



林思齊東西學術交流研究所
David C. Lam Institute for East-West Studies (LEWI)

Working Paper Series 研究報告系列

Paper Number: 105
November 2010

Wong Kar-wai and the Aesthetics of Disturbance

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Wong Kar-wai and the Aesthetics of Disturbance

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Abstract

Since *As Tears Go By* (1988), Hong Kong filmmaker Wong Kar-wai has elaborated and intensified an aesthetic of pictorial complexity. His oeuvre progressively demotes legible techniques (e.g. centred “singles,” uncluttered foregrounds) to favour visual strategies that roughen perception and challenge comprehension. Yet as a filmmaker pledged to narrative storytelling, Wong encounters an aesthetic problem – how to complicate perception and presentation, yet facilitate narrative understanding? If the image is to be both difficult *and* legible, Wong must find ways to render important story detail accessible. This paper explores the tactics employed by Wong to balance opacity and legibility, and, more intricately, to modulate the viewer’s attention across the duration of a shot or scene. It considers how late films such as *My Blueberry Nights* (2007) modify visual schemas that in early Wong assumed more simplified and streamlined form. It also suggests that Wong’s production habits (such as a preference for abundant takes) encourage certain sorts of obfuscating techniques.

Introduction

With remarkable discipline, many of the most renowned Asian filmmakers have mounted stylistic programs optimizing a narrow set of techniques. Ozu Yasujiro plumbs the expressive possibilities of frontal staging, fixed perspective, and low camera height. Hou Hsiao-hsien and Tsai Ming-liang test the inexhaustibility of extended takes and distanced framings. And in Hong Kong, Zhang Che and John Woo explore the kinesthetic potential of specialized techniques, from camera-speed juxtapositions to the rapid zoom shot. Unlike these counterparts, Wong Kar-wai displays fidelity to no stable stylistic repertoire. Yet Wong’s films – even those as stylistically dissimilar as *Chungking Express* (1994) and *In the Mood for Love* (2000) – seem unified by a consistent visual sensibility, one that organizes and motivates particular techniques. The thesis I advance here is this: Wong is a director wedded not so much to a favourite set of techniques as to a privileged narrational *principle*, to which an array of stylistic techniques is subordinated. This governing principle amounts to complicating both perception and comprehension without sacrificing dramatic clarity. Committed to making the image difficult yet intelligible, Wong revises, recombines, and repurposes standard techniques in seemingly indefinite ways.

By elevating a formal principle above preferred devices, Wong outstrips aesthetic pigeonholing – hence he is no more a “long-take director” than he is a devotee of MTV-style editing. And yet, while Wong is in a sense properly characterized as a “polystylistic” filmmaker (Bordwell 2000: 276), he remains monogamous to a privileged stylistic (and narrative) norm of “roughened form” and perceptual difficulty. In what follows, I offer a preliminary sketch of this dynamic of opacity and communicativeness, and consider its consequences upon narrative meaning and spectator response.

Wong’s output in the past decade has been castigated by some critics as regressive. To these detractors, *2046* (2004) is parasitic upon *In the Mood for Love*, *My Blueberry Nights* (2007) recycles *Chungking Express*, and *Ashes of Time Redux* (2008) explicitly reverts to previous work, putting beyond doubt Wong’s artistic stagnation. Yet at an aesthetic level, Wong Kar-wai has not stood still. Stylistically, his oeuvre can be seen as an ongoing exploration of distinct filmic techniques, reshaping established schemas to fulfil an abiding aesthetic principle. Even late films such as *My Blueberry Nights* – discussed at length below – renew the principle of visual disturbance by means of fresh techniques. This paper aims to show that, despite claims to the contrary, Wong continues to explore stylistic change within both his own aesthetic program and the international art cinema more widely.

Enigmatic faces

“A work of art should...be ‘an object difficult to pick up’”
Jean Cocteau (1972: 30)

Wong Kar-wai embraces stylistic pluralism, but his films are unified by an enduring aesthetic principle. For Wong, the film experience involves perceptual and cognitive challenge. From the late 1980s, he has sought to set dramatic clarity against tactics that unsettle, obscure, or retard the viewer’s perception and comprehension. While his local contemporaries sustained a popular cinema based on maximally readable visual design (Bordwell 2000), Wong inclined toward a different approach, elaborating an interplay of visual clarity and obscurity. He quickly tired of the perspicuous close-ups employed in *As Tears Go By* (1988). He grew still less fond of neatly symmetrical staging, which in this maiden film hierarchizes the characters and

fosters visual and dramatic clarity. (Figure 1 provides an instance of the approach he would soon discard – here, sparring hoods face off against their opposite numbers, diagonally tapering toward the triad boss who arbitrates between them.) Although this kind of schematic layout would continue to flourish in films by Johnnie To, Soi Cheang, and other mainstream directors, Wong’s subsequent films press toward other possibilities. Seeking to complicate perception and presentation, Wong sets about roughening stylistic norms. The aesthetic he cultivates is neither wholly opaque nor wholly informative. Moreover, it refuses both the direct emotional payoffs of popular Hong Kong cinema and the affective “distance” of the art film. Ascribing to Wong a “distanced, intellectual stance” (Plantinga 2009: 7) tells only part of the story.

Wong makes the denial or disturbance of facial access a major strategy. *Days of Being Wild* (1991) offers Wong’s first sustained exploration of this strategy, roughening form and perception by occluding faces with obstructive elements. Even communicative framings do not guarantee pristine views – in one scene, close singles and frontal staging provide an optimum vantage point from which to view Su Lizhen (Maggie Cheung), but intrusive shadow and oblique body posture (Su’s lowered head and downward glance) conspire to conceal legible facial expression, while also hinting at Su’s timidity. Sometimes other characters impede facial access, as when Yuddi’s aggressive seduction of Su is conveyed by oppressive over-the-shoulder shots (Figure 2). Granted, the clean, facial close view remains a standard device throughout Wong’s oeuvre; at times Wong can’t resist lingering on the sensuous visages of his photogenic players (Figure 3). But such compositions operate in counterpoint to less instantly readable images. Indeed, the blocked facial view in Wong’s films typically works in concert with facial access, roughening rather than retarding visual perception.



Figure 1 *As Tears Go By* (1988).



Figure 2 *Days of Being Wild* (1991).



Figure 3 *Ashes of Time Redux* (2008).

By *Ashes of Time* (1994) Wong had perfected what I'll call a disturb-and-refresh schema, temporarily masking a clear facial view before restoring visibility. A representative example occurs in the protagonist's ramshackle hut. Again, staging and framing are wholly communicative: Ouyang Feng (Leslie Cheung) is frontally positioned in a telephoto medium shot. As he addresses an offscreen figure, a foreground curtain breezes in and out of frame, periodically obscuring Ouyang's face. (Apart from generating pictorial and perceptual disturbance, this obscuring element plays into a wider schema of suppression – tantalizingly, Wong never supplies the reverse shot of the unseen figure.) Not for the last time, Wong discovers a means by which to flout the clarity promised by certain techniques (frontality, close framing), while also preserving enough communicativeness to ensure story comprehension. Visual perception is disturbed, but at no cost to narrative intelligibility.

Chungking Express presents another tactic to disturb and refresh our view of characters. Here, a character placed behind a glass surface is put out of focus by a dishrag swept across the plate glass; another sweep of the surface restores the character to crisp focus. (Wong revives this conceit in *My Blueberry Nights*.) A still more common strategy is that of facial cropping, whereby access to a character's face is obstructed by an obtrusive feature of décor (Figure 4). (Note that frontality and proximity are again no guarantees of visibility.) Wong's disturb-and-refresh schema demands that distinct visual cues be strategically co-ordinated; for instance, figure movement may be summoned to refresh the image, as when Chow stoops low to be glimpsed clearly in *2046* (Figure 5). Such compensating manoeuvres, unblocking obstructions in the frame, reveal a pictorial tension generated by distinct devices pulling in opposite directions – while some devices function to withhold knowledge, others work to furnish it. It is this visual dynamic that comprises Wong's stylistic

“dominant” (Jakobson 1971), unifying his oeuvre not only stylistically but at other levels of storytelling outside this paper’s purview.



Figure 4 *2046* (2004).



Figure 5 *2046*.

The tactic of muddying facial close-ups points toward a wider approach to filmic conventions in Wong’s cinema – the perverse treatment of traditionally communicative techniques. Consider the over-the-shoulder (OTS) shot, often integrated into an alternating shot/reverse-shot pattern. In the traditional OTS schema, the shot is composed so that the figure facing the camera is clearly visible. We see this schema operating in *As Tears Go By*, combined with the shot/reverse-shot structure (Figures 6–7). In subsequent films, however, Wong exploits this schema to fit his program of visual disturbance. An instance noted above occurs in *Days of Being Wild* (Figure 2), where camera position creates overlapping figures. *In the Mood for Love* displays a striking alternative when Su (Maggie Cheung) is upbraided by her landlady (Figure 8). While Su, the back-to-camera figure, dominates the centre foreground in sharp focus, the landlady delivers her lecture in a shadowy haze. Wong here reverses the traditional centre of interest in the OTS schema, throwing emphasis on the foreground agent. But although attention is cued toward Su, Wong’s repressive framing prohibits facial access. In keeping with the film’s atmosphere of understated melodrama, the viewer is invited to infer Su’s scolded reaction without the aid of expressive character behaviour.

Figure 6 *As Tears Go By.*Figure 7 *As Tears Go By.*Figure 8 *In the Mood for Love (2000).*Figure 9 *2046.*

2046 intensifies the strangulated OTS shot. Now the foreground figure encroaches even further on our sightline, preventing a full view of the figure placed in depth. In addition, Wong presses the characters against the vertical frameline, his fondness of edge framing gaining fresh saliency in the 2.35:1 scope format. Apparently, the wider screen ratio encourages Wong to perversely tighten the angle on the onscreen pair, squeezing them together. This squeezed OTS tactic creates an unusually claustrophobic staging, set in relief by the acreage of space left vacant by the characters. Stephen Teo detects secrets in these unpopulated areas of the frame, suggesting that the decentred characters “activate the space that surrounds them with mystery and depth” (Teo 2005: 150). This mystery extends to the pair of characters within the space too. Wong devises ways to make his protagonists enigmatic. One abiding tactic is to reduce faces to mere fragments, as when – despite frontal staging and communicative shot scale – an obtrusive shoulder blocks out the figure of interest (Figures 9–10). *My Blueberry Nights* intensifies facial masking still further, severely narrowing the player’s range of facially expressive cues (Figure 11). This tactic appears in milder form in early Wong (Figure 12), but it perhaps owes something to a wider international trend for combining anamorphic framing with tightened OTS staging, rendering characters only partly visible (Figures 13–14). From this angle, Wong adopts a current schema and assimilates it to his aesthetic of visual disturbance.



Figure 10 *2046*.



Figure 11 *My Blueberry Nights* (2007).



Figure 12 *Days of Being Wild*.



Figure 13 *Collateral* (2004).



Figure 14 *The Bourne Ultimatum* (2007).

Like *2046*, *In the Mood for Love* flaunts the OTS schema, but puts the device to deceptive effect. Two neighbours, Su and Chow (Tony Leung Chiu-wai), suspect their spouses of a romantic affair. Together they re-enact the overtures between their partners in an attempt to determine how the affair began. Chow urges Su to confront her husband proper and force a confession of infidelity. Following an ellipsis, Wong cuts to an OTS medium shot of Su as she accosts the foreground figure with her suspicions (Figure 15). Cunningly, Wong postpones the reverse shot of the male figure, allowing the viewer's inferences to mount before finally supplying the anticipated image. The reverse shot carries a sting of surprise: the man addressed by Su is not her husband, but Chow (Figure 16).

Figure 15 *In the Mood for Love.*Figure 16 *In the Mood for Love.*

By refusing exposition and deferring the reverse shot of Chow, Wong elicits a host of inferences and hypotheses from the viewer. We initially infer that Su is confronting her husband about his alleged betrayal. This inference is shaped not only by restricted dramatic exposition, but also by the uncommunicative visibility of the male figure, his body out of focus, turned from camera, and cropped by the frame edge. That Su confronts this figure about an infidelity reinforces our assumption that the man is Su's husband.

It is not until the narration supplies the reverse shot of Chow that our error is revealed. At this point, we are forced to revise our understanding of the narrative situation, the characters' relationships, and the authenticity of the emotion expressed by Su. The revelatory reverse shot, while cancelling out one hypothesis, triggers new ones. Is Chow being accused of infidelity? If so, why is Su distressed? Have Chow and Su been engaged in a romance unbeknownst to the spectator, to which Chow has now been unfaithful? The narration's ellipticality encourages us to "fill in" missing action by inferring a greater development in the protagonists' relationship than we have witnessed. Alternatively, we might hypothesize that the protagonists' activity is merely the latest stage in their ongoing, obsessive rehearsal – as indeed turns out to be the case. Repeatedly we are forced to revise our assumptions, and to imagine what has occurred during the film's elided periods. Ironically, this cluster of guesses and suppositions stems from a faithful rendition of the OTS schema, and not from contrived devices of facial masking such as occlusive shadow or squeezed staging. Wong exploits restrictions built into the traditional OTS schema to throw our comprehension into flux. He shows us that an aesthetic of disturbance can spring directly from apparently legible techniques.

Of course, not only OTS shots are recruited to the task of facial masking. Wong may relegate key characters to offscreen space, withholding facial reactions; or he

may throw faces out of focus or embed them deep in narrow apertures so as to ambiguate facial expression. Even the freeze-frame – traditionally a device yielding dramatic clarity, permitting leisurely scrutiny of the object – is in Wong’s repertoire an available method of obfuscation. Wong famously travesties the technique in *Chungking Express*, pausing the frame moments after the blonde woman (Brigitte Lin) slides from the centre of the frame. Here again, Wong reminds us that typically informative techniques such as the freeze-frame and the facial close-up carry no essential property of legibility. We will have recourse to revisit tactics of facial masking in the next section, which examines the dynamic of opacity and clarity in *My Blueberry Nights*. The following analysis also considers how Wong’s complex compositions function in concert with other parameters of visual style.

Night Vision: Ways of Seeing in *My Blueberry Nights*

Sergei Eisenstein, his interest always piqued by the power of images to shape viewer response, writes in *The Film Sense*:

The art of plastic composition consists in leading the spectator’s attention through the exact path and with the exact sequence prescribed by the author of the composition. This applies to the eye’s movement over the surface of the canvas if the composition is expressed in painting, or over the surface of the screen if we are dealing with a film-frame (148).

The task of successfully steering attention becomes magnified when composing an image that is perceptually dense or difficult. *My Blueberry Nights* provides some lessons in how to “ventilate” the busy image, cuing the eye to what is dramatically important and shifting attention across a shot’s unfolding. At times, Wong presents attentional cues in flagrant fashion, as if to flaunt the task of shaping attention. In the café managed by Jeremy (Jude Law), a glowing neon arrow steers the eye toward Elizabeth (Norah Jones), the female protagonist nestled in the frame’s lower region (Fig. 17). This playful cue constitutes an overt, centred element, but it is supported by subtler directional cues as well. Green light traces an outline around Elizabeth; a green window inscription arcs downward toward the centre of interest. In these cases, Wong derives attentional cues from apparently incidental bits of décor. Then there is Jeremy’s body posture, which creates a nook into which Elizabeth can be nestled. In addition, Wong exploits the wide screen’s shallow perspective to sharpen one plane of action and subordinate others. Rival centres of interest, chiefly Jeremy in the

foreground, are deemphasised thanks to selective focus. (Nevertheless, we probably notice the characters' synchronised gestures, which betray a more pervasive self-consciousness shaping the film's visual narration.)



Figure 17 *My Blueberry Nights*.

This image displays Wong's pictorial flamboyance, but it also gives a lesson in legible shot design. It demonstrates that directors seldom rely on a single directional cue, even a highly flagrant one, in an image that fosters several zones of interest (i.e. elements that might deflect the eye from Elizabeth, such as the "closed" door sign, the window art, the slightly off-centre globe of light, and the foreground figure). In this instance, Wong adheres to an age-old principle: the busier the image, the more redundancy required to shape attention and ensure intelligibility.

A slightly more elaborate choreography of cues occurs in a subsequent two-shot. The shot has to convey a simple bit of story action: the male protagonist chastely observes the female protagonist as she sleeps. How to stage and shoot this scenario? In *Chungking Express*, Wong tackles an identical premise by means of a brief panning shot, furnishing fairly close views of the agents and racking focus as the camera glides between them (Figures 18–19). Wong again favours a single moving shot in our scene from *My Blueberry Nights*, but now he juxtaposes the kind of legible presentation on display in *Chungking Express* with tactics that obscure the main action. Here, Wong opts for a distant framing, stationing the camera outside the café and using a long lens to magnify the action (Figure 20). As the camera tracks leftward, objects inserted between the protagonists and the spectator conspire to thwart straightforward access to the action (Figure 21). Foreground columns yield slivers of space from which we catch mere glimpses of characters. Faces are squeezed into tiny apertures. Inscriptions on the frontmost plane frustrate the viewer's eye. And central to the shot's perceptual difficulty is the arcing camera, which admits a string of obstructive elements into view, forsaking a clear rendition of the action.



Figure 18 *Chungking Express* (1994).



Figure 19 *Chungking Express*.



Figure 20 *My Blueberry Nights*.



Figure 21 *My Blueberry Nights*.

Yet Wong sets off these opaque tactics with legible cues. The mid-ground plane in which Elizabeth is located remains in sharp focus at all times. Centering of the protagonists occurs thanks to movement of camera and characters. And as the tracking camera comes to rest, the window lettering – an obtrusive element moments earlier – flanks and highlights Elizabeth’s head (Figure 22). (That is, the inscription now functions as a cue reinforcing the shot’s point of interest. It also primes the ensuing shot, which magnifies the area highlighted by the window inscription [Figure 23].)



Figure 22 *My Blueberry Nights*.



Figure 23 *My Blueberry Nights*.

Figure 24 *My Blueberry Nights*.Figure 25 *My Blueberry Nights*.

Wong not only strives to balance opacity and legibility; he also manages to modulate attention, achieving the sort of fluid hierarchization of detail described by Eisenstein, or what Charles Barr calls a “gradation of emphasis” (Barr 1963: 18-19). The shot alternates its centres of interest, subjecting clarity to a pattern of blockage and disclosure. As the camera tracks sideways, Elizabeth is masked off by the vase of flowers, briefly highlighting Jeremy and registering his furtive glance at her. Now the moving camera encounters a foreground column, causing Jeremy to slip out of view and throwing emphasis – albeit obliquely – onto Elizabeth, tucked into an aperture. As the column then blocks our view of Elizabeth, attention is cued toward Jeremy – glimpsed at first through a crevice (Figure 24), and then in more communicative medium shot (Figure 25). The window design impedes our sight of Elizabeth as she reappears, pressing us to notice Jeremy’s prolonged gaze at her, and hinting at his romantic desire. (Note that Wong finds a fresh device – the foreground window design – to disturb clear facial views.) Finally, Jeremy retreats to a position almost wholly off screen, restoring emphasis to Elizabeth whose head emerges neatly between two red swirls (Figure 22). In its nuances and embellishments, the shot exceeds the simple transmission of information that *Chungking Express* handles more succinctly.

Retaining its challenge to perception, this tracking shot manages not only to be broadly graspable, but also to effect gradations of emphasis without recourse to cutting or close framings. It presents an assemblage of precisely choreographed cues, co-ordinating figure movement, set design, camera height, the telephoto lens, and the mobile camera – all of which combine to launch the shot’s dynamic of accessibility and obfuscation. In all, the shot succeeds in guiding attention and grading emphasis; and it does this while confronting the spectator with perceptual difficulties. Like certain images in *2046*, it also asserts itself as a bit of overt visual narration, showing

off Wong's almost perverse engagement with the anamorphic frame. Compositions like Figure 24 – showing Elizabeth crammed into a tiny cube to the right of centre – at once flout the wide screen's capacity to enlarge figures, and flaunt the sheer scope of the format by rendering Elizabeth as a miniscule (though sharply rendered) element.

Such salient shots suggest how staging and cinematography can refresh and sharpen perception, but *My Blueberry Nights* roughens our perceptual habits through tactics of editing as well. A cluster of discontinuity devices are pressed into service: jump cuts, violations of the 180° rule, elliptical editing. Wong's visual narration disorients by executing quite drastic shifts in shot scale and camera angle, but even relatively minute shifts in perspective (e.g. slight reframings yielded by cuts) carry similar disjunctive force. In general, *My Blueberry Nights* forswears deep focus. Instead of a single shot arraying figures on different planes of space and holding each figure in crisp focus (the kind of scenic display prized by André Bazin), *My Blueberry Nights* utilises a relatively limited playing area, sharpening selected planes and putting others out of focus. Think, for instance, of the way our above examples prioritise the deep planes in which Elizabeth is placed.

Characters seldom walk toward the camera or retreat into depth. Rather, figures are anchored in space while Wong's narration cuts around them, typically in woozy fashion. Tight close-ups jostle with oblique long shots, reverse perspectives throw us off balance, and a single action is presented from a host of angles, as if to suggest that even slight variations in vantage point might yield significant character revelations. In concert with a breathless cutting rate and the kind of offhand staging tactics we have described, Wong's restless visual narration enlivens dialogue scenes and plays pinball with the viewer's eye. Frequently, the viewer must strain to process the incoming information before the next shot arrives.

My Blueberry Nights' editing techniques achieve the task of complicating perception, but we can posit other factors motivating Wong's stylistic choices as well. First, his tendency to cut into and out of depth (rather than employing deep focus) is probably shaped by constraints built into the anamorphic format. Widescreen technologies tend to yield a shallow depth of field, such that deep focus images (shots presenting background, midground, and foreground planes in simultaneous crisp focus) become an unlikely option. Representing depth is especially tricky in interior scenes, and *My Blueberry Nights* – oddly for a road movie – is dominated by interior locations. This technological constraint perhaps prompts the choppy editing style that

pervades the film, and elevates the importance of cuts to enlarge details or to disclose dramatic space.

Then there is Wong's distinctive shooting practice. An exponent of multicam shooting, Wong shoots a single take from a host of vantage points and distances. He is also fond of repeated takes, obsessively filming fresh renditions of a single scene (Chang 2007). These shooting protocols promote the likelihood of cutting, multiplying choices at the postproduction phase, and yielding numerous shots that can be spliced together in infinite combinations. As Wong's editor, William Chang, notes:

Wong likes taking a few master shots, which is good news for an editor. His shots are very fluid – they can be used alone, broken down into individual units or joined up – unlike the rigid and detailed shot breakdowns in some other films (quoted in Li et al 2004, 47).

It's worth stressing that Wong's production practices – multiple camera setups, high shooting ratio – invite but do not prescribe the often disjunctive editing patterns on display in *My Blueberry Nights*. Other directors insist on varied camera setups yet do not swerve from traditional continuity principles. Still, Wong could not dynamise his scenes with abrupt shifts in scale and angle were it not for his multicam approach. The perceptual difficulties at the film's surface find their genesis in the working methods of this fastidious auteur.

From the opening sequence of *My Blueberry Nights*, Wong announces self-consciousness and perceptual difficulty as internal stylistic norms. Numerous features of this hyperactive opening sequence call attention to visual narration – the initial tight close-ups, handheld camerawork, jump cuts, unpredictable shifts in shot scale and camera position, the impression of perceiving characters through layers of space, and so forth. Denied an establishing shot, the viewer is obliged to piece together the café's geography from restricted spatial cues, all the while adjusting to an occasionally elliptical and fast-moving visual narration. Our moment-to-moment effort toward spatial orientation occurs alongside the kind of inferential activities elicited during any film's exposition, namely, our concern to identify the main protagonists and milieu, hypothesize character traits, recognize the coalescence of a plot, and so on. From the outset, then, *My Blueberry Nights* presses spectators into a host of viewing activities.

The film's opening phase deploys a visual tactic that occupied us in the preceding section: the partial blocking of faces. As argued above, we can regard this

presentational motif as a roughening of traditional schemas – chiefly, the facial close-up, the over-the-shoulder shot, and the shot/reverse-shot, all mainstays of international film style. In its presentation of faces, the sequence enacts the dynamic of blockage and disclosure more generally at work in *My Blueberry Nights*. (Perhaps not surprisingly, the tactic ultimately prioritises dramatic clarity, freeing our sight to witness reactions and gestures that bear narrative importance; Wong’s aim is to roughen narrative clarity, not negate it.) At its limit, however, the tactic of partially obscuring faces yields almost abstract compositions. Partway through *My Blueberry Nights*, Wong presses Elizabeth against the frame edge, the back of her head largely obscuring Arnie (David Strathairn), the lovelorn cop, situated before her. The shallow depth of field provided by the anamorphic lens casts Arnie in crisp focus, letting a string of blurry lights dance across the frame’s rear horizon (Figure 26). Concrete features of mise-en-scène dissolve into indeterminate, abstract patterns of colour and light. Moreover, by casting Arnie in sharp focus, Wong ironically underscores our inability to gain a clear purchase on the cop. The effect is briefly anticipated during the opening sequence – as Jeremy blocks Elizabeth in the foreground, a row of blue discs climb up the frame edge (Figure 27). Compositions like these tantalize us with partial views of characters, but they also hint at a general fascination with substantially graphic or abstract configurations.



Figure 26 *My Blueberry Nights*.



Figure 27 *My Blueberry Nights*.

The tendency toward an abstract style is embodied in several of the film’s visual motifs. The café’s window art yields brightly coloured curlicues that swirl romantically around the characters. Similarly, mottled lights amplify the romantic tenor of dialogue scenes. Bold, saturated colours are pulled into motivic arrangement – in the café, the blue of Jeremy’s shirt complements both the column

beside him and the window inscription that stretches across the frame's foreground (Figure 28). Later, when the café's surveillance camera malfunctions, it conveniently preserves the setting's dominant colour scheme (Figure 29). (The saturated blue tones hark back to Andrew Lau's cinematography in *As Tears Go By* and *Chungking Express*.) Sometimes decorativeness takes off into abstraction, as when Wong's camera bathes in the striking shapes and colours that sweep across a Jaguar's bodywork (Figure 30). Extreme close-ups of a blueberry pie, stressing rich colours and sticky textures, provide an instance of purely graphic play (Figure 31).



Figure 28 *My Blueberry Nights*.



Figure 29 *My Blueberry Nights*.



Figure 30 *My Blueberry Nights*.



Figure 31 *My Blueberry Nights*.

So much abstraction has brought upon Wong the charge of pure aestheticism, his films derided as wholly or chiefly sensuous and superficial. At its most generous, this view regards Wong's films as exhibiting something akin to David Bordwell's "parametric narration" and Kristin Thompson's "excess," the sustained foregrounding of style taking precedence over traditionally central storytelling phenomena such as character, plot, and theme (Bordwell 1985; Thompson 2004). As Stephen Teo notes, "[Wong's] detractors accuse him of being shallow" (2005: 6). However, I've tried to indicate that *My Blueberry Nights*' visual aesthetic, while highly self-conscious, does not relegate other storytelling concerns. In Wong's program of sensuousness, style serves story. I've already suggested that Wong orchestrates the widescreen image in

ways that guide comprehension. For all its ocular retardations, Wong's visual narration lets legible cues come forward at strategic moments. These cues drive the eye to the proper zone of dramatic import. A dynamic narrational tension puts opacity and visibility into conflict, but the film's palpable style makes dramatic clarity an aesthetic priority.

Nor does the café's window design merely embroider the image. As already suggested, Wong exploits this feature of *mise-en-scène* for narrational purposes, creating visual payoffs by masking and revealing faces, and by guiding the eye toward relevant niches of action. In addition, our attention is strained by the compulsion to *read* the window writing. Consequently, Wong deemphasises the motif through focal tactics and other means at moments of dramatic importance. But Wong also patterns the device across the film's distinct plotlines. The window motif is most prominently a feature of Jeremy's café, but it surfaces in the film's other major plot strands too – the second episode set in Memphis (the bar), and the subsequent action line in Nevada and Las Vegas (the hospital) (Figures 32–33). Functioning as a cohesion device, the window motif cannot be reduced to a mere stylistic flourish; rather, it is made a function of large-scale narration, helping to knit the distinct plot episodes together.



Figure 32 *My Blueberry Nights*.



Figure 33 *My Blueberry Nights*.

These shots hint at the motivic use of colour too. Each plot phase in *My Blueberry Nights* is assigned a dominant colour scheme – deep blues and greens in New York; hot reds and oranges in Memphis; golds and tans in Nevada and Vegas. Wong's bold colour palette owes a debt to both Hong Kong's popular cinema (recall Zhang Che, Ringo Lam, and John Woo) and the European art cinema (think of the vibrant colour schemes in certain films by Godard, Bergman, and Antonioni). Like the exponents of those traditions, Wong handles film colour expressively. In *My Blueberry Nights*, the coloured lights that coruscate in background planes endow scenes with a tender, romantic quality. When Arnie is publicly spurned by his

estranged wife, a red wall simmers behind him. And when Wong occludes faces, colour can carry compensating expressive force. More generally, the film's vivid colour design is motivated by the diegesis as ambient features of setting and location. In sum, Wong's saturated colour design, motivated from within the story world, is hardly evidence of a parametric narration.

Even the most abstract compositions are provided narrative justification. A perceptual fascination springs from the coloured lights that bounce off the Jaguar, but the purpose of these shots is not wholly or gratuitously graphic. The car itself carries narrative importance: it facilitates Elizabeth's road trip; it represents a central character goal (Elizabeth works several jobs to earn money for a car); and it is a plot device that brings two protagonists (Elizabeth and Leslie [Natalie Portman]) together. At this narrative stage, the vehicle represents the coveted stakes in a gambling wager. Wong's sensuous treatment of the car is entirely apt to convey the allure that the object holds for Elizabeth.

We might also posit that abstraction is one expressive byproduct of facial masking. If legible facial expression is withheld, how to convey subjective states? Wong pursues what might be called the "expressive displacement" of character emotion onto other bodily attributes (hands, feet) and parameters of style (mise-en-scène, cinematography, music). Furthermore, the sensuous image offers both appealing and complicating possibilities in an aesthetic of disturbance. It may sustain attention, encouraging the viewer to adjust to a graphically complex composition; or it may stimulate perceptual effort, as when William Chang's intricate patterning of walls and cheongsams yields a rich density of detail. At times, both effects may be in play simultaneously.

I'd argue that *My Blueberry Nights* follows a logic of motivated sensuousness. It seems to me that Wong's film is not style-centred in the way that his critics suggest. This is not to demote the role of sensuousness in *My Blueberry Nights*, nor to deny that formal saliency is an integral part of its appeal. The film's sensuousness does indeed nourish the eye. But instead of elevating visual style above thematic and narrative concerns as his detractors allege, Wong endows every stylistic flourish with narrative meanings and effects. A self-conscious visual narration comes forward to assert the auteur's distinctiveness, and to highlight the transformation of traditional schemas. But visual narration in *My Blueberry Nights* is never gratuitously showy. Wong's foregrounded style both frustrates and facilitates comprehension and

emotional engagement, supporting story and form, and guaranteeing an active, cognitively alert spectator.

In denying that Wong is a pure aesthete, I'm not arguing that a wholly stylistic use of the medium would necessarily degrade Wong, or indeed any filmmaker of such persuasion. Purely stylistic exercises can be innately valuable, not least for their capacity to revivify perceptual habits. Still, the charge of pure aestheticism doesn't fit Wong, and if critics use the criterion of organic unity to appraise *My Blueberry Nights*, closer inspection would reveal the film's *de facto* fulfilment of that criterion. Far from privileging ostentation, Wong's film exemplifies the harmonious integration of style and story.

There are surely other visual tactics in *My Blueberry Nights* that warrant attention – the prevalence of the profiled shot/reverse-shot; the tendency to carve the picture format into discrete chunks of space – but I hope to have sketched out some important characteristics of the film's complex yet comprehensible aesthetic. Just as Wong's cinema resists summary by reference to a set of favourite techniques (smudge-motion, MTV-style editing, “distancing” long takes), so too does it discredit the charge of sheer aestheticism and passive spectatorship. As often in Wong's cinema, *My Blueberry Nights* roughens our perception, but it does so without detriment to either cognitive arousal or perceptual gratification.

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