

The Cinema of Wong Kar Wai

By Jamie Trapp



Wong Kar Wai, director of Chungking Express (1994)

Wong Kar Wai, the director of *Chungking Express*, has a unique filmmaking style. This unique style qualifies him as an Auteur, a concept I explained in one of my previous articles. Watching a Wong Kar Wai film for the first time can feel like a challenge as he employs a style that deviates from more traditional Hollywood movies. To be clear, his films are not confusing in the sense that they have complicated story lines such as say Christopher Nolan's mind baffling *Inception* (2010). On the contrary Wong's films can be confusing because they have such little in the way of traditional plot as Wong is less focused on some contrived story. He doesn't care about answering the questions traditional Hollywood films focus on such as whether or not the guy and the girl are going to fall in love with each other by the end of the movie or will the hero succeed in achieving his dream. Instead his films are more concerned with exploring his personal obsessions, these include time, fate, alienation, and other themes he examines throughout his filmography. I personally find his style to be exhilarating as his combination of splendid visuals, color palette, distinct characters, and pulsating music makes for quite an experience. In this article I will offer a general overview of Wong Kar Wai to help you appreciate this week's movie.

Brief Overview of Hong Kong Cinema

In China there are three distinct types of Cinemas; Hong Kong Cinema, Taiwan Cinema, and everything else is usually just referred to as Chinese Cinema. This article will focus solely on the works of Wong Kar Wai, who is associated with Hong Kong Cinema. Hong Kong Cinema has its own distinct identity separate from other areas in China and was at one point the 3rd largest film industry in the world with much of the focus on comedies, action, and martial art movies. The industry even has their own award show, the Hong Kong Film Awards which was founded in 1982. The Hong Kong movie industry was also known for using many crossover stars as several of the prominent actors and actresses were Cantonese Pop Music Stars. Early Hollywood operated in a similar way; it was known as “the star system.” The star system consisted of Studios developing and managing talented actors and actresses as well as directors and keeping them busy with work throughout the year. It is worth noting that while China has multiple languages, the two most prominent are Mandarin and Cantonese. In Hong Kong, the majority of people speak Cantonese and thus Wong Kar Wai’s films are in Cantonese.

The Hong Kong New Wave of the late 1970s into the 1980s produced many stars in the action and gangster genres. Many would go on to international fame such as Jackie Chan, a stunt specialist, who starred in the Police Story franchise, a fast-paced series equivalent to the American Fast and the Furious Franchise. John Woo is another popular filmmaker who focused on fast paced energetic movies that often revolved around cops fighting against Hong Kong Triads (gangsters). Woo eventually went to the US and directed a few American movies most notably Face Off (1997) and Mission Impossible 2 (2000). Wong Kar Wai was a part of what was referred to as the “Second Wave”, these directors ascended during the latter half of the 1980s. Many of the directors from the Second Wave made films that were a little outside of the mainstream styles of the time.

Traits of Wong Kar Wai Films



The Visual Master

- Wong Kar Wai is known for his emphasis on visual style. He studied graphic arts prior to the beginning of his film career. In his films WKW often favors heavily saturated colors and will often use particularly color palettes associated with certain emotions. For example, he will use combinations of blue and green to represent melancholy and alienation or combinations of orange and yellow to represent happiness. In some scenes he will effectively drain color from a frame to convey a character who feels disheartened or dead on the inside.
- Wong's films are not meant to be taken literally as he embraces expressionism over realism. The colors, use of lighting, and camera angles often are chosen in an effort to convey his characters emotions.

Time

- Most films generally occur in real time at least within a particular scene meaning that if a scene is 20 seconds long then what occurred is perceived to have taken 20 seconds. WKW is known for manipulating time by speeding scenes up or slowing them down. In Chungking Express he does this several times including the opening scene.

Music

- Wong Kar Wai will often use a song multiple times within a film. The song serves to connect with a particular occurrence in the film. Memory is itself an essential aspect of WKK films and music or a particular song is often used as a motif associated with a particular emotion.

Narrative Style

- One of the most immediately obvious aspects of WKW films is the de-emphasis on plot. There are many similarities between WKW and French New Wave director Jean Luc-Godard. Godard like WKW was more interested atmosphere and character than contrived story lines. Wong Kar Wai jumped onto the scene with *As Tears Go By* (1988), a film with a familiar Triad (equivalent to American mafia movies) setting in regard to the popular Hong Kong movies of the 80s. However, WKW, showed he was less interested in the inner workings of the Triads and instead focused on character motivations.
- WKW is known for non-linear story lines and vignettes that often focuses on multiple characters.

Fate, Time, and Existentialism

- WKW's films generally revolve around characters who are filled with existential angst.
- Characters are contemplative and often think about the past or future.
- WKW films are often philosophical in nature but not in a pretentious or overly serious way.

Hong Kong Setting

- Almost all of WKW films are set in Hong Kong, which is where Wong grew up.
- Hong Kong has a unique cultural identity given its history as a former British colony and its current rule by the People's Republic of China.
- Hong Kong's cultural identity is an importance aspect of WKW's films.

Hopeless Romance

- Many of the characters in WKW films could be described as hopeless romantics who pursue love which is not always returned.
- WKW rejects many of the cliches of Hollywood style romantic comedies.

Like anyone else Wong Kar Wai has his detractors who believe he is all style with little substance. Everyone is entitled to their opinion, but I would strongly reject this sentiment. Wong is without a doubt a highly stylized director whose movies certainly stand out for having unique visuals. However, there is a great deal more in my opinion as his films are character driven and filled with existential musings. Similar to other Auteurs the more you understand his style the more you can appreciate his movies. Given the combination of stunning visuals, repetitive music, nonlinear storylines, and idiosyncratic characters I would argue that watching a Wong Kar Wai film is more of a sensory experience than a typical movie watching experience or as the great film critic Roger Ebert put it "He is concerned more with the materials of a story than with the story itself." That may sound like a strange way to explain a movie but after watching one of his movies I think that quote will start to make more sense.