
Constipated Visuality and Its Fecal Reminders: The Anal Poetics of Wong Kar-wai's *In the Mood for Love*

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ABSTRACT

Though restraint is a theme frequently discussed in scholarly works on Wong Kar-wai's *In the Mood for Love*, the underlying Chinese reticent poetic tradition has nonetheless gone mostly unnoticed. This article seeks to understand the tradition and its potentiality in terms of a particular mode of visuality that I designate as anality, viewing the very act of holding or withholding treasured things, ideas, or affects as a function of anal retention that sometimes complies with while at other times contradicts collective Chinese norms. The ambivalence of such anal visuality is perceivable in the movie's defamiliarization of time and space, which subjects characters to the gaze of an inquisitive community while simultaneously insulating and transposing them into an elsewhere free from the pressure of surveillance. The anality as well as the potentiality thereof, I argue, consists in the very spatialization of the attempt to conserve, be it an unsaid/unrepresented event or time arrested in the form of slow motion. I conclude this article by aligning this anal logic of conservation with an impersonal, Buddhist-inflected notion of melancholia via a close examination of the film's last few shots of Angkor Wat.

KEYWORDS anality, reticent poetics, the long take, slow motion, Wong Kar-wai, *In the Mood for Love*

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He remembers those vanished years. As though looking through a dusty windowpane, the past is something he could see, but not touch. And everything he sees is blurred and indistinct.

--Wong Kar-wai, *In the Mood for Love*

Angkor Wat is like a movie theater in which, above which and behind which hovered deferred romance. If the camera, for all its incessant tracking, could only burrow into the crevice in the ancient wall, exposing desire once and for all! At such a moment in such a place, feeling turns back onto itself, having failed to attach to a proper object.

--Dudley Andrew, *What Cinema Is!*

I open my discussion with the two epigraphs above. Both relate to Wong's Kar-wai's artistic *tour de force*, *In the Mood for Love*: the first a meta-critical comment made at the very end of the film, the second an observation by critic Dudley Andrew regarding the last few sequences which appear immediately before the "He remembers" metacomment concludes the film. Insofar as both say a great deal about seeing, feeling, and their purported/disputed object, they warrant closer scrutiny should we want to bring into further relief details of the working mechanism at the core of the film's complicated aesthetic universe.

A brief introductory remark about the movie is in order. It has been widely noted that originally the nostalgic person in the first epigraph was Chun-yu Bai, the male protagonist in Hong Kong writer Liu Yichang's novel *Duidao* (*Tête Béche* or *Intersection*). Inspired by the novel's overall wistful longing for life in Shanghai as recalled by its male protagonist, Wong created a seemingly completely different storyline revolving around a different set of characters, placing the illicit romantic couple Chow Mo-wan and Su Li-zhen at the center of the film, and using the heroine Li-zhen's bilingual background (Cantonese and the Shanghai dialect) and the Shanghai immigrant community in Hong Kong to which she belongs to underscore the movie's indelible sense of attachment to the culture and style of that city around the mid-twentieth century. But what truly

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distinguishes Wong's movie from Liu's novel is its romantic plot. At the very beginning of the film, Mo-wan and Li-zhen move into two small adjacent apartments on the same floor. The public areas of the floor, a narrow corridor and a room with a mah-jong table, swarm with inquisitive, gossipy visitors and mah-jong players. Although they are both married, their respective spouses, as is normally the case, are absent even on their move-in day. It takes some guessing and roundabout mutual probes before they ascertain and reveal to each other that their spouses are having an affair behind their back. This newly shared knowledge of their spouses' betrayal throws them into a closet with its door firmly closed upon their landlord/landlady and their associates even while it concomitantly accords them an uncanny sense of intimacy. Despite their professed determination "not to be like them," they begin seeing each other purportedly in the hope of figuring out how their spouses' affair started. The bond between the two deepens over time, triggering a great deal of shame because of the closeted status of their intimacy. Platonic as it allegedly is, their relationship, as the story unfolds, becomes unbearable due to their insistent abstinence. Mo-wan eventually departs for Singapore in an attempt to move on while Li-zhen stays in Hong Kong, apparently still married to her husband. They never meet again despite a few occasions on which they nearly run into each other. During his exile, Mo-wan visits Angkor Wat. He finds a hole in a tree and confides in it all his inhibited love for Li-zhen, ritualistically bidding farewell to his secret longings. These moving images constitute the last sequences of *In the Mood for Love*. The two epigraphs quoted above begin precisely where the film leaves off.

I want before anything else to highlight a particular word used in the foregoing synopsis: *closeted*. It is quite striking that none of the critical literature on *In the Mood for Love* has ever mentioned this queer-inflected term even though the nature of the affective secrecy thematized in this film is perfectly comparable to "the love that dare not speak its name," now commonly celebrated under the identity banner of LGBTQ. By associating Wong's film with the trope of the closet, I am not arguing that the latter merely serves a rhetorical function in its metaphorization of erotic/affective inhibition. Rather, I maintain that the film has an inherent queerness to it because it treats as its central concern what has been generally considered by Anglo-American queer theorists the most fundamental queer affect, shame.¹ If fear and anxiety over the potential exposure of a

¹ Queer theorists' fascination with shame, of course, originated with Eve Sedgwick, most notably in her *Touching Feeling*. I have purposefully distanced myself from the Sedgwickian approach to shame, however, because of its over-reliance upon the individualist/humanist premises of Silvan Tomkins's self psychology.

long harbored sexual secret is the definitive trait of the closet, one can equally attest that it is precisely its prohibitory structure that informs the formation of the pent-up feeling in Wong's film and the speech inhibition of its main characters. It is, however, by no means my intention to simply assert that the film is queer. After all, "queer" is a term invented in Anglo-American sexual modernity, and I see no point in making a nominalist claim *tout court* at the cost of Chinese cultural specificity. To forestall any misunderstanding, it behooves me to state that by "queer" I mean a certain affective or ideological formation informed by the prohibitory force of the closet, which, without doubt, existed in Chinese society long before the advent of Western sexual modernity. By the same token, in the Chinese cultural milieu there is an established tradition in coding and decoding inhibited closeted speech which is sometimes compared to Victorian circumlocutionism. The deep-seated shame surrounding particular affects or sexualities is most of the time construed by Chinese people themselves as disagreeably repressive, but at other times, it can actually create an aesthetic potentiality whose downplay of language or even human agency forms an aestheticized and, arguably, queer ethos of reticence which finds its most expressive moment in its inhuman inexpressiveness. Apparently, Wong Kar-wai's movies, particularly those from the past two decades, belong in this tradition.

In what follows, I shall outline this aesthetic tradition and its potentiality in terms of a particular mode of visuality in his film which I take to be informed by a queer logic of anality. By anus or anality I mean not only any crevice or cavity shaped like the orifice on the human body but also a more figural, Freudian sense of the word, that is, as a *conserving* and, sometimes indeed, conservative force that aggressively holds or accumulates valuable entities, be it excrement or its symbolic equivalent, money.² But in this article I propose to go one step further by bringing the above Freudian understanding to bear upon Chinese culture, seeing the very act of holding or withholding treasured things, ideas, or affects as that of anal retention that sometimes complies with while at other times contradicts collective Chinese norms. The ambivalence of such anal visuality could be

I incline to view shame as a communitarian, as opposed to individuated, affect which constitutes the repressive collective norms of the so-called "shame culture" as exemplified in Wong Kar-wai's 1960s Hong Kong. My understanding of "queer" in this context, therefore, deviates from current Anglo-American notion of the term as it more broadly encompasses the potentialities derived from the ostensibly repressive aspects of collectivist shame. For an extended critique of the Sedgwickian/Tomkinsian approach, see my earlier work "Defacing Shame." For a detailed analysis of the characteristics of "shame culture," see Benedict.

² Freud famously equated money with feces in "On Transformations of Instinct as Exemplified in Anal Eroticism." See also his *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* for his groundbreaking association of anal pleasure with the act of fecal retention (185-86).

understood in the light of the movie's defamiliarization of time and space, which subjects characters to the gaze of an inquisitive community even while it also queerly insulates and transposes them into an elsewhere free from the pressure of such communitarian surveillance. It is my contention that the queer insulation and transportation at issue are deeply informed by the Chinese tradition of reticent (*hanxu*) poetics while its anality, I argue, consists in the very spatialization of the attempt to conserve or withhold, be it an unsaid/unrepresented event or time arrested in the form of slow motion. I conclude the article by further aligning this anal logic of conservation with an impersonal, Buddhist-inflected notion of melancholia via a close examination of the film's last few shots of Angkor Wat.

**The Anal Poetics of
*In the Mood for Love***

Anal Spectatorship

With my argumentative trajectory laid out, I now set out to scrutinize the two epigraphs cited at the beginning of this article. Both passages feature a mode of seeing through a frame or *mise-en-abyme*, the very liminality of which, however, occasions a sense of blockage that frustrates the viewing experience. In the first instance, the frustration derives from a failure to see things directly without the mediation of the windowpane. In the second instance, seeing is further meta-critically compared to film spectatorship, and the obstacle for unmediated viewing is arguably the blockage of the tree hole (here mistaken by Andrew for a "crevice in the ancient wall") responsible for an incessant sense of deferral, which in turn produces an affect lacking in intentionality—that is, lacking a definite intention to see a particular identifiable object because vision is infinitely blocked, which nonetheless paradoxically creates a desire to probe deeper what is being blocked from view. Both the windowpane and the tree crevice could be seen as following the same kind of logic of visibility in that they share a circumscribed enclosure which can function somewhat like a camera lens. Their hole-like structure, however, makes the act of viewing come tinged with voyeurism, an air that in fact suffuses the entire film because most of the time the camera is placed at such a strange angle that a full view of characters is blocked, relegating their partly averted profiles to the margin of the screen or even, sometimes, offscreen (Lee 33; Braester 471-72). The repeated use of medium shots and close-ups, moreover, creates a sense of overwhelming or overbearing "presentness" of the camera that tends to make viewers feel as if they were thrown among doorframes, furniture pieces, or other household items, which enables them to peep at or eavesdrop on the characters within close range. Many critics have noted that this queer style of *mise-en-scene* disrupts the traditional mode of

film editing, deconstructing the illusory sense of reality fabricated by conventional techniques such as shot/reverse shot and the eyeline match at work in cinema's "suturing" of characters into its diegetic time and space.³ Together, these measures constitute a challenge to the phallic visuality habitually taken to task by feminist film theorists in the last few decades of the twentieth century. Insofar as they "[unsettle] the continuity of our vision by shattering the unity or wholeness of a scene," as Vivian P. Y. Lee puts it, "[they] do not reveal as much as they *obscure*" (33; emphasis added).

From Lee's remark one can deduce a logical connection between the physical obstruction caused by the liminality of the framing hole/object and a subjective sense of obscurity/uncertainty, arguably the effect of the obstruction. Past psychoanalytic works might have a lot to say about the former, about how the sense of physical obstruction is informed by anality, but very few, unfortunately, have taken their cue from there to further suggest that a lack of clairvoyance might be a direct corollary of anal blockage instead of symbolic castration. I have no intention to revise the theory of anal spectatorship in purely psychoanalytic terms, which might turn out to be too strenuous a task to complete in the space of a journal article. I do, however, see fit to revisit an article I wrote a couple of years ago which gestured precisely in that direction. There, in my reading of Eileen Chang's "Red Rose and White Rose," I appropriated Freud's theory to conceptualize Chinese subjectivity, which I dubbed liminal in that it constantly finds itself embarrassingly caught between a phallic, upright gait of clairvoyance and an anal, crouching gait of mindlessness, as epitomized in one of the story's most suggestive scenes in which White Rose (or Yanli, one of the story's female protagonists) is spotted by the male protagonist in the act of rising from the toilet. The smell and color of shit now come to haunt Yanli's characteristic trait of whiteness even after she has finished her business. Eileen Chang, I argued, uses this iconic moment to conceptualize Chinese blind conformity to parental and social norms as a product of anal blockage, the root cause also to be held responsible for Yanli's brain fog which obscures any possible full understanding of her schoolwork: "No matter how diligently she looked up new words, memorized charts and figures, copied whatever was written on the board, there had always

³ It is nearly impossible to exhaustively list all the unconventional shots used by Wong Kar-wai in this film, but it bears mentioning at least a few more. For example, Wong frequently places a character's face on the far right or far left, leaving a large streak of empty space on the screen. Sometimes when a character converses with someone, the camera clumsily moves back and forth between them in medium shot as if to mimic the direction of an onlooker's gaze. For a detailed discussion of these rather idiosyncratic stylistic features, see Lee 33-35; McElhaney 357; and Brunette 90. For an alternative reading that stresses the haptic, rather than spectatorial, aspects of visuality and the politics of its materiality, see Liao.

been, as it were, a white membrane stuck between her brain and that which she studied” (Chang 83). Building on and yet also somewhat departing from this earlier understanding, I now venture to add that the anal obstruction that leads to visual and mental obscurity is similarly at work in Wong Kar-wai’s film, or more broadly, in not only the body of his work but also in the entire Chinese aesthetic tradition noted for its flair for foggy suggestiveness rather than plain referentiality. An aesthetic reappraisal of this very anality might indicate that blockage does not necessarily amount to intellectual incompetence. But before I move on to a detailed analysis of Wong’s aesthetics, I shall first delineate the contours of this tradition and consider the political implications of its seemingly retrograde anal repressiveness.⁴

The Politics of Reticent Poetics

Let me begin by offering a few words on the appellation of this aesthetic tradition, which in effect has gone by different names in different scholarly works. A great number of sinologists favor the name “lyrical tradition” whereas in this article I prefer to call it reticent poetics, following the critical lineage of Jen-peng Liu and Nai-fei Ding.⁵ Drawing upon Ying-chun Tsai’s definition of the term as “a mode

⁴ For want of a better term I use the qualifier “Chinese” throughout to designate a set of attributes not derived from national borders or the use of a specific language or dialect such as Mandarin. Rather, I lean toward an understanding of the word in affective terms, seeing it as a correlative of shame culture whose philosophical and cultural impact traverses contemporary national or ethnic identities. It is in this light that I argue that Wong Kar-wai belongs in the Chinese tradition of reticence, since no matter in what dialects the characters speak or how multilingual the film is, the heteroglossic community in the movie performs exactly the same ideological maneuver of shame conferral over the protagonists as, say, parents or seniors in Taiwan who tirelessly admonish single kids to marry at a New Year family reunion. It is along exactly the same lines that Jen-peng Liu and Nai-fei Ding, whom I will momentarily invoke, most cogently spell out their critique of this tradition, while my undertaking is to further complicate their line of argument by pointing to the positivity of this aestheticized “Chineseness.”

⁵ For an extended overview of sinological scholarship on the lyrical tradition throughout the twentieth century, see David Der-wei Wang’s *The Lyrical in Epic Time*. “The lyrical,” it should be noted, is an inadequate translation of *shuqing*. In fact, any English translation of the term would not suffice because both characters possess multiple meanings. The romantic understanding of “lyrical,” therefore, can only partially subtend a small fraction of the signifying ensemble of *shuqing*. While *shu* might refer to “expressing,” it may also suggest “unraveling,” “releasing,” “dissipating,” or even “modulating,” among others (5). And what remains to be unraveled or modulated proves equally elusive, for *qing* can refer to at once a personal feeling/sentiment and a de-subjectivated situation or state of affairs (6). The important implication of Wang’s study is that there is a deeply impersonal aspect to the lyrical tradition which stresses the indistinction between humans and things, as can be witnessed in Wang Guowei’s proposed move to do away with the obstruction (*ge*) that exists between feeling/*qing*, and scene/*jing* (303). The thematized dialectic of obstruction/non-obstruction indicates a concern over anality which parallels the definitive implication of the term “reticent poetics.” This comes as no surprise, given that both phrasings share a material referent in reality. The difference between them simply consists in the fact that the connotations of one are slightly more overdetermined and multifarious than those of the other. The reason why I choose to use “reticent poetics” throughout this article is

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of writing wherein ‘the real message tends to go beyond the actual words of the text’” (34), Liu and Ding nonetheless criticize the deeply entrenched custom in Chinese society to idealize reticence as an aesthetic and ethical imperative, which produces in queer people’s daily lived reality such an aggressive force as to subject them to a state of invisibility similar to that of a penumbra. Liu and Ding’s critique of the ideological violence of reticence is quite convincing, and I have, for that matter, used their influential essay in both my own work and classroom without any problem with their argument. But, as I increasingly come to recognize, it might also be necessary to note that the attribution of queerness to a site definitively set as the precise opposite of reticence might risk precluding some other possibilities for queers, as if one could not, for better or worse, fight back against heteronormative society with an equally reticent strategy. There may be some truth, after all, in the Foucauldian/Sedgwickian axiom that there always exists more than one kind of silence. To tease out a potentially more accommodating mode of silence, I propose that we first consider the meaning of the original Chinese term *hanxu*, which, as Tsai noted at the outset, signifies “holding back” and “storing up” and has been translated as “conservation,” “reserve,” “potentiality,” and the like (qtd. in Liu and Ding 34). It is quite striking that “reticence” is in fact a more symbolic or figurative sense of the word that derives from the more literal sense of “storing up” whereas the anal implication of “holding back” or “retention” tends to get lost during the process of translation. A different way of putting this is to say that the anal implication, while being translated, is transformed into a sublimated sense of orality equivalent to silence. The very act of “conserving,” of course, is inherently ambivalent, since there is no knowing whether it is meant as a conformist surrender to the status quo in a compulsive attempt to keep things exactly as they were or a rebellious gesture that rejects such conservatism by stalling the linearity of the symbolic flow of time as it happens in our quotidian reality. Most of the time it simply proves too formidable to distinguish one mode from the other. It certainly stands to reason to claim that the anality in reticent poetics is conservative, but, in so doing, one might miss out on its radical potential, as can be suggested in one of the term’s less popular translations, “potentiality,” brought up in Tsai’s initial discussion of the term. Only by taking into account the dialectic of its ambivalent signifiatory slippage from one end to the other can we stand a fairer chance of reaching a more comprehensive view of its affective politics, not to mention devise a hitherto un-

twofold: on the one hand, to adhere to a word whose anal implications seem more straightforward, and, on the other, to continue to address the vexed issue of its political potentialities.

thought-of escape route from the repressive status quo.

How, then, is it possible to employ the above anal understanding of reticent poetics as a framework of visibility to advance a reading of *In the Mood for Love* which underscores the potentiality within its ambivalent slippage from the pure negativity of repressiveness (epitomized in, say, the camera's anal compulsion to place the viewer at a voyeuristic keyhole) to other stylistic features that may provide an escape route? I propose that we take heed of David Der-wei Wang's insightful remark about the Chinese lyrical tradition or, more specifically, "cinematic Chineseness" in his analysis of Fei Mu's films: "What Fei Mu and his peers wanted to accomplish, after all, amounts to no less than transposing the visual dynamic of traditional Chinese poetry to the new medial form of cinema. To that end, his cinematic concepts, from 'air' to 'long take' to 'slow motion,' bear a strong imprint of Chinese poetics" (303). According to Wang, Fei Mu excels at what he calls "cinematic Chineseness" (272) because his appropriation of film, an art form supposedly invented by the West, has engaged with specific techniques from Chinese poetic and artistic traditions. His employment of long takes, for example, is informed not only by André Bazin's notion of cinematic realism but also by traditional Chinese hand-scroll painting, whose fascination with the contingent perspectives implied in the act of scrolling paves the way for Fei's interest in cinematic offscreen space. Both, in short, are informed by a non-mimetic tradition in favor of locating meaning only outside the confines of language and image (Wang 295). As well as long takes, Fei frequently resorts to slow motion. As he once noted in an interview, he made use of this skill in *Spring in a Small Town* "to foreground a group of figures lagging behind their time and incapable of real action" (296). Retrograde as it seems, one might nonetheless detect some philosophical potentials. Wang in fact even goes so far as to argue that this specific technique serves "to reconfigure the relationship between the subject and the world, distance and proximity" and, most importantly, "to spatialize time, calling attention to the multiple layers of reality in a synchronized zone" (296).

Wang's analysis of Fei Mu's filming methods is important for an embedded localized understanding of Wong Kar-wai's poetics not least because these are also a staple of Wong's landmark style of cinematography. I consider the similarities far from coincidental in that, as Wang mentions at a different point, the reticent air or *qi* which seems intangible within the frame can only be approximated through concrete camera work (275). By tweaking diegetic space and time using long takes and slow motion, Wong Kar-wai in effect works within the tradition of cinematic Chineseness to pursue visual hints rather than direct ref-

erences.⁶ In the case of long takes, as stated earlier, Wong has been noted for his idiosyncratic mode of avoiding traditional suturing techniques such as the shot/reverse shot, and these stylistic features follow a logic of anality that challenges phallic sociality as well as clairvoyance.⁷ But the interest in the dialectic play between what is present/said/represented and what is absent/unsaid/unrepresented is certainly not Wong's alone. Through the deployment of long takes Wong is able to follow in the footsteps of not only Fei Mu but also innumerable artists working in the reticent poetic tradition in their exploration of a non-referential anal visuality—that is, what is *visually, verbally, or even ideationally withheld or suspended* beyond the scope of the camera. Used in conjunction with other techniques, such as anal suspension can in turn create a fantasmatic time/space shielding the protagonists against communitarian surveillance.

This brings me to the political implications of the spatialization of time in slow motion mentioned in Wang's study of cinematic Chineseness. In *In the Mood for Love*, one may recall, slow motion normally accompanies Shigeru Umeyashi's "Yumeji's Theme," causing an interruption of normal narrative flows. Such interruptions sometimes appear in the guise of scenes showing characters' daily rituals such as eating and working and yet sometimes contrarily call attention to what is not there, to elliptical moments deleted from the footage, therefore creating a paradoxical sense of fast-forwarded chronology which leaves further interpretive ambiguities. Whatever functions it serves, the specific technique of "spatializing" time generates a loophole within the normative framing I discussed at the beginning of this article, transposing not only characters but also viewers from a constraining place/atmosphere to a virtual elsewhere through recourse to a radically different *anal* approach. The sense of *spatial obstruction* which occurs during the regular narrative flow and is therefore facetiously deemed a symptom of repressiveness is now reconfigured as a no less anal principle of

⁶ Critics have noted that *In the Mood for Love* shares close affinities with Fei's *Spring in a Small Town*. But most of the time they are compared merely on the basis of plot: in both movies, the female protagonists find themselves struggling between a received notion of marital fidelity and an unstoppable yearning for a man they are not married to, only to capitulate to the conjugal norm at the last moment with a profound sense of resignation. See, for instance, Marchetti 209. Wang's work, however, suggests that the similarity might be more than just thematic. But there are certainly differences between them too. As Stephen Teo maintains, "Wong was . . . not interested in making a moral fable in the manner of Fei Mu in *Spring in a Small City*" (123). By staging role-playing between the main protagonists that imagines and mimics their spouses' mutual flirtings, he has instead unsettled and deconstructed the line between betrayed and betrayer in marriage.

⁷ See also my reading in "Defacing Shame" of Tsai Ming Liang's active attempt at courting the failure of the eye-line match, which I construe as anal in that what is usually prioritized therein is an anal resistance against symbolic exchange, often emblemized in the rear view of characters' backs. Critics have also noted Wong's emphasis on this rear view in *In the Mood for Love*. See, for example, Lok.

temporal blockage. (Imagine the feeling of temporal slowness or stoppage when a constipated person is struggling with his/her sphincteric muscle movement on the toilet bowl.) The stylization of character movement that David Der-wei Wang observes in Fei Mu's slow motion similarly calls attention to a different layer of reality which in turn "reconfigures the relationship between the subject and the world, distance and proximity," except that in Wong this reconfigured relationship is one that deviates from, rather than conforms to, as it does in Fei, the collective norms of Confucian society. In so doing, such a strategy creates through the temporal blockage an impalpable air sometimes referred to as *mood*, stuck liminally between a felt and an unfelt sense of emotionality.

Spatializing Temporal Blockage

To reach a fuller understanding of the anality of slow motion, it is reasonable now to attend to an article by Rey Chow. In "Seminal Dispersal, Fecal Retention, and Related Narrative Matters," she conducts an anal reading of the obstructed narrativity of the Eileen Chang story mentioned earlier, "Red Rose and White Rose." She begins with a critical appraisal of György Lukács's denunciation of the modern novel's degenerate bent of privileging description over narration, with narration, he bemoans, being now forever lost in capitalist modernity to the bourgeois obsession with the dehumanized visual details of a world surrounded by objects. Though ostensibly out of joint with his times, Rey Chow observes, Lukács's tirade against description arrived at a historical juncture suffused with visual culture such that traditional writing could no longer accommodate the challenges posed by new visual media such as photography and film (157). When one tries to engage with a visual culture in a non-Western framework, his theory becomes even more problematic considering the wide array of cross-cultural issues that must be factored in. Viewing Eileen Chang's story as an exemplary case, Chow then sets out to delineate a different politics of style that uses descriptive details to derail the idealized nationalist and familialist narratives bolstered by Chinese mainstream society. Invoking the story's iconic bathroom scene, she maintains that the *tableau* of the heroine's rise from the toilet contests the metaphorizing symbolic arrangement which sees women as being categorized as either an angelic white rose or whorish red rose. The anal descriptive details surrounding a supposedly pure wifely figure present a narrative halt instead as, in Chow's words, "a picture-story ever in progress" which displaces the above conservative allegorical understanding of women onto a new style of visuality that privileges an emancipatory elsewhere captured in the very act of suspension

(171). The potentiality of the “picture-story” consists precisely in its incompleteness, in its refusal to cohere into a teleological tale about Confucian morality.

Chow, of course, is commenting not on an anal aesthetic tradition but rather on a counteraction or, more precisely, counter-inaction, albeit no less anal, initiated by a woman writer like Chang against that tradition. To that end she only delineates Western narrativity’s degradation into descriptiveness. Though Chow also means to criticize a tradition of Chinese narrativity, it remains less clear whether such narrativity has undergone a similar course of degeneration. Whatever the case may be, I would for the moment venture a misreading of Chow’s attribution of anality to description in a manner more allegorical than historicist. Given that the narrative in question is a heteronormative one centering on the making of an ideal male subject in accordance with the Confucian ideal of familial ethics, the very act of lingering over the descriptive details in this regard constitutes a queer recalcitrance against that heteronormative temporal linearity. The descriptive content thematizing a woman stuck in her bathroom is merely a literalization of a symbolic message already potentially decipherable in the *tableau*—that is, these descriptions bespeak an anal compulsion to fixate upon *un(re)productive wasteful conduct* irrelevant to the grand narrative of marriage and childbearing ordained by the entire Chinese society. The bathroom scene is, therefore, a spatialized representation of an arrested development repeatedly cautioned against in these narratives. But symbolically this anal fixity, now rendered back in temporal terms, also stands for a strenuous queer effort to hold on to the moment or to bide one’s time, albeit without a clear purpose, for the new kind of “picture-story ever in progress” always lacks definite contours and is constantly in a state of deferral.⁸

In Wong Kar-wai’s case, the picture-story in question corresponds to each of the narrative ruptures that capture the protagonists’ daily routines in their most mundane state, most of which prove irrelevant to important narrative turns because of their banality. For my present purposes, I shall dwell on two of the “Youmeji’s theme” sequences to illustrate the potentiality of the film’s anal vi-

⁸ There are, in fact, some interesting affinities between Chow’s analysis of anality and the Deleuzian theory of affect. As Brian Massumi argues in “The Autonomy of Affect,” in a non-linear narrative suspension there tends to reside more affect which escapes verbal expression rather than linguistically qualifiable emotions. “Intensity,” he writes, “would seem to be associated with nonlinear processes: resonance and feedback which momentarily suspend the linear progress of the narrative present from past to future. Intensity is qualifiable as an emotional state, and the state is static—temporal and narrative noise. It is a state of suspense, potentially of disruption. It’s like a temporal sink, a hole in time, as we conceive of it and narrativize it” (86). Insofar as Massumi’s figural conceptualization of narrative interruption is couched in anal terms (a sink, a hole), one may deduce that anality appears in both scholars’ work informing significantly their consideration of narrative potentiality.

suality. The first example is a scene which comes up about fifteen minutes into the film, at the critical juncture when Mo-wan and Li-zhen are beginning to realize their spouses are having an affair with each other. An intimate bond between these two main characters begins to take root even though they appear in solitude throughout the sequence. A tracking shot first seizes hold in close-up of the lower half of Li-zhen's body, dressed up in her usual gorgeous *cheongsam*, her thermos in hand. The camera then slowly follows her as she descends the stairs to a food stand outside. There she waits alone, her face all solemn, before the vendor returns with her food. The next shot cuts to a dark corner slightly to the right of the entrance on the landing upstairs, panning somewhat to the left to get a fuller view of her as she retraces her steps. As she finishes climbing the stairway and disappears into the dark on the left corner of the screen, the camera holds still, as if from the vantage point of a paparazzi who can accurately predict that Mo-wan will, in a matter of seconds, emerge from the same spot, also going out for dinner, although he stays at the street food stall alone to finish his meal.

I find Yomi Braester's understanding of Wong's use of offscreen space of great use for my interpretation of this sequence: "Wong . . . redefines the function of offscreen space, and with it the role of cinematic time and the cinephiliac gaze. Like other directors in the cinephiliac pantheon, Wong structures much of the film's form and plot around offscreen space. . . . But unlike prominent precedents, *In the Mood for Love* uses offscreen space not to reaffirm visual interaction but rather to undercut vision as a vehicle of desire" (476). Braester is speaking specifically about the stairway scene under discussion. Visual interaction is downplayed or vision itself is undercut, he suggests, because the most important action in this scene occurs offscreen. Even though at this point Li-zhen and Mo-wan are still nodding acquaintances who have just recently moved into the same building, they are already beginning to bond offscreen by perhaps an exchange of nods, smiles, or a few words of greeting (477). Vision therefore gives way to elliptical cues or hints supposedly coming from the shadowed areas. It should be noted, however, that despite Braester's understanding that Wong is different in this aesthetic treatment from his European counterparts from the cinephiliac tradition, he seems more content with their alleged similarities and, in so doing, sidesteps a most fundamental fact: that Wong's inheritance from Western film art is more formal than conceptual. In spirit it is in effect reminiscent of the famous artistic or literary style in the habitual practice of reticent poetics which the Chinese designate as *liubai*, that is, leaving blank space exactly where details are most needed. The anal inexpressiveness or non-referentiality that characterizes this tradition is now concretized into a chunk of darkness that

forms the off-screen space at issue. Like the Lacanian real, it frustrates and subverts the Symbolic vision through the creation of an insignifiable/unrepresentable space of the open secret that one might refer to as the closet, except that in the Chinese aesthetic tradition such frustration has always been welcomed.

Put differently, even the normative Chinese Symbolic vision has long harbored within it an anal strain of compulsive voyeuristic, one, however, that is constantly contested by a contradictory thrust of the hermeticism of the closet, which, though ostensibly repressive, sometimes also functions as an invisibility cloak. From this vantage point I suggest that we now revise Braester's decontextualized analysis of the film score: "The score lends the sequences a dreamlike autonomy and shuts out any reference to what may be outside the frame, indeed any thought of the realm outside the here and now of the moody scene" (476). That music plays a very important role here is indeed a remarkable observation, but the score, I maintain, should be resituated in its original social context so as to pinpoint the shaming aspect of the ideological gaze embodied by not only, say, Li-zhen's landlady, who admonishes her not to go out too often, but also the framing of the camera itself. This is why in this sequence, as elsewhere, Wong subjects the anal details (such as the thermos and Li-zhen's *cheongsam*) to *voyeuristic close scrutiny*. It is only when the music begins (along with the slow motion it also enacts) that the entire scene takes on an affectively liberatory tone. It is also at this juncture, when the narrative is caught at a standstill, that offscreen space is transposed to not least the locus of the closet, the very site of *the open secret*, whose ambiguous visual obscurity no longer implies pure repressiveness but rather subtends a potentiality that suggests *through its spectatorial frustration*, at once spatially and temporally, a way out of the symbolic voyeuristic economy imposed by traditional communal norms.

I now proceed to the second sequence, which arguably achieves an emancipatory effect by virtue of an even more complicated assemblage of long takes, music, and slow motion. Beginning around the time of the landlady's "well-meaning" admonition, the audience first hear a telephone conversation in which Li-zhen tells Mo-wan she won't go out to meet him in the hotel room, at least for the time being, to work on their joint project of writing martial-arts fiction, apparently daunted by the pressure of the communal norm embodied in her landlady. During the conversation, the camera dehumanizes her from the perspective of the complicit fetishistic viewer by first giving us an obscured view of the interior of a darkened room, then slowly panning toward the left until a close-up view of Li-zhen's waist comes in sight, with only one hand visible to the viewer as it rests on a small table holding a telephone. All the while, Li-zhen's

other hand, apparently clutching the telephone receiver, remains blocked from view by shadows which devour nearly half of the entire screen from the right, supposedly a wall or a piece of furniture in the doorway. Next comes a medium shot of her from the doorframe of the kitchen, which is half covered by a curtain. This partial framing, again, produces a feeling that the audience are peeping through the opening from the hallway when they find Li-zhen in the middle of revealing to a servant that she does not want to take out food that evening as she used to. The above details comprise a narrative reality that monitors deviant forms of intimacy in close quarters.

With the score introduced in the next scene, however, the temporal stoppage that comes with slow motion immediately spatializes the protagonists' living quarters into a site hermetically shut off from those shame-inducing onlookers. The sequence begins with a long take in total silence, as we witness Li-zhen again leaning against the doorframe while watching her landlady play mah-jong with her associates. There is a sense of direct diegetic continuity from the previous sequence though we are now in a different time setting, because within this short interval Li-zhen's body also undergoes a similar partial obstruction by the doorframe which resembles a voyeur's field of vision. As Li-zhen begins to move, there are hints of languidness akin to one's morning process of slow awakening such that the score also becomes blunted in its reaction. But once the music begins, the hermetic effect is in the making. And the originally voyeuristic camera comes to assume a subjective angle siding with Li-zhen, echoed by a camera movement which equally languidly follows her inside the mah-jong room and closes in on her in profile. Together, these techniques construct a sense of aloofness that sequesters Li-zhen from her neighbors and accords her a sense of autonomy despite physical proximity to a world of would-be watchers. This is, however, not how the sequence ends. After stopping by her landlady's side for a cursory look, she continues to move toward the other end of the room. No longer surrounded by people or reduced to a chopped-up object for voyeuristic surveillance, she looks to the right of the frame, occasionally sipping from the glass of water in her hand. By the time the camera movement stops, the overall "air" thus created has registered an implicit shift of spectatorial affiliations in Li-zhen's favor. Determinedly not in sync with the long take, what is more, the score goes on to ensure that the above subjective perspective is not fully interiorized, for in the next shot Li-zhen is seen again within a framing structure, this time a window. If the music ended here, we would have no doubt that the camera might have resumed its surveillance function. But it lingers on, and as it pans left, we cut to a similar arrangement of *mise-en-abyme*. In another freeze-frame that also contains

a window, we find Mo-wan in his office, who, cigarette in hand, is assuming a similar attitude of looking outside after some casual exchanges with his co-workers. In short, when put to work as an ensemble, Wong's employment of long takes, music, and slow motion produces an effect analogous to that of the literary stream of consciousness technique which inclines to focalize subjective perspectives even while merging them within an exteriorized, impersonal current. In so doing, the image fragments culled from the sensual objects or bodies within the frame, to follow up on Braester, construct in the interrupted eternal present an *embodied presence* or *co-presence*, a spatializing style which, in its continuous movement with the camera, has potentially devised for its escapist intent a myriad of exteriorized interiorities and their accompanying ambivalent spectatorial bonds.

Anal-izing Melancholia

As I suggested above, the anal drive to conserve or hold on to spatialized temporality is potentially subversive of the no less anal scopic drive to peep or monitor. But insofar as these conflicting forces appear in a text informed by the tradition of reticent poetics, one must also take into account the affective ramifications of its reticence. This is especially important considering that *In the Mood for Love* has been generally regarded as a melancholy movie. In the concluding section of this article, then, I turn to the last sequences of the movie to further tease out the anal aspect of the melancholy affect I dub "Buddhist melancholia" that arises from its ineloquent textual economy.⁹ The sequence begins with a long shot of a Buddhist monk sitting on the doorframe of the ruins of a huge temple at Angkor

⁹ I am borrowing the coinage from Arnika Fuhrmann's queer study of such affect in Thai cinema. By "Buddhist melancholia" she means "all those instances in which persons defy doctrinal temporal logics and delay, stall, or refuse detachment: *I want something. I can no longer have it. Yet I persist in my desire*" (4). In her theoretical framework, Buddhist melancholia remains a vernacular practice that rejects out of hand the Buddhist doctrinal teaching about impermanence and the futility of desire. Perhaps this might hold true in Thailand, a country that practices Theravāda rather than Mahāyāna Buddhism. But in Chinese Buddhism, which belongs to the latter category, the affective structure of melancholy appears far more complicated than she suggests. Though formally one can still detect a sense of mournfulness and a wistful unwillingness to let go, this stubborn mournfulness, as is often witnessed in reticent poetics, is arguably conveyed in the most detached and impersonal manner possible. The coexistence of detachment and attachment and the transcendence of personhood into the realm of the abstract and the impersonal unsettles Fuhrmann's rather binaristic understanding. Contra Fuhrmann, my reconceptualization of this notion instead inclines toward Jacques Derrida's idea of "mid-mourning," which deconstructs the classic Freudian distinction between mourning and melancholia and sees mourning as a forever deferred process. The Angkor Wat shots in *In the Mood for Love* only mark out a point of departure in Wong Kar-wai's continued engagement with Buddhist melancholia. In *The Grandmaster*, he would return to this problematic by more resolutely contextualizing it within the philosophical and aesthetic tradition of reticent poetics. The present discussion of this affective formation in particular and of reticent poetics in general is a pre-meditated attempt to delineate the vicissitudes along the way. For an extended discussion of "mid-mourning," see Derrida.

Wat, followed by a close-up of first a crevice in a tree, then of Mo-wan's profoundly solemn and hesitant face right next to the tree's trunk. The camera then pauses before Mo-wan whispers his secret into the crevice. After a series of close-ups that fully take in his revelation, we are suddenly given the rather bizarre point of view of the Buddhist monk. An out-of-focus close-up of the nape of his neck blocks the center of the camera, with Mo-wan's profile, still in the middle of his confessional act, diminished to the size of a figurine placed on the immediate right to the back of the monk's dimly lit bald head, which is reminiscent of a maximized image of an eclipsed sun. After Mo-wan leaves, the camera lingers on presenting to the audience a great number of empty shots of the ramshackle ruins, most of them imageries of *mis-en-abyme* in which one framing captured in the corridor is shown to contain within it another framing in an unremittingly recessive geometric design. Another long take ends the movie, the camera continuing with a tracking shot of the ruins well after Mo-wan's exit; it is then and only then that it stops to take full stock of another temple among the wreckage, refocusing on the doorframe at its center.

Despite Wong's decision here to use a different song for a more somber effect, I shall mainly focus on the visual aspects of these last few scenes, since in contrast to the above two sequences, sequestration is implemented in this instance mainly through slow motion and the long take in the last shot. For that matter, one must first look at how he attempts to situate these scenes within a socio-historical context. Right before the sequence, he inserts a newsreel clip about former Cambodian leader Sihanouk's greeting of Charles de Gaulle, then President of France, when the latter visited Cambodia in 1966. He was warmly received by a crowd of reportedly two hundred thousand civilians lining the road. In the clip, the people waving at the French general are mostly faceless because the footage is not only out of focus but suffers from low resolution. The newsreel abruptly stops because the camera plunges into the crowd, causing the clip to end in a blurry mess. Though these details come from real news reportage, there is an undeniable sense of commotion and chaos inherent in its representation of this political event when contrasted with the otherworldly atmosphere of the ensuing shots of Buddhist temples.

Wong Kar-wai once said in an interview that he did not intend the story to be read as a romance between just two people. With the news footage he was hoping to add some historical consciousness to the film about the liminal nature of the times, a turning point situated precisely at the interstices between modernity and tradition (Wong, "Wo chang huanxiang ziji shi xizhige" 329). From such authorial intention perhaps we can derive an allegorical reading about a funda-

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mental ambivalence regarding the Chinese tradition of reticence. While the tradition may strike one as thoroughly repressive, lovers born into it are sometimes so habituated to its constraining forces that they remain persistently wary of a more violently eruptive historical moment to come, one that belongs to a more “modern” mode of affective expressiveness. The newsreel fragments appear precisely in this symbolic manner as the historical current about to drown the protagonists, now universalized as a *relatable* collectivity signifying the protagonists’ contemporaries. Considering this allegorical strain, the image fragments collected from the Buddhist ruins should be viewed as an equally allegorical rejoinder which meta-critically indicate the potentialities that lie hidden within those remains from the past. Rather than being downright conservative, the “conserving” intent inherent in the pervasive imageries of holes and frames therein somehow indexes an important difference underlying their superficial resemblance to those framings in the foregoing parts of the film. The difference in question here, I would suggest, consists in nothing less than the spatial quality of the Buddhist ruins. Neither a completely enclosed walled-up residence nor a public resort fully open to the elements, the Buddhist ruins are located between interior and exterior, between psychology and sociality, and between affective inhibition and its release. Given the liminal nature of the temples and their related anal tropes, it becomes rather difficult to adjudicate whether Mo-wan’s attempt to confide in a tree hole, analogous to the case of “coming out,” functions as the revelation of a given secret or simply another “re-closeting” act suggesting its further concealment.

Furthermore, the very imagery of *mise-en-abyme* where the doorframe is shown in an incessant process of self-containment indicates a spatial logic that confounds the orthodox understanding of mourning and melancholia proposed by Freud (“Mourning and Melancholia”). No longer informed by the principle of oral incorporation which favors a complete repudiation of a cathected object by devouring it once and for all, what we witness in this movie, on the contrary, is a case driven by anality rather than orality. The constipated struggle between letting go and keeping intact an invested object, as epitomized in the confused boundaries between inside and outside, resolutely negates any possibility of a total foreclosure. The very burial and entombment of an endeared one in the Freudian understanding is often employed as a trope symbolizing an interiorized subjectivity that arrives in the wake of incorporation. Yet no such process exists in the case under discussion, where these acts become literal movements which, rather than giving rise to an interiorized psychological space, correspond to a queer mode of conservation that willingly conflates the normative distinction

between not only introverted withholding and extroverted stockpiling, but also between time and space in their own right.

Though conflation of the spatial-temporal divide exists in the other parts of the film, where narrative progression is slowed down or halted by means of spatialization so as to create otherworldly potentialities, here, the otherworldliness is figured in a different vein, that is, in a manner that completely evacuates human existence by means of so-called empty or scenery shots. As mentioned earlier, *liubai*, or leaving blank most needed delineative details, has long been celebrated in Chinese art and literature. And here again, Wong resorts to the same technique to convey a melancholy air of a Buddhist sort even while the melancholy at issue is anal through and through. As opposed to deploying offscreen space to imply unseen dramatic action, the direct cancellation of human activity is arguably a more radical gesture in that the emptiness retains a partial memory of what was once there. There arises then a dialectic interplay between an inscrutable desire to expel even the minutest human trace and an equally insistent compulsion to mourn *it only in its most evicted state*. Through this Buddhist melancholy dialectic of detached attachment, the “exterior” world becomes paradoxically semi-interiorized and partially contained by the framing or the hole. Any object captured therein becomes a fecal sign indicative of a vital form it once witnessed before the extinction of mundane human activities. There is something both extraordinarily misanthropic and merciful in these shots’ willful attachment to unspeakable losses embodied in fossilized scenes and objects: misanthropic, because even the melancholy air is petrified in the course of its very spatialization into hieroglyphical entities which reduce everything shown in their by turns half-expanded and half-obstructed vision to nothing more than an allegorical tale about the futility of human action; merciful, because despite such futility, it remains the quintessential prerequisite for what it takes to be an affective sentient being, therefore fully warranting one’s commiserative understanding.

I would therefore recommend interpreting Wong’s comment about the trans-individual nature of *In the Mood for Love* in a different manner, to detect in its latent allegorical resolves another layer of Buddhist melancholia, which is located in the queer figure of the Buddhist monk. By replacing lay people’s conventional point of view with the monk’s ostensible omniscience, Wong transfigures the former’s hypocritical morality into a more tolerant Buddhist awareness of the evanescence of human connectedness: tolerant, I would suggest, because the monk’s omniscience is informed not by an absolute transcendence equivalent to a theological notion of divinity, but by an affective immanence that does not set the all-seeing monk aside from the sentient beings he observes. This is

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borne out in the way he is framed by the camera in both of his appearances in these shots, a sign that echoes the Buddhist notion that even gods or supersensible beings cannot escape the force of *karma*. The pervasive sense of melancholy, in turn, no longer pertains to Mo-wan and Li-zhen, but rather extends by means of an impersonal knowingness that pervades the entire surroundings of the ruins, which somehow retains within the camera lens a fabled notion of the value of melancholic attachment at the exact moment of the predestined loss.¹⁰ The loss remains unspeakable or unidentifiable because what the melancholy affect involves has been transfigured from a tangible *object* into an inchoate *object lesson* which contains a detached yet sympathetic understanding of the worth of futile attachment. Escapist notwithstanding, the misanthropist intent inherent in the monk's otherworldly vision does do away with the voyeuristic gaze of human society by turning an illicit affair into a detached mourning after its own reticent fashion of fossilized ruins that serve as fond traces of past affective human activities.

Perhaps the political potentialities encoded in the movie's final lingering shots over the Buddhist ruins might seem too metaphysical for a more positive, confrontational mode of struggle to actualize. But that might just be a perennial issue that continues to haunt the fraught relation between politics and reticent poetics (and sometimes poetics in general). My aim throughout this article is therefore, not to provide a solution that satisfies everyone across the political spectrum. Rather, my ultimate concern is to chart through a detailed reading of *In the Mood for Love* the following two aspects: first and foremost, the underappreciated anal economy underlying the tradition of reticent poetics; and secondly, the potential itinerary with which one can at least provisionally *anal-ize/analyze* a way out of the eternal conundrum of a constrictive environment common in Chinese society. However, instead of seeing these two objectives as consecutive stages, I would prefer to argue that they are dialectical entities that might actively occasion a precarious mode of blockage, a condition one should embrace at all costs since around the obscurity thus engendered, be it spatial, temporal, or a bit of both, we might begin to notice or improvise different ways of readings or even worldviews. As shown in the very last frame of the film, when the camera eventually stops moving, the door of the antiquated temple notably becomes a transitional point that at once clings to things past and anticipates the more mobile times of 2046, when/where the aesthetic and political insinuations of Wong's framings start to take on a new tone.

¹⁰ In his analysis of Fei Mu's notion of "air" (*kongqi*), David Der-wei Wang points out that there is an implicit sense of the Buddhist vision of emptiness (*samsara*) in one of its composite characters *kong*. My argument here is a further attempt to flesh out the Buddhist associations mentioned therein.

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