

# *Analysis of Director Wong Kar Wai's Personal Style and Movie Characteristics*

## *—Taking 2046 and Chungking Express as Examples*

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**Abstract:** Wong Kar-wai is one of the few Hong Kong Chinese directors known in the West. His films not only hold an important position in the Chinese film industry but have also attracted a great deal of attention in the international film industry. His films often display themes of search and loss, memory and forgetfulness, adding his unique nostalgic elements while expressing social issues. In his films, Hong Kong and the movie are one and the same. Several of Wong's classic films contain his memories of Hong Kong, and through his use of space and time elements, he shows the Hong Kong of his memories. Wong's choice of music and costumes in his films has also helped him to shape the atmosphere of his films, distinctly representing the various styles and cultural influences in Chinese cinema. Director Wong's unique personal style and the characteristics of his films are worth analyzing and researching. This paper uses the method of literature review to study the characteristics of director Wong Kar-wai's films. This paper will analyze Wong Kar-wai's personal style and film characteristics through the space and time in his films, especially the nostalgia that exists in time. Thus, it will provide new perspectives for a deeper understanding of Wong's artistic contributions, and it will also enable a more in-depth understanding of Wong Kar-wai's cinematic world.

**Keywords:** Wong Kar-wai, Nostalgic, Time and Space, Hong Kong society.

## **1. Introduction**

Wong Kar-wai is a very talented filmmaker who impresses audiences with his unique narrative techniques and visual style. With his unique visual images, postmodern expression and grasp of delicate emotions, he has formed an aesthetic style of Wong Kar-Wai's films that is unique to him [1]. When exploring his films in depth, it is necessary to analyze them in the context of Wang's experience and background. He was born in Shanghai in 1958 and moved to Hong Kong when he was five years old, and in his movies, he has skillfully combined Hong Kong with movies. To analyze the characteristics of Wong Kar-wai's films, it is necessary to place most of his films in the context of Hong Kong in the 1990s. This period is also very important for Hong Kong, as it is the important point of Hong Kong's return to China. Wong Kar-wai's films represent a complex web of inner desires

and emotions connecting the two phases before and after the handover. He does a good job of combining his films with this period of time, implicitly showing the anxiety and other feelings that people felt at the time of Hong Kong's return. His films have ubiquitous elements of time and space, and the memories of Hong Kong that he displays reveal a sense of nostalgia. This paper discusses Wong Kar Wai's personal style and the characteristics of his films through an analysis of two films, *2046* and *Chungking Express*. This paper argues that these two films show time and space, *2046* and *Chungking Express*, respectively. This paper argues that these two movies show time and space respectively, *2046* expresses more of a temporal theme, while *Chungking Express* focuses on space as well as time. Therefore, this essay aims to discuss space and time in Wong Kar Wai's movies, as well as the nostalgia generated by the memories that exist in time. Through the study of Wong Kar Wai, this essay will understand the influence of time, space and nostalgia on the movie, as well as to learn better and utilize the director's movie techniques.

## 2. Synopsis of the story

### 2.1. 2046

*2046* is considered to be the sequel to *In the Mood For Love*, and in this movie shows the story that emerges when Chow Mo Wan returns to Hong Kong and meets the familiar room 2046 again. In this movie, he starts writing again for a living. In the process of writing and selling his articles, he meets various women with different personalities, and he tries to forget the past through contact and communication between these friends and confidants. However, these exchanges not only fail to make him forget the past, but also bring up many sad or happy memories. Finally, in order to say goodbye to the past, he wrote the novel *2046*.

### 2.2. Chungking Express

*Chungking Express* is a typical Wong Kar Wai movie. In this movie, he used the simplest equipment and a low-budget film shot in documentary-like conditions [2]. This movie shows two love stories in a melancholic atmosphere. The title of *Chungking Forest* is taken from Chungking Mansions in Hong Kong, and the movie also uses Chungking Mansions and its nearby Lan Kwai Fong fast-food restaurant as the main scenes. In this movie, Wong Kar Wai focuses on the elements of time and nostalgia. The story is driven and shown through different timelines as well as points in time as clues.

## 3. Characteristics of Wong Kar-wai's movie themes and style

As a postmodernist film director, Wong Kar-wai was undoubtedly influenced by the New Wave movement. The Hong Kong New Wave movement emerged unexpectedly in the late 70s and early 80s [3]. Wong Kar-wai loved literature and watching movies, so he was influenced by many directors and writers and absorbed their styles well to create his own characteristics. Since Wong admired the French "New Wave" representative Jean-Luc Godard and others, his films show a lot of similarities with the "New Wave" films, including non-linear narratives, jump cuts, and the choice of life-like film themes [4]. For example, in *In the Mood for Love*, he imitated Bresson by shooting close-ups in a small enclosed space [3]. Garcia Marquez's work showed Wang the possibility of non-linear narrative [3]. Unlike the linear narrative approach of most movies, in his films, the narrative is driven by different characters. For him, narratives are intermittent and fragmented. This is also evident in *Chungking Express* and *2046*. Wong Kar-wai's use of non-linear narrative techniques in these two films makes the audience watch them as if they were wandering in a vortex of time. In *Chungking Forest*, through two seemingly independent but interrelated stories, Wong Kar-wai skillfully intertwines the flow of time with the emotions of the characters. Each love affair becomes fragile and

short-lived as time moves on, not only reflecting the fast pace of urban life, but also conveying a deeper reflection on human relationships. *2046* also centers on the relationships of several different characters to talk about love, memories, and regrets. The combination of different characters' stories and his use of jump cuts and voice-over narration create a sense of uncertainty and confusion in the movie. This creates a sense of loneliness and confusion about the character's identity in the context of a certain time. Wong Kar-Wai's use of this technique is also suitable for telling the story of the complex society of Hong Kong in the 1990s. Wong Kar-Wai is not only skillful in using non-linear narratives in his films, but he also integrates linear narratives well into his films, for example, *In the Mood For Love* is a linear narrative, while *2046* and *Chungking Express* are non-linear narratives, etc. Therefore, Wong Kar-Wai is a director who is able to use non-linear narratives in his films. Therefore, Wong Kar-Wai is an outstanding director with his own personal characteristics.

Due to the fact that Hong Kong was once invaded by British culture, the people who live there are confused about their national concepts and sense of identity: Hong Kong is often referred to as “borrowed time” and “borrowed space” [4]. Time and space are also the most frequent elements in Wong Kar-wai's films. Wong's films are filled with his memories of Hong Kong and the situation of some marginalized characters. For example, he uses the theme of homosexuality in *Spring Breakers* to show the loneliness and wanderlust in their emotions and lives, and in this way, he triggers people to think about the situation of marginalized people. Wong Kar-wai shows the Hong Kong he remembers through the depiction of time and space. This also means that his movies are full of nostalgia and memories. French historian Pierre Nora points out that nostalgia is a deep longing for memory [4]. The shock of different cultures encountered in Hong Kong at that time and the impending change of identity were a major reason for the emergence of nostalgia films.

In summary, Wong Kar Wai was influenced by the New Wave movement and became a postmodernist filmmaker/artist. His unique postmodernist style, his use of non-linear narrative style, and the atmosphere he creates undoubtedly make him a unique filmmaker. This paper will analyze nostalgia and memory in Wong Kar-wai's films from the perspectives of time and space, especially time.

## 4. Space, Time and Nostalgia in Wong Kar Wai's Films

Movie is the art of space and time [1]. Space and time are undoubtedly two recurring elements in Wong Kar Wai's films. It can be said that his film is inseparable from the elements of time and space, and also about the background of Hong Kong. In his films *2046* and *Chungking Express*, the intertwining of time and space is not only the basis of the narrative, but also the carrier of emotions. Through their unique narrative structures and visual styles, these two works are a profound exploration of the passage of time and the transformation of space. Clues to Wong Kar-wai's use of time and space can even be found in the titles of his films [5]. In *Chungking Express*, “Chungking” means space, a reference to Chungking mansions, and “Express” represents time [2]. Wang chose to create the film *2046* because it is the 50th anniversary of the handover of Hong Kong [3]. Both films reveal the meaning of time and space dimensions from the very beginning of their titles, especially in *2046*, where time is regarded as a cyclical concept, and the protagonist's experiences seem to repeat themselves over and over again, repeatedly returning to past memories. This treatment of time makes every moment in the movie filled with a sense of fatalism and hopelessness, showing the endless nostalgia for loss.

### 4.1. Space

Wong Kar-wai's highly personal visual style in these two films further emphasizes the themes of time and space. In *Chungking Mansions*, the space of the city is imbued with unique emotional coloration,

reinforcing the characters' sense of marginalization and alienation through the contrast between the delicate depiction of Hong Kong's street scenes and the characters' isolation. Wong chooses to unfold the whole story in two locations: Chungking Mansions and Midnight Express. In an interview with Michel Ciment, he mentioned that Chungking mansions is a mixture of different cultures, as if it is the epitome of Hong Kong [3]. And this is how Hong Kong unfolds in Wong Kar-wai's memories. In *2046*, the rooftop is a recurring space, and all three female protagonists in the movie have been to the rooftop. Wong Kar-wai sets the rooftop as a private space for the characters [3]. Each one has a different mood in going to the rooftop, thus driving the whole movie. In *2046*, the rooftop sign and the train corridor are scenes where the characters are squeezed into corners even though the space of the movie becomes bigger. Wong Kar-wai uses this to show the alienation between people and the loneliness of the characters. The protagonists of the movie are in these crowded environments, but they feel so lonely that it is as if time is standing still in the space, while emotions are constantly flowing. Time in the movie is often blurred, and the encounters and misses between the characters seem to suggest the relentlessness of time and fate.

#### 4.2. Time

Wong Kar Wai mentioned in an interview with Michel Ciment that the themes of his movies are more about rejection and the lack of a sense of belonging [3]. It is probably because of this that the characters in his movies usually like to be alone, and therefore the protagonists in his movies pursue love. And love is temporal, appearing too early or too late without closure [1]. This is the reason why the protagonists are mostly missing out on *Chungking Express* and *2046*. The dialogues in *Chungking Express* constantly emphasize time, for example, the shelf-life that keeps recurring when He Zhiwu buys a can of pineapple; the last date to make up for the mistake in Lam Ching-hsia is the expiry date on the can of sardines and so on. He uses objects such as pineapple cans, stuffed toys, and toy airplanes as vehicles of time to transport the characters into the past. People's reactions to emotions in *2046* change over time, which is also a kind of delayed reaction and lasts throughout the movie [2]. For example, the unresponsive waiter on the train, Faye Wong's sadness over her Japanese boyfriend's departure only reveals itself after he is gone, and so on. In this movie, the emotional burden becomes greater with the passage of time. At the same time, Wong Kar-wai cleverly uses the dates "1224" and "1225" as time codes to show the characters' loneliness in the midst of the festivities. Both movies show the characters as well as their memories, which become more and more nostalgic with the passage of time. Therefore, the next paper is to discuss the relationship between memory and nostalgia in Wong Kar Wai's movies.

#### 4.3. Memory and Nostalgia

Memory and forgetfulness are timeless themes that appear in Wong Kar Wai's movies [1]. It is also because of memory that people develop nostalgia. The element of nostalgia is an indispensable theme in Wong Kar-wai's films. The word nostalgia comes from two Greek roots: "nostos" and "algos," the former being the word for "nostalgia" and the latter being the word for "nostalgia" and the latter being the word for "nostalgia." The former means "home" and the latter "hurt" [4]. As time progresses, the meaning of nostalgia changes from spatial "homesickness" to temporal "nostalgia" [4]. Therefore, nostalgic film can induce thoughts about the future while tracing the past. The presence of "nostalgia" is not only because the setting of the film is arranged in the 1960s, but also because it shows the scene of a certain period of history, which makes people recall the past through the objects [6]. Therefore, nostalgia, time, and memory in Wong Kar Wai's films are inseparable. Only by combining them can we better understand what we want to show in Wong Kar Wai's movies.

Wong Kar Wai's choice of music and costumes in his films also helped him shape the atmosphere of the films, distinctly representing the various styles and cultural influences in Chinese cinema [7]. He also added many nostalgic elements in these two movies to show the Hong Kong he remembers. In *Chungking Express* Brigitte Lin's blonde hair and sunglasses look seems to be an attempt to imitate the early Hollywood fashion look. The recurring song "California Dreamin'" is also from 1969's "The Mamas and the Papas." The song is American street music sung by a choir, and while it is one of the clues in the movie, it also reflects the nostalgic elements of Wong Kar Wai's films. In *2046*, the protagonist's memories of the past and his longing for the future are intertwined, creating a profound psychological conflict. Every character in the movie is searching for something lost, which also seems to be nostalgic for the past. Through his delicate portrayal of these emotions, Wong Kar-wai makes nostalgia not just an emotion, but a human reflection on the nature of life. This nostalgia is not only embodied in the inner world of the characters, but at the same time, he places the whole movie in permeating every detail of the whole movie, enhancing the audience's emotional experience. Among them, the *2046* train and the setting of the future are full of technology and nostalgia, as if exploring mankind's desire for the future and attachment to the past. This seems to be what Wong Kar-wai wants to convey to the audience through the movie, that the past is untraceable, that Hong Kong's development is only getting faster and faster, and that people should think about the future rather than indulge in the past. In the movie, he records and shows Hong Kong in his memory, and at the same time relieves the anxiety of people at that time due to the change of identity in this way.

Wong Kar-Wai's use of space, time and nostalgia creates his unique style, which causes the audience to reflect on life while showing the emotions of his characters. The "reality" shown in his movies is close to reality, and the audience can find similar scenes or stories in reality. This paper argues that Wong Kar-Wai's films also show the loneliness and alienation of marginalized people. Whether in *2046* or *Chungking Express*, the protagonists are almost always marginalized characters who are unassuming and may be overlooked in the social context. Therefore, Wong Kar-wai's films are very meaningful and worth watching and analyzing in depth.

## 5. Conclusion

Wong Kar-wai's films effectively alleviate the anxiety brought about by the return of Hong Kong to China, while at the same time presenting an aesthetic style that is undoubtedly unique. His films reveal his themes of time, space and memory. He incorporates his memories into his movies to deepen the sense of reality and nostalgia, which makes his movies more appealing to the people.

Overall, in *2046* and *Chongqing Forest*, Wong Kar-wai deeply explores the themes of time and space through his unique narrative structure and visual style. In his expression of nostalgic feelings, he not only presents the emotional experiences of individuals, but also reflects the helplessness and contemplation of the whole society towards the passage of time. This also means that Wong Kar-wai's works are not only visual enjoyment, but also spiritual resonance and reflection. This paper's research on director Wong Kar-wai is not complete, and we hope that we can gain a deeper understanding of Wong Kar-wai's movie world and his movie style in future research.

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