

ACADEMY OF PERFORMING ARTS IN PRAGUE

FILM AND TELEVISION SCHOOL

Film, Television and Photography

Montage

MASTER'S THESIS

A BALLAD OF PROXIMITY:

A NEOFORMALIST ANALYSIS OF CHUNGKING EXPRESS

Ivona Popchevska

Thesis supervisor: doc. Zdeněk Hudec, PhD

Awarded academic title: MgA

Prague, August 2023

AKADEMIE MÚZICKÝCH UMĚNÍ V PRAZE

FILMOVÁ A TELEVIZNÍ FAKULTA

Film, Television and Photography

Střihová Skladba

DIPLOMOVÁ PRÁCE

BALADA PROXIMITY:

NEOFORMALISTICKÁ ANALÝZA FILMU CHUNGKING EXPRESS

Ivona Popchevska

Vedoucí práce: doc. Zdeněk Hudec, PhD

Přidělovaný akademický titul: MgA

Praha, Srpen 2023

D e c l a r a t i o n

I declare that I have elaborated the Master's thesis entitled:

A BALLAD OF PROXIMITY:

A NEOFORMALIST ANALYSIS OF CHUNGKING EXPRESS

independently, under the expert supervision of my thesis supervisor, and using only the literature and sources cited therein, and that the thesis was not used within the scope of a different university programme of study or to obtain the same degree or a different degree. I consent to the publication of the thesis in accordance with legislation and with AMU internal regulations.

Prague, 2023

Ivona Popchevska

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my supervisor, professor doc. Zdeněk Hudec, for his guidance throughout this theoretical work, for all of his remarks and patience. I would also like to thank the heads of the Editing department for the support throughout my studies, as well as my mentors and teachers, who have the influence from their expertise during the entire master studies imprinted on my work. Special thanks to my colleagues, family and friends for their moral support.

Abstract (EN)

This theoretical work explores Wong Kar-wai's film "Chungking Express" (1994) through a neoformalist analysis. The first part covers the theoretical basis, and the specificities of the film, which argue for its selection as a case study. In the main chapter, the basic analytical tools examined in Kristin Thompson's book "Breaking The Glass Armor", are employed into a neoformalist analysis. The goal of the analysis is to confirm the hypothesis that the main dominant of the film, which organizes its formal elements, is the principle of 'proximity without reciprocity'. This principle is explored on the stylistic, narrative and thematic level. The findings are summarized into a conclusion in the final chapter.

Abstrakt (CZ)

Předmětem diplomové práce je neoformalistická analýza filmu "Chungking Express" (1994) hongkongského režiséra Wong Kar-waie. V úvodní části jsou upřesněna teoretická východiska a specifika filmu, která argumentují jeho výběr jako případové studie. V hlavní kapitole jsou metodologicky využity základní nástroje neoformalistické analýzy popsané v knize Kristin Thompsonové "Breaking The Glass Armor". Cílem analýzy je prověřit hypotézu, že dominantou filmu, která organizuje všechny jeho formální prvky, je princip „blízkosti bez vzájemnosti". Tento princip je zkoumán v rovině stylistické, narativní i tematické. Zjištěné poznatky jsou shrnuty v Závěru diplomové práce.

Table of Contents

1. Introduction.....	6
2. Literature review.....	9
3. Chungking Express.....	17
3.1: Wong Kar-wai.....	17
3.2: Chungking Express in context.....	20
3.3 Synopsis.....	25
4. Neoformalist Analysis of Chungking Express.....	26
4.2 The Stylistic System.....	28
4.3 The Narrative System.....	38
4.4 The Thematic System.....	49
5. Conclusion.....	53
6. Bibliography.....	56
Literature.....	56
Internet Resources.....	57
Sources.....	57

1. Introduction

Film has existed for only a little over a century, and yet, during its relatively short life span, it has established itself as a highly influential art form. From its young age film has been studied as a discipline which constantly evolves, carrying a great potential to express a variety of messages, ideas and aesthetics. As a powerful medium for storytelling, it offers us an experience that can be uniquely engaging and immersive by involving our senses, emotions, and minds in a dynamic process. This process heightens our interest and deepens our involvement. How does this happen? In what way do films, images, poems, paintings compel us to engage with them?

In *Film Art: An Introduction*, the co-authors, American film theorists David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson write: "...the artwork cues us to perform a specific activity. Without the artwork's prompting, we couldn't start the process or keep it going. Without our playing along and picking up the cues, the artwork remains only an artifact... In general, any work of art presents cues that can elicit our involvement."¹.

Like all artworks, films have a form. In its broadest sense, it can be defined as "the overall system of relations that we can perceive among the elements in the whole film."² Established knowledge about form can significantly enrich our understanding of films. And it is something people have been trying to do since the very beginnings of motion pictures. Maxim Gorky, the renowned Russian poet, happened to be at one of the first exhibitions of the Lumière films and he wrote a two-page document explaining his experience of films, where he begins by saying:

I was at Aumont's and saw Lumière cinematograph - moving photography. The extraordinary impression it creates is so unique and complex that I doubt my ability to describe it with all its nuances.³

The experience of art is often accompanied by a sense of expectation. When we engage with a crime novel, we anticipate that eventually the crime will be solved. When

¹ Bordwell, D., Thompson, K., (2008), "Film art: An introduction", New York:McGraw-Hill Higher Education, p.55.

² Ibid.

³ Harding, C., Popple, S., (1996), "In the Kingdom of Shadows: A Companion to Early Cinema", Cygnus Arts, p.5.

we are listening to somebody telling a joke, we expect that a punch line will eventually come. When a character's face is hidden in their introduction, we cannot help but think it's a strategic move and expect that eventually showing their face will be a big revelation.

There are many films whose agenda isn't to satisfy this need for closure, but rely on other principles to keep the audience engaged. Playing with popular forms and conventions has proven successful in bringing innovation in a number of films. One such example is Wong Kar-wai's 1994 film *Chungking Express*, embracing experimental impulses and unique storytelling techniques. The viewer's expectation is being built towards two groups of characters eventually converging, but instead, through non-linear narrative we are guided on a different kind of journey. Watching the film for the first time was definitely one of the most memorable impressions a film has made on me. While watching the film I was left in awe, yet unable to explain what had produced that effect. What I could only describe as remaining in a complete state of flow⁴ throughout the film, marked the moments I started seeking answers to the question 'where does the film's hypnotizing power derive from?'. *Chungking Express* is known for its distinctive visual style, storytelling techniques, and creative use of cinematography and editing. It was created during a break from the shooting of *Ashes of Time (1994)*, with limited shooting time, a modest budget, and minimally prepared script and dialogue. The film embodies its experimental nature and non-classical form. American film critic Roger Ebert foresaw that *Chungking Express* would primarily resonate with cinephiles, film theorists, and cinema scholars. In a review of the film in 1996 he stated:

Many of today's younger filmgoers, fed only by the narrow selections at video stores, are not as curious or knowledgeable and may simply be puzzled by "Chungking Express" instead of challenged. It needs to be said, in any event, that a film like this is largely a cerebral experience: You enjoy it because of what you know about film, not because of what it knows about life.⁵

At a first glance, the film is divided into two separate stories, each centered around different sets of characters, the second one starting after the first one ends. In *Film Art: An Introduction*, film scholar David Bordwell lays down some thoughts on 'web-of-life plot' films. He uses this term to describe a particular narrative structure that

⁴ Csikszentmihalyi, M., (1990), "Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience", Harper & Row, p.4.

⁵ Ebert, R., (1996), Review: *Chungking Express*, Chicago Sun-Times.
<https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/chungking-express-1996>

interconnects multiple characters and storylines in a complex manner. This concept is often associated with films where “the plotlines may at first seem completely isolated from one another, but usually they converge, revealing unexpected causal connections.”⁶. According to him, in the case of ‘web-of-life plot’, the viewer would normally expect for some unanticipated, surprising connections among the distinct characters to be made further down the line. Among the typical examples of such plots he mentions *Magnolia* (1999), *Pulp Fiction* (1994), *Short Cuts* (1993), *Nashville* (1976), before turning to *Chungking Express* and what links the two stories together. Through his reflection on this, he emphasizes that “by analyzing narrative form and style, we can bring to light some intriguing similarities and differences, which in turn point to a set of themes that unify the film.”⁷.

Focused on exploring the narrative and stylistic structure of a film, how the form is shaped by historical context, and the activity of the viewer in making sense of films, neoformalism is a fairly modern approach to analysis. In her book *Breaking the Glass Armor* (1988), Kristin Thompson displays the key principles of neoformalism. She deals with what should be the goal of film analysis, the foundations neoformalism is based on, and the advantages of the neoformalist approach. This text is methodologically based on the concept of neoformalism and uses the essential tools of a neoformalist analysis which Thompson explores in her book. By performing a neoformalist analysis, we are enabled to closely examine the film's leading principle - *the dominant*, that ties the stylistic, narrative and thematic system.

The following chapter provides an overview of the theoretical framework we will use as a base, and the tools we shall apply in our central analysis. Chapter 3 provides a brief introduction to Wong Kar-wai and his work, covering the background and characteristics of *Chungking Express*, while also outlining the film’s synopsis. Chapter 4 is focused on analyzing *Chungking Express* through the prism of neoformalist approach and the concept of the *dominant*. Chapter 5 will summarize the findings into a final conclusion.

⁶ Bordwell, D., Thompson, K., (2008), “Film art: An introduction”, New York: McGraw-Hill Higher Education, p.405.

⁷ Ibid.

2. Literature review

To embark on the process of film analysis and maintain coherence in our approach, it is essential to establish a theoretical framework. This foundation of literature and references will aid in defining our analytical approach. First, we will take a look at *neoformalism* as a concept which will serve as a basis for our analysis, before taking a look at literature relating to our selected film, through the work of a small selection of authors, ideas, and concepts that have proven to be valuable guides in our exploration.

Neoformalism traces its origins back to the work of Russian Formalist literary theoreticians and critics, in the period from the mid-1910s to 1930s. It is associated primarily with prominent film theorists and historians, David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson. Kristin Thompson's publication *Breaking the Glass Armor (1988)*, serves as a foundational source for neoformalism. She advocates for an approach that would be able to suit each film, one that can build onto itself, and be constantly challenged and thus changed. According to Thompson, "each analysis should tell us something not only about the film in question, but about the possibilities of film as an art."⁸ In this publication, Thompson notes a difference between 'approach' and 'method'. She distinguishes the approach as a much more general concept - as a set of assumptions which are capable of being generalized. On the contrary, she perceives the method as a set of specific procedures employed in the actual analytical process. Further she states that neoformalism as an approach does "offer a series of broad assumptions about how artworks are constructed and how they operate in cueing audience response."⁹ But neoformalism does not prescribe *how* these assumptions are embodied in individual films. Rather, "the basic assumptions can be used to construct a method specific to the problems raised by each film."¹⁰ Essentially, the approach is what allows us to determine which of the many potential questions that could be asked about a certain work, are the most valuable and intriguing ones.

For neoformalists, art is a realm separate from all other types of cultural artifacts because it presents a unique set of perceptual requirements.¹¹ Through non-practical

⁸ Thompson, K., (1988), "Breaking the glass armor: Neoformalist film analysis", Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, p.6.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., p.8.

perception, we are enabled to view everything within the artwork in a manner different from how we perceive it in reality, as it takes on a new and unfamiliar quality within its new context. Films and other artworks immerse us in a non-practical, playful mode of interaction. They revitalize our perceptions and mental processes by detaching themselves from immediate real-life implications. In our daily lives, we engage with the world by selectively perceiving elements that are relevant to our immediate actions. For instance, in a life-or-death situation, a doctor's ability to filter out irrelevant information and focus on the immediate medical emergency is crucial for ensuring the patient's survival. His instincts and trained quick assessment skills allow him to take prompt action, but the capacity to narrow down his mental focus plays a crucial role in making timely decisions when facing urgent situations. On the contrary, when witnessing a hero or heroine in distress on the screen, we do not instinctively leap forward to rescue them; instead, we engage in the film-watching process as an entirely distinct experience from our everyday existence. A dying patient on the movie screen might not evoke the same intensity of emotion in the viewer, as witnessing one in real life.

This does not imply that films hold no influence over us; on the contrary, like all artworks, they bear significant importance in our lives. In fact, art, by refreshing our perceptions and thoughts, can be thought of as a form of mental exercise, similar to how sports serve as physical exercise for the body. Our non-practical perception allows us to see everything in the artwork differently from the way we would see it in reality, because it is strange to us in its new context.

Victor Shklovsky's who coined the term *defamiliarization*¹² - a formalist term for how art shows us familiar objects and concepts in a manner that encourages us to experience them as if they were new entities. famously wrote:

....habitualization devours work, clothes, furniture, one's wife, and the fear of war... And art exists so that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone *stony*. The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived, and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects "unfamiliar", to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged.¹³

¹² Shklovsky, V., (1965). "Art as Technique" in *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays*, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, p.4.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p.12.

The neoformalists assume that meaning differs from film to film because it, like any other aspect of the film, is a device. The word *device* indicates “any single element or structure that plays a role in the artwork - a camera movement, a frame story, a repeated word, a costume, a theme, and so on”¹⁴. For the neoformalist, all devices of the medium and of formal organization are equal in their potential for defamiliarization and for being used to build up a filmic system. Art is art if it allows for transformation of reality as we know it, and setting familiar objects, images and situations in a new context, thus enabling us to escape from automation. Defamiliarization is an element in all artworks, but its means and degree will vary considerably, and the defamiliarizing powers of a single work can change.

When examining the specific manifestation of defamiliarization in each work, neoformalist critics employ the notion of the *dominant* - “the main formal principle a work or group of works uses to organize devices into a whole”¹⁵. It dictates which devices and functions will be highlighted as significant elements and which will be of lesser importance. The dominant connects and governs both small-scale and large-scale devices. It establishes a relationship between the stylistic, narrative, and thematic aspects of the work, ensuring their interconnectedness. Finding the dominant provides a beginning for a comprehensive exploration of a film. The work provides us with cues about its dominant element by bringing certain devices to the forefront while placing others in a less prominent position. We can start by identifying the devices that appear most intriguing and significant. According to Thompson, in a highly original film, these will tend to be the most unusual and challenging, while in a more standard film, they will be the most typical and recognizable.¹⁶ Identifying the dominant provides us with the starting point for analysis.

¹⁴ Thompson, K., (1988), “Breaking the glass armor: Neoformalist film analysis”, Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, p.38.

¹⁵ Ibid., p.43.

¹⁶ Ibid., p.44.

Through the search for suitable literature for this theoretical work, a few works stood out as particularly useful when diving into the analysis of *Chungking Express*. The selected works provide insights into various aspects of the film, including its formal elements, aesthetics, embodiment, and the cultural context of Hong Kong.

Film Art: An Introduction by the authors David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, is a foundational text in film studies that offers a comprehensive and accessible exploration of the formal elements of cinema, providing readers with essential tools to analyze and understand the art of filmmaking. The book holds valuable insights into a wide range of topics, including cinematography, editing, sound, narrative structure, and mise-en-scène. Through clear and thorough explanations, Bordwell and Thompson present the principles and techniques employed by filmmakers to create meaning and evoke emotions in their audience. For a neoformalist analysis of "Chungking Express", "Film Art: An Introduction" proves invaluable as it focuses on the formal aspects of cinema, which align with the neoformalist approach. Neoformalism emphasizes the importance of formal elements in the construction of meaning in a film. By using Bordwell and Thompson's book as a reference, the analyst can delve into the film's cinematography, editing, and other technical aspects to identify the dominant that shapes the overall artistic expression of the movie. This method allows the critic to examine how the film's unique and innovative techniques relate to its themes and narrative structure, providing a deeper understanding of Chungking Express's distinct qualities. "Film Art: An Introduction" not only explains formal elements but also encourages readers to consider how these elements interact and create complex relationships within the film. This holistic approach aligns with the neoformalist principle of examining how smaller devices connect to the larger framework of the work. The analyst can perform a deeper exploration into the cinematic language of Chungking Express, showcasing how *the dominant* becomes an overarching formal principle, influencing the narrative, characters, and visual aesthetics.

Planet Hong Kong: Popular Cinema and the Art of Entertainment (2000) by David Bordwell is a seminal work that explores the unique characteristics of Hong Kong cinema and its significance in the global film industry. The book provides a comprehensive analysis of the city's popular cinema, including its genres, styles, and themes, shedding light on the cultural context in which "Chungking Express" emerged. The book's emphasis on the relationship between entertainment and art in Hong Kong cinema resonates with the film's balance between experimental storytelling and commercial appeal, making it an

important literature to contextualize Wong Kar-wai's work. Bordwell takes a closer look into the film's narrative structure, innovative techniques, and stylistic choices that distinguish it from conventional Hollywood storytelling. Bordwell's insights enrich the understanding of how "Chungking Express" utilizes unconventional storytelling techniques and visual aesthetics to evoke emotional responses within the audience.

The Sensuous Cinema of Wong Kar-wai: Film Poetics and the Aesthetic of Disturbance, written by Senior Lecturer in Film Studies at Lancaster University, Gary Bettinson, focuses specifically on the filmmaking style and artistic vision of acclaimed director Wong Kar-wai. The book dives into Wong's distinct approach to cinema, which is marked by a sensuous and emotionally evocative storytelling. Bettinson's analysis provides a deep understanding of Wong's film poetics and how he creates an aesthetic of disturbance through his unique use of imagery, editing, and narrative structure. This in-depth exploration of Wong's filmmaking style is helpful for a neoformalist analysis of *Chungking Express*, as it sheds light on the director's formal choices and thematic concerns. As a neoformalist analysis seeks to identify the dominant elements that shape the overall work of art, "The Sensuous Cinema of Wong Kar-wai" offers valuable insights into the recurring themes and motifs that characterize Wong's films. By understanding Wong's cinematic sensibility and how he creates a sense of disturbance and intimacy, the neoformalist analyst can begin unraveling the complexities of *Chungking Express*.

The 2016 article *Hong Kong through Chungking Express* by Taher Abdel-Ghani focuses on the socio-cultural context of Hong Kong as depicted in *Chungking Express*. The text explores the connection between the city of Hong Kong and its representation in the film, examining how the urban landscape, its people, and their relationships are portrayed through the director's cinematic vision. By analyzing the film's portrayal of the city, its inhabitants, and the urban experience, this literature provides a broader understanding of the factors that influenced the creation of the film and the social dynamics within it. This source enriches the analysis by adding depth to the exploration of themes and visual representations in the film and it offers valuable insights into the cultural and social dimensions that influence the film's formal elements. The text sheds light on how Wong Kar-wai's visual storytelling and use of formal techniques are influenced by the city's identity, cultural complexities, and historical background.

We turn to the book *Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance*, written by Ackbar Abbas, a comparative literature professor who has written extensively on Hong Kong culture, architecture, and cinema, regarding the complexities of Hong Kong's culture, identity, and history. The book expands on how Hong Kong's unique cultural landscape is shaped by political, economic, and social forces, as well as the impact of its colonial history. It explores the city's disappearing identity and the challenges of maintaining cultural authenticity amidst a rapidly changing globalized world. In this book Abbas identifies Wong's first four films as films that display some of the most wide-ranging exploration of Hong Kong's problematic space.¹⁷ As "Chungking Express" portrays a city where characters try getting closer to fulfilling their desires and dreams, yet constantly fail to establish meaningful connections, "Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance" offers insights into the underlying cultural tensions that contribute to this phenomenon. By understanding Hong Kong's unique sociopolitical context and cultural struggles, the film's formal elements gain depth and relevance. The book's reflection on how Hong Kong's inhabitants interact and communicate within crowded spaces, while maintaining a certain distance or reluctance to reciprocate, aligns with the dominant principle depicted in the film, as we shall see later on in Chapter 4. The significance of this book lies in its ability to contextualize the film's portrayal of non-reciprocal connections in the city's bustling environment.

The Filmic Bodies of Wong Kar-wai, a PhD Doctorate thesis by Louise Malcolm published in 2013, delves into the thematic and stylistic aspects of Wong Kar-wai's filmmaking that revolve around the portrayal of bodies in his films and it explores the particular performative and cinematic techniques found in his work. Through close analysis of scenes and visual motifs, the book highlights the ways in which Wong's cinematic language evokes proximity and emotional intimacy. "The Filmic Bodies of Wong Kar-wai" also explores how the impact of Wong's stylistic choices through cinematography, editing, and mise-en-scène contributes to the film's overall aesthetics and narrative structure. Considering this theoretical work as a supplemental source could help uncover connections between formal elements and the film's underlying messages.

A doctoral thesis within the University of Western Australia, written by P.h.D in Philosophy candidate, Danica van de Velde, named *Spatial intimacies: negotiating place in*

¹⁷ Abbas, A., (1997), "Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance", University of Minnesota Press, p.49.

four films by Wong Kar-wai, considers the multiple ways in which Wong engages with space through the intertwined lens of travel. In chapter one she begins by taking the viewer through the alleys and streets of Hong Kong in *Chungking Express*. She addresses the geographical specificity, exploring how the spatial intricacies are mediated through the presence of a travelling object that functions as a symbolic compass. Offering an analysis of the manner in which Wong connects urban space with constructions of memory and dreaming, van de Velde examines the film's emotional geography that is depicted on a filmic map of Hong Kong that shifts and unfolds with the characters' psychological states. Van de Velde's reflection on urban space in Wong's cinema, allows me to reflect on proximity in urban spaces in "Chungking Express" through a coherent and more extensive neoformalist analysis.

Lastly, I would mention the doctoral thesis within Universitat Pompeu Fabra in Barcelona, named *The Emotional Cinema of Wong Kar-wai* by Viktoriia Protsenko, who, drawing on the neoformalist along with cognitivist and reception studies', seeks to explain why Wong's films appeal to a global audience. In this text, she proposes that Wong Kar-wai's consistent visual style, interconnected stories and recurrent tropes serve to lure the audiences by means of repetition. To test this hypothesis, she examines the ways in which Wong Kar-wai uses formal elements - storytelling, set design, cinematography, editing, and commercial stratagems, and how those compare to mainstream filmmaking techniques. From a neoformalist perspective she explores choices related to the type of lenses, lighting, film stock, camera position and movement, and how they were pre-determined by the setting. This academic work relates to my text in the sense that it borrows a neoformalist perspective on selective matters of *Chungking Express*, however, my text is primarily based on a neoformalist approach, focused on the concept of the dominant, explored through the different levels of the film.

Upon reviewing existing literature related to my topic, I argue that a thesis such as this one, focused on the dominant principle, defined in the stylistic, narrative and thematic level through a neoformalist analysis of *Chungking Express*, offers valuable insights into the intricate interplay of cinematic elements, providing a deeper understanding of the film's underlying themes and stylistic choices. By examining the dominant at multiple levels, the thesis can offer a comprehensive exploration of how stylistic choices, narrative structures, and underlying themes interweave to create a multi-layered cinematic experience. Such an analysis will not only shed light on the director's unique storytelling

techniques but also provide an understanding of how these elements contribute to the film's overarching message and emotional impact. Through this approach, the thesis can offer valuable contributions to film scholarship, enhancing our appreciation of Chungking Express as a captivating and thought-provoking work of art.

3. Chungking Express

3.1: Wong Kar-wai

Wong Kar-wai was born in Shanghai in 1958, followed by a move to Hong Kong at a young age due to his father's occupation as a sailor. Despite the initial intent for a temporary stay, his family became exiles due to the Chinese Revolution. As a child he frequently visited the cinema with his mother. Growing up in a run-down area of Hong Kong surrounded by fellow exiles, tourists, and the influences of global capitalism, Wong's interest in creative arts flourished. He studied Graphic Design at Hong Kong Polytechnic, eventually enrolling in a TV drama training course and later becoming a scriptwriter for films in the commercial Cinema City studio. Wong's filmic concerns about displacement, cultural differences and isolation, can be traced back to his immigrant upbringing and early experiences in photography, film, and television.

As a director, Wong Kar-wai is known for his improvisational approach, scripting sequences the night before filming and avoiding rehearsals. He demands multiple retakes from his actors, aiming to achieve a variety of performances and a great deal of options for editing. His films often undergo significant changes during production, with plotlines and character motivations evolving, leading to an extensive amount of unused footage. This improvisational style largely stems from the quick-paced film industry in Hong Kong.

Wong Kar-wai's artistic journey illustrates his commitment to crafting captivating cinematic experiences that transcend borders and resonate with audiences worldwide. His unique storytelling approach, combining poetic visuals, engaging characters, and intricate narratives, has solidified his status as one of the most admired and influential directors in contemporary cinema. Over the years, he has composed a diverse and influential filmography, with a distinct visual style and a tendency for exploring themes of love, longing, solitude and urban life.

His directing career initially started with "As Tears Go By" (1988), a crime drama about a Chinese gangster whose love for his cousin causes him to consider abandoning his lifestyle, but his partner-in-crime pulls him back. This film was his first feature and it already showcased his distinctive style. He then ventured into his second feature film, "Days of Being Wild" (1990), which embodied his artistic interests and personal vision,

diving into the lives of emotionally troubled characters. In 1994, Wong released two critically acclaimed films that cemented his reputation as a master filmmaker. "Chungking Express" explores love and loneliness, following two heartbroken policemen, a mysterious woman in Hong Kong, and a free-spirited fast-food place worker. The film's kinetic editing, inventive storytelling, and use of pop music became pillars of Wong's style. Simultaneously, he released "Ashes of Time", an epic martial arts film set in ancient China. The film's narrative, cinematography, and philosophical themes gathered praise from critics and audiences around the world.

The release of the two films in 1994, was followed by the film "Fallen Angels" (1995), a spiritual sequel exploring themes of estrangement and unrequited love through a dynamic visual language. "Happy Together" (1997), a romantic drama set in Argentina in 1997, won Wong the Best Director award at Cannes, showcasing his expertise in portraying intense relationships against the backdrop of foreign cultures. The romance "In the Mood for Love" (2000) is one of Wong's most widely-known masterpieces, bringing him back to his beloved Hong Kong setting, depicting the delicate relationships between neighbors in 1960s Hong Kong. The film's poetic visuals, impeccable production design, and engaging performances received universal acclaim and solidified Wong's status as a visionary director.

Continuing his exploration of emotions and time, in 2004 Wong introduced science-fiction elements in the semi-sequel "2046", a visually stunning romance that expanded on the themes of "In the Mood for Love."

"My Blueberry Nights" is a romantic drama film released in 2007, which marks Wong Kar-wai's first English-language film and features an ensemble cast, including Norah Jones, Jude Law, David Strathairn, Rachel Weisz, and Natalie Portman. The film follows the journey of Elizabeth, a young woman who embarks on a cross-country trip to find herself and heal from a broken heart. The film retains the characteristics of Wong Kar-wai's signature style.

Returning to Chinese cinema, his latest work includes "The Grandmaster" released in 2013, a biographical martial arts film exploring the life of Wing Chun grandmaster Ip Man. Known for breathtaking fight sequences and lush cinematography, the film received critical acclaim and garnered multiple award nominations, including an Oscar nomination for Best Cinematography.

David Bordwell, reflecting on Wong's signature style as a filmmaker, in his book *Planet Hong Kong: Popular Cinema and the Art of Entertainment* states: "At last Hong Kong found its exportable festival filmmaker, the one director no intellectual need be ashamed to like"¹⁸. Throughout his filmography, Wong Kar-wai frequently explores the passage of time, memory, emotions, troublesome relationships, and his unique vision has secured his place as one of the most influential filmmakers of his generation, making him a key figure in film history.

¹⁸ Bordwell, D., (2000), "Planet Hong Kong: Popular Cinema and the art of entertainment", Harvard University Press, p.171.

3.2: Chungking Express in context

In 1994, a two-month break in the process of creation of the very demanding and time-consuming *Ashes of Time* (1994) took place. Burdened by the weight of working on a historical film, and guided by the desire for a change of pace and an opportunity to explore a more spontaneous filmmaking process, he decided to take a detour and create a film where he could rely solely on his own instincts and creative impulses. And so, while dealing with the technical delays of *Ashes of Time*, during a six week break from the set, the urban romance "Chungking Express" was born, a vibrant and fragmented portrayal of love in the busy city of Hong Kong. This film catapulted him to international recognition, paving the way for his subsequent works.

Chungking Express is a film that illustrates, derives from, and is directly inspired by the city of Hong Kong itself. Hong Kong stands as a unique destination on Earth, boasting a distinctive blend of characteristics that set it apart from any other place. With a staggering population of six and a half million, the city-state ranks among the most densely populated areas worldwide. This population is composed of immigrants, international businessmen and workers, as well as travelers from all corners of the globe. Consequently, Hong Kong is in a constant state of transience, with its inhabitants ever-changing, converging in the same bustling spaces. The city never sleeps because it is driven by its pursuit of production, distribution, and consumption of goods and services. These features paint a vivid picture of Hong Kong as a city of diversity, dynamism, where the pursuit of prosperity defines the very essence of its existence.

To gain insights into the social and political context of "Chungking Express", it is essential to briefly dive into the historical landscape of Hong Kong. Having been a British colony since 1841, Hong Kong was characterized as a nation with no identity or unified history, existing as a space of constant transience. A city that "...has always been, and will perhaps always be, a port in the most literal sense - a doorway, a point in between - even though the nature of the port has changed. A port city that used to be located at the intersections of different spaces, Hong Kong will increasingly be at the intersections of different times or speeds."¹⁹, notes Ackbar Abbas in his "Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance" (1997).

¹⁹ Abbas, A., (1997), "Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance", University of Minnesota Press, p.4.

Between the 50s and 70s Hong Kong experienced rapid economic growth, initiating to set up a new market outside its borders, all around the world. The emergence of Hong Kong's "modern new wave" cinematic movement took place in the late 1970s and early 1980s. There was a notable shift in film style and imagery, moving away from the popular Kung-Fu action films that dominated the American market, towards a cinema that responded to the specific circumstances of Hong Kong. By the early 1990s, at the time of creation of *Chungking Express*, Hong Kong was going through a period of transition, uncertainty and instability, marked by the impending handover of sovereignty from the United Kingdom to China in 1997. This significant political event had a profound impact on the collective consciousness of the people in Hong Kong and influenced the themes and narratives explored in films.

According to Louis Wirth, an American sociologist famous for his work on urbanism, residing in an urban environment elicits transformations in human behavior and social interactions. In essence, the city has a profound influence on our personalities and overall way of life, it goes way beyond just a place where you live. As he put it in his 1964 book "On Cities and Social Life":

The contacts of the city may indeed be face to face, but they are nevertheless impersonal, superficial, transitory, and segmental. The reserve, the indifference, and the blasé outlook which urbanites manifest in their relationships may thus be regarded as devices for immunizing themselves against the personal claims and expectations of others.²⁰

Relating to that, Hong Kong as a city is a typical environment where the physical contacts are close but the social contacts are distant. The greatest emotional affect is achieved when the object of desire is not present but a space common to both is still shared, linking the two parties. The second tale where an encounter over the counter at *Midnight Express* brings Faye and Cop 663 together, develops this interplay between shared space, absence and affect further.

Chungking Express captures the turbulent climate of Hong Kong during the 1990s, reflecting a social and political turning point for the nation that was just a few years ahead. It offers a glimpse into the anxieties and disconnections felt by the citizens of Hong Kong during this time of change. It captures a sense of restlessness, longing, and

²⁰ Wirth, L., (1964), "On Cities and Social Life: Selected Papers ", University of Chicago Press, p.71.

fragmentation that were prevalent in the city's atmosphere. Wong himself once said in an interview:

To me, *Chungking Express*, it's like the night and day of Hong Kong. Some people say the film is about this or that character, but I say, 'No, this film is about Hong Kong, it is my love letter to Hong Kong'.²¹

Chungking Express appears to pose a profound question to the citizens of Hong Kong regarding their sense of identity amidst the backdrop of significant political shifts that followed 1997. Wong stands as one of the few filmmakers determined to safeguard Hong Kong's identity from vanishing. He seeks to protect it from becoming a mere representation of the past, or as Abbas stresses in his 1997 book: "the danger now is that Hong Kong will disappear as a subject, not by being ignored but by being represented in the good old days."²² The characters in the film, like Hong Kong itself, lack definitive backgrounds, mirroring the blurred and chaotic images of life within Chungking Mansion. The Hong Kong scenario is represented not only through the characters, but also through physical objects like the soon-to-expire pineapple cans, airplanes, unused flight tickets, props in 663's flat that "evolve" without him noticing, and physical settings.

Chungking Express explores themes of fleeting momentum, missed opportunities, and the yearning for human connection in a fast-paced urban environment. The film captures the essence of Hong Kong's vibrant streets, neon-lit alleys, and crowded spaces, painting a vivid portrait of a city on the brink of change. In the film, Wong Kar-wai is exploring the ways in which the habits and daily routines can get in the way of progress and the psychological impact they have on urban inhabitants, the loneliness in the middle of a big crowd and the longing for freedom. Some of the motifs often repeated are deadlines, expiration dates, and destinations. The use of repetition underlines the routines, habits and the cyclical nature of connections and relationships in the modern world.

The characters in the film, with their yearning for human connection and their search for love in a bustling and chaotic urban environment, serve as metaphors for the larger social and emotional landscape of Hong Kong. Wong Kar-wai explores these themes through the juxtaposition of local and international elements, blending Western

²¹ <https://filmmakermagazine.com/107448-wong-kar-wai-chungking-express/>

²² Abbas, A., (1997), "Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance", University of Minnesota Press, p.25.

influences with traditional Chinese culture. The film also reflects the influence of globalization and the rise of consumerism in Hong Kong. The busy streets and crowded buildings depicted in the film are symbols of the rapid urbanization and commercialization taking place in the city. The characters' interactions with consumer products and the emphasis on fast-paced, transient relationships highlight the commodification of human connections in a rapidly changing society.

In an interview, Wong reflected on the guerrilla way of shooting, with very limited time and small setups, stating: "We were shooting without permits, so we had to be very quick, just like robbery."²³ In another interview in 1995, he elaborates on the writing and dialogue preparation:

My ideas about writing changed as soon as I started directing. As a writer, I wanted my scripts to be perfect and fully formed. As a director, I know there are always factors beyond my control. Many things in any film cannot be planned concretely in advance. The best you can do is visualise what you want, and then respond to what's there once you go on set. Nowadays I start from a fairly loose script and tend to write the dialogue on the day of shooting. On *Chungking Express*, for example, I would sit in the coffee shop of the Holiday Inn on Nathan Road writing the lines and then go two blocks down the road to Chungking Mansions and give them to the actors just before we shot.²⁴

These, typical for Wong, methods of preparation, writing and shooting, to a great extent support the spontaneous, playful and improvisational nature of his approach. But it doesn't grant the opportunity to trivialise the thought that has gone into his work.

On the contrary, when we take a closer look at *Chungking Express*, despite the split stories there are definitely driving forces that tie the film together. Upon repeated watching, one can start to identify the unifying principles that weave through multiple levels of the film, which makes it such an engaging and compelling piece.

With a thorough exploration of the stylistic and narrative choices in the film, under a certain thematic umbrella, the intentional binding principle of the film comes to the surface, revealing a lot more than first meets the eye. Forming and confirming a

²³ <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1996-03-03-ca-42640-story.html>

²⁴ <https://www2.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/sight-sound-magazine/archives/wong-kar-wai-chungking-express>

hypothesis that proves precisely that, is central to the aim of this thesis. Before moving onto formulating our hypothesis and diving into our neoformalist analysis, we shall briefly visit the film's synopsis.

3.3 Synopsis

Set against the backdrop of the city of Hong Kong, *Chungking Express* weaves together two separate stories of love, loneliness, and chance encounters. The film follows the lives of two police officers struggling with the aftermath of their recent breakups, as they navigate the complexities of heartbreak and emotional recovery, after being left by their girlfriends.

The first story revolves around officer 223, who frequents a local fast food restaurant called Midnight Express. Unable to let go of his recent breakup, he finds comfort in purchasing 30 cans of pineapple that expire on his birthday, May 1st, marking the deadline he gave his ex-girlfriend to come back to him. Seeking a connection amidst the disappointment, his life takes an unexpected turn when he encounters a mysterious woman who is involved in illegal drug smuggling. After spending a night together in a hotel room where she sleeps and he spends the night eating, they go their separate ways.

The second story follows cop 663, also recently left by his girlfriend, who is a flight attendant, while Faye, a Midnight Express employee falls for him and starts sneaking into his apartment, slowly making small improvements, by cleaning, decorating, and tending to his fish. After getting caught one day, Faye avoids him, but as he slowly becomes infatuated by her, the two spend time together and their bond deepens. Eventually, they arrange to meet for a date, to which she never shows up, until a year later when she comes back as a flight attendant, finding out that he is the new owner of Midnight Express.

4. Neoformalist Analysis of *Chungking Express*

As elaborated in Chapter 2, when embarking on application of neoformalist analysis to a cinematic piece, identifying the *dominant* in the film will provide us with a solid base and starting point for further exploration. In order to discover a film's dominant, it is crucial to avoid employing an overly broad term that encompasses a wide tapestry of films, which would ultimately defeat the purpose. Instead, the dominant should accurately reflect the distinctive attributes of a specific work. The dominant, as Kristin Thompson puts it in *Breaking the Glass Armor*: "...is a formal principle that controls the work at every level, from the local to the global, foregrounding some devices and subordinating others."²⁵ Depending upon the particular work, a certain element acquires the role of the organizing dominant, which governs all the others.

Chungking Express on the surface stands out with his two supposedly unrelated stories, loosely connected with themes such as isolation, loneliness and heartbreak. But in order to determine the overarching principle that ties everything together, we need to take a closer look at what the film is trying to communicate. As we will explore throughout the rest of this chapter, through various techniques and motifs, the film explores the theme of fleeting encounters and unfulfilled connections.

Ackbar Abbas in his *Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance*, reflects on Wong's film "Days of Being Wild" (1990), when he originally proposes that "...in Wong's film there are no images even of pleasure, only instances of proximity without reciprocity."²⁶ Later on in the same text, he gives a brief but interesting analysis of *Chungking Express*, where he emphasizes the transient moments, and yet again claims that "the situation is still one of proximity without reciprocity."²⁷ Abbas's characterization of *Chungking Express* refers to the idea that characters in the film share physical proximity, yet they fail to establish meaningful reciprocity or potential connections with each other. It highlights the accidental collisions, like the one near the beginning when officer 223 and The Blonde bump into each other on the street before they get

²⁵ Thompson, K., (1988), "Breaking the glass armor: Neoformalist film analysis", Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, p.89.

²⁶ Abbas, A., (1997), "Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance", University of Minnesota Press, p.51.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 54.

acquainted. "This was the closest we ever got... only 0.01 cm apart." - indicating their most intimate moment occurred when they were still strangers to one another.

Referring back to Abbas' characterization, we can locate the film's dominant, in the principle of '*proximity without reciprocity*'. From the stylistic choices, narrative structure to the thematic exploration of unfulfilled desires and emotional distance, the film constantly reinforces this dominant principle. The aim of this chapter is, thus, to showcase how the principle is infused in the film at its stylistic, narrative and thematic level.

4.2 The Stylistic System

At the beginning of the film, right after the main title shows up on screen, a short sequence of four shots of buildings and the blue sky at dawn are shown, and the first voiceover of the film is heard: "Every day we brush past so many other people... People we never meet... People who may become close friends someday." (Fig.1-4). The shots are far from the typical images a classical film might show, such as a wide shot of the cityscape, or the crowdedness of the city streets.

Instead, we are shown four subsequent shots, abstractly portraying hovering clouds drifting across a blue sky. Each shot captures the clouds from different angles and settings. The initial two shots are taken from a rooftop, featuring chimneys and TV antennas as defined lines, shapes, and colors against the clouds in motion. The following two shots are captured from an angle closer to street level, contrasting the black brick against the rolling clouds. The cloud shots hold metaphorical significance, referring back to the concept of transience, movement, transformation, and cause a disruption to the film's opening sequence thus far. The clouds' continuous movement mirrors the cyclical nature of relationships depicted later in the film.

In the third shot of the clouds, a voice-over monologue is introduced, adding yet another disruptive element to the established narrative. This voice-over emerges before the character speaking is given physical presence, creating a sense of lingering presence like that of a ghost. Suddenly, we find ourselves immersed in a memory that has already taken place. The voiceover mentions meeting 'so many people', but no people are shown, so at a first glance it might seem we are seeing the opposite of what is said.

But if we take a closer look at the progression of the shots, how the edit guides our attention, we can see that the buildings are places where people live and with each shot we are getting closer and closer between the buildings, to their homes, therefore the emphasis is on the proximity and possibility - "people who *may* become close someday".

Similarly, Abbas reflects in his *Hong Kong: Culture and Politics of Disappearance*:

Wong's shots of the city and even of Chungking Mansions itself give us visual fragments that require a certain effort to construct, not clichéd images of the Hong Kong skyline or unified wholes. It is true that people in Hong Kong, like

the city itself, may be seen but not known,- the situation is still one of proximity without reciprocity, except that this state of affairs does not completely exclude the growth of intimacy, even if it is an intimacy that takes idiosyncratic forms.²⁸

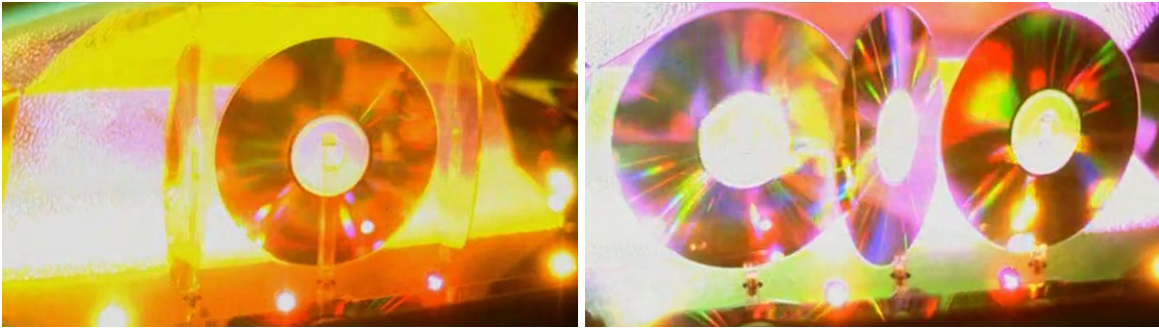


Figures 1-4: Opening sequence: Hong Kong at dawn

Through its camerawork, framing, blocking and editing, *Chungking Express* often emphasizes the dominant - the principle of proximity without reciprocity, and we can recognize multiple different strategies that Wong's masterfully uses to achieve that. We shall first take a look at how this is achieved within the shot and over shots joined with an edit.

Within the shot, the dominant is frequently showcased by demonstrating several moving elements within the frame which are positioned very close and yet do not ever share physical touch. By intentionally blocking characters or objects in such a way, the audience gets a subliminal reminder of the force that moves the film.

²⁸ Abbas, A., (1997), "Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance", University of Minnesota Press, p.54.

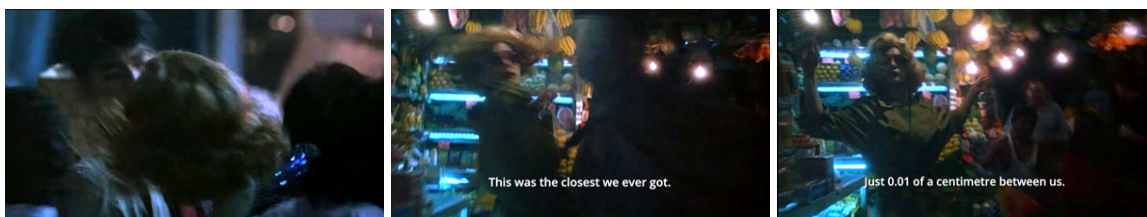


Figures 5-6: Rotating CDs at the local bar

In the scene at the local bar (Fig.5-6), we can see how the rotating CDs are always moving at the same speed, in opposite directions, and remain extremely close at all times, despite never touching each other. This shot is part of the first story and it acts almost as a depiction of the relationship that cop 223 and The Blonde could or could not have. The movement of the CDs sends a message that largely reminds us, even subconsciously, of movements between elements in two shots we have seen 5 minutes earlier, near the beginning of the film.

The first one is the instance when cop 223 almost bumps into a doll with a blonde wig that someone is dragging right past him (Fig.7), foreshadowing him bumping into the character of The Blonde (Fig.8). As Cop 223 navigates through the bustling street, his attention is drawn to a female mannequin being carried above the crowd. Cop 223 and the mannequin rotate around each other much like the CDs do, and more importantly just like him and The Blonde are about to rotate past each other in real life, creating a simulated and surreal first encounter. This intriguing situation allows for the criminal to escape, setting the stage for the theme of both desire for the enigmatic Blonde Woman, as well as how dangerous she is.

This encounter is mirrored moments later in the sequence (Fig.8-9), when 223 states: "This was the closest we ever got. Just 0.01 of a centimeter between us."



Figures 7-9: Cop 223 runs into a doll | Cop 223 runs into The Blonde

Let us take a look at the opening of the film and discover what key techniques are employed. We see The Blonde 'brushing past' many people, sharing a glimpse of a look, getting within millimeters shoulder to shoulder, yet never interacting (Fig.10-12). The music serves as a unifying element that connects different characters within the scene. Although we do not linger on any particular character for long, nor do we show them eventually come together, the music creates a sense of shared experience and common emotional ground. The step-printing camera technique contributes to the principle of 'proximity without reciprocity' by accentuating the fragmented nature of connections between characters. This technique involves manipulating the speed of the camera's frame rate, resulting in a slowed-down or staccato-like effect, creating a disjointed visual rhythm, creating shots which contain multiple characters as if existing in a different time, as our leading character appears to move in slow motion compared to other characters. This suggests that despite the physical proximity between characters, there is a disconnect that prevents the establishment of reciprocal relationships.

In this opening sequence the editing plays a crucial role in showcasing the dominant. It swiftly merges a series of dynamic, handheld shots, maintaining the skewed subjectivity of the initial scene. At times, the audience seems to experience a point-of-view shot from The Blonde's perspective, only to have her suddenly appear within the same frame. The camera's kinetic movement propels us through crowded public spaces filled with anonymous faces, many of whom lock eyes with The Blonde (or the camera) as she breezes by. These shots overflow with a feeling of density and claustrophobia, producing a disorienting effect. The jump-cut technique maintains the consistency of The Blonde's movement in time but not in space. So from the very first moments of the film, the viewers find themselves captured in the gaze of people whose faces are almost blurred out of existence. The rapid editing creates a sense of urgency and chaos, mirroring the fast-paced environment of the city. With the quick cuts between different characters, the audience is introduced to various individuals who exist in close physical proximity to each other. However, it also reinforces the lack of exchange, as their stories remain unknown, with minimal overlap or genuine connection. The editing techniques applied to this sequence, heighten the feeling of transience of these moments, brief, and yet a momentary potential of a connection is sensed. The film, then, establishes the key principle of 'proximity without reciprocity' from the very beginning.



Figures 10-12: The Blonde brushing past people in busy Chungking Mansions

Later in the story, the camera is on a journey alongside The Blonde within a very cramped location, as she attempts to coordinate the drug mules for their task. The handheld camera navigates through the space, weaving between individuals and objects, capturing the entirety of the environment without lingering long enough on any particular element for the viewer to fully absorb. Had these shots been preceded by a wide or establishing shot of the location, the viewer would have already been acquainted with its layout, resulting in a less overwhelming experience. However, in this instance, the viewer gradually becomes acquainted with the geography of the place in fragments, as the camera unsteadily traverses through it. The combined effect of this cinematography, accompanied by the fast cuts, and swift-paced Indian music, is sensations of dizziness, disorientation, and claustrophobia within the viewer. What this also brings is the feeling of looking at these people for some time, but still knowing absolutely nothing about them. The viewer gets a hint at the fact that The Blonde also isn't familiar with these people, therefore there might not be a relationship of trust formed there. This hypothesis is proved in the following scenes, when the mules run away with the drugs and The Blonde is left alone at the airport.

In the opening sequence, as Cop 223 pursues a suspect, he remains in sharp focus while the background appears blurred, resembling a vibrant array of neon lights surrounding him (Fig.13). This visual technique effectively situates him within the scene while simultaneously creating a sense of detachment. The blurred background suggests a disconnection between Cop 223 and his environment, as if he exists in a separate realm from the backdrop. The scene is not characterized by traditional slow-motion or fast-motion effects, but rather a unique combination that combines elements of both. It appears as if cop 223 perceives time in a certain way, while the rest of the world, although in close physical proximity, circulates in a different time. This unconventional approach to time, facilitated by the step-printing technique, contributes to the film's play with missed connections and evokes a feeling of isolation. The step-printing effect alters the perceived pace of the scene, creating a sense of both slowness and swiftness

simultaneously, further enhancing the atmospheric and emotional impact of the sequence.



Figure 13: Cop 223 chasing a suspect in the opening sequence.

This engaging technique repeats a few more times in the film, but as the second story exhibits a slower and more romantic tale, it is used to portray something different. In a scene between Faye and cop 663, Faye presents to him the letter from his ex-girlfriend. Upon asking if he wants to read it, he responds "After my coffee.", after which he walks away and stands aside. We know that the letter is the first sign of communication from the woman that broke his heart, and instead of witnessing any kind of reaction or physical transformation from Cop 663, the audience is invited to contemplate the emotions experienced by both Faye and Cop 663, as conveyed by the cinematography (Fig.14).



Figure 14: Cop 663 and Faye at Midnight Express - step-printing shot

In this fragment of time, one can envision Cop 663 reminiscing about the long-term relationship he had with the airline stewardess. Simultaneously, Faye's longing for the cop becomes evident, along with the realization that he remains emotionally

invested in his previous romance. As the step-printing effect unfolds for twenty-two seconds, Faye and Cop 663 remain motionless while the world continues to rotate around them. Again, the emphasis this stylistic choice brings is on the dominant, the proximity without the possibility of exchange.

A different technique that delivers on the feeling of proximity without reciprocity in the film is done by an edit that transcends the spatio-temporal settings, in order to create a potential connection. This is performed by employing a cut, which Bordwell defines as 'instantaneous change from one shot to another'²⁹. For example, in the shot below (Fig.15), The Blonde is looking at something or someone. The composition frames her in a close-up, her eyes are covered by sunglasses, therefore we cannot see the direction in which she's looking, however, from the position of her head, it appears as if she might be looking through a window. The following cut is to a high angle shot of cop 223 (Fig.16), looking at somebody's window, creating a match to the eyeline of The Blonde, connecting the two. However, the voiceover immediately reveals that he is underneath his former girlfriend's window, and the connection to the blond fades away. Nevertheless, with a cut between the two shots, that fleeting moment of a bond has been created.



Figures 15-16: The blonde looking down | Cop 223 looking at someone's window

A similar case can be noticed after the night they spend together. When she wakes up in the hotel room, he is already gone (Fig.17). At the end of the scene we see a close up of her looking outside the frame, as we cut to a high angle shot of him walking away in the opposite direction (Fig.18). If in the previous instance, this technique was building anticipation for something that might happen, this one creates a feeling of an ending, of a

²⁹ Bordwell, D., Thompson, K., (2008), "Film art: An introduction", New York: McGraw-Hill Higher Education, p.219.

brief encounter passed, with no promise of it ever repeating again.



Figures 17-18: The Blonde wakes up | Cop 223 is walking away in the street

A similar technique is applied within the second story between Faye and cop 663. In the scene where Faye is finally caught by the policeman in his apartment, she manages to hide and eventually runs away from the flat. She disappears down the stairs and the last shot of the scene is cop 663 looking at the staircase (Fig.19). We linger on this shot for a bit, music starts playing and moves into the next shot which is Faye at work (Fig.20), wearing new clothes, suggesting it could be a new day.



Figures 19-20: Cop 663 looking at the empty staircase | Faye at work

With a different stylistic approach, the dominant is emphasized during the first scene of the second story when Faye and cop 663 meet for the first time. Immediately after the first shot of them together which is over the shoulder behind 663's back, the film language gives the audience a hint which not only foreshadows the entire dynamic that is to follow between Faye and the cop, but it also ties back to the overall idea - the potential of getting close, without knowing if it'll happen. With a static camera, the shot begins with cop 663's hand gesturing to Faye to approach him closer (Fig.21), upon which the two

characters come into the frame and their movement stops just as they are about to overlap which would give the illusion of their shapes touching (Fig.22).

With the cut back to an over the shoulder shot from the policemen's side, we realize that from another angle, the distance between them isn't so small, and it never was, but the potential of connection has already been set up with the previous shot, so the sequence sets our expectations for what could happen between these characters in the future.



Figures 21-22: First scene between Cop 663 and Faye

The motif of closed doors and barriers throughout the film reinforces the idea of the dominant "proximity without reciprocity". Characters are often separated by physical barriers such as doors, windows, walls or furniture, symbolizing the emotional walls that prevent them from truly connecting with each other. This visual representation of barriers heightens the sense of unfulfilled bonds and the difficulties of forming deep relationships in a fast-paced modern city (Fig.23-24).



Figures 23-24: Faye hides in his apartment | 223 sees The Blonde for the first time

These examples imply how techniques incorporating the principle of 'proximity without reciprocity' can evolve into significant devices that contribute to structuring the second level, the narrative.

4.3 The Narrative System

In order to dive into an exploration of the narrative level of *Chungking Express*, a brief summary of the plot and characters would prove helpful. As pointed out in Chapter 1, the film contains two stories, happening in the city of Hong Kong.

In the first story, we follow Cop 223, a police officer who has recently been dumped by his girlfriend. Overwhelmed by loneliness, he frequents a local fast-food place, hoping to find solace in routine and the passage of time. As he ponders the nature of love and the fleeting connections we make every day, he encounters a mysterious female drug smuggler in a blonde wig who sparks his curiosity. Despite their brief encounter and lack of physical intimacy, their meeting helps cop 223 break free from his emotional rut following the recent breakup.

The subsequent hour of the movie delves into the connection between Faye, an employee at the same fast food restaurant, and a police officer known as number 663, who also happens to be trying to get over his recent breakup. Faye develops feelings for 663 and secretly takes care of him by sneaking into his apartment, rearranging his belongings, and leaving behind small tokens of her presence. As Faye develops a deep affection for him, their lives intertwine into a dance of missed opportunities and unspoken desires.

Chungking Express diverges significantly from conventional narrative strategies. Unlike typical Hollywood films that follow a clear pattern of narrative development, which may involve evolving relationships between characters, a quest for something, or a conflict to overcome, *Chungking Express* explores a different approach to storytelling.

In a classical film, the protagonist is often the central focus, driving the narrative forward. However, in *Chungking Express*, the emphasis is not on one protagonist. The film explores somewhat a collective experience, looking into the lives of multiple characters and their interactions. Rather than centering on a single character's journey, the film offers a broader perspective on human experiences and relationships. In *Planet Hong Kong*, Bordwell states:

Although *Chungking Express* feels loosely structured because it depends on coincidental encounters, the plot is built out of a daunting number of minutely varied repetitions of locales and routines. As these cycles compare characters and

situations, cause and effect become less important than parallels among congruent or contrasting aspects of love.³⁰

Bordwell & Thompson claim that as a viewer or listener you don't simply let the parts parade past you. You enter into an active participation with them, creating and readjusting expectations as the pattern develops over time. With any film in which patterns start to emerge, whether you realize it or not, you start to form expectations and then you are, in a way, given reasons to pay attention to the alteration and those expectations.

The opening immediately sets up the device of remote proximity - the characters are disconnected, they do not enter the film in the same scene or share a perspective. The Blonde and cop 223 are introduced through separate scenes, where they both quickly move through seemingly different crowds of people. However, the potential to become a part of each other's stories is also set up, as The Blonde and cop 223 haven't met yet, but the stylistic elements of his chase scene tie back to the opening scene of The Blonde.

By showing them in close proximity, separated by a voiceover that says we may or may never meet the people we brush past every day, this combination of opening scenes is set up to build anticipation in the viewer, expecting that they will soon meet. And soon we get a glimpse of that potential encounter, although as cop 223's voiceover confirms, the emphasis is on the *potential* encounter, as the closest they get is "Just 0.01 of a centimeter" apart. In the following scene, cop 223 calls May - his ex's house, and talks on the phone to all of May's close family and friends, everyone but her, to talk about their breakup. After a number of unfulfilling conversations, he pointlessly hangs around Midnight Express (Fig.25), while the boss tries to suggest getting over her by asking the other May out (Fig.26) - the girl that works there. 223 declines by lying that he has a date and leaves.

³⁰ Bordwell, D., (2003), "Planet Hong Kong: Popular Cinema and the art of entertainment", Harvard University Press, p.181.



Figures 25-26: cop 223 after being rejected | The boss of Midnight Express proposing solution

This scene, which serves the purpose of introducing the character of the Midnight Express boss, is also being planted for another purpose. The payoff happens 17 minutes later when cop 223, after having exhausted many attempts for human connection, finally decides to take his advice. But when he shows up in the Midnight Express looking for the employee May, the boss tells him she just went out with another man. The girl who was often there, right behind the counter, is gone exactly at the moment he returns to make a connection - making another instance where the narrative shines some light on missed opportunities. He continues to call essentially everyone he can think of - old classmates who are either asleep, or married, or don't even remember him. Ultimately failing to make a connection, he ends up at the bar, where he promises himself he will fall in love with the first woman that walks in.

The Blonde's involvement with the group of aspiring drug smugglers in the depths of Chungking Mansion is purely practical and focused on business, just like her relationship with her drug boss, who may have been a former lover. In the city, all her relationships are expendable and subject to the rule of violence. The fact that her drug boss delivers an ultimatum to her using a tin of sardines that is rapidly approaching its expiration date, underscores the disposable nature of the culture she inhabits. She is nothing more than a consumable commodity, soon to be discarded if she does not swiftly resolve the issue of the missing drugs. She is always shown being in close proximity to many people, she is rarely alone. However, she has no real human connection or someone she can trust. After failing to retrieve the drugs that the mules stole, she ends up at the same bar as cop 223, where they meet by chance (Fig.27).



Figure 27: cop 223 trying to connect with The Blonde at the bar

Cop 223 goes over to talk to her but ends up constantly talking about his ex May. He asks her questions about herself, but isn't getting much out of her. Although she isn't making herself approachable, The Blonde doesn't leave either. She presents herself as a mysterious distant woman, but there is a hint of yearning for human connection as she isn't escaping his company. For the first time we hear her voiceover, which, at the time, seems like kind of a response to him: "Knowing someone doesn't mean keeping them. People change. A person may like pineapple today... and something else tomorrow." (Fig.28).



Figure 28: The Blonde and 223 at the bar

These lines foreshadow the breakup story of the second part of the film, where the flight attendant leaves cop 663 because she is ready to try something new. It also connects with the recurring theme of transience of relationships and connections.

We get the sense of some time passing by showing the rotating CDs again, and the waiter tells them the place is closing. The exhausted Blonde finally gives in and, as someone she now trusts, she collapses in his arms, saying: "I just want a place to rest".

Next they are at a hotel room, where The Blonde is sleeping while 223 spends the night watching movies and eating.

Despite their physical proximity and shared space, there is a lack of genuine reciprocal connection between them. They exist in the same room, yet barely interact, often positioned facing different directions. The camera often separates the characters within the frame, highlighting their individuality rather than their connection. When the morning comes, 223 leaves the room, after removing and cleaning her shoes.

He goes for a jog and 2 minutes before, according to him, his actual birthday - 06:00, he states he will ditch his pager as no one is going to call him. We linger on a longer shot of him alone, before he walks away without the pager. But immediately, it starts to ring, and as the clock ticks 06:00, The Blonde's "Happy Birthday" message reaches him. Surprised by this act, he gets a sense of relief and the restlessness seems to slowly fade away, as he says: "On May 1994 ... a woman wishes me a happy birthday.", before implying that he would like to keep that memory forever. This scene is again about the difficulties of human connection and about proximity which does not guarantee reciprocity, however, at the end of this sequence we are left realizing that that brief moment of exchange was somehow there - The Blonde, exhausted after her failed ventures, finds a shelter with him, and cop 223 gets someone who delivers on what he really wants - attention, and someone to wish him Happy Birthday.

The first story's structure is limited by the days left until the deadline of May 1st, which both characters have hanging over their heads, but for different reasons. On May 1st, The Blonde needs to deliver the stolen drugs, but instead she decides to kill her drug boss and end that story. On the same day, according to the deadline he set for her to come back to him, the breakup of cop 223 and his ex becomes final and their love expires. He goes back to the Midnight Express, where the boss of the venue suggests to him to try with Faye, the new employee. Him and Faye almost bump into each other, as the shot freezes on the frame when they look at each other (Fig.29). What momentarily seems like a potential new love story we could follow, is soon dismissed, as he says "This was the closest we ever got. Just 0.01 of a centimeter between us" and ends the scene by saying "6 hours later, she fell in love with another man" which launches us straight into the second story in the film.



Figure 29: cop 223 bumps into Faye

The intersection of the two stories perfectly underlines the dominant, as it comments on the potential connections we could have while being in close proximity with many people every day, and yet, the majority of them end up disappearing forever within a matter of seconds. It is again about missed opportunities and potential exchange that is never pursued. Before we dive into story number two, I would like to point out one more element Wong uses to mildly foreshadow what's to come later in the film. The less attentive viewers will probably miss these moments, but we are shown glimpses of the three characters who get involved with one another in the second part of the film, during the first story - the flight attendant, the policeman, and Faye carrying a striped toy tiger - all make a brief appearance during the first part (Fig.30-32).



Figures 30-32: Characters from the second story make an appearance in the first story

These early glimpses of the characters of the second story may mildly foreshadow the plot switch to come, but it clearly isn't set up in such a way that the audience should, with no doubt, expect that. In *Chungking Express*, the viewer's expectation that two groups of characters will converge, is rechanneled to focus interest on narrative parallels.³¹ Rather, in a similar fashion as the rest of the movie, the interactions are minimized to brief encounters, or even limited to circling the same

³¹ Bordwell, D., Thompson, K., (2008), "Film art: An introduction", New York:McGraw-Hill Higher Education, p.384.

location. Moreover, the classical principles of individuation of characters are set aside here, as the purpose of these introductions only becomes apparent retroactively, upon repeated viewings.

The second story begins with cop 663 showing up at the Midnight Express when Faye is working as she's dancing to "California Dreamin" at a very high volume. He starts off as an ordinary guy who orders a chef's salad for his girlfriend, who is about to leave him. Following his breakup with the flight attendant, we witness him in a sentimental state, engaging in heartfelt conversations with the objects in his apartment: the slim bar of soap, the soft white doll, the worn-out towel. Meanwhile, the flight attendant leaves her apartment keys along with a letter at the Midnight Express, prompting Faye to secretly visit his flat during her lunch break. Although physically apart, now they are able to share the same space. Faye initially explores Cop 663's environment, and gradually takes the initiative to improve it. As her confidence grows, she starts to initiate changes - introducing new elements to his flat such as a fresh tablecloth, different bed sheets, his soap, towel, and toothbrush, acquiring goldfish for the fish tank, exchanging his fluffy white stuffed bear for a Garfield, and substituting his cans of old sardines with a better brand. It is worth noting defamiliarization at play here, as this extensive sequence of the numerous times Faye goes to his apartment to clean, tidy up, and upgrade his environment, holds not much variety in the content. Solely describing the plot of a girl who goes to the cop's apartment various times to perform simple house chores, would underrate the overall effect this sequence has on the viewer. Kristin Thompson notes in *Breaking the Glass Armor*:

Defamiliarization must be present for an object to function for the spectator as art; yet it can be present to vastly varying degrees [...] The works that we single out as most original and that are taken to be the most valuable tend to be those that either defamiliarize reality more strongly or defamiliarize the conventions established by previous artworks - or a combination of the two.³²

Through these acts, she feels closer to him, she expresses her affection and asserts her presence in his life. Remarkably, Cop 663 remains seemingly oblivious to the alterations made by Faye in his absence, seamlessly incorporating her additions and adjustments into his daily routine. He listens to the CD she leaves behind, consumes the

³² Thompson, K., (1988), "Breaking the glass armor: Neoformalist film analysis", Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, p.11.

canned food she restocks his pantry with, and engages with the large Garfield toy she substitutes for the previous white stuffed bear, all without noticing the changes. It is a depiction of love unfolding within an intermediary space, where distance becomes intertwined with the expressions of desire.

In the "Ecrits" (1966), Lacan says that the ability to maintain our desire is so vital that it safeguards us against the experience of satisfaction: "For desire is a defense, a prohibition against going beyond a certain limit in jouissance."³³. The implication here is that the wrong thing to do is to try and satisfy the desire. What Faye is doing for the bigger part of the story is dancing with desire itself, instead of pursuing an opportunity to satisfy it. When we first meet her in the film, she is enjoying her favorite song "California Dreamin". She is dreaming about going away to better, sunnier places while stuck at her monotone job. The less she pursues it, the louder the desire. When she unexpectedly falls in love with cop 663, the unknown feeling overwhelms her and she isn't sure how to react to this. When she gets an opportunity to secretly explore his space, he gladly seizes it. The physical distance separating Faye and Cop 663 serves as the fertile ground for the growth of romantic longing. Faye's choice to express her feelings through spatial gestures establishes a relationship that thrives on absence. Accepting the physical absence of Cop 663 as an integral part of their romance, Faye is liberated to indulge in her fantasies by immersing herself in his living space.



Figures 33-34: cop 663 and the stewardess | Faye and cop 663

The film constantly makes parallels between the characters, and time and space play a big role as well. One of the examples is the connection from cop 663's apartment window to the escalators. In the sequence with his ex, cop 663 playfully waves, while the stewardess leaves, never to return again (Fig.33). Later on, Faye uses the same window to

³³ Lacan, J., "Ecrits", (1966), Éditions du Seuil , p.246.

playfully shout at him and hide, while he goes up the escalators, leaving his realm to her (Fig.34).



Figures 35-38: Faye and 663 at the same place in different times

Same parallel is drawn between the scenes where she leaves a photo on his mirror (Fig.35), and places a shirt in his closet (Fig.37), with the scenes later on where he finds the same objects in his space (Fig.36-38). She enjoys the comfort of being in the places he has been and will come back to, without ever being there together.



Figures 39: Faye awkwardly avoiding to connect with 663

When he finally catches her present in his apartment, Faye finds herself overwhelmed and tries to escape. She ends up joining him inside but her behavior is

totally changed. Cop 663 even puts on “California Dreamin”, oblivious to the fact that it is in fact her CD. But it is the first time we see Faye not reacting to her favorite song. Instead of bonding over the music, she goes so far out of character that she lies: “I’m not really into music” (Fig.39).

The strain of being in close proximity with him holds some kind of weight over her. Eventually she succumbs to exhaustion and falls asleep on his sofa. A big difference can be noticed in her behavior in the scenes they share where they meet by chance at Midnight Express or in the street, where his presence doesn’t seem threatening and she always seems more in control. But as with the scene in his apartment we just explored, when she finally gets caught being inside his apartment, she is completely out of her comfort zone, she hides and then runs away. Now that he finally knows she has a big crush on him, cop 663 goes to the Midnight Express to ask her out on a date (Fig.40-43). Startled by his appearance, Faye is in defensive mode, while instead of “California Dreamin” this time the song that plays has the lyrics: “*What a difference a day makes, twenty four little hours. Brought the sun and the flowers where there used to be rain*”. Cop 663 has now realized that Faye has feelings for him and is prepared to respond and willing to embrace her as his love interest, ready to finally form a more permanent meaningful relationship that isn’t based on accidental encounters.



Figures 40-43: cop 663 goes to Midnight Express to ask Faye out on a date

Caught by surprise and true to her tendency to flee from situations, when she doesn't show up to their scheduled date, we realize Faye has decided to relocate herself to the real California, the one from her favorite song. Cop 663 is now put in a position to learn how to nourish love in her absence. At the time of their scheduled date, at the California Bar, we see Cop 663 alone, consoling the rejection with a drink. Both Cop 663 and Faye are in 'California', just a different one. Whereas before they were sharing a physical space at a different time, now they are figuratively sharing the space of 'California' at the same time. A year later, she returns as a stewardess and they meet again by chance at the Midnight Express (Fig.44-45).



Figures 44-45: Faye returns to Midnight Express a year later

This too circles back to our dominant principle, as they are always one way or another close, but do not get to fulfill their desires. The concluding section of the second story delicately balances the resolution of the first narrative. As Cop 223 begins to let go of his past and embrace his cherished memories, he also becomes open to an uncertain future. Meanwhile, Cop 663 embraces change and growth. Previously, Faye had invited him to accompany her to California, but he had shown indifference. However, when Faye returns after a year, she discovers that he is now operating the Midnight Express and renovating it. Interestingly, he is even listening to "California Dreamin" at the volume she liked. He notes that it takes time to adjust to new circumstances. Finally, he is ready to be with her. As she fills out a boarding pass on a napkin and asks him where he wants to go, he replies: "Wherever you want to take me.". We can take the implications of this narrative and turn to an analysis of the third level, the thematic system.

4.4 The Thematic System

The movie involves many instances that underscore the inevitability of change and the irreversible nature of time, highlighting the risks faced by those who resist this reality. Yet, it also presents recurring motifs and mirrored situations, uncovering patterns and connections amidst the dynamic cityscape. Through these observations, it suggests the faint potential for positive transformations. The film reflects on the nature of encounters in the city, characterizes the city as a place of multiple possibilities, and in multiple levels suggests other potential stories in the vicinity.

A lot of parallels are drawn between the four main characters of *Chungking Express*, comparison and contrast are used as a device to expose their similarities and their differences. All of them experience feelings of loneliness, longing, and the desire for companionship. They are all grappling with personal struggles, whether it's a recent breakup, unrequited love, or the fear of being alone. This vulnerability makes them relatable and adds depth to their individual journeys. Each character is portrayed as having a somewhat unconventional or eccentric nature. They possess unique quirks and idiosyncrasies that make them stand out. They also share a connection to the busy urban environment of Hong Kong. The city itself almost becomes a character in the film, influencing their experiences and shaping their interactions. The fast-paced, chaotic nature of the city mirrors their internal turmoil and creates a backdrop against which their stories unfold. In "Hong Kong through Chungking Express", Taher Abdel-Ghani summarizes the common characteristics the characters of the film share. In his words "four traits have contextualized Wong's characters: (1) loneliness, represented in how citizens of Hong Kong are separated from China, (2) expiration, which was on their minds after the handover, (3) uncertainty, towards their future, and (4) optimism, the struggle to cope with anxiety hoping for the best. Loneliness, expiration, uncertainty and optimism are traits we can recognize in all four leading characters of *Chungking Express*, however often portrayed in different ways for each character.³⁴

So far we have been using the word *reciprocity* in its most commonly accepted meaning - as the practice of exchanging something. But if we look back at the origin of the word, it developed from French *réciprocité*, which derives from the Latin *reciprocus*, which can be defined as 'moving backwards and forwards'. Now, we can take this as

³⁴ Abdel-Ghani, T., (2016). Hong Kong through Chungking Express (1994): A City-Film Review. 10.13140/RG.2.2.36145.20320.

grounds for interpreting the word as implying that subjects are moving in, or headed in different directions, and take a look at what it means for the characters of *Chungking Express*.

If we look at each of the couples, we shall see there are a number of differences between them. Faye lives on the edge with the future, while 663 lives on the edge of the past - they are both longing for the circumstances to be different than they are - bring back the past or fast forward to the future. Faye is depicted as a character who embraces the future with a sense of anticipation and possibility. She is spontaneous, adventurous, and constantly seeking new experiences. Faye lives in the present moment, but with a forward-looking mindset. Her favorite song "California Dreamin'" sings about being in a safe and warm place - California. Her actions, such as leaving an imaginary boarding pass for Cop 663 dated for the next year, demonstrate her willingness to wait and invest in the future. She represents the belief that love and connection can be found in the unknown, in the anticipation of what is to come.

On the other hand, Cop 663 is portrayed as someone who is stuck in the past. He clings to memories of his failed relationship with the flight attendant and struggles to move on. He is emotionally attached to the past, therefore unable to embrace the present or the future. He finds consolation in the routines and comfort of his apartment, which becomes a symbol of his stagnant emotional state, until Faye slowly changes his surroundings and gradually changes his mind.

We can see a similar case in the first story where The Blonde is portrayed as a character of spontaneous nature, always moving on. She makes quick decisions, like kidnapping the little girl to threaten the man in the alley while looking for the drug mules. Her reluctance to invest in deeper connections represents the idea of living in the moment and embracing the possibilities that the future holds. Similarly to cop 663, officer 223 is depicted as a character trapped in the past. Deeply affected by his recent breakup, cop 223 clings to memories and rituals associated with his past relationship, which hinder his ability to form new connections or envision a different future. Upon deeper exploration we can see that being in proximity to someone doesn't necessarily mean being close or knowing them. It is possible to be in physical proximity without having anything to exchange. As Abbas, while reflecting on Wong's cinema, states: "the seen is not the known".³⁵

³⁵ Abbas, A., (1997), "Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance", University of Minnesota Press, p.55.

At times, the exploration of the thematic level meets some of the formal choices in the film. In *The Sensuous Cinema of Wong Kar-wai: Film Poetics and the Aesthetic of Disturbance*, Bettinson elaborates on two shots which highlight Faye's leitmotif (Fig.46-47):

First, an airplane soars overhead while an airline uniform flutters on a clothes-line; second, Faye lounges on the balcony of 633's apartment, launching paper planes into the air [...] Juxtaposed, these shots imply Faye's stunted desire for change, indicating the separation between action (actual transportation) and mere reverie (ersatz flight). But "California Dreamin" endows these shots with further specificity. If the first image schematizes the visualizable aspects of Faye's fantasy (aircraft, flight uniform), "California Dreamin" specifies that which is not readily expressed pictorially: Faye's dreamed-of destination.³⁶



Figures 46-47: Airplane soaring overhead | Faye throws paper airplane towards the sky

Bordwell reflects on this moment in the film as well, in his blog entry *What a difference a day makes: Chungking Express* from 2018, stating "When I see that jet and that clothesline, I remember looking out the window of such a plane and wondering about the people I saw on the rooftops, scarily close."³⁷ Faye throwing paper planes out of the window, and the paper plane flying over the clothes line, forms almost as if a phrase, it is a thought-provoking connection, executed in a very subtle way and yet hard to dismiss.

In *Chungking Express*, the traditional notion of urban indifference, often discussed by scholars like Louis Wirth and Georg Simmel, is transformed into a sense of urban connectivity through spaces, shared or individually explored. The film illustrates how even the smallest encounter, such as sharing 0.01 cm of space in a turbulent city, can evoke a

³⁶ Bettinson, G., (2014), "The Sensuous Cinema of Wong Kar-Wai: Film Poetics and the Aesthetic of Disturbance", Hong Kong University Press; 1st edition (November 10, 2014), p.45.

³⁷<https://www.davidbordwell.net/blog/2018/03/27/what-a-difference-a-day-makes-chungking-express-comes-to-the-criterion-channel/>

profound impact. In the second story, the film explores the idea of sustaining a relationship through non-simultaneous sharing of space. It challenges the notion that proximity must always lead to reciprocity or that reciprocity comes from proximity. Instead, it presents a system of desire that substitutes physical presence with the space inhabited by the beloved. As a result, we shouldn't be surprised to find Cop 663 becoming the new owner of Midnight Express at the end of the film. Unable to gain Faye, he keeps his connection to her by taking over her place at the fast food stall.

As we have seen, the dominant is employed throughout the film in its thematic level, portraying the elusive nature of humans, the difficulties to find a connection in urban cities, as well as the people of Hong Kong.

5. Conclusion

The analysis of *Chungking Express* has demonstrated how a dominant principle in a highly original film can be composed from devices that at a first glance could strike us as unconventional. The dominant in a film exists neither solely within the work itself nor entirely in the mind of the spectator. Instead, it comprises a series of cues that prompt our responses, as we construct our overall understanding of how different elements in the film relate to each other. In the same piece of art, various analysts may identify slightly different dominants, while they might articulate similar ideas in distinct ways. The dominant represents a key organizing principle that influences our perception and interpretation of the film's narrative and thematic elements.

By employing the neoformalist tools of analysis as formulated by Kristin Thompson (1988), we can confirm that the principle of 'proximity without reciprocity' takes the shape of a dominant in the film *Chungking Express*. Through a neoformalist lens, we explored how this recurring principle weaves its way throughout the film, influencing formal choices, character dynamics, narrative structure, and themes.

Wong Kar-wai's unique background and experiences undoubtedly contributed to the exploration of this theme. As an immigrant in Hong Kong, he was familiar with displacement, cultural differences, and isolation, which are evident in the film's portrayal of the characters' lives in the dynamic city. The run-down areas filled with exiles, tourists, and merchants symbolize the globalized, fast-paced world in which the characters are constantly in close proximity but rarely experience genuine reciprocity in their relationships.

We began the analysis by diving into the stylistic choices and cinematic techniques employed in Wong Kar-wai's film. The principle of 'proximity without reciprocity' acts as a persistent thread that informs the blocking, cinematography, editing, time and space. Cinematography plays a vital role in highlighting the 'proximity without reciprocity' principle. The use of handheld camera, unconventional angles, step printing, adds to the film's raw and authentic feel, heightening the feeling of dynamism, urgency and uneasiness. Further we mentioned blocking as another key element supporting the dominant. Characters often find themselves in the same physical space, but rarely get to actually share it. In most cases they are separated by a counter, a door, a wall, or a piece

of furniture. When they do come in close proximity with no obstacles between them, they are often facing different directions, or get involved in disconnected activities, as in the example of *The Blonde* sleeping through the night while cop 223 spends the time eating and watching television. They spend the night together, however, it only means in the same room, as they are never seen interacting. The minute the second character awakens, the first one has already left. The film's editing style further accentuates the 'proximity without reciprocity' principle. The use of slow motion, jump cuts, and rhythmic editing evokes a sense of temporal dislocation and emotional fragmentation, mirroring the characters' disjointed relationships. In a great deal of scenes, the cuts are there to connect two characters who otherwise find themselves in different spaces. These cuts transcend spatiality and play with the illusion of connection. But the illusion is quickly broken, dismissing the connection that was built, which serves the dominant principle, as a connection was almost shared but never really lasts. Often the pacing of the sequences helps create some anticipation, drawing a parallel between characters, as in the case of the opening and *The Blonde through Chungking Mansions* and the chase of cop 223.

Wong Kar-wai refrains from building a continuity system and instead "... draws us to seek thematic links between two storylines that do not connect causally."³⁸ The nonlinear structure allows the film to play with time and space, emphasizing the transience of human connections and the constant state of longing that dominates the characters' lives. The parallel narratives emphasize the theme of missed opportunities and unfulfilled desires, drawing a stark contrast between physical closeness and emotional distance. The film presents two separate but interconnected stories, each revolving around a cop and a woman. Despite their close physical proximity, the characters' emotional connections remain elusive, and genuine reciprocity in their relationships seems unattainable.

The principle of 'proximity without reciprocity' was also proven as a dominant through the thematic level of *Chungking Express*. Throughout the film, characters frequently cross paths and come into close contact with each other, but their interactions remain superficial and lack genuine reciprocity. This, however, goes deeper than the actions they take, spaces they share and decisions they make, as explored in the narrative system. An examination of the thematic system showed us that fundamentally, the characters are distant from each other. Even when they share the same space, there is

³⁸ Bordwell, D., & Thompson, K., (2008), "Film art: An introduction", New York: McGraw-Hill Higher Education, p.431.

constantly a big gap that can never be bridged. Faye and cop 663 both struggle with their reality and their daily routines, but Faye always turns to the future, to the possibilities, dreams and fantasies, while cop 663 frequently turns to the past, mourning the lost love, the ending of a relationship without hope for another. Similarly, *The Blonde* lives in the moment and is constantly working for the future, while cop 223 is stuck in the past, counting down the days till the end of their love with May, a girl that already broke up with him. By deciding to take it as a joke, he locks himself in a loop that seems like it will never end.

Chungking Express stands as a prime example of Wong Kar-wai's ability to use filmmaking techniques to evoke powerful emotions and ideas. Through the principle of 'proximity without reciprocity', the film captures the complexities of human relationships, the transient nature of connections, and the universal yearning for meaningful intimacy. As viewers, we are left pondering the delicate dance between physical closeness and emotional distance. Wong Kar-wai's cinematic masterpiece remains a compelling and thought-provoking exploration of human nature and the eternal quest for true reciprocity in a world of fleeting encounters.

6. Bibliography

Literature

Abbas, Akbar. "Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance". University of Minnesota Press. 1997

Abdel-Ghani, Taher. Hong Kong through Chungking Express (1994): A City-Film Review. 2016. (10.13140/RG.2.2.36145.20320)

Bettinson, Gary. "The Sensuous Cinema of Wong Kar-Wai: Film Poetics and the Aesthetic of Disturbance". Hong Kong University Press; 1st edition. 2014

Bordwell, David. Planet Hong Kong: Popular Cinema and the Art of Entertainment. Harvard University Press. 2000

Bordwell, David and Thompson, Kristin. "Film art: An introduction". New York: McGraw-Hill Higher Education. 2008

Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly. "Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience". Harper & Row. 1990

Harding, Colin. and Popple, Simon. "In the Kingdom of Shadows: A Companion to Early Cinema". Cygnus Arts. 1996

Lacan, Jacques. "Ecrits". Éditions du Seuil. 1966

Malcolm, Louise. "The Filmic Bodies of Wong Kar-wai". University of New South Wales. 2013

Protsenko, Viktoriia. "The Emotional Cinema of Wong Kar-wai". Universitat Pompeu Fabra in Barcelona. 2018

Shklovsky, Victor. "Art as Technique" in Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press. 1965

Thompson, Kristin. "Breaking the glass armor: Neoformalist film analysis". Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press. 1988

Van de Velde, Danica. "Spatial intimacies: negotiating place in four films by Wong Kar-wai". University of Western Australia. 2011

Wirth, Louis. "On Cities and Social Life: Selected Papers". University of Chicago Press. 1964

Internet Resources

Ebert, Roger. Review: Chungking Express. Chicago Sun-Times (March 15, 1996).

<https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/chungking-express-1996>

<https://filmmakermagazine.com/107448-wong-kar-wai-chungking-express/>

<https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1996-03-03-ca-42640-story.html>

<https://www2.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/sight-sound-magazine/archives/wong-kar-wai-chungking-express>

<https://www.davidbordwell.net/blog/2018/03/27/what-a-difference-a-day-makes-chungking-express-comes-to-the-criterion-channel/>

["Those Two Characters are There, Forever Young": Wong Kar-wai on Chungking Express | Filmmaker Magazine](#)

[Alone in the Crowd: Routines and Urban Isolation in "Chungking Express" | by David Leeds | Medium](#)

Sources

Chungking Express (1994), Miramax, directed by: Wong, Kar-wai;
produced by: Chan Yi-kan, Jeffrey Lau; written by Wong Kar-wai; cinematography by:
Christopher Doyle, Andrew Lau; editing by: William Chang, Kit-Wai Kai, Chi-Leung Kwong;
music by: Frankie Chan, Roel. A Garcia, Michael Galasso