

2 Secret Origins

People say my films are about time and space, but actually they're not. Most likely they have nothing to do with anything but me myself. That's why my characters have such closed-off lives and can't reveal themselves; they're afraid to get hurt.

Wong Kar Wai, from an interview by Esther Yeung and Lau Chi-Wan, published in *City Entertainment* no. 402, 8 September 1994 (translated from the Chinese by Tony Rayns)

Wong Kar Wai has not always been as candid about his own social inhibitions as he was in this interview in 1994, but he has always spoken freely about his aleatory methods, his habit of allowing his films to determine their own tone, shape and direction *while they are being made*. Ironically for a man who entered the film industry as a scriptwriter (he started by contributing ideas in the writing team at an ultra-commercial film company, then wrote scripts alone for a couple of years), Wong turned away from pre-scripted film-making during the production of *Days of Being Wild*, his second feature. His practice these days is to seclude himself in coffee shops to think through possible new storylines and scenes, and then to return to the waiting cast and crew with his ideas; it's this method which stretches his productions out over months or even years. His chronic indecision of course tests the loyalty and commitment of his collaborators to the limit. We'll come back to the case of *Days of Being Wild* in more detail, because that film has a direct bearing on *In the Mood for Love*, but first we should establish how Wong's abandonment of scripts affected his films.

Days of Being Wild and its successor, *Ashes of Time*, have many things in common, despite the first being set in the early 1960s in Hong Kong and the second in the *jianghu*, the mythic martial world

of ancient China. Both centre on Leslie Cheung playing alpha males with troubled backstories, and both feature ‘packages’ of other top stars playing characters who drift in and out of his orbit. More crucially, to the frustration of the actors and crew, both films had extremely protracted shoots, because Wong was continually trying out – and then rejecting – ideas for ways that his story might move forward. And so both films were eventually constructed in the editing room, because their structures had not been planned on the page. Inevitably, this caused major grief for Wong’s financiers. *Days of Being Wild* was made for In-Gear Film Productions, which ended Wong’s contract after the film’s release. Wong founded his own company Jet Tone soon after, and secured finance from Taiwan to make *Ashes of Time*, filmed intermittently on remote locations in western China in 1992–3 but not completed and released until 1994.

If Wong’s trial-and-error approach to film-making is tough for financiers to deal with, then it’s many times tougher for a director who works as his own producer. Jet Tone’s survival has often seemed precarious over the years. Wong explored many options to keep the company’s cash flow going: he marketed limited-edition collectibles at the height of his popularity; he accepted commissions to make music videos and ads; he produced films by other directors and did his utmost to hype them to success; and even, in 2001, considered subletting part of the company’s office in Hoi Ping Road, Causeway Bay. The establishment of Wong’s talent agency Project House eventually brought Jet Tone a measure of financial stability in the 2000s, and branch offices were opened in Taipei and Shanghai.

Since his changes of mind during production are unfortunately matched by an equally aleatory approach to editing, frequently requiring him to reshoot scenes and re-voice lines of dialogue or voiceover, Wong has sensibly looked for ways to bring his film-making under better control. His default solution is to think of films as aggregations of short stories, an idea no doubt sparked by the way that *Days of Being Wild* and *Ashes of Time* resolved themselves into episodic narratives. *Chungking Express* comprises

two contrasted short stories and was first envisaged as three; the third, about a hitman, was subsequently realised in *Fallen Angels* (1995), where it acquired another counterpoint in the shape of the story of the man who sets up businesses in shops and concession stands which have closed for the night. *2046* also began life as an aggregation of three stories; Wong thought of taking the storylines from three nineteenth-century operas and giving them a sci-fi spin. This idea, of course, was dropped when Wong found himself turning the film into a kind of sequel to *In the Mood for Love*, although the manager of the Oriental Hotel still plays opera discs loudly to drown out the sound of his domestic arguments.

The problems tend to begin when Wong sets out to stretch a short-story idea to feature length, as in *Happy Together*, *In the Mood for Love* and *The Grandmaster*, all three of which strained budgets, production and post-production schedules and the morale of the crew to breaking point. Wong became acutely self-conscious about the financial and practical difficulties caused by his *modus operandi* soon after the one-minute-to-midnight rush to finish *In the Mood for Love* in time for its scheduled premiere in the Cannes competition. He told me at the time that he felt an urgent need to ‘change’, but rationalised it as a need to stay one step ahead of the world’s many Wong Kar Wai imitators. The line ‘I can change’ ran through the version of *2046* screened at Cannes in 2004 like a refrain, spoken twice in Japanese by the protagonist of Chow’s sci-fi story, and then repeated at the end of the film in Cantonese by Chow himself. In other words, Chow expresses himself through his fictional Japanese character Tak, and Wong expresses himself through his fictional Cantonese character Chow. The line survives only once in the widely released version of the film; Wong dropped the too-subtle idea of having it spoken in both Japanese and Cantonese, perhaps tacitly acknowledging that most foreign viewers wouldn’t notice the difference.

Since *2046*, Wong has tried to force himself to ‘change’ by undertaking a film in English and an Ip Man biopic, but he failed to reinvent his idiom, themes or working practices in either case.

My Blueberry Nights turned out to be an over-extended remake of his short film *In the Mood for Love* 2001, and Natalie Portman's gambler was very obviously Gong Li's Su Lizhen from 2046 come again. *The Grandmaster* turned out to be less interested in Ip Man's life than in his chaste, yearning romance with Gong Er (Zhang Ziyi), which of course directly echoes the central relationship in *In the Mood for Love*. Although the filming of *My Blueberry Nights* went more smoothly than *In the Mood for Love* and 2046 had done, production of *The Grandmaster* took him back to the chaos of 2046: an on-and-off shoot which stretched to nearly three years, two scheduled release dates missed, three substantially different versions released in different territories. The longest of the three cuts did very well in China, though, which may well signal a shift to more China-oriented subjects in Wong's future.

Of all Wong's earlier films (and misadventures in production), the one most relevant to *In the Mood for Love* is *Days of Being Wild*. Wong acknowledged as much in the 'Director's Statement' he wrote for the press kit published by Jet Tone when the film premiered in Cannes. This text presents a selective version of the truth, but it's interesting enough to quote in full:

Filming *In the Mood for Love* has been the most difficult experience of my career. We began shooting two years ago, amid the Asian economic crisis. Over the two years since then, we have been through a lot: problems with censors, the departure of some members of my crew, and the challenge of telling a story about only two people. We are physically and financially exhausted.

I'm always being asked when I will make the second part of *Days of Being Wild*, a film I remember with great affection. Over the years, I often asked myself the same question. Time moved on, but I kept looking for an answer.

In the Mood for Love happily reunites me with Maggie Cheung and Tony Leung. In a sense, this film answers the question I've been asking myself for so long.

Wong Kar Wai (May 2000)

While *In the Mood for Love* is clearly not Part Two of *Days of Being Wild*, the two films have an obvious kinship. Both are set in the Hong Kong of the early 1960s, both feature Maggie Cheung playing characters called Su Lizhen and Rebecca Pan playing surrogate mothers, both have vintage Latino pop music on their soundtracks, and both are somehow rooted in a Shanghainese identity. The former chanteuse Rebecca Pan speaks Shanghainese in both films, and brings to her scenes the spirit of all Shanghai ‘exiles’ in Hong Kong.

Wong himself is Shanghainese by birth; his family moved to Hong Kong in 1963, when he was five years old, and his father worked as a nightclub manager. (He says, incidentally, that Nat King Cole was his mother’s favourite singer.) He would have been too young to have many clear recollections of life in Hong Kong in the early 1960s, but *Days of Being Wild*, *In the Mood for Love* and parts of *2046* are imbued with a potent nostalgia for the Shanghainese environment and ambience in which he grew up. It is no accident that Wong’s closest collaborator since he turned director has been William Chang, who was born in Hong Kong (he is five years older than Wong) to Shanghainese parents. Chang has been credited as production designer on Wong’s films since the start (*As Tears Go By* [1988]), and as chief editor since *Chungking Express* (1994), but the collaboration goes much deeper; Chang has been Wong’s indispensable advisor in every aspect of the films they’ve made together.

Days of Being Wild was conceived as a touchstone for the look, mood and nihilism of the early 1960s, across the stories of two charismatic but flawed protagonists and a small group of other ‘lost’ characters who know and love or lose them. Leslie Cheung’s playboy (hideously dubbed ‘Yuddy’ by the film’s original subtitled) was the first protagonist; after the character’s death in the Philippines, his function as the figure around whom the others orbit would be inherited by Tony Leung’s equally heartless gambler. Wong took the Hong Kong release title for Nicholas Ray’s *Rebel without a Cause* (1955) as his own Chinese title: *A Fei Zhengzhuan*, meaning ‘The True Story of Ah Fei’. (Ah Fei was the generic name for a young

tearaway/delinquent in the Hong Kong of the 1950s.) Jacky Cheung's role as the hanger-on who idolises the playboy is directly modelled on Sal Mineo's role in Ray's film. Incidentally, Wong used the same ploy again seven years later when he took the Hong Kong release title of Antonioni's *Blow-up* (1966) (*Chunguang Zhaxie*, 'Spring Light Bursts Forth', connoting the revelation of something indecent) as his Chinese title for *Happy Together*.

As we've noted, Wong was under contract in 1990 to In-Gear, owned by the former matinee idol Alan Tang and run by his brother Rover Tang; he had already made *As Tears Go By* and scripted other films for them. He reportedly began filming *Days of Being Wild* with a storyline draft and notes on the main characters, but changed his mind about many things as the shoot progressed. After spending a reputed HK\$20 million of In-Gear's money (much more than the average budget for a Hong Kong feature at the time, justified by the roster of top stars and the pre-sales to East and South-east Asia) but with no end in sight, Wong proposed to his producers that the film be split into two parts, set a year or two apart, the first starring Leslie Cheung and the second Tony Leung. But In-Gear had pre-sold the film on the basis of its title and *all* its stars, so it was contractually imperative that Tony Leung should still appear in the first film. Hence the film's much-discussed coda – a single, extended shot showing the gambler preparing for a night out, added without explanation at the end of the film. Editor Patrick Tam, an out-and-proud Godard fan, came up with this solution to the contractual problem.

Of course, Part Two was never made. The film was modestly successful in Hong Kong, probably because of its cast, but came nowhere near to recouping its production cost. The clincher came when distributors in neighbouring countries begged In-Gear not to send them another film 'like that'. So In-Gear pulled the plug and Wong left the company to go independent. We'll never know – and Wong isn't telling, always assuming he knows himself – what would have happened in the second part of *Days of Being Wild*, but it's fair

to assume that Tony Leung's gambler would have been more like the hardened, hedonistic Chow Mo-Wan of *2046* than the hesitant, proper Chow Mo-Wan of *In the Mood for Love*. The only real sense in which *In the Mood for Love* answers the *Days of Being Wild Part Two* question is that it returns to the milieu of the earlier film and uses a broadly similar aesthetic in order to rethink Wong's view of the 1960s. In place of a reckless indulgence in nihilistic sexual relationships and adventures, it offers a profoundly nostalgic meditation on a time and a place that have been lost.

In the Mood for Love had an unusually complicated genesis. As the 1997 handover of Hong Kong approached, Wong Kar Wai came out of the worldwide triumph of *Chungking Express* and the respectable showing of its follow-up, *Fallen Angels*, with a plan to save money by making two features back to back. One of the films would be about fleeing Hong Kong; guided by his enthusiasm for Latin American writers, including Manuel Puig and Julio Cortázar, Wong chose to set it in Hong Kong's antipodes, Buenos Aires. After another awkwardly protracted shoot in Argentina, eventually curtailed by Leslie Cheung's contractual commitments elsewhere, this emerged as Wong's first Cannes prizewinner, *Happy Together*. Before going to Argentina, though, Wong had conceived the other half of the diptych as the other side of the coin: a light-hearted movie, in the vein of *Chungking Express*, about embracing the motherland. Tony Leung and Maggie Cheung were set to star in it. Wong's title for the film was *Summer in Beijing*; he drafted some ideas for the story and went to the communist government's Film Bureau in Beijing to discuss it. The Film Bureau pointed out (politely, Wong says) that its regulations prohibited the production of any film in China without its pre-approval of the script. Wong's explanation that he didn't work like that fell on deaf ears, so the project was abandoned. It got no further than a series of poster designs, later published by Jet Tone in a limited-edition folio.

Following the success of *Happy Together* in Cannes, Wong returned to the *Summer in Beijing* ideas. The project evolved into a three-episode film, with one story about a chef, one about a writer in



the 1960s, and another about a delicatessen owner. The linking theme would be food; ‘Beijing’ became the name of a restaurant in Macau. As he began mapping out the project (with some urgency, since Maggie Cheung was expected to leave to act in a Hollywood film – which in the event went into turnaround), Wong once again changed his mind. As he told me: ‘We planned the story about the deli-owner and then moved on to the one about the writer – at which point, I realised that the one about the writer was the only one I really wanted to make.’

The writer on his mind was Liu Yi-Chang (born in Shanghai in 1918), who has lived and written in Hong Kong since 1948. Wong particularly liked his short story *Duidao*, which has been serviceably but improbably translated by Nancy Li as *Intersections*. The story first appeared in Chinese in 1972, the translation in 1988 in the Chinese University of Hong Kong’s periodical *Renditions*. (The title *Duidao* is the Chinese translation for *tête-bêche*, a term from philately for a pair of stamps from adjacent sheets in which one is the inverse of the other.) The translation has been reprinted in the brochure that comes with the Criterion home-video editions of *In the Mood for Love* and appears too in Block 2 Pictures’ photo book *tête-bêche* (2001), which also contains Joanna C. Lee’s short interview with Liu Yi-Chang about the film.

Liu’s story has forty-two mini-chapters which alternate between two characters. One is Bai Chunyu, an elderly Shanghainese who has lived (like his author) in Hong Kong since the late 1940s and watched

One of the poster designs for *Summer in Beijing*

the city grow from a sleepy port into an overcrowded, high-rise metropolis. The other is Ah Xing, a young Cantonese woman who worries that she doesn't yet have a boyfriend and picks up a pornographic photograph discarded in the street. Bai looks back to the time he fled Shanghai as the civil war got nearer, and also remembers a period he spent in Singapore. Ah Xing fantasises about being a popular singer, about getting married, about sex. The story traces their itineraries across one day. Independently, they witness the same events in Mongkok – the robbery of a jewellery shop, a woman knocked down by a car – and then happen to choose adjacent seats for the 5.30 screening of a movie. But they never meet or speak, and eventually go their separate ways.

From quite early on, Wong felt a kinship between this story and the film that *In the Mood for Love* eventually became. There was never any question of directly adapting the story for the screen: Chow and Mrs Chan are about the same age, their backgrounds are at best a marginal issue, and their spatial and emotional trajectories converge from the start. Whereas Bai Chunyu and Ah Xing are virtual polar opposites, and their differences reach a crux in their reactions to the climax (a wedding) in the movie they happen to watch side by side: he laughs out loud, scornful that a marriage is presented as a happy ending, and she is disgusted by what she assumes to be his lustful thoughts. This polarised reaction to the prospect of wedded bliss – in essence, experience meets innocence – is one of several motifs that trickle down into Wong's film. Others include nostalgia for the traces of Shanghai in old Hong Kong, the notion that a life can be sketched through close attention to its quotidian routines, and the perception that women and men can see the same things very differently. We should note in passing that *Chungking Express* owed comparable debts to the Japanese writer Murakami Haruki, but those were signalled only in the titling of tracks on the soundtrack CD, not in the film itself.

Wong's principal interest in Liu Yi-Chang is precisely that he is a writer. Specifically, a writer whose work reflects the perceptions of

a Shanghainese immigrant in Hong Kong. Wong reveres writers, probably even more than he reveres some cineastes (the one most often cited is Antonioni) and some pieces of music. Much of the idiosyncrasy of Wong's cinema springs from his wish to apply lessons learned from literature and music to film-making. In this instance, where journalist and *wuxia* novelist Chow is clearly *not* a surrogate for Liu Yi-Chang, Wong chose to express his respect for Liu by quoting him on screen. As we've noted, the film opens and closes with quotations from Liu's writings (they are presented like silent-movie intertitles) and includes a third quotation between its two 1966 codas about the past being a closed chapter. The wishful intention, I think, was to give the whole film a literary cast. I recall that at the start of the long-drawn-out subtitling process, Wong gave me a dozen Liu quotations he'd selected for possible use as captions in the film, as usual allowing himself plenty of leeway to make choices later. Here's one I translated which didn't make the cut:

At that time, he hadn't known what love was. He had liked several women. But it was always 'like' rather than 'love'. He still doesn't know what love is. Even when he married, he didn't know. He didn't love his wife, and his wife didn't love him.

When he started making *In the Mood for Love* in Hong Kong early in 1999, Wong had no clear sense of what the film would become. On the contrary, he was still thinking in terms of the *Summer in Beijing* frivolities. So he filmed sequences in room 2046 showing Chow and Mrs Chan stir-frying food in a wok; sequences showing them carrying kitchen implements and a live chicken up to the room despite management protests; sequences in which they sing (or more accurately mime) bits of Cantonese opera and even a sequence in which they perform a pastiche of John Travolta and Uma Thurman's dance from *Pulp Fiction* (1994). All of this can be seen in the 'Making of' documentary @ *In the Mood for Love*, which is available on several home-video editions of the film. The documentary also



Rejected ideas:
cooking in room
2046 ...



Singing Cantonese
opera in room 2046
(production photo
with actual singer in
foreground) ...



... and dancing in
room 2046

includes a rather surprising interview with Tony Leung in which he wonders aloud why these comic sequences didn't make it into the finished film; the interview was clearly shot before he won the Best Actor prize in Cannes. @ *In the Mood for Love* was begun by Kwan Pun-Leung and Amos Lee, who had made a film about the shoot of *Happy Together*, but their names don't appear in its credits. Wong took the documentary out of their hands and finished it himself with footage of the film's premieres in various cities, possibly because he couldn't afford to go on paying them.

In passing, during the Hong Kong shoot in 1999, Wong hadn't settled on the film's title either. His sales agent Fortissimo discussed pre-sales of the film in the Berlin Film Festival market that year under the title *The Mood for Love*. Their flyer promises delivery in May 2000 (a promise that was more or less kept), but includes stills from scenes that would eventually disappear from the film, including one of Chow and Mrs Chan eating together in the *daibaitong* and another of the sex scene.

By 1999, Wong Kar Wai had reformulated his 1996 plan to economise by making two films back to back. The new plan was to knock out *In the Mood for Love* quickly, the film being essentially a two-hander to be shot in a few recurring settings, and to then move on to the bigger *2046*, still thought of as an 'operatic' sci-fi movie. Since *2046* was to be a large-scale production, investments were



The Fortissimo Film Sales flyer with deleted images (1999)

sought (and found) in neighbouring countries: one concrete result was that the Japanese Kimura Takuya and the Thai Thongchai 'Bird' Macintyre – top singing stars in their respective countries – were contracted to appear in the film. Other stars – from China, South Korea and who knows where else – were expected to join the cast list later. Having turned singer Faye Wong into a movie star overnight in *Chungking Express*, Wong remained confident that his touch could turn charismatic pop stars into viable screen actors – despite his cautionary experience with the wooden Leon Lai in *Fallen Angels*. This confidence carried through into his casting of Norah Jones in *My Blueberry Nights*.

The first version of *In the Mood for Love* was indeed shot relatively quickly in Hong Kong in 1999, including the slowed-motion trips to and from the *daibaitong* (filmed in old alleyways in the Sheung Wan district of Hong Kong Island) and the comic sequences. As usual, Christopher Doyle was the cameraman, although he seems to have bridled quite early on at the realisation that Wong was allowing him much less freedom to 'dance' with the characters than he'd had on the second part of *Chungking Express*.



Mrs Chan buys noodles in the Sheung Wan *daibaitong*

and subsequent films. (He looks distinctly unhappy whenever he's glimpsed in the 'Making of' documentary.) Wong's unit then decamped to Bangkok to begin scouting locations for *2046* ... and that's when things became even more complicated.

Wong had already experienced some problems ten years earlier in finding suitably retro Hong Kong locations for *Days of Being Wild*. The city has changed almost beyond recognition since the 1960s, and nearly all traces of 'old' Hong Kong have been swept away in a frenzy of demolition and rebuilding. One reason that the exteriors in *Days of Being Wild* tend to be fixed-angle shots is that any movement of the camera would have risked revealing some visual anachronism. But Wong is driven by his nostalgia for the city's vanished locales. I recall him telling me during the shoot of *Fallen Angels* how hard it had been to find the grungy, decrepit locations he needed for that film. He'd struck lucky in *Chungking Express*, because he was still able to use the rabbit-warren interior of Chungking Mansion in Tsimshatsui (it's a labyrinth of flophouses, Indian tailors and tiny provisions shops) as a primary location for the first story and Christopher Doyle's own shabby apartment for the second.

The arrival in Bangkok was transformative, because Wong saw immediately that the back alleys of the city's Chinatown were more like 1960s Hong Kong than anything he could find in Hong Kong itself. He did make a desultory attempt to begin shooting for *2046*, and the one surviving shot of Thongchai Macintyre in the film as released (it's there for purely contractual reasons, like Tony Leung's appearance at the end of *Days of Being Wild*) dates from that time. Very soon, though, preliminary work on *2046* was abandoned in favour of reshoots for *In the Mood for Love*. Maggie Cheung and Tony Leung were summoned back to pose in Bangkok alleyways, endlessly repeating variations on lines of dialogue and 'role-play'. It was during this agonisingly protracted process, Maggie Cheung says in the 'Making of' documentary, that she came to realise that spending fifteen months working on one film to get it right might



mean more than lending her presence to half a dozen trivial quickies in the same period.

Chris Doyle left the crew early in the reshoot, and Mark Lee (amongst many other things, Hou Hsiao-Hsien's regular cinematographer) came from Taiwan to take his place.

'Impossible' and elusive points of view in the alley

Wong subsequently took Doyle back for *2046*, but when Doyle left that production too, the break became absolute. Leaving questions of ego aside, we can speculate that it actually made little difference who shot *In the Mood for Love*. No fewer than six cinematographers are credited on the film – Doyle and Lee as directors of photography and Yu Lik-Wai, Lai Yiu-Fai (Doyle's former assistant), Kwan Pun-Leung and Chan Kwong-Hung as 'additional cinematographers' – and I would defy any viewer to guess who shot what. On earlier films, Wong had delighted in needling Doyle by asking things like 'Is that the best you can give me, Chris?' (We know this from Doyle's own account of the shooting of *Happy Together*.) This mildly sadistic approach helped to make Doyle a world-class cinematographer, and it greatly benefited Wong by giving his films their distinctive look. On *In the Mood for Love*, though, Wong soon developed – for the first time in his directorial career – a clear sense of what he wanted to see and feel in the images. All he needed from his cinematographers was a skilled realisation of those images. Doyle left, I think, because he found that his creative input was no longer required.

It was during the Bangkok reshoot that the film acquired its character and tone: sombre, wistful, yearning. We don't know exactly when Wong decided to use 'Yumeji's Theme' and Nat King Cole's Spanish versions of standards on the soundtrack, but the music cues had certainly become integral to the film's effect – crucial, even – by the time William Chang started editing it in earnest. As we've noted, the decision to add the coda at Angkor Wat came at the very end of the Bangkok shoot, and the adventure of filming in Cambodia added the extra days which very nearly caused the film to miss its Cannes screening slot. In the event, the near-hysterical final days of post-production turned out to be a dress rehearsal for a very similar panic four years later when *2046*, too, was 'finished' only just in time to be screened on schedule in Cannes. But 'finished' is a relative concept in Wong Kar Wai films. There was more tinkering with *In the Mood for Love* after its Cannes premiere, and that included rewriting and re-recording the odd line of dialogue.

3 Oblique Strategies

It's a classic story, slow and very romantic. But when it came to editing, I couldn't use the same pace and had to speed it up. Still, the rhythm and speed of the cross-cutting were reduced significantly. We tried something new. It may sound like a cliché, but an old poem crossed my mind while I was editing the film. I've forgotten the title but it conjured a picture of two persons – or rather, the reaction Person A has when seeing Person B. Does he/she leave at once, or after a long silence? The poem worked magic and completely transformed the tempo.

Editing the Angkor Wat scene was pure pleasure – a big relief that he [Chow Mo-Wan] finally extricates himself from the trivial romantic relationship to embark on a new journey.

William Chang, from interviews by Li Cheuk-To, Keith Chan, Lawrence Pun and Lawrence Lau, published in *William Chang, Art Director* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong International Film Festival Society, 2004).

Translation slightly revised by Tony Rayns

There's a paradox at the heart of Wong Kar Wai's films. They generally spring from pop culture ideas and sometimes have generic roots, but the ways Wong frames and stages scenes and the ways William Chang edits the shots owe little to classical film storytelling conventions. Wong shares with many other Hong Kong directors his preference for building his scenes shot by shot (rather than following the old Hollywood model, which starts with a master shot of the scene and then inserts close-ups, point-of-view shots and so on), but he tends to take his film language into areas of abstraction avoided by his contemporaries. His and William Chang's liking for *discontinuities* in editing, coupled with their reliance on evocative music, produces a quite idiosyncratic film syntax. This could be thought of as Wong's 'art-house tendency'. The paradox is that it

results in films which most audiences – even the mass audience in China, which took up Wong’s offer in *The Grandmaster* in a big way – have no trouble understanding.

The mix of visual discontinuities and strong, repetitive music of course evokes the style of music videos, so it’s not a surprise that Wong is sometimes dismissed as a glorified MTV director. (That, for example, was the view taken by the late Edward Yang.) Such disrespect is not a total stretch: Wong’s music videos, such as *Six Days* for DJ Shadow, do look very much like sketches for episodes in features, and the same goes for his more ambitious ads too. But the features don’t have the random, disposable quality of MTV fodder, and the better music videos and ads don’t either. Wong’s films have a core of lived, felt experience which is expressed through narrative, however fractured. The tics of visual syntax that he and William Chang have developed do not amount to a coherent system in the Eisensteinian sense, but I think they do amount to a distinctive aesthetic. Time to look at the way it works.

Let’s start with the film’s punctuation marks. The first thing shown by our scene breakdown in Chapter 1 is the large number of fades to black in the film. These are all quick fades, not the long-drawn-out fades characteristic of some Hollywood films of the 1930s, but they are nonetheless a somewhat archaic device. Many scenes end with a quick fade to black, occasionally followed by a quick fade-in to the start of the next scene, but equally often by a hard cut to something new. Elsewhere, the film cuts hard from one scene to the next, sometimes covering the cut with continuing music on the soundtrack. Most viewers watching the film in the normal way will barely register this punctuation, but a closer examination reveals that William Chang has made precise and careful decisions about each and every scene transition.

Fades to black traditionally indicate the passage of time between one scene and the next, and that’s often one of their functions here. The film’s early scenes in the adjacent Suen and Koo apartments are mostly linked by fades out and in, and we are

certainly expected to understand them as spanning weeks or months. (Wong was very proud of the way that he'd built another signifier of passing time into the film by having Mrs Suen's Amah prepare seasonal Shanghainese dishes for the mahjong parties, and I remember his frustration when I had to explain that it was impossible to capture such nuances in the subtitles. He complained about this subtitling 'failure' in several early interviews about the film, but cut some of the month-specific references to dishes after the Cannes premiere.) But the opening scene also includes an indication of the way the film will jump-cut through time when Wong deletes the whole of Mrs Suen's discussion of rental terms with Mrs Chan: the cut takes us directly from the two ladies sitting down to talk to Mrs Chan leaving, saying she'll let the landlady know her decision. A further cut to Mr Chow climbing the narrow tenement stairs, newspaper ad in hand, brings us back to the corridor outside the two apartments – and to Mrs Suen's line 'It's settled, then'. The cutting briskly elides inessential material like the rent negotiation and Mrs Chan's brief hesitation about committing to the deal.



The heart of the matter: Mrs Chan's first fleeting glance at Chow

There's no detectable principle behind William Chang's decisions about how to punctuate the beginnings and endings of scenes: every possible option except a 'wipe' from one scene to the next is used at least once in the film. It seems to me that his decisions were generally intuitive, guided by his sense of pacing: quick fades out and in for moments when the action is 'poignantly' unresolved, hard cuts for moments when the film needs to power forward into the next phase of its exposition. However, we shouldn't lose sight either of Chang's need to ring the changes when confronted with such repetitive material. Since the number of characters and settings is so limited, Chang undoubtedly wanted to vary the ways he punctuated the film. He precisely wanted to avoid locking himself into any rigid system of visual punctuation.

At one point, apparently randomly, Chang uses dissolves for the only time in the film: he mixes from one shot of Mrs Chan leaving the alley to another, and then again to another. This occurs just after Chow has invited her to spend more time with him, helping to write a *wuxia* serial, and the device perhaps obliquely expresses her hesitation. Again, though, it doesn't fit into any editing schema; it's simply a fleeting, expressive moment.

The same could be said of the film's opening fade-in – on a shot which tracks rapidly past framed photographs on a wall to the back of Mrs Suen as she calls her guests to dinner. There are probably road movies which open with a fade-in on a tracking shot, but the device is vanishingly rare in films featuring domestic storytelling. This particular shot is Wong's shorthand way of establishing Mrs Suen's Shanghainese world, but the way it hurries past the framed photos actually gives it no time to establish anything concrete. It does, though, lead us into the action and milieu with a speed that anticipates the velocity of trains to 2046, the place where nothing ever changes.

It's a little easier to account for what we might call the film's 'off-screen strategy'. Relegating the adulterers to the margins of the frame isn't the half of it. As the scene breakdown shows, the



adulterers effectively disappear from the plot once their affair is discovered by their spouses. But the film has a broader ‘off-screen strategy’. Minor characters – Mrs Koo, the hotel desk clerk who alternates shifts with Mrs Chow, the man who’s bought Mr Koo’s apartment in 1966 – are also disembodied voices, not recognisable faces. Even when they’re seen, we catch only brief glimpses of them, usually from behind. Wong works tirelessly to make sure that we’re always aware of being shown people and spaces *selectively*.

He does this first by staging scenes and framing shots in ways that deliberately exclude characters from our sight. This is most arresting when he shows only one participant in a conversation, such as Mrs Chan’s doorway chat with Mrs Koo, shown as a profile shot of Mrs Chan speaking. This is followed by a brief glimpse of Mrs Koo accepting the pile of Chow’s borrowed books and placing them in his room, but this action is shown reflected in the Koo apartment’s blemished mirror – a visual analogue for Liu Yi-Chang’s ‘everything he sees is blurred and indistinct’. Wong uses the exact same strategy when Chow calls at the former Koo apartment in the 1966 coda: the camera holds on a frontal shot of Chow’s face, while the new owner

The off-screen strategy in action

is heard but not seen. And when the scene cuts to the interior of the apartment, the new owner is glimpsed no more clearly than Mrs Koo was.

This kind of ostentatiously selective presentation of the action extends to many other sequences in the film. Take the scenes in Mr Ho's shipping company office. The first two go out of their way to highlight the large Siemens clock which apparently hangs from the ceiling, although not obviously in anyone's line of sight. Whenever the clock face fills the frame, we hear off-screen conversations and phone calls continuing on the soundtrack. On our third visit to the office, the clock is scarcely glimpsed as the chatter refers to an off-screen typhoon in the Philippines and the tie which Mr Ho has received from his mistress as a birthday gift. But in the fourth scene (a vignette featuring Mrs Chan on the phone to Chow, asking about the letter he has received from his wife in Japan), we see almost nothing *but* the clock.

There's an element of self-parody to the frame-filling shots of the clock, which refer back to the original *Days of Being Wild* poster. It showed the starry cast grouped in a retro interior with a huge clock face hanging over them; not a Dali-type clock face – it's not melting – but flattened, distorted and patently symbolic. Of course, the clock shots here are also sucker-bait for the countless commentators who have presumed that 'time' is Wong's major theme. Like close-ups of clocks in any film, these fulfil the minimal narrative function of telling us what time it is, and whether or not Mrs Chan is working late today. At a stretch, we might make a connection between them and the tricky schedule Mrs Chan has to engineer to make sure that Mr Ho's wife and mistress never cross paths. Or maybe the clock merely symbolises the horrors of salaried office work? Whatever, the frame-filling close-ups of the clock face belong to a subset of assertively bizarre images that runs through the film, and we'll return to that in a moment.

Wong compounds his 'off-screen strategy' in several other ways. He limits some actions to shots of the characters' feet: Mrs Chan's

hasty getaway from Chow's room after her night hiding from the mahjong players, seen from under the bed in a shot which also highlights Chow's slippers; Chow's first venture along the corridor leading to room 2046; the montage of Mrs Chan's feet on the stairs when she first goes to the hotel. He also periodically films Chow and Mrs Chan at waist height, leaving their faces temporarily off screen: this first happens when Mrs Chan enters Mrs Suen's living room during a mahjong party in an early scene, and last happens when Chow strides along the alley with a gift box under his arm in the 1966 coda. And he presents some actions from a perspective that remains opaque to the viewer: the repeated shots of Mrs Chan looking out of Mrs Suen's living-room window are apparently shown from another window opposite, a perspective emphasised by the inclusion of blurred foreground objects; and quite a lot of the 'role-play' in the alley is shown in lateral tracking shots taken from *inside* one of the buildings, with its walls and barred windows frequently obscuring our view of the characters.

We could extend this point into a consideration of the way Wong avoids conventional eyeline matches when he cross-cuts



Trapped by the mahjong game outside the door, with an unexplained foreground obstruction

between the speakers in conversation scenes: for example, in two newspaper office conversations between Chow and Ping. The shots of the two speakers seem deliberately ill-matched, as if Wong wants us to feel that there's something intangibly disquieting about the film's syntax. But to go further down that road would be academic, and that is far beyond the scope and ambition of this slim volume.

We should note in passing that some of these visual eccentricities are introduced to allow Wong to 'rhyme' sequences in different parts of the film. The under-the-bed shot of Mrs Chan's getaway, for example, is much later directly echoed in the under-the-bed shot of her reaching for Chow's slippers in the Singapore hotel room. Wong assumes that we will remember the first shot when we see the second. The same goes for shots of Mrs Chan looking out of Mrs Suen's window, first with curiosity, much later with tearful nostalgia and regret.

As we've just suggested, the close-ups of the clock in the shipping company office appear to be related to a small group of other seemingly anomalous shots in the film. These are oddly composed images of the decors in which scenes are set, from which characters are absent or in one case marginalised. These images are bisected by strong vertical or horizontal lines (like a clock face?), and the strangeness of the compositions seems intended to link them in our minds. The first occurs at the end of the first scene in Mr Ho's office. Mr Ho hurries down the stairs for his dinner date with his mistress, and the camera pans slightly, holding on a general view of the office. A vertical line bisects the shot; the office accountant is visible through a hatch in the wall at the right, but most of the image is filled with decor and furniture, all of it redolent of 1960s design. The shot has no narrative function; Wong is simply inviting us to observe a vanished style.

The second such shot is the one that introduces the western restaurant. It's bisected by a horizontal line. The top half of the image shows a light fitting, and the bottom a jukebox. (Wong has a thing about jukeboxes; the one in the old Wally Mat pub in *Chungking*



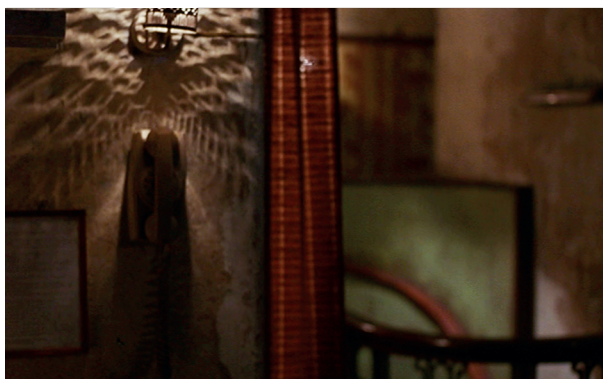
Express was favoured with extended close-ups.) The jukebox provides a minimal narrative rationale for the appearance of Nat King Cole's Spanish standards on the soundtrack, but the shot seems nonetheless anomalous in a film which elsewhere consistently avoids establishing shots.

Slippers and heels seen from under beds in Hong Kong and Singapore



And the third such shot appears when Mrs Chan invades Chow's hotel room in Singapore, immediately before the under-the-bed shot of her feet in high heels as she reaches for the slippers. It's an odd view of the room's decor, vertically bisected by a brown curtain; Mrs Chan is off screen. The throw of light from a lamp on the off-

Looking out of Mrs Suen's window twice, first pensively, then with nostalgic regret



Three narratively redundant shots of decor: Mr Ho's office, the western restaurant and Chow's Singapore hotel room

white wall is distantly reminiscent of the lighting in the western restaurant. The shot occurs just after Mrs Chan has called Chow's newspaper office but failed to speak down the phone line, and its 'emptiness' seems to relate to her silence.

These shots of decor form a small but striking part of the film's visual repertoire. Their sporadic appearance helps to consolidate the sense that there are 'secret' connections between disparate times, places and events. This sense in turn has an oblique connection with Wong's emphasis on repression and the problem of expressing feelings face to face. There are no literal links; it's a matter of mood and unspoken thoughts. As Wong said in the interview quoted at the start of Chapter 2, his characters are versions of himself. 'That's why my characters have such closed-off lives and can't reveal themselves; they're afraid to get hurt.'

The use of music, particularly 'Yumeji's Theme', justifies the use of slowed motion in a similarly oblique way. Slightly slowing the movements of Chow and Mrs Chan makes their steps seem dance-like. It's an assertively unrealistic tic of style, but it passes unquestioned by most viewers. Of course, slowed motion emphasises the sexiness of Mrs Chan's steps in her constrictive *qipao*, but the slowing of the image also chimes with the characters' emotional awkwardness: their hesitations and the embarrassment they feel about a nascent mutual attraction. Modern popular cinema has 'normalised' the use of slow motion for showing violent action and explosions to the extent that no viewer ever takes the visual effect as disruptive to the flow of events, but to slow the motion slightly as Wong does here – building on his play with relative perceptions of time in *Chungking Express* – is less usual. The music obliquely 'explains' it and suggests the unspoken feelings in play. It also makes the slowed-motion shots an integral part of Wong Kar Wai's offer to his audience, and the pleasure viewers take in watching them is a key part of the deal.

There's more to say about the film's elisions, particularly the way they withhold narratively significant information. In Chapter 2,

we noted that Wong's decision to excise the sex scene between Chow and Mrs Chan in room 2046 was taken very late in the editing, a matter of days before the premiere in Cannes. But that omission is 'covered' by the elaborate build-up to the 'missing' scene: the lengthy montage in which we hear the voiceover lines 'I don't want to go home tonight' and 'It's me ... if there's an extra ticket, would you come with me?' and see the couple becoming more physically intimate in the back of a taxi. The same is not true of Mrs Chan's first visit to room 2046. After the mini-montage of shots of her feet rushing up and down the hotel's stairs and along the Lynchian corridor with its billowing red drapes, the film cuts to a shot of Chow smoking and looking out of the window. We hear a knock at the door. Then there's a hard cut to a wide shot of the corridor *as Mrs Chan leaves at the end of their meeting*, promising to return next day. Nothing at all is shown of what was said or done in the room, and the continuity implied by the edits makes us all the more conscious that we've been denied information.

The film contains several other time-jumps within apparently integral scenes: there's one at the end of the first visit to the *daibaitong*, in which we've seen Mrs Chan and Chow separately, when there's a hard cut to another occasion when they pass each other on the stone steps, and another in the second scene in the western restaurant, when there's a hard cut from one dinner to another towards the end of the scene. In both those examples, the cuts are 'disguised' by continuing music ('Yumeji's Theme' in the first case, Nat King Cole in the second) but at the same time 'revealed' by Mrs Chan's changes of *qipao*. In neither case, though, is there any sense that the film is withholding anything. It's merely quickening the pace of its story development, advancing the burgeoning relationship between Chow and Mrs Chan.

But other narrative elisions make the storytelling wilfully oblique. They range from the minor (Ping's move to Singapore, Mrs Chan's mysteriously easy access to Chow's Singapore hotel room) to the absolutely major (Mrs Chan having a son, the marital status of

both Chow and Mrs Chan in 1966). These elisions are designed to leave us speculating. The close-up of the hotel boy denying that anyone has been in Chow's hotel room – the only such close-up of a supporting character in the whole film – leads us to speculate that he's lying, that he, too, fell victim to Mrs Chan's charm.

More significantly, we can speculate that if Mrs Chan had a child that wasn't her husband's, that would certainly have led her to a formal separation and divorce, despite her face-saving assurance to Mrs Suen in 1966 that Mr Chan is 'fine'.

Our speculations are ultimately subsumed into the film's closing sense that an era has passed, a chapter has ended. The film is finally all about the bittersweet memory of something lost. Psychologically, Wong's 'off-screen strategy' is all about that loss. The film's evasions, elisions, exclusions, disjunctions and enigmas – even its momentary fixations on decor – are all about the imperfect retrieval of a memory, while its evocative and insistent music is all about smiling or sobbing through the parts that time has heightened or discoloured or erased. The tenor of the ending is clear: time to move on.