

Knowing, Acknowledging, and Loving:
Cavellian Themes in the Films of Wong Kar-wai¹

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Time, memory, and history are the themes most often highlighted in discussions of famed Hong Kong director Wong Kar-wai. Less often remarked upon, but just as pervasive throughout his cinematic oeuvre, is the theme of knowledge—specifically, knowledge of other persons. A desire to know another, or to be known, is often what sets Wong’s characters in motion,² and the characters’ subsequent satisfactions and frustrations serve to teach us, the audience, something about life and about love.

A preoccupation with this particular cluster of topics is something Wong shares with Stanley Cavell. For it is a theme spanning Cavell’s philosophical oeuvre that we humans desire knowledge of each other, and that we might well be confused about what that desire comes to. In Cavell’s telling, our search for knowledge of the other is born frequently of a mis-identified drive for what he terms “acknowledgment.” What acknowledgment is, precisely, and how it differs from knowledge, is a fraught question, and one that Cavell doubts can be profitably answered

¹ For discussion and comments, I thank David Cumiskey, Mike Dacey, Jorah Dannenberg, Sam Filby, Rafeeq Hasan, Bill Porter, Chris Porter, John Taflan, and an audience at the Northern New England Philosophical Association conference.

² Or pins them in place. In Wong’s *Happy Together*, the protagonist struggles to move on from his first lover because his lover knows him, and he knows his lover, in a world otherwise filled with strangers. Thanks to Bill Porter for this point.

through the philosopher's favored method of listing necessary and sufficient conditions. But, explains Francey Russell, Cavell believes it *is* possible to come to grasp the notion "by learning to recognize instances of its success and cases of its failure, both in life and in art" (2019, 3).³ Wong's films, famously observant about human relationships, thus suggest themselves as potential sources of insight on these matters—works of art with the potential to put us in possession of the concept of acknowledgment, without necessarily offering a proper definition of it.

This essay will take up two of his films—his lighthearted romantic comedy *Chungking Express* (1994), and his dramatic masterpiece *In the Mood for Love* (2000). My method will not assume that the films mirror Cavell's thinking about knowing and acknowledging in all its particulars, but will, as Stephen Mulhall suggests we should, treat the films as "thinking seriously and systematically about [philosophical views] in just the ways that philosophers do" (2016, 4). Which seems only fitting, given that this is how Cavell himself taught us to approach film.

1. Knowledge is No Cure for Loneliness

Chungking Express is organized around two pairs of characters—connected only by their patronage of a noodle stand—whose stories parallel, rhyme, and develop similar themes. The film begins with a lament from our first protagonist, Cop No. 223 (Takeshi Kaneshiro), who muses about the scores of individuals he passes on Hong Kong's crowded streets, inches away,

³ Russell's discussion of knowing and acknowledging in *Chinatown* focuses not only on a different film, but ultimately a different set of issues than I do here. But her chapter is extraordinarily insightful and illuminating, and thinking through it inspired many of my thoughts on Wong Kar-wai's films.

who he will never have the opportunity to know. The proximate cause of these reflections is a recent break-up—one that has left him alone, looking for love amidst a sea of anonymous strangers. “Every day we brush past so many other people—people we never meet,” he says, as the screen overwhelms us with images of countless pedestrians. For a romantic, committed to finding a beloved who *must* be out there somewhere, the task presents as overwhelming—perhaps impossible.

No. 223 decides to phone the home of his ex, a young woman named May. “Mrs. Chen?” he says, holding the receiver to his ear. “This is Qiwu. Don’t fetch May, it’s you I’m calling! It’s been a while, how are you?” Following some awkward small talk with May’s mother, No. 223 asks to speak with her father, but refuses offers to speak with May herself. Played for comic effect, the scene suggests less that we’re witnessing a sustained program of surveillance and more that we’re witnessing 1994’s equivalent of social media lurking—a naïve attempt to cling to a relationship by glimpsing a bit of what a former lover is up to.⁴

“How can I forget May?” No. 223 eventually asks himself, drinking at a bar. His only hope, he determines, is to fall in love with the next woman who walks through the door, whomever she happens to be. Sporting a blonde wig, sunglasses, and a trench coat, the nameless woman (Brigitte Lin) who eventually enters is almost entirely shielded from the gaze of our protagonist, as well as from the camera’s. If we incline toward a Cavellian reading of the scene, we might say that her presentation is designed to inspire anxiety about her very knowability. For one of Cavell’s major themes in *The Claim of Reason* is that in acting on our drive to know

⁴ Another possible reading of this scene, suggested to me by Sam Filby, is that No. 223 is driven by a desire to force himself into May’s consciousness in such a way as to inspire anxiety about *her* lack of knowledge about *him*. No. 223’s behavior strikes me as a bit more innocent than this, but I think it’s an interesting possibility nevertheless.

another, we often reveal an assumption that there exists some barrier between each of us that must be removed, penetrated, or overcome. The problem of other minds, he says, arises because we conceive of “the body as a veil,” concealing a person’s true interior self (1979, 368).⁵ And this mysterious woman is concealed by several additional layers.

With this thought in the background, it’s understandable that our police officer would take his task to be to interrogate her, to learn the facts, to uncover what it is that she does not outwardly display.⁶ He immediately begins peppering her with questions:

“Do you like pineapple?”

“I grew up in Taiwan. And you?”

“What kind of man do you like?”

And yet a second time: “Do you like pineapple?”

If love involves a unifying of two distinct people, then what No. 223 needs—if it is love he seeks—is to close the gap between him and her that is opened by her mysteriousness. This, it would seem, requires him to uncover that which is concealed.

At this point in the film, we in the audience actually know much more about the woman than our protagonist does.⁷ In an earlier scene it is revealed that she has been smuggling drugs,

⁵ There are obvious sexual undertones to these thoughts. While I don’t think that the problem of other minds is inherently sexual, or that Cavell conceives of it that way, erotic love often inspires a particularly acute desire to know its object, and so it is unsurprising that the desire to know other minds could be characterized in sexual terms.

⁶ And who better than a police officer to undertake such an investigation?

⁷ A complication here is that No. 223 sometimes displays a kind of omniscience when talking through voiceover about the mysterious woman. At the beginning of the film, he notes that he comes within a centimeter of her on the street before announcing: “Fifty-seven hours later, I fell in love with this woman.” It’s the kind of knowledge a

has been betrayed, and is now in the midst of carrying out her revenge. There is thus real purpose in her concealment, and we in the audience are made to think that the prospects for romance will hinge on what gets revealed to this romantic cop, when, and how—indeed, the woman’s identity as a criminal, and his as a cop, suggests that a happy ending between these two will depend in large part upon their *not* getting to know one another in the typical way.

“I’m just trying to learn more about you,” the officer pleads, as the woman thwarts his advances. “I was in love with a girl for five years and we just split up. She says I don’t understand her. So I want to find out more about you.”

“Knowing someone doesn’t actually mean anything,” she responds through voiceover. It’s a striking bit of redirection, given that up to this point, the film seems to have more or less accepted No. 223’s assumption that his anxieties are epistemic—the fear that these strangers with whom he shares a world are ones he’ll never know, the twin concerns that he doesn’t know what May is up to but that he cannot forget her, the belief that satisfaction depends upon how he extracts information about this mysterious woman. But if we’re being redirected *away* from this assumption, what exactly are we being redirected *toward*?

In lieu of divulging information about herself, the nameless woman offers something in the vicinity of a proposal, or a request. She wants a place to sleep and asks to go home with him. Exhausted from all the drug running, the woman arrives at the apartment only to fall asleep immediately, still wearing her wig, sunglasses, and trench coat. One might think it only natural for No. 223 to ask a few questions here. What is this person up to, exactly? Why does she have

lonely person in a large city filled with strangers is likely to crave, and, interestingly, it does No. 223 no good. I thank Bill Porter for this point.

nowhere to go? Why did she come back home with him? Did she really not know what going home with him under these circumstances might imply?

But rather than wondering about any of this, No. 223 simply remarks caringly upon the nameless woman's exhaustion. Quietly eating his take-out and watching movies alone, he acknowledges her need for rest, and before he leaves for work in the morning, he removes her shoes and cleans them. "My mother says a woman's feet swell up if she sleeps in high heels," he says. And "a pretty woman should have clean shoes." Later, he discovers she's left him a message at his answering service. Apparently, she's remembered something he'd told her the night before: today is the day he turns twenty-five, and she's called to wish him a happy birthday.

In his book-length study of Wong's films, Peter Brunette characterizes No. 223's evening as a "potential amorous encounter" than "ends unhappily" for him. For once the woman falls asleep, No. 223 "finds himself more alone than ever" despite the fact that her birthday message "offer[s] a ray of hope" (2005, 46). This strikes me as a significant misreading, turning us away from the film's central teaching. We in the audience are given no indication at all that had the wig, sunglasses, and trench coat come off, and had No. 223 "gotten to know" her in *this* sense, that he would have had his longing assuaged. And crucially, the tone in the final moments of this story is sanguine rather than resigned, as what happens is depicted not as a letdown, but as an achievement. It's just that the achievement is *practical* rather than epistemic. The officer acknowledges, with his action, the woman's need for care, and she acknowledges his need for a kind gesture with hers. The melancholy mood established in the opening scene lifts, suggesting that No. 223 has, from the outset, misunderstood the nature of his own desire. And if we viewers were initially inclined to think that what No. 223 needed was an exchange of life histories with a

beautiful woman followed by a night in which he and she get to know each another even more intimately, one might hope that the film has gone some way toward unsettling our preconceptions.

2. Mistaking Knowing and Acknowledging

No. 223 mistakes his desire for mutual acknowledgment with a desire for knowledge. To the extent that we, the viewers, share in his mistake, we might come to recognize in ourselves a tendency to make it. But this is relatively limited, as far as philosophical insight goes. If the hope is to better grasp the concept of acknowledgement by reflecting on our tendency to mistake it for knowledge, then surely part of what is needed is a diagnosis of why we'd ever make this mistake in the first place. To put this another way: It's not enough to notice that we incline toward mistaking knowledge for acknowledgment. We need to say something about *what acknowledgment is such that we're inclined to confuse it with knowledge*.

In an early paper, Cavell identifies an internal connection between knowing and acknowledging that hints at why we might be tempted to muddle them. "From my acknowledging [X]," he writes "it follows that I know [X]." If I acknowledge your pain, then I know that you're in pain. If I acknowledge your need for comfort or reassurance, then I know you need these things. If I acknowledge your presence, then I know you're there. Knowledge and acknowledgment share *this* connection to epistemology, at least. What differentiates the two is that, "Acknowledgment goes beyond knowledge" (1979, 237). To acknowledge requires acting upon knowledge one already possesses. To acknowledge your pain, I must *do* something—maybe I fetch you some balm. To acknowledge your need for reassurance, maybe I express my

love for you again. To acknowledge your presence, maybe I give you a nod. So, perhaps the thought is that we're mistaking acknowledgment for one of its preconditions.

It's worth pausing, however, to ask whether we should rest content with this diagnosis. To acknowledge requires knowledge, yes. But *any* foray into the practical depends upon knowledge of some sort or other. In the film, a lonely No. 223 eats a stack of canned pineapple by himself. This requires knowledge—of the location of the cans, of what pineapple is, of the external world. Yet there's no temptation on our part to confuse eating the pineapple with the various bits of knowledge upon which this activity relies. So why, then, would we be tempted to confuse acknowledging with the knowledge it requires? Perhaps I need to know things about someone in order to acknowledge them. Or perhaps I need not just to know things about them, but actually *to know them* in some deeper sense—in the way we mean it when we say we know a friend or lover.⁸ Either way, it seems mysterious why we'd mistake such knowledge for acknowledgment just because the former is a precondition for the latter.

One possibility, perhaps, is that the quest for knowledge is particularly prone to crowd out the quest for acknowledgment, disorienting us in the process. Cavell speaks of the vulnerability felt when persons attempt to know one another, and about the inclination to conceal oneself and to avoid others in response (1979, 459-461). Such a dynamic renders the relevant knowledge difficult to secure. It is thus easy to imagine the search for mutual acknowledgment

⁸ David Lauer (2014) argues that knowing a person should be distinguished from knowing facts about them, and gives an insightful account of what this distinction comes to.

devolving into a single-minded, relentless pursuit of that which enables it.⁹ So, like the capitalist who forgets what wealth is *for* and begins engaging in accumulation for its own sake, so too might we lose track of our purpose in gathering knowledge and begin fetishizing it.

Were this the entire story, though, it would suggest that someone like No. 223—and insofar as we sympathize with him, us in the audience—isn't so misguided after all. Since knowledge of the other is a precondition for acknowledgment, knowledge is precisely what ought to be sought. Best not to lose sight of the ultimate goal, of course. But if we're seeking out knowledge, we're on the right path. I want to recommend, though, that we at least give serious consideration to the counsel of the nameless blonde-wigged woman. She tells us that No. 223's attempts to know more about her are not just doomed to failure, but are misguided at a more fundamental level. After all, in his case, it seems that satisfaction did *not* require the knowledge he was seeking—he didn't need to know where the woman is from in order to attend to her exhaustion, he didn't need to know whether she likes pineapple in order to clean her shoes, and he didn't need to know anything about her secret life as a gangster in order to emerge from the interaction feeling sated.

But this brings us full circle: We'd hoped to get a grip on what acknowledgement is by understanding our tendency to mistake it for knowledge. We'd hoped to gain clarity about that which left No. 223 assuaged by coming to understand the nature of his mistake earlier in the story. But as yet, we appear still to be lacking in such understanding. I suggest we now turn to the second half of the film, which I'll argue offers some wisdom on this very point.

⁹ Russell's (2018) reading of *Chinatown* highlights this. Jake, the private detective, desires to know Evelyn's secret. Evelyn desires to conceal it. This dynamic leads Jakes to develop a kind of obsession, unmoored from his original professional concerns—all to disastrous effect.

3. Acknowledgment's Ability to Constitute What Is Known

The second half of *Chungking Express* parallels the first with its focus on a second heartbroken police officer, Cop No. 663 (Tony Leung). At the noodle stand he frequents, his girlfriend drops off a letter that he refuses to open, along with keys to his apartment that he refuses to take with him. In the meantime, our protagonist mopes around the stand, pouring his heart out to anyone who will listen. From a distance, he is observed by a young employee named Faye (Faye Wong), who sneaks glimpses from the kitchen, clearly smitten, trying to see but avoid being seen.

Her interest intensifies until we reach the film's most notorious sequences, where Faye uses the abandoned keys to repeatedly enter No. 663's apartment while he's out. There, she sifts through his belongings, daydreaming about him and about everything she imagines him to be. She also begins to place her own stamp on his dwelling, cleaning at first, then redecorating, and finally purchasing him new goldfish. His reaction, upon returning repeatedly to an ever-evolving apartment, is something between vague bemusement and delight—he muses about the possibility that his apartment and its contents have come to life, remaking and regenerating themselves spontaneously.

Throughout, the film pointedly withholds information about the characters' inner motivations. Faye not only fails to explain her bizarre actions, but spends much of her time bopping her head to the music she's blasting, often with a fairly inarticulate facial expression, rather than doing anything that might clue us in to her intentions. What is driving her to clean, redecorate, and buy new fish, especially when she seems to want her identity to remain unknown? What's her purpose in carrying out these odd deeds? No. 663 is similarly inscrutable. What does he think is going on, exactly? Does he really not realize that someone is redecorating

his bathroom? Does he suspect Faye? Or someone else? Does he actually think his apartment has come to life?

Each character thus presents as a mystery to the other, and both present as mysteries to us. What exactly these people are even doing is a question we're invited to ask in order to understand them, and it's the question that the film presumably expects will drive the viewer's interest through this stretch. But interestingly, when No. 663 finally catches Faye in his apartment and she flees, his reaction is *not* to undertake an inquiry into the details of her deeds and mysterious purposes. The moment instead inspires intrigue—an openness to the new possibilities suggested by his discovery. This is made apparent throughout the film's final sequence, which depicts a series of events in rapid succession. No. 663 finds Faye at the noodle stand. Rather than interrogate her, he asks her for a date. She agrees. But then she stands him up, leaving for California. However, she asks him to wait a year for her. He does. She returns having taken a job as a flight attendant, and discovers he has purchased the noodle stand. He presents, playfully, a boarding pass that she'd sent him.

“Would you let a person on board with a boarding pass like this?” he asks. “It's dated today, but it got blurred in the rain. I don't know where it's taking me. Do you?”

“No idea,” she says. “But I'll give you another. . . Where do you want to go?”

“Wherever you want to take me,” he responds. The film ends.

Even if the film can be said to drop some clues about its characters' motivations here, it should be admitted that much remains opaque. Why Faye left for California, why she returned, why No. 663 bought the noodle stand—none of these questions are ever addressed, let alone answered. What drives the film to its conclusion are not revelations, but acts of acknowledgment. No. 663 approaches Faye and asks her for a date, which is his way of acknowledging what she

has been doing in his apartment, and ultimately a new way of acknowledging *her*. Her acknowledgment of his gesture, and thus of *him*, consists in a counter-move: she accepts the offer, stands him up, and then promises to return. It is this back-and-forth that brings the film to its resolution. If we follow Cavell, the acknowledgement embodied in these interactions rests upon knowledge as a precondition—there is something there, waiting to be known, that may or may not ultimately be acknowledged. But I want to suggest that the film presents us with an alternative, which is that acts of acknowledgment themselves can constitute that which we seek to know. To put it provocatively: acknowledgment can be the cause of what it acknowledges.¹⁰

Fleshing out this obscure suggestion, Faye’s behavior in entering the apartment cries out for a response from No. 663 once she’s discovered. But there is *a* sense—an important sense, perhaps *the* important sense—in which what she’s actually done depends on the response itself. Are Faye’s actions ultimately an innocent bit of flirtation? Or do they, instead, constitute a profound violation? Of course, we can reach for a neutral description of what’s been done, such as that she entered the apartment. (Presumably it’s under such a description that her act must be known in order for it to be acknowledged, which is perhaps what Cavell was getting at). But, more interestingly, there’s a sense in which her actions constitute an amorphous offering of sorts, whose precise shape and character remain undetermined even in her own mind until it receives a response. In this, what she does bears some resemblance to the giving of a gift. I might place a wrapped parcel at your feet. But whether I actually *gave you a gift* in the fullest sense of that phrase will depend upon whether you respond to the gesture by opening it or by flinging it back

¹⁰ This, of course, has the same air of paradox as the Anscombian dictum that practical knowledge is the “cause of what it understands” (which she attitudes to St. Thomas) (2000, 87).

at me. If you do respond by accepting it, you will have given it to me. This might even be the case if I lay the parcel at your feet without any clue as to what your reaction will be, or, more dramatically, if I do so expecting you will fling it back. You might pick it up and express gratitude, and I might think on my feet and say “you’re welcome.” Through this exchange, an indeterminate act becomes the giving of a gift. The various responses here are species of what I’m calling acknowledgment. If you and I acknowledge one another in this way, we will thereby possess mutual knowledge of one another—knowledge that I gave you a gift, and that we relate to one another as giver and recipient. This knowledge won’t be of a private interior truth, concealed beneath our skins, and it won’t be knowledge of an already-existing truth that was just waiting there to be discovered. It will be knowledge of a public act that we completed together, the reality of which was determined by the acknowledgment itself—knowledge that you and I are connected as giver to receiver, knowledge that we are related in just this way.

Once we appreciate this, I think we’re well-placed to appreciate the ending of *Chungking Express*. Our lonely characters who set out at the beginning searching for knowledge of the other are neither completely correct nor totally off-base. By offering and responding, by acknowledging and being acknowledged, they come to know about one another, and thus come closer to knowing one other, by creating the very reality that is ultimately known. One can imagine, for instance, Faye asking herself, “What exactly am I doing here?” and there being no fully determinate answer until No. 663 acknowledges her gesture as a bit of eccentric flirtation.

Our characters’ optimism about the future is thus grounded neither in their now having uncovered a truth previously concealed, nor in their confidence that they *will* uncover such a thing, but in the realization that their relationship going forward holds out the possibility of knowing each other by virtue of their mutual acknowledgment. And if this is right, then the

tendency to mistake knowledge for acknowledgment seems more understandable. For we are most used to the quest for knowledge being a search for what is already there to be known, which, I am suggesting, isn't always the case. *Doing* what is required to acknowledge can plausibly be said to precede the *understanding* of what is known. More radically still: it possible that in instances such as these, *doing* and *knowing* cannot be cleanly separated in the way we are accustomed to.

4. Play-Acting on the Edge of Reality

It must be admitted that the philosophical themes glossed at the end of the previous section are merely suggested by *Chungking*. This is unsurprising, given that the film is typically considered to be among Wong's lighter and less substantial works.¹¹ But we find, I think, richer and more mature reflections on these themes in his 2000 masterpiece *In the Mood For Love*. Whereas the earlier film acquaints us with acknowledgment as that which may facilitate a transition between angst and young love, the latter approaches it by meditating on the tragedy of acknowledgment withheld in the context of mature love. As will become clear, I read the two films as being complementary, enhancing our understanding of acknowledgment from different standpoints.

The plot of *Mood* is relatively simple. Our principal characters, Su (Maggie Cheung) and Chow (Tony Leung), are married, though not to each other. They, along with their spouses, rent out rooms in adjacent apartment units located in 1960s Hong Kong. Over time, the two begin to

¹¹ Though I hope my discussion in this essay serves, to some extent, to challenge any notion that the film is mere fluff.

suspect their spouses are carrying on an affair, and begin meeting up to commiserate. Romantic tension builds. But the two eventually decide that they will not be like their spouses, and decline to consummate the relationship. Chow moves away, and though they almost encounter one another on a number of occasions, they never again meet.

A good deal of the relationship, and of the film, consists of the two protagonists play-acting interactions they imagine taking place between their spouses—trying to envision the details of the relationship, speculating about how it began.

“It’s late. Won’t your wife complain?” asks Su.

“She’s used to it. She doesn’t care. And your husband?” Chow responds.

“He must be asleep by now.”

“Shall we stay out tonight?”

The scene is edited deceptively, so that we in the audience are led initially to believe that Su and Chow speak these lines in their own voices. It is only once Su breaks character—“My husband would never say that,” she eventually protests—that we realize the two have been playing their spouses.

This trick is repeated throughout the film. Multiple times, we are shown the two of them carrying out extended episodes of flirtation, seduction, and romance, only to realize that they are play-acting. The ultimate effect is to blur the distinction between pretend and reality, as we sense that their words are beginning to carry the weight of sincerity. Walter Chaw sums up the dynamics of these interactions nicely:

[Su and Chow] practice confronting their Others; in one of only a few instances where they actually touch, [she] puts her head on Mr. Chow’s shoulder to cry.

‘See? It just happens,’ he says, and neither of them ever acknowledges that it’s just happened to them. (2012)

So what, then, is the true nature of this relationship? Are they unreservedly, wholeheartedly in love with one another? Does each feel confident in their understanding of the others’ feelings? Is Su aware of her own feelings for Chow, and is Chow aware of his for Su? Throughout, the two expend extraordinary effort to conceal their doings from their neighbors’ prying eyes. In a comic scene, the owners of the apartment return home unexpectedly to play cards, forcing the couple to hide in the back bedroom for what initially promises to be an hour, but eventually becomes all all-night affair, which then extends into the morning, requiring Su to call out from work. In a scene that feels more morose, they find themselves rushing home in the pouring rain, but realize that they cannot enter the building together because doing so would arouse suspicion. Though the two occasionally wonder if they’re succumbing to paranoia, we get many indications that the neighbors are indeed seeking to know what is going on between them.

“What are you cooking?” asks the landlord at one point, while Su’s husband is away on business.

“I had a sudden craving for sesame syrup,” she replies.

“That whole pot is for you?” Her tone suggests that this is small talk, but it’s obvious to all that she is prying, gathering evidence that her tenant is cooking for two despite her husband’s absence.

Relatedly, and importantly, one of the film’s visual motifs is a shot that places the audience in the position of a voyeur. Throughout, we watch the couple surreptitiously from around a corner or at a distance, from across the street or through a doorway. The effect is to generate hope that we might catch a glimpse of something to which others are not privy—that we

might come to know our characters' secret, which they labor to conceal and to obscure, but which is there waiting to be uncovered. The effect is to generate a desire in us to know, similar to the one generated during the second half of *Chungking*, when we wondered what was going on with Faye and No. 663. And here, the camera placement is such as to call our attention to exactly what we are doing—peering at the characters with excitement and intrigue, committed to the proposition that what's interesting and important is what's being concealed and what can be uncovered.

But, as with *Chungking*, there is a real question about whether satisfaction will be secured through the acquisition of knowledge of the sort that we in the audience, along with the characters in the film, seem inclined to seek. For it really is painfully obvious to all—to the neighbors, to us in the audience, to Su, to Chow—that the two have developed feelings for one another. What exactly, then, does the landlord's "discovery" that Su is cooking for two tell us, or Su, or the landlord, that we didn't already know? The same goes for our own voyeurism: it's wholly unclear what sort of epistemic gains we could hope to secure by listening in, by peeking around the corner, by watching from across the street, when we're already confident that the two harbor feelings for each other.

A parallel absurdity manifests in the play-acting that Su and Chow engage in. From the moment they have their first conversation, they are completely convinced of the reality of the affair, and each seems alienated from their respective partner. So there isn't much mystery as to what is going on and why. Yet the play-acting is treated as attempt gain knowledge. "I just wanted to know how it started," says Su at one point. But her hopes of finding contentment in this way seem every bit as misguided as ours as we sit on the edge of our theater seats, peering through the doorway, hoping for a glimpse into their souls.

Here I want to suggest, as before, that the desire to know is bound to be frustrated because its putative object *isn't there to be known*. That is, insofar as what is sought—by us, by onlookers, by Su and Chow—is insight into the precise nature of this relationship, frustration is inevitable because the relationship itself lacks the requisite determinacy. This indeterminacy, I suggest, is due to the ways in which the relationship goes unacknowledged by both the onlookers and by the participants themselves. Take, for instance, the play-acting. Plausibly, the thing we desire to know when observing it is the extent to which their words and actions are real life, as opposed to pretend. Indeed, we can imagine each of them posing this question to his or herself. But to the extent any of it could have a precise character of the sort we're inclined to wonder about, it would seem that action actually needs to be taken—something needs to be done—to clarify and give shape to the relationship. Indeed, it's plausible to think that the two are afraid to acknowledge the relationship, or to have it acknowledged, precisely because it would reify it in such a way as to give it an illicit shape. “We won't be like them,” Su declares at one point. At this juncture, the two are spending all of their time together. A common read of the line is that it suggests they'll not sleep together. This is fine, as far as it goes. But the relevance, I think, is not just that the sex would be illicit, but that the sex would refashion the entire relationship into something illicit—transforming it from something more ambiguous to something much more determinate and more forbidden.

5. Nothing More to be Known, Nothing to Acknowledge

As *Mood* progresses, the two “break up.” They do so by acting out what they imagine to be the end of their spouses' affair. But by this point, there is less ambiguity about what is actually going on. It is clear that the feelings to which they give voice in this conversion are their

own, and it's the first time that we in the audience feel like the relationship is acknowledged in anything more than a wholly implicit way.

"I thought we wouldn't be like them," says Su, apparently breaking character. "But I was wrong."

"You won't leave your husband," Chow replies. "So I'd rather go away."

"You'd better not see me again," she eventually says.

But no sooner is the relationship acknowledged than the two seem to retreat back into play-acting, re-obscuring whatever may have just been made more concrete. When Su begins to cry, Chow replies, "Don't be serious. It's only a rehearsal. Don't cry! This isn't real." Chow decides to leave for Singapore. In quick succession, we see a number of events that occur over the next several years. The two never forget one another, and almost come into contact again on multiple occasions. But they never do.

Toward the film's end, Chow says to his friend, "In the old days, if someone had a secret they didn't want to share, you know what they did? They went up a mountain, found a tree, carved a hole in it, and whispered the secret into the hole. Then they covered it with mud. And leave the secret there forever." Chow eventually travels to Angkor Wat, the great Buddhist temple in Cambodia, where he whispers something into a hole in the stone, which he proceeds to cover with mud. We don't hear what he says. But it's typically assumed that it has to do with his love for Su.

An obvious way to read this ending is that Chow has a secret that needs to "get out." There is an inner truth in need of expression. We in the audience can try to guess what this secret is. But we're nevertheless left frustrated that it isn't shared with us, or with anyone else, and that is the note one which the film ends. But it's a mystery why this ending should be frustrating.

What could Chow possibly have confessed that we don't already know, or suspect, or that would surprise us? Here again, I think the lesson is that we're looking for the wrong thing—a glimpse of his soul, through outward expression of his deepest secrets. Rather, what we hope for is a glimpse of something that never became a reality, and that would have become a reality only through mutual acknowledgment—explicit declarations of their feelings, determinate hashing out of what it all means, physical consummation of the relationship, and so on. Were any of this to have occurred in the place of the ambiguous play-acting, then the two would have known each other, or would have begun to know each other, in a special sense—in the sense available only once they engage in the sort of acknowledgment that they never do.

6. Conclusion

I've not offered a formal definition of the word "acknowledgment." Instead, I've argued that two of Wong Kar-wai's films use the resources of the medium to help us better grasp a concept that the word sometimes refers to, and to put us in a better position to understand its role and importance in human life. In brief, this species of acknowledgment is a kind of act that, when performed, creates a reality that simultaneously allows one to know a person in a special sense. This sense is not the mundane one that involves uncovering of facts previously hidden, but one that involves grasping that which is generated through the act itself. We go wrong when we mistake the mundane sense for the special sense. We are inclined to make this mistake because the mundane sense is the one most familiar to us. The mistake comes at a considerable cost. For if acknowledgment is central to human life and love, confusion about it will lead us astray concerning the things that matter to us most.

There is a broader lesson in these reflections as well, having to do with the general shape of the problem of other minds. Cavell writes that this problem is “a problem of human history.” He goes on to say that “the problem is lived, and that [its] life has an origin and a progress” (1979, 468). The determinate form that the problem takes, and what constitutes a successful solution, will depend up this history. The picture of a private inner self, walled off from the rest of the world, is one that arose at a particular time, in a particular place, and it generated its own particular problems that called for their own particular solutions. It’s possible, though, for the picture and its attendant problems to become so familiar and pervasive that they crowd out other possibilities, leading us to mistakenly pursue a solution to one problem when we should be pursuing another on entirely. I’ve suggested that Wong’s films warn against a particular version of this mistake, while suggesting a way of correcting course. This suggestion is one we might want to take to heart. Philosophers think a lot about encounters with the Other—those from other cultures or nations, those with other morals or values, those operating in other paradigms or with other conceptual schemes. It’s typical to treat these encounters as posing problems of knowing. It’s worth asking whether and to what extent they actually pose problems of acknowledging.

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