

CASE STUDY: *HAPPY TOGETHER* (WONG KAR WAI, 1997)

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A glimpse of Chinese diversity

In recent years, since the opening up of Chinese society, gays and lesbians inside China have become more visible, especially in traditional centres of gay life such as Shanghai. Nevertheless, it is no surprise that a film such as *Happy Together* should have been made in the more liberal enclave of Hong Kong, and with outside funding and locations in Argentina. Any reference to dialogue and speech in the following analysis is based on the subtitles provided for the Artificial Eye video edition, which translate the Cantonese, Mandarin and small amount of Spanish in which the film is acted.

Ho Po-Wing is an attractive but louche good-time boy. The other half of the couple at the centre of the narrative, Lai Yiu-Fai, is a hard-working, down-to-earth man who dotes on Ho. Both parts are played by well-known Hong Kong stars. The film is initially structured around the contrasts between these two characters, and their interaction. Later a young man named Chang becomes significant in Lai's life and the narrative momentum shifts to the Lai/Chang relationship.

Voice-over viewpoints

The voice of Lai on the soundtrack puts this character firmly in control of viewpoint. Lai is the one who explains to the viewer the on/off nature of his relationship with Ho, that they came on holiday to Argentina and hit the road in order to try and sort things out. Lai's voiceover explains, comments and vents emotions throughout the film.

He tells us that it was Ho's purchase of a waterfall lamp that inspired them to visit the famous landmark waterfall at Iguazu. He expresses his most intimate emotions on the soundtrack at such points when, in a later flashback showing him caring for Ho's injuries, he admits that he never told Ho that he didn't want him to recover too fast because 'these days were our happiest. When he finally gets to see the Iguazu falls on his own, his voiceover confesses that he still feels sad, that he should be there with Ho. The visuals both complement and counteract Lai's voice. A longshot of him as a lone figure next to the vastness of the falls makes us aware of his sense of isolation, and there is a close-up of his face splashed with tear-like water drops.

Chang enters the film about two-thirds of the way through. His viewpoint too is privileged through voiceover. His voice also comments and expresses emotions. Initially, we see his long, lean face in close-up while he is washing up in the restaurant kitchen, telling us how he loves listening to sounds. He has already noticed Lai and comments on how pleasant his voice sounds. He lets us know that he has noticed how much Lai talks on the phone and says 'he must be talking to someone he likes'.

When Chang is about to leave Buenos Aires, having saved enough money to move on, he says a fond farewell to Lai. As the two men embrace we hear Chang's voice asking himself uncertainly whether the two of them have become close. He tells us that he can hear his own heart beating, and wonders whether Lai's heart is beating too. He goes to visit the lighthouse at Ushuaia, a famous landmark. He had tried to capture Lai's voice on tape as a souvenir because he prefers sound to photos, and left Lai alone to speak into the machine, telling him to express his feelings. Lai had told him of a legend connected with the lighthouse which says that people with emotional troubles can dump them there. At the lighthouse, he plays his small, portable recorder and tells us that he is trying to help Lai, but that all he could hear on the tape is sobs. Sweeping panoramic aerial shots of Chang at the lighthouse give an airy sense of liberation and suggest that he might be successful in his chosen purpose.

A good-time boy?

Ho is portrayed as mixed up, self-centred and immature, a character who commands little audience sympathy. He quickly decides they are to split up again and is soon parading his rich white boyfriend in front of Lai at the tango bar. Other themes in this film can be explored around relations between white and Chinese gay men. A shot of Ho lounging in his boyfriend's luxury apartment contrasts tellingly with the scenes of Lai's small, simple room and his hard work.

However, Ho does attempt to help Lai by stealing a watch, an act that misfires and results in him being beaten up and kicked out. He comes back to Lai for help. When Lai gives him a ticket and puts him on a bus he comes back again, this time with his wrists slit. During his long recovery, Lai loses his job at the bar because of an angry attack on the white boyfriend. He finds the job in the kitchen and supports Ho. Only when fully recovered through Lai's care and support does Ho run off yet again. For Lai, this is clearly the last straw. In his final scene, as we see Ho clutching a blanket and weeping copiously, there is still the question of exactly what or who he is weeping for.

A troubled man?

Lai, initially in thrall to Ho, is obviously unhappy; the film is dotted with shots showing Lai alone, looking depressed, clutching his forehead with his hand, smoking or looking wistfully from windows. In one instance, his near-naked figure is slumped against a wall in the restricted space of a harshly lit bathroom, the tiles glinting mercilessly. There is a scene where he gazes out from a boat on the river, the whole screen bathed in blue to reflect his melancholy. Other expressionist techniques are used such as the jagged blurry shot with a jolting camera as Lai runs down the street after a quarrel.

Lai is also an angry man. There are several instances of him breaking beer bottles against hard surfaces. He angrily kicks Ho out when the latter taunts him about the number of boyfriends he's had. At one point the viewer is given an outside shot of the tango bar as Lai watches the white boyfriend go in with yet another young conquest. The camera remains fixed, and all we see is Lai picking up a beer bottle, walking angrily into the bar, followed by a male scream on the soundtrack. A short while later, we learn he has lost his job for this.

As indicated earlier, Lai tries very hard to distance himself from Ho but perhaps he can't help himself when faced with Ho's childlike, dependent nature, which contrasts so strongly with his coping, caring and working which we continually view. The major instance of this inability to help himself occurs when Ho returns to his apartment with his wrists cut.

A significant shot follows immediately. After all Lai's efforts to reject Ho and put him on a bus, the camera angle reverses to reveal the love and concern on Lai's face. As Lai nurses Ho, and after he has confessed in voiceover to that time span being one of the happiest, there is surely a feeling here of unease. A relationship where one partner wants the other helpless and ill is not a healthy one and Lai seems to demonstrate this to a certain extent in his behaviour. He continues to insist on the two of them sleeping apart, one on the single bed, one on the sofa. He seems to be weaning himself off Ho.

At the same time, Lai's behaviour tends towards the obsessive and possessive, and serves to increase the viewer's sense of unease about the situation. Lai is finally strong enough to refuse to see Ho but his strong feelings for Ho continue to the end of the film. We see him gazing wistfully at the waterfall lamp just after Ho leaves and later, after Chang has left him alone with the tape recorder, we see him sobbing quietly into it as he hides his face behind it.

Finally, the script offers a possible psychological explanation for Lai's troubled nature. A phone call he attempts to make, and a long letter he writes, are accompanied in voiceover by references to seeking his father's forgiveness, not only for stealing some money from the tango bar (run by a friend of his father's) but for other unspecified things. Later, when he meets Chang's family in Taipei he envies Chang his happy, stable home background.

Happy together?

The relationship between Ho and Lai is clearly a troubled one. Both men seem dependent on each other for reasons which do them harm. Yet there is no doubting their sexual compatibility and attraction. Their mutual attraction on this level is established in the opening scene of the film where they almost seem to eat each other up as they make passionate love in a way that is remarkably explicit but perhaps too frantic to be stable.

Lai came to Argentina to try and work things out, but as the film progresses, he seems to change. The happiest period for him may have been when he nursed Ho, but after the initial passion all we see is Ho trying to provoke, tease, caress, lick and kiss in a one-way flow of sensuality. After the break-up, we see Lai out in the gay bars and haunts of Buenos Aires, cruising.

The waterfall lamp is a powerful visual symbol of the relationship between the two men. It is often foregrounded in shots of the apartment and, as indicated, used by both lovers as a focus for emotional contemplation. It ties in closely with the planned trip together to the falls, which hovers over the narrative like some kind of ideal view of how the relationship could turn out.

A sweet saviour?

After extended scenes of Ho's selfish manipulations, it is with great relief that the sweet, sensible Chang enters the narrative with the facial close-up described earlier. Chang's presence in the film puts an interesting emphasis on sound. When he and Lai are out drinking together as they get to know each other better, Lai finds that Chang is listening to a conversation far away at the other side of the bar. Chang explains that he had an eye problem as a child and learned to make hearing his main way of looking at the world. This is the motivation for his taping of Lai's voice which leads to the symbolic release of Lai's woes at the lighthouse. Chang's gentle behaviour and plain style of dress combine with his dedication to listening to give him an almost mystical aura.

A similar aura of mystery remains around Chang's sexuality. He seems to be a loner, working late in the kitchen because he has nothing else to do. He tells Lai that he left home to travel in order to 'work some things out'. We see him refusing an attractive young female workmate's invitation to go to the cinema, telling Lai that he doesn't like her voice, that he prefers women whose voices are deep and low. At the same time he is eager to invite Lai out for a drink. His beating heart and tremulous musings about how much Lai likes him perhaps signal strongly that he is in love. When he returns from Buenos Aires after his trip to the lighthouse, he tries to find Lai, who has already left for home.

Although Lai doesn't get to meet Chang in Taipei, his final voiceover remark is that he will always know where to contact Chang should he want to, offers a positive expectation for the audience. To what extent does the appearance of Chang give the film a Hollywood-style happy ending?

Filmic pleasures

The mise-en-scene tends to reflect emotional dysfunctionality in its emphasis on harsh surfaces, empty streets and enclosed spaces. Most scenes of the Ho/Lai relationship are also shot in black and white. Yet there are visual and aural pleasures on offer that offset the often dismal feeling of the affair. When the two men are driving towards the waterfall, and before their car breaks down, we are treated to a panoramic, mobile aerial shot of the falls, bathed in vivid blue light and accompanied on the soundtrack by a ballad in Spanish about love and suffering, sung by a mellifluous male voice. This scene suggests a fantasy desired by both the lovers. Argentine tango music and Frank Zappa's jazz enliven the soundtrack.

There are other specific parts where the film bursts into colour photography, which is thrown into relief by the surrounding black and white: Lai's period of happiness, the scenes with Chang in the bar. The lighthouse shots accompanying Chang's 'release' of Lai's troubles are positively exhilarating. The colour and movement of Buenos Aires is a kind of backdrop for the relationship between Ho and Lai, encapsulated in speeded-up shots of the downtown area with the vivid colours of traffic zooming by. The film ends with visuals of a similar urban background in Hong Kong, extended to include trains, people, high buildings and a throbbing sense of urban speed, accompanied on the soundtrack by Frank Zappa singing 'Happy Together'.