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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. 🍷

Hannah Keziah Agustin majors in Film Studies and Creative Writing at UW-Whitewater. She wrote this essay for a Cinema Auteurs course in the fall of 2020.

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