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Queering Bodies: "Becoming-unrecognisable" in Wong Kar-Wai's *Happy Together*

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Abstract: This paper is interested in the cinematic apparatus's potential to produce affect which defamiliarises the visible presence of star-bodies in Wong Kar-wai's *Happy Together* (chunguang zhaxie, 1997), thus invoking non-normative and new modes of thinking about queer identification and representation. By close reading the mise-en-scène of the two Iguazu falls sequences, the on-screen star bodies of Tony Leung and Leslie Cheung are defamiliarized when they produce Gilles Deleuze's affect and "become-unrecognisable" as on-screen subjects. Through this, the encounters with the Iguazu Falls allow us to queer heteronormative and linear narrative time that is associated with (a movement towards) futurity. This inability to pass judgement, I argue, is the ethics of sexual desire which *Happy Together* proffers when we understand the body that queers and becomes unrecognisable through productive affective assemblages. Instead, we move through the transsensorial potentials for the cinematic assemblage to rethink modes of queering normativity and to redefine bodies in terms of plurality and multiplicity. To that end, this paper presents a new way of thinking about how film stars, familiar tourist spots and even a classic text like *Happy Together* may be defamiliarized through productions of affects, new-sensations, to provide more ways of revisiting and regarding the film anew.

Keywords: affect, sensorial, queer assemblages, Gilles Deleuze, star studies

When Wong Kar-Wai's *Happy Together* was first released in 1997, it received immediate acclaim at international film festivals and ceremonies: Wong was the first Hong Kong director to win the award for Best Director at Cannes Film Festival; the film also won numerous awards including Best Director, Best Cinematographer and Best Actor, at the 34th Golden Horse Film Festival and Awards. *Happy Together* follows Ho Po-Wing (Leslie Cheung) and Lai Yiu-Fai (Tony Leung Chiu-wai), a gay couple from Hong Kong who moves to Buenos Aires in hopes of salvaging their

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relationship. However, Fai and Ho break up within the first few scenes of the film and do not find themselves happy together in the end. With big names such as Wong himself, Leung and Cheung (both of whom have become the auteur's regular collaborators in his earlier films), the film's success was further influenced by the strength of its star presence. Whether it is the result of Leung's increased popularity over the year, Cheung's continued posthumous fandom over the years (Yu 2021, 186), or the unwavering critical attention given to *Happy Together*, the conversation surrounding the film never quite ends. This paper is interested in the cinematic apparatus's potential to produce affect which defamiliarises the visible presence of star-bodies in *Happy Together*, thus invoking non-normative and new modes of thinking about queer identification and representation.

1 Literature Review: Making Sense of *Happy Together* through Star Studies

Almost a quarter of a decade later, *Happy Together* has become a seminal film used to discuss the portrayal and/or erasure of male homosexual love and desire in Hong Kong cinema (e.g. Berry 2000; Chow 2001; McElhaney 2000; Siegal 2001; Tambling 2003; Teo 2005; Nochimson 2005; Lim 2006). Today, *Happy Together* continues to attract renewed interest and nuanced engagement from film scholars who adopt interdisciplinary approaches from queer studies (e.g. Chao 2020; Eng 2010; Kim and Atanasoski 2017; Leung 2007; Pecic 2016; Rojas 2015; Yue 2000), spatio-cultural studies (Abbas 1997; Brunette 2005, 56; Guo 2021; Teo 2005), auteur studies (e.g. Lalanne 1997; Brunette 2005; Wong and Powers 2016) and transnational Chinese film studies where the film is read allegorically to expand the discourse surrounding the film's rich meanings (e.g. Cameron 2007; Stokes and Hoover 2001, 268).[1] Despite extensive and growing scholarship on Wong Kar-wai and his oeuvre, Yingjin Zhang astutely observes in "Film Stars in the Perspective of Performance Studies: Play Liminality and alteration in Chinese Cinemas" (2017) that attention to male performance remains largely absent. When present, writings on Tony Leung Chiu-wai often focus on Leung's role in films such as *In the Mood for Love, Days of Being Wild and Ashes of Time* (Dissanayake 2003; Lau 2021; Teo 2019; Zhang 2017, 50). Zhang argues that despite Leung's international stardom, his "style of self-effacing performance-as-repetition represents a special type of

1 It is also important to note that discussions of Wong Kar-wai often constitute interdisciplinary approaches and fields which may not be as neatly distinguished as the stated areas of research here. As such, readers may find that scholarship intersect between fields and cumulatively add to the overall meanings of Wong Kar-wai's works.

performativity that questions aggression and fixation in representation" (2017, 51). Similarly, Mark Gallagher examines how Leung's emotional and intimate performances in *Happy Together* craft a nuanced portrayal of homosexual identity and love that differ starkly from the media persona which his fans are used to seeing on and off screen (Gallagher 2018, 42). Accordingly, Leung's performative gestures and emotional expressions on-screen problematise the signifier–signified relationship afforded to the star image, insofar as his celebrity presence does not connote a fixed and unifying sense of identity.

Likewise, Gary Bettinson writes in "Reflections on a Screen Narcissist: Leslie Cheung's Star Persona in the Films of Wong Kar-wai" (2005) that Cheung often plays characters in Wong's films, who "possessed … a perverse ambiguity" because his performances in *Happy Together* enable an auto-erasure "centrally inhered in his popular image" (220). By incorporating and playing into the image accrued to his star persona, Cheung effectively embodied the narcissistic figure that erases the fixity of self-identity (Stewart 2021). Discussions of Leung and Cheung's performances in *Happy Together* demonstrate how filmic performances may both reinforce and subvert star power. Leung and Cheung's stardom echoes Steven Shaviro's theorisation of popular stars in *Post Cinematic Affect* as "anchoring points, as particularly dense nodes of intensity and interaction. They are figures upon which, or within which, many powerful feelings converge; they *conduct* multiplicities of affective flows" (2010, 9). For Shaviro, the pop star, while being a point of reference, is also where various conflicting effective charges and forces accumulate and gather. When Cheung and Leung's bodies on-screen produce affect through different layers of cinematic mediation, they challenge the pop star's function as stable visual iconography. Very briefly, affect here refers to the propensity for a body to be moved through interrelational encounters with other bodies, without the primary need to create signifcation or meaning out of these interactions. More importantly, the porosity of this relationality ensures that the star image may be redefined as open and plural modes of sense and meaning-making through the form and functions of the cinematic apparatus.

As Richard Dyer contends in *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society* (2013), the study of stardom includes more than the star's filmic works as texts to be decoded and deciphered. Rather, "star images are always extensive, multimedia, intertextual", produced by and for specific cultural, historical and geopolitical contexts (Dyer 2012, 3). If the star-image is artificially made and productive of meanings for a film, then it follows that there is value in considering how film techniques, cinematography and film form, construct these star bodies on-screen and how such a meta-reflexive film process simultaneously opens up new ways of thinking about *Happy Together*. Wimal Dissanayake ascertains that "the way images [in Wong's films] are constructed and the way they function in propelling and giving shape to the narrative

discourse merits close study" (2003, 62). For Dissanayake, close-reading Wong's cinema means paying attention to how his images function as Gilles Deleuze's "time-image", which is ontologically self-reflexive and provocative of critical thinking. Indeed, "dominant visual tropes [such as the waterfall in *Happy Together*] seem to cast a long shadow over the narrative discourse," which both unifies and disrupts narratological coherence (Dissanayake 2003, 68). Through close reading, interpretations of Wong's film yield disjunctive, multiple and dynamic perspectives that resist easy reconciliation; an ambivalence that is also evident in how Wong "wishes to draw on the public images of his chosen actors and the concomitant cross-identifications so that the public images and the images of the constructed role would generate new energy" (Dissanayake 2003, 69). Star images often allude to intertextual and contextual rather than self-referential meanings. Similarly, Stephen Teo considers the evocative potentials of Wong Kar-wai's film aesthetics, where cinematic and literary influences supplement our understanding of *Happy Together*.

Likewise, Gary Bettinson writes in *The Sensuous Cinema of Wong Kar-Wai* (2015) that the film is significant not just in terms of its social connotations but also on the fundamental level of how the film illuminates signification from within the aesthetics itself (18). He posits that when one attends to Wong's cinematic form, these styles exact "affective cues" in *Happy Together*. To Bettinson, such sensuous effects are especially important because they reveal how Wong's images are evocative of personal feelings even if they do not drive the story forward in a tangible or forceful manner (2015, 57). Instead, when situated within the scope of the entire film, these images have the potential to express narrative signification and subjective intention even if they "look wholly abstract" (Bettinson 2015, 57). Thus, images and their presumed innate signifying qualities must be considered alongside narrative aspects of the film. To this end, Bettinson explains that the aesthetically crowded film world infuses cinematic images with concentrated nooks of visuality (81). The complex interiority of feelings becomes tangible through the mediation of Wong's cinematic style that "roughens" and defamiliarises conventional use of film techniques and elements (69). Following Bettinson, this paper illustrates how Wong's specific film form and style defamiliarize star images and subsequently queer dominant visual tropes such as the Iguazu Falls in *Happy Together*.

2 Transsensorial Cinematic Defamiliarisation of Stardom

In *Happy Together*, cinematic processes deliberately destabilise Leung and Cheung's transnational stardom that may be associated with their

"recognisability" and visibility. Instead of thinking about the star as a visual signifier with external elements that transcribe and determine its meanings, this section approaches the star image as bodies constructed within/without the film. In this regard, I posit a "transsensorial" approach of thinking about star studies beyond audio-visual signs to consider the materiality and immateriality of their production and productivity. Transsensoriality here produces ways of thinking about cinema across, beyond and through the sensory, sensible and that which pertains to the senses. Jean-Louis Baudry and Alan William write in "Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus" (1974) that the problem with contemporary media is that it "[does] not allow us to see the transformation which has taken place" (40). Baudry asserts that the work of cinematic techniques and processes are made invisible and all that is left of the "labour" of the camera is the finished product—the film—and its intended meanings. Here, Jonathan Beller's conception of the cinematic mode of production is an important theoretical framework that underpins this paper's method of making processes of labour visible (2002, 2006). Beller argues that we do not regard "the image at the scene of the screen", rather, "we confront the logistics of the image wherever we turn" (2006, 60). When we attend to the organisation and implementation of an image, the "*mise-en-scène* of the new work" is revealed in the process (2006, 60). Logistics here refer to the transsensorial types of "work" behind the image (i.e. film form, techniques and other filmmaking contexts and processes) that may have been made invisible through the illusory sense of a finished product in front of the camera.

Along the same vein, I attend to the "logistics" of the two Iguazu waterfall sequences in *Happy Together* (i.e. the production processes and film form, implemented film techniques and elements) to negotiate the ways that star bodies of Leung and Cheung actively and autonomously create new affective cinematic dimensions. This cinematic mode of defamiliarization is first evident in the opening sequence of *Happy Together*. The film begins with a quick montage of Lai Yiu-Fai's (Tony Leung; from here on known as Fai) and Ho Po-wing's (Leslie Cheung, from here on known as Ho) passports being stamped at immigration as they travel into Buenos Aires, Argentina from Hong Kong. This scene immediately cuts to the opening credits with the film title, "*Happy Together*/春光乍洩" appearing boldly in white against a striking red background.

A black-and-white sequence follows with an establishing shot of a tiny and messy hotel room. The camera zooms into Ho staring intently at a tacky lampshade that illuminates the image of the famous Iguazu Falls, where our two protagonists intend to visit together. In the next scene, we see an obscured, grainy image of Fai clad only in white briefs as reflected on a mottled mirror, obscuring the scene's visuality. As the camera pans up to Fai's side profile, Ho's voice is heard saying,

"Let's start over". Fai's voiceover narration explains that the two of them have been going through a cyclical series of breaking up, often making up when Ho utters those three words. The scene quickly cuts to a sex scene between the two men in the hotel room before the scene jump cuts to them en route to the Iguazu falls together. They run into car troubles and get lost finding the falls, resulting in a huge fight where they break up and go their separate ways.

Loosely, the rest of the film depicts how Fai and Ho go through a series of break-ups and reconciliation with each other while separately seeking to earn enough money to leave Bueno Aires. Fai takes up a part-time job at a Tango bar while Ho engages in sex work. By the end of the film, only Fai manages to earn enough to leave Buenos Aires and visit the Iguazu Falls, marking an end to their co-dependent relationship. The relatively straightforward story with few characters and minimal subplot is juxtaposed to film aesthetics that complicate and foreground the narratology of the film. Incidentally, the names of the main characters are appropriated names of Wong Kar-Wai's crew members.[2] This opening scene reveals the arbitrariness of representation or identification in relation to what is eventually presented on screen. These effective cues discourage the audience from deciphering fixed meanings and readings *about* the images we encounter. Indeed, the disrupted visuality in the opening scene draws our attention not just to the faces of Tony Leung and Leslie Cheung, but also to the materiality of the cinematic medium that interrupts our ability to access the image and what the image signifies. This self-reflexivity thus highlights how the body on-screen does not connote a stable audio-visual sign, and more crucially, how the cinematic spectacle functions as an assemblage of affective forces.

In the introduction of Gilles Deleuze's and Félix Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Deleuze, Guattari, and Massumi 1987), Brian Massumi highlights the definition of Deleuze's affect. Following Spinoza, "L'affect (Spinoza's *affectus*) is an ability to affect and be affected. It is a prepersonal intensity corresponding to the passage from one experiential state of the body to another and implying an augmentation or diminution in the body's capacity to act" (Massumi 1987, xvii). For Deleuze and Guattari, affect is an intensity that is void of conscious interpretation, something which shifts from body to body. Its prepersonal quality also distinguishes affect from emotion. Affect's apparent ambiguity blurs the line between personal-subjectivity and collective-subjectivities. Brian Massumi writes about Deleuze's and Guattari's theorisations of a subjectless subjectivity in his

2 See Stephen Teo, *Wong Kar-wai: Auteur of Time* (Bloomsbury Publishing: 2019): Teo observes in *Wong Kar-wai: Auteur of Time* that Wong often plays inside jokes on his crew members by naming fictional characters after them. Lai and Ho are those of a gaffer and focus-puller who worked on *Happy Together* (p. 173).

introduction to A *Shock to Thought: Expressions after Deleuze and Guattari* (2002). Without a unified subjectivity, the body becomes unrecognisable, where "the movement of expression itself is subjective, in the sense that it is self-moving and has determinate effects. It is an agency, only without an agent" (Massumi 2002, xxiv). Through the specificity of the cinematic medium, an orchestra of bodily affect—including the body of cinema and bodies in cinema—conducts the film's emphatic transsensorial assemblage, without fixing subjectivity on any particular material body. In Levi R. Bryant's essay, "The Ontic Principle: Outline of an Object-Oriented Ontology" (2011), he asserts that "whether animate or inanimate: all objects are defined by the effects of their capacity to act and be acted upon" (274). Following Bryant's argument, bodies in cinema extend beyond human bodies to non-human bodies such as the body of texts, skewed angled shots, things and objects that interact affectively through the cinematic apparatus to form assemblages of new sensations. The second half of this paper explores how cinematic assemblage reconstitutes a dynamic spatial atmosphere, which enables this paradoxical moment of Fai and Ho both arriving at the falls despite the circumstances of their relationship.

3 Defamiliarising through the Logistics of Cinematography

This section maps out the affective transsensorial ecologies evoked through filming conditions that enable *Happy Together*'s cinematography to make visible the processes of transformation in film aesthetics. I contend that Christopher Doyle's journal entries from *Don't Try for me Argentina* (1997) reveal *Happy Together*'s improvisational mode of filmmaking where actual physical spaces are transformed and become new through the affective processes of cinematic bodies—human and non-human—encountering one another within and without the cinematic apparatus. In an entry, Doyle describes the story breakdown he drafted for Wong Kar-Wai as "feeble in this form: few 'motivation', little apparent action, no subplot but is quick to add that the self-assured and intuitive quality of their filmmaking process should prevail and advance this plot. While the lack of a linear narrative might be taken as a lack of movement, or direction, this responsive mode of filmmaking allows us to understand how affect functions through the form and medium of cinema in spite of this lack of subjective storytelling. As Rei Terada writes in *Feeling in Theory: Emotion after the "Death of the Subject"* (2009), "affect [is] a structure that holds up without subjective aid" (113). It follows that affect is not produced by a subjective body but is a result of

processes interacting with one another. Affect transpires without a need to propel plot progression or posit subjectivity, thus queering heteronormative discourse that requires Fai and Ho to ascertain whether their relationship is moving toward; if they have a future together.

This improvisational mode of filmmaking that produces a cinematic assemblage of affect is further reiterated when Doyle writes that "[Wong and Doyle] never know what the story will eventually become or where the search for it—what [Doyle] calls the journey—will take [them]" (Doyle 1997). Driving through the northern province of Jujuy was meant to inspire a "route and a reason for Tony and Leslie to have come to such a place", instead of having physical spaces fit the framework of their story. In this instance the meaning of "Tropic of Capricorn" as a lone poet estranged from society, making sure he empowers his own fate by taking his own life, becomes an impulse to develop Leslie and Tony's character arc. While Doyle begins his journal by suggesting that the film is conceptualised through "very visual landscape and spaces", the meaning of spaces alters through the course of the filming process and his journal. Doyle underscores how he needs to "see the space and what [he] hope[s he] can do with it" that reveals on a fundamental level that the space mediates as much as it is produced as new through camera work, and is not merely represented on screen.

Even so, Doyle explains that the film's 'empty shots' that are "not conventional establishing shots because they're about atmosphere and metaphor, not space. The only thing they 'establish' is a mood or a totally subjective POV. They're cues to an 'ambient world we want to suggest but not to explain". This reflects the production crew's decision to shoot in Argentina to "'*defamiliarize*' [themselves] by moving away from the spaces—and hopefully the preoccupations—of the world [they] know so well" (Doyle, italics mine). Notably, Doyle clarifies that since they are "out of [their] space and depth" in Argentina and they do not even know the city at all, the crew ends up returning to familiar public spaces of bars, food joints and trains. However, there was an intention to find new ways of filming these places. This transformative mode of filmmaking is not only found in defamiliarising public spaces but even in the sequences of familiar tourist places like the Iguazu Falls. In view of this, I demonstrate how the sequences of the Iguazu Falls which appear both at the beginning of and towards the end of the film embody the affective potential for the cinematic apparatus to evoke transsensoriality through specific cinematic elements. In turn, the Iguazu Falls are crucial in opening up another way of regarding *Happy Together* because of the following reasons: (1) they illuminate what cinematic affectivity entails; (2) they reveal the defamiliarization of a renowned tourist attraction that has become tired from being marketed as a touristic place of interest and becomes independent of this physical location; (3) the affectivity produced when the bodies—the falls, the camera movement, the music body, etc.—in the sequence interrelate to one another create

new-experiences, new-atmospheres of assemblages emerge; (4) in experiencing the impossible arrival at the Falls, and the body-without-organs not-yet-formed, *Happy Together* ensures a transsensoriality of desire, where bodies are queered through construction and deconstruction; and finally, (5) a transnational quality in which sensoria are circulated with/through cinema to produce a transsensoriality of sexual ecologies.

Elsewhere, Erin Manning effectively negotiates the significance of the falls in *Politics of Touch: Sense, Movement, Sovereignty* (2009), suggesting that the film is "haunted, from the outset, with the impossibility of reaching the Iguazu Falls, the ideal tourist journey" (20). For Manning, Ho's and Fai's lamp with an illustration of the Falls printed on the shade is emblematic of how consumerism and tourism exploit desires of bodies by displacing them onto packaged tour groups and tacky souvenirs. This entrapment is embodied in the rotating lamp which imitates the movement of the Falls as the light projects the image. This "replicated instance of static repetition, a dream of renewed beginnings of perfect symmetry" demonstrates how the falls exist as a renewable product on a circuitous conveyor belt that feeds the tourism sector with demand for a supply infinitely deferred (2009, 21). Manning argues that the material possession of this lamp thus seals their fate of never arriving at the Iguazu Falls—and the impossibility of such an act—as a postponement of desire that is never fulfilled since this destination is always mediated by the shadows of consumerism. Manning contends that instead, the falls represent "a multiplicity of sensations that will lead [Ho and Fai] both together and apart, that will challenge the bonds of their friendship and their love, and relocate both Hong Kong and Argentina within the maps constructed by their desiring bodies moving in and across time and space" (2009, 21). In using the falls as a metaphor, she explains that the film is thus not one about homosexuality or a relation to home since the protagonists never arrive at home—regardless of its shifting definitions.

4 Queering Iguazu Falls: Affective Transsensoria of Subjectless Subjectivity

Especially important as a springboard for the final section of this paper is Manning's contention that *Happy Together* calls for new ways of thinking about queer desire as relationality that manifests through the power of sensations. Indeed, queer desires in *Happy Together* may be understood as the paradoxical want to remain static within the spatial-temporal specificities of two moving bodies already held within in place in a world that problematises the concept of movement.

Accordingly, I return to the first sequence featuring the Iguazu Falls to demonstrate how affective transsensoria that produces and is produced by the bodies, posit a way of thinking about affective bodies as sites of indeterminacy and unrecognizability. Through this cinematic mediation, Ho and Fai avoid the traps of heterosexual notions of subjectivity through the production of queer desire as affect. The first encounter with the Iguazu Falls in *Happy Together* opens with the camera circling slowly from above the foaming mouth of the falls, allowing the audience to encounter the waters for the first time near the beginning of the film. This one and a half minute long shot follows a bright whitewashed mise-èn-scene of Fai and Ho lost by the roadside while finding their way to this touristic location. As juxtaposed to the high whites, high contrast and saturated images from the previous black-and-white scenes, this scene is coloured a slight tint of dark blue, with low exposure and high shadows, evoking a mellow undertone throughout. The waters in varied hues of blues and muted greys gush down from the top of the falls as they blend dizzily into the milky froth that churns up from the plummeting funnels of waters. The camera rotates aerially through 180 degrees across the falls so that the waters resemble a thick wall of navy velvet curtains threaded with silky silver.

One is unable to make out the specific visuality of the falls and is made to engage with the texture of this scene. On the contrary, the slowness and duration of this scene allow the audience to engage with the falls in an affective manner that is independent of the camera movement. In fact, the audience's body is enticed to move in to feel the water and touch its materiality beyond a visible/visual representation of it. Simultaneously, the resonating sound of strings being plucked is heard. As the rhythm and timing from the notes punctuate the music soundtrack "Cucurrucucu Paloma", the audience's body is conducted into an immersive aural atmosphere that enhances the mesmeric cinematic encounter further through its acoustic directions. Caetano Veloso's haunting voice further permeates the scene while the camera takes its time to glide over the willowy falls. Softly, the humming sounds of water slushing down, vibrate from a quiet distance. The famous Iguazu Falls are not represented here through cinema. Rather, cinematic mediation has rendered the material physicality of the falls as on-going productions of impulses and forces that act on the body of water into assemblages of affective sensations. This sequence does not provide a recognisable view of the waterfalls as one would imagine from touristy lookout points, or even as compared to the image printed tackily on the lamp in Fai's apartment (Figure 1). Rather, this cinematic moment embodies an affective assemblage of transsensoria that disrupts one's ability to think of this cinematic experience as a mere visual representation of the falls.

Figure 1: Lampshade with a print of Iguazu Falls.

What could have been a scene charged with high kinetic energy from the pressure of the steep waterfalls is firstly counteracted by the slow motion of the camera. This is not to say that the image remains flat, static and predictable. Rather, this synaesthetic sequence invokes a mishmash of senses that overlaps with one another. This movement does more than give rise to new meanings about this scene and what it means, but induces new experiences, and produces new atmospheres. Secondly, what would have been a typical establishing long shot of the iconic Iguazu falls is not only defamiliarised but forgotten in this scene. In other words, the affective transsensoria evoked through the cinematic medium and style erases the referent that it was supposed to point to—the falls—in the first place. Sensoria functions here to resist representation and to produce an encounter that is not yet known. Even within the context of a physical space that is touristic and well-known, this moment exemplifies the paradoxical notion that makes the material presence of Iguazu Falls both important and not important to this scene at the same time. Essentially, the bodies involved in this sequence do not include a "human" one but encompasses involve the water body interacting with the other elements. As such, this sequence rethinks the notion of bodies as restricted only to human bodies. In *Deleuze and Cinema: The Aesthetics of Sensation* (2000), Barbara Kennedy asserts that Deleuze provides another way of thinking about bodies in cinema'

> An engagement with how bodies 'link', the relational quality of bodies, the linkages of the human body to other bodies, human and inhuman, animate and inanimate, machinic and non-machinic in a post-human trajectory. Thus the 'body' of the cinematic relates and assembles with the bodies of those viewers/observers in a web of inter-relational flows in material ways. (Kennedy 2000, 26)

Hence, whether bodies are human or not is a non-issue. Affect moves through bodies regardless of their said categories as "human bodies" or "non-human bodies". In fact, following the sentiment of Deleuze and Guattari, Teresa Brennan emphasises in *The Transmission of Affect* (2004) that "the transmission of affect means, that we are not self-contained in terms of our energies. There is no secure distinction between the 'individual' and the 'environment'" (Brennan 2004, 6). The sequence exemplifies the bodies involved in the environment that work towards a transsensorial affective assemblage. Cinematic transsensoria thus transcends one's ability to account for the origins of affect. That is, even if one were to trace affective transsensoria through the processual construction of bodies, these movements are irreversible and cannot be traced *back* to a single source/various sources of subjectivity.

Like Ben Anderson writes in "Affective Atmospheres" (Anderson 2009), bodies are produced and produce atmospheres that are sensorial and affective beyond their materiality, but they may not be reducible to them. Thus, atmospheres always hold up moments of "indeterminate affective 'excess' through which intensive space-time can be created" (Anderson 2009, 80). As the camera encircles the waterfalls, the fact is the audience does not identify with the camera's look, because the sensoria arise from the competing bodies of colour, sounds, waters, birds and the shift in light defragment the possibility of a unified subjectivity or identifiable subjectivity. Perhaps then, when Manning asserts that buying the lamp seals Ho and Fai's fate of never arriving at the falls—or, the impossibility of doing so—it is—accurate insofar as the falls remain an object to be visited, and the two protagonists are maintained as subjects within the capitalist exchange of products and desires. This sequence problematises the possibility of subject–object relations when the falls affectively become new through new sensations produced through the bodies within this cinematic assemblage.

While the narrative up to this point has decidedly revealed that Ho and Fai have yet again broken up, there is no clue to ascertain the impending direction that these two lovers are going to take from here. The insertion of this new event through the falls undoes the politics of sexuality by withholding judgement on the fate of the two lovers and where their bodies move from here. Not to undo their breakup, or to "start over", but to assert that at this moment, this ambivalence cannot be reduced to understanding or comprehension—whether we consider the contextual information we have of the lovers and their geopolitical situation. This sequence thus suspends the couple, queers time and space, to allow bodies and their autonomous desires to float freely within and without this cinematic transsensoria, outside the boundaries of fixed time. For this reason, this sequence allows the experience of aporia through a suspension of judgement that reveals the possibility of a transsensorial mode of thinking about desire and sexuality. The desiring act is thus understood as an experience of aporia, an encounter of the "impossible of such arrival", that is met with a welcome of such an event, even if this event that has yet to arrive as François

Raffoul writes in *The Origins of Responsibility* (2010, 37). Thus, this seemingly meaningless scene is a commitment to alterity, to the otherness of sexual autonomy not yet arrived but always on the verge of experience. Only after taking on the responsibility to regard this experience of aporia and undecidability can the bodies begin to experience the freedom of desire from definitions of identity, and freedom of fixed subjectivity by queering through the cinematic assemblage of transsensoriality.

5 "Becoming-Unrecognisable": Aporetic Assemblages of "bodies-without-organs"

The audience encounters the falls the second and final time towards the end of the film, after Fai leaves Argentina for good, when Ho returns to Fai's apartment only to find his own passport left behind on the desk. Ho fixes the broken lamp after cleaning the house while waiting in vain for Fai. The sequence leading up to the falls begins with an aerial shot of the lamp before it pans down into a close up on the lamp as Fai watches it rotate mechanically. Simultaneously, sweet soothing sounds of the accordion from the musical refrain, "Tango Apasionado: Finale" by Astor Piazolla is heard. This soundtrack is heard repeatedly throughout the film, when the couple is about to enter a new phase, or when they experience a significant moment in their relationship. More than to signal the developments in the filmic narrative, the soundtrack carries with it a unique valence that not only evokes its set of narratives but its own sensations as well. Notably, the choice of this soundtrack, "Tango Apasionado: Finale", creates a sort of oxymoron considering how it has been reprised many times within this film to reflect the cyclical nature of Ho and Fai's relationship. Every time the song plays, it could signal the finale or end of their relationship. Yet, this possibility is subverted each time the song reprises. As the soundtrack is heard this time, the audience is left only to experience the aporia created through the affective. While the track could refer to the end of the relationship, it need not be the end and there is no possibility of knowing for certain if this is the case. Simply put, each time the soundtrack plays in the film, the audience is led to a moment of indeterminacy where they are forced to engage with the affective sensoria produced, while considering the (im)possible future of the lovers and the ambiguity of their relationship.

The shot of the lamp, which reveals the artistic impressions of the milky falls surrounded by luscious greens and clear skies, lights up picturesquely and the waters in the painting appear to glisten as if hit by rays of sunlight. For the first time, the design on the lampshade is revealed in such detail—in colour, and not obscured lighting. As if having caught sight of something new for the first time on

this lamp, as if seeing the lamp properly for the first time, Ho picks up the lamp and stares at it intently (Figure 2). All this while, the camera remains static on a close-up image of the waterfalls in the lamp instead of a shot on Ho's eyes. At this moment, the camera does not align itself with the look of Ho. Eventually, when the camera cuts to a reverse-shot of the lamp, it is not clear what it is that catches Ho's attention. Again, visual cues do not present new understandings of this situation. In fact, the light from the lamp contrasts Ho who remains in the shadows.

Finally, the camera zooms in to a close up of a particular part of the lamp. At this point, the canvas material of the lamp can almost be felt with one's eyes, while the brush strokes of the waterfall artwork water are made palpable at this proximity. The shot, lasting a mere three seconds, is not only distracting visually because of the grainy texture that makes the paintings on the lamp unclear and hard to distinguish, the light further disrupts the attention of the visual field. In fact, it is easy to miss the shadows of two darkened figures at the edge of the ledge overlooking the waterfalls. One may even argue that the closeup, instead of offering a better perspective, seeks to create more ambivalence in this scene. Firstly, the camera resists the alignment of the audience's engagement with that of Ho's gaze. As such, the audience's body interacts directly without being given more insight into the mood of this scene. Secondly, the audiovisual cues at this point are affective in evoking a cinematic encounter of textures without the need for signification. Lighting at this point creates a rhythmic pulse that forces an engagement with the light patterns than to understand the images' meanings.

The scene then cuts to a shot from outside Ho's apartment through a worm eye's point of view as it zooms and rotates before stopping as the screen appears to be split in half by the dark red ceiling walls from the architecture of the building. Ho's apartment is shot from the outside where the lamp is barely seen when set against

Figure 2: Fai looks carefully at the lamp for the first time.

the pale green of the window frames, further obscured by the reflection of a fluorescent light on the window pane. While the mise-en-scène appears minimal at first glance, it is packed with disharmonious shapes and colours. A rod in darker green segments the screen further while discoloured and peeling paint flank the window frame further. The scene does not draw the audience's attention to the lamp. Rather, it encourages an un-seeing amidst the other visual cues that distract one's attention. Poignantly, the affective assemblage here is produced through the angled shapes, contrast in types of lighting and shadows, in addition to the unsteady camera movement that reminds the audience of its cinematic specificity. This forces the encounter with this sequence to remain one that is subjectless, in which it remains within the field of the affective. Even if the "subject" appears to be Ho in the scene, an engagement is encouraged beyond identifying with him: as he cries in the room, the camera remains on the outside from the reflective window pane, while the lens is splashed a strong tinge of sepia (Figure 3). The audience is not given access to Ho's subjectivity, not because he is silenced. Rather, Ho embodies the excess of affects as enacted through the autonomous body while ensuring its relation to the bodies around him. As he sits on the couch and cries, his flannel shirt blends with the patterns on the woollen throw, while the floral wallpaper in the home is made more palpable because of the different patterns one sees in the shot. Instead of asserting Ho's personal subjectivity, his body becomes sensations. His tears, not so much a reflection of emotional sadness, but signals pure affects and the potential for his body to affect and be affected.

Instead of making sense of Ho's tears, the scene draws to mind the production of Ho's body as related to and connected with the bodies—how bodies affect and are affected one another—to renew the acknowledgement of what cannot be decided about Ho; an undecidability that the audience is made to confront through

Figure 3: Ho crying alone in Fai's apartment.

the cinematic experience. The lack of access to Ho ensures that one may remain responsible towards his body. This affective cinematic encounter erases the subject to inform a "subjectless subjectivity" so that the question is not so much about what the scene tells about Ho's feelings. Instead, the audience contemplates the transsensorial spaces and connections that bodies express and create through cinematic affects as such.

Fai's voiceover is heard at this point, saying "I lost my way and wandered around for a while but I finally reached Iguazu. I felt very sad. I felt like there should be two of us standing there" while the scene intercuts to an ariel shot of Iguazu Falls with the powdery splashes rising from the middle of the falls, akin to the first sequence we encountered. This time, the waterfall splash fiercely and more relentlessly. A silhouette of Fai standing on the bridge staring up at the Iguazu falls is seen, mirroring the close-up of the souvenir lamp that Ho held up to observe (Figure 4). Instead of two figures, there is one. We may well draw an easy parallel between these two scenes and suggest that the relationship between Fai and Ho has indeed come to a finality, doomed to never "start over". Quickly, the scene cuts to a medium close-up of water pouring relentlessly on Fai. However, one must not assume that the audience has now become aligned with Fai's gaze (towards the object of Iguazu Falls). On the contrary, the pouring water from the falls reminds the audience that our visual access to Fai is mediated through the body of the camera since water visibly splashes onto the camera lens as well. It is not Fai that we are looking at as much as the different bodies on and off screen cumulating in this scene of affective sensoria. The scene cuts to a medium-long shot of Fai's back view through the rain-soaked camera lens where the torrential gush of water from the falls blurs the visual field as the scene is hard to make sense of with complete clarity.

Figure 4: Silhouette of Fai standing by Iguazu Falls.

The inability to visually attend to the image on-screen in its entirety is noteworthy. Even if Fai stands at the typical tourist spot to look at the falls, the scene deconstructs this representational possibility by blurring the visual field. Evidently, these affectively constructed cinematic assemblages of transsensoria challenge representation, and suspend our ability to decisively respond or regard this cinematic encounter. This openness is further maintained when the sequence cuts to a similar aerial shot of the waterfall. The contrasting movements in the next sequence are significant: while the water gushes down fiercely from the mouth of the waterfall, this movement is juxtaposed with the rising foam from the bottom of the falls. The rotary movement of the camera, rhythmic beats of the tango finale playing in the background, and constant humming sounds of the water bodies produce a dynamic affective transsensoriality that forces the audience to engage with the cinematic encounter as an event of sensations. This cinematic moment highlights the autonomy of Fai's subjectivity in deciding to see the falls—or, his lack of—in place of an ecological and transsensorial encounter as opened up through the film which queers normative modes of thinking about *Happy Together*.

6 Conclusion

By close reading, the mise-en-scène of these waterfall sequences, the on-screen star bodies of Leung and Cheung are defamiliarized when they produce and experience Gilles Deleuze's affect, "become-unrecognisable" as on-screen subjects, thus escape from the normative process of identification and representation. This undecidability also enables one to withhold judgement, and queer our need to know. Instead, we move through the transsensorial potentials for the cinematic assemblage to rethink modes of queering normativity, and to define bodies in terms of plurality and multiplicity. In other words, a transsensorial approach expands scholarship that ascertains that Ho's body is characterised as an abject through his entrapment in Argentina while Fai is allowed to move (Bao 2011, 2020; Quero 2016). As with the first sequence, an aporia of undecidability enables bodies to move and interrelate in ways unrestrained by social or political order. Not only does transsensoriality remove the overpowering preoccupation with fixed positions of subjectivities but it also enables both Fai and Ho to exist within an openness that is not dictated by heteronormative time, and space. Affective encounters amongst human and non-human bodies such as the Iguazu Falls in *Happy Together* contra the interpretation of bodies on-screen as queer subjects to be read. Rather, when bodies on screen are constituted as affective assemblages, the boundaries between human and non-human bodies no longer remain as distinct, enabling the desire to move through affective ecologies of transsensoriality to produce new narratives of meaning. It

follows that the two waterfall sequences open up spaces of ambivalent and indeterminable ethical aporia within the film. Significantly, the undecidability of the fate between Ho and Fai is still present and will remain as such even if Fai leaves to forge new friendships, make new connections in new spaces and atmospheres.

The potential of queering and resisting normative narratives exists through the complexity of the Iguazu falls sequences, regardless of—or perhaps because of—our inability to substantiate the potential lines of experiences that are to occur, or what we will come to understand of the experiences of the bodies involved. Through which, the encounters with the Iguazu Falls allow us to queer heteronormative and linear narrative time that is still defined by human understanding, often associated with (a movement towards) futurity. This inability to pass judgement, I argue, is the ethics of sexual desire which *Happy Together* proffers when we understand the body that queers and becomes unrecognisable through productive affective assemblages. To that end, this paper presents a method of thinking about how film stars, familiar tourist spots, and even a classic text like *Happy Together* may be defamiliarized through productions of affects, new-sensations, to provide more ways of revisiting, and regarding the film anew.

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