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Happy Together? Generic Hybridity in *2046* and *In the Mood for Love*

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In this chapter I argue that adventurous storytelling in Wong Kar-wai's *2046* (2004) and *In the Mood for Love* (2000) arises predominantly out of an elaborate engagement with popular genre. I begin by arguing that narrational ploys in *2046* act self-consciously to disorient and misdirect the viewer: the film's ambiguous combination of melodrama and science fiction draws the viewer into errors of comprehension. Later I suggest that *In the Mood for Love* discreetly meshes together two disparate genres, resulting in a narration shot through with story gaps, unreliable cues, and retardations. I go on to sketch the ways in which both films alight upon a convention of melodrama, arguing that *2046* – a putative sequel to *In the Mood for Love* – cannot justify its complex generic strategies to the same degree as its more celebrated predecessor. Finally, I identify Wong's generic tactics in terms of a fundamental cinephilia, and point to what I suggest are the most pertinent and proximate contexts for Wong's generic and narrational experimentation.

Storytelling in both films is seldom gratuitously complex. Typically an obliquely staged action or a story ellipsis will be motivated by textual elements; often the unorthodox device will execute narrative functions, retarding, advancing, or providing commentary upon story action. I try to show that *In the Mood for Love* and *2046* justify even their most idiosyncratic narrational maneuvers by generic or compositional devices of motivation. The chapter also attempts to characterize the narrative functions performed by such maneuvers, along with the particular effects they engender.

Changing Minds: Complex Narration in *2046*

At the beginning of *2046*, Tak (Takuya Kimura) is travelling on a train departing from the year *2046*, a year which attracts time-travelers who seek

reclamation of lost memories. It is also a temporal space in which the forces of change are retarded. In 1963 Chow Mo-wan (Tony Leung Chiu-wai) pursues but is rebuffed by Black Spider (Gong Li), a professional gambler in Singapore. In 1966 Chow encounters Mimi (Carina Lau), who mourns the death of her playboy lover. After Mimi is violently attacked by a jealous admirer (Chang Chen), Chow learns that the assault occurred in room 2046 of Hong Kong's Oriental Hotel. The room number resonates with Chow, and he rents the adjacent room. There he writes a futuristic story entitled "2046." Later Chow solicits the attentions of Bai Ling (Zhang Ziyi) and a tempestuous affair ensues; but when Bai Ling becomes too emotionally dependent on him, Chow backs off. An ongoing feud between the hotel manager and his daughter, Wang Jingwen (Faye Wong), prompts Chow to intervene: he becomes a go-between in the affair involving Jingwen and her Japanese lover, Tak, of whom Jingwen's father disapproves. In 1970, Bai Ling inadvertently triggers Chow's memory of Black Spider, whose real name, Su Lizhen, reminds the protagonist of a past love. Chow rejects Bai Ling's overtures and taxis home alone.

2046 opens in the epoch of the film's title, and its post-credits sequence establishes a spectacular artery of futuristic roads and rail-tracks. Tak's voiceover dialogue accompanies enigmatic imagery of color-streaked tunnels, cavernous monoliths, and female robots. The plot then moves to 1963, though at this stage a lack of expository markers prevents us from determining the spatio-temporal context of the action. (A viewer familiar with *In the Mood for Love* may be able to infer a broad narrative context by certain echoic elements of the *mise-en-scène* [lighting, setting, etc.], as well as by the figure of Chow.) An inter-title provides the transition between the two scenes but is too abstract to orient us to the narrative context of our new setting. To compound our disorientation, Wong Kar-wai starts the second scene *in medias res* as Chow and a female intimate converse cryptically about promises exchanged during a prior unseen encounter. Combining repressive story exposition with an unspecified temporal and spatial context provokes the viewer's curiosity about narrative action: Who are the figures in this scene? How are they related? When and where is this action set?

Most strikingly, the juxtaposed scenes exhibit a highly disjunctive use of genre. There is a staggering lack of explicit causal, temporal, or spatial links between the two opening scenes, which generates ambiguity and in turn engages our curiosity. (How) are the two scenes related? Wong will sustain this ambiguity throughout the first 24 minutes of the film, so that the two

plotlines unfold in uncertain relation to each other. Such ambiguity sets the viewer on the path to inference-making. Among the various hypotheses we are likely to hold in balance is that the two plot strands are unconnected, unless perhaps in broadly symbolic or thematic ways. Principally, though, the spectator will search for causal connections between the lines of action. Several factors may prompt us to regard the science-fiction plot as a “frame” narrative which encloses and articulates the 1960s action (which we regard as an “embedded” narrative). Plot order is one such factor: the film opens in 2046 and subsequently switches to 1963, an anterior maneuver which may hint at a flashback structure. The flashback hypothesis is strengthened by the presence of Tak’s voiceover narration in the opening scene, which we may assume to bracket the 1963 scene as well as the futuristic action. And we might expect the embedded plotline to elucidate several oblique enigmas set up by the film’s opening sequence (Why did Tak leave 2046? Did the woman he refers to ever truly love him? Will Tak discover the woman’s secrets?).

The spectator’s flashback hypothesis will be attenuated and eventually disqualified by subsequent events. An attenuating factor is the narration’s refusal to anchor the 1960s action to Tak’s voiceover commentary; and the introduction of Chow’s voiceover during the 1960s scenes weakens our flashback inference still further. It is fully 24 minutes into the film before we can unequivocally determine the proper connection between the plotlines. Now both story strands are revealed to be causally linked: as Chow conveys in voiceover that he is writing a science-fiction novel entitled “2046,” the narration provides visual fragments of futuristic action. The narration’s communicativeness here allows us to confidently relate the film’s science-fiction plotline to Chow’s subjectivity.¹ At the same time, this new information countermands our initial flashback hypothesis, reversing our assumption that the futuristic scenes constitute a frame narrative that “narrates” an embedded 1960s storyline. Moreover, we are forced to recast what we have taken to be a “real” story universe (the 2046 sequences) in terms of a fictional milieu dreamt up by Chow. Until now (and given that 2046 initially announces itself as a science-fiction film) we are given no reason to regard the futuristic world as any less ontologically stable than the film’s period setting. All of these factors function to mark the narration as predominantly repressive, apt to foster inappropriate and erroneous assumptions.

The overt juxtaposition of melodramatic and science-fiction genres in 2046 strikes a disjunctive note, particularly during early phases of the action.

As the film progresses, however, these genre elements gradually cohere in each of the main plotlines. Emotion is the common link between the genres, and it becomes central to both parallel stories. Without abandoning its futuristic iconography, the science-fiction plotline settles down into an essentially melodramatic narrative invoking sentiment, romance, and thwarted desire. The melodramatic line of action reciprocally broaches what genre specialists agree is a favorite theme of science fiction: the notion of “humanness” (Neale 2000, pp. 102–3; King and Krzywinska 2002). 2046 limns Chow’s everyday existence as robotic. This analogy holds good for Chow’s mechanistic tendency to shut down his emotions, and to repel the emotions of others. An assembly line of women bears witness to Chow’s repudiation of emotional commitment. He values alcohol for its anesthetic effects (“It makes things easy”). His existence is also robotic in its commitment to routine: Chow is locked into an automated pattern of behavior. (It is not incidental that his diegetic writing fabricates a universe in which “nothing ever changes”; such a place offers utopian comfort for a protagonist seeking habituation and permanence.) Chow traces an arc of character development which guides him toward an acceptance of emotion (he develops romantic attachments to Jingwen and Su Lizhen) and change (he shrugs off old routines). In other words, indelibly *human* aspects of life force their way into Chow’s acceptance. By organizing plot material around themes of emotion, Wong is able to harmonize two initially discordant genres.

Science fiction violates ordinary standards of realism, and 2046 exploits this norm to motivate a double character strategy: several of the film’s performers play futuristic characters as well as their twentieth-century counterparts. Agents with identical physicalities routinely populate the universe of science fiction – think of François Truffaut’s *Fahrenheit 451* (1966) as another example allied to art cinema. Moreover, Wong can motivate his film’s science-fiction devices diegetically, by subjectivizing the futuristic plotline. 2046 justifies its fantastic genre iconography by harnessing it to Chow’s outlandish imagination. Despite the bizarreness of the world he envisions, Chow weights his fictive universe with data from his own life (“I made up the whole thing,” he says, “but some of my experiences found their way into it”). By making the protagonist a writer who is apt to novelize his real life, Wong can further justify placing several of the film’s performers in dual roles.

The film’s narration will complicate its pattern of doubling by yoking Chow’s future self to the physical attributes of a different character. The

Chow of 2046 is identified by the bodily traits of Tak. In story terms, it is plausible that Chow should envision himself as Tak, given that he identifies with the Japanese character's romantic affection for Jingwen. But the narration delays overt signaling of this conflation of characters, so that for much of the film we inappropriately individuate Chow and the time-traveling Tak as separate characters. The late-arriving information (coming after an hour and ten minutes of screen time) forces us to make a host of reassessments and qualifications. First, we must re-identify Chow on the basis of entirely new bodily features: "Chow," we now discover, is individuated in the film by two contrasting physical specificities. (At the same time, we must discriminate Chow's "imagined" body from his "actual" body.) Second, we must revise our understanding of earlier sci-fi action involving Tak. The time-traveler's subjective state must now be retroactively understood as representing the attitudes, emotions, and beliefs of Chow. Complicating matters still further, the narration asks us to ascribe a different cluster of psychological traits to Tak in each of the film's two main time zones: despite their bodily continuity, Tak's past and future incarnations are not harnessed to a single psychology.

Deviously, the narration suppresses cues that might alert us to Chow and Tak's synonymy. In the film's opening sequence, Tak's voiceover dialogue (spoken in Japanese) overlays images of a futuristic cityscape. Later, the same stretch of dialogue is repeated and is once again accompanied by science-fiction imagery, but now *Chow* intones the dialogue (in Cantonese). By this stage, the narration has revealed Tak to be Chow's simulacrum, and thus the iterated phrase spoken by Chow compounds our understanding that both characters are interchangeable figures. But the more communicative iteration also exposes the repressiveness of the initial voiceover, which in retrospect is seen to hold back fundamental character information. Nothing in the opening sequence cues us to the protagonist's shifting identities. However, narrational sleight of hand is here justified at a diegetic level: since Chow literally "authors" the 2046 universe and envisions its visual dimensions, it is conceivable that he also "envisions" its sonic dimension, including the vocal characteristics of his characters. In this case, a repressive storytelling tactic can be justified in terms of the fantasy constructions of the novelist-protagonist.

Bodily resemblances encourage us to compare characters across the film's two distinct plotlines. The narration does not merely ask us to comprehend the future action *in its own right* (itself a demanding task, given the action's elliptical and enigmatic procedures); we must also grasp story

action in the 2046 narrative as echoing and illuminating character psychology and relationships in the parallel plotline. Chow's romantic attraction to Jingwen is communicated most strongly – though, because "narrativized" by Chow, most obliquely – during the science-fiction scenes between Tak and the android. As well as keeping pace with current action, then, the viewer must constantly cross-reference characters and action across the parallel lines of action. Failing to determine the appropriate connections between characters, and to map the emotions and attitudes of an agent onto his or her parallel counterpart, risks losing track of character relationships in the 1960s sequences.

Both *2046* and *In the Mood for Love* weave repetitive patterns of story action, and here again compositional motivation anchors the narration's play with form. As we will see, obsessive reenactment justifies much of *In the Mood for Love*'s motivic action (i.e., action which, through formal repetition, acquires the function of a motif). *2046* motivates its repetitive action diegetically as well. Actions that we witness in the 1960s plotline are subsequently restaged in the 2046 narrative – a strategy which not only calls attention to the narration's motivic patterning, but also corroborates our belief that Chow builds his diegetic writing out of his real-life experiences.

However, though Wong motivates a surprising number of storytelling strategies by action within the story world, not every narrational strategy in *2046* can be accounted for by the diegesis or by generic convention. The film's ordering of story events, for instance, is outside the influence of any diegetic character or story action. No diegetic factor can justify the fact that, in plot terms, we are shown the 2046 universe *before* Chow decides to invent it. More generally, the narration asserts its autonomy by ordering story events in convoluted fashion. It is with considerable unpredictability that *2046* zigzags through its various time zones. The time-traveling trope of science fiction does not motivate this adventurous plotting either. It cannot, for example, account for the film's mazy trajectory within the twentieth-century plotline (e.g., its unpredictable shifts between 1963, 1967, 1970, and so on). Nor does science fiction motivate the narration's repressiveness. To be sure, many modern science-fiction films exhibit a repressive (or detective) narration (recall, for example, *Blade Runner* [1982], *12 Monkeys* [1995], and *Minority Report* [2002]). But detective narration in these films is motivated by an enigma and investigation set up in the film's story. In *2046* there is no such investigation to *generically* motivate the narration's ellipses, retardations, and deceptive stratagems. Occasionally refusing to mark temporal data explicitly (e.g., through inter-titles),

the narration creates a labile sense of time by sliding between distinct time periods.

An unpredictable temporality also pervades *In the Mood for Love*, as does a highly repressive narrational style. If 2046 cannot textually motivate certain of its storytelling tactics, we shall find that *In the Mood for Love* provides greater justification for its various narrational strategies. Here, as so often in Wong's films, experimental storytelling begins with the director's cinephilic engagement with genre.

Crimes of Passion: *In the Mood for Love*

In discussing 2046 I argued that a clash of generic styles creates a strong retarding and disorienting effect. More subtly, *In the Mood for Love* generates narrational complexity by tacitly imbricating two distinct genres. Wong has alluded in interviews to this generic layering, suggesting that a latent genre is operative beneath the film's surface melodrama. He reveals that *In the Mood for Love* was at first conceived as an exercise in Hitchcockian suspense, with the romance story of affairs and heartbreak merely a pre-text for a virtual 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. (Tirard 2002, p. 198)

This detective framework is discernible not only in the narrative structure of *In the Mood for Love*, but also, I suggest, in the film's *mise-en-scène*, iconography, and narrational point of view. A furtive detective paradigm recurrently snakes its way to the surface of the film, rupturing the conventions of melodrama and, most significantly, forcing us into errors of comprehension.

In the Mood for Love begins in 1962. Two strangers, Chow Mo-wan (Tony Leung) and Su Lizhen (Maggie Cheung), briefly cross paths at Mrs Suen's boarding house in Hong Kong. Mrs Suen leases a room to Su and her husband, while Chow leases the adjacent apartment for himself and his wife. Chow and Su establish a neighborly acquaintance, but begin to suspect their respective spouses of having an affair. The two characters grow curious as to how the affair began, and tentatively enact their spouses' initial overtures,

Gradually, the protagonists come to acknowledge their own mutual attraction, but determine not to act further on their desire. Gossip about their friendship soon percolates through the tenement building. Aware of his nascent feelings for Su, Chow takes a job in Singapore. Years later, Chow travels to Cambodia and visits the ruins of Angkor Wat, where he whispers a secret into a crevice in the ruins.

Synoptically, *In the Mood for Love* may seem to augur a fairly typical melodrama. Domestic conflict – the bedrock of the genre – is forecast by the story's marital betrayals, which prepare the way for impassioned confrontations within the central quartet of characters. Yet the narration largely banishes the spouses from the film, staving off melodramatic conflict, and exposing the adulterous figures as a kind of story armature on which to hang the activity of the main protagonists. More generally, the film will parade a host of narrational stratagems and gambits that cut against the grain of melodramatic convention.

How can we account for such unpredictable and apparently anti-generic storytelling in the film? I would posit the following explanation. Despite its explicit evocation of melodrama, *In the Mood for Love* tacitly animates and generally cleaves to the conventions of a distinct generic schema. The real locus of conflict in the film may be perceived at the level of narration, which negotiates a tension between melodramatic and detective modes of storytelling.

As Wong has hinted, *In the Mood for Love* may be understood as a virtual detective story, depicting the protagonists' investigation into a concealed infidelity. While the spouses' surreptitious affair constitutes the narrative "crime," the protagonists' post-mortem of the affair represents the narrative "investigation." In invoking the structure of a detective narrative, Wong also invokes the moral dimension of the detective universe. 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 morality that Chow and Su must confront when they become conscious of their illicit emotions, a revelation that occurs as they role-play the coquetry exchanged by their spouses. This restaging of the spouses' adulterous overtures literalizes a cliché of the detective genre: namely, that of retracing the criminals' movements (or reenacting the crime).

Mapping such tacit schemata onto the film allows us to expose familiar detective tropes, and ascribe generic motivation to apparently unconventional,

anti-generic story action. Again, the protagonists' role-play provides an instance. If the protagonists intend their reenactment to be akin to a "detached" investigation, their intention backfires. Investigating the spouses' affair leads Su and Chow to identify with the extramarital desire they simulate.² This identification finds direct correspondence in detective fiction, where the close association of detective and criminal is a staple genre. This results in 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).³ Against the film's overt melodramatic template, this role-play trajectory appears idiosyncratic and anti-generic. But by drawing on the film's *tacit* detective schemata we begin to discover quite traditional generic material. In this example, then, storytelling is not anti-generic; rather it hews to a generic paradigm that the film on the whole keeps hidden.

Tacit detective elements are brought palpably to the fore by the film's scenographic design. Noir iconography invades the *mise-en-scène*: ringing telephones and doorbells remain discomfitingly unanswered; cigarettes are obsessively smoked and function as ubiquitous markers of anxiety; and at night a perpetual rainfall pounds the lamp-lined streets of Hong Kong. An otherwise latent detective schema here parades on the surface of *In the Mood for Love*, and cues the spectator to search for other detective elements in the film.

Aside from story action and iconography, these detective elements become manifest in the film's narrational point of view. It is here that the film most consistently overturns conventional melodramatic storytelling. David Bordwell argues that a melodrama's narration is characterized by communicativeness and omniscience (Bordwell 1985, pp. 70–3). A melodrama will construct knowledge hierarchies which bestow epistemic authority upon the spectator. Edward Branigan has shown how hierarchies of knowledge allow us to "evaluate whether the spectator knows more than (>), the same as (=), or less than (<) a particular character at a particular time" (Branigan 1992, pp. 75–6). Melodramas predominantly cleave to the following pattern: $S > C$, where S denotes the spectator and C denotes the diegetic characters. In conventional melodrama, the narration creates a "disparity of knowledge" so structured as to situate the spectator on the top tier of the epistemic hierarchy. Consequently, the melodrama's narrative is presented with maximum transparency, mobilizing mainstays of the genre such as legibility of action and dramatic irony. By contrast, the detective film contrives a style of narration governed by opacity, repressiveness,

and retardation. Omniscience and transparency are jettisoned. Even the investigation stage of the narrative is characterized by some degree of uncommunicativeness. In accordance with its narrative emphasis on concealment and mystery, the detective film harnesses its narration to the restriction of the viewer's knowledge. In Branigan's terms, the spectator and the protagonist tend to occupy the same strata in the hierarchy of knowledge ($S = C$), though sometimes the spectator will know even less than the detective ($S < C$).

In the Mood for Love's investigation is communicated with detective-style repressiveness. It is 26 minutes into the film before we are alerted unequivocally to the protagonists' suspicion of their spouses. (As with *2046*, Wong postpones the apparent crystallizing of story events until the third reel.) By this stage the film has strongly hinted at marital discord (Chow's wife invariably works late; Su's husband takes frequent and lengthy trips abroad). But the narration is extremely reticent in revealing both the spouses' affair and the protagonists' suspicion of it. Only when Chow first broaches the infidelity with Su is the viewer brought into knowledge of the crime and its incipient investigation. True to detective tradition, then, *In the Mood for Love* does not allow us "access to the detective's inferences until he or she voices them . . ." (Bordwell 1985, p. 67).

Revelation of the spouses' affair invites the spectator to retroactively sift through prior action. Now we are asked to reappraise earlier scenes whose proper context the narration has suppressed. For example, we must retroactively assign a dual motive to a foregoing conversation between Su and Chow's wife: such scenes ought no longer to be construed as neighborly encounters, but as phases in an investigation. Although *In the Mood for Love* will concentrate our attention on present and future action involving the protagonists, narrational gambits such as this cue us to reevaluate preceding action in the film. We might assume, then, that the film adheres to the kind of temporal flexibility that Tzvetan Todorov argues is central to detective fiction (Todorov 1977, pp. 42–52). But contra Todorov, the retrospection ordered by *In the Mood for Love's* narration does not encourage us to reconstruct the *crime* (i.e., the spouses' infidelity) so much as guide our attention to an earlier stage of the protagonists' *investigation* – thereby undergirding our assumption that the spouses are not the center of story interest.

The repressiveness of detective narration is also used to make the story events ambiguous. This is especially evident in the scenes of role-play, which often begin *in medias res* (thereby narrowing contextual hypotheses), and which present ambiguous cues to the performative nature

of the protagonists' interpersonal exchange. Scenes of this kind initiate fluctuating hypotheses: Are the protagonists conversing "as themselves" or as the spouses they impersonate? The viewer must keep both possibilities in play while she waits for unambiguous cues to clarify the proper state of events. Once it has established the protagonists' penchant for performance, the narration can effect a play with our assumptions. It may, for instance, force us to recast ostensible role-play action as authentic dialogue between the protagonists – or vice versa. One strategy is to append a role-play scene to a "straight," non-simulated exchange between the protagonists, so that we mistakenly infer a continuation of unpremeditated character interaction. Just as 2046 undercuts our assumptions of objectivity (by subjectivizing the future universe), so *In the Mood for Love* undertakes ground-shifting tactics to render the authenticity of character action uncertain.

In the Mood for Love flaunts a narration that is restricted as well as repressive. Unlike melodramatic narration, which provides omniscient access to a cross-section of characters, the narration here is mostly restricted to the trajectory traced by one or both of the protagonists. The narration briefly deviates from this internal norm at an early stage in the film, before the spectator is made aware of the spouses' affair. Here our spatio-temporal attachment⁴ to the protagonists is momentarily broken to grant us oblique access to the two spouses. Following an exchange with Su, Chow's wife (whose visual legibility is obscured by distant, out-of-focus, and back-to-camera framings) is heard to say to an off-screen male figure: "It was your wife." Abrasively, the narration then cuts to new action.

The narration here is *at once* communicative and repressive. Character dialogue is fairly communicative, cueing the spectator to infer an illicit relationship between the spouses. Yet both the brevity of the moment and its oblique visual treatment disorient and quite probably distract the spectator from the dialogue's import, causing us to miss or misconstrue essential story information. We may, for example, be unclear as to the identity of the man and the woman in the scene, particularly since the imagery does not present them legibly. (Su's husband is not shown even in oblique fashion; and in typical noir style, a large object – in this case, a lamp – ominously dominates the foreground of one shot, obstructing our view of Mrs Chow.) This oblique visual treatment of the spouses prevails throughout *In the Mood for Love*. Insofar as they appear corporeally in the film at all, the spouses are invariably obfuscated by repressive framings or by obtrusive objects in the *mise-en-scène*. The narration's uncommunicative

presentation of these characters further sharpens our assumption that the spouses are not the film's central "interest-focus."⁵ Still, the prospect of the spouses emerging more prominently into the action is not closed down: the narration refuses to foil our expectation of melodramatic conflict.

Repressing access to a character's physicality is a strategy more common to detective narration than to melodrama. However, if in the detective film such a strategy 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 unveiled at a later climactic stage in the narrative. Moreover, any sense of mystery in this regard is largely attenuated because the spouses are not anonymous figures: the spectator knows them as the husband and wife of the protagonists, while the spouses are of course fully visible to Chow and Su. We therefore come to realize 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, they never are.

What, then, is achieved by shrouding the spouses in obscurity? Most significantly, I would argue, the physical void represented by the spouses means that they are more effectively supplanted – in the mind of the spectator – by the protagonists who undertake to simulate their activity. For the spectator, then, the adulterous couple becomes synonymous with, and thus inseparable from, the main protagonists.

A fallout of this conflation is that character individuation becomes hard to execute. Stylistically *In the Mood for Love* assists this effect, furnishing visual compositions that sometimes encourage a confusion of its two pairs of characters. Two contiguous shots provide an example. In the first shot, a woman sobs while taking a shower. We see the woman through her mirror reflection. She is turned away from the camera, which frames her obliquely from a high angle; furthermore the dimly lit, 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. As the image fades to black, the sequence comes to an end. 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? A repressive detective narration retards and lays bare character individuation: because we have not been granted an adequate purchase on the spouses' physical appearance, and because of the narration's repressiveness, we are unable to individuate the characters

with confidence. Consequently, in an important sense, the central protagonists become indistinguishable from the spouses. According to Wong, “at first I wanted to have all four characters in the film played by Maggie [Cheung] and Tony [Leung], both the wife and Mrs. Chan, and the husband and Mr. Chow” (quoted in Brunette 2005, p. 130).⁶

This putative interchangeability is also connoted by the gifts from abroad that the spouses present their partners. In a searching conversation, Chow hints that Su’s handbag is strikingly similar to the one owned by his wife; Su observes that her husband owns a necktie precisely identical to 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. This sartorial duplication thus creates more correspondence between the protagonists and their adulterous doubles: Chow and Mr Chan wear identical ties and Su and Mrs Chow shoulder similar handbags. Wong provides the payoff for all this doubling later in the film. By exploiting our awareness of these sartorial likenesses, the filmmaker undermines our already tentative grasp of story action. Consider the scene in which Su rehearses a confrontation with her husband. The scene begins with characteristic uncommunicativeness. Exposition of the narrative space, and of the characters within the space, is eschewed in favor of a single long take, which frames Su clearly in a medium shot. Crucially, the narration doesn’t provide facial access to the man that Su 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 aren’t sufficiently *au courant* to realize that Su’s “confrontation” is merely a performance and that the man she addresses is not her husband, but Chow. That Su confronts the obliquely positioned man about an infidelity reinforces our assumption that the man in the shot is Su’s husband.

Moreover, the repressiveness of the composition, together with our belief that Chow and Mr Chan are physically alike (i.e., they are attired similarly), tricks us into a mistaken inference. (The composition also sustains the pattern of obscurely rendering [whom we assume to be] Su’s husband, thus further encouraging us to form the incorrect inference.) It is only when the narration provides us with the previously withheld reverse-shot of Chow that we are made to realize our error. At this point, we are forced to revise our understanding of the narrative situation, the characters’ relationships, and the authenticity of the emotion expressed by Su.

This scene’s repressive detective narration generates several hermeneutic possibilities among which the spectator oscillates. The fact that the

narration has misled us previously does not prevent us from succumbing once more to its deceptive maneuvers. Here, we must attempt to determine the epistemic status of the action. We initially hypothesize, I would suggest, that Su is confronting her husband about his alleged infidelity. This hypothesis is facilitated at once by the limited situational context provided for the viewer, and the oblique way in which the “husband” is positioned in the frame. At last, we might suppose, the film brings to fruition our generic expectation of marital conflict. But our hypothesis here is eventually contradicted by the narration’s communicative cut to the man’s face, revealed to be Chow.

This communicativeness, while canceling out one hypothesis, triggers new ones. We must now speculate that Su is confronting Chow with respect to an off-screen affair that she suspects him of being involved in. This hypothesis 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 an expression of sympathy for Chow’s wife? Is Su upset that she herself is not the object of Chow’s affections? 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? The narration’s ellipticality encourages us to “fill in” missing action by inferring a greater development in the protagonists’ relationship than we have witnessed.

Finally, the spectator – still reeling from the narration’s deceptive gambit – must balance these conjectures against a broader hypothesis: namely, that the protagonists’ activity is merely the latest stage in their ongoing, obsessive rehearsal. Our comprehension of the scene is thus constantly in flux. We have constantly to revise our assumptions concerning the protagonists’ relationship, and to imagine what has occurred during those narrative periods that the film elides. Moreover, the film’s generic shaping comes palpably into play in this sequence: what at first appears to be a situation conventional to the melodrama – a moment of domestic conflict – is revealed to be something rather more unusual and elusive. The scene’s apparent melodramatic content, then, is disarrayed by a detective narration that is both reticent and misleading.

Contingency, Motivation, and Cinephilia

In the Mood for Love not only hybridizes its melodramatic narrative with detective conventions; it also undertakes to rework certain hallmarks of the

melodrama. Principally, the film flouts the melodrama's legible and forceful expression of character emotion. Su and Chow conservatively subordinate emotional display to the prevailing mandates of their social milieu (i.e., cultural "display rules" prescribing outward composure, decorum, and impassivity). By substituting "excess" with "restraint," *In the Mood for Love* inverts the melodrama's characteristic emphasis on emotional expressiveness. In melodrama, it is customary that the protagonist's affective state – inferably bubbling away at the surface – pours out into the expressive design of the diegesis. *In the Mood for Love* adopts this principle, but here the *mise-en-scène* reflects a character type not given to outward, "excessive" displays of 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 delivers the pathetic fallacy, lamenting the unfulfilled romance that the protagonists themselves cannot openly mourn. Not incidentally, these latter two motifs have greater congruence with the visual iconography of film noir than with melodrama.

Both *In the Mood for Love* and *2046* evoke the melodramatic convention of contingency. As ingredients germane to the melodrama, chance and coincidence are strategies for motivating action and eliciting surprise. An effective melodrama will make economical if judicious use of these strategies – all the better to preserve the semblance of causal logic and narrative plausibility. Acausality "acts upon" the protagonist (Elsaesser 1996, p. 75), thereby positioning her as a victim of providence. Not so much purposefully maneuvering through a causally prepared chain of events as buffeted between a sequence of chance incidents, the melodramatic hero is thrust inexorably closer to the dire conclusion that fate has prepared for her. Conventionally, then, the trajectory of the melodramatic agent is overlaid with a sense of the inevitable and the inescapable: no amount of effort or artfulness will emancipate the protagonist from her predetermined course.

Several moments of coincidence assail the protagonists of *In the Mood for Love*, and the film itself employs this generic trope quite self-consciously. On several occasions the characters are made to remark upon 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, underlines the vulnerability and lack of agency peculiar to the protagonists. At a narrative

level, however, the film will subvert its apparent positioning of the protagonists as victims of fate.

Coincidence is evoked conventionally in the opening phase of *In the Mood for Love*. Chow and Su convey their possessions into their new apartments at a coincidentally concurrent time.⁷ Character dialogue ensures that the coincidence is well marked: "What a coincidence! Moving in on the same day!" Already our generic expectations are animated: we are likely to read into these opening scenes something more than simply a succession of plain coincidences.

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. (This reading relies on the inferred presence of a predestined order of things, which I have noted teleologically orders the melodramatic universe.)

Engendered by these opening scenes, then, is a set of generically informed inferences and assumptions. The rest of the film, however, invokes coincidence in a way that aims to dislodge our generic assumptions. If we have been tracking the film's coincidences, we begin to realize that the protagonists disingenuously adduce coincidence for events which they know to have a firm basis in causality. The phrase "What a coincidence!" is the most repeated line in the film, and yet the accuracy of the remark becomes increasingly suspect with each repetition. Gradually the phrase comes to expose the protagonists' willingness to live inauthentically, to cede responsibility to invisible (ideological, metaphysical) forces, and to negate their personal desires and beliefs. Denying personal responsibility, the protagonists sign quite logical situations over to fate by intoning this phrase. In no sense are the protagonists "acted upon" by capricious phenomena outside their control; rather their repression is largely of their own design, since the existence of fate can no longer be deemed the prime mover of the protagonists' inability to act. Once again, what strikes us initially as generic convention – the evocation of coincidence – emerges, on closer inspection, as something quite different (in this case, generic subversion). If the viewer is to fully grasp the film's intricacies of storytelling, then, she must mine its apparently conventional generic elements for clues to character psychology and story action.

2046 revives the "What a coincidence!" dialogue, but (as with some of the film's other allusions to *In the Mood for Love*) it falls short of capturing the phrase's original *raison d'être*. Far from staking out character traits, the appropriated utterance now functions denotatively as a

fragment of incidental dialogue, and transtextually as an instance of authorial citation. As such, it serves neither the melodramatic function of foregrounding acausality nor the function of exposing character traits. More generally, *2046* recycles old motifs while diminishing their degree of justification.

Consider *In the Mood for Love's* appropriation of a Nat King Cole song. As Chow prepares to leave for Singapore, he asks Su: "If there's an extra ticket, would you go with me?" This dialogue constitutes a dangling ellipsis, since Su makes no reply. Instead the aural track is dominated by Nat King Cole's "Quizas, Quizas, Quizas," the refrain of which significantly translates into English as "Perhaps." 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. In addition the song fulfills an affective purpose, establishing and augmenting mood. *2046* establishes sonic continuity with *In the Mood for Love* by making motivic use of another Nat King Cole ballad, "The Christmas Song." Some important narrative functions are performed by the song's usage, which designates a specific time of year, operates motivically to highlight developments in story action, and contributes to mood-setting. But in contrast to *In the Mood for Love's* deployment of Cole's music, "The Christmas Song" fails to comment on character relationships or to convey subjective states.

Dense intertextuality invites the viewer to situate *2046* with respect to Wong's earlier work (most particularly, *In the Mood for Love*). Indeed, cinematographer Christopher Doyle has described *2046* as "a compendium film" (quoted in Walters 2005, p. 86), a kind of elaborate suite of favorite themes, forms, and styles. The film's (self-) citation and repetition, often excessively showcased, might lead one to infer artistic stagnation. But regardless of whether this is the case, such qualities can be assimilated "positively" into the film's overall storytelling armory. The dense intertextual allusiveness of *2046* solicits an additional layer of comprehension from the viewer schooled in Wong's previous work. For such viewers, the process of unraveling *2046* includes determining in what ways the film cross-fertilizes with other films in the director's oeuvre.

Irrespective of its allusive qualities, *2046*, as we have seen, possesses its own intrinsic formal tactics, many of which depart flagrantly from orthodox storytelling norms. Yet, *In the Mood for Love* coordinates a greater range of motivation devices than does *2046*. Both films foreground repressive

narrations that hold back narrative information, encouraging us to plug gaps in the story while refusing to validate any of our competing hypotheses. Storytelling of this sort can be justified in both films by norms of art cinema narration, and by the signature traits of the film author. But whereas *2046* cannot motivate narrational repressiveness by its melodramatic or science-fiction schemata, *In the Mood for Love* can justify its narrational strategies generically, since it dovetails both narrative and narration with the norms of detective fiction.

The generic gambits in *2046* and *In the Mood for Love* point us, finally, to the filmmaker's implicit cinephilia, which in turn enables us to sketch in pertinent contexts for Wong's filmmaking. Primarily, there is the 1960s European art-cinema context: Wong admires such auteur cineastes as Truffaut and Jean-Luc Godard, whose films have exemplified the practice of bending popular genres to personally expressive ends.⁸ The genre mixing germane to Hong Kong mainstream cinema provides a secondary, albeit more proximate, reference point. Approaching traditional genres with both affection and irreverence, the film-obsessed auteur produces ostensible genre films that assault or travesty generic norms. Characterizing Wong in these terms also helps us make sense of the bold allusive strokes evinced in *2046*: the cinephile-auteur celebrates his own work as well as that of other filmmakers.

I have argued that complexity in *2046* and *In the Mood for Love* largely arises out of a cinephiliac play with genre. Overlapping genres permeate *In the Mood for Love*, whose style, structure, and story are shot through with detective conventions; and *2046* mobilizes a collision of generic schemata, only to smooth down this conflict once the narration becomes more communicative. Both films prompt us to probe generic convention. What looks like fidelity to generic norms may come into focus as generic subversion; likewise, apparent deviation from generic norms may, on closer inspection, emerge as an oblique or tacit adherence to convention. Moreover, story comprehension in both films is complicated by gambits of character individuation, firmly rooted in generic motivation (the detective film's affinities between investigator and criminal; the science-fiction film's populace of clones and androids). Indeed, many of the films' bold narrational procedures are motivated generically and/or diegetically; in other words, the films provide strong compositional justification for their experimental techniques. As I have pointed out, not every aspect of adventurous storytelling in *2046* and *In the Mood for Love* is attributable to the filmmaker's ambivalent commerce with popular genre. But I have aimed

to show that, in both films, Wong's engagement with genre constitutes an extremely fertile source of narrational complexity and experimentation.

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Notes

- 1 Given the opening vista's hyper-stylization of Hong Kong skyscrapers and neon signs, we might take the futuristic cityscape to evoke what Warren Buckland calls a "possible world"; that is, a world which represents "a modal extension of the 'actual world'" (Buckland 1999, p. 177). We might suppose, in other words, that 2046 is a projected milieu which exists in causal (albeit temporally distant) continuity with the 1960s Hong Kong we see later in the film. But this hypothesis is invalidated by the revelation that 2046 is harnessed to a character's interior subjectivity. As a reification of Chow's diegetic writing, 2046 is "a purely imaginary world that runs parallel to, but is autonomous from, the actual world" (ibid.).
- 2 A kind of ambiguous double relationship is implied in the protagonists' mutual attraction: 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"?
- 3 A parallel scenario pertains to *In the Mood for Love*'s protagonists, whose close identification with the spouses destabilizes their own sense of moral propriety (e.g., their convictions of marital fidelity).
- 4 I am borrowing the term "spatio-temporal attachment" from Murray Smith (1995). Smith's term "concerns the way in which the narration restricts itself to the actions of a single character, or moves freely among the spatio-temporal paths of two or more characters" (1995, p. 83).
- 5 The term "interest-focus" derives from Seymour Chatman. It 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 (Chatman 1990, p. 148).
- 6 That Wong would occasionally enlist Tony Leung and Maggie Cheung to act as (off-camera) stand-ins for the husband and wife characters would seem to confirm that Su and Chow are meant to *embody* for us their respective counterparts.
- 7 During this sequence, which is overlaid with a comic atmosphere of pandemonium, 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 harvest more dramatic effect later in the film.

- 8 Like Wong, both Godard and Truffaut subject the science-fiction genre to less than reverential treatment. Godard's *Alphaville* (1965) yokes the genre to noir iconography, while Truffaut presents a weirdly anachronistic vision of the future in *Fahrenheit 451* (1966), complete with 1930s-style fire engines.

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