

“Happy Together” – a search for identity through alienation

In the year of 1997 almost everyone in Hong Kong had a single thought on their minds: the Handover. As the sovereignty of then still-a-colony of Great Britain was being transferred back to mainland China, Wong Kar-wai, one of the most prominent directors of the so called Hong Kong’s ‘second new wave’, released his latest film. However, instead of offering his own take on the changing political situation, the famous art director defied the public’s expectations and delivered something that seemingly deliberately alienated itself to anything Hong Kong related. The film in question is “Happy Together”, a miniscule and personal love story between two Chinese men, taking place as far away from home as possible – in Argentina, literally on the other side of the world. Nothing is ever as it appears at the first glance though. The very reason why the film took place so far from Wong Kar-wai’s comfort zone *was* the Handover, or more specifically, the director’s reluctance to talk about it: “For the past two years, everybody has been asking me about the fate of Hong Kong, and if my next film would be about 1997. I didn’t have an answer, so I thought we should just walk away and try something else”¹, the director explains in one of his interviews. Thus, it is not surprising that Wong’s desire to think things over and make a fresh start infused the story of the film itself: these two concepts serve as the main themes of the “Happy Together” narrative.

The film’s plot revolves around two men forming an extremely dysfunctional couple: Lai Yiu-fai (played by Wong’s regular Tony Leung) and Ho Po-Wing (portrayed by the late Leslie Cheung). Both of them have journeyed to Argentina in hopes to rekindle their relationship and ‘start over.’² Yet they break up during the first scenes of the film. Lai’s narration explains that the two men have already had countless separations and as many reconciliations – the vicious cycle is continued throughout the story when Ho Po-Wing, after sleeping with various other men, returns to Lai and they start over yet again. The cycle is illustrated both by the film’s editing and the masterful cinematography done by another regular Wong Kar-wai’s collaborator – an Australian cinematographer Christopher Doyle. The beginning of “Happy Together” is shot in black and white; combined with Lai’s narration and Ho’s destructive behaviour which is both repelling and inescapably attractive to

¹ As cited in Stokes, Lisa Odham and Hoover, M. *City on Fire: Hong Kong Cinema* (1999), Verso, London, pp. 269-270

² A phrase repeated by Ho numerous times throughout the film.

his on again, off again lover (behaviour not too different from the conduct typically associated with femme fatale type of character) it invokes a very film noir-like feeling. One of the major themes of the film noir style is determinism, a sense of entrapment; both of the main characters in “Happy Together” are indeed trapped in their unhealthy relationship. They are happiest ‘together’ in the end of the movie, when Lai finally decides to move on and, despite understanding each other better as ever before (or perhaps thanks to that) the two men break from their cycle for good.

Wong Kar-wai’s unique style of directing is both the film’s greatest strength and its weakness. Despite starting his career as a screenwriter, Wong famously shoots his films with unfinished scripts, which constantly change and evolve during both the shooting and the editing. “Happy Together” is not an exception: much of film’s footage found its way to the cutting room floor. Furthermore, its production faced various problems and delays, ranging from health problems of both cast and the director to Tony Leung’s unhappiness with the film’s sexual explicitness³ (one of the first scenes involve his and Leslie Cheung’s characters having anal sex). All of these factors lend “Happy Together” its chaotic nature. The plot of the film is convoluted, often quite unclear and generally driven by emotion rather than the actual narrative. This does work well to portray the often chaotic nature of relationships in general, yet at the same time can confuse and alienate the audiences – it certainly did that to me. The effect of alienation, however, works in favour of the film’s themes. Christopher Doyle noted, that: “We came to Argentina [the film was shot on location] to “defamiliarize” ourselves by moving away [...] the world we know so well. But we’re out of space and depth here. [...] We’re stuck with our own concerns and perceptions.”⁴ The characters of the film mirror this notion – a probable result of the script being produced on the spot. The very alien landscapes and cityscapes of Argentina provide them not a “fresh start”, but quite the contrary – a way to understand *their own* identities better. Thus, the alienation works on four different levels – plot-wise, content-wise, reception-wise and finally, cinematography-wise. In the beginning of the second act of the film the monochrome colour scheme shifts into a very colourful one; but the colours are highly saturated, highlighting the cold of Argentinean summer and the heat of its winter, which defamiliarizes the *mise-en-scène* even further.

³ Stokes, Lisa Odham and Hoover, M. *City on Fire: Hong Kong Cinema* (1999), Verso, London, p. 270

⁴ As cited in Stokes, Lisa Odham and Hoover, M. *City on Fire: Hong Kong Cinema* (1999), Verso, London, p. 270

The film's reception in the east was quite controversial: "Happy Together" gained a Category III rating in Hong Kong and was even banned for a time in South Korea and Malaysia. The reason was, undoubtedly, a very realistic and explicit depiction of a central gay couple. However, for Wong himself the 'gay' aspect of the film is not important at all – according to him, it is a story about relationships in general and temporal relationships in particular. During one interview he expressed, that: "To me, *Happy Together* applies not only to the relationship between two persons, but also the relationship between one person and his past. If people are at peace with themselves and their past, this is the start of being able to be happy with somebody else."⁵ The film's happy ending ensues when Lai finally makes peace with his past and moves on. The future is symbolized by the third character of importance – a Taiwanese immigrant Chang (played by Chang Chen). His presence helps Lai to break free from his dysfunctional relationship with Ho. At the same time, Chang's nationality furthers the notion that the film might have to do something with politics after all.

It may be dangerous to search for a political subtext in such an emotion-driven movie, yet it would not be too far-fetched knowing, that the inception of the "Happy Together" was, in a way, caused by the Handover. Thus, if the film was a result of Wong thinking things over about the 1997's situation, its conclusion could very well be a metaphorical answer: the couple only becomes 'happy' after acknowledging their *incompatibility* of being together. If one would take into an account the presence of Taiwanese character as a symbol for the desirable future, the film's possible critique of the Handover becomes obvious.

"Happy Together" is a highly interesting film to watch; though it does not mean that it will necessarily be enjoyable. Wong Kar-wai's signature disjointed narrative is more cohesive than in some of his other movies, yet it still does alienate the viewers. It is a unique work of art that is not to be missed: the majority of the western critics tend to agree on that. "Happy Together" won Wong Kar-wai a best director award in Cannes.

⁵ Ong, Han *Wong Kar-Wai; film interview* (n.d.) [Online] Available from: <http://bombmagazine.org/article/2113/wong-kar-wai> [Accessed: 14 April 2014]

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