

Corridor Romance: Wong Kar-wai's Intimate City

Laurel Wypkema

Laurel Wypkema is the first of two authors investigating the place and importance of Wong Kar-wai's Hong Kong Cinema in this special issue of *Synoptique*. Hong Kong as Intimate City and the Cinema of Wong Kar-wai focuses on Kar-wai's unique vision of Hong Kong as a post-new wave filmmaker. Wypkema beautifully articulates Kar-wai's postmodern representation of love and loss in a Hong Kong that is characterized by fragmentation and familiarity. This essay provides a unique insight into Kar-wai's emotionally charged, and experiential, view of Hong Kong.

Hong Kong's geopolitical history is fundamentally unique. Colonized for almost 200 years by England, Hong Kong prospered enormously, becoming internationally renown as a wealthy and cosmopolitan region boasting luxury cars, expensive hotels, the English ritual of afternoon tea, contemporary architecture and soaring skyscrapers comprising an exquisite skyline and a unique mix of languages: Cantonese, a dialect from Canton (Guangdong) province not spoken throughout the rest of mainland China and English (obviously, the language of the coloniser). Hong Kong's curious suspension between cultures has continued well past 1997, when the capitalist colony was ceded back to China, which had, in the meantime, become a Communist republic. China's "One Country, Two Systems" policy is in place until the year 2047. Hong Kong's legal system, culture, currency and immigration laws will be replaced by China's. The Special Administrative Region (SAR) of Hong Kong has continued to thrive financially, though its residents

have become increasingly involved in protesting for their democratic right to elect government officials following China's appointment of the deeply unpopular Tung Chee Hwa as their Chief Executive¹.

Hong Kong's cinema – particularly its new wave cinema – cannot be considered outside of its distinctive political and social history. Particularly interesting are the various contrasts and idiosyncrasies evident in the relationship between site of production – the region itself – and film texts produced since the early 1980s, which is the period generally agreed upon as the beginning of Hong Kong's new wave movement. It is precisely the emergence of Hong Kong's unique cultural, political, colonial, postcolonial and arguably *recolonial* identity during this period that has shaped the region's creation of film texts fundamentally in recent history; most notably in the turbulent and uncertain years preceding – and the near-decade following – the 1997 handover.

The emergence of Hong Kong's "modern" new wave cinema in the late 70s and early 80s is discussed critically as a major turning point in the industry's history. In his book, *Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance*, local scholar Ackbar Abbas corrects a misunderstanding typical of his Western peers, who until recently maintained the notion that the cinema of Hong Kong was primarily one of kung fu and a hyper-action-melodrama. Contrary to this widespread impression, he says, Hong Kong's new cinema

...is not essentially a cinema of action or a 'cinema of blazing passions,' which was how

one popular festival of Hong Kong films was billed in the United States. What is interesting is that it is a cinema that responds to a specific and unprecedented historical situation, what I have called a space of disappearance where 'imperialism' and 'globalism' are imbricated with each other... Dislocations and novel connections typify the new Hong Kong cinema and the images we find in them².

I would like to briefly explain the thrust of Hong Kong's cinematic history. Since consideration of this pivotal moment, in what is indeed an articulation of Hong Kong's still-emerging cultural, even perhaps "national" identity depends, in part, on an understanding of what led to the emergence of the new wave. The postmodern depiction of the city in Hong Kong's new wave films emerged after decades of locally-made films were produced there for people outside of its regional boundaries, where Hong Kong was often dressed up to look like elsewhere – usually mainland China – and to emulate the various traditions and cultural specificities of those elsewhere. Prior to the emergence of the People's Republic of China in 1949, two genres typified Hong Kong's cinematic output. As the tiny region sought (unsuccessfully) to contribute propaganda films to the construction of nation-building for the mainland, Confucian-minded mainland-style melodramas (*lunli*) and revolutionary films (*minzhu*) were produced as a show of patriotic loyalty to mainland China on the eve of Japanese occupation in the 30s and 40s. After the import of Hong Kong films was banned in China in 1952, Hong Kong sought a new market – again outside its local borders – in the various Chinese diasporic communities around the world until the 1970s. It was another step away from mainland ties, and, according to scholar Chu Yingchi, a landmark in the eventual emergence of a certifiable 'Hong Kong society.'

Chu's book *Hong Kong Cinema: Coloniser, Motherland and Self*, plots this tendency to market and distribute films abroad – an otherwise unusual tendency for a nation's film industry – or in Hong Kong's case: a "quasi-national" film industry. She argues that the residential history of Hong Kong – an atypical blend of colonization, transience, immigration and exile from elsewhere (most often mainland China, the Philippines, Taiwan and other areas of South and Southeast Asia) directly influenced film production choices in Hong Kong, in turn creating a film industry that pandered to "others" rather than to local Hong Kong audiences. The tendency to produce films for other areas – whether for mainland China or for various Chinese

diasporas throughout Southeast Asia and the rest of the world – continued approximately until the last quarter of the 20th century. At the same time, the region became more culturally well-defined, politically stable, economically successful and, significantly, increasingly distanced from identification with mainland China. At the same time, the emergence of Hong Kong's new wave cinema launched a prolific period of filmmaking that has been described as "locally-concerned". This breakthrough led to others – political filmmaking and locally-situated documentary, for example – but perhaps most significantly, the art house film and the frequent depiction of Hong Kong as "home" – whether fondly, nostalgically or problematically – are centrally important during this period. Until the early 1980s, Hong Kong was treated by many as a home away from home; a transient, "meantime" destination. As increasing numbers of people were born – or more often raised – in Hong Kong, though, an indigenous film culture began to take shape. The new wave marks the emergence of a cinema made specifically *for* Hong Kong residents. The cinema of Stanley Kwan, Ann Hui, Tsui Hark, Patrick Tam and, slightly later, Wong Kar-wai, depicts Hong Kong as specific place and city with a distinctive culture and people. These films arguably work towards a definition of what it is to live in Hong Kong, call Hong Kong home, and cope with leaving and yearning to come back when a journey abroad is portrayed. In other words, this new cinema began exuberantly showing the spaces of Hong Kong as *home* for the first time. These images became an important part of Hong Kong's cinema, and continue to be so.

Wong Kar-wai is, perhaps, the best known new/second wave Hong Kong filmmaker, worldwide. He is at the peak of critical acclaim following the international success of *In The Mood For Love* (2000) and the greatly anticipated recently released *2046* (2004). As such, he is a filmmaker belonging as much to international cinema as he belongs to Hong Kong's. He is noted for his sensitivity and a melodramatic style often focused upon a Hong Kong that is intimately represented in a fractured, dislocating manner emphasized by a complex visual aesthetic, fragmented temporal thrust, and lush musical score. Despite this fragmentation and small-scale, or perhaps because of it, the city – renown as a thriving and densely-populated metropolis – becomes familiar to both indigenous and foreign viewers in a very particular way, and this is perhaps best described as "Wong Kar-wai's Hong Kong". David Bordwell has said of Wong Kar-wai that, in him, "Hong Kong has found its exportable festival filmmaker, the one director no intellectual need be ashamed to like...Critics claim

him as the allegorist of postmodern urban culture”³. At the same time, Bordwell anticipates and warns specifically against scholarly study of the director, fearing that this will inevitably overlook the import of Wong’s emotionally-wrought humanist films in which, he says, time is treated as

...an unmanageable flux, a stretch of reverie, an instant revelation, and an undying memory, the films invite critics to search for allegories of impermanence reflecting Hong Kong’s pre-1997 anxieties...[but] this Romantic and romantic cinema, however concerned with the city in history, is centrally about being young and in love...To treat these lovelorn films as abstract allegories of Hong Kong’s historical situation risks losing sight of Wong Kar-Wai’s naked appeal to our feelings about young romance, its characteristic dilemmas, moods and moves⁴.

It is with this charge that I take issue. My study of Hong Kong film and concentration on the region’s new and postnew wave movements, especially in the films of Wong Kar-Wai, arise precisely out of my understanding of him as a dynamic and emotionally articulate filmmaker. If I study his representations of the city it is because I firmly believe that they are rooted in an understanding of his films as a whole experience.

“Every day we brush past so many other people. People we may never meet or people who may become close friends.”
Cop 223, *Chungking Express*

This quote, spoken by He Qiwu (Takeshi Kaneshiro), are the first words heard in Wong Kar-wai’s *Chungking Express* (1994). Kaneshiro’s voiceover literally gives voice to a series of shots over grimy rooftops and grids of satellite dishes, wires and a hazy twilight sky. These shots are curiously emptied of people, though they are no less densely packed than the ensuing sequence inside Chungking Mansions, where He Qiwu pushes past the roaring, heady nighttime throngs who eat, laugh, shout, steal, shop, loiter and work there.

The “mansions,” a real-life duo of huge and thickly populated tenements, house 6,000 low-income renters apiece, an assortment of hostels, fly-by-night travel agencies, fast food stalls and knickknack shops which measure, in some cases, less than 25 square feet. Hong Kong’s notoriously overcrowded tenements – just blocks away from its equally quintessential luxury hotels – are in Kowloon, part of Hong Kong’s mainland side and separated from Hong Kong Island by a narrow

strip of South China Sea.

Chungking Mansions, the thickly populated Island-side markets and Officer 633’s (Tony Leung Chiu-Wai) tiny apartment comprise Wong Kar-wai’s Hong Kong. It is within this tropical and constantly changing urban space that various manifestations of sensuality, intimacy, failed love, lost love, and love of loneliness unfold in *Chungking Express*. These bustling corridors, dank alleyways, food stalls, crowded markets and tiny apartments also typify Wong’s *Fallen Angels* (1995), *Happy Together* (1997) – an undeniably “Hong Kong” film, though it takes place in Argentina – *In The Mood For Love* and, to a lesser extent, *Days Of Being Wild* (1991). Considered together, these films present Hong Kong as a place of intimate public spaces. That is: intimacy is possible and flourishes in spite of – indeed, because of – the use of Hong Kong’s densely populated urban spaces as private and familiar. Intimate, interior spaces here are represented within typically exterior metropolitan sites: the sway of urban crowds, the glut of city noises and labyrinthine side streets. The inner-city is prone to intimacy; the negotiation of private relationships is located here.

Indeed, Wong Kar-wai’s characters in these films share the (often frustrated) pursuit of intimacy within intensely urban spaces. Esther Yau says of Wong’s characters that they have “a sense that there is a public world of possible intimate connections, but that one does not quite know how to access it”⁵.

Considered one of Hong Kong’s foremost second wave filmmakers, Wong Kar-wai’s films tend to depict in great detail the lives of Hong Kong residents as they struggle with issues of romantic and familial love and the search for personal identity. These recurrent themes of fledgling intimacy, self-discovery, disappointment, and the endless, repetitive thrust of time are inevitably paired with characters who are tangled up in the domestic, local, indigenous and transient aspects of Hong Kong life. In particular, *Chungking Express*, *Happy Together* and *In The Mood For Love* present these aspects of intimacy as spatial relations between characters and the various site-specific city nooks they inhabit. Wong’s films portray a physically and spatially intimate Hong Kong.

These rowdy, steamy spaces so typical to Hong Kong contrast starkly with, and are located literally just below, the region’s overwhelming wealth typified by skyscrapers and massive, serpentine sidewalks linking ever more luxurious and modern air-conditioned shopping centres in Central, Hong Kong’s business hub. Though

this sanitized, glass and steel metropolis is rarely even glimpsed in the background of Wong Kar-wai's Hong Kong (his only pan of the familiar skyline is flipped upside down in *Happy Together*), it is nevertheless *there*, concretely suspended above the crowded street-level population. This architectural contrast is part of a local identity that is very specific to Hong Kong and which originates in myriad political, geographical and social tensions unique to this bustling region. Neil Leach, professor of Architectural Theory at the University of Bath, says:

Hong Kong is the quintessential site of spatial appropriation. The interstices of the urban fabric are used and re-used with an extraordinary intensity. Stalls appear over night, squatting within the leftover spaces of the urban fabric, and disappear with equal ease. *Interior spaces – home – are created even in the external zones of the public realm.* Public thoroughfares are adopted as the site of ritual events. These spaces – many of them transit spaces – become spaces of transitory identity, as their character changes according to the way in which they have been appropriated (emphasis added) ⁶.

Wong Kar-Wai's films struggle with issues of representation, sexuality, and culture within a postmodern context. And perhaps ironically, at the historical moment Hong Kong film was finding and portraying a specifically "Hong Kong identity," filmmakers such as Wong Kar-wai have also implicitly understood the transience and ultimately culturally fractured and transnational nature of the space of the city; of *their* city. In fact, it might be argued that Hong Kong residents, as they come to terms with and explore aspects of their identity with their "home" space, must at the same time address their fundamentally shared and shifting politics of location.

Wong Kar-Wai's Hong Kong is not often narratively bound to contemporary Asia specifically. The subtleties of his work can be understood as internationally accessible, while remaining founded on an intimately identifiable cityscape. This, arguably, has everything to do with certain undeniable realities of current Hong Kong culture and its history. In seven of the eight films he has made to date, Wong has portrayed Hong Kong unquestionably as "home" for his characters. The city is a place of unavoidable triad violence in *As Tears Go By*; a place of origin and abandonment, inescapable even after the film's main character travels to Taiwan in *Days Of Being Wild*; a home of frantic movement, clogged public

thoroughfares and anonymous chance encounters, each a possibility for potential romantic connection in *Chungking Express*; a home of neighborhood gang violence, thwarted romance and impossibly cramped quarters making the pain of unrequited love that much more physically unbearable in *Fallen Angels*; a home known to us only through nostalgia, memory, painful familial disassociations in *Happy Together*; and, finally, a 1960s Hong Kong is home to lingering but ultimately abandoned romantic possibility and emotional connection in the sumptuous *In The Mood For Love*. These films concentrate repeatedly on lost or failed love, with main characters usually ending up alone, if they don't die first.

These films have in common both a concentration on young and almost exclusively failed love, and the representation of city space as largely anonymous corners, as well as a handful of immediately recognizable spaces that belong unquestionably to Hong Kong: a city that is most often represented by crowded nooks and crannies, idiosyncratic shops, fast food joints and narrow alleyways. Wong's characters exist within a city that is the physical embodiment and postmodern, transnational indication of their various social lives.

In The Mood For Love, for example, provides an almost constant depiction of this sense of intimate space paired with unfulfilled emotional intimacy. This film and others, most notably *Chungking Express*, *Fallen Angels* and *Happy Together* express these fraught intimate spaces – which are always public city spaces – of Hong Kong (or the small, steamy Hong Kong-esque spaces of Buenos Aires in *Happy Together*) and its residents. These spaces are as recognizable and familiarly comfortable to local residents as they are universally accessible to international audiences. Potential romantic couples in each of these three films, are confronted with – are, indeed, *comforted* by – the ever-present urban public space as potential, sometimes exclusive, site for romantic pursuit.

The thematic link between city space and the search for romantic love and identity in these films serve to remind us that Hong Kong is a region of constant political and cultural change. The region is, at the same time, literally shifting and transforming as architectural booms replace the old with the new. As a consequence, regional and individual identity is often portrayed as ambiguous and resistant of definition. Questions of place, space and identity arise out of the fact that Hong Kong is a place still deeply involved in immigration and emigration which, in turn constantly hampers

the region's ability to concretely define a "national" or "quasi-national" identity. The Hong Kong resident confronts daily the inescapability of the space of the city – a relatively tiny plot of land that is nonetheless home to more than seven million people. Just as identity and identity formation are implicitly linked to Hong Kong's recent history and, subsequently, its people, so does the spectre of the city's cramped quarters and the inevitability of chance meetings and anonymous encounters weigh on character consciousness in Wong Kar-wai's cinema.

Questions of identity and the reality of intimacy are therefore constantly present in the lives of the people of Hong Kong, however indirectly they are felt. These realities are consistently present also in the region's contemporary post-new wave films – which Wong Kar-Wai's oeuvre is a part of. For his characters, intimacy is achieved as much in the public realm as in the private realm, and this can be read as a learned consequence of identification with the small spaces of Hong Kong as the *home spaces* of Hong Kong. Wong's films portray the city as a place where intimacy is, in fact, achieved or sought after *exclusively* in public. This use of city space is both emotionally universal and regionally specific. Small city spaces are used to connote intimate spaces of failed, forlorn and yearning love and tenderness.

Laurel Wypkema previously wrote about HBO in Synoptique 7.

Laurel Wypkema is working hard for her Master's degree in Film Studies at Concordia University in Montreal. Current interests include the recent cinemas of Hong Kong and Ireland, Chinese folk tale films, movies by Todd Haynes, all things HBO and Channel 4's "Jamie's School Dinners".

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ENDNOTES

1 Tung Chee Hwa resigned (officially due to health problems) in March, 2005. Many Hong Kong people considered him to be incompetent and speculation persists that his resignation had more to do with the demand that he step down as Chief Executive than with physical illness. Donald Tsang, a native Hong Kong resident and devout Roman Catholic, took up the position on June 21.

2 Abbas, 16.

3 Bordwell, 274.

4 Bordwell, 274, 280.

5 Yau, 285-286.

6 Leach, 173.