



Between “Facts” of Genre and “Fictions” of Love

Happy Together (1997) and *In The Mood for Love* (2000)

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Abstract. Hong Kong New Wave director, Wong Kar-Wai’s two films constitute the focus of analysis, *Happy Together* (1997) and *In the Mood for Love* (2000) being compared along questions of genre (degrees of melodrama(city) and “pseudo-genres” created for the sake of citation), and observing the clashes between love stories of a homosexual, respectively a heterosexual couple. Besides exhibiting the characteristics of “pure” melodramas and mythical tales, these two of Wong’s films radicalize such categories of understanding as the exact time-frames of the diegetic worlds, placing a heightened emphasis on visual and auditive elements of style. Thus they lead the viewers into perceptually saturated experiences (an interpretative direction indebted to Lóránt Stóhr’s analysis) and offer them the possibility to live through “affective intensities with no name” (Ackbar Abbas’ term).

“These films [of the Hong Kong New Wave] do not so much thematize Hong Kong culture as they give us a critical experience of Hong Kong’s cultural space by problematizing the viewing process. This may also explain why so many of the innovative films are situated in a space between ‘fact’ and ‘fiction,’ allowing the specular, the given-to-be-seen, to retain a certain critical speculative edge.”
(Abbas 1997, 26.)

Two Films about Love

It is a truism to analyze the films of Hong Kong New Wave director Wong Kar-Wai in relation to the commercial genres that his films recreate or

reinterpret. Furthermore, it seems typical to establish (sequential) links between his films and find repeating motives – as if the works somehow constituted a cycle, worthy of an auteur’s efforts. From this perspective it may appear as accidental to compare two of his films that do not succeed each other, and choose as a basis of comparison the simple fact that both are about two human beings falling in love. These two films of Wong Kar Wai – *Happy Together* (1997) and *In the Mood for Love* (2000) – are perhaps the best known and mainstreamed representatives of East Asian cinema in Eastern Europe. Screened at film festivals, in art cinemas and on (art) televisions, they may boast a wide audience. No wonder that for many of us they have become the synecdochic signifiers of a vast corpus of films – a reason, no doubt, for my having chosen to examine them.

Watching both mentioned films – the 1997 *Happy Together* and the 2000 *In the Mood for Love* – is advisable to fans of the director and his team of production, yet anyone should engage with the two pieces if they would like to face the fact that screen relationships to be deciphered as love are dependent as much on fictional codes of representation and narrative conventions as they are on certain similarities with (objective) reality. The elaboration of this statement constitutes one axis of this essay.

Yet, in a different order of thoughts, my observations may be categorized as being about “the melodrama(tic) qualities of Wong movies”, an important pathway of interpretation in generic criticism referring to the Hong Kong director’s oeuvre. Lóránt Stóhr argues that Wong approaches the different generic models only not to fulfill them and to construct out of their ruins the one genre that most suits his interest in time and its characteristics: namely, melodrama.¹ Quoting Torben Grodal’s cognitive assessment of filmic genres, Stóhr states that the perceptual awareness the melodrama’s passive viewer experiences is in perfect harmony with the visual excesses of “glossy” generic

¹“It is commonplace to speak about genres and their transformation in the case of Wong Kar-Wai’s films, yet critics and theoreticians examining the oeuvre of the director up to now have placed the emphasis on the deconstruction of the genre used as a starting point, and have not given enough attention to the fact that during deconstruction there is always a new narrative pattern emerging. Behind the action genres employed as public-catchers and narrative starting points there is another genre appearing, the melodrama, which can be regarded as Wong’s true, personal mode of speech. My paper sets out to analyze the ways Wong uses, turns upside down and re-interprets the leading genres of Hong Kong film production, how he creates art out of the vulgar filmic language meant for mass consumption, and finally the question of why melodrama is adequate for narrating and showing the nature of Wong’s great theme, time (itself).” (Stóhr 2005, 36, translation mine, A. V.)

examples.² Furthermore, he finds that the theoretical model most adequately explaining the specific Wong stylistics (in the case of images: abrupt cutting, slowing down, doubling, abstracting forms into patches of colour, the cyclical treatment of time in narratives, etc.) is the masochistic aesthetic presented by Gaylyn Studlar (Stöhr 2005, 40–41).

While certainly regarding my below analysis as a “subclass” of the viewers’ perceptually saturated experiences of melodramas – and in this I am more than indebted to Stöhr’s insights, in the conceptualization of Wong’s visual stylistical trademarks I take a route other than the one provided by Studlar’s masochistic aesthetic and the idea that Wong’s films are “pure” melodramas. My reason for doing this is, as hopefully demonstrated by the below analyses, that these two of Wong’s films – even though being exclusively about love relations – somehow go further than the generic formulas of melodrama. Therefore I propose to link them to the gender and sexual orientation of filmic characters and actors performing, and suggest that the idea of Ackbar Abbas about New Wave Hong Kong cinema developing a cultural representation of the *déjà disparu* is most adequate, even without supposing a thorough knowledge of Hong Kong historical realities³ – which is the case with (East Asian) Wong’s most East European viewers.

Histories and Melodramas

While *Happy Together* paints a homosexual relationship in Argentina, and is accompanied (mainly) by Astor Piazzolla tango melodies, *In the Mood for Love* stays with heterosexuality in Hong Kong and the “good old” cello/violin solos composed by Michael Galasso. There are thematic crossing points that organize both narratives: the usual relational drawbacks and mutual infidelities

²“As a result of passivity [in Grodal’s sense] not only emphatical, but also perceptual identification comes in the foreground, therefore the viewer of the melodrama gives a much bigger attention to images and sounds, s/he is more sensitive to compositions, objects, colours, music, and noises. By stating this Grodal gives a new and general explanation to the question that presented a challenge to many theories, namely why the auteurs of “sensitive” 1950s American melodramas, foremost Sirk and Minnelli, are using such a dense and over-aestheticized imagery. The other basic trait of melodrama, besides the passive leading character, is its specific temporality. In contrast with canonical narration, time does not proceed in a linear manner; it is rather cyclical or timeless: the narration of melodrama is often composed of timeless repetitions, or repetitions without past, and repeating activities in the perfect (tense).” (Stöhr 2005, 39, translation mine, A.V.)

³Most notably the change from a British to a Chinese government in the year 1997.

programmatically end up in partings. Perhaps it is this narrative trajectory that conditions the palpable retro atmosphere of the two movies.

In *Happy Together* we may speak about the patina of an eternal turn-of-the-century up to the 1930s Argentinean tango culture, filtering over the first-order diegesis which takes place in a contemporary, fully technologized world. In his well documented piece about (the production of) *Happy Together*, Marc Siegel also elaborates on the temporal markers the creators wanted to attribute to the boys' melodramatic story, and these are not the eternal turn-of-the-century up to the 1930s, but the 1970s. However, the team proved incapable of "finding" 1970s Buenos Aires (spaces), an incapacity mirrored by the present writer's inability to correctly determine the films' (metaphorical) temporal allusions: "when Wong and his crew went to Argentina in August 1996 to begin work on *Happy Together*, they sought the space of 1970s Buenos Aires. Financially incapable of recreating the earlier period and style, they gravitated instead to that aspect of contemporary Argentina that resembled Hong Kong." (Siegel 2001, 277) And if we consider Siegel's further observations about the mode of "remaking Hong Kong" at the other end of the globe slowly pervading the production process⁴, we may argue that a correct assessment of the time coordinates (based on the visual elements) is not a must in *Happy Together*, since the sense and memories of a place/site (with a real geographical original) dominate the movie.

In the film presented to the public in 2000, *In the Mood for Love*, we may witness the coming to life of a micro historical, intimate and familial 1960s Hong Kong, certainly in a most stylized variant, which in most cases would send the viewers – especially those from different cultural backgrounds – to their other East Asian film experiences. By this last statement I mean that we are not urged to attribute historical faithfulness to the detailed and richly "decorated" scenery, rather to reflect upon the primacy of style and atmosphere involved.⁵

⁴"Unacquainted with Buenos Aires, Wong and his crew found themselves returning to the transient spaces that are familiar to any international traveler. These bars, barbershops, fast-food joints, and trains, as well as the temporary, fleeting human encounters associated with them, are also familiar to viewers of Wong's other urban films [...]. In this sense, *Happy Together* does not really tell us very much about Buenos Aires. Instead, it uses certain Argentine spaces in order to localize Hong Kong concerns and perceptions. As Wong has put it, "It's more like I'm remaking Hong Kong in Buenos Aires" (Siegel 2001, 278).

⁵This is a critical observation which is by no means singular in Wong-criticism, as Ackbar Abbas writes about *Chunking Express* that "[a]ll events therefore are mediated by a style that puts them at a distance and reduces their seriousness." (Abbas 1997, 56).

Even though writing a *propos* Wong's first feature film, the 1994 *Days of Being Wild*, Ackbar Abbas' observations can be quoted in this respect, since he elaborates on the relational mode the different time planes are constructed in: "If the visual details locate a time, the soundtrack dissolves it back to prior moments. The result is then a history of the sixties that, like the experience of disappearance itself, is also there and not there at the same time. The film does not give us Hong Kong in the sixties viewed from the nineties, but another more labile structure: the nineties are to the sixties as the sixties are to an earlier moment, and so on and on." (Abbas 53-4). Such a regressive structure – time of actual production (1990s) relating to time deciphered from metaphorical visual allusions (1960s/1970s) relating to time of soundtrack/music (1930s tango in *Happy Together*, *In the Mood for Love*'s "eternal" classical music) – characterizes both of the analyzed films. Thus we can conclude that the fluidization of time periods and their transformation into atmospherical-topographical constructs is an important feature of Wong's poetics, at least in the analyzed movies.⁶

As for the generic patterns graspable in the two films (besides the evidence of both being melodramas), I would argue that we are faced with simulacra of otherwise perfectly logical genres which may have existed (or actually did) in world film history: 1960s Hong Kong heterosexual melodrama or 1930s Argentinean homosexual dance/tango romance. In Wong's *Happy Together* and *In the Mood for Love* one cannot ignore the double conceptual process happening: the creation of a (virtual, fictional) genre in order to be able to perform its retro-atmospheric citation in stories of love relations doomed to fail. I suppose the nostalgia for an original that might have existed but never did is infinitely more retrograde and to be mourned more deeply than the "simpler" sorrow felt for a golden age that just passed away. This observation echoes the complex argumentation of Abbas who elaborates on the quality of the already mentioned "*déjà disparu*" in films of the Hong Kong New Wave: "Furthermore, the binarisms used to represent Hong Kong as a subject give us not so much a sense of *déjà vu*, as the even more uncanny feeling of what we might call the *déjà disparu*: the feeling that what is new and unique about the

⁶Cristopher Doyle, the director's chief cameraman (and, no doubt, equivalent creative partner) in these movies, has written: "I don't know what to call our "trademark" shots in English. In Chinese we say "kong jing." They're not your conventional "establishing shots" because they're about atmosphere and metaphor, not space. The only thing they "establish" is a mood or a totally subjective point of view. They are clues to an "ambient" world we want to suggest but not explain" (quoted by Siegel 2001, 290).

situation is always already gone, and we are left holding a handful of clichés, or a cluster of memories of what has never been” (Abbas 1997, 25).

Be they re-enactments or ironic quotations of the relational pessimism suggested by these pseudo-genres – Hong Kong melodrama and Argentinean dance romance – in both movies harmony is born of the incapacity for harmony and peaceful idyll. This solution is in a sense similar to the mode the films deal with the frustrations of viewers hoping for a happy ending, avoiding at the same time a weepy and truly melodramatic closure of the narratives. This other double bind is performed through a simple mode: the change of narrative planes and the creation of symbols capable of carrying mythical dimensions. In the context of the primary diegesis about the meetings and partings of the pairs, the naïve and at the same time primordial question of “What is to happen to sadness (as such)?” sneaks in, and the answer, *per definitionem*, is not to be found in their (un)lovers’ world, but in another time and space continuum, at the end of the world – the Angkor Wat ruins in Cambodia or the Iguatzu Falls in Argentina. In *Happy Together* the sorrow of the unhappy lover is carried on a tape to the lighthouse and it is let free in the wind there, while the lonely journalist of *In the Mood for Love* whispers (the causes of) his sadness in the hole of the sacred Cambodian ruin, covering it – for any occurrence – with mud.

A same function – that of creating a second-order, poetic and mythical sphere where sadness and disgrace lose their importance – is performed by the lyrical insert of the coloured waterfall in *Happy Together*: a visual and photographic masterpiece in itself, joined by a perfectly harmonious soundtrack, which transposes the viewer in a different dimension, ravished and fascinated, while watching it.

These symbolic-metaphorical settings and the scenes widen the horizon of the traditional melodramatic love-story towards tales, at the same time as they entangle the initial story-line. I conceive of them as narrative pillars or closures, which organize the narrative as self-conscious narrative moments, or as the repetition of motives and scenes, ensuring that the happy end somehow and somewhere takes place.

Bodies, Genders and Love

The person and body of actor Tony Leung may serve as a direct link – and actually it does, if we surf on the internet on a certain route – between the two films, him being the cheated, more sincere and ready-to-sacrifice-everything

counterpart in both movies. His physical characteristics and dramatic gestures recreate the homosexual background in the beautiful man-woman duo and suggest traditional heterosexual longing in the immigrant boys' home- and lovesick tale.

Such a double performance is not a singular one – we may recall Guy Pearce's appearance in *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* in 1994 as a transvestite gang-member and in the 2000 *Memento* as a memory deficient avenger whose relation to the pursuing cop is not lacking homosexual overtones. The screen personas thus created by Tony Leung or Guy Pearce appear as open towards both types of sexual identities, always balancing on a bisexual terrain at least, and on a confused homo-heterosexual field at most. Making unstable not so much the man-woman dichotomy as the "compulsory" homosexuality versus heterosexuality opposition, the consistent use of an actor's body and character – in this case that of Tony Leung – in alternative roles of desires directed to a man and to a woman is an adequate mode of creating awareness. A similar perspective can be decoded from Marc Siegel's analysis of Wong's gender agenda: "*Happy Together* shares with Wong's other films a concerted refusal to relegate intimacy to the private form of the couple or to the privatized space of the apartment. It is perhaps in this way that we could make sense of Gross' temptation to refer to Wong as "the last heterosexual director" (...). He is the last heterosexual director because his films picture the limits of heteronormative constraints on intimacy. In other words, Wong's films challenge the idea that intimacy can be confined within the form of the couple and within the realm of the private." (Siegel 2001, 286)

Trying to compare Leung's screen characters in *Happy Together* and *In the Mood for Love* one arrives to the conclusion that the basic differences, ironically, lay in the dressing and hair-code of the two characters. Nevertheless, these non-verbal signs are also conditioned by the social status and profession of Lai Yiu Fai and Mr. Chow, respectively: a night-shift worker and a journalist cannot resemble each other, by definition. Is there any other essential difference between them? I suppose that by producing and screening his two films "together", Wong Kar-Wai succeeded to raise this question in the mind of most of his viewers. Tony Leung's repeated performances call for an effort to understand the halo of homosexuality in the heterosexual relationship and vice-versa, an experience all viewers must conceptualize having seen both films.

Man-to-man and woman-to-man: how are they different? Certainly, this is a question that comes to mind if we set out to analyze two movies made by the same team, with a difference of three years and interested in examining the parameters of homosexual and heterosexual love.

One of the least spectacular, yet most curious differences between the relationship of the Hong Kong boys in Argentina, respectively the cheated scribbler husband and wife in Hong Kong lays in the grade of conventionality they are ready to assume. The only aspect with reference to the boys, which is worth to be mentioned, is that of non-normative sexuality: besides that they lead the most everyday life of a married and one-household couple. They cook, they clean, take care of each other, go shopping, make love and have fights. Marc Siegel points to the clear intention of the makers in turning the homosexual pair into a most ordinary couple, in the case of whom the same sex and gender is more or less a simple chance: "As Wong stated in a press conference at the 1997 Cannes film festival, where the film won a prize for *mise-en-scène*, this film is not merely about two men, but about human relations, human communication and the means of maintaining it. It's two men but it could have been any other couple. [...] Doyle reiterated the director's sentiment: 'At a pinch, there are no gays. One is what one is and this film shows that.'" (Siegel 2001, 279.)

Compared to the immigrant male couple's story, the conventional heterosexual trajectory of the journalist and the secretary is lacking such familiar "ingredients": no trace of a common household, despite their being neighbours and supposedly lovers as well, bodily contact is limited to hands touching each other, and the conflicts lived together are basically addressed to their unfaithful spouses. Everyone may remember the famous scene of the dinner in the hotel, when and where the two figures seem to dispute the appearance of a lover in the man's life, only to be informed several minutes later that this was a main "rehearsal" for Mrs. Chan's interrogation of his unfaithful husband.

What happens is that the homosexual love is placed in a jungle of love relation stereotypes, while the heterosexual variant is torn out of such a film genre historical or even reality tradition, therefore forcing us to re-write or re-consider our formulas of understanding. In the Wong universe the homosexual pair resembles infinitely more the arguing young couple in everyone's neighbourhood than the woman-man distribution of Maggie Cheung and Tony Leung, as the latter ones do not even attempt to create a world of reference common to both of them. We, as viewers, are made aware that (gendered) sexual orientation is but one feature of human relationships constituted on the basis of love, and perhaps not the most essential one for that matter. This may be so in an objective reality around us, and totally so in the presented filmic universe.

Besides Tony Leung we may find so many similarities between the two films exclusively dedicated to the anatomy of sexual/love relationships that the filmic universe created by "conflating" *Happy Together* with *In the Mood for Love* becomes a playground of elements of filmic love and eroticism as such. The Wong type of eroticism, or better said the screen construction of human relationships based on this element is fundamentally dependent on the human bodies' situatedness in well-defined spaces. In both movies there is a sharp contrast between the actors/figures and the surroundings they are meant to live and move in. Their physical beauty, sensuality and desire for the other are constituted in opposition to (with the background of?) the falling plaster, the bare furniture, the crowded and noisy neighbourhood.⁷ We, as viewers are to identify the minimal number of scenes by simply taking a look at them, as no other information comes through the dialogues with reference to sites of the story.

This type of engaging the reader's attention to a maximum degree leads us into a state of heightened visual awareness and we find ourselves waiting for the red patterned blanket or the kitschy lamp to enter into focus in *Happy Together*, not to speak about the labyrinthine rooms and the food-carriers, or Mrs. Chan's robes in the film *In the Mood for Love*. Such a lead exercised over the viewer is different from the well-known classical creation of suspense situations or the sustaining of viewer's curiosity by witty and suggestive dialogues. An exclusively visual fixation of the attention is achieved by setting, lighting, photography and editing in both films: viewers who are ready to follow this path are already and halfway seduced. And more than that: if incapable of such a visual immersion into and of identifying the scenes by quick and short visual clues, they are to lose the narrative thread as well. To exemplify this, we may think about the tourist bureau where Mr. Chow's wife is working: this is only symbolized by the information bar, the half-side of the mirror and the postcards exposed. Failing to identify the place and its importance for the narrative of layered infidelities, the viewer will not see the point of repeated asymmetrical and well emphasized shots of it.

Colours and non/figurative elements must play a crucial role in such a scheme, and so they do, we may remember the numerous analyses devoted to Mrs. Chan / Maggie Cheung's wardrobe to suggest the importance of the

⁷Lóránt Stóhr has a similar observation, further speculating on the overerotization of space and objects, with reference to *In the Mood for Love*. "The narrow spaces, the visually overcrowded apartments, the clocks signalling the passing of time become aestheticized and eroticized: they reappear as fetishes, as objectified prostheses of the desired lover." (Stóhr 2005, 44, translation mine, A.V.)

question. The close-ups of such – basically and otherwise – insignificant pieces as staircases, clothing-patterns, window-frames, vegetables and food-portions contribute a great deal towards a sense of “materiality” being born while watching the movies. The scene when the sick Lai Yiu Fai in *Happy Together* – covered with the well-known red blanket – is preparing a dish for his whining mate, the camera closing up on his hand breaking the egg and pouring it on the pasta is a good example for the mechanism alluded to.

The mode when the viewer is the desiring subject of a love relationship, lingering and looking for the beloved one, paying extreme attention to every perceivable trace of the person, is evoked by the detailed camera analysis, the strong colours and the exquisite camera-movements, since we are bound to sensually enjoy such a spectacle. The difference is that the object of our erotic(al) attachment in the case of these two Wong movies are not the otherwise beautiful, iconic star-actors, rather the filmic image itself. The slowing down of movements, the minutely choreographed dance-steps, the recurrent melodies and the repeated angles, the constant employment of mirrors and mirroring offers the viewer a much acclaimed position: that of the fascinated lover, seduced without even realizing it. A less poetical, yet more cognitive genre theoretical account of this process is offered by Lóránt Stóhr: “Slowing down narration and making it cyclical finally leads to the emancipation of images: sequences become musical spectacles, which, according to the basic cognitive-emotional function of melodrama, offer pleasure to the ears and the eyes” (Stóhr 2005, 46).

I have proposed to take a look at the methods the makers of the films employ to create the images and narratives of homosexual and heterosexual love. These methods and elements are numerous: from the construction of settings and colour/form of the costumes on to the musical tunes and the slowed down camera effects, not to speak about the emphasized materiality of the actors’ bodies. I conclude that besides the theme and subject these two movies represent love and the state of being fascinated on a different plane as well: this is the situation of the viewer who cannot resist but “fall in love” with the extreme perceptual beauties – visual, aural, even tactile – presented by the moving images in question. In Ackbar Abbas’ interpretation the viewers of Wong’s movies find themselves reacting to “affective intensities with no name”, a metaphor most adequate to illustrate the mechanism: “one of the features of New Hong Kong cinema is its sensitivity to spatial issues, in other words to dislocations and discontinuities. [...] Rather, what we find represented now are emotions that do not belong to anybody or to any situation–affective intensities with no name” (Abbas 1997, 27).

The Hungarian title of the first version of my paper – then in the form of an article in a monthly film magazine – was the following: “Being Seduced without Knowing It”. This formulation summarizes adequately the conclusion I intended to arrive to: namely, that the Wong method of making films about love is intent not so much on the representation of love as a series of activities but on transposing the viewers in a state of mind and perception similar to that of being seduced and falling in love. This is being achieved through an extremely rich texturing of the filmic image and soundtrack, that is, an exaggerated enhancement of the illusionary filmic experience. The “fictional” codes of films about love and the lingering attitude of the “really” immersed and seduced viewers may clash, but also mingle while watching these movies.

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