

University of Vermont

ScholarWorks @ UVM

---

UVM Honors College Senior Theses

Undergraduate Theses

---

2018

## At Sea

Joshua D. Holz  
*University of Vermont*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.uvm.edu/hcoltheses>

---

### Recommended Citation

Holz, Joshua D., "At Sea" (2018). *UVM Honors College Senior Theses*. 244.  
<https://scholarworks.uvm.edu/hcoltheses/244>

This Honors College Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Undergraduate Theses at ScholarWorks @ UVM. It has been accepted for inclusion in UVM Honors College Senior Theses by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks @ UVM. For more information, please contact [donna.omalley@uvm.edu](mailto:donna.omalley@uvm.edu).

BOREDOM AS RADICAL MELODRAMA: WOMEN AND OBJECTS IN WONG KAR-  
WAI'S FILMOGRAPHY

Writing Supplement for Undergraduate Honors Thesis

By

Joshua Holz

University of Vermont

Supervisor:

Professor Hyon Joo Yoo, Department of Film and Television Studies

Committee Members:

Professor Maria Hummel, Department of English

and

Professor Sarah Nilsen, Department of Film and Television Studies

Spring 2018

To Lily and Nora

# **"AT SEA"**

written by  
JOSHUA HOLZ

[www.vimeo.com/266036253](http://www.vimeo.com/266036253)

## 1. WOMAN

In his essay titled “Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations of the Family Melodrama,” Thomas Elsaesser discusses the aesthetic form of 1940s and 50s melodrama films in the context of signification. Elsaesser argues that inherent to the melodramas of directors such as Douglas Sirk is a certain “myth-making function, insofar as their significance lies in the structure and articulation of the action, not in any psychologically motivated correspondence with individualized experience” (69). While these films are certainly psychological in their plot, their characters’ individual emotions are nearly insignificant. It is rather the melodrama film’s form itself, the way that it employs camera movement, overlaid music, and the gesture of its actors’ physiological movements, that truly articulates its emotion. Elsaesser continues his argument historically, looking at the musical forms of German *Bankellied* ballads:

Yet, what particularly marks the ballad of the *Bankellied*, i.e., narratives accompanied by music, is that the moral/moralistic pattern which furnishes the primary content [is overlaid with] ‘parodied’ or relativized by the heavily repetitive verse-form or the mechanical up-and-down rhythms [...] that has a distancing or ironic effect. (69)

In melodrama, this ironic effect puts the viewer in opposition to the morals espoused by the storyline. Music, then, invokes a certain parallelism: emphasizing something in the “experience” of the film that is in opposition to a moral lesson. But this ironic, moral crisscrossing is not an end into itself. Elsaesser argues this privileges the viewer to an inherently “open” position to judge the morality of a film. In the films of Sirk, for example, the plots are often configured so that the actions of their characters are ultimately morally ambiguous. The audience is in a position to judge the individual characters’ actions through multiple moral lenses, open to see an inherent, moral relativism.

This position of open judgment has implications for signification. It is the aesthetic form, and not the storyline, that truly dictates the tension and emotion in melodrama film. As such, the aesthetic quality of the music in these films plays a crucial part in this articulation. The things directly signified in Sirk's melodramas—the domestic American home, anguish of individual characters, dreams of a city—are not what are truly signified to the viewer. It is instead the sensory, aesthetic qualities of these films that tell the story, that indeed attempt to signify something. Speech, Elsaesser continues, “loses some of its semantic importance in favor of its material aspects as sound” (76). This emphasis on material, aesthetic qualities can be read in melodrama's visual landscape as well: it is “perhaps the most highly elaborated, complex mode of cinematic signification that the American cinema has ever produced” due to this emphasis on aesthetic composition (76).

Employing a wide-screen frame, full color film, and lavishly complex *mise en scène* and props, melodramas embrace a guttural, constituent aesthetic intensity from both their sound and visuals. The position of the viewer is receptive to this rapid, near infinite chain of significations of “baseline” sonic and visual qualities. We are less receptive to any physiological state of the actors—their actual emotions and reactions within the plot of the film—and more to the signification of the sound and visuals surrounding them. The moral ambiguity the viewer is privileged to see is not from the plot-oriented actions of the characters. Rather, it is this never-ending series of aesthetic, stylized signification that creates these morals to begin with.

Music shifts filmic portrayal toward an infinite signification, repetitive stylistic representations that are never fully signified. The suburban family doesn't represent the suburban family in Elsaesser's melodrama, but deeper moral issues. Focus on the material, aesthetic qualities of sound and *mise en scène* in these films carries this deeper representation (indeed

signification) through. This “open” viewpoint privileged to the audience ultimately re-positions the feminine subject.

The most direct analysis of Wong Kar-wai’s use of music in this context can be easily found in his acclaimed 2000 drama, *In The Mood for Love*. Maggie Cheung’s excessive number of *cheongsam* dresses, switched every single scene she is in to a different pattern, can be read as a symptom of the inability to signify the woman in the language the melodrama film. *In The Mood for Love* uses music, and Elsaesser’s described melodramatic filmic forms, excessively and masterfully, using recurring musical numbers throughout. These montage-like applications of melodrama use camera movement and filmic language much in the same way original melodramas do, using literal up-and-down camera movement, portrayals of filmic space, and visually distinct and colorful props. All of these considerations will be analyzed in more depth throughout Wong’s early filmography in the following sections.

Yet, reading Wong’s use of music as simply re-realizing earlier melodramas’ articulated forms, and the consequences of signification of the feminine subject, would be uninformed. While Wong himself has said that he’s heavily inspired by western cinema of this period, his use of music goes past simply re-realizing some specific melodramatic aesthetic. His early films establish a distinct filmic grammar, using this recognition of music to reconfigure signification of objects. In doing so, this grammar uses Elsaesser’s “radical misunderstanding” between characters common in melodramatic plots toward its own radical abandonment – a re-realization of the spectator’s position, toward a new filmic grammar entirely. This re-realization is achieved through two things: Wong’s cinematographic, visual portrayal of actual *objects*—props—in the *mise en scène* of his films, and displays of physiological *boredom* of his actors.

Elsaesser's analyzed melodramas do use music in a stylistic way, but is their stylistic specificity in any way consistent? In the context of analyzing Wong's films and the way they inform my own narrative short, *At Sea*, my answer is no. Elsaesser's original essay outlines much of the argument needed to see this. In a use of music that is only employed for its fundamental, fetishized, aesthetic qualities, any consistency is lost in an infinite chain of aesthetic signification. The original melodramas of Sirk and his contemporaries are clearly stylized, but never truly reach a consistent grammar. They're doomed to indecision by their own stylistic mission statement, pursuing infinite signification through aesthetic intensity, but never reaching anything signified. This is not to say Wong's films radically abandon language. Instead, Wong's filmography takes filmic melodrama further by reaching a more consistent language. He avoids excessive signification and successfully establishes a more signified, consistent filmic grammar.

Joan Copjec's *Read My Desire* clarifies this concept of infinite signification in a Lacanian psychoanalytic context. In chapter 7 of her book, Copjec relates the concept of the woman to signification most directly, relating femininity to the inherent excess of language:

The gap that necessitates interpretation, that prevents the signifier from signifying itself, is caused, as we've argued, by the absence of one signifier, a final signifier that would establish an end to the chain. [...] This signifier, if it existed, would be the signifier for woman. (179)

Inherent to the language of a society is a limit. This limit internal to language guarantees some unit of excess that is never within reach. Similar to the seemingly infinite chain of signifiers Elsaesser describes in Douglas Sirk's melodramas—excessive, lavish displays of props, sets, and music that never seem to end—psychoanalysis understands language itself as a set of signifiers, an infinite set of referents that will always call upon one more. Copjec writes that “it is in the fact



that a signifier is unable to signify itself but must always call on another in an infinite appeal to one signifier more, that language's internal is located" (175). This limit ensures that there will always be an excess, a final signifier out of reach. This signifier is the Woman.

This concept of infinite signification can be better understood through Copjec's critique of Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity. While Butler's *Gender Trouble*, Copjec argues, made unprecedented political progress for its time, it errs in conceptualizing gender as something that exists *a priori*, prior to language. Lacan's notorious *there is no sexual relation* statement can be broken down as such: the sexed subject is radically disjoined from signification. Butler's argument, Copjec argues, "makes no sense unless we state its hidden assumption that two have a tendency to one, to couple" (202). Butler's theory of performative gender roles assumes there is a complementary relation between the sexes prior to language. By doing so, Butler engages in a certain solecism, denying that sex itself lies in this inner limit of language. Copjec defines sex as an internal limit to language itself, not something existing prior to language that is then realized performatively: "we have no intention of denying that human sexuality is a product of signification, but we intend, rather, to refine this position by arguing that sex is produced by the *internal* limit, the failure of signification" itself (204; emphasis added). Sex resides at the limit of language. This guarantees there will always be a signifier out of reach: the sexed subject. Copjec relates this best in her discussion of the contradictory nature of sex:

When we speak of language's failure with respect to sex, we speak not of its falling short of a prediscursive object but of its falling into contradiction with itself. Sex coincides with this failure, this inevitable contradiction. (206)

In contrast to Butler's deconstructionist argument, sex itself is the impossibility of completed meaning. Within language, we always have further knowledge placed within the realm of

possibility: knowledge of this final signifier. But the sexed subject is the subject where no knowledge of them is the only possibility. As such, we are driven by this limit of sexuation, caught in an infinite chain of signification where we are driven to seek out knowledge of this subject, never arriving.

This leads to the infinite signification described by Elsaesser seen in the (filmic) language of Sirk's melodramas. Their seemingly infinite barrage of visual and musical aesthetics can be understood in a psychoanalytic context as a symptom of attempting to signify the sexed subject: pursuing knowledge of the Woman, when no knowledge of her is possible. Copjec clarifies signification in an aesthetic context in her analysis of Kant:

Within discourse there are no positive terms, only relations of difference. One term acquires meaning only through its difference from all the others—*ad infinitum*, since the final terms is never at hand. (205)

Language itself, for psychoanalysis, is formulated through difference. I understand the individual objects signified to me in a film's scene, for example, as how they are different from each other. The lavish *mise en scène* of early melodrama can be considered pursuits of the subject I can never know. The excessive number of objects in these scenes are all there to attempt to gain knowledge of the final signifier, placed in the scene in order to further progress a chain of differentiated signifiers. Yet, this final object can never be fully grasped. This pursuit only leads to excess, the furious *ad infinitum* barrage of visuals and sounds that Elsaesser describes. However, this infinite signification is not limited to visuals or music. Although psychoanalysis understands the final signifier as a "woman," Copjec argue that women in society are subject to a certain material overdetermination.

In her “The Sartorial Superego” chapter, Copjec discusses material excess in a less theoretical manner in the case study of the French philosopher Gaëtan de Clérambault. In a project best understood through the lens of French colonialism, Clérambault became famous for his undertaking of taking tens of thousands of photographs of Arabic Moroccan fabrics draping, covering, and malforming the human subjects under them. Copjec studies this as an example of how subjects can be victim to the material equivocations of an internal limit to language:

No fact exists outside a signifying chain and no fact is unequivocal. And since this is so, psychoanalysis reasons, the subject, affected by the facts of its life, is affected by meanings that it never lives. (66)

This state of being “affected” can be understood in a practical, material context. This infinite signification does not just lead to excessive aesthetic displays: rather, subjects within a society—particularly those identified as women—are victim to material overdetermination. Between 1914 and 1918 while recovering from a war wound in Morocco, Clérambault took over forty thousand photographs of this Arabic cloth. Copjec argues this serves as a good example of the revolution of the definition of type since the industrial revolution. She writes that, since the industrial revolution:

Man was also submitted to the trauma of the fact that this definition would not definitely, unambiguously enclose him [...] the traumatic collision of the concepts of man and machine robbed man of a little bit of his existence, [...] symbolized as the embodiment of the very impossibility of [his] complete identity. (91)

The lack of a complete identity within the social subject has material consequences. This concept can be understood in more practical terms with this case study: a loss of wholeness. Traumatic repetition was realized by Clérambault materially, an obscenely excessive number of

configurations. As a response to this traumatic collision, he was driven toward pursuing this excessive number of signified variations of a material – in his case, cloth.

But what about the human subjects under these forty thousand forms? These veiled figures are the overdetermined subject. There is no better example of overdetermination than these obscured human figures. The massive number of cloths can be understood as a modern notion of fashion that women, particularly, are subjected to. Copjec writes:

Woman, on the other hand, came at this same time to be subjected to a new, modern notion of fashion: the rapid and seasonal renewal of clothing before any functional wearing out. [The] image of the modern woman was defined and redefined several times over by the vicissitude of vestimentary codes. While the image of the man remained steady and stable, hers was constantly reshaped. (80)

This constant reshaping is a materially realized result of trauma. While both men and women in society might experience trauma from the split, women face the material consequences, a constant reshaping of style and material forms of clothing. If there is always a signifier out-of-reach in psychoanalysis, the pursuit of knowledge of this signifier leads to a traumatic repetition – infinite signification. But while Clérembault himself remained steady performing this repetition, it is the woman that lies under his fetishized cloth, victim of overdetermination. She is subject to a constant, material reshaping of fashion and aesthetics. Copjec's discussion of overdetermination clarifies melodrama's aesthetic signification. Infinite signification is not a theoretical concept: the material consequences have been visible since the industrial revolution, realized as an infinite reshaping.

## 2. BOREDOM

How does this psychoanalytic viewing of form relate to Wong Kar-wai's filmic style? Wong re-realizes a certain form of melodrama with dedication: mirroring the lavish, visually intense sets throughout his early films, and using music in a classic, montage-heavy style. However, he goes further than simply re-realizing specific spectacle. Rather, it is more productive to think of Sirk and his contemporaries' original melodramas as wholly *unspecific*. Though aesthetically intense, it is this very intensity that proves they are classic examples of psychoanalytic overdetermination: barraging us with an excessive number of signifiers, while never arriving at a final subject. This leads to inconsistency. While the *mise en scène* of these films, for example, might be visually interesting, they ultimately exist as a product of overdetermination. If there is a certain feeling of emptiness or inconsistency when watching mid-century melodramas, perhaps it is because their aesthetic identity is a product of a pursuit of something they'll never have knowledge of. What we see in these lavish sets, ultimately, is a gap: an inevitable internal limit to their language, producing (a very visually pleasing) excess with no end in sight.

Wong's early filmography—including *Days of Being Wild*, *Happy Together*, and *In The Mood for Love*—re-realize this excess, but with far more consistency. Although Wong's filmic language is no exception to psychoanalytic interpretations, these films treat their human subjects with more care, avoiding some of the material overdetermination Copjec describes. This consistency is achieved through one primary display – Wong's portrayal of his actors' physiological state of boredom. This display of (lack of) physiological movement in his films can be understood through Paul de Man's concept of the divided body.

Cathy Caruth's reading of Paul de Man's philosophical body in her *Unclaimed Experience* clarifies how the human body is inherently divided, part-by-part, within language. In her penultimate chapter, Caruth analyzes the poststructuralist study of how language affects referentiality. She cites de Man's argument that, in philosophy, phenomenal reference to the world is "the production of fiction; or otherwise put, that reference is radically different from physical law" (79) While mathematics can maintain a consistent set of references to an empirical world, philosophy's referentiality necessitates this production of a fiction. This invokes a performative dimension of discourse that ultimately dictates how the human body itself performs within language. In modern philosophy, the very possibility of referentiality—self-discourse—depends on implicit self-representation, that is itself represented as a human body. Caruth writes that when the body enters this philosophical discourse, it is ultimately "a moving human body: a body that is a series of articulated parts" (82). This "upright," divided, philosophical body is carnally realized, cut up into individually articulated parts. This body required for modern, poststructural philosophy can be understood as a divided puppet. Each one its gestures, and individual body parts making these motions, are divided and referentially distinct.

Within language, all empirical referentiality is lost in favor of a transformational system – indeed, a grammar:

A grammar conceived as a coded set of differences not based on any extra linguistic reality; what is at work here is the power of a grammar that incorporates referential differences into nonreferential, intralinguistic ones. (85)

De Man sees this non-referential body, one enveloped completely in a society's language instead of empirical reality, as inherently divided into individual body parts. This division constitutes "a system of nonpurposive parts, a kind of disarticulation" (91). Caruth continues that we can

consider “our limbs, hands, toes, breasts [...] in themselves, severed from the organic unity of the body [...] We must, in other words, disarticulate, mutilate the body” (91). When this body appears most beautifully in language, it is, paradoxically, because it has completely lost its ties to any empirical referentiality. In language, the body is mutilated through a reliance on a certain “purely formal” grammar.

Throughout his filmography, Wong Kar-wai re-realizes this grammar. His stylistic consistency re-appropriates the aesthetically lavish environments of mid-century melodramas, and in doing so, has the potential to re-assert an authorship that reconfigures this severed human body. Displays of physiological boredom attempt to re-introduce the figure of the author, rupturing conventional grammar.

Wong’s 1990 drama *Days of Being Wild* showcases his earliest attempts of juxtaposing conventional filmic grammar, the shot-reverse-shot convention, with boredom. In doing so, Wong challenges filmic treatment of timing, space, and the physiological movement of actors. One particular scene of the film highlights all three of these elements, when Maggie Cheung—playing Su, the protagonist Yuddy’s ex—is shown staring downwards for upwards of ten seconds and then pacing for another prolonged sequence. We can already see a tangible form of physiological boredom displayed in this film. Su’s physical gestures and lack of emotive response creates tension. The scene begins with Su walking down an alleyway, and then confronted by a policeman she was talking to previously. Before the cop talks, however, the camera engages in a distinctive sequence of movements. We first follow him as the only character in the center of the frame, as if he is about to deliver a soliloquy, before the camera moves to visually align him to the back of Su’s figure. This aligns the two characters into a more conventional shot-reverse-shot visual as we cut to a close-up of Su. In this drawn-out sequence

we can see the prototype of Wong's filmic grammar, carefully balancing conventional filmic techniques with intentional displays of boredom.

My use of the word "boredom" in this essay will refer to this style of performance that entails a lack of emotive response, reserved gestures, and neutral facial expression that is common throughout Wong's filmography. Su's non-emotive, inherently "bored" ennui in this scene entails a precise display of gesture that is common throughout Wong's later works, including *Happy Together* and *In the Mood for Love*.

At the heart of this negotiation is space itself. Surrounding the cop during this entire transition are the drab, grey tones of a rainy alleyway. This negotiation between the shot-reverse-shot convention, boredom, and drab, absent spaces can be applied to the scene at the start of the film between Yuddy and Su. Their faces are shown floating in space in a close-up shot, exchanging lines as they are supposedly lying in bed (00:06:40). During this dialogue we are barraged with an intricate combination of cuts between similar close-ups, lighting techniques (eventually showing Su's face nearly black), and further problematization of shot-reverse-shots (fig 1). It is significant we see the faces of Su and Yuddy as completely isolated, severed as with de Man's divided body. If these combinations of techniques can be understood as a language, it should be no surprise it leads to Wong's actors treated part-by-part, divided by the film's internal grammar.





Fig. 1

These techniques relate to melodrama form in their shifting between diegetic and overlaid music. Later in the film, there is an even more problematized shot-reverse-shot sequence as Yuddy stares at his aunt (00:57:18). Although this scene is a simple cut between shots of two faces, Wong's use of sound in this sequence makes it a far more bizarre experience. As we cut from Yuddy's to his aunt's face, the sound of a foghorn is overlaid, the camera zooms in, and then quickly cuts to the view of an empty, moving road. If this sequence is a prototype for similar grammar in Wong's later films, it is through this mixing of diegetic and overlaid sound. It is unclear if the foghorn we hear in this sequence is environmental, in Yuddy's mind, or is acting as a sort of soundtrack that only the viewer is privy to. This diegetic vagueness serves as a prototype for Wong's full application of melodrama in his later works, where he often shifts subtly from songs inserted diegetically within scenes, to the music becoming overlaid as a soundtrack. Central to this negotiation of diegetic space is the display of absent spaces: a cut to a visually empty highway, and dark, nearly black tones surrounding Yuddy and his aunt.

Wong's 1997 feature *Happy Together* continues this negotiation of diegetic music. The film marks Wong's first full realization of classical melodrama: montages of the actors' movements paired with recurring songs. The first instance of this occurs as the film's protagonist, Lai, stares into space after having a fight with his lover, Ho (00:20:20). The song in

this short sequence begins as highly echoed, sounding as if it's occurring diegetically within the space that Lai is standing in. Right after this sequence, there is a shot of him in the same position through a restaurant window, implying that someone is staring at him (in a rather malformed shot-reverse-shot), and that the music might be coming from inside this building, rather than non-diegetically. This experimentation with diegesis can be understood as problematization of traditional filmic conventions, similar to the shot-reverse-shot. In the film's next montage, the sequence of Ho and Lai tango dancing, Wong again cuts to a wide-open landscape (00:35:00). In both instances, wide shots of barren, absent spaces follow these melodramatic montages (fig 2).



Fig. 2

By problematizing the shot-reverse-shot convention, Wong opens the door to display physiological boredom. Imposing these absent spaces malforms a traditional filmic convention, allowing further nonconventional language. Although Wong acknowledges melodrama through his montages, he strays from conventional Hollywood storytelling by allowing his actors to be bored. Following both the montages described above, there are short sequences where Lai and Ho are shown simply doing nothing. In the first instance, after an intense musical sequence of the two characters sitting together in a car, Lai is shown loitering around the apartment and changing bed sheets. After the second montage, Lai is again loitering, now sitting in an empty street. During these short yet prolonged clips, little is shown: only the mundane, physiological movements of a human subject. As discussed above, Wong is certainly adhering to an internal

grammar, and his human actors are no exception to de Man's divided body. Though transforming it, Wong's actors are divided part-by-part by the filmic language they inhabit. These displays of outright *boredom*, however, are an acknowledgement of the language Wong is re-realizing. The montages show the puppet-like beauty his actors are able to realize, moving to music. But the actors' boredom following these sequences shows a de-realization of this puppeted movement. While the melodramatic movement of Wong's actors creates drama, their boredom forces a confrontation, forcing the audience to view physiological movement in a different way.

This confrontation is aided by these insertions of absent, empty spaces. Wong's general experimentation with space, the diegetic status of music, and shot-reverse-shot all show that film editing is inherently a grammar. The audience is forced to see the flexibility of Wong's film's internal language: that an eyeline match to an actor can be replaced by an empty landscape, that music can shift between diegesis, and so forth. Revealing this flexibility allows Wong to further stretch the grammar of melodrama film, staging confrontations with boredom.

Wong's 2000 feature *In the Mood for Love* realizes his melodramatic grammar in its most classical form, using musical montages throughout its story. The nature of these montages resembles Elsaesser's originally described melodramatic form, using up-and-down camera movements in a sonically conscious way that creates tension between two characters. Wong is juxtaposing music with visuals to create drama. *In the Mood for Love* pushes Wong's filmic grammar the furthest through its imposition of absent spaces. Space itself anchors its actors' physiological movements. The most well known montage using these stylistic elements occurs early in the film, overlaying Shigeru Umebayashi's classical instrumental composition with scenes of Maggie and Tony entering and exiting a market. In this sequence, two images of barren spaces act as an anchor point between the two characters' movements (fig 3).



Fig. 3

As Maggie exits the scene, the camera pans left to a completely black wall, and remains on this visual absence for several seconds (00:15:50). The frame then slowly pans to Tony entering the scene from the right, following him walking down the stairs. Finally, Tony walks up again and exits the scene, and the camera pans right to another blank wall. While *Happy Together* juxtaposes landscapes and its actors' movements in experimental ways, *In the Mood for Love* establishes a consistent grammar utilizing visually empty space. The drab, empty spaces in this montage act as a literal pivot point between Tony and Maggie's movement and suggest emotions regarding their relationship. The timing, visual absence, and camera movement all work to create tension between the two characters and emphasize their isolation from one another. Wong re-realizes original melodrama through imposing this absence. He creates the same tension of original melodramas with a far more consistent and sophisticated treatment of space.

The film's final montage of Angkor Wat shows Wong's full realization of this grammar. As the film ends, we are shown a montage of still, architectural shots of the city (01:31:00). Another classical musical score is overlaid as the shots become increasingly impressionistic, proceeding to simple, two-tone silhouettes of the ruins. This confrontation with space shows Wong's realization of his wholly original grammar: juxtaposing simplified, absent spaces with his well-known musical style. Wong is clearly not limited to original melodramas' lavish props and visual intensity. He is able to draw these same emotions from a grammar using space itself.

This increasingly consistent grammar, and flexibility using space, music, and human movement, leads to more intense displays of physiological boredom. Using these spaces allows the director to reconfigure the human body in film. As Wong's most intense use of melodrama, *In the Mood for Love* also contains the most intense instance of boredom in the director's filmography. This occurs when Maggie is trapped in Tony's bedroom, afraid that his landlord and neighbors will see that they are together and conclude they are cheating on their spouses. The film confronts us with Maggie's deadpan expression in a prolonged series of cuts of her stare, implying she is forced to wait in Tony's bedroom for an entire day (00:49:25). This scene is Wong's most sophisticated use of boredom because of the emotion it is able to convey from Maggie's lack of movement (fig 4).



**Fig. 4**

Immediately from viewing Maggie's expression, we are confronted with the tension of the two characters' situation: the fact they are afraid to be caught, the public's misunderstanding of their platonic relationship, and the physical agony of Maggie. In contrast to Wong's earlier works, however, Su's expression is not confined to a drab background. Rather, it is accompanied by an intricate mise en scène and Tony's own human figure. This illustrates Wong's portrayal of boredom and the way he draws tension from physiological state. The director has fully re-realized the lavish environments of original melodrama film, and is now playing by his own

rules. Rather than create a film's morals from its props alone, Wong has reconfigured these aesthetics, drawing new emotions from a lavish *mise en scène*. It is no longer the props themselves that are creating the emotions of this scene, but a more complex interaction between the set and Maggie's (lack of) physiological movement within this set. Ultimately, this scene serves as a foundation for analyzing the director's reconfiguration of signification.

### 3. OBJECT

*In the Mood for Love* also might be Wong's easiest film to view through a psychoanalytic lens. From Maggie Cheung's twenty-one *cheongsam* dresses to its lavish props and *mise en scène*, it would be easy to view Maggie's character as the subject of material overdetermination. Yet, the film's unique use of these absent spaces re-realizes its signification, using a different grammar than original melodrama.

Is Maggie a Woman, anyway? Although one could argue that her visual appearance as a woman in the film leads to material consequences, the feminine (sexed) subject is, by Lacan's definition, inherently nonexistent – residing outside of society and language. Although the film relishes in Su's excessively realized appearances, it radically re-realizes melodrama—and filmic grammar as a whole—through *equalizing* these appearances. Maggie is subject to excessive signification, but so are the spaces and objects surrounding her. *In The Mood for Love* treats space itself as a split subject.

It would be easy to read the scene of Maggie's boredom as lending her a certain agency, forcing the viewer toward some confrontation with her character during those few seconds of her furious silence. But I believe this scene contains a far more radical proclamation: that a film's spaces and objects can themselves be subjects of signification. The original melodrama directors,

and quite a few today, might be said to occupy the place of Clérembault, the pervert: avoiding the split this chain of signification necessitates. Wong, in contrast, splits the looking glass itself. We are not privileged to an open moral position to judge the film – the very space and rhythm that constitutes the viewing process are themselves subject to an aesthetic (over)determination. Wong’s filmic grammar levels the field of signification.

For Wong, objects are equal to his human subjects. Space, individual objects within a film’s *mise en scène*, and human actors are all equal units of meaning. In the first analyzed montage in *Happy Together*, it is significant that the camera pans and racks its focus to the lamp residing in the foreground of Tony (fig 5).



Fig. 5

This is one of the clearest displays of Wong’s treatments of objects throughout his filmography. There is no more obvious display of his equalizing of human subjects and objects than this lamp and Tony occupying equal space in the frame. In another scene of the film, Lai responds to Ho by talking to the same lamp (00:50:25) (fig 6). The film doesn’t cut to Ho’s face, as conventional editing might, but stays on Lai as he speaks to the object. In this problematized shot-reverse-shot, Ho’s human figure is made equal to an object: replaced by one.



Fig. 6

The ending Angkor Wat montage of *In the Mood for Love* can be viewed similarly: space is interchangeable with human subjects, subject to the same melodramatic montages Tony and Maggie were. Boredom itself is not Wong's radicalization of melodrama grammar. Spectacles of boredom rather show the director's ability to re-realize a film's grammar, reconfiguring the movement of bodies. Wong sees the props and space of a film as these same bodies, subjecting them to the same stylization and signification as his actors.

Maggie's agency is not from her boredom, but Wong's reconfiguration of signifiers that allows this physiological display. Though flexible, Wong's filmic grammar is extremely consistent. He reaches a language in his films that is steady enough to allow his experimentations and exchanges of empty spaces, formal problematization, and the movement of bodies. Wong does not rely on lavish *mise en scène* to communicate meaning, as in original melodrama, but instead intertwines aesthetic intensity within these elements. This grammar allows Wong to experiment: portraying his characters as truly bored, radicalizing traditional physiological movement. Maggie is not exclusively subject to material overdetermination – rather, her physiological presence is equalized to the objects that might have previously defined her.

–

This problematized filmic language informs my own short film, *At Sea*. My film explores the tension of not knowing whether someone in one's life is coming or going. Nora lets Lily stay



in her apartment, and cares for her deeply, but doesn't know if she'll leave. I apply the three main problematizations I analyze above—of the shot-reverse-shot, objects, and absent space—to convey this tension.

I obstruct the shot-reverse-shot convention throughout my story. In the second scene, Nora and Lily's conversations are introduced through reflections of their faces. Rather than match the speaker's voice to a direct shot of their face, I begin their conversation with this obstruction. Nora's split, doubled face adds tension and a ruptured quality to her dialogue. Objects also play a central role in conveying drama. When Lily leaves, temporarily, to visit the pier, Nora is left staring at her dirty dish (the bowl). Nora resents Lily leaving in the car, and having to act as her caretaker (washing her dishes). These plot elements and emotions are portrayed through a single interaction with this object. Finally, insertions of absent space communicate the absence of Lily. Toward the end of the film, the car is shown pulling away through the window, posing the possibility that Lily has permanently left. The cut to an absent, void-like space—the reflection of the window, showing only a sliver of the red lamp—conveys her absence visually. I see Nora and Lily as two people always at sea, young people in transition periods in their lives. I adapt the boredom I observe in Wong's protagonists to reveal my characters' own isolation and ennui. As in Wong's films, these obstructions form a grammar internal to the film. Nora and Lily's boredom—frequent pauses in dialogue, ennui in their movement, and sequences where they simply say nothing—occur within this grammar.

I view *At Sea* as a silent melodrama. In the early edits of my film, I had music overlay numerous scenes. I wanted to capture the emotions Wong Kar-wai intertwines intimately with music in his own narratives. But in my story, it wasn't working. Nothing matched the young, reserved passion Nora and Lily realize. I found using silence and ambient tracks instead—the

sound of driving from inside a car, the ambience of a pier, running water from a sink—better conveyed the emotions I wanted. In some ways, I think *At Sea* realizes a new language. It shows the ennui, boredom, and emotions I desired from Wong Kar-wai's films with a new silence.

## Works Cited

Elsaesser, Thomas. "Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on the Family Melodrama."

*Imitations of Life*, edited by Marcia Landry, Wayne State UP, 1991, pp. 68-91.

Copjec, Jean. *Read My Desire: Lacan Against the Historicists*. New York: Verso. 2015. Print.

Caruth, Cathy. "The Falling Body and the Impact of Reference." *Unclaimed Experience:*

*Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Baltimore: John Hopkins UP. 2016. 76-93. Print.

*Days of Being Wild*. Dir. Wong Kar-wai. Kino International. 1990.

*Happy Together*. Dir. Wong Kar-wai. Kino International. 1997.

*In the Mood for Love*. Dir. Wong Kar-wai. Kino International. 2001.