

The city as a space of
multiple, infinite,
relational possibilities
in chungking ...



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The city depicted in Wong Kar Wai's ' Chungking Express' is one that invites the viewers to ponder about the city as a setting for multiple, infinite and relational possibilities. Chungking Express is a film with two separate plots, comprised of chance encounters between characters, as a result of a shared setting, like the bar and Midnight Express. The characters are lonely and introspective, yet as a result of these encounters that are made possible by the city's random flux, they form unlikely emotional connections. It is through these connections and the relationships that they establish, that they are able to move on from their failed romances and discover a new sense of purpose and embrace change in their lives.

Wong uses cinematography to capture the multiple psychic possibilities of a single setting. In a slow motion shot, Officer 633 drinks his coffee, while Faye watches dreamily on one side. Meanwhile, the crowd outside Midnight Express passes by in fast motion. Here, a moment is captured between the two of them, even while the rest of the city passes by, oblivious to this moment. As a result, Wong is able to differentiate between the private and the public space of the city – the moment that is shared between Officer 633 brooding about his ex-girlfriend and Faye in a daydream is in slow motion, as it is a significant moment that captures both characters' state of mind. All this happens while the crowd moves in fast motion outside, indicating that moments like this one is glazed over, from a perspective of a passerby.

The appearances of characters from different plots suggest the possibility that all the characters could have met each other at certain points of their lives, given the shared spaces of a city. Officer 633, Faye and the Officer's 633's air stewardess girlfriend make fleeting appearances in the first plot.

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Yet, despite their appearances, what we know of them is very superficial, until the second plot begins, they are simply one of the ‘so many people everyday... you may never know anything about’ that Qiwu refers to in his voiceover at the start of the film. The idea of ‘proximity without reciprocity’ (Abbas 54) aptly captures the sense of the social spaces within Wong’s Hong Kong.

The use of handheld camera in the introductory action sequences in *Chungking Mansions* brings to attention the heterogeneity of the city, as well as idea of ‘proximity without reciprocity’. During the sequence, movement is blurred and so are the faces of the innumerable strangers on the street. Wong presents to the viewers a jostling Hong Kong that has barely enough room to walk without rubbing shoulders with everyone, yet their faces are simply shown as a blur. The possibilities of connections are infinite, yet it is only so few of these people with which we actually make a meaningful connection. The city is shared by people from all sorts of backgrounds, a cultural heterogeneity that is also emphasised by the different types of food sold at *Midnight Express*.

The use of selective focus is also utilised to visually demonstrate the idea of ‘proximity without reciprocity’. Through the innovative use of focus, Faye and Officer 633 is literally 0.01cm apart on-screen. Yet he does not really tell her what he likes, not willing to reveal his true feelings and emotions to an acquaintance, choosing instead to be comically melodramatic in telling her that he likes chef’s salad. Through this shot, Wong effectively illustrates the unspoken emotional distance between city dwellers, explaining why

emotional disconnect exists despite the close social proximity of people
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within a city. At this point, the viewers are forced to question the idea of the city as a space for infinite possibilities, since we are naturally socially inhibited with acquaintances, resulting in the lack of an emotional connection.

However, the resolution of both plots affirm the idea that indeed, the city is a place of infinite possibilities, that we are only constrained by time, as well as the ability to accept change.

The heterogeneity of the city has an effect of inducing change on the characters. Just as the city is in constant flux, the identities and personalities of the characters are affected by their interactions. Change is inevitable as the song suggests, “ It’s not everyday that’s gonna be the same way, there must be a change somehow.” Faye transforms herself from a dreamer to actually living out her dreams, by visiting California and becoming an air stewardess. She wears sunglasses and rests her head on her hands in a similar pose as that of the blonde, exuding an air of confidence. Officer 633, too has made a change in the past one year, having bought over Midnight Express to renovate it, while listening to Faye’s favourite song at the same volume. He has broken out of routine and gamely answers Faye that he will go “ Wherever [she] wants to take [him]”. Even the blonde agrees that change is inevitable over time, explaining that it may be impossible to truly understand a person since personality is constantly changing. Thus, infinite possibilities are truly possible in a city, where the personalities are in constant flux, only constrained by the limits of time.

Qiwu and the blonde, two vastly different characters, meet by chance at a bar and form an unlikely connection. From a superficial standpoint, the chemistry between the blonde and Qiwu is unlikely, as the blonde partakes in criminal activities and has literally spent the entire day running away from drug smugglers. In contrast with the idealistic Qiwu, who spent his month pining over his ex-girlfriend, she is portrayed as a worldweary and cynical character. Despite their seeming lack of chemistry, the blonde reciprocates Qiwu's kind act of washing her heels. She sends him a happy birthday message, which he serendipitously receives at the exact moment he turns 25. Because of this moment, he will remember her for all his life, suggesting that the connection is one that is deeply lasting and significant, one that truly transcends beyond simply random chance and coincidence. A freeze frame aptly captures Qiwu's joy and embodies his wish to keep this memory forever in his heart, never to expire. Hence, the resolution like that of the second plot, suggests that indeed multiple possibilities within a city are possible, that chance and coincidence can be transcended by initiating or reciprocating acts of kindness to provide moments of significance.

In conclusion, Chungking Express presents the city as a random flux, that does not necessarily give rise to meaningful emotional connections, yet there is no doubt that it is a space that has the potential for infinite possibilities. The resolution of both plots inspires hope, that ultimately, chance and coincidence can be transcended by change and time, as well as acts of mutual kindness.

(1139 words)

Works Cited

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