

BEYOND POSTCOLONIAL NOSTALGIA: WONG KAR-WAI'S MELODRAMAS IN THE MOOD FOR LOVE AND 2046

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«The one charm of the past», wrote Oscar Wilde, «is that it is the past» (Wilde, 2007: 72). Factual or imagined, the past is actively exploited by the producers of mass culture: retro furniture, vintage clothing and analogue technology are in vogue once more. Nostalgia marketing extends to the cinema industry: Hollywood is overtaken by incessant remakes, Disney live action adaptations, Marvel reboots, re-imaginings of the classics and grandiose period pieces. Re-cycling of narratives and visuals triggers affective response from the audiences and grosses impressive amounts at the box office. Nostalgia also reigns the art-house circle, predominantly melodramas. As a genre that appeals to the emotions through the use of subjective narration, lavish set design and powerful score, melodrama provides the ideal structures for the cinematic construction of pastness.

A prototypical melodrama revolves around loss, unrequited love, self-sacrifice or pre-destiny, and prioritizes mise-en-scène, gestures and

music over action. It is a genre best suited for delivering personal stories set against the backdrop of a changing society, which is certainly the case with *wenyi pian* — a Chinese equivalent of melodrama—. We can trace its origins to *wenming xi*, a theatrical tradition which was popular in Shanghai between 1913-1915, and *yuanyang huie pai*, or Mandarin Duck and Butterfly, an early twentieth-century literary school that has shaped not only the Shanghainese publishing industry but also local film audience (Teo, 2006: 204-205; Zhang, 1999: 13-14). *Wenming xi* drew on Shakespearean plots and Western staging techniques, and relied heavily on improvisation: «The majority of the plays performed during this period were not yet literary dramas [...] More often than not there only existed outlines of scenes [...] the actor was expected to improvise the details of the action and the dialogues» (Eberstein, 1990: 12). A number of 'civilized plays' were adapted for cinema in the 1920s', prompting the creation of a 'progres-

sive melodrama' genre, which was exemplified by such films as *The Goddess* (*Shen nü*, Wu Yong-gang, 1934), *Daybreak* (*Tianming*, Sun Yu, 1934) and *Crossroads* (*Shizi jietou*, Shen Xiling, 1937). That same decade, several novels by the Mandarin Duck and Butterfly writers were turned into films: Zhang Shichuan's *The Spirit of the Jade Pear* (*Yu Li Hun*, 1924), based on the novel of the same name by Xu Zhenya, and *Lonely Orchid* (*Kong gu lan*, 1926), based on the novel by Bao Tianxiao, stand out as major box-office hits. As reflected in their intricate plot and excessive sentimentality, these melodramas were characterized by Western influences, but they also exposed Confucian ethics. Screen adaptations of Butterfly novels dominated the industry in 1930-1940s Shanghai and 1950-1960s Hong Kong. The new genre was named *wenyi* – an abbreviation for *wenxue yu yishu* ('arts and letters')–, connoting the origin of these films in literary works.

A typical *wenyi* picture of the time told a forlorn love affair: the protagonists, restrained by social and familial norms, had to renounce their feelings for the sake of propriety. The often cited *Spring in a Small Town* (*Xiaocheng zhi chun*, Fei Mu, 1948) about a young woman who chooses loyalty to her sick husband over reignited love for an old friend of theirs, is regarded as the finest example of melodrama in pre-Communist China (see Wang, 2013: 271-310; Daruvala, 2007: 169-185; Yeh, 2006: 8-10; Teo, 2006: 206-207). Nonetheless, after the Cultural Revolution erupted, chaste love stories as this one lost their appeal for the general public. The macho warrior superseded the romantic hero, the chivalrous woman replaced the noble heroine (Teo, 2006: 209), and the cinema industry – now relocated to Hong Kong – concentrated on the martial arts productions that mirrored the off-screen violence. *Wuxia pian* ('films of chivalrous combat') and crime thrillers responded to the political, social and economic changes in the city in the late '60s – mid '90s. However, at the turn of the century, *wenyi pian*

experienced a revival – Teo cites *Tempting Heart* (*Xin dong*, Sylvia Chang, 1999), *Fly Me to Polaris* (*Xing yuan*, Jingle Ma, 1999), *Anna Magdalena* (*On na ma dut lin na*, Yee Chung-man, 1998) and *In the Mood for Love* (*Fa yeung nin wa*, Wong Kar-wai, 2000) as «examples of the union of literature, art, music [...] and romance» (Teo, 2006: 209). The oeuvre of Wong Kar-wai, the first Chinese filmmaker to receive the Best Director Award at Cannes, is particularly interesting to the scholars of Chinese melodrama. Kar-wai's biggest success to date, *In the Mood for Love*, and its sequel, *2046* (idem, 2004), both set in the 1960s' Hong Kong – the period when *wenyi* was at the peak of its popularity – revisit the classics of the genre. Nonetheless, while their sumptuous *mise-en-scène*, archetypal characters and moral lessons evoke the Second Golden Age of Chinese cinema, *In the Mood for Love* and *2046* imbue the traditional *wenyi* with socio-political sensibilities of postcolonial Hong Kong. This essay explores how these two films appropriate both Chinese and Western melodramatic conventions – such as subjective narration, non-linear chronology, extensive use of music and props – in order to portray nostalgia.

It is important to define the meaning and the use of term 'nostalgia' in the first place. Though not acknowledged scientifically until the seventeenth century, the symptoms of nostalgia were described much earlier than 1688, the year Johannes Hofer submitted *Dissertatio Medica de Nostalgia*. In the time of Ancient Greece and Rome, when nostalgic longing was a privilege of the intellectual class (Klibansky et al., 1964: 30-31), Ovid wrote profoundly sentimental *Epistulae ex ponto* and *Tristia* while in exile at Tomis, Vergil mourned Troy's destruction in *Aeneid* and Homer created one of the major epic poems of antiquity, *The Odyssey*. Akin to Ulysses, who ached 'merely to see the hearth-smoke rising upward from his own island' (Homer, 1998: I.57ff.), Hofer's patients were susceptible to the sad mood originating from the desire for the return to homeland (Hofer, 1934:

381). Mainly Swiss mercenaries, they experienced anxiety, lack of appetite, insomnia and depression, and were prescribed colon cleansing, bloodletting and opium ingestions (Adelman & Barkan, 2011: 250). For over a century following Hofer's publication, French and British physicians reported numerous cases among their soldiers and sailors. Nostalgic outbursts significantly delayed the imperial expansion: instead of dying for their country on the battlefield, militaries were dying from their desire of returning to it (Goodman, 2013). The French army in the Napoleonic Wars (Battesti, 2016: 134), the Russian army in the War of the Polish Succession (Lowenthal, 1985: 11) and the crew of James Cook's first voyage (Banks, 2011: 329) were all plagued by nostalgia.

In times when most people hardly ever travelled farther than a few days' walk from their village, homesickness was a prerogative of the nobility, military and mariners. But by the turn of the eighteenth century, with progress providing new means for travelling, nostalgia had reached epidemic proportions, affecting peasants, refugees, poets and philosophers alike: «The new scenario of nostalgia was neither battlefield nor hospital ward but misty vistas with reflective ponds, passing clouds and ruins of the Middle Ages or antiquity» (Boym, 2001: 26). Particularly sensitive in this respect were the Romantics, who celebrated the past in its incompleteness, thus giving birth to the culture of commemoration. Encapsulated in the curio cabinets, albums and writings, the past became heritage. Urban memorials and provincial museums sprang up like mushrooms, and «for the first time in history, old monuments were restored in their original image» (Boym, 2001: 29). The restoration of architectural heritage in Germany, France, Italy, Portugal and England all stemmed from the newly acquired sense of national identity.

Rapid socio-cultural changes and historical upheavals that followed in the late nineteenth-mid twentieth century intensified nationalistic identification. Nostalgia was labelled «immigrant

psychosis» (Frost, 1938: 802) and «failure of adaptation» (Starobinski, 1966: 101), but the focus of longing shifted from space to time: dislocation alone did not cause homesickness, it was the fast-paced life and linear temporality of the industrial society that made individuals prone to nostalgia (Fritzsche, 2002: 62-85). Understanding time as an irreversible passage led to realizing that the past was forever lost, and it made the nostalgic even more fixated on the vanishing sites, traditions and crafts. Nostalgia remained closely associated with heritage throughout the twentieth century, when public debates drew attention to the disappearance of entire districts in the aftermath of urban development and the two world wars. Historic preservation engulfed Europe, where during the European Architectural Heritage Year twenty-three countries participated in 'A Future for Our Past' restoration campaign, and the United States, where the *National Historic Preservation Act* was signed in 1966. Although historic preservation was neglected in Hong Kong until the early 2000s, it is only fitting that in a city where one finds a Buddhist temple next to a skyscraper and a jewellery shop, nostalgia should be embedded in local identity.

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Raised in the shadow of Shanghai, the cosmopolitan, money-driven Hong Kong came of age at the time of the Great Leap Forward. Fear and famine drove over 142,000 people from Shanghai, Chaoshan, Guangdong, Siyi and Ningbo to the flourishing British colony. Wealthy émigrés brought

in their business, creating jobs and developing the industry, but the flow of illegal refugees that continued in the wake of the Cultural Revolution caused shortages of land and water. Rich or poor, most immigrants thought of Hong Kong as a space of transit rather than a place to settle in (Abbas, 1997: 4). *In the Mood for Love* is a testament of this expatriates' society: «they lived in their own isolated part of the city [...] the housing problems were such that you'd have two or three families living under the same roof and they'd have to share the kitchen and toilets and even their privacy. I wanted to make a film about those days» (Tobias, 2001). While elderly émigrés kept their own dialect, cuisine and lifestyle, younger generations embraced Western music, fashion and cinema. Those émigrés who profited under the British rule gradually abandoned their dream of going back to China. By the late 1960s Hong Kong had become one of Asian Tigers, and the emergence of local identity had begun to take place. This transition is made evident in *2046*: upon returning from his self-imposed exile, the protagonist moves into the multi-diasporic Oriental Hotel that well depicts Hong Kong at the end of the sixties, when it was one of the most populated places on earth.

By the 1970s Hong Kong had transformed into a financial centre, but as natural disasters and fiscal crises hit the city, China seized the moment to discuss the 'unfair treaties' under which it had been annexed. With Hong Kong given no say in the matter, the Sino-British Joint Declaration of 1984 ended 155 years of the colonial rule, granting the city half a century of the unchanged capitalist system. The deadline is year 2046, and it is easy to see the irony behind the title of Wong's film. Although he claims that: «It was never my intention to make a film about politics» (Fernstein,

2004), the leitmotifs of changeless time, search for identity and fixation on the past resonate with existential crises of the transitional period. Chow is determined to rent the room 2046 because it holds emotional significance to him and he gets attached to women who occupy this space: Lulu, Bai Ling and Jingwen. Teo reads Chow's involvement with mainland women as an allegory of Hong Kong's relationship with China (Teo, 2005: 149), but Wong's explanation is more prosaic: «the number 2046 brings up the past, a memorable affair [...] he has been trying to re-live ever since. It casts a shadow over everything and dooms all his relationships.»¹ Chow even writes science-fiction novels, titled *2046* and *2047*, in which the characters, based on people from his life, are travel-

ling on a futuristic train to a rather temporal than spatial destination – year 2046, a place where nothing ever changes. The whole premise can be read two ways, as a nostalgic attempt «to revisit time like space» (Boym, 2001: 12) and as scepticism over Xiaoping's promise of «wushinian bubian.»² Although the protagonist of this metanarrative is supposed to represent Jingwen's Japanese boyfriend, the spectators do not fail to read him as the alter ego of Chow.³ Looking back on his losses helps Chow ease anxiety over the future, in the same way as lapsing into collective nostalgia prepares the natives of Hong Kong for the return to China. They mourn both a vanishing present and a future loss that awaits the city upon the transfer of sovereignty. No longer British, not yet Chinese, Hong Kong has reverted to being «a port in the most literal sense» (Abbas, 1997: 4).

The themes of homesickness, temporal dislocation and evocation of the past, so common in Kar-Wai's filmography, are entwined with postcolonial quest for identity. We could compare post-Han-

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do over tendencies in Hong Kong cinema to the replacement of movement-image with time-image in the post-World War II Europe. As theorized by Deleuze, a movement-image subordinates the narrative to a logical succession of sensory-motor actions while a time-image presents non-linear narration with often disjointed visuals and sounds. One method strives to recreate the story sequentially, the other, to fuse the actual and virtual, remembered and imagined, present day and yesterday. The difference between movement-image and time-image is alike Boym's distinction between restorative and reflective nostalgia: a nostalgic of the first type seeks to establish continuity with the past through reconstruction, while a nostalgic of the second type contents himself with contemplating the remnants. The past for the restorative nostalgic is an ageing fresco that has 'to be freshly painted in its 'original image'; the past for the reflective nostalgic is an irrevocable time that can only be preserved in 'shattered fragments of memory' (Boym, 2001: 61). While restorative nostalgia juxtaposes two timelines, reflective nostalgia charts them along the same temporal axis.

2046 features time in a loop: past and future, memories and fantasies, reality and fiction blend together imperceptibly. Jumping from one timeline to another, the narrative heightens a tragic awareness of the passage of time: «the altered order changes the significance. And you learn more because of this order» (Fernstein, 2004). Elliptical chronology of *2046* is well-suited to represent the endless meditation on the 'what if' scenario: after all, Wong's characters are nostalgic not for the irredeemable past, but for the future they could have had, if they had made a different choice. Regretful of missed opportunities, they find themselves in the wrong time and place. The circumstances are uncannily familiar: «Hong Kong in the 1960s was surviving on [...] 'borrowed time', a pre-97 condition that produced a certain syndrome of fear and insecurity causing citizens to drift and wander» (Teo, 2005: 142). Wong's characters, too, are restless,

and so they embark on journeys to other countries: Chow leaves for Singapore in the aftermath of his affair with Su, and she follows, but they miss each other.⁴ Lulu returns from the Philippines after having searched in vain for 'legless bird' Yuddy, and Jingwen eventually runs away to Japan to marry her boyfriend. Bai Ling, who was hoping to spend Christmas 1967 with Dabao in Singapore, ends up there alone after breaking up with Chow. Like Bai Ling and Chow before her, the Black Spider settles down in Singapore to escape the past. When Chow offers her to return to Hong Kong together, she decides to stay. Their farewell –ironically, filmed in the same location where Chow and Su parted ways– concludes with a sexually charged kiss that vindicates *In the Mood for Love's* lack of physical intimacy. It makes Chow realise that his feelings for this woman had been directed at another Su Lizhen, that he had been looking for «the repetition of the unrepeatable» (Boym, 2001: XVII).

2046 is full of allusions to *In the Mood for Love*. The two were shot practically side-by-side within fifteen months and could have ended up as a single film. The protagonists of *In the Mood for Love* reappear in *2046* but they are changed: Chow shares many personality traits with the solitary wanderers of the 1960s Hong Kong cinema, and Su is reduced to 'a shadow from the past' (*Interview: Wong Kar-wai on 2046*). Tony Leung recalls the confusion on the filming set: «on the first day, Kar-wai told me that he wanted me to play the same character again, but [...] as a dark, cynical playboy [...]. I was trying to create a new Mr. Chow, but things kept reminding me of *In the Mood for Love*. The scenes, the room number, everything» (Keefe, 2012). Indeed, *2046* explores the same milieu and situations. Repetitive actions, leitmotifs and mise-en-scène point at the intertextuality of *2046* and *In the Mood for Love* in relation to each other and to Wong's previous films. Within the diegesis, this kind of self-referentiality conveys the «hopelessness of ever recapturing, modifying, or getting rid of the past» (Brunette, 2005: 105).

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Wong's treatment of the past in these films is essentially postmodern: «stylistic connotation» (Jameson, 1991: 19) of the 1960s Hong Kong and its cultural artifacts «renders nostalgia visually irresistible» (Carvalho, 2009: 156). From coiffures to cabs to cuisine, *In the Mood for Love* and *2046* make the past alluring through quotidian objects and rituals (Chow, 2002: 646). «The whole experience of this community is like a dream, it is lost and gone,»⁵ laments Wong. His childhood home is currently occupied by an Italian restaurant, the basement café where he had written his first scripts is now a jewellery outlet, and Café de Goldfinch, featured prominently in both films, closed its doors after fifty-three years of service. High rental prices, fleeting fashions and everchanging urban landscape mean that Hong Kong becomes a «space of the *déjà disparu*» (Abbas, 1997: 48) at the same speed it evolves. On his quest to «preserve from perishing» (Lalanne et al., 1997: 88) the remnants of his favourite era, Wong borrowed quotations from period novels and hired radio announcers from the 1960s to record the music (Chow, 2002: 646). The importance of soundtrack in Kar-wai's oeuvre cannot be overstated, and his innovative use of songs is particularly relevant to our analysis, since melodrama, by definition, is a blending of music and action. The soundtrack of *In the Mood for Love* ranges from instrumental music (Shigeru Umebayashi's rendition of the existing score, *Yumeji's Theme*) to boleros (*Aquellos Ojos Verdes*, *Te Quiero*, *Dijiste* and *Quizás, Quizás, Quizás*), and the soundtrack of *2046* adds opera to the mix (Bellini's *Norma* and *Il Pirata*). In both films, Spanish-language songs suggest the hedonistic nightlife that

dominated Hong Kong in the sixties, and serve to comment on the narrative as much through their lyrics as through hidden connotations.

Aquellos Ojos Verdes was the first bolero to be recognized internationally. It was written by Nilo Menéndez, an aspiring Cuban pianist, and his friend, poet and singer Adolfo Utrera, in 1929. Menéndez claimed that the song was dedicated to Adolfo's sister, Conchita, but she returned to Cuba soon after their meeting in New York, and the two have never met again (Román, 2015: 20). The only legacy of their romance was made famous by Xavier Cugat, a Catalan musician raised in Havana, whose renditions of *Siboney* and *Perfidia* appear in *2046*. However, for *In the Mood for Love* Wong chose Nat King Cole's version, released in 1959, which was immensely popular on the radio, alongside Connie Francis's cover of *Siboney*, recorded in 1960. *Siboney*, composed by Ernesto Lecuona for one of his stage works, became an instant classic and lost much of its original context (Jacobson, 1982: 32), which, I argue, is crucial to understanding the song's function in *2046*. It was created in 1929, while Lecuona was on his second year of recitals abroad. Lecuona was feeling nostalgic and spilled his longing into a song dedicated to homeland (Román, 2015: 13). To this day, Hispanics refer to Cuba as «Ciboney», honouring the indigenous people of Cuba. The first tribe to arrive there, more than 5,000 years ago, and the most populous at the time of the Spanish conquest, the Ciboney people became nearly extinct by the end of the sixteenth century (Simons, 1996: 67). Their disappearance is a cautionary tale of colonization, yet, to the people of Hong Kong, the opposite process is no less dreadful. As the city approaches the fifty-year mark of reintegration, it experiences strong identification with Shanghai, whose past may predict Hong Kong's future.⁶ Abbas remarks that «[b]oth cities were essentially created by Western colonialism in the aftermath of the Opium Wars [...] the two cities seemed to have been linked at birth, which makes it possible sometimes

to read what is tacit in the history of one city in the history of the other» (Abbas, 2000: 773). Notably, one of the few pop songs in Mandarin from *In the Mood for Love*, *Hua Yang De Nianhua* ('Age of Blossoms'),⁷ is a lament for the golden days of old Shanghai.⁸ The singer, Zhou Xuan, was also a legendary actress and the incarnation of the 1930s' era of splendour.

It is important to address here Wong's nostalgia for his native city: having moved to Hong Kong at the age of five, what he remembers best of the sixties is the Shanghainese community of Tsim Sha Tsui. «In those days, the Shanghainese in Hong Kong didn't get along very well with the local people. In the '30s and '40s, Shanghai was so modern that even '50s Hong Kong seemed rather primitive to them. At first the exiles lived by themselves and tried to build a small Shanghai with their own music and cinemas» (Fuller, 2001: 96). The meticulous restoration of everyday objects, practices and fashions of the 1930s Shanghai disguised as the 1960s Hong Kong in Wong's films «easily produces the effect of retrospection and hence —since the past is made to appear so beautiful and elusive— of nostalgia» (Chow, 2002: 651). In fact, when *In the Mood for Love* was released in China, «almost every viewer saw it as a story that happened in former Shanghai. [...] details like women's elegant cheongsams, men's cigarettes, the sound of footsteps in incommensurable aisles, and songs from radio programs [...] all made this film seem like an old Shanghai drama that took place in Hong Kong» (Cui, 2007: 38).

Costume design in both films is of equal importance as the soundtrack to the portrayal of the era. Created by William Chang, Wong's most frequent collaborator,⁹ it features a wide array of cheongsam dresses. So called in Western fashion after the Cantonese term, cheongsam is better known in Mainland China as «qipao». As the name suggests,¹⁰ it must have originated during the Qing Dynasty. Originally being rectangular-shaped and wide-sleeved, the robe left nothing uncov-

ered except for hands and face. Donning form-fitting garments was contrary to Chinese etiquette, and it was not until the 1920s that qipao began to get tight. Calendars of that decade featuring qipao-clad girls playing golf, dancing and sipping Coca-Cola popularized body-hugging designs. Following the May Thirtieth Movement, women in China started wearing qipao in their pursuit of gender equality (Clark, 2000: 7-9). Contrasted to the rural two-piece outfit, it came to represent urban lifestyle in the 1930s, and during the Second Sino-Japanese war cheongsam attained the status of national dress. That was mostly thanks to the first lady of China, Madam Chiang, who masterfully combined modern qipao with Western coats while abroad, and wore plain, soft-hued models back home. In its new rank, qipao was incorporated in the Miss Hong Kong beauty pageant.¹¹ The winner of the 1966 edition also wore a cheongsam to the Miss Universe of the same year to represent Chinese ethnicity.

While mainland China stayed isolated from the rest of the world, Hong Kong engaged in a beneficial fashion exchange with the West. By the 1950s, qipao had adopted an hourglass shape but many recognizable elements —diagonal construction, mandarin collar and frog fastenings— remained intact. Western women were fascinated by it, even Hollywood stars Grace Kelly and Elisabeth Taylor appeared wearing cheongsam-inspired dresses. Meanwhile in Hong Kong, ladies were pairing qipaos with Western accessories: cardigans, jackets, stockings, heels and furs (Xie qtd. in Yang, 2007: 35). Brocades, embroidery and slits were reserved for particularly bold women —prostitutes from Wan Chai and Tsim Sha Tsui—. Lavish cheongsams we see on Bai Ling and Lulu were preceded by iconic designs of Phyllis Dalton in *The World of Suzie Wong* (Richard Quine, 1960). Familiar with the film and a real-life Suzie,¹² Wong likely drew inspiration for Bai Ling from this Hollywood melodrama: the protagonist is a call-girl who falls in love with a resident artist and offers

herself free of charge. In contrast to Bai Ling's sensual qipaos, dresses worn by Su Lizhen were a popular daily wear around the same decade. Middle-class women used cotton fabrics, while better-off ladies ordered customised cheongsams with laces, plaids and prints (Clark, 2000: 15). Form-fitting qipaos were harder to make, as a tailor had to take twenty-four body measurements to draft the pattern, then sew the collar and buttons by hand, trim the dress and lastly, carefully iron the fabric to give it shape. This painstaking process is portrayed in Wong's short film *The Hand* (Eros, 2004), made between the shootings of *In the Mood for Love* and *2046*.

Costly in making and uncomfortable to move in, cheongsam became associated with city vanity and fell under the taboo during the Cultural Revolution. Mao's 1966 campaign urging people to destroy the «Four Olds» resulted in burning flamboyant garments as symbols of feudalistic culture. It took another twenty years for qipao to restore the status of a national dress (Finnane, 2008: 268), but ever since China reopened its market, cheongsam sparked the interest of elite Western designers: Ungaro, Dior, Yves Saint Laurent, Oscar de la Renta, Christian Lacroix, Prada, John Galliano, Tom Ford and Louis Vuitton. «Qipao fever» reached its peak in the early 2000s, mainly due to the releases of *In the Mood for Love*, *2046* and *Lust, Caution* (*Sè, Jiè*, Ang Lee, 2007). Nowadays there are qipao tours¹³ and clubs,¹⁴ and both Chinese and Western celebrities occasionally don cheongsam in its original or modified form.¹⁵ Qipaos from *In the Mood for Love* not only cleverly match the surroundings,¹⁶ they also establish continuity between different scenes and between Wong's pictures. In the viewer's eyes, Su and cheongsam are inseparable, and so we perceive Bai Ling —clad in the same fashion, walking in similar locations— as her doppelganger. Other characters wearing qipao in *2046* —Lulu and Su Lizhen from Singapore— prepare us for the realization that all women in Chow's life are in fact

simulacra of the same woman, and cheongsam itself is tinged with mourning over lost love.

Loss is the principal ingredient of longing, and nostalgia thrives on this tragic awareness. The desired object is «lost to the past» (Jankélévitch, 1974: 290) and it is this temporal irretrievability that makes the object desirable in the first place. The pain of loss comes together with the acceptance of the impossible return: «reflective nostalgia takes pleasure in the misty remoteness of the past and cultivates the bittersweet pangs of poignancy... The reflective nostalgic understands deep down that loss is irrecoverable» (Boym, 2001: 28). When Chow seeks to rent the room 2046, or writes his fiction, or seduces Bai Ling, he indulges in longing for something that can never be attained. There is sadness *and* pleasure in this longing, and so it relies on the frustration rather than fulfilment of Chow's wish. He remembers «in order to be unhappy» (Barthes, 1978: 217), not to learn from past mistakes, and by re-living his loss in the present, proves that 2046 is a destination desirable only from afar.

LOSS IS THE PRINCIPAL INGREDIENT OF LONGING, AND NOSTALGIA THRIVES ON THIS TRAGIC AWARENESS

The epilogue to *In the Mood for Love* illustrates that loss triggers nostalgia: «He remembers those vanished years. As though looking through a dusty window-pane, the past is something he could see, but not touch. If only he could break through the glass and bring it back.»¹⁷ Wong is nostalgic about the world that had been reduced to remnants. It is no coincidence that the last scene of the film is set against the backdrop of the ancient Buddhist ruin. Ruins remind not only of the bygone times and the present that never came to be, but also of the future, when the onlookers themselves will be history. Once the transition is complete, Hong Kong of

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today will become another ruin. But instead of trying to restore the city to how it was before, «Wong is really telling his Hong Kong audience that they should take the opportunity of changeless time to reflect on themselves and their history in order to prepare themselves for the great changes that are to come after 2046» (Teo, 2005: 142). In the closing scene of *2046*, Chow leaves Bai Ling because, despite the obvious allure of the old Hong Kong she symbolizes, he needs to end their game of borrowing each other's time. And so, he gets on a taxi «headed for a drowsy future through the unfathomable night...»¹⁸ The last shot of the film mirrors the first, only this time, the same hole for burying secrets has a sinister aspect. In the tradition of *wenyi pian* and in contrast with Hollywood melodramas, there is no happy ending. «Some years back I had a happy ending in my grasp... But I let it slip away,» confesses Chow when he is unable to finish his novel on a high note, as Jingwen requested. It seems that Hong Kong, too, lost confidence in the future back in 1984, as the city lost its place at the negotiating table. Twenty years after the Handover that had affected them not only politically and economically, but also psychologically, the citizens of Hong Kong feel like «an endangered community» (Loud qtd. in Tam, 2017). The new government is more of a replica of the old colonial system, but without the freedom of speech, and so many locals see Hong Kong independence as «the only way out for future» (ibid.). Wong Kar-wai captures the prevailing spirit of escapism through the metaphor of travelling «forward in time and backwards in space» (Yue, 2004: 226). Nostalgic not so

much for their golden years as for the «visions of the future that became obsolete» (Boym, 2001: 13), Wong's characters, much like Hong Kong citizens, are stuck in a place where nothing ever changes. It is a society in crisis, unsure of its identity or destiny. While resonating with the collective fears, Wong's film really offers to overcome stagnation of the post-Handover period by moving to the next stage, toward a future beyond 2046. ■

NOTES

- 1 Quote from the *Interviews with Wong Kar-wai and the Cast* special feature of *2046* on DVD.
- 2 五十年不變 means «remain unchanged for fifty years».
- 3 Many of Tak's quotes refer to *In the Mood for Love*: «That day, six years ago [in 1962], a rainbow appeared in my heart. It's still there, like a flame burning inside me. But what are your real feelings for me? Are they like a rainbow after the rain? Or did that rainbow fade away long ago?»
- 4 The alternative ending of *In the Mood for Love* contains a brief re-encounter of the protagonists in Cambodia: Su accompanies her husband on a business trip and Chow is on his way to Vietnam. Come find me if you are going there, he says. As they part ways, Chow cannot help asking: «Did you ever call me?» Su replies: «I don't remember». As she disappears into the passage, Chow follows her with a sad gaze. The next shot reveals a young monk on the upper gallery. He watches Chow deposit a heart-shaped trinket inside a hole in the wall, cup his hands around it and whisper. *The Secret Reunion in Angkor Wat* thus connects the protagonists' last meeting to the omnipresent «whispered secrets» leitmotif of *2046* and Chow's dramatic transformation.
- 5 Quote from the special feature interview of *In The Mood for Love* on DVD.
- 6 In the decade following the Handover, films and television programmes set in the 1930s Shanghai were extremely popular among the Hong Kong audiences (Lee 1999: 219).
- 7 This song also provided the title under which *In the Mood for Love* circulated in the domestic distribution.
- 8 The diegetic use of *Hua Yang De Nianhua* in the sequence that portrays the protagonists, separated by the wall,

listening to the same radio programme, heightens «the complicated play of proximity, distance and connectedness» (Tse, 2014: 43). The song subsides as the telephone rings in Su Lizhen's office. Chow asks: «If there is an extra ticket, will you come with me?» The following scene, accompanied by Nat King Cole's *Quizás, Quizás, Quizás*, depicts Chow leaving the room 2046 and Su arriving there minutes too late. They miss each other for the second time in Singapore, when she secretly comes to his hotel, but does not find the courage to meet Chow in person. As Su takes her leave, *Quizás, Quizás, Quizás* ensues again.

- 9 William Chang Suk Ping has worked as production designer, costumer and editor on all of Wong's feature films.
- 10 Qipao 旗袍 can be translated as 'banner gown', alluding to the Eight Banners of the Qing Dynasty (Yang, 2007: 20).
- 11 Maggie Cheung was discovered during one of such contests when she was only 18. Surprisingly, she came second (Lau, 2010).
- 12 Wong comments: «After I first came to Hong Kong from Shanghai, I was living in Tsim Sha Tsui, an area frequented by girls who were generally known as Suzie Wong – girls who worked in the bars entertaining sailors arriving on those battleships.» (Lalanne et al., 1997: 84).
- 13 Offered by Newman Tours, this guided walk explores the origins of qipao and its changing status between visits to the Shanghai Museum, Jinjiang Hotel, Cathay Theatre and one the most respected tailors in the city.
- 14 Wang Weiyu opened Shanghai Cheongsam Salon in 2007, where she teaches women how to select the right dress, walk, dance and sit wearing a qipao (Trouillaud, 2010).
- 15 Nicole Kidman, Jessica Chastain, Celine Dion and Madonna are merely a few examples.
- 16 Floral patterns of the two dresses Su wears in the beginning and in the end of *In the Mood for Love* replicate the curtains; at other times, geometric patterns complement the interiors; and in the deleted hotel scene – the consummation of the affair Wong chose not to show – one can catch a glimpse of a red qipao that appeared on the film's posters.
- 17 The line comes from Liu Yichang's short story *Intersection*, set in the 1970s Hong Kong.

- 18 The epilogue to 2046 is borrowed from Liu Yichang's *The Drunkard* (1963), the first stream-of-consciousness novel in Chinese literature.

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BEYOND POSTCOLONIAL NOSTALGIA: WONG KAR-WAI'S MELODRAMAS IN THE MOOD FOR LOVE AND 2046

Abstract

Wenyi pian, a Chinese equivalent of melodrama, has been experiencing a revival in Hong Kong cinema at the turn of the twentieth century. As a genre that appeals to the emotions, it is best suited for delivering personal stories set against the backdrop of a changing society. Particularly interesting to the scholars of wenyi is the oeuvre of Wong Kar-wai. His biggest success to date, *In the Mood for Love* (Fa yeung nin wa, 2000), and its sequel, *2046* (idem, 2004), revisit the classics of the Second Golden Age of Chinese cinema and imbue the traditional wenyi with socio-political sensibilities of Hong Kong in the transitional period. This essay explores how these two films appropriate melodramatic tropes – such as subjective narration, non-linear chronology, extensive use of music and props – in order to portray nostalgia.

Key words

Melodrama; Nostalgia; Wong Kar-wai; Hong Kong; *In the Mood for Love*; *2046*.

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MÁS ALLÁ DE LA NOSTALGIA POSCOLONIAL: LOS MELODRAMAS DESEANDO AMAR Y 2046 DE WONG KAR-WAI

Resumen

El *wenyi pian*, el equivalente chino de melodrama, ha resurgido en el cine de Hong Kong a principios del siglo XXI. En tanto que apela a los sentimientos de la audiencia, es el género más apropiado para contar historias personales en el contexto de una sociedad cambiante. La obra de Wong Kar-wai reviste especial interés para los investigadores del *wenyi pian*. Su mayor éxito hasta la fecha, *Deseando amar* (Fa yeung nin wa, 2000), y su continuación *2046* (2004) revisitan los clásicos de la segunda edad de oro del cine chino. Enriquecen el *wenyi* tradicional con las sensibilidades sociopolíticas del Hong Kong en transición, y reinventan las convenciones del melodrama –la narrativa no lineal, voz en *off*, música y escenografía– para retratar la nostalgia poscolonial.

Palabras clave

Melodrama; nostalgia; Wong Kar-wai; Hong Kong; *Deseando amar*; *2046*.

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