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

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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 camera-work, 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

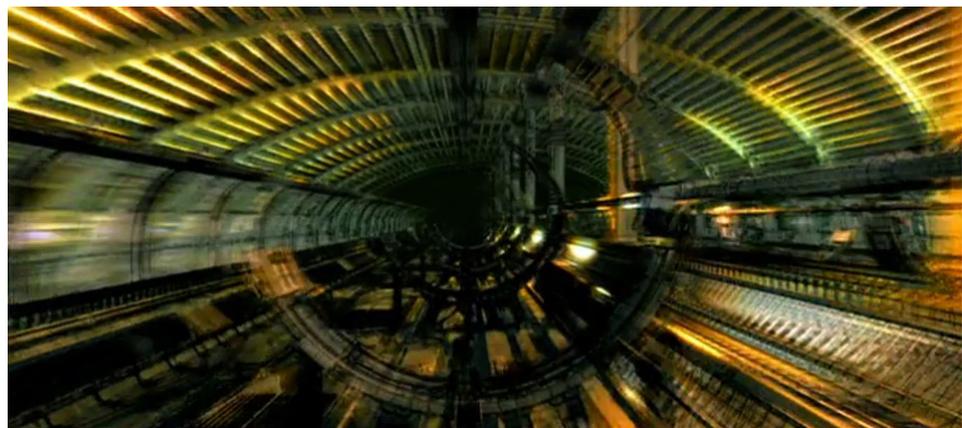


gives Chow Mo-wan back all the cash she has collected from him for their sexual encounters. This would seem to present the opportunity for him to recognize that she never wanted his money—that he has treated her badly, as a prostitute rather than an intimate partner. But he’s unable to admit this to 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. ❧

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