



## Longing: Ephemeral Reciprocity in Wong Kar Wai's 1990s Urban Films

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This audiovisual essay explores the fleeting reciprocity in Wong Kar Wai's films *Chungking Express* (1994), *Fallen Angels* (1995), and *Happy Together* (1997). It specifically examines how these films depict the changing interactions among city dwellers, reflecting the constant evolution and transient nature of urban spaces.

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### Creator's Statement

This piece delves into the central theme of fleeting reciprocity in Wong Kar Wai's films *Chungking Express* (1994), *Fallen Angels* (1995), and *Happy Together* (1997). Wong's films alter the frame's materiality to depict encounters among city dwellers, establishing the centrality of the urban environment in defining and altering the individuals' attempts to connect with the Other. Searching for a partner, characters physically engage with the city (and its objects), participating as well in various forms of reciprocal interaction with the urban fabric they inhabit.

Urban spaces are dynamic, constantly evolving due to the diverse actions of their multifaceted agents (Delgado 1999; Donald 1992). In this context, global cities become key elements of what Doreen Massey calls "throwntogetherness"—a time-space where individuals form connections, embracing both the vastness of the global and the intimacy of the local (Massey 2005: 9). These interactions are fluid, creating an ever-changing space that is always under construction and never fully finalized. Space, inherently temporal, is in a constant state of becoming. Therefore, any spatial concept, like "here" or "there," is a transient convergence of various trajectories that soon disperse in multiple directions. Geographic considerations are thus "irretrievably here and now" (Massey 2005: 139), destined to evolve unpredictably.

Wong's films convey "a vertiginous feeling of spatial/temporal disorientation" (Marchetti 2000: 293), as characters navigate the crowded cityscape. They segment the frame into multiple-speed planes of action, capturing the simultaneous yet desynchronized experiences of city inhabitants. Narratively fragmented, the films interweave different stories of characters crossing paths in the city's streets and interiors (Mazierska and Rascaroli 2001–2002). Consequently, they address a contemporary cinematic concern about the global city: the "non-synchronicity between the rhythms of individual lives and the pace of urban change" (Andersson and Webb 2018: 22).

Thus, Wong's films often highlight the coexistence of multiple speeds within the same frame to express the emotional turmoil of his characters, their experience of time passing and their sense of isolation within crowded locations (BFI 2021). In this sense, they redefine depth of field in terms of both space and time: first, depicting characters within the same space but distant from each other (Li 2018); second, showing characters moving at different frame rates within the same shot. This disrupts the transparency of the cinematic image, continually experimenting with its materiality and dislodging the synchronization between sound and image.

Consequently, in Wong's urban films, the cities depicted are culturally fractured spaces of transience and constant change (Wypkema 2005), often preventing inhabitants from achieving long-term human reciprocity, while continuously offering myriad stimuli with which they interact in a variety of ways. The discussed films focus on depicting the emotional disconnect among individuals in Hong Kong and Buenos Aires through various stylistic techniques. By doing so, they bring to the fore the intertwining of time and space in shaping the urban experience and demonstrate how navigating these coordinates alters both interpersonal relationships and the "textual/physical particularities" of the cities with which inhabitants interact.

In these films, the *material* depiction of the city allows spectators, as Henri Lefebvre (1999) suggests, to rediscover time, providing a temporal map of the urban interpersonal malaise that prevents city nomads from bridging their physical and emotional gaps. Despite this, Wong's characters continuously strive for reciprocity. The near future is never fully determined; chance may present the possibility of a brief encounter that could lead to reciprocity, albeit temporarily; or, alternatively, the possibility to physically connect with the objects and spaces of the city. In engaging with both other inhabitants and these objects and spaces, Wong's characters continuously produce and alter the city's time-space.

This audiovisual essay proposes that cinema equips us with perceptual tools to comprehend the complexity of urban phenomena (Penz and Lu 2011). Exclusively utilizing images and sounds from Wong's films, it focuses on the faces and gestures of key characters as they navigate their loneliness in an urban environment that periodically hinders their physical and emotional reciprocity, while simultaneously offering multiple routes to seek pleasure, forgetfulness, or, otherwise, the intense emotions produced by the distant memories of those who are now absent—memories Wong's characters cannot easily escape. Concurrently, the provisional nature of the city offers timely opportunities for encounters, as crisscrossing paths may intersect. To sum up, this piece explores key aspects of Wong Kar Wai's poetics of urban time-space, situating diverse types of reciprocity as central tools for framing interpersonal relationships within the global city.

## Note

In the video essay, the word “Wong” is frequently used as a shorthand for all the creative talent involved in these films, highlighting the collaborative nature of filmmaking. Wong Kar Wai’s films are, therefore, the collective work of their writer/director, cinematographer Christopher Doyle, editor and art director William Chang, and actors such as Tony Leung, Takeshi Kaneshiro, and Brigitte Lin, among others.

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## Biography

Vicente Rodríguez Ortega is an Associate Professor at Universidad Carlos III de Madrid and a member of the TECMERIN research group and Instituto Universitario del Cine Español. He is co-editor of the *Contemporary Spanish Cinema & Genre* (Manchester UP) and author of *Spanish Horror Film and Television in the 21st Century* (Routledge). He has written more than 30 scholarly articles and book chapters. He has published in journals such as *New Media & Society*, *Quarterly Review of Film & Video*, *Television & New Media*, and *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, among others. He was the founding editor of *Tecmerin: Journal of Audiovisual Essays*.

## Review by Nikolina Dobрева, Middlebury College

This video essay explores the ephemeral nature of the connections that Wong Kar-Wai's characters form while interacting within a dynamic urban environment. Drawing on his research in urban spatial theory and his deep understanding of Wong's work, Rodríguez Ortega provides an insightful and visually engaging commentary on the complex relationships between characters, their (urban) environment, and the film frame in the 1990s films *Chungking Express* (1994), *Fallen Angels* (1995), and *Happy Together* (1997).

"Are we still partners?" asks The Killer's Agent (Michelle Reis) in *Fallen Angels*. This question posed at the beginning of the video essay sets off an immersive experience as we follow a succession of minute yet significant gestures, facial expressions, and movements that signal the characters' often futile attempts to establish lasting connections within a rapidly changing urban setting. Crafting a perfectly symmetrical and easy to follow analysis, the video essayist also ends with a question: "Will reciprocity last?" The answer for Wong's characters is uncertain but Rodríguez Ortega provides a solid and lasting connection between Wong's characters, city environments, and unique expressive forms.

I particularly appreciated the pacing of the essay set to original music from the films discussed. The critique also takes a distinct visual shape as it progresses with a steady rhythm by means of different expressive tools, including text, split screens, and an effective use of dissolves that highlight both the characters' urban environment and the melancholy of their fleeting connections. Watching this video essay left me with a deeper appreciation of Wong's work and a much better understanding of how the filmmaker uses cinematic time and space to create unforgettable characters.

## Review by Ken Provencher, Loyola Marymount University

Vicente Rodríguez Ortega's "Longing" is a thoughtful and stimulating addition to the wide and deep commentary on Wong's *Chungking Express* (1994), *Fallen Angels* (1995),

and *Happy Together* (1997). It is almost hard to believe that the 1997 film was Wong's most recent (and last?) about Chinese characters in a present-day urban setting. This gives the 1990s urban films an ever-increasing coherence, and Rodríguez Ortega's video essay finds some new ground. With reciprocity as the subject, the video essay argues that the romantic lead characters and their urban surroundings have a relationship parallel to the interpersonal. But rather than limit the character-city relationship to a one-way force of environmental imposition, Rodríguez Ortega's video essay sees reciprocity in the characters' interactions with their environment.

Beginning with shots of couples together, the video essay shows their lack of mutual intimacy. Further shots reveal characters alone in their thoughts, but with some object giving them small pleasures: a table fan, a cigarette, a soda can, a blanket. With smooth transitions, including superimpositions, and a well-organized soundtrack with cues from all three films, the video essay argues persuasively that even without the presence of a romantic partner, characters pursue their own relationship with the city and its limitless resources. As couples share the same space, we see how space-time is often distorted, as if the city itself were antagonistic to their possible intimacy. The onscreen text explains this as characters being "in touch" with the city. Given the ephemerality of the interpersonal, it is suggested that the characters have an even more intimate relation to the city that provides for their immediate needs, including and especially the creature comforts that are at times the alternative to personal contact. We see desire for a partner fulfilled in part by consumption of food, drink, stimulants, and relaxants.

As the onscreen text further argues, this activity results in a "shaping" of the city, and not just a lonely nomadic lifestyle shaped by the city. The "timing" aspect is crucial here: even though some clips are repeated to emphasize the idea of cyclical urban rhythms, the speed of travel and commerce that makes chance encounters possible also creates ruptures and sometimes permanent breaks. Rodríguez Ortega's video shows the impact of the accelerated pace of city life as increasing opportunities for interpersonal contact while also reducing it to mere glances. And yet even in a glance, memories are created and stored, and their intensification through time sets a personal rhythm for characters who are bound to their own desires as much as they are to their surroundings. Wong's latest work, *Blossoms Shanghai* (2023), set in the 1990s, suggests that we do not yet have the last word from Wong on that period, but Rodríguez Ortega's video essay makes a clear and persuasive case for the ephemeral reciprocity of 1990s urban life in Wong's films.

