Original research article
UDK 791.43.05:371.335
DOI 10.21618/fil2532521s
COBISS.RS-ID 143862017

Ljiljana Ž. Stević[1]
University of Banja Luka
Faculty of Philology
Sinology Department
Željka Lj. Babić
University of Banja Luka
Faculty of Philology
English Studies Department

BETWEEN MEMORY AND MODERNITY: THE VISUAL AND SONIC LANGUAGE OF WONG KAR-WAI'S CINEMA

Abstract: *The paper deals with Wong Kar-wai's (王家衛) films* Chungking Express (**重慶森林**) *(1994) and* In the Mood for Love *(花樣年華) (2000), focusing on mood, music, and clothing as conduits for cultural messages. By situating these films within the framework of globalisation, the study explores how Wong's aesthetic choices engage with transnational identity, nostalgia, and cultural hybridity. Drawing on film theory, cultural studies, and historical analysis, the paper argues that Wong Kar-wai's films articulate a unique dialogue between local and global cultural dynamics, offering insights into Hong Kong's shifting identity in a globalised world. The primary objective of the study is to investigate how Wong Kar-wai's cinematic techniques—particularly his use of mood, music, and costume design—construct cultural narratives that resonate both locally and globally. The paper seeks to analyse the aesthetic and emotional impact of these elements in* Chungking Express *and* In the Mood for Love. *We also attempt to examine the films' engagement with Hong Kong's cultural identity amid the forces of globalisation and to explore the interrelationship between nostalgia, modernity, and transnationalism in Wong's visual storytelling. Several themes are explored throughout the argumentation, including mood and aesthetic sensibility, music as a cultural memory, the choice of soundtracks in constructing nostalgia, and bridging local and global sensibilities, as well as the use of costumes as a means of cultural semiotics.*

[1] ljiljana.stevic@flf.unibl.org

Keywords: *Wong Kar-wai, culturalist theory, cultural displacement, poetics, identity, nostalgia, globalisation.*

1. Introduction

The appeal of Wong Kar-wai's work to Western audiences continues due to the versatility and uniqueness of his expression, which openly challenges not only Eastern norms and traditions but also Western views on the role of contemporary Asian, particularly Chinese, film in today's cinema. Additionally, the sense of connection experienced when engaging with his films, combined with a general appreciation for life amid globalisation and alienation, prompted us to explore issues in this paper that we consider essential for a deeper understanding of both his culture and cinematic oeuvre. Wong Kar-wai is seen not only as a representative of the new Chinese cinema but also as a pioneer of changes that constantly reshape our understanding of global cultural trends and flows.

2. Theoretical and Methodological Considerations

This paper adopts an interdisciplinary approach to examine Wong Kar-wai's (王家衛) stylistic choices, for the complexity with which the multimodal approach to discussing the particularity of Hong Kong as a space and place within the cinematic world calls for it.

Firstly, we turn to Cultural Studies, specifically Hall's (2019) concept of cultural identity and diaspora, and Appadurai's (1996) notion of global cultural flows, to contextualise Hong Kong's place in international cinema. In culturalist theory, cultural disappearance refers to the process by which cultural traditions, languages, practices, and identities gradually decline or vanish due to external pressures, internal changes, or shifts in social and economic structures. This concept is often linked to globalisation, modernisation, and dominant cultural influences that overshadow or replace local and indigenous cultures. The process is ongoing, and the number of contemporary research issues directed towards it adds more zest to its attractiveness and importance. Referring back to Wittgenstein's (1922:p.189) widely-exploited quote in which he states that "whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must keep silent", it is more than evident that cinematic multimodality enables transformation of aural silence into visual screams by means of movement, colours, mise-en-scène, etc, in which cultural issues offered present the way of deciphering and overcoming the obstacles, because if language is unable to transfer something

for whichever reason, the culture steps in there as a mediator through its specific symbols and rituals which are used for transmission and expressions of values which are uniquely human.

The key aspects of cultural disappearance are given by Tomlinson (1999:p.106) and can be summarised as follows:

1. hegemonic cultural influence – more dominant cultures (often Western or economically powerful) spread their values, media, and consumer habits, leading to the erosion of smaller or less globally influential cultures.
2. linguistic erosion – as major world languages spread (e.g., English, Mandarin, Spanish), minority languages face decline, leading to loss of cultural knowledge embedded in those languages.
3. commercialisation and homogenisation – Traditional practices may be commodified or altered to fit global markets, stripping them of their original meaning.
4. modernisation and urbanisation – rural and indigenous communities often shift towards urban lifestyles, leading to the loss of traditional ways of living, such as folk arts, craftsmanship, or religious customs.
5. state policies and cultural integration – governments may promote national unity by discouraging regional or ethnic cultural expressions, leading to cultural assimilation or suppression.

Secondly, various theoretical perspectives are taken into account when discussing the research issues, apart from the aforementioned Hall's (2019) notion of *cultural identity*, where he argues that historical and cultural forces continuously shape it, and that when dominant cultures impose their narratives, marginalised cultures may fade, we deemed it essential to pinpoint Pierre Bourdieu (1977; 1985; 1996) and his *cultural capital theory* which suggests that when a culture lacks social and economic power, its practices may be devalued and eventually disappear. Consequently, it was necessary to include Said's (1993) notion of *cultural imperialism*, i.e., how dominant powers reshape or erase local cultures through representation and discourse, as the geographical, political, social, and cultural specificities of Hong Kong and its artists present an inexhaustible source of discussion points related to them.

Thirdly, in film studies, poetics refers to the formal analysis of how films create meaning through their structure, visual style, and narrative techniques. It focuses on the internal mechanics of cinema—editing, cinematography, sound, mise-en-scène—rather than external sociocultural influences. David Bordwell, a key figure in cinematic poetics, argues that films should be studied based on their aesthetic

strategies rather than ideological or cultural contexts. Poetics seeks to answer: How is a film constructed? What techniques shape audience perception? What stylistic choices define a filmmaker's artistic signature? Since one of Bordwell's cinematic poetics postulates a claim that "[C]ulture not only divides us; it unites us" (Bordwell, 2001:p.23 cited in Battinson, 2019:p.21), it also adds the possibility of mediation between the cinema and the society it portrays, thus putting the film in the top-most position during the process of analysis.

While these two types of analysis seem opposed, they can also be complementary. A poetic analysis might examine how a filmmaker constructs a scene, while a culturalist approach asks why these choices matter in a broader societal, historical and political context. We attempt to analyse the two Wong Kar-wai films using these two approaches, giving a slight advantage to the culturalist approach, as we find it more familiar and closer to our understanding.

Finally, we will mention just a few of the recent studies which aim to shed light on Wong Kar-wai's cinematic oeuvre. The interest which his film raises both in the West and the East never ceases, showing the necessity of the application of novel theories and approaches to his work. Wang (2023) focuses on the analysis of technical skills applied in a chosen movie, which is seen as an alternative approach to researching late 20th-century Hong Kong cinema. Ning (2025) studies the characteristics of Wong Kar-wai's films using the method of literature, Wei (2024) researches on narrative characteristics, colour and composition in *Chunking Express* and Rodríguez Ortega (2023:p.1177) focuses on Hong Kong as "a nodal component of the worldwide grid of interconnected spaces across borders". Lastly, Lei (2023) focuses on mobile women in his films, Liang (2024) on the connection between Hong Kong and Argentina, and Lee (2024), using the auteur theory, investigates the relationship between the director's ideology and the thematic elements present in his cinematic works. From the aforementioned, it is evident that Wong Kar-wai's films present a research challenge that scientists willingly take to explore the intricate depths of his cinematic oeuvre.

3. Results and Discussion

Wong Kar-wai's films subtly reflect cultural disappearance through themes of nostalgia, loss, and the fading of traditional identities in the face of modernity and globalisation. His cinematic style effectively captures the tension between past and present, personal memory and historical change, and the erosion of cultural roots resulting from urban transformation. Wong Kar-wai does not explicitly discuss

cultural disappearance, but his films feel like a meditation on it. Through urban alienation, lost traditions, and the changing landscape of Hong Kong, he captures the anxiety of a culture in transition—one that is constantly looking back at what it has lost while struggling to define what remains. Historical Analysis of Hong Kong's sociopolitical transformations and their reflection in Wong's films belongs to the culturalist theory approach, whilst textual analysis of key cinematic scenes, focusing on visual composition, soundtrack, and sartorial elements, will be based on the poetics theory.

There are several key aspects we will look into:[2]

a) fading cultural spaces and nostalgia: *In the Mood for Love* (花樣年華) (2000) depicts 1960s Hong Kong, a time of transition when traditional values and community life were slowly giving way to modern urban anonymity. The film's setting—old tenement buildings, narrow corridors, and intimate social ties—evokes a cultural world that is disappearing. The destruction of these physical spaces (like the demolition of the apartment complex) symbolises the vanishing of a cultural identity tied to a specific time and place.

b) displacement and rootlessness: Wong often portrays characters who feel disconnected from their cultural origins. In *Chungking Express* (重慶森林) (1994), Hong Kong's neon-lit, globalised spaces replace a sense of cultural belonging with transient relationships and isolation. His characters, often migrants or outsiders (e.g., Su Li-zhen in *In the Mood for Love*), navigate a city that is both familiar and alien, reflecting the loss of a stable cultural identity.

c) language as a marker of cultural shift: In Wong's films, characters speak a mix of Cantonese, Mandarin, Shanghainese, and English, mirroring Hong Kong's shifting linguistic landscape under colonial and post-colonial influences. This multilingualism reflects the fading dominance of certain linguistic traditions.

d) globalisation and the loss of local identity: *In the Mood for Love*, we see neighbours packing and announcing their imminent departure from Hong Kong in the wake of the transition of administrative governance of Hong Kong to China. Also, the music used in both films shows a transition to modernity and globalised trends.

e) the role of memory and impermanence: Wong's films are deeply melancholic, reinforcing the idea that cultural identity is fluid and constantly slipping away. His signature use of slow motion, step-printing, and voiceover reflections heightens the sense of longing for something irretrievable.

[2] The concepts originate from migration studies, diasporic cinema, cultural studies, and globalisation theory, and we utilised language in cinema as a significant indicator of cultural change and identity. All this is mainly used for analysing the cultural narratives in Wong Kar-wai's films.

3.1 Chunking Express – mood, colour and music

Chungking Express (1994) is an exemplar of Hong Kong's postmodern cinematic landscape, capturing urban alienation, fragmented time, and the transient nature of human connections. The film, divided into two loosely connected stories, explores themes of loneliness, chance encounters, and the interplay between the local and the global, all within the unique spatial dynamics of 1990s Hong Kong. Wong Kar-wai employs frenetic handheld camerawork, step-printing techniques, and unconventional framing to convey a sense of displacement and urban chaos (Bordwell, 2000). The film's claustrophobic mise-en-scène mirrors the characters' emotional isolation, reinforcing Hong Kong as a transient space where relationships are fleeting. (Teo, 2005). The dimly lit neon ambience and rapid camera shifts create an atmosphere of restlessness and nostalgia, aligning with Wong's signature melancholic tone. The first story, involving Cop 223 (Takeshi Kaneshiro) and the mysterious woman in a blonde wig (Brigitte Lin), employs step-printing to distort movement, symbolising temporal disjunction and emotional disorientation.

The soundtrack plays a crucial role in *Chungking Express*, reinforcing the film's thematic concerns. The repetition of The Mamas & The Papas' *California Dreamin'* underscores themes of longing and escapism, reflecting the transient identities of the protagonists. Similarly, Faye Wong's Cantonese cover of The Cranberries' *Dreams* bridges East and West, symbolising cultural hybridity and the fluidity of Hong Kong's postcolonial identity. Faye Wong's character dancing in the snack bar to *Dreams* encapsulates a moment of personal liberation, counterbalancing the film's prevailing melancholy. Costume design subtly reinforces character identity and the film's cultural hybridity. Faye Wong can be compared to the 90s American icon Winona Ryder in another movie that explores generational issues, *Reality Bites*.

Meanwhile, Faye Wong's casual attire and playful demeanour contrast with the rigid, emotionally repressed world of Cop 663 (Tony Leung), illustrating a generational shift in attitudes towards love and spontaneity. The final exchange between Faye Wong and Cop 663 at the Midnight Express snack bar highlights the contrast between youthful spontaneity and emotional restraint, which is accentuated through their costumes and body language. Through its disjointed narrative, evocative soundtrack, and distinct visual style, Wong Kar-wai constructs a cinematic meditation on isolation, desire, and the globalising effects of urban modernity.

When it comes to the musical themes, Garry Bettinson discusses what he calls eclectic music choice to "narratively coherent unity" (Bettinson, 2019:p.27). The usual framework applied to analyse Wong's choice of music is postmodernism,

which reveals his close connections to Tarantino and the modernist *nouvelle vague* (Bettinson, 2019:p.28). The music in his film, in some ways, interrupts the storyline and is often described by critics as MTV moments. Music as a visual element points to the transcultural trends. Cantpop itself represents cultural hybridity, fusing Chinese, Latina and Western music into a unique Hong Kong style. *California Dreamin'* as the theme song of the second part of the movie implies Faye's fear of change and simultaneously her desire to leave and travel, a notion so much present during the nineties (Bettinson, 2019:p.34). The femme fatale (Brigitte Lin) wears a blonde wig and trench coat, evoking noir aesthetics while subverting traditional gender expectations in Hong Kong cinema.

When discussing fading cultural spaces and nostalgia, it becomes clear that Chungking Express is rooted in the urban topography of Hong Kong—specifically, Chungking Mansions and the Midnight Express snack bar. These spaces represent a liminal Hong Kong caught between tradition and modernity. The crowded corridors, neon-lit interiors, and transitory diners suggest cultural spaces in flux, on the verge of disappearing with the city's redevelopment. Wong films these environments with romantic melancholy, turning them into sites of nostalgia, even as they continue to exist in the present. The fast-moving crowd shots underline how the local cultural fabric is being eroded by time and by forces of globalisation. For Abbas (1997), this is the condition of *déjà disparu* — a city experiencing its disappearance even before it vanishes. Wong's camera lingers on hallways, counters, and shadows, transforming them into reservoirs of nostalgia for a city whose identity slips away under redevelopment and impending political transition.

Both narratives, displacement and restlessness, depict characters in constant movement, yet unable to find stable connections. Cop 223 (Takeshi Kaneshiro) runs endlessly, eats canned pineapple with expiry dates, and wanders through the city trying to outrun heartbreak. Cop 663 (Tony Leung) drifts through his routines in a daze, displaced emotionally after his breakup. The women, too —the blonde-wigged smuggler and Faye Wong's character —embody forms of dislocation, either through illicit survival or through daydreaming about escape to California. Restlessness is thus both a personal and a collective condition, mirroring Hong Kong's unease before the 1997 handover. Their wandering is both intimate and collective, mapping the psychic terrain of displacement. On the other hand, it also evokes generational sentiments of displacement and nostalgia, with Fay Wong becoming the icon of the cool girl of the nineties, epitomising all these elements and crossing borders and generations.

As far as language is concerned, the film serves as a marker of cultural shift, foregrounding the polyglot reality of Hong Kong. Cantonese dominates, but English and Mandarin intrude: the Indian and South Asian traders in Chungking Mansions speak in multiple tongues, the blonde woman's identity is tied to her Western appearance, and pop music (e.g., Faye Wong's cover of *California Dreamin'*) arrives in English. Language becomes a marker of cultural layering and shift, symbolising a city negotiating its hybrid colonial/postcolonial condition. Miscommunication and code-switching reinforce the sense of cultural uncertainty. Chow (1998) argues that this linguistic mixture is symptomatic of Hong Kong's in-betweenness: belonging everywhere and nowhere, its identity constantly shifting under the pressures of colonial legacies and global flows.

The import-export economy of smuggling, fast-food culture, and American pop songs encapsulate Hong Kong's entanglement with global flows, thus emphasising the aspect of globalisation and the loss of local identity. The Midnight Express snack bar, with its hybrid menu, epitomises how local culture gets diluted under global influences. The characters long for elsewhere — California, new relationships, escape from crowded streets — signalling a loss of rootedness. Even the canned pineapples with their expiry dates metaphorically suggest that Hong Kong's cultural moment is temporary, commodified, and always approaching obsolescence. Global commodities — canned pineapple, fast food, jukebox singles — dominate Wong's mise-en-scène. These objects, circulating like people through airports and cargo ships, reduce intimacy to expiration dates and imported soundtracks. Stephen Teo (2005) suggests that Wong renders globalisation not as an abstract force but as textures of everyday life, embedding loss of locality into the rhythms of consumption. Hong Kong's porousness to global currents makes identity unstable: is Faye's dream of California an escape, or merely the fantasy of becoming absorbed into another empire?

Wong Kar-wai's cinema thrives on memory's fragility. In *Chungking Express*, memory is tied to objects: canned food, towels, soap, keys left behind. These tokens evoke people who are no longer present, and yet they cannot stop time's flow. Cop 223's fixation on expiry dates literalises impermanence, while Cop 663's apartment becomes a site of memory haunted by his absent girlfriend. Wong's use of step-printing, slow motion, and fragmented narration visually captures the fleetingness of time, reinforcing the idea that nothing—love, places, or identities—lasts. Wong Kar-wai's cinema is memory written in light and shadow. In *Chungking Express*, memory attaches itself to objects: keys, towels, empty soap bottles, a flight ticket never used. Yet these tokens cannot prevent decay. The film's step-printing tech-

nique visually materialises temporariness, stretching instants into fading traces. As Wong reflected in a recent interview (Wong, 2025), cinema itself is "a medium of memory that always disappears as it plays." The film is haunted by its own transience: lovers vanish, spaces fade, identities dissolve, and only the melancholy of impermanence remains.

Chungking Express dramatises the urban anxiety of Hong Kong in the 1990s: a city suspended between colonial past and uncertain future, between local identity and global absorption. Fading cultural spaces, displacement, linguistic hybridity, globalisation, and memory's fragility all converge to paint a portrait of impermanence. We see how the director transforms the ordinary (snack bars, canned pineapples, apartments) into metaphors for cultural and emotional transience. The film ultimately conveys a longing for stability and a sense of belonging in a world defined by restlessness and change.

By accident, our upbringing in a totally different culture on the other side of the world during the disintegration of Yugoslavia evoked similar emotions and identification with the emotional transience and disappearing world. In this way, *Chunking Express* resonates beyond the specificities of Hong Kong's late colonial moment, extending to other cultural geographies, such as Yugoslavia, which was defined during the 1990s by fragmentation, displacement, and a sense of impermanence. For a generation of young people negotiating exile, migration, and the collapse of familiar structures, music and film functioned as a fragile anchor of identity, echoing the repeated refrains that shape Wong's cinematic world. The figure of Faye, with her restless energy, refusal of permanence, and attempt to reimagine intimacy through music and small gestures, may be read as a symbolic counterpart to the migrant subjectivity formed in the Balkans during the same decade. Her insistence on listening, translating and inhabiting foreign sounds mirrors a diasporic negotiation of selfhood between inherited memories and unstable presents. To identify with Faye's role is not merely to see oneself reflected in a character but to recognise how Wong's poetics articulate a condition of searching for stability, for connection, and for a future not yet guaranteed. In this light, *Chunking Express* becomes not only a film about Hong Kong's fleeting moment before transition, but also a transnational meditation on the shared fragility of worlds disappearing in the 1990s, whether in East Asia or in the fractured spaces of the former Yugoslavia.

3.2 *In the Mood for Love* - nostalgia, timbre and qipao

The film that premiered at the Cannes Film Festival on 20th May, 2000 — exactly 25 years ago — was far from the project Wong Kar-wai had initially imagined when he began developing it around 1997. What would become *In the Mood for Love* emerged out of a series of unfinished, overlapping ideas. At one stage, there was *Summer in Beijing*, a light comedy. At another, a triptych film about food, in which Wong particularly wished to craft a vignette about 1960s Hong Kong and the quiet domestic revolutions brought by the rice cooker — a symbol of modernisation and shifting gender roles. Wong was also drawn to Liu Yichang's (劉以鬯) novel *Intersection* (对倒), a fragmented narrative of adultery and longing that fascinated him but which he refused to adapt in conventional melodramatic form. Other influences hovered: Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958), with its exploration of obsession and the darkness of male desire, and Wong's own *Days of Being Wild* (阿飛正傳) (1990), which suggested the possibility of reuniting characters across decades.

What ultimately took shape was not one of these projects but the residue of all of them — sculpted, whittled, and reshaped through Wong's famously improvisational process. The film's eventual title came, characteristically, from elsewhere: a Bryan Ferry song. Just as *Happy Together* (1997) borrowed its title from The Turtles, *In the Mood for Love* gestured toward a global cultural repertoire refracted through Wong's local vision.

The narrative that survived tells the story of two neighbours, Mr. Chow (Tony Leung) and Mrs. Chan (Maggie Cheung), who gradually discover that their spouses are having an affair with one another. Instead of succumbing to betrayal and vengeance, the two enter into a tentative, restrained intimacy, rehearsing scenarios of what their partners may be doing, while keeping their own desires unspoken. Here, Wong inverted the adultery genre: the act itself is never shown, and in fact never consummated between the protagonists. Instead, longing, silence, and proximity generate a different kind of intensity.

This aesthetic of restraint was hard won. A sex scene was filmed but cut, as was an entire 1970s sequence that would have extended the affair across time. Instead, Wong closed the film with a coda at Angkor Wat in 1966, a temporal and spatial rupture that broke from the film's claustrophobic interiors and pointed to the impossibility of resolution. The cutting-room floor was littered with discarded possibilities, yet what remained was pristine — a paradox, since the finished film was assembled hurriedly in time for Cannes (Teo, 2005).

Like *Chungking Express*, *In the Mood for Love* is centrally concerned with impermanence, memory, and cultural displacement, but it inverts the earlier film's restless speed with hushed slowness. If *Chungking Express* staged Hong Kong's transitional identity through fast cuts, pop songs, and fragmented spaces, *In the Mood for Love* reimagined it through repetition, ritual, and stillness. Christopher Doyle's cinematography and William Chang's art direction frame narrow corridors, dim stairwells, and cramped apartments, evoking a city simultaneously intimate and suffocating. Maggie Cheung's cheongsams, each exquisitely tailored and yet worn only fleetingly, become visual emblems of ephemerality: beauty that cannot be held.

Music underscores this temporality. The repeated strains of Shigeru Umebayashi's *Yumeji's Theme* cycle through the film like memory itself — insistent, melancholic, and unresolved. Nat King Cole's Spanish-language ballads overlay Hong Kong with an imagined elsewhere, reinforcing how colonial and global influences shaped its soundscape. Much as Faye Wong's cover of *California Dreamin'* in *Chungking Express* reinterpreted the West through a local voice, these borrowed melodies in *In the Mood for Love* blur temporal and cultural boundaries, binding nostalgia to displacement (Chow, 2007:p.77).

The film also engages deeply with the politics of Hong Kong identity. By setting the story in 1962, Wong simultaneously returned to the city of his parents' generation and projected onto it the uncertainties of Hong Kong's 1997 handover to China. As Abbas (1997) argued, Hong Kong culture lives in a condition of *already disappearing*. In this sense, *In the Mood for Love* stages a love that cannot be spoken as an allegory for a city whose identity is suspended, caught between colonial memory and an uncertain future.

Even after its release, the film refused to settle. Wong returned to the material in the short film *In the Mood for Love 2001*, which is nearly impossible to see, and in *2046* (2004), a sequel of sorts that reimagined its characters and themes. In 2021, he supervised a remaster of his films featuring a yellow-leaning colour palette, which divided audiences. "These are not the same films, and we are no longer the same audience," Wong insisted, framing the act of restoration itself as an invitation to impermanence and renewal (Wong, 2025).

Today, *In the Mood for Love* is widely considered one of the greatest films of world cinema, often ranked alongside *Mulholland Drive* (2001) as the defining masterpiece of the turn of the century. Yet Wong himself has suggested that the project remains unsettled for him, unfinished in spirit. Perhaps this is fitting: a film about longing, silence, and the impossibility of resolution could only itself stay in flux.

In an attempt to pinpoint the notions of fading cultural spaces and nostalgia, we turn to Wong Kar-wai himself. In a 2025 interview with the British Film Institute (Wong, 2025), he reflected on the formative cultural environment that shaped both his childhood and his cinema:

> 'When my family arrived from Shanghai in 1963, Hong Kong was a collision of dialects and customs. What struck me most was how living spaces forced people together. We shared flats with strangers. There was no such thing as privacy; your life was an open book that everyone read over your shoulder. Today, we barely know who lives next door. But in those days, the walls were thin and the connections were thick. The characters in *In the Mood for Love* are inventions, but the world they move through came straight from my childhood memory.'

This statement reveals not only the autobiographical dimensions of *In the Mood for Love* (2000) but also Wong's broader preoccupation with memory, nostalgia, and the vanishing social geographies of Hong Kong. His recollection of shared tenements and thin-walled intimacy highlights the collective experience of migrant families, many of whom had arrived from Mainland China in the mid-twentieth century. In these cramped dwellings, privacy was scarce, yet human connection flourished. Wong positions this contrast against the atomised reality of contemporary urban life, where proximity does not guarantee intimacy, and neighbours remain strangers despite physical closeness.

The nostalgic tone here is crucial. *In the Mood for Love* was released at the turn of the century, just three years after the 1997 Handover of Hong Kong to China. The film's temporal setting in 1962 functions as both a personal recollection and a cultural palimpsest, evoking a transitional moment when old Shanghai émigré traditions intersected with the emergent modernity of Hong Kong. Wong's evocation of thin walls and thick connections signals a social texture that had already begun to disappear by the time of filming. Thus, nostalgia in the film does not merely reflect personal longing; it becomes an act of cultural preservation, an attempt to hold onto a disappearing way of life through cinematic reconstruction.

This layering of memory is also reflected in Wong's shifting creative intentions. The project that would eventually become *In the Mood for Love* began, according to the director, as a story about food and daily encounters (Teo, 2005). Yet as the narrative developed, the focus turned toward secrecy, repression, and unspoken desire. In retrospect, this transition is deeply resonant: food as a symbol of everyday cultural exchange gave way to the more elusive theme of hidden emotions, mirroring the gradual erosion of communal life. Wong's childhood tenements provided the

architecture of proximity, but the final film captures the silences, the glances, and the untold stories that emerge from such enforced closeness.

In this sense, Wong's cinema functions as an archive of disappearing cultural spaces. The nostalgic recreation of 1960s Hong Kong in *In the Mood for Love* is less about historical fidelity than about affective truth: the atmosphere of narrow staircases, the smell of shared kitchens, the quiet rhythms of neighbours brushing past one another in hallways. These details, reconstructed from memory, create a *poetics of space* that foregrounds the fragility of intimacy in a changing urban fabric (Bachelard, 1994). Wong's nostalgia, therefore, should not be mistaken for simple romanticisation; it is instead a critical reflection on cultural loss and the shifting meanings of home, belonging, and memory at the edge of modernity.

If nostalgia in *In the Mood for Love* is rooted in Wong Kar-wai's reconstruction of shared cultural memory, it is equally shaped by an acute sense of displacement. The characters of Mr. Chow and Mrs. Chan live in transit: migrants from Shanghai or Guangdong who find themselves in Hong Kong's crowded boarding houses, suspended between traditions and an uncertain future. This condition reflects Wong's own biography as the child of Shanghai émigrés arriving in Hong Kong in 1963, an experience that shaped his sensitivity to fractured identities and transient homes.

The film does not offer its protagonists a stable ground; instead, their world is one of constant movement through rented rooms, narrow corridors, and cheap noodle stalls. The boarding house, which might be imagined as a site of community, becomes, in Wong's framing, a reminder of impermanence. People come and go, walls are porous, and belongings are meagre, often contained within a single suitcase. Wong captures this restlessness visually: doors opening and closing, staircases traversed repeatedly, and characters perpetually passing one another without resolution. These motifs emphasise the provisional nature of life in Hong Kong's migrant neighbourhoods during the 1960s.

Displacement also manifests on an emotional level. Both Chow and Chan are trapped in marriages marked by betrayal, yet their connection remains unfulfilled. They circle one another, share fleeting intimacies, but cannot anchor their desire in permanence. Wong structures this rootlessness into the narrative itself: time slips forward in elliptical jumps, scenes fade into others without clear transitions, and the possibility of a stable romantic resolution is repeatedly deferred. This reflects what Abbas (1997) calls *the culture of disappearance* in Hong Kong, where spaces and identities are constantly in flux, always on the verge of vanishing.

At the turn of the millennium, *In the Mood for Love* thus embodies a double displacement: historical, in recalling a Hong Kong on the cusp of modern trans-

formation, and personal, in dramatising the emotional exile of two individuals caught between duty and desire. Wong's nostalgic gaze reconstructs a lost world, yet it simultaneously acknowledges that this world was never entirely secure. The characters' rootlessness mirrors the broader condition of Hong Kong itself, a city historically shaped by migration, colonialism, and political transition.

The film's final gesture — Chow whispering his secret into a hollow at Angkor Wat — makes this rootlessness a global phenomenon. The protagonists' unspoken love migrates from Hong Kong to Cambodia, from one sacred space to another, suggesting that memory itself becomes a kind of exile. In this way, *In the Mood for Love* renders displacement not only as a social reality but as the very condition of desire and remembrance.

Language in *In the Mood for Love* functions as a subtle but powerful indicator of cultural transition. The film's world is populated by Shanghai émigrés who carry with them the linguistic rhythms, idioms, and cultural codes of their place of origin. Within the boarding houses and noodle stalls, Shanghainese dialects and Mandarin intermingle with the dominant Cantonese of Hong Kong, creating a sonic tapestry that reflects the city's hybridity. This multiplicity of tongues not only situates the characters historically but also reveals the fragile boundaries of identity in a society shaped by migration and displacement.

Wong Kar-wai has often emphasised how his childhood was marked by linguistic plurality: arriving from Shanghai, he grew up listening to Cantonese outside while speaking Shanghainese and Mandarin at home. This constant shifting between idioms created, in his own words, both a sense of intimacy and estrangement. *In the Mood for Love* preserves this layered experience by embedding language into the texture of daily life, where accents and speech patterns become markers of class, belonging, and otherness. The very act of ordering food at a noodle stall, or conversing across the thin walls of the apartment, carries with it cultural histories that are on the verge of fading.

The film's deployment of language thus signals a broader cultural shift taking place in mid-20th-century Hong Kong: the gradual dominance of Cantonese in public life, set against the slow erosion of Shanghainese migrant enclaves. This shift, although subtle on screen, has profound implications for how characters perceive their relationship to their community. Mrs. Chan, for example, straddles both Shanghainese traditions and Hong Kong modernity, her identity marked as much by her speech as by her qipao. Mr. Chow, who moves between different cultural registers, embodies the linguistic adaptability required in a city where survival often depended on negotiating multiple languages.

At a symbolic level, Wong's attention to language underscores the themes of displacement and rootlessness. As Abbas (1997) argues, Hong Kong's cultural identity has often been defined by *the politics of disappearance*, where traditions dissolve under the weight of modern transformation. The fading of Shanghainese speech in Hong Kong reflects not just demographic change, but also the gradual erasure of cultural memory. In *In the Mood for Love*, language becomes both an echo of a disappearing world and a marker of the city's relentless cultural reconfiguration.

Ultimately, language in the film is more than dialogue — it is atmosphere. Just as Wong reconstructs vanished spaces through sound and décor, he uses language to evoke the texture of a past moment that is no longer recoverable. The shifting tones and dialects heard in passing gestures remind viewers that cultural identity is never fixed but always negotiated, suspended between memory and modernity.

One of the most visually striking aspects of *In the Mood for Love* is the recurring presence of the qipao, the high-collared, body-hugging dress worn by Mrs. Chan (Maggie Cheung). Wong Kar-wai uses the qipao not merely as a costume but as a central narrative device, a cultural symbol, and an aesthetic motif through which memory, time, and desire are expressed.

The qipao is deeply embedded in the cultural history of twentieth-century China. Emerging in Shanghai during the 1920s and 1930s, it came to symbolise modern femininity, urban sophistication, and cosmopolitanism (Finnane, 2008:pp.1–2). In the diasporic context of Hong Kong, the qipao carried with it an aura of cultural continuity, linking émigré communities back to a nostalgic vision of Shanghai modernity. By situating his protagonist in this garment, Wong not only reconstructs his own childhood memories of Shanghai émigré women in Hong Kong boarding houses but also inscribes Mrs. Chan into a broader cultural narrative of displacement and nostalgia. The dresses she wears throughout the film become material traces of a displaced world, echoing the broader themes of cultural memory and disappearance.

Wong's use of repetition is especially significant. Mrs. Chan appears in more than twenty different qipao designs, but they often reappear in similar settings or visual contexts, creating a rhythm that mirrors the cyclical structure of memory. This recalls Assmann's (2011:pp.15–16) notion of cultural memory as repetitive, ritualised, and performative, rather than linear. Each reappearance of a qipao design functions like a refrain, stabilising the fragmented temporality of the film while reinforcing the persistence of memory. The dresses thus operate as what Pierre Nora (1989:p.7) would call *lieux de mémoire (*sites of memory), embodied in fabric, pattern, and colour.

The colours and patterns of the qipao enrich this mnemonic role. The dresses frequently feature floral motifs, visually resonant with the film's title, as flowers serve as metaphors for both ephemeral beauty and the fleeting nature of desire. Their palette shifts from bold reds and greens to muted beige and grey, silently charting emotional trajectories that the characters cannot articulate verbally. Roland Barthes (1983:p.35) argued that clothing is never a neutral object but a sign system, capable of encoding cultural and emotional meanings. In Wong's film, the qipao becomes a silent language of repression and longing. Each hue, pattern, and silhouette functions as an affective sign, marking emotional intensities otherwise suppressed by social norms.

Visually, the qipao is framed against the narrow corridors, staircases, and doorways of Hong Kong's crowded apartments, emphasising its dual role as both ornamental and constraining. The fitted silhouette accentuates elegance, yet within Wong's mise-en-scène, it also symbolises restriction, echoing Mrs. Chan's position as a woman confined by societal expectations of propriety. This dynamic resonates with Barthes's (1983:p.51) idea of clothing as both an *armour* of identity and a form of social discipline. The qipao, in this sense, embodies the paradox of Wong's female protagonist: poised and graceful, yet bound by invisible social and cultural walls.

By the late 1960s, when the film is set, the qipao had already begun to fade from daily wear in Hong Kong, replaced by Western fashions. Wong's insistence on foregrounding it is therefore an act of cinematic remembrance. As theorists of cultural memory, such as Assmann (2011), remind us, objects can serve as *memory bearers*, materialising what might otherwise disappear from collective consciousness. The qipao in *In the Mood for Love* is precisely such a bearer: it reconstructs a vanishing cultural form while embedding it into the visual archive of cinema.

In this light, the qipao is more than fashion; it is a mnemonic device. Its repetition across the film's elliptical narrative reflects the cyclical nature of memory, its colours silently register the emotional intensities of longing, and its cultural connotations inscribe Wong's characters into a vanishing Shanghai-Hong Kong milieu. In *In the Mood for Love*, the qipao becomes the material embodiment of nostalgia, displacement, and the haunting persistence of memory.

4. Conclusion

Wong Kar-wai's films offer a profound meditation on cultural disappearance, capturing the tension between memory and modernity, as well as the interplay between individual experience and collective history. Through *In the Mood for*

Love and *Chungking Express*, he constructs cinematic worlds where nostalgia, loss, and impermanence dominate, reflecting the erosion of traditional identities amid rapid urban and sociopolitical change.

The analysis demonstrates how Wong's use of spatial environments, from narrow corridors and tenement buildings to neon-lit urban streets, embodies the fragility of community and the vanishing of cultural spaces. These physical settings are inseparable from the emotional landscapes of his characters, who experience displacement, rootlessness, and a pervasive sense of alienation. By portraying individuals caught between personal memory and shifting cultural norms, Wong emphasises the fragility and fluidity of identity in a globalised, rapidly transforming city.

Language emerges as a key marker of cultural transition in his work, where the coexistence of Cantonese, Mandarin, Shanghainese, and English reflects both historical migration patterns and the changing social fabric of Hong Kong. Similarly, sartorial elements, particularly the repeated use of the qipao in *In the Mood for Love*, function as materialised memory, evoking vanished aesthetics, traditions, and forms of feminine subjectivity. Music and soundtrack choices further reinforce the juxtaposition of local cultural memory against the homogenising pressures of globalisation, highlighting the tension between the particular and the universal.

Ultimately, Wong Kar-wai's films operate as cultural texts that transcend national borders while remaining deeply anchored in Hong Kong's local specificity. Through his poetic cinematic style — combining visual composition, step-printing, voiceover, and repeated motifs — he transforms individual longing into a collective meditation on impermanence, loss, and nostalgia. These films remind viewers that cultural identity is neither static nor easily recoverable: it is constantly negotiated, fleeting, and intimately tied to the spaces, languages, and memories that shape human experience.

Wong Kar-wai's oeuvre reveals the aesthetic and emotional dimensions of cultural disappearance, offering a poignant reflection on the impermanence of memory, tradition, and identity in the modern city. His cinema not only preserves the traces of a vanishing world but also illuminates the universal human experience of longing for what has been lost.

References

1. Abbas, A. (1997) *Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance*. Minneapolis and London, University of Minnesota Press.
2. Appadurai, A. (1996) *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalisation*. Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press.

3. Assmann, J. (2011) *Cultural Memory and Early Civilisation: Writing, Remembrance, and Political Imagination*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
4. Bachelard, G. (1994) *The Poetics of Space*. Boston, Beacon Press.
5. Bettinson, G. (2019) *The Sensuous Cinema of Wong Kar-wai: Film Poetics and the Aesthetic of Disturbance*. Hong Kong, Hong Kong University Press.
6. Bordwell, D. (2000) *Planet Hong Kong: Popular Cinema and the Art of Entertainment*. Cambridge, Harvard University Press.
7. Bourdieu, P. (1977) Cultural Reproduction and Social Reproduction. In: Karabel, J. & Halsey, A. H. (eds.) *Power and Ideology in Education.* New York, Oxford University Press, pp. 487–511.
8. Bourdieu, P. (1986) The Forms of Capital. In: Richardson, J. (ed.) *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education.* Westport, Greenwood, pp. 241–258.
9. Bourdieu, P. (1996) *The State Nobility: Elite Schools in the Field of Power*. Stanford, Stanford University Press.
10. Barthes, R. (1983) *The Fashion System*. Berkeley, University of California Press.
11. Chow, R. (2007) *Sentimental Fabulations, Contemporary Chinese Films: Attachment in the Age of Global Visibility*. New York, Columbia University Press.
12. Finnane, A. (2008) *Changing Clothes in China: Fashion, History, Nation*. New York, Columbia University Press.
13. Hall, S. (2019) *Essential Essays, Volume 2: Identity and Diaspora.* Durham and London, Duke University Press.
14. Ning, K. (2025) Analysis of Director Wong Kar Wai's Personal Style and Movie Characteristics — Taking *2046* and *Chungking Express* as Examples. *Communications in Humanities Research.* 64, 122–127. DOI: https://doi.org/10.54254/2753-7064/2024.19147.
15. Nora, P. (1989). Between memory and history: Les lieux de mémoire. *Representations.* 26, 7–24.
16. Lee, D. (2024) Exploring Philosophical Dimensions in Wong Kar-wai's Filmography. *Journal of Global Research in Education and Social Science.* 18(3), 16–22. https://doi.org/10.56557/jogress/2024/v18i38753.
17. Lei, C. P. (2023) 'Take the longest way to cross the street': mobile women in Wong Kar-wai's films. *Gender, Place & Culture.* 31(5), 595–613. https://doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2023.2228510
18. Liang, W. (2024) Wong Kar-wai's Argentine Affair: Happy Together as a Translingual and Multimodal Adaptation. *Adaptation*. 17(2), 230–252. https://doi.org/10.1093/adaptation/apae010
19. Liu, D. (2017) An Analysis of the Narrative Mode of Wong Kar-wai's Films: A Case Study of *Chungking Express*. *Audiovisual.* 7, 74–75. DOI:10.19395 j.cnki.1674-246x.2017.07.040.

20. Rodríguez Ortega, V. (2023) Hong Kong and Taipei in the 1990s: From Wong Kar-Wai's to Tsai Ming-Liang's Cinematic Works. *Quarterly Review of Film and Video.* 42(5), 1177–1198. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1080/10509208.2023.2265779
21. Said, E. W. (1993) *Culture and Imperialism*. New York, Vintage Books.
22. Teo, S. (2005) *Wong Kar-wai: Auteur of Time*. London, British Film Institute.
23. Tomlison, J. (1999) *Globalisation and Culture*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press.
24. Wang, C. (2023) A Study of Film Aesthetics of Wong Kar-wai - Taking *Fallen Angels* as an Example. *Communications in Humanities Research*. 21(1), 72–77. DOI: 10.54254/2753-7064/21/20231418
25. Wei, J. (2024) Wong Kar-wai's Film Aesthetics: An Analysis of *Chungking Express* from the Perspective of Film Studies. *Journal of Education, Humanities and Social Sciences.* 33, 78–84. DOI: https://doi.org/10.54097/hq19yz65
26. Wittgenstein, L. (1922) *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. New York, Harcourt, Brace and Company, Inc.
27. Wong, K.-w. (2025) Wong Kar-wai on *In the Mood for Love* at 25 [Interview]. *Sight & Sound*. Retrieved from: https://www.bfi.org.uk/sight-and-sound/interviews/wong-kar-wai-mood-love-25

Љиљана Ж. Стевић
Универзитет у Бањој Луци
Филолошки факултет
Катедра за синологију

Жељка Љ. Бабић
Универзитет у Бањој Луци
Филолошки факултет
Катедра за англистику

ИЗМЕЂУ СЈЕЋАЊА И МОДЕРНОСТИ: ВИЗУЕЛНИ И ЗВУЧНИ ЈЕЗИК ФИЛМОВА ВОНГА КАРВАЈА

Резиме

Филмови Вонга Карваја дубоко су атмосферски, јер спајају визуелне, музичке и одјевне елементе како би створили наративе који превазилазе националне и временске границе.

Овај рад испитује филмове *Чунгкинг експрес* (1994) и *Расположени за љубав* (2000), усредсређујући се на расположење, музику и одјећу као канале преношења културалних кодова. Смјештајући филмове у оквир глобализације, рад истражује како се Вонгови естетски избори повезују са транснационалним идентитетом, носталгијом и културном

хибридношћу. Ослањајући се на теорију филма, културалне студије и историјску анализу, овај рад тврди да Карвајеви филмови остварују јединствен дијалог између локалне и глобалне културне динамике, нудећи увид у промјењиви идентитет Хонгконга у глобализованом свијету. Основи циљ рада јесте да истражи како Карвајеве кинематографске технике – посебно његова употреба расположења, музике и костимографије – конструишу културалне наративе који одјекују и локално и глобално. Рад настоји да анализира естетски и емоционални утицај ових елемената у два одабрана филма. Такође, покушава да испита везе филмова са културним идентитетом Хонгконга у доба глобализације и да истражи међусобни однос носталгије, модерности и транснационализма у Вонговом визуелном приповиједању. Обрађује се неколико тема као што су расположење и естетски сензибилитет, музика као култура сјећања и избор музичке подлоге (кантопоп, латино џез, западни класици) који конструише носталгију и премошћује локалне и глобалне сензибилитете. Најзанимљивија је тема костима као извора културалне семиотике, која истражује како одјећа у Вонговим филмовима преноси темпоралност, класу и чежњу, посебно у филму *Расположени за љубав* са својом симболиком ћипаоа, традиционалне кинеске женске хаљине из доба династије Ћинг. Посљедња тема јесте разумијевање како филмови Вонга Карваја управљају историјским и друштвено-политичким транзицијама Хонгконга унутар ширег глобалног кинематографског пејсажа.

▸ ***Кључне ријечи***: Вонг Карвај, културална теорија, културално измјештање, поетика, идентитет, носталгија, глобализација.

Preuzeto: 5. 9. 2025.
Prihvaćeno: 7. 9. 2025.