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Time after Time: Exploring Temporality and Identity in Wong Kar-wai's Days of Being Wild, In the Mood for Love, and 2046

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Time after Time: Exploring Temporality and Identity in Wong Kar-wai's *Days of Being Wild*, *In the Mood for Love*, and *2046*

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Wong Kar-wai is part of a generation of Hong Kong filmmakers whose work can be seen in response to two pivotal events in Hong Kong, the 1984 signing of the Sino-British Joint Declaration detailing Hong Kong's return to China in 1997 and the events of Tiananmen Square in 1989. As a condition of the handover, China has promised a fifty-year period in which the economic system and way of life in Hong Kong are to remain unchanged, and that period ends in the year 2046. It would be an error, however, to read Wong's films in a political context solely because he is a Hong Kong filmmaker, and Rey Chow criticizes such a wholesale political reading of Hong Kong cinema, writing, "I am referring to the tendency, whenever a non-Western work is being analyzed, to affix to it a kind of reflectionist value by way of geopolitical realism so that a film made in Hong Kong around 1997, for instance, would invariably be approached as having something to do with the factographic 'reality' of Hong Kong's return to the People's Republic of China" ("Nostalgia" 32). Chow suggests that an analysis which deliberately departs from such a reading might be more beneficial.

Although I understand and agree with Chow's criticism, for the purpose of this essay I take a viewpoint closer to that of Ka-Fai Yau who maintains that Hong

Kong's geopolitical position does affect its cinema. Yau works within a Deleuzian framework to suggest a connection between Hong Kong cinema and, primarily, the anxieties surrounding the 1997 handover. Yau writes, "In response to its specific geohistorical situation, an o/Other cinema of thirdness begins, when the new Hong Kong cinema has been responding to a new geohistorical situations via new cinematic images" (541). Yau correlates the post-1984 new Hong Kong cinema with the post-WWII cinema and the "new image" that Gilles Deleuze explores in *Cinema 1* and *Cinema 2*. Deleuze identifies WWII as the pivotal event whose fallout fundamentally altered the way we experience images. This alteration resulted in the creation of a new cinematic image in which the seer replaces the agent and movement changes from being location specific to being time specific. For Deleuze, action loses its impact as "it is no longer time which is subordinate to movement; it is movement which subordinates itself to time" (*Cinema 2* 271). Events occur across the terrain of time as stories unfold in cycles instead of lines. We see this in Wong's films as his characters are more or less locally fixed but wander freely through temporal space, often manifested in nocturnal wanderings without destination or the simple act of waiting. Yau interprets this Deleuzian emphasis on the new image within the context of thirdness which can be understood as a relational quality or a point of transition, essentially a space of becoming in which a character moves between one identity and another. In this essay, I read Wong's work in part through Yau's lens, as a response to the cultural anxieties provoked by the handover

as manifested in Wong's films by a preoccupation with both the specificity and arbitrariness of time resulting in temporal dilemmas which come to identify the characters.

The first film in the trilogy, *Days of Being Wild*, centers on Yuddy (Leslie Cheung), a rebellious young man whose search for his birth mother provides the structure for the story. Rebecca (Rebecca Pan) is Yuddy's foster mother with whom he shares a combative relationship because Rebecca knows the identity of Yuddy's mother but refuses to tell him. Finally she does relent and tells Yuddy that his mother lives in the Philippines, at which point Yuddy goes to the find her but is disillusioned, and in a voiceover tells us that he only wanted to know what his mother looked like, but she refused to see him at all. Her rejection sends Yuddy into a hostile depression and in a self-destructive move he cheats a gang of criminals out of a forged passport. Yuddy flees on a train with a friend and while onboard is shot by an unknown man with a gun. He dies on the train and his last thought is of a woman he once loved, So Lai-chun (Maggie Cheung), a character of sorts whom we will meet many times.

The second film, *In the Mood for Love*, begins with a character named So Lai-chun, again played by Maggie Cheung, moving into a boarding room. If this is the So Lai-chun from *Days of Being Wild*, she is now the married Mrs. Chan, a sophisticated version of her character from the previous film. Just as So Lai-chun reappears, so, too, does Yuddy, also in minor variation and now called Chow. It is complicated to read Yuddy and Chow as the same character because Yuddy dies in the first film,

however, as I will demonstrate later, I believe there is a strategy for reading these two characters as parts of a whole. Chow rents a room in the neighboring apartment and moves in on the same day as Mrs. Chan. The moving crews mix up the couples' possessions before finally returning things to their rightful owners and this only begins a pattern of swapping as Mrs. Chan and Chow soon realize that their spouses are having an affair with each other. Attempting to determine how the affair started, they begin to role play with Mrs. Chan acting the part of Chow's wife and Chow acting the part of Mrs. Chan's husband. They also slip into and out of their own identities as well, creating an indeterminate layer of identity while repeating, "We won't be like them," defining themselves in relation to their absent spouses. Chow eventually truly falls in love with Mrs. Chan and the relationship ends in a melancholic sigh.

In *2046*, the last film of the trilogy, Chow returns, though he is considerably different. As opposed to the earlier clean-shaven Chow, this one wears a moustache and, as he tells us, is an "expert ladies man." Essentially, he looks like Chow, but acts like Yuddy. Chow meets a gambler in Singapore called Black Spider, who he later finds is named Su Li Zhen (Gong Li). This Su Li resembles the other in both name and appearance, though is not the same woman. Chow's dealings with Black Spider begin and end the film, echoing a pattern of recurrence we see throughout the trilogy. Concurrent to this story, the film also portrays a place called 2046, accessible by a futuristic train. As Chow tells us, "It is a place to recapture lost memories because in

2046 nothing ever changes.” We see the train with one passenger on it. He is another iteration of Chow, this time a Japanese man called Tak (Takuya Kimura). As the film ends, we see Tak going to 2046 and returning in a seemingly endless train ride.

Wong deftly manipulates time within each film and through the course of the trilogy such that a repeated element in one film ultimately becomes part of a consistent framing device for the whole trilogy. These elements such as clocks and mirrors are what Rey Chow might call items of the “everyday” that come to take on multiple meanings (“Sentimental” 648). Through repetition, these items undergo a constant process of redefinition, similar to the transformational process Wong’s characters undergo. When *Days of Being Wild* begins, Yuddy buys a Coke at the counter of a modest hotel lobby in Hong Kong, 1960. His bag is slung over his shoulder as he leans against the counter and the lobby walls sweat under peeling layers of paint. Yuddy and the counter girl are the only ones in the room, seemingly in the world. In one smooth motion Yuddy pulls a bottle from the cooler, pries the cap off and sets it down on the counter, cigarette dangling from his lips. A medium shot moves into a close-up of Yuddy’s handsome face as he asks the counter girl, “How much?” She tells him the price and the scene cuts to a close up of a wall clock; it’s 3:00 in the afternoon. The scene cuts back to Yuddy as he asks, “What’s your name?” The girl refuses to tell him, but he already knows, “Your name is So Lai-chun.” The camera follows So Lai-chun (Maggie Cheung) as she moves from behind the counter into the room. Startled that he knows her name, she straightens her back and asks

how he knows it. Instead of answering, Yuddy leans in over her shoulder and purrs, “You’ll see me tonight in your dreams.” So Lai-chun does indeed dream of Yuddy and when she sees him later, he tells her that he wants to be friends. In a close-up of the wall clock we see the second hand sweep through one minute before the hands arrive at 3:00 again. Yuddy tells So Lai-chun, “From now on, we’re one-minute friends.” The two move from being friends for one minute to two minutes to an hour and so on. Indeed, their friendship will last throughout the trilogy, though always in variation.

This scene begins Wong’s 1960s trilogy, and it is a fitting introduction to the director’s major themes of temporality in relation to secrets and revelation, the actual and the virtual and nostalgia and return. I suggest that one way to understand Wong’s trilogy is to see *Days of Being Wild* as the beginning of a long memory which builds a sense of melancholic nostalgia that is shot through the whole trilogy. The story initiates a search for identity that eventually culminates in a state of irresolution in *2046*. The characters do not arrive at any one defined state, but rather exist in a state of what Ka-Fai Yau might describe as thirdness, or a space of transition and becoming. Wong complicates this interstitial space by layering characters and forming plot circuits so that a character’s name might resurface despite being associated with a different person in a different time, suggesting that identity is perpetually unfixed or unknown. Yuddy illustrates this idea because he is repeatedly denied his “real” identity.

Like many of the women in Wong's films, Yuddy's foster mother Rebecca has an ambiguous past. It's hinted that she was a paid escort and, as we find later in the film, was steadily paid by Yuddy's birth mother to care for him. Rebecca, however, now supports Yuddy and draws a connection between supporting Yuddy and paying for an escort. The transactional nature of Yuddy and Rebecca's relationship is repeated elsewhere throughout the trilogy. Here Yuddy and Rebecca are bound by an unspoken contract. Similarly, in *In the Mood for Love*, the affair is discovered through exchanged gifts and in *2046* one lover keeps the other at a distance by buying her time. This commodification of time gives value to an otherwise abstract entity, but in a very critical way. Payment serves as a precursor to love as love becomes a thing that must be serviced. Wong's characters rarely love the person with whom they are partnered to the degree that payment serves as a substitute for love. To that end, love is not the thing of greatest value in relationships, but rather time is.

The combative relationship between Yuddy and Rebecca is based on secrets, the first of Wong's three major themes. Rebecca withholds the identity of Yuddy's mother from him in part with the hope that her secret will draw Yuddy closer and will deepen their bond. This hope establishes a pattern of relation between Wong's characters in the trilogy. Characters rely on secrets as having special powers that will release them from the present. Yuddy wants to know the secret of his mother's identity because he wants to understand his own, but Rebecca does not want to divulge what she knows because she wants to keep Yuddy as a part of her identity.

This reliance on secrets as protection implies a faith in the power of the unknown, whether it is the future or the past, and in this case Rebecca and Yuddy both feel the power of the unknown and struggle for it. During a scene in Rebecca's bedroom in which she and Yuddy discuss the matter of his mother's identity, Yuddy lazily daydreams in a chair while Rebecca sits on the bed talking to him. Yuddy looks at her and says, "Don't you know you're giving me an excuse to hate you?" Rebecca stands in flash of anger and replies that Yuddy should go and find his mother in the Philippines. She tells him that he thinks of his mother as a fantasy and instead she could be, as she says, "Worse than me!" Rebecca's implication is that the secret Yuddy dearly wants to know may be a disillusioning fantasy that is worse than the reality he already knows, suggesting he should take refuge in fantasy. Nevertheless, Yuddy cannot be swayed and leaves as soon as Rebecca tells him his mother's whereabouts. The scene ends in a curious medium shot of Rebecca as she stands before the backdrop of a plum colored sky with her back to us as she stares into the distant sea. As the shot tracks in to a close-up, Rebecca turns to cast an arched look over her shoulder. She is poised somewhere between Yuddy's past and future and the knowing looks she gives is one of the most pointed in the film because it suggests the corrosive nature of her secret and the dangerousness of this peculiar threshold.

Though Rebecca may not know the future, she has decided to relinquish the past by releasing her authority over Yuddy and as he leaves, she stands centered in a placeless frame, waiting.

Yuddy leaves for the Philippines to find his birth mother, but it is a doomed trip because knowing his mother's identity does not provide him with any insight into his own. In a tracking shot we see Yuddy from behind, walking angrily down a palm tree-lined gravel road and away from his mother's tropical estate. His back is to the camera as we follow behind him. Yuddy's mother refused to see him, and even worse she refused to let Yuddy see her. It's a greater crime because to have seen his mother's face would have been to see into his past, to find the root of himself, but instead her denial is a denial of his own identity because for Yuddy, the face is the primary site of identity, as evidenced by the number of occasions that he stares searchingly into a mirror. His mother's rejection means that he'll never see beyond his own blankness and as he walks away with his back to the camera, his denunciation of identity is clear.

Yuddy's fixation with his image in a mirror is emphatic in the film. In several shots we see Yuddy before a mirror combing back his hair or adjusting his collar, even at one point dancing with his mirror image. He seems to exist as a companion to his mirrored self rather than the originator of it. Yuddy's search for an identity through the mirror may provide a connection between Yuddy in *Days of Being Wild* and the central character, Chow Mo-wan (Tony Leung), in the next two films of the trilogy. At the end of *Days of Being Wild*, Yuddy flees on a train with a friend, Tide, and while onboard is shot to death. While Yuddy dies on the train, his last thought is of his "one minute friend," So Lai-chun. Yuddy tells Tide, "When you see her again, tell her

I remember nothing.” This will be significant in *2046* when Chow boards a train to a place called 2046, a place where people go to recover lost memories.

In the last scene of *Days of Being Wild* we can establish the connection between Yuddy and Chow. The final scene is short and mysterious. A nameless character (Tony Leung) is preparing for an evening out. The ceiling is strangely low, giving the room a vaguely convex, hallucinatory cast. The man is a dapper figure styled as less tragic Yuddy. With Yuddy’s mannerisms, he folds a pack of cigarettes into one pocket and a bundle of money into another. He looks deeply at himself in a mirror and combs back his pomaded hair. He has all the confidence and certainty Yuddy lacks and the film ends with the man flicking his cigarette out the window, turning off the light and leaving the room. The scene lasts about three minutes and seems to have no connection to the film and no explanation, until ten years later when the second film in the trilogy, *In the Mood for Love*, offers a possible solution with the appearance of Tony Leung as Chow. If the films are read in a straightforward chronology, it’s difficult to say that Yuddy is Chow, particularly because Yuddy dies on the train. However, if the films are read as concurrent alternatives or as stories which overlap in chronology and potentialities, it’s possible to read Chow as a facet of Yuddy, a kind of through-the-looking-glass version. In order to read the films this way, it’s helpful to look at Gilles Deleuze’s concept of the mirror image.

Deleuze sees the mirror as a place of exchange. The actual and the virtual enter into a circuit which becomes a dialogue about identity. Deleuze sees this circuitry as

part of the crystal image, the relay between the actual and the virtual (*Cinema 2* 71). If we see Yuddy and Chow as bits along the circuit, we can read them as facets of a singular entity, reflecting and existing in relation to each other. Operating under this theory, it's possible to imagine a situation in which Yuddy looks into a mirror and sees Chow staring back. It becomes therefore possible to follow Chow as he picks up the story where Yuddy leaves it. This is not a chronology, but a circuitry in which repeated characters play more like minor variations. Deleuze argues that this circuitry is part of image-making in a postwar, and I argue new Hong Kong, cinema in which we "no longer know what is imaginary or real, physical or mental...It is as if the real and the imaginary were running after each other, as if each was being reflected in the other" (*Cinema 2* 7). In Wong's films, the real and imaginary are always in constant intersection in the form of coincidences, clichés, and mistaken identities. To read Chow as a minor variation of Yuddy allows us to look at the trilogy in a different way, through layers versus linearity, and it introduces Wong's second major theme, which is the interplay between the actual and the virtual.

In the Mood for Love explores the relationship between the actual and the virtual explicitly. For the sake of clarity in this discussion, I will refer to the So Lai-chun character as Mrs. Chan and the Yuddy/Chow character as Chow. Mrs. Chan and Chow are brought together by the discovery that their spouses are having an affair. The scene takes place in a restaurant as Mrs. Chan sits in a booth across from Chow. In a shot/reverse shot series of close-ups, Chow subtly asks Mrs. Chan where she got

her handbag. She replies that her husband bought it on a trip abroad and it isn't available locally. Chow replies gently in an exhale of cigarette smoke, "Oh," he says as he clinks his cup against its saucer. "Actually," Mrs. Chan says, "I want to ask you something too." The camera quickly pans to Chow as he looks up, "What?" he asks. A quick pan to Mrs. Chan holds her in close-up as she inquires about Chow's tie. He says that it, too, came from abroad and was a gift from his wife. "What a coincidence," Mrs. Chan smiles subduedly and then reveals that her husband has the same tie. Chow then reveals that his wife has the same handbag. Casting their eyes downward, the two confess their suspicions of their spouses' affair, a fact confirmed by their indiscrete gift exchanges. Before long, the discovery turns out to be liberating because it unites them in their curiosity about how the affair started. The next scene shows Mrs. Chan and Chow strolling down a deserted street as they begin an intricate game of role playing in order to retrace the beginning of the affair. When we return later to the restaurant, Mrs. Chan and Chow's roles have changed somewhat as they enter into a second, virtual relationship.

The couple is again seated in a booth. "You order for me," Mrs. Chan says, handing Chow the menu, "I've no idea what your wife likes." With this invitation, the couple takes on an additional set of identities. Mrs. Chan acts the part of Chow's wife as Chow acts the part of Mrs. Chan's husband. In the course of this, they nonchalantly slip into and out of their own identities as well, breaking character when the moment doesn't feel right or when a point is in dispute. In their combination of

reality and fantasy, they live in the virtual and actual world simultaneously. If in *Days of Being Wild* the mirror acts as a point of exchange between the actual and the virtual, here that exchange happens without the mediation of a mirror. Mrs. Chan and Chow establish a circuit between the two worlds in which their present identity is an oscillation between the real and imaginary. This layering of identity creates a present based on a perceived past. Mrs. Chan and Chow may reenact the beginning of their spouses' affair and at the same time create a history for themselves in which they are defined in relation to a set of others, or the two missing spouses.

Several times during the course of their relationship, Mrs. Chan and Chow say to each other, "We won't be like them," yet it's unclear what they really mean because the two indeed are becoming just like "them" by intentionally retracing their steps and it is here that time begins to fragment. During the scene in the restaurant, Mrs. Chan has three wardrobe changes. Though the scene appears to play out over the course of one evening, Mrs. Chan's three different dresses indicate that the couple has had dinner on at least three separate evenings. In this atypical differentiation of time, Wong gives us no other sense that time has passed except this subtle clue that plays out between four personas in the bodies of two characters. In Deleuzian terms, this layering can be thought of as part of something that Deleuze refers to as the crystal image, which he defines as the relay between the actual and the virtual, the clear and the opaque, and the part and the whole (*Cinema 2* 71). In the case of Mrs. Chan and Chow, it is a relay between themselves and the roles they play, between real and

repressed desire, between this one moment and time undifferentiated. This process of layering is an ever changing reformulation of the present via the past in a situation in which facets of an image or reality can be held simultaneously because multiple potentialities can originate from one source. Chow can be himself or Mr. Chan or even an idealized Yuddy, or all three together. As in cubist painting, the figure can reflect various perspectives because it is not a static entity, but rather a captured moment in the process of building and rebuilding meaning. In this way, Chow can embody multiple characters at once because he is in the process of developing an identity, becoming the character who eventually arrives at *2046* in an ambiguous state, not a definitive endpoint.

Deleuze writes, “The present is the actual image, and *its* contemporaneous past is the virtual image, the image in a mirror” (*Cinema 2* 79). In this case, the mirror is altered as the question of pinning down an identity becomes elusive because the characters themselves represent the relay between the real and the imaginary. In her reading of Deleuze, Claire Colebrook makes the point succinctly when she writes “memory is the clearest case of the imbrication of the virtual in the actual” (80). In this case, Mrs. Chan and Chow simultaneously create the past and the present which exists somewhere both outside and inside their real selves. The place for *In the Mood for Love* in the trilogy is as just such a fantastic memory. As Mrs. Chan and Chow create a past that never existed, the film itself is a version of the past which never existed. It is not simply a memory, but an image representation of memory itself.

With its saturated color palate, undifferentiated sense of time and stylized slow motion, the film represents the very act of remembering in which some images stand out, others fall away and time loses its shape. The allegiance the characters have to a past love, the kind Chow will have for Mrs. Chan, can instead be read as a love of the past. It is the era as much as the person that represents love. Paradoxically, here the past is born as a response to the threat of the future. By creating a past, Mrs. Chan and Chow stall the inevitable future in which the discovery of their spouses' affair will likely end their own, lending the present an air of nostalgia as they create moments in order to remember them later.

Of the films in the trilogy, *In the Mood for Love* has the most visceral feel of nostalgia. Referring to this quality, critic Stephen Teo writes, "In watching the film unfold, the audience itself is partaking in a ritual in transfigured time...each member of the audience, depending on their ages, could in theory go as far back in time as they wish to the moment that holds the most formative nostalgic significance for them." The film evokes nostalgia in a way that is non-specific and instead conjures feelings of a universal passed time that is glamorous and romantic. With this emphasis on nostalgia, we can tie the film to Hong Kong's recent political culture and the significance of evoking the past. Ackbar Abbas likens the phenomenon to creation in a space of disappearance. He writes, "The binarisms used to represent Hong Kong as a subject [East versus West or tradition & modernity] give us not so much a sense of déjà vu, as the even more uncanny feeling of what we might call the *déjà disparu*: the

feeling that what is new and unique about the situation is always already gone, and we are left holding a handful of clichés, or a cluster of memories of what has never been" (25). Wong responds to this phenomenon by creating layered histories for his characters to establish a vanished time and place, essentially a history created to service the films. He uses clichés to present a memory so real as to be taken for granted, so recognized that it must be true. If Yuddy in *Days of Being Wild* was denied identity, here we have a surplus of identity. For Mrs. Chan and Chow, this singular embodiment of rivaling personas, memory, nostalgia, past, and present must find some outlet, and it does, in a hotel room, number 2046.

2046 is a complicated number in Wong's world though it is often a site of creation. In the case of this film, it is a hotel room where Mrs. Chan and Chow co-write a martial arts serial. Chow moves into the room and the scene in which Mrs. Chan visits him for the first time begins with a short montage of Mrs. Chan alternately climbing and descending the stairs to the room in a cinematic version of Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase* and a nod to the trilogy's cubist sensibility. The visit is brief and concealed behind a closed door and upon leaving, Mrs. Chan says again to Chow, "We won't be like them." Her insistence always leaves the couple in negation, what they will not be. Room 2046, however, provides a space where they create new identities by writing the martial arts serial.

When Mrs. Chan visits again, the camera follows her inside the room. Though the décor is period, this is a separate other space without time or place. None of

Wong's ubiquitous clocks haunt the room; instead, it is a step away from the present into a realm removed from the battle between the reality and role-playing that has defined the couple. Their relationship moves into a territory of creation through their writing as they invent yet another set of identities over which they have complete control. Mrs. Chan and Chow are happy in the room. In one shot, they smile at each other in a series of mirrors, three versions of Chow smiling contentedly at three versions of Mrs. Chan. Here they exist not in the actual or virtual, but in a separate state of possibility, or a state of becoming. It is their happiest time together, the synthesis of the layers of the past and present, the actual and virtual, coming together in a new, undefined way. The scene is composed of tracking shots and languid pans as the camera seems to sway in a breeze, watching the couple in the mirrors, reflected, faceted, multiplied. Eventually, however, the couple must leave the room and their affair ends on a note of melancholy nostalgia.

Making a connection between the characters in the three films, Chow is the gentleman to Yuddy's rogue and provides a sentimental memory to counter Yuddy's disappointed reality. *In the Mood for Love* is a romanticized version of a past whose impact on the future is uncertain and it prompts the question of whether romanticizing the past neglects the present or looks with ambivalence on the future? How does the constructed relationship between Mrs. Chan and Chow affect Chow in the future? How are these stories of disappointment and nostalgia tied into notions of temporality and identity? Wong begins to address this question by looking toward

the future, though still through the lens of the past. This process marks the last major theme of the trilogy which the final film *2046* exemplifies. It is the element of nostalgia and return.

2046 fittingly begins with a scene that also ends the film. Chow is in Singapore and meets a gambler who is called Black Spider but named Su Li Zhen (Gong Li). Black Spider resembles Maggie Cheung's character from the previous two films not only in name, but in appearance by wearing the same elaborate hairstyle and stylized cheongsams. Su Li Zhen has a mysterious black-gloved hand and is silent about her past. Chow asks her to go to Hong Kong with him, but she refuses so he leaves alone. After arriving in Hong Kong, Chow goes to a nightclub and runs into a woman named Lulu (Carina Lau) that he recognizes from his days in Singapore. She pretends not to recognize him until Chow mentions that she once told him he reminded her of a man she loved very much who died young. They spend the evening together before Chow takes her back to Lulu room, number 2046 at the Occidental Hotel. She's had too much to drink so Chow makes her comfortable on the bed and leaves quickly. When he returns the next day to return her key, the manager tells him she's left. Chow later discovers she was stabbed by her boyfriend, who she referred to as a "legless bird" preoccupied by wandering. In *Days of Being Wild*, Lulu, played by Carina Lau as well, was Yuddy's last girlfriend and we can take the legless bird allusion to refer to Yuddy as it was a metaphor he often used to describe himself. Here the connection between these two films, the first and last in

the trilogy, becomes apparent in a convoluted way through familiar characters who disappear only to reappear later. Chow asks to rent Lulu's room because he likes the number. The manager asks, "It has some significance for you?" Chow smiles and says, "I'm joking." It's an ambiguous response to an issue that has been critical in the trilogy and certainly we can't interpret the whole thing as a joke, but it again calls into question the true significance of 2046.

Chow eventually takes room 2047, which we might think beyond reason at this point, but he takes it with little thought, meaning to move to 2046 when it becomes vacant. Here the film begins to pile up coincidences, off-kilter substitutions and repetitions. Chow befriends a woman named Bai Ling (Zhang Ziyi) who he pays for intimacies, another example of the commodification of time that we saw in *Days of Being Wild*. Chow then takes up with the hotel proprietor's daughter, Wang Jingwen (Fay Wong). Jingwen has been conducting an affair with a Japanese man of whom her father disapproves. He orders her to cease the affair and in a state of pity she spends time with Chow. Together the two begin writing a martial arts serial that they title *2046*. Chow says, "That was my happiest summer ever," before adding, "But it didn't last." Chow travels to Singapore to look for "Miss Su." When he can't find her, he begins gambling every day and the person who comes to his rescue is Black Spider. The two meet in a dingy noodle stall next to the casino and begin a conversation. By coincidence, they find that they've just come from the same place. Chow tells Black Spider that he's lost a lot gambling and is trying to win enough to

return to Hong Kong. He tells her, “I didn’t expect to win. I just hoped to get back my stake.” By his “stake,” Chow may be referring to his relationship with Mrs. Chan, and if not the relationship, then the memory of it. As Chow continues with the present, the thing most in jeopardy is the past. He strikes a deal with Black Spider to recapture what he’s lost and she wins back his money. At the noodle stall, she gives him a folded stack of bills, sliding it across the table and keeping her small share. She says, “If you need be again...I’ll be waiting here.” She rises from the table and walks away and in a close up we see Chow turn his head over his shoulder as she walks by. “Hey,” he says, “I still don’t know your name.” The scene cuts to a medium shot of Black Spider turning, then a close up on her profile. “It’s Su. Su Li Zhen,” she says. The shot is framed to conjure an iconic shot of Mrs. Chan in *In the Mood for Love* and the connection is immediate. Chow turns back to the table stunned and in voiceover recounts the story of Mrs. Chan, which he later tells Su Li Zhen after she returns. The two leave the noodle stall and the final shots of them walking away are the same shots that introduce them in the beginning of the film. They stand in a darker version of an alleyway in which Chow and Mrs. Chan once stood. Su and Chow share a desperate, empty kiss and part ways.

Concurrent to this story unfolding is the futuristic space of 2046. It is a place, we are told at the beginning of the film, where people go to recapture lost memories because nothing ever changes. Nobody knows if it’s true because nobody ever returns, save for one person, another version of Chow, the Japanese character Tak

who is dressed like a futuristic samurai. 2046 is represented by a high speed train that travels through a hi-gloss cityscape. The interior of the train is the only image we have of the place called 2046. Tak is the only traveler on the train and is a version of Chow taken from the martial arts serial Chow wrote with Jingwen. Tak/Chow is returning from 2046 for “vague reasons,” though he seems to be returning because he didn’t find the woman he truly loved. We get the sense that like Yuddy, Tak’s destiny is to remain on the train forever.

The trilogy leaves us wondering about the significance of 2046. In the films, it is a number of things: the future represented by the train; the place where people go to reclaim lost memories; the name of the martial-arts serial that Chow and Jingwen write; the number of Chow’s room in the Occidental Hotel; and the number of the room Chow once shared with So Lai-chun in *In the Mood for Love*. Outside of the film, it is also the last year of the fifty year period of dormancy between British and Chinese rule over Hong Kong. With all of these associations the issue becomes relating them back to Wong’s main themes and making these connections relies on Ka-Fai Yau’s interpretation of thirdness.

In reference to Deleuze’s concept of thirdness, Yau writes “Deleuze’s appropriation of [C.S.] Peirce’s concept of thirdness is an endeavor that aims at a “beyond” that disrupts binary reductions of things. This endeavor sets out to enter the state of B/becoming – reading and deciphering” (544). Yau interprets these three images as the essence, the other and their relational quality, thirdness. In Wong’s

trilogy, we might read them as Yuddy, Chow and Yuddy/Chow where Yuddy stands as the essence, Chow as the other in relation to Yuddy, and Chow/Yuddy as the interconnectedness of all three. Through the lens of thirdness, analyzing interconnectedness becomes a way of making meaning. For Yau, this is one of the projects of Hong Kong cinema, “The conception of a new Hong Kong cinema itself is an endeavor to initiate thirdness out of prevailing representations of both Hong Kong cinema and other Western cinemas” (543). Thus it can be argued that Wong’s films portray the attempts of characters to establish their own identities within a shifting temporality as well the attempt of the films to establish their identities within a shifting geohistorical situation. In both cases, the issue is to get at identity through a sense of thirdness, or relation and connectivity. Wong complicates connectivity through secrecy, virtuality and return.

Yau identifies thirdness as a personal and political space of becoming, of the movement from one identity into another. In this space, time loses its linearity. Connections are made based on what is possible, in the most unrestrained sense. Leaving aside the political aspect and just looking at the films, we see this in the myriad of coincidences throughout the trilogy. How can it be that each film features a different character named So Lai-chun? How does this character intersect with Chow in various versions throughout time and place? Time is divorced from any sense of chronology and instead becomes a meditation on connection, particularly as it is often a missed connection. When Yuddy tells So Lai-chun that they will be “one minute

friends” it’s a minute that eventually extends throughout the course of all three films in one character or another. To expand one minute into something much larger is Wong’s triumph over the tyranny of time while still being subject to it because eventually all periods of time must end. For Wong, however, deadlines are not endpoints but instead reflective surfaces that prompt a return investigation. Wong’s characters exist in an ambiguous state while forever traveling in pursuit of an identity that they are eternally creating and recreating. Like Hong Kong itself, Wong’s characters struggle with the idea of sovereignty as they exist within overlapping identities. Wong’s characters are defined by misaligned connection, by the continual processes of acceptance and rejection in which their power is diffused because it is misplaced. Wong’s characters fundamentally cannot exist both within a state of thirdness and alone, yet they attempt to live in this paradox because it expresses the vitality that unity alone cannot provide. They exist in the act of relating, not in the relation itself.

The relentless making and remaking of images is the inevitable result of the passage of time, which in this case means the characters see themselves in the past and because the whole past can never be known, they live in secrets and one step behind the actual. Colebrook summarizes the point succinctly, “We repeat the past in order to destroy the present” (82). In Chow’s case, to repeat the past is to be forever stranded on the train to 2046, a journey which is somewhere between memory and the future. For Chow, the compulsion to return to the past, a past which coexists

with the present and the future, is a compulsion to build, destroy and rebuild an identity while simultaneously denying the power of the present or the authority of the future. This constant recreation of the past is the very thing that holds the present in limbo. The present and the past exist in a third state which is always emerging. Chow is always emerging, however Chow's continual emergence is not necessarily an evolution because to move forward does not mean to progress.

Before Yuddy dies on the train in *Days of Being Wild*, he asks his friend to tell So Lai-chun that he "remembers nothing." When Chow returns from 2046, it is because he can't recover a lost memory. They are both left cherishing the past but denied by it. In the form of secrecy, confusion between the actual and the virtual, or nostalgia, the past repeatedly betrays Chow. His reliance on a faltering history renders him powerless and adrift on a train with no real destination. He loses and wins back his stake, but getting it back means getting it back in a different form. Winning and losing are only ways for Chow to exchange the cards in an attempt to reassemble the hand he started with. Chow finds that there is no such thing as recovering a lost memory because once it's gone, it's gone forever. If that memory is attached to a person or a time, they disappear with it. There is no place that is the same for Chow as where he started because he is changed by the journey. As a title card at the end of *2046* reads, "He didn't turn back. It was as if he'd boarded a very long train heading for a drowsy future through the unfathomable night." For Chow, the place of connection is unavoidable but disillusioning, and seemingly without end.

Temporality and identity become intertwined as a meditation on the paths Chow continually retraces in an effort to find his place in a shifting time.

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