Nostalgia of the New Wave: Structure in Wong Kar-wai’s *Happy Together*
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In one of the earliest discussions of poststructuralism to appear in English, “Of Structure as an Inmixing of an Otherness Prerequisite to any Subject Whatever,” Jacques Lacan puts across a notion of structure that would henceforth have significant ramifications on the way identity is theorized across the human sciences. This was during the late 1960s, when structuralism, having been an intellectual trend in Europe for some time, had belatedly crossed the Atlantic and become controversial in select North American academic circles. Lacan, like his younger contemporary Jacques Derrida, was working against the more traditional and widely accepted philosophical assumptions about structure, which tended to see structure as the systematic relation between the part and the whole, with the whole being given priority as a unitary or central governing totality. Unity, Lacan writes, has always been considered “the most important and characteristic trait of structure.” Instead of unitariness, Lacan introduces the possibility of thinking about structure in terms of otherness, which he explains in part by appealing to Frege’s parsing of numbers. In even the most elementary process of counting, he argues, it is always a subsequent number that holds the meaning of the one preceding it:

When you try to read the theories of mathematicians regarding numbers you find the formula “n plus 1” \((n + 1)\) as the basis of all the theories. It is this question of the “one more” that is the key to the genesis of numbers and instead of this unifying unity that constitutes two in the first case I propose that you consider the real numerical genesis of two.

It is necessary that this two constitute the first integer which is not yet born as a number before the two appears . . . the two is here to grant existence to the first one: put two in the place of one and consequently in the place of the two you see three appear . . .

Lacan’s confusion of logical sequence with temporal sequence is a deliberate provocation. Albeit still in the heyday of structuralism, what he is arguing here is of course already a poststructuralist way of
understanding structure itself as a temporal process governed by non-identity (or difference). Accordingly, a structure (such as an integer), no matter how integrated (as one) it appears, must be understood to be the effect of retroaction—a belated conferral of meaning on an event (such as the number 1), which does not have such a meaning until it has been repeated in an other, subsequent event (the number 2). The non-italicized word “two,” then, stands in Lacan’s passage both as the number/integer 2 and as the second, deferred space of a repeated event. The phrase “one more,” which Lacan uses to describe the genesis of numbers, Jacques Derrida would, in his own equally famous arguments, call “supplementarity” or “play,” which tends to be repressed or restricted within the normative understanding of structure. Whereas Lacan problematizes the unity or oneness attributed to structure, Derrida would problematize the notions of origin and center, and their accompanying metaphysics of presence.2

The point of these brief and simplistic recalls of otherness (with its vast implications for the subject) and supplementarity (with its vast implications for language and the text) is not to instigate another round of debate about the master theorists of poststructuralism. It is, rather, to use them as a kind of historical and theoretical shorthand with which to examine what may at first appear to be a rather distant event, a contemporary film from Hong Kong. If the major epistemological rupture introduced by early poststructuralism can be summarized by the formula \(1 = 1+\), how might this rupture inform the reading of a cultural work such as a film, a love story between two men?

Although this operation (“applying theory to practice”) may come across as naïve, it is nonetheless relevant as a way to counter the analytically reductionist readings, ubiquitous inside and outside the academy, of non-Western cultural work. I am referring to the tendency, whenever a non-Western work is being analyzed, to affix to it a kind of reflectionist value by way of geopolitical realism—so that a film made in Hong Kong around 1997, for instance, would invariably be approached as having something to do with the factographic “reality” of Hong Kong’s return to the People’s Republic of China. While a detailed analysis of such a tendency and its complicity with a specific type of cross-cultural interpretative politics can only be made on a different occasion,3 it would be salutary to attempt a kind of analysis that consciously departs from it. The brief references to Lacan and Derrida serve, then, as a means of introducing certain prevalent epistemological problems—the problems of structure and its accompanying metaphysics—that are, I would argue, interestingly set into play in the film Happy Together (1997), which brought Wong Kar-wai the Best Director Award at the Cannes Film Film Festival of the same year.
Let me begin by suggesting that *Happy Together* can be seen as a nostalgic film. This may surprise some readers for the simple fact that nostalgia is most commonly understood as the sentiment of homesickness, which may extend into a tendency to reminisce old times or to romanticize what happened in the irretrievable past, whereas Wong’s film is decidedly a work of Hong Kong’s “New Wave Cinema” both in terms of its technical aspects—its avant-garde, experimental use of image, color, sound, and editing—and in terms of its content—a love affair between two men. Unlike many contemporary Chinese films, Wong’s work does not seem to be emotionally invested in the usual sites of nostalgia such as rural life or the remote areas of China, or, for that matter, anything having to do with the ideologically oppressive, but visually spectacular, Chinese cultural tradition. How can a film like this be described as nostalgic, and what is its relationship with the old and with the past as such?

The first clue, I think, lies in the titling of the film itself. The Chinese title, *Cheun Gwong Tsa Sit/Chunguang zhaxie* (in Cantonese and Mandarin), literally meaning the “unexpected revelation of scenes of spring,” is a metaphor for the surprising display of erotic sights, and as a film title it is borrowed from the Chinese translation of Michelangelo Antonioni’s *Blow Up*, when the latter was shown in Hong Kong in the 1960s. In many ways, of course, the phrase *cheun gwong tsa sit* is entirely apt for the sensual aspects of Wong’s film, which indeed amount to a revelation of the erotically charged relationship between two men. However, although the Chinese title focuses on the eroticism of the relationship, it is, as I will argue, the English title, *Happy Together* (with the subtitle *A Story about Reunion*), which more precisely reflects the nostalgia embedded in the story, which is loosely adapted from the little known novella *A Buenos Aires Affair* by Manuel Puig. Indeed, the bilingualism and multi-way translations of the film title raise some interesting questions: what is this film really about, and what is the relationship between the erotic as such—the so called “scenes of spring”—and the state of being happy together? If eros has customarily been construed as “2 becoming 1” (or 1+1=1) in classical philosophy, what does it tell us about the metaphysics of structure? Do eros and happiness complement each other, or are they incommensurable events?

Like some of Wong Kar-wai’s other films, the story here revolves around a melodic popular song with a catchy refrain: the state of being happy together is thus literally a theme both in the musical and in the narrative sense. At the same time, narratologically speaking,
this theme is a frustrated one: despite the suggestiveness of the music, it is clear from the narrative that being happy together is a difficult, perhaps impossible, project. In this regard, the music itself, while being familiar, seems to be a signifier with no real referent; it is as if the more readily we recognize the tune “Happy Together,” the more we must notice the actual gap, the discontinuity, between what we hear and what we experience through the film narrative.

The film narration begins with the voice-over of Lai Yiu-fai (played by Tony Leung Chiu-wai) telling us about his ongoing relationship with Ho Bo-wing (played by Leslie Cheung Kwok-wing). The two lovers have traveled from Hong Kong all the way to Argentina, hoping to see with their own eyes the famous Iguazu Falls. Like many lovers, Fai and Bo-wing often quarrel bitterly and break up, but after being separated for a while Bo-wing usually suggests: “Let’s start over again.” In this manner, the tortuous relationship continues.

In terms of our discussion about structure, the plea to start over again bespeaks a certain desire for a new beginning, a fresh point of departure. This seemingly simple and innocent plea nonetheless already contains its own contradiction, for the wish to start anew often turns out to be a wish to repeat, to revisit something familiar, something that has already been lived through before. The desire to begin from the origin—from “the first” as it were—is thus haunted by the inherent duplicity of its own articulation: the figure of 1, even as it is being invoked as a way to clear the past, inevitably derives its meaning from that past. 1 is always already a reiteration, which makes sense only in the supplementarity of 1+.

This fundamental otherness of structure is staged in the film through the handling of eros. Near the beginning of Fai’s narration, a scene of the two men having sex appears. This scene, shot in black and white, is the only one in the entire film in which the physical coupling of the two men is presented thoroughly without constraint, and in which they seem to climax together. It is entirely possible to interpret this erotic scene as part of an act of recollection—as part of a memory of what has supposedly already receded into the past. Even so, it would be insufficient to conclude that such remembrance alone is what constitutes nostalgia. As we will see, the nostalgia projected by the film complicates the purely chronological sense of remembering the past as such.

The series of black-and-white shots featuring the physical entanglement of the lovers is, in terms of effects, quite distinct from other scenes in the film. It is, for sure, a moment of erotic passion, but it is also what we may call a moment of ind differentiation, a condition of perfect unity that was not only (perhaps) chronologically past but also seemingly before difference and separation. A moment like this, placed at
the beginning of the film, cannot but be evocative. It brings to mind myths of origins such as that of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Are these images of passionate togetherness, then, indeed a recollection of something that actually happened, or are they part of a fantasy, a metaphysical conjuring of something that never took place? We do not know. In terms of narrative structure, therefore, these images of copulation constitute not only a remembered but an enigmatic other time, an other-worldly existence. They are unforgettable because their ontological status is, strictly speaking, indeterminate.

But whether or not this series of "primal scenes" actually took place, both men apparently desire to return to the reality they conjure. This desire to return—to some other life that is imagined as a primal union—is, I believe, the most important dimension of the nostalgia projected by this film. Nostalgia in this case is no longer an emotion attached to a concretely experienced, chronological past; rather, it is attached to a fantasized state of oneness, to a time of absolute coupling and indifferentiation that may, nonetheless, appear in the guise of an intense, indeed delirious, memory. From this perspective, Wong's style of nostalgia differs significantly in aim from that of other contemporary Chinese directors. Among the Fifth Generation Chinese directors from the People's Republic, for instance, nostalgia usually assumes the form of cultural self-reflection by way of stories about traditional China, stories which receive their sharpest focus in the rural countryside or in remote geographical areas beyond Han Chinese boundaries. Directors from Taiwan and Hong Kong, on the other hand, often convey nostalgia in the form of a sentimental fascination with legendary eras with clear moral divisions, such as are found in martial arts (kung fu) movies. There are also the works featuring modern and contemporary society with their typically contradictory feelings about the rural or colonized past, which is at once idealized and resented. These latter works include not only those films about diasporas, exiles, and emigration to the West, and about "home" visits to China, but also those films in which a particular form of traditional art (such as Beijing or Cantonese opera) is being thematized. Nostalgia, in other words, can be found everywhere in contemporary Chinese cinema, but the object of nostalgia—that which is remembered and longed for—is arguably often in the form of a concrete place, time, and event.

The nostalgia that surfaces in Wong's films is of course also traceable to concrete places, times, and events (e.g., the gangsters’ haven of Mongkok in *As Tears Go By*; the protagonist's journey to the Philippines to look for his birth mother, or the clock pointing at three in *Days of Being Wild*; the derelict, crime-infested Chungking Mansion and the fetishized canned pineapples with their "use by" dates in
*Chungking Express,* the claustrophobic tunnels, dark alleys, tiny apartments, bustling shops and restaurants in Hong Kong in *Fallen Angels,* and so forth). But the concretely situated happenings in his stories seem at the same time to give way to something more elusive and intangible. As Wong himself puts it, all of his works tend to "revolve around one theme: the communication among human beings." With this predominant interest in human beings, the nostalgia expressed in his films is, we may surmise, not simply a hankering after a specific historical past. Instead, the object for which his films are nostalgic is what we may call the flawless union among people, the perfect convergence between emotional and empirical realities, a condition of togetherness in multiple senses of the term. This is a condition which can never be fully attained but which is therefore always desired and pursued. In *Happy Together,* this nostalgic pursuit of what is ultimately unreachable is clearest in the relationship between Fai and Bo-wing. In terms of personalities, they are opposites: one is earnest and faithful; the other is an irresponsible scumbag. How could there be a long-lasting union between two such different people? And yet, it is precisely on their impossible, indeed hopeless, encounter and entanglement that Wong constructs the fantasy of being "happy together."

This wishful imagining of, or insistent gesturing back to, an originary state of togetherness—a kind of Edenic perfection in terms of human relationships—against a profound understanding of the tragic differences that divide human beings is characteristic of a certain irreverent and Romanticist tendency in what may be termed high modernism. (The plays of Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco, Harold Pinter, and their contemporaries come to mind.) In this light, the English title of Wong’s film, *Happy Together,* is arguably more appropriate than the Chinese title because it accurately captures this Romanticist and modernist structuring of desire. Etymologically, the word "happy" in English can be traced to roots such as *hap* and *fit.* Apart from its common meaning of feeling good, "happy" also carries connotations of happenstance, coincidence, good luck, and the felicitous fit. These connotations suggest that happiness is, philosophically speaking, an expression of the metaphysical condition of unitariness—a condition that is supposedly prior to separation, difference, and conflict; a condition that is, in Biblical terms, before the fall.

Once these implicit connotations of happiness are foregrounded, a place that appears frequently in Wong’s films takes on special significance. This is the home. As Shi Qi writes,

> Wong Kar-wai’s films are characterized by a basic structure... apart from the bond between men, there is also a tenacity expressed toward old,
decrepit homes, which serve as a refuge from the wild and dangerous jungle outside, and as the only kind of place belonging to oneself and one's loved ones. . . . Few directors have made use of the home as frequently as he . . . whether it is Mongkok, the Central District in Hong Kong, the wilderness, or Argentina, the home [in Wong's films] looks more or less the same, providing a personalized space in the midst of a foreign land.¹⁰

What is the home? Why is there such an obsession with the home and with homelessness in so many modern and contemporary works, East and West? (The current theoretical fascination with the themes of diaspora, exile, travel, migration, and their like is, properly speaking, part and parcel of this obsession as well.) Is it possible to argue that, much like happiness, the home is, from a modernist perspective at least, the wishful sign of a primary unitariness, an origin that is felt to be repeatedly threatened and destroyed by human conflict? Home in this modernist construction is not a mere matter of the family or family system; and, even though personalized (as Shi Qi's remarks suggest), it also functions as much more than a personal residence and refuge. Signifying an ideal of a primordial togetherness, the home is, epistemologically, already the product of a binary opposition, the opposition between myself or ourselves (as one unit) and the hostile world outside.

To this extent, the partners involved in an erotic relationship, insofar as they can be considered as a single unit, may be regarded as members of a certain kind of home. The relationship between Fai and Bo-wing can be thought of as a home which, despite its many break-ups, both attempt to maintain. Ironically, it is the unfaithful one, the one who is always leaving, who most frequently desires to "start over again" and rebuild the broken home. By agreeing, however reluctantly, to begin anew, Fai is in effect repeatedly submitting to Bo-wing's tyrannical demand that the two of them remain one—that, rather than remaining as two distinct individuals, they indefinitely perpetuate the dream of the home as the merging of two people into a single entity. And yet, as things never quite work out, this home remains no more than the occasion for a certain metaphysical longing. As unitariness always eludes the two lovers, eros gives rise to a profound nostalgia or homesickness.

To complicate things a little, it would be pertinent to recall at this juncture one of the most imaginative theories about the home—Freud's argument about the uncanny (1919).¹¹ Freud's thesis, we remember, is that the feeling of uncanniness is not necessarily the result of what is strange and frightening, but rather the result of some emotional affect (from an earlier time) which one has repressed yet which, somehow,
recurs fatefully to haunt one. For Freud, the uncanny is thus associated with an inner repetition-compulsion, an involuntary return to what was once a familiar, or homely, place. In the context of our lovers, this compulsion to repeat could easily be identified in Bo-wing's frequent suggestion that they "start over again." But there is still the question of what exactly it is that demands repetition. What is it that Bo-wing needs to have start over again?

In a theoretical move that was to make his essay controversial, Freud would go on to suggest that, for his male patients at least, the uncanny par excellence is the female genitals, which stand as reminders of "intra-uterine existence," of the former home where "everyone dwelt once upon a time and in the beginning." The wish to start over again, for Freud, would be the wish to return to this maternal origin, a wish which, tragically, can only be fulfilled through conscious or unconscious substitutes (of the mother). What this means is that, by virtue of its intense intimacy, an erotic relationship—even when it is an erotic relationship between two men—is inevitably haunted by an uncanny, because repressed, memory of the primary bond with the mother. In this regard, it would be possible to see the scene of erotic indifferentiation staged at the beginning of Happy Together in terms of a mother-child dyad, and to interpret Bo-wing's constant plea to "start over again" accordingly as a wish to revisit this familiar home. Should this line of reasoning that is so powerfully elaborated by Freud be followed, the biological mother-child bond would by necessity become the ultimate figure of the primeval union to which all erotic relationships, be they homosexual or heterosexual, seek to return. At the same time, for the simple fact that being-one-with-the-mother is already an irretrievable loss (as Freud repeatedly reminds us), this line of reasoning and the desire that accompanies it remain largely fantastical—and trapped within a nostalgic and metaphysical structure.

Another Sense of Home: The Banality of Everyday Life

In retrospect, what seems most redeemable about Freud's argument is not his masculinist musings about the female genitals per se (as the home to which we all seek to return) but rather his imaginative introduction of the figure of woman in a discussion about the home. By equating the homely and the familiar not just with anything or any place but specifically with the mother, Freud has, unwittingly, provided us with a means of deflecting the age-old trajectory of nostalgia and shifting the discussion from a metaphysical into a social frame.
(To be sure, he did not actually do this himself, but his argument, if only because it is so noticeably simple-minded about the mother—namely, that she equals her uterus—forces us to change the terms of the discussion fundamentally.) Rather than thinking of the mother simply as the child-bearing biological organ (and hence as the ultimate origin, the site of a primal union), then, it is also necessary to think of the mother as a worker, a caretaker, and a custodian of the home in the sociological sense. This theoretical shift, which deconstructs the metaphysics attached to the origin as such at the same time that it places woman at the center of thinking about the home, opens up a significantly alternative dimension to intimacy and happiness.

Importantly, in *Happy Together*, the shift from the metaphysical to the sociological understanding of the maternal is enacted in a relationship between men, which further confirms my suggestion that the maternal as such need not be essentialized and tied to the biologically female body, but should instead be considered as the outcome of specific social configurations, of preferred arrangements of intimate bonds across or within biological groups (that is, among men and women, among women and women, or among men and men). In this regard, the numerous small, unremarkable details in the film that fill the mundane experience of actually living together become highly revealing. What is the status of such details in relation to the erotic, on the one hand, and the quest for happiness and togetherness, on the other? Let us look at a few examples.

When the two lovers try looking for the waterfall, we remember, their car breaks down; there is the usual petty, bitter quarrel, and another separation. The waterfall is nowhere to be seen. After this incident, Fai works at a tango bar in Buenos Aires and lives a rather boring life; Bo-wing, meanwhile, continues his promiscuous adventures and is seen going in and out of the bar with different partners. Although they pass each other, they do not talk. One day, Bo-wing is badly beaten up and comes begging to be reunited with Fai, who, though reluctant, once again allows him to stay.

Later, Fai tells us that the period when Bo-wing is recovering from his injuries is the happiest time they have spent together. (This is also the time when the film changes steadily from black-and-white into color.) This recovery period may thus arguably be considered as the heart of the matter of Wong’s (ambivalent) portrayal of happiness. Crucially, this portrayal is from the perspective of the faithful partner, the one who is repeatedly betrayed and stuck at home, and who is, moreover, forced to assume the maternal role of caretaker when the promiscuous partner comes stumbling back. Certainly, nothing ground-breaking happens during Bo-wing’s recuperation. Only the most trivial,
indeed oppressive, of domestic routines transpire when Fai and Bo-wing are together in the apartment—with Fai, in the manner of an exploited but loyal wife/mother/servant, cooking for and spoon-feeding Bo-wing (while Bo-wing remains critical and bossy in attitude), cleansing and dressing Bo-wing’s wounds, spraying insecticide around the bed because Bo-wing complains of fleas, and going out in the middle of the night to get Bo-wing some cigarettes. The boring and tedious nature of tending to one’s beloved comes across unmistakably, but to Fai, the chores he is obliged to perform also bring about a sense of rhythm and security. This sense of rhythm and security makes it possible to endure even acts of cruelty from the beloved. For instance, one bitterly cold morning, Bo-wing forces Fai to go jogging with him. Fai catches a cold and falls into a feverish sleep. In his typically selfish manner, Bo-wing feels no compunction about waking Fai up simply because he is hungry and wants to eat. Albeit annoyed, Fai not only does not resist but gets up immediately; in the next scene we see him standing by the stove, shivering under his blanket, cooking. This remarkable scene is not at all visually glamorous. In its plainness, however, it communicates a compelling message about love in all its ambiguities, its lack of a clear distinction between submission and abuse, between sacrifice and slavery.

As Bo-wing is confined to the apartment, he becomes for the time being Fai’s captive, and Fai takes this opportunity to hide his passport. This detail, needless to say, is once again ordinary, but at the same time precise, in its reflection of the contradictory mindset in which Fai finds himself: the man he loves happens to be a jerk, who fucks around, and comes and goes as he pleases. Apart from literally taking advantage of his temporarily vulnerable condition and treating him like a domesticated animal, what else can Fai do to ensure that Bo-wing will not again leave? Confiscating Bo-wing’s passport is of course by no means a reasonable or even practical move, yet its madness also embodies a kind of groping, a desperate attempt to be constructive in the midst of a destructive relationship.

Describing Wong’s subtle use of details, Pan Liqiong comments: “The profundity of the film Happy Together lies precisely in its ‘shallowness’—different kinds of bric-a-brac, sounds, fragments of life all help to expose the difficulty of two lovers living together.” Although it is sensitive and perceptive, Pan’s view in the end is that these mundane details are what typically destroy romance—in other words, that there is a certain incompatibility, indeed incommensurability, between erotic love and everyday life as such; that romance, being such a delicate phenomenon, cannot really coexist with the banal. By thus preserving a kind of aura around the notion of romance (and
eros)—namely, that this is something so precious that it is susceptible to being destroyed by the vulgar realities of everyday life—Pan’s reading, despite its insights, falls largely within the metaphysical structure of thinking about origins.

Seen from Fai’s perspective, on the other hand, these mundane details do not indicate, as Pan does, that ordinary life destroys love, but rather that ordinary life in all its banality is an indispensable part of a love relationship, in which even quarreling must be understood essentially as a way of communicating. The Romanticist, metaphysical meanings of the home, the origin, and happiness are, in this perspective, punctured and deflated into quotidian, almost ritualistic, domestic practices, which bring about a different kind of illumination and equilibrium. For Fai, happiness and togetherness need not be tumescent ideals in the form of a masculinist heroic other time and other life. Instead, they have to do with all the little things that he can do for his beloved in the here and now.

Interestingly, it is during the period of Bo-wing’s recovery, when the two lovers reestablish their intimacy, that another male character enters the story. While working at a Chinese restaurant, Fai becomes friends with Chang (played by Chang Chen), a young fellow from Taiwan who seems more interested in men than in women. Perhaps more so than his relationship with Bo-wing, Fai’s relationship with Chang is conducted almost exclusively around the banal and mundane—they get to know each other in the kitchen, amid the menial labor of food preparation—without the punctuation of a sexual encounter. In the rest of the film, while his character remains largely undeveloped, Chang’s presence nonetheless provides the intriguing suggestion of an alternative kind of relationship, one in which Fai’s “maternal” way of loving would, it seems, become a mutually shared practice and in which Fai, too, can feel he is being taken care of.

Rather than becoming one with Bo-wing, then, Fai’s character and the affective possibilities that revolve around him stand in effect as an irreducible other(ness) in the structure of eros, the 1+ that dissolves the aura of erotic unitariness, revealing the latter to be a fragile kind of tyranny. In contrast with Fai’s nurturance, we see for the first time that romantic love, as personified by Bo-wing, is no more than an act of self-aggrandizement, the point of which is not to sustain intimacy with an other but rather to overcome, to destroy the other’s resistance. For the romantic, the other is desirable only insofar as he functions as an impediment to be conquered. Once this conquest is made—one the other gives up resisting and succumbs—he will no longer be valuable and must be abandoned for a different target. Even so, as the romantic repeatedly takes flight toward ever newer objects of
desire, his carefree loitering is forever structured by a parasitical dependency on the other’s seeming stability, conventionality, and homesickness—hence his pathological compulsion constantly to “start over again.” Fai’s definition and expectation of love and happiness, based as they are on attentiveness, self-sacrifice, and a need for sustained intimacy with the other, are decidedly different in kind and in quality.

Through the repetitive, lack-luster details of the home, and the accompanying tedium of feminine caretaking as personified by Fai, Wong Kar-wai has, one may argue, introduced a rift within the structure of the all too familiar, nostalgic yearning for togetherness. Without fanfare, Fai’s faithfulness and domesticity, and different perspective on happiness stand as a force which has the potential of displacing and dismantling the Romanticist and metaphysical ideals. How successful is this force? To answer this question, we will need to turn to another aspect of Wong’s filmmaking: the images, produced and assembled by cinematographer Christopher Doyle.

The Order and Function of Images: Returning to Nature

At the most basic level, Wong’s style—with its trademark of experimentation, its bold deployment of speed and color, and its technically sophisticated methods of shooting and editing—is indeed what has already been widely acknowledged as “new wave” and “avant-garde.” However, in the case of Happy Together, these labels do not tell us very much. To get at the manner in which Wong’s images signify, it is necessary to move beyond such facile labeling.

We notice that many shots, made with a hand-held camera, are in the style of the documentary. Recall, for instance, the multiple scenes around Fai’s living quarters: the cold long corridor leading to the public bathroom; the shabby-looking kitchen shared by all the renters; the interior of Fai’s apartment, which is neither tidy nor clean. There are also the cold and deserted streets near the bar where Fai works; the kitchen of the Chinese restaurant where Fai calls home to Bo-wing every day during the recovery period; the abattoir where Fai later takes another job; the small alley where Fai, Chang, and their friends play soccer in the shadows of the afternoon sun; and finally, the crowded commercial district in Taipei where Fai looks for Chang. None of these scenes are, strictly speaking, visually spectacular. On the contrary, they often convey the impression of things and people being captured in a drab, matter-of-fact manner. Like the ordinary and fragmented nature of the two lovers’ life together, the reality displayed unobtrusively by these images appears unremarkable and unattractive.
In the midst of this unremarkable and unattractive reality, meanwhile, some memorable visual moments surface, such as when Bo-wing tries to teach Fai to tango first in the apartment and then in the shabby kitchen. Between Bo-wing’s experienced movements and Fai’s awkward gestures, the dance becomes a unique image of love. There is also the cheap lampshade printed with the waterfall the lovers want to see but never manage to see together. Placed in Fai’s sparse, impoverished apartment, the incandescent tones of the lampshade bring to life a kind of other-worldly picture basked in warmth and light. These visually striking images seem to imbue the love story with a kind of magic, inserting in the mundane reality of the documentary-like fragments a dreamlike world.

I would therefore suggest that the images of this film are a structural corollary to the erotic and emotional entanglement between Fai and Bo-wing. However, while a logical comparison, working by the assumption of correspondence between image and content, might want to associate the drab, documentary images with the banality of the home (understood from Fai’s perspective), and the brilliant, magical images with the eroticism of romance (as embodied by Bo-wing), let me offer a somewhat different kind of reading, one in which visuality functions in a more ample manner than simply being a mimeticist reflection of the content. Conceptually speaking, it would perhaps be more productive to think homologically (rather than analogically) and argue that the coordination between the documentary-style images and their dreamlike counterpart are not unlike the relationship between a promiscuous lover and his faithful partner. On the one hand, like the promiscuous lover, the documentary-style images pick up things and people ubiquitously and indiscriminately, including even the basest kind of everyday sights such as a slipper, a rag on the floor, a public bathroom, or animal blood from an abattoir draining into the gutter. By simply making them visible, this documentary style establishes a casual, flirtatious liaison with each of these phenomena, a liaison that is replete with all the ambiguities of the actual significance of such arbitrary encounters. (How important is a rag on the floor? Why does it have to be included? Why does it have to be captured and seen?) On the other hand, there are the images which, like the faithful partner, simply keep being there because they are deeply ingrained in memory—and in fantasy—so deeply ingrained as to defy verbal articulation. These other images, such as the lampshade, the waterfall, the tango, and so forth, suggest that in the midst of a messy, degenerate reality there is a wondrous moment, a moment which has become eternal simply because it has not been abandoned casually for something newer or more exciting.
These two complicit orders of images slide from one into the other and back, creating a visual ambiance in which the audience must learn to accommodate two different yet complementary emotional perspectives, which are, in the end, indistinguishable from and interchangeable with each other. After the final breakup, for instance, we see Fai having sex with a stranger in a movie theater, and he tells us in the voice-over that to his own surprise, he is much more like Bo-wing than he previously imagined. As Fai plans on returning to Hong Kong, we also hear him speaking exactly like Bo-wing, wondering whether he can “start over again” in his relationship with his own father. Last but not least, there is the astonishing scene in which Bo-wing, returning again to Fai’s now empty apartment, begins to scrub and clean the apartment’s floor in a manner that literally makes him resemble Fai.

At the metanarrative level of the film as a whole, what is conjured by these at first alternating but ultimately amalgamating image-orders is, I would propose, a kind of superhuman agency. In the case of the lovers, this superhuman agency lies precisely in its ability to yoke together—to render into one unity—entirely incompatible or incommensurate universes (such as promiscuity and fidelity, flânerie and domesticity), so that what begins as difference eventually turns into sameness. By the end of the film, precisely the kinds of details that used to distinguish the two men—having casual sex with strangers and performing tedious domestic chores—have become instead the means of visually conflating them. Each man has, it seems, internalized the other to the point of changing places with the other.

Alongside the integration of the characters, the superhuman agency of the metanarrative can also be detected in a kind of childlike wishful thinking embedded in the use of certain images, a thinking that says: “If I want something to happen, it will happen.” Consider the part when Fai mentions how much he misses Hong Kong: remembering that Hong Kong and Argentina are at two different ends of the globe, he wonders aloud as to what Hong Kong would look like if it could be glimpsed upside down. Following the infantile logic of Fai’s free association, the camera immediately gives us scenes from the streets of Hong Kong turned upside down, as if this animistically willed, inverted order of things were indeed what the city would look like from the far end of Argentina. At a moment like this, the screen has, in effect, taken on the status of a magic wand, which is capable of making something “come true” simply because it has been fantasized and voiced, in a manner free of the constraints of the empirical world. In this omnipotence, this fairy tale fluidity in which they can become whatever they want to become, the images project themselves—to use
the language of poststructuralism—as sites of logocentrism, of unmediated presence.

As Shi Qi comments, “Fai keeps searching for stability in the midst of his losses. Whenever he fails, he throws himself into work and play. However, he cannot forget the romance associated with the waterfall . . .”14 Before departing for Hong Kong, Fai once again heads for the waterfall. As we watch the swelling torrents fill the entire screen, we are reminded that this is the dream that first inspired Fai and Bo-wing to take their trip together.15 Now the lovers are separated, presumably for good, but the dream stands there in its abundance, seemingly unperturbed by what has transpired in the human world. The visual fullness of the waterfall brings the animistic logic of the image to its crux: it is as if the screen image, an artifact though it is, has in these final moments physically merged with and become part of the origin that is the natural universe.

To this extent, we may argue that the “romance” mentioned by Shi Qi has extended considerably beyond the romance between two men to become the romance of man losing himself in nature. From the perspective of this latter union, the human stories seem paltry. When Fai stands by himself next to the surging waterfall, no viewer knows what will happen to the human stories going on around him. What will become of his friendship with Chang? Will Fai find Chang again? Will Chang, after depositing his unhappiness at the end of the world, return to his former life situation in the boisterous streets of Taipei?16 What will happen after Fai returns to Hong Kong—how will he relate to his father, who was silent when Fai called him long distance from Buenos Aires? What about Bo-wing, who does not appear to have family and who is grief-stricken by Fai’s departure?17 All of these questions remain loose ends, but none seems particularly important. Against the changefulness of the human stories, the image itself has apparently reached a sublime eternality.

Despite the attention he compellingly bestows on the mundane details of everyday life so as to render the metaphysics of a primeval union untenable, by the end of the film Wong has, to my mind, doubled back to an affirmation of the Romanticist ideal of happiness and togetherness precisely through the fantastical omnipotence he attaches to the image. In the tumescent form of the waterfall, image has now become All, exuding an overpowering feeling of oneness that seemingly transcends the interminable, volatile human narratives around it. Is not this return to, and integration with, majestic nature—the divine home—the ultimate wishful sign of a lost plenitude and the final meaning of nostalgia in Wong’s film? Does not the throbbing presence of the nature-image foreclose the sociological
alternatives and affective possibilities that the film has otherwise opened up? As the almighty waterfall leaves the indelible impression of its discharge on our memory, these are the questions that reverberate with the sappv musical refrain, "Happy together . . ."

NOTES

Several groups of people must be acknowledged for the contributions they have made to this essay. Leo Tak-hung Chan generously provided, in Summer 1997, copies of some of the Chinese publications mentioned. Sneja Gunew's highly perceptive feedback to the first version (Spring 1998) helped me considerably in my revisions. An enthusiastic audience at Brown University, who heard a subsequent version in Fall 1998, raised questions that helped complete some of my arguments. Finally, my thanks to the editors of Camera Obscura, in particular to Lynne Joyrich, for a set of responsive and meticulous suggestions.


3. Interested readers are asked to see Rey Chow, "Introduction: On Chineseness as a Theoretical Problem," boundary 2 23.3 (1998): 1–24. In this essay, I analyze the manners in which certain kinds of ethnicity (such as Chineseness) are explicitly or implicitly imposed on non-Western literary or cultural texts, as if such texts would make sense only if they can be shown to speak in a documentary mode—from within their a priori ghettoized backgrounds. Instead of simply focusing on identity politics per se, then, my point is to underscore the way identity politics is, in such contexts, always already embedded in habits of literary criticism and reading that may be termed "coercive mimeticism."

4. Stephen Teo, for instance, writes of Wong's work in the following terms: "As the latest new wave auteur, Wong may be said to have brought the Hong Kong new wave into the 90s by combining postmodern themes with new wave stylistics" Hong Kong Cinema: The Extra Dimension (London: British Film Institute, 1997) 196. In Wong's films, "the accent on style conveys a feeling of sharp-edged excitement and a sense of high-octane elation recalling the impact of the French new wave in Europe" (197).

5. Some critics in Hong Kong consider Happy Together to be a love story rather than a love story between two gay men. Wong Kar-wai himself
shares this view. When asked during an interview the reason he had chosen to deal with the theme of male homosexual love in this film, he said: "As far as I am concerned, this was not planned in advance... in fact, homosexual love is not any different from heterosexual love..." Wong Kar-Wai, interview in Cannes by Peng Yiping, *Dianying shuangzhoukan* [City Entertainment] 473 (1997): 42. Naturally, other critics disagree. For instance, Jiang Yingsheng writes: "Happy Together takes homosexual love as a point of departure but also tends to idealize paternal power. For the character Lai Yiu-fai, traditional family values and his own homosexual identity constitute two incompatible forces." "Let's Start Over Again—A Brand New Wong Kar-wai," *Dianying shuangzhoukan* 473: 70. My translation.

6. The version of the song "Happy Together" Wong had in mind was the one by Frank Zappa. See Zhong Yitai, "From The Turtles to Wong Kar Wai," *Dianying shuangzhoukan* 474 (1997): 71.

7. To avoid confusion, I will hereafter follow the English subtitiles of this film and refer to the two main characters as Fai and Bo-wing.

8. Interview by Peng Yiping, *Dianying shuangzhoukan* 473: 44.

9. The contrast between the two characters has been well noted by critics. See, for instance, Xu Kuan, "Happy Together as a Continuation of Days of Being Wild": "The male characters of Wong Kar-wai's works all follow a consistent pattern, which can be divided into the killer-type and the policeman-type. The former is decadent, unruly, and highly sexed; the latter is innocent, straight, and nearly platonic by inclination. In the film which brought him fame at Cannes, this principle continues to hold." Xin bao [Hong Kong Economic Journal] 27 May 1997, Overseas Edition: 9. Similarly, Shi Qi writes that the typical subjectivity explored in Wong's films is "actually a journey of self-exploration... there is often an introverted, conservative character as opposed to an unruly and decadent one. This can be regarded as two faces of a single person." "The 'I' in Wong Kar-wai— a Third Discussion of Happy Together," Ming Pao Daily News, 5 June 1997, Entertainment Section. My translation.


14. Shi Qi, "Happy Together—Straightforward and Stylistically Unusual,"


16. Some critics in Hong Kong consider the character of Chang to be an inspired creation and suggest that what takes place around this character can easily lead to the making of another film. Indeed, if the love story of Fai and Bo-wing can be said, in the conventional manner of describing romance, to form a single unit, then what Chang’s presence stands for is precisely the “1+,” the “one more” that carries with it the unpredictable possibilities of an open-ended structuration. It is in this light that the suggestive use of sound and voice brought by Chang (who likes to understand people through listening), in contrast to the dominance of the image within the diegesis, may be understood. Be that as it may, as a character, Chang remains, as I already mentioned, undeveloped and lacks the vitality of the mutually implicated affinities of Fai and Bo-wing.

17. When an early version of this essay was first presented at the symposium on Visualizing Eros at the University of California, Irvine in May 1998, some members of the audience commented that Chang has a family to return to in Taipei, whereas Fai’s acceptance by his father is uncertain and Bo-wing does not seem to have any family links at all. These familial reminders, they suggested, could be interpreted in conjunction with the announcement of the death of Deng Xiaoping (which is made during Lai’s brief stay in Taiwan at the end), with Fai’s return to Hong Kong, and with Hong Kong’s return to China in 1997. As I indicated at the beginning of this essay, I am not too enthusiastic about this line of inquiry because it would require one to reduce all narrative and imagistic significations more or less to a “national allegory” type of reading and thus, by implication, to confine the film work within an ethnic ghetto.