

Resisting the Lure of the Fetish: Between Abjection and Fetishism in Kar Wai Wong's *In the Mood for Love*

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Abstract

Even though abjection has been an unexplored aspect of fetishistic theories, its association with excluded otherness, the logic of disavowal, and the horror of castration not only is basic to fetishism, but also offers an approach to depolarize categories of sexuality and gender. In this essay, a hardly discussed psychological research on the middle pattern between abjection and fetishism is suggested to support a reading of Wong Kar Wai's film *In the Mood for Love*. Resurrecting fetishism as a new and radical mode of spectatorship, Wong's film evokes a nostalgic mood within the liminal space of his presentation of Hong Kong in the 1960s. His fetishistic impulse resonates in the sequences of slow motion, freeze-frame shots, and role-playing that transcend the temporal constraints of traditional film technique. The director works through the fetishistic processes of affirmation and disavowal through the major female lead Mrs. Chen. Neither can Mrs. Chen simply sustain the status of being a fetish object nor can she accept her own constitution as an abject, as shown in her famous line: "We will never be like them." In this paper, first, I will address the question of whether the issue of abjection can shed light on our understanding of Mrs. Chen's fetishistic desire toward the inanimate objects of *chipaos*, shoes, and cigarettes, and the reified traits, namely cultural constructs of nostalgia and mimetic performativity of an abject self. I will also explore the issue of whether her disavowal of cruel reality has the potential to destabilize the patriarchal structure of the film. The visual text confirms a back-and-forth route from psyche to body, from erotics to sexuality within a frame of fetishistic scopophilia. However, the object of desire returns repeatedly, not simply to haunt the female subjects, but to take them elsewhere, to the in-betweenness of disavowal and affirmation. Articulating the relation between abjection and fetishism, *In the Mood for Love* facilitates reflection on a true object cathexis that recalls a lost maternal memory, a reflective mirror that leads us to the primal trauma and offers healing empowerment.

Keywords

fetishism, disavowal, abjection, a/object, spectatorship, femininity

The abject confronts us . . . with our earliest attempts to release the hold of maternal entity even before ex-isting outside of her. . . . It is a violent, clumsy breaking away, with the constant risk of falling back under the sway of power as securing as it is stifling.

—Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*

Against the body, the floral *chipao* silhouette
Aligned within a badge of honor, a restricted frame
Gently shimmying, my *derrière*
To strut around in high-heeled shoes, hesitate
To your world of flame
It must be a moon's curse
That seduces me to the mood for love
To the only night we share
I live in the deeper of your eyes
From desire to desire, our kiss
Suspended, a moment of slow simmering
Puffing away as flare, our love
All that is solid melts into air
At every chance that I miss

—Yuh-yi Tan

I. It's There and It Isn't: Fetishism and Abjection

Sexual fetishism, according to Sigmund Freud's classical theory, bears witness to the human psyche's ability to accept under repression the loss of love objects in a seemingly contradictory complicity that anchors on the relation between voyeuristic mechanism and femininity. For Freud, fetishism implies both the recognition and disavowal of the reality of castration and the constitution of a penis substitute, both of which concepts can be traced back to the childhood. When a little boy discovers that the mother does not have a penis, he is afraid of acknowledging the mother's castration for fear of his penis under threat. To accept that the mother has no penis would mean that he could lose his own with the result of preventing him from experiencing the sexual arousal. Thus, the fetish acts as a protection from the horror of female castration and lack. In his 1927 article "Fetishism," Freud states:

Yes, in his mind the woman has got a penis, in spite of everything;

but this penis is no longer the same as it was before. Something else has taken its place, has been appointed its substitute, as it were, and now inherits the interest which was formerly directed to its predecessor. But this interest suffers an extraordinary increase as well, because the horror of castration has set up a memorial to itself in the creation of this substitute. Furthermore, an aversion, which is never absent in any fetishist, to the real female genitals remains a stigma indelible of the repression that has taken place. . . . It remains a token of triumph over the threat of castration and a protection against it. (*Standard Edition* 21:154)

Freud here acknowledges that some part of reality can be denied, as is the case with fetishism, a vehicle that combines both the denial of and assurance of the fact of castration. The fetish, thus, is the substitute for the mother's penis that the little boy once so strongly believed in and does not intend to forsake so he buries it in his unconsciousness. The mysterious and ambivalent part of the fetish is that it screens out this castration in the form of a memorial thing which allows the woman/mother to be seen as both whole and castrated. Simultaneously, the fetish symbolizes the presence and absence of the maternal penis, a sign of secret fear and desire associated with the unconscious mind.

The Freudian theory of fetishism, contributing to deciphering the displacement of meaning behind representation linked with the unconscious, has been widely discussed in various academic fields. Extending Freud's conception, feminist film theorists in particular have exercised alternative approaches to fetishism and have contributed to cultural studies by expanding the scope of fetishism discourse and adding to its cross-disciplinary theoretical models. Among these feminist theorists, the film critics Laura Mulvey, Lorraine Gamman and Merja Makinen have synthesized Kleinian and Freudian fetish concepts and explored analogies between the two in their books. In *Fetishism and Curiosity*, Mulvey explains Freudian fetishism and its consequence of castration anxiety: "The fetish object also commemorates. It is a sign left by the original moment of castration anxiety and is also a mark of mourning for the lost object. The fetish as sign includes, therefore, even in its fixated belief in the female penis, a residual knowledge of its origin" (5). In most of his statements,¹ Freud designates fetishism

¹ Fetishism has gained popularity as an academic field of study through the exploration of Freud's four articles, namely, "Three Essays on Sexuality" (1905), "On the Genesis of Fetishism" (1909), "Fetishism" (1927) and "An Outline of Psycho-Analysis" (1937). In brief summary to

as a male preserve, yet Mulvey recovers fetishism for female agency and pleasure. Traumatically misperceived as being castrated, the mother's body acknowledges its own abjection; the missing object can be represented and preserved by means of an idealized object substitute. However, Expounding on the Freudian fetish as a phallus substitute, feminist film critics also consider that fetishistic disavowal and substitution can, in a broad sense, represent the trace of other kinds of traumatic lost objects back to the pre-oedipal phase.

Similarly, in *Female Fetishism*, Gamman and Makinen return to a Kleinian model to explore the reason why females are able to become fetishists. Their original inspiration comes from Melanie Klein, who places emphasis on the pre-oedipal, the first year of the baby's life, and then on the mother-child relationship. During the first oral stage, the feelings of love and aggression are fantasized onto parts of the mother's body, primary the breast. Klein stresses "orality" and argues for a shift to the pre-oedipal instead of the oedipal phase. Thus the fetishist regresses to the feeling of the mother's breast as both a direct comfort and a substitute for the castrated penis. Gamman and Makinen stress that Klein posits a "feminine" phase, in which Julia Kristeva develops the notion of abjection, and in which both sexes identify with the powerful mother. They elaborate:

Although Klein still endorses penis envy in girls, she does move away from Freud's emphasis on the importance of the phallus. She does this by shifting the stress back to an earlier, pre-oedipal stage of the baby's relation to the breast and then to the whole mother, during what she calls the "feminine" phase. Such a model might enable some clearer explanation of female fetishism. (99)

In her 1928 article "Early Stages of the Oedipus Conflict," Klein indicates a "feminine" phase in which the child's fantasized relations to the mother are illuminated; later, the child becomes the mother in order to take his/her place with the father. This conception was a forerunner of Klein's later idea of projective identification developed in 1945 and 1946. For girls, this phase is the base of their future femininity; for boys, it is overcome as oedipal desires develop. Generally

what has been mentioned above, in 1905 Freud discusses the pathological aspect of fetishism without gendering it. In 1909, women have been included into the discussion in a passive way. More important conclusions are made in the 1927 article "Fetishism," where Freud restricts fetishism as a male perversion, saying rarely women fetishize.

speaking, Klein and her followers emphasize the importance of the “feminine” phase that molds the possible formation of “female fetishism” and constitutes a basic psychological position for Kristeva to develop her notion of “abjection.”

Through exploring the two major Freudian and Kleinian contexts, we realize that both women and men fetishize, that such a symptom reveals their unconscious repression, which can be retrieved back to the early childhood attachment to their mother and father. Thus, a confusion of the Freudian and Kleinian family romances has two foregrounds, which could be inferred from not just the Oedipus complex but also from the pre-oedipal one. To appropriate and redirect the important argument in *Theatres of the Mind*, Joyce McDougall illuminates that by undoing the “denial of breast or vagina,” the fetish embodies that “psychic scenario capable of uniting the two sexes.” It seems to embody at once “the autonomous penis” and “the unlimited vagina” (44-45). McDougall exemplifies the strategy of unification that considers two sexes as complementary yin-yang halves fitting together. The lost continuity between me and not-me has been recovered in a net of the fetishistic desire. Accordingly, a double meaning of the fetish is in the nonstructurable feminine meanings hidden within the mode that most pretends to be wholly masculine and phallic.

Therefore, the essay’s two dimensional approach of fetishism follows a seemingly contradictory pattern. One adheres to the film theories, whose notion is based on Klein’s pre-oedipal model, such as Mulvey who considers fetishes originally allowing the child to derive comfort and compensate for the withdrawal of the primary object, specifically the mother or caregiver. The other approach maintains with Freud and his followers who believe that the fetish amounts to an anxiety-ameliorating substitute for the missing maternal phallus. Employed in different psychoanalytic interpretations, the logic of fetishism moreover could be associated with abjection. Even though abjection has been a relatively unexplored aspect of fetishistic theories, its association with excluded otherness, the logic of disavowal, and the horror of castration not only is basic aspect to fetishism, but also depolarizes categories of sexuality and gender. Bearing this in mind, further, I explore the possible links between fetishism and abjection.

A paradigmatic condition of Kristeva’s abjection occurs at the level when the child is separated from the mother. Based on Lacan’s mirror stage, the concept of abjection becomes a core for developing fetishism as the principal mechanism for film criticism. The concept elaborates not only a revolt against that which gives us our own state of being but also positions woman in a state of being prior to signification. Indebted to Klein’s notion of projective identification, on the one hand,

Kristeva's abjection declares a rejection of the mother; on the other hand, it also inscribes a primary identification with the mother. Kristeva explains,

Abjection preserves what existed in the archaism of pre-objectal relationship, in the immemorial violence with which a body becomes separated from another body in order to be—maintaining that night in which the outline of the signified thing vanishes and where only the imponderable affect is carried out. (*Powers of Horror* 10)

Although Kristeva does not elaborate her critique on the concept of fetishism, she, indeed, suggests that the absolute status of the phallus and the idealization linked with it are connected with abjection in her book *Powers of Horror*. The phantasy of castration and the associated tropes of fetishism against this traumatic fabrication, such as the mechanism of disavowal, process of instituting subjectivity, and the horror of castration, are constituted to imply a potential extension to fetishism in Kristeva's abjection.

Tina Chanter, in her 2008 book *The Picture of Abjection*, relates Kristeva's notion of abjection to the various fields of feminism, race, film, and cultural studies. Her book emphasizes that abjection is the unexplored yet potential ground of fetishistic theories: "Kristeva's theory of abjection figures as a response to the dominant logic of fetishism" (33). Chanter not only refers to the ways in which fetish and fetishistic discourses relate to abjection, but also argues that the abject is usually covered over and disavowed by fetishistic discourses which stand as self-evident groupings to reify the hegemonic categories of gender, sexuality, and class. By mobilizing fluid registers of abjection, the excluded "other" discourse of femininity has been revealed by the myth of castration and the logic of disavowal.

It is on this terrain that I situate my investigation into the possibilities of interpretation opened up by the abject and abjection contained in a package of fetishes in Wong Kar Wai's film *In the Mood for Love*. The first part explores the three classical sexual fetishes of *chippaos*, shoes, cigarettes and their contradictory fetishistic functions: one is the affirmation mechanism to address Mrs. Chen's femininity, yet also the manipulation of disavowal to pose a threat by situating her in the liminality between self and other. The second part argues the fetish flourishes as phantasmatic inscription in Mrs. Chen's three mimetic performances of her abject other, the False Mrs. Chow, to reveal her unspoken desire. A trilogy of role-playing games deliberately destroys the totality of her performed body, and she

ultimately is reconfigured to revolt against the Symbolic and her subjectivity dissolves in an encounter with the abyss of the abject. The third part, resurrecting fetishism as a wistful style of cultural construct tinged with a bit of bittersweet nostalgia, displays a melancholic mood for the liminal space of Hong Kong in the 1960s. Wong's fetishistic impulse resonates from the sequences of freeze-frame shots of old pictures, clocks, noirish *tableaux vivants*, and relics transcending the temporal constraints of traditional film technique to search for a maternal longing. Articulating the relation between abjection and fetishism, *In the Mood for Love* facilitates reflection on a true object cathexis that recalls a lost maternal memory, a reflective mirror that leads us to the primal trauma and offers healing empowerment.

II. De-fetishizing the Otherness

Wong Kar Wai, the maestro of Hong Kong new wave cinema, creates a nostalgic visual world in his film *In the Mood for Love*. Set in a Shanghaiese enclave in Hong Kong in the 1960s, the film centers on two young couples who rent adjacent rooms in a cramped apartment. Having realized that their respective spouses are having a love affair, Mrs. Chen (Maggie Cheung) and Mr. Chow (Tony Leung Chiu-wai) unexpectedly become involved with each other. However, the would-be lovers separate, leaving their tentative love unrequited. Wong gives us a psychoanalytic insight into perceiving that a fetishistic culture as a whole is a symbolic and symptomatic discourse on the primal loss. Based on such a context and with the understanding of the fetish, the viewer perceives that Wong's major female lead Mrs. Chen is viewed as a partial self that must be read as its quasi-linguistic symbolic self-expression. Her maternal body is fetishized as she masquerades in her high-necked floral *chipao*. She becomes a kind of phallic doll whose relationship to her husband's mistress, Mrs. Chow, seems to invoke a narcissistic and reflective symbiosis. Although the relationship is echoed in the fetishistic objects, in the later part of the film Mrs. Chen's fetishistic character encounters a dramatic transformation to reveal a radical criticism of a patriarchal society which considers that a woman can only be treated as a phallic doll without individual autonomy.

A. Objects of Fetishistic Sexuality: *Chipaos, Shoes, and Cigarettes*

In landlady Mrs. Suen's house, Wong Kar Wai arranges a preface scene to reveal an intersection of these two leading couples. The scenario of mahjong-playing details the slow movement of the two couples' entanglements that is one of Wong's visual trademarks.² The scene starts with Mrs. Chen unpacking a cigarette pack for her husband, then strolling toward the mahjong room and sitting beside her husband whose back obtrudes the camera's intended view of her. Coming from the opposite direction, Mr. Chow's wife walks into the room to replace her husband in the game. Mr. Chow, then, leaves the room and walks toward the same direction from which Mrs. Chen comes in. Concurrently, Mrs. Chen reclaims her original place from Mr. Chow's wife.

These two wives' respective appearances, following the counter direction of the cut movement—one from the right frame; while one from the opposing side—constitute an impression of two obviously contrasted personalities whose intersection is at the crossroads of their marriage betrayals.³ As a modern woman working as a hotel receptionist on the night shift, Mrs. Chow foreshadows Mrs. Chen's abject other, a dark persona who betrays her husband by having an illicit relationship with Mr. Chen. Nevertheless, Mrs. Chow's face is never really seen, and just her voices are heard behind closed doors. The camera, as an interloper, views the cheating spouses in shadow, from behind, or via a blocked view. The device of exclusion of the adulterers from the screen answers to Kristeva's remarks on the abject: "Such lives are based on exclusion . . . articulated by negation and in modalities, transgression, denial, and repudiation. Their dynamics of exclusion challenges the theory of the unconscious, seeing that the latter is dependent upon a dialectic of negativity" (*Powers of Horror* 6-7). The camera eye identifies with Mrs. Chen's point of view yet positions Mrs. Chow as an abject self whose visual exclusion makes her easily fit into that "rhetoric of abjection" retraced by Kristeva.

² Actually in the film *In the Mood for Love*, there are altogether eight scenes shot with the slow movement; each of the scenes has been embedded with a unique implication, yet at the same time, they are linked to demonstrate a systematic sign of Wong's visual aesthetics of melancholic nostalgia.

³ The aesthetics of intersection is something that Wong borrows from the Hong Kong writer Liu Yichang. Wong quotes several passages from Liu Yichang's novella *Duidao*, translated into English under the title of *Intersection* whose double stories describe a young Hong Kong woman Ah Xing and an elderly Shanghai migrant Chunyu Bai.

However, in this love quartet, the feeling of spatial confinement intertwined with the character's replaceable quality is predictable and demonstrated by the fetish-aimed camera that catches several motifs of antitheses, namely the contrasted pairs of subject/object (or object), observer/observed, and active/passive. These contrasts bear implicit connotations within a fetishistic package of *chipaos*, cigarettes, and shoes that stages the emotional arc of Mrs. Chen's hidden desire. The *chipao*, an integral part of the fetishistic sexuality, decorates the female body for an erotic spectacle. In the first scenario of mahjong-playing as mentioned before, invariably eroticized by camera treatment, Mrs. Chen's tight-fitting *chipao* is extremely different from that of Mrs. Chow's wife, especially in her high-neck style and blue-and-red spiral pattern which imply her split psyche torn between the conformist and mysterious qualities. Mrs. Chow, in contrast to Mrs. Chen, wears a more modern version of the *chipao*, which is like a western dress to the knees, sleeveless, bare-necked, and matched by her short, cute hair.

The original for the associated image of these two women comes from Madeleine/Judy in Hitchcock's film *Vertigo*. In an interview by Scott Tobias, Wong spoke of the inspiration for his film: "I wanted to treat it like a Hitchcock film, where so much happens outside the frame, and the viewer's imagination creates a kind of suspense. *Vertigo*, especially, is something I always kept returning to in making the film" (5). *Vertigo* is a film whose primary character Scottie feels a strong obsession with the past. The idea of the "lost past" and of the "urge to recreate it" are recurring themes that Wong has borrowed from the earlier film. What's more, the circling image of the "spiral" hairstyle worn by Hitchcock's female lead Madeleine, the same as that worn by Mrs. Chen in *chipao* shown at the first mahjong table game, visually draws us into the track of time or a delusive maze. Madeleine is a blonde, fashionably bound-up dream girl who becomes the director's obsession, his fetish. As Roger Ebert said in his review, "Over and over in his films, Hitchcock took delight in literally and figuratively dragging his women through the mud—humiliating them, spoiling their hair and clothes as if lashing at his own fetishes." Yet what makes *Vertigo* so intriguing is not just Madeleine but also her double Judy, who is earthier, more approachable, a real person, not a fictional character like Madeleine whose tragic fate is destroyed by the fantasy. Based on such a connection, we might guess that the split model of Madeleine/Judy is being used to forward a generic depiction of fetishistic femininity responded to by Mrs. Chen/Mrs. Chow in Wong's film.

Freud argues in his 1909 paper "On the Genesis of Fetishism" that fetishism could be considered as a perversion instead of a form of hysteria due to the

unconscious repression of the scopic drive. He goes on to assign to all women a form of clothing fetishism by which women idealize their clothes to prevent themselves from being looked at openly. The main Freudian argument focuses on the splitting process whereby one aspect of the object gets suppressed while the rest is idealized into a fetish. In her article “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” Mulvey analyzes that women’s bodies are positioned as objects of scopophilic or fetishistic voyeuristic pleasure, and the female body becomes a phallic fetish. In Wong’s film, Mrs. Chen is magnificently attired in a glorious array of *chipaos* showing her as fulfilling Mulvey’s voyeuristic-scopophilic image. Not only is her *chipao* cut in a trim-waisted and cowl-neck style silhouetted against the body within a restricted frame, but also her derrière is gently shimmying. The consistent changes in her *chipaos* parallel her varying and layered moods and signify her increasingly sexual pursuit and awakening. Most of Mrs. Chen’s scenes are shot alongside Mr. Chow; therefore, her erotic look is often magnified by his character. As their intimate relationship grows more intense, her wardrobe reveals her gradually increasing fondness for her neighbor-lover, so the fabrics of her *chipaos* become richer, the patterns more blooming. While the *chipaos* unravel the secret of her femininity, they also repress her into a melancholic image. Something unsayable is concealed within the *chipaos*. Stephen Teo makes it clear that:

The array of cheongsams [*chipaos*] worn by Maggie Cheung [Mrs. Chen] is Wong’s cinematic way of indicating the passage of time, but Wong also milks it for its erogenous impact on the mind and soul. Maggie Cheung clad in the cheongsam is surely every Chinese person’s idea of the *eternal Chinese woman* in the modern age, evoking memories of elegant Chinese mothers in the ’50s and ’60s (when the gown was still in fashion) as well as memories of the Chinese intellectual female still bonded to tradition. (“Wong Kar Wai’s *In the Mood for Love*”; emphases mine)

The allusive and sensual properties of the body-hugging *chipao*, according to Teo, are a metaphorical sign to elaborate an idea of the “eternal Chinese woman.” In the background of this statement is Simone de Beauvoir’s criticism of the “eternal feminine” described in *The Second Sex* where she challenges the Platonic theory of absolute ideals. The basic concept of the “eternal feminine” claims that there is an ideal of femininity that holds true for all people for all time. Beauvoir

proposes that the eternal feminine is nothing more than the method by which a patriarchal society subjugates women. In her article “Women Can Never Be Defined,” Kristeva’s similar statement indicates a post-feminist interpretation:

It is something which does not even belong in the order of *being*. It follows that a feminist practice can only be negative, at odds with what already exists so that we may say “that’s not it” and “that’s still not it.” In “woman” I see something that cannot be represented, something that is not said, something above and beyond nomenclatures and ideologies. (*New French Feminism* 137)

Perched like a voyeur, the camera snatches close-ups of Mrs. Chen whose voyeuristic-scopophilic representation seems to evoke images that are not just the residue of the castration anxiety but also a reminiscence of motherly longing connected with “eternal Chinese woman.” The *chipaos*, thus played as a nostalgic sign, recall the mood of Hong Kong in the 1960s. More than personal outfits, they represent Wong’s remembrance of the lost world of the 1960s, a milieu that has been traumatized by something that cannot be traced, a kind of primal loss.

The *chipaos* and high-heeled shoes constitute a picture of the double fetters of femininity. Wong, then, returns to his fetishistic roots—feet, high-heel shoes, beaded slippers which are to be visualized to embody Mrs. Chen’s journey of self-liberation. In one scenario, Mrs. Chen is confined to Mr. Chow’s quarters for a full night and day due to an unexpected cause. Removing her comfortable pink slippers to be left at the edge of the bed and slipping into Mrs. Chow’s high-heeled shoes, she walks into her own room and takes off the painful shoes immediately since they are one size smaller. In her later trip to Singapore to find Mr. Chow, Mrs. Chen reclaims her lost pair of pink slippers from his hotel room. A close-up has been arranged in a freeze-frame indicating Mrs. Chen’s picking up of the slippers. The pink slippers, first, are pieces of evidence of the couple’s platonic relationship since Mrs. Chen has been trapped in Chow’s room; then, they become treasured as love trophies collected by Mr. Chow. As a great secret admirer of Mrs. Chen, Mr. Chow carries the slippers to Singapore with him. Finally, the slippers are reclaimed by their hostess to complete the process of imbuing fetishistic objects with associations of psychological fulfillment, sexual desire, and self-realization.

Fetishization of the shoes corresponds to the classic metonymic cinematic representations of the female form and femininity, whose patriarchal scopophilic potential feminists have often critiqued. In Mulvey’s words, “the high heel on

high-heeled shoes, a classical fetishist image, is both a phallic extension and a means of discomfort and constriction” (*Visual* 128). For Mrs. Chen, the small high-heeled shoes bring her double constriction and suffering: one is related to the social convention that limits a married woman’s behavior; the other is linked to the extra-marital affair. The physical pain and mental trauma parallel the torture that foot binding was for Chinese women. Freud cites Chinese foot binding as fetishism where he stresses the mutilation suffered by the female foot. The analogous foot binding experience suffered by Mrs. Chen suggests the reinforcement of power relations since constriction is a form and symbol of control. The sight of Mrs. Chen teetering on the wrong-size high-heeled shoes is supposed to create an effect of vulnerability inducing a feeling of sympathy and protectiveness in the viewer’s mind.

Compared with the restrictions brought by the high-heeled shoes, Mrs. Chen’s embroidered slippers are embedded with the connotation reconciling a female essence with liberation and equality. Attention is drawn to a close-up freeze-frame of an image that combines high-heeled shoes, slippers, and a hand hovering over the slippers, in a gesture of reclaiming of them. The two fetishistic objects, slippers and high-heeled shoes, penetrate the masculine gaze, according to Mulvey, freezing the visual narrative. In a similar discussion to Hollywood movies, she argues,

the female image as a castration threat constantly endangers the unity of the diegesis and bursts through the world of illusion as an intrusive, static, one-dimensional fetish . . . the fact of fetishization . . . freezes the look, fixates the spectators and prevents him from achieving any distance from the image in front of him. (*Visual* 126)

The scene displays Mrs. Chen’s resumption of female empowerment in a freeze-frame *tableau* when she proposes to lift her slippers. The title lyrics of the background music of Nat King Cole’s Spanish version of “Perhaps, Perhaps, Perhaps” indicate a mood of uncertainty and suspension. The paradox created by the visual scene, music, and lyrics tones up the shot with a feeling of anxiety at every missed opportunity. Wong’s re-visioning of Mrs. Chen’s femininity has far more in common with the subversive strategies proposed in the writings of Mulvey who focuses attention on the female power, substance and pleasure that is situated in the very zone where Freud detects a frightening castration and subsequent lack.

On her return, Mrs. Chen leaves a lipstick-stained cigarette butt in Mr. Chow’s

ashtray in a Singapore hotel to hint at her trace. Perhaps the most emblematic and sensual scenarios of the film are the close-ups of her puffing away at his cigarette and his erotic touch of this cigarette butt from the ashtray. It recalls for the viewer the previous shot, where she holds an unlit cigarette in her hand as she walks towards her husband who is playing at the mahjong table. If we compare these two cigarette scenes, we perceive that the first is shot in such a way as to identify her as a fetishized woman submissive to her husband's control. By taking her husband's position, she looks at the world through his eyes and her identification is based on his own image of her. With a fetishistic cigarette, she constitutes her subjectivity in the male gaze by identifying herself as a maternal phallus that could be triggered by an association with cigarettes. Initially, Mrs. Chen is designed primarily to maximize herself as not only the fetishistic icon of the eternal woman but also a sacrificial figure on the altar of marriage since her husband is unfaithful, yet somehow the camera movement gradually foretells her transformation.

Her obvious and dramatic change is manifested in the second cigarette shot in which she smokes a cigarette like a man, representing her rebellion against the patriarchal hegemony and reversing her passive reception of the gaze, a reflection from Mulvey's "to-be-looked-at-ness" to active spectatorship. Therefore, the lipstick-stain left on the cigarette and the reinforcing image of swirling smoke, are congruent with her empowered image to suggest that in the gendered power relationship Mrs. Chen subverts and defetishizes her vision which is no longer a reenactment of the castration anxiety but an outlandish representation far from the feminine principle. The accumulation of phallic signs associated with Mrs. Chen—cigarettes, high heels, slippers, lipstick, *chipaos* etc—is doubly coded—as both an object of desire and sublimation. Her femininity is a fundamentally uncanny position which endorses an intellectual hesitation between self and other, between a surmounting loss and its irrevocable fulfillment of love. Wong's film presents this shifting identity of femininity in opposition to the order of patriarchy and demonstrates the nature of femininity as located in an ultimately liminal border of abjection.

B. Three Rituals of Femininity Performance: “It's Only a Rehearsal”

Rather than an exterior object, the fetish may be held as an imaged self searching for the displacement of meaning behind the consciousness. Usually the self is blind, severed from consciousness and marked by the trace of the other. In

What Do Pictures Want?, W. J. Thomas Mitchell similarly explains, “the fetish is the Mother’s Breast or Little Other” (165). In this sense, the self is no longer perceived as a unified whole but, like the figure as a constantly shifting kaleidoscope of myriad fragments. Mulvey describes a construction of femininity enigma:

The fetish object acts as a sign in that it substitutes for the thing thought to be missing, the maternal penis. The substitute also functions as a mask, covering over and disavowing the traumatic sight of absence, especially if the absence sets off associations with the wounded, bleeding body. The psyche constructs a phantasmatic topography, a surface, or carapace, which hides ugliness and anxiety with beauty and desire. (*Fetishism and Curiosity* 5)

Based on Mulvey’s interpretation, a higher form of fetishism, then, is disguised by an image that is the shadow of a shadow, the after-image of what has never been perceived, of what is always presented as an absence, a desire. While discussing a feminine curiosity of the female body via the myth of Pandora’s box, Mulvey believes that Pandora’s desire to look in the box symbolizes the “self-reflexive desire to investigate the enigma of femininity itself” (“The Myth of Pandora” 11). In Wong’s film, placed in a position of voyeurism that corresponds to psychic processes of fetishism in which the threat of symbolic loss is allayed by displacement, Mrs. Chow’s function of the woman-as-fetish occurs through the sublimation and regulation of her libidinal energy into performative pleasure.

In the light of Mulvey’s explication, in the following section, I think through the sources of Mrs. Chen’s fetishistic transformation of her persona into an imagined abject role of Mrs. Chow that shares in the space of the phallicized fetish itself conceived as something more than the mark of a masculinity complex. Mrs. Chen’s performative body is not the object of a sympathetic identification, but is perceived as a narcissistic shadow, familiar yet strange. Masquerading in the role of Mrs. Chow, she thus opens Pandora’s box that is linked with the secrecy of femininity. A tension between exterior appearance and interiority, thus, exudes ambiances for femininity as a masquerade in Mrs. Chen’s succession of dressing up a role of abjection. Using a combination of theatrical and cinematic effects, her performance spectacles reproduce a split self where the difference between reality and phantasy is collapsed.

Mrs. Chen undergoes dissective performances for the purposes of reincarnation recalling of self-abjection, in Kristeva's words, the subject dissolves and is "ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable" and enters a new mode, a "dark revolt of being" (*Powers of Horror* 2). Kristeva argues that the proper subjectivity requires the expulsion of the improper and the unclean, which are always ambiguously presented and therefore can never be completely eradicated. However, the juxtaposition of the abject other is performed in its crudest sense. Thus, while one portion of Mrs. Chen's body is desperate, the other parts of her body are alive and participating in her rebirth in acting out ritualized plays. This in-between ambiguity of Mrs. Chen's performances is fetishistic since it forces us to look upon both the abject and its opposite at the same time, granting us the power of perceiving an arising of a curious doubling between the boundaries of the reality and the imaginary.

The camera is consonant with the delight of intrigue when Mrs. Chen displays her incursions into the domain of three fetishistic performances, namely when she and Mr. Chow rehearse how their respective spouses started their extra-marital affairs; then when in the second practice session, Mr. Chow plays a role of her husband as she confronts him with his infidelity; and finally, when they practice their own farewell scene.

While acting out the scenes of imagination about the cheating couple, the cheated pair gradually develops a strong attachment in spite of their determination to remain faithful to their respective marriages. Yet even though their mutual bond seems compelling, in order to maintain social or ethical propriety, they refuse to surrender to their desire. As Mrs. Chen says in the script, "We will never be like them."⁴ She is referring to the offscreen disloyal spouses who have a torrid affair. Although the lines are a reminder of moral consciousness within their heart, unconsciously, the borderline between play-acting and real romance is blurred. The art of mimetic performances, in the film, reveals a kind of game of acting out what they imagine Mr. Chow's wife and Mrs. Chen's husband do when they are together. In their respectively masquerading roles, they experience the subject-split experience in a contrasting pair of self and other: on the one hand, this acknowledges their real-life selves; on the other hand, it responds to the fictional characters they are playing. It all starts with curiosity.

Performance is an identity with fluidity. A trilogy of role-playing games starts right after Mrs. Chen inquires: "I wonder how it began. . . . Who made the first

⁴ Please see *Tête-bêche: A Wong Kar Wai Project* (Hong Kong: Block 2 Pictures, 2000). The book is not to be paged.

move?" They enact repeatedly the part of the straying spouse, curious to learn how the romance began, yet in the meantime, they are becoming increasingly drawn to each other. This liberating disguise lets them live in a fictional world without a further confrontation with the real world. When playing the role of Mr. Chow's wife, Mrs. Chen observes a part of her self disguised as an image of otherness, an image of the association with her husband's erotic desire/lack, which she fetishizes like some disfigured/malfeatured and abject self. She desperately wants to perceive how her husband sees his secret lover, so she desires to be the other in order to resolve the riddle of complicated love. In the initial stage of mimetic performance, she becomes the other, the abject other that she abhors but whom she is determined to be for her husband's sake.

All her psychical motivations are based on her curiosity to know what her husband thinks and how he loves. The false fabrication model of signification that she creates by playing out the False role of Mrs. Chow is a method to deceive the eye and mind. A definite link between the False Mrs. Chow and Mrs. Chen makes one human being the carapace of the other. As in *Fetishism and Curiosity*, Mulvey writes of the figure of Pandora:

The story of Pandora's creation, and the story of the purpose behind her creation, also install her as a mythic origin of the surface/secret and interior/exterior topography. She is artificial, made up, cosmetic. As a manufactured object, Pandora evokes the double meaning of the word fabrication. She is made, not born, and she is also a lie, a deception. There is a dislocation between her appearance and her meaning. She is a Trojan horse, a lure and a trap, a *trompe l'oeil*. Her appearance dissembles. (55)

Mulvey details the metaphoric implication of Pandora's box in terms of Pandora-as-box. Along with the lines of all-defining archaic mother, she describes Pandora as "a mythic origin of the surface/secret and interior/exterior topography" (55). Mulvey links the myth to illustrate a secret of femininity-as-fetish that could be associated to the psychoanalytical reaction to primordial longing and fears. A similar parallel is observed in the process of Mrs. Chen's acting out the imaginary role of the False Mrs. Chow. Her masquerading role lets her get into the mind of Mrs. Chow, a woman in the Pandora-like myth that inscribes the origin of betrayal and sexuality.

In the second mimetic performance, Mrs. Chen decides to role-play her confrontation with her unfaithful husband. This playing of the real self challenges the false other since her husband's role is played by Mr. Chow. In the first pretense performance, she questions his infidelity and the final gesture is her slightly flinging a slap at Chow who, then, is back-to-camera, a visual setup that misleads the audience to consider him as the real Mr. Chen. The similar questioning lines are repeated in the second pretense episode, only there is a sharp contrast between Mrs. Chow's over-acting of a loud slurping of noodles like an offensive buffoon and Mrs. Chen's crying over his shoulder with a sad facial expression to say, "I didn't expect it to hurt so much." The most poignant and evident observation in the above-mentioned scene seems to be getting at the truth of performativity that affords them the only moment of accepting the infidelity and a possibility of a new start. The scene even goes much deeper to foreshadow their eventual parting. On the surface, Mrs. Chen's melancholic tears seem to point out her inability to react to her husband's unfaithfulness, yet underneath, since Mr. Chow acts out her husband's role, she's really suggesting her inability to react to their eventual departure.

Mrs. Chen certainly understands Mr. Chow's lines, "This is just rehearsal. He won't really admit it so readily," that invoke multiple implications crossing over a domain of their relation and social conventions. The interdependence between notions of performance and affect becomes dominant in Mrs. Chen's two performances: one is her angry slapping on the cheek of Mr. Chow, her False husband; one is her crying on Mr. Chow's shoulder, but this time, Chow is playing the role of her secret lover. Her fetishistic performing body presents the self as a shock wave of affect which is concretized visibly. Affect is the force of becoming that enables her to pass from one bodily state to another in the name of a "rehearsal" that transcends the self/other boundaries.

Freud describes, in "Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality," the typical fetish as "some part of the body . . . or even some bodily defect" (153). The defective self, a secret or enigmatical part of the subject, is revealed in the second confrontation rehearsal scene that uncovers Mrs. Chen's consciousness of her hieroglyphical self putting on Mrs. Chow's role and her reluctance to accept her false self. The camera follows her into the unconscious zone to reflect her fears of acknowledgment of the love for Mr. Chow and the consequence of their parting. In Room 2046, the half-transparent red curtain floating and blowing the passion into their heart and their embracing gesture reflected from the mirror like a false couple, both foretell their sexual encounter that predicts a final cracking of the two

seemingly perfect marriages.

In a narrow alley, they playact the third performance of farewell, and Mrs. Chen believes that “For us to do the same thing would mean we are no better than they are.” As a center of speculation and gossiping by neighbors and colleagues, they still remain sexually chaste even though they form a strong attachment for each other. As in the previous performances, they bid goodbye twice: the tone for the first time is implanted with the color of a courtly gesture for departing: Mr. Chow is gentleman-like to give his blessing upon their marriage while Mrs. Chen heartbrokenly accepts his departure. It seems that Mr. Chow is prepared to accept the fact of his wife’s adultery and decides to live a new life, yet Mrs. Chen seems to be paralyzed into a maze of indecision.

In the farewell scenario, while the first half acting scene is fictional-like, the second one comes down to earth and is more realizable in the true situation. The complicated layering of the mimetic performances, divided into four parts, builds up to a further sophisticated vision to seal their attraction and leads to a one night stand. It starts with a black frame, accompanied with Mr. Chow’s voice-over saying, “Please. Don’t be serious. It’s only a rehearsal. Don’t cry.” Then the camera pans to the same shot of their holding hands in the first scene but reverses the initial letting go of hands in parting to an embracing reunion scene. Somehow, there is a contradictory arrangement between the visual image and the audio sound for when Chow declares “This isn’t real,” we perceive a visual image of their holding hands.

What follows is something that poses a threat to interrogate the issue of crossing over fabrication and performativity. The camera slowly pans from the right wall where they embrace, passing through to the left. Restricted to the shadows of fences, the couple is stuck in the squeezing frame of the 1/4 space in the left hand corner, the right is dominated by some dark shapes from which a figure is vaguely recognized like a capital “X.” Chow tries to comfort her by pressing her shoulder, and then we see a very disturbing and puzzling half frame close-up shot of Chow’s facial expression which seems to suggest that he finally gets his revenge on Mr. Chen since his wife sheds tears over her loss of him. However, his facial expression turns to a melancholy one after he and Mrs. Chen in a taxi drift into a nightly journey, then in a very surprising way, Mrs. Chow’s offscreen voice suddenly intrudes, “I don’t want to go home tonight.” In the third ritualistic scene of “farewell,” surrendering to the abject “other” roles they are playing, both Mrs. Chen and Mr. Chow are crossing between the roles of their real and fictional selves. On the way to their sexual consummation, under the condition of the fetishist disavowal,

Wong has designed serial shots of resistance under the disguises of mimetic performances. The account of Mrs. Chen's metaphorical performance functions as a momentary disruption of narrative whose threat to the binding power of visual narrative is canceled out since the film is characterized with a feeling of inertia due to the loss.

In his diagnosis of cultural phenomena in "Fetishism and Its Vicissitudes," Slavoj Žižek invents the term "interpassivity" which denotes best the communicative behavior under the condition of fetishist disavowal. The importance of the Big Other is, through his concept of interpassivity, a form of protest that leads to phenomena of disavowal and even resistance. Briefly stated, interpassivity is when we gradually allow others and objects to do things in our place. In applying Žižek's concept to Mrs. Chen, it can be seen that her abject self placed in the phantasmatic acting points out the "real" or forbidden relation that's irrational and against social norms. The logic of her ritual of interpassivity, through the fetishistic performance of her real self and fictional other, is based on the notion of paradox and contradiction of the auditory and the visual senses. It can help explain how her image is dubbed into Mrs. Chow's offscreen voice "I don't want to go home tonight." The ritual of acting and identification connects Mrs. Chen and her interpassive double Mrs. Chow by the representation of the art of performance. Likewise, Žižek writes,

Transposing onto another my very passive experience is a much more uncanny phenomenon than that of being active through another: in interpassivity, I am decentered in a much more radical way than in interactivity, since interpassivity deprives me of the very kernel of my substantial identity. ("Fetishism and Its Vicissitudes" 116)

Identity can be treated as a performative, imitative process. The mobilization of the body's affect through the repetitive performances has actualized the body's potential through specific thoughts, action, displacements, all of which can be seen as different degrees of Mrs. Chen's inner fetishistic desire between the subjected and the abject femininity that centers on a lack. By playing the fetishistic role of Mrs. Chow, Mrs. Chen experiences three levels of transcending: rejection, splitting, and identification, all of which constitute an abjection experience that is based on the self/other pairing and their relations to the Symbolic. For Kristeva, at the level of subjectivity formation, the separation of the infant from the mother is probably the first paradigmatic of abjection since it owes the self to a tentative positing of

boundaries that distinguishes other objects and subjects from one self. However, the way in which abjection returns to haunt the Symbolic is crucial for it is through the order that its movement comes to be articulated.

The first fetishistic performance is a ritual demonstrating Mrs. Chen's decision to play an abject role well and solve a love riddle caused by Mrs. Chow, an outcast from the marriage institution. Even though her femininity is threatened by "lack"—the horrific abject represented by Mrs. Chow, she forces the self to play out an abject role in order to understand her husband whose identification is aligned with his mistress. By being cast as a seducing mistress, she is on an ongoing process that is implicated in the fluidity of an imaginary and excluded other. In this initial stage of performance, she encounters a crisis that prevents her from conforming to the expectation fostered in the masculine imaginary by posing remarks to her playing partner Mr. Chow, "Do you really know your wife?" The provocative and angry tone seems to suggest that she cannot play an attractive and fatal fetishized woman who has earned an adoring gaze from her husband.

If the first performance is triggered by her curiosity and pride to face the abject self, then the second performance is motivated by her anger and sadness in confronting the split self. Between the wife and mistress role, her fetishistic femininity is fluid. This moment of abjection, as Kristeva puts it, "draws me toward the place where meaning collapses" (*Powers of Horror* 2). There are masculine gazes at work, both in the roles of Mr. Chow and his False double role Mr. Chen, that preclude her from a productive relation to the law: fetishistic image is restricted to male subjects, who consider female subjects in terms of fetishes in order to cover their lack. Thus, Mrs. Chen's fetishistic role-playing is underwritten by phallic monism that transforms the scene of a confrontation with her husband to the scenario of questioning to her inner abject self. That helps to expound her intensely emotional arc crisscrossing rage and melancholy.

The last fetishistic performance acts out a picture of sophisticated mapping of abjection. The similar two-time rehearsal method is represented in this mimetic show to indicate how the ironical chances play with human desire. Yet there is a significant difference from the previous two performances since they are not based on the same script lines. Wong picks up the ending of the first departure scene to start the second one that presents a more distinguished performance and visual strategy compared to the previous half. Whereas the first half of the third performance is encoded in the Symbolic law, the second half is staged to articulate the sense of abjection reworking the Lacanian Real. If the abjection of the mother's

body is a necessity of the Symbolic social order, then Mr. Chow's parting with Mrs. Chen is a strategy to establish a metonymic chain of the Symbolic. In spite of that, a dream-wish that ruptures the conscience of the Symbolic comes to the stage in the second half of the bidding-farewell scene. The visual language of fetishism has gained dominance, and with it the concept of disavowal has begun to circulate, often in visual contexts that remain ignorant of the social limitation, like Mrs. Chen's hinted proposal for a sexual encounter that positions her to identify with Mrs. Chow whose offscreen voice certifies this crucial point that completes the self and the abject other as one. As Kristeva points out,

In this struggle, which fashions the human being, the *mimesis*. . . .
Abjection, with a meaning broadened to take in subjective diachrony,
is a *precondition of narcissism*. It is coexistent with it and causes it to
be permanently brittle. The more or less beautiful image in which I
behold or recognize my self rests upon an abjection that sunders it as
soon as repression, the constant watchman, is relaxed. (*Powers of
Horror* 13)

The mimetic performances of the abject other not only make the boundaries and limitations of selfhood ambiguous but also indicate the physical wasting and ultimate death. In Wong's film, within the last playacting session, Mrs. Chen rests her head on Mr. Chow's shoulder in the back of a cab heading for a hotel. Wong thus juxtaposes Mrs. Chen's back image with Mrs. Chow's offscreen voice saying, "I don't want to go home tonight." The gap between the visual image and the sound disturbs the viewer's distinctions between outside and inside, real world and fictional performance. Mrs. Chen once proposes to disavow her abject other, Mrs. Chow, because she represents a sign of disorder, yet at the same time Mrs. Chow is also a reminder of her ambiguous sexual desire. Recognizing the body is more than the clean and proper, she becomes an abject body like Mrs. Chow who disrupts the wish for physical self-control and social propriety.

Altogether, these three mimetic performances offer a way of rethinking what is at issue in forming the female subjectivity like Mrs. Chen whose female image goes through both maintaining a loving relationship and abandoning the abject self to the vicissitudes of the world. Mrs. Chen is seen as playing on this inside/outside topography of femininity in which nothing can be imagined behind the performative façade but the monstrous otherness, the wounded interior that results from the blow of her husband's unfaithfulness, a kind of phantasmatic castration. Acting out the

object role of Mrs. Chow is where the true rebellion of her mimetic performances resides. From sequences of masquerading, she discovers a new self in the role that she used to disavow. The arc of her emotional progression toward resolving a riddle of object otherness could be explained as a refusal of taking the role of a fetishistic object.

C. Nostalgic Moods and Eroticized Remains

In a footnote added in 1920 in “Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality,” Freud writes that “behind the first recollection of sexual development. . . . The fetish, like a “screen-memory, represents this phase and thus is a remnant and precipitate of it” (*Standard Edition* 7:154 n.2). In other words, Freud remains receptive to the potential truth that a fetish can be more than just a simple material object, such as a pair of shoes, dress, and cigarette as well as a masqueraded female body as discussed in the earlier paragraphs, it can be a cultural construct as well. In praising the aesthetics of nostalgic evocation in *In The Mood for Love*, Teo explains,

Wong’s key elements—what older critics might call “atmosphere” and “characterizations”—are thus grounded in abstraction rather than plot, and it’s hard to think of a recent movie that offers just such abstract ingredients that are by themselves sufficient reasons to see the picture. But it is precisely this quality of aesthetic abstraction that makes up an ideal dreamtime of Hong Kong, which is Wong’s ode to the territory. (“Wong Kar Wai’s *In the Mood for Love*”)

Probably the most extraordinary aspect of Teo’s charting of the role of “atmosphere” in Wong’s film comes in his assertion of its association with nostalgia. In this sense, the film itself is a fetish object *par excellence* whose identity is vested in an elusive “quality of aesthetic abstraction” that exists in the space between individuals, objects, and cultures, transforming and being transformed at the same time. *In the Mood for Love* is less the description of an extra-marital affair than of its nostalgic mood as re-envisioned and fetishized in the mind’s eye. Thinking through the lens, Wong has taken many shots emphasizing an aura of the good old times of Hong Kong in the 1960s: the film’s crowded quarters and narrow alleys are illustrated to show a continuous sense of claustrophobia that symbolizes the restricted belief systems and the mores of society.

In “A Souvenir of Love,”⁵ Rey Chow actually points out two modes of nostalgia: the first one is “linear and teleological in orientation;” yet the second is “a loop, a throw, a network of chance, rather than a straight line” (211). If the former reflects emotional retrieval of a lost object, then the latter continually restores a hope to grasp the rhythm of longing tinged with an unfulfillable “loss.” Chow explicates the hidden ideology behind the regional restriction to convey a nostalgia not triggered by a lost object in the past, but a repeated feeling of “a sense of loss and melancholy” (211). Wong’s film is certainly complicit with the logic of the second mode of nostalgia, which takes us on a voyage into an evocative mood of the past, based on Blanche Chu’s interpretation: “an antithetical counterpart to reaffirm the ‘prosperous and stable’ present” (43). Fascinated with his childhood memory of Hong Kong in the 1960s that is also a reflective 1930s Shanghai, Wong drives from the lush retro imaginary characterized by a multiplied nostalgia. His late ‘90s depictions of 1960s Hong Kong mirroring 1930s Shanghai atmosphere displays his own fetishistic desire of a continuous wistfully pinning for a lost maternal love for home.

Somehow, Wong uses his talent to give the nostalgically visual representation a rapturous flavor that reflects a misty quality through a series of freeze-frame shots of old photos, clocks, noirish *tableaux vivants*, and relics to show the motifs of loss through time and the maternal yearning for unrequited love.

In his article “Photography, Phantasy, Function,” Victor Burgin develops a notion about the experience of looking at photographs from the spectator’s point of view. Based on the Freudian psychological aspect of looking, he focuses on voyeuristic and fetishistic investment in looking, arguing that the “photography is like the fetish, is the result of a look which has, instantaneously and forever, isolated, ‘frozen,’ a fragment of the spatio-temporal continuum” (189). In the beginning of Wong’s film, camera captures two female photos hanging on the wall, then moves on to the landlady Mrs. Suen’s backside, finally to Mrs. Chen who opens a window and has a moment gazing at the camera. The fetishistic old wall photos of women and Mrs. Chen’s gaze, accompanied with Mrs. Suen’s offscreen voice saying, “Eat up, the fish is very fresh today.” This way of juxtaposing the visual and auditory is pregnant with the power to encompass an entire nostalgic narrative in the film, an allusion to the fetishistic maternal craving. In disavowing the threat of separation, Wong seeks fulfillment in substitute fetishistic images such as realistic photos of women in the 1960s. The photos foreshadow the fictional

⁵ In the article, Rey Chow makes a comparison of Kwan Stanley’s film *Rouge* and the novel it is based on.

characters of a mother-daughter relation between Mrs. Suen and Mrs. Chen, who will eventually become one of the portrait ladies, fetishized inside the frame of conventional patriarch hegemony that “eats up” women’s sexuality. The function of the old photos prefaces a lost memory of Hong Kong in the 1960s which is the moment that lives forever in the director’s mind. The city’s imaginary story of the past, present and future are interwoven by the stories of Mrs Suen and Mrs. Chen. In a similar vein, in *Cinema 2*, Gilles Deleuze claims that a freeze-frame shot from the movie is qualified with the ability to encompass the whole film, or at least to allude to it.

The paralleling images to this are noirish *tableaux vivants* of the leading couples. A *tableaux vivant* is a living image where actors or actresses would take on the poses of the characters in important narrative plot and hold them for periods of time. Being frustrated by the normal visual conventions, Wong luxuriates in confining the two images to the narrow corridor of a hotel Room 2046 with their back freeze-frame shots. The camera first takes a medium close-up shot of Mr. Chow’s back, then pans out to his full portraiture with a dimmed light. As for Mrs. Chen, her back freeze-frame is also frozen in the end of the corridor, as if both of their back postures are consumed by a lost memory they can neither recapture nor escape left within Room 2046.

It is like the moments of death, or of loss, what Roland Barthes calls “mortification” in *Camera Lucida*, the suspended moment that will be remembered. At the same time, there is a different hidden dynamic to illustrate no sign of “mortification” because the camera is still working, and a sense of continuity has been perceived. For the couples in the film, the back posture *tableaux vivants* provide an aesthetic vision to reveal a notion of fetishistic disavowal and affirmation at the same time. In Freud’s words, “In very subtle instances both the disavowal and the affirmation of the castration have found their way into the construction of the fetish itself” (*Standard Edition* 21: 156). In *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Žižek explains “a fetish conceals the lack around which the symbolic network is articulated” (49). Just like their dishonorable spouses, Mrs. Chen and Mr. Chow develop a kind of forbidden love while writing a novel in Room 2046. The “back” posture has a melancholy to it as a shadow self, the otherness being definitely attached to it, too. That’s the “disavowal” part of it since the self is to be regarded by others, yet the borderline experience for the *tableaux vivant* brings up the “affirmation” of resurrected love that sublimates the pain caused by lack.

A visible fetishization of the past is at the centre of the metaphorical symbol

of a clock. In one scene the camera dollies down from a huge Siemens clock hanging overhead first in Mr. Chow's office, then moves to Mrs. Chen's workplace to catch their indulgence in the "pregnant moment." Wong has always been obsessed by the image of time, especially the lost time in the 1960s. In *Image, Music, Text*, Barthes tells us that the "pregnant moment"⁶ is just this presence of the absences (memories, lessons, promises)" (73). In *In the Mood for Love*, the pregnant moment of nostalgia, whether embodied in the old photos, *tableau vivants*, or freeze-frame shots, has the power to attach representations of the absences of memories of maternal yearning to Hong Kong in the 1960s, an imaginary spatio-temporal continuum.

"Nostalgia," according to Mulvey, "is selective memory and its effect is often to draw attention to its repressions, to the fact that it always conceals more than it records" (*Fetishism and Curiosity* 67). In Wong's film, the connotation of the "absence" is always haunting in the visual image. The ending lines speak to its fetishistic quality of loss and its basic tone of nostalgia: "That era has passed. Nothing that belongs to it exists anymore" and "The past is something he could see but not touch."⁷ Highly connotative but elusive and contrasted images accordingly are Mr. Chow's trip to the ruins of Angkor Wat, accompanied by a newsreel clip of de Gaulle visiting Cambodia. There is cohesion between personal and historical memory, while the former is constructed by Mr. Chow's memoir of the lost love; the latter is a public documentary of lost empire. Even though the aesthetic tone is obviously distinctive, the two memories are not mutually exclusive but exist rather in symbiosis. As Rey Chow indicates in "A Phantom Discipline," "What are on the screen are not people but images. . . . [They] liberate us from the constraints of literal, bodily identification, while reminding us of the undertheorized relation between economics, on the other hand, and fantasy and identity, on the other" (1393).

The most phantasmagoric and feminine metaphor conjured up in the ruins of Angkor Wat is the stone hole in the wall where Mr. Chow whispers a secret of lost love. The weeds growing out of the stone hole evoke both a nostalgic motif of the passing of time and an association with the female vagina. The fetishistic eroticization of the stone hole and the male lead's gesture of whispering into the hole indicate his sexual desire for Mrs. Chen. The image enables a sense of erotic

⁶ G. E. Lessing coined the term "pregnant moment" in his discussion of the famous Greek sculpture, *Laocoön*. See Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Laocoön: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry* (Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 1962). Original version published in 1766.

⁷ Wong has borrowed the lines from Liu's short story *Intersection*.

sexuality that is nostalgically reminiscent of that pre-subjective moment of image recognition in the Lacanian mirror stage—the primary union with the mother. The motherly figure that will outlive all, like the cave hole, is Mrs. Chen, who eventually leaves her unfaithful husband to let him bear the burden of his own fetishism and abjection. She now raises her 4-year-old son independently at the cost of her secret lover, Mr. Chow, whose ritualized abjection of being an exile in a foreign country. Mrs. Chen’s son, the result of their one-night stand, is a miracle born from the remains of their love. The mother and son move back to the old house that nurtures the affairs, whose hostess has left for the United States to raise her grandson. Mrs. Chen and Mr. Chow could have a chance to get together but destiny prevents such an opportunity. Love remains loss.

In Kristeva’s conception, abjection, serving to privilege the maternal body as a site of rejection, facilitates the primal separation from the other by positioning an initial boundary between self and other. It is precisely this mobility of the process of signification that should be of paramount importance, the instability of which can never be prohibited, and which returns, as a “disturbance of language and/or of the order of the signifier” and even “destroys the symbolic” (*Revolution in Poetic Language* 5). In *The Picture of Abjection*, Chanter follows Kristeva to write, “Abject figures become the repositories of a world in which shifting boundaries allow various dejects to mark the limits of socially acceptable, purified, civilized imaginary norms” (19).

Wong’s nostalgic mood of Hong Kong acts as a source of a whole visual poetics and discourse of fetishism that pose a threat to the Symbolic order. His repression of maternal identification constitutes the basic melancholy color of the film. Foregrounding his fetishistic aspects on the old pictures, clocks, *tableaux vivants*, and relics, he develops a new trope of visual representation to build up a simulacrum of Hong Kong in the 1960s. The film starts with the old pictures of ladies sitting for portraits and ends with the haunting relics at Angkor Wat, both of which bring completeness to the visually nostalgic narrative and demonstrate a very consistent visual elaboration on the fluidity of imaginary, amorphous, excluded otherness that constitutes the logic of abjection.

III. Feminine Enigma: The Desire to Desire

In the Mood for Love modifies the male gaze framework to include the female gaze and feminine sexuality, and to make a case for female agency during

spectatorship and the process of abjection. Mrs. Chen relies heavily on fetishistic imagery that inscribes a state of revulsive epiphany, creates a dialogue of self and other, and eventually rejects an absolutely polarized binary of spectacle and spectator, all of which echo the language and processes of Kristevan abjection. According to Kristeva herself, the visual image of abjection is “what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” (*Powers of Horror* 4).

Clarifying the matrix of abjection to observe possible parallel relationships of Mrs. Chen’s fetishistic desire contributes to a discussion of feminine sexuality. In the film *In the Mood for Love*, viewers are surprised to discover Mrs. Chen’s inability to detach herself from the substitute mother figure, the landlady Mrs. Suen, who offers an image of the traditionally archetypal ideal-woman, going to such lengths as to make a proposition for her to live in her house after she moves to the U. S. On the other hand, she cannot refuse the temptation of masquerading in Mrs. Chow’s role of seduction that disturbs “system, order.” Situated in “in-between, the ambiguous” zone, Mrs. Chen is an archetypal idealization of woman fraught with sexualized tension (*Powers of Horror* 4). She intends to solve the riddle of sexuality that is intimately bound up with the desire for knowledge; that is, a quest for the truth of female femininity.

As Mulvey explains in “Pandora’s Box: Topographies of Curiosity,” the myth of Pandora may provide a model for reading a secret of feminine sexuality. Pandora, Mulvey advocates, is the ultimate idealized spectacle of femininity, whose box contains unspeakable anxiety-provoking secrets of femininity. With a strong sense of impulse to look inside the box no matter what danger might be lurking, her curiosity encapsulates a desire that cannot speak its right name. Mulvey writes, “curiosity projects itself onto, and into, space through its drive to investigate and uncover secrets, carrying with it connotations of transgression and danger” (*Fetishism and Curiosity* 60). Mrs. Chen’s desire to know and desire to look are driving forces behind a feminine enigma. Like a modern Pandora, she becomes an undeniable representation of the female psyche and its secret desire. Being the phantasmatic caricature, she is the symbolic-and-therefore-real content of the unconscious and a role model of the autonomous self. Fetishism continues to play a key role in broadening the scope of feminist psychoanalytic film theories in association with Kristevan approach of abjection that witnesses Mrs. Chow’s abjection. Wong opts to read female fetishism as a strategy rather than a perversion. His film is an appropriation of the fetish’s oscillation between disavowal and reaffirmation of castration, thus a refusal to reduce sexuality to a single pole, and

finally a yearning for the maternal embrace and empowerment.

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