

Wong Kar-wai: Time, Memory, Identity

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IN HIS BRILLIANT TRIAD FILM DEBUT *As Tears Go By*, the Hong Kong's maverick filmmaker Wong Kar-wai⁽¹⁾ seeks to challenge popular audience expectations of the genre. A story about male bonding in which two friends are hired by the triads to carry out a murder, the film was selected by the informed programmer of the 13th Hong Kong International Film Festival (1989) to represent new Hong Kong films of the 1990s. The choice was prophetic in highlighting the thirty-one-year-old director as a new and exciting film talent. The following five years have seen Wong achieve an eclectic oeuvre of films which departs from the tidal wave of fast-paced Hong Kong films packed with sex and violence.

In *As Tears Go By*, Wong Kar-wai takes the courageous position of showing more interest in the existential motivations and feelings of the film's two protagonists (Andy Lau and Jacky Cheung) than in the workings of the triads and their victims. The film's violence is never gratuitous and excessive. Indeed, Wong uses the frenzied hand-held slow-motion photography to convey the indecisiveness of the young assassins. Already in this film, his famous trademark of the "cool" anti-hero has surfaced. Andy Lau portrays the slick and unruffled partner who refuses to be romantically committed to his lover (Maggie Cheung in a low-key performance). His coolness is counterpointed by the hot-headed spontaneity of Fly (Jacky Cheung) who is always looking for trouble.

However, a deeper assessment of the moody and apparently uninvolved Andy reveals a far more complex character than mere coolness. In fact the hesitant and Fassbinderian emotional dependency and withdrawal (rejection) between Andy and Maggie resonates with a deep yearning for human warmth and a desperation for love and commitment, more so for the Maggie who ironically in the end accepts with a stoical stand the tragic fate of her lover.

The strong contrast between the two men, the film's languid pace and the overall feeling of doom -- for the protagonists as well as the love affair -- are unusual for a triad film. While these aspects delighted discerning critics at the Hong Kong Film Festival, commercial audiences were less thrilled. This observation was confirmed when I saw the film for the second time when it was shown in Singapore in the early months of 1990. *Tears* failed miserably at the box-office within three days of screening. Many viewers blamed the film's languorous and plotless tale.

Two years later, in his second landmark film *Days of Being Wild* (1991), Maggie Cheung reprises the role of the forsaken love -- this time by the dandy Yuddy (Leslie Cheung) who out of boredom seduces the soft drinks girl (Maggie) at the soccer stadium but then drops her when she mentions marriage. As in the preceding film, the narrative of *Days of Being Wild* is non-linear, the sleepy and hallucinatory quality of the pacing aided by haunting Hawaiian steel guitar music and those strange nostalgia-invoking Latin arrangements that transport viewers to a more romantic and slower-paced Hong Kong of the 1960s.

Wong employs the now familiar method of using mirrors (recalling Fassbinder in *Bremen Freedom* and *Effi Briest*), clocks and watches as key motifs to comment on his principals' entrapment by their delusion, passion and fate's inevitability. The film strikes one as highly existential; Leslie, like a modern-day Don Quixote, is a loner on a desperate quest for the proverbial missing mother -- a fixation that renders him incapable of a true, lasting relationship with any woman of worth.

The obsession with memory -- as a way of capturing and holding on to the past and of living as if the past were the present -- is manifested in the scene of the poor obsessed Maggie listening to a rookie patrol cop (Andy Lau). Taking her as his confidant, the policeman launches into a reminiscence of his past and his desire to be a sailor in what appears to be one of the longest monologue scenes in Chinese film history.

Again, a sense of doom and rootlessness dominates the film; in the light of the Crown Colony's impending return to the Mainland in July 1997, this pessimism seems a reflection of the aimlessness experienced by many Hong Kong citizens who contemplate emigration or who are trying to cope with the distress of dislocation.

Jacky Cheung, who plays Leslie's best friend, finds his love for a bar hostess (Carina Lau) unrequited. Instead she falls desperately for the uncommitted, philandering cop Leslie who desires to drift as a sailor. Whereas Leslie's Shanghaiese foster mother plans to emigrate to the United States with an elderly admirer, Leslie dreams of returning to his source -- his lost mother who abandoned him at birth -- leading him to a rendezvous and wish-fulfilment with death in a foreign land -- the Philippines. In *Days of Being Wild*, emotional and spiritual alienation take centre-stage.

Thus time, memory and death wish are Wong's leitmotifs of which the last is very much apparent in the first two films as embodied by Andy in *Tears* and Leslie in *Days*. Later in his two subsequent films *Chungking Express* and *Ashes of Time* Wong keeps harking back to the same motifs and reinforcing his emigration complex as experienced by the Faye Wong character in *Chungking*, and Leslie's foster mother in *Days*.



Figure 1: As Tears Go By (dir. Wong Kar Wai, 1988)

In his most recent films, *Ashes of Time* and *Chungking Express*, shot back to back, Wong showed that, contrary to the criticism of his detractors, he is entirely capable of pacing his films fast. The fighting and action scenes in both are furious and choreographed to a hallucinatory precision, sometimes obscured by slow-motion and hand-held camera but nonetheless whiplash. It is the dialogue scenes that mar all his films by their obliqueness, metaphysical discourses and obscure philosophical yearnings.

The opening shots of *Chungking Express* are fast and furious, conveying the lightning pace of Hong Kongers going about their everyday business-life. True heir to Cassavetes and Scorsese, the grainy rushing scenes which capture bits and pieces of Hong Kong street life and the seedy inhabitants, and the environs of Chungking Mansions are a parody of the pretty postcard images that tourists see of the Colony in brochures and advertisements. The collaboration of the accomplished cinematographer Chris Doyle with Wong brings up dark-hued textures and moody compositions -- here is the city pulsating with the vast sea of humanity's lust for commercialism and social intercourse, its heartbeat throbbing like the anxious ticking of the clock in *Days of being Wild* or the closeup of Mass Transit Railways' analog time-keeping displays.

Chungking Express consists of two separate stories linked thematically about four individuals trying to connect or break away in Hong Kong. The first part is a tale of an undercover policeman (Aniki Jin Cheng-Wu) and his emotional (lack of) involvement with a drug moll (Lin Ching-hsia) who is perpetually seen with a pair of dark sunglasses even in the shadowy alleys of the crime-prone Chungking Mansions. Recovering from a failed affair of the heart, the policeman hangs out at 24-hour convenience stores, trying unsuccessfully to make dates with ex-girlfriends and little-known female acquaintances, eating only canned food having the same expiry date as his birthday. Finally, he gives himself an ultimatum to fall for the first woman who

comes through the doors of the bar he frequents -- she turns out to be the droll, cold drug dealer in dark glasses and blonde wig (probably a homage to Cassavetes' *Gloria*).

Part Two is lighter in tone. Faye Wong gives a spirited performance as a fast-food waitress who becomes obsessed with another policeman (Tony Leung Chiu-wai) and who goes about like a playful fairy rearranging and meddling with his set-up at his home. With the two different stories, *Chungking* becomes almost fractured and schizoid -- torn apart in tone, rhythm and texture. While Faye Wong is delightful with her neurotic spontaneity and comic persona, Lin Ching-hsia looks laboured and weighed down by the anxiety of being pursued by a killer for fouling up a drugs consignment. There is a sense of time running out on her as she fights for her survival to stay above the fray, romanticism being furthest from her obsessed mind. This is an apt metaphor for the Crown Colony's uncertain future and a reflection of the jittery Hong Kongers' psyche. Even the love-sick anti-hero Aniki who only devours canned food with the particular expiry date is telling. The date might as well be 1st July 1997. And again shots of Father Time in the form of the Mass Transit Railways clocks remind us of the director's leitmotif.

Wong Kar-wai's justly acclaimed montage of the conclusion of the first part and the start of the second story is almost seamless. Cantonese pop-star Faye Wong's rendition of her hit "Dreams" and the Mamas and Papas' haunting "California Dreaming" (at times tediously repetitious) further reinforce the idea of the second part being a dream-like fairy tale transplanted onto a modern setting. Hailing from Beijing and not a Hong Kong national herself, Faye impresses as a highly talented comedienne in the calibre of the popular Crown Colony actress Do Do (Carol) Cheng. In *Chungking Express*, Faye reveals her talent for mime and spontaneity in her debut as an actress. Counterpointed by Lin Ching-hsia's fatalistic persona, she is as fresh and original as a life-invigorating summer breeze.



Figure 2: Chungking Express, (dir. Wong Kar Wai, 1994)

Also, for the first time the director plays with the audience's memory. When watching the film for the first time, it is easy to be mesmerised by its sense of timing and to miss the initial encounter between characters from both stories. As Aniki (the policeman in part one) narrates his love fable, for a fraction of a second, Cop 223 (from part two) crosses path with Lin Ching-hsia only a hair's-breadth apart from each other. Six hours later the narrator would fall for her in a pub.

However, Wong Kar-wai returns to the serious course when he subverts a well-known martial arts genre (*wu hsia pien*) film by saturating it with existential angst suffered by his questing sword-yielding protagonist in *Ashes of Time*.

The film, much underrated by critics, fractures the plot of a story, *The Eagle Shooting Heroes* (aka *Condor*

Heroes) by Hong Kong's famous martial arts novelist Louis Cha (or Jin Yong), to such minimalist extent as to retain only the interweaving tale and the colliding fate of three of the four great *gongfu* masters: Evil East (Tony Leung Kar-fai), Malicious West (Leslie Cheung) and Northern Beggar (Jacky Cheung). By any standards, it is an original interpretation. Tony Leung Chiu-wai who plays Blind Swordsman is not considered as a major character in the film's scheme. He comes across as a disillusioned man hurt by the adulterous liaison of his wife (Carina Lau) with Evil East and who fights the gang of horse thieves, finally meeting his tragic end at the lightning-fast left hand of one of the swordsmen.

As with Jean-Luc Godard's dictum that a film's narrative does not have to be structured in the order of a beginning, middle and end, the conclusion of *Ashes* is a return to the beginning as in *Citizen Kane*. Perhaps it is the director's need to emphasise the sense of loss and waiting, what is known in Japanese as *Mono no aware* -- the fleetingness of life and its coming to a full circle.

As with *Chungking*, one may benefit from a second or third viewing of *Ashes* as it is highly elliptical. The angst-ridden characters set in a background of Japanese-Buddhist aesthetics and philosophy are rare features of a *gongfu* genre film. The only instance of a swordsman's vain quest for ambition and fame is portrayed by the director's former mentor Patrick Tam Jia-ming (of *The Sword* and *Snow is Burning* fame) who also serves as editor and producer of the film. The legendary Lin Ching-hsia plays a dual role as Murong Yin and Murong Yang, the daughter and son of the Murong clan.

Ouyang Feng or Malicious West narrates the minimally coherent story of his role as a hired killer's intermediary agent who has lived in self-imposed exile in the desert ever since his lover (Maggie Cheung) married his elder brother after her waiting becomes apparently futile. Malicious West engages in long monologues -- reflecting on his vainglorious but futile ambition (also Patrick Tam's theme in *The Sword*) and on his greatest sorrow and regret, his lost love. Wong introduces the element of amnesia to accentuate his chief preoccupation, memory. In *Ashes*, Malicious West and Evil East drink the wine of forgetfulness to obliterate painful memories of the past which have shaped their destinies. They know they are deluding themselves but it is their only solace. The melancholic Malicious West is the same character as the rookie cop (played by Andy Lau) who pines for the sea in *Days of Being Wild*.

The director also shows a certain understanding of the female psyche in the compassionate depiction of Malicious West's thwarted love who mourns her own lost love and happiness. She is the typical Murasaki Shikibu heroine who is defeated by melancholy and inevitable change. When looking out of the window and talking to Evil East about her two-year old son, she reflects that beautiful moments are only illusions, that her child will grow up and eventually leave her. The only constant is change and death.

In intercutting between the past and the present, as in Alain Resnais' *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, we are reminded of the awesome sense of futility and loss, especially of lost opportunities, in the lives of the film's characters. Thus like Marcel Proust who believes one can only capture time and "freeze" it through memory, Wong's *Ashes* is a reworked version of *Remembrance of Things Past* in which the characters feel the universal human need to regain time lost.

In just four films which are highly derivative of existentialist European cinema and literature, Wong Kar Wai has imposed his Eastern sensibility and stamped them with his mark of authority. Whether he is working on genre films (like the established but hackneyed gangster or martial arts films), or paying homage to the great traditional 1960s Hong Kong cinema featuring alienated Casanovas and lonely drifters, he has consistently kept to his uniquely oblique and disquieting vision of lonely individuals trying to find meaning and identity in an absurd universe.

All past achievements considered, Wong Kar-wai is truly a tour de force personality and an uncompromising, talented film artist of the highest calibre and integrity.

Notes

1. Director Wong Kar-wai was born in Shanghai, China, 1958 and immigrated to Hong Kong as a child. He graduated from the Hong Kong Polytechnic in 1980 and later worked for Hong Kong Television. In 1982, Wong Kar-wai started writing screenplays. His 1988 directorial debut was presented in the Critic's Week at



Figure 3: Chungking Express, (dir. Wong Kar Wai, 1994)

the Cannes Film Festival. -- Films: *As Tears Go By* (1988), *Days of Being Wild* (1991), *Chungking Express* (1994), *Ashes of Time* (1994).

Author Information

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