[Experimental Film]

Subversions of the three-act structure	Narrative restructuring	Character-driven narrative subversions	Postmodern stylistics	Genre subversion and genre hybridity	Surrealism's challenge to conventional narration	The French New Wave

Subversions of the three-act structure

- Both independent cinema and contemporary filmmaking routinely test the classic three-act structure, offering audiences more experimental forms of storytelling by fragmenting or reordering timelines or by telling stories that shift character perspective across the arc of the film.
- Breaking the rules of three-act storytelling can engage contemporary audiences who are overly familiar with rhythms of equilibrium, disequilibrium and new equilibrium storytelling.
- Contemporary audiences are more cine-literate than ever before – those audiences are more suitability equipped to decode complex narrative arcs.
- The three-act formula presents filmmakers with an overly rigid storytelling schematic – a schematic that invariably provides narratives in which flawed protagonist characters are magically healed.
- If filmmakers want to tell stories that narrate tragedy or that outline doomed protagonists, they need to find alternative narrative mechanisms to work within.

Narrative restructuring

Filmmakers (particularly independent ones) depart from traditional three-act structures by adapting or altering conventional storytelling formulas – Common strategies include:

- **Unresolved timelines** – indie narratives often produce stories that don't end with the happy resolution of a new equilibrium – they create characters who fail to complete their quests or offer us storylines that leave audiences with unresolved endings – those unresolved endings can be used to infer tragedy or produce ambiguous meanings – narrative ambiguity also prompts active spectatorship – forcing audiences to imagine how stories might end for themselves via the information supplied during the film's narrative – other stories might end with ambiguous resolutions to assert the complexity of the character's film existence.
- **Circular narratives** – occur when stories refuse to end with a new equilibrium transformation, finished instead with the suggestion that central characters are trapped within a cycle of repeated action – circular narratives are often used to underline character tragedy through their suggestion that protagonists are unable to transform their self-destructive behaviours or escape the tragic circumstances of their lives.
- **Condensed equilibriums** – contemporary audiences increasingly demand that film narratives deliver action or disruption from the outset – filmmakers respond by providing narrative hooks or by condensing the initial act one equilibriums – using what is called 'in media res' to immediately engage audience attention with a moment of crisis at the start of a film.
- **Frame stories** – stories told within a wider story – using complex layers of narrative to place the main action of the film within a wider context – frame narratives often start and end with action that is displaced from the main body of the fil [see: diner hold-up scene in 'Pulp Fiction'].
- **Disjointed prologues** –a distinct strand of film storytelling exists in which filmmakers preface action with narrative sequences that don't fit with the cause-and-effect logic of the rest of the movie.
- **Anachronic devices (flash forward/flashback)** – anachronic devices test the linear storytelling expectations of conventional narration – reordering scenes/sequences so that they appear out of order – injects enigma, suspense and anticipation – flash-forwards might be used to relate story endings before they have occurred – to give enigmatic hints of future events that lie within the film's storyline – flashbacks might be used to outline character backstories or to revisit screen action from an alternative perspective.
- **Smashed timelines** – some films super-charge anachronic storytelling to the extent that any semblance of a linear timeline is minimized – literally smashing the timeline of a film – can easily confuse or disorientate viewers – restricted to avant-garde or surrealist film output.

Character-driven narrative subversions

The charm and simplicity of the three-act structure's use of single character protagonists is increasingly tested by contemporary cinematic output.

The long-format multi-protagonist box sets on-demand TV have helped to test the simplicity of the single hero structure.

Contemporary audiences can now track multiple character arcs with greater ease.

Common character-driven subversions include:

- **Multi-focalization narratives** – tell the same story using a range of character perspectives and vantage points – multi-character protagonists cross-cut from one character's experience to another, switching story arcs at narrative climaxes in order to maintain audience interest – offers range of identities for audiences to align with.
- **Unreliable narration** – when films are related from the POV of a dishonest/unreliable character – to reflect the experience of a character who has a limited worldview – can be used to deliberately disorient the audience.

Postmodern stylistics

- **Metanarrative and intertextuality** – these provide audiences with moments that knowingly draw attention to the idea that they are watching a story.
  - metanarration might knowingly refer to a film as a media construct or speak directly to audiences through fourth wall breaks.
  - Also known as reflexive filmmaking, the postmodern device begins to circulate after film becomes an established cultural presence and where its historical back catalogue of output can be referenced through moments of intertextuality.
  - Directors of the French New Wave integrated reflexive moments as a result of their shared interest in pre-WWII filmmaking – Godard's anti-hero lead Michel in Breathless models himself on the screen-based persona of Humphrey Bogart –intertextual references of this kind make use of sequences that reference other films and visual media forms.
  - intertextuality rewards knowing audiences who can spot potential links to other products or can prompt questions regarding the social/psychological effects of film as a cultural force.
  - Intertextuality can be deployed to provoke audience nostalgia or to piggyback on emotional resonance of scenes that are reproduced.
- **Parody and homage** – provide extended moments of intertextuality wherein filmmakers provide extended references to other artforms – homage invariably celebrates the influence of other artists and filmmakers – parody conversely references external media for the purposes of humour or to offer a critique.
- **Bricolage** – experimentation through the collaging of styles of several different film aesthetics – Tarantino builds films using bricolage – his costume and sets for Pulp Fiction borrow elements from rock'n'roll and 1960s hippie culture that masks the film's authentic historical setting.

Genre subversion and genre hybridity

- Assessing the impact of genre in individual films requires analysis that explores how genre-based rules are both applied and adapted
- genre-driven conventions are selectively used/bypassed as a result of approaches that individual filmmakers adopt during production
- auteur filmmakers apply and break genre-based conventions to shape stories using their own artistic direction.
- Genre-driven output does not offer us a static classification system but presents us with an ever-changing set of rules that individual filmmakers continuously bend and reshape.
- Genres can be fused or hybridized, sometimes spawning entirely new sub-genres of film.
- The ever-changing nature of audience tastes plays a pivotal role in sustaining/reviving commercially successful genres, while those film types that fail to attract box office success are casually forgotten.
- Some academics suggest that most contemporary filmmaking exhibits a hybridized approach in which narratives combine elements across several established genre forms to help nurture audience appeal – genre hybridization as a narrative formatting strategy appeals to contemporary filmmakers because:

- **Hybridity enables quick tonal shifts** – film stories can quickly change emotional effects using hybridization – humour/serious/escapist/horror/fear/pathos etc.
- **Audience appeal is expanded** – films need to garner widespread appeal to be successful – combining ingredients from several genres is one way that films can grow their audiences –some suggest that British cinema output in 1990s used hybridization to nurture mass audiences for UK-produced films.
- **Nostalgia** – hybrid narratives can invoke nostalgia by referencing genre-based character or narrative tropes.
- **Knowing audience rewards** –the sheer weight and scope of film/media consumption in contemporary era means that audiences are far more knowledgeable – hybrid products acknowledge and reward knowing spectatorship by including intertextual references to products from across a range of genres.

Surrealism's challenge to conventional narration

The dawn of European modernism saw a stylistic and aesthetic revolution that cut across literature, art and architecture, and was partly fuelled by technological innovations of the period.
- Modernists focused on the subjective nature of human experience:
- Edvard Munch explored the effects of social change on the individual, capturing the emptiness of modern living with 'Scream' paintings (decreased role of religion, corrosive effects of industrialization).
- James Joyce and T.S. Eliot sought to explore human psychology – stream-of-consciousness prose styles and unstructured rawness of free-verse to express their inner realities.
- Sigmund Freud was a psychologist mapping human behaviour as the product of internal drives and instincts.
- Most innovative European modernist film group – Dada collective – Marcel Duchamp, Salvador Dali, Rene Magritte and Luis Bunuel – all explored their interests in the sub-conscious via new artistic possibilities that film opened up – Dadaists believed the Europe-wide WWI conflict exemplified the horrors of 20th Century modernity – trench warfare (mechanized destruction of human life), war trauma (probe origins of mankind's inhumanity) – Dadaists pointed to therapeutic capacity of introspection.

- **Narratives abandon cause and effect progression** – real-world logic is readily abandoned in surrealist stories – timelines move forward using coincidence or symbolic connection – scenes transition using graphic matches or cuts that connect shots using patterns or textures rather than a sense of real-world continuity – surrealist narratives work through lateral connections or dream-based logic.
- **Central characters are passive** – mainstream film stories progress as a result of character actions – consequences, narrative progression – surrealist narratives often deliver passive characters who are positioned to witness the actions of others.
- **Everyman characterization** – characters lack personal details (names, identities, backstory) – mothers, fathers, lovers, priests – characters represent universal experience or symbolize wider social forces.
- **Narrative sequences tend to be episodic** – disjointed episodic sequences where central character's world is in a state of flux/change – moments of disequilibrium are succeeded by further disequilibrium – the world at large is chaotic and all-consuming.
- **Meaning is constructed using visual symbolism** – surrealist narratives work using rich visual symbols that represent sub-conscious desires or repressive actions.
- **Time treatments are distorted** – surrealist narratives readily repeat sequences as well as stretching or speeding up time.

The French New Wave

- **Changing audience tastes** – by late 1950s, French film attendance declined steeply – industry attempted to stimulate new talent – industry subsidies and new 'advance on receipts' funding system enabled a new generation of directorial talent to make their first features.
- **Technological advances** – availability of lightweight cameras and long lens technologies liberated young French filmmakers – no longer static cameras or expensive studio production facilities – handheld, raw location-based aesthetic that looked like a documentary.
- **Youth culture explosion** – well-educated, politically savvy generation of young people emerged in 50s and 60s – influence of rock'n roll, Hollywood films, American jazz and French writers like Sartre and Camus nurtured counter-cultural youth movement who railed against French occupation of Algeria and French Indochina.
- The influence of Cahiers du Cinema – hugely influential French film magazine – critiqued 50s French film industry's high-brow adaptations of literary classics – celebrated Hitchcock, Welles, Ray – Truffaut, Godard and Chabrol transitioned from film journalism into filmmaking and were responsible for a great deal of output that came to be known as French New Wave.

A personalised film movement

- **A documentary style aesthetic** – use of real locations and handheld camera work constructed a documentary aesthetic with long-takes and observational camerawork used to dial up the realism of New Wave films.
- **Coincidence-driven narratives and existential themes** – narrative excitement produced by episodic narrative structures where coincidence and chance meetings drive events – suggests existential themes and the idea that individuals are subject to the forces of fate rather than acting as agents of free will (Vivre Sa Vie – Nana's chance meeting with would-be pimp Raoul at café, leads to her tragic death).
- **Narrative irresolution** – New Wave narratives lack neat endings of traditional filmmaking – use of unresolved endings nurtures a more active form of spectatorship, prompting audiences to determine for themselves how character dilemmas are resolved – directors resist the urge to punctuate their films with resolved endings in order to underline the objectivity of their films – no overriding judgments regarding characters presented.
- **Youth culture celebration** – New Wave directors staged their films in gritty urban France – young audiences could align with real-life contexts – unknown actors used for authenticity – anti-authoritarian plot points used – characters who freely commit crimes without compunction or find themselves in confrontational situations with older authority figures.
- **Scene intensity** – celebrating 'here and now' of film moment – intensity of scene exposition and zen beauty of present.
- **Metanarration and reflexive filmmaking** – film as art ethos – intertextual style (Breathless to Humphrey Bogart, Vivre Sa Vie to The Passion of Joan of Arc) – cinema as important cultural filter for characters – those who shape our identities.
- **Sound and editing experimentation** – jump-cuts condense time with abrasive edits, soundscapes cut sharply to moments of prolonged silence, authentic newsreel footage and voiceovers collaged to create a curious mix of fact and fiction – real-world political resonance.
- **Low-fi aesthetics** – small budgets, limited access to equipment, raw aesthetic – dialogue often dubbed onto films during post-production as a result of location shoots – jump cut as lo-tech editing solution.

Fallen Angels
(1995, Wong Kai Wai, Hong Kong)

Rationale for study

Fallen Angels represents another stylistically innovative chapter to add to Wong Kai Wai's familiar signature as an auteur. It is a film which also deals with a number of recurring themes in this work such as alienation, memory and obsession. The experimental nature of its storytelling and the claustrophobic mood created in the film, add to its noir feel and the dreamy, nocturnal nature. At first glance, it is not an easy film, but it is one that offers many rewards on subsequent viewings.

STARTING POINTS - Useful Sequences and timings/links

50.25 – 55.13 - This is an interesting sequence which underscores the experimental nature of the film to very good effect. The first scene shows He Zhiwu and his girlfriend Charlie Young attacking a blow-up sex doll who is personified as Blondie, who is Young's mortal enemy. This is achieved with hand-held camera and a fast cutting technique. This is followed with these two characters in a restaurant shot in wide-angle lens. A vicious fight breaks out around them and this uses both fast and slow motion to fine effect. The sequence ends with the two characters shot through the window of a bar, they move very slowly but the extras in the

background move extremely fast. This scene was shot at four frames a second and it lasts two minutes on screen – but it took twelve minutes to shoot.

1.27.17 – 1.30.52 - In many respects this is similar to the first sequence in that it has the Agent shot with a wide-angled lens. We see her eating in a café and this is after the death of her partner, the killer. The shot isn't flattering, and we are drawn to what is behind her as a fight breaks out in real time. Voiceover is employed from both her perspective and that of He Zhiwu, who has been involved in the fracas. Finally some sense of connection is made and we see them leave on a motorbike – shot in both fast and slow motion. A glimpse of the sky is shown as they leave; the only shot of daylight in the whole film is the final one.

CORE STUDY AREAS 1 - STARTING POINTS - Key Elements of Film Form (Micro Features)

Cinematography

- Wong Kai Wai's long term relationship with his Director of Photography Chris Doyle has been a cornerstone of his finest work over the years. The emphasis on a variety of different uses of the camera in this film certainly adds to *Fallen Angels'* overall aesthetic.
- The use of wide-angled lens which conversely distort and enhance the sense of separation on the part of the audience. This is also on occasion contrasted with the long-lens shots, where the depth of field is so short and only the subject of interest is shown in the frame and the background is therefore blurred.
- There is a great deal of hand-held camera movement in the film. This can follow characters and track their faces as they move through a scene. Equally there are a number of tilted shots in the film, which add to the sense of disconnection.
- The film utilises lighting in a dynamic way with a sense of an exaggerated neon-tinted

palette. There is also a very interesting use of colour here, which uses filters to give at times a drenched effect. There is also the use of different film stocks and also a few instances where the film switches to a black and white inserts. There is a constant sense of Doyle's camera being present and this is never disguised. The interview with him on the Artificial Eye DVD of the film gives a very clear sense of what he set out to achieve here.

Mise-en-Scène

*   The setting gives a very good indication of the Hong Kong location. At times it feels murky and cramped. The Killer's targets are shown at the back of rundown shops and restaurants; his own apartment seems spatially narrow and is often shown in the same shot with the city in the foreground. The Chungking Mansions where He Zhiwu and the Killer's Agent live is full of passage ways and small rooms. The most overpowering element in the mise-en-scène is the dominant feeling of night and artificial light that fills the film with a woozy, at times surreal atmosphere.

*   The personification of the empty shops and idle market stalls that He Zhiwu 'commandeers' as part of his night-time job adds to the sense of dislocation that prevails in the film. His hijacking of an Ice Cream van is especially interesting and at times very funny. There is also the link here (true or not) to the death of his mother and his father's subsequent period of long mourning.

*   The emphasis on female costume and also hairstyles is also a key element here. The Killer's Agent is often dressed quite provocatively – with short skirts/dresses, stockings and high-heeled shoes. The scene with the jukebox, with its close-ups of her dress certainly emphasises her longing and obsession with the Killer. This is also true when she is shown masturbating in the film fully dressed but in a deliberately femme fatale style. The female character's hair is also given some prominence too. This is particularly the case in terms of Blondie, who the Killer has a relationship with and who He Zhiwu and Charlie Young are trying to track down.

Editing

*   There are a number of very effective editing devices employed in the film. There is the use of both fast and slow motion which is employed right across the narrative. The numerous slow-motion shoot outs and the fast motion shots of

Hong Kong's highways are used to good effect. Jump-cuts and freeze-frames are also used too. Much like Doyle's camera style there is a constant sense that one is also watching a film.

*   There are also a number of occasions when there are examples of quick cutting then juxtaposed with long takes.

*   The use of ellipsis is also very valuable here adding to the expressionistic temporal stylistics. The movement between the two different narrative strands also adds to this feeling.

Sound

*   The actual dialogue in the film is extremely minimal so this is deliberately countered by the use of voiceover narration which is privileged to three of the main protagonists. In these interior monologues, the outsider nature of the characters is given full attention as they discuss their hopes, fears and desires. The mute He Zhiwu is also given this voice.

*   Wong Kai Wai's use of music is also crucial in constructing meaning in the film in order to underscore moods. Massive Attack's '*Karma Coma*' is reimagined and re-orchestrated in the early part of the film around the activities of the Killer. There is an example of Canto-Pop song which is used to connect the Killer and his agent (and is used in the aforementioned jukebox sequence). The film ends with the Flying Pickets version of *Only You* which offers melancholy counterpoint to the final sequence.

*   This fusing of sound and image directly links into the rhythmic construction of shots and develops what has been noted as a MTV aesthetic, tapping into the influence of music video on his work. Certainly the overall mood of the film is directly linked to the trip-hop darkness of the Massive Attack track and the lovelorn feel of the Chinese songs in tandem with the sombre imagery. The isolating nature of urbanity is enhanced by the use of music here.

CORE STUDY AREAS 2 - STARTING POINTS – Meaning & Response

Representations

*   The representations of Hong Kong itself see the modern experience of living in a highly populated city to be one of dislocation, where people are cut off from each other. Isolation and memory are presented as major themes in relation to this representation. The Killer keeps

his distance from the Agent as he doesn't want to complicate their working relationship. His affair with Blondie is in itself fragmentary in terms of her remembering him as a past lover which he has no recollection of. Using parallel editing we see the start of a sexual encounter with Blondie, as the Agent is shown alone masturbating. Co-incidences do also occur, as do fleeting glimpses of what might happen if characters do make connections. This is particularly true with He Zhiwu and the Agent – who live in the same place (she is seen hiding him early in the film) and it is the possibilities of their future relationship where the film ends.

- The women in the film are seen in a variety of ways – but can be said to be linked by a common instability. At various points in the film, they all seem to be on the verge of a nervous breakdown. The Agent is obsessed with the Killer, cleaning his apartment when he isn't there, sitting in his seat at the bar where he drinks. Apart from one brief meeting their relationship is conducted via fax machine and recorded messages. There are hints at happiness at the end of film, but this is uncertain. Charlie Young's erratic behaviour attracts He Zhiwu (as her shoulder to cry on). They have a short-lived relationship which involves unsuccessful attempts to track Blondie and a brutal attack on a blow-up doll. In another nod to Chungking Express, she reappears at the end of the film as an airline stewardess, seemingly with no memory of her relationship with He Zhiwu. Blondie with her over-the-top and at times worrying behaviour bites her lover when he abandons her screaming 'I have left my mark okay? You may forget my face, but you won't forget my bite.'

- The representations of men are in part a little bit more low-key. The Killer is rather listless, avoiding emotional ties, wondering if someone in his profession might be able to get insurance. There is some sense of a past when he meets a former friend from school on a bus, after the first shootout that we see him in. However he is very much an obvious construct, faking a relationship with a picture of a woman and child that he could pass off as his wife and son. He Zhiwu on the other hand initially provides light relief in the film with his erratic demeanour, particularly in hassling potential customers to the point where they tell him to go away. His relationships are as transient with women as the Killer, being rejected by Charlie, but making a late connection

with the Agent. That said what marks him out as more interesting is his relationship with his father, which is explored in social contexts.

Aesthetics (i.e. the 'look and feel' of the film including visual style, influences, auteur, motifs)

- The look and feel of the film do echo Wong Kai Wai's previous piece *Chungking Express*. Certainly there is a great deal of pleasure to be wrought from linking the films together. The notion of expiry dates is explored here – with He Zhiwu's muteness being caused by eating an out of date tin of pineapples. His prison number 223 is the same as the police officer in Chungking. There is also a lovely intertextual reference to the former film when He Zhiwu plays with the sauce bottles as the changed Charlie (as a stewardess) waits outside his stall. The Agent's anonymous cleaning of the Killer's apartment also echoes Faye's housework at 663's flat.

- Certainly stylistically there is a clear sense of Wong Kai Wai's visual and aural techniques. That said there was a real leap forward for his next film *In the Mood for Love*. What is also fundamental here is his quite loose and minimalist attitude to plot. This film, like much of his early work presents the events in a mosaic fashion, in some ways like a photo montage. That said there can be said to be a structure of sorts – in establishing the main relationships, introducing new relationships, breaking up and then the climax where the two narrative strands do merge.

- There is certainly a sense that this film is also indebted to the influence of the French New Wave and in particular the work of Jean-Luc Godard in its overtly self-conscious spirit. A good example of this in the film is when the police are looking for He Zhiwu who is hiding in the Agent's toilet, but is furiously smoking a cigarette. In Tony Rayns' *Sight and Sound* review (September, 1996) he draws parallels with the Hong Kong created here with the Paris in *Alphaville*, in terms of the complex world created in each film.

CORE STUDY AREAS 3 - STARTING POINTS - Contexts

Social

- Perhaps one of the more touching aspects of *Fallen Angels* is the relationship shown between

He Zhiwu and his widowed father whom he lives with. This is best demonstrated in the video he makes of his father at work, cooking and at one point sleeping. The father is not enamoured with his leading role in this film, but we see a sequence with him watching it and laughing when it is completed. When he dies, He Zhiwu replays the scene with his father frying a steak, pausing and rewinding it as he speaks about of his sense of loss. In a film where the vast majority of relationships are fractured and disconnected, this (relatively) normal relationship does suggest that there is some form of social cohesion on Wong Kai Wai's Hong Kong.

Historical and Political

- *Fallen Angels* in many respects at a surface level makes few deliberate political or social points. Its characters certainly don't have what we might think of as proper jobs, they have no overt political leanings and in terms of citing the film within its historical contexts – its use of pastiche and intertextuality do suggest a post-modern reading. At a deeper level however this film (and the earlier *Chungking Express*) and the mood created may well be implicitly linked to the status of Hong Kong at that time. The nebulous space of Hong Kong as in-between the UK and mainland China may well be seen to be reflected in the transient, dislocated status of the main protagonists. The handover in 1997 is close and there seems to be a feeling of something ending, which is returned to in this narrative a number of times. Hong Kong in this very specific historical and political moment can be seen to act as a clear metaphor for the characters.

Technological

- Certainly the film utilises film stock in a very unique way as well as Doyle's adaptation of wide-lens shooting. While it lacks the lavish mise-en-scène of his latter films, the combination of the various cinematic techniques fits the poetic nature of *Fallen Angels* perfectly.

Institutional

- *Fallen Angels* was originally conceived as the third story in his previous film *Chungking Express*, but it didn't fit into the overall mood of that film and subsequently took on a life of its own. Certainly *Fallen Angels* is a far darker film tonally and although there is a great deal of crossover between the two texts, they are distinct in their own right. Takeshi Kaneshiro (He Zhiwu) played 223 in the previous film. Wong Kai Wai's taste for using people from outside the film industry as leads is also pursued here with Leon Lai – a Hong Kong pop star playing the Killer and Michelle Reis a former beauty queen playing the Agent.

SPECIALIST STUDY AREA - Auteur/Narrative

Starting points

- Much of this has been covered in the sections on aesthetics and film form in terms of the auteur status of Wong Kai Wai and the importance of viewing this film alongside *Chungking Express* in particular.
- The close working relationship between Christopher Doyle and Wong Kai Wai is also vital to understanding how the signature aesthetic is created in their collaborations.
- The narrative style here is interesting because once again it has parallels with *Chungking Express*. The way that the two strands are in opposition to each other and conversing make connections is certainly worth reflecting upon and this may well only become more apparent after another viewing of the film. Certainly it might be worth trying to represent the relationships and the temporal nature of the plot diametrically to get a sense of overlap and implicit and explicit linkage.