Part Two

Mapping Wong’s Liminality
1

Transnational Wong

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Introduction

It is indicative of a remarkable transition in the field of film studies that a simple statement such as “Wong Kar-wai is a Chinese filmmaker” is an invitation to rigorous questioning. The word “Chinese,” in its descriptive brevity, appears reductive and problematic. Chinese in what sense? Citizenship? Production practice? Aesthetics? And what does each of those referents mean, in terms of an exclusive national identity? Sociologists, film historians, and cultural critics have argued Chinese citizenship as flexible, Chinese film production as inherently transnational, and Chinese film aesthetics as a melding of Eastern and Western influences. Perhaps a better way to describe Wong, as Stephen Teo does, is as a “Hong Kong Chinese director” (2005, 1). The emphasis on Hong Kong helps to contextualize what is meant by “Chinese,” and “director” defines his occupation more precisely than “filmmaker,” a word that suggests he makes only one type of film – a Chinese (or Hong Kong Chinese) film. But even Teo considers Wong Kar-wai a somewhat perplexing figure: an internationally famous director who does not Anglicize his name, a “paradox” not unlike the city/nation of Hong Kong itself. Our critical vocabulary seems unsuited to the task of defining Wong, and his work, in geographic terms.

Along with the elusiveness of Wong’s geographically delimited identity, there is the geographic position of the commentator and the reader to consider. This chapter fits within the emerging subfield of transnational film studies, and is intended for English-language readers with an interest in Wong Kar-wai’s cinema. The author does not speak Cantonese or Mandarin, and this chapter is not presented as an interdisciplinary or comparative approach to Wong’s films, crossing the fields of film studies and area studies. The question of transnationalism in Wong’s films, I argue, is a question of Wong’s presence – in physical and cinematic terms – outside of China. Wong’s transnational cinema is not a measure of the various ways in which his films import cultural influences, funding, and distribution revenue into China. It is a measure of the distance
and the potency of his cinema’s influence across national borders. This chapter, and very likely this book, would not be necessary if Wong’s films had never exceeded China’s film industry and marketplace. Wong’s audience, as a collective, is a transnational one, and this is partly a reaction to transnational aspects of the films themselves. Wong’s audience, as a whole, may or may not watch the films to learn something about China, but the size and scope of the audience indicate that the films, as a whole, explore subjects and themes not exclusive to China. Wong’s audience, the films, and Wong’s own stature as a filmmaker, all exceed China.

“Excess” is at the heart of this chapter’s definition of the transnational. Not coincidentally, it also defines Wong Kar-wai’s cinema. All of Wong’s films are populated with escapist characters: polyglots, tourists, migrants, outlaws, and fantasists. Rarely do we see characters satisfied with their lot, content to settle into stable occupations, relationships, and locales. The Wong Kar-wai protagonist is nearly always a distracted figure, seeking other places, other people, other pleasures – and rarely finding what he or she is looking for. What they do find, or achieve, is melancholic wisdom, a realization of the futility of their quest. This is communicated largely through the device of the first-person voiceover; it is the voice of the experienced traveler who, upon returning home, can barely remember why he or she left in the first place. In their travels, Wong Kar-wai characters are not just looking for a place outside China, or a different place within China, although many of them do just that; they exceed whatever expectations have grown too familiar or restrictive. Looking beyond traditional options for employment, marriage, friendships, or residences, these characters want out. And yet, as the films consistently frame their explorations, they can only go so far out before encountering, and surrendering to, another form of in. Very frequently this in is coded, in one way or another, as environmental, a spatial-temporal context beyond the characters’ control. Unable to transcend time and space, the characters can only find genuine escape in their own subjectivities: dreams, sensations, distorted memories. Wong Kar-wai characters are happiest when they are asleep – and they often are. In a state of sleep they can even escape their own conscious urge to fantasize: they are free of the limited, and limiting, imaginings of Hong Kong, China, East Asia, the world.

Environmental limitations may seem, therefore, to undercut much of the films’ transnationality of subject and theme. If characters’ escapist desires remain unfulfilled, that may point to a greater conservatism in Wong, a conservatism that may be sourced in biographical, industrial, or historical terms specific to Hong Kong, China, or East Asia. Many film scholars have argued in both broad and narrow terms that transnational forms of filmmaking do not exceed, but are rather contained within, national or regional scopes of inquiry (see Zhang 2007; Choi 2011, 2012). Just as characters in Wong Kar-wai films are prevented or obstructed from pursuing an object of fantasy because of the limitations of their environment, the apparent transnationality of his films can appear endemic to their particular nation(s) of origin. That argument would
compel a more modest assessment of the transnationality of Wong’s films. However, the argument that nationally or regionally coded environments ultimately dominate the characters of Wong’s films – and are thereby reflective of a more national, or regional, cinematic product – does not reflect what I see as Wong’s framing of the environment in relation to the characters. Far from being alienated or overruled by their environment, the characters rather find, or create, alternatives.

Interjections of history and traditional society – for example, Japan’s invasion of China in *The Grandmaster* (2013), or something as minor and yet dramatically weighted as Mrs Chan’s landlord cautioning her not to spend so much time in public without her husband in *In the Mood for Love* (2000) – impact characters’ behavior, certainly. But they function as backdrop, as an environment that presents characters with choices: either choose to live in it, or choose to live out of it, in an alternate of their own creation, even if it is only imaginary. (Although in a Wong Kar-wai movie, things are never “only” imaginary.) Of course, the transnationality of the environments in Wong’s films is not there by accident; it is the result of deliberate choice. That choice, as I see it, is Wong’s method of framing “choice” as both available and desired. His characters are not only surrounded by the promise of alternatives to Hong Kong (China, East Asia, the world); those characters have, as Wong himself has, deliberately placed themselves within that surrounding, supporting it, protecting it. It is their dream world, in China but not of China.

This chapter will begin with a short critical survey of the concept of transnational cinema, as it has been argued and debated since the 1990s in the field of film studies. Unsurprisingly, Chinese cinema has been central to many of the most prominent defenses, and criticisms, of the transnational cinema model. However, Wong Kar-wai’s status in those defenses and criticisms is inconsistent and disputed. As Teo points out above, Wong operates internationally as a borderline, not borderless, figure, somewhere between the global and the local. I will outline ways in which Wong’s biography and career history have kept him at an intriguing remove from either extreme of the national/transnational rhetorical paradigm. Following that, I will conduct a wide-ranging analysis of Wong’s films to highlight patterns of transnationality in image, sound, and thematic concerns. I will conclude with a section arguing in favor of Wong’s status as a specialist of transnational cinema, an argument conducted in consideration of the potential drawbacks of that status.

First, a point of definition. The words “transnational” and “transnationality” here will describe phenomena existent, or apparent, in two or more nations but not exclusively sourced in any one nation. By “transnational” I do not mean to describe a singular person or object, or groups of people or objects that move to or from one nation to another. I do not, for instance, refer to Wong the person as a “transnational filmmaker” or any one or all of his films as “transnational films.” People and products have origins, and movements do not negate those origins. The movements themselves, though, I define as transnational, as well
as such phenomena as Wong’s production practices, audiences, and aesthetics. I also do not pose the transnational as a utopian alternative to the national (even if many of Wong’s characters do), but rather as a practical means for analyzing Wong’s films.

**Transnational vs. national**

The concept of transnational cinema derives from concepts developed in the fields of international studies, anthropology, and film studies since the 1980s. The foundational text is perhaps Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities* (1983), which provided a necessary tracing of the cultural roots of modern nationalism in mass-produced print media. Anderson defined the nation as a discursive topic, as a media creation. Without denying the geographic boundaries of nations that are government-enforced and internationally recognized, Anderson challenged the coherence of the nation as a mediated idea. Such was the power and efficacy of 20th century mass media that even post-World War II revolutions had defined themselves in national terms. “Nation-ness,” Anderson concluded, “is the most universally legitimate value in the political life of our time” (2–3). Anderson’s project was to counter dangerous forms of nationalism by positing the nation as imaginary.

Building from critiques of Anderson’s work, social anthropologists Arjun Appadurai and Ulf Hannerz argued that mass media (visual as well as print) and human agency had the potential of turning citizens either against the state, toward other states, or beyond any state-bound identity. Appadurai’s *Modernity at Large* (1996) challenged social scientists to do more than compare societies, but to find inconsistencies within societies. The nation-state, for Appadurai, must compete with electronic mass-media producers and consumers whose perspectives transcend essentialist forms of nationalism. Appadurai’s concept of the “mediascape” – “image-centered, narrative-based accounts of strips of reality” – is one that contrives to script “imagined” lives, both ours and others’ (35). Hannerz (1996) likewise challenged Anderson’s notion that state formulations of national culture always played a dominant role. He proposed the term “transnational” to describe the increasingly varied and pervasive connections between people who were becoming more mobile, communicative, and imaginative (7). The chameleonic nature of what he called “world cities” is ultimately indistinct, undefinable, and, by definition, inconclusive.

The role of China in theoretical debates over the efficacy and legitimacy of nationally coded identities became prominent in Aihwa Ong’s *Flexible Citizenship* (1999). Criticizing Appadurai for giving the “misleading impression” (11) that all citizens of a state have equal access to mobility and communication channels, Ong debunked the utopian strain pervading concepts of the transnational. She used China as an example of a nation that still defined, regulated, and in many ways restricted transnational practices. Transnationalism
was her mode of analyzing the cultural specificities (sourced in the nation) of global processes and interconnections. Ong’s focus on China, engaging in both political-economic and socio-cultural analysis, attempted to contain the transnational within the national – a perspective shared by several scholars of Chinese cinema. But her concern was with the complexities of identity politics for a select group of individuals moving in and out of a particular region, not with the transnational flows of capital, texts, and discourses of cinema, Chinese or otherwise.

In film studies, the transnational cinema concept began as a critique of deficiencies with the national cinema model, which had the tendency to overlook important cinema-related heterogeneity within a nation. Andrew Higson’s fundamental 1989 essay “The Limiting Imagination of National Cinema” (reprinted as Higson (2006)) illustrated the incoherence of national cinema in a postcolonial, multiracial, or multi-ethnic context. Using Black British cinema as his supra-national case study, Higson argued that black filmmakers and large sections of the British audience did not self-identify as British, so the cinema they produce and consume has no relation to a “national” cinema. Proposing, as Hannerz did, the term “transnational,” Higson argued for a more subtle understanding of cinematic practices of production, distribution, and consumption. With the ending of the Cold War, accelerated forms of globalization, and the formation of the European Union, the transnational cinema concept gained equal amounts of traction and criticism.

Chinese cinema, and by extension East Asian cinema, was an early and continuing focal point of debate. Sheldon H. Lu, in his introduction to Transnational Chinese Cinemas, argued that there can be no such thing as a “Chinese cinema” (1997, 3). He cited as proof the cultural and political fractures between and within Chinese-language territories (the PRC, Hong Kong, and Taiwan), as well as the transnational cinematic industrial practices of those territories since the 1990s, and the forceful interrogation of “Chinese-ness” in the film texts themselves. Since its publication, the reputation of Transnational Chinese Cinemas has grown to that of “a watershed moment in the study of Chinese cinemas” (Berry and Pang 2008, 3). As far as Chinese cinema was concerned, the national cinema model appeared outmoded. Gary G. Xu, aligning himself with Aihwa Ong, described Chinese cinema as “inherently heterogeneous, transnational, and political” (2007, 4, emphasis original).

Opponents of the transnational cinema model found little that was new or illuminating in the approach, again using Chinese or East Asian cinema as their focal point. Detecting an unmerited challenge to their specialization, national and regional cinema scholars urged caution against using “transnational” too loosely and “national” too dismissively (see Taylor 2011; Morris 2004). Even Higson, one of the earliest proponents of the model, had to clarify in an updated version of his essay that with so many cinemas nationalized on the level of state policy, and with cinema playing such a key role in stimulating touristic activity to particular nations, it would be “foolish…to attempt to do away
altogether with the concept of national cinema” (2006, 20). The apparent danger of the transnational concept is its indeterminacy. Analysis of a transnational phenomenon requires, to some degree, a denial of the determinism of a nationally coded context: production sites, aesthetic traditions, government support, critical and popular reception. There is also a latent trendiness in the concept. As Valentina Vitali and Paul Willemen note, the transnational cinema concept derived from academic concerns of the 1980s, when the globalizing economy compelled a more realistic assessment of how films are made and distributed (2006, 3–4). Actual transnational filmmaking, however, predates the 1980s. The study of transnational Chinese cinema is in many ways a discovery, or recovery, of previously unstudied yet historically prevalent forms of cinematic practices. The novelty of the transnational theoretical model is not in the objects of study, but in the application of the model itself.

Wong between models, theories, disciplines

However belated the introduction of the transnational model in the field of film studies, with regards to the films of Wong Kar-wai, it has only grown in viability. Amazingly, there is only one mention of a Wong Kar-wai film in the entirety of Transnational Chinese Cinemas – Chungking Express (1994) – and that is in a footnote referring to Chungking’s theatrical release in the USA under the auspices of Quentin Tarantino (Lu 1997, 259). Covering the films of Hou Hsiao-hsien, Zhang Yimou, Chen Kaige, Jackie Chan, John Woo, and Ang Lee, among others, the collection does not consider, or anticipate, either the growing prominence or the inherent transnationalism (to use Gary Xu’s phrase) of Wong’s films.

Wong Kar-wai’s appearance in film books of the 1990s was generally limited to enthusiastic reportage of an art-house figure among the aggressively commercial figures of popular Hong Kong cinema. As a subject of study in English, Hong Kong cinema was limited to mass-market entertainment guides and special reports in popular cinema periodicals in the 1980s and 1990s (see Hammond and Wilkins 1996; Logan 1996; Weissner 1997). Many of these publications reported on Hong Kong cinema as somewhat separate from mainland Chinese cinema, not the least for Hong Kong cinema’s parallels to Hollywood’s star system and genre aesthetics. The mass-market volume Hong Kong Babylon (1997) combined a breezy journalistic account of the contemporary Hong Kong film industry (with a sensationalistic emphasis on its ties to organized crime) with a set of interviews of leading figures and lists of recommendations from critics. Wong Kar-wai was one of the interviewees, and his films placed highly on critics’ lists. But analyses of the films were rote digest, even with such pithy remarks as Chuck Stephens’s on Days of Being Wild (1991): “a clock-watching meditation on invented memories.” (1997, 409) A point of agreement among these publications was Wong’s outlier status: popular outside of Hong Kong, and not so
popular, though known and respected, inside of Hong Kong. His films’ ties to the martial arts and gangster genres were more tenuous than those of Jackie Chan and John Woo, and his sense of melodrama appeared less commercial, in the domestic market, than Stanley Kwan’s and Ann Hui’s. In the heyday of Hong Kong cinema’s exposure to Western markets in the late 1980s and 1990s, and as English-language publications simultaneously informed and entertained a growing Western audience for East Asian films, Wong could not be ignored, but he was frequently marginalized. In Stefan Hammond’s *Hollywood East*, contributor Jeremy Hansen paid Wong the ultimate back-handed compliment by referring to him as “a darling of the international art-house film crowd” (2000, 40), a controversial figure who nevertheless represented Asian cinema to the (art-house) world. Wong’s films seemed to fit neither the commercial system of the Hong Kong film industry nor the commercialization model of Hong Kong cinema in Western markets.

Three academic studies of Hong Kong cinema appeared at the end of the 1990s to engage in more detailed textual analysis, and proved to set the tone of most subsequent studies of Wong’s work. These books appeared in tandem with the growing subfield of transnational cinema studies, and all present Wong as representative of a *local* cinema containing transnational elements. In *City on Fire* (1999), Lisa Odham Stokes and Michael Hoover give a political reading of his films (up to and including *Happy Together*, 1997) that locates their significance in their symbolism – what can be inferred from the images and sounds as reflective of a political sensibility. The clocks in *Chungking Express*, for example, refer to the impending handover of Hong Kong to the People’s Republic as of July 1997. And the couple in *Happy Together*, one a mainland Chinese and the other a Hong Kong Chinese, is a metaphor for contemporaneous international tensions, and so on. The collected volume *The Cinema of Hong Kong* (Leung 2000) poses in two essays a dialectical view of Hong Kong in *Chungking Express*. Leung Ping-kwan sees the city, in the film, as full of “conflicts and inconsistencies” specific to Hong Kong, a place that appears to be all fragmented surfaces but also containing a “counterforce” that tries to draw our attention to “specific urban spaces” (245). Gina Marchetti sees the city in *Chungking* as a “transnational entrepot” (2000, 293) that the film “addresses” (294) in the characters’ commodity fetishism. Finally, in *Planet Hong Kong* (2000), David Bordwell describes Wong as Hong Kong’s “exportable festival filmmaker,” (270) the one director with high-culture credentials in a mainly low-culture cinema. But Bordwell then places Wong strictly within Hong Kong tradition in the way his films make “an unembarrassed effort to capture powerful, pleasantly adolescent feelings” (281).

In one way or another, these initial attempts to contextualize Wong’s films acknowledge the transnational in Wong’s reputation as well as in the film texts themselves, only to further argue, and to conclude, that they are essentially nationally coded works. Whether they are concerned with intra-regional politics, the postmodernism of Hong Kong’s urban space (considered unique to
Hong Kong and to no other major city), or the commercial demands of the domestic marketplace, Wong’s films in these studies are determined by the exigencies of local history and local industry. Perhaps the crudest distilment of the overall argument would be that the international marketplace can take Wong out of China, but it cannot take China out of Wong.

In the last dozen years, further scholarship and analysis on Wong’s films have, for the most part, adhered to the rhetorical strategies of Stokes and Hoover, Leung, Marchetti, and Bordwell. The setting of Wong’s films, no matter their geographical region, is a metonym for Hong Kong, and Wong’s thematic concerns are located in his Hong Kong identity. Transnational funding, casting, and content are factored in these studies primarily as means to a more national end, or as distractions from what the studies argue are more local thematic concerns. While it is common for the studies to acknowledge first that Wong is an international figure, it is just as common for the studies then to seek correctives to that image, to nationalize or contextualize Wong as a product of his Hong Kong environment. Collectively, academic writings on Wong Kar-wai since the early 2000s have engaged in an attempted recovery of Wong’s identity as a regional, not global, figure.

Furthering the dialectical readings of Hoover and Stokes, Marchetti, and Bordwell et al., subsequent writings have used Wong Kar-wai’s films as conduits to critical analyses of the Hong Kong film industry, and of Hong Kong itself, as deceptively transnational. This approach somewhat rejects the acceptance of the industry’s—and of the city’s—transnational identity as presented in Esther C.M. Yau’s collected volume *At Full Speed* (2001). Yau’s introduction to the volume makes the case for Hong Kong films exuding “a modern, worldly sensibility” that crosses borders of class, taste, and region. The audience in this framework appears equally borderless, enjoying the films as international products that also “make references to local events and conditions” (2). Upending this view, current scholars in the fields of Chinese cinema studies and area studies have overwhelmingly argued that the “local events and conditions” Yau is referring to are not happenstances or incidental elements or effects in the films, but are rather the key to understanding the films despite their international appeal. In turn, understanding the films means understanding something about the “local conditions” of Hong Kong cinema and Hong Kong itself. Film studies, in this framework, become area studies. Tracing Wong’s films back to their apparent geographical, cultural, and political source, current studies have contributed to a more detailed understanding of Hong Kong’s historical relation to China, East Asia, and the West, while downplaying elements that may have contributed to the circulation of Wong’s films outside of China.

The industry in which Wong operates is clearly not limited, geographically, to Hong Kong. Only a portion of the funding for his films has derived from Hong Kong (or China), and he has featured foreign locales and international casting since the beginning of his career as a director. These factors, and Wong’s high profile in international film festivals, do not deter scholars from arguing
that the cinema emerging from these transnational networks of financing and distribution is strictly Chinese. Jean Ma sees Wong as self-consciously responding to “the historical ruptures and political upheavals of modern Chinese history,” a response that takes into account “globalization and shifting conceptions of narrativity in post-classical film culture” (2010, 4). In other words, Wong’s reliance on international sources of money, exhibition, and literary or musical source material reflects on local concerns – a Chinese condition that is central to the "remaking of Chinese cinema in the contemporary moment" (4). Wimal Dissanayake, in his volume on Ashes of Time (1994), writes of the “common practice” for Hong Kong producers to “pre-sell their products in Taiwan and Southeast Asian countries before the films were made (2003, 18). Ashes of Time went even beyond that, according to Dissanayake, pre-selling in Japan and France as well when the film went over budget. Fundamentally, however, he argues that a study of Ashes of Time, and in fact the study of any Hong Kong film made between 1984 and 1997, could not afford to ignore the “social anxieties and the emotional qualities of this period” (8). The film, and all other Hong Kong films in that period, therefore, reflect first and foremost upon their most local social and cultural context. Why and how these films appeal to cultures outside of the local site of production, however, are not as important or relevant.

Transnationalism in Wong’s films, and by extension in any Hong Kong film (as critical consensus places Wong within the deterministic framework of Hong Kong cinema), is acknowledged as significant insofar as it is limited to Asia. Scholars readily accept Hong Kong cinema as conditionally transnational in relation to China, following Sheldon Lu’s intra-Asian definition of transnational Chinese cinemas. Yingchi Chu, for instance, argues that Hong Kong cinema from the late 1970s on was a “national cinema” produced inside a “quasi-nation,” and that the “cultural specificity” of Hong Kong films is demonstrated in “cinematic representations of Hong Kong’s identity as a duality: being geographically both Hong Kong and China” (2003, 51, 63). The rather loose framework here defines Hong Kong cinema as about Hong Kong, and therefore about China in its dialectic relation to Hong Kong. Wong Kar-wai similarly functions as a local figure concerned with the “global” on a limited basis, either in relation to China or East Asia, but nowhere beyond. Thorsten Botz-Bornstein, for example, locates “the real sources of Wong’s oeuvre” in “the sphere of modern East Asian culture,” which is defined as “Pan-Asian” (2007, 71–72). On a similar note, Song Hwee Lim argues for an “intra-Asian intertextuality” as defining Wong’s work, a symptom of a broader trend in contemporary East Asian cinema (2011, 22). Most recently, Peter C. Pugsley considers Wong Kar-wai’s sense of music, pace, and performance as adding up to a particularly “Asian aesthetic” (2013, 11). Wong’s “penchant for the nostalgic Orient,” Pugsley argues, functions as “an internal alterity” (34) to other Asian cinemas – not presumably as an “external” alterity that could be identified as Occidental. The scholarly intention in all of these writings is to escape traditional East–West binary oppositions, to
escape the determinism of the West in writings about “Eastern” subjects. However, casting a brighter light on the intra-Asian aspects of Wong’s films, while illuminating, fails to shed light upon the appeal of Wong’s films outside of Asia. If a pan-Asian scope of transnationality were the only valid approach, then that would infer a non-Asian audience’s sole interest in the films (or at least the only interest worthy of study) as an interest in pan-Asian culture.

The most potent set of national/transnational dialectics that recent academic studies have perceived in Wong’s films is one that Wong has apparently established himself: his characters in contradiction to their environment. It is here that academic scholars have defined the Hong Kong in Wong’s films as not only different from other places, but as determining characters’ behavior and psychologies to damaging effect. In this framework, Hong Kong (or wherever the films are set) appears as something outside the characters, an environment with which they enter into an almost subconscious struggle. This environment, coded as transnational, is antagonistic to characters who, scholars argue, are alienated and adrift. Chungking Express is unsurprisingly the primary case study in this regard. In his book on the film, Sean Redmond considers Chungking a “radical film” that is “saying something profound about the human condition in a postmodern Hong Kong desperate for definition” (2008, 32). That “desperation,” it seems, is an outgrowth of accelerated transnationalism that has rendered formerly coherent spaces incoherently “postmodern.” Esther M.K. Cheung, in an essay on voiceovers in Wong’s films, sees “estrangement in the urban context” as Wong’s exploratory subject. The voiceover in Chungking Express, to Cheung, is like “a voice speaking after the trauma in the moment of retelling” (2011, 17, 23). Characters in Wong’s cities are not merely alienated, but traumatized by their urban environment. Tsung-yi Michelle Huang likewise finds Chungking’s Hong Kong to be “a space of fantasy for its walkers to inscribe their own desires and dreams, a space glossed over by the grand rhetoric of globalization” (2004, 32).

Huang’s citing of “globalization” as the defining form of “gloss” over what was formerly (it is presumed) an unglobalized region, fits with a common critical definition of Hong Kong as a near-dystopian site of oppressive multiplicities. Note that the definition is not of Wong’s presentation of Hong Kong (though that is implied), but of the scholars’ own assessment of Hong Kong. Hsiu-Chuan Deppman, for instance, in a valuable study of Wong in relation to the writer Liu Yichang, finds them both sharing “anxiety over the ways in which a rapidly evolving capitalist economy in Hong Kong has redefined gender and class relations and disintegrated other familial values” (2010, 101). The title of Liu’s novella Intersection (1972), the loose basis of Wong’s In the Mood for Love, is an apt metaphor of this critical concept. Vivian P.Y. Lee likens Wong’s films to Hong Kong cinema, and to “perhaps Hong Kong itself, as a point of intersection, between global currents and local realities, city and nation, ‘high art’ and popular culture, affections and disaffections, memory and the loss of memory” (2009, 22). The use of the word “realities” in contrast to “global currents”
is telling: those “currents” appear unreal, an alien force that has warped the environment to a near-insensible degree. Audrey Yue analogizes Wong’s films with Hong Kong in terms of their intersectionality: the way Wong bifurcates narrative is similar to Hong Kong’s own “period of transition” from pre-1997 to post-1997 (2008, 145); the “one country, two systems” dynamic is parallel to the “one film, two (or more) stories” structure of many of Wong’s films. Yue takes other critics to task for not acknowledging these parallels in greater detail, stating, “It is ironic that the modernity of Hong Kong that is used to categorize Wong’s style is now the same site used to wipe out the specificity of the Hong Kong locality.” (146). In other words, critics who view Wong’s Hong Kong as a pure abstraction, as a cinematic construct, deny the “locality” of the actual Hong Kong, which is not only analogic but deterministic in regards to the films.

What emerges from the numerous studies that attempt to contextualize Wong’s films as local products within a “global” environment is less a critique of Wong’s films than a critique of globalism itself. In these studies, Hong Kong is the object of study, and through Wong’s films, critics reflect on the environment of Hong Kong as a condition of modernity, or postmodernity. Rather than considering the mise-en-scène of Hong Kong’s urban spaces as a product of its characters, or as their own projected view of the world supplemented by frequent voiceover narration, much of the English-language academic criticism of the films reads the environment as culturally determined, as something imposed upon the characters from outside. That “outside” is further defined as being outside Wong himself, as originating in a deterministic realm beyond the control of the characters, their performers, and their writer/director. Transnationalism, in this approach, is a theoretical antagonist, or at the very least a limited model of analysis compared to more national or regional approaches. Transnationalism is the distracting glitter (or “gloss”), enticing in its appearance but ultimately damaging to characters and critics alike.

The intention of these studies is to serve as a corrective to transnational approaches that run the risk of framing Wong’s cinema as a utopian vision of speed, transit, and nostalgia. Indeed, they reflect upon a significant – if fairly obvious – ambivalence, if not ambiguity, in Wong’s films. The question of his most self-reflexive techniques, whether they are postmodern for the sake of postmodernism or as a reflective examination of Hong Kong (as it is, or as Wong imagines it is), eludes definitive answers. Compounding the difficulty of assessing Wong’s techniques is that with every new film we are presented with new places, new characters, and new time periods (though not always new performers). A study of Wong’s cinema dated 2015 must by necessity depart from studies dated in 1997, or 2000, or 2005. As each new film expands the geographic, linguistic, generic, and temporal “localities” of Wong’s subjects and settings, the critical insistence on the limited regional origins of Wong’s work grows increasingly untenable. This may, ironically, lead to a decline in Wong’s international art-house stature. The more his collected body of work defies a
singular, bordered, socio-cultural origin, the less utility it holds for scholars and critics of Chinese cinema, transnational or otherwise.

Transience and randomness

An account of the transnational appeal of Wong’s films would be a simple endeavor: highlighting their successes at film festivals, their international casts and sources of funding, and their prominent distribution outside of Asia. (See Wong (2007) for a concise summary of how Hong Kong filmmakers exploit international networks of exposure.) Accounting for their appeal, however, leads us naturally to the films themselves, seeking some connection between them and non-Chinese cinemas and audiences. Whether in a pan-Asian or “world” cinema context, Wong’s films have a tangible impact. The censorship of Happy Together in South Korea, for instance, enhanced Wong’s artistic reputation even after he attempted cutting the film to appease the Korean Public Performance Ethics Committee (Lee 2006). In terms of their circulation to markets outside of Asia, Wong’s films are enfolded within a paradigm where Hong Kong cinema has innate transnationality. Accounting for Wong’s transnationalism, scholars frequently cite the “paradox” (à la Stephen Teo) of Wong’s bifurcated status: as representing Hong Kong cinema to the world while simultaneously placing outside the commercial realm of that “local” cinema. Here we can find the somewhat contradictory framing of Wong’s audience outside of Hong Kong. It is an audience composed of young film enthusiasts schooled in Hollywood genre and appreciative of the genre aesthetics of Hong Kong cinema’s action thrillers, and of art-house enthusiasts drawn to the formal and thematic sophistication of leading Chinese directors. Films of both kinds – martial arts spectaculars, gangster epics, historical dramas, modernist/postmodernist urban explorations – have played in American and European art houses and multiplexes since the 1990s. 

Since this chapter is focused on Wong and not on the broader topics of transnationalism in Hong Kong or Chinese cinema, perhaps his cinema can appear less paradoxical. It is tempting to establish yet another dialectical opposition between Wong’s cinema and non-Wong Chinese cinema in terms of their appeal to non-Asian audiences, framing his art-house style against the commercial styles of his contemporaries. It is also tempting to fold Wong’s cinema back into a Hong Kong or Chinese cinema context where the films can be decoded, as if through a process of cultural translation, for non-Asian audiences. Either approach, however, is a partial neglect of Wong’s method in constructing his films and how that construction registers its appeal to audiences outside of China. 

My approach to Wong’s transnational cinema finds a parallel between it and the transnational appeal of Akira Kurosawa’s Rashomon (1950). The award-winning success of Rashomon at the Venice Film Festival in 1951 and at the
Academy Awards in Los Angeles in 1952 astounded critics in Japan, who did not consider it first-rate Japanese cinema. But a major part of the film’s appeal to non-Japanese, to Europeans and Americans who did not know much about Japanese cinema, was in its narrative structure and thematic concerns. A film that attested the impossibility of knowing the truth about a situation, *Rashomon* presented its viewer with options: conflicting versions of a story that enhanced the reputations of the various tellers. This narrative design (and not so much the film’s visual design) registered with international audiences to such a degree that it opened up channels of international distribution for other works of Japanese cinema that were even more humanist in their design. (See Nygren (2007) for a detailed study of *Rashomon*’s international influence.) The appeal of a foreign film that considered alternate truths, alternate subjectivities, and alternate realities is unsurprising in an audience that itself is seeking alternate cinemas, alternate cultures, and alternate images. The transnational appeal of the optional and conditional approach to the truth represented by *Rashomon* has a parallel in the optional and conditional approach to modern life in the films of Wong Kar-wai. The transnational audience of Wong’s films is as curious and welcoming of non-Western cinema as the films’ characters are curious and welcoming of non-Asian cultures and locales.

The protagonists of Wong’s films place themselves deliberately in areas of transience, always open to the possibility of a “random” encounter with a desirable other (Figure 1.1). Wong’s emphasis on transient environments and chance encounters in his work has received much attention, though it is generally analyzed as a passive phenomenon. In several studies, Wong’s characters seem trapped in an environment not of their own making, and which they (and the audience) can hardly identify. Rey Chow’s assessment of chance encounters in Wong’s work is that they seem to indicate “even the most unforgettable human relationships are only a matter of fortuitous rather than deliberate performances – and perhaps not so much by human beings as by chance or fate” (2007, 76). In an analysis of *Chungking Express*, Janet Harbord makes the case that Hong Kong in the film is a “heterotopia…without meaningful geography,” and further argues that Hong Kong and California in the film “perform as opposite poles in the film, but their instability as knowable locations blurs the distinction” (2007, 98–99). These analyses equate randomness with lack of agency, and transnationalism with confusion. But it could be argued that Wong’s characters choose their environments, preferring them for the randomness they promise. Just like the gambler who looks forward to losing as much as winning – enticed by the promise of reward against known odds – Wong’s characters are motivated by chance, not limited by it. Even if we in the audience are not sure exactly where the characters are, or where they are going, they are not only sure of it, they are sure of how inexact it is, and that is exactly the way they like it.

If it is the case that Wong’s characters are somehow representative of all Hong Kong Chinese, their characterization as alienated and aimless strikes an
Figure 1.1  The Wong Kar-wai protagonist in his/her environment: encountering random others. (a) Days of Being Wild (1990), directed by Wong Kar-wai, produced by Rover Tang. (b) Chungking Express (1994), directed by Wong Kar-wai, produced by Jeffrey Lau and Chan Yi-kan.

odd note. That this sort of character, lost and fragmented, should be Wong’s depiction of a “typical” Hong Konger, raises the question of who are all these unacknowledged millions in the background who seem to manage stable careers, relationships, and lifestyles, who keep the city moving. Is Wong saying that there is no genuine stability in Hong Kong, as shown in these “typical” characters, and that everyone else (including us outside China) are as lost and
fragmented as they are? This adolescent worldview, already exhausted in counterculture films like One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest (1975) – where the madhouse is a microcosm of the “sane” world – would certainly be transnational. But it would also be inadequate as a summarizing statement on Wong’s films, despite the adolescent posturing of many of their adult characters.

All Wong Kar-wai films revolve around the main characters’ reflections on dramatic moments of transition, and more often than not, at the onset of their narratives, the characters are positioned, deliberately, at a site of juncture. Exposed and rootless, the characters are vulnerable to surrounding forces but are also guarded by a sense of purpose. They choose freelance or service occupations that compel random interpersonal contact, while keeping their duties reasonably modest. They have jobs, but there is always time for socializing on duty; socializing, in fact, seems to be their motivation for maintaining the modesty of their duties. Even the criminals among them, the murderers, gangsters, and petty thieves, are nowhere near the top (or even the middle) of their organizations. Glamor, riches, and social respect are irrelevant to their goals. What they want, primarily, is the means to travel, to escape, not to rise up in an organization or community. Their needs are private, and their day-to-day activity allows them to indulge in introspection while encountering numerous others. By exposing themselves to whom or what they are not, the characters arrive, unexpectedly, at moments of self-discovery. This is not a social condition forced upon them by a hypercapitalist environment; it is a condition they have imposed upon themselves, ironically, out of a desire to escape.

Whether it requires mobility or stasis, characters’ jobs create endless opportunity for random encounters. Li-zen’s (Maggie Cheung) positions in Days of Being Wild, at the service desk of Yuddy’s (Leslie Cheung) apartment building, and later at the ticket counter of a sports stadium, keeps her in place but allows others to encounter her. The same is true of Faye’s (Faye Wong) position at the fast-food stand in Chungking Express, Ouyang’s (Leslie Cheung) post as liaison to assassins in Ashes of Time, and both Jeremy (Jude Law) and Elizabeth’s (Norah Jones) service jobs in My Blueberry Nights. These characters are not stuck, but rather fulfilled by their seemingly immobile occupational roles; they allow for countless interplay with new acquaintances from all over town (and elsewhere). They need not explore the world because they are positioned where the world can come to them. Likewise, the more mobile occupations of policeman (Tide in Days, 223 and 663 in Chungking, Arnie in Blueberry), criminal (Wah and Fly in As Tears Go By, Blondie in Chungking, Wong and The Agent in Fallen Angels), playboy/playgirl (Yuddy in Days, Ho in Happy Together, Miss Hua in “The Hand,” Bai Ling in 2046) and journalist (Mr Chow in In the Mood for Love and 2046) seem to be defined more by the ways in which random encounters – an occupational certainty – interrupt or disrupt the jobs the characters should be doing, rather than any conventional form of work ethic. Tellingly, the most mobile of the characters listed above have homes with very loose security. Wah, Yuddy, 663, Wong, Bai Ling, and Mr Chow are the unwitting, and yet
not entirely unhappy, victims of home invasion, as other characters permeate the private space of the home while the residents are busy elsewhere. In the case of Wah, Bai Ling, and Mr Chow, romantic affairs begin abruptly within the confines of domestic space. Because these affairs are welcomed, they do not appear to be violations, but rather an acknowledgment of the pre-designed permeability of the home. It is as if the home were closed to all but the perfect stranger.

Work in Wong Kar-wai films is a means to an end beyond the job itself; it is a means for exposure to the world. Compensation for menial or criminal labor allows the workers to move on to the next job, the next environment. As a result, relations with employers are pleasant if temporary, strained if permanent. Characters who see no way out of their occupations are the least satisfied in their work; they desire both the security of regular compensation and the independence from loyalty to an overseeing boss. In this sense, there is little difference between the brazen outbursts of Fly in Tears and the quiet frustrations of Mrs Chan in Mood. Fly rages against the protocols of his gang, while Mrs Chan begrudgingly assists her boss in carrying on an affair (while he silently judges her for her own affair). A job that requires more than simple compensated work – that requires a measure of unpaid loyalty or sacrifice to one’s employers – is a job nobody wants in a Wong Kar-wai film. Desiring more, if not always better for themselves, Wong’s characters prefer the transient role of the freelancer to the static role of the company employee. Money is a necessity to fulfill short-term goals or to pay the cost of travel and exploration, as when Lai takes on slaughterhouse duties in Happy Together to afford a plane ticket out of Argentina, or when Elizabeth works odd jobs in Memphis and Reno to buy a car. Always looking elsewhere, or imagining an elsewhere, Wong’s characters desire options above all else. This is not a condition of hypercapitalism imposed upon the characters, but rather an exploitation of it by the characters – just as global channels of media distribution provide viewers outside of China with the option of viewing Chinese cinema. Wong’s cinema is a cinema of choice.

Shifting narratives and self-referentiality

As if following the characters in their desires for an elsewhere, Wong’s films tend to indulge in their own form of wandering, as narratives frequently shift from one character, one location, one time period, or even one genre, to another. The wanderings and fracturings of narrative lines may seem like the jigsawing of a once-linear pattern that the films’ audiences are encouraged to piece back together. In the Mood for Love and 2046, for example, are the focus of an essay in the collected volume Puzzle Films (Bettinson 2009). The disjunctions of Wong’s films, whether intended for intuitive reconstitution on the part
of the audience or as reflections of the disordered lives of the films’ characters, contribute to, rather than detract from, the films’ transnational appeal. Non-Chinese audiences consuming Chinese-language films have already entered into a silent pact with the filmmakers to accept an array of images and sounds that may or may not make literal sense. As if mirroring the audience’s openness to viewing the unfamiliar, Wong’s characters, and the narrative construction of Wong’s films, deny closure and coherence.

Beginning with his first film, *As Tears Go By*, Wong’s narratives are packed with diversion, sometimes never returning to an established, and interrupted, plot. Teo accurately observes of *Tears* that “the gangster scenes quite literally intrude into the romance,” and he likens the “schizoid” design of Wong’s films to Godard (2005, 21, 88). What is remarkable is how Wong chooses the romance plot over the gangster plot in terms of dramatic interest in *Tears*, and yet it is the gangster plot that determines the characters’ fates, destroying any hopes of a future between Wah and Ngor (Maggie Cheung). Similarly, generic conventions such as shootouts, martial arts battles, chases, card games, and historical flashpoints such as the Japanese invasion of China in World War II, the Vietnam War, and the return of Hong Kong to Chinese sovereignty appear as interjections, as challenges to characters’ personal desires. They are what characters must overcome to achieve their goals, but because their goals are predicated on unconventional modes of work, travel, and communication, they are ill-equipped to resist the tides of history and genre. A crime film will not indulge a romance in *Tears* (or *Fallen Angels*) any more than a martial arts film will indulge it in *The Grandmaster* (or *Ashes of Time*).

This poignancy – and, I would argue, part of the transnational appeal – of Wong’s films is the refusal of generic conventions or historical determinism to give way to the exploratory or amorous fantasies of the characters. This tension between private desires and public (or generic) interruptions matches the tension between the transnational and the national. Audiences outside of China understand the Chinese-ness of Wong’s cinema as contributing to their own achievement of enjoying and understanding it. The intimidating or alienating Chinese-ness of Wong’s cinema, unlike the intrusions of history and genre in the films themselves, does not present itself as an overpowering obstacle. Non-Chinese audiences who seek options in their movie-watching clearly consider Wong’s films comprehensible, if sometimes ambiguous. But the ambiguity seems to enhance rather than detract from the pleasure of seeing so many romantic fulfillments denied to characters who so earnestly desire them. The characters fail to realize their grandest fantasies, but they succeed, at least, in undertaking the journey to reach them. Non-Chinese audiences may not believe they understand everything in Wong’s films, but that does not make the fantasies in the films (or the films-as-fantasy) unpleasant or undesirable. Characters who do not get what they want – or, on a more basic level, fail to understand or articulate what they do want – mirror a non-Chinese audience in its failure, at times, to comprehend the onscreen action. Built into the
appeal of Wong’s films is the sense that nothing is more important than what cannot be understood. It is okay not to “get” a Wong Kar-wai film in terms of its cultural specificities or historical backdrops, when so many of his characters equally fail to “get” the whys and wherefores of their own actions and environment.

Wong’s intertextuality also has transnational appeal in that it is most prominently a self-referential technique. Although several of Wong’s films, such as *Ashes of Time*, *In the Mood for Love*, and *Happy Together*, have literary source material, the adaptations are far from strict or even faithful; and more potent connections seem to exist between these films and others in Wong’s filmography. From *As Tears Go By* to *2046*, the degree of self-referentiality intensifies, and audiences familiar with his work are increasingly acknowledged in the films’ referential framework. The references could be on the level of plot or narrative, as *Fallen Angels* connects to *Chungking Express*, and *In the Mood for Love* connects to *2046* in settings and characterizations. The references appear sometimes as visual tropes, with an increasing frequency of shots that include mirrored reflections, obstacles between characters and the camera, the stretch-printing technique that establishes a busy environment around immobile characters, or an impressionist rendition of what could be a conventional action scene – a chase, shootout, or martial arts brawl. There are also repeating sounds: music cues like the “Yumeji theme” that is heard in both *Mood* and *Blueberry*, and of course the almost ubiquitous voiceover narration. It would be wrong to assert that intertextuality dominates Wong’s stylistic choices; across the films there are clear attempts at fresh techniques that he does not repeat in later films, such as the use of the wide-angle lens in *Fallen Angels*, the handheld photography in *Chungking Express* and *Happy Together*, and the panning effects in *Mood*. Switching to scope framing, beginning with *2046* and continuing through *Blueberry* and *The Grandmaster*, Wong adopted a new set of tricks, exploiting the empty space of the wider frame through off-center close-ups. But the experimentation seems to be at the service of exploring character types and thematic concerns that transnational audiences, from the beginning of their exposure to his work with the international release of *Chungking Express*, identify as belonging to a “Wong Kar-wai film.”

Wong can never be accused of being a topical filmmaker, in the sense that he shapes his projects around the lucrative exploitation of immediate social and cultural trends (coded commercially as Chinese-national), and audiences unfamiliar with those trends are simply ignored in the cinematic modes of address. Rather, Wong shapes his projects as visual dramatizations of struggles to transcend immediate boundaries. Visualizations of socio-cultural transcendence have obvious transnational appeal, but they also have commercial and artistic drawbacks. They can alienate potential, and substantial, local Chinese audiences, and they can also appear as international market pandering. Non-Chinese audiences may consume Wong’s films more enthusiastically than those of other Chinese filmmakers because Wong’s aesthetic appeals to a
certain kind of spectatorial narcissism. Chinese characters who seem “just like us” – that is, exploring alternative realities just as non-Chinese audiences are exploring Chinese cinema – may be overindulged by viewers experiencing a mirror effect. Not coincidentally, mirrors feature prominently in Wong’s cinema. As motifs, they represent Wong’s art-cinema visual aesthetic perhaps more than any other element of design. They also, ironically, point to the commercial values of transnational cinema, as an acknowledgment of an audience’s desire to see what they know even as they purport to see the unfamiliar – to see themselves in the foreign other.

For many critics, the multiplicity of “mirror shots” in Wong’s films – where we see characters repeatedly in mirrored reflections – indicates the conventional theme of “fragmentation,” where characters appear split or splintered, struggling for an identity. This interpretation matches the larger thesis of the films as representing a “fractured” city like Hong Kong, itself apparently unsure of a self-identity. However, the appearance of the characters’ reflected images seems to point just as forcefully at the way mirrors create doubles or triples, the way the films themselves seem to mirror each other – and, ultimately, to mirror Wong’s international audience. At the end of Days of Being Wild, Tony Leung Chiu-wai poses in a mirror much like Leslie Cheung’s playboy York earlier in the film, combing his hair in a ritual of self-beautification. In 2046, we see Tony Leung’s character Mr Chow (who may be the same man from Days) entering into a relationship with Bai Ling that is similar to the relationship in Days between York and Mimi (Carina Lau) – a relationship between seemingly casual lovers battling for control of the other. Mimi (Carina Lau again) turns up again in 2046, telling Mr Chow some of what happened in Days. Viewers familiar with Days, or with In the Mood for Love, to which 2046 is a clear sequel, may group these associations in literal terms (these are the same people from film to film) or in symbolic terms (they are not the same people, but the same kind of person), with the presence of the mirror, and of mirrored reflections, serving as reminders of the fluidity of character identity.

The doubling and tripling of characters set up a series of paradoxes, inviting speculation as to who, if anyone, has only a single representational self. We watch characters in mirrors watching themselves, sometimes hearing them narrate their own experience as we watch them. They are not just played by actors; they are actors, performing roles that seem to have no greater purpose than the indulgence and liberation of play. Wong plays a similar game, making his movies act on occasion like his other movies, or shifting a narrative only to make the protagonist of the new narrative exactly the same as in the previous narrative. It could be argued that Tony Leung’s Officer 663 in Chungking Express does not replace Takeshi Kaneshiro’s Officer 223 as the protagonist of the film; he actually is Officer 223, a fantasy version of 223 who succeeds in winning the heart of Faye and ownership of the Midnight Express, fulfilling 223’s own desires at the end of his segment. It could be further argued that
Kaneshirō’s role in *Fallen Angels*, “Prisoner 223,” who has the same name as Officer 223 (He Zhiwu), is yet a third iteration of the character. Who is the original, and who are the doubles, or triples? Wong’s intertextuality keeps compounding the multiplicity of character identities from film to film. This helps to construct a self-enclosed universe of associations, a kind of world-building not only appreciated but practiced by non-Chinese filmmakers like Quentin Tarantino and Steven Soderbergh. It is a method of self-branding, highly marketable inside and outside of China, and also a thematic statement: Wong will not limit his characters to whatever roles they perform in any particular narrative, just as they resist limiting themselves to whatever role they are expected to perform in their own (self-told) narrative. Through repetitive casting, episodic narrative structures, and the high frequency of signature visual tropes, Wong’s films appear to be all of a piece, even as they leap across time periods, genres, and geographical settings. The multiplicity of his characters’ identities has the effect of strengthening the coherence of his filmography, as each new film becomes the “next” Wong Kar-wai film, anticipated by an international audience who knows what a Wong Kar-wai film is supposed to look and sound like.

**Talking to themselves**

Voiceover narration in Wong’s films adds yet another layer of optional meaning—again, appealing directly, and perhaps deliberately, to non-Chinese audiences. As characters comment on their own actions, presumably from some future vantage point, the visible actions appear suggestive, only one of many possible accounts. Because some of the character-narrators are dead by film’s end, it is an open question of whether or not their vocal accounts originate from a mysterious realm of the undead. Dead or alive, however, the character-narrators take pains to explain their motivations or to frame their past actions in some coherent form. Wong’s first use of voiceover, in *As Tears Go By*, was highly conventional: Wah reads a letter written by Ngor, in Ngor’s voice. But beginning with *Days of Being Wild*, the voiceovers moved beyond recitation and became an alternate voice for the characters. Serving as guides, the narrators pinpoint dramatic moments, making sense (or nonsense) of their own lives even as they appear transient and open to random encounters. The voiceovers serve as connections between narrator and character, character and action, character and audience. There is clearly an organizing intelligence at work behind the seemingly chaotic environments of Wong’s films. Officer 663 in *Chungking Express* does not simply talk to his own possessions in his apartment; he narrates why, connecting his onscreen behavior with a recognizable nostalgia for habits he shared with his ex-girlfriend. Likewise, Faye in *Chungking* uses voiceover to reflect on her own immediate experiences; she is not one to look back nostalgically but to be reflective in the moment. The voiceovers both
complement and contradict characters’ behavior. Nothing if not impulsive, Wong’s characters exhibit an extraordinary self-consciousness in their voiceovers that seems at odds with onscreen action. When Lai narrates in *Happy Together* that he was “happiest” with Ho when they were stuck together bickering in a small Buenos Aires apartment, or when Mr Chow in *2046* narrates that his failed affair with Mrs Chan in *In the Mood for Love* was “perfect,” the viewer is not inclined to disagree, but rather to wonder at the characters’ definitions of happiness and perfection. The voiceovers give significance to actions that appear not at all significant, or that are the opposite of what the voiceovers claim that they are. The unreliability of these narrators matches the unreliability of the biased witnesses in *Rashomon*. They may or may not have their facts right, but whatever the truth of the situation, what is most important to the characters is the emotional resonance of the experience at the time of their narration of it. Intriguingly, the malleability of historical truth in the service of latter-day reflection does not, as it does in *Rashomon*, result in alternative visualizations of single events presented as blatant distortions. Instead, we see events occurring as if true, with the awareness that the narrator or viewer of those events has the freedom to comment on it in any manner he or she chooses. Such an openness to interpretation, embedded within the narrative design, extends to non-Chinese audiences an endorsement of their own reflections, however they may be argued.

For an international audience, having a guide in the form of a voiceover is helpful; it helps to orient the viewer as to the facts of the situation. The voiceovers take frequent opportunity to establish a precision of time and place in their accounts, documenting with authority the settings of important events. This method of viewer orientation serves an international audience extremely well, with the subtitles of the narration appearing as further written confirmation of the facts of certain events. Just as importantly, the voiceovers, in their mode of reminiscence that can run counter to the onscreen action, function as an art-cinema device that Teo and others rightly attribute to Godardian influence. Even a film completely without voiceover narration, *In the Mood for Love*, comes with onscreen textual narration introducing and delineating the film’s subject of unfulfilled desire. And that film arrives with built-in contradictions established in elliptical patterns of narration: Mr Chow and Mrs Chan simultaneously have, and do not have, an affair, and at film’s end appear to have had, or not to have had, a child together. A rare film that introduces a child (only heard, never seen) whose blood relation to the film’s leading male character is neither confirmed nor denied, *Mood* is the rare Wong film without a voiceover for perhaps that very reason – to keep the paradoxes alive. The absence of the narrative voice has the effect of muting the main characters and preventing them from sharing the confidence of the audience, unlike in *Fallen Angels* where a clinically mute character, He Zhiwu, is given a narrative voice to communicate with the audience. By addressing the fallacies of the visual as communicating reliable
facts, Wong’s films use voiceover to present an alternate version of the facts. Again, opening up options of meaning for his audiences, Wong asserts his own status as an option for non-Chinese audiences.

Conclusion

It is common for a filmmaker with transnational appeal, such as Wong, to have humanistic tendencies, to find the universal within their localities. While much attention has been paid to Wong’s humanism as exhibited in the transnationality of his Hong Kong settings, in the borrowings from non-Chinese literary and musical source material, and in the curious wanderings of his characters, the tendency in cinema studies has been to relegate the transnational to a secondary (or lesser) significance. This devaluing of Wong’s transnationalism reflects a prevailing critical stance that seeks authenticity in the upholding of the national over the transnational. Unmoored by nationally coded systems of aesthetics and industry, transnational cinema such as Wong’s threatens to be subsumed into a morass of universal signifiers that defy categorization. In an attempt to recover Wong from such muddy grounds of analysis, scholars have counter-argued that Wong’s cinematic determinants are much closer to home.

However, a critical perspective that seeks to locate Wong within a national or regional paradigm requires a distancing technique that runs counter to Wong’s cinema. Returning to Hong Kong itself as a defining subject, I see a clear separation between scholars’ framing of Wong’s “transnational” Hong Kong as either his shaping of the city (as his representation) or the city’s shaping of him (as its representation). Ultimately, a study of Wong that traffics in the national/transnational debate concludes that his cinema is most important when it says something about China or when it says something beyond China. The question of where the determinacy of Wong’s cinema begins or ends may never be resolved. But what is clear is the desire of Wong’s characters to escape their own determinacy. Scholars can delineate the exigencies of the local environment as an origin point for Wong’s cinema, but that fails to account for the geographical and cross-cultural sweep of its destinations. Audiences who do not know much about Chinese culture (however that is defined) unsurprisingly connect with a Chinese cinema that considers national-cultural borders as obstacles to be overcome.

Note

References


Ken Provencher


