

Labyrinth of Time in Wong Kar-Wai's *In the Mood for Love* and *2046*

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to analyse and interpret two films of Hong Kong director Wong Kar-Wai, In the Mood for Love (2001) and 2046 (2005), through the lens of Gilles Deleuze's and other theorists' writings on cinema and time. Both films consist in a temporal labyrinth where the boundaries between the past and present, the actual and virtual, the real and imagined, memories and dreams are blurred. The labyrinthine quality of time – its loops, repetitions and potentialities – demonstrates here the processes governing memory. The paper explores Kar-Wai's strategies to denote the protagonists' internal emotional time in which memories are plunged: the films' mood, lyricism, poetics of openness, musical leitmotifs, editing, colour, light and focus on objects. All of these devices contribute to depicting an image of duration; the essence of time.

In the Mood for Love (2001) and *2046* (2005) are Hong Kong director Wong Kar-Wai's seventh and eighth feature films, respectively. Here he explores unfulfilled relationships as well as the issues of memory and time. His characteristically luscious visual style, often associated with French New Wave cinema, is subordinated to the theme and mood, rather than employed for its own sake. In *In the Mood for Love* and *2046* the meaning of the story is partly negotiated by means of *mise-en-scène*: aesthetic excess, stylization and some exaggeration underlined by opera music. In the film, the meaning of the story seems to emerge from the liminal space of the play between temporal levels. It is created on the points of contact of images, by the usage of light and colour, camera movements, montage and narration.

In the Mood for Love and *2046* consist in the temporal labyrinth where the present shapes the past and the future. While the past is concealed under the present events and can only be guessed, the present and what seems to be the future, inhabited by the same characters, intermingle with and complete each other. The border between them being fluent, it is not to be determined which trajectory represents the characters' reality and which poses a phantasm. The labyrinthine quality of time is illustrative of the processes governing memory, and together with Kar-Wai's dense visuality it poses an image of duration.

In the Mood for Love is a story about next door neighbours, Mrs. Chan (Maggie Cheung) and Mr. Chow (Tony Leung), who discover that their spouses are having an affair with each other. The betrayed ones decide not to "be like them," they fall in love. After some time of furtive meetings and suppressing emotions, Mr. Chan decides to leave the city. He goes to Cambodia where he whispers a secret about his unfulfilled love into a hole in the ruined wall of the Angkor Wat temple, since, according to a Chinese legend, if one has a secret that cannot be revealed, one should whisper it into a tree hole and close the hole up afterwards.

In *2046* the story takes place on several Christmas Eve evenings from 1966 to 1969. In 1966, Mr. Chow returns from Cambodia. Back in Hong Kong of the 1960's, he fills his time with love affairs and writing science fiction stories into which he incorporates oddly transformed elements from the past and the present. The film-within-the-film illustrates Mr. Chow's stories, introducing characters wearing futuristic costumes and the stage design of large empty surfaces of neon colours, mainly intense red, yellow, and blue. The director utilizes vivid colours, as he elucidates, "to contrast with the characters' restrained emotions" (qtd. in Brunette 92).

One of the stories, entitled "2046," visualizes time travel conducted via a futuristic train. *2046* constitutes space-time where people go in search of lost

memories. It is the place of permanence and as such a picture of duration, as things last there. A tree hole from *In the Mood for Love* in 2046 turns into a voyeuristic and exhibitionist striped tube, which becomes a separate fluid amorphous space-time, a time tunnel. It recalls an ear, a seat of memory, since according to Kopaliński, in China, wide and long ear lobes were meant to represent wisdom and common sense (443-4). To understand the significance of the memory hole, we can consider it in terms of a Deleuzian crack: a portal into another world, a threshold between the actual and the virtual, between the interior and the exterior. Deleuze explains that

The real difference is not between the inside and the outside, for the crack is neither internal nor external, but it is rather at the frontier. It is imperceptible, incorporeal, and ideational. With what happens inside and outside, it has complex relations of interference and interfacing, of syncopated junctions – a pattern of corresponding beats over two different rhythms. (*The Logic of Sense* 155)

The crack, in 2046 envisaged as a memory hole, poses liminal space which enables the opening between the interior and the exterior, the entry to the other side of the mirror. If the crack results from the pressure of tensions from within and from the outside, in 2046 it comes into being under the pressure of the repressed and denied contents of one's past. The crack, along with lines, openings, depths and surfaces, is formed by the structure of a phantasm which creates invisible energy swallowing up space and concomitantly constitutes that energy. The phantasm is a point moving in between surfaces, planes and layers, a place of impossible convergences (155). It is the phantasm that enables the passage:

the phantasm covers the distance between psychic systems with ease, going from consciousness to the unconscious and vice versa, [...] from the inner to the outer and conversely, as if it itself belonged to a surface dominating and articulating both the unconscious and the conscious, or to a line connecting and arranging the inner and the outer over two sides. (217)

The liminal tube with a black hole inside, everyone's object of desire, appears at the beginning and at the end of the film together with the same musical motif. Thanks to the bracketing by the same opening and closing sequences, the film sustains a cyclical unity (Neupert 22). The story coming full circle, ending at the point it has started, includes not only the past but also all the conditional tenses, the present ones, as well as the anticipation of the future.

In 2046, Kar-Wai (referred to as "the poet of time" or "Proust from Hong-Kong") paints the image of time that undergoes ellipses and loops.

The temporal flow is constantly disturbed by repetitions and fragmentation. Retro- or futuroscpections are abruptly introduced, interchanging between the past, present and future. Non-linear editing is employed – some scenes are reversed; first we see the result, then the cause (e.g. the red hotel corridor appears before the protagonists rent the hotel room; Mrs. Chan walking in the rain is dry but a moment later she shakes water off her hands; she wears different dresses during one sequence; etc.). In spite of knowing that the film takes place between 1966 and 1969, the viewer becomes disoriented by other pieces of information, such as “a hundred hours later,” or “ten hours later,” or “eighteen months later,” taking us to the year of 1970. Events whose temporal or ontological status we are not able to determine also appear – it is questionable whether they have occurred in any of the real times or whether they are figments of the characters’ imagination. One of the examples can be Su Lizhen’s visit to Mr. Chow’s hotel room, which constitutes an out-of-sequence flashback from the consciousness of the film, so to speak, not from that of any particular character (Brunette 99). Moreover, the film provides an unannounced insight into memories from 1963 to 64. Apart from abrupt time transitions, there are also three black and white scenes in a taxi. The taxis seem to serve as time machines, a role similar to the futuristic train, pointing to the belief that memories cannot be escaped from, as well as to the irreplaceability of the lover (as opposed to *Chungking Express* [1994] or *Fallen Angels* [1995]). Similarly, through the red colour and oval lamps, the corridor of the train recalls the corridor in the hotel where Mr. Chow and Mrs. Chan rented a room in *In the Mood for Love*. The shots of a street lamp in the rain and empty cul-de-sacs with the light on in the last window constitute other intertextual references to Kar-Wai’s previous film, being like flashes of memory (Aleksandrowicz 110).

Editing inconsistencies lead to time loops as well. Space-time is sometimes created through connecting shots with different space and time by means of a masked editing cut. Two shots can be connected in such a manner that at the end of a shot and at the beginning of the next one the filmed surfaces are very similar in terms of light, colour and texture (96). An example of such fluid transition into another space-time hardly perceptible for the viewer can be a sequence when the camera films the protagonist, moves onto a dark wall, and then emerges from a similar wall in another space and time (96).

Kar-Wai makes use of a few strategies to denote time arrested. The emphasis laid on dates poses an attempt to capture the passing of time while the clocks are the icons and visual signs of passing moments. Slow motion, extending the scenes in time, functions as a metaphor for frozen

time, allowing the viewer to admire the cigarette smoke wafting in the air or a character walking in a dance-like manner. It thereby serves as the emblem of time's dismemberment into moments or, in André Bazin's words, "change mummified" which poses the image of duration (qtd. in Rosten 41, 352). In-shot speed changes where people move quickly around a character isolate him from the surroundings and point to his solitude in a city. Time in its movement towards 2046 is symbolized by the moving light; it brightens, softens, flickers, dims or changes direction (Teo 51). Seasonal food designates both time and "a remembrance of time" (128). The lyrical dance-like movement of the camera captures nostalgia, contemporaneously, however, making the film distant and cool, which results also from the effect of stylization and artificiality of the characters' bodies.

Thorsten Botz-Bornstein identifies elements of *manga* aesthetics in Kar-Wai, particularly in the science fiction parts of *2046*. He associates realism produced by "highly stylized, abstract quality" of Kar-Wai's images with the realism in *manga* where it is not the objects which are stylized but the images (80). This feature is accompanied in Kar-Wai by another *manga* characteristic – the vestigial plot: the characters in the science fiction sequences drift as if in a dream, lost in thought, contemplating themselves in mirrors. They talk of emotions but mostly they do not expose them, alienated behind the masks of perfect make-up and costumes. The impression of alienation is also connected with the excess of the diegesis and the haptic quality of the images, influencing perception. As Shklovsky elucidates: "A thing passes us as if wrapped, we realize it exists because we take into account the space it occupies, but we see only its surface. In such perception the thing dies in feeling" (16). As a result, all the film events seem unreal – suspended between the past and the future, between reality and potential.

Kar-Wai's struggle to arrest the passing of time points at the impermanence of things. Permanent versus impermanent is an opposition more likely to be emphasized by the Chinese, rather than eternity versus temporality (Blake 346). The editing enacts the viewer's mobility in limitless space. Hong Kong cinema violates the 180-degree rule of traditional cinema and employs

360 degrees of space, setting up the cameras on all sides of action, rather than in front of it, they [Hong Kong filmmakers] are in accord with the principles of *shanshui hua* (landscape painting). The Western rule that the spectator never cross the axis of action, never enter the diegetic space, thus destroying the illusion, is unnecessary with a Chinese spectator who is expected to become part of the work of art. (345-6)

The constant presence of mirrors and a way of framing invalidate the presence of the characters. Mirroring images results in angularities, off-centre framing, refractions and bisections (Brunette 106). Shots are most often composed with characters pushed to one side of the frame, sharing it with big, flat areas (walls, for instance) or with themselves in mirror reflections. The division of the frame is taken to such an extreme that sometimes the filmic image seems to be split. The mirrors multiply space and characters in such a way that many a time we are unsure whether we see the character or the mirror reflection, which might stand for the uncertainty whether what we see is what “really” happened or what is remembered. Also in conversations one of the interlocutors is often obscured or we cannot see his or her face, which emphasizes the understatement and the mystery of the past, and the impossibility of discovering the truth about it.

Often by a mirror image another character is introduced, which metaphorically introduces parallelism of times and actions. It also enhances the labyrinthine quality of space and claustrophobia of the chambers and, by inference, the characters’ feeling of being lost. The narrow passages and corridors and claustrophobic rooms pose “tropes for the labyrinthine quality of the mind, its ceaseless movement along the same unending pathways of remembered experience” (Paul Arthur qtd. in Brunette 93). Walking along the corridors of the Angkor Wat temple constitutes the visualisation of the passages into the depth of memory (Olechnowicz 219). The lines dividing the screen, as well as the rails of the train and the vertical lines of the futuristic city cut the filmic reality into a series of planes. The lines constitute yet another manifestation of the workings of the aforementioned phantasm; they simultaneously pose both openings and closures and indicate further slippages of time and space.

The interior of the room is frequently filmed in other roundabout ways, such as through the window with its transparent curtains and blinds, pointing to the impossibility of returning to the past because it is covered by new sheets of time, as well as adding up to the effect of the distorting power of memory. All the mentioned editing strategies, as well as a system of prisms, such as mirrors, curtains and panes, serve the same purpose, underlined by the motto at the end of *In the Mood for Love*: “He remembers those vanished years. As though looking through a dusty window pane, the past is something he could see but not touch. And everything he sees is blurred and indistinct.” The film presents, thus, an unreliable account of the events, influenced by tangible melancholy. Accordingly, Kar-Wai reconstructs Hong Kong of the 1960’s, the time of his childhood, as he remembers it and, thus, the city emerges as the texture of melancholic memory. The painterly patches

of colour, as well as light contribute to the picture of duration. According to Bergson, colours, the intensity of light and the resonance of voice make each sense vibrate intensively (qtd. in Powell 46). Deleuze argues that “a colour like red, a value like hardness or tenderness, are primarily positive possibilities” which refer only to themselves and thus surpass any narrative function. This leads to their disconnection from sensory-motor extension and the shift from linear time into duration (qtd. in Powell 46).

The poetics of openness is dominant, proposing time without resolutions and stories never closed, which is underlined by one of Wong Kar-Wai's mottos in which a blooming peony “stands proudly and leaves without yes or no” (2046). This refers to Jing Wen, one of the female characters, who parts with her boyfriend without a word, standing next to the blooming bushes. But the motto refers also to the diegesis where memories, imaginary events and real ones cannot be separated from one another. Thus, the film can be classified as the open story film, which Richard Neupert describes as the one in which “the *told* is not resolved but the *telling* is concluded” (104). Both Kar-Wai's films are organized in accordance with paratactic ordering in which the film's sequential arrangement of the constituents does not affect the consistency of the themes of the narrative as they do not rely on linear progression (Neupert 104). Indeed, the sequences in both films could be reorganized without obliterating their meaning. This also springs from the nature of repetition, as it is “more a matter of coexistence than succession, which is to say, repetition is virtual more than it is actual” (Parr 224). Repetition in Deleuzean understanding, as elucidated by Adrian Parr, does not refer to the same thing taking place over and over again but to the “power of difference in terms of a productive process that produces variation in and through every repetition” (223).

The characteristic repetitions of the same situations, objects, dialogues and gestures, the same movements of the camera and its points of view, as well as composition rules in relation to similar objects and spaces produce the impression of eternal return and circularity of time both within the film and Wong Kar-Wai's oeuvre. For instance, the director starts the story of Su Lizhen, one of the protagonist's lovers at the end and then returns to the story, presenting its disordered fragments, sometimes the same ones but undergoing re-focalization. Going through a series of repetitions - sometimes the same, sometimes slightly different ones - creates the effect of *déjà vu* and entrapment in time. This repetition in difference that comes from the eternal return illustrates the process of remembering and the mechanisms governing the psyche. The viewer gets insights into the consciousness, which is characterized by an atemporal structure in spite of its effort to order and

keep a chronology. Time loses its fluidity and becomes a search through the layers of the past, brooding over a past moment, multiplied and extended in the emotional time (Aleksandrowicz 95).

The creation of the protagonist's internal time assumes the form of the stream of consciousness, characterized by the space-time simultaneity and relativity, mirrored in stylistic and aesthetic aspects (Aleksandrowicz 116). Both in the film and in the present time of consciousness, memories, dreams, the imagined and the real are conflated. The past, present and future in the form of layers create the Deleuzian time-image. In this labyrinth of time its pathways expand outwards infinitely, or "rhizomatically." According to Deleuze's claim of multiple parallel universes, they exist in a virtual state and become actual in the present along a series of infinitely bifurcating pathways "passing through *impossible presents*, returning to *not necessarily true pasts*" (qtd. in Martin-Jones 23). The time-image's "labyrinthine falsifying of causality ensures that what returns, the memory of the past, can be used to create the memory of the future" (Martin-Jones 60). The memory of the future in *2046* is created through "the virtual empty form of time [which] folds itself into a self-reflexive loop" predisposed towards difference (61, 62).

Creating the appearances of development, employing the poetics of atemporality with numerous contaminations, the film presents the story as it is remembered (Sikora 213). It is the time remembered that allows for the overlapping of the internal and external realities, where things can be illogical or unsure, and compounding what "really" happened with the reality of desire, events with unclear ontological status, and imagining alternative potential solutions (213). This illustrates Lowenthal's realization in his *The Past Is a Foreign Country* that remembering very seldom preserves the sequence of events as "we locate them by means of associations rather than methodical penetration. Places kept in memory tend to blend unless something separates them" (qtd. in Sikora 216).

The quotation of Zbigniew Preisner's music from Krzysztof Kieślowski's *The Decalogue: Five* (1989) constitutes another temporal level of *déjà vu*, the Deleuzian "ritornello" (refrain), characteristic of the opera, which he employs to depict the processes of memory. Deleuze regards sound or visual images appearing at intensive moments as little ritornellos (Powell 45-46). Preisner's musical leitmotif appears only in the science fiction parts, emphasizing the workings of memory. It becomes a "musical cinematic code" and consequently, the meaning of the films is "associated with a character, a place, a situation, or an emotion" (Gorbman qtd. in Neupert 101). For Deleuze and Guattari, music is particularly important when it comes to becoming, as it constitutes "a potent catalyst for molecular becomings"

(Pisters qtd. in Powell 45). Deleuze points to the gallop and the ritornello as the dimensions of “musical time” heard in the crystal of time, the gallop “being the hastening of the presents which are passing, the other the raising or falling back of pasts which are preserved” (*Cinema 2* 93).

Slow motion, fluidity of the camera movements and nostalgic lyrical music result in the characters’ movements assuming dance-like quality. The movements of the characters illustrate the music; the characters and the rhythm of the music complete each other, forming an indissoluble whole. In Deleuze’s words, the body’s dance-like movements inspire the world-movements, “sucking up and carrying away the living” (59). The dance-like motions, as well as music, contribute to creating temporal layers of the films since they expand world-movement to embrace “passage from one world to another, entry into another world, breaking it and exploring” (63). The dance-like fluent movements as “the passage between worlds” become the medium which enables one to plunge into the other’s past; “the sole means of entering into another world, that is, into another’s world, into another’s dream or past” (63). Through that the films present “a mystery of memory, of dream and of time, as a point of indiscernibility of the real and the imaginary” (64).

The inability to recall certain things, remembering details instead, and thus being subjected to the transforming qualities of memory is expressed by concentrating on objects. Objects function as dominant memories here, Bergsonian “shining points,” clear and sharp, a certainty, “around which the others form a vague nebulousness” (223), blurred and multiplied by a possibility. The director’s fixation on objects recognizes their physical reality and fills them with meaning through the very prolonged obsessive scrutiny and defamiliarization (Shklovsky’s *ostranenie*). As such, the objects disturb the semantics of the narrative links and the composition of the frame. The specificity of an object creates a fold in the Euclidean space and the object forms an alternative centre of the frame around itself.

Focusing on objects may also be read as the embodiment of the thought expressed in *There’s Only One Sun*, Wong Kar-Wai’s commercial for Philips Aurea: “It’s hard to look at things directly. They’re too bright and too dark. Sometimes we need to see things through a screen. On one side of the screen memories fade. On the other, they glow for ever.” The justification for employing the roundabout means to show the past would therefore be the fear of its intensity and of its power of impact on the present. Looking at the past directly could result in “going blind,” which is literally the case with the character in *There’s Only One Sun*, deprived of her sight because she “has seen something which she shouldn’t have.” The film’s aesthetics is very similar to *2046*’s: the woman enters a kind of train whose interiors are

covered with huge patches of warm colours: yellow, orange and red, and the music in the background is the same as used in 2046, pointing thus to time trapped in yet another ritornello. The quotation above can also be referred to the two worlds presented in 2046: “one side of the screen” where “memories fade” is the world of 1960s, and its prequel in *In the Mood for Love* with the protagonist’s insistence on remembering, whereas the other side of the screen constitutes the futuristic train and the world of 2046 where “memories [...] glow for ever” in the form of unchangeable things.

All the strategies described above – presenting the characters as spectral in both films, as well as utilizing inappropriate for the occasion *cheongsams* (“She dresses like that to go out for noodles?” [*In the Mood for Love*]) and out-of-date morality in *In the Mood for Love*, non-linear editing, scenes with unclear ontological status, variations of the same situations underlined by the recurrent musical motif, lyricism and mood point to the films being a tissue of idealizing memory mixed with the actual events and desire. The variations of the scenes indicate Mr. Chow’s traversing the lanes of the past, attempting to figure out, to remember what really happened, which of the roads he took. The character’s memory is subjected to the process of localization, during which it endeavours to be distinguishable from “a confused mess” of memories which “could not find its proper place” (Bergson 224). He tries out various possibilities, attempting to establish a web of threads connecting the events, which would grant reality to his past. The result of the fresh threads juxtaposing and rewinding is that “between any slightest point of our past and all the others a rich network of memories gives us an almost infinite variety of communicating paths to choose from” (Proust qtd. in Lloyd 145).

Wong Kar-Wai’s characteristic aesthetics based on the density of the image highlighted by fetishistic music – intense and insistent – results in isolating Proustian “invisible substance of time,” “a fragment of time in the pure state” (Proust qtd. in Lloyd 125, 140) in the cinematic form. Thanks to repetition the past is regained in memory, nonetheless, Proust recognizes in art some unfaithfulness, springing from the fact that the experiences turn into “an ‘essence’ which escapes time at the cost of no longer being exactly what it was” (qtd. in Lloyd 142). Deleuze also elucidates infidelity: “the world of sensual impressions or qualities” appears to be

the sign of an *altogether different* object [...] It is as if the quality enveloped, imprisoned the soul of an object other than it now designates. [...] by the solicitation of the madeleine, Combray is not content to rise up again as it was once present [...] but rises up absolutely, in a form that was never experienced, in its ‘essence’ or its eternity. (Proust & Signs 11-12)

Similarly, Kar-Wai restores the essence of time in his films; time not as it was but in its condensed form, filtered through the consciousness.

Apart from the inability of entering the same river of time again, the films also suggest the inability of attaining a single stable perspective of the past, and by inference, the incapability of discovering the truth about it (Brunette 92). It seems therefore that the characters do not travel to the future, but into the world of their memories and dreams, and thus the mystery train poses a passage into the depth of memory, rather than into the future. The work of the phantasm is revealed as bringing “its internal and external sides into contact, in order for them to unfold onto a single side” (Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense* 211). The passage to the other side and back reveals that

the other side is nothing but the opposite direction. [...] all possible science is along the length of the curtain. It suffices to follow it far enough, precisely enough, and superficially enough, in order to reverse sides and to make the right side become the left or vice versa. (9)

A living past endures in the present and the future turns out to be the past – the past through the looking-glass; the past in reverse, closing in on the present.

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