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Wong Kar-Wai
b.1958

In the Mood For Love
2000

Wong Kar-wai

Elizabeth Wright • May 2002

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(Wang Jiawei)

b. 1958, Shanghai, China.

Wong Kar-wai is undeniably an auteur of striking and salient cinema, standing apart from much mainstream Hong Kong cinema. Wong belongs to the mid-1980s Second New Wave of Hong Kong filmmakers who continued to develop the innovative and fresh aesthetic initiated by the original New Wave. The Second Wave, which includes directors such as Eddie Fong, Stanley Kwan and Clara Law, is often seen as a continuation of the first as many of these directors worked as assistants to First Wave directors such as Tsui Hark, Ann Hui and Patrick Tam (with whom Wong worked and collaborated).¹ The innovation of this group of filmmakers was linked to the social and political issues facing Hong Kong as well as an artistic impetus. The uncertainty with which Hong Kong citizens faced the 1984 Sino-British Agreement outlining the handover of Hong Kong to China forced Hong Kong residents and filmmakers alike to confront and examine their relationship with China. This issue was translated into film by the Second Wave of cinema but done so “with introspection rather than outright cynicism” that “brought Hong Kong cinema to a new level of maturity”.² Consequently, the themes connected to identity and Hong Kong’s relation to China were broadened and modernised. The identity of Hong Kong is perpetually marked by its closeness to the motherland China and its Western link as a British colony. Yet in the face of its history, Hong Kong has duly created its own culturally specific identity, one that inevitably combines both elements of the West and Mainland China. The cinema of Hong Kong reflects this notion of a

¹ S. Teo, *Hong Kong Cinema, The Extra Dimensions*. London: British Film Institute, 1997. p. 184.

² Ibid. p. 160.

dual identity, combining to create a third, localised identity. Significant in this respect is Hong Kong cinema's 'New Wave' movement, which rose to prominence in 1979.³

Varying from his New Wave counterparts' preoccupation with the 1997 handover, Patrick Tam's contribution to the New Wave movement came via his interest in the influence of the West and Japan on Hong Kong. His exploration of a society rapidly consuming Western and Japanese popular culture led him to reveal the "no man's land of Hong Kong's cultural, spiritual and geographical dislocation".⁴ Tam's interest in themes of dislocation and alienation can be identified in the work of his protégé Wong Kar-wai. Notably, Wong was the scriptwriter of Tam's 1987 *Final Victory* and Tam supervised the editing on Wong's 1991 *Days of Being Wild*.⁵ Both directors combined their preoccupation with themes of isolation and dislocation with a striking visual aesthetic. It is this exact



visual and thematic amalgamation that signifies Wong's mode of filmmaking. He works outside of the usual representational approaches that underpin classical narrative cinema and transcends artistic boundaries. Moments, questions and answers are infinite for Wong as he attempts to charter the terrain of his lovelorn outsiders. Wong's status as a postmodern auteur sees him delve into 'moments' that are linked to both history and the personal, whether directly or indirectly. Notions of identity and the ever-present fusion between East and West find context in the themes of love, loneliness and alienation that pervade his protagonists. Tension between the past and present is linked to memory, desire, time, space and environment. Hong Kong cinema's complex status as both a national and 'transnational' cinema as well as its relation to mainland China are distinct issues in the quest to define Hong Kong cinema. Wong's art of filmmaking is crucial in discussing an innovative and inimitable cinema that is at once collective and exclusive. His focus on detail over totality consolidates his talent for creating a distinct mood and atmosphere, a visual pastiche of colours and emotions.

After obtaining a diploma in graphic design from the Hong Kong Polytechnic School in 1980, Wong became a television production assistant. Following work on several television drama series, he began working as a scriptwriter for television and then later for films. Wong's directorial debut *As Tears Go By* (1988) marked his unique visual style and was screened as part of the 'Critics' Week' at the 1989 Cannes International Film Festival. Wong's next film *Days of Being Wild*, which featured several of Hong Kong's beautiful and popular young stars, won five Hong Kong Film Awards, including Best Film and Best Director. His following effort, *Ashes of Time* (1994), varied greatly in genre, successfully subverting the conventions of the period martial-arts drama. During a break in the post-production of *Ashes of Time*, Wong made *Chungking Express* (1994), which later became a cult hit. Following this came *Fallen Angels*, which received considerable critical success when it was premiered at the 1995 Toronto Film Festival. In 1997, *Happy Together* premiered at the Cannes Film Festival

³ L. Cheuk-to, "The Return of the Father: Hong Kong New Wave and its Chinese Context in the 1980s", *New Chinese Cinemas: Forms, Identities, Politics*. Ed. N. Browne, P. Pickowicz, V. Sobchack & E. Yau. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994. p. 160.

⁴ Ibid. p. 158.

⁵ Ibid. p. 157.

where it garnered a Best Director Award for Wong. In 2000, Wong's *In The Mood For Love* was also awarded Cannes accolades, including Best Actor for Tony Leung Chiu-wai and the Technical Prize. Wong is currently completing his latest film entitled *2046*, his first science fiction film to date.



As with Wong's other films such as *Chungking Express*, *Days of Being Wild*, *Happy Together* and *Fallen Angels*, *In the Mood for Love* dictates the arbitrary nature of romance and the notion of the 'missed moment'. In fact, the permeating concept of the 'moment' is a crucial component of Wong's *oeuvre*. He consistently employs a signature 'paralleling' and 'intersecting' rhetoric in which

his characters arbitrarily cross paths. Wong's protagonists are most often revealed to be a set of individuals existing within the visual array of urbanity. As in *Days of Being Wild*, *Chungking Express* and *Fallen Angels*, Hong Kong provides the ideal setting for this exposition of human contact within a buzzing cosmopolitan city that is both vibrant and brash. Wong successfully grants introspective gazes at his characters (usually in sets of twos), exploring their insecurities, personal motives and ultimately the random nature of relationships. With *In the Mood for Love*, the focus centres on the jilted figures of Chow Mo-wan (Tony Leung Chiu-wai) and Su Li-zhen (Maggie Cheung Man-yuk). Their isolation and longing is transformed into a melange of intersecting paths and poignantly shared moments in which the possibility of a soulful connection is entertained. Again, Wong's arbitrary rhetoric finds expression in the poetic and brightly drenched tones of his unique filmic aesthetic, and his much-loved themes of loneliness, isolation, and longing rise to the surface. However, whilst *In the Mood for Love* incorporates all of his usual stylistic and thematic traits, it also ascends to a new level where the cultural significance of Wong's setting is explored in greater detail.

A title card at the beginning of *In the Mood for Love* reads: 'It is a restless moment. Hong Kong 1962.' This verse immediately triggers the mood of both the protagonists and the wider, social environment. At this time in 1962, 13 years after Mao and the Communist party's rise to power in Mainland China, Hong Kong remained a British Colony. However, during the 1960s there was considerable unrest as a result of the wider social and political situation that was existing in the world. The threat of the spread of Communism inspired the Cold War between the Soviet Union and the United States that was to centre heavily on Southeast Asia as a focal point for the competition between the global powers. In addition, the Vietnam War and China's support for the North Vietnamese Communist regime made the threat of Communism genuine. Naturally, Hong Kong's proximity to Southeast Asia made it a serious candidate for the Domino theory of a looming Red presence ready to advance upon any territory. China's hostile opposition of capitalism and imperialism also increased Hong Kong citizens' fears that China would not wait for the end of Britain's lease in 1997 to regain



control of the territory. Many Hong Kong residents saw it in their best interests to leave Hong Kong and find homes elsewhere.

In both *Days of Being Wild* and *In the Mood for Love*, Wong recreates a '60s Hong Kong that is both nostalgic and contemporary, evoking both tradition and modernity. Significantly, the '60s era represents the childhood period of the directors of the Second Wave. Wong himself was five years old when he moved from Shanghai to Hong Kong. Thus, the recreation of this period is deeply nostalgic and sentimental in its theme of Hong Kong as home. Wong's portrait of 1960s Hong Kong is both retro and commodity conscious, with clear influences from the West and Japan. The 'restless moment' and mood of uncertainty that defines both the protagonists and the era is significant within *In the Mood for Love*. Indeed, Wong's films may not be directly or overtly political, however there is often an "indirect relation to the political" via Wong's conveying of "a particularly intense experience of the period as an experience of the negative; an experience of some elusive and ambivalent cultural space that lies always just beyond our grasp".⁶

The sense of history and nostalgia that pervades *In the Mood for Love* is a signature of Wong's style and reminiscent of filmmakers such as Alain Resnais, Jean-Luc Godard and Krzysztof Kieslowski. With history and nostalgia, however, come change and the notion of 'before' and 'after'. The protagonists are caught in a



constantly evolving space where time can stand still or be momentarily captured, but will eventually succumb to expiration. The inevitability of change brings with it a nostalgia and reminiscence that often evoke melancholy. Following Chow and Su Li-zhen's return to their former home, a title card reads: 'That era has passed. Nothing that belonged to it exists anymore'. The characters whose identities are inexorably shaped by the past express Wong's nostalgia for an era passed. Su Li-zhen's

Shanghainese landlady "can't bear to throw things away" and Chow must physically unburden himself of the past by burying his memory in an ancient monument. Reminiscent of the female leads in *Chungking Express* and *Fallen Angels*, Su Li-zhen (unbeknownst to Chow) visits his apartment in Singapore and fetishes over his belongings, lying on the bed and taking a solitary drag from one of his cigarettes.

The notion of time is a pervading concept in all of Wong's films. His preoccupation with capturing time is constantly evident, his camera doting on specific moments and intent on finding difference in repetition. In both Chow and Su Li-zhen's offices, there are clocks that oversee them. Particularly reminiscent of the clock in *Days of Being Wild* is the large Siemens clock that is prominent in Su Li-zhen's office interior. Time and again the camera studies the stark black and white face of the clock as it attempts to capture the time that is constantly advancing. In the first part of *Chungking Express*, Cop #233 (Takeshi Kaneshiro) obsessively eats cans of pineapple with the expiry date of the 1st of May, convinced that everything has an expiry date, including love. In *Fallen Angels*, the hit man Wong (Leon Lai-ming) says "I do not know who these people are and I do not care, soon they will be history" and in *Happy Together*, Wong effectively captures the period of Hong Kong's return to

⁶ A. Abbas, "The Erotics of Disappointment" *Wong Kar-wai*. Ed. J. Lalanne, D. Martinez, A. Abbas & J. Ngai. Paris: Dis Voir, 1997, p. 41.

China. Time and memory are inexorably linked, and these notions are in turn linked to both the personal and the historical. Wong depicts the transience of life and reveals that nothing is permanent in the worlds he creates. However, he also conceives characters that despite living in the present ‘moment’ are maimed by their “desperate attempt to find something stable”.⁷ His characters’ lack of roots or painful personal history means they are forced to create their own history. Consequently, Wong acknowledges the significance and pervasiveness of history, especially for Hong Kong citizens who are constantly in transition. He also observes modernity and technology as discourses that must be worked with and not against. The result is often characters with fragmented identities whose inner struggle and quests for clarity in a dynamic social world ensure their validity.

In the Mood for Love continues Wong’s tradition of capturing moments within a potentially isolating and disconnected environment and bears resemblance to his other 1960s homage *Days of Being Wild*, which is believed (through Wong’s own statements on both films and popular perception) to be the first instalment to *In the Mood for Love*. Set in the ‘60s, *Days of Being Wild* presents young adults who are both lost and vulnerable. The film’s protagonist is an *A Fei* named Yuddy (Leslie Cheung Kwok-wing), *A Fei* being a “euphemism for vaseline-haired and rock-loving delinquents and unsavoury teenagers with gangland connections”.⁸ The characters within this film are connected to other individuals, even if arbitrarily, yet unable to initiate lasting relationships. Their sense of desolation and perceived lack of identity pervades every aspect of their lives. Yuddy is both “macho and vulnerable, sensitive and insensitive”, representing the “undefined soul of Hong Kong who seeks to find himself an identity he can respect”.⁹ *Days of Being Wild* is a chamber film that evokes the utmost of personal emotions through unspoken words, desire, the notion of possibility and the melancholy of detachment. The film’s constant reference to time, via repeated shots of ticking clocks, alludes to the 1997 issue as well as the sheer intangibility and fleetingness of time. When Yuddy meets Maggie Cheung’s character, he charismatically exclaims, “let’s be friends for one minute”.¹⁰ This same sentimentality and awareness of time permeates *In the Mood for Love*. Wong creates an internal world in which time is homogenous and ephemeral. His protagonists are caught in a quasi-dreamscape where time and memory cannot be secured.

Music is also a prominent and strategic element in all of Wong’s films. Musical repetition is often employed to articulate that which is unsaid or that which cannot be expressed via words and dialogue. Moreover, Wong’s “destructuring and modernisation of genres involves re-interpreting codes, a process in which music is central”.¹¹ The notion of re-



⁷ E. Mazierska & L. Rascaroli, “Trapped in the Present: Time in the Films of Wong Kar-Wai” *Film Criticism* Vol. XXV, No. 2 (Winter 2000-01), p. 8.

⁸ S. Teo, *Hong Kong Cinema, The Extra Dimensions*. London: British Film Institute, 1997. p. 193.

⁹ Ibid. p. 194.

¹⁰ Ibid. p. 195.

¹¹ D. Martínez, “Chasing the Metaphysical Express” *Wong Kar-wai*. Ed. J. Lalanne, D. Martínez, A. Abbas & J. Ngai. Paris: Dis Voir, 1997., p. 30.

interpretation is particularly evident in two of Wong's earlier films. David Martinez asserts that '40s and '50s music is used to re-create the '60s era in *Days of Being Wild* and a score by composer Frankie Chan and "inspired by Ennio Morricone's spaghetti western music" is used for the martial arts epic *Ashes of Time*.¹² In *Chungking Express* music is used to evoke emotion and create atmosphere but also as an identification tool for the character of Faye (Faye Wong). The Mamas and Papas' 1960s track "California Dreamin'" plays continuously throughout the second half of the film, and becomes a trademark of Faye's presence within a scene. The song not only allows her to transcend her spatial and temporal boundaries and "represents her state of mind but also emphasizes her as a subject who prefers music to words as a way of expression and communication".¹³ Notably, the Cantonese translation of Western pop songs is a favourite cultural traverse of Wong's, as evident in the Cantonese version of The Cranberries' "Dreams" in *Chungking Express*, Berlin's "Take My Breath Away" in *As Tears Go By* and the re-orchestration of Massive Attack's "Karma Koma" in *Fallen Angels*. It is this willingness to borrow and reformulate influences and reference popular culture that contributes to Wong's status as a postmodern auteur and makes his films both local and 'transnational' in execution. The rhythmic presence in the construction of shots and the pastiche of eccentric audio-visual rhymes and coincidences also allude to Wong's musical sensibility.

Wong's 'MTV aesthetic' that finds an equilibrium between sound and image retains a sentimentality that does not succumb to an 'empty' spectacle, or allow it to be subsumed by a postmodern ethos. Wong effectively highlights the fact that people (who make up part of the postmodern pastiche) are in close physical proximity, but can be so far apart, and indeed *are* so very far apart, at the same time. The literary nature of Wong's films is often ignored in favour of readings that focus on the visual splendour of his film aesthetic. Nevertheless, his penchant for voiceover monologues and written captions are also part of his signature compositions. The isolation of his characters often gives way to voiceover monologues in which his character's status as outsiders is constantly reiterated. The alienating space of the city is often the backdrop for inhabitants who struggle to mentally articulate their own sense of place and identity within the urban landscape. This translates to a visual pastiche of deeply drenched colours and stylised camera shots. *Chungking Express* adopts this rhetoric using MTV editing vocabulary and by constantly manipulating visuals. Wong finds "creativity in the astute articulation of the pause and rewind modes", another postmodern emblem of the late 20th century.¹⁴ He effectively employs the functions of fast-forward and pause into his aesthetic repertoire, illustrating the various modes of remote control technology. *Chungking Express* articulates this mode with the accelerated passing of clouds and Cop #633's (Tony Leung Chiu-wai) hastened running. The film also proposes a dual gaze through the visual juxtaposition of action



¹² Ibid.

¹³ Y. Yueh-yu, "A Life of Its Own: Musical Discourses in Wong Kar-Wai's Films" *Post Script* Vol. 19, No. 1 (Fall 1999): p. 124.

¹⁴ M. Turim, "Cinemas of Modernity and Postmodernity" *Zeitgeist in Babel: The Postmodernist Controversy*. Ed. I. Hoesterey. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991. p. 189.

versus immobility, as when a long take films the protagonists stationary whilst indistinguishable bodies hurriedly move past the camera, creating flashes of movement.

Spectators must suspend their beliefs in chronology, time and in many cases, their memories too, in order to fully experience the depth of Wong's evocative filmic creations. Wong's story is continual and the narrative as dependent on the context of the present as of the past. The geography, history and unique cultural identity of Hong Kong inhabitants have inevitably shaped the territory's cinema. Hong Kong's adaptability to change, cultural diversity and cosmopolitan lifestyle has led to a dynamic output of films that portray a distinct Hong Kong psyche. The films of Wong Kar-wai attest to this manner of filmmaking, articulating the nebulous space of Hong Kong and the 'in-betweenness' and possible dislocation felt by Hong Kong citizens in the face of cultural and political diversity and advances in modernity. Through Wong's *oeuvre*, Hong Kong becomes a metaphor for the characters and their varied existence. It represents an urban pastiche in which individuals struggle to come to terms with a sense of detachment and loneliness despite the territory's high-density population. Wong's endless array of possible scenarios and the navigation of his protagonists' internal and external journeys in turn constitute an unravelling and reconfiguring of spatio-temporal constrictions.

Hong Kong's identity cannot always be summated via its east and west sensibilities. Rather, in portraying Hong Kong's culturally diverse existence, Hong Kong cinema is effectively constructing and revealing its *own identity*. Wong's empirical aesthetic creates a cosmopolitan filmmaking practice that transcends cultural boundaries. His taste for popular culture, global influences and incorporation of several different music genres is explicit within his films. The origin of Wong's filmmaking may be Hong Kong but his films cannot be categorically contained or strictly confined to a culturally specific consumer. Ultimately, Wong Kar-wai is a filmmaking poet, concerned with issues as varied as memory, identity, time and space, urbanity, mood, isolation and absence. He is also dedicated to the location of Hong Kong as an urban landscape in which his thematic concerns find expression. Hong Kong's unique identity with its fusion of Chinese and Western culture and complex history provides a culturally diverse space in which technology and tradition co-exist in various forms. Wong's avant-garde filmic aesthetic is composed of elliptical storytelling through the use of deeply drenched tones, slow motion, jump cuts and fragmented images. Although the notion of *auteur* is not entirely customary in



Hong Kong where films are often shot quickly and marketed via their accessibility as popular entertainment, Wong's status as *auteur* marks his position within Hong Kong cinema's industrial environment and signifies his complete creative freedom and control of every facet of his films' production. In Wong's own words, his films represent explorations in which "Wong Kar-wai, the director, managed to add something into the work".¹⁵

¹⁵ J. Ngai & Wong Kar-wai, "A Dialogue with Wong Kar-wai. Cutting Between Time and Two Cities" *Wong Kar-wai*. Ed. J. Lalanne, D. Martinez, A. Abbas & J. Ngai. Paris: Dis Voir, 1997, p. 109.

Filmography

- As Tears Go By (Wangjiao Kamen)* (1988)
- Days of Being Wild (A-Fei Zhengzhuang)* (1991)
- Ashes of Time (Dongxie Xidu)* (1994)
- Chungking Express (Chongqing Senlin)* (1994)
- Fallen Angels (Duoluo Tianshi)* (1995)
- Happy Together (Chunguang Zhaxie)* (1997)
- In the Mood for Love (Huayang Nianhua)* (2000)
- The Follow* (2001) (short commissioned by BMW Films)
- Lacoste commercial* (2002) (TV, short)
- La Mano* (2004) segment in Eros omnibus film
- 2046* (2004)
- Eros* (2004) segment "The Hand"
- My Blueberry Nights* (2007)
- To Each His Own Cinema* (2007) segment "I Travelled 9000 km to Give It to You"
- The Grandmaster* (2013)

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In the Mood for Love

Roger Ebert • February 16, 2001

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3/4 Stars

They are in the mood for love, but not in the time and place for it. They look at each other with big damp eyes of yearning and sweetness, and go home to sleep by themselves. Adultery has sullied their lives: his wife and her husband are having an affair. "For us to do the same thing," they agree, "would mean we are no better than they are." The key word there is "agree." The fact is, they do not agree. It is simply that neither one has the courage to disagree, and time is passing. He wants to sleep with her and she wants to sleep with him, but they are both bound by the moral stand that each believes the other has taken.

You may disagree with my analysis. You may think one is more reluctant than the other. There is room for speculation, because whole continents of emotions go unexplored in Wong Kar-wai's "In the Mood for Love," a lush story of unrequited love that looks the way its songs sound. Many of them are by Nat King Cole, but the instrumental "Green Eyes," suggesting jealousy, is playing when they figure out why her husband and his wife always seem to be away at the same times.

His name is Mr. Chow (Tony Leung Chiu-wai). Hers is Su Li-zhen (Maggie Cheung Man-yuk). In the crowded Hong Kong of 1962, they have rented rooms in apartments next to each other. They are not poor; he's a newspaper reporter, she's an executive assistant, but there is no space in the crowded city and little room for secrets.

Cheung and Leung are two of the biggest stars in Asia. Their pairing here as unrequited lovers is ironic because of their images as the usual winners in such affairs. This is the kind of story that could be remade by Tom Hanks and Meg Ryan, although in the Hollywood version, there'd be a happy ending. That would kind of miss the point and release the tension, I think; the thrust of Wong's film is that paths cross but intentions rarely do. In his other films, like "Chungking Express," his characters sometimes just barely miss connecting, and here again key things are said in the wrong way at the wrong time. Instead of asking us to identify with this

couple, as an American film would, Wong asks us to empathize with them; that is a higher and more complex assignment, with greater rewards.

The movie is physically lush. The deep colors of film noir saturate the scenes: Reds, yellows, browns, deep shadows. One scene opens with only a coil of cigarette smoke, and then reveals its characters. In the hallway outside the two apartments, the camera slides back and forth, emphasizing not their nearness but that there are two apartments, not one.

The most ingenious device in the story is the way Chow and Su play-act imaginary scenes between their cheating spouses. "Do you have a mistress?" she asks, and we think she is asking Chow, but actually she is asking her husband, as played by Chow. There is a slap, not as hard as it would be with a real spouse. They wound themselves with imaginary dialogue in which their cheating partners laugh about them. "I didn't expect it to hurt so much," Su says, after one of their imaginary scenarios.

Wong Kar-wai leaves the cheating couple offscreen. Movies about adultery are almost always about the adulterers, but the critic Elvis Mitchell observes that the heroes here are "the characters who are usually the victims in a James M. Cain story." Their spouses may sin in Singapore, Tokyo or a downtown love hotel, but they will never sin on the screen of this movie, because their adultery is boring and commonplace, while the reticence of Chow and Su elevates their love to a kind of noble perfection.

Their lives are as walled in as their cramped living quarters. They have more money than places to spend it. Still dressed for the office, she dashes out to a crowded alley to buy noodles. Sometimes they meet on the grotty staircase. Often it is raining. Sometimes they simply talk on the sidewalk. Lovers do not notice where they are, do not notice that they repeat themselves. It isn't repetition, anyway--it's reassurance. And when you're holding back and speaking in code, no conversation is boring, because the empty spaces are filled by your desires.