



Discuss Wong Kar-Wai's *Happy Together* in relation to its Signification and Textuality.

‘A famous phrase of Derrida’s, “Il n’y a pas de hors-texte” – “There is no outside-of-text”: when you think you are getting outside signs and text, to ‘reality itself’, what you find is more text, more signs, chains of supplements.’¹

In 1997, the year of Hong Kong’s sovereignty handover to China, Hong Kong auteur director Wong Kar-Wai (WKW) shot the film *Happy Together* in Argentina - the geographically opposite end of Hong Kong. WKW has clarified more than once that *Happy Together* is not a ‘gay film’ as seen by some of the audience and critics, however this film still earned a category III censor rating in Hong Kong. Internationally, the film has been eye-opening and received good reputation in competitions like the Cannes Festival.

I found *Happy Together* an interesting subject matter for cultural analysis for a number of reasons: the nature of the film production, considering the setting in Buenos Aires, Argentina, the film is made by Hong Kong people and very much about Hong Kong, the distant perspective WKW has taken is symbolic; the embryonic political references inscribed in the film, suggested in different ways, for example by the small print on the poster: ‘A Story About Reunion’ and the fact that it is a 97-minute film, issued in year 1997 when Hong Kong comes to reunion with mainland China. In terms of the film’s psychology, WKW attempts to explore relationships and human emotions; homosexuality is not a theme or issue, it is a backdrop that is meant to disclose the complicated yet in some ways simple associations among the protagonists: two gay men took their break from Hong Kong to Argentina, Lai Yiu-Fai (actor Tony Leung) and Ho Po-Wing (actor Lesile Cheung), bicker, fight, break up, reunite. ‘Let’s start over again’ is the phrase being repeated all the

time, the two men eventually separated and as Lesile remains idle and sluggish, Tony meets new people and moves on in his life by returning home (Hong Kong) and earnestly looking for a genuine start-over.

In this essay, I shall discuss *Happy Together* in relation to its signification in:

- Geography: urban dreamscapes and landscapes, how lonely cities are signified by the sense of place and placelessness
- Nationalism & National Identity: Hong Kong people in 1997; the border between old endings and new beginnings; how the sense of belonging, of nostalgia and reunion is conveyed.
- Relationships & Emotion: WKW's films are always concerned with the emotional development of the characters rather than plot; while *Happy Together* is not an exception, I shall explore how love, yearning and other feelings are presented.

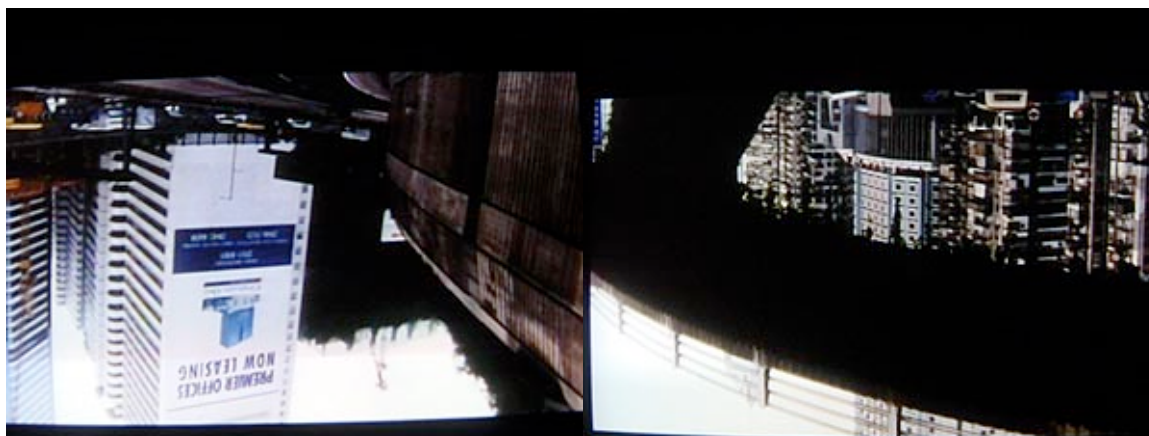
While conducting an analysis on the film's signification, I will point to the film's textuality, specifically its visual power: camera, editing and set design, narrative and sound. A point worth noting is that in my essay I refer a lot to 'senses' rather than concrete themes because many of WKW's ideas are abstract and implicit and sometimes merely 'psychological imprint of the sound, the impression that it makes on our senses'²

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GEOGRAPHY

Places are symbolic in *Happy Together*. WKW's cinematographer Christopher Doyle says in his shooting dairy: '...we (film-makers, actors and crew) came to Argentina to "defamiliarise" ourselves by moving away from the spaces – and we hope the

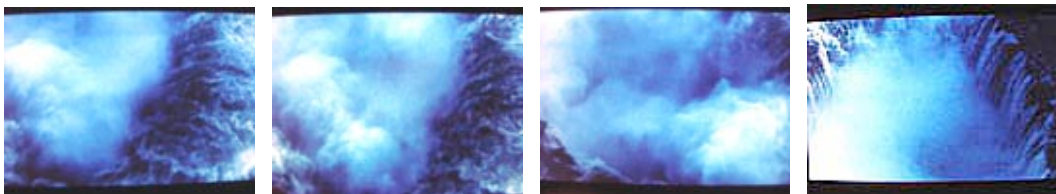
preoccupations – of the world we know so well. But we're out of our space and depth here. We don't even know the city well. So why do we still tend towards bars, barbershops, fast food joints and trains? ... We're stuck with our own concerns and perceptions...³ Despite the shooting location, as a film, *Happy Together* does not tell us much about Buenos Aires; the space is instead being used to signify Hong Kong concerns and perceptions; Hong Kong is being localises/ remade in this practically foreign city. WKW shoots the foreign places as if they were like Hong Kong. He shoots the same rooms, the same kitchen and the same little dark roads. These images register Hong Kong urban structure, like the narrow and filthy backstreets, closely built residential blocks etc. WKW has a flavour in putting up urban night scenes stylised by fast-motion time twist through editing. The sensation of freedom is these scenes' emotional weight, blends with highly saturated colours streets and bars, colour-flooded interiors, and non-figurative compositions of light and motion to overwhelm the audience with stunning visual stimuli. WKW addresses issues through indirection and displacement of setting; in the film, he jokes about this strategy with upside-down shots of Hong Kong traffic illustrating how that city look to Tony from his geographically inverted perspective.



Localisation of Hong Kong in Argentina, after all, can be seen as a signification of Hong Kong's local internationalism, depicted by the changing urban environment, fleeting human encounters in public places etc. All kinds of images resonate with sounds bring out the

ambiguousness and uniqueness of Hong Kong's cultural space, formed by its position in the global economy and its social and political conditions at the time.

The Iguazu waterfall (equivalent of North America's Niagara Falls) is vast and roaring, it is both an imagined and physical destination for the film's characters, so close, yet far. Leslie and Tony never get there together because of their incompatible personalities and different approaches to life. Iguazu is a sign of urban people's dreamscape, magical in a sense that the beauty of nature can reunite the people's broken spirits; in this case, heal Tony and Leslie's sick relationship. It is shot from a helicopter high overhead, in an image that slowly rotates through 180 degrees; when seen for the first time, it is a place that cannot be reached whereas at the end, an arrival point for Tony after he has gone through some kind of self-recovery from the love bruises and has finally saved enough money to go home.



The stupendous waterfall is a recurring image as WKW has inserted a series of obsessively repeated shots of a prop - a rotating Iguazu waterfall souvenir lamp in Tony's room. As well as giving the film a touch of romanticism, these shots stress the importance of the characters' once common destination - the dream-place of their yearning.

Furthermore, music helps bring out the scenes of the virtual Iguazu waterfall as a kind of perfect world; the imagery is immersed with rhapsodically tender Caetano Veloso song,

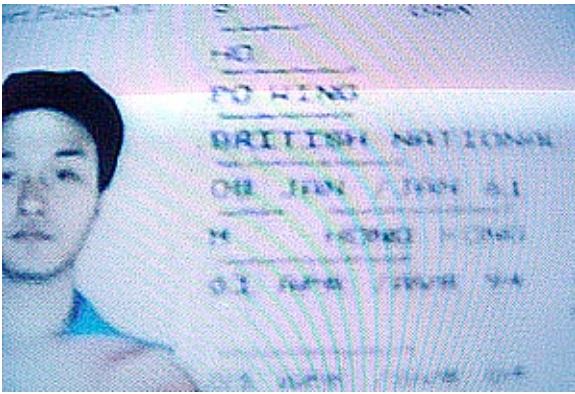
used to signify a place - real or imaginary, close at hand or impossibly far off - that the film characters need to believe in in order to survive.

The lighthouse in Tierra del Fuego is the so-called 'the end of the world' where one can leave his sorrow and pick up new energy for life. Near the end of the film, Tony's same-sex Taiwanese friend Chang 'releases' Tony's miserable weeping from his recorder at the lighthouse, borne witness by the borderless sea. It is a kind of myth that signifies Tony's new world while he prepares to head back to Hong Kong through Taipei. Going back to the first point in this paragraph on 'geography' – Hong Kong and its bits and pieces being remade in Argentina, 'the end of the world' here also signifies the filmmakers query on globalisation: when all cities and content of these cities look increasingly alike, is 'the end of the world' still exist?

Geographical factors play an important role in *Happy Together*. WKW uses the qualities of different places to draw reference to his own nostalgia – an original Hong Kongness; and, by transplanting his protagonists to these places, seeks a new level of meaning both for his protagonists and for the film as a whole.

NATIONALISM & NATIONAL IDENTITY

Hong Kong is a westernised but not western city, when asked about their nationality, Hong Kong people find it hard to answer straight the way, particularly before 1997. Are they Chinese or Hong Kongers? They are definitely not authentic British but why do many of them have British passports, BNO passports or even US, Canadian, Australian passports? In the very first 10-second shot, we see some anonymous fingers flipping through two passports; the nationality column reads British Nationals (Overseas) and the photos are two apparently Asian faces, the year on the immigration officer's stamp is 1995.



Passport can be regarded as an absolute signifier of both nationalism and personal identity; this brief shot introduces the audience directly to WKW's concern: to what extent are Tony and Lesile (and other absent Hong Kong people) 'British Nationals'?

As the story goes, we get a sense that, by leaving their homeland, the protagonists' dissatisfaction with their romance bespeaks dissatisfaction with their national identity.⁴ In fact, the decisive separation of Tony and Lesile is due to a crisis of nationality: During the short-term harmonious period the lovers share, when Lesile is battered and is taken in by Tony (his former lover now), Tony hides away Lesile's passport to prevent him from leaving. Once the temperamental Lesile is fully recovered, he cannot bear to be trapped in Tony's room and is wanting to go out and seek fun (again), he demands the passport back, and Tony refuses. 'Of all the scenes in the film, the editing in this moment is the most fragmentary and disorientating: the uncertainty of the cinematic space reflects both the uncertainty of Po-Wing's (Lesile) national standing and Yiu-Fai's (Tony) uneasiness over the possibility of losing his lover'⁵

Red is the colour used in the opening title as well as the ending credit. In Chinese culture, this sharply vivid red almost immediately suggests Mainland China, with reference to Mao's communist ideology - red is the blood and sweat of proletariats. Red also signifies luck, glamour, prosperity and happiness, it is a colour seen and used everywhere in Chinese New Year. Whereas *Happy Together* is a story of two men, how they love and cannot tolerate each other, if we enlarge this plot to a national extent, the emotions go to the complicated nostalgia of Hong Kong people triggered by the confusion in their national identity; from here, I would argue



that the colour red somehow states WKW's political perception and his aspiration for a fresh start in 1997 handover. At the same time, written in bold white letters and placed in a red background, the film's distinguishing title *Happy Together* contains a double vision – first, are people happy because they are together? Second, can people be happy and together at the same time? In both the fictional (film) and realistic (real world in 1997) time of 'start over', the key issue is to pursue happiness and harmony between people and events, akin to the meaning of red as a sign.

In the end of the film, the former crown colony is again depicted. During Tony's stop-over in Taiwan before going back to Hong Kong, the camera scans pass the television which is announcing the news of Deng Xiaoping's death, it is the most direct acknowledgement of the 1997 issue WKW has made. Deng is an authoritarian figure that signifies the old political and cultural entanglements, now with his death, new options become possible, along with new uncertainties. This brief shot becomes a momentous event in the film, a political intrusion into Tony's inward-looking self-obsession.

RELATIONSHIP & EMOTION

The hot but fractious relationship between the main characters is a signification of the idea 'Reunion' and 'Start-over'. Tony says in his voice-over at the film's start, 'we left Hong Kong to start over... we hit the road and reached Argentina'. Before 1997, Hong Kong people are uncertain about their emotions towards China – should it be fear? respect? suspicion? or passion? In general, people look forward to this reunion with the 'motherland' China with bitter-sweet optimism caused by the displacement of their national identity and worries of unforeseen social and political changes.

Love is communicated through the repetitive cycle of attraction and repulsion between these two very different men. This relationship is well signified by excerpts of Tangos that are played and danced along throughout the film - Astor Piazzolla's *Tango Apasionado*, suffused with desire yet sheltered with a layer of darkness and emptiness. 'The interaction between music and the characters is expressed visually as much as symbolically... Music exacerbates their (characters') narcissistic impulses, brings out their natural sensuality and consolidates the fantasy worlds that they invent for themselves. Music creates pockets of fiction within the overall fiction of the story, mini-narratives for the characters.'⁶ The complicated emotions are also recorded by fractured montage, as Lesile and Tony confront each other through chains of jump cuts, made from every available angle and distance, there is a beautiful rhythm that groups the shots together as a sense of one moment. Long takes also assist in demonstrating the tension between and within the characters. For instance, the camera holds persistently on Tony who, in one scene, sadly leaned on the dock of a tourist boat, drifting up and down the Argentinean canal; in another scene, unable to articulate his sadness, weeps into the tape recorder that Chang gives him. WKW and his long-term cinematographer Christopher Doyle are often accused of stressing style over substance, a charge supported by WKW's typical skinny story plots. However, the creation of WKW-Doyle's style is revolutionarily substantial and meaningful. Shot with mixed film stock, colour and black & white, stutter slow motion effects, Doyle uses every trick in the bag to isolate the briefest moments of emotional connection: as Tony and Lesile eye each other, and as Lesile holds Tony's hand and use Tony's cigarette to lit his.



After all, *Happy Together* is also about the solitude of urban people. To highlight the characters' nostalgia and loneliness, WKW again uses shooting and editing techniques to let audience feel the time flow by slowing a tender lovers' dance so that it will become a lasting moment in audience' memory; fracturing and speeding up some other scenes with jump cuts; and playing with fast-motion to capture the traffic in Buenos Aires and Taipei so audience feel the accelerated pace of urban time. WKW also uses a large amount of carefully and wittily written dialogues and monologues to speak out his characters' loneliness: 'Haven't been there is fun', 'I wasn't happy that's why I came (to Argentina), I need to think things over before I go back', 'I thought I was different from Po-Wing, turns out that lonely people...are all the same'.

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Films come from an imaged world where the close-to-reality life there is made up by signs, signifiers and signified. It is adequate to quote Culler's writing in relation to Derrida's interpretation of texts '...instead of thinking of life as something to which signs and texts are added to represent it, we should conceive of life itself as suffused with signs, made what it is by processes of signification...'⁷ WKW's film is an example of deconstruction and post-modernity characterised by his emphasis on structure and form over the content. Along with his collaborator/ editor/ production designer William Chang and joined by cinematographer Chris Doyle, the 'magic three' give birth to a mix of style which is concerned less and less with narrative coherence, and more and more with mood and empathy. The way WKW interprets texts, supplemented by rich cultural elements and aesthetic strategies in *Happy Together*, provides good reading for cultural analysis.

Happy Together is a film that bridges the excitement of Hong Kong's mid-90's.

Political-wise, WKW handles the 1997 issues in a rather light-hearted fashion, a light-heartedness not particularly cheerful or sadistic, conveyed by numerous signifiers and rich textuality, matched by acute emotional insight. Meanwhile, *Happy Together* is an audio-visual signification of emotional estrangement - from one's lover, one's homeland, and oneself. *Happy Together* is also simply a voyage, a heart-rending one where we eventually see the reflection of our home, and what has happened in search of it.

¹ Jonathan Culler, *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 12

² Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics (1910-11)* in Julie Rivkin, Michael Ryan (eds.), *Literary Theory: An Anthology* (Malden, Mass: Blackwell, 1998), p.78

³ Christopher Doyle, *Buenos Aires* (Tokyo: Prénom H, 1997), p. 53.

⁴ Robert M. Payne, *Ways of seeing wild: the cinema of Wong kar-wai*, 2001, <http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/jc44.2001/payne%20for%20site/wongkarwai1.html> (retrieved 19 Dec)

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Marc Siegel, *The Intimate Spaces of Wong Kar-Wai* in Esther C. M. Yau (ed.), *At Full Speed: Hong Kong Cinema in a Borderless World*, (Minneapolis, London: Minnesota University Press, 2001), p.31

⁷ Culler, *op. cit.*, p.12

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