

Loving in Solitude and Encountering Pity in the Cinema of Wong Kar Wai

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In Wong Kar Wai's films, the characters experience a transition from the attempt to regain a lost unity, to the recognition of the role of a psychic division in enabling a potential convergence with the other. Analysing aesthetic and iconographic components of his films, I will interpret certain turning points of the plots by identifying his cinema with the genre of

melodrama (Marcantonio 2015, 6) and by revealing its metacinematic value.

Among the most profound affinities between Wong Kar Wai's cinema and the melodrama genre is the primary importance given to the *hamartia* inherited from tragedy (Pérez Rubio 2004, 15). Desacralised and translated into ordinary problems (127), in melodrama the wound is transformed into the loss of the object of love (84), facilitating the identification (González Requena 1986, 94) necessary to activate the process of catharsis. In the case of the protagonist of *Days of Being Wild* (a.k.a. *Ah Fei Zheng Zhuan*, 1990), who has been abandoned by his mother, it is explicitly a question of that state of fusion linked to primal and irreparable loss (Jullien 2014, 88) – namely the castration typically portrayed in melodrama (Pérez Rubio 2004, 196) – which social order represses (Gledhill 2002, 117). Indeed, given the tonal and aesthetic exaggerations through which this genre operates (Pérez Rubio 2004, 91), it is important to consider the specific means by which the protagonist is permitted to embark on a journey in search of his mother, attempting to regain the lost love. The radical nature of this character is further framed by a mirror that highlights his vanity, ultimately reflecting his psychic split (see *Figure 1*).

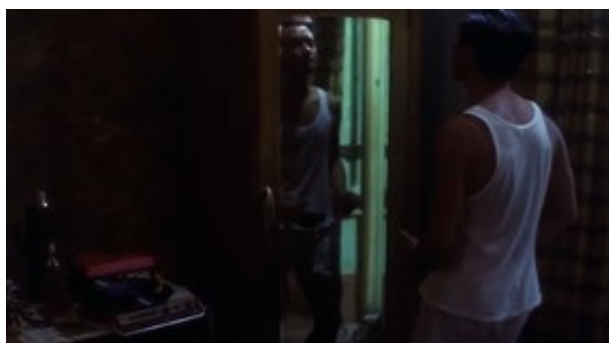


Figure 1: The character of Yuddi and his mirror reflection in Days of Being Wild (a.k.a. Ah Fei Zheng Zhuan, 1990)

This situation inaugurates the “primal scene” of Wong’s cinema, where we find characters wounded by unrequited love affairs (Weinricher, 2001), echoing the original trauma of the separation from the mother (Tarizzo 2003, 21). Unlike *Days’* character, many of these tormented souls seek to restore a mythical unity by creating a new emotional nest. This properly-melodramatic variant arises because of the incorporation of the expiatory journey derived from the Oedipal model (Pérez Rubio 2004, 118), filtered through the sentimental novel and extended to the couple’s dimension (119). For this reason, behind the great utopia of achieving redemption through love, lies a healing of the respective wounds of the two lovers (109). This should ordinarily arise only as a consequence of the other ambitious objective. However, in Wong’s films, the narcissistic core of the quest usually results in a failed interlocking of selfish pretensions, a mismatch often iconographically rendered by frames in which the mirror separates two characters occupying the same room (see *Figure 2*).



Figure 2: Two characters, framed as separated by the mirror, in Happy Together (a.k.a. Cheun Gwong Tsa Sit, 1997)

However, a poignant sequence in *Ashes of Time* (a.k.a. *Dung Che Sai Duk*, 1994) clarifies that what unites the characters is precisely what divides them, creating a situation in which it is impossible for them to meet. Bound together by their shared sense of loss, each of them uses the other's body to restore contact with his or her own fantasy of fusion. In this case, the role played by the iconographic element of the mirror is taken on by the cross-cutting montage, which serves to represent the different timeframes that split and separate the characters (see *Figures 3, 4, and 5*).



Figure 3, 4, and 5: Cross-cutting montage showing the different times between which the characters are split in Ashes of Time (a.k.a. Dung Che Sai Duk, 1994)

The difficulty of living in the present is a common trait of the two characters-narrators, each of whom is projected into another time, in the book

Intersection (a.k.a. *Dui Dao*, Liu Yichang, 1973). Significantly, excerpts from this novel are quoted in *In the Mood for Love* (a.k.a. *Fa Yeung Nin Wa*, 2000).

For Wong's characters, the recognition of temporal depth marks a turning point in their *impasse*. However, perceiving the passage of time also means recognising its deteriorating effect on love, which has transformed it into another feeling (Paz 1984, 215), giving it the traits of compassion (213). In this sense, the capacity to feel pity seems to distinguish characters who have reached a certain degree of sentimental maturity. The choice of the protagonist of *2046* (2004) to fulfill himself vicariously, through the desire of a young woman with whom he identifies, determines a reduction of the possibilities of connection with others to pity; a quality that becomes an ashen remnant of a passion of the past (see *Figures 6 and 7*).

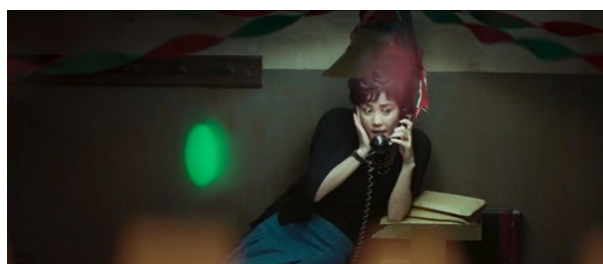


Figure 6 and 7: A transition showing the compassionate gaze of a character, yet marking a temporal distance between the two in 2046 (2004)

In the case of *In the Mood for Love*, this maturity is acquired “in progress”. It is possible to grasp a salient moment in the gradual development through the manifestation of the visual motif of pity, in its variant of mutual pity, which crystallises a transition (see *Figure 7*). By trying to put themselves in their spouses' places, the characters end up distancing themselves from their own selfhood, even as they come to feel and attempt to heal the pain of the other.

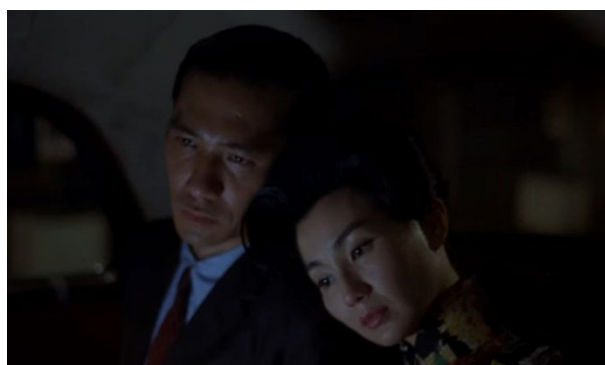


Figure 8: The visual motif of pity in the mutual pity variant in In the Mood for Love (a.k.a. Fa Yeung Nin Wa, 2000)

Although, psychoanalytically, compassion refers to the narcissistic dimension – as secondary identification arising from a feeling of loss that belongs to the subject but is shared with the object (Pérez Rubio 2004, 94)

– the examples mentioned show that this feeling implies a certain detachment from the self. In this case, that approach to the other in projective terms (Jullien 2014, 51) – although the antithesis of self-referentiality – actually paradoxically leads to achieving that longed-for reconciliation with the self.

The *In the Mood for Love* protagonists' attempt to empathise with their respective spouses leads them to emulate the love affair that was going on between the other two, dissociating themselves from their "selves" and consequently, imperceptibly opening each individual up to new experiences of (or possibilities for) love. Thus, if reconciliation with oneself is a necessary condition for ensuring receptivity and openness to otherness (Wai-ming Lee and Lee 2017, 32), awareness of the temporal distance from mythical unity is achieved through dissociation. One can see in these implications an allusion to that empathetic mode of experience, which typifies the spectator's position. In this case, the ongoing process that the characters, as well as the empathetic viewers, go through in these films can lead to the opening onto the possibility of encounter in the name of that communion with the other (156) to which the melodrama's amorous vocation always aspires. Following a smile, a mixture of disillusionment and self-compassion that establishes detachment from the deadly clinging to the past, policemen of the second story in *Chungking Express* (a.k.a *Chung Hing Sam Lam*, 1994) is ready to reinvest his desire, this time truly being "in the mood" for love.



Figure 9: A character's smile which is a mixture of disillusionment and self-compassion in *Chungking Express* (a.k.a *Chung Hing Sam Lam*, 1994)

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Days of Being Wild (a.k.a. *Ah Fei Zheng Zhuan*, Wong Kar Wai, 1990)

Happy Together (a.k.a. *Cheun Gwong Tsa Sit*, Wong Kar Wai, 1997)

In the Mood for Love (a.k.a. *Fa Yeung Nin Wa*, Wong Kar Wai, 2000)

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