
The Sensuous Cinema of Wong Kar-wai

Film Poetics and the Aesthetic
of Disturbance

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Wong Kar-wai and the Poetics of Hong Kong Cinema

In May 2004 Wong Kar-wai arrived at the Cannes Film Festival, exhausted. His new film *2046* was a competing entry, but Wong delivered the print twelve hours late. Festival organizers hurriedly arranged a last-minute screening. Official selections had to be rescheduled. Disgruntled delegates carped about Wong's tardiness. Worse, the film was not finished. Crucial computer-generated (CGI) sequences had yet to be added; the sound track was defective; whole scenes remained to be shot. Wong had started production in December 1999, but *2046* had become a behemoth, impossible to finish. His crew had been working twenty-four-hour shifts. Now Wong was fatigued and facing censure from critics and festival delegates. The film would win nothing at Cannes, and industry experts forecast retribution against Wong. Commentators debated the long-term effects on Wong's career: Would Cannes ever accept him back again?

The Cannes debacle has become part of Wong's legend. To Wong's detractors, this episode highlights the faults of a self-indulgent filmmaker. By their account, Wong is a notorious wastrel, adopting a shooting ratio so high that entire plotlines are excised from the final cut. His productions balloon over schedule and over budget. He is disorganized; the shooting commences without a script, and he may shoot forty takes of a scene, looking for something ineffable. His method can be "taxing on the actors," Tony Leung wearily notes (Yoke 2000: 30). However, Wong is feted as one of the world's finest directors. As a personality he is iconic, the omnipresent sunglasses an indelible trademark. As a beacon of Hong Kong cinema, he has kept that industry in the public spotlight, even when its fortunes were flagging. Critics hail him as a master of film technique and a romantic artist of the first order. His critics might decry his purported profligacy and self-indulgence, but without his unique production methods—the relentlessly varied takes and rough cuts, the protracted shooting schedules—Wong's films would lose the distinctive aesthetic that makes them so singularly exhilarating and elusive. Put simply, Wong makes splendid films.

Two years after the Cannes fiasco, he was invited back to the festival . . . as president of the jury.

This book treats Wong's films from the perspective of a poetics of cinema. It is concerned with his films as artworks and as aesthetic objects. It seeks to illuminate their narrative and stylistic systems and to account for how they affect spectators. The book places his cinema in context, tracing patterns of influence to pertinent cinematic traditions. More polemically, the book theorizes a poetics of Wong's cinema to fruitfully provide a greater appreciation of the director's artistic achievement. This broad conceptual approach—what David Bordwell calls a poetics of cinema—has so far been marginal to studies of Hong Kong films and filmmakers. Since the early 1990s the reigning approach to Hong Kong film has been culturalism, which posits broad correlations between films and social phenomena. Throughout this book, I aim to show that a poetics can shed light on aspects of Wong's cinema typically neglected by culturalist criticism. Another task of this monograph is to explicate and critique the dominant theories applied to Wong's films. These theoretical stakes frame the book's practical criticism, its formal analyses of Wong's films. These analyses, in turn, provide the marrow of the book. It is only by closely attending to Wong's films that their artistic richness and complexity can be appreciated.

A Biographical Sketch

Wong Kar-wai was born in July 1958 in Shanghai. At age five he immigrated to Hong Kong with his parents; two older siblings remained behind, stranded in Shanghai's French Quarter as the Cultural Revolution gathered force. Raised in effect as an only child, Wong grew up in the teeming Tsim Sha Tsui District, his isolation compounded by the region's alien dialects. (Wong would not become fluent in Cantonese and English until his teens.) His father managed a trendy nightclub; his mother adored movies, ushering the child to matinee shows. The local theaters served up a diverse menu—Hollywood epics and westerns, British Hammer studio films, Japanese ghost movies, French *policiers*, Mandarin and Cantonese films. In his late teens Wong began studying graphic design. He earned a diploma in the subject, graduating from the Hong Kong Polytechnic in 1980. Shortly after, he enrolled in the training program of local terrestrial station TVB. A stint writing serials and soap operas led to permanent employment at Cinema City, an independent film studio specializing in comedies with a local flavor. Though Wong chafed at the studio's house style, he spent much of the 1980s dutifully hammering out scripts. The finished films were occasionally diverting and mostly disposable—*The Haunted Cop Shop of Horrors* (1987), *Just for Fun* (1983), and *Rosa* (1988) are typical titles. More important was Wong's introduction to colleagues such as Jeff Lau, Patrick

Tam, and Frankie Chan, later to become long-term collaborators. After two years spent writing Tam's high-end effort *Final Victory* (1987), Wong became a partner in a new independent company, In-Gear, for which he would sign his first feature.

As Tears Go By (1988) piggybacked on the local triad-gangster trend, a genre revived by John Woo's hugely popular *A Better Tomorrow* (1986). Wong's maiden film was shrewdly packaged as a commercial enterprise—the film's star, Andy Lau, had proven form in the triad genre; a Cantopop tune was chosen to accompany a crowd-pleasing MTV-style sequence; and gangster-film tropes ensured periodic stretches of kinetic spectacle. Ultimately, though, *As Tears Go By* was distinguished by its visual flair. Its moody palette was de rigueur for late 1980s triad films, but its step-printing technique brought fresh energy to the genre's chase-and-fight sequences. This technique, as deployed in *As Tears Go By*, liquefies hard blocks of primary color into iridescent streaks of light; its unfamiliar rhythms, moreover, wield a potent affective charge. The film's visual aesthetic, engineered by Andrew Lau and Patrick Tam, augured what many critics think of as Wong's signature style. At the same time, several of the film's shots possess a geometric precision atypical of Wong's later work.

Local critics championed Wong's distinctive aesthetic. He was quickly earmarked as an exciting new director, one of several pioneering a "second new wave" of Hong Kong filmmakers.¹ *As Tears Go By* found popularity and critical acclaim, empowering Wong to venture into more ambitious filmmaking. The film that followed, *Days of Being Wild* (1990), seemed indifferent to current fads. Relegating scenes of physical action, the film swerves from Hong Kong's action genre. As romance drama, it avoids the genre's cuteness and levity. *Days of Being Wild* seems intent on defying mass taste: its plotting is as enervated and languorous as its male protagonist, it solicits sympathy for a scoundrel, its portentous images bear the gravity of thematic significance, and its non sequitur ending risks anticlimax. Some critics found the film ponderous, others profound. Ultimately, mass taste prevailed, the expensive production culminating in a conspicuous commercial failure. Nevertheless the film accumulated honors. In the years that followed, critical appreciation deepened; by 2012, *Days of Being Wild* would be ranked the fifth-greatest Hong Kong film ever made.²

1. This second wave of directors emerged in the mid-1980s and included Stanley Kwan, Peter Chan, Gordon Chan, Ching Siu-tung, Mabel Cheung, Alex Law, Clara Law, Jacob Cheung, and others. The first new-wave directors, most of them graduating from local television in the late 1970s, comprised socially conscious and artistically adventurous filmmakers such as Ann Hui, Patrick Tam, Tsui Hark, Yim Ho, Allen Fong, and Alex Cheung.
2. In March 2012, *Time Out Hong Kong* published a critics' poll of the "100 greatest" Hong Kong films. Five of Wong's films appeared on the list: *Happy Together* (#79), *Ashes of Time* (#53), *Chungking Express* (#25), *Days of Being Wild* (#5), and *In the Mood for Love* (#1). See

In a way, the film's local failure was beside the point. With *Days of Being Wild*, Wong targeted an altogether different market—not the local audience nor even the pan-Asian market but the international audience for foreign art cinema, accessible via the festival circuit. One index of Wong's market strategy is his use of Asian stars. At the local level, relying on stars brings fiscal rewards, enticing financiers and audiences. But Wong's casting also reveals an astute sensitivity to the international art cinema market. His star players—Leslie Cheung, Maggie Cheung, Andy Lau, Tony Leung Chiu-wai, Gong Li, Brigitte Lin, Zhang Ziyi—were renowned on the international film circuit before Wong worked with them. Moreover, they were perceived to be affiliated with artistically significant filmmakers and projects of high cultural value.³ From this angle, Wong's casting strategy—relying on actors with strong international profiles—betrays the director's transnational ambitions. Since *Days of Being Wild*, his films have been intended less for the local market than for international festival distribution. Wong's success on this network brands him not only as a “Hong Kong” director but as an international purveyor of film art—a reputation consolidated by his subsequent output, including such “prestigious” portmanteau films as *Eros* (2004) and *Chacun son cinéma* (2007).

By the mid-1990s Wong had assembled a cadre of trusted associates. At the production level, his entire oeuvre is unified by favorite colleagues. Production designer and editor William Chang and cinematographer Christopher Doyle proved crucial in shaping Wong's aesthetic. Composers Frankie Chan and Roel A. García lent a percussive energy to Wong's mid-1990s work. And to the aforementioned list of players can be added Chang Chen, Jacky Cheung, Takeshi Kaneshiro, Carina Lau, and Faye Wong. With one long-term associate, writer-director Jeff Lau, Wong founded Jet Tone Films, an independent production company formed in 1992, largely by necessity. *Days of Being Wild* was a financial disaster. Investors balked at its inflated budget, cost overruns, and meager returns. They shied away, too, from Wong's practice of shooting without a full-fledged script. “Nobody wanted to produce my films,” Wong

Time Out Hong Kong (March 14–27, 2012), 21–34. I surmise that the high position of *Days of Being Wild*, and its rising stock in the past decade, is partly attributable to public affection for Leslie Cheung, whose death in 2003 is annually commemorated in Hong Kong.

3. Consider, for example, the following films, all of which achieved various kinds of international success and which preceded Wong's initial collaboration with the star in question. Leslie Cheung: *A Better Tomorrow* (1986), *A Chinese Ghost Story* (1987), *A Better Tomorrow II* (1987), *Rouge* (1988); Maggie Cheung: *Police Story* (1985), *Project A II* (1987), *Police Story Part II* (1988); Andy Lau: *Boat People* (1982), *Twinkle Twinkle Lucky Stars* (1985); Tony Leung Chiu-wai: *Love Unto Waste* (1986), *City of Sadness* (1989); Gong Li: *Red Sorghum* (1987), *Judou* (1990), *Raise the Red Lantern* (1991), *The Story of Qiu Ju* (1992), *Farewell My Concubine* (1993); Brigitte Lin: *Zu: Warriors from the Magic Mountain* (1983), *Police Story* (1985), *Peking Opera Blues* (1986), *Dragon Inn* (1992), *Swordsmen 2* (1992); Zhang Ziyi: *The Road Home* (1999), *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000), *Hero* (2002).

says, “so I had to start this company” (Forde 2000: 23). *Ashes of Time* (1994), the new firm’s first production, was an investor’s nightmare—with a budget of HK\$47 million, Wong’s sprawling *wuxia* epic took two years to complete, and it was eventually denied distribution in the West. (It would later be restored and repackaged as *Ashes of Time Redux* [2008] and released theatrically in world markets [Figure 1.1].) By now Wong had gained notoriety as a profligate director. As if to prove he could work cheaply and fast, Wong embarked on a “quickie,” *Chungking Express* (1994), during a two-month hiatus from *Ashes of Time*.

These two films, released in 1994, were rich in contrasts. *Ashes of Time* is a historical costume epic, tonally somber and introspective; *Chungking Express* is urban, modern, and infused with a breezily wistful temperament. Whereas a distribution agent foiled the Western release of *Ashes of Time*, *Chungking Express* gained prominent Western exposure, distributed in the United States under the patronage of Quentin Tarantino and Miramax Films. Nevertheless, both films consolidated authorial themes salient in Wong’s previous and subsequent films: the friction between social mores and romantic desire, the longing to surmount psychic inertia, the capricious forces that thwart or furnish personal encounters, the impregnability of time and memory, the burden of individual choice and responsibility. Again, though, the two films registered their material differently—if *Ashes of Time* seemed suffocated by the weight of its themes, *Chungking Express* wore its ideas lightly. The success of *Chungking Express* brought Wong international recognition.

If Wong’s next film, *Fallen Angels* (1995), looked derivative of this popular hit, the two films differed sharply in visual style, affective tone, and plot structure. Still, *Fallen Angels* coaxed audiences to spot connections with *Chungking Express*. Wong elaborates the game of cross-referencing at a metatextual level too. A dense web of intertextual allusions recycles characters, locales, and music cues across the entire oeuvre. The apparent integrity of Wong’s authorial universe tantalizes viewers into positing connections among his films’ narrative agents and events. This is the sport of an *auteur* cinema—presupposing an intimate knowledge of his body of work, the filmmaker rewards the initiated viewer with intertextual referencing.

Critics dismissed *Fallen Angels* as superficial, but it remains a complex work, not only a brooding noir but a delicate, poignant meditation on father-son relationships. Unlike *Fallen Angels*, *Happy Together* (1997) bolstered Wong’s critical cachet. A gay romance story shot largely in Argentina, the film ruminates on themes of exile and absent fathers—themes that found social resonance in the year of the handover. Another (transnational) context for *Happy Together* was the 1990s new queer cinema. Unlike many films of this trend, however, *Happy Together* avoids camp and caricature, wringing pathos

from Tony Leung's soulful performance. The Cannes Film Festival feted Wong for *Happy Together*, awarding him the Best Director palm in 1997. Thereafter his career would be closely intertwined with Cannes. He chaired the jury in 2006; *My Blueberry Nights* (2007) opened the festival the following year. On the festival circuit more generally, Wong has won admirers and critics in equal measure. Though *Happy Together* and *In the Mood for Love* (2000) took major prizes, the *2046* affair hurt his reputation. Most critics, however, failed to note that Cannes frequently exhibits unfinished films (see Corless and Darke 2007: 179). Today, Wong regards the Cannes festival as both a production deadline (forcing him to terminate the editing phase) and a kind of high-profile test screening (which subsequently determines further revision and fine-tuning).

After the triumph of *Happy Together*, Wong announced his next project. *Summer in Beijing* was to be shot largely in Mainland China, but disputes with the Chinese censoring body (over filming in Tiananmen Square) persuaded Wong to abandon it. Instead he forged ahead with *In the Mood for Love*, his paean to period Chinese melodrama. Turning away from the zestful brio of his most recent work, Wong returned to the statelier rhythms of *Days of Being Wild*, prompting critics to compare Wong to Hou Hsiao-hsien. *In the Mood for Love* became a worldwide success and initiated a Chinese-language film renaissance in the West (e.g., *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* [2000], *Hero* [2002], *Infernal Affairs* [2002], *House of Flying Daggers* [2004], *Kung Fu Hustle* [2004], and others). This renaissance included Wong's *2046*, a production begun in 1999 and beset by difficulties. An ambitious science-fiction film, *2046* required elaborate CGI sequences that added months to the schedule. The severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) outbreak in 2003 caused further delays. By the time *2046* emerged, four years had passed since Wong's previous feature film. It would be another three years before *My Blueberry Nights*, Wong's first foray into English-language cinema. Filmed in the United States, this romance-drama employed Hollywood stars, embraced Hollywood genres (including the road movie), and reached down into American mythology. The film was perceived as a failure relative to Wong's previous work. Still, *My Blueberry Nights* confirmed a production strategy rarely pursued in Hong Kong. As his local contemporaries sought coproductions with Mainland Chinese partners, Wong looked increasingly to Europe for finance. His recent reliance on French capital, in particular, testifies to his renown in France as an auteur filmmaker. His ability to attract European and US funding, moreover, attests to the irreducibly transnational bent of his cinema.

As the first decade of the twenty-first century wore on, mooted projects fizzled out. A thriller entitled *The Lady from Shanghai* and a film about Hurricane Katrina came to naught. *The Grandmaster*, a kung fu drama centered on Bruce Lee's *sifu*, was characteristically beset by interruptions and

delays. As obstacles postponed the film's completion by years, Wong stirred anticipation virally using teaser trailers and promotion art. (*The Grandmaster* would eventually open in Asia in 2013, becoming Wong's most successful film in Mainland China.) Amid these setbacks, however, Wong's stock showed no sign of waning. In *Sight & Sound's* 2012 critics' poll, *In the Mood for Love* ranked 25th in the list of the greatest films of all time. In the same year, the film topped *Time Out's* poll of the greatest Hong Kong films yet made. Wong's international esteem is unparalleled among Hong Kong's second-wave filmmakers. Today, Wong stands not only as the finest director in Hong Kong cinema but as one of the finest directors in the world.

Some Broad Assumptions

Wong's biographical legend can usefully illuminate aspects of his films. Noting Wong's cinephilia, for instance, cues us to spot intertextual allusions within the work or to consider the oeuvre in relation to other filmmaking traditions. However, Wong's legend also accrues fallacies that must be redressed. One premise holds that Wong's films are principally or wholly sensuous. On this view, the films are essentially superficial: they elevate style over substance; they disguise vacuity with visual pleasure. This premise casts Wong as an aesthete, preoccupied with sumptuous audiovisual style. A strong version of this position is epitomized by David Thomson, for whom Wong's oeuvre is ravishing yet vacuous (2010: 1053). A weaker version grants the films' "depth" but perceives them as primarily stylistic ventures. Buttressing these premises is the assumption that Wong's viewer is "seduced" by aesthetic beauty (Blake 2003: 343). Overwhelmingly, the viewer is characterized in passive terms—as "spellbound," "bewitched," "mesmerized." Then there is Wong the postmodern director, here again committed to surface impressions: his films serve up pastiche; they introduce radically new forms. Fragmentation governs their compositional strategies and characterizes the experience of the viewer, and the films are steeped in nostalgia. Still further, the legend presents the image of Wong the allegorist. Irrespective of explicit subject matter, the films are presumed to be "about" Hong Kong's 1997 handover to China, imperialism, globalization, postcolonialism, or some other sociohistorical phenomenon.

Wong as aesthete, postmodernist, allegorist—this book reconsiders these aspects of the popular legend. I certainly do not deny that Wong's films are highly sensuous, that they are innovative, or that they engage with social issues, but I do attempt a more nuanced account of these features than the constructed legend provides. I also contest the tacit and pervasive critical assumption that Wong's films are properly understood—*best* understood—as cultural allegory—more, that their cultural value and artistic merit stems precisely from

their embedded social meanings. This assumption underlies what I call the culturalist approach to Wong's cinema. It is, I believe, the most widely adopted perspective in Wong scholarship. The remainder of this chapter provides an exegesis and critique of its broad premises and practices, before introducing an alternative—and to some extent, complementary—critical approach. I then go on to rehearse the book's main arguments.

Abbas's Culture of Disappearance

Ackbar Abbas's *Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance* (1997) offers a paradigmatic instance of the culturalist approach. Abbas draws his thesis from the historical circumstances of the moment. In the wake of the 1984 Joint Declaration, which formalized Hong Kong's return to China in 1997, the British colony faced potentially seismic cultural change. For Abbas, the countdown to the 1997 handover triggered a pervasive crisis of identity: "Now faced with the uncomfortable possibility of an alien identity about to be imposed on it from China, Hong Kong is experiencing a kind of last-minute collective search for a more definite identity" (1997b: 4). This search for a new identity, however, threatened the extinction of Hong Kong's distinctive heritage: its colonial identity, cultural traditions, and social values. Exacerbating this "space of disappearance" was the rise of globalization, further endangering local identity and tradition (3). "Disappearance" thus arises from the intermeshed forces of imperialism and globalization. These forces conspired to engender a collective sense of impermanence, a pervasive social anxiety. What would become of Hong Kong in the postcolonial era? Would its subjectivity and legacy simply vanish?

From the 1980s, Abbas argues, the new Hong Kong cinema began addressing this historical situation. A few films tackled the issue explicitly, but most evoked it indirectly by means of film technique. The local cinema's "new" images caught "the slipperiness, the elusiveness, the ambivalences" of Hong Kong's precarious cultural space (Abbas 1997b: 24). Disappearance was conjured in oblique ways, and visual style became a vessel for social meaning. Because it evoked the political situation indirectly, a film could be read for social comment "*regardless of subject matter*" (24; italics in original). Thus films as different as Stanley Kwan's *Center Stage* (1991) and Wong's *As Tears Go By* were assimilated to the "problematic of disappearance" (ibid.). According to Abbas, moreover, the new cinema did not merely evoke the historical situation; it critiqued it. *As Tears Go By*, for instance, problematizes visuality; a "general sense of visual overload" complicates the act of looking (36). Abbas takes this unorthodox visuality as a critique of the colonial gaze, that is, a gaze intended to produce social subjects, promoting a way of seeing that fosters acceptance

of colonial space. As Abbas puts it, “Because Wong’s film consistently gives us a form of visuality that problematizes the visible, it can be said to represent and critique such a space” (36). Ostensibly a formulaic gangster film, *As Tears Go By* thus becomes a political text by virtue of its “techniques of disappearance” (8).⁴

Abbas’s analysis rests on a heuristic frequently employed in the culturalist approach. At an abstract level, Abbas starts with a general theory of culture and maps this conceptual scheme onto a group of artworks. Abbas’s interest in these films is frankly illustrative, principally concerned with their propensity to prove the a priori theory. Abbas is explicit on this matter: “I will use [the cultural objects] to pursue a particular theme: the cultural self-invention of the Hong Kong subject in a cultural space that I will be calling a space of disappearance” (1997b: 1). Here a theory precedes film analysis and is applied to films in top-down fashion. Culturalist approaches, I shall demonstrate shortly, have often relied on such routines. That the new Hong Kong films respond to and represent (albeit obliquely) the 1997 situation, that they critique (rather than, say, celebrate) this situation, and that this critique is embedded in visual techniques—Abbas’s thesis hinges on these contestable assumptions. The risk is that Abbas’s interpretive moves create a causal link among several unsubstantiated assumptions, a problem that has often hindered the culturalist approach in general. Moreover, the critic often equivocates as to how far cultural critique is intended or recognized by the filmmaker. Are the film’s meanings implicit or symptomatic? Can they be assigned to the filmmaker’s explicit materials, or are they “leaked” by the text involuntarily as structured absences? Cultural readings have tended to fudge this issue. Culturalists often imply authorial intention, but problematically this intention is not always taken to be conscious on the part of the filmmaker. From a privileged position of omnipotence, the critic reveals intentions the filmmaker does not know he or she has.

Abbas’s discussion spotlights another characteristic of culturalist readings. Reacting to what he sees as critics’ homogenization of Hong Kong cinema, Abbas stresses the diversity of local filmmaking (1997b: 18–19). He exhorts critics to avoid “gross simplification,” such as that which reduces all Hong Kong cinema to action spectacle. “There is,” he writes, “. . . no easy homogeneity to Hong Kong cinema, in spite of appearances” (19). Yet in the same paragraph, Abbas goes on to say, “The films that are made cannot be reduced to ‘a single metanarrative’ but represent so many disparate attempts to evoke a problematic cultural space” (ibid.). To be sure, the new Hong Kong cinema

4. In a later work, Abbas claims that his thesis holds good for Hong Kong’s postcolonial cinema too. Invoking Wong as an exemplary case, he writes of “the continuing relevance of . . . the cinematic—the production of images inside and outside cinema that respond to mutations in Hong Kong’s geo-political, economic and cultural situation. The cinematic in this sense remains central to the project of cultural studies in Hong Kong” (Abbas 2001: 624).

cannot be reduced to the action genre. But neither can it be wholly assimilated to the critic's conceptual structure ("disappearance"). In disclaiming one generalization, Abbas imposes another. Though he cautions against homogenizing Hong Kong cinema, he falls prey precisely to this tendency. The catchall dimension of Abbas's heuristic seems to me a limitation of culturalist criticism, which invites a fairly damning criticism: in the culturalist approach, the a priori thesis is all, and all encompassing.

The Culturalist Approach

In the 1990s arguably no writer exerted greater influence on the field of Asian cinema studies than Abbas. But to take the measure of the culturalist approach, it is necessary to expand our discussion beyond his work. Scholars allied to the culturalist turn embraced Abbas's tropes of disappearance, as well as the broader symptomatic and implicit hermeneutics guiding his approach (already well-entrenched as a disciplinary practice). Surely no Hong Kong filmmaker received more culturalist analysis than Wong, and this scholarly attention yielded riches. Studies by Stephen Teo, Gina Marchetti, Rey Chow, and others have greatly enriched the field's understanding of Wong's films and Chinese cinema in general, often basing culturalist readings on careful scrutiny of the films' aesthetic features. The very best of this work displays the undoubted virtues of culturalist criticism. In its broadest compass, culturalism situates the film within and against pertinent contexts, including its immediate sociohistorical milieu. Culturalism can demystify anomalous features of the work that escape "internal" motivation. It can illuminate the film's implicit or symptomatic meanings. And it provides a welcome corrective to the perception that Hong Kong cinema and its filmmakers are politically disengaged. At an abstract level, however, the culturalist approach has harbored problematic practices and routines. Some of these problems stem from the weaknesses of Grand Theory, such as the critic's reliance on top-down interpretation, symptomatic criticism (allegorical readings, reflectionism), and recourse to punning maneuvers. Other problems arise from conceptual tropes pertaining to Hong Kong cinema and culture. It is worthwhile to examine these problems in detail.

A recurring tendency within socio-allegorical criticism involves thematizing the film's characters and personifying geographical regions. Teo provides a paradigmatic instance of this maneuver, mounting a symptomatic reading of *2046*: "On an allegorical level, the film denotes Hong Kong's affair with China through Chow's affairs with Mainland women: Zhang Ziyi, Faye Wong, Gong Li, and Dong Jie (playing Faye's younger sister who has a brief fling with Chow)" (2005: 149). (Note Teo's reliance on a pun—"affair/s"—to open up the associative link he wishes to pursue.) Under this personification heuristic,

the critic's interpretations soon become repetitive. If Teo's interpretive frame can be mapped onto the characters in *Days of Being Wild*, the film allegorizes Hong Kong's impending reunification with the motherland. We might consider Hong Kong to be personified by Yuddy (Leslie Cheung); Britain to be represented by Yuddy's foster mother, Rebecca (Rebecca Pan); and China to be embodied by Yuddy's biological mother (Tita Muñoz), depicted in the film as an austere and implacable matriarch. Interpreted this way, Hong Kong's prospects under Chinese sovereignty look decidedly bleak—unable to reconcile with his true parent and estranged from his adopted home, Yuddy's fate is doomed. The fable that Yuddy recites, about a bird without legs, could be read along similar lines. Evoking themes of rootlessness, the fable correlates Yuddy (Hong Kong) with the aimless bird, which is destined to perish when it lands (in China). That the bird in the fable was “dead all along” might be construed as a critique of prehandover Hong Kong, the British colonizers having divested the city of its authentic and unique cultural identity.

With a little finessing, this reading would be passable as an example of the personification heuristic. Yet the account contains obvious infelicities. Reading the bird fable this way obliges us to execute two interpretive moves—first, to perceive the bird as a personification of Yuddy (as most commentators do) and, second, to perceive Yuddy (now aligned with the wayward bird) as a metaphor for Hong Kong. The accumulation of metaphors is not hermeneutically sophisticated. This approach also relies to a large extent on a partialized reading strategy, selecting certain characters (even minor ones, such as Yuddy's birth mother) and omitting others (including major protagonists such as Su Lizhen), depending upon which agents best fit the interpretive frame. Worse, this interpretive frame reveals nothing that the hypothetical critic had not surmised in advance of the analysis. The critic simply concludes that *Days of Being Wild* is “about” Hong Kong's relationship with China, much as *2046* is—thus reproducing the same interpretation in cookie-cutter fashion. Each film's distinctive features are minimized, flatly suppressed by a top-down heuristic. This heuristic might be endorsed for foregrounding the films' thematic affinities. But the affinities yielded by the personification heuristic risk being spurious and facile, imposed upon the work a priori rather than constructed from specific features within the work. At worst, the heuristic betrays the hypothetical critic's hermeneutic intransigence and reveals little about the shared traits and preoccupations of the films themselves.

Central to the culturalist enterprise are questions of identity and public “consciousness,” notions beset by conceptual difficulties. If the notion of identity is often conceptually vague, the notion of a public consciousness is also problematic. For instance, the culturalist sometimes claims that the public “consciousness” operates at the level of the individual's or the society's *unconscious*—an

impossible position to defend or discredit, for who is to say what dwells in the unconscious? In such cases, what is attributed to the populace as a collective sensibility can look more like hermeneutic categories imposed onto a society by cultural commentators.

Like Abbas, Teo (2000) considers identity a central trope of Hong Kong cinema. Both critics assume that, in prehandover Hong Kong, a drastic effort to define local identity consumed both the general populace and the region's cinema. "If I were to choose one word to characterize Hong Kong cinema," Teo writes, "I would choose Identity" (2000). He goes on:

From Jackie Chan to Wong Kar-wai to Clara Law to Sammo Hung—from action pictures to art pictures—it is possible to see Hong Kong pictures as sharing one perennial theme, that of identity: the quest of, the assertion of, the affirmation of, identity. (Teo 2000)

Here again the specter of homogenization raises its head. In this case, though, a totalizing assertion homogenizes Hong Kong films as dissimilar as "action pictures" and "art pictures" (along with differences, one might suppose, within those broad categories). Teo's premise also invites top-down interpretations, obliging the critic to show how every Hong Kong film makes identity its major theme. The very notion of identity is conceptually (and conveniently) nebulous, the easier to summon evidence of it in a diverse range of films. Whether applied to Hong Kong films or Hong Kong society, the trope of identity is sufficiently vague to be applicable to all cases; but as a catchall, predetermined schema its utility and meaningfulness are limited.

Most generally, top-down culturalism bears a cluster of conceptual and methodological drawbacks. As Grand Theory, culturalism risks the pitfalls of simply "applying" theory. The routine of mapping a preexisting theory onto a given case is easily repeatable but essentially facile; at worst, it can distort both the film and the preexisting theory. Furthermore, if the culture offers up movies amenable to the critic's cultural thesis, it also furnishes numerous counterexamples. Not every Hong Kong film in the early 1990s featured bleak endings, a pessimistic mood, accelerated motion, and other purported repositories of 1997 allegory. Reducing films to political allegory, moreover, downplays their commitment to spectacle. For one symptomatic critic, the shopping mall climax in *Police Story* (1985) and the clock tower stunt in *Project A* (1983) evoke cultural disappearance (Collier 1999). But first and foremost these sequences set out to create a visceral impact, furnishing an affective, sensuous, physiological experience. Deriving allegory from such sequences is not (necessarily) wrongheaded, but *reducing* such sequences to allegory disregards the ways filmmakers utilize craft traditions to generate palpable effects and responses. By stressing *local* identity as central to a film's concerns, moreover,

the culturalist may underplay the film's address to an international audience. This is especially pertinent to figures such as Wong Kar-wai, John Woo, and Jackie Chan, whose Hong Kong films harbored ambitions beyond pan-Asian markets. Lastly, the credence afforded allegorical accounts is often wholly reliant on the critic's rhetorical ingenuity; one must simply accept that x (i.e., a feature of the text) represents, say, a collective disquiet toward the 1997 handover, without the benefit of empirical evidence. As Noël Carroll puts it, "Given enough latitude, you can probably allegorize anything to say whatever you wish, but that won't establish causal connections where there are none" (1996: 42).

None of this is to deny that local filmmakers absorb materials from their social milieu. I do not, for instance, suggest ignoring the 1997 handover as a causal factor in, say, *Days of Being Wild*. But one must recognize that filmmakers assign these materials varying degrees of importance in any given film. Topical subject matter may permeate to the very marrow of the work, or it may assert a negligible influence upon the finished film. In any case, the basic material is inevitably deformed to some degree by the fiction-making process. For instance, the genesis of *2046*, we are told, stemmed from a historical circumstance within Wong's milieu (China's assurance that Hong Kong will remain a special administrative region for fifty years); but *2046* drastically deforms this referential material, not least by virtue of its overt science-fiction elements. The finished film makes no explicit reference to the actual historical situation. It is not that the film's political dimension—explicitly flagged in the title—is mere window dressing; rather, it provides a point of departure, a kernel or conceit enabling Wong's *idées fixes* fresh elaboration. As with any social allegory, moreover, the deformation of the work's materials produces a primary level of discourse—consisting of characters, settings, actions, and so on—that is sufficiently removed from allegorical meaning to warrant analysis in its own right.

Socio-allegorical hermeneutics also provides critics a useful tool in arguing for a filmmaker's significance. Allegorical readings provide an expedient way to boost a director's social relevance and critical esteem without obliging the critic to prove artistic ingenuity or innovation. Certainly there is no doubt that allegorical treatises by both Western and Asian critics contributed to Wong's burgeoning critical reputation during the 1990s. Still today, I argue, film studies scholars predominantly approach and appreciate Wong's films through culturalist lines of reasoning. For Teo, Wong's 1990s output "elucidate[s] the great issues of the decade," including the angst-inducing handover, civil rights for gays, and equal opportunities for women (2005: 161). Of *Happy Together*, Teo asserts, "Seen today, the power of the film resides in its sense of being a memorial to the pre-1997 anxiety of Hong Kong" (110). From the culturalist

perspective, these films possess cultural value primarily because they speak to, and speak for, the culture. This is indeed one facet of their value. It is the purpose of this book, however, to show that the value of Wong's films resides at least as much in their artistry *as films*. Nonetheless, if allegorical readings inflate Wong's cultural cachet, I should also note Wong's own savvy in alluding to social reference points. Naming his film "2046," for instance, in part constitutes a shrewd marketing gambit, a "hook" attracting cultural commentators to a film whose political content is, arguably, negligible. For critic and filmmaker alike, then, symptomatic hermeneutics offers strong advantages, despite the array of conceptual and methodological pitfalls that addle the approach.

If Abbas's cultural theory of Hong Kong cinema inspired allegorical readings of Wong's films, it also informed a cognate culturalist tendency: reflectionism. Here the critic conceives the film not as embedding a "hidden" narrative but rather as reflecting the attitudes of the public it is perceived to be addressing. The reflectionist does not try to demonstrate causality but settles for a more or less tenuous linkage of film and social realm. Of *Chungking Express*, for instance, one critic claims that "collective anxiety about the handover is reflected in the situation of Brigitte Lin's blonde-wigged gangster" (Taubin 2008). Similarly, film scholar Janice Tong, evoking Abbas's culture of disappearance, finds the Hong Konger's experience of temporal flux "reflected in Wong's destabilising cinematographic self-image of Hong Kong" (2008: 65). Both writers require at least two leaps of faith—first, to accept that there *is* collective anxiety (Taubin) or temporal instability (Tong) among the local populace triggered by the impending handover and, second, that Wong's film reflects precisely this collective experience. As with allegorical readings, reflectionist criticism relies for its cogency upon the critic's rhetorical ability to persuade the reader—in lieu of causal explanations—of abstract notions immanent within both the film and its proximate milieu.

Sometimes the critic expands reflectionism beyond societal metaphor, so that the films are burdened with a freight of symptomatic meanings. One standard heuristic perceives the films as reflections of the biographical author. Teo (2005), for instance, construes Wong's films as essentially autobiographical, with the director's personal history discernible at several levels of narration. The narrative settings of *Days of Being Wild* and *In the Mood for Love* recreate Wong's childhood milieu (5), the visual strategies of *As Tears Go By* "attempt to translate [the filmmaker's] innermost feelings into images" (24), and characterization in *Days of Being Wild* "reflects the director's fundamentally shy nature" (43). That *In the Mood for Love* excises sequences set in the 1970s indicates that the decade does not hold personal resonance for Wong: "it was probably an uneventful period when [Wong] would have gone through primary and secondary schooling" (13). Even setting aside this recourse to

speculation, the author-reflection heuristic becomes murky when Teo slides between the director as biographical individual and as authorial “personality.” Teo appears to invoke the latter when claiming that Killer in *Fallen Angels* “reflects Wong Kar-wai, the author” (87). Whether this claim is persuasive (and I argue in Chapter 4 that Killer does not embody Wong’s authorial worldview), the author-reflection schema is here clearly of a different order than that employed previously (e.g., when discussing Wong’s shy nature). Likewise, Teo means to denote authorial personality, rather than biographical figure, when stating that voice-over in *Fallen Angels* “expos[es] [Wong] as perhaps dangerously schizoid, split into several personalities. I am not suggesting that Wong himself is psychotic” (88). Wong’s characters are assumed to reflect *both* the biographical individual with a personal history and the cinematic author who articulates a personal vision.

The author-reflection heuristic becomes murkier still when applied to contrasting, even contradictory, cases. For Teo, “*Fallen Angels*, like all of Wong’s films, is told from the multiple perspectives of its characters, and all of them reflect Wong, the writer and author” (2005: 88). Among the problems with this sweeping claim is that it irons out crucial differences among the film’s characters, who are hardly of a piece and among whom Wong encourages us to weight judgments (see Chapter 4 of this book). It is not explained how the specific traits and trajectories of these various agents are unified into coherent form nor how they manifest an authorial worldview. Nor is it specified precisely in what ways the characters of *Fallen Angels* dovetail with those of *Days of Being Wild*, in whom Teo also perceives Wong’s reflection. Indeed, Teo’s point might be precisely that the characters are not alike, that, moreover, they represent contradictory subjectivities. Each one possesses a distinct personality and they all reflect Wong, hence the view of Wong as “perhaps dangerously schizoid.” By extension, Wong’s authorial personality must be read as schizophrenic, fragmented, contradictory—an interpretation consistent with Teo’s broadly postmodernist line of criticism. I will not digress here except to iterate that, as I attempt to argue in subsequent chapters, Wong’s films exhibit a highly consistent and coherent worldview. My present point is that the author-reflection model—potentially useful but beset by conceptual difficulties pertaining to the ontology of the “author”—becomes yet another mode of reflection theory imposed upon the work.

The accretion of reflectionist schemas puts a strain on both the film’s levels of meaning and on the cogency of the critic’s interpretation. Teo’s study of Wong embraces social reflection as an explicatory schema. Even Wong’s post-1997 Hong Kong work, he argues, “mirrors the pathology of Hong Kong society in the 1990s” (2005: 164). But Teo goes on to invoke still another reflectionist frame, asserting that “the downbeat mood of Wong’s films reflects the mood of

the [Hong Kong film] industry as it lingers on the downswing” (165). In sum, Teo saddles the films with a surfeit of associational baggage: the films reflect the author-as-biographical-person, the author-as-formal-component, the 1997 collective mood, and the waning Hong Kong film industry. Any film would buckle under so much symptomatic weight. Moreover, the critic’s reflectionist claims risk looking tenuous, even arbitrary. As Bordwell points out, “An ingenious critic can make virtually any film reflect anything” (2011: 23).⁵ If a film’s mood is broadly downbeat, how does one know that it is the 1997 zeitgeist, and not, say, the blue funk of the film’s director, that is being reflected? And what should be made of those numerous moments in Wong’s films that are decidedly not downbeat but euphoric? Why should the film’s mood be assumed to be reflective of anything at all? Since interpretation here rests on loose associations, nothing prevents us from substituting 1997 anomie with any other somber affair culled from the historical milieu. At an abstract level, the reflectionist heuristic lacks the emphasis on concrete causal explanations promoted by a poetics of cinema.

If Hong Kong films are overburdened with symptomatic meanings, so too are they saddled with contradictory ones. For Natalia Chan Sui Hung, the postcolonial Hong Kong cinema—a period identified with the 1997 count-down—constitutes a nostalgia cinema, its films mounting a two-tiered system of meaning. On the one hand, they exhibit yearning for a bygone era in Hong Kong history; on the other hand, they are prompted to such nostalgia by contemporary anxieties about the region’s posthandover future. The nostalgic experience, Chan writes, “helps to manage the unpleasant present by celebrating the past and transcending the future” (2000: 264). Citing as a characteristic case *Days of Being Wild*, Chan goes on to suggest that the film’s cinematography “highlights not only the nostalgic feeling of love of the 1960s but the social insecurity of the 1990s” (267). Like Teo, Chan asks the film to bear the weight of multiple conceptual structures, but these structures are also mutually exclusive. A single feature of visual style becomes the locus both of affirmative feeling (nostalgic affection) and negative feeling (present insecurity).⁶ In a sense Chan evokes both allegory (the film, though set in the 1960s, is also “about” 1990s Hong Kong) and social reflectionism (a feature of visual style reflects social disquiet). Precisely how cinematography embodies affective moods goes unanalyzed; indeed, the causal relation between Hong Kong’s “nostalgia cinema” and larger social processes does not come into focus. The accepted

5. For Bordwell’s astute critiques of reflectionist criticism, see *Planet Hong Kong* (2011: 23, 29) and *Poetics of Cinema* (2008b: 30–32).

6. The objection could be raised that it is one function of symptomatic readings to expose social contradictions, but Chan is not explicit about this. Further, it is not evident how a basically consistent cinematographic style can express incoherent attitudes.

routines of top-down criticism, at least on this occasion, absolve the culturalist critic from the burden of proof.

Chan's discussion exemplifies another broad tendency within culturalist theory—postmodernism. It has become critically orthodox to perceive Wong as a postmodern filmmaker; certainly some of Wong's most dedicated commentators characterize him thus (Brunette 2005; Teo 2005; Tsui 1995). In what sense is Wong's cinema postmodern? For some critics, the films are postmodern not only in their visual narration—the fragmented editing patterns, for example—but in their narrative elements, such as Ouyang Feng's role as archcapitalist in *Ashes of Time* (Tsui 1995: 106). The postmodern experience also manifests itself in the oeuvre's imputed "newness," its cultivation of an innovative film aesthetic. I certainly do not dispute Wong's innovativeness, but I will propose presently that it is more accurate to see Wong's films as recasting preexisting norms of Hong Kong's popular cinema rather than as inventing norms ab ovo. This is not to negate the postmodernist view but rather to qualify it—Wong's films, though innovative, are not wholly new insofar as they rely upon and rework some well-entrenched principles of local and transcultural storytelling. Finally, the postmodernist critic (and the culturalist generally) emphasizes what I call the *temporal salience* of 1980s and 1990s Hong Kong cinema. Films that are part of this trend foreground temporality as something complex, elusive, and transitory; the split time zones in *Rouge* (1988) or the juxtaposed rates of motion in *A Better Tomorrow* and *The Killer* (1989) are characteristic examples. Accordingly, postmodernists examining Wong's cinema pretune their attention to instances of temporal salience. Smudge motion, step printing, jump cuts, freeze frames, elliptical cutting, anachronistic music, period settings, tropes of memory and missed encounters—such features are magnified by the postmodernist applying implicit and symptomatic meanings (Figure 1.2). Inevitably, the films' temporal salience is treated as a direct result of social events. Consciously or unconsciously prompted by the Joint Declaration, local filmmakers (it is argued) began to thematize the notion of time ebbing away—hence what critics have called an "end-of-an-era sentiment," a "doomsday mentality," a "fin-de-siècle cinema," and a "crisis cinema." I will return to some of these arguments in later chapters, but suffice it to say that bending features of the film to fit a preconceived thesis repeats the interpretive errors assailing certain culturalist writings on Hong Kong cinema.

I have tried to suggest that, for all its virtues, top-down culturalism harbors significant shortcomings. By extension, there is a strong incentive to seek an alternative (yet potentially complementary) approach compensating for the flaws of meaning-centered criticism. This is not a repudiation of culture or interpretive practice. It is rather an appeal to not, as it were, put the cart before

the horse. Tzvetan Todorov here refers to literary studies, but his comments hold just as good for film criticism:

[I do not espouse] a denial of the relation between literature and other homogenous series, such as philosophy or social life. It is rather a question of establishing a hierarchy: literature must be understood in its specificity, as literature, before we seek to determine its relation with anything else. (1969: 71)

Often, culturalists move directly to the secondary level of the work, leaving the impression that the surface discourse is straightforwardly graspable. Yet as subsequent chapters will try to demonstrate, the surface level of Wong's films—however sensuous and beguiling—is typically fraught with perceptual and cognitive obstacles that render comprehension difficult. Before proceeding to “read” the film for allegory, the viewer must first master the film as a film, that is, grapple and come to terms with the film's often complex surface level. A good deal of how the film affects us springs from this primary level of discourse. Though Teo argues that the power of *Happy Together* springs from its social resonance, it seems to me that the film is no less powerful at its denotative level. Bordwell argues, “To treat these lovelorn films as abstract allegories of Hong Kong's historical situation risks losing sight of Wong's naked appeal to our feelings about young romance, its characteristic dilemmas, moods, and moves”—risks losing sight, in other words, of the films' delightful (and difficult) surfaces (2011: 178). To bypass the work's primary level is to neglect the complexities in Wong's cinema, its appeals to the emotions, and its sheer mastery of craft.

Bordwell's Transcultural Poetics

As doctrine-driven criticism dominated Asian film studies, Bordwell proposed an alternative approach to the study of Chinese film. Bordwell outlines the stakes of this approach in a 2001 essay published in *Post Script*, “Transcultural Spaces: Toward a Poetics of Chinese Film.” Here Bordwell advances a bottom-up, comparative, and empirical historical poetics of Chinese-language cinema (restricted here to the cinemas of Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Mainland China). According to Bordwell, a poetics approach to Chinese film (and to films in general) focuses centrally on (1) *overarching form*, the relation of parts and wholes in the film's (or films') large-scale composition; (2) *stylistics*, the norms and conventions of audiovisual style; (3) *spectatorial activity*, the viewing effects created by the dynamics of form and style; and (4) *historical poetics*, how and why formal and stylistic patterns stabilize or mutate over time (2001: 9). As a conceptual framework, poetics pursues explanations to fine-grained

questions about the film's composition and effects. Unlike Grand Theory, which takes as its point of departure an abstract theoretical proposition, Bordwell's poetics operates inductively from the bottom up. The poetician starts not from a broad theory of culture but from the film's particularities. From here he or she generates explanations for the film's distinctive patterns of form and style. In contrast to most culturalist approaches, poetics gives priority to a given film's integrity, to the film medium's specificities, and to the filmmaker's choice situation within historical and institutional constraints (10).

How does the transcultural figure in Bordwell's discussion? As conceived by Bordwell, the poetics approach is intrinsically comparative. It surveys a range of pertinent filmmaking traditions and practices, looking not only for divergence but for convergence. The transcultural perspective illuminates norms of composition and comprehension that operate across cultures. Here poetics runs counter to cultural essentialism, whose strongest version denies the possibility of cross-cultural translation. However, as Bordwell points out, "Chinese films, to put it bluntly, are Chinese; but they're also films" (2001: 11). As films, they constitute potent vehicles of transcultural expression. Moreover, they employ schemas pervasive in other national cinemas. If the culturalist program, stressing prehandover angst, is too narrowly parochial, Bordwell's transcultural poetics widens the playing field, relating Hong Kong cinema to norms and practices widely shared across filmmaking cultures. Focusing on transcultural conventions of film style, Bordwell demonstrates that Chinese filmmakers recast and elaborate these conventions in inventive ways. He charts the transcultural emergence of the planimetric shot in Mainland Chinese cinema (revived from the 1970s and 1980s European art cinema) and of the distant long take aesthetic in Taiwanese cinema (recasting the tableau tradition of early European cinema). As for Hong Kong cinema, its commercial filmmakers adapted the stylistic norm of "intensified continuity" from Hollywood (itself a stylistic mutation of classical continuity).⁷ Directors such as John Woo did not merely adopt the idiom of intensified continuity but revised it to their own ends. Intensifying intensified continuity, Woo, Tsui Hark, Johnnie To, and others reworked Hollywood style for greater pictorial precision, clarity, and kineticism (14).

Regrettably, Bordwell's poetics approach has had limited impact on the research field. Emilie Yeh's "Politics and Poetics of Hou Hsiao-hsien's Films," published in the same journal issue as Bordwell's essay, attempts to redress the dominance of culturalist hermeneutics in Hou Hsiao-hsien scholarship. Another Hou expert, James Udden, has brought a poetics perspective to the

7. Planimetric shots station the camera perpendicular to a background surface, encouraging lateral as well as depth staging. Intensified continuity is characterized by fast cutting, close framings, extreme lens lengths, and restless camera movement.

films of Hou and Wong (2000, 2006). These studies offer exemplary cases of inductive criticism and close analysis, building upon Bordwell's poetics of cinema. Bordwell himself exemplified the poetics approach in his *Planet Hong Kong: Popular Cinema and the Art of Entertainment* ([2000] 2011), as well as in several research essays.⁸ Nevertheless, within the discipline at large, Grand Theory and top-down hermeneutics still prevail, while cultural studies has held sway since the 1980s. Despite a legacy including Rudolf Arnheim, André Bazin, Noël Burch, Sergei Eisenstein, and the Russian formalists, Bordwell's poetics and Kristin Thompson's neoformalism (see Thompson 1988) remain minority research programs. Yet there are compelling reasons for taking up the research project of poetics.

Because poetics is less centrally concerned with interpretive practice, it does not restrict our understanding to what films mean. As Bordwell has elaborated in other works (e.g., Bordwell 2008b, 1989), poetics does not exclude hermeneutics but extends its ambit to broader interests. Chiefly, poetics enhances our grasp of the work's composition. It does so not by applying a general interpretive scheme but by approaching the film inductively. Top-down analysis prioritizes the a priori theory; bottom-up analysis privileges the film. The latter approach enables the poetician to illuminate aspects of style and structure without producing endlessly repetitive readings. Because poetics focuses on the film's functions and effects, moreover, it can postulate causal relations between the film's qualities and the viewer's activity. As such, it is apt to spotlight the filmmaker's artistry—for instance, by positing correlations between the viewer's responses and the filmmaker's creative choices. By contrast, culturalist approaches pay relatively little heed to the filmmaker's craft knowledge. Poetics, then, can illuminate the way the film's components shape the viewer's activity; it can elucidate the role of the viewer, reconstructing the processes of inference making, hypothesis framing, and other perceptual and cognitive activities that guide the viewer's comprehension. Culturalists, in contrast, have tended to subsume effects to general theories of culture. A typical heuristic involves inferring the effect a filmic device has upon the viewer (e.g., handheld camera and rapid cutting produce disorientation) and then interpreting this effect as a symptom of the a priori theory (e.g., disorientation betokens cultural instability and disappearance; see, for example, Tong 2008: 65–66). If culturalism reduces the viewer's activity to a nebulous, univocal “condition” (e.g., cultural anxiety), poetics systematically reconstructs the viewer's moment-by-moment uptake.

Poetics often goes beyond the work to enrich knowledge of genres, institutions, and social contexts. By means of bottom-up analysis, the poetician can,

8. See, for example, the following essays in Bordwell's *Poetics of Cinema* (2008b): “Aesthetics in Action: Kung-Fu, Gunplay, and Cinematic Expression” (395–411) and “Richness through Imperfection: King Hu and the Glimpse” (413–30).

for instance, theorize generalized principles governing a body of films—say, the signature traits of an individual author or the reigning tendencies of a national cinema. In addition, poetics positions the film in history. Its emphasis on historical and transcultural norms enables a perception of the film's indebtedness to past and culturally diverse traditions. Hence poetics often has occasion to refine postmodernist critics' hyperbolic claims of "newness." This is not to say that poetics dismisses contemporary films as inescapably derivative. As an inherently comparative undertaking, poetics can highlight continuity as well as change, indebtedness as well as innovation. In all, the poetics approach circumvents many of the flaws of culturalism while opening profitable avenues of its own. The above cluster of virtues is by no means exhaustive. Even so, I think it summarizes some ways in which poetics offers a preferable alternative to top-down culturalist hermeneutics.

What of the "thorny" issue of culture and society? Does poetics not neglect cultural forces in favor of a blinkered emphasis on the aesthetic object? The very proposition of a transcultural cinema indicates this is not so. Bordwell simply weights his emphasis differently than many culturalist critics do. If culturalism often puts an accent on cultural difference, Bordwell attunes his analysis to the affinities between cultures. As he succinctly puts it, "Culture not only divides us; it unites us" (Bordwell 2001: 23). Moreover, if society impacts movies, as culturalism contends, this impact is not direct and unmediated. Several layers of mediation intercede between the film and its social milieu. The concrete forces of the filmmaker's working situation, mode of production, and institutional and historical circumstances impinge more proximately upon the film than a broad feature of society does. Bordwell proposes that the critic, as a default, starts from the film and moves outward—the better to achieve plausible causal links among the film, its proximate conditions of production, and wider social causes (2008b: 32). Thus Bordwell does not ignore society but reverses the culturalist's priorities. The poetics of cinema he advances does not oppose cultural hermeneutics, hermeneutics in general, or general theories of cinema in toto. It highlights the importance of fine-grained close film analysis, of the priority of the film above predetermined general theories, and of the critic's obligation to create causal correlations between the film and society that are concrete, plausible, and (at least potentially) empirically verifiable. Bordwell's poetics, then, does not discount social and cultural factors. But it does diminish the woolly assumptions of social-reflection theory, along with other Grand Theories of culture and society that seldom provide causal explanations of the sort a poetics strives for (31).

The chapters that follow pursue a poetics of Wong's cinema. In adopting this approach I am not trying to argue for replacing one method or perspective (cultural hermeneutics) with another (poetics or formalism). Film analysis

should not reject cultural readings nor should it deny the value of interpretation tout court. I assume that the poetics approach can coincide with cultural hermeneutics as complementary practices. For the methodological reasons outlined in the previous section, however, the poetics approach and top-down heuristics do not always mesh well. Yet it is perfectly conceivable that a poetician could mount, say, a socio-allegorical reading of *2046* from the bottom up, moving from concrete features of the film to general conclusions concerning social factors. A poetics of cinema, therefore, does not preclude allegorical interpretation. Nevertheless, this book places primary emphasis on the films' denotative level, searching out patterns of composition and style; identifying textual motivations, functions, and effects; and reconstructing viewer responses (perceptual, cognitive, affective) cued by the work. This denotative level is not of concern only to the poetician interested in film art. Even allegorical critics should aim to know the film's surface intimately. I take it as given that allegorical content is always necessarily mediated by explicit textual features. One can only "access" embedded meaning by engaging with the film's primary level, its surface structure of style, story, and character. Studying this level of discourse, then, is not only essential to appreciating a filmmaker's mastery of craft. It is also *necessary* for the ascription of implicit or symptomatic meanings to the work.

Wong's Aesthetic of Disturbance

Central among this book's arguments is that Wong's cinema cultivates an aesthetic of disturbance. To explicate this idea, I need to set Wong's aesthetic against some key tendencies governing contemporary Hong Kong films. Bordwell identifies several of these features in his "Transcultural Spaces" essay and elsewhere (e.g., 2008b: 395–411). From the 1970s to the 1990s, he argues, Hong Kong directors adapted Hollywood's continuity practices to fresh effect. Close-ups, fast cutting, focus racking, and fluid camera movement were repurposed for a cinema based on expressive movement. Local directors harnessed these features to the principles of pictorial clarity and legibility, enabling the audacious movements of a swordsman or a kung-fu master to be crisply delineated. These pictorial principles are perhaps most visible in the action genre, though they govern other types of film too—romantic comedies, supernatural dramas, historical sagas. Even within Hong Kong's action cinema, however, directors adopted the legibility principle in different ways. Jackie Chan gives primacy to the profilmic event, stressing the spectacle's actuality; John Woo "constructs" action analytically, relying heavily on close-ups, rapid editing, camera movement, and the like. Both directors, despite their contrasting styles, prioritize the pictorial legibility of the spectacle. Against this context, Wong's

films can look utterly opaque. Yet Wong repudiates neither the legibility principle nor the cluster of devices drawn from intensified continuity. Instead, he mounts an aesthetic of disturbance, rather than outright violation, of the norms of maximal pictorial clarity holding sway in the local cinema. Visual schemas of legibility are revised in the formalist sense of “roughened form,” the play of devices within the work that complicates, retards, or thwarts the viewer’s perception and understanding (see Thompson 1988: 36–37). Just as Bordwell’s transcultural directors recast norms circulating within and between milieus, so Wong reworks the local cinema’s legibility, pressing toward an aesthetic fostering perceptual and cognitive challenge.

Not that Wong’s aesthetic of disturbance is solely or even chiefly visual. It is my contention that disturbance penetrates all parameters of his work. Again, this is partly a corollary of Wong’s effort to flout the transparent devices of local cinema. Take, for example, narrative plotting. In the 1980s and 1990s, popular Hong Kong films made plot architecture maximally salient, explicitly parsing stories into discriminable episodes (Bordwell 2011: 114–26). From the outset, Wong also adopted the principle of episodic construction. At times, however, he roughens the schema in ways that obscure the plot’s distinct phases. Tacit ellipses conceal progressions in the story, sending the viewer’s comprehension into disarray. At a more abstract level, the plot’s architectural design—explicitly episodic in most Hong Kong films—becomes harder to perceive; hence, critics tend to label Wong’s plots “fragmentary” and “disjointed” rather than episodic. In addition, Hong Kong movies of this period incline toward *moral* perspicuity. Manichaeism is part and parcel of local films, as of popular cinema everywhere. Even the eponymous hero of *The Killer*, a paid assassin, comes forward as fundamentally virtuous. Wong, however, disturbs this norm of moral clarity, placing fairly malevolent and amoral protagonists at his films’ center (think of *Days of Being Wild* and *Fallen Angels*). Popular Hong Kong films also furnish explicit emotional appeals. The emotions portrayed and elicited tend to be saturated, specific, and unambiguous; in other words, these films traffic in strong basic emotions. Wong’s films are also emotional experiences, but they tend to depict and arouse more diffuse emotion states. His protagonists—many of them disinclined to emote openly—are prone to express the “higher emotions,” that is, emotions that are complex, compound, or contradictory. At the level of effects, moreover, the films resist both the transparent emotions of popular cinema and the remote austerity of the art film. Drenched in mood, Wong’s cinema elicits powerful yet diffuse emotional responses.

In these and other ways, Wong disturbs the principles of clarity and legibility intrinsic to Hong Kong’s popular cinema during the 1980s and 1990s. Nevertheless, as this book tries to make clear, Wong’s experimentation takes place within self-imposed formal constraints. Perhaps surprisingly, his films

bear the hallmarks of organic unity. The films are formally experimental, but they are also characterized by compositional coherence and integrity. The tension between these impulses—toward disunity on the one hand and organicity on the other—contributes greatly to the films' fascination and dynamism. Contradictory impulses also obtain at the level of visual style. While sensuous imagery entices viewers toward passive absorption, a host of perceptual difficulties forces them to stay cognitively alert. The Wong Kar-wai film both exhilarates and exasperates. If the films are frustrating, this is due to Wong's roughening of popular norms. And here the very fact that Wong roughens—rather than radically subverts—established schemas behooves me to qualify the postmodernist claims of a radically new aesthetic. Instead, I conceive an aesthetic of disturbance; that is, an aesthetic that roughens existing norms in ways that both nourish and nonplus the eye, posing obstacles to the viewer's perception and understanding.

Why would Wong foster such an aesthetic? I can posit some gross hypotheses. Most crudely, Wong is a self-conscious auteur, and he seeks distinctiveness. From the start he defined a signature that marked him off from his contemporaries. Later, when the local industry responded with rip-offs, he reworked his stylistic program to outstrip his imitators. "Too many people are 'doing' Wong Kar-wai these days," he stated in 1997, "so I have to do something else" (Rayns 2008a: 33). He is also self-consciously a "world cinema" director, cognizant of the importance of the festival circuit. Wong understands that festival approval frequently goes to films probing the boundaries of film form, genre conventions, and norms of national cinema. In the late 1980s, local films like *Peking Opera Blues* (1986), *Rouge*, and *The Killer* proved that offbeat genre films could win international respect, preparing a path for Wong's own entry onto the festival market. Further, Wong is a passionate cinephile, well-versed in film history. He has cited as influences the modernist generation of European art filmmakers, including Antonioni, Godard, Truffaut, and Fellini. Like Wong, these auteurs pressed the limits of form without abandoning narrative. Their films evince a ludic approach to film style (compare Wong's topsy-turvy shots in *Happy Together* and the address to camera in *Fallen Angels*), they pose difficulties of perception and understanding (consider *Last Year at Marienbad* [1961] and *Hiroshima, mon amour* [1959]), and they can be visually sensuous (e.g., *Red Desert* [1964], *Le mépris* [1963], *Domicile conjugal* [1970], *La dolce vita* [1960]). More proximately, Wong was weaned on Hong Kong genre cinema (e.g., Shaw Brothers' *huangmei* operas and *wuxia pian*), a tradition of cinematic spectacle that was nothing if not visually sensuous. We might consider, then, Wong's aesthetic as drawing upon and blending these local and foreign influences. Another factor is Wong's background working in the commercial industry. Allied with his art film sensibility, the knowledge of popular

filmmaking he acquired informs an aesthetic at once abstruse and accessible. In addition, we could identify different personalities at work within a collaboration. If Wong relishes improvisation, chance, and accident, his editors (William Chang, Patrick Tam) reassert the formalities of structure at the postproduction phase. As I argue throughout this book, Wong's aesthetic of disturbance springs in large degree from Wong's work routines and mode of production.

The Book's Structure

In *Poetics of Cinema*, Bordwell distinguishes among analytical poetics (concerned with such matters as audiovisual style, constructional form, and themes), historical poetics (studying the film's historical circumstances and its contexts of reception), and a poetics of effect (focusing upon the viewer's activity). The chapters that follow reside predominantly in the first and last of these domains. Each chapter considers how Wong's compositional strategies try to steer the viewer's uptake in particular ways. As such, the book presupposes a problem-solution heuristic governing the filmmaker's activity. Brian Boyd summarizes this perspective thus:

We can see authors as problem-solvers with individual capacities and preferences making strategic choices within particular situations, by shaping different kinds of appeals to the cognitive preferences and expectations of audiences—preferences and expectations shaped at both specieswide and local levels—and balancing the costs against the benefits of authorial effort in composition and audience effort in comprehension and response. (2009: 396)

Filmmakers, like literary authors, compose the work so as to encourage particular kinds of pickup. (This assumption contrasts the culturalist trope of unconscious directorial activity.) In addition, the filmmaker may set *himself* problems in the form of artistic challenges. As Jacques Rivette rhetorically puts it:

Is challenge too slim a criterion [for art]? But what was Michelangelo's fresco technique or Bach's fugue technique if not the compulsion to invent an answer to some vexing question (and I'll say nothing of the infinite challenges of technique and construction—often subtle to the point of seeming trivial—which all artists secretly impose on themselves, and which will never be known to the public). (1985: 277–78)

Wong's aesthetic of disturbance, reworked by the director throughout his career, might be perceived in terms of both kinds of problem-solution model. Most broadly, this book attempts to illuminate the interface among film, filmmaker, and viewer. That is not to say that the book slights historical matters.

On the contrary, it attempts throughout to identify historical norms and to situate Wong's cinema against pertinent historical traditions.

The questions I pursue range across Bordwell's three domains of poetics. What principles of composition characterize Wong's films? Why are they composed as they are? What continuities of style, story, and theme unify the oeuvre? How are the films designed to elicit particular responses? How do they draw upon and recast particular traditions? To this cluster of questions I would add: How have Wong's films been theorized by critics and scholars? These questions unify the chapters that follow. The book's overall structure mirrors the poetics method itself, beginning with close attention to specific features of the films and widening the scope to examine pertinent contexts (e.g., genre, historical poetics, appropriation, and influence). Each chapter takes as its primary focus a single aspect of Wong's filmmaking—musical style, visual style, narration, and genre. Treating each aspect separately enables the critic to provide detailed analyses of the films' functions and effects. Of course, all these filmic aspects work together, and I do not neglect how, say, Wong coordinates music with visual style. However, for analytical purposes, isolating distinct components gives a greater purchase on each one, and ultimately, on the whole. To isolate features of the work also enables a confrontation of critical assumptions about those features (for instance, that Wong flouts genre). Finally, the book's format lets me ask, "How does an aesthetic of disturbance manifest itself in each of these aspects of the work?"

The next chapter examines Wong's musical practices and principles of musical organization. It begins by surveying the critical frameworks customarily applied to Wong's musical style. Like the other main chapters, I treat Wong's corpus generally before presenting a case study. The analysis of *Chungking Express* in Chapter 2 introduces one of the book's thematic leitmotifs (indeed, a leitmotif braided throughout Wong's films)—that of authenticity, a key pre-occupation for Wong and his protagonists. Chapter 3 treats visual style. Here I elaborate what I take to be Wong's stylistic "dominant," namely, his principle of disturbance. The salient feature of Wong's visual style, this chapter suggests, is its tactics of compositional and perceptual disturbance. In Chapter 4 I turn to the formal principles of Wong's storytelling, arguing that his films display robust formal unity. Chapter 5 centers on Wong's controversial engagement with popular genre. This chapter's main analysis of *In the Mood for Love* seeks to bring together this book's parameters of study—music, visual style, narrative discourse, and genre. The final chapter isolates and reviews the book's major claims. It reiterates the importance of a poetics approach to Wong's films (and to Chinese films generally). Put simply, the poetics approach helps us appreciate the art of Chinese cinema.

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