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Love in Liminal Spaces: An Analysis of Transience in the Cinema of Wong Kar-wai

Hannah Keziah Agustin

"Love is all a matter of timing," Chow Mo-wan says in *2046*. This makes love impossible to find in the steadily evolving and fast-growing Hong Kong of the 1960s. Its economic and technological advances were far ahead of its time, making it one of the Four Asian Tigers (South Korea, Taiwan, Singapore, and Hong Kong) that rose to prominence because of their growth. Hong Kong, however, was constrained by its ever-changing relationship with Britain and China. As a British colonial territory closely tied to neighboring China, Hong Kong was both free and unfree from imperialist forces, its autonomy partial and contested, caught in a tug of war between Western colonial capitalism and Chinese communist socialism until it was finally handed over to China's "one country, two systems" model of governance in 1997. But between 1945 and 1997, and arguably even after, Hong Kong persisted in an in-between space and time—a negotiated space between competing imperialist forces in a fraught time of vanishing traditions, global capitalist imperatives, and uncertain futures. In Nancy Blake's words, "Hong Kong is a transient space in a time out of chronology, an exception to history" (343). With that in mind, it can be said that Hong Kong is a liminal space, a place of transition, uncertainty, and disorientation.

Wong Kar-wai honors this space of transience by turning quick scenes into liminal moments that seem to last for an eternity, a technique he repeats in several of his films. Liminality is a state of ambiguity that is characterized by being perpetually stuck in the in-between, unable to turn back or move forward in time. The word "liminal" is derived from the Latin word *limen*, which means threshold or boundary, the place in between. Wong explores this concept of liminality in *Chungking Express* (1994), *Happy Together* (1997), *In the Mood for Love* (2000), and *2046* (2004) by cinematically manipulating time in the romantic sequences and portraying the different stages of love—the first meeting of Qiwu and the criminal (*Chungking Express*), the break-up of Po-wing and Yiu-fai (*Happy Together*), the dinner event with Mr. Chow and Mrs. Chan (*In the Mood for Love*), and Bai Ling's and Mr. Chow's ride home (*2046*)—as liminal spaces, places between the conception of desire and acting upon it. Wong manipulates the movement of time in his films, placing his characters in moments of sudden temporal deceleration in order to express the liminal nature of love.

Chungking Express is the film that first put Wong Kar-wai on the international scene. Its opening sequence is revolutionary because of its use of step printing, wherein frames blend together to give

the sequence a slow-motion feeling. This is the style he uses when the cop Qiwu chases down the suspect in fast, canted-angle shots of the blue-tinged streets of Hong Kong. This sequence was shot on a handheld camera that disorients the viewer and induces a kind of motion sickness.

The urban space of possibilities is interesting because we see almost nothing in focus and everything seems to move in slow motion. The kinetic cinematography is essential in establishing the worlds that the characters navigate and the recalibration of time they need to do in order to find love in the Hong Kong of their time. In this film, time is significant not only because Wong repeatedly puts shots of the electronic flip-card in our face but also because in both of its two stories, characters miss futures together because of how fast time moves.

The same thing happens in *Happy Together* when Po-wing and Yiu-fai do not end up with each other because of missed chances. Time is important in this narrative because the characters' love story is a ticking time bomb. They are constantly running out of time. Nevertheless, their passion for each other is still present amidst this toxicity. They still long for each other, as seen in the slow-motion sequence that happens after Po-wing leaves. When Yiu-fai gets on the boat, the camera closes in on his face, and a lamenting orchestral score plays in the background. The violins sound like sirens, and the piano plays a haunting bass line underneath it. The two characters could have made up and saved their relationship if only they had more time to fix it. But in this scene, Wong emphasizes how quickly bliss passes by and how slowly pain drags on. The fast-paced post-colonial Argentina only slows down when their relationship crumbles. Earlier in the film, after Po-wing and Yiu-fai fight in a hotel room, Yiu-fai runs away from the place while the camera trails behind him in a long-distance, long-exposure shot, showing the character's smallness. Cinematically, these long-exposure shots further emphasize the brevity of time.

Time's brevity reoccurs in *In the Mood for Love*. At the beginning of the film, Mrs. Chan and Mr. Chow pass by each other on the stairs in a melodramatic slow-motion sequence, foreshadowing

how the two miss the opportunity to make a life together by just a few moments and a few words. The four lovers first interact with one another in the earlier part of the film in a slowed-down sequence that encapsulates the yearning and anguish of falling in love, which is the thematic focal point of the movie. Mrs. Chan enters the scene, and the camera zooms in on her hand carrying a box of cigarettes for her husband. She wears a wedding ring, signaling that she's already a married woman. Mrs. Chan sits beside her husband, who continues to play mahjong without acknowledging her presence. Then Mr. Chow's wife enters the scene dressed in a solid-colored orange dress that plunges to her midback. This is in stark contrast to Mrs. Chan's white dress with a red, blue, and green pattern. Mrs. Chan, whose demeanor is more reserved and reticent (signaled by her repeatedly declining to have lunch with the older ladies), has her hair up, while Mr. Chow's wife—who waves at the people around the table in an outgoing and unreserved manner—has her hair down, signaling her more gregarious personality. This is confirmed when she touches Mrs. Chan's shoulder to greet her. She initiates the contact, which could be considered a power move in this context because she takes Mrs. Chan's place at the table beside her husband. She is not given a face because Mr. Chow's wife is a concept, an image that Mrs. Chan thinks she cannot compete with. Mr. Chow's wife literally and metaphorically comes between them. If the mahjong table is a metaphor for a social circle, then Mrs. Chan is already removed from it early in the film. After Mrs. Chan moves to the back of the room, which is our cinematic foreground, Mr. Chow enters the scene to exit the crowded room. He makes eye contact with Mrs. Chan and even forces a tight smile before walking away. As if it were a dance, their shoulders avoid each other—the peak moment of liminality. This is the moment of lost possibilities, as echoed by the hypnotic and haunting musical score

in the background. They are so near and yet so far, almost star-crossed lovers but not quite. What is important about the concept of liminality is its impermanence. This passing moment encapsulates the relationship between Mr. Chow and Mrs. Chan. They meet at a crossroads and then go their separate ways forever.

"Love is all a matter of timing," Chow Mo-wan says in *2046*. "It's no good meeting the right person too soon or too late." As true as this is for *In the Mood for Love*, it is also applicable to the science fiction masterpiece *2046*, in which Wong uses time to magnify the pain of constant loss, slowing down the frame rate to show the burden of love, longing, and desire. This is specifically seen in Chow's and Bai Ling's car scene. This slowed-down, monochrome sequence summarizes the relationship of the two almost-lovers and the depth of emotion that goes unspoken between them. Before this sequence, Chow and Bai Ling agree to attempt a platonic friendship by "borrowing" time from each other. The painfully slow-moving sequence is sedate and unhurried because every second between the two is important from Bai Ling's perspective. She is the only one awake in this sequence. From her point of view, Chow sleeping with his head on her shoulder has meaning. It makes the world move in slow motion because of its dizzying tenderness. But what makes this sequence heavy with yearning is the extreme close-up of their hands. First, Chow's hand sensuously slides into her inner thigh, and Bai Ling rejects the gesture by putting his hand back on his lap. Then, when Chow once again reaches over in his sleep, this time to hold her hand, she accepts it. As Chow holds her hand, his head on her shoulder, Wong cuts to a close up of Bai Ling's face, lingering over the mournful, faraway look in her eyes. In Anthony Carew's words, she harbors both "conflicting desires and a heavy heart" (79).

This is the tragedy of the film. Bai Ling desires Chow and Chow desires Bai Ling, but their desires are irreconcilable. Chow desires Bai Ling as a sexual object—a kind of desire with which Bai Ling, as a nightclub girl, is familiar. But when Bai Ling reluctantly finds herself desiring Chow at a deeper, emotional level, she finds that identifying as the object of desire makes it difficult to become the subject who allows herself to desire. Meanwhile, Chow cannot bring himself to admit that he desires Bai Ling for more than sex. "There is one thing," Chow says to Bai Ling late in the film, "I'll never lend to anyone," presumably indicating his heart. In short, Bai Ling finds that in the context of her relationship with Chow, she cannot be recognized by him or even recognize herself outside of her role as the object of desire. We first see this in her introductory sequence.

She is getting ready inside her apartment, and everything moves in slow motion, indicating how time is unrushed when one looks at the desired. Bai Ling is dressed in a tight, black, sequined, qipao dress, checking herself out in front of a mirror. In the background, Connie Francis's "Siboney" plays, with lines that translate to "Siboney, I love you; I die for your love." Bai Ling's back is against the camera, expressing her refusal to reveal who she really is. The man who looks through a gap in the wall only sees her face through the reflection, symbolizing that the desired object is simply a projection of an actual human being and not an actual being itself. Bai Ling is desired only from afar in this sequence, but in the car with Chow, she begins to feel what it means to be desired on a deeper and more intimate level when he holds her hand instead of groping her inner thigh. Wong encourages the audience to imagine that the only intimacy Bai Ling has ever known up to that point was purely physical. Hand holding indicates a different level of desire, which makes Chow's betrayal near the end of the film so utterly tragic: it falsifies the tenderness he demonstrates in the car sequence.

Time is essential to this love story because Chow and Bai Ling borrow time from each other. Bai Ling even explicitly asks him, "So people are just time fillers to you?" And in this film, yes, she is simply a time filler for Chow, who is passed out during the one scene where Bai Ling feels the most loved. The emotional weight of the pivotal car sequence is further magnified by the use of slow motion in order to visualize the heaviness of Bai Ling's desire. Bai Ling is a prisoner of time, a hostage of that short car ride that may have played and replayed in her mind for hours on end, its archaic and artifactual nature rendering in monochrome.

Overall, Wong Kar-wai is truly exceptional in the film industry because of his painfully slow romanticization of betrayal in various liminal spaces, demonstrating the ultimate tragedy of love. This is why none of his films have happy endings. In Nancy Blake's words, "what you see is never what you get" in Wong's films (354). Time passes by quickly, unforgiving in its speed, consigning moments of possibility and hope—for human connection, intimacy, and love—to the hopelessness of the irrecoverable past. The deceleration of these climactic sequences is therefore necessary to portray liminality with a sobering intensity. The liminal spaces that Wong creates in his films are

thresholds, points of no return in which the opportunity for love demands immediate, affirmative response lest it be lost forever. Does one heed its call or not? The power of Wong Kar-wai's cinema lies in this gut-wrenching representation of the liminality of love. ❦

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"ARGHHHHH!"
Unexpected Violence in Paul Thomas Anderson's Films

Cass Aleatory

Paul Thomas Anderson's films tend to include startling bursts of inexplicable violence. Three of his films in particular exemplify this tendency: *Punch-Drunk Love* (2002), *There Will Be Blood* (2007), and *Inherent Vice* (2014). Anderson's attempts to catch the audience off guard with sudden bursts of auditory and visual activity, both in these films and across his body of work, serve as a method of characterizing mercurial protagonists who lash out against social expectations. Such rejections of the unexpected, in turn, contribute to a postmodern storytelling mode that rebuffs audience desires for linear narratives and formulaic conventions.

Anderson's postmodern romantic comedy *Punch-Drunk Love* is a good example of this tendency. The film follows protagonist Barry as his relationship with a sister's coworker empowers him to face his fears and develop a more affirmative expression of masculinity. The first two minutes of the film are deceptively calm. Featuring quiet shots with minimal motion, the opening sequence seems most interested in conveying Barry's isolation. The heightened stillness serves to make what's coming in the next sequence all the more shocking. This sequence begins when Barry steps onto the sidewalk outside. At first, the film conforms to the expectations it has set in its opening two minutes. The mise-en-scène offers a picturesque view of the sun rising over a still-quiet city street, the very image of a peaceful morning. No jarring edits distract us from the moment, and even the cinematography, previously dominated by a gently creeping camera, gradually falls still, leaving the audience's attention fixed on a vanishing point shot of a deserted road. There's no sound except for the diegetic, ambient noises of the morning, including the hushed blowing of the wind.

That all changes abruptly when a car cruising smoothly down the road unexpectedly hits the curb and flips, rolling and bouncing down the street. Suddenly, everything comes alive. The camera begins to move, tracking the car for a few feet before it rolls out

of sight. The vehicle tears through the mise-en-scène, a literal slash of violence that bifurcates an otherwise perfectly composed scene. Most notably, we hear the sound of the accident. It's so loud and unexpected that one is hard-pressed not to flinch.

Perhaps the most pressing question is "why?" Why would Anderson include a jump scare so early in the film? And why would startling bursts of violence become one of the protagonist's defining motifs? The answers to these questions are likely intertwined, and they become more and more apparent as the sequence continues. The next shot opens with a sudden cut to Barry, who has much the same reaction to the freak accident as the audience: a mixture of confusion, shock, and horror.

In this relatively brief shot, Barry is centered on the screen, the camera's sole focal point. We see him flinch multiple times, even backing away a little bit. In short, what we're witnessing is characterization on multiple levels. To start, we're encouraged to connect with Barry because he shares our reaction. His ordinary response to this extraordinary circumstance helps him make sense to us—despite all the less sensible things we'll see him do later in the film. But there's something else at work here, too. Barry's reaction reveals a key aspect of his personality: he handles the unexpected poorly. His fears and insecurities make life's unexpected occurrences feel unbearably extreme, just as the excruciatingly loud audio that dominates this scene makes the accident far larger and more startling than it has any right to be (in the context of a film, at least).

As the sequence continues, we get an eyeline match back to the street, where the shrieking of the car's metal frame scraping against the road dissolves into the squealing brakes of a taxicab dropping off a harmonium. The mise-en-scène here is no less violent than in the auto accident. If anything, the sudden, inexplicable delivery of the harmonium takes up more of the screen and lasts for slightly longer than the accident did, all with no reduction in noise, making it the more alarming moment of the two.

The scene concludes with another cut back to Barry. Although he's no longer flinching, he doesn't seem any less alarmed by the sudden appearance of the harmonium than by the car crash. The same horrified anxiety is still plastered across his features, further underscoring Barry's tendency to defensively overreact to the odd occurrences that transpire around him—a tendency that marks his behavior throughout the film.

Something eerily similar happens early on in *There Will Be Blood*. Loosely based on Upton Sinclair's 1927 novel *Oil!*, *There Will Be Blood* tells the rags to riches to crime story of protagonist Daniel Plainview. The film ends with Daniel killing his rival in a bowling alley, the last in a series of

ruthless actions he performs throughout the film to grow his oil business. But the film begins well before he turns murderous. The opening moments depict Daniel as a poor silver miner. Four minutes into the film, we find ourselves watching a bucket slowly rising out of the mine as Daniel attempts to hoist it with a pulley ahead of a dynamite detonation. We're once again treated to a scene with minimal sound (only the diegetic creak of the pulley) and steady cinematography that tracks the slow ascent of the bucket, then its sudden descent when Daniel loses his grip. The dark, claustrophobic mise-en-scène of the mine contrasts with the bright, expansive spaces in which we see Daniel trying to pull the bucket up. The editing offers ordinary cuts that alternate between views of Daniel and his bucket, emphasizing his lonely and repetitive labor.

Once again, this calm setup is abruptly ripped away in a moment seemingly designed to startle the audience. The dynamite explodes with no warning, surprising the audience with an extremely loud wave of sound and an abrupt cut from a dark bucket shot to dust billowing up into Daniel's brighter world. Once again, the sound seems artificially amplified, making it inherently jarring. There's an element of narrative discontinuity at work here as well. Though the audience is aware that Daniel lit the charges, and though nothing notable has happened since he did, Anderson still manages to catch us off guard with the explosion. This is in part due to the implicit narrative contract he subverts. When we see a character start to pull a bucket on a pulley, the expectation is that they will ultimately succeed in lifting it. Here, we see Daniel's efforts violently interrupted instead.

As the smoke clears and the explosion's reverb fades, we see Daniel move closer to investigate the shaft. We get a sort of transitional shot, half-way between the light of the overworld and the darkness of the mines, as he climbs down the ladder. Then, incredibly, a second burst of unanticipated violence occurs. The ladder breaks with a sharp snap, and we see Daniel fall down the shaft, vanishing into darkness. The next shot takes us under him, allowing his body to blot out the light from above as he falls onto the camera. The sound of Daniel's body hitting the ground and his grunts of pain are just as loud as the explosions were before they too fade away into silence over a black screen.

Just as in *Punch-Drunk Love*, this scene, complete with its shocking violence, serves as a metaphor for its protagonist. Daniel seems to be caught somewhere between darkness and light, prone to nearly inexplicable episodes of savage anger that ultimately foreshadow his complete descent into darkness at the film's conclusion. Like Barry, Daniel is unpredictable to the point of becoming antisocial, given to the same sort of erratic outbursts that catch the audience so off guard in these two scenes. Sudden violence thus serves as a continued motif in both *Punch-Drunk Love* and *There Will Be Blood*. We see Barry smash windows, bathrooms, and street thugs. Daniel executes one enemy on a whim and beats another to death with a bowling pin in the film's shocking and memorable closing scene.

Although the motif of sudden violence lives on in *Inherent Vice*, the following examples offer notable contrasts to the two films discussed above. *Inherent Vice*, an adaptation of Thomas Pynchon's 2009 novel of the same name, tells the story of Doc Sportello. Doc is an unconventional private detective who spends the film trying to solve a beachside mystery in a state of uneasy cooperation with the police. Unlike the previous two films, the motif of sudden violence isn't pervasive throughout *Inherent Vice*. Instead, it's concentrated in two scenes.

The first scene occurs about thirty minutes into the film. Doc is having what seems to be an ordinary conversation with a woman involved in the case he's investigating. He looks at a picture of a baby, ponders it for a moment, then abruptly contorts his face and unleashes a horrified scream. Doc and the woman then continue talking as if nothing happened. The scene features a surprisingly unremarkable mise-en-scène. When Doc screams, he's in the center of the shot, and the camera is close enough to clearly mark him as the focal point. Other than a small segment of wall behind him, he's the only thing in the shot that isn't white. Even the back of the photograph blends neatly into the background, creating the illusion that he is screaming at nothing at all.

The scream here might be interpreted as an attempt to snap the audience out of the drowsy back-and-forth of conversation and refocus them in preparation for important information (such as a key plot point), but if the pattern of the motif holds, there's something we can learn about Doc's character here, too. Perhaps what's at stake is his complicated relationship with reality. The idea of screaming at nothing or screaming into the void dovetails nicely with the psychedelic themes prevalent throughout the film. Where the audience sees a normal photograph, Doc clearly sees something deeper, and perhaps more terrifying. Whether this perception is real or an illusion produced by Doc's perpetual marijuana high is ancillary to the point; as a character, Doc is always looking deeper into things, for better or worse.

In a similarly shocking moment at the end of *Inherent Vice*, the motif of sudden, loud violence returns. The shot preceding the disaster is unremarkable. Doc sits in the middle of a warm indoor

landscape, smoking his weed with nary a care in the world. The camera is still, and the gentle female voice-over is still wrapping up from the previous scene. Then, we get a smash cut to Doc's door the very moment that his on-again, off-again police ally, Lieutenant Bigfoot, kicks it down. The new camera angle, sharper lines in the mise-en-scène, and (of course) the startling crash of diegetic sound have no setup whatsoever. They just happen. The scene continues with Bigfoot nonchalantly walking over the fallen door, creating even more noise by further shattering the already broken glass. While there are no further jump scares, the surrealistic sequence continues with Doc and Bigfoot apologizing to each other in unison and Bigfoot eating Doc's entire bowl of marijuana.

As before, this scene feels like it could be a psychedelic trip. And as before, the sudden outbursts of noise and violence seem to herald a critical moment of character development. After all, Doc and Bigfoot's final conversation of the film brings a sort of closure to their complicated relationship. Bigfoot's use of Doc's presumably illegal weed indicates a closeness or similarity between the two characters even though they've been portrayed as polar opposites until now. Their concurrent speech hints that this collaboration may have finally brought them to a shared understanding. And yes, even Bigfoot's unwarranted, noisy entrance parallels the only other moment in the film that a character does such a thing: the scene of Doc screaming at the photograph. Perhaps this inexplicable self-expression indicates that Bigfoot has finally invaded not just Doc's house but also his psyche, or at least his psychedelic interpretation of the reality around him.

While Doc and Bigfoot are far from normal, they are not quite the same kind of socially-maladjusted characters we see in Barry and Daniel. Yet the fact that Anderson still uses jarring audio jump scares to characterize them demonstrates the auteur's dedication to this particular approach. Once again though, it begs the question: why? When there are so many simpler and more audience-friendly ways to convey character information, why rely on this motif again and again for so many different characters?

I suggest the answer lies in Anderson's penchant for postmodern techniques and narratives. If he blatantly rebels against master narratives in other areas of his filmmaking, why not follow suit with his characterization? After all, it's not unprecedented in postmodernism; in his book *Blossoms & Blood*, historicist Jason Sperb points out that this sort of setup harkens back to the films of Stanley Kubrick. Sperb argues that Anderson, like Kubrick, constructs "long narrative sequences of inconsequence and isolation, disrupted suddenly by bursts of shocking violence" (205). Ultimately, Sperb seems to suggest that association with inexplicable violence is a demonstrably postmodern strategy for characterizing individuals of a certain type. I suggest that in Anderson's

films, that type is one who is (or becomes) trapped in mental or physical isolation. For all their differences, one key thing Barry, Daniel, Doc, and Bigfoot have in common is that they feel profoundly isolated from much of the world around them. Like the eccentric protagonists of so many alienating postmodern films, they fit uneasily into normative social roles, leaving them in a sort of identity moratorium within which they're never quite able to settle into a fully recognizable form. Thus, they act out. While their moments of chaotic violence may seem to come from nowhere at first glance, it's symbolically emblematic of their inability to actualize the love, respect, or understanding that they want from a society with which they can't properly interact.

Ultimately, Anderson's decision to use uncontrollable violence to represent so many of his protagonists makes sense, at least insofar as it doesn't make sense. That is to say that Anderson uses this strategy to subvert audience expectations regarding characterization in order to characterize people who subvert audience expectations regarding social norms. This deeply thought-provoking technique does a superb job of forcing audiences to challenge their beliefs—not just about how films define their protagonists, but also about how film protagonists are defined by society. ❦

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Face Value: The Traps of Visual Storytelling in Joe Wright's *Atonement*

John Best

When adapting a full-length novel into a film, portions of the story must be reshaped or omitted. Ian McEwan's *Atonement* poses particular challenges due to its metanarrative structure: the story is revealed to be a novel within the novel, written by character Briony Tallis. The realization that details, thoughts, and events have all been shaped according to Briony's fallible point of view prompts readers to question their own reading behaviors, as the novel both thematically and performatively undermines the connection between seeing and interpreting. Joe Wright's adaptation of *Atonement* takes up the same charge within a visual medium, and through the first section of the film, his translation of the text's metaphors and plotting achieves a compelling parallel. Ultimately, however, the physicality of the film's visuals works against the narrative ambiguity it seeks to maintain, leaving viewers with a slightly myopic understanding of *Atonement*'s story: it invites us to turn a critical eye on the storyteller, but not so much on ourselves.

The film opens on a close-up of a miniature replica of the Tallis estate before panning out across a line of toy animals that leads towards Briony. Her back is to them as she works at a typewriter, then runs off to show off her newly finished play. The diegetic sound of the typewriter keys morphs into the percussion for an opening melody as she runs through the house. These visual and aural metaphors subtly imply that Briony is the master of this universe, and that her prose may command the events to come. The dollhouse is a model of the idyllic setting of *Atonement*'s first section, and the toy animals, enthralled to their owner, represent the characters in the novel who are subject to Briony's whims. Using the dollhouse for the establishing shot thus immediately

primes viewers for the metanarrative elements of the story, and within two minutes of the film, Wright has foreshadowed the elder Briony's parting question: "how can a novelist achieve atonement when, with her absolute power of deciding outcomes, she is also God?" (McEwan 350). The film also relies on editing to communicate the difference between sight and perspective, which forms the thematic core of McEwan's novel.

The first few minutes of the film follow Briony's perspective, leading up to her witnessing, from a distance and through a window, an altercation between her sister Cecilia and Robbie, the son of the family's female servant. From Briony's view, it appears as if Robbie commands Cecilia to remove her clothes and dive into a fountain. Briony turns away, shocked by Robbie's ostensibly lewd behavior. The camera then cuts to Cecilia and breaks chronology, now following her actions leading up to her confrontation with Robbie at the fountain, where a tense conversation leads to their breaking a vase. From Cecilia's perspective, these events unfold much differently than they do from Briony's detached vantage. The gesture that ties the two scenes together is Robbie's raised hand, which Briony sees from behind and interprets as an authoritative command. In fact, Robbie is warning Cecilia not to step on a broken shard. Cecilia in turn removes her clothes not to satiate Robbie's sexual appetites, but to fetch another piece of the vase that had fallen into the water. Robbie, in response to her near nakedness, appears not lustful, but discomfited and unsure of himself. Both novel and film use careful plotting here to break Briony's initial perspectival control over the story to help complicate Robbie's characterization at a crucial early point. However, where the novel must rely on description and dialogue to communicate the sexual tension between Robbie and Cecilia, the film has the advantage of physicality. We read Robbie's care for Cecilia on his face, and we pick up the tension in the two actors' gestures and body language, while Briony cannot.

Equally important for the outcome of the story is that both novel and film then reverse this movement to bring things back within Briony's ill-informed control. Soon after the fountain scene, the film depicts Cecilia and Robbie confessing their love for each other and getting physically intimate. Briony walks in after the amorous dialogue and sees only Robbie pinning Cecilia against the wall. Briony misinterprets the event as an assault and cries out "Cecilia!" as tears well in her eyes. Cecilia and Robbie then recompose themselves before—in what will prove a tragic miscalculation—silently

exiting the room, leaving Briony alone to contemplate the worst interpretation of what she witnessed. Seeing the two simultaneous points of view depicted contiguously in the film really enhances the theme of perspective in *Atonement*. The film invests, as it must, in using visual language and embodiment to communicate the volatile relationship between sight and interpretation, pairing Briony's visions with a lack of explanatory context. This is its greatest key to representing the work of the novel, and it is also the root of its ultimate failure to do so.

The crisis in *Atonement* that catapults nearly every character's life into turmoil is the (supposed) rape of Briony's cousin, Lola Quincey, on the Tallis estate's grounds. Here, again, both novel and film similarly stage the original incident. Briony happens upon Lola and the man with her, but is unable to positively identify him, while Lola is either unable or unwilling to do so. During the inquiry that follows (and to Lola's chagrin) Briony points the finger at Robbie with unsupportable certainty, leading to his arrest and the thing for which Briony ultimately tries to "atone." Her entire case against Robbie rests on the false conclusion she had drawn from the scenes she'd witnessed earlier: that Robbie's carnal attraction to Cecilia made him a "maniac."

From this point forward, the film less successfully parallels the novel. At issue are the ambiguities at the heart of Briony's path to atonement, because in the novel, McEwan establishes these largely through the narration—that is, through the elderly novelist Briony's own storytelling choices. In opting for immersive realism, the film can only do this through its selection of action and dialogue and through subtle metacinematic efforts to keep us at a critical distance from what we are seeing. For example, the film reproduces Briony's interview with the police, where a detective presses Briony on the line between "knowing" it was Robbie and "seeing" him, until ultimately, Briony vehemently commits: "Yes. I saw him. I saw him with my own eyes." But in the novel, the narrator also qualifies this moment ten pages before it occurs. McEwan writes that Briony "did not think she had the courage, after all her initial certainty and two or three days of patient, kindly interviewing, to withdraw her evidence. However, she would have preferred to qualify, or complicate, her use of the word "saw." Less like seeing, more like knowing. Then she could have left it to her interrogators to decide whether they would proceed together in the name of this kind of vision" (159–160). The qualifying language of this passage is in some ways defensive, suggesting that young Briony hadn't lied so much as substituted evidence for interpretation in her fervent belief in Robbie's guilt. But elder Briony is also shaping the blame readers should cast on her younger self by suggesting that she had deliberately covered over some doubt. By the end of the novel, readers should be asking why the elder Briony would have done this, but the film leaves us firmly focused on young Briony's actions, closing off an essential ambiguity too cleanly. In viewing the story without the context of the narration, we are put in much the same position as naïve Briony is when she views Robbie and Cecilia's interactions and leaps to her conclusions. While the film does try to keep us mindful of this, its efforts are ultimately undone by the kind of proof that the visual medium offers, and the level of control this exerts on viewers' satisfaction that they leave knowing the "absolute truth" of the story.

The second section of the novel follows Briony into young adulthood, and here the film makes one particular omission and one particular addition that collapse the critical narrative ambiguity. In the book, an initial hint that Briony is our story's author comes in the form of a publisher's letter

rejecting her novella, *Two Figures by a Fountain*. In it, the editor critiques the credibility of Briony's details: "'A young man and woman by a fountain, who clearly have a great deal of unresolved feeling between them, tussle over a Ming vase and break it. (More than one of us here thought Ming rather too priceless to take outdoors? Wouldn't Sèrves or Nymphenburg suit your purpose?)'" (McEwan 295). If we then page back to the fountain scene, we discover that the vase is now identified as a Meissen. The evidence of this changed detail, while minor, raises questions about how malleable fact and memory are for Briony, as well as what level of trust we should be investing in what we've been reading. It also, however, reminds us that Briony's story has been shaped by still other people's motives—namely, publisher demands, which focus squarely on what a reader would enjoy reading and be willing to believe. The second part of Wright's *Atonement* includes no such reminder of the role of fiction or the role that audiences of fiction play in desiring alterations of fact. The film tries to invoke something like it in its conclusion, but it is too little, too late: the nature of the visual encourages us to take what we see at face value unless something is added to induce disbelief. Since during this section of the film we watch the events unfold rather than track Briony's recounting of them, we are far less inclined to question the factuality of what we see.

Perhaps most damaging to our sense of narrative ambiguity is a scene Wright chose to add. In the story, Briony eventually concludes that it had been her brother's friend Paul Marshall she had seen with Lola on the night she got Robbie arrested. Both novel and film had already laid clues nudging us toward this conclusion: provocative dialogue, bruising on Lola's arms that Marshall attributes to her brothers, etc. These hints put the audience in a position of greater "knowing" than young Briony, even though we do not yet realize it is the elder Briony who is dropping them. When the film introduces this new development, it should also establish a new method of distancing us from Briony, as the publisher's letter does in the novel. Its attempt to do so, however, ends up instead solidifying Marshall's guilt, when this should be left unknowable. Because at this point in the story there are no other characters who can serve as checks on Briony's perspective, Wright has to depart from his earlier method of signaling us to doubt her conclusions. Here, he uses shots of Briony's face during a pause in action to register that she is processing or interpreting a visual or a memory—a processing that we are not privy to. This is a motif that

occurs in both the first and last segments of the film, but in the middle sequence, Wright actually gives us a visualization of her memory, and this time it includes Paul Marshall's face. In the novel, Briony's dawning realization that her prior conviction had been an error starts with a letter from her father announcing Lola's impending marriage to Marshall. In its own metacinematic moment, the film instead puts Briony in a movie theatre, seeing the planned nuptials announced in newsreel footage. Briony's suspicion is piqued, and it is clear that she begins to consider Marshall the likely perpetrator, so she attends the wedding, seeking a definitive confrontation to confirm her suspicions. Instead, this triggers an apparently repressed memory in which she sees Paul Marshall on top of Lola. The epiphany is blatant: we see Briony's (present) face register the shock of the onset of the memory, then we flash back to her young face as the film repeats its early footage of the discovery. This time, however, it cuts in Marshall's face as he turns toward her before fleeing.

Nothing in the novel suggests that Briony saw anyone clearly that night, leaving us to speculate whether Briony's new conviction is just another instance of her own fallible habit of reaching a conclusion and believing it to be a clear way to right a wrong. In fact, as evidence for the truth, Paul Marshall's engagement to Lola is just as specious as Robbie's carnal attraction to Cecilia was. If Briony had been willing to exaggerate in her testimony to police, change details to craft her story, and invent a new ending for Cecilia and Robbie, why would she be unwilling to villainize Marshall to exonerate Robbie? The novel persistently punishes readers for overly credulous behavior regarding Briony's visions. But in the film, Wright uses Robbie's face to communicate his true character, and Briony's face to convey silent narration, so the appearance of Marshall's face in this scene makes the viewer's certainty of Marshall's guilt that much harder to resist. In other words, Marshall's face betrays the film's own meta-level analysis of "seeing" and invites us to slip into "knowing." As a consequence, we might find it so comfortable to blame or to sympathize with Briony for all of her interpretive foibles that we stop questioning our own, and that is a major departure from the novel's apparent intent.

Like the novel, the film ends with Briony—now a famed author and fatally ill—musing over her construction of *Atonement*. Again, though, while the novel presents this in a memoir or journal entry, Wright conveys it in dialogue. Briony tells an interviewer that *Atonement* is at once "entirely autobiographical," a product of drafts written over a span of many years, and a product of her commitment to tell the "absolute truth." Then she slips into another long pause and says that she eventually "couldn't any longer imagine what purpose would be served by" that project. She then admits that she manufactured the novel's ending, including her own active attempts to exonerate Robbie and the happy reunion between Cecilia and Robbie. In the space of that pause, Wright again uses a close-up on Briony's troubled face (shown above), so that we could conceivably recall the wedding/flashback scene and catch this signal of her internal debate between seeing and knowing, between fact and fiction, and rebalance the critical distance we're meant to have. But in a film viewing, you can't always just skip backward and re-see what you first thought you saw.

Both McEwan's novel and Wright's film explore themes of narrator reliability, credulity, and scapegoating, and raise doubts about the nature of truth in the first place. However, while the novel consistently turns these questions back onto the reader, the film ultimately trains viewers' attention too squarely on Briony's persona and on her culpability in both the central event and her fictionalized retelling of it. This diminishes our own culpability for "proceed[ing] together in the name of this kind of vision" (McEwan 160), which is a satisfaction we should be denied. ❦

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READING FILM

ISSUE #2 | JULY 2021

Time and Trauma in Wong Kar-wai's *In the Mood for Love* and *2046*

Amanda Brashi

Traditionally, we understand a film as a "sequel" because it continues the action of a previous film in a predictable linear narrative. Challenging this convention, Wong Kar-wai maintains—and arguably heightens—our understanding of his films as sequential without the aid of a linear timeline. This manipulation of time is crucial to the interpretation of his works, particularly *In the Mood for Love* and its sequel *2046*. So how does Wong Kar-wai establish *2046* as a sequel while employing an entirely contrasting narrative structure to *In the Mood for Love*? First, he's painstakingly consistent with thematic and stylistic aspects of the films, making his movies "feel part of one artistic continuum" (Carew 71). Second, he strategically leverages the story of the first film as a psychological trigger for the action of the second film, attributing the skewed and cyclical narrative to protagonist Chow Mo-wan's unresolved trauma. The result is a deeply nuanced commentary on the concept of time as well as the reality of trauma caused by love that never was and never will be.

To understand these films as sequential without the aid of a linear timeline, we must note the thematic and cinematic similarities that tie them together. Cinematically, both films employ the same moody color palette and claustrophobic mise-en-scène. In Anthony Carew's words, "Wong's films look as romantic as their sentiments: all saturated colors, evocative blur, intuitive camerawork, slow motion, and varying rates of exposure" (71). Cameras squeeze around tight corners, getting up close and personal with the main characters. Much of the action happens off-screen, leaving many events implied rather than depicted. The sense of time and pacing of the film feels stretched, with seemingly drawn-out days and conversations. Though at first time is linear, it's hard to decipher where days begin and end in accordance with the action. As Nancy Blake notes, both films "luxuriate in the luminescence of images boosted by high-contrast film, the Godardian jump-cutting and iconographic fascinated staring at objects, especially clocks, to underscore a fixation on time and immanence" (346). Over-the-shoulder camera shots allow us to peek into rooms. Characters spying on one another through gaps in walls give us glimpses into the private lives of others. Because the story is "big on atmosphere but short on regular plot beats," there's no major action that determines the course of the plot (Carew 71). Instead, each film focuses inward on the private lives of our main characters while keeping the audience in the role of voyeur. Though the cinematography favors intimate closeups of the main characters, we're kept emotionally

distant. Thematically, both films operate on the same thread of romantic longing. Cinematic romance that's memorable "doesn't come from people getting together, but remaining apart – no love burning so bright, and burrowing so deep, as unrequited love" (Carew 71). These films are metacinematic in this regard, as the audience is forced into a similar state of longing when watching the action.

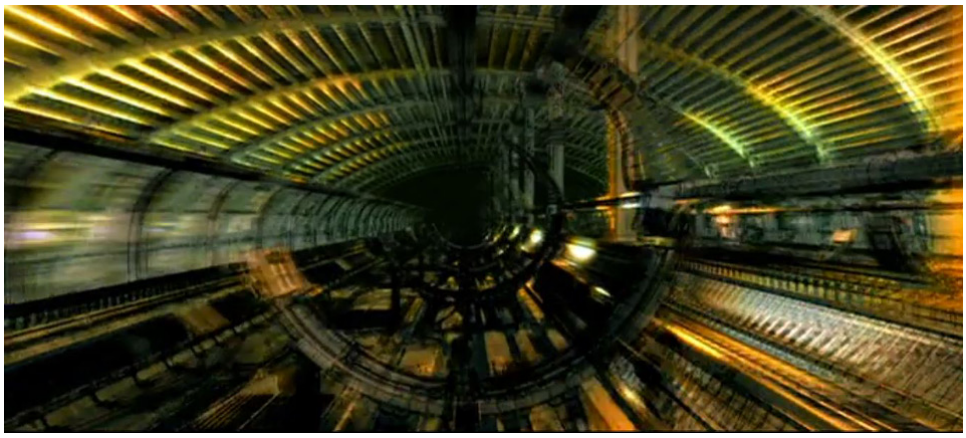
When our expectation for a happy ending is disappointed in the first film, we're primed for the trauma that triggers the conflicting narrative structure of *2046*. Neither film is a fairytale romance; they're both painfully realistic. *In the Mood for Love* "perfectly captures not a tortuous affair, but how paralyzing a harbored crush can be, creating a debilitating form of inaction" (Carew 78). This becomes the catalyst for the skewed narrative timeline in *2046*—a commentary on the cycle of Chow Mo-wan's trauma resulting from and perpetuated by poor timing and missed opportunity. If *In the Mood for Love* is the primal missed opportunity, *2046* is the psychological aftermath. Time, though always feeling somewhat precarious, has stopped for Chow Mo-wan. Those hopeful aspects of his character in the first film are altered in the second. This is particularly evident in how the roles of sex and love—or the divergence of the two—transform from film to film. With *In the Mood for Love*, Chow Mo-wan and Mrs. Chan pursue a relationship of sexless love. Though presented with numerous opportunities, including a nod to the sequel with a hotel stay in room 2046, the two never consummate the affair. Sharing in their mutual pain, they strive never to be like their spouses who treat them as interchangeable with extramarital lovers. As a result, their relationship feels personal and deeply intimate.

As a stark, post-trauma contrast, *2046* explores the opposite of sexless love with loveless sex. Though Wong uses the same cinematic practices in both films, he uses them to create a very different tone in the second. Even the score, though similar in instrumental quality, changes from tempting and hopeful to a jaded numbness. A strong character shift places Chow Mo-wan in a similar position to that of his ex-wife's lover. Hurt and traumatized, he participates in the same inauthentic relationships he once denounced. As a coping mechanism, Chow Mo-wan uses sex to avoid intimacy, immersing himself in the trauma of others to avoid acknowledging his own. The gift-giving scene emphasizes this transition with a pointed reference to *In the Mood for Love*. In the first film, Chow Mo-wan and Mrs. Chan discover the infidelity of their spouses when they realize they've all been giving each other similar gifts—a luxury handbag, a tie. Confirming their suspicions, the act of gift giving becomes a painful reminder of cultural obligation. Trapped within this system of exchange, "they are always acting a part; just like the rest of us, they are condemned

to act a part" (Blake 352). In *2046*, Chow Mo-wan actively embraces this kind of performative, transactional exchange, but the gift giving is not even the most worrying part of the scene. When pushing the gift at Bai Ling, Chow Mo-wan is disturbingly forceful, something uncharacteristic of his previous self. He continues his relationship with Bai Ling on a transactional basis. He pays her for sex, which keeps her removed from him and within the realm of obligation. The thematic thread of missed opportunity reemerges late in the film when, to settle their dinner bill, Bai Ling gives Chow Mo-wan back all the cash she has collected from him for their sexual encounters. This would seem to present the opportunity for him to recognize that she never wanted his money—that he has treated her badly, as a prostitute rather than an intimate partner. But he's unable to admit this to himself. When she asks him to spend one more night with her—the final opportunity—Chow Mo-wan responds, "there's one thing I'll never lend to anyone." The authentic intimacy that was established in the first film is closed off and destroyed, left to be commodified in *2046*.

In both films, Chow Mo-wan uses fiction writing as a form of escapism. Like sex, Chow Mo-wan distracts himself from reality with science fiction. Based loosely on his real-life encounters, he crafts "2046," a place outside of time where one goes to "recapture lost memories." However, Chow Mo-wan is not the only character choosing escapism. At a point in Hong Kong's politically unstable history, "the protagonists do not talk politics; on the contrary, they collaborate on martial arts fictions, a flight into an idealized tradition of honor and chivalry far removed from the mafia-riven scene of sixties Hong Kong" (Blake 343). We also see this theme with Wang Jing-wen, the landlord's daughter. Attempting to escape her father's cultural clutches, she writes secret letters to her forbidden love in Japan. Like Mo-wan, she never really escapes. Instead, she's forced to end things with her lover, eventually needing to be institutionalized.

By beginning the film inside his futuristic novel, the altered narrative structure is immediately established. The stark contrast between a stylized 1960s Hong Kong in *In the Mood for Love* and the futuristic fantasy of *2046*'s opening sequence disrupts our ability to see the films as connected until it's revealed to us that we're within Mo-wan's story. With that revelation, we understand that "2046" is a metaphor



for Chow Mo-wan's inability to move on from the past. Even in a world of total make-believe, a world where he can define and control time, he's unable to confront his trauma. This commentary on time is as culturally poignant as it is cinematic: "Hong Kong is a transient space in a time out of chronology, an exception to history. Little wonder then that Wong's heroes and heroines cannot reconcile past and present" (Blake 343). This is a direct reflection of 1960s Hong Kong, a time when cultural tradition was challenged by enduring colonization as well as immense economic growth and modernization.

Wong seamlessly positions these two films as sequential without relying on the foundation of a linear narrative structure. It's not the continuation of time that glues this pair of films together, but the use of over-arching cinematic and thematic concepts. As Carew so fittingly suggests, *2046* is the "spiritual sequel" to *In the Mood for Love* (71). The films are not chronologically linked; they're related in essence. Time is not what guides our understanding of these films. In fact, this strategic lack of narrative consistency reinforces the film's deeper message in a way that a linear timeline could not.

Because the narrative cycle follows that of unconscious trauma, we're better able to understand the depths of Chow Mo-wan's psychological crisis. He lives a life of avoidance as an attempt to cope with his trauma, which mirrors the historical significance of a rapidly changing, 1960s Hong Kong. These films highlight the darker side of our forward movement through time, where we're unable to escape the past, yet also unable and unwilling to confront it as we're forced forward. ❦

Amanda Brashi graduated from UW-Whitewater in the fall of 2020 with a major in Professional Writing and Publishing, a minor in English Literature, and a certificate in Film Studies.

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READING FILM

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Same As It Ever Was: Rem(a)inders of Racism in *The Walking Dead*

Abigail Lammers

"Good zombie movies show us how messed up we are, they make us question our station in society… and our society's station in the world," writes Robert Kirkman in his introduction to the *The Walking Dead* comics series. Like many zombie properties since Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), both Kirkman's comics and Frank Darabont's television adaptation of them probe the outlines of post-apocalyptic social reformation through their representations of families. Rick Grimes, who emerges as a leader in the show's first season, is a former deputy sheriff and avowed family man. His search for genuine cores of humanity and community often means confronting ethical inconsistencies in his past legal and social roles. Characters of color in the show, however, have to reckon differently with personal and social identity as they discover that harmful racial prejudices and narratives prevail even in this post-apocalyptic world. Interactions in the first season between Rick and two other family heads (Morgan and Guillermo) highlight particular social issues related to white privilege and perceptions of people of color. These perceptions have embedded themselves so deeply into our society and its popular narratives that even an apocalypse-level event cannot mitigate the racially charged constraints on identity perpetuated by received narratives.

The first survivors Rick encounters in the changed world are Morgan Jones and his son, Duane, who are isolated in a dangerous area because they won't abandon Duane's mother, despite the fact that she is now a "walker." Their situation introduces a social critique by showing how racism affects their behavior even in the midst of crisis. This is apparent after Rick first wakes up in the house they have claimed and, as yet unclear about what's happening outside, knows only that he has been bound to a bed by a black man. Both fear each other, but for critically different reasons: Morgan worries that Rick's bandage and hospital robe suggest infection; Rick hints at ingrained, racist suspicions by questioning Morgan and Duane's presence in his former neighbors' house. Soon, they talk over a candlelit dinner in the home's formal dining room, underscoring the distance between old social graces and new survival demands. In this scene, Duane is eager to explain the knowledge he has acquired of the walkers, yet his father interrupts to correct his speech, likely because he is in the presence of a white man.

Morgan forces Duane to speak formally and avoid the vernacular that he is comfortable using with his father, as evidenced when Duane first finds Rick outside and calls Morgan over. In that prior moment, Morgan and Duane are focusing on surviving, not on social expectations, since they do not yet know that Rick is not a walker. The high-angle shots of Duane and Morgan looking down on Rick cut with low-angle reverse shots of Rick looking up at them show that Duane and Morgan are the ones in power in this situation. Not only do they have knowledge and weapons that Rick lacks, but Rick is physically in a position of weakness, as he has not yet fully recovered from his gunshot wound and from being unconscious for so long. They also have yet to figure out that he is human and not a walker. For all of these reasons, they are not concerned about proper speech, only survival.

However, in the dinner scene after they have helped Rick to safety, these positions are reversed: the camera assumes Rick's perspective, standing in front of them while they sit at the table. His physically dominant position symbolizes that he has regained both his strength and his social position of power. Although their shared (and assailed) humanity should make them all equals, Morgan and Duane fall back into learned social behavior, removing racial markers from their speech that are typically reserved for others of the same race.

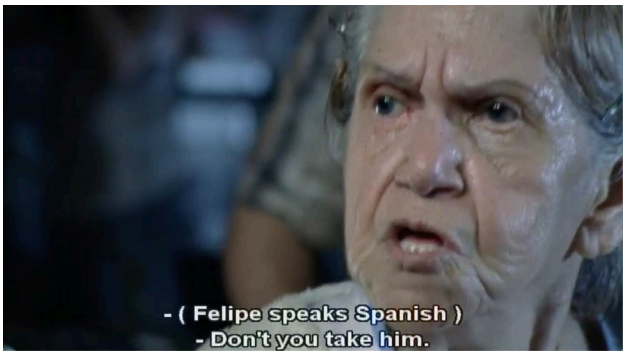
The importance placed on these behaviors is made ridiculous in the context of a zombie apocalypse. Perhaps more than in some of the overtly racist exchanges featured elsewhere in the show, this episode emphasizes how people are marginalized by racist social systems. Morgan's felt need to suppress Duane's self-expression to adjust to the normativity of whiteness, even after many other rules and norms have drastically changed, exposes just how deeply ingrained this has become.

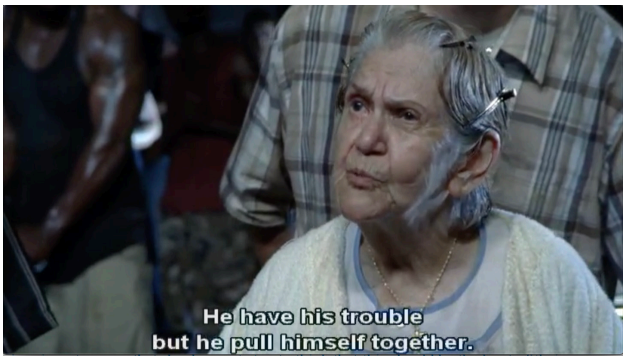
Morgan and Duane are not the only people of color who feel compelled to suppress their identities and change their behaviors in Rick's presence.

Guillermo's Hispanic "family" is a group of people who are brought together in a nursing home by the tragedy that has occurred. Although there are some literal family units within the large group, the group as a whole has bonded together by choice in order to survive. Guillermo, the former custodian in the nursing home, explains that when the entire staff had taken off when everything happened, he and one nurse had taken over the responsibility of taking care of and protecting the elderly residents. They have also taken in anyone who comes seeking their family members. Although Guillermo isn't related to the residents, he feels a responsibility to stay and lead rather than leaving them there to die like so many others had. In doing so, he and the others form a strong relationship built on shared morals and a desire to help others, creating bonds similar to those found in a biological family structure. But none of this is revealed until after the episode plays out as a gang confrontation between Rick's group and Guillermo's over a bag full of guns Rick had abandoned in an Atlanta street.

The family unit made up of Guillermo, his gang, and the people in the nursing home demonstrates that racism teaches people to have inaccurate expectations and assumptions. Societal stereotypes lead the white characters to assume they are confronting a violent gang leader; Guillermo performs the role defensively, playing on their stereotypes to create an illusion of greater strength than the group actually has. This escalates the situation far past what is necessary, because in fact, motives are pure on both sides: both groups desperately need the guns in order to protect their respective families. But as Guillermo later explains, many of the people they come across treat them badly and try to take advantage of them, which explains why they assume the worst of the people they meet, and Rick does the same. Despite the fact that every group of people Rick has come across so far has actually helped him, Rick and Darryl's group assumes that Guillermo is a threat based on racial profiling, inducing their perceived need to defend themselves. In reality, Guillermo and his friends do nothing to antagonize or threaten them until they are driven to defend themselves, which causes them to act according to the way Rick initially assumed they would.

The mise-en-scène during the initial confrontation implicates viewers in these same assumptions, once again aligning them with Rick's (white) perspective even while ostensibly looking through Guillermo's gang's eyes. The use of chiaroscuro when viewing Guillermo from behind in the dark and Rick and his group in the light creates a sense of drama and suspense about what is going to happen that corresponds with what Rick's group automatically assumes to be true. The actual truth is revealed when a grandmother bursts into the room and begs Rick to see that they are kind people just trying to help each other survive. Immediately, the violence and threats stop, and the groups start communicating as equals. This speaks to the way in which assumptions are made quickly and based on limited information: Rick and Darryl see a group of





Hispanic men wearing chain necklaces and bandanas and assume that they are gang members simply because they fit a stereotype, and the grandmother sees a white man in uniform and feels the need to reveal everything about her family as a form of self-preservation. And the plot twist makes viewers experience their complicity in the same narrative patterns. The grandmother's immediate assumption that Rick is there to take her grandson Felipe is also triggered by stereotypes and past experiences of race relations in U.S. society. Racialized violence through familial separation is such a prevalent and common fear among immigrant groups that she does not stop to think that this should be the least of their concerns within the clearly changed, post-apocalyptic world they are adjusting to. Whether based on personal experiences or community lore, the grandma instinctively fears that this government official is there to take her son away from her and possibly deport him. When a sheriff shows up in full uniform and she sees people arguing, she assumes that the world is, in Guillermo's words, "the same as it ever was; the weak get taken," and she knows to start begging and defending Felipe's character without asking for specifics. The shallow-focus close-up on her concerned face highlights the fact that the weapons and hostages in the scene are not her concern; in her internalized and automated script, the police are there to take away her son for potentially gang-related charges or illegal immigration.

This confrontation reveals from both angles the negative and destructive implications of narratives based on stereotypes. These ideas are so normalized in society that—despite the otherwise brutal and complete loss of normalcy in their world—none of the characters in this scene really stop to effectively question why they assume what they assume. They simply react, very nearly to deadly effect. This is how *The Walking Dead* makes viewers question how "messed up" society is. By staging interactions between different racial families, the show examines how racism affects behavior and ways of thinking, and suggests that this is so deep seated, it might even survive an apocalypse. ❦

Abigail Lammers is a double major in Spanish and Professional Writing and Publishing at UW-Whitewater. She wrote this essay for a Text and Image course in the fall of 2020.

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READING FILM

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Power and Perception in Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner*

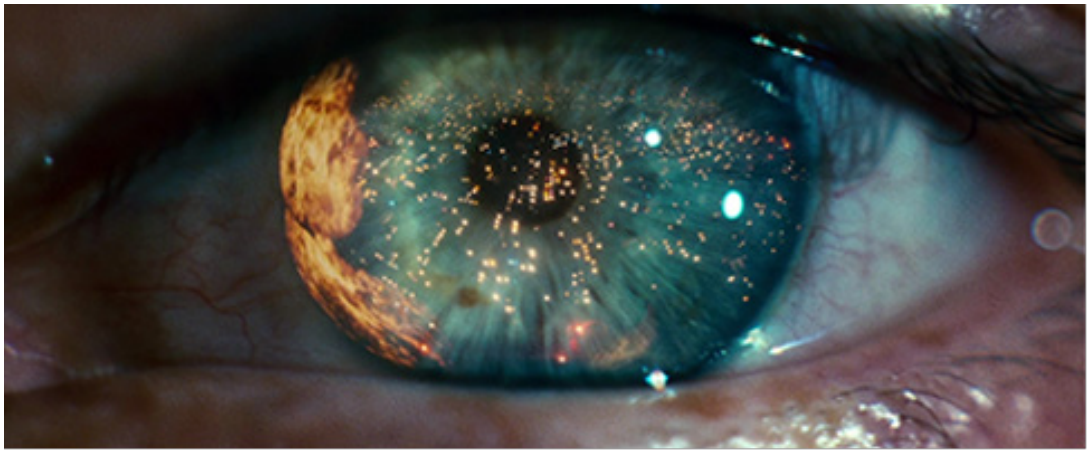
Jane Shallcross

In its plot, Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* recalls elements of "The Sandman," the story that grounds Freud's analysis of the uncanny. Its eerie atmosphere is created by the premise that automaton "replicants" are visually indistinguishable from humans, while replicant Roy Batty overthrows his human "father," Eldon Tyrell, by gouging out his eyes in what Freud would identify as a symbolic castration. But the film's complex use of the motif of the eye takes its exploration of the uncanny beyond individual psychology into social critique. By its conclusion, the film suggests that one's ability and willingness to perceive systemic social inequality is the true measure of humanity. *Blade Runner* trains us into awareness of flawed social hierarchies by repeatedly emphasizing eyes and connecting them with perception beyond the physical.

The film integrates Freud's definition of the uncanny in unexpected ways to point out the fundamental flaws of its society as a whole. Freud defines the uncanny as "something repressed which recurs" (241). He states that this strange feeling stems not from fear of the unknown, but from "something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression" (241). The main uncanny feature of *Blade Runner* at first appears to be the very thing that human characters struggle with throughout the film: the inability to distinguish replicants from humans. However, what they've truly repressed is their awareness of the damage caused by their hierarchical society, driven by Tyrell's distorted vision of progress. When the replicants themselves start resisting this system, its flaws resurface, eventually shifting Deckard's perception of reality. We as viewers are trained through the repeated eye motif to perceive this social uncanny, which is upheld through the characters' unquestioning adherence to a destructive social system.

Images of eyes frequently dominate *Blade Runner*'s mise-en-scène, drawing attention to how the film's fictional world is perceived by those within it. One of the first shots we see is an extreme close-up of an eye reflecting the dystopian urban wasteland of Los Angeles, immediately followed by a shot of a futuristic ziggurat on its skyline—an obvious symbol of the class hierarchy that was inherent in the civilization that built it. The shot then cuts back to the eye, this time with an explosion from the smokestacks reflected in it. This opening sequence sets the stage for a world where industry has run rampant, but the pollution and destruction are still structured within a

class pyramid. However, the cuts to these extreme close-ups of an eye show us that the eye's owner is aware of the destructive nature of this system. The strategic use of the eye reflecting the setting informs us within the first minute that there is likely a class structure, that it is destructive, and that there are those who see it for what it is.



While the eye in the opening sequence invites us into a critical perspective on the story's society, the scene immediately following it establishes the eye's role within that society: that is, as an indicator of either naturalness or artificiality, an attempted ward against the uncanny. The camera zooms into the ziggurat skyscraper, where a man named Leon is undergoing a "Voight Kampff" test: a test that examines pupil dilation in response to questions that should provoke an emotional response, thereby proving the test subject's humanity. We see multiple close-ups of Leon's eyes through the examiner's camera, as well as a flash of light in his pupils as the intensity of the scene builds. We as the audience thus start trying to discern whether Leon is human or replicant, likely overlooking the artificiality of the humans' constructs and even the artificial nature of the test itself. Since Leon kills the examiner, the test is not completed, but we can assume he is a replicant. We cannot, however, assume that he doesn't have the capacity for human emotion; his killing of the examiner was likely an act of desperation, perhaps an even more human emotional response to extreme stress than passing the test would have shown. The juxtaposition of eyes in these two sequences indicates that in this society, being able to perceive what is real and what is fabricated is a matter of importance, yet the social structure itself can be seen as a fabrication in which the humans are playing an even more mechanical role than the replicants.

The connection between eyes and perception of the uncanniness of the power structure is developed further when Roy Batty kills his "father," Eldon Tyrell, by gouging out his eyes. The use of this classic reference to the uncanny tells us that his limited perception of humanity is the root

of his society's ills. His greed makes him blind to the fact that he is manufacturing slaves who are sentient beings capable of human emotion and intelligence. Despite having the genius to design artificial intelligence, his perception is so deeply ingrained in normalized social hierarchies that he is unable to see all the damage he is causing, most of all to his own creations. Tyrell's death—in his home at the top of the pyramid—metaphorically emphasizes his lack of true perspective for all his vision. This is reinforced by the way Scott presents the characters' eyes, suggesting a dichotomy between Batty's and Tyrell's perception. Close-ups of Batty's face show orange light reflecting in his pupils during his conversation with Tyrell and even while he's gouging Tyrell's eyes. This

same light reflects in the pupils of Tyrell's owl, close-ups of which frame Batty's entrance into and exit from Tyrell's room. The parallel drawn between Batty's eyes and those of an animal known for having incredible vision in the dark suggests that Batty perceives the world as it is, despite the constructs that obscure that truth from others. In contrast, Tyrell literally has poor vision, wearing thick glasses that often obscure his eyes. Given the film's connection between physical eyes and social perception, this is clearly symbolic of Tyrell's ignorance; there is an artificial barrier between him and the rest of the world. Even the camera is out of focus as Tyrell looks at his chessboard before allowing Batty to enter the room, pointing further toward the blurry hierarchical lens through which he views the world. In failing to see anything but a narrow vision of progress, Tyrell precipitates his own demise. In ignoring the social uncanny that he is largely responsible for, he falls victim to it.

The film's use of eyes to symbolize perception of resurfaced social issues also extends to its dialogue. The dialogue repeatedly brings attention to physical eyes and then shifts our focus to perception through Roy Batty's lines, showing that it's actually the replicants who perceive the truth of their society's uncanny nature despite being manufactured themselves. While searching for answers to extend his lifespan, Batty questions Tyrell Corporation employee Hannibal Chew. Chew answers, "I don't know such stuff. I just do eyes. Just eyes—genetic design—just eyes. You Nexus, huh? I design your eyes." Batty then says, "Chew, if only you could see what I've seen with your eyes." In this reversal, Batty shifts the focus from the physical eyes to the idea of perception by implying that Chew would think differently if he had experienced the world through Batty's point of view. This is further clarified by Batty's dialogue with Deckard later in the film. Before saving Deckard's life, Batty says, "Quite an experience to live in fear, isn't it? That's what it is to be a

slave." Batty has been at the very lowest rung of society and poses a threat to the status quo when he refuses to be exploited any longer. As a blade runner, Deckard represents the cultural controls that keep the existing order in place—an order established by fear. Yet at this key moment when even the contrasting low and high camera angles show that Batty finally has power over Deckard, he saves Deckard's life, showing him that replicants have the capacity for empathy and, in fact, teaching Deckard what empathy is. As Batty is dying, he again brings attention to the things he's seen. Describing moments of awe in outer space, he says, "I've seen things you people wouldn't believe" and laments that "all those moments will be lost in time, like tears in rain." Because of the incredible phenomena he has seen, he perceives the transience of life with greater clarity. His enlarged perspective allows him to see the senselessness of a society that privileges progress at whatever cost. Given Deckard's teary eyes in response to Roy's death, and his subsequent flight from the authorities with a replicant, the film suggests that Batty's mercy changes his perspective on both replicants and the system he has played a role in upholding. He is finally able to see the corruption of the social structure through the eyes of those who are most exploited by it.

While eyes are associated with the uncanny, the uncanniness that pervades the film is itself used to bring awareness to the fact that something is off with society's vision of reality. *Blade Runner* shows the importance of this awareness by repeatedly emphasizing eyes and connecting them with perception beyond the physical. Through changes in perspective, characters come to see through the fear and ideology they are conditioned to accept to keep the power structures in place. They're able to spot the difference between authentic and artificial, finding that humans are often more artificial than the replicants they manufacture. Perhaps due to humanity's blindness to the destruction its societal structures have caused, the Tyrell Corporation may be accurate in saying that replicants really are "more human than human."

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