AUTHORSHIP IN TRANSNATIONAL CINEMA:
PEDRO ALMODOVAR, WONG KAR-WAI, AND THE STAR-AUTEUR

A Thesis
submitted to the Faculty of the
Graduate School of Arts and Sciences
of Georgetown University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree of
Master of Arts
in Communication, Culture and Technology

By

Vanna Sann, B.A.

Washington, D.C.
April 13, 2007
To all authors
I was born at a bad time for Spain, but a really good one for cinema.

PEDRO ALMODOVAR
CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ..............................................................................................v

ABSTRACT.................................................................................................................vi

INTRODUCTION: AUTHORSHIP AND ITS DISCONTENTS .................................1

CHAPTER I: LITERATURE REVIEW, BIOGRAPHICAL........................................14

CHAPTER II: NARRATIVES OF EXILE, NARRATIVES OF INTIMACY..........31

CHAPTER III: LA POLITIQUES DE STAR-AUTEURS ..................................49

CHAPTER IV: SITES OF CRITICAL AUTEURISM...........................................63

CONCLUSION: NEW AUTEURISMS ...............................................................79

WORKS CITED.......................................................................................................85
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Fellow colloquium members Emily M. Anderson, Barbara Blondet-Arca, and Donald Jones have been invaluable sources of support. I’d also like to thank Georgetown University’s program in Communication, Culture & Technology, as well as faculty and peers in the graduate departments of English and Philosophy.

This project could not have been completed without the engagement of my mentors at Georgetown, Dr. Jeffrey Peck and Dr. Matthew Tinkcom. Thank you for giving so generously of your time, wisdom, and friendship.
ABSTRACT

Built into the schema of commercially successful film today is a demand that directors perform as stars. This thesis explores the work of two filmmakers widely held as vanguards of contemporary global cinema and coveted as pop cultural icons: Pedro Almodovar (Spain) and Wong Kar-wai (Hong Kong). Looking at key sequences from Almodovar's *All About My Mother* (1999), *Talk to Her* (2002), and *Bad Education* (2004), I compare the authorial logic of Pedro Almodovar’s work with that of Wong Kar wai’s using the films *Happy Together* (1997), *In the Mood for Love* (2002), and *2046* (2004).
INTRODUCTION
CINEMATIC AUTHORSHIP AND ITS DISCONTENTS

Built into the schema of commercially successful film today is a demand that directors perform as stars. This thesis explores the work of two filmmakers widely held as vanguards of contemporary global cinema and coveted as pop cultural icons: Pedro Almodovar (Spain) and Wong Kar-wai (Hong Kong). Looking at key sequences from Almodovar's *All About My Mother* (1999), *Talk to Her* (2002), and *Bad Education* (2004), I compare the formal and historical dimensions of Almodovar’s work with that of Wong’s using the films *Happy Together* (1997), *In the Mood for Love* (2002), and *2046* (2004). Given the levels of “creative control” these directors enjoy and the value of their proper names in transnational media markets, this thesis uses their work to get at questions of “auteurism”, or authorship, in contemporary film practice. What distinguishes the auteurism of Pedro Almodovar and Wong Kar-wai? What claims about authorship do the directors make? What adjustments to traditional auteur theory do we need to make to account for the popular appeal of their cinema?

While auteurist studies, like mine, may sound retrograde after decades of important poststructuralist critique in the arts and humanities, my purpose in this thesis is not to simply refute poststructuralism’s claims nor to naively defend outmoded and ideologically suspect notions of authorship. Rather, I seek to historicize the productions of Wong Kar-wai and Pedro Almodovar in an effort to better understand
what the later works of these directors have to yield about the demands we make on cinematic authors today and how an “auteur”, made to play the role of an international star, goes about addressing those stresses and strains. As such, this thesis asks: Why is there such a marked emphasis in the popular and scholarly press on Almodovar’s and Wong’s standing as “auteurs” and is there a way to see this new “star-auteurism”, as I term it, as a tool for social critique? What do the figures of Almodovar and Wong offer conceptually about the role of star directors in our global film culture and can a resurrection of the critical baggage that attends prior versions of “auteur theory” be avoided? Further, why does so much of the literature on their work focus on the distinct aesthetic styles of Almodovar’s and Wong’s films and what kind of critical readings can we gather from said uses of style? Lastly, and more generally, how can we productively reconcile the function of the star director in our time with the “death of the author” posited by poststructuralism given recent historical shifts in cinematic markets and technologies?

Given their iconic position in the world of international film, i.e., the wide circulation of the films and their strong critical appeal, my claims about the work of Wong Kar-wai and Pedro Almodovar in this project, no doubt, find truck with some aspects of old-fashioned “auteur theory”, an idea championed in America most famously by Andrew Sarris in his essay “Notes on Auteur Theory”. According to Sarris, to be classified as an "auteur" a director must showcase, at a minimum, technical competence, personal style in terms of how the movie looks and feels, and
perhaps the most vexing of criteria, interior meaning or “depth”. It must be said that in
the post-studio moment, auteur theory, as Sarris articulated it, had its strategic
valences. Auteur theory asserted that certain films and directors had critical value and,
consequently, the notion of artistic genius in cinema was used by critics to recuperate
directors who had worked for Hollywood at a time when the industry’s outputs were
considered intellectually debased and genre films previously judged as too commercial
to be critical\(^1\). As the film critic Clive James succinctly puts it, “the essence of the
auteur theory was that the director, the controlling hand, shaped the movie with his
artistic personality even if it is made within a commercial system as businesslike as
Hollywood’s”\(^2\). In addition to calling needed attention to the work of neglected
Hollywood directors and others working in mainstream or avant-garde film production
America, auteur theory also provided critical arsenal for the development of film
studies and led to its establishment as an academic discipline\(^3\).

Following Sarris’ pronouncement of the auteur theory for American followers
of cinema came formidable critiques of his ideas, most notably from feminists
influenced by Left critique and especially by the tenets of poststructuralist thought,
pointing to auteur theory’s complicity in perpetuating social inequities manifest in such
ways as gendered divisions of labor in film practice and the implicit hierarchies of

\(^{1}\) Andrew Sarris, “Notes on the Auteur Theory in 1962”, in Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory
515-518.

(accessed 2 February 2007).

\(^{3}\) See for examples: Robert Stam and Toby Miller, eds., Film and Theory: An Anthology (Malden, MA:
Blackwell, 2000).
racial power in privileged modes of reading film texts. Auteur theory, its critics claimed, justified the existence of deeply troubling institutional forms of knowledge and power by reinforcing an image of the singular “author” as a kind of genius more responsible for the quality of the film than any of his colleagues in production. Pauline Kael, one notable example, points out that in privileging the role of the director within film analysis that the work of screenwriters and producers (not to mention the production crew and actors) are neglected at great cost. As support, Kael calls attention to the role that the co-writers and producer of Orson Welles’ classic *Citizen Kane* (1941) had in organizing this much-canonized film, and suggested that an emphasis on the film’s director plainly ignores the complex industrial realities of film production⁴. Later on, important work in cultural studies made alarmingly clear the extent to which Sarris-style auteur theory relied on a specific image of the auteur as a genius force coded as male, white, heterosexual, and, again, “deep”. Accordingly, this hegemonic image of the author was used by institutional interests to keep “others” (women, racial minorities, unlearned populations) out of the pictures⁵.

As these critiques make clear, what auteur theory neglected most significantly by insisting on the central role of the director was attention to the *circumstances of production* facing directors working with or against the Hollywood system in the postwar period. Though Sarris’ auteur theory had its critical advantages, filmmaking,

---

as an economic and cultural practice, is a decidedly group venture involving the labors of many different kinds of subjects and different forms of significations. Thankfully, recent critical literature about auteurism and film authorship in our historical moment attempt to marry an idea about the director’s role, as inspired by Sarris, with attention to the work of other production staffers, marketing interests, and legal entities, among others. This thesis has been very much influenced, in particular, by two recent anthologies that set out to explore the controversial category of the “auteur” as it is invoked by the contemporary film industries and in popular discourse. The first is a collection of essays entitled *Film and Authorship* edited by Virginia Wright Wexman which, through its essays, puts film authorship in conversation with juridical, nationalist, and industrial discourses; the other is the similarly titled collection *Authorship and Film* which considers the director’s place alongside that of screenwriters, production artists, and viewers and it is edited by Janet Staiger and David Gerstner. In addition to John Caughie’s eminent anthology *Theories of Authorship*, I have relied heavily on the critical reflections offered by various essays in the above collections to frame my thoughts on auteurism today as we glimpse it through the work of Pedro Almodovar and Wong Kar-wai.\(^6\)

Along with the work of directors, recognizable actors and their accompanying “star texts” have become an important part of semiotic film analyses over the past three

decades. Through various texts in public circulation that produce and reproduce an image of the star (pin-ups, magazine profiles, interviews), Richard Dyer explores how the Hollywood star system made the actor-cum-celebrity into a commodity for consumption through identifiable and particular characteristics. As Dyer writes, “appearances are another kind of reality” and can reveal much about the way the film industry dissimulates social reality and offers an image of the “extraordinary” self to “ordinary” audiences vis a vis the star persona. In his work, Dyer argues that the star texts of Marilyn Monroe show that she was identified through her sexuality at a time when female sexuality made traditional society nervous and excited; Paul Robeson was identified through distinctly racial characteristics but no discussion was had at the time about race relations in America; and Judy Garland, perhaps more complexly, was popularized through her image in films as the small-town girl as well as through her reputation as a performer in gay nightclubs. Dyer’s work inaugurated research in star studies and, very importantly, makes us aware of the different levels of intertextuality involved in the reception of the film commodity. Not only is the film a commodity, he argues, but so too is the star who stands in as a representation of life and subjectivity under capitalism. Extending Dyer, I would say that the star is both singular and multiple, an individual and a set of images which stand, often, in contradiction to one another before an audience that struggles to make sense of the compounded set of images and texts.  

---

While Dyer’s work provocatively reveals how the star personas, in some ways, revolted against the lack of control they felt they had, his research focuses on the machinations of Hollywood in a specific historical era. We are now past that era. As such, the critical purchase of his work for studies of Almodovar’s and Wong’s films would need to consider how the international film industry, and global audiences, make their own historically specific kind of demands on the stars of their films as well as, I argue, on the directors who are made to perform as stars. For example, Dyer's argument about the star's ability to mediate the distance between the "ordinary" and the "extraordinary" bears consideration in relation to the new brand of global stars who seem to signal a new moment in late capitalism as well as the media industries' new awareness of global capital and value. What makes Wong and Almodovar so appealing as stars or as star-auteurs? Following Timothy Corrigan’s methodological work on the commerce of auteurism, this thesis turns to the various star-texts in circulation that impact Almodovar’s and Wong’s reception as star-auteurs (such as interviews and press appearances) and considers how the public persona of the filmmakers effect readings of the films that may or may not be intentioned by the star-auteur. How do Almodovar and Wong revolt against the strictures they experience as star-auteurs?

According to traditional auteur theory, meaning precedes reception of the film and, in a sense, is just waiting to be discovered by the audience. Under this view, any

---

film by Woody Allen, for example, would generate the same sort of meanings just by virtue of being made by Woody Allen, seemingly regardless of the specific elements of the actual film text and its historical situation. In the words of Timothy Corrigan,

> to view a film as the product of an auteur means to read or to respond to it as an expressive organization that precedes and supercedes the historical fragmentations and subjective distortions that can take over the receptions of even the most classically-coded movie. ¹⁰

Corrigan, however, offers a different model and one that I use as a starting point for my own theoretical reflections. Bearing in mind Dyer’s work on stardom, Corrigan offers the category of the “auteur-star”. “Despite the general consistency of the tradition of the textual auteur”, Corrigan asserts,

> more recent versions of auteurist positions have deviated from its textual center. In line with the marketing transformation of the auteur of the international art cinema into the cult of personality that defined the film artist of the seventies, auteurs have increasingly situated along an extra textual path, in which their commercial status as auteur if their chief function as auteur: the auteur-star is meaningful primarily as a promotion or recovery of a movie or group of movies, frequently regardless of the filmic text itself… in today’s commerce, we want to know what our authors and auteurs look like or how they act: it is the text which may now be dead. ¹¹

Perhaps, but I for one am not totally convinced. While I find much of Corrigan’s work impressive, I’m left wondering if he pushes the notion of the death of the text too far and if he doesn’t push the notion of the “auteur-as-star” quite far enough. Film studies, in my view, can benefit from serious inquiry into the ways that today’s popular cinema directors position their personalities alongside, or within, the film text in much the same way that “star-texts” compound meanings in films around the figure of the star actor. This will be termed “star-auteur” theory.

The discreditation of auteur theory during the 1970's and 1980's, in my view,

---

¹⁰ Corrigan, 96.
¹¹ Corrigan, 97.
was not due entirely to an excessive kind of arrogance or myopia on the part of the early auteur-theorists like Sarris and those associated with the French New Wave. Rather, my feeling is that auteur theory was never meant to be a stand-alone kind of theory. The author does not stand alone, so neither should auteurist theory. If we take authorship to mean something about who controls the production of signs and meanings, then it needs to be theorized alongside questions of history, politics, culture, the market, and other social realities that create a world into which a film, a book, a painting, an idea can be born and sustain itself. The idea I have just articulated now, in no small way, takes its cues from the claims of poststructuralist critique.

Since the late 1960’s, poststructuralist thinkers in literary studies and the humanities have raised important questions about the study of cultural and historical texts and of how readers (and viewers) are made to engage with them. Landmark work by Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, and others can only be referenced briefly here as the implications of their research on semiotics and systems of meaning will be assumed. It is the “death of the author” posited by poststructuralist thought which is of most interest to this project as it appears to contradict the author’s symbolic value in current cultural markets. Roland Barthes notes famously that to give a text an “author” and assign a single, corresponding

---

interpretation is tantamount to imposing a limit on that text. Barthes goes on further to suggest that the final authorial marks on a text are left by readers, a prescient remark which I take up later.13

This project, then, attempts to work with two contentious positions that plainly appear to dispute one another: auteurism, which sees the director as the center creative force of the production, and poststructuralism, which posits the “death of the author”. Instead of opposing each to the other, I explore what explanations these views can offer to the study of cultural texts that the other approach might foreclose. How do we reconcile the “death of the author” that poststructuralists seem to position or call for against the thriving commerce of auteurism? Why does such a commerce thrive and what does the figure of the “star-auteur” offer the industry? I want to be clear again that this is not an attempt to resurrect auteur theory in the name of singular authorship, intentionality, or any other form of essentialism that would suggest a simple return to auteur theory or to a mythical “pre-post-structuralist” moment. As such, I would argue that my view of the author’s position within the text does not attempt to exalt the author nor to exculpate either directors from the shortcomings of their cinemas. Rather, mine is an idea about film authorship that wants to consider the historical situation that directors encounter, the industrial and technological tools with which they operate, along with their responses to those conditions, that is, their films/texts.

So what does authorship mean in the age of digital technology for cinematic

---

craftsmen like Pedro Almodovar and Wong Kar-wai? And what might global cinema’s currently most noted filmmakers have to say about the relationship between their cinema and the world into which it is born? As I stated previously, this thesis argues that built into the notion of auteurism today is a demand that directors must perform as stars. Whether this is a commercial strategy or if we might be able to read something more critical going on with the ways that Wong Kar-wai and Pedro Almodovar play with notions of singular authorship and with the commerce of auteurism will be a guiding concern of this project. Before I proceed, I want to make a note on methodology. The chapters of this project engage with the film texts as well as with extra-cinematic textual material that inform the persona and works of Wong and Almodovar (public appearances, critical literature in the popular press, interviews, the infotainment provided by DVD special features) in an effort to better understand their value as “star-auteurs” of contemporary global art cinema. While my selection of extra-cinematic materials is admittedly very limited, I have focused my energies on those texts which seem to offer most on the question of authorship in cinema today.

The first chapter presents a brief review of select critical literature on the question of auteurism as we encounter it nearly half a century after Sarris’ essay. It begins to sketch the space and evolution of international art cinema and considers theoretical approaches for how cinematic style can be read as a political or critical tool. I submit in this chapter the reasons for my nomination of Pedro Almodovar and Wong Kar-wai as global star-auteurs, while touching briefly on other filmmakers, of
contemporary and prior moments, who could productively be thought through using this category. I then move to provide biographical and career information about Pedro Almodovar and Wong Kar-wai that I find relevant to the questions with which their cinemas seemed to be concerned. In sum, this chapter cites the work of scholars offering productive strategies of film analysis of which my thesis makes later use.

The second chapter looks at *Happy Together* and *All About My Mother*, arguing that both films, as road flicks, can be read as allegories of transnational cinema. Here, the historical situation surrounding the production of *Happy Together* in 1997 is given special attention and I discuss how narratives of exile in both films emerge simultaneously as narratives about new forms of intimacy and social units under globalization. Following Dyer, I emphasize the role of “stars” in *All About My Mother* and *Happy Together* as their public personas seem to clash with their roles in these films. Further, I explore the possibilities for political content in these films by addressing how Wong and Almodovar, as astute students of art cinema, make use of similar star iconographies and musical themes.

The third chapter further explores the question of political content in cinematic style through a discussion of the films *In the Mood for Love* and *Talk to Her*. Insofar as their narratives make use of secrets and confessions, I examine how style and music in these films may be read as a strategy for conveying story or historical information by means other than traditional narrative. In this chapter, I begin to extend my analysis of star texts beyond the actors and into the directors themselves through past interviews
conducted with Almodovar and Wong. This chapter argues that by inhabiting the category of “star-auteur”, Almodovar and Wong are licensed as filmmakers to do precisely what commercially successful directors are often warned against doing: make political statements.

The fourth and final chapter turns to Bad Education and 2046 to consider how Almodovar and Wong issue critiques of traditional auteurism at the moment that their star-auteurism seems to be cemented globally. As genre-busters, both these films offer insight into how Almodovar and Wong negotiate the privileges and demands of their global star-auteur status and how they conceive of their work now given their acclaim. Further, I submit that the metanarrative reversals of text and authorship, handled deftly by Wong, Almodovar, and their production staff in these films, hints at the authorial logic underpinning the work of star-auteurs today: that the author, or “auteur”, is as much a production as s/he is a producer of texts.
Examining Almodovar and Wong as directors operating as star-auteurs under a late-capitalist or postmodernist mode bears important critical value because their distinct cinematic styles serve as a "signature" of their "brand" in a globalized film market. In popular culture, as John Frow writes, “the brand is something like a set of meanings and values attached to a standardized product and generating desire--perhaps a historically quite new kind of desire, extending the love of luxury objects to the world of serially produced goods”¹⁴. In a similar way, I would argue that their biographies give them historical and political specificity in a rapidly homogenizing world, and can lead to productive critiques of globalization’s consequences for the idea of the individual. Thus the signature or brand distinguishes Almodovar’s and Wong’s work from that of other filmmakers and elevates him into the strata of auteur from which vantage point they may be able to make use of their enunciatory power.

Elizabeth Wright explains the relationship of Wong’s aesthetic signature to his ability to exploit the auteur label:

Wong’s avant-garde filmic aesthetic is composed of elliptical storytelling through the use of deeply drenched tones, slow motion, jump cuts and fragmented images. Although the notion of auteur is not entirely customary in Hong Kong where films are often shot quickly and marketed via their accessibility as popular entertainment, Wong’s status as auteur marks his position within Hong Kong cinema’s industrial environment and signifies his complete creative freedom

and control of every facet of his films’ production.\textsuperscript{15}

By highlighting the trademark style and signatures of Wong and Almodovar, I aim to highlight the historical adaptability of auteurism in the face of "changes in industrial desires, technological opportunities, and marketing strategies". Indeed, paradoxically, though auteur theory itself has waned in popularity among scholars and critics, the marketing of film commodities by the film industry as specific "brand-name" visions whose contextual meanings are already determined appears to be more profitable than ever, even when that brand appears almost incomprehensible or hard to put accurately into words\textsuperscript{16}. As Wong’s gifted cinematographer, Christopher Doyle once remarked

\begin{quote}
I don’t know what to call our ‘trademark’ shots in English …. They’re not your conventional ‘establishing shots’ because they’re about atmosphere and metaphor, not space. The only thing they ‘establish’ is a mood or a totally subjective point of view. They are clues to an ambient world we want to suggest but not explain.\textsuperscript{17}
\end{quote}

It is often difficult for Wong to linger for very long on a possibly crucial detail in the narrative, and at other moments his camera's luxuriates on the seemingly inconsequential, the worthless and banal. However, it would be misguided to use intentionality, even of style, as the only proper measure for assessing Wong or Almodovar’s cinema. A Wong Kar-wai film is built on ellipses and partial information, evidencing a director who struggles with knowing how or where to guide

\begingroup
\footnotesize
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{15} Elizabeth Wright, “Wong Kar-wai”, \textit{Senses of Cinema} [online]; available from http://www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/directors/02/wong.html; Internet; accessed 14 January 2007.
\item \textsuperscript{17} Marc Siegel, "The Intimate Spaces of Wong Kar-wai," in \textit{At Full Speed: Hong Kong Cinema in a Borderless World}, ed. Esther C. M. Yau (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001) 284.
\end{itemize}
\endgroup
his productions. As but small examples of the problem of intentionality plaguing auteur-inspired film studies, Wong envisions and films many different scenarios for the ending of his movies which perhaps results in the unfinished feel of many of his works. Similarly, projects started by Almodovar are not usually completed according to schedule, and intentions the director may have had for one project necessarily bleed into another film.

Such moments of excessive beauty or incomprehensible spectacle, both in narrative and mise-en-scene as has become a trademark for both Wong and Almodovar, are taken in this thesis to indicate something more than sheer pleasure. The directors’ deft, if challenging, cinematic styles are often praised by the critical press and these moments of “camp” that seem to pervade the film texts of Wong and Almodovar are understood by this author as aspects of the film through which another form is given to social critique. In his book *Working Like a Homosexual: Camp, Capital, and Cinema*, Matthew Tinkcom argues that the critical energies that reside in moments of film spectacle - where the chain of narrative logic, causation, is suspended in favor of forms of stylistic excess - can be considered part of a camp philosophy that takes to task the wild fluctuations of value. Along with Marxism, argues Tinkcom, camp can be seen as an intellectual response to the demands of modernity and to the often contradictory life conditions for subjects of capital. Tinkcom is quick to underscore the historical specificity of the project of his book, rooting the camp aesthetics of the films under consideration in the predominantly white gay male
subculture of post-WWII metropolitan America\textsuperscript{18}.

The critical sensibilities of camp aesthetics which came together in this period was thus a response by some members of that community to the various ways in which forms of desire, in this case queer male desire, was not granted forms of viable articulation for itself. Tinkcom writes, “we can understand camp as a tendency, indeed an insistence on, continually examining the contradictions that capital gives rise to on a daily basis, specifically through the ruptures and fluctuations of monetary and cultural value”\textsuperscript{19}. While his study is grounded in a specific historical epoch and nationally-bound community, Tinkcom suggests that a longer view of camp’s critical energies would engage with other forms of camp critique at other historical moments and national stages, and how they deal with fluctuations of value.

To consider the director's function in the production of the film's meaning through style and production is thus not an attempt to rescue "auteur theory" but, following Colin MacCabe's essay "The Revenge of the Author", an attempt to see the author's function as "a contradictory movement within a collectivity rather than a homogeneous, autonomous, and totalizing subject". This view of the director's place is more tentative and provisional than that of prior auteurism and is open to readings, such as my own, which stake their claims in historical and political contingencies that might impact the reading of a text for particular spectators. Such is clear in MacCabe's view of the technological turn from Renaissance to Romantic literature and the


\textsuperscript{19} Tinkcom, 5.
changes wrought on its attendant modes of production and consumption. The solitary figure of John Milton, whose writings, according to MacCabe, sought to address readers as though they were "certainly not an audience actively engaged in the text" epitomized this prior view of authorship. Technological change, according to MacCabe, redefines the figure of the author. In the 19th century, he argues, this change was the development of a literate population due to technological changes in printing and textual production. MacCabe writes further:

As the capitalist economy responded to this new market with the production of those mass circulation newspapers that herald the beginning of our recognizably modern culture, we entered a new historical epoch of communication in which any author's claim to address his or her national audience became hopelessly problematic. 20

A similar phenomenon is occurring in our historical moment with the shift from traditional modes of cinematic production to the new digital mode of production and reproduction. The final cinematic product is not written by the auteur or the director but by the audiences who consume and make use of the film texts in their own way, a subject about which I will have more to say later. Following MacCabe, this thesis sets out to account for the technological changes that make ideas of stardom and auteurism so important to film viewers today and to consider how digital technologies changes the political and cultural landscape of film and film studies.

While an idea of the “art house” film can conjure up associations with aspects high-culture and the avant-garde in our moment, its development into a category of cinematic production and consumption of global proportions is a uniquely post-WWII

phenomenon. "Art house" cinema is, of course, a difficult one to define. In *Sure Seaters: The Emergence of Art House Cinema*, Barbara Wilinsky leaves the definition purposely vague to show how cultural, industrial, and economic factors converged in the 1940's and 50's to produce a kind of cinema that would work with and against Hollywood, seeking audiences that longed to dissociate themselves among newly arranged social hierarchies of taste. Thus, art films of the 1960's reinforced notions about the distinction between the Hollywood commodity (industry, collective creations, entertainment) and that of European productions (freedom from commerce, creative genius, art).21

As Virginia Wexman points out, international cinema is a space that has historically privileged directorial autonomy but stands "increasingly plagued by its tangled relationship to nationalist agendas".22 While directors like India's Satyajit Ray have benefited from national subsidies aimed at promoting patriotism at home and favorable images of the nation abroad, few auteurs, including Ray, can claim to have unproblematic relationships to their home cultures—and Wong and Almodovar are no exceptions. It also seems productive to use the two of the two filmmakers to further problematize the relationship between nationalism and the author function in our historical moment.

According to David Bordwell, international art cinema, a category in which

---

Wong and Almodovar's films can analytically be clustered, are marked by a broad schemata which he terms "art cinema narration", but sounds more like narrative by other means, namely, narrative through style. In "Authorship and Narration", Bordwell argues that overt narrational commentary evidences its self-consciousness and "creates both a coherent fabula world and an intermittently present but highly noticeable external authority through which we gain access to it". Bordwell references the opening credits of Ingmar Bergman’s *Persona* and Michelangelo Antonioni’s *Close-Up* which "teases us with the fragmentary, indecipherable images that announce the power of the author to control what we know". Bordwell claims that "the consistency of an authorial signature across an oeuvre constitutes an economically exploitable trademark" which I understand to be the commodification of the authorial voice. One such signature style that Bordwell identifies, which will be productive for an analysis of Wong and Almodovar, is the "baroque narrator" in which the author stresses the spectacular concatenation of music and mise-en-scene.23

Like traditional auteur theory, the “star-auteur” nomination that I offer has many strategic valences for the evaluation of postmodernist cultural texts. First, it allows for the recuperation of films (as kinds of labor) and directors (as subjects) as materials to be reflected upon historically, an intellectual response foreclosed by the various critics of postmodern cultural productions. It is considered too superficial, all artifice with no substance and the circumstances of production are rarely taken into

account. Auteurism here is not only a way for talking about how films are made, but of what people do with the films after they are made. Following poststructuralism, star-auteurism hints at an awareness shared by the “author” and the “reader” that the text never fully belongs to one or the other; that author and reader are mutually dependent upon one another. In historicizing star-auteurism as a function of digital technology and celebrity culture, particularly in the new ways that people are enabled by digital technologies to work on cultural text after the “author” has completed his/her work, I want to suggest a dialectical relationship between technology and history, between ideas and the material world.

I also submit that for both directors style emerges as the centerpiece of their cinematic enterprise, cited over and again by those who both enjoy and abhor their work. Putting aside the question of whether their stylistic appeal makes these “good” or “bad” films, this project wants to understand how questions of style in contemporary cinema might allow us critical access to some of the most pressing political questions of our time, questions such as: the value of authenticity in an industrially and culturally globalized world; the impact of new and old media forms on identity; the politicization of desire and intimacy across space and time; and the kinds and levels of discourse which authorize and maintain modes of living and being.

Combining a cautious awareness of the director’s place in the economic activity of filmmaking and the star-text as a symbolically powerful medium, I believe that the star-auteur nomination can be applied to other directors who, in their own time, exhibit
a trepid awareness of the star’s public image and his/her lack of control over that persona. R.W. Fassbinder and Jean-Luc Godard are two iconic examples of directors deeply engaged with the question of their own fame and celebrity and who “live their private lives publicly” whether that be in films or in interviews. Andy Warhol would be another artist who in the 1960s and 1970s was thinking about the same questions regarding the business of stardom in the art market. Francis Ford Coppola would also be deserving of further analysis as a “star-auteur”24. It seems to me that the pressures of the commercial filmmaking industry are, at least, partly responsible for creating the category of the star-auteur as a kind of marketing tool. But I don’t feel that the directors are unaware of this. Instead of just being tools of the system, it seems to me that Wong and Almodovar’s self-consciousness vis a vis their film projects are attempts to call attention to the pressures that attend their work and the historical situations confronting them. As Pedro said in an interview for the New York Times:

I do see my influence in some Spanish films," he said, "and even some American films, but I say that with some embarrassment. I truly would not counsel anyone to imitate me, not because I'm so unique, but because I think the way I work is very personal, and also because the kind of material I work with is often on the verge of being ridiculous, even grotesque. Some of my movies became plays, in Spain and in Italy, and they were very successful, but I didn't like them at all. They were very broad and exaggerated. The mistake is that people will think I'll be very happy to go to a play with a lot of drag queens, and I can't tell them that I'm fed up with drag queens, because it might be offensive or it might not be politically correct.25

When Sofia Coppola won a Best Original Screenplay award for Lost in Translation (2003) at the 76th Academy Awards, her acceptance speech included a nod

---


to Wong Kar-wai; an acknowledgment of Wong's impressive achievements and the social capital of his name in the film industry. Like many of their contemporary “auteurist” colleagues, I submit that the projects of Wong Kar-wai and Pedro Almodovar are able to generate a new kind of cultural capital, one, arguably, on which industrial film practices today depend: buzz. Buzz allows film producers to start collecting revenue on a film text before the text is released and in no small part extends from the directors perceived image. Stephen Teo points out rightly that the name "Wong Kar-wai has come to signify a cool, post-modern [sic] sensibility in world cinema". Wong's name, unlike that of 'John' Woo or 'Bruce' Lee, Teo points out, remains un-Westernized which is worth noting given the tremendous success Wong has had and the pressure exerted by the mainstream film industry to make projects that are easily understood and star-texts, of which a person’s moniker is one example, that can be easily deciphered for origin and intent26.

Wong Kar-wai was born in Shanghai in 1958. At the age of five, Wong moved to Hong Kong with his father who worked as a sailor and his mother who became a housewife. Wong’s family was among the many Shanghainese who flooded into Hong Kong after the Communist Party took power in China in 1949, and the experience of emigration has been a crucial part of his cinematic oeuvre ever since. As Ackhbar Abbas notes, Hong Kong at that time was a multi-cultural place where many ethnicities of Asians and in particular Southeast Asians came together and shared experiences of

exile; themes we find readily in *In the Mood for Love* and *2046*. Stephen Teo also notes that the strong presence of Latin music in Wong's films owes to the Filipino community in Hong Kong in the 1960's and to the ubiquity of Filipino band culture, a large part of daily local and nightlife.

Wong graduated from Hong Kong's Polytechnic Institute in 1980 where he studied graphic design, followed by a job at TVB, Hong Kong's premier television station, one year after graduation. Wong's role at TVB was as a collaborator and contributing scriptwriter. This experience has influenced his approach to mixing genres and to shooting without a script. According to sources who worked with Wong at the time, his “trademarks as a director is that he works largely through improvisation and experimentation involving the actors and crew rather than adhering to a fixed screenplay.” This has been a frequent source of trouble for his actors, his financial backers and many other people connected with his films including often himself. Colleagues recall that Wong never completed a script on his own at TVB, preferring a team approach to projects. While at TVB, Wong met Jeff Lau who became an associate and a friend who would later introduce Wong to Alan Tang with whom Wong became partners at In-Gear Films in 1988. The company's first production was *As Tears Go By* (1998) and Wong’s relationship to his early colleagues and collaborators remains extremely important to Wong.

---

27 Teo, Ibid
28 Teo, Ibid.
29 Teo, Ibid.
Wong’s signature style of staging mise-en-scene and his highly dramatic cinematic flourishes quickly garnered the attention of the international film festival circuit which compared *As Tears Go By* to Martin Scorsese’s *Mean Streets* and described Wong’s *Days of Being Wild* (1991) as a Cantonese *Rebel Without a Cause*. By the early 1990’s, Wong had been generously feted by the mainland Chinese and Hong Kong film industries for his films *Chungking Express* (1994) and *Ashes of Time* (1994)\(^3\). Along with the prizes of fame and notoriety in the film world, however, come the pressures. Although his films failed to be successes at the Hong Kong box-office, Wong’s signature style meant that he had to negotiate relationships with financiers who wanted him to produce as many marketable film commodities as possible as well as with an overstretched cast and crew who, as is par for the course in Chinese filmmaking, were often working on multiple projects of their own\(^3\). As the production notes show, in order to help Wong make *Happy Together*, lead actors Leslie Cheung and Tony Leung had to take time off from their work on other, more commercial, projects they were doing with other Chinese media interests. It is no wonder then that the limitations of time and the desire to finish a work turn up as such important parts of his film work to date. Further, it appears that a familiarity with Chinese and Hong Kong popular culture affords the spectator privilege knowledge about the film’s varied meanings. The stars of his films constantly re-appear in forms

\(^3\) Wong shot *Chungking Express* on a three-month hiatus from the more commercially focused *Ashes of Time* and often refers to *Chungking Express* as one of his more favored shooting experiences.

\(^3\) Peter Brunette, *Wong Kar-wai: Contemporary Film Directors* (Chicago and Urbana: University of Illinois, 2005).
and roles that comment upon previous roles they may have played in Wong films.

Maggie Cheung, Tony Leung and Leslie Cheung are all well-known and prolific actors for whom an association with contemporary Chinese popular culture can be expected.

Paul Julian Smith calls Pedro Almodovar Europe's only remaining auteur and it is worth dwelling on why such a claim seems indisputably true given the rich history and traditions of European filmmaking. His movies are magic and often bring together a heartbreaking mixture of pop, kitsch, and art that is at once exhilarating and sublime. New York Times film critic A.O. Scott gives a good, if overwhelmed, summary of the Almodovarian style:

To attempt even a bald, literally accurate plot summary is to risk not only spoiling some keen surprises but, much worse, falsifying the film's delicate tone and heartfelt mood. Events that might sound outlandish, even grotesque if I tried to tell you about them here, are presented with warmth, humour and sympathy. The film's passionate, brightly coloured humanity would inevitably be lost in translation.

Likewise, according to Marcia Kinder, the term "Almodovarian" in Spain has come to mean when things get just a little bit too crazy. In this way, I would argue that Almodovar's films seem to exaggerate what are already exaggerations in an effort, not to demean, but to champion the characters in his films who are often unhinged by their obsessions. What his work does is put a frame around the absurd scene or image and to call attention to the historical context.

Like Wong, Pedro Almodovar was also very much influenced by his personal

---

experiences growing up and his sense of being exiled from the community into which he was born. A longtime openly-gay artist, Pedro Almodovar Caballero was born in Calzada de Calatrava, Spain on September 24, 1951. He is the youngest of four children born to a family of peasant stock. Pedro's mother, Francisca Caballero, put young Pedro to work as a part-time translator and teacher of literacy for members of their rural community who could not read. At age 8, Pedro was sent to a religious boarding school in Caracares, in the country's West (an experience he would later dramatize in Bad Education). According to Pedro, what distinguished Caracares from Calzada was not so much that he was able to get better schooling, but that Caracares, unlike the less developed Calzada, had movie theaters³⁵.

According to Almodovar, the cinema has been his greatest educator and he recounts going to the movies among his most cherished and influential memories. "You know at those moments I felt like a sinner. I was twelve or thirteen, and Cat on a Hot Tin Roof absolutely corrupted me. I felt at that moment... I recognized that I belong to the world of this film in which there were sinners and not to the world of the priests"³⁶. In 1967, against the wishes of his parents, Almodovar moved to Spain's capital, Madrid. Though Almodovar had dreams of becoming a film director, the closing of the National School of Cinema by Franco meant that Almodovar would have to be largely self-taught. Almodovar worked for twelve years as an administrative

assistant at Spain's national telephone company which allowed him time to pursue
other interests when the working day ended at 3pm. Pedro Almodovar would have had
much to draw from as a youth in Madrid born during the years of Franco.

I would argue that Almodovar's contemplation of the conditions of his unique
existence extend to his early work in Super-8, his punk rock band, and his early career
as a staffer at the Spanish telecommunications firm, Telefonica. By the time Franco's
death released Spain's seething subculture, Almodovar was at the center of it. At
seventeen, Almodovar moved to Madrid where he spent ten years working for the
phone company. The world that Almodovar has built through his work since that
time is most obviously a post-Franco world but this thesis wonders why the political
features of his work are rarely discussed. Almodovar wrote for underground
newspapers and acted with the independent theater company Los Goliardos. He made
experimental Super-8 comedies with titles like *Fuck, Fuck, Fuck Me Tim*. He wrote
the novel *Fuego en las Entranas (Fire in the Belly)* and shot a pornographic
fotonovela, *Todo Tuya (All Yours)*. He led a rock band called "Almodovar Y
McNamara", and created the character Patty Diphusa, an international porn star whose
serialized confessions appear in the magazine *La Luna*. He made his first feature-

37 Almodovar on working for Spanish Telefonica: The type of living I made when I was at the telephone
company was very different. I had two lives. In the morning, I was one person and in the afternoon, I
was someone completely different. It was crazy – my afternoon life. I was with people making theatre.
But what was important for me to work there was that I was in contact with the kind of people from
Spanish society that I wouldn't know without being there. They were not the kind of people that I would
like to work with or would like to be related to. It allowed me to gather information about the way of life
of the lower middle classes in Spain. And that information was very important for me much later when
writing my films.

If an idea of authorship is to guide us fruitfully in a discussion of these films, then I submit in this chapter that the biographical details of Wong Kar-wai and Pedro Almodovar are of no minor import to the significations of their texts because it frames their work and contextualizes the productive “genius” behind the text within social and political realities. For Wong, the history of Chinese emigration emerges as a high concern while we find in Almodovar’s work that the shadows of the Franco regime and his experience as a queer male in a post-fascist state cannot be ignored. Similarly, both directors share early experiences of exile and the challenge of feeling like outsiders within the communities where they found themselves. Though their “star-auteurism”

---

in this chapter had been in its nascent stages, it is my hope that charting the course of their careers towards full star-auteur status will yield insight on two of the available trajectories for the work of star-auteurs in our moment.
CHAPTER II
NARRATIVES OF EXILE, NARRATIVES OF INTIMACY

The first two films, *Happy Together* and *All About My Mother*, are organized in similar fashion around themes of migration and recuperation. Central characters in each film embark on incredible journeys with hopes of finding a lost person or a longed-for object that will bring the protagonist(s) nearer to some kind of closure or liberation. In short, they are both road films and, as such, point to the directors' familiarity with conventions of the 'road flick' genre. At the same time it suggests that some subversion and parodying of the conventional road narrative, for Wong and Almodovar, can be counted on given their familiarity with canonic cinematic texts and the ways in which they have experimented with genre-busting in previous efforts.

Marc Siegel writes convincingly about *Happy Together* as an articulation of new kinds of intimacy and identities in postnational space. According to Siegel, the presentation of queer sexuality in the film is also a disarticulation of national identity; queers, Siegel argues, within prior concepts of the nation-state are rendered unintelligible and almost alien. The film opens in black and white with two Asian men wrestling on a squeaky bed in little more than their underwear. They seem to be in a cheap motel room, an intimate sense of space no doubt fostered by the hand-held camera and by a lack of controlled lighting. The image is grainy and the shot

---

unsteady; the scene feels almost voyeuristic as we watch the two partners engage in intimate acts of love that border on violence. Though their kissing suggests a sexual (if not romantic) relationship between the two men, the presence of an empty single bed opposite the one on which they will have sex reminds the viewer that this world might, for the time being, be inhabited by queers but it is certainly not made for them.

If we may, for a moment, consider *Happy Together* as a road film then the analysis quickly runs into the problem of subversion. This film is a text deeply committed to overturning conventions of the road flick genre at the same time as it bears a deep reverence for its predecessors in the category. In our historical moment of postmodernism, one might be tempted to argue that conventions of genre, like the distinct styles of high modernism, now function as postmodern codes. And codes require deciphering in order to get at full(er) meaning. Jeffrey Tambling's work on *Happy Together* distinguishes itself by drawing on a rich history of poststructuralist thought (Derrida, Spivak, DeMan, et al.) to give the film's prominent themes and devices a rare proper treatment as social critique. Tambling's point is that *Happy Together* may be seen as an allegorical text but he insists that that allegory is neither continuous nor self-contained.40

*Happy Together* brought Wong best director honors at the Cannes film festival in 1997. In the film, Ho Po-wing and Lai Yu-fai, two male lovers from Hong Kong (played by Leslie Cheung and Tony Leung respectively) find themselves in Argentina,

hopeful that they can repair an ailing relationship. Cheung’s character, Ho, wants to find the waterfalls at Iguazu on the southern tip of Argentina after falling in love with the image as it appears on the side of a kitschy lampshade. Leung’s character, Lai, either out of love or exhaustion, goes with him. While the film in no uncertain terms attempts to chronicle the couple’s attempt to “start over”, the idea of beginning with a clean slate, a tabula rasa, quickly is made to seem impossible for the pair. Instead, the film calls attention to other communities the couple enter, separately, while in exile in Buenos Aires and the often bittersweet task of letting go of an ideal, in this case a two-person romantic union, once believed to hold the key to individual happiness.

*Miserable Together* would have made better sense as a title.

By most accounts, *Happy Together* is considered Wong’s most political film. Wong himself has said, "Hong Kong needed to make a real gay film before 1997” a reference to the Sino-British handover of Hong Kong in 1997. *Happy Together* was scheduled to be filmed in Asia yet owing to feelings of unrest and anxiety among Hong Kong residents, as discussed brilliantly by Ackhbar Abbas in *Hong Kong: Culture of Disappearance*, in the months leading up to the 1997 handover of Hong Kong from Britain to communist China, Wong decided to move shooting from Hong Kong to Buenos Aires. Along with its shooting location, the film’s narrative was also transplanted from Hong Kong to Buenos Aires and became a story, not about two male

---

41 *Happy Together* is not the first of Wong Kar-wai’s films to feature Leslie Cheung and Tony Leung in lead roles. In the 1994 martial arts film, *Ashes of Time*, Cheung plays an ancient martial arts swordsman who hires Leung as a bounty hunter.

42 Quoted in Siegel, 256.
lovers in their home country, but of love in exile. The decision to translate the film’s Mandarin title, “Chunguang Zhaxie”, into “Happy Together” for foreign release also reveals Wong’s familiarity with the recognizably upbeat musical piece under whose banner Wong opted to distribute the film worldwide. Ever since 1967, when the musical group The Turtles first recorded “Happy Together”, the song has become one of the most popular and most performed songs of the 20th century. Happy Together's Mandarin title is also a reference to Michelangelo Antonioni's Blow-Up which, when it debuted in Hong Kong in 1966, also bore the Mandarin title, "Chunguang Zhaxie". Wong discovered that Antonioni had also taken his story from an Argentinian writer, Julio Cortazar, and decided to use the title of Antonioni's film for his own, as a tribute to the late director and to the art house classic L’Avventura which Wong has cited as a major influence for In the Mood for Love.

Watching Wong (and Almodovar) play with familiar genres and pop imbued with so much masculine-driven patriotic fervor, i.e., the road film, one begins to get a nagging sense of the filmmaker’s self-awareness. In this regard, the road film within Happy Together seems to begin when the melodrama of national identity ends, when the couple leave Hong Kong (and the cultural space dominated by a repressive Chinese regime) in search of other possible modes of living. The road movie is a distinctly American genre whose primary aim is to mythologize its world and characters, a

---

43 See Ackbar Abbas, Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).
universe wherein America occupies the epicenter. But for Wong Kar-wai, America’s
grip over the road flick is weakened under the pressure, and import, of transnational
cinema. For a postwar audience, the premise of Happy Together is both strikingly
simple and familiar: two lovers struggle against their better selves, and each other, to
figure out if they can make their failing relationship work while they are on self-
imposed exile. According to the narrative conventions of this trope, if conditions at
home are pulling the couple apart, then a trip away from home might help determine
the pair’s suitability once and for all. Notable examples of this genre would be
Rosselini, Resnais, Antonioni, etc., and I would suggest that all these films give rise to
other opportunities for exploring the relationship between desire, exile, and generic
conventions of filmmaking.

Pedro Almodóvar's All About My Mother, nominated for an Academy Award
for Best Screenplay in 2000, is about a mother who loses her son and goes from
Madrid to Barcelona in search of the boy’s father, a man she left 18 years before while
pregnant with her now-dead son. The mother, Manuela (Cecilia Roth), loses her
eighteen year-old son Esteban in a car accident and spends a large part of the rest of the
film looking for Esteban’s father. Manuela leaves their home in Madrid and goes to
Barcelona in search of Esteban’s father whom she last saw eighteen years prior, before
Esteban was born. Along the way she meets up with an old friend, Agrado (Antonio
San Juan), a preoperative male-to-female transsexual who helps her around the streets
of Barcelona. By the film’s end, Manuela finds Esteban’s father, now a preoperative
transsexual himself named Lola (Toni Canto), and returns to Madrid with a new baby in tow, a second child named Esteban. In the film’s coda, Manuela returns to Barcelona again with the second Esteban whose body, the topic of a medical conference, is now miraculously free of HIV.

In Forms of Being: Cinema, Aesthetics, and Subjectivity, Leo Bersani and Ulysses Dutoit conduct a thorough analysis of All About My Mother, paying attention to the aspects of the film that seem to announce new forms of being and subjectivity, ones that often bleed out from under the pressures of naming. Like Happy Together, All About My Mother mobilizes different sets of meanings for viewers through the English translation of its title. Who is the mother? And what is her place all about? An early scene features Manuela and Esteban in their living room watching a segment of Joseph Mankiewicz’s classic film All About Eve (1950) which foregrounds the fact that Manuela is not the only mother in the film and, like in All About Eve, that the female subjectivity is anything but a given. Likewise, the place of the author is also called into question. The narrative of All About My Mother is predicated on the death of its main author-character, Esteban, who, towards the beginning of the film is killed in a car accident involving one of his favorite stars, an actress named Huma Rojas who is played by Marisa Paredes, herself a star of many Almodovar films. We see Esteban in an early scene with his mother watching All About Eve. The inclusion of these other texts, All About Eve and A Streetcar Named Desire, is not coincidental; it compounds the meaning of the film text we encounter and reveals it to be fractured, multiple, and
As the final credits of the film make clear, *All About My Mother* is a tribute to other great film texts and to the great female stars without whom cinema's first 100 years would have looked remarkably different. In a sense, these movies are an unabashed celebration of auteurism and stardom; they love the idea of the celebrated author, referencing directors and shots and the history of cinema as the history of the 20th century. Yet, they also feature an awareness of how texts play off of one another and compound avenues of meaning. Thus, we note that *Happy Together* is based on the Manuel Puig novel *The Buenos Aires Affair* which also served as the film's working title throughout its production phase. Stephen Teo suggests that *Kiss of the Spiderwoman*, another short story by Puig, would be a more apt attribution of source material. Correct attribution of source materials notwithstanding, both *Happy Together* and *All About My Mother* are texts that clearly do not stand alone.

Yet neither is the text merely a cover for other some other, more “authentic” or “real” text buried within or behind it. Often in these films, the search for such authenticity bears little fruit. This idea is very much literalized through the object of the lamp in *Happy Together*. In Jean Baudrillard's terms, the lamp represents the precession of simulacra, a virtual reality with which we fall in love over and beyond the actual object itself. I would say that Wong's use of the lamp as a metaphor for the lovers' destination hints at the complexity of their relationship but I hold that to see a complex\(^4\).

---

simply metaphoric relationship for the lamp as their relationship would be an
analytically reductive approach to considering the new forms of intimacy Wong has in
mind. Turning the equation around, I wonder if there's not a more satisfying approach
which could read the twists and turns of desire as an allegory for the unpredictable life
of the commodity which in this case is the lamp. Such a reading pays attention to
representations of intimacy in a medium, or object, that has had the uncanny ability of
entering into our most intimate of spaces, both physical and psychical and that is the
cinematic product. A film can be enjoyed in the bedroom, the living room, the airplane
or the theater and the refraction of such places within the cinema today stands to tell us
much about how we see ourselves.

As Richard Dyer’s work makes clear, the image of the star is a powerful text if
one is looking to understand more fully the ways in which media refract how we see
ourselves and how we relate to the unique conditions of our existence. In this regard,
it’s worth keeping in mind that Wong and Almodovar use some of the most well-
known performers and pop stars to emerge from the cultural spaces of China and Spain
and, in the films, the stars are made to work, and challenge themselves, in ways that
their other, more commercial projects would not risk. The stars’ performances in
Wong’s and Almodovar’s films in this way comment on the roles they play in other
films in which they have “starred” as well as on the public role they play before the
media and the supposedly adoring public.

In *Happy Together*, both Tony Leung and Leslie Cheung had to learn the tango
for their roles. To promote the film in Asia, the two actors were sent on a press tour where they enchanted the media corps, who at first were put off by the then novel idea of doing a romance picture where the lovers are Asian males, by doing the tango. Being the more trained performer of song and dance routines, Cheung, and the character he plays Ho, takes the lead in both the film and in the media rounds. Ho teaches his partner the steps of the dance, in a rare scene of intimacy, and the tango is even incorporated into his work as a hustler.

In the film, the kinds of employment the star couple obtain in exile is nowhere near as glamorous as the work audiences typically associate with the life of stars or the internationally mobile. Lai Yu-fai begins as a doorman at the Bar Sur then, after being fired for assaulting a patron, moves into the kitchen of a Chinese restaurant as a line cook. Before the film's final segment, we also see Lai working the graveyard shift and wrestling with slaughtered carcasses at an Argentinian abattoir. Ho Po-wing, on the other hand, takes up hustling, meeting many of his client/boyfriends at Buneos Aires' tango bars. Two distinct categories of labor emerge from the kinds of work that Lai Yu-fai and Ho Po-wing do to make money in Argentina: the service economy and the sexual economy which, by the end of the film, begin to appear as one and the same. In a touching scene, we find the members of the kitchen staff with Lai playing soccer in an alley, another skill the actor, Leung, had to pick up in order to portray his character and a way of connecting Lai to the other Chinese expatriates with whom he works. Unfiltered light from the sun on the painterly mise-en-scene makes trails across the
screen as the flimsy whites of kitchen shirts are soaked through with sweat and the exhaustion of work, play, and the afternoon. We next see Lai hug his newfound friend Chen, a young Taiwanese who is also on a journey from “home” and for a moment we glimpse another community and social bond stronger than what we have been given with Lai and Ho. The introduction of Chan's character is perhaps one of the most refreshing moments in the film. As the relationship between Lai and Chan unfolds in the story, the audience is quickly made to forget Ho for whom sympathy seems unwarranted given Ho’s, comparatively, immature and pitiful behavior. Any obligatory sense of pity from the global audience was perhaps too little and too late for the actor who portrays Ho, Leslie Cheung who, by that time, had had his own tumultuous relationship with the demands of stardom. That Wong Kar-wai works with immensely popular figures from the Chinese culture industries has important consequences for the meaning of his film texts and, I submit, especially in Happy Together, a film with queer characters that stars one of the most recognizable, and beloved, male faces in Asia.

Leslie Cheung is a Canto-pop god. Cheung was a teen heartthrob who developed into one of the most highly sought after commodities of Asian media and popular culture. He was a hit musical recording artist; the best-selling Chinese pop artist of all time both in terms of record sales and concert receipts. He was also a box-office matinee idol and a regular feature on Chinese calendars around the world. Cheung died in a similarly spectacular fashion. In a suicide note found after his jump
from a 16th-story hotel balcony in Hong Kong in 2001, Cheung noted that the pressures of international stardom were too much to bear. In "Screen Idols: The Tragedy of Falling Stars", Reni Celeste explores the relationship between stars, their image, and fan reception and, according to Celeste, our fascination with stars has as much to do with their projection of glamour as it does with their fall from great heights. In this way, Celeste argues that "stars represent the tragedy of heroism", of the individual identity that is built up only in anticipation of their inevitable demise. Bearing in mind Celeste’s comments on the tragic nature of stardom, what makes Leslie Cheung’s performance in Happy Together so fascinating, for the purposes of my project, is how Cheung’s character in the film dovetails with the star persona that he had, up until that point, cultivated. The biographical accounts of Cheung’s life in the Chinese popular media, and the accounts offered by Cheung himself, reveal a man deeply troubled by his status as a “star”, not least through the incommensurability of his star persona with the actual conditions of his own life as a queer man and an Asian pop icon. Cheung’s intimate and sexual relationships with other men had long been speculated by the media, with whom Cheung had been rather frank in response to questions posed to the celebrity about his sexual proclivities. According to the suicide note he left behind, Cheung makes it clear that the pleasures he took in his status as a star had, for some time, been troubling him and that he

---

realized that his attempts to successfully navigate the superstar route, to please the crowd, yet maintain his individuality and integrity would always be deemed a failure.

In *All About My Mother*, Almodovar also betrays an awareness of stardom’s often tragic consequences through characters who live as fallen stars and characters who think that stardom is the ultimate pinnacle of achievement. Almodovar’s consciousness of stardom’s demands, however, is nuanced owing perhaps to his own experience as a verifiable star-auteur and as an openly gay man often asked to answer for all gay men47. In his film, stars are people too with their attendant failures and fantasies. The film features Marisa Paredes, the actress whose portrayal of the actress Huma Rojas calls to mind Paredes' past performances in Almodovar's films. Indeed, without Paredes' character there would be no story for it is Paredes' character, or rather the car in which she is seated, that kills the first Esteban. The relationship between the car in which she sits and the name of the play in which she performs, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, is also worth noting because in both situations it is the subject's inability to recognize the text before him is not reality.

The character of Agrado in *All About My Mother* has often been cited as the film's moral center, a peculiar accolade given that Agrado is an aging transvestite who we first meet when she is on a date with a trick gone sour on Manuela’s first night back in Barcelona48. That Agrado has managed to capture so much sympathy from

---

audience, and critics, betrays the otherwise marginal status of transvestites and prostitutes within secular social culture. Yet, it's not what sets Agrado apart so much as how so many parts of Agrado are compatible with the expectations of a mass audience that makes Agrado such a fascinating character study. She is not a star but, in her faux Chanel business dress, adorns herself with the airs and accoutrements of one. She will not be the heroine of the feature, but will naturally assume the role of the sidekick, strong yet without the star’s appeals or expectations of failure.

A cunning awareness of the demands made on subjects of marginalized status, be they stars or drag queens or other minorities, suggests that Almodovar’s own biography is very much involved in how Almodovar would want his texts to be read. As a famous “out” gay man working in film in the latter half of the 20th century, Almodovar’s movies usually include at least one gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender character, and Almodóvar often contrasts today’s Spanish culture with the repressive era during the dictatorship of Franco. While he's been openly gay since the beginning of his career, Almodóvar does not consider his works to be “gay”, but rather films that depict a universal passion to which both gay and straight viewers can relate.

Queer theory and feminism teaches us that, among other things, questions of desire and identity are bound up with questions of history and power. Not unimportant to a discussion of commercial authorship in contemporary transnational cinema is the paradox that these auteurs, Wong and Almodovar, are licensed to make

---

films about controversial subject matter not generally seen as being linked to some part of their personal identities. That is, these filmmakers disavow the politics of identity yet get to speak with authority on the subjects their films feature. What can Wong Kar-wai, a heterosexual man, bring to the making of Happy Together, a story about the relationship of a male same-sex couple? In a similar curious fashion, All About My Mother strengthens oft-repeated claims that Almodovar is truly contemporary cinema's most insightful maker of "women's" films, but how can this be so when Almodovar himself does not speak from a position of experience as a woman?

In All About My Mother, the central political question the film asks is that of the family and of role of new intimacies in new family units. What, in a rapidly globalizing world, constitutes a family? As I mentioned above, not only is the place of the mother, Manuela, called into question against the backdrop of other family units but so too is the place of woman in that many differently-sexed subjects, both “natural” men and women, adopt the position of woman (and consequently enables Almodovar to speak as something of a “feminist”). By the end of the film, when Manuela finally discovers Esteban’s father, and discovers that he is still a transvestite who has sex with, and impregnates, women, the question of who is the mother seems hopelessly mired in conventionalism and almost inconsequential. All About My Mother, in this way, can be read as being about the various mothers in the text, about the mother of the text who is, perhaps, the author, the auteur; perhaps it is all about Almodovar.

Unlike the tightly coordinated narrative structure of All About My Mother, and
of Almodovar’s other projects, outtakes from the production of *Happy Together* reveal a production process whose final result was never to have been known in advance guided by a director open to the metaphysics of chance. Wong shot much of the film without a script and relied instead on the performances of the actors to guide the development of the story. In the accompanying 59-minute reel of production notes, *Buenos Aires: Year Zero*, we meet a cast and crew of over 45 Chinese men and women who had left Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore and China to come to Argentina to work with the notorious director. They followed Wong from Hong Kong after the story of Buenos Aires Affair had already gone into production as a love story about two men set in Hong Kong. Amidst the tension of pre-handover fever, Wong felt that the movie could no longer be shot in Hong Kong with the same kind of artistic freedom so decided that a change in location was important. Had he not taken the circumstances of his own historical situation into consideration, this movie would most certainly have been made in a radically different fashion.

Wong’s scriptwriting also follows a similarly contingent organization of events and narrative which gives us more fodder for thinking through the work of many transnational filmmakers for whom a script is but only one primary text for making a film and giving it meaning. Rey Chow, perhaps Wong's most astute critic, calls *Happy Together* a nostalgia film, using Freud's theory of the uncanny to discuss the ways in which the compulsion to "start over" is about a longing for the repressed or, more precisely, for a repressed notion of home. Chow's analysis of *Happy Together* as a
film about finding home is grounded in much textual evidence but I would hazard that a different understanding of "nostalgia" film does not have to place a sense of unity or a unified sense of home at its core nor does it have to insist on a stable destination.\textsuperscript{50}

While I agree with Chow that representations of the quotidian in \textit{Happy Together} are an articulation, in material terms, of the exile experienced by the film's characters in their attempt to construct a new sense of home. \textit{Happy Together} takes place in Buenos Aires and features a predominantly Chinese cast. Its concerns are with the expatriates and not the local, more indigenous, community of Argentinians. While some have commented that the erasure of the local Buenos Aires population suggests an insidious form of textual negation, I am inclined towards the view that it owes itself to a different understanding of the history of Argentinian demographics and one that pays attention to the importance of cyclical patterns of emigration, subjects that deserve further analysis.

CONCLUSION: OTHER STARS, OTHER INTIMACIES

The presentation of intimacy in \textit{Happy Together} and \textit{All About My Mother} bears knowledge of the tensions between the global and the local in a world where such distinctions have become increasingly blurred. Flows of people and capital keep contemporary life in constant flux, as the narratives of both films make clear. Many of the most evocative and emotionally charged scenes in \textit{Happy Together} and \textit{All About My Mother} take place in border areas: bathrooms, waterfalls, kitchens, tunnels, planes,

cars. I would emphasize that while the lovers in *Happy Together* seem to be struggling towards some sense of oneness, they always end up pushing each other further away, as they both grow farther from their original destination, and in the process the destination changes. So too is Manuela’s character in *All About My Mother* forced to re-evaluate her original aim in light of the information she discovers in Barcelona about her own past and the past of the new family unit she has forged abroad.

Among the various stars that I have mentioned that Wong and Almodóvar employ in the production of these films, perhaps the most curious standout is the musician Caetano Veloso who has the unique distinction of appearing in important sequences in works by of each which I've chosen to discuss in the course of this thesis. The song “Cucuruccu Paloma” appears at important moments in both *Happy Together* and *All About My Mother* which the characters are traveling. The music keeps time for a moment that could theoretically go on forever and a journey with no end. Veloso, an influential Brazilian musician allied with dissident movements in his native Brazil, has become one of the most respected and prolific musicians in international pop, and contributes his own star-text to the films under consideration. Veloso's left ideological leanings, combined with his pensive and provocative arrangements, has earned him a devoted following among Brazilian émigrés as well as comparisons in the popular press to the likes of Bob Dylan and the Beatles, whose later work he cites as extremely influential. Along with musical collaborator Gilberto Gil, was jailed in 1968 for "anti-government activity", and the two eventually exiled themselves to London. That both
Almodovar and Wong capitalize, in their own ways, on Veloso's star appeal in *Happy Together, All About My Mother* (and later *Talk to Her*) suggests that at the heart of international art cinema today is a reliance on intertextuality and the ways that multiple kinds of star discourses cut across one another to produce different levels of meaning for spectators. In *Happy Together*, an absorbing aesthetic detour at the beginning of the film which leads the viewer out of the film's narrative world for the first time and into another order of cinematic pleasure altogether. We begin with a long shot in black and white which foregrounds in medium close-up the figure of a discouraged Lai standing on the edge of deserted highway. In the background, Lai's boyfriend, Ho, enjoys a cigarette in the backseat of their beat-up car as he waits for Lai to figure out why they are lost and where they are going. As Lai's hand comes up to shield his eyes from wind-whipped debris on the highway, the film cuts to an extended shot, notable in its length and saturation of color, of the actual Iguazu waterfalls, set to Veloso's rendition of "Cucurrucucu Paloma". Compared to the rapid cutting found in the film's first fifteen minutes, this long take of a "natural" object of beauty, the couple's seemingly elusive destination, provides a moment in which the audience might contemplate the nature of the road trip in another way, of the destination in new terms.
CHAPTER III

LA POLITIQUE DE STAR-AUTEURS: STYLE AS NARRATIVE

_In the Mood for Love_ picks up thematically where _Happy Together_ left off and starts to unpack Wong's fascination with the nature and uses of secrets. In a scene towards the end of _Happy Together_, Lai and Chang are in a noisy bar this sets us up for a theme that will come to occupy a significant part of Wong's two following features: the tension between the visual and the aural text, that is, what one media form can "speak" or say and what the other media form cannot. Wong conveys the overriding motif across to the audience through a short but memorable story about secrets; one found in this Wong film and the next, _2046_. The action of _In the Mood for Love_ begins in the cramped quarters of a Hong Kong boarding house. The film opens in Hong Kong 1962 and follows a friendship and somewhat romantic relationship between a married man and woman ending in 1966. A young Chinese wife named Su Li-zhen (Maggie Cheung), dressed in a cheongsam, fashionable of its time, is looking to rent a suitable space for herself and her husband, a business man who travels frequently. Li-zhen has a conversation with the housemistress and disappears into a room when the camera finds Chow Mo-wan (Tony Leung) bounding up the stairs. He also inquires about the room, number 2046, but is told that the woman now on her way

---

51 The line from the film concerning secrets: In the old days, when people had a secret they didn't want anyone to know, they would climb a mountain, find a tree, dig a hole in the tree and whisper the secret into the hole. Then they would cover up the hole with mud.
out, Li-zhen, has already agreed to take the room. Consequently, Chow, a writer, takes the room across the hall.

_Talk To Her_ is also concerned with the structure of the secret, of what can be “told”, and opens to a performance by the Pina Bausch Ballet in which two women can be seen moving around the stage with their eyes closed, dressed minimally in silk slips and "dancing" to the sound of an opera. The stage is littered with chairs and a man scurries around the stage batting the chairs out of the way of the two female dancers so that they will not bump into the furniture-debris on stage.\(^52\)

Opening the film with a scene from a theatrical performance is nothing unusual for the director who uses this moment as a kind of mirror for the audience of the film, one that splits subjectivities and rejects the stability of identification. From the stage performance, Almodovar cuts to a two-shot of the two actors who will come to assume starring roles in the film, Benigno (Javier Camara) and Marco (Dario Grandinetti). Immediately we are made to question the significance of the performance that is staging itself before the audience of the film and the performance being staged before the characters in the film. Significantly, the tears on Marco's face are given in extreme close-up and the POV belongs to Benigno, suggesting that it will be the relationship of the man who cries, Marco, to the man who doesn't cry, Benigno, that will organize the narrative.

\(^{52}\) In the language of contemporary dance form and practice, this piece would be classified as postmodernist because it, like modern dance of the Martha Graham school, wants to consider movements of the body in relationship to machine movement but at the same time wants to involve the work of affect in the reception of the artwork so much that it radically calls into question modern art's (and I use the term loosely) insistence on separating emotion from form.
In *Talk to Her*, Benigno, a nurse, and Marco, a journalist, are united by the fact that their affectionate interests cannot speak due to both of them being in a coma. Lydia, Marco’s girlfriend, is a bullfighter gored in a recent fight and consequently rendered comatose. Alicia, is not Benigno’s girlfriend (and the allusions to Benigno’s possible homosexuality are not unimportant here), yet Benigno is Alicia’s nurse in the hospital and takes great pleasure in conversing with and taking care of his mute object of affection who is, even more tragically, a former ballet dancer. Marco, on the other hand, does not speak to Lydia in her vegetative state.

By the time that these two particular films had been released, if not at that moment the each film went into production, both Pedro Almodovar and Wong Kar-wai had become firmly established “star-auteurs” within the market space of contemporary art-house international cinema. Following Richard Dyer’s note that stars are examples of the way people live their relation to production in capitalist society, turning to the stars of these films offers us insight into the workings of transnational cultural objects and personalities. Leonor Watling, the actress who portrays Alicia in *Talk to Her* is the lead singer for a successful Spanish R&B band. Rosario Flores (Lydia) is also a two-time Latin Grammy Award winning Spanish singer and the character she plays in the film is, ironically, also mute. *In the Mood for Love* also de-emphasizes the vocal abilities of its star actors, an aspect of production Wong purposely played on

---

53 Wong on coaching his actors for the shoot: I tell Maggie and Tony, this film is not going to be verbal, you are not going to express yourself through dialogue, you are going to express yourself through body,
The star personas of Wong and Almodvar are themselves crucial texts that line up along the diegetic world of the film. It would also seem from their public presentation that Wong and Almodovar have quite a bit to say about how the “star-auteur” lives his or her relation to the capitalist mode of production. Wong Kar-wai is rarely shown in public without his sunglasses. The director's accessory choice, one he owes to his inability to withstand intense sunlight, recalls Jean-Luc Godard who also rarely made public appearances without shades on. Godard was known as the enfant terrible of French New Wave; Wong that of Hong Kong's 7th generation filmmakers. Both directors consider themselves to be something of cinephiles. Wong recites homages to Antonioni and Bresson; Pedro Almodovar is a huge Sirk fan. I would argue here that the phenomenon of the star-auteur in our contemporary moment licenses these filmmakers to makes comments and critiques of politics, culture, and history in ways that evade the label of "political film". Further, I would suggest that star-auteurism in the international arena (among whom I would nominate Alejandro Inarritu, Hou, Aki and Kaurismaki, Abbas Kairostami, et al.) have a unique power to address historical questions of both local and global concern in a manner that makes clear how limited our ways of looking, seeing, being and knowing actually are.

In “Nostalgia for the Present”, Fredric Jameson proposes a radical possibility for forms of art and culture in our postmodern moment. Namely,

that period concepts finally correspond to no realities whatsoever, and that whether they are through small gestures. Tony has no voice-over, he does not have the words he has had in my other pictures, he is mute, he can only express himself through his body. The film should be like a waltz.
formulated in terms of generational logic, or by names of reigning monarchs, or according to some other category or typological and classificatory system, the collective reality of the multitudinous lives encompassed by such terms is unthinkable or [nontotalizable, to use a current expression] and can never be described, characterized, labeled, or conceptualized. 54

In his discussion of Blue Velvet and Something Wild, films made in 1986, Jameson remarks that prior concepts of history and historicity in representation are gone (the present as history; history as a lavish costume ball decked out in its greatest hits), and that the postmodern approach that these films signal in their “allegorical complexity” is now an “open space for something new” (296). Alongside a shift to, what Daniel Bell termed, postindustrial society, Jameson argues, late-capitalism’s aspiration to envelope space on a massive scale shifts ideas of historicity from being preoccupied with time to being more concerned with space. This chapter takes up the question of that historical space as it is conceived by postmodern artists like Wong and Almodovar and asks what cinematic authorship allows a filmmaker to articulate through a discussion of their next two films In the Mood for Love and Talk to Her. The postmodern sensibilities of each director is most clear through the staging of the films and suggests that rather than breaking from history and the past that these filmmakers are concerned with how art and aesthetics from the past that have endured might be useful today to understanding power and history.

As star-auteurs whose work have been marked by a distinguished sense of style, the look-and-feel of these films offer a way of communicating meaning that bypasses the normative routes for narrative relay. My argument is that the star-auteur

status allows these filmmakers to be "political" in a way that lets them sidestep questions of the political, per se, from critics and fans. Both directors have of course disavowed the mantle of "political film" but in this way they resemble notable auteurs from the past who have disavowed the notion of politics for the ostensibly less politically invested banner of art, or vice versa (see: Godard). These are filmmakers, I would argue, who are deeply committed to politics but for whom the (troublesome) nomination of a "political film" would spell doom for the reception, and thus funding, of their projects.

Almodovar sees his work as political in much the same way as he sees Pasolini's work as political, "in the sense that I always defend the autonomy and absolute freedom of the individual--which is very dangerous to some people". But again, he is quick to note how times have changed.

Everything has changed in this decade. Everything. You can't trust ideology in the same way that you did once. After the militancy of the sixties, the superficiality of the eighties is actually a very active political gesture. You have to be conscious of it. 55

Almodovar is haunted by his reputation as a camp auteur. Thomas Elsaesser accuses Almodovar of certain "postmodern political cynicisms" and sets Almodovar's work at a distance from the work of Fassbinder whose ouevre, Elsaesser suggests, is more politically responsible. According to Elsaesser, Fassbinder's work contains a conviction not only that history can give us a hold and a perspective on contemporary society, but that the historical referent, though it may be vanishing as a determining force, can nonetheless be seized in the form of resentment, anger, refusal, and desire, in short, at the level of psychic and possibly "perverse" investment which may overturn the existing order: the

55 Russo, 68.
promise of revolution....

Of comparisons to Fassbinder, Almodovar admits that they share at least two things: homosexuality and a love for cocaine. Other than that, Almodovar is quick to assert his historical distanciation from the famed German auteur. The same goes for Almodovar’s kinship with Douglas Sirk.

I like big melodramas, but I actually can't make a big melodrama because my point of view is amoral. I can't... take the underlying morality, which is the basis for melodrama. I have different morals from that period.... I can never make [those kinds of] movies, again. I can respect the rules of the genre, which I love, but my sensibility is something which I believe belongs to the eighties. You can't be innocent. You can't be naive any longer, even if you like the genre.

Nevertheless, Almodovar is that rare kind of visual storyteller who can make you cringe at the moral consequences of story's development while also notice how beautiful the shot is. In Talk, a scene of rape marks such a departure. Also, the visual stunning opening scene where Benigno and a fellow (female) nurse are dressing Alicia is also captivating but set on a hospital bed looks and feels like the dressing and undressing of the flag. She becomes a symbol for Spain and of a people who for so long had been denied the ability to speak up against their government.

I maintain that Almodovar is a director deeply concerned with ethical issues but I find that his narratives cleverly and quickly deflects any charge that he is trying to impose a new moral standard; a project doomed to failure. Part of the genius of Almodovar is that he presents the problem, that is, identifies the problematic in the everyday, yet stops short of prescribing a solution which would itself only reinscribe

---

56 Thomas Elsaesser, “Historicizing the Subject: A Body of Work?” New German Critique o. 63, Special Issue on Rainer Werner Fassbinder (Autumn, 1994) 10-33, 22
57 Russo, 65.
the structure of the problem in new form. This comes from a belief, often verbalized by Almodovar, that to present the everyday in all its banality is perhaps more freakish or radical than any politically-defined project may be capable of doing.

In a footnote to their study, Bersani and Dutoit note that:

The women, unable to speak, somehow 'speak' so powerfully in being spoken to that they create between the two men--as a kind of innovative refraction of the feelings directed toward them--a relation that includes them, a relation so strong, so inclusive and so new that it would be inexcusably reductive to describe it as homoerotic and, perhaps, even to appropriate it for the familiar category of friendship.\(^{58}\)

If new forms of being and intimacy are to be seen in the relationship between Alicia and Lydia, as well as between Benigno and Marco, then that new form is attended by a certain sadness as we see in the character of Marco who cannot stop emoting. The work of melancholy is most evident in the film through the character of Marco and, at times, Marco's melancholy can almost be seen as a threat to his masculinity. Adriano Novoa identifies Marco as "the modern hero\(^{59}\). He is a successful journalist in the new global economy whose failure to contain his emotional intensity is one of the structuring contradictions of the film. His counterpoint, Benigno, provides another example of the failure of masculine identity to map out on the male, presumably, heterosexual, body: he is a feminine man and a heterosexual and it is precisely a heterosexual act which criminalizes him. Almodovar toyed with naming this film "The Man Who Cried" and, in an interview given to A.O. Scott, Almodovar admits that it was only the fact that Sally Potter had used this title for her

---

\(^{58}\) Bersani and Dutoit, 122. f3.

own film that Almodovar settled on "Talk to Her"\(^{60}\). That affect plays a huge part in communicative practice seems to be one of the more pronounced features of the film; affect is of no effect if it is not shared.

Of course, the English version of the film's title can only hint at the meaning Wong Kar-wai had in mind when he declared that, in Chinese, the film would bear the title "When flowers were in full bloom". *In the Mood for Love* is not only an exploration of the relationship between two people who cannot say what they want to say but also between two kinds of ethnic Chinese people, the Shanghainese and the Cantonese, and things that they can share with one another in Hong Kong in the 1960’s, a time and place where making out differences between Chinese people and regionalities was challenged by the racial and cultural mixings of immigrant groups.

In a telling scene towards the film’s center, a darkened hallway frames our view of Li-zhen who stands in long view, looking over a pot of rice. The housemistress enters with a letter she presumes to have been sent by Li-zhen's husband since she, the housemistress, cannot read. But the identity has been mistaken, along with the attribution of authorship. The letter, it turns out, is from a Japanese man.

I would hazard, then, that *In the Mood for Love* is about life in Hong Kong during the 1960's or more specifically 1962-1966, but that its interest is more in the quotidian as historical than in the discussing the details of the larger, more cited, political situation. The relationship that develops between Chow and Li-zhen (Maggie

\(^{60}\) Pally, Ibid.
Cheung) is set among interaction between the Cantonese and Shanghainese populations in HK during the 60's, both prominent groups of Chinese exiles after the 1949 makes this also a film about pan-Asian diasporas post-Communism. Li-zhen works as a secretary; Chow is a writer-reporter-kung fu novelist. There spouses are largely out of the picture. Without paying attention to the historical backdrop we cannot understand why the narrative unfolds the way it does; why Chow is in Cambodia by the end of the film and why Li-zhen must flee Hong Kong. We cannot understand why Chow and Li-zhen react to their desires the way they do without thinking more about Wong’s investment in the past and in his way of telling a historical story.

As Rey Chow writes, “the everyday objects we encounter in their immediacy constitute a uniquely and subjectively composed visual representation, one that is unavoidably metaphorical”\(^6\). The encounter between Li-zhen and Chow at the beginning of *In the Mood for Love* gives a hint of the important role that chance will play in the relationship between the two, and the role that chance seems to play in the distribution of objects into the worlds of our everyday existences. Sentimentalism attends nostalgia in film precisely through representations of the quotidian, of the everyday, writes Rey Chow and in *Mood*, Chow argues, Wong's insertion of daily objects and rituals into the mise-en-scene of the film suggests that film has a special power to make the past appear "beautiful and elusive" through an auteur's organization.

---


58
of the visual world, to give another story to the world.

Wong has suggested, in an interview for the Cannes debut of the film, that today in Hong Kong divisions no longer exist between immigrants from the south of China and their local brethren from the capital of Shanghai. *In the Mood for Love* makes it clear that this was not always so.

From the very beginning I knew I didn't want to make a movie about an affair. That would be too boring, too predictable. What interests me is the way people behave and relate to each other in the circumstances shown in the story, the way they keep secrets and shares secrets...

"And so, like the Chinese communities in the film, there are people from Shanghai who had their own language, and they had no contact with the local Cantonese. They had their own cinema, their own music, and their own rituals. So they were actually building Shanghai in Hong Kong. I’m from that background, and I wanted to recreate that world. At that time we had neighbors, we knew who were living next door to us, on the other side of the wall. And there was a lot of gossip and it was fun."62

In addition to gossip, one must also pay attention to the costumes of the film. The cheongsams found in *Mood*, and which will reappear later in *2046*, were discovered in Buenos Aires while filming was being done for *Happy Together*. The costume designer had so fallen in love with the pieces that they were immediately purchased although no project existed at the time for which the dresses could be used. Wong uses an almost unrecognizable jump cut to switch out one cheongsam for another before a scene has ended. Also, the shooting of *Mood* makes one feel like a voyeur and an eavesdropper through elliptical cinematic techniques that leaves an audience begging for more information.

We always put something in front of the camera because we wanted to create the feeling that the audience was one of the neighbors and was always observing or watching these two people. And the color is so vivid because everything from memory is vivid—it’s beautiful because it’s

---

very close to your mind. 63

The film’s cinematography was handled not by Christopher Doyle but by Mark Ping-ling, a frequent collaborator with Taiwanese auteur Hou Hsiao-Hsen, who set the shooting in Bangkok. The apartment scenes were shot in Hong Kong and Wong likes to consider the film a tribute to the works of fellow auteurs Michelangelo Antonioni and Robert Bresson. The central characters are often hidden from the camera's view in scenes where they are speaking. This use of off-screen voices creates a tension between the intimate world into which we have been drawn and the figureless voices that would seem, in a more conventional filmic undertaking, to be our primary guide for sense-making64.

The music of *In the Mood for Love* makes use of celebrated artists like Nat King Cole and Shigeru Umebayashi who musical theme for Seijun Suzuki's *Yumeji* (1991) here becomes the theme of *In the Mood for Love*. The waltz theme which recurs throughout the film was originally scored for a Seijun Suzuki film. Music is very important to Wong and accounts for much of the sensuous, perhaps inordinately sensuous, quality of the film. According to Wong, a sense of communal history and the past returns in a decidedly musical form. Wong says, “The whole experience of this community, it is like a dream, it is lost and it’s gone.” Thus, the music employed by Wong in this film deserves attention in its attempted fidelity to historical reality.

According to Wong, his project in *Mood* was to try and maintain a sense of what “real life” was like back then by showcasing the elements of everyday life with which Hong Kong residents of the 1960's would have been familiar and encountered in their lives. One such historical feature is thus the use of Latin band music, a popular style of music brought to Hong Kong by migrant Filipinos, and a version of "Aquelles Ojo Verdes" sung by Nat King Cole\(^65\).

In *Talk to Her*, music too plays a critical role in the activation of certain memories, for the audience and for the film’s characters. Caetano Veloso again finds himself at the center of an elaborate subjective detour into the idle mind of one the main characters. The sequence begins without explanation with a take which follows in aerial view through water an unnamed male who seems to be swimming from one side of a pool to the other. We join him somewhere in the middle of his journey. He surfaces but remains anonymous, unidentifiable as any character we've encountered in the film and will be nowhere identified or referenced again in the film. Instead, Almodovar brings us poolside to a nighttime gathering of other seemingly unidentifiable characters who have come to enjoy a musical performance by Caetano Veloso who, in this film, appears in person accompanied by his band. But for Almodovar fans, the presence and identities of the performance's attendees are

\(^65\) Wong on the influence of Spanish music in his films: I like Latin American literature a lot, and I always think Latin Americans and Italians are very close to the Chinese, especially the women—the jealousy, the passions and the family values. And the Latin music in the film, actually, was very popular in Hong Kong because the music scene at that time was mainly from the Philippines and all the nightclubs had Filipino musicians, so they got Spanish influences there. Latin American music was very popular in the restaurants at that time, that’s why I put it in the film. And I especially like Nat King Cole because he's my mother’s favorite singer.
immediately clear: they represent (are) the female stars who have helped cement
Almodovar's reputation as an auteur with a particular fondness for the conventions of
that most female of female genres: melodrama. They are Almodovar's girls. This
scene calls attention to the complexities and intersections of star texts in our historical
moment: these are (female) stars watching, and being absorbed by, a (male) star (an
idea that I will have occasion to discuss in Chapter Four).
Bad Education seems, on its surface, to be Pedro Almodovar's most autobiographical work. Appearances, though, can be deceiving. The film continually relies on an awareness of metanarrative to make the audience pay attention to narrative twists and to continually jolt the viewer out of his or her identifications with characters. In the opening sequence, Enrique, a film director who is generally read as a double for Almodovar, is mining the paper's headlines for his next great story when he is interrupted by a visitor from the past. The interloper claims to be Enrique's childhood friend, Ignacio, a fact which seems to draw equal parts confusion and joy from the director. Ignacio, now an actor, is in town performing with a small troupe staging a play by Garcia Lorca, one of Spain’s few other recognizable authors in addition to Almodovar. Ignacio leaves for Enrique a script entitled "The Visit".

Almodovar's method of imbedding multiple narratives within the film is developed in close relationship to the plot of the story itself as each new narrative is turned into a plot twist. The famous Mexican actor Gael Garcia Bernal (Y Tu Mama Tambien, Amores Perros) plays Juan, the brother of Ignacio, who pretends to be Ignacio which allows Almodovar to use Bernal to play the role of the author in the screenplay purportedly written by Ignacio. The author, in this film, is never stable.

This chapter takes a particular interest in how Pedro Almodovar and Wong
Kar-wai represent authorship as a critical category in their 2004 films *Bad Education* and *2046*, a film shot simultaneously as *In the Mood for Love*.

This chapter also undertakes a discussion of how Almodovar and Wong as star-auteurs, play with their images, dominant ideas about authorship, celebrity culture, and the commerce of contemporary auteurism both in the films and in extra-cinematic materials. According to Timothy Corrigan, Eric Renstchler’s study of Alexander Kluge strongly suggests that Kluge’s work has been “part of an effort to enact a variety of cultural subjectivities in which different enunciatory relations with history have decentered the conventions of auteurism”.

Have Almodovar and Wong deployed auteurism as a critical category in these films? How do *2046* and *Bad Education* address authorship and how have the directors used interviews, press appearances, and other positions of enunciatory power, in addition to their films, to question the conventions of auteurism?

Corrigan’s argument is that the most significant change to the notion of auteurism from the 1960’s to 1980’s has been the shift from auteurism as a critical category of production to that of reception. Kluge’s genius, according to Corrigan, was his ability to “make specific use of commerce of his own singularity and subjectivity”.

Is there a way in which Wong and Almodovar are doing something similar critically in these films?

The sophistication of their styles reaches a noticeable zenith with these two

---

66 Of shooting *Mood* and *2046* simultaneously Wong says: The whole process is very… ah, painful, it’s like loving two persons at the same time.

67 Corrigan, 43.

68 Corrigan, 44.
features and so does their fame. Along with fame, both Almodovar and Wong have by this time to deal with the pressures of an international film system that wants to keep them productive (read: profitable) yet happy. *Bad Education* has been likened to a gay marriage between Billy Wilder and Alfred Hitchcock while *2046* has androids and high-speed trains, elements of science-fiction, melodrama, Romantic hero-worship, and Orientalism, and can be read, in short, as an attempt to make an international art house blockbuster. In some ways, their infamy by this time allows Wong and Almodovar to indulge in projects that, for other directors, might be dismissed as "too autobiographical" or some other situation in which readings of the film apart from as a depiction of the director’s life or as a personal “pet project”, are somehow foreclosed. Some critics use such a view to dismiss the cinematic and historical merits of *Bad Education* which is known to be based, at least in part, on Almodovar's own life-story and his much documented time at religious boarding school as a child. Similarly, *2046* is a project Wong began four years prior, and whose aesthetic and narrative roots go back to *Days of Being Wild*. While the narrative structure of *2046* is admittedly complex, it has been too often dismissed for being an “insider” film, only fully appreciable by fans familiar with Wong’s work, and lacking in new critical value.

It’s worth recalling here that cultural practices are linked to industrial modes historically dependent on the uses of available technologies and, in this regard, perhaps no technological development has had a greater impact on cinema in recent years than the advent of digital technology and the worldwide network of networks we call
Internet. From the film's opening to its final credits, it’s clear that Wong has matured significantly and *2046* in many ways brings together ideas that had been percolating in Wong's mind and in his films for some time. Though the themes are familiar the technologies have changed. The film's opening sequence features CGI animation and a rich orchestral score which will become the film's musical theme. This is also the first film that Wong films in Cinemascope which offers a wider canvas for visual presentation. None of this should be taken as a definitive sign that Wong’s films have gotten “better” but rather as in indication that perhaps the terms of debate within film studies need to change.

*2046* also expands Wong’s use of stars and features some of the biggest stars in Asian and international pop culture. Alongside Tony Leung and Maggie Cheung from *In The Mood for Love*, the film stars Zhang Ziyi from *Flying Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2002); Gong Li from *Red Sorghum* (1987), *Farewell My Concubine* (1993), and *Miami Vice* (2006); Faye Wong; the Japanese pop star Takuya Kimura; and Carina Lau (Leung's wife and the current CEO of Hong Kong's TVMART station). Faye Wong is the most successful female recording artist in Asian history. In *2046*, Faye Wong plays the role of Wang Jing-Wen who is the eldest daughter of the hotel owner and the one woman in the film that Chow cannot have. In her first appearance in the film, Chow peers through a divide in the wall at Wong’s character, calling to mind similar moments between Leung's and Faye Wong's characters from *Chungking Express*. The shot is an extreme close-up on Wang's feet in black pumps and it seems like she is rehearsing.
some lines in Japanese. "I'm going-- let's definitely go". Chow tells us that she is the hotel owner's daughter, and that she is in love with a Japanese man of whom her father strongly disapproves. The words she has prepared are not enough however as her boyfriend, played by Japanese pop music star Takuya Kimura, is forced to listen to Wang's father tell her, "No, you have to break up". Even pop stars, it seems, suffer from the occasional broken heart.

Insofar as this is a thesis concerned with the relationship between contemporary films and the audiences they address, feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey provides two useful and historically important openings into my discussion. The impact of her theorization of the always-already masculinized position of film viewership on film studies since the 1970's has been thoroughly cited. Having recourse to Mulvey's rereading of film history in her 2006 work, *Death 24x Per Second*, opens up yet another engagement with cinema that addresses the complexities of visual pleasures in our moment of digital cinema. It also addresses the expansion of control licensed to today's cinema viewers by new media technologies and by modes of "digitextuality". Her previous arguments about authorized codes of gendered spectatorship, canonized vis a vis the theory of the "male gaze" in her seminal essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", along with her updated arguments about "delayed cinema" and the construction of the "possessive" and "pensive" spectator, in *Death 24x Per Second*, will help to inform my reading, here, of *2046*, a film whose aesthetic nods in many ways to
new cinematic capabilities opened up by digital filmmaking.\textsuperscript{69}

Writing of the spectacularized female body in “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”, Mulvey says that "male vulnerability to a castrating gaze could be deflected onto a female body that was stylized to the point of artificiality, like the beautiful automaton representing castration in the process of its repression". This idea of the privilege male viewer, reevaluated in terms of digitality, seem to have an almost literal relationship to the beautiful female androids in Wong’s \textit{2046} who suffer from a condition in which their reactions to the advances of the male passengers are always delayed, whose tears well up but do not get released until the next day.

Digital technology has had an immense impact on practices of film viewing. The ability to pause on frames and play movies at home changes the relationship between the viewer and the text, says Mulvey, and unveils the “hidden stillness” in the moving image. According to Mulvey, the pensive spectator "rescues those aspects of the cinema that Roland Barthes felt were lacking in comparison to the complexity of the photograph".\textsuperscript{70} Here, she refers explicitly to Barthes ideas about the punctum and about the particular way in which photographic detail can have an arresting effect on the viewer of the image. Mulvey argues,

\begin{quote}
At a time when new technologies seem to hurry ideas and their representations at full tilt towards the future, to stop and reflect on the cinema also offers the opportunity to think about how time might be understood within wider, contested patterns of history and mythology. Out of this pause, a delayed cinema gains a political dimension, potentially able to challenge the patterns of time that are neatly ordered around the end of an era, its 'before' and 'after'.\textsuperscript{71}
\end{quote}


\textsuperscript{70} Mulvey, \textit{Death 24x a Second}, 196.

\textsuperscript{71} Mulvey, \textit{Death 24x a Second}, 22-23.
Mulvey's look at film history is of course not without its own ideological investment 
for, as she writes, "the cinema (today), rather than simply reaching the end of its era, 
can come to embody a new compulsion to look backwards, to pause and make a 
gesture to delay the combined forces of politics, economics, and technology". In sum, 
as Mulvey goes on to argue, "To turn to the past through the detour of cinema has a 
political purpose" and I would argue that the political purposes to which digital 
cinematic technology may be put require our thoughtful contemplation as film scholars 
wrestle with the ascendancy of the digital and Internet mode. 

According to Mulvey, a “cinema of delay”, as made available by DVD 
technologies and the ability to press pause, results in the construction of the pensive 
and the possessive spectator; the former is concerned with the passing of time in film 
while the latter is preoccupied with images of the human body. The tension between 
stillness and the moving image is underscored by new media technologies which give 
spectators control over image and narrative like never before, argues Mulvey. This is 
also a turn, in Freudian terms, from the voyeuristic spectator to the fetishistic one. 
Mulvey cautions however that the distinction between these positions is not always 
neat and recalls Christian Metz's observation about the cinema fetishist being the 
person enchanted by what the cinema is capable of, that is, its technological 
equipment. According to this view, the pensive and possessive spectator reside in the 
body of the same person.

72 Mulvey, Death 24x a Second, 24.
So how can Mulvey’s ideas help us to make sense of the female cyborgs that populate 2046, the cyborgs who, in a pre-digital moment, would be a confirmation of male scopophilia and sexual desire? What does it mean that they cannot emote until after the moment of affective contact and that the author is male? These questions need, I think, to be thought of in relation to the film’s main character, Chow Mo-wan, the film’s primary author figure who is ostensibly in charge of the action in his science-fiction novel where the androids reside. In this film, Chow is a writer who at times is working on a comic book (those moments when he is most financially desperate); a political story for a newspaper (his press sends him to Cambodia to cover the arrival of DeGaulle); and a science-fiction novel (entitled 2046). The author's function is thus manifold according to the movie’s logic. He (and we note the masculinism) is both a chronicler and a fabulist. That he tells us that the main character in the novel is actually a representation of himself, "I imagined myself a Japanese man", because he could not in real life be with Faye Wong's character, gives only a glimpse into the complex interplay between an author’s desire, the restrictions on his/her desire, and the possible ways in which authorship’s demands and privileges can be navigated in our moment.

The film's most heartbreaking moment occurs in a scene between Wang Jin-Wen and her boyfriend (Kimura) who is trying to convince her to go to Japan with him. Most of the scene lingers in close-up on the face of Kimura, the back of Wong's head is visible in the foreground, with occasional reverse/shot to Wong face turned
sideways staring stoically at the floor. The pain of the moment seems too much for her to bear. In this sequence, Kimura is trying to get Wang to confess that she likes him, but he has no luck. "Leave with me", he pleads. When she fails to respond, Kimura leaves. Wong slows the shutter speed down to elongate a moment which would otherwise be quite abrupt. It is at this moment, Chow tells us, that Wang began talking to herself; the sequence we have just witnessed between Wong and Kimura has been a flashback. The film also continues Wong's fascination with ideas of repetition. The film's narrator is Chow Mo-wan, again played by Tony Leung in an extension of his role from *In the Mood for Love*. A lovely black and white scene finds Bai Ling and Chow in the backseat of a taxi recalling some of the most lasting images between Tony Leung and Leslie Cheung in *Happy Together*. The pace of the camera is slow and the movement of Chow's hand onto Bai's dress is heavily accented. The music is orchestral. The relationship between Wang and Chow takes a turn when Chow offers to serve as the intermediary between Wang and her boyfriend for their correspondences. Chow offers to receive letters from Japan on Wang's behalf, a secret which he will withhold from her father, Wang Sum. An interesting moment occurs when Faye Wong is shown reading a letter from her boyfriend for here it feels like she is a star reading a letter from an adoring fan. The viewers' knowledge of the careers of Wong and Kimura however reveals that it is a star reading a letter from another star.

There is no irony lost in the fact that Wong’s feature is about a writer with performance issues. Wong's spontaneous style of shooting films without scripts, duly
chronicled in the public press, suggests a troubled relationship to authorship, as does his previous work as a member of a screenwriting team for TVB notorious, among colleagues, for never completing a script. "He worked better in teams", many noted. This way of working, of missing and extending deadlines, and of course, with it, budgets, has also frustrated financiers. Correspondingly, Almodovar's representation of authorship is not without with own set of self-referential gestures which seem to take quite serious the work of the writer even within the business of writing. The author is not singular in these film texts. Almodovar keeps revealing that many performances are being staged by many different and competing interests through his framing and manipulation of POV. For Wong, crews are very important and filmmaking efforts seem always to be collaborative. Related to this, in a significant way, is the character that Faye Wong plays as Chow's "ghostwriter" which may, optimistically, be read as a critique of the gendered assumptions that accompany prevailing notions of auteurism. She is asked to help scribe Chow’s novel but it becomes clear that she is a better writer than he, revealing female labor at work behind the veils of male showmanship.

There is also an acknowledgment in these films of the things that the author cannot say. Silence, the inability to speak or write, is articulated loudly through sequences in which time is condensed or where the pivotal action happens off-screen as we watch and listen nervously. For Almodovar, like Wong’s technique in *In the Mood for Love*, this happens in pivotal scenes in the film as when the young Ignacio is
being molested by a priest while on a day outing to the watering hole. The action is off-screen and all we hear is the sound of the boy singing “Moon River”. In *2046*, the character of Chow played by Tony Leung, a reprisal of his role in *In the Mood or Love*, is a writer and we might read his representation as a way for Wong to comment on being a director notorious for working without scripts and for his trouble completing writing. In one memorable sequence, Chow sits down to pen a story but fails to make a single mark after one hour, ten hours, and one-hundred hours, respectively, as Wong’s succession of intertitles tells us and as anyone struggling to write under a deadline will confirm.

Further, there is noted difficulty in knowing how precisely to classify the relationship *2046* bears to *In the Mood for Love*. *2046* has been called a "quasi-sequel", a "sort-of-sequel", suggesting that Wong’s circumstances of production (shooting two films at once) defy the categorical logic of genres and sequels. In a similar way, critics and viewers are baffled by what *2046* refers to. Is it a year, a hotel room, a stop on a high-speed train or is it all or none of the above? With this film, Wong seems to going for a quite apparent confusion of proper names and genre-busting. I would say that one can watch *In the Mood for Love* and *2046* in any order as the two are linked by the character of Chow Mo-wan. If *In the Mood for Love* is seen first, then the story is about man who, at first conservative about sex and morality, has an intense, if not adulterous, relationship with a married woman after which *2046* becomes an exploration of what love means to the writer after the falling apart of this
relationship. If 2046 is seen first, then I would suggest that Mood fills in the back story of the relationship between Chow and (the first) Su Lizhen.

Under the agreement entered into by Hong Kong and the PRC, Hong Kong will enjoy a large degree of autonomy until at least 2047. Allusions to the significance of historical events are also presented vis a vis Chow's conversation towards the end of the film where he speculates that the first Su Li-Zhen is back in Phnom Penh. His sidekick, Ah-po, comments to Chow that the state is in chaos. Chow was sent to cover the events as a reporter and I cannot help but believe that the state of chaos being referred to here is the rise of the Khmer Rouge, Cambodia's communist faction, to power in the Democratic Republic of Kampuchea (Cambodia's name under the Khmer Rouge). The film is also punctuated by stock footage of significant moments in the political history of Hong Kong. The first moment is taken from the Wanchai Riots of 1966; the next May 22, 1967. Further segmenting the narrative are significant moments from the personal and social experiences of the people, represented through images of the everyday and ordinary. The film's story begins on the day of Christmas Eve 1966 and we will visit Chow on every Christmas Eve for the next four years, up until the fateful year of 1969.

"2046" thus has many significations. It is the title of the novel on which the Tony Leung character (Chow) is working; it is the number of the hotel room adjacent from Chow's and occupied by a steady string of Chow’s lady-friends; and the

---

73 See again Chris Berry, *Postsocialist Cinema in Post-Mao China.*
beginning of the movie suggests that it is both a place and a time. By the end of the film, Jin's father, the hotel owner, is on his way to Japan to celebrate the wedding of his eldest daughter to the same Japanese man that he had for so long warned his daughter against. This information essentially closes down any hope that Leung and Faye Wong's characters will get together, and provides a sense of closure or finality that we rarely get from Wong Kar-wai, and a moment of truth for the author who must confront the unsatisfactory state in which he finds his desires. But the father also delivers a piece of information from his daughter to Chow, writer to writer: Jin-wen feels that the story's ending is too sad and she requests that he change the ending which Chow says he cannot do.

As in 2046, the appearance of authorship can be misleading and both films under discussion heavily thematize this concern. Bad Education, in many ways, warns of the dangers of identification, when too must trust is invested in something about which too little is known. Appearance, for Almodovar, is not reality but a clue into another kind of reality itself; appearance is the construction of reality; it is a form reality takes. In Bad Education, the uses to which an appearance of authenticity may be put are manifold. Garcia-Bernal, the homme fatale, is not, of course, Ignacio but Ignacio's younger brother, Juan. Juan adopts his brother's identity and steps in to play the part of Ignacio.

If Almodovar's films betray his deep love for a mythical golden age of cinema, his work is also clearly committed to subverting those same genre and narrative
conventions that have so influenced his own work. *Bad Education* is noir-like, Hitchcockian, and tightly-constructed, yet features a male, Bernal, in the femme fatale role. Because of his flair for the melodramatic form, Almodovar is frequently compared to other high-camp directors Douglas Sirk and King Vidor. But as The New Yorker's David Denby points out, Almodovar's audience differs markedly from that of his predecessors:

[Vidor and Sirk] in different ways, as serious artists or masters of kitsch, they were immersed in creating illusions for an audience that wanted to believe in what they saw. Almodovar, in contrast, always let us know that his actresses are performing, that what they offer is not a piece of life but a convulsively entertaining fiction 74.

Whereas an audience of another time might approach a Sirk film with a desire to see reality in the image, to have the image confirm their reality, a reality which received little articulation in the public sphere, an Almodovarian spectator is content with the reality of the image; in postmodern fashion, with just image.

Keeping image separate from reality can be a hard task for Almodovar whose involved directorial techniques and intensely personal handling of actors has presented more than a few challenges. When filming the controversial opening scene for *Law of Desire* in which a young actor in an erotic film sequence is being directed to say to another man, "Fuck me, fuck me", Almodovar found himself grappling with discomfort.

I added cutaway shots to the director and his assistant just to relieve some of the tension. I couldn't even say the words 'fuck me' in direction. This machismo education is never going to go away. And I'll tell you something, I'm afraid of knowing that. It frightens me to know that I will never get rid of that education. I don't like to think about the truth of that" 75

75 Russo, 65.
Almodovar’s relationship to his stars has also suffered because of the morning after shock that separates between cinematic image and the reality of day-to day life in which passions are no where near as explicitly carnalized as Almdoovar makes them out to be. Carmen Maura and Almodovar famously broke in 1988 after *Women on the Verge*. Of his relationship to actors, Almodovar has said,  

> I am a dangerous director. I don't want to sound pretentious but when I work with my actors I become whatever they need at the moment--lover, father, mother. When the shooting is over I separate, and this can be difficult. Actors work with something so deep and private you have to take care of that, but the final morality on the set is to make a good film.

When Tony Leung’s Chow character narrates the events of May 22, 1967, in *2046*, the words sound very much like something Wong Kar-wai might say of himself and of his working conditions which prioritized making a film above all else. The scene is like two narratives in one; “this is the film I would have made and this is the one that I did/had to make”. The film's opening intertitle is a line from a Chinese poem that reads "Memories are but the traces of tears" suggesting that trauma or loss lies at the heart of “2046” and raises difficult questions about possible readings which cross textual and extratextual evidence, texts that cross space and time. Is the android who cannot cry dysfunctional in the same way as a star who cannot perform? Chow’s time on the train is like penance but it is not his own; he keeps trying to confess but no one is capable of listening. Chow speaks through the novel; the author here uses textual production to offer self-agency but the act of writing is portrayed as excruciatingly difficult. The film portrays watching as an almost sad occasion; an act always

---

76 Pally, 90.
obstructed. Chow imagines himself in the role of a passenger on his way to/from 2046, a character portrayed in the science-fiction sequence by the Japanese Kimura. The action of the film now goes back to the introductory sequences from the film's opening. The androids on the train do not speak, and can only provide the passengers with a modicum of comfort. Perhaps Chow sums it up the sentiment of both Wong and Almodovar when he declares, "I felt more at ease in my fictional world".

For all the similarities this chapter, and thesis, has pointed out between the two filmmakers, Wong and Almodovar are divided by radically opposed approaches to making films. Almodovar must know, must orchestrate, exactly what he is looking for when starting a film; Wong admits to "sometimes having an idea" before he starts production. Almodovar is a meticulous screenwriter (a number of Academy Awards for writing, Cannes prizes); Wong draws his ideas from literary sources but rarely composes scripts in advance of shooting. Where Almodovar's camp is clean, sharp, and considered, Wong's retains a certain degree of spontaneity and chance, a sense that the world drew itself together for one gorgeous shot and that in the next moment, when the camera is off, it will again melt into air. When Almodovar turns off the camera, in contrast, we are left standing on a soundstage slightly dazed by how suddenly the fictional world can slide into, well, a kind of clinical non-fiction most disturbing to us via a newfound sense of artifice. The "real world" and the author's place in it is, for both directors, something best taken with a grain of salt or, better, with a shot of tequila while cozying up with an old record.
CONCLUSION
NEW AUTEURISMS

The celebration of star-auteurism is a central element of today’s feature film industry and part of the textual interplay between Wong and Almodovar is fueled by the demands of their industry, the international art cinema. Most notably, events where the two filmmakers are in competition or judging one another, namely at the big five festivals Venice, Cannes, Sundance, Berlin and Toronto, bring the two star-auteurs into conversation with one another pretty much for the whole public to see. It is no small historical event for this thesis then that Wong Kar-wai served as president of the jury at Cannes 2006 and that Pedro Almodovar’s latest film, *Volver*, had been cited as a frontrunner for the festival’s grand prize, Palm d’Or, a prize *Volver* did not win.

Alongside my analysis of Pedro Almodovar and Wong Kar-wai, a study of different contemporary American star-auteurs seems to me a useful way to gauge how different filmmakers in different national contexts play with notions of their own identity and fame and with ideas about the purported genius of conventional authorship. Wong and Almodovar work in the space of international art cinema and face different kinds of pressures from their national audiences and their global ones, another study might compare their reception by different national, subnational, or
transnational groups. Both have renowned reputations on the international scene, and much control over the kinds of projects they undertake, and it would seem to me that were they working within or for the Hollywood system that we would see a different body of work emerge from their labors. Quentin Tarantino, Francis Ford Coppola, Woody Allen, Sam Peckinpah, and Martin Scorcese all come to mind as filmmakers for whom the nomination of creative genius is associated and whose public persona on behalf of their films bespeaks an understanding that the pressure to perform for the camera, in our time, extends to the director as well as to the star. They too, in my view, could be considered star-auteurs.

Noticeably absent from the tentative list of star-auteurs I have offered so far, however, are female filmmakers and filmmakers of color. Feminist and critical race theory objections to auteurist studies are taken very seriously by this author and their criticism of auteurist kinds of projects are not disputed here. No doubt, early auteur theory built itself on an aggrandizing of a unified subject position inherited from the Enlightenment, i.e., the genius, whose solitary figure was believed to be responsible for organizing the “genius” of the text. And the genius figure is posited by hegemonic forces as always already male, always already white. That even the most astute

77 Pedro Almodovar on working for Hollywood: I think it's a danger when you decide to change the language you speak or your culture when doing a movie. I think, in my case, I would probably lose part of the richness in my films, and also the details that make up them. Another reason that's probably more important is that Hollywood will probably never allow me to have the same degree of independence and freedom I have now when I do my films. My films are like handicraft work – I intervene in all processes, at all the levels of my filmmaking. In Hollywood, there are many people making decisions – not just the director. So this is why I don't think I will be able to work in the Hollywood system.
cinephiles can barely call together a list of more than a handful of female directors (from anywhere, let alone prominent ones), or filmmakers of color working in America, seems to me a symptom of the larger social problem that I will suffice to call here racial segregation and gendered divisions of labor, that is, the different values we assign to male and female work, to the work done by whites and the of labors of people of color. To isolate the concern of feminists, women have only entered the industrial filmmaking workforce as directors fairly recently and yet they are an integral part of the industrial system that is commercial filmmaking and no one will dispute the role that the female star has been made to play in the economic exploitations of cinema.

The conventional logic of the gendered division of labor within filmmaking would seem to be thus: woman perform the work of stars, men reap the rewards of auteurism. As a hybridization of these two positions, my theorizing of the star-auteur would want to also include the suggestion that the place of the star-auteur is not stable and subject to combustion. The demand that they play the role of the star as well as the auteur is no small task and, as my thesis explored in the final chapter, Almodovar and Wong develop an awareness of the ways in which becoming star-auteurs have hemmed them in to certain positions, critical or otherwise, that they would rather avoid. Thus, even auteurs get performance issues and stardom can be quite a curse.

That Almodovar and Wong seem to accept the mantle of “star-auteur” without hesitation should not, I think, be read as simply a sign of their acquiescence to the commercial demands of the contemporary film industry nor of their triumph over the
system. Instead, this thesis argues that by donning the persona and affectations of a
global auteur, of a worldwide star, these directors also build for themselves a kind of
barrier against criticism that might stunt the development of the more ambitious and
avant-garde aspects of their work. Given the extant of the thematic, visual and musical
similarities we find in the films under discussion, it would be hard to conclude that
Wong Kar-wai and Pedro Almodovar are not in conversation with each other, and with
the historical moment they share. Indeed, that two of the most influential and
appealing directors of the contemporary art cinema find themselves addressing issues
of similar concern seems to confirm a complex and dialectical relationship between
local and global concerns. Important questions are to be raised about why we are
turning our attention to notions of auteurism today and why such a concept matters for
students of cultural and media studies. Star-auteur theory suggests that we must not
take auteurism at face value and frames readings of star-auteurist films in such a way
that allows for conversation to open up about political content, at a moment when
cinema, and indeed most of digital (call it postmodern) culture, is bemoaned for its
lack of political content.

No doubt, the digital mode of cultural production has had an incredible impact
on the ways in which viewers, readers, and authors relate to the film text and, as such, I
would suggest that future work would need to take into account more fully digital
technology’s effect on practices of viewing and reception for the works of star-auteurs.
This study focused on the film’s formal elements and their production leaving aside other facets of contemporary film practice that are also deserving of attention, namely exhibition and acquisition. As questions of digital culture move increasingly into the center of cultural production and consumption, the seemingly ubiquitous networks of information facilitating the flow of such culture across time and national borders is not-so quietly short-circuiting previous kinds of restriction on access to protected data and information. I am speaking here of course of the Internet and its impact on modes of cinematic reception.

One important resource for this project has been the Google-owned streaming video application YouTube. From YouTube, I managed to obtain interview clips with Wong and Almodovar which, in a pre-YouTube world, would have required more work. Also, YouTube provided me with relatively unfettered access to important clips from all of the films under consideration in this project and to montages of their work created by fans which perfectly captured the signature styles of both directors. It seems that in the age of YouTube, Barthes’ premonition that the final authorial marks will be made by readers/viewers has been born out quite explicitly in the form of digital mash-ups that bring together, quite cunningly, auteurist work in film and music. If Almodovar and Wong have come to inhabit the critically, economically, and politically valuable position of star-auteur through their awareness of the tension between stardom and authority, then the mash-up cultural form made by fans in honor of star-auteurs might serve as a model for other forms of auteurism. Where the stars
go, the fans will surely follow and in this regard I would hazard that contemporary
technological advances, like YouTube, digital technology, and easy to operate desktop
ing editing software, might bear witness to the birth of a new cinematic author whose work
with sound and the moving image might soon be featured at an online streaming video
source near you: the fan-auteur.
WORKS CITED


Arthur, Paul "In the Mood for Love." (Review) *Cineaste* Summer 2001 v26 i3 p40


Bear, Liza "Wong Kar-wai." *Bomb* Spring 2001 i75 p48(5)


86


---------. Pedro Almodovar. (Urbana: UIP, 2006)

---------. "The Geopolitical Aesthetic in Recent Spanish Films." Post Script: Essays in Film & the Humanities. 21(2):78-89. 2002 Winter-Spring


---------. The Culture of Queers. (New York: Routledge, 2002)


Foucault, Michel in Interview with Pascal Bonitzer and Serge Toubiana, “Anti-Retro”, Cahiers du Cinema 251-2, July-August 1974

88


Hernadi, Paul. “Re-presenting the Past: A Note on Narrative Historiography and Historical Drama”. History and Theory, 1976, Vol. 15 Issue 1, p45

Hok-sze Leung, Helen. “Queerscapes in Contemporary Hong Kong Cinema,” positions, Fall 2002, Vol. 9 Issue 2, 423


89


Kawin, Bruce F. Mindscreen: Bergman, Godard, and First-Person Film (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1977)

Kinder, Marsha. "Pleasure and the New Spanish Mentality: A Conversation with Pedro Almodovar." Film Quarterly Fall 1987 v41 n1 p33(12)


Lu, Sheldon H. "Hong Kong Diaspora Film and Transnational TV Drama: From Homecoming to Exile to Flexible Citizenship." Post Script: Essays in Film & the Humanities. 20(2-3):137-46. 2001 Winter-Summer


Mulvey, Laura. “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”, *Screen* 16, No. 3 (Autumn 1975)


Study of Film”, *boundary 2*, Winter/Spring85, Vol. 13 Issue 2/3, 57-171


Rodríguez, Héctor. "Organizational Hegemony in the Hong Kong Cinema." *Post Script Essays in Film and the Humanities* 191 [Fall 1999] 107-119


Tambling, Jeffrey. *Wong Kar-wai’s Happy Together*. (Hong Kong: Hong Kong UP, 2003)


---------. “Local and Global Identity: Whither Hong Kong Cinema?”, paper delivered at *Second International Conference on Chinese Cinema* in Hong Kong Baptist University, 4/19/00, accessed 1/8/07:
http://www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/00/7/hongkong.html


Vernon, Kathleen. “Melodrama Against Itself: Pedro Almodovar’s *What Have I Done to Deserve This?*” *Film Quarterly*. Vol. 46, No. 3, (spring 1993), p. 28-40


Williams, Bruce. "Slippery When Wet: En-Sexualized Transgression in the Films


Yau, Esther M, ed. *At Full Speed: Hong Kong Cinema in a Borderless World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001)

