Unhappy Together
Wong Kar-Wai's *2046*

"Why can't it be like before?"

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Wong Kar-Wai's films, I have to admit, have been slow to win me over. **Chungking Express** (1994) was on its release an intoxicating experience with its moody visuals, fast-paced editing, cheerful pop songs, and charming (if sometimes a little too ingratiating) voice-over, but I could never quite rid myself of the feeling that underneath it all there was something a little hollow about it, and about the follow-up **Fallen Angels** (1995) too. **Happy Together** (1997), on the other hand, seemed a quantum leap forward, with a real emotional depth (rather than poppy charm) to it; and in the achingly beautiful **In the Mood for Love** (2000) Wong achieves a near-perfect balance between the melancholic feelings at play and the film's formal beauty.

Now comes **2046** (2004), four years in the making, three cinematographers, at least one of the stars (Maggie Cheung) reduced to two very brief shots, and by all accounts a lot of chops and changes in conception, dominant theme, and emphasis along the way. The biggest change is that this is no longer Wong's "science fiction" movie, although we might be moved to think so by the opening: a futuristic train trip to, the Japanese narrator tells us in his voice-over, 2046, a place where you can relive your memories (and from which no one but this narrator has ever returned). But we very soon discover that this sci-fi tale is actually the work of **In the Mood for Love**'s Mr Chow (Tony Leung), as he rather disconcertingly relives with Gong Li in Singapore one of the scenes (and lines of dialogue) that he played with Maggie Cheung in the earlier film, and then, in a customary Wong-style voice-over, details his return to Hong Kong and his transformation into a smooth, rather callous lady's man: a less appealing character this time around.

So, **2046** works as a companion piece to **In the Mood for Love**, with Tony Leung reprising his role as Chow (initially, there's a sense that he might be a parallel character, but it's later made clear he is the same man); his buddy Ping making a reappearance; Gong Li taking on Maggie Cheung's character's name Su Lizhen (from both **In the Mood for Love** and 1991's **Days of Being Wild**); and the film as a whole constantly repeating the "whispered secrets" motif that **In the Mood for Love** ended with. There it was the hole in the wall at Angkor Wat that Chow whispers his secret into; here it's a folk story of finding a tree on a mountain, carving a hole in it, and whispering a secret into the hole, with the film itself zooming out from the "hole" in the opening shot and zooming into it in the closing shot. It's a sign of **2046**'s excessive overuse of motifs that this story is told three times in the course of the film, twice by the Japanese narrator and once by one of the androids.

But the focus is on Chow's relationships with three women, played by Gong Li (as gambler Su Lizhen), Zhang Ziyi (as Bai Ling), and Faye Wong (as Wang Jingwen), with a

briefer encounter with Carina Lau identifying the meaning of the title: her hotel room number of 2046, which Chow later tries to rent before opting for 2047 next door. In fact, it's Bai Ling who ends up living in 2046, in the hotel run by Jingwen's father; and "2047" becomes the title of one of the sci-fi stories Chow writes, in this case specifically for Jingwen after she finally leaves for Japan to marry her Japanese boyfriend — who Chow makes the Japanese narrator that we hear in the opening sequence of the film. (Of course, "2046" has other resonances outside of this film: it was the number of Chow's hotel room in **In the Mood for Love**; and it is the last year of the fifty-year period that China has guaranteed to leave Hong Kong unchanged.)

Characteristically for Wong, the film's major theme is spelt out quite explicitly late in the film in one of Chow's voice-overs: "Love is all a matter of timing," he says. "If I'd lived in another time or place, my story might have had a different ending." Hardly a profound philosophical statement to bear the considerable weight of the film, but there's still a recognisable, emotional truth to it, and it's clearly being applied in Chow's mind to his feelings about Jingwen, the character played by Faye Wong.

Faye Wong's performance is the airiest, lightest, and most appealing of the three female leads, where fullest expression is given to the romantic, visual poetry Wong Kar-Wai's fans most associate with him. The approach to her character is the most oblique and indirect of the three main women characters. Our very first view of her consists of repeated shots of her high heels clicking over the floor as she recites Japanese phrases to her missing Japanese lover. Perhaps the most emblematic shot of her is a low-angle one of her leaning out over the hotel roof, framed by a bluish, leaden sky; or there's the high-angle shot of her playing with a cigarette/cigarette smoke, which is then replayed with a similar (although low-angle) shot in her role as the android in Chow's sci-fi story.

It's all very moody and enticing; thematically, Jingwen represents a possible but lost romantic opportunity for Chow (his story "2047", as I've said, is a coded message to her), but this relationship is never as resonant as that with Maggie Cheung in **In the Mood for Love**. Still, Chow as a character is at his most appealing here, more like the self-abnegating Chow of the earlier film. This is clearest on the Christmas Eve he spends with Jingwen and in the way he both accepts missing out on the warmth he claims everyone needs on that one night and still gets satisfaction from just making her happy.

But of the three romances, Chow's relationship with Bai Ling (Zhang Ziyi), the dancehall hostess living in room 2046, takes up the central part of the film. It's initially played out as a "mature," cynical, and realistic affair, but one where true feelings start to emerge on Bai Ling's part (Chow, however, remains quite callous throughout). Zhang Ziyi gives a fine, wordless expression to the way her feelings are changing and growing, stressed in some of the set-ups Wong puts her in, in lengthy shots, centre-frame, facing the camera; there's one shot where the camera, very effectively, just holds on Bai Ling's face after Chow leaves the frame — and the scene — as she struggles until the inevitable tears (there's a lot of crying in this film) come. But at the same time it's true that this narrative does seem rather drawn out.

The scenes with Gong Li are chronologically the earliest but, apart from a brief extract at the start of the film, are structured to appear after the Bai Ling and Jiangwen stories. In them, Gong Li plays a gambler Chow meets during his time in Singapore, who cleverly

turns down Chow's romantic overtures, perhaps because she fears his interest is only because she bears the identical name of his lost love from **In the Mood for Love**. Frankly, the scenes with her are a little dull, but they are important thematically. This is not only in how her name Su Lizhen invokes the Maggie Cheung character and Chow's feelings of loss. Gong Li's Su Lizhen also acts as a reflection of Chow himself. In the voice-over he explicitly reads her gloved hand as an image of her past, sealed, closed-off, hidden, and tells her: "Maybe one day you'll escape your past. If you do, look for me." Yet it's clear that Chow is as much talking about himself.

2046 is Wong's first film in Cinemascope (*above*), and for all its narrative weaknesses it does offer a splendid achievement in its composition of wide-screen space. With so many scenes taking place between only two characters, it's fascinating — and visually beautiful — how so often they are positioned off-centre, or never completely fill the frame, with drapes, curtains, furnishings, walls all taking up so much of the visual space. Sometimes as much as half the screen is darkened or in shadow, a flat block of black playing off against the human figure in the other half. Repeated visual motifs (such as the close-ups of the side of Chow's face peeking into the room next door) or the sudden cuts from medium two-shots to extreme close-ups of objects (a door-handle; Bai Ling's hand playing with a watch) are all the more effective for being in Cinemascope.

There's a tendency for an individual shot within a scene to stand alone, to produce qualities of mood and emotion as a discrete visual unit, irrespective of the preceding and following shots that it's matched with; hence, the amount of eyeline mismatching in the film. Look, for example, at the low-angle shot of Jingwen on the hotel roof which is followed by first a shot of Chow looking screen-left (the direction of Jingwen in the preceding shot) but then by one of Chow looking screen-right. Or the scene where, prior to the first time they make love, Chow playfully chases Bai Ling with all the direction screen-left, but which is interrupted by one shot of Chow looking screen-right. Or, again, the scene in Chow's room when Chow and Bai Ling have their break-up argument and the individual shots of each of them have both facing screen-right. Not that there's a problem in understanding the dynamics of an individual scene (although the "geography" of Chow's room in that argument scene is a little obscure), but it is just one of the many strategies Wong calls on to assemble his intricate mosaic of visual effects.

The film's strength is in its intricate intertwining of story and image, of dialogue, voice-over and music. There is a whole series of different underlying structures — narrative, visual, aural — that hold the film together. Take, for example, the motif of Christmas Eve and how it appears in the course of the film, marked in the main by titles:

1. "24 December 1966" Early in the film, Chow meets up with Lulu (Carina Lau), an acquaintance from his time in Singapore. **2046**'s key concerns are established here: the hotel room 2046; the themes of memory and emotional loss (on the one hand, Lulu can't remember Chow — deliberately or not, he doesn't know; on the other, Lulu is in emotional mourning for her dead boyfriend); tears as the sign of a character's emotional distress — the sequence ends with Lulu crying, the first of many such scenes in the film.

2. "24 December 1967" Chow and Bai Ling's first date together, reinforcing the cool, playful, and rather callous character of the Chow of this film compared to that of **In the Mood for Love**. The sequence ends with a black-and-white scene of Chow and Bai Ling

in a taxi together (where Bai Ling carefully removes Chow's hand from her knee — her own real feelings of love for Chow are a later development), which is rhymed towards the end of the film with a similar flashback shot of Chow with Su Lizhen (Maggie Cheung).

3. The long section devoted to Chow's story "2047" tells of the Japanese narrator's return from 2046 and how the coldest part of the train is when they cross 1224 and 1225 (in other words, as Chow tells us in his own later voice-over, December 24 and 25). This looks forward to an idea Chow proposes in his voice-over during the Christmas Eve he spends with Jingwen, that everyone needs some warmth on that one night of the year; and the sequence itself enacts Chow's feelings for Jingwen. It's preceded by Chow's declarations first that "feelings can creep up on you unawares," then that "I once fell in love with someone, but I never knew if she loved me back," and it plays out, in transmuted science-fiction form, the film's repeated motifs: the whispered secret (the Jingwen android plays teasingly with the motif, the Lulu android tells the story), the question left unanswered by the loved one (here, the android never replies to the narrator's invitation to leave with him — echoing Su Lizhen/Gong Li's "answer" through her card game at the start of the film — with the reason left unclear), crying (the androids' delayed tears, the narrator's weeping).

4. "24 December 1968" Chow invites Jingwen to dinner. Here, Chow's character is at its most appealing in this film, as he misses out on his own chances for Christmas Eve "warmth" by taking up the opportunity to make Jingwen happy (encouraging her to phone her boyfriend in Japan) and getting his own happiness from that. Wong is showing in Chow how our actions and behaviour change and alter from one relationship to another; Chow's character is not fixed, but shifts in relation to the partner and the story. In the Jingwen story Chow really takes on the role that Bai Ling has in the story of their relationship — even if Chow is never as overtly emotional or weepy (he never cries himself, except when he allows his surrogate to do so in "2047").

5. "18 months later" When Bai Ling, after a long separation, contacts Chow for his help, she tells him that she looked for him the previous Christmas Eve because "I suddenly missed you so much." Which then flashes back to:

6. "24 December 1969" Chow spends this Christmas Eve in Singapore, looking in vain for Su Lizhen (Gong Li, *right*). The story of their relationship is then told in a long flashback. Again, common motifs reappear here: a hidden, secret past; a refusal to answer questions (Su Lizhen's high-low card game is a way not to answer); and weeping. Su Lizhen's crying is the most extreme that we've seen so far in the film, although she does regain control of herself, rubbing her fingers across her lips as a demonstration of that control — which is also, finally, an explanation for the smudged lipstick we saw in the shots of her at the beginning of the film. This weeping is then rhymed with the final scenes with Bai Ling (in the 1970 "present", which date, in keeping with the film's and Wong's romantic/nostalgic fascination with the sixties, is never explicitly named), which end with a complete breakdown into tears, from which, for once, we never see her bravely recover.

So, as much as the film suffers in comparison with **In the Mood for Love** (a comparison it clearly invites, not only in the way it multiplies the original's romantic narratives, but also — far more damagingly — multiplies and overuses motifs like that of the "whispered secrets"), Wong still manages, in the way that all the different elements of the film are intricately intertwined, to pull things together at the end, to end on a note of moody,

emotional force. (This intertwining is also rich enough for the film to stand up to repeated viewings.) "Why can't it be like before?" is Bai Ling's resonant, painful cry, evoking the film's major theme of lost memories; just as her and Su Lizhen's final collapse into tears are an illustration of the title that appears early on: "All memories are the traces of tears." By the end, **2046** has come closest to recapturing the mournful melancholy of **In the Mood for Love**. Here, the major theme is regret for a past that is lost and the way characters can be locked into those past memories. And the point of the journey to 2046 is to recapture those lost memories, even if: "No one knows if it is true because no one ever comes back."