

# 0.01cm: Affectivity and Urban Space in Chungking Express

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The Hong Kong of Wong Kar Wai's *Chungking Express* is one that operates in the interstices of the cliched city of wealth and economic success and Ackbar Abbas's city of "negative" space (Abbas, 1997b: 311). It celebrates the charm of the everyday and recovers the affective possibilities of mundane spaces in the midst of a commodified, "chainstore" Hong Kong, as Wong himself put it (quoted in Stokes and Hoover, 1999: 195). This filmic renegotiation of Hong Kong's urban spaces offers up new meanings and new narratives that jostle and disturb conventional delineations of Hong Kong's urban environment as dislocated and bland, shifting pessimism to optimism, reinvesting urban banality with affectivity. Wong achieves this through a renewed emphasis on the potential of shared space within the city, suggesting that while "proximity without reciprocity" is often the affective result of urban space, a re-thinking of shared space as a form of proximity that allows the gradual blossoming of reciprocity can offer new forms of urban relations (Abbas, 1997a: 54. See Appendix One). The film also presents a re-reading of desire that accompanies and lends itself best to the potential of shared space in an urban context of physical closeness but emotional distance. By imagining the lack in the Other, from which desire springs, as physical, tangible absence and substituting shared space for this absence, the film provides a means of coping with lack through the fetishisation of space.

*Chungking Express* is Wong Kar Wai's third and one of his most popular films. While his previous films were critically acclaimed both in Hong Kong and abroad, *Chungking Express* was the film that secured his international reputation as a hip, unconventional filmmaker, no doubt helped by a distribution deal in the United States with Quentin Tarantino's (of *Pulp Fiction* fame) distribution company, Rolling Thunder. Apart from Tarantino's unqualified support for the film, the film's success has much to do with its fresh, breezy style *a la* Jean Luc Godard, catchy soundtrack and its quirky take on love and urban life. Filmed very quickly in a spare slot of time as a break from the difficult production of Wong's groundbreaking kungfu film, *Ashes of Time*, *Chungking Express* is a refreshing exercise in minimalist, guerrilla-like indie filmmaking, a complete contrast to the complicated and lavish production of *Ashes of Time* with its special effects, elaborate period costumes and difficult location shooting conditions in the desert.

Thematically though, *Chungking Express* is not much different from *Ashes of Time* nor most other Wong Kar Wai films. While *Ashes of Time* is a kungfu period costume film, peopled with lost individuals wandering in an emotional desert of pain and rejection, set in a literal desert landscape stunningly photographed by Chris Doyle, *Chungking Express* is similarly peopled with lost individuals wandering in an urban landscape of loss and rejection. What has changed between *Ashes of Time* and *Chungking Express* has been the location. The city has replaced the desert and it is in the city of *Chungking Express* where Wong Kar Wai's characters seem best able to cope with the rejections and dejections of love, unlike the

"obsessed, embittered, haunted and intermittently hysterical characters" from his earlier films (Rayns, 1995: 12). All of his characters are afflicted by the same problems of loneliness, insecurity and inability to commit; it's just that the ones in *Chungking Express* have found ways to cope which the others haven't (Rayns, 1995: 12). The city offers new redeeming narratives of love and desire and, for Wong, specific Hong Kong urban spaces play an essential role in supplying some of these new narratives.

*Chungking Express* is a film directly inspired by the city of Hong Kong itself, in particular two distinct locations -- Chungking Mansion in Tsim Sha Tsui and Central (consisting of Lan Kwai Fong and the Mid-level escalators) on Hong Kong Island (See Appendix Two). Both locations are places that intrigue Wong; Tsim Sha Tsui because he grew up there amidst its cosmopolitanism and Central, particularly the Mid-level escalators, for its absence in filmic representations of Hong Kong -- "no one has made a movie there" as Wong himself put it (Tsui, 1994). Furthermore, according to a question-and-answer session with Wong after a UCLA screening of *Chungking Express*, both places serve as "microcosms of Hong Kong"-- dense, cosmopolitan, consumerist, where the local and the global are superimposed palimpsestically (Wai, 1995).

A film of two halves, the first part of *Chungking Express* takes place largely in Chungking Mansion, a unique pocket of Hong Kong urban life. Chungking Mansion, a daunting, warren-like complex of shops, offices, cheap guest houses and private homes, is conveniently located in the heart of Tsim Tsa Shui, one of Hong Kong's more important commercial and shopping belts. Jostling shoulder to shoulder with numerous upmarket hotels such as the elegant Peninsula Hotel, Chungking Mansion with its faded facade and uncertain reputation seems quite the anomaly -- notorious as it is for its poor safety and hygiene record, its dirty, cramped conditions, its tiny lifts overburdened with heavy traffic. There are also the prostitutes and illegal immigrants, and the constant raiding of Chungking Mansion by police for both the above types of inhabitants. While its notoriety serves to give it a certain fascination, the appeal of Chungking Mansion comes also from its cosmopolitan nature. As Wong himself says, "Inside Chungking Mansion you can run into people of all races and nationalities: Chinese, white people, black people, Indian" (Tsui, 1994). With its numerous flophouses housing backpackers of all ilks, its numerous South Asian eateries and the predominantly African and South Asian clientele, the cosmopolitanism of Chungking Mansion may itself be threatening to a Chinese Hong Kong person used to being in the majority. Though the cramped nature of the space is a familiar Hong Kong standard, it is nonetheless a space dominated by ethnic minorities, making Chungking Mansion an inverse mirror image of Hong Kong, reflecting both class and racial difference to its Tsim Tsa Shui neighbours.

The radical heterotopic space of Chungking Mansion is the setting for Wong here to explore the romantic possibilities of the chance encounter. As Cop 223 declares at the start of *Chungking Express*, "We rub shoulders everyday. We may not know each other. But we could be friends some day" and opportunities for chance encounters abound in the urban poverty of cosmopolitan Chungking Mansion and its environs. In this heterotopia, individuals from diverse backgrounds are brought together. Middle-class Hong Kong Cop 223 who speaks the local lingua franca with an accent promptly finds himself rubbing shoulders with a shifty Chinese drug dealer in a Marilyn Monroe wig, fully prepared for all weather conditions in raincoat and dark glasses as he chases a suspect down a crowded corridor. In a voice-over, Cop 223 notes, "At our closest point, we were just 0.01cm apart from each other. Fifty-five hours later, I was in love with this woman". In that slow-motion near-collision, 0.01cm is the

amount of space that enables Cop 223 and the drug dealer to remain within their own boundaries of personal space and as separate entities. Fifty-five hours later, that tiny measure of space will gain a completely different meaning as the drug dealer walks into the same bar where Cop 223 is drinking and they end up slumped against each other, propping up the bar. What formerly separated them may now be read as that which connects them as well. 0.01cm is an urban space of possibilities -- separation or connection, strangers or friends. This is a form of urban space that is of interest to Wong -- that physical gap between busy passers-by in the city. It is a measure of ambivalent space, simultaneously separating and joining two individuals from different ends of the social spectrum. It is a shared space that establishes the potential for reciprocity to develop.

Yet while reciprocity is allowed to build gradually between Cop 223 and the drug dealer through their connection via a fraction of shared space, this development takes an unusual path. For most of the duration of the first half of the film, Cop 223 and the drug dealer pursue separate routes after their initial contact and in the spaces traversed in their individual journeys, the urban space is familiarly alienating, much like what has been described by George Simmel and Louis Wirth:

[T]he city is characterised by secondary rather than primary contacts. The contacts of the city may indeed be face to face, but they are nevertheless impersonal, superficial, transitory, and segmental. The reserve, the indifference, and the blasé outlook which urbanites manifest in their relationships may thus be regarded as devices for immunizing themselves against the personal claims and expectations of others .... Typically, our physical contacts are close but our social contacts are distant (Wirth, 1964: 71-3).

This is true of the drug dealer whose relations in the city are largely mercenary. Her association with her troop of South Asian would-be drug smugglers in the bowels of Chungking Mansion is purely utilitarian and business-oriented as is her relationship with her drug boss, and possible former lover, despite the fact she wears the blonde wig he has a penchant for. Her city is a place where all relations are dispensable and subject to the law of violence. The fact that her drugs boss delivers his ultimatum after her betrayal by her troop of smugglers through a tin of sardines fast approaching expiry underlines the utilitarian and disposable culture she inhabits. She is no more than a consumable product and soon to go off too if she does not solve her problem of the missing drugs and drug couriers quickly.

While Cop 223's world overlaps with the violence of the drug dealer's as evidenced by both having their own glamorous action-chase sequences, complete with jump cuts and Wong's trademark step-printed frames, he is more preoccupied with the difficulties of affective relations in the city. Having been jilted by his girlfriend, May, on April Fool's Day and thus unsure of the seriousness of her intent, he has given her a month to return only to find himself facing the reality of abandonment as his deadline draws closer. Cop 223 desires closer social contacts but can only depend on desperate phone calls to May's parents and cans of pineapples (May's favourite food) as substitutes for actual physical and emotional contact and intimacy. Like the drug dealer, Cop 223 inhabits a world where affective relations are negotiated through consumer goods. As Gina Marchetti has noted, "*Chungking Express* tells its story of love, loss, and memory through the romance of goods" (Marchetti, 2000: 293).

Even when our two protagonists meet in a bar, finally sharing more than 0.01cm of space, the tale is a familiar one of physical proximity but emotional distance. Cop 223 makes his opening address to the drug dealer in terms of the affective substitute of pineapples still. To confirm their disconnectedness, the shot of the two of them shoulder-to-shoulder in the bar as the drug dealer muses in a voice-over on the "ultimate inability to know someone -- pineapples one day, something else the next" is a fractured mirror shot that disorients the viewer (Marchetti, 2000: 300). The chaste night they spend together in an anonymous hotel room seems to confirm the distance between them. She sleeps off her exhaustion while he watches old Cantonese operas and eats his way through the night on the floor.

Yet, though the connection between them is tenuous and superficial, in a world of brief urban contacts, shared space, be it 0.01 cm or a hotel room, has its own emotional resonances. The fact that space is shared is enough to establish a link held by good will and faith. Before Cop 223 leaves the hotel room early in the morning, he touchingly removes the drug dealer's shoes and cleans them -- "For a pretty girl like her should always have clean shoes". Urban relationships may be brief, secondary and somewhat superficial but there is nothing to prevent them from being nonetheless sincere. The drug dealer later reciprocates with a birthday message on his beeper; a move which provides Cop 223 with a memory that he hopes will never expire. Though still speaking in the language of commodities, Cop 223 is at least partially distorting the discourse of commodities and expiry dates.

Whether Cop 223 ever moves beyond his model of affect coded in terms of commodities is a question the film does not pursue as the narrative shifts to new protagonists. Yet, the first tale already contains the seeds of a new conception of affective relations in the city. Interestingly, it is the absence of one party in some form or other that enables the most touching gestures of affection in this first tale. The drug dealer's mental absence as she sleeps oblivious to Cop 223 brings on his considerate cleaning of her shoes. She delivers her birthday greeting to him via his beeper, in his physical absence. The greatest emotional affect is achieved when the object of desire is not present but a space common to both is still shared, linking the two parties. The second tale where an encounter over the counter at Midnight Express brings Faye and Cop 663 together develops this interplay between shared space, absence and affect further.

Location once again makes a specific impact on how love is played out in the city. The second half of the film focuses on another unique Hong Kong location, the Mid-level escalators. It is the world's longest stretch of escalators, connecting Central to the less accessible, residential areas of the Mid-levels on Hong Kong island. The escalators fulfil a functional purpose in providing a pedestrian walkway for office workers to get to and from the Mid-levels and the main business district of Central. In the mornings, the escalators move in a downward direction in anticipation of the morning rush to work. By late morning, the direction is reversed and remains so until the shutting down of the escalators late at night. In spite of its functionality, the escalators are also a playful space. On an elevated walkway beginning from Central the escalator squeezes up the hill first amidst low-rise buildings, past shops, offices and private flats, hidden only from prying eyes by a translucent plastic screen. As it reaches Hollywood Road with its tall apartment blocks and antique shops, restaurants and bars begin to dominate, the screens are removed and the voyeurism that a ride up the slow-moving escalators encourages is given full scope. Looking is generously encouraged in the hope of luring one to stop and spend some time and money in a shop or a restaurant. If consumerist attractions fail, there is nonetheless the pleasure of watching others eat and shop from the vantage point of the escalators.

The escalators are hence a space where curiosity and desire are activated and allowed to dominate. Wong foregrounds the pleasures of voyeurism and the awakenings of desires of consumption that are very much part of the experience of riding on the escalators and transforms it as the perfect setting for romantic desire. Cop 663's flat is located just behind the screen on the lower sections of the escalators and for the infatuated Faye, the escalator walkway is the place where her own sense of curiosity and her object of romantic desire come together. The escalators also work as a metaphor for romance in the city -- the place arouses curiosity and desire but only allows you to look and not touch. There is always a measure of space that separates, that distances the spectator from the spectacle -- an apt description of how the unusual romance between Faye and Cop 663 is spatially organised.

The romance centres on Cop 663's flat, rather than physical proximity between Faye and Cop 663. When a pair of Cop 663's house keys lands unexpectedly in her lap, Faye takes to secretly visiting his flat during her lunch break. While Cop 663 and Faye may not be physically together, they still can share the same space. Faye first begins by exploring his space, cleaning it and inhabiting it by eating her lunch there with his bowls and his utensils. Then, growing bolder, she begins to embark on a programme of change, swapping or adding various items to his flat -- a new tablecloth, new bedsheets, a new mug for his toothbrush, a photo of herself as a child stuck onto his mirror. She lavishes attention on his space as an expression of her love, signalling her presence and influence on his life. Seemingly oblivious to the changes made by Faye in his absence, Cop 663 takes them in his stride, making her additions and adjustments part of his everyday life. He plays the CD she leaves behind, eats the canned food with which she replenishes his larder and talks to the giant Garfield toy she puts in place of a white giant stuffed bear.

This is love played out through an intermediary space and distance becomes part of the register of romantic desire. "Desire is predicated on lack," as Catherine Belsey neatly put it (Belsey, 1994: 38). Every object of adult desire stands in for an original object which is forever lost, and which it represents. Since each substitute, each representation, is always only that and no more, it can never fully be the object of unconscious desire. Loss returns as the impossibility of perfect satisfaction (Belsey, 1994: 50-1). Language thus frustrates desire, offering only numerous substitutions and representations but never the "real" thing, making desire wait. Not only is it required to wait, it is required to wait at a distance while the object of desire is elsewhere. Desire has a spatial as well as a temporal dimension and the distance between Faye and Cop 663 is the perfect breeding ground for romantic desire to blossom and be sustained. Faye's means of declaring her love in a spatial manner sets up a relationship that is largely dependent on absence. This is a strategy that recognises "the existence of ruination ... while positing the existence of an idealised elsewhere" (Lapsley, 1997: 200). Focusing her attentions on Cop 663's flat, and avoiding physical proximity with him, is Faye's means of turning the lack that is at the heart of desire into a virtue. Having accepted romantic lack in the form of Cop 663's physical absence, Faye is then free to indulge in the plenitude of her own fantasies about her object of desire by inhabiting his space. The presence of the beloved is not essential, it is the presence of his living space, signalling his idealised existence elsewhere that is important. When the two are actually placed together in his flat, Faye cringes at his touch and even falls asleep on his sofa, exhausted from the strain of being in the same room with him, uncertain of how he will react. For Faye love feeds off distance and absence; proximity to the beloved allowing close scrutiny that can reveal true lack, in fact, inhibits affect.

It comes as no surprise then that the object of one's love here is constantly in flight. Cop 663's ex-girlfriend is none other than a flight attendant who comes in and out of his life as she flies in and out of Hong Kong until she finally makes her exit and leaves him for good. Faye is often in flight herself, hiding from Cop 663 in his own apartment, fleeing from his apartment when he at last catches onto her secret flat-visiting habit. Once Cop 663 has realised that he is the object of her affections and is ready to reciprocate, ready to transform her into his object of love, Faye beats a quick and quirky retreat and given her penchant for flight, later returns as an air stewardess herself.

Cop 663 too has to learn the advantages of love at a distance. At the appointed time of their date at the California Bar, Cop 663 is found alone, nursing his rejection with a beer. Faye, obsessed with the California of the United States (as evidenced by her constant playing of "California Dreaming" by the Mamas and Papas) has decided to relocate herself to the real California, which in spirit does not break her appointment with Cop 663. A shimmering shot of the gold-lettered, rain-splattered sign of "California" from Hong Kong's California Bar becomes a poignant reminder of how perverse signs can be (see Appendix Three). Both Cop 663 and Faye are in 'California', just different ones that's all. Desire, tricked by a slippery signifier, has to wait and wait at a distance too, while its object of desire is at a different location. There is consolation though. Where before there was the solace of shared space, Cop 663's flat, now there is that of a shared signifier -- "California". Besides, as Cop 663 will learn, this is an effective means of sustaining romantic desire: physical absence disguises the real lack in the Other and enables the illusion of plenitude, while the shared space, acting as a kind of fetish, maintains a sense of connection between the two parties. It's a formula that works, for a year later he is still enamoured of Faye (see Appendix Four).

In *Chungking Express*, the urban indifference often theorised by Georg Simmel or Louis Wirth as part of the urban condition gives way to urban connectiveness simply through the potential of spaces (and even signifiers) shared both simultaneously and non-simultaneously. Wong appropriates the usual urban dynamics, reinvesting shared space with relational and emotional potential. In the first story, Wong suggests that the sharing of 0.01 cm in a busy city can produce an affect. In the second, the possibility of sustaining a relationship through the non-simultaneous sharing of space is posited. What does it matter if proximity does not result in reciprocity for the second story promotes a system of desire that substitutes the lover's space for the lover, subverting the need for proximity in the first place. As such, we should not be too surprised that at the end of the film we find Cop 663 as the new owner of Midnight Express. Unable to possess Faye, he occupies her old workplace instead. Wong's Hong Kong is re-imagined as romantic despite the odds, as functional and mundane spaces are imbued with a subtext of desire. This is a different Hong Kong, full of the charm of the everyday and reinvested with optimism. It is part of what Ackbar Abbas suggests Hong Kong cinema can offer: hints of "the existence of other histories and other politics than the discernible ones" (Abbas, 1997b: 309). *Chungking Express*, despite its small obligatory nod towards the commercial conventions of the gangster/cop genre, especially in the first story (see Appendix Five), still manages to open up the unseen affective possibilities of seemingly ordinary Hong Kong urban spaces. As Cop 223 declares, "We rub shoulders everyday. We may not know each other. But we could be friends some day".

## Appendix One

As if to suggest that new film narratives may also be generated in the same manner, *Chungking Express* is structurally a film of two segments held together through the shared

space of the fast food joint, Midnight Express, which Cop 223 of the first half and Cop 663 of the second both patronise.

#### **Appendix Two**

These locations have also intrigued Wong's fans. The urban space of *Chungking Express's* Hong Kong, unlike that of Abbas's version of tedium and banality, has exerted a fascination so deeply entrenched that after the fact of the film, the main locations of the film have become invested with an additional filmic reality. For those familiar with the film for example, the real life Chungking Mansion cannot help but evoke the "reel life" Chungking Mansions as seen in *Chungking Express*. Indeed, the locations of Wong's other films are often so memorable that they have become sites of pilgrimage. A Japanese fan, Eriko Hirano, has even put together a map of locations for *Fallen Angels*, Wong's follow-up film to *Chungking Express* (Garnier, 2000: 12).

#### **Appendix Three**

There are many perversely slippery signifiers in the film that constantly remind one of the elusiveness of signs and the deferred nature of desire. For example, when one looks at Wong's own delineation of Central as a location, his markers consistently shift. At one moment, he speaks of the region of the escalators that connects to the Mid-Levels (Tsui, 1994) and at another, he speaks of Lan Kwai Fong, an area of bars and restaurants popular with foreign executives and yuppies after work and during the weekends, about a ten-minute walk away from the escalators (Wong, 1995). Central, in everyday life, also functions as a signifier for a local subway station, as well as the main business hub of Hong Kong Island (Abbas, 1997a: 56). Even Cop 663's moniker is often confused: is he Cop 663 or Cop 633? Abbas's section on *Chungking Express* consistently alternates between 663 and 633.

#### **Appendix Four**

Faye returns from California less enamoured of it than when she had never been -- a neat lesson in the importance of keeping one's distance from one's objects of desire, especially if there is a wish to sustain interest in the latter.

#### **Appendix Five**

This is after all Hong Kong cinema, where the demand of the market exercises its inevitable influence on films made. As Wong told Richard Corliss from *Time*, the Hong Kong marketplace "has its own censorship. It requires a lot of action. So you either have a cop, a gangster or a kungfu film" (quoted in Brown, 1996: 46).

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