimately in the characters' resistance to spontaneity and change). Nevertheless, whereas the archetypal cop in the *policier* has little but his work and no semblance of a private life, the cops in *Chungking Express* have little but their private lives and no semblance of police work. What makes the situation of the latter characters especially barren is that their private lives are equally without content: unable to keep pace with the hyperkinetic world that pulses around them, they are resigned to lonely pursuits and habitual routine.

Generic structures also miscue the film's spectator to expect conventional character relationships. Both male protagonists in *Chungking Express* are linked explicitly by their professional existence as police officers, and thus associated, a host of personal comparisons and contrasts can be made between them. Suggestive of 'types' rather than individuated human subjects, the cops' titular identities are reduced to numbers, which echo each other in number of digits and repetition of numbers (223 and 663). However, these affinities are to be drawn across the film's two stories, and in this respect, *Chungking Express* departs from the norms of the *policier*. Contrary to our generic assumptions, the two cops are not revealed to be partners; indeed, it is by no means apparent that they are acquainted with each other. When Cop 663 emerges as a prominent figure in the narrative, and given that he is a regular customer at the food counter that has been recurrently visited by 223, we reasonably assume that the two characters will know and encounter each other. Yet affinities and contrasts are evoked not by adherence to the 'buddy' genre, or to any typifying 'good cop/bad cop' dualism, but rather in a more indirect fashion: that is, through echoes and parallels established between the cops across the film's two stories. Ultimately, then, *Chungking Express* may be considered

'antigeneric' in the sense that it challenges certain generic and narrative norms; but insofar as the film is not independent of generic tropes, styles, and expectations, the term 'antigeneric' is inadequate and misleading.

Before we turn to an analysis of *In the Mood for Love*'s generic manoeuvres, we need to highlight a further impetus underlying Wong's characteristic manipulation of genre. The most significant antecedents in Wong's reflexive and subversive play with generic norms must surely be the modernist band of European auteurs, in particular those spearheading the *nouvelle vague*. In the case of the *nouvelle vague* filmmakers, and I want to argue also in the case of Wong, the purpose of this generic manipulation is the expression of the auteur as *cinephile*: the filmmaker displays his affection for the codes and conventions of traditional genre filmmaking. Wong has described how his own cinephilia influences his aesthetic decisions as a filmmaker:

> The only thing that I try to make very clear when I start a film is the genre that I want to place it in. As a kid, I grew up watching genre movies, and I was fascinated by all the different genres, such as Westerns, ghost stories, swashbucklers...So I try to make each of my films in a different genre.[20.]

Genres typically prove an irresistible fascination for the film-obsessed auteur: thus we often find an engagement with a diverse range of genres in the oeuvre of any one such auteur. Like Truffaut or Tarantino, for example, Wong is generically pluralist – his oeuvre encompasses the generic realm of the gang drama, martial-arts epic, the *policier* film, the queer road movie, romance melodrama, and science fiction. This kind of generic migration can also take place within a single film, as in *Chungking Express*' genre switch. Generic pluralism, moreover, allows the auteur to develop and explore personal themes within different generic contexts. Is the protagonist's response to change, for example, likely to be the same within the context of melodrama as it is within the realm of science fiction? (The answer will be contingent upon the

degree and nature of Wong's subversions of the respective generic norms.)

Historically, the cinephile-auteur's affection for genre has been matched by a suspicion that generic familiarity might compel the film spectator to form passive and complacent viewing habits. Invariably, therefore, the filmmaker's scepticism toward genre results in ostensible genre films that challenge or travesty the particular genre's essential conventions and provoke the viewer to active contemplation.[21.] These filmmakers' generic experimentations also attest to the pliability of genre, exposing the fallacy that genres impose rigid limitations upon artistic expression. As André Bazin has argued, 'the tradition of genres is a base of operations for creative freedom'.[22.] At the same time, as the foregoing discussion has attempted to indicate, the auteur's pursuit of personal expression frequently manifests an explicit tension with generic convention. If the concept of genre draws us toward a homogenous taxonomy of films and directors, the notion of the auteur directs us toward recognition of individuality and 'uniqueness'. At any rate, my main concern here is to convey that genre considerations have seldom been inimical to auteur filmmakers, and that, on the contrary, genre has invariably proven a central attraction for such directors in the terms outlined above. If, then, it is to be usefully and adequately applied to these filmmakers, the term 'antigeneric' must be refined to denote only a challenge to generic norms, and not to the disavowel of genre altogether.

If it is one of Wong's signature marks to rework, in Steve Neale's phrase, the 'rules of the genre'[23.], *In the Mood for Love* would appear, on the face of it, an uncharacteristically conventional genre piece. Critical discussion of the film has generally excluded questions of genre. Critical analysis of Wong's oeuvre in general has tended to relate his appropriation of the generic apparatus to wider contextual issues and functions. Ackbar Abbas subsumes Wong's generic subversions as one of several strategies that allude to the 'disappearance' of Hong Kong as a coherent cultural space.[24.] Gina Marchetti describes Wong's use of

genre in terms of a self-conscious strategy to facilitate his films' acceptance into the international art film market.[25.] My discussion of genre in Wong's *In the Mood for Love*, however, will be concerned primarily with the level of the text and with the ways in which the manipulation of genre redefines how the characters are situated, in relation to us, and to one another. I shall argue that the film's subversion of genre, and its complex imbrication of two generic modes, retards straightforward notions of generic paradigms and challenges our assumptions about the meaning of apparently conventional genre elements.

Whispered Secrets: *In the Mood for Love*

Most critics categorise *In the Mood for Love* as melodrama. Stephen Teo describes the film as 'a melodrama about love and romance'[26.], and indeed, in overt subject matter the film displays the traditional elements identified with the genre. As we shall see, however, the film in fact flouts several basic elements of the melodrama.[27.] In addition, *In the Mood for Love* adopts the postclassical trend of generic hybridisation (although Wong's tacit interweaving of two distinct genres is perhaps untypical of the postclassical cinema's more self-conscious, explicit generic hybrids). Wong effectively distresses the pure, unalloyed melodramatic mode: key conventions of the genre are overturned and the resultant melodrama is fused with another genre. In this practice, Wong thereby combines the auteur's suspicion of generic convention with the cinephile's affection for distinct genres. As a result of such thorough tampering, the paradigmatic melodrama is hardly to be found in Wong's film. Moreover, analysis of genre in *In the Mood for Love* reveals a tension not only between the different genres evoked in the film, but also between genre convention and the auteur's revisionism. I shall discuss presently the film's synthesis of distinct genres, but I want first to examine Wong's appropriations, subversions, and qualifications of the prototypical melodrama. At this point, it will be useful to recall the plot of *In the Mood for Love*.

The narrative frame of *In the Mood for Love* is constructed from the materials of romance melodrama. The story begins in Hong Kong at the start of the 1960s. Two strangers, Chow Mo-Wan (Tony Leung) and Su Lizhen (Maggie Cheung), briefly cross paths at Mrs Suen's boarding house, where they enquire after room vacancies. Mrs Suen lets the one available room to Su and her husband, and refers Chow to the adjacent apartment owned by Mr Koo. Chow succeeds in leasing a room for himself and his wife, and a short while later he moves his belongings into the flat. Su, coincidentally, also oversees delivery of her belongings on the same day. Chow and Su establish a neighbourly acquaintance, but begin to suspect that their respective spouses are engaged in an affair. Astounded by this realisation, the two characters grow curious as to how the affair began, and tentatively enact their spouses' initial flirtations. Before long, the protagonists consider that they too might be falling in love, and determine not to succumb to the same infidelity of which they are victim. However, Chow and Su continue to spend time together, and the pair collaborate on a martial-arts novel. Disturbed by the frequency of Mr Chan's business visits abroad – actually a pretext for his affair with Chow's wife – Mrs Suen reproves Su for too many absences from home. Su conveys to Chow that they should meet less often, in order to assuage the neighbours' suspicions. Aware of his intense feelings for Su, and mindful that her husband is soon to return from abroad, Chow takes a job in Singapore. A year later, Su travels to Singapore and locates Chow, but overcomes her desire to contact him. A further two years go by, and both Su and Chow make separate visits to their previous lodgings in Hong Kong. Mrs Suen and Mr Koo no longer reside in the premises. Later, Chow travels to Cambodia and visits the ruins of Angkor Wat, where he whispers a secret into a hole in the architecture.

The film's story may be interpreted as a melodramatic narrative organised around an ill-fated central relationship. In its themes of intense emotion, thwarted desire, and personal sacrifice, the film's narrative scenario dovetails with the representative terrain of the

melodrama. Conflict, the bedrock of the genre, is promised by the dysfunction that devolves from the spouses' affair: the stage is set for impassioned confrontations between the central quartet of characters. However, the essential melodramatic content of *In the Mood for Love* is afforded a narrative and stylistic treatment that deviates in several important respects from the quintessence of the melodrama genre. Let us consider more closely Wong's co-optings and subversions of the staples of melodrama.

The legible and forceful expression of character emotion is a hallmark of the melodrama. Typifying scenes prioritise the 'soul-bearing histrionics'[28.] of the melodramatic agents, while the melodramatic mode, as defined by Peter Brook, is one of 'excess'.[29.] The melodramatic terrain is one in which extremes of emotion are allowed to play out in an atmosphere of fraught drama. Yet, in Wong's film, we find not the naked baring of emotion but the sustained suppression of emotion. This tone of muted affect is indelibly suffused by the conservatism of the protagonists; Chow and Su are emotionally pent-up figures. There is a further sense in which the overdetermined emotion of melodrama sits in tension with the cultural norms and display rules of the 'typical' Chinese subject, particularly the Hong Kong subject living in an ostensibly repressed 1960s milieu.[30.] In the classical Hollywood melodrama, cultural context is a significant determinant of the protagonist's emotional display. For instance, the lower-class, untutored 'vulgarity' of the eponymous protagonist in *Stella Dallas* (1937) entails that she is prone to unchecked outpourings of emotion, although the film demonstrates how such displays are inappropriate within certain cultural environments. Similarly, the attention-grabbing actress played by Lana Turner in *Imitation of Life* (1959) is regularly urged to temper her melodramatic inclinations and to 'stop acting'. (The melodrama's emphasis on play-acting is pertinent to *In the Mood for Love*, and will be discussed later in this chapter.) In contrast, Chow and Su allow their emotions to be regulated by the cultural norms of their specific social milieu, which insists on outward

composure, decorum, and concealment of emotion. It is the corollary tone of muted affect that prompts several reviewers to remark on the film's 'restraint'.[31.] Substituting 'excess' with 'restraint', then, this inversion of generic convention is an arresting index of Wong's defiance of generic propriety.

In melodrama, it is customary that the protagonist's affective state – presumably bubbling away at the surface – pours out into the expressive design of the diegesis.[32.] *In the Mood for Love* reflects this principle, but here, the *mise en scène* reflects a character type not given to outward displays of 'excessive' emotion, characters whose affective states remain firmly corseted. Thus Su is dressed in close-fitting *cheongsams* (traditional Chinese dresses), the protagonists are confined by the cramped interiors of their apartment building, and an incessant rainfall laments the unfulfilled romance that the protagonists themselves are unable openly to mourn. Significantly, these latter two motifs have greater congruence with the visual iconography of film noir than they have with the melodrama. Notwithstanding this point, the film's *mise en scène* reifies the protagonists' ritual form of repression and self-denial (instantiations of melodramatic sacrifice), the defining traits that will make inevitable their shared conviction to abstain from adulterous action.

Music, too, serves as an essential element of melodrama in expressing subjective states. *In the Mood for Love*, in common with most melodramas, features a classical score, but its main theme is primarily plaintive in character and not characterised by sudden (melo)dramatic alterations in tone. Furthermore, Wong's appropriation of contemporary pop music exploits the denotative aspect of song lyrics both to express a character's inner state and to provide commentary on the narrative scene. For example, as Chow prepares to leave for Singapore, he asks Su: 'If there's an extra ticket, would you go with me?' This dialogue is left to hang as a dangling ellipsis, since Su makes no reply. Instead of providing Su's response, the aural track is dominated by Nat King Cole's 'Quizas, Quizas, Quizas'. Significantly,

the refrain translates into English as 'Perhaps', and the lyric may be understood as representing Su's thoughts in response to the question posed in dialogue. More generally, the ambiguity conveyed in the lyric is entirely apt for the undefined relationship between the protagonists, and successfully sustains the suspense that the scene aims to evoke. (This is not to deny that the song fulfils an affective purpose, establishing and augmenting mood; only that this is not the sole, or even the most important, function ascribed to the song's usage. The song therefore transcends its melodramatic purpose (i.e. to convey subjective states) to perform additional, authorial functions.)

In the Mood for Love seems most to subscribe to melodramatic convention in its emphasis on social circumstances and the subjugation of the individual. Prototypically, the melodramatic universe is one in which human life is governed by predestination and fate. Characters in the genre are invariably dispossessed of agency, or else their attempts at agency are rendered hopeless and absurd. In any event, the melodramatic agent is ultimately less mobilised to act than she is 'acted upon', in Robert Lang's phrase.[33.] As participants in society, the characters' destinies are determined by capricious social conditions outside their control. Melodramas thus confer on the individual an ineffectuality that renders her vulnerable to the fated machinations of society. The protagonists of *In the Mood for Love* appear *prima facie* to be snared by this particular generic trapping, caught as they are in an epoch that is unsympathetic with their muted desires. In this view, the protagonists are doomed to suffering by the incompatibility of their mutual (extra-marital) desire and the disapproving society in which they must manoeuvre.[34.] Wong has described *In the Mood for Love* as being 'about a certain period that has been lost'[35.], and the unremitting condemnation of adultery espoused by the community in the film is held up as one more faded anachronism of a now obsolete social epoch. In fact, by surrounding the protagonists with promiscuous and adulterous characters, Wong implies that this putative decay of moral values has already been set in motion.

This implication, of the speciousness of the social equilibrium and its nearing the verge of collapse, points to a crisis in the social order that Stephen Neale argues is not conventionally the province of melodrama. Neale writes: 'Melodrama does not suggest a crisis of [the legally established social] order, but a crisis within it, an 'in house' rearrangement'.[36.] Once more, *In the Mood for Love* ostensibly conforms to the generic rule: the crisis depicted 'within' the social order is the more or less nascent promiscuity that Chow and Su must confront in others and in themselves. And yet the film subtly exceeds its generic requirements to critique the milieu it presents, so that the crisis the film depicts is both within and of the social order. It is left to the viewer to question the efficiency of a hegemony that represses personal desire and dragoons couples into clandestine relationships (for example, the spouses' affair), or into an internalisation and suppression of deeply-felt desire (for example, the impasse between Chow and Su): an ideology, in sum, that is in each case compromising of 'authentic' modes of existence.

I am evoking the term 'authenticity' as it is understood in existentialist literature and philosophy. It may seem odd that we find correspondence between a mid-twentieth century Western philosophy and the work of a contemporary Hong Kong filmmaker. In fact, existentialist philosophy had a discernible impact upon Asian thought.[37.] Some Asian art filmmakers (for example, Takeshi Kitano) are known to be well-versed in existentialist literature, and 'translate' this influence into their narrative themes and styles.[38.] Wong seems to make no mention of existentialism as a direct narrative and thematic source. However, linking Wong's cinema with existentialist concepts is not as far-fetched as it may appear. The philosophy had direct influence upon the subject matter and formal styles explored by the European art filmmakers of the 1950s, and it is known that this cinema at least is a major influence on Wong's work. Though Wong himself may not be versed in, say, Sartrean thought, Antonioni and Bergman most surely are[39.]; and it is by no means obvious that their influence on Wong should

be limited to formal style. Rather, it is quite possible that their thematic terrain - of human existence, alienation, absurdity, and authenticity - is apt for appropriation by Wong as well.

For Jean-Paul Sartre, the individual is authentic to the extent that he recognises and accepts his responsibility 'for everything he does'.[40.] The authentic figure, 'abandoned' to the world (and thus not the subject of an *a priori* metaphysical design), 'makes himself; he is not found ready-made; he makes himself by the choice of his morality, and he cannot but choose a morality, such is the pressure of circumstances upon him'.[41.] The existentialist's characterisation of a Godless universe flies in the face of melodrama's emphasis on predestination and fate. Inauthenticity, on the other hand, is engendered by the individual that identifies 'too much, and too easily, with the 'communal character' of his existence'.[42.] Inauthentic existence, then, is effected when individual freedom is sacrificed to the prevailing social morals and standards, an occurrence that eventuates in the 'loss' of the self. The inauthentic self is 'moulded by external influences, whether these be circumstances, moral codes, political or ecclesiastical authorities, or whatever'.[43.] In Martin Heidegger's terms, the individual is enveloped in the embrace of the 'they', the anonymous majority that seeks to suppress personal desire and expression, coercing the individual into 'being-for-others'. The 'they' governs social behaviour and 'prescribes what can and may be ventured, [keeping] watch over everything exceptional that thrusts itself to the fore'.[44.] For Heidegger, ultimately, 'the Self of everyday Dasein [human existence] is the *they-self*' which is to be 'distinguish[ed] from the *authentic Self* – that is, from the Self which has been taken hold of in its own way' (emphases in original).[45.]

That inauthentic ways of life are pervasive among *In the Mood for Love*'s characters, along with the atmosphere of melancholia that permeates the film, indicates failings in the superficially reputable social order (symbolised by Heidegger as the 'they'). Putatively in a state not of mere flux but of crisis, the society is thus fissured into two factions: those individuals (such as the film's protagonists) who

demonstrate self-restraint in order to observe the ideology's professed moral code; and those (such as the protagonists' spouses) who pursue authentic desire but nonetheless take care to do so behind a veneer of social respectability. (In this way, these secondary characters manage to act on authentic inclinations without being forced into exile or rendered 'alien' (Friedrich Nietzsche) or a 'stranger'/'outsider' (Albert Camus).) Chow and Su are surrounded, both in the workplace and at home, by examples of this duplicity: aside from the infidelity of their own spouses, Su bears witness to the philandering of her married employer, Mr Ho, while Chow's ear is routinely bent by the sexual boasts of his promiscuous colleague, Ping.[46.] The implication that such secondary characters are representative of changing attitudes in the society is set in relief by the protagonists' refusal to transgress the traditions of social decorum: 'We won't be like them' is the refrain they repeat with ebbing conviction. In their tacit refusal to acknowledge the shifting attitudes of society, then, Chow and Su join Wong's pantheon of protagonists whose primary impulse is to eschew change, and to thus remain out-of-sync with a world prepared to progress without them. (In this respect, genre here provides an ideal context for the filmmaker's authorial interests.) The moral idealism of the protagonists thus becomes an armature against change.[47.]

As I have just suggested, *In the Mood for Love* depicts a societal schism that separates the social-conformist and the (covert) social-transgressor. A melodrama in the conventional mould would probably dramatise this schism in terms of conflict.[48.] Melodramas stage moral agons in which characters are situated in Manichean opposition to one another. Ostensibly, the Manichean opposites central to the melodrama are constituted in Wong's film by the collective figures of the spouses, Ping, and Mr Ho, all of whom represent a discord from the protagonists in terms of marital and sexual morality. Yet *In the Mood for Love*'s 'oppositional' characters are shown to have the allegiance (if not the total respect) of our main protagonists: they are their friends, colleagues, and lovers. (The spouses' virtual absence also renders them

unlikely antagonists.) The film, then, does not posit these figures as melodramatic 'villains' in any straightforward generic sense, although each is defined by the extent to which they transgress social mores. These secondary figures are limned for us more or less schematically, but it is the fact of their social nonconformity that is most prominently conveyed about them: they are principally defined, therefore, as morally and socially transgressive subjects. Moral virtue in the film is made synonymous with conformity to the dominant ideology, and, in the transgressions of these characters, Su and Chow find examples to be held up for excoriation. It is thus that the protagonists differentiate themselves from the other characters by repeatedly invoking the distinction 'We' and 'Them' (a distinction that ironically echoes the 'I' and the 'They' of existentialist discourse – ironic, that is, because the protagonists' invocation of 'We'/'I' effectively maintains, rather than abolishes, their inauthentic way of life). Acutely aware of their position as social subjects, the protagonists refrain from acting upon their mutual desire for no other reason than to avoid the negative consequences it would bring on them *as social subjects*. Su's distress at being chastened by Mrs Suen, who admonishes her for staying out late, is indicative of the protagonist's heavy feelings of social responsibility, while Chow is increasingly sensitive to the damaging effects wrought by gossip and rumour. Private and social identities do not coexist harmoniously within Wong's protagonists. The Kafkaesque corridors, staircases, and communal areas of the apartment building shared by Chow and Su represent sites of intersection between their private and public selves. Mrs Suen, the film's diegetic enforcer of the social patriarchy, delivers her lecture to Su about social propriety in these apparently private living quarters. Personal imperatives are consistently permeated by social doctrine, such that the former is almost completely overwhelmed and conditioned by the latter.

Melodramas tend ultimately to reward morally virtuous agents. Even in the event of the protagonist's death, affirmative values of valour and moral fortitude are foregrounded. *In the Mood for Love*, however,

denies its protagonists a sense of moral validation and personal triumph. Triumph exists neither for the protagonists nor for the spectator, which is to say that the viewer is offered little satisfaction in witnessing the protagonists' virtuous display, since it is this display that ultimately compounds the characters' misery. Moreover, in classical melodrama, the viewer is furnished with a firm sense of the value of the protagonist's sacrifice. We realise, for instance, that Annie's actions in *Imitation of Life* are performed for the ultimate good of her light-skinned daughter, who has been presented in the film as essentially sympathetic. In contrast, the eponymous protagonist in *Mildred Pierce* (1945) discovers that ceding her romantic ideals, as well as a stake in her business franchise, is too great a sacrifice for the resultant payoff (the putative affections of her baleful daughter). Similarly, Cary, the female protagonist in *All That Heaven Allows* (1955) who gives up a romantic affair at the behest of her children, soon realises that her sacrifice was not properly warranted (her children selfishly privilege their own happiness, prompting one character to ask of Cary: 'What good was your noble sacrifice?'); Cary's moment of realisation consequently prompts her to reignite the affair. *In the Mood for Love*, however, does not provide access to the direct 'beneficiaries' of the protagonists' sacrifice, namely, the spouses, thereby preventing us from judging the quality of the sacrifice engendered. Inasmuch as this is the case, the spouses are not presented sympathetically, in contrast to the daughters in *Imitation of Life* and *Stella Dallas*; indeed, what we know of the spouses (i.e. the fact of their infidelity) implies that they are not deserving of the sacrifice. Moreover, as a result of the spouses' virtual absence from the film, the protagonists' sacrifice seems to be made in the name of certain amorphous (and socially-constructed) ideals rather than for the benefit of specifically individuated figures. Since the film implicitly critiques the milieu's hegemonic system and does not attempt to elicit sympathy for the spouses, it therefore diminishes any concrete sense that the protagonists' decision to remain apart is a sacrifice that contains any inherent worthwhile value.

In the Mood for Love implies a kind of catharsis at its denouement, when Chow unburdens himself of secret desires by whispering his feelings into a hole at Angkor Wat (a mythical ritual alleged to preserve and honour the disclosed secret). In melodramatic terms, this is an odd form of catharsis: such purgation is not the corollary of an alpine emotional outburst, as we might expect in melodrama, but is at once more private, restrained, and virtually imperceptible.[49.] The words whispered by Chow are not rendered audible on the soundtrack, and thus Wong's narration here, as previously, exhibits its disregard for melodramatic transparency. (I shall discuss at greater length the film's narration later in this chapter.) If the moment of catharsis in melodrama comes out of an extreme, legible, and 'dramatic' release of emotion, in Wong's film it is achieved in ambiguous, opaque, and de-dramatised fashion. Chow buries his 'unheard' secret (which we nonetheless infer is the story of the love shared by the protagonists) in the ruins of Angkor Wat, thereby effectively enshrining the memory in (and as) history, affording the memory an immortality at the same time as marking its expiration. A caption inaugurates the film's final section: 'That era has passed. Nothing that belonged to it exists anymore'. These words encompass not only the shifting modernity but also the finite relationship shared by the protagonists: the film's catharsis, then, is the moment of the central relationship's simultaneous 'birth' (Chow's 'authentic' acknowledgement of its existence) and death (his entombing of the memory), while the ruins of Angkor Wat serve as its symbolic burial place.

'What a Coincidence!' Generic Convention and the Auteur

Earlier I noted the cinephile-auteur's affection for genre filmmaking. The auteur will flagrantly display his fascination with genre by means of generic pluralism, allusion, and a playful engagement with conventions. Yet genre and auteur expressivity are sometimes held to be irreconcilable. The argument here is that the true auteur's uniqueness cannot find expression within a structure governed by familiar norms

and repetitions. Immutable genre patterns, the argument goes, prohibit originality and authorial freedom. For the filmmaker attracted by cinema's reflexive potential, moreover, genre – by virtue of its conventionality – can be considered too 'invisible' a structure to successfully lay bare the operations of the medium. It is only by making generic conventions visible – that is, by de-conventionalising genre and defamiliarising its norms – that the self-conscious auteur can expose the formulaic underpinnings of genre cinema. Yet are there generic strategies that can be exploited, not by subversion, perhaps, but by intensification, to fulfil an authorial, commentative purpose? In other words, is there a point at which genre and auteur, apparently antipathetic, converge? I want to argue that *In the Mood for Love* makes use of a narrative device that, at least superficially, sutures the fabric of genre to the preoccupations of the auteur.

Chance and coincidence reflect a point of intersection between melodramatic convention and Wong's particular authorial vision. As a narrative fixture of the melodrama, chance and coincidence are strategies for motivating action and eliciting surprise. An effective melodrama will make economical use of these strategies, restricting their use to limited points in the narrative: all the better to preserve the semblance of causal logic and narrative plausibility. (For instance, as Bordwell observes, motivating the plot's resolution by chance or coincidence can result in a 'problematic ending', because the device will undermine these classical principles of causality and plausibility.)[50.] The auteur filmmakers of the *nouvelle vague*, however, liberally pepper their narratives with chance encounters and improbable coincidences, irrespective of the appositeness of genre. One can comprehend the attractiveness of these devices for the French auteurs, who recognise the conspicuous way in which chance and coincidence can expose a fiction's contrivance. As a potentially obtrusive *deus ex machina*, chance and coincidence can function as signifiers of a text's artifice, which is precisely the appeal it held for the filmmakers of the French New Wave. By relying heavily on these devices to lay bare the

constructedness of narrative, the French auteurs found an effective method by which to engender their self-reflexive discourse on the process of fiction-making. Following this principle, Wong Kar-wai has recurrently wielded the tools of chance and coincidence as a wrench to stop the narrative wheel from smoothly turning. Consonant with the European auteurs, moreover, Wong employs these devices in films that do not provide generic motivation for their usage. If chance and coincidence are germane in melodrama and comedy, they are less so in the martial-arts film (e.g. *Ashes of Time*) or the *policier* (e.g. *Chungking Express*). As melodrama, then, *In the Mood for Love* provides a harmonious context for the generic and auteurist engagement with chance and coincidence. The tension that exists between auteurism and genre in some of Wong's earlier films is here apparently dissolved.[51.] Finally, in both conventional melodrama and the films of the French New Wave, chance and coincidence can orient the viewer to the theme of 'time', thus representing another affinity with Wong's authorial concerns. Characters in Wong's universe are apt to 'rub shoulders' with one another as a result of chance events, and relationships may or may not devolve from these encounters: as Chow declaims in *2046*, 'Love is all a matter of timing'. The precise nature of a chance or coincidental event is governed by the arbitrary temporal co-ordination of separate elements, and points us to the contingency of the consequent action. The intrusion of chance and coincidence into a causal pattern, then, gives emphasis to the notion of contingency, and opens up the possibility of a *range* of conceivable outcomes. However, in melodrama, contingency is typically overridden by a sense of inevitability: though a range of outcomes are possible, the actual outcome is one that seems 'destined'.

Melodramas are routinely studded with moments of chance and coincidence. The protagonist's status as a victim is underscored by an indifferent and random world, with an acausal sequence of events that 'acts upon' the melodramatic hero and brutalises her. Correspondingly, the character's agency is undermined in such a way as to accentuate

her limited, ostensible effectiveness, a disenfranchised autonomy that renders her vulnerable to the capricious forces of destiny. It is in this evocation of notions such as 'destiny' and 'fate' that the melodrama implies the presence of a governing transcendental order. (Charlotte (Bette Davis) articulates the melodrama's strong overlay of fate when she exhorts at the end of *Now, Voyager* (1942), 'Don't let's ask for the moon; we have the stars'.) Not so much purposefully manoeuvring through a causally-prepared chain of events as buffeted between a series of chance incidents, the melodramatic hero is thrust inexorably closer to the grim conclusion that has been prepared for her. Conventionally, then, the trajectory of the melodramatic agent is tinctured with a sense of the inevitable and the inescapable: no amount of effort or artfulness will emancipate the hero from her predetermined course.

If chance and coincidental occurrences therefore assail the melodramatic protagonist with anxiety, such phenomena are especially traumatising for Wong's characters, whose aversion to any destabilising influence is well-marked. Chance and coincidence confer chaos upon order: they are catalysts for change, and thus constitute an unwelcome phenomenon for Wong's characters. *In the Mood for Love* confronts its protagonists with several moments of coincidence, and employs this generic convention quite self-consciously. On several occasions the characters themselves are made to remark on the disquieting presence of coincidence. Baring the device of coincidence gives emphasis to the protagonists' position as *subjects*, both of fate (in narrative terms) and of fiction (in narrational terms); in other words, the salience of coincidence, as both story event and plot device, italicises the vulnerability and lack of agency peculiar to the protagonists. Acausal events would seem here, as in the paradigmatic melodrama, to foreground victimisation as a defining condition of the protagonists' existence. So *In the Mood for Love* may be seen as a conventional narrative involving star-crossed 'lovers', whose fated circumstances (i.e. the socio-historical context into which they are 'placed') are such that

their desires can never find satisfactory fulfilment. Chance and coincidence in the film thereby serve to illumine the manoeuvrings of this omnipotent controlling power. Yet I want to suggest that the film's deployment of coincidence is deceptive in its apparent adherence to the device's generic function and usage. *In the Mood for Love*, I submit, affords arbitrariness an atypical function, which in retrospect forces us to revise our understanding of the protagonists' legitimacy as 'victims'. As is frequently the case with Wong's engagement with genre tools, what strikes us initially as conventionality is, on closer inspection, revealed to be revision and subversion. Let us examine the film's scenes of coincidence in more detail.

Two coincidences occur in the film's early stages. As has been observed elsewhere, films that employ coincidence tend to restrict its use to the opening phase of the narrative.[52.] In this way, a film can inaugurate its principle line of action through a chance or coincidental event, without the threat to narrative plausibility and causality that such an event might otherwise produce, if, for example, it were to occur further into the story. At the beginning of *In the Mood for Love*, Chow and Su, as yet unknown to each other, arrive at Mrs Suen's apartment on the same day, enquiring after room vacancies. By chance, two rooms happen to be available in adjacent apartments. Following an ellipsis, we see both protagonists convoying their possessions into their new apartments at a later, though coincidentally concurrent, time.[53.] The spectator's attention is directed toward the coincidental nature of the protagonists' second encounter, when Mrs Suen remarks: 'What a coincidence! Moving in on the same day!' Generic expectation perhaps entices the viewer to read into these opening scenes something more than simply a succession of plain coincidences. Given the romantic union we anticipate will occur between the two characters, we may understand these initial scenes to be indicating the protagonists' mutual synergy. Such conceits are a commonplace of the romance genre, and such would be the generically typical reading of this moment. Separately choosing the same day on which to move apartments, the

film's romantic protagonists are, we infer, already unassailably 'attuned' to each other, and thus perfectly compatible as an ideal partnership. Such a reading relies on the inferred presence of a predestined order of things, which I have suggested is the province of the melodrama, and which finds expression, in this instance, in the destined union of two characters whose fate it is to meet each other. A set of generic expectations is therefore activated by these opening scenes, but the rest of the film, and Wong's subsequent manipulation of coincidence, will serve to derail the spectator's generic assumptions.

Coincidence is next remarked upon when the protagonists obliquely acknowledge their spouses' affair. Chow wears a necktie identical to one owned by Su's husband; Chow's necktie was received as a gift from his wife, who had purchased it while on a business trip abroad. Su reveals that her husband had bought an identical necktie while overseas. The brand of tie, both protagonists believe, is not sold by retailers in Hong Kong. A similar bit of business unravels around the identical but rare handbags owned by Su and Chow's wife. The protagonists' suspicion, that their spouses purchased these gifts together during a rendezvous on foreign territory, is quietly and mutually corroborated. At this point, Su exclaims: 'What a coincidence!' However, in spite of Su's remark (which must contain a certain pungent sarcasm, given that she has already deduced the true nature of the situation), this is not a 'legitimate' coincidence. Rather, a carefully motivated cause has been provided for the personal possessions that the quartet of characters have in common: that is, the causal event of the spouses' affair, their tryst overseas, their purchasing and bestowing of rare gifts and so forth. This situation is not, then, corollary to a random collision of acausal elements. Self-evidently, there is a disparity between Su's pronouncement of coincidence and the kind of coincidence identified by Mrs Suen at the beginning of the film. Whereas the earlier moments of coincidence could not be attributed any discernible cause (or, at least, no *tangible* cause, if we believe that these coincidences connote the presence of an invisible, transcendent phenomena), here the

'coincidence' has its basis in causal human action. In this instance, therefore, the attribution of coincidence is not to be taken at face value.

Later in the film, Su learns that Chow is ailing from a severe head-cold and is craving 'medicinal' sesame syrup. She prepares the food for Chow and takes it to him. After an ellipsis, Chow, apparently recovered, meets Su in the street. He is moved to greet her with the phrase, 'What a coincidence!' Since Chow's remark is not contradicted by wider contextual information, the present encounter may legitimately be attributed to chance. Chow thanks Su for the syrup that she had prepared for him during his illness, telling her that he had, at the time, been craving just that particular meal. To this, Su replies: 'Really? What a coincidence!' 'It really was!', responds Chow. This dialogue rings hollow in the spectator's ear, for we know the opposite to be true. Here, also, Su employs the phrase 'What a coincidence!' to attribute chance to a situation that she knows to have a definite causal basis. As with her previous utterance of the phrase, Su evokes the presence of coincidence disingenuously, since she is aware that genuine coincidence has played no part in the true nature of events.[54.]

This fragment of dialogue – 'What a coincidence!' – is repeated more times than any other line of speech in the film, and yet the accuracy of the statement becomes increasingly suspect with each repetition. Incrementally, we become aware of the ostensibility of the so-called 'coincidences'. By the time that Su is made to self-consciously co-opt the repeated phrase, it is clear that 'coincidence' is no longer being appropriated according to melodramatic convention. It no longer signifies, for instance, either the protagonists' lack of agency or the manifestation of a transcendent entity. Furthermore, our realisation that the film's later 'coincidences' are indeed nothing of the kind triggers, I suggest, a retroactive appraisal of the legitimacy of the film's initial (and apparently 'authentic') moments of coincidence. Is it due to sheer coincidence that Chow and Su seek lodgings at the same time and in the same building, where there are two rooms going vacant?

Certainly, in light of the later counterfeit coincidences, the protagonists' capricious first meeting now occurs to us as being too convenient. Had the spouses' affair begun before the two couples became neighbours? Were the protagonists alerted by their spouses to the vacant rooms, and had the switch in lodgings been the idea of the spouses (as a means of contriving more regular contact, i.e. as neighbours)? This possibility, which the film does not confirm and yet which it invites us to entertain, cuts against the grain of the generic reading that the protagonists' first encounter is an arrangement of Fate. If coincidence in melodrama is conventionally taken to be an index of the powers of destiny that act upon the individual, in Wong's film it is more explicitly exposed as ostensible, causally-explicable, and secular. The most important moments of coincidence in the film are demystified by the unmasking of their causality, such that they are firmly established as events that occur as a consequence of concrete, cause-and-effect, human action. A key trope of the melodrama is thus reversed: the things that happen to characters are no longer necessarily outside their control, but are placed squarely within the realm of human activity. Absolutes are dissolved: the strain of fatalism that courses through the melodrama, the sense of ineluctable doom, and thus the protagonists' *a priori* position as 'victims', is qualified, since the characters' ability to act is not rendered impotent by an all-powerful, metaphysical presence. If legitimate coincidence reveals the absurdity of life, Wong's undermining of legitimate coincidence puts emphasis on the primacy of human freedom and agency. It is in this way, then, that any characterisation of the protagonists as archetypal melodramatic figures is undermined: their circumstance is revealed to be *surmountable*, and, by evaporating the shadow of Fate as a determining agent, Wong effectively empowers his characters with the freedom of belief, choice, and action.

If the protagonists are so empowered, the cause of their repression must reside elsewhere than in the machinations of Fate and social structures. It is here that a recurrent authorial preoccupation may be

unearthed. Like so many of Wong's protagonists, Chow and Su resist any form of change. Putatively, their repression is largely of their own making, since the existence of Fate, having been disavowed by Wong, can no longer be deemed culpable for the protagonists' inability to act. Furthermore, as suggested above, the conservative milieu that the film depicts imposes no necessary stranglehold on its inhabitants: choice and agency are still available to the social subject, as demonstrated by the film's secondary characters who surreptitiously act on their desires. It should be added that these characters are not directly judged or condemned for their social transgressions, as far as the film is concerned. Rather, it is the protagonists of whom Wong offers a critique, and whose (in)actions are such that Wong can only see fit to prescribe them an unhappy end. It is not the protagonists' refusal to act against the prevailing social order that Wong condemns, nor is it merely the fact of their timorous attitude towards change. It is rather in their willingness to live inauthentically, to cede responsibility to invisible forces (ideological, metaphysical), and to negate their personal desires and beliefs, that Wong locates the object of criticism.[55.] Thus Wong invokes the Sartrean view that, since 'the situation of man [is] one of free choice, without excuse and without help, any man who takes refuge [...] by inventing [or espousing] some deterministic doctrine, is a self-deceiver'.[56.] *In the Mood for Love*'s protagonists therefore exist in 'bad faith', for, according to Sartre, in such an inauthentic existence 'it is from myself that I am hiding the truth'.[57.] Consequently, neither Su nor Chow reaches the moment of *anagnorisis* achieved by Cary at the end of *All That Heaven Allows*, who realises that 'I was so frightened, I listened to other people. I let others make my decisions'. Circumventing such self-conscious reflection, the protagonists of *In the Mood for Love* do not achieve the salvation that such contemplation might engender.

One index of the protagonists' denial of responsibility is Su's habitual tendency to sign quite logical situations over to Fate, with the phrase 'What a coincidence!' In effect, the protagonists would desire

to be figures trapped in a prototypical melodrama, for they wish their autonomy to be wrested from them by some impersonal agency. (Ironically, of course, this circumstance would provide no greater asylum from change.) By first evoking the genre of melodrama, and then by shaving away several of its key conventional tropes, Wong underscores both the freedom available to the protagonists, and their insincere refusal to acknowledge it.[58.] In self-conscious awareness of their own 'melodramatic' situation, then, Chow and Su cast themselves as victims, thereby using their ostensible powerlessness as a means of circumventing both purposeful action and change. It is not insignificant that, in *2046*, the character Chow authors a story dramatising a futuristic landscape in which 'nothing ever changes'. Such a fictitious universe would represent nothing less than a nirvana for the Chow of *In the Mood for Love*; in fact, it would provide a utopian existence for the majority of the protagonists in Wong's oeuvre.

Melodramatic convention is ultimately manipulated for authorial expression. *In the Mood for Love* evokes a staple of the genre (coincidence), subverts its conventional usage, and sculpts its new meaning into a conduit for the filmmaker's own thematic preoccupations. Furthermore, by invalidating the legitimacy of the coincidences in the narrative, Wong not only subverts the traditional use of coincidence in melodrama, but also strikes a contrast with the reflexive function afforded the device by the *nouvelle vague* filmmakers. The greater the improbability of the coincidence, the more the viewer's attention will be led to narrative construction. Wong's 'coincidences' are not legitimate accidents of time and place, hence are in no sense improbable, and thus are not employed for reflexive purpose. Rather, coincidence is made a device through which to activate the principle concern of auteur filmmakers: that is, the mobilisation of favourite themes and interests. For *In the Mood for Love*, Wong exploits the device of coincidence to render personal themes of responsibility and authenticity. In the next section, I turn to another central approach to

genre exemplified by the cinephile-auteurs, and of prime importance in Wong's film: the notion of generic hybridity.

Happy Together? Generic Hybridity

Genre films rarely exist in 'pure' form. The temptation to mix genres and create hybridised texts proved especially irresistible to the cineastes of the *nouvelle vague*, who recognised in the generic hybrid the possibilities for disarming unpredictabilies and disruptive shifts in tone. Fusing slapstick, film noir, and the musical, for example, could also satiate the cineaste's desire to work within different generic traditions. Wong's films continue this practice of yoking distinct genres. *As Tears Go By*, generally regarded as Wong's sole attempt at pure genre filmmaking, interlaces the main crime story with a romance sub-plot. *In the Mood for Love*, however, imbricates almost imperceptibly two separate genres. The film may evoke the romantic melodrama genre, but just as *Chungking Express* promises the *policier* and morphs into romantic comedy, so *In the Mood for Love* reveals another generic complexion. Unlike *Chungking Express*, however, which initially alludes to the *policier* and subsequently tempers this point of reference, and in contrast to the *nouvelle vague*'s experiments with hybridity, out of which is created abrupt changes in tone, *In the Mood for Love* mixes genres more discreetly. The film does not openly abandon its semblance of the melodrama, but rather sustains this appearance while a latent genre is operative beneath the melodramatic surface. In interviews, Wong has revealed that *In the Mood for Love* was conceptualised as an exercise in Hitchcockian suspense, with the romance story of affairs and heartbreak merely a pretext for a veritable detective story:

> ...instead of treating [*In the Mood for Love*] as a love story, I decided to approach it like a thriller, like a suspense movie. [The protagonists] start out as victims, and then they start to investigate, to try to understand how things happened. This is the way I structured this film, with very short scenes and an attempt to create constant tension.[59.]

This detective framework is evident not only in narrative structure, but also, as we shall see, in *mise en scène*, iconography, and narrational point of view. The covert detective paradigm recurrently snakes its way to the surface of *In the Mood for Love*, rupturing the conventions of melodrama and, most significantly, problematising the spectator's perception of character and command of narrative events. In other words, the detective genre is not dormant here, in the sense of being *inoperative*; rather, detective conventions, though veneered, are active and influential upon the film's explicit melodrama. There is a contrast here with the *nouvelle vague*'s palpable confusion of genres, as well as to Wong's own conspicuous juxtapositions of genres in *Chungking Express* and *2046*. *In the Mood for Love* is more understated in its synthesis of genres, but is no less daring in the explicit tension it creates between patent melodrama and furtive detective film.

As Wong's comments just quoted serve to indicate, *In the Mood for Love* can withstand a 'subversive' generic reading. Just as the film can be interpreted manifestly as a romance melodrama, so it may also be read 'against the grain', as a virtual detective story mobilised by the protagonists' investigation of a concealed infidelity. If, as narratologists generally agree, the cardinal elements of a detective story involve a crime and its investigation, *In the Mood for Love*'s narrative is loosely carpentered to a similar framework. According to this reading, the spouses' stealthy affair comes to constitute the narrative 'crime'; the protagonists' post-mortem of this affair, their vicarious attempts at understanding and empathy, may be considered to represent the narrative 'investigation'. (In the figures of Chow and Su, moreover, Wong invokes the noir archetype of the 'spurned lovers', though he is not concerned to enmesh them in generically conventional acts of murder and revenge.)[60.] It is my contention that the analogy with detective narrative, that is, with the genre's essential properties of crime and investigation, helps us to make greater sense of *In the Mood for Love*'s moral framework.

In their 'investigation' of the spouses' affair, Chow and Su role-play the coquetry exchanged by the unfaithful couple.[61.] Through this impersonation, they believe, will be achieved a greater understanding (an 'elucidation'[62.]) of those foregoing circumstances between the spouses, circumstances pregnant with adulterous desire. Chow and Su here literalise the notion of retracing the criminal's movements by attempting to embody the 'criminal', re-enacting the overtures that lead to the spouses' affair. Moreover, the generation of suspense in these scenes – a generic mechanism conventional to both the detective film and melodrama – sets up important narrative questions. If detective narratives are frequently organised around the enigma of 'whodunit', that enigma is superfluous here. The question that occupies the protagonists, with regard to their spouses, is rather: 'how (and why) did they do it?' For the spectator, however, Wong uses the role-play sequences to ratchet up suspense. As the protagonists' acting-out intensifies, we are invited to ask: 'will *they* do it?' This meditation is faintly counterpointed by the protagonists' refrain, 'We won't be like them', the very repetition of which arouses our suspicion regarding its persuasiveness. Counterbalancing curiosity about the past with suspense about the future, the narrative of *In the Mood for Love* would seem to adhere quite faithfully to the temporal flexibility common to the detective genre.[63.] And yet, the scenes in which the protagonists masquerade as their spouses – scenes that would seem designed to satisfy curiosity about past events - are, for the spectator, vehicles for suspense. It is through these sequences that we conjecture most intensely whether or not the protagonists' artificial foreplay will transmute into authentic emotion. That Wong alludes to past events (the spouses' initial flirtations) through the device of the protagonists' role-play, rather than employing the device of flashback to convey more directly past information (as a detective film would do), is not incidental. Curiosity about past events is shared primarily by the protagonists and not so much by the spectator. There is little at stake for the spectator in learning about the inception of the spouses' affair,

particularly since (as I shall presently discuss) we have so little purchase on the spouses as individuated agents. The spouses represent nothing less than a pretext, therefore, akin to a Hitchcockian 'MacGuffin'. Our focal point of interest is the activity involving the protagonists. For the spectator, each new phase in the role-play is more revelatory of Chow and Su than it is of their absent partners. In the nature of Hitchcockian suspense, then, *In the Mood for Love* orients the spectator's interest toward future events.

As the protagonists' role-playing occurs with greater frequency, their conviction not to 'be like [their spouses]' becomes more incongruous, since their time is spent doing little else. Moreover, the suspicion accrues in the spectator that the protagonists' fear – of simulated affection bleeding into genuine desire – has a legitimate foundation. (Elsewhere, as we shall see, the film indicates the extent to which Chow and Su increasingly come to replace and inherit the positions of their marital counterparts, for example, through the use of misleading and opaque compositions.) The protagonists' situation comes to approximate a scenario envisaged by Gregory Currie in relation to the spectator's response to fictional characters. Currie writes: 'by imagining ourselves in the situation of a character with destructive, immoral desires, and thereby coming to have, in imagination, the desires of the character...we may be in danger of really acquiring those desires...'.[64.] For Chow and Su, as well as for Currie's hypothetical viewer, 'imagination would have a tendency to spill over into belief: what starts as an act of imagining might turn into a real belief or desire'.[65] Gradually, the content of the protagonists' 'performance' blurs the distinction between role and self. Initially concerned with reconstructing past events, the protagonists soon begin to 'rehearse' their own responses to anticipated future events. Su imagines how she will react when her husband confesses to adultery; both protagonists rehearse the moment of their own estrangement, which they sense is a future inevitability. This shift in the role-play's emphasis marks a transition not only from analeptic re-enactment to

proleptic rehearsal, but also from the assumption of another identity (the respective spouses) to simulation of the protagonists' *own* (future) identity and behaviour. This segue from their role as the spouses to performance as themselves is virtually imperceptible, and implies a conflation of the protagonists' and the spouses' identities. (It also suggests the extent to which the protagonists seek mastery of their emotions.) If the protagonists' pantomime is originally intended as something akin to a 'detached' investigation, it fails. Through impersonation and reconstruction, the protagonists 'elucidate' the spouses' affair so successfully, retrace their actions so fully, that they begin to identify with the extra-marital desire that they have imitated. (A direct correspondence with the detective genre is evident here, where the close identification of detective and criminal is a familiar conceit.)[66.] A kind of ambiguous double relationship is implied in this development: has Su fallen in love with Chow, or the character he incarnates (which is, paradoxically, Su's own husband)? Is Chow attracted by Su, or merely by his wife's 'copy'?

At any rate, the role-play activity can be seen to hasten the moral education of the protagonists, who are inclined to equate sexual freedom with moral weakness. There is no escaping the pejorative tone with which the claim 'We won't be like them' is made in reference to the spouses: the protagonists thereby define themselves in opposition to the inferred moral orientation of their partners. In invoking the structure of a detective narrative, Wong also invokes the moral dimension of the detective universe. Thus, if the protagonists' play-acting is analogous to an investigation, the spouses' affair is attributed all the moral worth of a crime. (I am not arguing that the *film* confers this perspective on the spouses, only that it is the view shared by the protagonists.) It is their own simplistic view of morality that Chow and Su must confront when they become conscious of their illicit emotions, and it is in this sense that I refer to their 'moral education'. (The negation of Fate, which I have argued above is implied by the discrediting of authentic coincidence, also relativises morality, and

undermines any absolutist illusions of right or wrong.) And yet, if they must admit to a sympathetic understanding of the motivation that engendered their spouses' misdemeanour, the protagonists stop short of committing the crime themselves. Ever deferential to social mores, the protagonists rationalise their self-denial in terms of moral fortitude, a casting-off of responsibility that relinquishes them from the necessity to act, and thus from the inevitable galvanisation of change.

Film noir iconography finds its way into the *mise en scène*. Ringing telephones and doorbells are discomfitingly unanswered; cigarettes are rigorously smoked and represent a ubiquitous marker of anxiety; at night a humid rainfall perpetually hammers the lamp-lit streets. Seeing *In the Mood for Love* as a detective story allows us to re-examine the usage of such traditional noir iconography in the film. In Wong's film, as in noir, cigarettes and smoking may stand for duplicity and obscurity (captured in such figurative expressions as 'smoke-and-mirrors', 'smokescreen' and so forth). But Wong also laces this iconographic motif with a bitter twist of irony. The omnipresence of lit cigarettes serves to pungently underscore the protagonists' chasteness, so obvious is the absence of any traditional post-coital situation in which a cigarette may be shared by the characters.[67.] (A similar byplay with cigarettes occurs in *Now, Voyager*, wherein smoking signifies repressed desire, and coital situations are curtailed by caprice and fate. Evoking this connotation allows Wong to tincture a noir motif with melodramatic significance.) Inverting noir's causal association of smoking and sex, cigarettes are in Wong's film ineffectual preludes to sex, the film staging an elaborate but infertile game of foreplay: the protagonists are perpetually in the mood for love, but they do not – as far as we are aware – actually *make* love.

Other noir motifs are afforded subversive treatment. In a detective film, the presence of a car typically indicates the imminence of a chase sequence: it is used alternately to give pursuit or to facilitate escape. *In the Mood for Love*, however, manipulates this generic emblem to different effect. It is striking that neither protagonist is shown to drive,

and is rather transported around Kowloon's streets by taxi, a neat indication of the characters' general lack of agency. The taxi is certainly never involved in anything as spectacular as a chase, but, on the contrary, crawls along at a deliberate pace, in no sense transporting the protagonists beyond the parameters of their parochial existence. Moreover, the taxi does not so much facilitate a getaway, as per the noir film, as constitute a hideaway, a veritable safe house in which the protagonists seek refuge. It is apparent, however, that this 'sanctuary' – in which the hand of one protagonist can brush imperceptibly against the other's[68.] – is but one more negligible site of privacy, the taxi's legitimacy as a private space undermined both by its very 'public' function (the service it provides) and its passage through the contours of the familiar Hong Kong milieu. Its confining enclosure, moreover, brings at once a feeling of intimacy and of impersonality, with any semblance of private retreat or freedom being contradicted by the hemmed-in quality of the vehicle's configuration.

It is apparent that Wong's invocation of detective narrative, and his appropriation of the genre's iconography, ought not to be explained reductively, as the mere 'self-indulgence' of a cinephile filmmaker. The detective elements instead function connotatively and denotatively to inflect the spectator's understanding of the film's characters and milieu. However, *In the Mood for Love* reveals the influence of the detective genre not only through narrative and iconography, but also in its characteristic mode of narration. It is, I suggest, in its narrational point of view that the film most explicitly adulterates its melodrama with the presence of the detective genre. Relevant here is the distinction explicated in David Bordwell's study of cinematic narration, between melodramatic and detective modes of narration.[69.] In the conventional melodrama, Bordwell claims, the narration is characterised by communicativeness and omniscience. Legibility of action and dramatic irony are thus trademarks of the genre. Melodramas bestow epistemic authority upon the spectator, and the drama is consequently rendered with maximum transparency. In

contrast, the detective film contrives a style of narration governed by opacity, repressiveness, and retardation. Unlike the melodrama, detective narration browbeats omniscience and restrains transparency. Even the investigation stage of the narrative is characterised by some degree of uncommunicativeness. In accordance with its narrative emphasis on concealment and duplicity, then, the detective film harnesses its methods of narration to the restriction of the viewer's knowledge.

The 'investigation' engineered by *In the Mood for Love*'s protagonists is symptomatic of the detective genre's repressiveness. For some time, we are not alerted to the protagonists' suspicions and inferences concerning their spouses. Indeed, we are not made aware that any investigation is underway, that is, that anyone should be under suspicion for any 'wrongdoing'. Such opacity is in marked contrast to the kind of narrational omnipotence we would conventionally experience in melodrama. Rather, it typifies a convention closer to the detective genre, whereby 'we are not allowed access to the detective's inferences until he or she voices them...'.[70.] Until Chow and Su meet in the restaurant and indirectly quiz each other, the spectator has no indication that the protagonists suspect their partners of adultery.

Moreover, the omnipotence to which the spectator is accustomed in melodrama, which in that genre provides access to a cross-section of characters and their individual emotional states, is generally denied the viewer of *In the Mood for Love*. In Wong's film, the narration is mostly restricted to the trajectory traced by one or both of the protagonists. An exceptional instance occurs quite early in the film, before the spectator is made cognizant of the protagonists' incertitude. This instance, the duration of which is but a matter of seconds, momentarily breaks our alignment with the protagonists to provide oblique access to the two spouses. Following an exchange with Su, Chow's wife (whose visibility is deliberately marred by distant, out-of-focus, and back-to-camera framings) is heard to say to an out-of-shot male figure: 'It was your wife'. Abrasively, the narration then cuts to the following scene.

The narration here is *at once* communicative and repressive. On the one hand, the dialogue is fairly communicative, and cues the spectator to infer an illicit relationship between the spouses. On the other hand, however, both the brevity of the moment and its obfuscated visual treatment disorients and quite possibly distracts the spectator from the dialogue's import. Such is the visual and temporal indistinctness of the moment that the spectator, who no doubt is still acclimatising to the film's exceptionally fragmentary and elliptical style, is unlikely to grasp the full significance of the dialogue. This obliqueness may result in the spectator either missing or misreading the information; we may, for example, be uncertain as to the identity of the man and the woman in the scene, particularly since they are not made clearly visible in the imagery. (The husband is not shown even obliquely; and in typical noir style, a large object – in this case, a lamp – ominously dominates the foreground of one shot, obfuscating our view of Mrs. Chow.) Nevertheless, repeat viewings indicate that, just as the spectator is here (elliptically) cued to suspect an infidelity, so, we can infer, have the protagonists begun also to suspect. Strikingly, however, the protagonists' suspicions are founded on a completely different set of clues to ours. Neither Chow nor Su are present during the brief exchange between the spouses to which the spectator is privy. By the same token, the spectator is quite ignorant of the clues that have aroused suspicion in the protagonists (namely, the rare merchandise that incriminates the spouses). While the protagonists' and the spectator's suspicions are (to a greater and lesser degree) aroused concurrently, effectively running parallel together, the respective activities are divorced from each other because in response to distinct narrative details.

Throughout the entirety of *In the Mood for Love*, Wong presents the spouses only obliquely. Insofar as they appear corporeally in the film at all, they are invariably obfuscated by repressive framings or visual distortions. Wong's oblique presentation of these characters at once consolidates our growing sense that they are not the real locus of

interest in the film, and yet serves to pique our curiosity about them, such that we are interested in the attempt by the protagonists to understand and illuminate them. In terms of generic conventions, the repression of access to a character's physicality is a strategy more common to detective narration than to melodrama.[71.] We may think, for example, of the camera's lack of omniscience in relation to the shadowy figure in the car in *You Only Live Once* (1937), the figure who may or may not be Henry Fonda's escaped ex-con; the narration's withholding of complete visual access to a character's physical specificity in such an example creates ambiguity and uncertainty, so suspended until the apt time of 'revelation' in the narrative, when the figure's real identity is disclosed. Withholding visual access to individuating features of a character's body (e.g. her face) is typically a strategy designed to preserve the agent's anonymity, create suspense, and maintain the narrative's enigma. However, if such a strategy in the detective film arouses and ultimately satisfies our desire for the concealed figure to be 'unmasked', no such satisfaction is afforded the viewer of *In the Mood for Love*. The spouses are not concealed so that they may be subsequently unmasked at a later climactic stage in the narrative. Moreover, any sense of mystery is in this aspect largely attenuated because the spouses are not 'anonymous': the spectator knows them as the husband and wife of our protagonists, while the spouses are of course fully visible to the protagonists. We therefore come to realise that there will be no significant narrative revelation if the spouses are presented to us in a legible fashion (that is to say, without visual obfuscation) - which, in fact, is never the case. Clearly, then, Wong's purpose in refusing to individuate the spouses by affording them a discrete physical specificity must be explained in some other way.

It is not only the obliqueness with which they are shown that associates the spouses with inscrutability and absence. They are also frequently absent from their domestic homes, under the pretext of business peregrinations abroad, leaving the protagonists to reconcile

the void left by their partners. Indeed, *In the Mood for Love*'s main drama is built around this structuring absence. It is an absence that the protagonists will attempt to compensate, by assuming the role of the other's spouse. Wong does not need to dramatise the spouses' affair directly, because the protagonists dramatise it for us, through impersonation. Moreover, the physical void represented by the spouses means that they are more effectively supplanted, in the mind of the spectator, by the protagonists who will simulate their activity. For the spectator, then, the adulterous couple become synonymous with, and thus inseparable from, our main protagonists.[72.]

Wong's compositions sometimes encourage a confusion of the two pairs of characters. Consider the following two shots. In the first shot, a woman sobs whilst taking a shower; she is turned away from the camera, which frames her obliquely from a high-angle, and the dark, out-of-focus composition serves to muddy our visual hold on the woman. The second shot frames a man's hand in close-up, tapping on the door; the image fades, and the sequence ends. Narrational point of view is hardly melodramatic, or communicative, here. Who are the figures in these shots? Is the woman in the shower Su or Chow's wife? Does the hand at the door belong to Chow or to Su's husband? Because we have not been allowed to acquire a real purchase on the spouses' physical appearance, and because of the inherent repressiveness of the film's narration at this point, we are unable to individuate the characters with confidence, and thus, in a certain sense, the central protagonists become indistinguishable from the spouses.[73.]

Interchangeability is also suggested by the gifts from abroad that the spouses present their partners. In a circuitous exchange described above, Chow recognises that Su's handbag is remarkably similar to the one owned by his wife; Su observes that her husband owns a necktie precisely the same as the one worn by Chow. At last, the protagonists reveal that the respective items were gifts from their spouses, who had each purchased the items during a business trip overseas. As I noted earlier, the 'coincidence', as Su characterises the situation, is clearly

nothing of the kind. Further, the duplication of sartorial accessories creates more correspondence between the protagonists and their adulterous doubles: Chow and Mr Chan both wear identical ties and Su and Mrs Chow both shoulder similar handbags. Later, Wong will exploit our awareness of these sartorial likenesses to purposely deceive the spectator, during the scene in which Su rehearses a confrontation with her husband. The scene in question begins with characteristic uncommunicativeness. Exposition of the narrative space, and of the characters within the space, is eschewed in favour of a single long take, which frames Su clearly in a medium shot, but which does not provide facial access to the man she addresses (who, though visible in the foreground of the frame, is turned away from the camera). Once more we are denied adequate knowledge of the narrative context, and thus we are not sufficiently *au courant* to realise that Su's 'confrontation' is merely a performance and that the man she addresses is not her husband, but Chow.[74.] The fact that Su is confronting the obliquely-positioned man about an infidelity augments our assumption that the man in the frame is Su's husband. Moreover, the repressiveness of the composition, together with our belief that Chow and Mr Chan are physically alike (and, as just noted, are attired similarly), tricks us into making an incorrect inference. (The composition also sustains the pattern of obscurely rendering (what we assume to be) Su's husband, and this also helps engender the mistaken inference.) It is only when Wong provides us with the previously withheld reverse-shot of Chow that we are made to realise our mistake, and obliged retroactively to revise our understanding of the narrative situation, the characters' relationships, and the veracity of the emotion expressed by Su.[75.]

The repressive detective narration in this sequence generates several hermeneutic possibilities, between which the spectator oscillates. The fact that the viewer has been gulled before (with respect to the narration's misappropriation of her trust) does not militate against her falling victim a second time to the mischief wrought by the narration. Here, the spectator must attempt to determine the

epistemic status of the action with which she is faced. Our initial hypothesis is likely, I would suggest, to comprise the view that Su is confronting her husband with respect to his imputed infidelity. This hypothesis is permitted by the brevity of situational context provided for the spectator, and the opaque way in which the 'husband' is presented in the frame. At any rate, this hypothesis is eventually dispelled by the narration's 'communicative' cut to the man's face, revealed to be Chow. This communicativeness, while dispelling one hypothesis, produces new ones. We are now enjoined to speculate that Su is confronting Chow with respect to an offscreen affair that she believes him to be involved in. This interpretation engenders several further conjectures, none of which the spectator can corroborate at this stage in the narrative. If Chow is having an affair, why is Su distressed? Is her distress purely a sympathetic reaction on behalf of Chow's wife; is she upset that she herself is not the woman with whom Chow is involved; or have Chow and Su been engaged in a romance of which the spectator has not been aware, and to which Chow has now been unfaithful? Here the characteristic ellipticality of the narration is exposed as a further device by which to repress the spectator's access to narrative information. The spectator is encouraged to fill in the interstices by inferring a greater development in the protagonists' relationship than we have witnessed. Finally, the spectator - still nursing the sting previously received from the narration - must balance these conjectures against the hypothesis that the protagonists' exchange is merely the latest stage in their obsessive rehearsal. The spectator's comprehension of the scene is thus constantly in flux, and we have constant recourse to revise our assumptions concerning the epistemic specificity of the protagonists' relationship, and to imagine what has occurred during those narrative periods that the film elides. Genre is once more in disarray. What at first appears to be a situation conventional to the melodrama - a moment of domestic conflict - is revealed to be something quite different; and the scene's apparent

melodramatic content is put in relief by a detective narration that is both reticent and misleading.

Finally, then, *In the Mood for Love* is a film which escapes a unitary generic categorisation. Its critical characterisation as a melodrama risks underplaying the important presence of detective narration in the film, as well as the ways that the customary codes of melodrama are interfered with. The film palpably reworks several of the central norms of melodrama: transparent emotion and excess are sacrificed for affective opacity and restraint; Manichean conflict is dissolved by subtly-graded moral positions; the 'victimisation' of the melodramatic agent gives way to the empowerment of the protagonists; expressive *mise en scène* is invaded by detective iconography; and melodramatic omniscience is subordinated to a restrictive and unreliable narration. Wong thereby achieves a radical transformation of the melodramatic landscape, recurrently arousing and demolishing the spectator's generic expectations. Such thoroughgoing alteration of generic convention cannot but affect the viewer's relationship with the text, which comes to a point of caution and tension: encouraged to submissiveness by the sensual effects of the film's surface (its decorous *mise en scène*, attractive performers, seductive score and so forth), as well as to complacency by assumed familiarity with generic conventions, the spectator is shaken from this semblance of comfort to confront an elliptical, uncommunicative text that disables genre assumptions. The spectator is thus dispossessed of the stable narrative orientation that generic frameworks ordinarily provide.

I have been concerned in this chapter not only to redress the notion of Wong's 'non-engagement' with popular genres, but also to situate his approach to genre within a certain tradition of auteur filmmaking. My contention is that Wong joins a lineage of cinephile art filmmakers in his celebration and critique of genre cinema. It is an approach that allows the auteur to affectionately recreate generic strophes and surfaces, and to manipulate these elements into forms apt for personal

expression. In my discussion of *In the Mood for Love*, I have sought to demonstrate that the conventions of melodrama are challenged and shot through with the codes of another, virtually antithetical, genre. *In the Mood for Love* holds in tension the imbrication of two generic modes (melodrama and the detective film), as well as the insinuation and foregrounding of an authorial point of view. In conclusion, I want to suggest that the film ultimately abandons the cross-fertilisation of its two genres, thus dissipating the tension between them, and opens up a space for the authorial voice to be most pronounced.

In the Mood for Love is generically amorphous in its denouement. The final sequence is prefaced with a caption: 'That era has passed. Nothing that belonged to it exists anymore'. The caption confirms *In the Mood for Love*'s earlier intimation that the story's main epoch is nearing dissolution. What, we might ask, has taken the place of *In the Mood for Love*'s evaporated era? It is a question that Wong will confront in his following film, *2046*, a kind of sequel to *In the Mood for Love*, in which he only superficially supplants melodrama with science-fiction. But the question is also addressed in the present film's coda. In an abstract disjuncture from the main action, the final sequence of *In the Mood for Love* plays out amid the ruins of the Angkor Wat temple in Cambodia. The coda's austere terrain is substituted for the moodily suggestive milieu that provides the context for the film's main story. In overwhelming contrast to the immured settings in the Hong Kong locale, the vista provided by Angkor Wat suggests a landscape burned clean of moral and ideological constraints. (Privacy is still unattainable, however, since an anonymous robed figure observes Chow, who is seen whispering into a hole in the architecture.) Commensurate with its change in setting, the final coda obliterates the presence of genre, too. Insofar as Chow's whispered secret is withheld from the spectator, the sequence is uncommunicative, yet the presence of generic cues are noticeably absent: besides narrational authority, nothing in the sequence evokes the detective film or the melodrama. We might say that the film here sheds its generic skin in order to lay bare the voice of

the auteur, whose presence is surely articulated by the film's sacrificing of conventional generic closure in favour of a self-consciously ambiguous, 'art-film' ending. The auteur, who has all along controlled our access to narrative information, thus discards the ornaments of genre and asserts his narrational authority undisguised by generic iconography. In this localised instance, then, *In the Mood for Love* becomes genuinely 'antigeneric', that is, stripped bare of genre elements. The conventions of genre have served their purpose; the tropes that traditionally provide closure are inappropriate for Wong's protagonists, who, as I have argued, are atypical generic agents. Detective films invariably conclude on a triumphant note: the lawman apprehends and overcomes the criminal. Melodramas, despite a tone of despair, generally wind up with the virtuous being rewarded and the evil thwarted. The mood that Wong's film seeks to create at its closure is not one of absolutes: it is instead an uncertain negotiation of the opposing poles established by those denouements of popular genre, a mood that finds greater affinity with the ambiguity that hallmarks the art film. In the final analysis, then, the cineaste's obsession with genre is exhausted. Without the kind of pre-established closure provided by a generic paradigm, the film concludes with its protagonists neither wholly triumphant nor wholly defeated, but with the changing world around them an inevitable source of distress.

Insofar as it carpenters a denouement discarding overall formal unity and determinate plot resolution, *In the Mood for Love* repudiates not only generic closure but also the kind of narrative closure exemplified in classical Hollywood cinema. Irrespective of its generic context, a classical film will invariably resolve its main plotlines and establish a symmetrical relation to its opening action. The romance plotline of *In the Mood for Love*, however, is diffused rather than resolved, implying that the protagonists' mutual desire will somewhat tragically fade and extinguish (a far cry from the emotional summits that typically constitute the melodrama's climax). We have said that, in furnishing a denouement that foregrounds ambiguity and irresolution, Wong employs

a narrative strategy characteristic of the European art cinema; in its narrative closure, at least, *In the Mood for Love* thus eschews the norms of classical narrative construction. But to what extent is the rejection of classical storytelling principles typical of Wong's films in general? Moreover, if *In the Mood for Love* evaporates its generic schemas at its point of closure, how far is genre typically influential upon Wong's organisation of narrative? Do the causal ambiguities and sensuous aesthetic of Wong's films belie a haphazard and casually constructed narrative design? Chapter 4 will seek to provide answers to these questions, with *Fallen Angels* the primary object of analysis.

Notes

[1] See Peter Brunette, *Wong Kar-wai*, University of Illinois Press, 2005, pp.3-5.

[2] David Bordwell, *Planet Hong Kong: Popular Cinema and the Art of Entertainment*, Harvard University Press, 2000, p.271.

[3] Ackbar Abbas, *Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance*, University of Minnesota Press, 1997, p.50.

[4] Chuck Stephens, 'Time Pieces: Wong Kar-wai and the Persistence of Memory', *Film Comment* 32:1 (January/February, 1996) p.15.

[5] Tony Rayns, 'Poet of Time', *Sight and Sound* 5:9 (September 1995), p.12.

[6] Brunette, *Wong Kar-wai*, p.5.

[7] Unfortunately, Brunette does not explicitly develop this observation to clarify his position in general. His occasional references to genre in later chapters seem to ascribe Wong's films a greater commerce with genre than he seems willing to at the outset. For example, Brunette subsequently characterises Wong as an 'ostensibly antigeneric director' (p.36); and in his analysis of *Fallen Angels*, he compellingly suggests that 'rather than making a genre film, Wong is making a film about the relation of genre films to art films' (p.61). Such a film, of course, would inevitably have to rely on generic frameworks in order to make this contrast explicit.

[8] Bordwell, *Planet Hong Kong*, p.270.

[9] Quoted in John Ashbrook, 'Wong Kar-wai and Chris Doyle: Available Light', in *The Crime Time Filmbook*, edited by John Ashbrook, No Exit Press, 1997, p.166.

[10] For one example allied to the art cinema, consider Truffaut's *Fahrenheit 451* (1966), which not only presents a bizarrely anachronistic vision of the future (replete with 1930s-style fire engines), but also presents Julie Christie in dual roles, inviting the viewer to recognise the apposite contrasts.

[11.] There are, of course, exceptional precedents for this kind of doubling elsewhere (particularly in European art cinema) where matters of generic propriety are apparently discarded.

[12.] One might counter that a marker of Chow's acceptance of change can be found in the character's promiscuity: Chow boasts that his sex life encompasses several different women. Yet it ought to be acknowledged that Chow's bed-hopping is itself a habitual act, a routine into which the protagonist has settled. Moreover, Chow's promiscuity is limited to a closed set of women whom he moves between and returns to, and thus his ostensible promiscuity belies an inclination for stability and similitude. Finally, by refusing to settle with any one woman, Chow wards off the likelihood of permanent change inevitably wrought by commitment to a single individual.

[13.] By presenting his protagonist as a maker of fictions, Wong encourages identification of himself with Chow. The temptation that besets Chow, of being seduced by his own artwork, also putatively assails Wong, and we may be inclined to take the protracted production history of *2046* as evidence of this.

[14.] As an ostensibly non-human object, the android evokes the glass motif in *As Tears Go By* in symbolising the protagonist's succession of deindividuated ex-lovers.

[15.] Jeremy Tambling, *Wong Kar-wai's Happy Together*, Hong Kong University Press, 2002, p.33.

[16.] See Robert Lang, '*My Own Private Idaho* and the New Queer Road Movies', in *The Road Movie Book*, edited by Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark, Routledge, 1997, pp.330-348. Among the titles that Lang identifies in this hybrid cycle of films is *My Own Private Idaho* (1991), *The Living End* (1992), *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (1994), and *Total Eclipse* (1995).

[17.] Wong states: 'In fact I don't like people to see this film as a gay film. It's more a story about human relationships and somehow the two characters involved are both men'. Quoted in Richard Lippe, 'Gay Movies, West and East', *CineAction* 45 (1997), p.58.

[18.] Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M.M. Bakhtin*, edited by Michael Holquist, translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1992, p.243.

[19.] Although *Chungking Express* gradually abandons the *policier*'s typifying plot tropes, *policier* elements still permeate the film's second story, in the form of generic iconography (the cop's police uniform, for instance).

[20.] Quoted in Laurent Tirard, *Moviemakers' Master Class: Private Lessons from the World's Foremost Directors*, Faber, 2002, p.197.

[21.] Wong has alluded in interviews to the cinephilia that begets both an admiration for, and a dissatisfaction with, traditional genre conventions: 'Now we have reached an age of recycling. Our generation gets to see lots of movies, and takes these movies to

heart; and we knock them down and start reconstructing...And we get fun out of doing that'. Quoted in Lalanne et al., *Wong Kar-wai*, edited by Daniele Riviere, Editions Dis Voir, 1997, p.83.

[22.] André Bazin, 'On the *politique des auteurs*'. In *Cahiers du Cinéma : The 1950s : Neo-Realism, Hollywood, New Wave*, edited by Jim Hillier, Harvard University Press, 1985, p.258.

[23.] Steve Neale, 'Questions of Genre', *Screen* 31:1 (Spring 1990), p.47.

[24.] Abbas, *Hong Kong*, Chapter 3.

[25.] See Gina Marchetti, 'Buying American, Consuming Hong Kong: Cultural Commerce, Fantasies of Identity, and the Cinema'. In *The Cinema of Hong Kong: History, Arts, Identity*, edited by Poshek Fu and David Desser, Cambridge University Press, 2000, p.306.

[26.] Stephen Teo, *Wong Kar-wai*, London: BFI, 2005, p.128. See also David Rooney, *Variety* May 29-June 4, 2000, p.23.

[27.] Steve Neale has provided evidence that the terms 'melodrama' and 'meller', as employed by American trade reviewers during the classical period, typically designate films that are high on adventure, thrills, and excitement. 'Melodrama', Neale finds, was a term used to denote not so much the woman's film as traditionally male-oriented genres like the thriller, the western, the war film, the horror film, and the adventure film. (See Steve Neale, 'Melo Talk: On the Meaning and Use of the Term "Melodrama" in the American Trade Press'. *The Velvet Light Trap* 32 (Fall 1993), pp.66-89). The term, however, is defined more narrowly in contemporary film theory. Notwithstanding Neale's discoveries, we can identify some broad characteristics that are generally associated with the melodrama genre, as the term is understood today. I shall discuss some of these generic traits shortly.

[28.] David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, Routledge, 1985, p.70.

[29.] Peter Brook, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess*, Yale University Press, 1995.

[30.] For cultural display rules and facial expression, see Paul Ekman (ed.), *Emotion in the Human Face*, Cambridge University Press, 1982.

[31.] See, for instance, Desson Howe, 'A Smouldering 'Mood for Love''', *The Washington Post* 18:18 (February 26-March 4, 2001) p.35; and Kenneth Turan 'In Thrall to a Romantic Spell', *Los Angeles Times*, February 2, 2001. This familiar identification of the 'restraint' in and/or of *In the Mood for Love* has a bedfellow in another characteristic no less often applied to the film: its 'conservatism'. It seems to me that a common critical slippage in reviews of the film involves the confusion between the film itself and the characters and milieu that the film depicts. Stephen Teo appears to make this slippage when he conflates the 'conservative core' of the narrative with the 'moral restraint' of the central protagonists (Teo, 'Wong Kar-wai's

In the Mood for Love: Like a Ritual in Transfigured Time', *Senses of Cinema*). While the protagonists and their co-textual backdrop (i.e. the diegetic environment as it is defined by a set of morals, values, and beliefs) may certainly be expressive of conservative attitudes, I think it would be wrong to suggest that the film shares an identical, or even harmonious, perspective with its main characters. On the contrary, as my discussion of the film will indicate, *In the Mood for Love* adopts a quite critical stance towards its protagonists and milieu. Unlike the film's conservative protagonists, moreover, those characters who act contra to conservative morality are neither judged *by* the film nor castigated *within* the story. (For further discussion of the co-text in narrative cinema, see Murray Smith, *Engaging Characters: Fiction, Emotion, and the Cinema*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995, pp.194-7.)

[32.] As Bordwell observes, in melodrama 'all the expressive resources of mise-en-scène – gesture, lighting, setting, costume – work to convey inner states'. Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, p.70.

[33.] Robert Lang, *American Film Melodrama: Griffith, Vidor, Minnelli*, Princeton University Press, 1989, p.5.

[34.] In its emphasis on social conditions, *In the Mood for Love* ostensibly marks a departure from Wong's preceding film, *Happy Together*. If Chow and Su are smothered by the oppressive moral precepts of a specific socio-historical context (precepts that order the extinguishing of sexual impulses when such impulses run counter to acceptable social relations), the protagonists in *Happy Together* are unhindered in forging homosexual bonds, despite the relative unacceptability of their union (homosexuality being, in a conservative society, a greater offence than adultery). In other words, a sexually-repressive society polices the characters' behaviour in *In the Mood for Love*, while no such intervention is visible in the contemporary milieux (Argentina, Hong Kong) of *Happy Together*. As Chris Berry notes, 'Homosexuality is ripe for melodramatisation in the Western tradition as a personality trait in conflict with dominant social values' (Chris Berry, 'Wedding Banquet: A Family (Melodrama) Affair'. In *Chinese Films in Focus: 25 New Takes*, edited by Chris Berry, BFI, 2003, p.186). It is thus counter to expectation that Wong chooses not to examine this particular terrain in *Happy Together*. Instead, ideological constraints do not here encroach upon or retard 'forbidden' romantic union, and it is rather the case that the apparent 'impossibility' of union in the film is attributable to the specific psychological and existential dilemmas of the agents themselves. In this sense, the protagonists' relationship implodes, and is not made victim to external forces that seek to annihilate socially-undesirable unions. This shift in emphasis, between a contemporary examination of 'interior' subjectivities (*Happy Together*) and a period evocation of conservative ideology (*In the Mood for Love*) may be taken to reflect a historical difference in ideological and moral constraints.

[35.] Quoted in Elizabeth Weitzman, 'Wong Kar-wai: the director who knows all about falling for the wrong people'. *Interview*, February 1998.

[36.] Stephen Neale, *Genre*, London: BFI, 1980, p.22.

[37.] See, for example, Graham Parkes (ed.), *Heidegger and Asian Thought*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1990.

[38.] Takako Imai reports of Kitano's attraction to existentialism, noting that the filmmaker 'raked through literature books to keep up with such topics'. Takako Imai, 'Born to be Wild', in *'Beat' Takeshi Kitano*, edited by Brian Jacobs, Tadao Press, 1999, p.9.

[39.] The salience of existentialist ideas in the work of such key European auteurs is reflected by the films' attractiveness to non-film academics, especially philosophers. For instance, 'philosophy departments used films by Godard and Antonioni to illustrate existentialism'. (David Bordwell, *Making Meaning: Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema*, Harvard University Press, 1989, p.53.) The films' engagement with such 'legitimisable' material as existential philosophy thus aided cinema's entrance into the academic arena, and further marked off 'art films' from so-called Hollywood 'entertainments'.

[40.] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism and Humanism*, London: Methuen, 1973, p.34.

[41.] *Ibid.*, p.50.

[42.] David E. Cooper, *Existentialism: A Reconstruction* (Second edition), Blackwell, 2000, p.109.

[43.] John Macquarrie, *Existentialism*, Penguin: Pelican Books, 1973, pp.161-2.

[44.] Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, translated by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980, p.165, H.128.

[45.] *Ibid.*, p.167, H.129.

[46.] It is possible to relate the liberal-mindedness of these characters to their experience of foreign society, attitudes, and customs. The spouses, Ping, and – we may infer, given his senior position in a shipping office – Mr Ho, each make regular expeditions abroad, in contrast to Chow and Su, who are relatively parochial (a suggestion of their dislike of change). Moreover, the Hong Kong society's impending disintegration is due to this kind of cultural osmosis, the accelerating infiltration of non-indigenous influences into the local sphere; thus of modernisation and globalisation. Wong indicates this by the presence of 'foreign' appliances that turn up in the protagonists' apartment building: not only the neckties and handbags, but also the Japanese rice-cooker that draws the delight of the neighbours. Such items symbolise the great impact that 'foreign' influence (a 'liberal' influence, to which the secondary characters are exposed) will have upon the protagonists' domestic relationships and emotional lives. In this respect, the film recalls Yasujiro Ozu's *Ohayo* (1959) with its emphasis on 'alien' material goods (e.g. the television set,

washing machine, Western-style nightgowns and so forth) as a divisive source of pleasure and chaos.

[47.] Moral idealism is critiqued in *As Tears Go By* as well. As a deeply entrenched code of the street, Wah's unquestioning loyalty to his 'little brother' Fly is the prime catalyst in his own downfall. Wong makes us aware of alternative choices available to the protagonist. A 'better life' (i.e. more morally wholesome) awaits Wah if he can cast aside the codes of brotherhood and effect a romantic commitment to Ngor. Wong marks the two possibilities as incompatible: by interlacing the romance and crime plotlines, Wong conveys how the protagonist's criminal existence perpetually interrupts and 'contaminates' Wah's idyllic experience with Ngor. Finally, Wah will remain staunch to his idealised notions of loyalty, avenging Fly's death and bringing into effect his own demise. By adhering to a street ethics, Wah thus forecloses upon a more optimistic trajectory. Wong underscores this point at the film's denouement. As Wah's body corkscrews under the impact of bullets, Wong intercuts a fleeting flashback to a romantic episode between Wah and Ngor. While this image can be understood subjectively, as a final image in the protagonist's consciousness, it also functions at a discursive level, elegiacally mourning a forsaken course of action. At least to some degree, Wah's allegiance to a relativised street morality may be construed as inauthentic. His failure to reflect critically upon the ethical precepts that govern his actions is an inauthentic mode of being that leads him to make misguided, and ultimately fatal, decisions; and an act of 'bad faith' is performed when Wah sacrifices an innate, authentic desire (to pursue his romance with Ngor) for a socially-indoctrinated one (the *a priori* fraternal codes of loyalty and vengeance).

[48.] Although *In the Mood for Love* dramatises the dissolution of domestic relationships, it strikingly avoids the melodrama's staging of familial conflict. In fact, the film effectively effaces the 'family' altogether, the spouses generally being abstracted from the action. Conflict, meanwhile, is literally 'staged' by the protagonists, as the pretext of role-play provides an outlet for their repressed yet authentic emotions.

[49.] It is striking that Chow, in common with many of Wong's protagonists, is afflicted by an inability to confide his feelings in another human being. His impersonal form of release points both to an 'individual' alienation, that is, a recoiling from human connection, and a concomitant social alienation, in which he is differently attuned to, or emotionally out-of-sync with, those around him. Other than Su, for instance, Chow's only available confidant is Ping, a loyal but wilful profligate, who would surely sympathise with Chow's sexual desire if not his conviction of romantic love; in other words, Chow assumes that Ping would coarsen this feeling of love by seizing on its opportunity for sexual gratification.

[50.] David Bordwell, 'Happily Ever After, Part Two', *The Velvet Light Trap* 19 (1982), p.4. Despite its historical shifts in definition, it seems that 'melodrama' was consistently

associated with such *deux es machina* as chance and coincidence in the American trade press of the classical era. Steve Neale reports that 'there are occasions on which melodrama, where used pejoratively, is taken to imply or is used to indicate a failure of *plausibility* (hence of verisimilitude...)'. Neale, 'Melo Talk', p.67. (Emphasis in original.)

[51.] When Wong slides between genres *within* a film, the presence of chance can both assume different meanings and qualify the viewer's expectations. Consider, for example, the first chance encounter between Cop 223 and the blonde woman in *Chungking Express*. Occurring at the beginning of the film (the set up of which, we will recall, encourages the viewer to expect a *policier* film), the characters' random collision represents a chance event atypical of the crime genre. According to generic convention, it is unlikely that the cop should encounter his nemesis (the blonde woman is a drug-trafficker) as a result of providence, rather than by his skills of detection. However, when we reconfigure the characters' relationships and the generic context – as David Bordwell and Ackbar Abbas argue the film obliges us to do – we find not the chance confrontation between cop and criminal, but a fortuitous meeting between romantic partners. In the generic context of a romantic comedy, the element of chance becomes far more permissible, as the forces of Fate play cupid and satisfy the spectator's desire to witness the romantic union of the protagonists.

[52.] David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style & Mode of Production to 1960*, Routledge, 1985, p.13.

[53.] During this sequence, which is overlaid with a comic atmosphere of pandemonium and apprehension, the characters' possessions are mislaid and delivered to the wrong apartment: a foreshadowing, therefore, of the confusion of personal items – e.g. Chow's necktie, Su's handbag - that will have more dramatic effect later in the film.

[54.] In *2046*, Chow repeats the dialogue 'What a coincidence!', but in this case the line is not so much explicitly harnessed to the theme of predestination as employed primarily to provide continuity with *In the Mood for Love* and other films in Wong's oeuvre (discussed below). Chow utters the remark to Black Spider (Gong Li), when he learns that they had once separately traversed the same overseas territory. However, that Chow's exclamation in *2046* is made in response to a banal and insignificant circumstance is, in fact, facetious, precisely because Chow does not apply the same exclamation to a much more significant coincidence: that Black Spider's real name is Su Lizhen, the name of the woman that Chow is in love with in the earlier film. Characters also acknowledge coincidence in *Chungking Express* and *As Tears Go By*. In the former film, a chance meeting occurs between 663 and the stewardess girlfriend that abandoned him. Similarly, in *As Tears Go By*, a chance encounter reunites Wah with Mabel, a former girlfriend now pregnant with another man's child. Wah exclaims: 'What a coincidence!', and the characters share an awkward exchange. Their

encounter echoes a chance meeting in *Baisers volés* (1968) between Antoine Doinel (Jean Pierre-Léaud) and his ex-girlfriend, who is now a mother; it also prefigures a similar chance occurrence in *Infernal Affairs* (2002), where Chan (Tony Leung Chiu-wai) happens upon his former girlfriend and her daughter, remarking 'What a coincidence'. (Andrew Lau, the co-director of *Infernal Affairs*, served as Wong's cinematographer on *As Tears Go By*; thus the correspondence between these two sequences is most likely intentional.) In *As Tears Go By*, as in *Baisers volés* and *Infernal Affairs*, the action implies an alternative lifestyle that the protagonist has for different reasons forsaken. At the level of plot, moreover, *As Tears Go By* introduces its chance encounter to recommence its romance subplot, which Wong has temporarily subordinated to the crime narrative. Coincidence is also closely related to genre in Wong's *Fallen Angels*. The initial action roots the film in the crime genre. Killer (Leon Lai), a professional hit-man, escapes the scene of his latest carnage by fleeing on a bus. Already on-board the vehicle is Hoi, a former schoolmate of Killer's, who now harries the hit-man to buy insurance from him. The comic improbability of this ill-timed reunion is underscored by Hoi's enthusiastic crowing: 'What a coincidence!' In juxtaposing this insubstantial encounter with the preceding scene of bloodshed, Wong deliberately undercuts the predictability of the genre. Occurring quite near the beginning of the film, these scenes in turn exemplify and disavow genre conventions. Wong thereby exploits the incompatibility of the crime genre and the device of coincidence to announce that *Fallen Angels* will not follow a generically conventional pattern.

[55.] Wong will also condemn Fly for suppressing personal responsibility in *As Tears Go By*. Fly whimsically reveals, 'A fortune teller told me I have a lucky nose. I'll be rich at thirty. Plain sailing. I'm going straight to the top'. Believing himself 'destined' for wealth and success, Fly can embrace recklessness and profligacy in the present moment. To cite another noir film – and another fortune teller, Tanya (Marlene Dietrich) in *Touch of Evil* (1958) – Fly's future 'is all used up'. Wah evinces a similarly casual attitude toward the future. When he is viciously attacked, Ngor examines his injuries, saying: 'You were lucky. What about next time?' Wah replies: 'I've never thought about the next time'. Heedless of their actions and the consequences they beget, both Fly and Wah will be dealt a final tragic hand by the film's author. *2046* provides another example. Here, Chow remarks that he would never have written his science-fiction story were it not for the room number 2046 (which reminds him of the hotel room he shared with Su Lizhen in the preceding *In the Mood for Love*). It is not that these 'omens' do not exist; rather, it is that the characters actively *look* for them – they seek out meaning in small details, longing to ascribe their actions to some force or phenomena outside their control.

[56.] Sartre, *Existentialism and Humanism*, p.50.

[57.] Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, translated by Hazel E. Barnes, Routledge, 2000, p.49.

[58.] In interview, Wong has claimed that sometimes 'genre conventions get in the way of dealing with certain areas of character psychology'. (Quoted in Rayns, 'Poet of Time', p.9.) No further elaboration is provided, but our example from *In the Mood for Love* might serve to illuminate Wong's meaning. Let us take, for example, the melodramatic convention by which the travails of Fate bankrupt the protagonist's personal agency and responsibility. This paradigm would seem to occlude any dramatisation of a protagonist whose specific psychology is such that she *desires* only to relinquish responsibility. Such a psychological bent is academic for the protagonist of melodrama, whose agency is always outside her own control. It is thus that Wong determines to act in defiance of generic convention, to overturn the genre's evocation of Fate. In this way, Wong can explore the psychology of characters who want to repudiate responsibility, without this exploration being made redundant by the disempowering presence of Fate.

[59.] Quoted in Tirard, *Moviemakers' Master Class*, p.198.

[60.] For a discussion of character types in film noir, see Andrew Dickos, *Street with No Name: A History of the Classic American Film Noir*, University Press of Kentucky, 2002, pp.65-70.

[61.] In their willingness to enter into various kinds of social performance (e.g. their routine efforts to maintain the appearance of emotional wellbeing, as well as their assumption of the spouses' roles), the protagonists would seem to exemplify the claim of sociologist Erving Goffman, who contends that an individual is nothing more than the sum of his or her 'social roles'. (Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Penguin, 1971.) However, existence that defines itself purely as social performance is, for the existentialist (and, I argue, also for Wong) a mode of inauthenticity. (See David E. Cooper, *Existentialism: A Reconstruction*, p.110.) In displaying the apparent naturalness with which Chow and Su ease into role-play, Wong indicates that social performance is second nature to the protagonists, and, by extension, that their inauthentic ways are deeply ingrained. A similar correlation between social performance and inauthenticity is conveyed in *As Tears Go By*: in his desire to gain 'face', Fly ascribes too much importance to his social role and how it is perceived by others. Fly's willingness to risk and ultimately lose his life in order to attain peer credibility is an inauthentic mode of existence, privileging social appearance over innate tendencies and desires. Inauthenticity is also interwoven with Wong's theme of doubling and interchangeability. In their assumption of alternative identities, *In the Mood for Love*'s protagonists recall Faye's flirtation with the stewardess' identity in *Chungking Express*. Unlike Su and Chow, however, Faye resists the temptation to inauthentically immerse herself in her love rival's identity. Instead

she pursues an authentic course of action by acknowledging and fulfilling desires of her own (e.g. to experience life in California).

[62.] The term 'elucidation' is borrowed from Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, p.64. Bordwell describes a stage in detective narrative in which the crime is 'elucidated' by the detective, and clarity is brought to the story's central enigma.

[63.] See, for example, Tsvetan Todorov, *The Poetics of Prose* (transl. Richard Howard), Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1977. Todorov identifies the various temporal emphases engendered in distinct sub-genres of detective fiction (the whodunit, the thriller, and the suspense novel).

[64.] Gregory Currie, *Image and Mind: Film, Philosophy and Cognitive Science*, Cambridge University Press, 1997, p.163.

[65.] *Ibid.*, p.162.

[66.] This close identification between detective and criminal conventionally extends to a blurring of morality: the polarities of good and evil are collapsed, and the detective's moral identity threatens to be absorbed by the criminal's (or vice versa). As we shall see, a parallel situation occurs with *In the Mood for Love*'s protagonists, whose close identification with the spouses destabilises their own sense of moral propriety.

[67.] I realise, of course, that the motif of the post-coital cigarette is not exclusive to noir, but is a more universal trope that possibly transcends genre altogether. Nevertheless, precedents can be found in the detective noir film (see, for one example, the self-conscious use of ellipsis and innuendo following Jack Nicholson's seduction of/by Faye Dunaway in *Chinatown* [Roman Polanski, 1974]).

[68.] This sequence is not unambiguous in terms of the context provided for such gestures: are we witnessing more scenes of role-play, or are the protagonists' physical encounters legitimate? The shot in question, which shows Su withdraw her hand after Chow motions to caress it, is most reminiscent of a corresponding shot in *Tirez sur le pianiste* (François Truffaut, 1960). In Truffaut's film, the gesture conveys the awkwardness of a first romantic exchange, and speaks to the timidity of the central character. The moment in Wong's film recalls also a scenario described in existentialist literature, in which a woman, whose hand is taken by an unwanted admirer, renders herself 'corpse-like' by mentally dissociating her emotional discomfort from her body's compliance (see Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, transl. Hazel E. Barnes, Routledge, 2000, p.55.). The woman's behaviour is considered by Sartre to be in archetypal 'bad faith', making of herself a split subject. If we assume that the protagonists' physical contact in the taxi is legitimate (i.e. rather than an 'acting-out' of desire), Su's withdrawing of her hand is no less an act of inauthenticity. In fact, she is Sartre's woman in reverse (she denies her body the satisfaction that her mind legitimately craves). A later scene will repeat this action, with the difference that Su now accepts Chow's

hand; once more, however, the epistemic status of the scene cannot be unambiguously determined.

[69.] See Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, pp.64-73.

[70.] *Ibid.*, p.67.

[71.] A kind of compromise is achieved in Zhang Yimou's historical melodrama *Raise the Red Lantern* (1991), in which the capricious and unfeeling husband – the putative villain of the piece – is individuated by the camera only insofar as he is framed exclusively in long-shot.

[72.] The supplanting of the spouses by Chow and Su is reminiscent of the displacement of the blonde woman and Cop 223 in the second part of *Chungking Express*. More generally, it reflects Wong's tendency to imply doppelganger relationships between his protagonists. This idiosyncratic conflation of discrete agents is not so much a generic conceit as an authorial trait, putting straightforward notions of identity into crisis.

[73.] That Tony Leung and Maggie Cheung were occasionally asked by Wong to act as (off-camera) stand-ins for the husband and wife characters would seem to compound our impression that Su and Chow are meant to *embody* for us their respective counterparts. Moreover, according to Wong, 'at first I wanted to have all four characters in the film played by Maggie and Tony, both the wife and Mrs. Chan, and the husband and Mr. Chow'. Quoted in Brunette, *Wong Kar-wai*, p.130.

[74.] The climax of Truffaut's *Le Dernier métro* (1980) similarly presents the viewer with an apparently reliable set of narrative 'facts'. Eventually, however, the narration (which the viewer has assumed to be sufficiently omniscient and reliable) ushers in a new, qualifying set of facts. Action assumed to be legitimate is revealed to be a staged performance by the film's thespian protagonists. In its emphasis on narrational unreliability and performance, Truffaut's denouement echoes our scene from *In the Mood for Love*, and similarly obliges the viewer to revise narrative assumptions.

[75.] The film's conflict between melodramatic and detective narration has consequences for the eliciting of suspense. As Hitchcock puts it: 'In the usual form of suspense it is indispensable that the public be made perfectly aware of all the [narrative] facts involved. Otherwise, there is no suspense.' (*Hitchcock/Truffaut*, François Truffaut, trans. Helen G. Scott, Revised edition, Simon and Schuster: Touchstone, 1985, p.72.) Such is possible in the melodramatic mode of narration, which is characterised by communicativeness; indeed suspense is a strategy common to the genre of melodrama. But as I have said, *In the Mood for Love*'s role-play scenes are frequently restrictive in their imparting of narrative context. I have suggested that the role-play sequences alter the emphasis of the 'whodunit' to ask 'will the protagonists do it (i.e. commit adultery)?' These sequences at first invert the dramatic irony that Hitchcock argues is necessary for the effective creation of suspense: the characters know more than we

do.   Detective narration therefore complicates and defers the straightforward Hitchcockian notion of suspense in these sequences, and it is only once the narration becomes more transparent, and the proper context of the protagonists' performance is revealed, that the spectator is able to participate in the suspense surrounding the future activity of the protagonists.

4. Routine Crimes: Narrative, Style, and *Fallen Angels*

The structure and implications of [Wong's] films are like a fat man's feet: he doesn't really know what they look like until the end of the day.

Christopher Doyle[1]

Christopher Doyle's wry observation echoes a general tendency amongst critics to conflate Wong's aleatory working methods with his films' narrative structures. It is a critical assumption that the films' syncopated and fragmentary sequences not only derive from Wong's tendency to jettison completed shooting scripts, but are also the inevitable consequence of narratives constructed in postproduction editing. If critics have become increasingly preoccupied with the production history of Wong's films, the filmmaker also perpetuates the image of an *ad hoc*, avant-garde narrativist:

> I always start with a lot of ideas, but the story itself is never clear...I think the whole process of making a film is actually a way for me to find all these answers.[2]

Equipped with self-unified episodes and portions of scenes, Wong then takes advantage of the postproduction process to suture this material into coherent narrative form. Orson Welles once argued that it is 'an error to suppose that the Russians worked so much with montage because they shot their films in short takes'[3]; yet, in Wong's case, it is apparently precisely the situation that narrative form is assembled from short scenes and episodes (if not necessarily short takes). Stylistic choices such as crosscutting, voiceover narration, and intertitles become subservient to the filmmaker's desire to holistically integrate discrete fragments of film. The fat man's feet come into view only when these fragments and episodes are assembled to the filmmaker's satisfaction. Without losing sight of Wong's remarks (or those of his colleagues, whose testimony generally supports the view that 'all concerned discover only gradually...what [the film is] 'really' about'[4]),

we should not assume that a casual and arbitrary filming practice produces narratives that are inevitably desultory or unorganised. (In Doyle's chronicle of the genesis of *Happy Together*, anxieties concerning the plot synopsis revolve around classical principles of structure: '[The synopsis] looks a little feeble in this form: few 'motivations', little apparent action, no subplot'.)[5.] Narrative structure in Wong's films *is* governed by traditional storytelling principles extant in classical and art cinemas, and is rarely as avant-garde or experimental as one might expect given his improvisatory working method. It is not therefore paradoxical for critics such as Stephen Teo to label Wong a 'literary' filmmaker[6.]; the extemporising nature of Wong's filmmaking process does not contaminate the principles of coherence and unity that Wong brings to bear upon story organisation.

In this chapter, I shall examine how narrative operates in a film that critics have primarily treated as a 'showcase' for Wong's visual and sonic style.[7.] I will argue that *Fallen Angels* contrives a narrative organisation that not only exhibits a self-consciousness equivalent to that of its sensuous sound and image track, but also precludes accusations of flagrant stylisation or ornamentation by anchoring its narrative strategies in such textual elements as character and theme. We shall find that the film provides 'architectural' pleasures that are explicitly justified by action within the diegesis.[8.] Treating narrative structure as an aspect of film style, I shall also seek to demonstrate that plot and audiovisual style in *Fallen Angels* are mutually accommodating. For example, the plot may suppress itself (through tactics of retardation or digression) so as to foreground other narrational parameters (music, editing, *mise en scène* and so forth). My contention shall be that, even in such sequences where plot is distressed and visual and sonic style come to the fore, *Fallen Angels'* narration is more or less explicitly communicative of narrative meaning. In other words, we can neither reduce *Fallen Angels'* plot to a position of redundancy nor interpret the film's aesthetic credo as one of 'style for style's sake'. Before examining *Fallen Angels* in detail, it will be

useful to introduce some important trends in Wong's storytelling style, and to consider how these elements function in narrative contexts other than that provided by *Fallen Angels*. Some of these trends are employed in several of Wong's films but will not be pertinent to our discussion of *Fallen Angels* (e.g. the use of intertitles as a structuring device). Others are characteristic of Wong's narrational style, and will be dwelled upon more substantially throughout this chapter (e.g. episodic structure, self-conscious narration, character motivation, and echoic shot motifs).

Wong's narrative strategies are often self-consciously bold. *Chungking Express*, for example, fissures into two distinct stories, with the second part almost entirely displacing the first. The switch in 'interest-focus' has precursors in art films such as *L'Avventura* (1960), but *Chungking Express* is perhaps more radical than Antonioni's film because its emergent protagonists have not been sufficiently established in the film before the first story is supplanted. The parallel stories in *Chungking Express* are not entirely disconnected, however. A scene inaugurating the second part shows 223 (a protagonist in part one) and Faye (a protagonist in part two) physically colliding, an encounter that momentarily dovetails the two stories. Moreover, in the first part of *Chungking Express*, the key personnel of the film's second story are glimpsed before the narration is ready to shift stories proper. On the basis of the oblique fashion in which these characters are 'introduced', the spectator can hardly infer their future importance in the narrative. A brief insert shot in the first story fleetingly shows us Tony Leung's on-duty cop; at another juncture, Faye is seen in long-shot, passing the blonde drug-trafficker. Introducing protagonists 'discreetly' is a strategy consistent with art cinema tradition, although Wong here intensifies the conceit beyond its normal function. The strategy works in striking contradiction to the legibility prioritised by the primacy effect (and the narrational privileging of the star performer's initial appearance, described in Chapter 2) that has been standardised in classical cinema.[9.] In *Chungking Express*, the device fulfils several

textual functions. Faye's near-encounter with the blonde woman is evocative of 223's opening voiceover dialogue, in which he describes the capricious pattern of people's lives. The blonde woman and Faye do not quite 'rub shoulders', but, the film implies, they easily might have. Faye's appearance at once foregrounds 'chance' as the prime instrument in the encounters and non-encounters of the film's characters, and tacitly augurs the line of action that will displace the film's first story. Faye's appearance here is thus not only motivated thematically and 'realistically', but also structurally: it foreshadows the introduction into *Chungking Express* of a second story, a story that the spectator has not otherwise been cued to expect.

A similar instance occurs in Michelangelo Antonioni's *The Passenger* (1975). The Girl (Maria Schneider), an architecture student who will eventually emerge as a character significant to the main drama, is passingly glimpsed by the film's protagonist, substantially in advance of her more consequential appearance later in the film. (In contrast to our first sighting of Faye in *Chungking Express*, Antonioni's camera self-consciously singles out The Girl as a figure commanding the spectator's attention.) This brief encounter, like the first appearance of Faye in *Chungking Express*, is attributed to chance. *The Passenger*'s protagonist, David Locke (Jack Nicholson), will subsequently allude to this moment, asking The Girl: 'Do you believe in coincidence? I never used to notice it. Now I see it all around'. In both *Chungking Express* and *The Passenger*, then, significant characters are inaugurated into the film somewhat obscurely and acausally. Furthermore, not only do these characters first appear by chance, but they also appear before they are properly established as influential causal agents; Wong thus introduces these figures 'pre-emptively'. They are at this stage neither causally motivated (by the fiction) nor causally motivating (of the action); it is only in retrospect that the viewer is able to recognise or confirm the characters' significance to the plot. When we first see them, then, neither 663 and Faye in *Chungking Express*, nor The Girl in *The Passenger*, assert any influence upon the causal trajectory of the

narrative action; it is only later that The Girl will be implicated in Locke's deception, and Wong's twin characters will initiate a narrative line of their own. Given the preoccupation of both films with indistinct and interchangeable identities, it is apt that these characters at first appear to us ambiguously or obliquely, only gradually coming into focus as individuated and significant figures in the story. Later, we shall consider how this formal strategy is reprised in *Fallen Angels.*

Wong's narrative organisation generally deviates from the classical paradigm. Often, the kind of tight causality that binds together the numerous short scenes in *Citizen Kane* (1941) is eschewed; continuity devices including dissolves, fades, and sound bridges are minimally employed, thereby enhancing the episodic quality of Wong's narratives.[10.] We also typically find a lesser degree of coherence between episodes than in a film organised around a single protagonist, such as *A Man Escaped* (1956). Whereas Robert Bresson unifies episodes through the continuous presence of Fontaine (François Leterrier), endowing each episode with a cumulative purpose as the protagonist progresses toward his goal, Wong typically must distribute his episodes among several spatially-separate agents, concentrating episodes along parallel lines of action. Consequently, the narration will create its episodes by crisscrossing between distinct lines of action, and can thereby amplify the viewer's perception that the films' scenes are loosely-integrated and autonomous. Whereas classical narrative can be considered holistic, insofar as it prioritises formal unity, an episodic narrative may be considered atomistic and analytic, placing stress on its disparate elements. Wong's films, though they give place to episodic organisation, are nonetheless more teleological than the term 'episodic', in its strongest sense, implies. Wong's organisation of episodes into a formal composition is at least as important as the individual episodes themselves.

Occasionally, Wong will employ intertitles to indicate transitions between episodes. The narrative's dismantling into discrete stages of action is thereby accentuated, and the episodic mode of narration once

again asserted. If Wong's use of intertitles is sometimes as self-consciously playful as Jean-Luc Godard's, the device is not employed as incoherently as in *Masculin-féminin* (1966), or as systematically as in *Vivre sa vie* (1962), which uses captions to parenthetically enclose episodes.[11.] Nor is the device rendered purely denotative, concerned merely to establish place and time. Rather, captions in Wong's films generally shift between denotative and commentative functions, with the ostensibly denotative captions often subordinated to thematic expression. The classical functions ascribed to intertitles can be manipulated by filmmakers for thematic effect, as in Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining* (1980), which undermines its precise chronological denotations (captions read 'Monday', 'Wednesday', '4 p.m.', '8 a.m.', and so on) by subverting the viewer's temporal orientation at the film's climax: Jack Torrance (Jack Nicholson), theretofore a protagonist in the film's contemporary setting, appears impossibly in a photograph whose date precedes his own birth. *2046* similarly engages with the intertitle's classical function to signal temporal progression, but here Wong *exaggerates* the device for thematic purpose. Inside a train, an android (Faye Wong) is framed in close-up as she stares blankly through the window. The shot is interrupted by an intertitle that marks a development in story time: '10 hours later'. Wong repeats the close shot of the android before another title – '100 hours later' - is inserted. The close-up is reiterated, followed by a final caption: '1000 hours later'. What follows is not a reiteration of the close-up, but rather a long shot framing which nonetheless presents precisely the same action as the preceding shots (i.e. the Android pressed against the window). The absurd temporal delineation in this sequence thus travesties the classical function of intertitles to mark time unobtrusively. But the captions also give emphatic expression to the film's governing theme of change, juxtaposing vast advances in time with similitude of place and action. Intertitles here both reveal the protagonist's inertia and lend weight to the claim asserted in the film's opening voiceover dialogue, that 'nothing ever changes in 2046'; in this imaginary temporal space,

the forces of change are retarded. *In the Mood for Love* furnishes another example of Wong's thematic deployment of titles. 'It is a restless moment', the caption reads. 'She has kept her head lowered to give him a chance to come closer. But he could not, for lack of courage. She turns and walks away'. The intertitle is not only unconcerned to specify an exact place and time, but is also relatively unmoored from the narrative action. The visual track does not corroborate the description we have read in the scripted text. Because such captions parallel but do not explicitly denote narrative action, the viewer is encouraged to interpret the titles 'abstractly', that is, as symbolic commentary on the narrative's overt themes of seduction, inaction, and asynchronicity.[12.]

As I indicated in the Introduction, allegorists are attracted by the episodic quality of Wong's films, extrapolating allusions to Hong Kong's cultural fragmentation and diaspora. Yet episodic organisation also provides comment upon the fictional universe. By enervating the causal relations between scenes, Wong evokes a diegetic landscape in which events appear arbitrarily or obscurely motivated; the events of the narrative are thereby attributed not to a fatalistic force but to the characters' actions and the vicissitudes of chance. (Our discussion of *In the Mood for Love* has set this causal attenuation within principles of generic convention; later in the present chapter, we shall consider the consequences upon narrative structure yielded by tactics of chance and coincidence.) Episodic narrative can also segregate characters, foregrounding their state of alienation. In *Ashes of Time*, the story's distribution into a series of parallel episodes is the means by which the protagonists are kept apart. Characters orbit the same narrative terrain but are largely separated by the film's episodic boundaries. (The ramshackle hut over which Ouyang Feng presides is the nexus around which the film's distinct episodes pivot, much as a central milieu connects the multiple protagonists in *Nashville* (1975).) Episodic structure can thus reflect and reify the physical and spiritual isolation experienced by Wong's protagonists.

Episodic narratives can also make salient narrational processes, directing the viewer's attention to the architecture of the plot. Rather than implying omniscience by representing the protagonist's trajectory in a continuous chain of causes and effects, the episodic plot extrapolates from the chain incidents and events that are deemed most significant for the purposes of the fiction; the episodic plot thus foregrounds selection and omission rather than omnipresence and omniscience. An episodic fiction may be especially adept at foregrounding a 'hierarchy of instances', which Roland Barthes assumes forms the basis of narrative construction. Barthes argues that, in narrative comprehension, the 'reader' is required 'not merely to follow the unfolding of the story, [but] also to recognise its construction in 'stories'…'.[13.] These 'stories' or units of narrative are laid bare in episodic fiction, because the story's truncated structure gives emphasis to a demarcation of the narrative's constituent elements. A narrative's 'construction in 'stories'' is perhaps more perceptible in episodic storytelling than in the Aristotelean paradigm of narrative, where causal connections and continuity devices disguise any disunity that may exist between separate 'instances'. In our analysis of *Fallen Angels*, we shall see that some episodes are more explicitly mobilised toward the overall construction of narrative than others (and are thus more or less adherent to Barthes' 'proairetic code', the accumulation of units of action into encompassing plot sequences).[14.] In any event, episodic narratives typically lay bare a fiction's narrativity and constructedness. Narration in the episodic film is highly restrictive, creating interstices both in the narrative and in the viewer's knowledge, and more or less overtly flagging the governing hand of the author. Given both the capacity of episodic fiction to spotlight artistic processes, and the concomitant palpability of Wong's audiovisual style, we may be justified in claiming that Wong's films exhibit a structural as well as a stylistic salience. Yet we would do better to argue that Wong's narrative structure is not so much distinct from style as one more aspect of a self-conscious narration that includes discursive elements

such as framing, editing, music and so forth. This perspective will elaborate the rather limited conception of style that, as we shall see, most commentators of *Fallen Angels* almost invariably confine themselves to.

Two further aspects of Wong's storytelling method require consideration. First, Wong often makes use of a suppressive narration to generate the illusion of character complexity. By rendering character goals illegible or opaque, the narration can intimate the presence of a confused or conflicted psychology. Wong's protagonists usually pursue discernible goals, but these goals are more often implied than overtly stated. It requires a gradual process of inference-making, for example, to deduce that Chow's 'goal' in *In the Mood for Love* is oriented toward romantic intimacy with Su. Wong can motivate the narration's repressiveness here by invoking psychological realism: Chow, being fundamentally timid and introspective, is simply not prone to articulate his goals and desires to others (and the narration does not furnish voiceover commentary to sidestep his reticence and convey his objectives). Instead of stating explicit goals and intentions, the protagonists of *In the Mood for Love* enunciate a kind of anti-motivation; they do not so much define purposeful goals as state negative ones. 'We won't be like [our spouses]', the protagonists assert, apparently firm in their conviction to abstain from infidelity. Their goals are thus defined only in terms of action that will not be pursued, a direct reversal of the kinds of causal goal mobilising the protagonist of classical cinema. Character complexity is further effected by the manipulation of another classical storytelling norm. The classical hero typically pursues at least two distinct goals (e.g. to apprehend the criminal and to marry the girl), twin objectives that motivate the presence of separate lines of action. (The two goals are often causally linked, as Kristin Thompson notes.)[15.] Similarly, we can identify dual aims for many of Wong's protagonists. But, in contrast with the harmonious goals attributed to the classical hero, Wong's protagonists often form contradictory and incompatible goals. Chow's desire for

romantic involvement with Su is counteracted by his intention to eschew adultery (and thereby gives rise to the emotional intensity anticipated in the melodrama genre). In *Chungking Express*, Faye's obliquely conveyed goal to roam California is inimical to her undeclared desire for romantic stability with Cop 663. Lai Yiu-fai seeks legitimate affection in *Happy Together*, but is held back by his commitment to an ill-fated relationship. The protagonist of *As Tears Go By* is beset by divided loyalties.[16.] Discordant objectives therefore enhance character complexity, positing a set of internally-conflicted agents warring with their own desires. Often, the characters are apt to equivocate over their conflicting desires, an incertitude that defers their pursuit of purposeful action. Moreover, not all of these goals precipitate their own line of action. Faye's ambition to abscond to America may be discernible to the viewer, but the narration does not institute a separate line of action to dramatise the process by which she attains her goal. Consequently, the character's departure comes as a surprise to the viewer because the narration has suppressed Faye's intention to actualise her California 'dream'. Finally, not all lines of action are precipitated by character goals. The second plotlines established in *Chungking Express* and *Fallen Angels* do not spring from the goals of the first set of protagonists. As a result, the two plotlines are mostly able to develop independently of each other. The resolution of the second narrative line does not necessarily close off a goal belonging to a protagonist from the first plotline, as would conventionally be the case in the classical film. Unlike classical narration, then, character goals and lines of action do not always beget each other in Wong's films.

The final trend we need to address is Wong's deployment of temporal motifs. For a filmmaker interested in themes of memory and nostalgia, Wong makes surprisingly economical use of the flashback device.[17.] A more recurrent device in Wong's oeuvre is the repeated or echoic shot, which tends to be motivated by an omniscient narration rather than by character subjectivity. This type of motif, then, does not so much render a character's memory of a past event (as flashbacks

are often, if not exclusively, wont to do) as summon forth the viewer's recollection of preceding action; in such shots, the sense of 'nostalgia' that is solicited is less the character's than the viewer's. Wong differentiates the flashback from the repeated or echoic motif by varying the action performed in the latter kinds of shot; if Wong sometimes reprises precise camera framings, the repeated action itself is never precisely identical. Moreover, these shots conserve the linear flow of the narrative, which the flashback (as a marker of anterior time that disrupts the temporal progression of the story) is unable to achieve. Iterations of shots and action also constitute leitmotifs that can lend structural unity to a causally-weakened narrative.

The repeated or echoic shot provides a further function that the conventional flashback is less apt to perform, a function, moreover, that allows Wong to assimilate the shot into his films' thematic concerns. For the purpose of contrast, let us consider a use of the flashback in Truffaut's *La Mariée était en noir* (1967). A flashback shows a bridegroom gunned down as he emerges from the church. At later points in the film, Truffaut will furnish further flashbacks to this event, narrating the character's demise from a range of perspectives. Regardless of the number of occasions this event is reprised, however, the viewer understands that the bridegroom has been assassinated only once, and that the narration invokes a specific spatio-temporal point in the story. Whereas each flashback shows us the same character (the bridegroom) performing the same action (receiving a bullet) at the same time in the story, the repeated or echoic shot can show us the same character performing the same action at *different* times in the story. When *In the Mood for Love*'s female protagonist revisits the night market for food, the viewer is expected to recall that Su has traced this path earlier in the narrative. Repeated or echoic shots are thus apt to give emphasis to routine – we witness a character habitually perform processes that she has carried out before. (The effect is taken to extreme proportions in a film like *Groundhog Day* (1993), where repeated camera setups and action reinforce the impression of

vexatious routine.) At the same time, of course, repeated or rhyming shots can serve to highlight new elements. The shot in which Chow and Su join hands during a taxi ride only assumes its proper significance when we recall a corresponding scene earlier in the film, in which Su withdraws from Chow's touch. Wong's use of this shot device is a means whereby a central authorial theme is expressed. Shot repetition can signpost the repetitiveness of the protagonists' existence, signifying the absence of change and variation, or it can provide a yardstick for the action's development. In any event, the spectator is invited to formulate specific hypotheses: why is the character committed to routine? Is the character trapped in routine or is her routine self-imposed? What is the character's attitude toward change? Such hypotheses are likely to be elicited in response to the protagonists of *Fallen Angels*, whose intertwined routines produce a variation on the repeated shot's functions that I have adumbrated above. Let us now turn to the film in detail.

Crimes of Fashion? *Fallen Angels*

Despite its complex storytelling strategies, *Fallen Angels* has accrued most critical attention upon its highly palpable visual and sonic design. Such is the film's sensuous appeal that its arsenal of compositional devices tends to relegate other aspects of style to the critical background. Not surprisingly, then, the film's specifically visual techniques - canted angles, oblique framings, fish-eye lenses, accelerated cityscapes, decelerated figure movements, transitions in colour scheme and film stock, split-screen effects, video footage – generally overshadow Wong's organisation and distribution of story material in critical discussions of the film. One scholar argues that *Fallen Angels* 'verges on being a mere exercise in style. It is indeed a stylish film that runs the risk of being too stylised'.[18.] More generally, Wong's emphasis on film style can lead commentators to regard his films as essentially superficial and insubstantial, akin to fashion

photography or music video - a position I summarise in the Introduction of this study.[19.] I do not want to argue against those critics who contend that *Fallen Angels* is preponderantly a stylistic exercise; but I do want to emphasise that style here is not simply (or even primarily) 'visual' and/or sonic, and that other aspects of style – in particular, the distinctive plotting of narrative - are no less dynamic than the film's image and sound track. I also aim to demonstrate that the film motivates its flagrant baring of structure by action and agents within the diegesis[20.] (and thus does not exhibit simply a style-centred or 'parametric' narration).[21.] To this end, I will concentrate on *Fallen Angels'* distinctive play with parallel lines of action, episodic organisation, and digressive departures from plot; finally I will examine how Wong manipulates a rarer species of structuring device – the diegetic figure of the mute – in order to lay open the film's style and themes. Let us first recount the film's basic story (a plot segmentation appears at the end of this chapter (pages 211-213) and will be referred to at various points throughout).

Killer (Leon Lai) is an assassin working contract jobs with Agent (Michele Reis), who cases the targeted sites ahead of the hitman's involvement. Despite Killer's insistence that they abstain from any kind of intimacy, Agent privately harbours romantic feelings for her partner. She grooms the assassin's apartment and peruses his wastebasket for clues to his personality. In the aftermath of an assassination, Killer encounters a boyhood acquaintance who offers the hitman life insurance. At Chungking Mansions, a dilapidated flop-house where Agent resides, a mute named He Zhiwu (Takeshi Kaneshiro) is arrested by police. Unable to raise capital for a business venture, He Zhiwu's sense of enterprise leads him to re-open establishments that have closed down for the night. Killer is wounded in a shootout and resolves to end his partnership with Agent. By chance, the assassin is reacquainted with Baby (Karen Mok), a former paramour, and they establish a sexual but emotionless relationship. He Zhiwu, meanwhile, becomes attracted to Charlie (Charlie Young), a feisty drifter who is

compelled to exact revenge upon Blondie, the fiancée of the man she desires. The mute determines to earn an honest living, acquiring a job in a bar where he meets Killer. Upon informing Agent of his decision to go straight, Killer is asked to perform one final assassination; he acquiesces to his partner's request but is slain during the hit. The mute acquires a video camera, with which he relentlessly pursues his father. Later, following his father's death, He Zhiwu slips into old routines, sequestering business establishments for his own use. In a restaurant, the mute is assaulted by a gang of men, and inadvertently encounters Agent. He Zhiwu and Agent ride off on motorbike.

Parallel Lives

> *We're all creatures of habit.*
> Cop 223, *Chungking Express*

Formally, *Fallen Angels* manoeuvres between two main plotlines; the first story (involving Agent and Killer) alternates and occasionally intersects with the second story (involving He Zhiwu). But most of the first story also forks into two lines of action, as Wong crosscuts between the protagonists' separate movements. Character psychology motivates the parallel editing pattern of the first story. Near the very start of the film, Killer's voiceover narration informs us that he and Agent seldom physically meet, invoking his professional axiom by way of explanation: 'Partners shouldn't get involved emotionally with each other'. Thus the protagonists' separateness is revealed to be a contrivance of their own design, and not attributable to the narration as such – they agree to mutual separation in order to nullify the threat of personal intimacy. If it is to be aligned with both agents, then, the narration must alternate between two distinct trajectories. The story's crosscutting pattern, although it may perform additional functions of narration (such as the eliciting of suspense), is ultimately justified diegetically, by the actions and attitudes of the protagonists. We may at this point return to the critical view that *Fallen Angels* 'verges on being a mere exercise in

style', and that the film privileges style above narrative. Story construction is not here reducible to mere histrionic style independent of narrative and character; rather, Wong presents the film's formal design as being determined by a specific set of character traits.

Parallel action exposes further character traits. In the post-credits sequence (segment 2a), Wong's camera establishes an itinerary for Agent: we observe the protagonist ascend a subway escalator, unhook a concealed door-key, and enter Killer's apartment. Agent methodically sanitises the apartment and leaves. The narration then aligns the viewer with Killer's spatio-temporal path, which is precisely identical to the one we have seen Agent move through (the walk through the subway, the removal of the key, and the entry into an empty apartment). Crosscutting and repeated action is here motivated by the protagonists' conviction not to rendezvous together. In story terms, the scene's crosscutting technique is not mobilised to separate the protagonists so much as to depict their separateness: the *raison d'être* for the parallel editing pattern lies in the specific traits of the characters themselves. Moreover, parallel action functions not only to convey the characters' mutual separation, but also to emphasise the fact that, in plot terms, Killer follows a spatial path already established by Agent. Repeated or echoic action here serves not to emphasise one character's routine (as in our earlier examples) but rather to convey that one agent inhabits the routines of another. Just as the protagonists of *In the Mood for Love* restage the furtive activity of their spouses, so does Killer (and subsequently, Agent) trace an itinerary that has, in a sense, been previously laid out. Killer's professional itinerary is predetermined by the instructions provided by Agent, while the latter spends her off-duty time adopting the assassin's private routines. In this sense, both protagonists frequently avoid mapping purposeful trajectories of their own. 'I like others to arrange things for me', Killer's voiceover tells us, announcing his dislike of 'decision-making'. Ceding agency to another person is one way in which these characters evade the formidable responsibility that comes with freedom of choice

and action.[22.]   (Tellingly, of course, Killer's conviction not to make decisions for himself belies his ability to do precisely that; it is not, therefore, an incapability but a disinclination to govern his own existence that blights the protagonist.)   Wong also suggests that the interchangeability of the protagonists' itineraries puts Killer and Agent in complementary relation to each other.   Killer's 'shadowing' of Agent conveys a peculiar splintering of autonomy.   On the one hand, Agent provides Killer with something he optionally relinquishes: a determinate goal and a course of action.   On the other hand, Killer, as the executant of Agent's plans, carries out the tasks that Agent is presumably incapable of performing herself – he provides the 'killer touch', as it were.   The film thus posits two interlocking and interdependent identities.   We might assume that Wong is here perverting a conventional romance trope, in which two synergistic protagonists fulfil and 'complete' each other (a conceit that is laid bare in *Jerry Maguire* (1996), a Hollywood exemplar of the romance genre).   But the protagonist's co-dependency as business partners also underscores their compatibility as individuals (and thus, implicitly, as romantic partners). If both characters self-consciously survey the narrative populace in search of romantic love, their conviction to ward off mutual intimacy appears bitterly ironic to the spectator who has registered their affinities.   As in *In the Mood for Love*, Wong presents us with characters who are romantically compatible yet who are themselves ultimately responsible for remaining apart.

At an early stage in the first story, Wong reprises a formal strategy from *Chungking Express*, in which a key figure from the second story is afforded an appearance in the first story *before* the second plotline is properly inaugurated.   The narration typically provides the viewer with an askance glimpse of the figure in question, and withholds any suggestion of the character's eventual significance to the action.   In such cases, the classical cinema's primacy effect is not properly mobilised until the character is brought more prominently into the fiction.   Early in *Fallen Angels* (segment 3c), as Agent traverses the

lobby of Chungking Mansions, a man sitting behind the reception desk utters a platitude and is briskly picked out by Wong's meandering camera. A swift cut to the next scene means that the viewer is unlikely to individuate the figure sufficiently to later recall him as the father of He Zhiwu. The father will not emerge as a prominent agent until halfway through the second story of the film (segment 17). If the first-time viewer is unlikely to digest this first appearance by He Zhiwu's father, the link between *Fallen Angels'* two stories will remain relatively vague and indeterminate. It is only retrospectively that the viewer may appreciate the film's subtler interweaving of its two main story strands. Moreover, recognising the first story's 'introduction' of He Zhiwu's father not only generates a greater awareness of the film's understated structural manoeuvres, but also evokes a narrative world in which characters may be spatially proximate but only tangentially linked (a scenario reflected in the film's parallel structure). This narrative context is explicitly counterpointed to the central relation between Agent and Killer, whose paths hardly intersect, but whose lives are intimately interconnected.

In narrative fiction, parallelism encourages the viewer to identify affinities and dissimilarities among characters that generally trace separate trajectories. Rhyming actions, traits, and situations relate characters who never meet. In *Fallen Angels*, virtually all of the main characters are, at different times, brought into contrast with one another. The figures contrasted in the film's first story are, of course, Agent and Killer; the web of comparison is only spun more elaborately when the film introduces other characters. What are the affinities between Agent and Killer that the film wants to underscore? First, both characters are titularly identified by their respective professions. This impersonal device not only links the two characters but also marks them off from the second story's protagonists, who are attributed proper names. Identification solely by their professional roles is apt for a pair of characters who insist upon extinguishing the personal from their relationship. (Wong employs the same device in order to underline the

interchangeability of Cop 223 and 663 in *Chungking Express*.) Second, as I have suggested above, the film identifies Agent with Killer by virtue of their complementary activity, which implies a mutual compatibility. We have seen that the protagonists' activity is echoic: just as Killer traces a path established by Agent, so Agent traces a personal itinerary set in accordance with Killer's habits and routines. Within these similarities, however, Wong marks important differences. Consider Killer's professional trajectory. Killer's desire to transfer autonomy to Agent at once renders the assassin a consenting automaton and indicates an act of inauthenticity: Killer seeks emancipation from the burden of human choice and action, and thus empowers another to determine these aspects of his existence. His apparent repudiation of autonomy and responsibility masks a lack of personal imperatives. (As Stephen Teo puts it, Killer 'is a blank space, an anonymity'.)[23.] In both his rejection of choice and his prohibition of emotional connection (with Agent), Killer recoils from the humanising aspects of social existence. In contrast, Agent's private itinerary – which takes in Killer's apartment, as well as the bar routinely patronised by the hitman – represents a sincere if surreptitious desire to forge emotional bonds. Her activity within these spaces signifies craving for human connection. In Killer's apartment, Agent combs the contents of the assassin's wastebasket, inspecting the discarded items for insights into his personality; later, she satisfies herself sexually on the assassin's bed; and at the bar, Agent sits at her partner's favourite table because it 'makes me feel sort of closer to him'. In all these activities, Agent acts in violation of the partners' pact not to become 'emotionally involved with each other'. Both characters desire to appropriate each other's itinerary, then; but this shared affinity belies radically divergent (if similarly inauthentic) impulses. The spectator is finally to decide which of the protagonists is the least authentic: the hitman who disavows human liberty or the agent who consents to personal distance, but who privately craves emotional intimacy.

Character juxtaposition is elaborated by the introduction of a second set of protagonists. The first appearance of He Zhiwu evokes comparison with Agent and Killer: circumventing the police officers that pursue him, He Zhiwu's relationship to the law is immediately characterised as dubious. His clandestineness identifies him further with Killer and Agent, who frequently have recourse to operate 'undercover'. Subsequent scenes will confirm He Zhiwu's criminality, dramatising his illicit commandeering of legitimate businesses, while further crystallising the character's fundamental estrangement from social existence: like Agent and Killer, He Zhiwu is no exemplar of social acceptability. Moreover, the attribution of a voiceover commentary to He Zhiwu stylistically links the character to the protagonists established in the first story. Wong solicits comparison with Agent and Killer by riveting the mute's voiceover to issues of engagement and authenticity. 'We rub shoulders with people everyday', He Zhiwu observes. 'Strangers who may even become friends or confidants'. Dialogue such as this implies He Zhiwu's receptivity to the prospect of personal intimacy, counterpointing the attitude of obdurate solitariness embodied by Killer. It also puts a different inflection on the alienation that undoubtedly conditions the mute's existence; He Zhiwu's alienation is not corollary to an inauthentic retreat from emotional involvement, as it is Agent and Killer, but derives instead from a physical rather than a psychological source: muteness. 'For this reason', the character informs us, 'I have very few friends'. Wong here discards realistic motivation and ascribes He Zhiwu's muteness an absurd cause. Since eating rotten pineapple as a child, He Zhiwu has been bereft of speech. Yet before this incident, we are told, his disposition was naturally loquacious. Muteness – not personal choice - thus deprives He Zhiwu of the kind of effortless human connection to which, we may assume, he is *naturally* inclined. It is not then a negation of desire that engenders the character's alienation, but a purely physical impairment; an impairment that does not render communication inaccessible, only oblique. Ultimately, the film's parallel structure puts into relief the

distinctions between agents: analogous situations belie divergent attitudes. While Agent and Killer authorise their own disengagement from social communication and yet move forlornly through the narrative, He Zhiwu is arbitrarily hindered in his efforts to emotional connection but is able to convincingly declare: 'I'm a very happy man'. The yearning for emotional connection provides He Zhiwu with a personal motivation and purpose that Killer wittingly lacks (a yearning, moreover, which Agent shares but hesitates to act upon).

Fallen Angels splinters into two stories after He Zhiwu is brought into the action (segment 8). Agent denies knowledge of He Zhiwu's whereabouts to the police, and then finds the mute taking refuge in a broom cupboard. Given that Agent effectively 'introduces' He Zhiwu into the film, and resides in the same apartment building, the viewer may reasonably expect the two characters to cross paths occasionally. (In fact, they won't meet again until the film's final sequence.) As the second story gets underway, the spectator awaits action that will explicitly relate back to the characters and events of the first story. The viewer's hypothesising will be expended on relating the second story to the action that has preceded it. How will He Zhiwu participate in the romance and/or crime story that the film has so far established? In light of Agent's apparent complicity with He Zhiwu, the viewer may meanwhile speculate as to the nature of the characters' acquaintance. One likely hypothesis is that He Zhiwu is bound up in Agent's criminal schemes. Is He Zhiwu an assassin? Will he come to 'replace' Killer, when the latter's partnership with Agent turns sour? These suppositions are soon discarded, I would argue, as the spectator learns more about He Zhiwu's illegal activities. The mute's petty crime appears relatively innocuous and sportive in comparison with the clinical assassinations that Agent and Killer participate in.[24.] Generic expectations are eventually derailed: He Zhiwu and Agent are related to each other only tangentially, as neighbours. Of course the largely divorced activity of the film's parallel stories corroborates He Zhiwu's unrelatedness to Agent, unlike the separate trajectories traced by Agent and Killer,

which are closely interrelated by echoic actions, locales, and motifs. The incidental feel of *Fallen Angels*' twin stories, along with the film's episodic texture, contributes to a narrational style that is ostensibly casual and limply assembled.

Fallen Angels justifies the eventual interlacing of its two story strands by analogous turns in character psychology. Both He Zhiwu and Killer resolve to discontinue their lawless ways and furnish their lives with purpose.[25.] For Killer in particular, this determination signals a major change in psychological attitude. Decisiveness, as the film has made explicit, is avowedly not among the character's armoury of traits. The desire of both agents to establish discernible goals not only reveals a recent regard for purposeful action but also represents a significant gesture toward authenticity: clearly-defined objectives sharpen the characters' engagement with choice and responsibility. This parallel development in character psychology is the cue for the narration to intersect its two main plotlines. Consequently, the affinities between He Zhiwu and Killer come explicitly into focus. Given the characters' separate but congruent decisions, it is appropriately an emphasis on fresh starts and clean slates that we find when the paths of He Zhiwu and Killer finally converge. At the bar he habituates, Killer solicits advice from the owner in respect of establishing a business enterprise of his own; He Zhiwu, meanwhile, has assumed the chef's role at the same bar, his acquisition of an 'honest' job a signifier of his change in attitude. (Coincidence of time and space, then, is the acausal diegetic factor that brings into effect the protagonists' present encounter.)

As I shall argue below, the absence of character goals contributes to *Fallen Angels*' truncated texture; episodic structure reflects, or arises from, the desultory existence that He Zhiwu and Killer now reject. We might expect, therefore, for the narration at this stage to adopt a greater degree of motivation between scenes, in other words, to match the assertiveness of cause and effect to the purposefulness with which the characters now move through the narrative. Yet in the scenes that immediately follow (segments 17, 18a and 18b), the narrative maintains

its aleatory path, reverting to its parallel structure and masking causality with chance encounters and plot digressions. I want to argue that the continued presence of acausal action serves to set in relief a subsequent portion of the story in which causation is afforded far greater legibility. As will become clear, our assumption that *Fallen Angels* harnesses its episodic structure to character traits need not be discarded.

The film disrupts its episodic norm to foreground causation when Killer, intent on abandoning his criminal career, meets Agent in person to convey his decision (segment 19a). Links between scenes now become increasingly overt. Compositional causality provides the segue into Killer's rendezvous with Agent, as his preceding voiceover posits a searching cause: 'We all need a partner', Killer's dialogue hook affirms. 'When will I find mine?' This theme is picked up immediately by Agent's dialogue (and by the sequence of events that follow) when the narration cuts to the ensuing scene of the partners' meeting: 'Are we still partners?' she asks. Killer replies that he is terminating their business relationship. Reluctantly, the assassin agrees to perform one last killing for Agent, a decision that triggers a set of generic questions. The viewer is given to wonder: will Killer renege on the assassination (given his recent conviction to repudiate crime)? What obstacles might he confront? What will be the outcome of the event? (A music cue, previously heard when Killer extracts a bullet from his own body, reappears in this scene, a leitmotif for physical damage inflicted upon Killer, and a precursor of the violence and injury to come.)

The next scenes (segments 19d and 19e) certainly seem causally connected, although they retain an obliqueness characteristic of the film's overall narrational style. An exterior travelling shot cruises through night-time Hong Kong. The shot is reminiscent of images of the city glimpsed earlier in the film, when Killer is convoyed by bus to the site of an assassination. Now, however, Killer is not present in the frame. The shot, we might suppose, renders Killer's optical point of view from aboard a bus, but the narration does not provide a glance

shot of the protagonist to confirm our supposition. While the visual track restricts contextual information, the music track is relatively communicative. The percussive leitmotif prominent here is also present during the bus journey mentioned above. From these cues, the spectator infers a causal relationship between the present shot and the preceding scene between Killer and Agent: Killer, we infer, is making his way to the designated assassination site. The narration now briefly transports us to Agent's apartment. Agent makes a telephone call and speaks in opaque code to an anonymous interlocutor; finally, the narration returns to Killer, depicting the maladroit assassination attempt that culminates in the protagonist's demise. Once more, generic schemata are activated and a causal influence between scenes is assumed. Does Agent's telephone call yield direct consequential influence upon the hitman's death? Has she set Killer up (putatively in response to his professional, as well as personal, rejection of her)? Are we to recast Agent as femme fatale, an interpretation that would justify the noir overtones that accompany the first story? (The viewer's equivocation about Agent is never fully assuaged. Rather like Patricia's betrayal of Michel in *À bout de souffle*, we are not entirely given to understand the precise nature of the central relationship at the end of the film. Tacitly, however, the narration works to implicate Agent in her partner's death. As Killer is slain, an earlier portion of his voiceover narration is reiterated: 'Who's to die, when and where, it's all been planned by others'. Self-evidently, this dialogue acquires new poignance in its present context, but it also reminds us that the 'other' referred to by Killer is originally employed to denote Agent. This narrational clue supports our assumption that Agent's conspiratorial telephone call is causally related to the fatal action that follows.)

At a textual level, the viewer is invited to speculate what has motivated the narration's apparent break from its normative causal looseness. The answer lies once more in character and theme. By making causality overt, *Fallen Angels* underlines that Killer's death is a direct consequence of his acquiescence to Agent's request for one final

hit. Killer's submission to Agent is thus decisive: it not only returns him to a position of passivity in relation to his own trajectory, but also sets in motion the events that will lead him into death. A direct path is mapped from submission to death, therefore; the blame for Killer's fate is squarely placed with the victim, because Killer acts contra to his desire (to withdraw from crime and reclaim personal autonomy). Wong thus condemns the character for his backslide into inauthenticity. Asserting the causal relation of those events precipitating Killer's demise allows Wong to clearly foreground the assassin's culpability in his own fate. Wong thereby avoids the causal ambiguity that a random patterning of events might create. Moreover, as I have said, the narration prior to this sequence has maintained an acausal and digressive course, and has not 'adjusted' its aleatory pattern to mirror the purposefulness newly acquired by Killer and He Zhiwu. Yet these episodic scenes illuminate character in another way. Their emphasis on randomness functions to put in relief and accent the discernibly causal action that follows, action that will convey the consequences of Killer's inauthentic activity. In a film characterised by causal tenuity, then, the presence of conventional cause and effect becomes ever more salient (or 'foregrounded', in David Bordwell's terms), and is closely aligned with the traits and destinies of the film's protagonists.[26.]

The trajectories of He Zhiwu and Killer converge only temporarily, to highlight parallel situations. Thereafter resuming their separate spatio-temporal paths, the protagonists' activity obligates the narration to once again disperse into distinct plotlines. In this way, Wong is able to show how contrasting characters can proceed from analogous situations along radically divergent paths. By yielding parallel action, moreover, Wong can italicise the discrete destinies laid out for the protagonists. Just as Killer backslides into the criminal existence from which he has sought extrication, so He Zhiwu will retrogress by clandestinely usurping private businesses. Later, at the fast-food counter, He Zhiwu melodramatically acts out his own 'death'. In an outrageous venture to impress Charlie, the mute substitutes ketchup for

blood and lapses into theatrical paroxysms, a farcical restaging of the actual death brought upon Killer moments earlier in the film.[27.] Echoic situations and rhyming gestures make it possible to perceive He Zhiwu as the blithe simulacrum of Killer, but the resemblance is merely ostensible: fundamental dissimilarities in psychology ensure that the protagonists do not share identical fates. These dissimilarities, as we have seen, pertain to issues of authenticity and responsibility, but also to morality. We can grasp this moral divergence most explicitly if we compare segments of voiceover narration that appear toward the end of *Fallen Angels*. In both commentaries, He Zhiwu and Killer meditate upon their inauthentic pasts. 'I feel the need for change', claims Killer. 'Whether it's right or wrong, I must make a decision for myself'. It is in the qualifying clause of the latter sentence that Killer's casual disregard for moral imperatives is articulated. Indeed, the assassin is at no time shown to reflect upon the (im)morality of his modus vivendi. ('I love my job', Killer announces near the beginning of the film.) His decision to cast off criminal activity derives not from an awakening of moral conscience, but from a desire not to endure further physical injury. Conversely, it is not a concern for self but the recognition of his own moral transgressions that prompts He Zhiwu to effect change. 'I...realised how irresponsible I had been in the past', the mute narrates. 'I shouldn't have taken over other people's shops the way I did'. While He Zhiwu's moral centre proceeds from a sympathetic interest in others, Killer's moral apathy not only consolidates his solipsistic withdrawal from affective relationships, but also endows him with the aptitude for mass murder.

Wong's character parallelisms function intertextually as well. The introduction of He Zhiwu is intended to invoke comparison not only with Agent and Killer, but also with Cop 223 in *Chungking Express*. Wong engenders the latter allusion through casting (both He Zhiwu and 223 are played by Takeshi Kaneshiro) and dialogue that repeats between both films ('We rub shoulders with people everyday' is the opening dialogue accorded both characters). Just as Agent is both the

complement and the mirror image of Killer, so He Zhiwu is the skewed counterpart of Cop 223. The symbol of conformity in *Chungking Express* (Cop 223) becomes the transgressor of order in *Fallen Angels* (He Zhiwu); the number 223 specifies the cop's identity in the former film, and the mute's prison number in the latter. In this sense, Wong invokes a bifurcation, a fissuring of identity, similar to that invoked between Agent and Killer, whereby the characters represent at once discrete individuals and two parts of a single identity. He Zhiwu's reference to expired pineapple is also a motif recycled from *Chungking Express*. But whereas in *Fallen Angels*, the corrupted fruit packs injurious force (effacing He Zhiwu's ability to speak), in *Chungking Express* it provides a soothing palliative for the pain inflicted by a broken heart. In both cases, however, the offbeat motif is linked to the theme of loss and impeded or failed communication. More generally, Wong's invocation of *Chungking Express* self-evidently assumes a viewer familiar with the filmmaker's previous work. In this respect, *Fallen Angels* presents itself as a knowing addition to an authorial oeuvre.

I have argued that parallelism highlights a fundamental dissimilitude between He Zhiwu and Killer. It also permits us to perceive the mute's affinity with Agent. By the time Agent and He Zhiwu are (re)united at the end of *Fallen Angels*, the film has furnished sufficient rhyming situations to persuade us of their compatibility as agents (and thus to ensure satisfactory closure). Wong aligns both characters, for example, when they are each deserted by prospective dates: Killer fails to keep an appointment with Agent, while Charlie aborts a rendezvous with He Zhiwu. At the same time, of course, Wong aligns Killer with Charlie, even though the two characters are never coordinated spatially. Their alignment is apt given that both agents are oblivious or indifferent to external affection. (Whereas Killer divests relationships of emotional content, however, Charlie's emotions are reserved for another, off-screen, figure.) Jean-Marc Lalanne argues that the 'driving principle of [Wong's] fiction consists in forming pairs [of characters]...and the film continues until all the possibilities for pairing up the characters have

been exhausted'.[28.] (So much emphasis on 'pairs', moreover, ironically exposes the solitude common to most of Wong's protagonists, unfolding their inability to cohere as couples.) Ultimately, parallelism can arouse the spectator's desire for the union of apparently symbiotic characters. Wong relies on this arousal to motivate closure in *Fallen Angels*. Since parallel action has foregrounded their mutual desire for intimacy, the final combination of He Zhiwu and Agent is thus the apogee of a series of character combinations that the film has methodically worked through. (Typically, these figures are finally brought together by chance.) If spectatorial desire is in this respect satisfied, the closure of *Fallen Angels* is not unequivocally affirmative, however.[29.] He Zhiwu and Agent must come to terms with the suffering that romantic desire has wrought on them; 'I've learnt to be more careful', both characters separately proclaim in voiceover at the end of the film. The 'downbeat' tone of art cinema thus horns in to temper the classically conventional 'happy' ending. Structurally, the second story has travelled full circle. 'We rub shoulders with people everyday', states He Zhiwu at the start of the second story, as he fleetingly encounters Agent. 'Strangers who may even become friends or confidants'. Reacquainted at the film's conclusion, He Zhiwu and Agent are perhaps no longer to remain 'strangers', and on motorbike they make haste toward an optimistic future.

Psychotic episodes

Several narrational devices combine to create *Fallen Angels*' episodic structure. But episodic narrative is not here conceived in terms of Brechtian 'anti-narrative', wherein the plot furnishes a succession of discrete and self-unified situations. Rather, the film negotiates a balance between apparently autonomous 'episodes' and the kind of causal progression we would associate with classical cinema. The critic arguing that *Fallen Angels* 'is a densely packed suite of vignettes that have the autonomy of pop songs or stand-up comic riffs' perhaps

underestimates the extent to which the film draws upon traditional continuity devices.[30.] Nevertheless, the film achieves its episodic quality through a repertoire of devices already well-established in art cinema narration. Among these are the centrality of the 'unmotivated' protagonist, abrupt and radical changes in tone, and the admittance of apparently implausible causal connections.[31.]

The absence of any overarching character goal augments the film's episodic texture; the characters perform action that appears arbitrary and inconsequential. Killer's indifference to his own future trajectory situates him antithetically to the motivated protagonist of classical narrative. His professional routine is determined by Agent, and consists of a series of isolated assassinations that do not converge on some larger objective or purpose. (Killer's willing subjection to cyclical routine is mirrored in his off-duty existence, in which he habitually returns to the same bar; thus, like Faye in *Chungking Express*, who fixates on a particular folk song, Killer is another of Wong's characters who fetishistically immures himself in a routine pattern of behaviour.) The assassination scenes partly function to signify the empty ritual in which Killer is mired; consequently, the film is uninterested in identifying or individuating Killer's victims.[32.] Killer thus implicates himself in routines whose cyclical repetition deflects the need for meaningful goals and purposeful action. Because they are isolated events that do not directly trigger future action, then, the hitman's assassinations typically lay bare the plot's episodic pattern.

This is not to argue that these scenes are entirely devoid of causal influence; rather causal links can be identified, but they tend to be tenuous and obscure. Following the film's first shootout, Killer flees the carnage by bus; aboard the vehicle, the assassin encounters a childhood acquaintance (segment 5). We can say that Killer's encounter with the man is a motivated event insofar as it follows from the protagonist's crime and escape. At the same time, however, we must recognise the tenuity of the causal link: the assassination sequence does not provide a necessary cause for Killer's encounter with

his school friend. Their reunion is marked as a purely chance encounter.[33.] Furthermore, the reunion does not causally prepare any future action. If causation is not entirely absent, then, it is often attenuated and oblique. The suppression of causal links augments the apparently 'independent' nature of the film's events, positing a series of loosely-related episodes rather than a system of tightly-motivated linearity.

Wong's organisation of the story into episodes allows him to implement the kinds of tonal rupture traditionally associated with the *nouvelle vague*. Shifts in tone most commonly occur between, rather than within, scenes; an episode is put in relief by the scenes that juxtapose it. (In this respect, *Fallen Angels* most closely approximates the juxtaposition sought by Brecht, through a 'montage' of contrasting episodes.)[34.] Consider the following juxtaposition of episodes. Killer arrives at the site of a contracted assassination, where he picks off his targets with detached efficiency. In the assassination's immediate aftermath, Killer boards the bus that will facilitate his getaway. The protagonist's attempt at an inconspicuous retreat is blighted by his chance meeting with a boisterous former school colleague, Hoi, who spends the bus journey harassing the assassin with an insurance pitch. Contrasting the ferocious bloodbath with the comic reunion destabilises tonal continuity and focuses the spectator's expectations away from generic criteria. Yet tonal shifts do not only frustrate generic expectations or assert the primacy of an overt narration. They can also provide comment upon the fiction's action and themes. In the episode depicting Killer's surprise encounter with Hoi, dialogue and performance conspire to create a scene that is intrinsically comic in tone; but it is only in the context of its juxtaposition with the preceding massacre that the scene exceeds the comic and achieves a tone of absurdity. Wong here undermines *Fallen Angels'* tonal coherence to foreground the irrational relation of incidents that pattern everyday life. If these two episodes comprise an unlikely juxtaposition with respect to generic norms, they gain greater plausibility when considered as a

realistically-motivated sequence of events. The attenuation or obscuring of causal connections implies a diegesis afflicted by arbitrariness, wherein characters' actions cannot be attributed to a governing transcendent order.

Tonal shifts can also be employed to differentiate plot lines. If the first story in *Fallen Angels* is generally characterised by noirish moodiness, the second story is typically overlaid with an atmosphere of surreal derangement. Each of the plotlines exhibits tonal fluctuations, however, which justifies the relatively neutral tone arrived at when the two separate lines involving Killer and He Zhiwu properly converge. The offbeat tone associated with He Zhiwu is thus 'stabilised' when he meets Killer late in the film. (This neutrality of tone is reinforced aesthetically, as the film achieves a compromise between its two visual styles: while He Zhiwu stands luminous beneath a mantle of white light, Killer is enveloped by the red light that covers the rest of the room. Each character is thus preserved in the visual style with which he has been associated throughout the film.) More generally, tone can be seen to be determined by character types. If the demented tone that accompanies He Zhiwu's scenes befits the mute's idiosyncratic personality, so the sombre mood permeating the first story objectifies the emotional impotence of Agent and Killer. Since the narration will mostly alternate between these characters, tonal fluctuations inevitably arise across the film as a whole.

Carving *Fallen Angels'* story into a series of linked 'episodes' is not the only way in which Wong achieves the loosening of causality that is traditionally identified with art cinema narration. Chance, as we have seen, operates as a mode of realism to motivate new or unexpected story action. We may also expect a film influenced by art cinema techniques to motivate a substantial portion of its action by psychological changes in character. Killer's meeting with Agent, for instance, is motivated by his volte-face decision to terminate their partnership and to reclaim personal autonomy. Yet the absurdity that characterises much of the second story's action and tone liberates Wong

to deviate from the principle of realism that – in both classical and art cinemas – typically governs character psychology and plot motivation. An example occurs when He Zhiwu and Charlie decide to confront Blondie in person (segment 14a). As He Zhiwu and Charlie are framed in two-shot, the mute's voiceover appears to address Charlie and the spectator at once. Of Charlie's suspicions of Johnny, He Zhiwu opines: 'You have to talk face to face. If that fails, you can punch him on the nose. I keep my thoughts to myself. But somehow, [Charlie] appears to be able to read my mind'. As if in response to the mute's non-verbalised advice, Charlie says: 'I think you're right. Let's go'. Telepathy, then, apparently provides the causal link to the next sequence. The humour of this moment – as well as causal motivation - proceeds from a diminution of psychological realism. Yet the comic overlay of the moment encourages the spectator not to take the characters' mind-reading activity literally. Nonetheless, the gag exhibits thematic relevance as well as causal purpose. Charlie's ostensible telepathic ability literalises the authorial trope in Wong's oeuvre of characters that are in some way 'attuned' to each other; in *Fallen Angels'* first story, for instance, we learn that Agent seems routinely able to read Killer's mind, although hers remains a purely figurative 'ability'. Yet, despite the synergistic connection implied between characters, the present scene expresses the prevalence of indirect interaction. As he consoles Charlie, He Zhiwu narrates to the viewer: 'I wish I could tell her you can't solve problems over the phone. You have to talk face to face'. He Zhiwu's appreciation of direct interaction starkly contrasts with the mediated methods of communication preferred by Killer and Agent, who purposely choose to interact via fax, telephone, and – most obliquely - jukebox songs. In this context, then, 'telepathy' is a further and rather less orthodox index of such circuitous modes of communication.[35.] Ultimately, however, Charlie's telepathic display calls attention to narrational processes, because it represents a textual attenuation of soundly established causal links. Furthermore, the scene achieves a mode of

causation not typically admissible in classical and art cinemas, nor – I would argue – in *Fallen Angels*' first story, which operates according to a greater standard of realism.

Plot Digressions

'Digressions', claimed Orson Welles, 'can give reverberation and density to ordinary narrative'.[36.] Ostensibly at least, Wong's films proceed in the aleatory and digressive fashion associated with art cinema narration. Jonas Mekas identifies the extraneous plot meanderings conventionalised by the *nouvelle vague* with the 'best work' of Rossellini, Renoir, Hawks, and Hitchcock. These latter films, according to Mekas,

> give place to a spontaneous, even hazardous flow – a style full of bits of slightly indirect details that do not always progress the plot but add to it indirectly, as moods, atmospheres, observations...And this becomes one of the most important characteristics of the new French directors too...[37.]

As Mekas suggests, scenes that swerve from the causal impetus of the story rarely do so at the expense of plot or character. Plot digressions can italicise character traits and sharpen the significance of explicit story action. A celebrated example is the protagonists' dart through the Louvre in Godard's *Bande à part* (1964). In this scene, the action is both temporally related to explicitly causal plot events (it fills the 'dead' time in the build-up to the robbery) and communicative of character traits (it suggests that the agents possess sufficient pluck to follow through on the robbery). Godard has also justified the presence of digressive sequences by thematising boredom, for example in *Weekend* (1967), a film '*about* certain boredoms'.[38.] In general, however, there is no necessary relationship between Godard's digressive scenes and the advancement of plot. Conversely, the classical film will typically elide time and action that does not directly

propel the narrative forward: an oft-repeated dictum attributed to Hitchcock observes that 'drama [is] life with the dull bits cut out'.[39.] The art film, on the other hand, will often linger on the 'dull' and aleatoric aspects of its characters' lives, accommodating action that, in respect of plot, may be considered frivolous, tangential, or inconsequential. Such fluctuating plot manoeuvres most likely contribute to the 'certain kind of boredom' that Ackbar Abbas argues is induced by Wong's narrative strategies. Abbas refers not to 'the boredom of nothing happening, but [to] the nervous boredom of not knowing what is happening, of losing the thread'.[40.] Certainly, along with the perceptual demands wrought by the palpable audiovisual design of his films, Wong's story digressions may distract the viewer from the imperatives and immediacy of the plot. Yet as we shall see, Wong places cognitive demands on the viewer even in those scenes where the comprehension of plot is not made a priority. 'Boredom', then, is not here 'the apogee of mental relaxation', as Walter Benjamin conceives it, but rather a textual effect that redirects the viewer's attention to 'adjacent' plot matters, such as characterisation and theme.[41.]

Discontinuous tactics underlay *Fallen Angels'* plot structure, as in the montage sequence (segment 9) portraying He Zhiwu's innovative methods of torture (whereby the mute induces the compliance of a luckless client with a superabundant serving of ice-cream).[42.] The action codes of classical cinema are temporarily suspended while the narration sidetracks the viewer into less explicitly causal territory. Similarly, Killer's encounter with Hoi may appear *prima facie* to exemplify the kind of purely digressive scene that punctuates art film narratives. The viewer has ample evidence for according the scene a gratuitous purpose. Chiefly, the exchange between Killer and Hoi neither dramatises the effect of a previously established cause, nor introduces a new causal chain of events. Moreover, Hoi will not reappear in the film as a causally significant agent. However, if the scene is inconsequential in terms of causal motivation, it is

consequential in terms of narrative meaning. The scene may appear inconsequential and digressive partly because its meaning is not so much explicitly stated as implied. Wong invites the spectator to recognise the radically divergent trajectories traced by Killer and Hoi since their schooldays.[43.] Hoi has become an exemplar of bourgeois success, a city professional who distributes personalised business cards, and immodestly announces himself the subject of a *Time* magazine interview. Hoi's professional achievements are matched by his personal 'possessions'. Hoi is happily engaged to the school beauty and Killer's former, unrequited sweetheart. The assassin, on the other hand, carries in his wallet a phoney business card and a 'staged' photograph of his invented wife and child. Wong thus contrasts Killer's semblance of middle-class achievement with Hoi's legitimate success. Given the characters' shared background, Wong encourages us to recognise that the success enjoyed by Hoi was also at one time attainable by Killer. We are thereby directed to the protagonist's psychological traits: what errors of decision-making have diverted him so far from social acceptability and 'success'? At this point, the spectator recalls Killer's repudiation of choice and personal autonomy. Wong's implication here is that Killer's existence might have been different (more morally virtuous, perhaps, if socially orthodox[44.]) had he embraced freedom of choice and not assigned his trajectory to the control of others. In any event, the scene is 'inconsequential' only insofar as causation is concerned; the scene is otherwise communicative not only of character information, but also of a wider perspective on the protagonist's passive attitude toward autonomy and responsibility. Although the sequence is indifferent to plot motivation, then, it nonetheless subtly offers an explanation for Killer's involvement in the crimes that form part of the film's explicit plot action.

Given the scene's apparent digressiveness, we might expect for Wong to reinstitute explicit plot action at this point. Yet the film becomes even more retardatory in its thwarting of the viewer's quest for narrative. The scenes that succeed Killer's encounter with Hoi seem

hardly to provide impetus to the plot: Killer retrieves a package from his private security box, and Agent disinfects the hitman's apartment (segment 6). These are actions we have witnessed the characters perform before, and, as such, they do not generate plot momentum. Thereafter, Agent examines the discarded items in Killer's trashcan, visits the assassin's habitual hangout, and listens to Laurie Anderson's 'Speak My Language' on the bar jukebox; finally, she returns to Killer's apartment where she gratifies herself sexually on his bed (segment 7).

These scenes betray a surprising deficiency of causal material and plot information. At this stage in the narrative, the film does not carpenter a local objective for the protagonists to pursue, nor has it furnished any overarching character goal. As far as the spectator is aware, Agent and Killer have not conspired to stage any further assassinations.[45.] There are no police officers restlessly pursuing the protagonists or preparing to manipulate them into a trap. The crime plot has all but dissipated. If spectators instinctively appeal to generic frameworks in order to make sense of narrative information, especially when the information presented is obscure or confusing, the application of generic schemata to Wong's films rarely provides the spectator with the comprehension she desires. For example, the film has so far indicated that, in spite of the noir iconography and narrative emphasis on crime, the story's real concern is with the projected romance between its two protagonists. But the film has consistently undermined the likelihood of their romantic union. All of the tropes of the romance story have been discarded. The postulation of two romantically-destined but physically distanced characters may be a familiar conceit of the romance genre, but rarely is the protagonists' separation a result of their own expressed wish to remain apart. (Furthermore, the solitude of Wong's protagonists ensures that the stock character of the 'donor' or go-between does not figure in the action.) Generic schemata fail us. With both the crime and romance plots apparently dissolved, then, the spectator is justified to wonder what has become of the film's story. Crucially, it is at this stage in the film – as the maintenance of

plot material appears to have been subordinated to a self-conscious audiovisual style – that Wong introduces new protagonists and sets in motion the film's second story. With the apparent impasse reached in the Agent and Killer story, and with the spectator searching for a tangible event to flag the direction of the narrative, the time is apt for Wong to restore the plot to a level of importance commensurate with the film's use of style. The introduction of a second line of action thus reinvigorates a narrative that has dissipated any forward-propelling impetus of its own.

Suppressing causal action and attenuating the plot's 'visibility' ensures that film style comes forward with greater prominence. If the jukebox sequence provides little motivation in terms of plot development, the viewer is not without material designed to capture her attention. Wong furnishes a sensuous level to the text that exceeds questions of story and plot. Such scenes invite the spectator to respond to a palpable sonic and visual style, a response made simpler by the emaciation of plot. The jukebox sequence in *Fallen Angels* would also appear to engineer 'a break [in] the flow of the diegesis' to privilege a moment of erotic spectacle. Laura Mulvey argues that mainstream cinema interpolates such moments for the purpose of male scopophilia, and that the spectacle of the sexualised female body 'tends to work against the development of a story line, to freeze the flow of action in moments of erotic contemplation'.[46.] Wong's camera truncates Agent's physical form into a sequence of fetishised body parts; in Mulvey's words, the protagonist's 'body, stylised and fragmented by close-ups, is the content of the film and the direct recipient of the spectator's look'.[47.] (I shall suggest presently how the overall sequence in *Fallen Angels* will undermine the scopophilic pleasure it elicits in the implied viewer.) At this point in *Fallen Angels*, then, the narration suppresses plot and privileges a foregrounding of style that is both sensuous and sensual. (It is worth stressing that the narration has been all along self-conscious; the difference here is that now plot is no longer afforded equal status with style. As the occurrence of consequential story events

recedes, therefore, style gains even greater perceptibility.) The critic contending that *Fallen Angels* prioritises style above story would surely adduce these scenes as evidence for her argument. Certainly Wong intends for us here to notice the texture and mood created by stylistic parameters, but the director does not manufacture a radical break from story and character. Instead, narrative information becomes connotative and inferential.

For example, the song that Agent selects on the jukebox asks to be interpreted in relation to character and theme, and not simply to be absorbed as a vehicle for eliciting sensoral pleasure or establishing mood. The song's lyric seems to evoke both the specific profession and the existential solitude in which Agent is situated: 'Now that the living outnumber the dead/I'm one of many'. (Given that Agent has personally selected the song, the viewer is justified in assuming that it resonates with the character's own condition.)[48.] Interpreting the song thematically allows the viewer to make sense of Agent's autoerotic display in the next scene. The expression of solitude that we have identified in the song's lyric, and our inference that the lyric obliquely articulates Agent's subjective state, overlays Agent's sexual activity with a sense of emptiness that divests the act of eroticism. A thematic reading of the sequence thus puts into relief the scene's sumptuous use of film techniques and undermines its address to the male gaze. The explicit strategies designed to gratify and 'seduce' the viewer – the sensuous audiovisual pattern and the sensuality of the diegetic action (Agent's explicitly sexual behaviour) - are thereby qualified at a connotative level, through which is implied the empty gratification experienced by the protagonist.[49.] (Revealingly, editing is employed far less frequently here than in the jukebox scene, reflecting an undercutting of the male gaze: most of Agent's sexual activity is here framed from a 'discreet' distance at the foot of the bed. I will elaborate upon Wong's characteristic editing techniques and sensuous visual style in the next chapter.) Furthermore, the scene must be read retroactively in the context of a reminiscent action later in the film. In

the later sequence (segment 13), Wong's narration counterpoints Agent's onanistic activity with a scene of sexual foreplay between Killer and Baby; these scenes are unified by the presence of a new jukebox song which urges Agent to 'forget' Killer. The sequence does not significantly qualify our earlier inference regarding Agent and Laurie Anderson's ballad; rather, it reinforces our assumption that the music issued from the jukebox mourns the absence of romance between Agent and Killer, and is expressively linked to Agent's state of solitude. One could argue that the meaning connoted in the song lyric redundantly reinforces information that is explicitly conveyed by the action: we do not need to thematise the song lyric in order to understand that Agent is lonely. However, I would argue that the spectator who responds solely to the sequence's sensuousness risks losing sight of the despair that accompanies (and putatively triggers) Agent's autoerotic activity. In any event, my point here is that those scenes apparently governed by style hardly grind the narrative to a halt. Albeit in a more diffuse fashion than would be the norm in classical cinema, such scenes transmit narratively significant detail, even when meaningful action seems to be altogether absent.

Taciturn Angels

Finally, I want to examine Wong's treatment of an even more idiosyncratic structuring element: the figure of the mute, a familiar if not pervasive fixture in narrative cinema. It is important to recognise that the mute character in fiction typically functions as a narrative device. The role of the mute is conventionally structured around the guarding of a narrative secret, although, as Michel Chion points out, '[the mute] is most often not the central focus of the story structure, but *near* the center, alongside it'.[50.] A mute character invariably alerts the viewer to the existence of a hidden enigma. Among other functions the figure performs, the mute can represent 'a double, a conscience, an instrument, a reproach, doubt'.[51.] Not surprisingly, Wong is

uninterested in observing the traditional functions ascribed such characters. The film furnishes no narrative 'secret' for He Zhiwu to mysteriously protect; consequently, Wong's narrative structure is not organised around the preservation and suppression of a concealed revelation. Insofar as he operates as the 'double' of other protagonists (e.g. Killer), He Zhiwu conforms to tradition; yet 'doubling' is hardly a function contingent upon the character's mute aspect, because, as I have indicated, *Fallen Angels* weaves echoes and parallels among all its main characters (and the double is in any case a prominent authorial motif in Wong's oeuvre). If Wong's mute is not reducible to a mere functional device, what significance is to be found in the character's muteness? Recalling the film's themes of communication and authenticity helps us explain the relevance of *Fallen Angels'* mute character. Wong has stated in interviews that his films 'revolve around one theme: the communication among human beings'.[52.] He Zhiwu's involuntary muteness reverberates across a largely reticent diegesis. (It also occasions the kind of 'silent' performance style explicated in Chapter 2.) The prevalence of voiceovers in the film underscores the brevity of dialogue exchanged among the characters in the diegesis. In the film's first half, the agreement between Agent and Killer to avoid mutual contact is a spur to a more indiscriminate 'muteness'. (When Killer chances upon Hoi, for example, he speaks not a word to his former school friend; a strategy, furthermore, by which Wong lays stress on the latter character's garrulousness.) In the second story, He Zhiwu recounts how his father 'very rarely talked' after his wife's death. If these characters recoil from speech, their reticence is motivated by specific psychological causes: an aversion to interaction in the former case and as the result of trauma in the latter. Thus the reticence besetting most of the film's protagonists articulates a more pervasive attitude of 'reticence' toward the world in general. Such an attitude, irrespective of the circumstances from which it is born, is inauthentic, because it connotes a negation of the world and humankind. The main irony of *Fallen Angels* is that it is the legitimately mute character – He

Zhiwu – who is most equipped to achieve effective communication and to vanquish social isolation. Here, psychological desire has the potential to overwhelm physical limitations.

Wong also manipulates the character of the mute to bare the device of film style. If voiceover narration has been 'naturalised' through conventional usage, it is nevertheless daring to afford commentary to a character that lacks the ability to speak. Standards of verisimilitude cannot be called upon to justify the apparently paradoxical fact of the mute's 'speech'. Instead, however, Wong can rely on the conventional postulate that commentary need not represent a literal vocalisation, but can rather be understood as the instantiation of a subjective mental state. Yet He Zhiwu consistently displays the thaumaturgic faculty to rupture the tacit boundary that seals the diegesis off from the viewer. While nondiegetic narration is hardly exclusive to He Zhiwu in *Fallen Angels*, the character is alone in directing a look at the camera that cannot be 'diegeticised'. In fiction films, the confluence of voiceover and the look at the camera indicates, according to Marc Vernet, 'an ensemble that is larger than just the look itself; it...designate[s] an address to the spectator...'.[53.] It is, I suggest, the non-naturalistic, surrealist overtones permeating *Fallen Angels*' second story that provide the justification for He Zhiwu's direct address and its violation of verisimilitude. Given his exclusive capacity to manipulate the narration, and in light of the film's evident affirmation of his psychological outlook, He Zhiwu may be identified as a surrogate authorial figure, a fictive envoy of the filmmaker's personal world-view. In any event, the figure is here employed to make the narration maximally prominent. Such foregrounding of style can 'disguise' tenuous causal relations, as when an obscure cause (described above) motivates He Zhiwu and Charlie to go in search of Baby. In such examples, we are sufficiently distracted by the address to camera that we allow obscurely-motivated action to pass without significant complaint.

There is surely an allegorical tenor to be detected in the film's emphasis on technological modes of communication. Unmediated interaction, it goes, is jeopardised by the universal proliferation of technologies and the growth of ethnic and national hybridisation within Hong Kong. But as many canonised art films have shown us, the breakdown of communication can be conceptualised as an existential dilemma as well. The mechanistic method of communication shared by Agent and Killer – involving telephones, faxes, pagers, and so on - reveals as much about the protagonists' withdrawal from personal, unmediated discourse as it does about the spread of global technologies. If *Fallen Angels* ostensibly criticises these mechanical systems, it does not however promote a blanket technophobia. An acquaintance of He Zhiwu who uses video equipment to record messages for his son is presented sympathetically. We should not be surprised that Wong, the filmmaker, places greater value in a video recording device than in other technologies. But Wong does not valorise the medium of video so much as the purpose to which it is put. The video camera is here conceived as a device through which to *effect* communication, not, as in the 'abuses' of technology achieved by Agent and Killer, to short-circuit communication. It is thus not technology per se that is problematic for Wong, but rather the underlying motives for its usage. Wong also affords He Zhiwu's use of the video camera an approbatory treatment. In a comic vignette the protagonist becomes paparazzo to his father, indefatigably filming the beleaguered old man. When He Zhiwu's father dies, the video will serve as a vessel for nostalgia. The mute's propensity for emotional intimacy is conveyed in this deployment of technology, which venerates the father in life and memorialises him in death. Parallels between characters are once more invoked to reveal divergent attitudes. He Zhiwu understands that to remember the dead is to confer immortality upon the dead; Killer, on the other hand, is heedless to remember even the living. That Killer does not recollect Baby, his former lover, attests to the negligible importance with which the assassin regards those around him. (Killer is

again aligned with Charlie here, who does not recall He Zhiwu when she encounters him at the Midnight Express.) In contrast with He Zhiwu, then, Killer is impelled neither to forge intimate attachments nor to maintain his memory of others.

This chapter has concentrated upon narrative strategies in a film that is most frequently discussed for its visual achievements. I have chosen to examine *Fallen Angels*' plot structure precisely in response to this critical imbalance; the main purpose of this chapter has not been only to identify salient structural principles that recur across Wong's oeuvre as a whole, but also to argue that narrative organisation in *Fallen Angels* be considered as a substantive aspect of the film's highly self-conscious style. Following from this, I have sought to demonstrate that the film's stylistic salience does not empty out narrative and thematic meaning: on the contrary, Wong embeds the film's narrative functions in elements both diegetic (character traits, story action) and nondiegetic (authorial themes). Parallel story strands expose characters' divergent attitudes to analogous situations; episodic structure proceeds from the depletion of character goals, augments the agents' segregation, and posits a diegesis bereft of metaphysical causality; tonal ruptures connote the absurd relation of incidents; echoic shots and action underscore habitual activity; and, more generally, digressive and ostensibly parametric sequences are communicative of thematic and story information.

Wong's fictions may appear casual in construction, but closer inspection reveals a rigorous attention to plot organisation. Within an apparently loose framework, Wong typically observes the formal unity of classical cinema. The narrative form of *Fallen Angels* provides a good example. If the two stories in *Fallen Angels* appear arbitrarily connected, nonetheless the second story is carefully organised into a symmetrical pattern, bracketed by the two occasions in which Agent and He Zhiwu are spatially united. It is not accidental that the lynchpin

originally connecting *Fallen Angels'* two stories is the combination of Agent and He Zhiwu, the pairing that will later reunite for the film's conclusion. Of all the characters that are systematically paired in *Fallen Angels*, Agent and He Zhiwu emerge as the most psychologically compatible (they both pursue affective relationships) and are apt to militate against inauthentic denial of choice and responsibility. In this sense, their joint appearance at the start of the second story is teleologically determined: it foreshadows the desired union that will mark the film's resolution. On a global level, the film stylistically matches the end of the second story (which is the end of the film) with the beginning of the first story (the start of the film). The achievement of classical closure is complicated by the fact that *Fallen Angels* begins *in medias res*, but the end of the film's plot resonates with its beginning, even while it aims toward a level of ambiguity more characteristic of art cinema.

At the end of *Fallen Angels*, the characters' destinies are indeterminate and certain plot elements remain unresolved (the search for Blondie, for example, never bears fruit). However, stylistic devices (voiceover narration, two-shot composition) provide continuity with the film's opening, as does the presence of Agent whose voiceover dialogue foregrounds the emotional gap that has been bridged during the course of the narrative. 'At this moment', she says, holding tightly onto He Zhiwu, 'I'm feeling such lovely warmth'. This closing scene is a striking counterpoint to the unavailability of intimacy established at the film's opening. 'Partners shouldn't get emotionally involved with each other', Killer argues in the opening voiceover, as a wide-angle two-shot pulls the assassin and Agent apart and confirms their lack of affective proximity. By the end of the film, Agent will admit the possibility of romance that she has denied herself for most of the narrative. As in classical cinema, the evocative closure of *Fallen Angels*, by reminding us of the film's opening, testifies to the (emotional) journey travelled by the protagonists.

Notes

1. Christopher Doyle, 'Don't Try for Me, Argentina', edited and introduced by Tony Rayns, in *Projections 8: Film-makers on Film-making*, edited by John Boorman and Walter Donohue, Faber and Faber, 1998, p.165.

2. Quoted in Laurent Tirard, *Moviemakers' Master Class: Private Lessons from the World's Foremost Directors*, Faber and Faber, 2002, p.197.

3. Quoted in Peter Wollen, 'Foreign Returns: Welles and *Touch of Evil*', *Sight and Sound* 6:10 (October 1996) p.23.

4. Tony Rayns, *Projections 8: Film-makers on Film-making*, p.155.

5. Ibid, p.156.

6. Stephen Teo, *Wong Kar-wai*, London: BFI, 2005.

7. In an interview with Wong, Jimmy Ngai suggests that *Fallen Angels* plays 'like a Wong Kar-wai sampler, a showcase'. Similarly, Howard Hampton argues that the film is 'like a noisy greatest-hits medley' that constitutes 'a commercial for Wong'. Hampton primarily has in mind Wong's use of visual style: 'With its showy wide-angle close-ups and punch-drunk hand-held camera moves, [*Fallen Angels* is] more a frantic resume than a movie'. And Julian Stringer describes how '*Fallen Angels* was seen by some critics as a virtual non-stop parody of the established Wong Kar-Wai style'. See Jimmy Ngai and Wong Kar-wai, 'A Dialogue with Wong Kar-wai: Cutting Between Time and Two Cities', in Lalanne et al., *Wong Kar-Wai*, edited by Daniele Riviere, Editions Dis Voir, 1997, p.98; Howard Hampton, 'Blur as Genre', *Artforum* 34:7 (March 1996), pp.92-3; and Julian Stringer, 'Wong Kar-Wai' in *Fifty Contemporary Filmmakers*, edited by Yvonne Tasker, Routledge, 2002, p.400.

8. The phrase 'architectural pleasure' is borrowed from Murray Smith, 'Parallel Lines', in *American Independent Cinema: A Sight and Sound Reader*, edited by Jim Hillier, London: BFI, 2001, p.156.

9. The 'primacy effect' denotes the information initially conveyed about a character or situation. Subsequent action involving this figure or circumstance will resonate against the viewer's 'strong first impressions'. See David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style & Mode of Production to 1960*, Routledge, 1985, p.37.

10. Wong's habitual deployment of the episodic mode of storytelling may also explain his affinity for the short film format (e.g. *The Hand*, his contribution to the portmanteau film *Eros*) and advertising shorts (e.g. *The Follow*, an eight-minute episode in the BMW commercial, *The Hire* (2001)).

11. The use of captions perhaps contributes to the reputation of Godard as an 'essayist' and Wong as a 'literary' filmmaker. Historically, Chinese film theorists have

expostulated over the perceived dependency on literary forms in domestic filmmaking; as film aesthetician Liu Na'ou put it, 'Chinese cinema is abundant in words but famished in images'. Yet Wong's highly prominent narrational style ensures that his films' 'literary' qualities do not subordinate other, apparently medium-specific, modes of expression. For further discussion of literary traditions in Chinese cinema, see Yingjin Zhang, *Chinese National Cinema*, Routledge: New York and London, 2004, p.108.

[12.] As a point of comparison, the title also echoes the opening dislocated voiceover of *Jules et Jim*, which intones an evocative commentary on asynchronous romance: 'You said: I love you. I said: wait. I was going to say: take me. You said: go away'.

[13.] Roland Barthes, 'Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives', *Image-Music-Text*, translated by Stephen Heath, London: Fontana, 1977, p.87.

[14.] See Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, translated by Richard Miller, New York: Hill and Wang, 1974, p.19.

[15.] Kristin Thompson, *Storytelling in the New Hollywood: Understanding Classical Narrative Technique*, Cambridge, Massachusetts; London: Harvard University Press, 1999, p.14.

[16.] Of this conflicted and unmotivated hero, Wong has stated: 'All through the making of *As Tears Go By* I had no clue what Andy Lau's role was after - what did he want?...I can't answer. But now, of course, I can say that there are people who are like that, having no clear idea what they themselves want, just drifting about'. Quoted in Tony Rayns, 'Poet of Time', *Sight and Sound* 5:9 (September 1995), p.14. Wah's dilemma - his simultaneous allegiance to his profession and to Ngor - assails other art cinema protagonists as well. One scholar, for instance, finds a corresponding conflict besetting Antoine Doinel in Truffaut's *Baisers volés* (1968): 'Success in love or success in work - Antoine can't have both'. (See David Bordwell, 'François Truffaut: A Man Can Serve Two Masters', *Film Comment* 7:1 (Spring 1971), p.22.)

[17.] Wong sometimes finds alternative aesthetic options to the flashback. A characteristically oblique portal to the past is occasionally preferred. In *2046*, Wong reprises a protagonist from *Days of Being Wild*, Mimi (Carina Lau). The initiated viewer is asked to recognise Mimi as a figure established previously in Wong's oeuvre. One strategy available to Wong in facilitating this recognition is to insert a flashback of Mimi from *Days of Being Wild*; other art films, such as *L'Amour en fuite* (1979) and *Before Sunset* (2004), employ this recycling tactic to stimulate the viewer's nostalgic memory of characters and action. However, *2046* establishes a less direct method for evoking Mimi's former appearance, instituting on its soundtrack a musical leitmotif from *Days of Being Wild* and making evocative use of *mise en scène*. The obliquity of Wong's allusion is justified by the equivocal status of *2046* as a sequel to *Days of Being Wild*; unlike the above-cited films by François Truffaut and Richard Linklater, *2046* is

not definitively a sequel nor an official 'chapter' in an ongoing filmic *Bildungsroman*. Interpolating a flashback to *Days of Being Wild* would thus link the film more explicitly to *2046* than Wong apparently desires.

[18.] Ackbar Abbas, 'The Erotics of Disappointment' in Lalanne et al., *Wong Kar-wai*, p.71.

[19.] See, for example, David Thomson's entry on Wong (cited in my introductory chapter) in Thomson, *The New Biographical Dictionary of Film*, Alfred A. Knopf: New York, 2004, p.970. The influence of fashion upon Wong's images is also identified by Howard Hampton, who writes of *Fallen Angels*: '...there's no way any parodist is going to top Michele Reis' latex-miniskirted...routine here: clutching a cigarette even when she masturbates, Reis is the ultimate fantasy of supermodel self-abasement'. Howard Hampton, 'Blur as Genre', *Artforum* 34:7(March 1996), p.93.

[20.] Other Wong films also adopt this pattern: *2046*, for instance, motivates its science-fiction plot by the subjective imagination of its main protagonist, who literally 'authors' the futuristic secondary line of action.

[21.] For parametric narration, see David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, Routledge, 1985, pp.274-310.

[22.] The protagonists' ceding of agency again links them to the central characters of *In the Mood for Love*. However, whereas Chow and Su attribute their own actions to the machinations of society and 'Fate', Killer and Agent rely on each other to determine their respective trajectories. Furthermore, Killer exhibits a far greater self-awareness of this desire to transfer autonomy than do Chow and Su. Unlike those characters, Killer does not project himself as a 'victim' of predestination, or pretend that fate has deprived him of the freedom to choose and act. Instead, Killer simply admits that he does not want to bear the burden of that virtue.

[23.] Teo, *Wong Kar-wai*, p.87. In his expulsion of professional intimacy, as well as in his assumption of another person's routine, Killer anticipates the protagonist of Wong's short film *The Follow*. In this advertising short, The Driver (Clive Owen) is hired to tail the wife of a celebrity (Mickey Rourke), the latter suspecting his wife of adultery. Like Killer, The Driver's trajectory is dictated by the woman whose path he traces, and whose routine he wittingly adopts: in voiceover, he stresses the importance of knowing the target's 'patterns'. Distance (both physical and affective) is also central to the professional credo of both films' protagonists. Echoing Killer's edict that 'partners shouldn't get involved emotionally with each other', The Driver states: 'Whatever you do, don't get too close. Never meet their eyes'. Unlike Killer, however, The Driver will fail to maintain the distance he espouses, and moreover seeks a change from the woman's routine ('patterns') he has adopted. In this way, The Driver navigates toward authentic action and reclaims personal imperatives of his own.

24. The mute expropriates legitimate premises after hours, co-opting private resources to engineer a 'business' of his own. In this, He Zhiwu is essentially opportunistic, a trait we have also seen displayed by Hoi, the rambunctious former schoolmate of Killer. He Zhiwu's parasitic operations are not as lucrative as Hoi's: 'I don't make a fortune', he says. But He Zhiwu exploits the kind of legitimate business that Hoi might be involved in.

25. In its story of a professional criminal seeking emancipation from lawlessness, *Fallen Angels* revisits a generic trope established in *As Tears Go By*.

26. See David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, Routledge, 1985, p.152. Bordwell uses the term 'foregrounding' to refer to 'the salience of a narrational tactic with respect to intrinsic norms'.

27. Intertextual parallelism is also embedded in this scene. In a further inversion of character positions in *Chungking Express*, Takeshi Kaneshiro is no longer the patron but the (putative) waiter at the Midnight Express. Tony Rayns has observed that Kaneshiro self-consciously parodies Faye (Faye Wong) here, and the allusion is certainly apt for Kaneshiro's character in *Fallen Angels*: similarly eccentric, both protagonists are set apart from surrounding agents by their spiritual optimism and willingness to stimulate change. See Rayns, *Fallen Angels* (review), *Sight and Sound* 6:9 (September 1996), p.42.

28. Jean-Marc Lalanne, 'Images from the Inside', translated by Stephen Wright, in Lalanne et al., *Wong Kar-wai*, p.10.

29. Following Stephen Teo, Carl Cassegard refers to *Fallen Angels*' 'chillingly desolate ending'. Both writers construct a hermeneutic perspective in which 'the ride in the tunnel symbolises...a ride toward death'. (Carl Cassegard, 'Ghosts, Angels and Repetition in the Films of Wong Kar-wai', *Film International* #16 (2005:4), pp.10-23.) I perceive a greater degree of ambiguity in the denouement than do Cassegard and Teo, however.

30. Stephen Holden, 'FILM FESTIVAL REVIEW: Better a Broken Heart Than Shot in the Heart', *New York Times* (Tuesday October 7, 1997).

31. As I described in Chapter 2, Thomas Elsaesser applies the term 'unmotivated hero' to a new kind of protagonist that is bereft of the 'drive- and goal-oriented moral trajectories' typical of the classical film (p.13). 'Notes on the Unmotivated Hero. The Pathos of Failure: American Films in the 70s'. *Monogram* 6 (October 1975), pp.13-19.

32. Because the film suppresses information about Killer's victims, the viewer is unable to determine the extent to which his violence is 'justified', i.e. do the victims deserve to die as a consequence of some wrongdoing? For Killer, an assassin for hire, there is at least no personal stake in the violence he metes out; thus he does not act out of any 'honourable' notion of avengement or retribution.

[33.] The use of coincidence as a device to motivate story action anchors Wong's films in historical storytelling traditions. Chance and coincidence are devices common not only to the Chinese family drama and romance narratives, but also to the indigenous 'civilised play' of the 1930s, and to butterfly fiction (an early twentieth-century conservative form of literature). See Zhang, *Chinese National Cinema*, pp.26, 54, 55. Further afield, of course, this narrative strategy is visibly entrenched in the nineteenth-century European novel and in Western melodrama. Filmmakers in Hong Kong have also consistently relied upon the device to weave together loosely-related episodes (see David Bordwell, *Planet Hong Kong: Popular Cinema and the Art of Entertainment*, Harvard University Press, 2000, pp.182-3).

[34.] See Martin Esslin, *Brecht: A Choice of Evils*, London: Mercury Books, 1965, p.113. To a greater degree than any other Wong film, *Fallen Angels* exhibits stylistic features that may be considered Brechtian (the look at the camera, formal juxtapositions of tone, the suppression of causal links, the use of socially-proscribed appellations, a frequent obfuscation of affective response and so forth). However, we have only to compare He Zhiwu's direct address with that device's utilisation in *Tout va bien* (1972) to recognise that while *Fallen Angels* appropriates aesthetic elements from Brecht, it does not motivate their usage ideologically, as Godard's film does. In this sense, Wong depoliticises Brecht's radical estrangement tactics and renders them as purely aesthetic features.

[35.] Of course, the protagonists make use of another technological form as an alternative to conversation: the cinematic apparatus, in particular, the device of voiceover commentary, which renders inner thought. Killer and Agent are not the only protagonists in Wong's oeuvre to favour circuitous modes of communication. In *2046*, Chow invites Black Spider to travel with him to Singapore. She accepts on condition that Chow trumps her in a card game. However, Black Spider plays, metaphorically, with a rigged deck, gambling professionally. That Black Spider will draw the ace is a foregone conclusion; and the defeated Chow states in voiceover, 'She found an indirect way of rejecting me'. The scene successfully articulates the evasions and miscommunications of Wong's characters. Such evasions signal traits that are anchored in the characters' repudiation of responsibility, their phobic reaction toward change.

[36.] Orson Welles and Peter Bogdanovich, *This is Orson Welles*, edited by Jonathan Rosenbaum, New York: Da Capo Press, 1998, p.126.

[37.] Jonas Mekas, 'Free Cinema and the New Wave' in *The Emergence of Film Art: The Evolution and Development of the Motion Picture as an Art, from 1900 to the Present*, edited by Lewis Jacobs, New York: Hopkinson and Blake, 1974, p.403.

[38.] Stanley Kauffmann, *Pierrot le fou* (review) in *Figures of Light: Film Criticism and Comment*, Harper & Row, 1971, p.140. Emphasis in original.

[39.] *Hitchcock/Truffaut* (Helen G. Scott, transl.), Revised edition, Simon and Schuster: Touchstone, 1985, p.103. As Mekas' inventory of filmmakers indicates, classical cinema restricts but does not entirely efface digressive material. Kristin Thompson suggests that classical films often intersperse 'lulls' within more causally-purposeful action, but that these suspension points function 'to provide other staples of classical storytelling: most importantly exposition, motivation, romance, and redundancy, but also humour, motifs, subplots, and the like. These elements need to be interlaced with the strong action'. (Thompson, *Storytelling in the New Hollywood*, p.43.)

[40.] Ackbar Abbas, 'The Erotics of Disappointment' in Lalanne et al., *Wong Kar-wai*, p.46.

[41.] Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* (Harry Zohn, trans.), Fontana Press, 1992, p.90.

[42.] The charm and humour of such sequences, I would argue, solicits the viewer's patience in accepting the film's temporary postponement of plot concerns.

[43.] As Killer's voiceover narration explains that 'even an assassin once had classmates at junior high', Wong repeats an earlier shot of the bus' rear-view mirror, which now reflects Killer with Hoi seated behind him. This framing device functions almost as a nostalgic perspective within the present situation: tinctured by the voiceover dialogue, the reflected image becomes evocative of a classroom setting, with Killer and Hoi seated in 'rows'. Obliquely, then, the frame-within-a-frame evokes the characters' shared history, and alludes to the distinction between their past and present situations. (The characters' physical appearance also alludes to class(room) distinctions: while Hoi is formally attired in, we might say, the grown-up equivalent of a school blazer and tie, Killer, the schoolboy rebel, adopts the uniform defiantly, exhibiting a vest and gold chain beneath the formal blazer.)

[44.] Wong neither condemns Killer nor valorises Hoi, however. For all his material achievements, Hoi displays personality traits that are no more admirable than the assassin's. A mouthpiece for capitalism, Hoi's perception of Killer as a potential client belies an indiscriminate opportunism. (Hoi's exploitative attitude toward Killer recalls Antoine Doinel's money-grabbing friend in *Baisers volés* and *Domicile conjugal* (1970), although Wong neatly inverts the destitution of Truffaut's character by articulating Hoi's material well-being; given his lack of genuine financial need, Hoi's overture to Killer thus appears even more mercenary.) Wong also limns Hoi as crude (the salesman proudly refers to his fiancée as 'Big Bosom'), intrusive, conservative, and racist ('Your wife's a nigger, eh? You're very liberal.'). Wong's portrayal of Hoi is saturated in cynicism: despite his undesirable traits, Hoi is by any measure a paradigm of social fulfilment and admissibility. A successful career and trophy girlfriend, social respectability and 'capital' (he claims to have been crowned 'King of the Brokers' in South-east Asia), and relative fame (the *Time* article) – all of these factors establish Hoi's social respectability. Self-evidently, Hoi's status as a social insider is contrasted with the outsider status of Killer, whose actions prohibit social acceptance.

Consequently, Killer will reject an invitation to Hoi's wedding, stating that 'it's not my scene' – the assassin is aware that he is not smoothly assimilable into the rituals of conventional society. This knowledge further separates Killer from social interaction, then; as in his aloof relationship with Agent, Killer here withdraws from an opportunity to nourish his private life.

[45.] Although the ominous packages deposited by Agent alert the viewer to the possibility of future killings.

[46.] Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', *Screen* 16:3 (Autumn 1975), p.11.

[47.] Ibid. p.14.

[48.] Allegorists, meanwhile, will most likely interpret the lyric as a tortured expression of anonymity in the densely-populated spaces of contemporary Hong Kong.

[49.] We may also note that this connoted narrative meaning is transmitted through a parameter of style, i.e. music.

[50.] Michel Chion, *The Voice in Cinema*, (translated by Claudia Gorbman), Columbia University Press: New York, 1999, p.98. Emphasis in original.

[51.] *Ibid*.

[52.] Quoted in Rey Chow, 'Nostalgia of the New Wave: Structure in Wong Kar-wai's *Happy Together*', *Camera Obscura* 42 (September 1999), p.36.

[53.] Marc Vernet, 'The Look at the Camera', translated by Dana Polan, *Cinema Journal* 28:2 (Winter 1989), p.50. Earlier in *Fallen Angels*, as the mute poses for police mug shots, the look at the camera is diegeticised; the cinematic camera-eye stands in for the police photographer's camera, and thus He Zhiwu is able to gaze directly into the lens without rupturing the diegetic illusion. In our present example, situational context removes the possibility of the look's diegetic enclosure, and He Zhiwu's voiceover commentary and look at the camera coalesce to produce a direct address.

Plot segmentation: *Fallen Angels*

0. Credits.

1. The film crosscuts between credit titles and the first meeting between Agent and Killer.

2. **a.** Agent traverses subway and arrives at Killer's apartment; she tidies the apartment and leaves.

   b. Killer traverses subway and enters his apartment.

3. **a.** Agent's apartment in Chungking Mansions. By telephone, Agent arranges a hit.

   b. Agent stakes out the site of the forthcoming assassination.

   c. Agent's apartment. Agent faxes a blueprint of the site to Killer. The film crosscuts between Agent, planting a package in a private security box, and Killer's receipt of the fax and preparation for the hit.

4. The assassination. Killer shoots the men gathered at the mahjong table, and flees.

5. Killer escapes by bus. By chance, he encounters a former school friend.

6. Crosscutting reveals Killer collecting the package deposited by Agent, and Agent cleaning the hitman's apartment. At her own apartment, Agent combs the contents of Killer's wastebasket.

7. Agent visits Killer's favourite bar. She listens to a jukebox song. The song becomes nondiegetic as the narration cuts to Agent later that night, masturbating in Killer's apartment.

8. Chungking Mansions. Agent helps He Zhiwu hide from the police.

9. He Zhiwu is arrested and released. At night, he breaks into a meat factory. The mute harasses reluctant customers to buy from him.

10. He Zhiwu's apartment in Chungking Mansions. He Zhiwu locks his father in the washroom.

11. Agent's apartment. Agent arranges a hit. The film crosscuts between Agent casing the targeted site, and Killer performing the assassination.

12. Independently of Agent, Killer collects debts. He is wounded in a shootout. He decides to go straight and terminate his partnership with Agent. He arranges to meet Agent but does not keep their appointment.

13. A fast-food restaurant. Baby flirts with Killer. They return to her apartment. The narration cuts between their sexual foreplay and Agent's solitary sexual activity in Killer's apartment.

14. **a.** He Zhiwu attempts to hand a flyer to Charlie, who is holding a telephone conversation with Johnny, the man she loves. Charlie and the mute decide to go in search of Blondie, Johnny's fiancée.

    b. An apartment building. Charlie and He Zhiwu fail to trace Blondie.

    c. They go to a fast-food restaurant; a fight breaks out among the customers.

15. In his apartment, He Zhiwu discovers his hair is growing blonde. He takes Charlie to a soccer match. Charlie fails to show up for a further rendezvous. He Zhiwu decides his past behaviour has been irresponsible, and determines to change his life.

16. Killer's favourite bar. Killer encounters He Zhiwu, who now works at the bar. Killer asks the proprietor of the bar about starting a business of his own.

17. He Zhiwu acquires video recording equipment, and documents his father's activities.

18. **a.** Agent and Baby cross paths by chance.

    b. Baby informs Killer that she has arranged for him to meet Agent.

19. **a.** The meeting between Agent and Killer.

    b. Killer breaks off his affair with Baby.

    c. Agent asks Killer to perform one last assassination.

    d. The film crosscuts between Killer's route to the designated

location and Agent, who places a coded telephone call.

 e. The attempted assassination; Killer is slain.

20. He Zhiwu's apartment. He mourns the death of his father; he screens the video footage he made of his father.

21. He Zhiwu harasses an unwitting customer; at night, he commandeers a fast-food counter and is ignored by Charlie, who fails to recognise him.

22. **a.** A restaurant. He Zhiwu is assaulted by a gang of men. He notices Agent eating at a nearby table.

 b. He Zhiwu gives Agent a ride home on his motorbike.

- End credits.

5. Sensuous Spaces: Visual Style and *The Hand*

Throughout the foregoing chapters, we have frequently alighted upon the visual procedures of Wong's films. Our attention has ranged from local tactics (e.g. repeated shots in *Fallen Angels*; the visual fetishisation of the jukebox in *Chungking Express*) to more encompassing strategies (e.g. the aestheticisation of the star performer, or the repressive compositions that proceed from *In the Mood for Love*'s detective schema). For most critics, visual style is central to Wong's cinematic appeal. Critical emphasis on the visual dimension of Wong's cinema, however, has led to some dubitable assumptions, several of which we have already encountered above. Among these assumptions, two in particular will be challenged in this chapter: first, the assumption that Wong privileges a self-conscious visual design above other narrative and formal elements; and second, that Wong's visual sensuousness entices the viewer toward critical passivity. A further prevalent perspective (characterised at the outset of this study) maintains that Wong's visual strategies are most appropriately reduced to allegorical meaning. Wong's aesthetic (including its visual dimension) can be taken to give form to the following kind of abstract social criticism posited by Fredric Jameson:

> If, indeed, the subject has lost its capacity actively to extend its pro-tensions and re-tensions across the temporal manifold and to organise its past and future into coherent experience, it becomes difficult enough to see how the cultural productions of such a subject could result in anything but 'heaps of fragments' and in a practice of the randomly heterogeneous and fragmentary and the aleatory.[1.]

This passage would surely attract the postmodernist film critic seeking to characterise Wong's visual style in terms of cultural allegory. The Hong Kong filmmaker stands in for Jameson's 'subject'; choppy decoupage results in 'heaps of fragments'; and uncertainties surrounding the 1997 handover hypostatize incoherent temporal

experience. Wong's collage-like editing style and embrace of chance as both artistic method and structural principle also provide evidence of an aesthetic practice that is 'randomly heterogeneous', fragmentary and aleatory. Yet, accounting for Wong's idiosyncratic visual style purely in terms of cultural metaphor induces some critical blind spots. Such a view presupposes that all (or at least, most) of Wong's visual strategies are furnished with an allegorical function. If Wong employs rapid cutting in a sequence, for instance, it must be to fulfil a primarily symbolic purpose, e.g. to connote the disintegration of Hong Kong culture and society. Strident allegorical readings also fail to take into account sequences that do not favour rapid cutting or visual fragmentation. In this chapter, I will explore other kinds of motivation, besides social allegorising, that underpin Wong's distinctive visual aesthetic. Through an analysis of *The Hand*, Wong's contribution to the portmanteau film *Eros* (2004)[2], I will attempt to show how the filmmaker's visual tactics are motivated at a textual level, by character psychology, plot events, narrative themes, and the pursuit of certain cognitive and perceptual effects. I will also be concerned to locate Wong's visual style within particular artistic traditions. In this way, we can begin to move beyond the relatively narrow range of artistic motivations that an allegorical reading provides. Before turning to *The Hand*, however, we need to identify some more general characteristics of Wong's visual style. Some of the stylistic traits I will discuss are not displayed in *The Hand*, but constitute significant strategies in Wong's earlier work. Other visual tactics are directly pertinent to *The Hand*, and will be elaborated upon further in my analysis of the film.

For Stephen Teo, aspects of Wong's style evoke the work of Suzuki, Antonioni, Godard, Bresson, Ruiz and Jarmusch.[3] Teo bases this comparison on what he considers the filmmakers' shared interest in minimalism. Such a style tends to prioritise the suppression of overt narrational cues: editing and camera movement are consistently understated and de-dramatised. Camera movements that would constitute minor gestures in a conventional context stand out as

ornamental flourishes. (A tacitly disjunctive panning shot in *In the Mood for Love* rests upon Chow as his wife's infidelity is revealed; rupturing the film's intrinsic norm of minimal camera movement enables Wong to underscore a moment of dramatic import with both formal subtlety and overtness.) Broad structural frameworks also achieve self-conscious transparency in the minimalist style, as in *Chungking Express*' explicit division into two largely disconnected parts. Moreover, melodramatic displays of emotion are generally drained from performance style (consider the parody of oriental 'inscrutability' in Jim Jarmusch's *Mystery Train* (1989), the 'granite-like' countenance identified with Takeshi Kitano, and the facial opacity of *In the Mood for Love*'s inhibited protagonists).[4.] Minimalism allows filmmakers to confer salience upon film style without recourse to 'obvious' or energised formal manoeuvres. In Wong's case, cultural norms (e.g. so-called Asian 'restraint') may provide further impetus for his assumption of stylistic reticence.

Acknowledging Wong's minimalist tendencies allows us to set in relief his more 'active' uses of style. Wong has cultivated an expressive style that evokes comparison with filmmakers like Welles, Hitchcock, Scorsese, and Tarantino, at least in terms of aesthetic verve and dynamism. Often, Wong will wrench camera movement, framing, editing, and optical effects into self-conscious and overt configurations. Most often, the films flirt with 'parametric' narration[5.], displaying a formal salience that threatens to match or surpass narrative elements in importance (though as I have sought to demonstrate in previous chapters, Wong's use of style will in fact typically contribute to narrative detail, and is rarely, therefore, foregrounded purely for its own sake). (I also noted of *Fallen Angels* that its flagrant audio-visual style tends to distract critics from other textual elements; thus the critic often underestimates the various narrative functions that Wong's palpable style will invariably perform.) In the words of one critic, films like *Fallen Angels* and *Ashes of Time* are 'all dizzy kinesis'[6.]: they engender relentless stylistic variation through deployment of jump cuts,

whip pans, step-printing, slow motion, and handheld camerawork. In such instances, Wong plainly deviates from culturally-inscribed norms of restraint. He also stakes out distinct formal territory from that traditionally fertilised in Asian art cinema. 'Dizzy kinesis' is seldom in evidence in the Asian art cinema's meditative use of film style (consider, for example, the generally deliberate rhythm, and the prevalence of the stationary camera and constant angle, in films by Yasujiro Ozu, Takeshi Kitano, Shohei Imamura, Tsai Ming-liang, Hou Hsiao-hsien, Edward Yang, and Jia Zhang-ke). Yet, as his engagement with minimalism shows, Wong does not rely exclusively on visual ostentation. By varying stylistic register from film to film, argues David Bordwell, Wong reveals a sensibility that is 'proudly polystylistic'[7.], purposefully assimilating and recasting stylistic material from a rich variety of aesthetic traditions. (In this respect, Wong's films disclose a close affinity with the eclectic pluralism that typifies Hong Kong's mainstream cinema.)

Stylistic minimalism and flamboyance can yield contrasting perceptual effects. A visual style in the minimalist mode, typically characterised by languorous rhythms and compositional austerity, is likely to invite the sustained gaze of the viewer and encourage contemplation of its typically legible elements. Conversely, a flamboyant use of style is more apt to discombobulate the viewer. Combining dynamic camera movement and rapid cutting can dissipate crisp action or throw the viewer's spatial assumptions off-balance. Wong will also exacerbate perceptual ambiguity through repressive back-to-camera figure placements, or by deliberately blocking characters from view. Compositions will mask the important figure by foregrounding 'hair straggling in front of a face, slits in curtains, semiopaque plastic curtains, and narrow alleys and stairways'.[8.] For Bordwell, this aspect of Wong's style generates an 'aesthetic of the glimpse', subordinating the viewer's perceptual access to an intermittently repressive narration.[9.] (Once more, Wong's rapid cutting rate and pictorial obliquity are in marked contrast to the more

deliberate, transparent style cultivated by a filmmaker like Ozu, who, conversely, 'gives us time to see everything'.)[10.] Most generally, Bordwell claims, Wong will shift 'between a nearly hypnotic stare and a teasing glimpse'.[11.] As Bordwell's terms indicate, Wong constructs intrinsic norms that intensify the classical cinema's narrational communicativeness and restrictedness. We can also identify an internal fluctuation between 'overt' and reticent narration, which allows us to lay bare Wong's engagement with different aesthetic traditions: in *As Tears Go By* and *Happy Together*, for example, Wong mixes popular norms (e.g. MTV-style abrasiveness) with art cinema austerity (e.g. the long-held shots of a waterfall in *Happy Together*).

Wong's visual strategies also invite thematic interpretation. In *Fallen Angels*, compositional style gives expressive weight to narrative themes of estrangement. The *mise en scène* is routinely organised to set the protagonists apart from their subtending environment. One reiterated shot establishes an exterior view of Killer's apartment building and an adjacent city street, the frame vertically 'bifurcated' by the two spaces; dividing the frame in this way allows Wong to graphically segregate Killer's private space and the public space of the city. A shot depicting Killer's bus journey to an assassination site is conceptualised along similar lines. As the protagonist is shown reflected in the vehicle's rear-view mirror, the night-time cityscape - visible through the bus windshield - evaporates abstractly into a stream of smeared light. Killer's 'containment' within the contour of the mirror sections him off from the mercurial urban space seen through the bus windshield. Furthermore, the shot juxtaposes distinct rates of motion for thematic connotation: the city's breakneck elapse as the bus courses forward is counterbalanced by Killer's relative immobility within the embedded frame (i.e. the mirror), the shot thereby implying a fundamental asynchronicity obtaining between Killer and his environment (and pointing to the hitman's existential stasis).[12.]

Social estrangement is visually connoted in other ways. Visual techniques will function to exaggerate the protagonists' physical

distance from other figures in the frame. Selective focus is a particularly useful device for a filmmaker interested in isolating single figures within a collective mass: dissolving background figures into an indistinct fog directs visual attention to the crisply delineated, foregrounded protagonist, but it also neatly conveys the main character's psychological divorcement from social existence. Moreover, Wong exploits the capacity of wide-angle cinematography for distending spatial depth, tautening the foreground protagonist's proximity to the camera and deepening the background figures' position within the frame. (Fig.5.1 – which depicts the psychically-detached protagonists in *Fallen Angels*' opening two-shot – illustrates this elastic effect of the wide-angle lens.) In such shots, the impression of spatial discordance is intended to signify psychological disengagement.[13.] In contrast, sandwiching characters within a tight framing enables Wong to flag a protagonist's distinctive propensity for intimacy (Fig.5.2). The film's spatial tactics thus reinforce the narrative emphasis on Killer's apathetic disassociation (as in Fig.5.1) and the mute's active search for intimacy (as in Fig.5.2). Most generally, then, Wong's visual strategies invariably function to sharpen the focus on the distinct psychological traits of the protagonists.

Other self-conscious devices reward the spectator's hermeneutic activity. In *Happy Together*, accelerated views of street traffic progressing at incredible speed invite the spectator to form interpretative hypotheses. Influenced by narrative context, the spectator will most likely ascribe thematic relevance to the imagery, e.g. she may infer the exigency of urban existence, and (aided by contextual information) hypothesise the protagonist's inability to keep in sync with this volatile environment. Alternatively, Wong will motivate visual ostentation within the diegetic action. In *Fallen Angels*, He Zhiwu's narratively banal acknowledgement of a heavy rainfall permits Wong to effect a shimmering play with light and focus, the apparently water-drenched camera-lens constituting another 'overt' use of visual style; and in *Happy Together*, topsy-turvy views of Hong Kong's

streets are furnished when a character speculates, 'How does Hong Kong look upside down?' On occasion, however, Wong's visual strategies elude narrative or thematic subsumption. Janice Tong notes that Wong sometimes 'brings to the fore certain kinds of images which are difficult to grasp through an analysis of narrative alone'.[14.] Such interpretative ambiguity is evidenced in *Happy Together*, which switches between colour, black-and-white, and monochrome with apparent indifference to narrative signification. (*Fallen Angels* and *2046* also utilise this strategy.) Alternating between colour and black-and-white provokes the viewer to speculate on questions of compositional motivation: can we adduce an underlying narrative purpose for this aesthetic manoeuvre? The viewer's appeal to background norms is unlikely to provide satisfactory answers. Such a visual strategy in classical cinema operates within a narrow range of narrative significations: it may function practically to demarcate separate worlds, as in *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), or to distinguish between past and present action. Criss-crossing between monochrome and colour may also tincture particular scenes with a character's psychological temperament, as when the colourful palette accorded the flashback sequences in *Bonjour Tristesse* (1958) serves to indicate the female narrator's nostalgia for the past. (Similarly, colour bleeds into the final shot of Shinji Aoyama's monochromatic film *Eureka* (2000) to portend an optimistic future.) This conventionalised set of functions, however, plays no role in *Happy Together*. How, then, can we make sense of the film's unpredictable departures from colour, or, for that matter, of the other self-conscious and 'active' visual devices in Wong's oeuvre (e.g. stop-motion, fish-eye lenses, simultaneously juxtaposed rates of motion and so forth)?

Self-evidently, these devices all serve to enhance affective, sensuous, and atmospheric effects. But just as important is the devices' propensity for radical defamiliarisation of the narrative world. Switches between colour and monochrome, or images that focalise action through a watery lens, create a diegesis that challenges the viewer's

perceptual experience of reality and makes the world of the fiction seem strange. In such instances, the film may become 'style-centred', exhibiting a parametric narration that reverses the classical hierarchy of story and form. (This is not to say that such sequences retard storytelling, however; rather, formal elements acquire unusual salience, while certain visual tactics cannot always be reduced to story interpretation.) Defamiliarisation in art, as Kristin Thompson has noted, occurs when the spectator's habitualised perception of things is 'renewed' or destabilised. Familiar items from the everyday world or from other artworks acquire the quality of strangeness 'through their placement in a new context and their participation in unaccustomed formal patterns'.[15.] Consider the aforementioned shots of traffic in *Happy Together*. Such shots may be taken up for thematic interpretation ('modern life progresses at too fast a pace') or understood as a punctuation device separating distinct scenes. But the spectacular speed afforded the city traffic also transforms our automatised perception of a commonplace event. An aspect of everyday reality is thus defamiliarised in such shots, which furthermore renew the representation of urban vistas in orthodox filmic texts (i.e. representations that invariably conform to habitualised codes of spatio-temporal reality). Wong discovers an 'unaccustomed formal pattern' - accelerated motion - to travesty our perception of a scene familiar from everyday life. Moreover, the shots' emphasis on speed strikes a tension with the perceptual objective of defamiliarised art. Victor Shklovsky maintained that defamiliarisation increases 'the difficulty and *length* of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and *must be prolonged*' (emphasis added).[16.] Paradoxically, then, the kind of enduring contemplation that Shklovsky identifies as central to an artwork's defamiliarising effects here finds expression in images that lay stress on acceleration, tenuity, and ephemerality. In any event, as so often in Wong's ostentatious handling of visual style, *Happy Together*'s traffic shots both alter and give salience to the viewer's perceptual experience of the artwork.

Trademark visual motifs also display defamiliarising power. The ubiquity of clocks in Wong's oeuvre transforms the object from an environmental detail into something perceptually intriguing. Suppressing the clock's conventional narrative function allows Wong to defamiliarise the object further: most often, Wong will furnish recurrent shots of clocks neither to mark significant passages of time nor to augur a fast-diminishing deadline, as (for example) in *Back to the Future* (1985). Stripped of its familiar narrative purpose, the clock hangs ominously and almost surrealistically above the heads of Wong's protagonists, forcing the viewer to recast automatic assumptions about the object's presence. (Such defamiliarising motifs may become habitualised as intrinsic norms, however, as the viewer's horizon of expectations is adjusted to the idiosyncratic workings of the individual film or corpus of films.) Most obviously, the clock motif bears thematic weight. For example, clocks may provide symbolic commentary on the degree of intimacy between characters. This is the conceptual significance that Tsai Ming-liang affords clocks in *What Time is it There?* (2001); like Tsai's film, Wong will often make figurative use of clocks and watches to underscore the temporal, spatial, and emotional distances that separate his protagonists. Alternatively the clock motif will memorialise a moment of shared intimacy. In *Days of Being Wild*, Yuddi claims that the temporal coincidence of his encounter with Su Lizhen betokens a common and irreducible bond.[17.] Establishing clocks as a visual motif also allows Wong to nourish his cinephiliac devotion to the European art cinema. Broadly, many of these art films reflect a fascination with 'psychological time', both as a formal possibility and as a rudiment of themes of human consciousness and alienation. Some films transform the household clock into a totem of existential anxiety, as in Ingmar Bergman's *Wild Strawberries* (1957). Another probable influence is the work of Ozu, whose oeuvre ascribes clocks consistent motivic importance. (Wong also shares Ozu's compulsion for reviving particular motifs throughout his corpus of films.) In Wong's hands, then, a visual motif can function in rich and diverse ways: it may renew the

viewer's habitualised perception, symbolise narrative themes, and imply the filmmaker's indebtedness to particular filmic traditions.

Moreover, Wong's visual style draws upon the tradition of avant-garde cinema. A basic affinity with the avant-garde is Wong's commitment to stylistic eclecticism. Wong can pack a single film with fish-eye views, smudge motion, monochrome shots, and generally deformed images, demonstrating an avant-garde devotion to formal experimentation; in this respect, Wong's films are internally 'polystylistic', as well as varying stylistically from film to film. Traces of Wong's avant-garde influence are also apparent in his use of particular visual devices. Appropriating strategies from the 'city symphony' genre helps Wong effect a flagrant use of style. *Chungking Express* and *Fallen Angels* evoke the modernist emphasis on speed and movement to foreground stylistic overtness[18.]: like *Koyaanisqatsi* (1983), both films interpolate shots that juxtapose decelerated agents and ferociously bustling, peripheral figures.[19.] *Happy Together*'s bracing depiction of street traffic is also indebted to Godfrey Reggio's film. Such visual tactics will invariably reify thematic preoccupations as well as foreground form. Asynchronicity, urban exigency, technological determination, grinding routine, and ineluctable change thematically undergird both Wong's cinema and the city symphony film.[20.] More generally, Wong's affinity with the city symphony points to his salient representation of the physical environment. Evident in the 'trick-motion' shots furnished by *Chungking Express*, *Fallen Angels*, and *Happy Together* is a striking environmental salience. Speeding up the background movement in *Chungking Express*, for example, allows Wong to endow the narrative setting with special prominence. The 'defamiliarised' environment acquires salience by means of its unnatural velocity and temporal asynchrony with the (slowed-down) protagonists. Similarly, bottom-up views of the city in *Happy Together* ascribe an unusual palpability to the diegetic surroundings. As we will see, however, the salience of the environment is not always reliant upon 'effect' shots. (Consider the camera's amble on environmental

detail in *Happy Together*'s languorous waterfall shots; or *Fallen Angels'* more pervasive defamiliarisation of its Hong Kong milieu by evoking, in Teo's words, 'a hallucinatory, futuristic environment…'.)[21.] Wong's 'environmental salience' is an authorial trait that will be dwelt upon more explicitly in the following section. For now, however, we can suggest further affinities between Wong's visual tactics and those of the city symphony genre.

Some city symphonies, like Wong's films, will seek to articulate themes of social alienation by employing self-conscious visual strategies. Reverse motion, for instance, provides the principal source of stylistic manipulation in Leon Prochnik's *The Existentialist* (1966), which depicts a man's traverse of New York City as all surrounding elements (passers-by, automobiles, cyclists and so forth) move in perverse backward motion. The theme of nonconformity comes to the fore, as does the film's parametric narration. Though their 'overdetermined' tactics differ, both Prochnik and Wong manipulate diegetic movement to delineate out-of-sync character/environment relations. Yet (intentionally or otherwise) *The Existentialist*'s overt narration functions less to convey its protagonist's individualism (he swims against the stream) than to make the city seem bizarre and fantastic, principally because it appears to defy natural laws (which the protagonist, moving 'naturally', contrarily obeys). Prochnik thus defamiliarises the diegetic milieu, as well as the viewer's perceptual habits. Similarly, as we have noted, defamiliarising effects are generated by Wong's erratic rates of motion. At one level, Wong's manipulation of 'natural' speed advances a challenge to ordinary perception and filmic norms; it also functions parametrically, as an exuberant display of film style. At another level, moreover, this stylistic tactic can be related hermeneutically to the diegetic action. *Fallen Angels'* juxtaposed rates of motion, for instance, may spur the viewer to active contemplation: are the protagonists out-of-sync with the society, or vice versa? What is the root cause underlying the agents' basic alienation? (Narrative context will inevitably colour the

viewer's conclusion here.) Defamiliarising 'automatised' perception and artistic convention thus stimulates viewer activity. As Thompson argues in *Breaking the Glass Armor*, 'art, by renewing our perceptions and thoughts, may be said to act as a sort of mental exercise'; defamiliarisation is one effect that Wong will pursue in his quest to nullify viewer passivity.

Assumptions of passive spectatorship are frequently implicit in critical descriptions of Wong's style. Often this assumption is bound up with Wong's sensuous stylistic use. *The Hand, In the Mood for Love* and *2046* each confer upon their 1960s milieu a visual treatment that teems with sensuous effects. For most critics, the films' dilatory panning shots, exotic imagery, and meditative editing rhythms induce a kind of intoxicating light-headedness. David Thomson writes of *In the Mood for Love* that it displays a 'drug-taker's immersion in the narcotic of cinema', while Ian Birnie notes that the film provides 'pure pleasure for the senses'.[22.] Amy Taubin echoes both of these observations when she claims that *2046* is 'intoxicatingly erotic in its images', constituting an 'operatic appeal to the senses.'[23.] The consensus among critics is that these films parade before the eye a 'visually narcotic', 'hallucinatory', and 'dreamlike' suite of images.[24.] I do not wish to argue against the baseline allusion to sensuousness that these metaphors invoke, or to deny that sensuousness is an emphatic part of Wong's aesthetic program: indeed, it is this sensorial allure that is a likely expedient in the films' cross-cultural acceptance. (It is also not my intention to undervalue the contribution of music to Wong's aesthetic, and I have referred to its significance frequently throughout previous chapters.) But one cannot negate the fact that these critical ascriptions, which coalesce around the 'anaestheticisation' of the spectator, connote a viewer seduced into a critical lull, an implication that fails to square with many of the films' other structures and strategies.

David Novitz argues that some works of art seek to 'anaesthetise' the audience's emotions for persuasive purpose. Artworks that seek to challenge deeply-felt values and beliefs, Novitz argues, may employ a

process of 'seduction' to '*prevent* us from responding emotionally to ideas that would normally upset us' (emphasis in original).[25.] I do not want to deny that Wong's sensuous aesthetic can function in this way. Anaesthetising the viewer's emotions may allow Wong to shift or destabilise moral boundaries. (Despite the character's undesirable traits, for example, the spectator feels sympathy with Yuddi in *Days of Being Wild*.) Or seductive tactics may dilute the implications of the flirtations between Chow and Su in *In the Mood for Love*, as 'people who might previously have praised the ideal of wifely devotion and dismissed with contempt the idea of extramarital love are gradually able to understand and sympathise…'.[26.] The viewer's knowledge that Chow and Su are the *victims* of adultery may be considered an anaesthetising tactic that revises a pre-existing moral attitude: if the anti-adultery viewer is sympathetic with Chow and Su, then she may no longer regard adultery as being universally wrong, but rather something that is acceptable or even 'desirable' under certain ameliorating circumstances. However, even if we allow that such anaesthetic effects may be engendered by Wong's sumptuous style, I would nevertheless argue that counteracting strategies are in play to trigger the viewer's perceptual and cognitive activities.

In previous chapters, I have expounded ways in which Wong's sensory effects are qualified or undercut by cognitive processes (e.g. inference-making, hypothesising, interpretation) elicited from the viewer. A narrative shot through with ellipses and digressions, I have argued, opens up story ambiguities that discourage the viewer from passive complacency. In *Fallen Angels*, we have seen, an explicit tension evolves around the spectator's aesthetic absorption and her effort to keep pace with the plot. I have also claimed that sensuous engagement with Wong's visual and sonic discourse is held in check by the retardation of generic expectations, which precludes passive assimilation of the narrative. Thus the viewer's enthrallment at *In the Mood for Love*'s sybaritic tactics is tempered by the film's comprehensive reworking of melodramatic convention. It is the

overarching purpose of this chapter, however, to tackle the assumption - engendered in the metaphors of anaesthesia cited above – that Wong's visual style is cognitively straightforward, effortlessly assimilable, and preoccupied exclusively with sensuous effects. My contention is that visual strategies of sensuousness are also qualified or undercut *at a visual level*. Just as a tension obtains between 'narcotic' visual strategies and episodic narrative, so a tension is manifest within the visual program itself: Wong's visual style is indeed sensuous but it is also a thicket of ocular retardations, spatial ambiguities, and thematically-loaded effects.

My analysis of *The Hand* will examine the way that Wong employs visual strategies to animate an 'active' response from the spectator. In order to explore this idea, my discussion will focus principally upon the film's compositional trends, construction of space, and focalising point of view. It will also be my aim to demonstrate how the film's small-scale visual tactics relate to a larger conceptual framework. Localised visual tactics frequently converge on the film's large-scale themes, and an interpretative task is consequently assigned to the active spectator. As we shall discover, the spectator's comprehension of visual style is motivated by a multiplicity of narrative demands; in this respect, *The Hand* is quite characteristic of the visual complexities manifested in Wong's overall corpus of films.

Compositional Style and Environmental Salience

Antonioni's great. And I learned one thing from Antonioni, he told me, sometimes the main character is not the actors and actresses, it's the background.

Wong Kar-wai[27.]

The Hand, though it forsakes many of the aggressive perceptual effects of Wong's contemporary urban films, relates nonetheless to the main preoccupation of the filmmaker's overall engagement with visual style. Its foreground/background demarcations, densely-constructed *mise en scène*, manipulation of figure movement, and the emphases brought out

by editing, are all coordinated to assert the primacy of the physical environment in which the narrative events take place. If defamiliarisation of the environment is less self-conscious in *The Hand* (compared with, say, *Fallen Angels*), we shall discover that defamiliarising effects are nevertheless pursued in the film. Before we turn to a discussion of the film's compositional strategies, it will be useful to recount its narrative events.

The Hand begins *in medias res*. The scene is laid in Hong Kong, sometime in the 1960s. In the Palace Hotel, a tailor, Xiao (Chang Chen), brings a handcrafted *cheongsam* (a traditional Chinese dress) to a courtesan who lodges there. The woman, Hua (Gong Li), is gravely afflicted by some malady, and, enfeebled, asks Xiao if he recollects their first encounter. The plot vaults backward to the scene of Xiao's first meeting with Hua. In the hotel apartment, Xiao (at this stage a junior apprentice) is instructed to wait for Hua, as amorous sounds come forth from the courtesan's bedroom. When Xiao is eventually summoned, he cannot conceal his arousal, and, with evidently exploitative purpose, Hua masturbates him. 'I'm nice to you, aren't I?' she tells Xiao. 'One day you'll become my tailor; remember this feeling and you'll make me beautiful clothes'. Several months go by. While Hua is embroiled in feuds with a lover, Xiao fashions clothes for her at the tailoring factory. Gradually, Hua accumulates financial debt with the tailors, and Xiao is deputised by his employer to exhort the courtesan to remunerate. At the hotel, Hua mysteriously informs Xiao that she plans to take a trip, but circumvents a question about her intended destination. Shortly after, Xiao is informed that the courtesan has set forth to an unknown location. On her return months later, Hua sends for Xiao, commissions him to tailor some new clothes, and announces that she has lost weight (due, the film implies, to ailing health). Xiao declines payment for his artisanship, and privately defrays Hua's hotel bill. The hotel manager informs Xiao that Hua is seriously ill. The plot has now come full circle: Xiao arrives at the Palace Hotel to discover Hua in emasculated condition. 'You've been so

good to me', Hua tells the tailor, 'and I've never repaid you'. Again, the courtesan masturbates Xiao and together they fall into an emotional embrace. Afterward, Xiao returns to the tailoring factory and contrives a tale to conceal the fact of Hua's stricken state.

Unlike *Happy Together* and *Fallen Angels*, *The Hand* typically does not have recourse to trick-motion in order to foreground its diegetic environment. Many of the film's scenes simply begin or end by dwelling upon unpopulated spaces, and emphasising, in the absence of human figures, the physical detail of key locales. Often a scene will commence by foregrounding a walled interior, panning across the wall's surface, and peeling off to frame action staged in a distant plane of the visual space. Evoked in such shots is the physical manoeuvre of peering upon private action from an undisclosed and clandestine area of space – that is, such shots provide a voyeuristic opening onto the intimate world of the drama. Indeed, in the discussion that follows, I will argue that one way to explain many of *The Hand*'s visual strategies is to construe them as proceeding from a voyeuristic camera eye. This interpretation is also well supported at a narrative and thematic level, as well as by the film's visual motifs and compositional strategies. The invocation of voyeurism as a mode of narrative focalisation may also be considered a continuation of the visual schema underpinning *In the Mood for Love*; of that film, Wong has revealed his intention to stage scenes as if observed by an imaginary neighbour set loose in the protagonists' apartment building. It is my view that this overarching stylistic principle also obtains in *The Hand*, although, as is true also of *In the Mood for Love*, we shall find that not every image in the film is explicable as a voyeuristic gaze. Rather, voyeurism may be considered a persistent characteristic of *The Hand*'s aesthetic program, but one that is intermittently deviated from in order for the achievement of certain other dramatic or expressive effects.

Given *The Hand*'s large-scale concern with voyeurism, it is perhaps inevitable that one should be put in mind of Hitchcock (indeed, Wong has acknowledged the filmmaker's influence upon his recent films).

Specifically, *The Hand*'s opening shots achieve a perceptual effect cognate with the beginning of *Psycho* (1960), although there are marked differences in the visual techniques employed to achieve this effect. In *Psycho*, an ostensibly continuous travelling shot traces a trajectory from an aerial panorama of the Arizona cityscape to a surreptitious rendezvous between lovers in an oppressive hotel room. The camera's anthropoid quality as it makes its staccato, hesitant advance toward the hotel window has engendered several critical hypotheses about its focalising source. William Rothman, for example, writes of this scene that Hitchcock's camera 'possesses a corporeal presence in the world of *Psycho*, a body...'[28.] Raymond Durgnat provides a qualifying hypothesis: for Durgnat, the 'diving camera...[is] hardly human – more like a bird's eye view, or a God's eye view.'[29.] In any case, the important point to note is that the camera's activity prompts commentators and audiences to confer upon *Psycho*'s opening shot an explicit *point of view*. Attributed to this shot is some kind of perceiving agency whose ambivalent entry into a private situation accords it the characteristics of a voyeuristic gaze.

In *The Hand* the trope of the camera is less virtuosic, but a comparable sense of furtive perception is aroused. The film begins with a vaguely askew establishing shot – a close exterior view of a building at night – that restricts the perceptual data available to the spectator. In contrast to *Psycho*'s urban vista and geographical specificity (denoted by careening titles), *The Hand* suppresses contextual detail, the viewer apt to place the context of action only by reference to a dimly illumined sign at the building's exterior, designating the 'Palace Hotel'. The voyeuristic gaze is articulated visually by the illusion of screen depth in the next shot. In a long shot composition from inside one of the hotel's corridors, the distribution of visual focus across the depth of frame enhances one's sense of observation through layers of space (Fig.5.3). The walls on either side of the camera's foreground stretch away into the offscreen space with a diminishing gradation of visual clarity; a glowing wall lamp in the middle region of the image seems

positioned less to achieve focal salience than to guide the viewer's attention deeper into the frame; and at the farthest region of the composition, an entrance cloaked by red drapery claims the most sharply-delineated area of the image. (Most generally, we might notice that the physical environment here assumes the centre of visual attention, as human figures have yet to be introduced into the realm of the depicted narrative space.) A cut to a medium shot of Xiao is putatively a movement into the screened area, just as the camera in *Psycho* fixes upon an obscured aperture (the window blinds are partly drawn) before trespassing upon the private situation enclosed within.

Although the films may differ in their degree of geographical specificity and spatial continuity, they both have the effect of evoking voyeuristic activity, penetrating private veneers to plunge the viewer into a considerably intimate dramatic situation.[30.] The second shot in *The Hand*'s opening sequence (see Fig.5.3) is especially important to this intimation of corporeal point of view. Juxtaposing foreground and mid-ground elements with a locus of attention embedded in the background, the multi-planar composition elicits the sense that the spectator must look past a dense *mise en scène* in order to gain access to the field of narrative action (in this instance, the veiled aperture). Thus at the same time as it designates a voyeuristic viewpoint, the composition also admits the physical world saliently into the frame. I will return throughout this chapter to the way that *The Hand* makes use of visual devices to signify voyeurism (and to its further allusions to Hitchcock in this respect). For the present, I want to explore further the stylistic techniques by which Wong accommodates environment into his images, and to examine the consequences of this practice for the viewer's response to the fiction. As in the example just discussed, we shall find that the two phenomena (i.e. the postulation of a subjective, prying camera and the salience of the physical world) are very often coterminous.

One effect of the use of deep space, exemplified in *The Hand*'s shot of the hotel corridor, is that the spectator must actively search the

frame for narrative significance. This process is assisted by the image's selective focus, which, in our example, throws the foreground elements out of focus and directs the eye to planes deeper in the visual field. Though the foreground elements are hazy, they nevertheless encroach upon and 'frame' our perception of the crisply-focused background space. An important consequence of ascribing visual weight to the physical environment, therefore, is that the spectator is to actively discriminate narratively significant detail from purely decorative items in the *mise en scène*. If the composition of the corridor shot seems only partly to impel this participation by the viewer, the following example places an appreciably greater and more characteristic demand on the spectator's attention.

A stationary camera presents a cluster of male figures at work in the clothes factory. Visual emphasis is given to a busy and productive workforce, with figure individuation sacrificed for an impersonal emphasis on limbs and other body parts. Sonically, a blanket of human voices and noise conveys the industriousness that is implied by the teeming imagery. One voice among the polyphonic hum (identifying himself as Jin, Xiao's supervisor) is hierarchically privileged on the soundtrack, and the 'vococentric' spectator scans the image for the source of this voice.[31.] At first, a foreground figure obstructs our view of the work area (and, as it happens, of Jin), while a labourer, in focus, is partially visible on the left side of the screen. The foreground figure then passes into the centre of the frame, blocking the labourer but exposing other bodies in distinct planes of the right-screen space. (These agents in the middle and distant planes of the shot will be obscured again, as the foreground figure passes in front of them before vacating at the left of frame.) The arrangement of anonymous bodies sardined in the shot and the dispersal of activity across distinct visual planes serves to confound the spectator's vococentric search. In other words, the visual image, congested with undifferentiated human figures that inhabit different planes of space, does not identify Jin within the throng of bodies with the same degree of legibility that the sound track

displays in picking out the relevant voice from a clot of vocalisations. Now the camera begins to track laterally to the right, forcing many of the labourers out of shot. This camera movement reduces the number of figures in the frame, and concomitantly directs the viewer's gaze toward the obliquely-positioned figure stooped in the background plane. (The dynamics of Jin's voice also provides a helpful directional cue here, as does the mode of dialogue itself: the spectator gathers that Jin is engaged in a telephone conversation, and thus searches the image for a figure involved in like activity.) As the camera continues its tracking movement, Xiao, positioned at a worktable, emerges in the foreground; Xiao briefly obstructs our view of Jin before the camera tracks further to frame Xiao in the foreground left of screen, and Jin, now out of focus in the deep background of the shot (Fig.5.4). During the camera's trajectory, the soundtrack continues to privilege the voice of greatest narrative consequence: Jin, we surmise, receives a telephone call from Hua's maidservant, who enquires after Xiao on Hua's behalf; Jin informs the woman that Xiao is absent from the building but that he will convey the message when Xiao returns.

Although the shot makes selective use of focus, refusing to afford commensurate visual emphasis to every plane of deep space, it nevertheless accords to a Bazinian concern for a style that animates an active, participatory spectator. It furthermore corresponds to the realist staging technique that Bazin characterises as 'lateral depth of field', the employment of lateral camera movement to survey action that has been choreographed across the horizontal dimension of the frame.[32.] A bi-directional play thus obtains in this shot from *The Hand* between the width and depth of the frame. The spectator is impelled to reflect upon the shot's visual space not only by the ocular obfuscations to dramatic clarity but also by the solicitation to cross-reference actions that occur on both the frame's multi-planar and horizontal dimensions. In addition to fostering ambivalence in the viewer regarding the locus of her visual attention, both compositional strategies (i.e. horizontal and axial staging) are separately expressive of

thematic and plot concerns. Recapitulated in the lateral tracking shot is *The Hand*'s visual trope of dwelling upon spatial context before locating a protagonist within the terrain. The sideways traverse of the camera also weighs the volume of workers passing in and out of shot, attesting to a populous and active workplace; moreover, the framing that crops the workers bodies at the shoulders, and the identical white vests in which they are apparelled, reduces the workmen to a collection of torsos, arms, and hands, their utility as labourers stressed over their individuation as humans. (Xiao is comparably attired, leading one to infer his anonymity among ostensibly interchangeable workers.) Finally, the tracking camera assists the reconnoitring viewer in discerning Jin in the frame, by gradually narrowing the content of the shot and excluding other workers from view. Although Jin remains immersed in the deepest plane of action and outside the focal range, the vococentric spectator is now able to locate the character's position with relative ease.

However it is not the horizontal dimension of the shot but the depth relation between foreground and background elements that reveals the most in terms of plot progression. Information emanating from the distant plane - e.g. Jin's pronouncement that Xiao is absent from the factory - is plainly contradicted by foreground content, e.g. Xiao's physical presence in the workroom. (The viewer has hitherto been introduced to Xiao, and thus is cognizant of this basic contradiction.) Plot considerations arise from this foreground/background tension: how will Xiao react to the spuriousness of Jin's utterance? Is Xiao's apparent passivity evidence of his complicity in Jin's deception? (Jin's dialogue, moreover, gives causal impetus to a later engagement between Xiao and Hua.) Ultimately, the shot's lateral trajectory and its staging in deep space are expressive of different details, the latter being especially concerned to articulate plot information; but Wong exploits the interplay of both strategies to elicit the active-seeking faculties of the viewer.

The Hand employs a gamut of compositional devices to furnish the diegetic terrain with visual prominence, as the necessity to direct audience attention becomes fused with an intensification of narrative space. Recurrently throughout the film, decentred compositions will hedge a character into peripheral space, thereby exposing purely spatial context in the vacant two-thirds of the anamorphic image. As understood in widescreen cinema, such compositions tend not so much to privilege the cavernous area as minimise distractions from the human figure in space. Charles Barr, in response to early anxieties regarding the perceptually overwhelming effects of widescreen technology, argued that careful organisation of the *mise en scène* could discourage the spectator's eye from aimless roving of the visual space; only in this way, Barr contended, could the spectator 'be led to focus on detail, and to look from one thing to another within the frame with the emphasis which the director intends; that is, if the spectator is alert'.[33.] One solution, as John Belton points out, is to narrow the lateral field by concentrating action within a slender portion of the frame.[34.] The superfluous two-thirds of horizontal space, emptied of narratively significant information, thereby serve both as backdrop and directional cue for the agent at the frame's edge, rather than constituting a contiguous area of significance.

I do not wish to deny that this practical component may underlie similar compositions in *The Hand*. And yet, to say that Wong's 'constriction' of the lateral field is a directional device intended to guide audience attention risks oversimplifying the nature of the aesthetic choice.[35.] An explanation of this kind seems especially inadequate in light of those shots in *The Hand* that incontestably suppress directional cues. We have already seen that Wong does not invariably take pains to direct the viewer's eye perspicuously to action of narrative significance; indeed, as in our example in Xiao's workplace, compositions are sometimes organised to purposely obscure or obstruct the spectator's search for significance. Rather, I submit that Wong capitalises upon a standard artistic response to the widescreen format,

namely, the arrangement of *mise en scène* to reduce the impression of width, so as to give palpable emphasis to the characters' physical surroundings. (As I argued in Chapter 2, such a tactic – which challenges the primacy of the human figure in the frame – can also operate irreverently in relation to the decentred star body.) In *The Hand*, the greater percentage of the frame that is not occupied by a character may well be empty of explicitly meaningful information, but it is not simply empty: it may, that is, be replete with the physical details of the character's environment. (In such shots, apparent 'negative' space becomes 'positive' space, because its content, though emptied of human presence, is intended to be contemplated by the viewer.) In any event, it asserts a contrast with the purely directional emphasis identified by Barr and Belton: in such shots in *The Hand*, I suggest, the characters are not so much set in relief by the background as set in the context of the background. Such compositions afford Wong the opportunity to reassert the conspicuousness of the narrative environment in pictorial terms.

We can requisition this authorial interest in intensified settings to account for other graphic leitmotifs in *The Hand*. Periodically, visual access to characters is mediated by ostensibly pellucid surfaces embedded in the *mise en scène,* as in the first flashback shot showing Xiao, deep in the visual field, just hazily discernible behind a window pane. Here, the viewer must look *through* a physical feature of the environment in order to attain any kind of visual hold on the protagonist. (This compositional tactic is fairly typical of Wong; recall David Bordwell's description of action obscured by 'semiopaque plastic curtains', and our example advanced in Chapter 2 of an obtrusive fabric curtain that augments Leslie Cheung's elusiveness in *Ashes of Time*.) Thus the diegetic surroundings are once more exhibited with utmost self-consciousness, while the sensation engendered is that of stealthy or voyeuristic observation. This feeling is induced not because our gaze violates intimate or private activity; rather, it is a corollary to the layers of physical detail concentrated along the depth of frame, through

which the gaze must 'pass' in order to reach its target. As the narrative surroundings are projected with a degree of overtness, therefore, the camera acts as a proxy for an invisible and furtive observer. It should furthermore be evident that such compositions do not give visual primacy to the locale simply in order to navigate the viewer's eye to a distinct area of the frame; in fact, one could argue that compositions of this sort, which obscure the focus of narrative interest with physical elements of the set, seek not so much to facilitate visual legibility as to problematise it.

It is, however, important to emphasise that *The Hand*'s stress on environmental details does not take precedence over the main drama. Often, the degree of salience conferred upon the setting will be 'modified' in scenes of dramatic significance. A concise example of this occurs when Xiao is dispatched to confront Hua about the debts she has accumulated with the tailoring company. Several of the compositional features that we have already identified converge here. The scene begins with a shot of a new locale (the stairwell leading to Hua's apartment), divested of human figures. Panning vertically upward, the camera scans over a glass partition dominant in the shot's foreground; presently, through the translucent surface, we discern the emergence of a shadowy figure whose physical specificity is distorted by rippled indentations in the glass panel. As the camera continues its ascent, the striated partition falls out of shot and Xiao, the tenebrous figure, rises up the steps and into clear view. A match-on-action places us closer to Xiao, who now hesitates on the spot; as he turns away from camera and scales the next flight of steps, the camera resumes its vertical trajectory until Xiao is visually displaced by a second glass partition; once more, our view of the protagonist is obscured by the crinkled glass, and, finally, Xiao disappears completely from sight.

Emphasis on the physical environment therefore parenthetically encloses Xiao's traversal of the stairs; but the important manoeuvre in this short sequence is the cut to a closer view of Xiao. It is an inessential cut if we consider the director's task to entail

straightforward depiction of the physical path of the protagonist; all the elements critical to the action (in schematic terms, Xiao and the stairwell) are visible in the 'master shot', that is, the first, more remote composition. In other words, the entire action could have been yielded just as effectively from this original vantage point. However, the cut-in to Xiao concurrently communicates the character's affective state and achieves the temporary diminution of the environment, which is otherwise foregrounded quite literally in the sequence. The scene is a good example of how, at judicious junctures in the film, environmental salience is subordinated to narrative signification. The closer view of Xiao constitutes a degree of communicativeness that is not typical of the film's large-scale narration. It is a visual emphasis upon the face as the site of affective transparency: from Xiao's facial expression, the viewer infers the character's displeasure at the task ahead of him (i.e. the mission to browbeat Hua). The timing of the cut, moreover, coincident with Xiao's stagnation on the steps, enhances our supposition of the character's internal dilemma: Xiao, we surmise, now hesitates between turning on his heels and proceeding on his course. Once the protagonist's incertitude is explicitly conveyed, the furnishing of legible facial access is no longer warranted (thus Xiao can turn his back to camera) and the agent's environs are saliently reinstated. Thus, in a microcosmic example of a strategy widely adhered to in *The Hand*, we see that environmental salience 'recedes' in order to accommodate action of dramatic importance.

Just as subduing physical elements of the set shifts emphasis onto the characters and their affective states, so Wong intensifies the prominence of the environment to preclude visual access to character emotion. In concrete terms, this involves introducing into the *mise en scène* obtrusive set details that will directly impede the spectator's view of a character. When Xiao eavesdrops on a telephone call that his supervisor places to Hua, an indeterminate foreground object blocks Xiao's face from view (see Fig.2.2). The composition functions to restrict subjective access: Xiao's attitude toward Hua is at this stage

ambiguous, and the obscuring object is entirely uncommunicative of information that might dispel this ambiguity. Though the fact of Xiao's eavesdropping betrays his interest apropos Hua, the nature of his interest has not yet been made explicit. Given that one cannot divine the feelings that Xiao has fertilised toward Hua, specifically in respect to his earlier seduction by her, the viewer, I suggest, counterposes two broad postulates: either Xiao has reacted to Hua's enticement with approbatory feeling (e.g. romantic love) or with malignancy (e.g. resentment). The obtrusion of the environment, blocking our visual access to a potentially communicative facial expression, thus becomes a means by which to suspend this basic ambiguity.[36.]

Of course, maintaining that such compositions amplify environmental detail does not necessarily imply that this detail is the composition's intended locus of interest. In the example just cited, the indeterminate foreground object achieves an unusual degree of prominence, but it is nevertheless an *indeterminate* object: the camera is not concerned to play up the specificity of the object as a point of narrative or expressive interest. There are other uses of this kind of composition in *The Hand* that, though they similarly retard the spectator's visual purchase on a character, appear not to do so for reasons of narrative significance. For example, it is several scenes into the film before an unimpeded view of Ying, Hua's maidservant, is provided; previously, our view of the character has been obscured by the physical structure of Hua's apartment. In terms of plot, there is no discernible payoff resulting from the withholding of access to Ying's physical form. If Ying is partly eclipsed by a glass partition, or barely observable behind a walled area, it is not to mask her affective state or to connote mysteriousness; nor is there achieved a revelation in the plot when the old woman's corporeality is finally, unambiguously, made visible. Ying's status as a secondary, inconsequential character in the drama discounts her as the prime site of narrative interest. In short, we can find no motivation at the level of plot to account for the salience ascribed to environmental detail in these shots. Consequently, one is

given to the conclusion that, in these obscured glimpses of Ying, the visual emphasis is placed on the environment, and not, as in our other example, on what the environment conceals.

A more sustained probing of the film's world unfurls in a montage of images that inventory the story's principal locales. This sequence functions not to introduce milieus with which the audience is unfamiliar, establishing dramatic backgrounds to impending action and so forth. Rather it occurs halfway through the film, and enumerates narrative territories that the film has earlier established as spatial leitmotifs. Moreover, these locations, in which we have witnessed the protagonists and secondary agents manoeuvre, are now bereft of human figures. The camera thus lingers in the physical specifics of the film's environment. This strategy has antecedents in Asian cinema. Shots devoid of human figures mark transitional segments in the films of Yasujiro Ozu, which, according to Noël Burch, do not so much serve a storytelling purpose as invite the viewer's active exploration of the frame. Burch terms these kinds of transitions 'pillow-shots'; for Jim Jarmusch, influenced by Ozu's minimalist style and apt to emphasise environmental detail in his own work, such transitional images provide 'static punctuation'.[37.] Chris Berry and Mary Ann Farquhar identify the prevalence of 'empty shots' in Chen Kaige's *Yellow Earth* (1984), which the authors argue express tenets of Taoist cosmology and function to 'suspend development of the narrative...'.[38.] Occasionally, American films such as *Annie Hall* (1977) and *Before Sunrise* (1995) will put emphasis on human absence within a shot or sequence, most typically for the elicitation of nostalgia. However, it is Antonioni's *L'Eclisse* (1962) that is surely the intended point of reference in *The Hand*. In the closing sequence of *L'Eclisse*, Antonioni furnishes a series of views of the protagonists' neighbourhood. Spaces previously occupied by the main characters are now dwelt upon as independent phenomena. Antonioni defamiliarises the neighbourhood by making us perceive it in an unorthodox way; for example, we no longer regard the environment as a phenomenological backdrop to the protagonists' activity, but

rather as 'autonomous' space (albeit space inflected by our memory of the foregoing dramatic action). Allusively invoking *L'Eclisse* enables Wong to display his cinephiliac enthusiasm for intertextual reference.

The Hand's compendium of locales is laid out after Hua announces her imminent departure from the Palace Hotel. Xiao arrives at the hotel apartment to find Hua already gone. On a series of cuts, the sequence moves through various locations heretofore identified with Hua: the bedroom, in which we see both a closet, empty but for a few clothes hangers, and a large curvilinear mirror; the hallway leading to the apartment's main entrance; the dining room, where we have several times observed Xiao waiting for Hua, and from which area he has previously overheard her tantrums and lovemaking; and the stairwell annexed to Hua's apartment. All these spaces have been home to previous action in the film, and, in those earlier iterations, the location is first emphasised as an autonomous space independent of human figures (for instance, a shot may linger on an area of the bedroom before Hua enters). Now, however, the characters we expect to discover in the space are nowhere evident, which eventuates not only in the magnification of the environment, but also in the abortive gaze of the voyeuristic spectator, who pursues a fruitless search for human presence in the scene. (Significantly, it is Hua's disappearance from the film that heralds the breakdown of the spectator's voyeurism.) Moreover, it should be noted that so much languishing over empty terrain serves primarily to sensitise us to Hua's absence from the space.[39.] (Revealingly, the only locale missing from the montage is one that Hua never enters - Xiao's workplace - thus restricting the spatial compendium only to those areas inhabited by Hua, and underscoring her absence from them.) A kind of paradox thus obtains: Hua's disappearance finds visual articulation in the abandoned spaces of her apartment (and in the apartment perimeter, e.g. the stairwell). Once more, ostensible negative space is 'filled in' by the viewer's awareness of what is missing from the space. By means of the montage, Wong reminds the viewer of the foregoing events that have unravelled amid

the depicted settings, and seeks to stimulate a nostalgic sentimentalism for Hua.

To summarise, it is my contention that the montage sequence is motivated by two factors, one of which is narrative, the other intertextual. First, there is the filmmaker's obligation, dictated by the plot, to convey Hua's absence and to solicit nostalgia; second, there is the authorial desire to incorporate allusion into the film, in particular, a reference to Antonioni (Wong's collaborator on *Eros*). The result of these twin motives is not only that the sequence is purged of characters, but also that the physical terrain of the drama is brought into focus with a degree of prominence seldom evinced in narrative cinema. Even in art cinema, shots devoid of human presence are more concerned to define off-screen space than to dwell on the specifics of an unpopulated *mise en scène*. According to Noël Burch, the 'empty frame' focuses the viewer's attention on putative off-screen activity: 'the longer the screen remains empty, the greater the resulting tension between screen space and off-screen space and the greater the attention concentrated on off-screen space as against screen space'.[40.] However, in our sequence from *The Hand* (and in Antonioni's conclusion to *L'Eclisse*), the 'empty frame' rivets the viewer's attention to onscreen space. In these examples, the viewer's attention is not focused on imagined activity occurring outside of the frame. Nor is it the case that 'with the screen empty there is nothing as yet (or nothing any longer) to hold the eye's attention'.[41.] Wong fixes the eye's attention upon the environmental detail 'contained' within the empty frame. In order to focus the viewer's attention on onscreen space, Wong must suppress any cues that might indicate off-screen activity: thus we do not witness characters exit the empty frame, and no off-screen sound will bring into play an 'active' area of off-screen space. In this way, the effects of Burch's empty frame are reversed. No longer is the frame simply 'empty'; rather, it is at once empty (of characters) and full (with environmental detail).

I have been preoccupied with expounding the various compositional strategies that Wong employs to effect environmental salience. It should be stressed, of course, that *The Hand* does not intend a degree of environmental salience on the level of certain avant-garde genres, such as the city symphony or the landscape film. I have argued, for instance, that the prominence of *The Hand*'s dramatic surroundings is systematically attenuated to privilege narratively important action. The physical world has graphic prominence in *The Hand*, but it does not exclusively represent the centre of audience attention. Less self-evident from my discussion, perhaps, is the way that *The Hand* departs from neorealism, a narrative mode that consciously assimilates environmental salience into its aesthetic program. Admittedly, certain of the compositional strategies identified above are of the sort associated with neorealism. For example, the momentary 'masking' of middle- or background action by foreground objects is a standard device in the neorealist tradition, attractive for its ability to deny prearranged staging and to evoke verisimilitude. But I suggest that it is misleading and thematically redundant to conceive of the significance of such shots in *The Hand* as emblems of realism. Rather than seek total fidelity to reality, *The Hand* aims to 'renew' our perception of objects and spaces that form an essential part of our everyday reality. (The same intention may also be read into the closing sequence of Antonioni's 'neo-realist' film, *L'Eclisse*.) The grounds for this contention rest on *The Hand*'s aesthetic disinclination to affect a sustained illusion of 'reality', as well as in the specific circumstances under which the film was produced. Quite apart from its fluid tracking shots and 'pre-emptive' framings (which anticipate the precise traversal of a character and thereby extinguish the impression of spontaneity), *The Hand* utilises professional actors, expressive (i.e. not available) lighting, and sophisticated widescreen technology, and moreover eschews gritty realism in favour of stylised aestheticisation.[42.] I maintain, of course, that *The Hand* pursues an evocation of voyeurism through its use of visual style, but this argument does not contradict my claim that the film is hardly a

slave to realism; it is quite possible, for instance, for a film to invite the surreptitious gaze in respect of a surreal or stylised diegesis. *The Hand*, therefore, is no more an example of neorealism than is *Psycho*, or, for that matter, the patently voyeuristic *Rear Window* (1954).[43.]

What, then, is the significance of *The Hand*'s environmental salience, if not to effect a neorealist reproduction of a specific socio-historical milieu? I shall claim that the visual accentuation of the environment, far from simply aiming for a 'literal', realist quality, functions metaphorically to set in relief a fundamental solipsism in the protagonists. *The Hand* reveals the self-preoccupation of its characters by exposing their myopia in response to a palpable and vital world. Neither Hua nor Xiao achieve the wider consciousness exhibited by Ouyang Feng at *Ashes of Time*'s denouement, whose nondiegetic narration over shots of a desert landscape proclaims: 'I sat at the doors for two days, watching the changing clouds. I suddenly realised that although I've been here for several years I've never really looked at the desert'. The more 'authentic' among Wong's protagonists learn to develop sensitivity to their environment. In *Chungking Express*, for example, 663 is eventually able to proclaim, 'I've changed a lot lately. I've become more observant. I've begun noticing tiny things'. (There is irony in the cop's claim, however, since he is still to discover the true nature of events, i.e. that the changes he notices in his apartment have been engineered by Faye; nevertheless, 663's increased attentiveness to his surroundings is a marker of his gradual progression toward authenticity.) Unlike 663 and Ouyang Feng, I will argue, *The Hand*'s self-absorbed characters demonstrate an inauthentic engagement with their physical surroundings, for they regard physical objects and their environment preponderantly in terms of utility and ornamentation. Wong undermines this insensitivity to the 'being-of-things', therefore, by laying stress on the environment (which stands as a microcosmic symbol for the world at large). (A similar tactic is in play in *Ashes of Time*, where the desert landscape is a recurrent 'autonomous' presence throughout the film; only at the close of the narrative does the salience

of the environment become apparent to Ouyang Feng.) It is a commitment to the 'external' world, I argue, that constitutes the conceptual basis for the general magnification of environmental features in the film.[44.]

But, of course, environmental salience achieves other, local effects, and sometimes emphasis is thrown on the environment as a by-product or fallout of other compositional strategies. As we have seen, the methods for giving visual weight to the environment are various: the physical terrain is actively explored by the spectator when multi-planar compositions camouflage plot details; compositions drive characters into the margins of the frame and expose an expansive stretch of environmental context; translucent foreground objects compel the viewer to gaze 'through' the environment at action occurring on a deeper spatial plane; opaque foreground objects repel our view of important action; shots begin and end with autonomous space, devoid of human figures; and virtually an entire scene is devoted to tabulating the film's key locales. The general point to be derived from these examples is that the spectator, confronted throughout the film with the salience of narrative space, must respond actively to the various challenges that environmental salience presents (e.g. its obfuscation of action, its obliquities, ambiguities and so forth). I have tried to outline, therefore, the spectator's complex viewing activity as it is cultivated by a specific set of compositional techniques. But I have not yet addressed the basic ambiguities that occur when Wong's compositions are juxtaposed in sequence. In other words, I have still to discuss how *The Hand*'s editing style impacts upon the viewer's reaction to the film's discrete compositions. Editing is one of several means by which a film can construct a sense of geography. In the next section, I will be concerned with exploring the visual strategies, including techniques of editing, that Wong employs to geographically organise the narrative space. As we shall see, the editing together of shots does not diminish the environmental salience that we discover on an individual shot basis;

however, the film's delineation of geography presents viewing challenges of a kind we have not yet encountered.

Geographical Confusion

Counterposing the film's environmental salience is a set of formal techniques that coalesce to render geographical specificity elusive. Most broadly, the film does not invoke a precise city or province in which its main locales may be contextualised. The Palace Hotel is a setting shorn of geographical specification, for example: it is situated in an unspecified Chinese milieu that only implicitly invokes wider contextual imperatives (e.g. social propriety) upon the cloistered world of the protagonists. Moreover, Wong eschews the option of limning (even vaguely) the geographical distance between the film's two principle terrains (the hotel and Xiao's workplace). In this, *The Hand* deviates from the relatively detailed mapping of geography in *Fallen Angels* (for example, the plotting of a trajectory from the underground subway to the assassin's apartment) and *Chungking Express* (which generally delineates the spatial relations between its central Tsim sha tsui and Lan Kwai Fong locations). This suppression of geographical context is partly revealed through *The Hand*'s economical employment of exterior establishing shots, which in classical cinema serve to position a key location within a surrounding milieu. Such shots are not only sparsely utilised in *The Hand* but also forswear the legibility with which they commonly function in classical cinema. In furnishing an exterior view of the tailoring factory, Wong favours an oblique close-up composition of the building's signboard over a more distanced, encompassing perspective of the environmental terrain. The vistas with which the classical spectator is encouraged to survey a setting's scenic encompassment are thus negated in *The Hand*, which seems to push geographical context to the margins of narrative significance.

The physical abstraction of the social landscape is not the only form of spatial elusiveness in *The Hand*. Frequently, Wong introduces scenes by framing a protagonist in close or medium-close shot, which inevitably privileges the figure in the frame at the expense of spatial delineation.

Similarly, scenes that commence with a panning movement over a wall, or that cull an obscure item from the *mise en scène* for visual emphasis, tend to obfuscate the viewer's recognition of the narrative space. A sense of disorientation accompanies the spectator throughout *The Hand*. We need to distinguish our sense of 'disorientation' from that conceptualised by the socio-allegorical critics, however. In the Introduction, I noted Janice Tong's characterisation of Wong's 'disorienting' visual style, and its animation of themes of cultural instability and 'disappearance'. Tong here presupposes a cognitively active perceiver, since the viewer is invited to 'read off' social allegory from a host of visual strategies. Disorientation functions in a more immediate way in *The Hand*, I suggest, though without attenuating the critical activity expected of the viewer. The film's spatial discontinuities and occasionally disjunctive editing style entail that the viewer's organising activity is essential in accurately reconstructing the topography of narrative space. Irrespective of social connotations, then, *The Hand*'s disorienting visual tactics presuppose a cognitively-active viewer at the crucial level of spatial (and therefore narrative) comprehension.

The Hand's typifying strategy is to fragment a homogenous space into a string of related but seemingly discontinuous shots, only to later revisit the locale and map out its spatial coherence with greater clarity. An example of this gradual crystallisation of space occurs in the sequence where Hua deflects the overtures of an admirer (Mr Zhao) and petitions Xiao to visit her. Wong begins this sequence with a repressive close-up of Hua and Mr Zhao that frames only their midriffs; when their bodies separate, the viewer can discern general features of the background space (white doors, purple walls), but the shot's exclusivity precludes unequivocal identification of the depicted space (Fig.5.5). The next shot may at first strike the viewer as discontinuous, principally due to its reversal of shot-scale: the close framing is now displaced by a long shot, which stages in depth Mr Zhao's exchange with Ying at the doorway (Fig.5.6). In fact, the viewer recognises facets of the décor as

features of Hua's apartment (in particular, the leaf-patterned wallpaper in the frame's foreground), while the presence of Mr Zhao now leads us to surmise that the action in the first shot has occurred somewhere in the courtesan's apartment. The narration cuts to a third space, Hua's bedroom: in medium-long shot, Hua checks her appearance before a circular mirror (Fig.5.7) and approaches the camera to enter a closer, frontal framing (Fig.5.8). She exits into the off-screen space at the left of frame, and the camera tarries for a moment upon the backdrop that now softens into a milky iridescence (Fig.5.9). A 180° cut presents an alternative point of vantage on the area that Hua has just vacated, revealing a large oval mirror (into which Hua, we now recognise, gazes [in Fig.5.8]) and incorporating a doorway on the right edge of the frame (Fig.5.10). From offscreen, we hear Hua converse with Ying. Presently Hua enters the shot through the doorway, continues her dialogue with Ying (who remains out of view), and turns back toward the entrance – a directional cue that underscores the spatial contiguity of the characters (and the distinct apartment rooms they occupy) (Fig.5.11).

The process of comprehending this scene's spatial unity involves both an awareness of the film's intrinsic norm of restrictedness and an active sensitivity to spatial and directional cues. I am not claiming that Wong here unfolds an unintelligible narrative space whose coherence it is impossible to map. However, the viewer's task of identifying a spatial nexus that connects the scene's discrete shots is constantly challenged by the way Wong deliberately flouts our spatial assumptions.[45.] Several disorienting tactics seek to mystify geographical transparency: extreme juxtapositions of shot-scale, the inaccessibility of offscreen space, and unpredictably shifting station points elicit a sense of uncertainty in regard to the apartment interior's precise coordinates. Thus disoriented, the viewer is apt to infer the action's geographical framework only to a general and indeterminate extent. It is in this context that the next shot (which is also, technically, the beginning of a new scene) acquires special pertinence. A slow lateral

pan seamlessly connects Hua's bedroom and the front door, thus corroborating the spectator's inferential connection of the two spaces and flattening out the previous scene's spatial ambiguities (Figs.5.12-5.13). In other words, the geography of the previous scene is now mapped with far greater simplicity and legibility, thereby undercutting the spatial complexity formerly postulated.

We might speculate as to Wong's motives in withholding straightforward delineation of the narrative space. The delayed sculpting of a specific geography may be designed to announce the narration's epistemic authority: whereas the narration at first restricts geographical transparency, it ultimately makes flagrant the fact that it can articulate spatial relations lucidly and without abstruseness. Alternatively the principle of geographical ambiguity may be conceived in relation to *The Hand*'s evocation of voyeuristic perception; the various fixed station points approximate the optical viewpoint of an invisible and unobtrusive observer. In this interpretation, the limits placed upon the spectator's visual perception symbolise the film's thematic concern with the failures to perceive (characters, situations) accurately. In any event, it seems clear that Wong's treatment of space typically assumes an active and inference-making spectator. The viewer cannot hold fast to conventional assumptions regarding spatial organisation and still achieve a coherent comprehension of the scene's geography. Rather each new shot qualifies the spatial dimension of the last; on such a basis, the viewer must constantly reconceptualise her assumptions regarding the geographical framework in which the action takes place.

Not all of *The Hand*'s spatial manoeuvres are as oblique as the example presented above. We tend to find that the film's spaces appear less 'heterogeneous' in scenes of particular dramatic importance. Our introduction to Hua's apartment, for example, is facilitated by an unpredictable assemblage of perspectives, but when the scene unfolds around Hua's crucial seduction of Xiao, the narration settles into a relatively conventional shot/reverse-shot pattern. (We find

correspondence here with our earlier example of Xiao on the stairs, and the film's overall strategy of diminishing environmental salience at moments of dramatic significance.) In general, the film's tendency toward spatial indeterminacy is nonetheless contained within a governing principle of continuity: the narrative action occurs within a naturalistic spatial continuum, and if many of the film's images initially confuse and disorientate, subsequent perceptual cues generally emerge to orient the viewer more reliably to the sequence of events. The viewer of *The Hand* therefore has continual cause not only to treat her initial assumptions about a shot's spatial properties with scepticism, but also to try to accommodate visual obliquities into a framework of spatial continuity.

So far in my analysis of *The Hand*, I have argued that the film's visual style, and in particular its representation of narrative space, tenders numerous obstacles for the viewer to navigate. However, I have not intended to imply a visual style that retards narrative comprehension and pleasure. Indeed, as I have argued, spatial qualities are subordinated to plot intelligibility. What I have identified as environmental salience and geographical confusion simply makes possible the viewer's active engagement with the text; both phenomena ensure that the viewer is not ordained to passively luxuriate in the film's sensuous aesthetic. We have seen that narrative space acquires special prominence in two principal ways: first, by means of a compositional bias that frequently italicises the physical environment, and second, as a result of discontinuous or oblique editing strategies. I have also introduced the supposition that, in many instances, the conceptual paradigm underlying *The Hand*'s idiosyncratic *mise en scène* is voyeurism, a claim that requires further elaboration and which I shall elucidate in the next section.

A Touch of Voyeurism

To me, the camera is nothing more than a tool used to translate what the eye sees.

Wong Kar-wai[46.]

In *The Hand* there are specific applications of cinematography that abet an impression of environmental salience, geographical confusion, and voyeurism. These applications moreover pursue expressive effects, sought not simply for their own sake but for the emotions they can induce in the spectator. To put it differently, expressive use of cinematography (including camera movement and postproduction visual effects) does not indicate that the film is flagrantly self-conscious, only that cinematography is a constituent in the film's dramatic and affective schema. The film's customary shots of walls, for example, most certainly manifest a large-scale tendency toward environmental gravity, and induce a sense of geographical uncertainty by a tight, exclusive framing; but, additionally, these shots reveal an expressive purpose. This expressivity derives partly from the *mise en scène*, of course, as well as from non-visual parameters like music, but it is also revealed through the movement of the camera, the languorous panning motions that the camera performs in its traverse of the environment's surfaces. In *The New Republic*, Stanley Kauffmann pinpoints the expressive charge of Wong's visual style, noting of *The Hand* that 'the very walls of rooms...seem erotic'.[47.] It seems to me that nothing of this erotic ambience is inherent within the images themselves: in Xiao's workplace, for instance, the walls lining the factory are lit for dankness and decorated to accentuate the squalid conditions in which the workmen operate. Rather, insofar as an atmosphere of eroticism is discernible, it is expressed through contextual factors (i.e. implicitly sexual story action), restrained but feverish string orchestration, and, at a visual level, the dilatory panning trajectory of the camera, which brushes along the wall like a long caress.

At other times, cinematography is expressively employed to identify the camera with voyeuristic perception. Earlier it was argued that *The Hand* carpenters specific compositional strategies that not only engender environmental salience, but also furnish a point of view analogous to that of an invisible, inquisitive observer. The evocation of voyeurism is instantiated by other cinematographic parameters besides *mise en scène*; in particular, Wong exploits camera mobility and focal shifts to achieve this expressive goal. When, for example, Hua forcibly throws a garment across the bedroom, the camera perceptibly shudders as if physically struck by the propelled object. The fact of the camera's responsiveness to Hua's activity cannot but implicate the camera in the diegesis; the camera is posited *as if* it were a palpable, corporeal presence in the fictional environment. (I am not, of course, proposing that the camera is a literal presence in the diegesis; rather, I postulate that the camera is *imaginatively* projected into the narrative situation.) Capitalising on its ostensible proximity to the diegetic action, the camera pursues effects of a visceral sort. The galvanic tremor of the camera, as if buffeted by the discarded garment, is intended to engender a concussive sensation, to elicit surprise or shock from the spectator.

I am not claiming anything original or innovative for this device (indeed, it is frequently evinced in narrative cinema). But I do want to make a claim for its successful employment in *The Hand*, if by success we mean the achievement of specifically intended effects by the filmmaker. In supporting this claim, it is necessary to set the device in contrast with the film's overall aesthetic form. Aside from its intrinsic power to perturb, the convulsing camera engineers a genuinely unexpected rupture in *The Hand*'s formal tissue, which has hitherto been governed by stationary shots, slow or barely perceptible pans, and a generally meditative visual rhythm. (Recall the similar effect engendered by *In the Mood for Love*'s disjunctive panning shot, as Chow becomes conscious of his wife's affair.) Given this understated background, the viewer's reaction here is surely liable to be comprised

at least of surprise; furthermore, I would suggest that the visceral sensation wrought by the vibrating camera is likely to pack a greater charge by dint of its very unexpectedness.

Moreover, if, as I have argued, one is apt to correlate the camera with a voyeuristic observer, this scene threatens to expose the limits of voyeurism, to beget its moment of collapse. For the implied proximity of the 'observer' and the action violates the distance that conditions voyeuristic activity, and threatens the (impossible) exposure of the observer to the object of his gaze. (Indeed, the proximal vicinity that we find here between the camera and the dramatic action is noticeably at odds with the 'discreet' and 'tactful' distance that is generally maintained by the film's tacitly inquisitive narration.) Hua's paroxysm spurs Xiao to establish a certain distance from the courtesan, if only at a physical level. And extradiegetically, the vigorous camera movement elicits a similar desire for distance from the spectator. This is not the only occasion where the spectator is identified with Xiao, and other examples of this analogy, we shall presently discover, develop more explicitly around visual cinematic structures.

One scene that identifies the camera as an 'observer' begins when Xiao reunites with Hua after an undisclosed period apart. Eventually, as Hua is overwhelmed by emotion, Xiao holds her in an embrace that is at once assuaging and furtively erotic. This erotic subtext is important, not only because it weaves a note of ambiguity into the action, but also because it generates a scenario apt for the bearer of the voyeuristic look. The apogee of voyeuristic activity is the gaze that contemplates an erotic object, and the scopophilic gaze is here beckoned by the implicitly sexual spectacle performed by the protagonists. But any kernel of scopophilic pleasure engendered by this scene is qualified by an overlay of melancholia, appreciable at a visual level by Hua's transparent distress and at an aural level by an aching, dirgeful string score. A tension between sorrow and eroticism is thus yielded, much as Xiao is beset by dichotomous impulses, i.e. to comfort and to seduce. In this example, moreover, the camera's simulation of an observer's

gaze is not accomplished through *mise en scène* or mobile camerawork. Rather it is an expressive play with visual focus that identifies the camera as an observer, at the same time conspiring to elicit audience emotion. The tight close-up that frames the twin protagonists slips fractionally out of focus, a stylistic gesture unmotivated by purely functional or practical demands (for example, the blurring of the image does not direct attention to new or important action, as in rack-focusing; rather, all dimensions of the image are rendered hazy). Given this lack of practical motivation by which to explain the shot's focal gesture, one is inclined to assimilate the effect into *The Hand*'s framework of voyeurism. In this context, the camera is again responsive to diegetic action (on this occasion displaying putative empathy) and almost literally becomes a camera-eye, a blurry, mechanical optic, misting over with emotion. In this instance, then, the camera is only partly voyeuristic, giving salience to the sorrow rather than to the erotic desire conveyed and elicited by the scene. At any rate, *The Hand* attributes corporeality to the camera; it animates what we might characterise as an emotive camera, because of the camera's capacity not only to solicit affective states but also to simulate them.

I have already noted that *The Hand* establishes an analogy between Xiao and the camera. It will be useful to now examine this identification more closely. Relating shots integrally to a character's optical viewpoint is the most explicit means by which camera and character may be identified with each other. Only two point-of-view shots (POV) are rendered in *The Hand*, but it is Xiao's field of vision that is represented in both. That Xiao should be identified with the camera is highly appropriate, since both camera and character share an indomitable tendency for voyeurism. Aside from POV shots, a kind of perceptual mise-en-abyme is proffered: if the camera is conceptualised as a voyeuristic observer, it in turn observes Xiao in acts of voyeurism. The camera-viewer and Xiao are thus conjoined in voyeurism, an affinity hinted at early in the story. When Xiao makes his first visit to

Hua's apartment, for example, the young apprentice is instructed to wait in the dining room until summoned. As he waits, a volley of erotic moans filter through an adjacent wall (behind which extends Hua's bedroom), and Xiao ambivalently listens in. The youth's position is curiously unstable in these moments, since while he is patently present in the narrative space, he is effectively placed outside of it by virtue of his surreptitious, prying activity. Xiao therefore is made an audience to the drama. His unsettled relationship to the environment is concurrent with an analogous feeling harvested in the spectator, whose sense of proximity without involvement is educed by the kinds of visual and spatial strategies we have examined above. (Though, as I have noted, there are exceptional instances that threaten to involve the viewer quite palpably, e.g. the convulsing camera). I would also contend that the viewer's experience apropos the diegesis, which in this case may be characterised in terms of intrusiveness, is parallel with Xiao's experience apropos the diegetic environment, the latter figure demonstrably discomforted by the unabashed sounds of lovemaking that reverberate through the walls.

Xiao's activity, like that of the camera, is habitually voyeuristic or intrusive, as when he eavesdrops on Hua's sexual encounters and affrays, or spies on the factory's foreman. It is therefore felicitous that the voyeuristic camera be identified with the agent most susceptible to voyeuristic perception. My argument is not that the camera ought to be understood as perpetually focalising Xiao's perception of narrative events. Rather I am claiming that Xiao and the camera are set in comparison, specifically in reference to a special proclivity for voyeurism. This correlation is most explicitly revealed in the two shots that render Xiao's optical point of view. *The Hand*'s first example of POV editing occurs when Xiao, stationed at one of the factory's worktables, observes Jin in a telephone dialogue with Hua. In the POV shot, Jin is turned away from camera (and hence away from Xiao). Several visual cues hint at a certain perceptual effort involved in Xiao's gaze; for example, the shot is composed in a way that maximises

foreground details and embeds Jin deeper in the frame. Xiao's line of vision must bypass these foreground elements and journey through an aperture in order to locate its target. Furthermore, given that Jin stands aslant the workspace where Xiao resides, one may infer that the foreman does not intend for others to overhear the telephone conversation. The other POV shot comes when Xiao languishes at the door to Hua's apartment, listening to the coital activity that takes place within. The camera does not cut to the participants engaged in lovemaking; from Xiao's visual perspective, we see only the firmly battened door. Xiao's voyeuristic gaze is thus retarded by a physical feature of the environment, and both Xiao and the spectator are cued to imagine or, at least, to infer the activity that transpires behind the door. (On the aural track, the sound of creaking bedposts assists this imaginative process.) The important point is that neither of the film's POV shots represents a conventional, 'innocuous' act of looking. Rather, the camera represents Xiao's field of vision only, but not always, when his gaze is covert and voyeuristic. By identifying the camera with Xiao's gaze in these moments, both the camera and the protagonist are complicit in the act of voyeurism. They are thus quite literally conjoined in the voyeuristic mode of seeing. That Xiao and the camera are coalesced around voyeurism (and that this coalescence occurs *at a visual level*) is tacit corroboration of the conceptual significance of voyeurism to *The Hand*'s overarching visual design.

That, in *The Hand*, there is an identification or parallel between Xiao and the camera, and moreover, that this affinity is predicated on an essential voyeurism, is evident throughout the film. To adduce one further example, in which Hua models a *cheongsam* for Xiao, there is implied an 'interchange' of the male protagonist's and the (implied male) viewer's perspectives. First we see an ornate close-up of Hua with her back to camera. This shot does not so much traffic in the kind of Brechtian distanciation assayed by a similar, well-known composition in *Vivre sa vie* (1962), as obliquely offer up the female protagonist for male scopophilic pleasure. The composition is framed and blocked to

solicit appreciation of Hua's immaculate grooming (principally, the nape of her neck, coiffured hair, and textured *cheongsam*). After a period lasting several seconds, wherein the viewer's gaze is attracted exclusively by Hua, Xiao materialises in the shot's mid-ground, disappears momentarily from view, and re-emerges in the extreme foreground plane. Now Xiao's back is to camera, and his prominent screen position largely obstructs our view of Hua. Has Xiao compositionally displaced Hua as the target of the viewer's gaze, therefore? This is not the case, I would argue, because Xiao is stationed outside the depth of focus. Rather, Xiao does not so much displace the object of the gaze as displace the gaze itself: he impedes and (roughly) appropriates the scopophilic gaze ascribed to the spectator. Again, the close identification of protagonist and camera is mobilised around the act of voyeurism. Xiao's hesitation at the back of Hua is sufficient for us to recognise that his ostensible haute couture activity is a pretext for voyeurism. At the same time, by extension of the fact that she literally models for him, Hua here invites the gaze of the tailor (and, by association, that of the spectator). In this respect, the dynamic interplay between the protagonists vaguely recalls a scene in *Vertigo* (1958), in which Judy, modelling a selection of outfits, nourishes Scottie's voyeuristic gaze; or, as Marian E. Keane puts it, '[Scottie creates] a woman in fulfilment of his *vision*' (emphasis in original).[48.]

The evocation of *Vertigo*, a film about a man who 'designs' a woman, clothes her, and sculpts her appearance for the satiation of his gaze, extends also to the visual schema of *The Hand*. Visual coincidences between the two films are particularly apparent in the decors embellishing the dramatic environments. In both films, the colour green is at once ubiquitous and leitmotivic. *The Hand* yokes greenish hues to places associated with Hua, saturating the hallways, doors, and apartments of the Palace Hotel in a green gloss. Green is the colour, according to Edith Head, of death; for William Chang, *The Hand*'s art director, a green palette can usefully invoke nostalgia.[49.] By dramatising the dissolution of a woman, a romance, and (implicitly) an

epoch, *The Hand* animates both of these observations. Furthermore, systematically co-ordinating colour schemes to specific agents and locales not only bares the device of *mise en scène*, but also courts the spectator's aesthetic appreciation of a consciously styled set design. This self-conscious play with colour constitutes yet another manifestation of environmental salience, of course, but it also buttresses our claim that Wong is neither slavishly realist nor adverse to tropes of visual stylisation.

The mirror is another visual motif central to both *Vertigo* and *The Hand*, and one that returns us to the notion of the gaze. *The Hand*'s main locales abound with mirrors, through which narrative action is routinely represented - another device, then, whereby the viewer's gaze reaches the action via a physical detail in the environment. (More generally, mirrors are a salient décor element in Wong's characteristic set design. In *Days of Being Wild*, Peter Brunette notes, Wong 'often chooses to view characters through their mirror reflections', a destabilising conceit revived in most of Wong's subsequent films; 'the eye', observes another critic, thus 'has its work cut out distinguishing the actors from their reflections'.[50.] In *Fallen Angels* and *2046*, mirrors refract the reflected figure, prismatically projecting multiple iterations of the same image. Such strategies transform a visual motif into an expressive vehicle for authorial themes of fractured identity and doubling.) Specifically in regard to *The Hand*, mirrors serve to facilitate and return Hua's narcissistic gaze. The film makes use of a compositional schema that expresses 'the unreciprocated gaze' – that is, a staging scenario wherein the gaze of a character is not reciprocated by the figure looked upon.[51.] Where possible, Wong aborts reciprocity of Xiao's gaze at Hua by conveying Hua's rapt absorption in her own reflection. (In this respect, Hua is on a continuum with other narcissists in the Wong Kar-wai canon.) Visually, this interplay of looks exposes the fundamental solipsism of both protagonists: Hua's gaze is anchored in narcissism, Xiao's in voyeurism, but each gaze, in corollary to its fixation on an object, is irreducibly myopic. It is to this myopia that I

earlier referred when I noted the protagonists' inauthentic engagement with their physical environment (and, by implication, with the wider social world). For instance, by making Hua the primary target of his gaze, Xiao downplays the vitality of the world that subtends her. For both characters, the environment liquefies into a subconscious haze and objects are outstanding only insofar as they can abet a solipsistic aim.

Consider the example of the mirror. Ritually throughout the film, Hua contemplates her reflected image. The perceptual target of Hua's gaze is not the mirror itself, but rather what it throws back; the object is attended to only in regard to its 'manipulability'. (Heidegger coins this term to denote equipment that is 'at our disposal', endowed with a primarily functional purpose; such equipment is 'ready-to-hand', utilised but not scrutinised by the protagonists.)[52.] The camera, on the other hand, occasionally dwells on the mirror even when the object is not subpoenaed by a posturing character. At times, visual emphasis on the mirror functions to set forth precisely this disappearance of the reflected figure, but not all of the mirror shots are accountable by this explanation. Indeed, by stripping the mirror of its practical function, the camera confers autonomous significance upon the object, encouraging the spectator to contemplate it in a way neglected by the self-centred protagonists. The object is thus defamiliarised for the spectator but not for the characters. (Similarly, our earlier example of street traffic in *Happy Together* is not experienced as defamiliarisation by the protagonists, i.e. the accelerated shot does not represent an agent's POV.) The camera thus stakes out a view of the environment that differs from that of the protagonists (i.e. more 'panoptic' and explorative). And it is here that we find the point of disjuncture in the identification of Xiao and the camera, for Xiao's voyeuristic gaze, riveted absolutely to Hua, fails to dovetail with the exploratory and comparatively omniscient gaze of the camera.

Hua maximises her attractiveness as a visual spectacle - for example, by commissioning the manufacture of resplendent clothes - not only for the scopophilic pleasure of her male clients, but also for the

gratification of her own narcissistic gaze. Hua may seem to correspond to Laura Mulvey's description of Lisa (Grace Kelly) in *Rear Window*. Mulvey writes: 'Lisa's exhibitionism has already been established by her obsessive interest in dress and style, in being a passive image of visual perfection...'.[53.] The equation of exhibitionism with passivity is rather half-baked, however: if Lisa and Hua share a fascination with the latest trends and, moreover, are cardinal examples of exhibitionism, it is frequently the case that Hua's 'passive image' is merely ostensible. Indeed it seems to me mistaken to equate exhibitionism with passivity, for surely exhibitionism connotes an *active* displaying of the self. This is not, of course, to argue that the exhibitionist cannot be rendered passive, that is, subjected to a gaze of which she is not aware; and this is perhaps the emphasis that Mulvey intends.

Nonetheless, I suggest that Hua's exhibitionism constitutes an active and conscious process, integrally related to the imperatives of her profession. The courtesan must effect her own objectification in order to maintain her particular livelihood. To bring this point into focus, let us return to a moment explored above, namely, the back-to-camera shot of Hua. All of the shot's compositional properties imply Hua's disempowerment: her statuesque pose, her oblique relation to the camera, and the 'active' position that Xiao assumes outside Hua's optical range. Stated roughly, the shot is structured in such a way as to subjugate Hua to the empowered ('male') gaze of Xiao and the camera. However, as Noël Carroll observes, 'voyeurs require unwary victims for their intrusive gaze'[54.]; the incognizance of the victim is the mainspring of the voyeur's empowerment. In this scene, as I noted earlier, Hua is neither unwary nor incognizant. But, more than this, she actively requisitions the male gaze by wittingly displaying herself as a model. Her apparent passivity, implied compositionally, is thus undercut by the active instantiation of exhibitionism, the conscious act of display.[55.] In this sense, Hua does not assume the kind of patriarchal role prepared for Lisa in *Rear Window*.

Hua's power (this is not too strong an adjective for her capacity to enthrall) is developed through the film's governing motif, the hand, which is manifoldly explored in the film. If Hua's elaborate *cheongsams* are bunting on an eroticised object, a veritable pageant is made of the film's congeries of hand movements. Hua's hands are instruments of power, wielded for manipulative purpose: a supine hand, for instance, seduces (as when Hua sexually pleasures Xiao) or stymies (as when she shields her mouth to discourage a kiss).[56.] In distinction, Xiao's hands are signifiers of both artisanal proficiency and sexual desire, and frequently the two signifieds are combined. The assiduousness of Xiao's dressmaking, for instance, is made an explicit index of his devotion to Hua; the conflation of craftsmanship and desire is evident also when Xiao uses, in place of measuring tape, his bare hands to determine Hua's physical dimensions. (Near the end of *The Hand*, Xiao intones this association quite explicitly: 'If it hadn't been for your hand', he tells Hua, 'I wouldn't have become a tailor'.)

Needless to say, hands are made prominent at a visual level. Multiplanar compositions exploit the depth of field to accentuate a character's hands, while allowing the rest of the figure to slip out of focus (Fig.5.14). Or obtrusive details of the environment obstruct our view of all but the protagonist's hands, which emerge in the shot as if dismembered (Fig.5.15). Attendant to this compositional concern with hands is a visual evocation of texture and touch. Stephen Teo identifies a commensurate fascination with texture in *Ashes of Time*, noting that 'there are scenes of hands stroking, squeezing and rubbing that have less to do with the narrative and are more concerned with the tactile sensations that the director wants us to feel...'.[57.] Given that it centres on a dressmaker and a courtesan, however, *The Hand* establishes narrative as well as aesthetic motivation for its focus on texture and touch. This emphasis is pictorially mobilised by the camera's dilatory ramble over the garments that Xiao handcrafts for Hua. Images of this sort are experienced as sensuous evocations of texture, and activate a tactile impulse in the spectator. Thus *The Hand* posits Hua's clothes as

fetish objects. Subsequently, just as the spectator's voyeurism is doubled in the furtive gaze of Xiao, so the spectator's tactility is a harbinger of Xiao's fetishistic desires.

One scene that exemplifies Xiao's fetishism begins when he works alone in the factory, modifying Hua's dress. As in other examples described above, Xiao's labour here transmutes into erotic play, as he slides his hand inside the garment, caressing the fabric. Xiao's autoerotic activity not only converges upon *The Hand*'s visual articulation of texture, corroborating the camera's fetishisation of the garment, but also underscores the physical absence of the figure for whom the *cheongsam* is intended. In this respect, the scene echoes earlier images in the film (e.g. the montage inventory of the film's abandoned locales) that tacitly portend Hua's permanent absence from the narrative world. (It is also possible to construe from this scene that in Hua's absence, Xiao is unable to work; without Hua, we have learned, Xiao would not have become a tailor. His devotion to his craft is inseparable from his devotion to Hua, a conceit implied at the very end of the film. Jin asks Xiao, 'Have you finished Ms Lau's dress?' But Xiao cannot answer, for having lost the woman he loves, he has also lost the *raison d'être* for his artisanship.)[58.] In *The Hand*, therefore, the task of the visual motif is only partly dedicated to engaging the viewer at a sensuous level. Motifs such as hands and clothes also beckon us to interpret the imagery symbolically, to extrapolate narrative themes.[59.] Hua's absence transposes the agency through which erotic pleasure is experienced. To Xiao, Hua asks: 'Do you remember my hand?' When the object of the gaze is absent, the voyeuristic act is rendered dysfunctional. It is in this moment that Xiao remembers the hand and its ability to bring pleasures commensurate with those of the gaze.

It has been the task of this chapter to elucidate the way that *The Hand*'s localised visual tactics assimilate into a large-scale conceptual framework. It has also been my concern to demonstrate how these visual tactics frequently become the focus of the spectator's

preoccupation, inaugurating a host of cognitive experiences that fly in the face of spectatorial passivity - the response implied by such non-technical assignations as 'hallucinatory' and 'dreamlike'. Yet I have not sought to deny that *The Hand* is visually very sensuous. Indeed, its optic allure is essential to the communication of important visual and narrative motifs, not least of which is the hand and its associations of texture, touch, and sensuality. (Lisa Odham Stokes argues that Wong's images are 'almost tangible; they make you swoon'.)[60.] I have also stressed the sense of geographical confusion that is entailed by a generally oblique editing style, but here I have not intended to imply that Wong is a pure avant-gardist, repudiating classical principles of shot relation and spatial construction. Rather, the claim is that Wong indeed utilises continuity devices, but that they tend to operate in distressed fashion.

If *The Hand* is not exclusively rooted in avant-garde visual styles, nor is it a product of the neorealist tradition. Writing of *In the Mood for Love*, Richard Corliss observes that the film 'has all the mystery of real life transformed into seductive art'.[61.] Glossing over the passivity implied by the artwork's 'seduction' of the spectator, what Corliss is describing here is essentially the defamiliarisation of reality, which is quite distinct from the commitment to represent reality that defines the aesthetic agenda of neorealism. We have seen how Wong employs postproduction effects to defamiliarise reality in *Happy Together*'s accelerated shots of street traffic, but *The Hand* generally finds subtler ways of making the familiar seem strange. Defamiliarisation pertains to *The Hand* in the way that everyday fixtures of real life (e.g. walls) acquire a new aspect (e.g. eroticism), and how, more generally, the physical environment becomes an expressive, rather than simply mimetic, feature through various strategies of foregrounding. I have attempted to relate this general emphasis on the environment, exemplified by what I have characterised as environmental salience and geographical confusion, to a perceptual evocation of voyeurism, and to

disclose how this perceptual practice is dovetailed at a narrative and thematic level.[62.]

Moreover, the visual theme of voyeurism, the confusion of spatial geography, and the notion of exhibitionist performance, are a constellation of elements that coalesce around a narrative theme intimated in *The Hand*'s denouement. This is the theme of social pretence and perceptual misconception. In the final sequence of the film, Xiao returns to the factory and invents a tale to conceal Hua's terminal condition. With unquestioning naivety, Jin observes: 'She didn't have it easy, did she? Two years ago I thought she's finished. Then an opportunity came along and she's on her feet again. Who would've guessed?' Xiao's response, echoing Jin's rhetorical utterance, is laden with thematic weight: 'Yes, who would have guessed?' The film's theme of perceptual misconceptions, dramatised, for instance, by the visual contrivance of geographical disorientation, is expanded metaphorically to encompass the fallacious assumptions that are made by characters in respect of Hua. These assumptions (e.g. of sound physical constitution, of financial sufficiency and so forth) are propagated by Hua herself, whose narcissism, as we have seen, does not desensitise her to the external gaze; the tailor-made clothes, for instance, serve partly to provide a semblance of social wellbeing.[63.] Of the characters in the fiction, Xiao is quite alone in 'guessing' the financial straits and physical affliction besetting Hua. The film concludes on a medium close-up shot of Xiao, the crestfallen state that assails him barely penetrating his surface composure; the question of 'who will guess?' applies equally well to this stricken but inscrutable figure.

Notes

1. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997, p.25.

2. The other episodes in the film are directed by Steven Soderbergh and Michelangelo Antonioni.

[3.] Stephen Teo, *Wong Kar-wai*, London: BFI, 2005, p.9.

[4.] Dan Harper employs the term 'granitic' to describe Kitano's facial distinctiveness, in 'Kitano Takeshi's *Sonatine* (1993)'. *Senses of Cinema*. http://www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/00/10/sonatine.html. Accessed: 22/05/01.

[5.] David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, Routledge, 1985, pp.274-310.

[6.] Nathan Lee, 'Elusive Objects of Desire', *Film Comment* 41:4 (July/August 2005), p.32.

[7.] David Bordwell, *Planet Hong Kong: Popular Cinema and the Art of Entertainment*, Harvard University Press, 2000, p.276.

[8.] *Ibid*. p.279.

[9.] See *Ibid*. p.285. Janice Tong essentially describes the same phenomenon when she writes of Wong's images often 'slipping from our gaze'. See Janice Tong, '*Chungking Express*: Time and its Displacements', in *Chinese Films in Focus: 25 New Takes*, edited by Chris Berry, London: BFI, 2003, p.54.

[10.] David Bordwell, *Ozu and the Poetics of Cinema*, Princeton University Press, 1994, p.76.

[11.] Bordwell, *Planet Hong Kong*, p.279.

[12.] *Fallen Angels* also places a visual emphasis on doubling. In the shot just described, a double-framing principle governs the formal depiction of the protagonist: Killer's enclosure within the perimeter of the mirror and his framing by the camera posits a visual mise-en-abyme. Similarly, shots staging characters in doorways or poised at windows activate this 'embedded' framing principle. More generally, Wong's fondness for two-shots, split-screen effects, and demarcations in depth (i.e. explicit foreground/background divisions) plays quite centrally into the film's visual system of duality. These visual strategies are utilised throughout Wong's oeuvre, but find particular conceptual significance in *Fallen Angels*. They also give formal expression to *Fallen Angels*' thematic and narrative motif of doubling, exemplified in the film's employment of parallel plotlines, iterations of dramatic action, and foregrounding of doppelganger associations between characters. (Wong also conceived *Fallen Angels* as the second part of a stylistic and thematic diptych.) Explicitly built into the film's visual design, therefore, is this narrative preoccupation with themes of the double. It is also worth observing that *Fallen Angels*' evocation of a noir universe aptly accords with the film's theme of urban alienation. The prototypical noir protagonist, according to Andrew Dickos, is 'alternatively lost and at home' within his urban world, 'a lone spirit' who experiences 'a loss of the self among the masses' (Andrew Dickos, *Street with No Name: A History of the Classic American Film Noir*, University Press of Kentucky, 2002, p.63.) Film noir thus provides an ideal generic context for Wong's characters who are at once inextricably of the city and irreducibly estranged from it.

[13.] Over one shot, in which Agent's advanced foreground position 'separates' her from a smattering of background figures, the female protagonist intones in voiceover, 'I don't know any of these people. They don't interest me either. Soon they'll be history'.

[14.] Janice Tong, '*Chungking Express*: Time and its Displacements', p.48.

[15.] Kristin Thompson, *Breaking the Glass Armor: Neoformalist Film Analysis*, Princeton University Press, 1988, p.11.

[16.] Victor Shklovsky, 'Art as Technique', in *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays*, (translated by Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis), University of Nebraska Press, 1965, p.12.

[17.] Many critics take Wong's clock motif to be an allegorical emblem, alluding to the 1997 handover (and thus invoking an extrafilmic, if not a narrative, deadline).

[18.] Stephen Teo associates this emphasis on light and motion with avant-garde Futurist painting. He also finds traces of avant-garde influence in Wong's fetishisation of clocks. Noting that Wong's clock motif functions symbolically to indicate 'the malleability of time', Teo invokes Dali's surrealist delineation of watches in 'The Persistence of Memory' as a point of comparison. (See Teo, *Wong Kar-wai*, pp.61-2; 37.) The clock motif is also attractive to the avant-garde filmmaker interested in shifting modernity, change, or abstract conceptions of time. In *Ghosts Before Breakfast* (1928), surreal and abstractly-related shots cohere around stable elements (the motivic image of a clock or a gun). As in Wong's films, the clock here eludes its classical narrative function (e.g. of portending a deadline). In addition to anchoring abstract shots to a common centre, the clock motif will also carry symbolic weight, as when the object fissures into two parts at the film's end. Although Wong's clock motifs are burdened with less formal importance, they can serve to orient the spectator in diegetic space (e.g. *In the Mood for Love*'s salient wall-clocks help us identify Chow's office or Su Lizhen's workplace). And, as in *Ghosts Before Breakfast*, presenting the clock in palpable fashion allows Wong to flag thematic or symbolic meaning in the object.

[19.] By categorising *Koyaanisqatsi* as a 'city symphony' film, I do not intend to deny that the film may also be associated with other avant-garde film types or 'genres', e.g. the landscape film.

[20.] For the avant-garde filmmaker, these themes may have an additional rhetorical or ideological centre. *Koyaanisqatsi*, for instance, puts forth an indictment of the perceived decay and chaos blighting modern societal existence. Its formal seductiveness works rhetorically: the playful manipulation of figure movement intentionally evokes and critiques a world that is too fast-moving. In contrast, Wong's appropriations of this tactic eschew any such rhetorical motivation. *Chungking Express*, *Fallen Angels*, and *Happy Together* do not criticise the world as being too

fast-moving; they simply show that the world is too fast-moving *for Wong's protagonists*. By operating within an explicit narrative framework, Wong can recast the ideological *raison d'être* that motivates equivalent visual tactics in *Koyaanisqatsi*.

[21.] Teo, *Wong Kar-wai*, p.95.

[22.] David Thomson, *The New Biographical Dictionary of Film*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004, p.970; Ian Birnie, 'Best of 2000: Film' (compiled by Elizabeth Howitz), *Artforum International* vXXXIX n4 (December 2000), p.27.

[23.] Amy Taubin, 'The Long Goodbye', *Film Comment* (July-August, 2005), p.28.

[24.] For example, see Tom Charity, 'The Wong Answer', *Time Out* (April 22-29, 1998) n1444, p.74; Amy Taubin, '*In the Mood for Love*' (review), *Sight and Sound* 10:11 (November 2000), p.55.

[25.] David Novitz, 'The Anaesthetics of Emotion', in *Emotion and the Arts*, edited by Mette Hjort and Sue Laver, Oxford University Press, 1997, p.248.

[26.] Ibid. p.249.

[27.] Quoted in Peter Brunette, *Wong Kar-wai*, University of Illinois Press, 2005, p.119.

[28.] William Rothman, *Hitchcock - The Murderous Gaze*, Harvard University Press, 1982, p.251.

[29.] Raymond Durgnat, *A Long Hard Look at 'Psycho'*, London: BFI, 2002, p.23.

[30.] Coincidentally, a hotel room provides the violated setting in both examples, and is a locale germane not only to the spatial horizon of subsequent narrative events, but also to the theme of repressed sexuality that each film in different ways explores.

[31.] 'Vococentrism' is a term, derived from Michel Chion, that denotes the hierarchical maintenance of the voice in the sound mix - its clarity and audibility - and its function in the aid of narrative comprehension. See Michel Chion, *The Voice in the Cinema*, Columbia University Press, 1999, p.6.

[32.] André Bazin, *Jean Renoir* (edited by François Truffaut) Da Capo Press, 1992, p.89.

[33.] Charles Barr, 'Cinemascope: Before and After'. In *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, edited by Gerald Mast and Marshall Cohen, Oxford University Press, 1974, p.139.

[34.] John Belton, *Widescreen Cinema*, Harvard University Press, 1992, p.199.

[35.] In any case, it is by no means assured that by confining figures to the frame's edge, the viewer's gaze is also confined to that area. Active spectators are sometimes wont to assert spectatorial freedom. Admitting so much environmental detail into the image can arouse the viewer's impulse to scrutinise peripheral areas of the frame. As Roger Cardinal has argued, a kind of viewing perception is possible that deliberately expands the scope of the gaze beyond the realm of narratively significant detail. The viewer's 'truant eye' thus 'mischievously' picks out fortuitous detail and disengages its gaze from the composition's intended object of attention. At the same time, Cardinal suggests that certain images are apt to spur this kind of 'aberrant' perception.

Appropriating terms from Roland Barthes, he argues that some images may unintentionally make salient peripheral, inconsequential, or capricious detail (the 'punctum'), thereby distracting the viewer's gaze from the intended locus of narrative interest (the 'studium'). I would argue that shots packed with environmental detail are likely to entice the viewer's gaze toward the punctum, that is, peripheral or narratively 'inactive' areas of the frame. See Roger Cardinal, 'Pausing over Peripheral Detail', *Framework* 30/31 (1986), pp.112-130.

[36.] Before this restrictive composition is complete, Xiao's face is seen clearly but its expression is opaque, the actor's performance thereby contributing to the compositional and epistemic opacity of the scene. Facial opacity is also motivated by *The Hand*'s generally minimalist aesthetic, as well as by connotations of the protagonist's culturally-engendered 'restraint'.

[37.] Noël Burch, *To the Distant Observer: Form and Meaning in Japanese Cinema*, edited by Annette Michelson, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979, p.160; Jim Jarmusch, 'Two or Three Things About Yasujiro Ozu', *Artforum International* XLII: 2 (October 2003), p.154.

[38.] Chris Berry and Mary Ann Farquhar, 'Post-Socialist Strategies: An Analysis of *Yellow Earth* and *Black Cannon Incident*'. In *Cinematic Landscapes: Observations on the Visual Arts and Cinema of China and Japan*, edited by Linda C. Erhlich and David Desser, University of Texas Press, 1994, p.90, 108.

[39.] Edward Branigan has highlighted the importance of narrative context for shots that attempt to convey absence. Branigan espouses the 'slot and filler' method for describing the structure of film narration, an approach that 'attempts to capture a large-scale, dynamic production of meaning'. (Edward Branigan, '"Here is a Picture of No Revolver!" The Negation of Images, and Methods for Analyzing the Structure of Pictorial Statements', *Wide Angle* 8:3/4, p.14.) In the 'slot and filler' approach, a shot is related not only to the images that are immediately contiguous with it, but also to other parts of the narration's structure. In one sense, *The Hand*'s montage of 'empty' shots expresses a negation of *all* human figures, because the depicted space is unpopulated; but due to the narration's foregoing manoeuvres (e.g. recurrently locating Hua within the depicted space), this negation is felt specifically in relation to Hua. It is Hua's absence that the narratively-informed sequence thus conveys, and not the absence of human figures per se.

[40.] Noël Burch, *Theory of Film Practice*, translated by Helen R. Lane, London: Secker & Warburg, 1973, p.25.

[41.] *Ibid.* p.19.

[42.] Wong himself denies being a neorealist. See Brunette, *Wong Kar-wai*, p.118.

[43.] Critics have also identified environmental salience as an iconographic rudiment of film noir. (See, for instance, J. A. Place and L. S. Peterson, 'Some Visual Motifs of Film Noir', *Film Comment* 10:1 (January/February 1974), p.31.

[44.] Wong has related *In the Mood for Love*'s environmental salience to generic expectations: 'Most of the time in a love story audiences want to concentrate on the couple…We wanted to start from an ambience and show how their relationship is not the only thing in the world'. See Graham Fuller, 'Interview: Wong Kar-Wai'. http://articles.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1285/is_2_31/ai_99757658/print (accessed 17/1/2002). This provides one possible explanation for *In the Mood for Love*'s brief interpolation of newsreel footage, which depicts General de Gaulle's visit to Cambodia. In plot terms, the newsreel motivates Chow's presence in Cambodia: he is there as a newspaper editor to cover the story of de Gaulle's visit. But the footage is also foregrounded against a narrative that has been quite hermetic in its scope, suggesting the vital existence of a world beyond the protagonists' intense and private drama. Thus the social and political world that impinges upon their affair (through its ideological and moral constraints) is now alluded to more explicitly.

[45.] Although Wong will undercut the classical cinema's principle of geographical clarity, he will stop short of the kind of impossible geography posited in such films as *Un chien andalou* (1929) and *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943). Such experimental films delight in overtly rupturing spatial continuity, manipulating conventional editing strategies to produce impossibly connected spaces. Wong's spatial manoeuvres position him firmly within the art cinema tradition. Like Ozu, for instance, Wong revises the classical norms of spatial construction without fully dispensing with geographical legibility. Occasionally, anomalous examples of avant-gardist geography emerge in the art cinema (e.g. in Orson Welles' spatially incoherent *The Trial* (1962)), but these exceptions invariably prove the rule.

[46.] Quoted in Laurent Tirard, *Moviemakers' Master Class: Private Lessons from the World's Foremost Directors*, Faber and Faber, 2002, p.199.

[47.] Stanley Kauffmann, 'Varieties of Love' (*Eros* review), *New Republic*, May 2 & 9, 2005 (232: 4,711 & 4,712), p.24.

[48.] Marian E. Keane, 'A Closer Look at Scopophilia: Mulvey, Hitchcock, and *Vertigo*' in *The Hitchcock Reader*, edited by Marshall Deutelbaum and Leland Poague, Iowa State University Press, 1986, p.236.

[49.] Edith Head, costume designer for *Vertigo*, quoted in Joel W. Finler, *Alfred Hitchcock: The Hollywood Years*, B.T. Batsford: London, 1992, p.120. William Chang quoted in Li Cheuk-to et al., 'An Art is Born: Interview with William Chang', in *William Chang: Art Director*, edited by Bono Lee and Li Cheuk-to, Hong Kong International Film Festival Society, 2004, p.41.

[50.] Brunette, *Wong Kar-wai*, p.25; Ryan Gilbey, '*2046*' (review), *Sight and Sound* 15:2 (February 2005), p.75.

[51.] See my 'Reflections on a Screen Narcissist: Leslie Cheung's Star Persona in the Films of Wong Kar-wai', *Asian Cinema* 16:1 (Spring/Summer, 2005), pp.220-38.

[52.] Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, translated by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson, Oxford: Blackwell, 1967, p.98, H.69.

[53.] Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', *Screen* 16:3 (Autumn 1975), p.16.

[54.] Noël Carroll, 'The Image of Women in Film: A Defense of a Paradigm', in Carroll, *Theorizing the Moving Image*, Cambridge University Press, 1996, p.266.

[55.] One might counter that Hua is not aware of the *camera's* gaze, but this objection is academic, for she is already actively performing for a gaze she knows to exist, i.e. Xiao's. She is not therefore an 'unwary victim'.

[56.] The visual theme of the hand is also in evidence in *2046*, revealingly moored to the character incarnated by Gong Li. Here, Gong plays Black Spider, a professional gambler who, quite literally, never reveals her hand; her omnipresent glove is worn, she claims, 'out of habit' – another of Wong's protagonists ensnared by a chronically self-imposed routine.

[57.] Teo, *Wong Kar-wai*, p.79.

[58.] Toward the climax of *In the Mood for Love*, Wong inserts an intertitle: 'The past is something [Chow] could see but not touch'. In *The Hand*, however, Xiao's only vestiges from the central relationship are the fabrics used for Hua's *cheongsams*; given the film's emphasis on touch and texture, Xiao's 'contact' with the past (unlike Chow's) is most likely to be tactile in nature.

[59.] Fig.5.5 shows one of many compositions in *The Hand* wherein visual emphasis is placed upon both the fabric and textures of Hua's *cheongsams*, and the innate expressiveness of her hands.

[60.] Lisa Odham Stokes, 'Being There and Gone: Wong Kar-wai's *In the Mood for Love* as a Pure Mood Poem', *Tamkang Review* 33:2 (Winter 2002), p.135.

[61.] Richard Corliss, 'Make Mood, Not Love', *Time* (November 13, 2000), p.96.

[62.] I have left aside the influence of certain production exigencies, primarily because they seem to me not especially illuminating of Wong's aesthetic choices. For instance, the constraints imposed by a shorter running-length have not discernibly resulted in artistic or aesthetic concessions.

[63.] Interestingly, the opposite effect may be engendered; William Chang suggests that 'flashy outfits actually underscore [a character's] weaknesses and conflicts'. Quoted in Li Cheuk-to et al., 'An Art is Born', p.44.

Conclusion

This study has undertaken to challenge some widespread assumptions relating to Wong's cinema. In particular, I have brought into question the following set of assumptions: that Wong disavows genre frameworks; that he purely subverts star images; that his films subordinate narrative elements to an overt use of style; and that his sensuous aesthetic straightforwardly 'seduces' the viewer. All these suppositions, I have argued, at least require qualification and revision. Upon closer inspection, for example, we find that the filmmaker so often identified with stylistic bravura rarely permits style to take precedence over narrative concerns. Nor can it be argued that Wong simply repudiates genre: as I argue in Chapter 3, Wong typically reworks, subverts, and yokes together distinct genres, manipulating their flexibility for authorial expression. In this generic practice, Wong is apt to be situated within a lineage of European auteurs, whose generic engagement encompasses a cinephiliac appropriation and modernist deconstruction of conventions. The association I posit between Wong and the European art filmmakers makes evident another major aim of this study, that is, to locate Wong's cinema within a base of pertinent traditions and contexts. By identifying the aesthetic traditions within and upon which Wong draws, much of the style and meaning of his work is brought into sharper focus. It is with style and meaning that I will be concerned in the rest of this concluding chapter. The discussion that follows will serve as a broad overview of the main issues raised within previous chapters. It also aims to embellish some of these earlier areas; in particular, it will elaborate upon a connection posited in previous chapters between Wong's thematic material and the tenets of existentialism. As a point of reference overlooked by critics, existential philosophy provides a fresh perspective on the key thematic meanings of Wong's films, and helps us attain a clearer understanding of the filmmaker's authorial 'world view'.

I began this study by pointing up the limitations that assail both purely allegorical accounts of Wong's films and accounts that place Wong as a straightforwardly sensual filmmaker. Whereas allegorists afford the narrative and thematic 'content' of Wong's films primary import, and thereby marginalise the films' stylistic virtuosity, critics that characterise Wong as a pure aesthete tend to centralise style and give too little attention to the films' conceptual material. On the first point, I hope to have demonstrated that an appreciation of Wong's oeuvre need not be contingent upon questions of social allegory. If some critics have argued that much of the richness and profit of Wong's cinema derives from its allegorical subtext, I have sought to demonstrate that the films are no less compelling at the surface level of story and theme. Conceptual 'depth' is implied by the critic who identifies Wong's cinematic achievement with social allegory: the films dovetail stylistic tactics and social comment in proficient and resourceful ways. Without discounting the allegorical dimension of Wong's films, I have been concerned to show that at least equal complexity is evident at the 'primary' level of diegetic action and narrative comprehension. An episodic plot structure, for example, may evoke the 'fragmentation' of Hong Kong culture, but it can also open up causal ambiguities that destabilise the viewer's command of story action. I have moreover sought to indicate that, just as cultural critics find an allegorical basis for Wong's use of style, so we can posit a conceptually holistic convergence of stylistic and *narrative* elements (a point I shall elaborate below). This total unity I have attempted to illuminate by characterising the formal arrangement of Wong's stylistic elements, and suggesting how this organisation functions to provide commentary on the narrative world.

I have also refuted the notion that Wong's films are primarily concerned with sensuous effects. Robert Bresson once trenchantly remarked of his contemporaries that '[they] were turning out cinematography rather than cinema'[1.], a criticism sometimes levelled at Wong. Correlating Wong's stylistic traits with music video and fashion

magazines, some critics dismiss Wong as a pure sensualist, preoccupied only with the sculpting of a sensuous audio-visual design. This is a critical perspective that the foregoing chapters have collectively sought to disqualify. Without denying the sensuous dimension of Wong's aesthetic program, I have argued that his films are not *purely* sensual: typically, Wong will motivate stylistic sensuousness by action or themes embedded in the diegesis. For example, a self-conscious, palpable, and sensuous use of music may be harnessed to character psychology and action, as when Faye makes a jukebox selection of 'California Dreamin'' in *Chungking Express*. Or the camera's sensual amble on a star's facial beauty may be motivated by character traits (e.g. narcissistic posturing) or by narrative themes (as in *Ashes of Time*'s emphasis on nostalgic idealisation). In such instances, Wong's seductive aesthetic is not merely sensuous, but is also anchored to storytelling concerns. (At the same time, acknowledging that Wong's style pursues sensuous and emotional effects allows us to see that style is not solely a vessel for narrative meaning.) A related assumption - that Wong's films are 'all style' - also comes into view here. I have tried to show that, while Wong's films characteristically exhibit a style that is palpable and self-conscious, they seldom engineer a purely parametric style. Rather, Wong's overt stylistic tactics are typically rudiments of story and theme. In this sense, his films are not so much 'all' style as style-plus-storytelling: his flagrant uses of style most frequently develop and inflect story material. Wong's cinema is neither purely sensuous nor wholly style-oriented, therefore. (As one critic writes of *Chungking Express*, its 'cool' style – i.e. its 'almost ramshackle' visualisation of Hong Kong space and the people that inhabit it - 'is not a pose of identity. It is an aesthetic strategy'.)[2.]

Stylistically, I have argued, Wong's films supplement formal palpability and narrative expressivity with defamiliarising effects. Allying a familiar Western folk-song to culturally-alien surroundings infuses the music with exoticness, as in our example of 'California Dreamin'' from *Chungking Express*. Self-evidently, this sense of the

exotic is not simply an effect of cultural 'otherness'; that is to say, it is not simply because Wong's films are culturally distinct that they can often appear exotic to us. Rather, exoticism in Wong's films is most often the result of the director's *intentional* strategies, the defamiliarising effects which he pursues, and is not merely a corollary basic to cultural difference and otherness. As well as facilitating narrative meaning, then, Wong's flagrant and sensuous style contributes to the studied *ostranenie* ('making-strange') of the narrative world; defamiliarisation thus constitutes another way in which Wong's stylistic procedures aim beyond the achievement of discursive saliency and sensuous aestheticism. Moreover, despite artistic explorations of beauty being a tradition-based and conceptually valid enterprise, the (erroneous) description of Wong as a pure cinematic aesthete is weighted with a distinctively pejorative valence. By debunking the view that Wong's films are style-centred, or purely sensuous, I aim to have cancelled out the assumption that Wong's films are 'bad' on the basis of stylistic excess or sensuousness.

We have also seen that Wong's sensuous aesthetic triggers assumptions of spectatorial passivity or 'anaesthesia'. One of the main aims of this study has been to disclose Wong's deployment of 'countervailing' strategies that undercut sensual pleasure and contravene the viewer's passive absorption of events. These strategies, we have seen, are manifest in a range of forms: compositional obliqueness or spatial ambiguity may spur the viewer's contemplation of narrative space; genre conventions may be reworked or travestied to throw the viewer's expectations off-balance; ellipses may appear in the plot to invite the spectator's inferential activity; narrational strategies may reveal repressiveness or unreliability, forcing the viewer to revise narrative assumptions; defamiliarisation may be in play to challenge the viewer's orthodox perception of events; and star personae may be manipulated to miscue the viewer about anticipated star tropes. All these strategies contribute to narrational complexity, and militate against the anaesthetisation of the spectator. (If these strategies

undercut sensual pleasure, however, they may engender a different kind of satisfaction that ensues from the challenge to expectations.) Often, the viewer is confronted with textual elements whose meaning is contingent upon hermeneutic activity. The (audio-) viewer of *Chungking Express*, for instance, is encouraged to infer the significance of the film's insistent song repetition: why is 'California Dreamin'' so densely employed on the music track? What significance does its lyric bear in relation to the frontiers of narrative and theme? (Here, critical activity may run concurrently alongside our sensuous experience of style.) Other textual phenomena – shot repetition, digressive action, pointed coincidences, visual motifs – also elicit active critical reflection from the viewer. Time and again, we find that interpretation of Wong's self-conscious or sensuous strategies pays dividends at the level of story, character, and theme: stylistic choices are typically embedded in the films' narrative and thematic material. Shot repetition may expose a character's commitment to routine action; or ostensible coincidence may indicate an agent's 'insincere' conviction in fate. It is seldom the case, therefore, that style is foregrounded for its own sake, or that it is employed purely for sensuous effect: rather, Wong's stylistic strategies most typically interact with authorial themes such as change and authenticity. Far from being 'all style', then, Wong's films holistically integrate style and content.

As I have indicated in previous chapters, Wong's thematic material frequently intersects with the conceptual terrain of existentialist philosophy. In pointing up this general similitude, I have sought to identify a pertinent frame of reference overlooked by Wong's critics. Indeed, further research could usefully be developed around the impact and osmotic 'assimilation' of existential thought not only in relation to Hong Kong cinema, but to Asian cinema in general. Some critics have cursorily identified existentialist ideas in the films of certain Asian auteur directors. Julian Stringer, for example, finds the 'burden of existential philosophy' embodied in the protagonist of John Woo's *The Killer* (1989).[3.] Another critic interprets Akira Kurosawa's *Rashomon*

(1950) in terms of 'existential allegory'.[4.] However, I know of no sustained study that deals centrally with the philosophy's infiltration into Asian cinema. Perhaps the most fruitful line of inquiry would involve tracing the intercultural transmigration of existentialism through its assimilation in the 'auteur-based', European art cinema. In his essay on Woo's treatment of masculinity, Stringer suggests that the philosophical themes evoked in *The Killer* are derived from Jean-Pierre Melville's existential gangster film, *Le Samouraï* (1967).   Not incidentally, Stringer argues, Melville's film is 'one of John Woo's favourite movies'.[5.] It seems to me plausible that Wong's existentialist themes can be accounted for in the same way. Wong's cinema is hugely indebted to the European art cinema, as I have indicated throughout this study. Irrespective of his 'primary' exposure to Sartre or Heidegger, Wong's cinephiliac devotion to films by Antonioni, Bergman, and the auteurs of the *nouvelle vague* will have thoroughly acquainted him with the broad landscape of existential themes and precepts. In particular, the themes of authenticity, choice, and absence of predestination are central to the conceptual material that glues Wong's oeuvre together. Still other themes that preoccupy Wong may also be traced to the existentialist tradition.

In marking several of his characters as solipsistic and estranged from social existence, for example, Wong reveals an affinity with the existentialist concept of 'Being-in-the-world'. In particular, we find correspondence with the doctrine's emphasis on the 'being-of-things'. Existentialism urges us to attend to the 'distinctive' and 'essential' character of objects and the spaces they inhabit. This 'discovery' of the physical world, John Macquarrie explains, 'is reached when practical concern is 'bracketed'…and we approach the point at which we consider space in a detached, objective manner'.[6.] However, as I argued in the previous chapter's discussion of *The Hand*, Wong's protagonists are generally oblivious to environmental detail. Myopically immersed in their own concerns, these agents relate to the phenomena of objects and things only as 'world-stuff', i.e. as providing a purely

practical or 'equipmental' purpose.[7.] Wong underscores his characters' prosaic, 'daily concern' of space by making the environment visually salient to the spectator. Significantly, in its emphasis on the perceptual distinctiveness of things and spaces, Being-in-the-world finds a related concept in a term of art that I have argued is crucial to Wong's aesthetic program: defamiliarisation. Iris Murdoch's description of the former phenomenon characterises equally well the experience engendered by the latter: 'The things around us, usually quiet, domesticated and invisible, are seen suddenly as strange, seen as if for the first time'.[8.] Both defamiliarisation and Being-in-the-world aim to 'renew' everyday perception of the things we encounter. As such, both phenomena encourage us to dissolve the habitual character of our perceptual experience. Wong's flagrant uses of style often function in this way: for example, in *Happy Together*'s rapid-motion traffic shots (discussed in Chapter 5), the environment comes forth in prominent fashion and encourages the viewer to regard it, in Stephen Mulhall's phrase, 'as possessed of a distinctive nature'.[9.] Defamiliarisation and Being-in-the-world also function as a part of wider schemes (formalism and existentialism, respectively). Just as defamiliarisation is a perceptual effect absorbed into the overall aesthetic design of an artwork, Being-in-the-world is one mode of perception in a broader program of phenomenological experience. The close affinity between the two phenomena means that film style and conceptual material converge in a film such as *Ashes of Time*, which yokes defamiliarising effects (e.g. the landscape that acquires visual salience) to the protagonist's 'authentic' engagement with the environment (whereby he comes to perceive narrative space in something other than purely functional terms). As so often in his film practice, Wong here finds a harmonious interplay between style and theme.

The anxiety that Wong's characters experience in relation to change also has a basis in existentialist philosophy. For the existentialist, human existence is characterised by vicissitudes in personality and circumstance. 'An existing individual', writes Søren Kierkegaard, 'is

always in the process of becoming'.[10.]   Sartre echoes this contention: 'an existentialist will never take man to be the end, since man is still to be determined'.[11.]   Change thus conditions the existence of human being, which is always 'ahead-of-itself', a '"not-yet" which it will be'.[12.] Existentialists affirm change when it is kindled by the individual, because it animates the philosophy's bedrock principles of individual freedom, choice, and action.   Transmutations brought about by circumstance (i.e. chance or coincidence) can also activate these types of activity: the individual acts authentically when she embraces change and chooses a determinate course of action in response to it.   (By consciously accepting and mobilising change, moreover, the existentialist strips away theological notions of metaphysical predestination.)   This quality of authenticity is sometimes achieved by Wong's protagonists.   In choosing to abandon cyclical routine (e.g. the nightly 'beat' that encompasses the fast-food counter), *Chungking Express*' second cop casts off his tremulous attitude toward change, and actualises the philosophy's flagpole edict, 'existence precedes essence'.[13.]   In other words, he comes to realise that disquietude about change is not so much an innate and unbending condition of his existence as a self-imposed constraint that can be surmounted.   In narrative terms, moreover, Wong rewards the cop's acceptance of change by fulfilling the character's chief narrative goal.   The cop comes to be reunited with the woman he desires (with whom, due to his new attitude to change, he is now in sync) by accepting circumstantial change (e.g. his stewardess girlfriend's departure) and engendering personal change (e.g. eschewing police work to assume ownership of the fast-food counter).

Like the existentialist, Wong condemns inauthentic retreat from change.   In *Fallen Angels*, Killer's violent demise is made an explicit corollary to his failure to fully relinquish cyclical patterns of behaviour. As we have seen in Chapter 4, Killer is anxious to cede the burden of choice and responsibility that comes with decision-making.   As Sartre puts it, 'in making [a] decision, [the individual] cannot but feel a

certain anguish'.[14.] Renouncing decisive action liberates Killer from the anguish of responsibility and the task of effecting change himself. It thus prevents him from repudiating both repetitive action and the criminality that defines him. (That he is synonymous with criminality is, among other ways, implicit in the appellation by which he is identified.) Killer's existence is characterised by routine and stasis, a marked contradiction to the 'in-the-process-of-becoming' and 'not-yet-being' of the ideal existentialist hero. Inauthentically immured from change, Killer is unwilling to transcend his present situation; the authentic individual, on the other hand, is able to proclaim: 'I cannot be defined in terms of what, in one obvious sense, I am ([e.g.] a criminal, etc.), since I can rise above this and direct how I shall become'.[15.] Killer, however, deflects the existential obligation to 'direct' his essential self by transferring decisive action to Agent and suspending himself in a state of perpetual inertia. In his commitment to routine, evasion of change, and characteristic emotional withdrawal, Killer evokes Camus' apathetic protagonist Mersault, in *The Outsider*, who regularly meditates on the futility of change: '[My boss] asked me if I wasn't interested in changing my life', the eponymous narrator conveys. 'I replied that you could never change your life, that in any case one life was as good as another and that I wasn't at all dissatisfied with mine'.[16.] In contrast to Mersault, however, Killer will seek to engender purposeful change and redefine his 'essence' in terms other than criminality; finally, a relapse into old routines eventuates in his death, ultimately decimating the possibility of authentic existence that is achieved by the similarly routine-bound cop in *Chungking Express*.

There is a further affinity with existentialism in Wong's critique of social conformity. As I argued in Chapter 3, Wong condemns *In the Mood for Love*'s protagonists for identifying too conscientiously with the communal nature of their existence. Like the anonymous 'they' (Heidegger) or 'herd' (Nietzsche), Su and Chow become ''absorbed' in or 'tranquillised' by the comforting, ready-made schemes of beliefs and values which prevail in their [society]'.[17.] These socially-proscribed

proprieties are subpoenaed by the protagonists as an armature against change, to hold in check the onset of overpowering desires. Following Heidegger, Yasuo Yuasa argues that an existence governed by the everyday 'means nothing more but the fact of living habitually in the midst of rumour, curiosity, and ambiguity'[18], a state of existence quite familiar to the circumspect protagonists of *In the Mood for Love*. Moreover, in their dutiful Being with and –for others, Su and Chow subscribe to a pervasive cultural norm. According to Sun Longji, 'a Chinese is the totality of his social roles', who 'fulfils himself within the network of interpersonal relationships'.[19] For both Wong and the existentialist, however, identifying human 'essence' wholly with the social dimension of existence negates the presence of other authentic (if socially undesirable) impulses. As David E. Cooper asserts, 'The Existentialist cannot accept that life's 'communal character', such as the playing of 'social roles', is even approximately the whole story about human existence'.[20] *In the Mood for Love*'s protagonists, nevertheless, subordinate mutual desire to social propriety, and, in harmony with the anonymous masses, 'live *as if* the 'communal character of existence' were the whole story' (emphasis in original).[21] Wong shows the barrenness of this logic at the end of the film: Chow, for instance, not only suppresses his furtive desire for Su, but is also utterly displaced from the communal milieu in which he earlier invests so much importance. (It is also possible to infer that the 'interpersonal relationship' that he seeks most to protect – his marriage – has also by this stage dissipated.)

Most generally, then, existentialism is a significant (if possibly indirect) antecedent of Wong's thematic material. In stressing Wong's affinity with the existentialist paradigm, and by critiquing socio-allegorical accounts of Wong's cinema (as I do most explicitly in the Introduction), I may be accused of simply replacing one allegorical reading (e.g. Hong Kong society circa 1997) with another, less immediate one (e.g. Western existentialist philosophy). However, I posit existentialism only as a pertinent and instructive context for

understanding Wong's films and the themes they explore. It is a pertinent context because existential thought has been explicitly thematised in the European art films that centrally influence Wong's own work; and it provides an instructive context because it can help us elucidate a 'world view' that, due to Wong's narrational complexity, may initially strike us as ambiguous or elusive. Moreover, I seek only to posit the existentialist framework as a context that can co-exist with, rather than displace, other relevant and instructive contexts, including social allegory. In this sense, existentialism offers one among several complementary frames of reference. Existentialism, therefore, can be adduced as a culturally-distant influence that exists in contiguous relation to more proximate thematic sources. It is, moreover, no less concretely embodied in the films themselves than are, for example, references to the 1997 handover. Finally, it is not my contention that Wong's films can be reduced to a set of philosophical precepts or themes, nor do I claim that existential analogies illuminate every aspect of the artwork, any more than social allegories do. But I would contend that such analogies are no less useful in helping us grasp the subtleties and nuances in some of Wong's most salient authorial themes. A thoroughgoing account of existentialist ideas in Wong's films has yet to be undertaken, but it is a project that could profitably sit alongside the numerous socio-allegorical readings of the director's work.

For all the austerity of their philosophy, Wong's films often display an exuberant and playful use of style. The critic who limits analysis purely to allegorical (or otherwise thematic) meaning tends to lose sight of the *variety* of pleasures afforded by Wong's cinema. Wong invites us to take pleasure in the act of critical reasoning. Far from 'seducing' the spectator into critical slumber, Wong's cinema, like the existential philosophy it invokes, compels us to act: it exercises our cognitive and perceptual facilities in ways untypical of mainstream (and much of art) cinema. Most obviously, aesthetic pleasure is derived from Wong's style (and here I am referring to the 'architectural' pleasure of narrative organisation, as well as to aspects of sonic and visual style). Wong's

aesthetic verve may evoke comparison with the *nouvelle vague* filmmakers, but it also grounds his films firmly in the tradition of Hong Kong popular cinema. Despite his desire to address the international marketplace, as well as his evident debt to the European art cinema, Wong remains in many respects a local filmmaker. He taps into local trends (e.g. the popular 'heroic bloodshed' genre, or the domestic appetite for Cantopop ballads), draws upon Chinese cultural-historical materials (such as the *wuxia pian* novel in *Ashes of Time*), and generally operates within the context of Hong Kong filmmaking (albeit under the aegis of his own production company, which liberates him from the production constraints besetting most Hong Kong directors). In their moments of virtuosic style (however these may be subsequently undercut), films like *Chungking Express* and *Fallen Angels* play centrally into the Hong Kong cinema's commitment to visceral pleasure and spectacle. However, just as some critics fixate on Wong's conceptual material and disregard stylistic playfulness, so others fail to perceive the richness of themes at once masked by and communicated through Wong's 'pop' aesthetic. As we have seen, accusations of shallowness and superficiality are levelled by Wong's detractors. This critical perspective seems to evoke what Fredric Jameson describes as 'inauthentic nostalgia films', which, he argues, perpetuate 'the cult of the glossy image' and reveal the 'lavish indulgence [of] contemporary cinema'.[22] Failing to discern the kinds of conceptual material outlined above denies Wong's critic a further pleasure; that is, the pleasure that accompanies recognition of an artwork's overall coherence, its accomplished harmonisation of style and content.

Notes

[1] Cited in Andrew Sarris, 'The Cinematographer as Superstar', *American Film* 6:6 (April 1981), p.34.

[2] Sam Rohdie, 'The Independence of Form', *PIX* 2 (January 1997), p.121.

[3] Julian Stringer, '"Your tender smiles give me strength': paradigms of masculinity in John Woo's *A Better Tomorrow* and *The Killer*', *Screen* 38:1 (Spring 1997), p.39.

[4] David Desser, '*Ikiru*: Narration as a Moral Act', in *Reframing Japanese Cinema: Authorship, Genre, History*, edited by Arthur Nolletti, Jr. and David Desser, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992, p.65. Besides *Rashomon*, other Kurosawa

films of this period seem particularly to draw upon the existentialist ideas with which they were concurrent. *Ikiru* (1952) explicitly dramatises its protagonist's 'being-towards-death' and his corollary pursuit of purposeful existence. *Yojimbo* (1961) begins with its samurai protagonist casting a stick into the air and using the co-ordinates of its descent as a directional cue: the stick points the way to what will become the film's main site of narrative action. The samurai thereby embraces the decisive power of chance, and, like Killer in *Fallen Angels*, evinces a desire to transpose personal autonomy (in this instance, to the contingent trajectory of the stick).

[5.] Op cit. Wong himself cites the influence of *Le Samouraï* upon *Fallen Angels*. See Peter Brunette, *Wong Kar-wai*, University of Illinois Press, 2005, p.115.

[6.] John Macquarrie, *Existentialism*, Penguin: Pelican Books, 1973, p.72.

[7.] Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, translated by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson, Blackwell, 1962, pp.85, H.80-1.

[8.] Iris Murdoch, *Sartre: Romantic Rationalist*, Penguin, 1987, p.47.

[9.] Stephen Mulhall, *Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Heidegger and Being and Time*, Routledge, 2000, p.3.

[10.] Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, translated by H. V. and E. H. Hong, Princeton University Press, 1974, p.79.

[11.] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism and Humanism*, Methuen, 1996, p.55.

[12.] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, pp.279, 286.

[13.] *Op cit.* p.26.

[14.] *Ibid.*, p.32. For Sartre, 'anguish' in an existential sense bears an affirmative connotation. Though he does not seek to play down the burden of responsibility associated with free choice, it is in the act of choosing that Sartre finds intrinsic value. He writes: 'All leaders know…anguish. It does not prevent their acting, on the contrary it is the very condition of their action, for the action presupposes that there is a plurality of possibilities, and in choosing one of these, they realise it has value only because it is chosen' (p.32). In *Fallen Angels*, however, anguish paralyses Killer from making the kinds of decision faced by Sartrean leaders, as he relates in voiceover: 'Who's to die, when and where - it's all been planned by others'.

[15.] David E. Cooper, *Existentialism* (Second edition), Blackwell, 2000, p.69.

[16.] Albert Camus, *The Outsider*, translated by Joseph Laredo, Penguin, 1983, p.44. David E. Cooper has argued that *The Outsider* is often inaccurately taken as a paradigmatic example of existentialist literature and thought. Adducing various points of divergence with other existentialist philosophers, he reasons that Camus should be excluded from the doctrine's canon of writers. He also contends that Mersault is 'no more 'authentic' in Sartre's sense than the bourgeois with his 'respectability' and fake 'sincerity''. See Cooper, *Existentialism*, p.12. However, while Mersault is in many respects antithetical to the ideal existentialist hero, *The Outsider* may still be taken as an existentialist text since it focuses explicitly upon the key preoccupations of existential thought. Similarly, Killer is no exemplar of existential heroism; but whereas Camus withholds criticism of his protagonist (and thereby deviates, Cooper argues, from other existentialist writers), Wong's condemnation of inauthenticity and bad faith aligns him more explicitly with existentialists like Sartre.

[17.] *Ibid.*, p.33.

[18.] Yasuo Yuasa, 'The Encounter of Modern Japanese Philosophy with Heidegger', in *Heidegger and Asian Thought*, edited by Graham Parkes, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1990, p.170.

[19.] Quoted in Stringer, "Your tender smiles give me strength", p.39. Longji submits: 'Strip [the Chinese subject] of his relationships, and there is nothing left'. This claim rings true in respect of the alienated Killer in *Fallen Angels*, of whom, we will recall, Stephen Teo observes: '[Killer] is a blank space, an anonymity'. But other agents in Wong's pantheon of alienated characters (such as *Fallen Angels*' mute outsider) show us that despite (or, the existentialist might argue, because of) their social isolation, an authentic and moral identity can still be moulded.

[20.] Cooper, *Existentialism*, p.110.

[21.] *Ibid.*

22. Fredric Jameson, *Signatures of the Visible*, Routledge, 1990, p.85.

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Figure 2.1 - *Ashes of Time*

Figure 2.2 - *The Hand*

Figure 2.3 - *Chungking Express*

Figure 5.1 - *Fallen Angels*
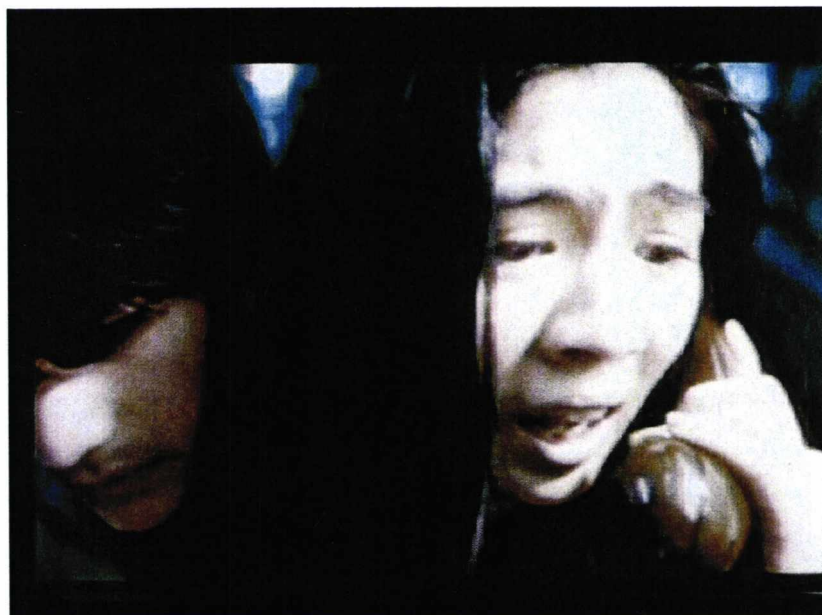

Figure 5.2 - *Fallen Angels*

Figure 5.3 - *The Hand*

Figure 5.4 - *The Hand*
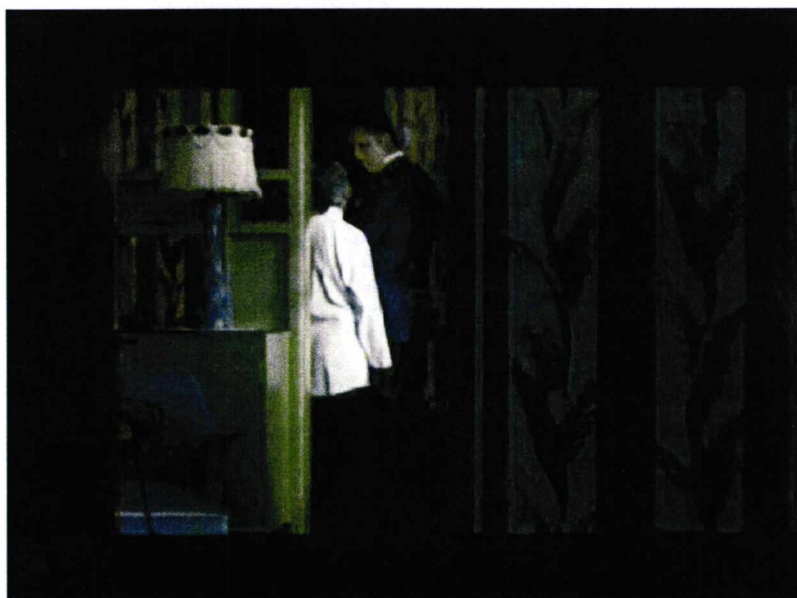

Figure 5.5 - *The Hand*
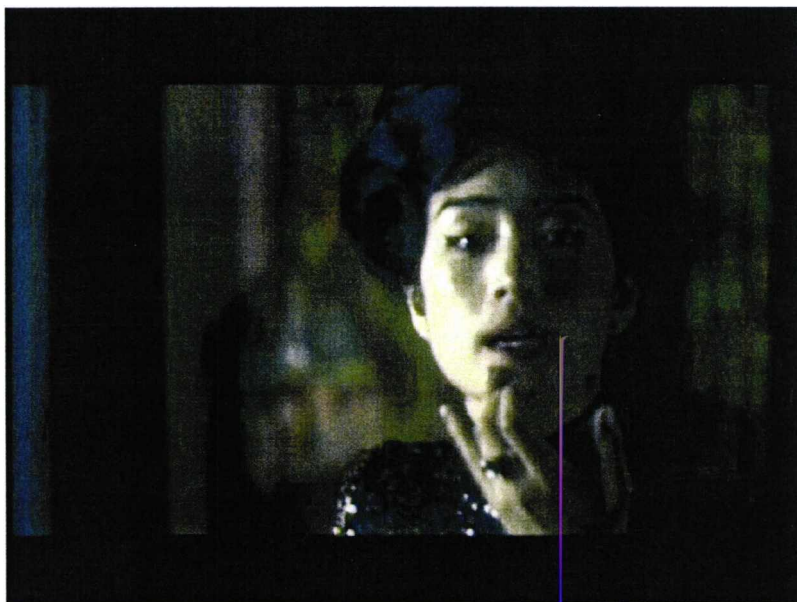

Figure 5.6 - *The Hand*

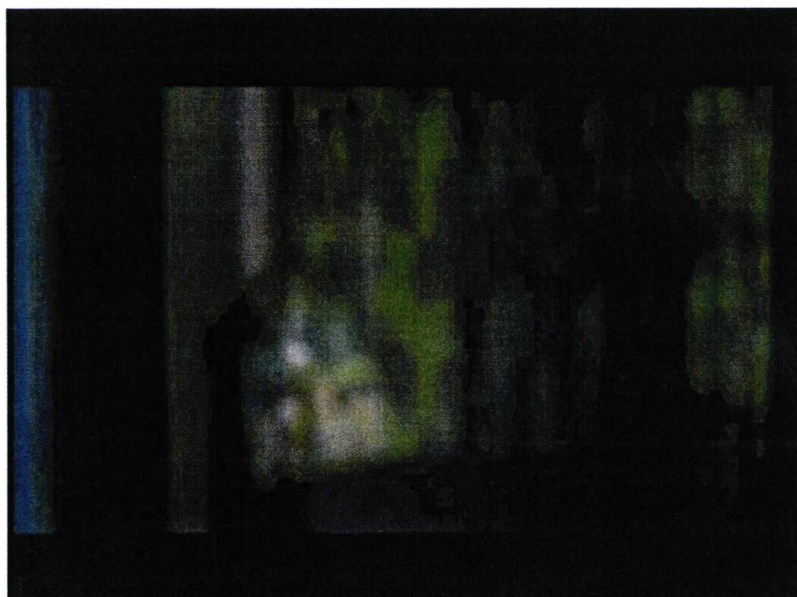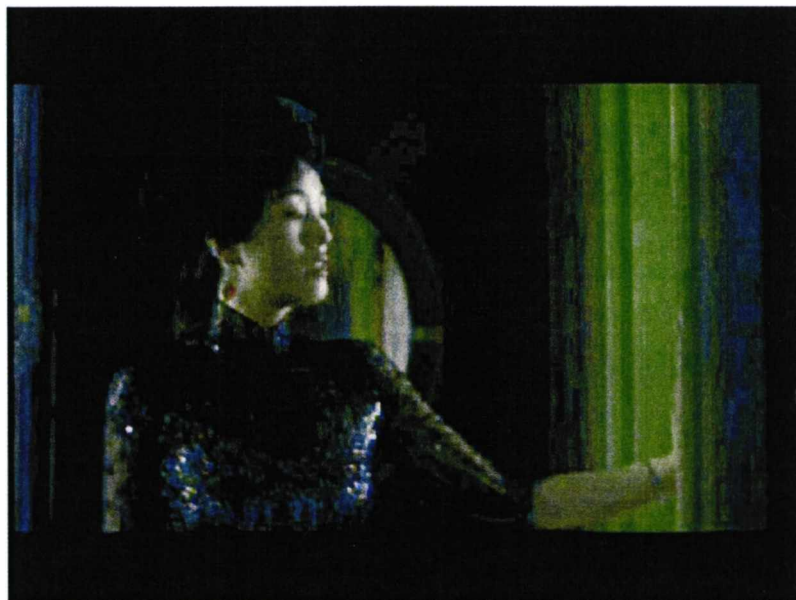Figure 5.7 - *The Hand*

Figure 5.8 - *The Hand*

Figure 5.9 - *The Hand*

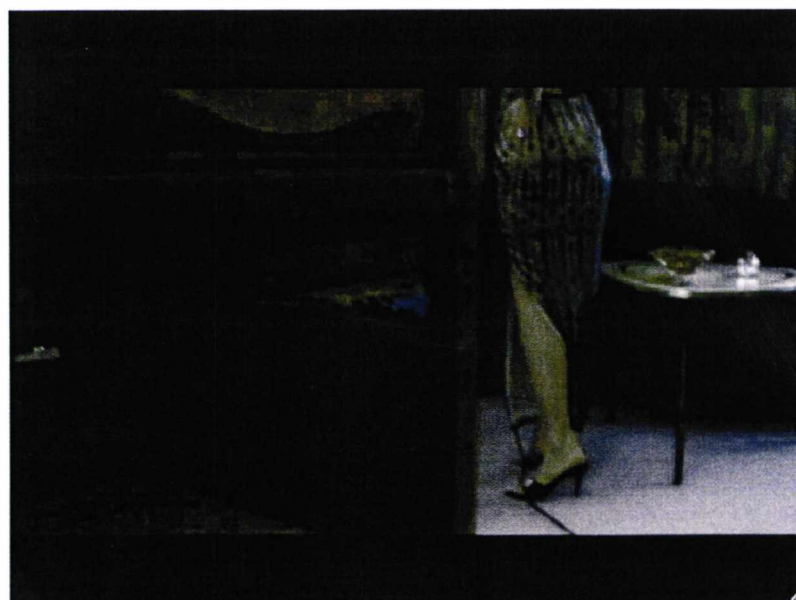Figure 5.10 - *The Hand*

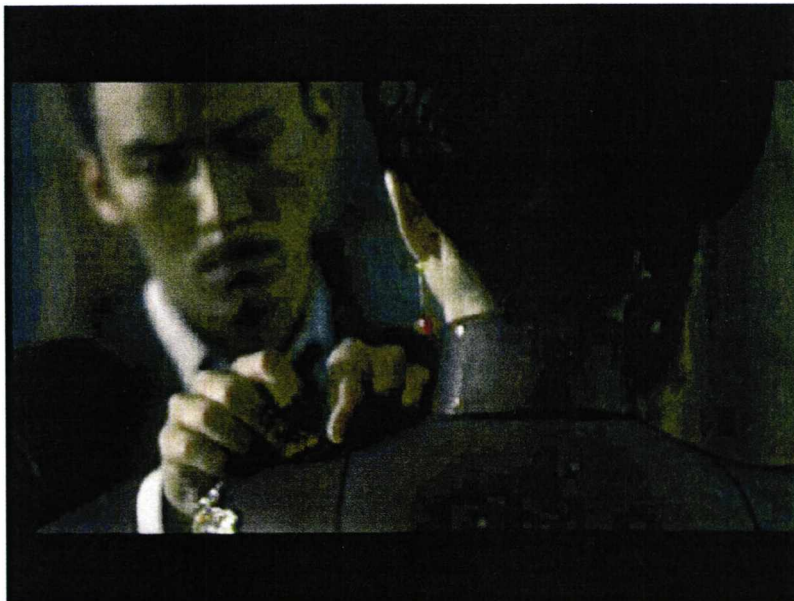Figure 5.11 - *The Hand*

Figure 5.12 - *The Hand*

Figure 5.13 - *The Hand*

Figure 5.14 - *The Hand*

Figure 5.15 - *The Hand*