

# *Narrative Structure and Aesthetic Style in Wong Kar-Wai's Films*

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**Abstract.** Wong Kar-wai's films are known not just for their stories, but for the way they feel — moody, fragmented, and filled with quiet emotion. Set against the shifting cultural landscape of Hong Kong, his work captures moments of disconnection, longing, and memory through a style that often breaks away from traditional storytelling. Instead of clear plotlines, his films unfold through nonlinear timelines, repeated images, and silences that speak louder than words. This essay looks closely at several of his key works — including *In the Mood for Love*, *Chungking Express*, *2046*, *Happy Together*, etc. — to understand how he uses visual rhythm, sound, framing, and improvisation to shape emotional meaning. Through close reading and stylistic analysis, the focus is less on what happens in his films and more on how it happens. What emerges is a portrait of a filmmaker who trusts mood over logic, and feeling over structure. Time in his films doesn't move forward — it circles, pauses, and sometimes disappears. In the end, his cinema isn't about telling a story but about capturing the texture of memory itself — where what's unsaid often matters most.

**Keywords:** Film study, Wong Kar-wai, nonlinear narrative, cinematic time, auteur style.

## 1. Introduction

This study focuses on the narrative structure and aesthetic style in the films of Wong Kar-wai, with particular attention to his use of nonlinear storytelling, fragmented structure, temporal themes, visual color, camera movement and soundtrack. As one of the most distinctive auteur directors in Hong Kong cinema, Wong's work holds significance not only in the local cultural context but also within global film discourse. His emotionally driven images, disjointed timelines, and intimate portrayals of urban solitude and memory have shaped a highly personal cinematic language.

Understanding Wong Kar-wai's work offers valuable insight into the diversity of contemporary Chinese-language cinema and the possibilities within auteur filmmaking. His films challenge conventional narrative logic and offer a different kind of viewing experience — one where mood often takes precedence over plot. Through his films, one can trace complex relationships between memory, time, and emotion, while also reflecting on broader themes such as urban experience, cultural identity, and collective memory.

This research is organized around several key areas: nonlinear narrative and temporal construction, visual language through color and lighting, the emotional function of music, and

Wong's improvisational working methods. These elements together form the foundation of his authorial style.

The method adopted here is literature-based analysis, involving the close reading of academic texts, interviews, critical essays, and statements by Wong himself. This approach allows for a multi-perspective understanding of his films, balancing theory and practice. It also helps situate this study within the broader field of film studies and auteur theory.

The goal of this research is to offer a detailed reading of Wong Kar-wai's narrative and stylistic characteristics, and to understand how he uses cinematic language to express time, memory, and emotion. To achieve this, the study combines film analysis with critical literature, focusing on key works such as *In the Mood for Love*, *Chungking Express*, *2046*, *Fallen Angels* and *Happy Together*.

## 2. Narrative structure and temporal disruption

One of the most significant styles of Wong Kar-wai's films is his challenge to traditional narrative structure and temporal logic. In his films, time is often blurred or even looped; narratives are broken up and reorganized to present the characters' inner chaos and anxiety. This “emotionalization of time” is reflected in the nonlinear narrative, fragmented structure, and technical techniques such as step printing, which constitutes Wong's unique cinematic language and builds a narrative aesthetic different from that of traditional cinema. His films do not tell “what happened” but show “how emotions flow”; they do not tell the past, but let the past “continue to happen”. As Teo puts it, Wong's films “use time as a canvas and emotions as a brush”, creating a poetic and fascinating movie world.

### 2.1. Nonlinear narrative

Nonlinear storytelling remains one of Wong Kar-wai's most distinctive narrative strategies. Rather than following a chronological order, his films often present a blend of past, present, and imagined realities. In *2046* (2004), the protagonist Chow Mo-wan drifts between memory and fantasy. His unresolved romance with Bai Ling becomes intertwined with a fictional future — a place called “2046” — serving as emotional refuge. The film switches constantly between real-life events and fictionalized versions crafted in Chow's writing, blurring the line between imagination and truth. As Lim notes, “Time in Wong's films is not a fixed, external measure, but a subjective extension of emotional experience” [1].

Similarly, in *Happy Together* (1997), the relationship between Lai Yiu-fai and Ho Po-wing is presented through jumping flashbacks and interpolations. The viewer is never told exactly when their relationship began or ended, but can only piece together their emotional track from scattered memory fragments. This instability is Wong's way of reflecting the characters' chaotic emotional states. As Brunette writes, “The fractured structure is key to expressing the volatility and collapse of human relationships in Wong's cinema” [2].

### 2.2. Fragmented structure

Closely related to the non-linear narrative is the fragmented story structure. Wong Kar-wai's films often do not emphasize the development of a complete plot, traditional cause-and-effect structures give way to a mosaic of moments — emotional fragments, life moments, unfinished dialogues, and repeated actions. These sequences resemble what Teo calls “emotional mosaics”, where plot becomes secondary to mood, it blurs the traditional logic of beginning, middle and end [3].

In *Chungking Express* (1994), the film is split into two seemingly unrelated narratives. The first centers on a heartbroken cop (No. 223) and a mysterious blonde woman; the second follows another cop (No. 663) and a quirky fast-food women worker. Though the two stories never connect directly, only the geographically meaningless brushes of the four protagonists, which Wong Kar-wai breaks up and re-synthesizes into a single story, they share themes of loss, disconnection, and urban loneliness and isolation of the youth of Hong Kong in the 1990s. Abbas describes this as “a structure of disjunction, reflecting the psychological alienation of modern life” [4].

### 2.3. Step printing

Beyond narrative, Wong reconstructs time visually, most representative through step printing — a technique that duplicates frames to create blur, slow-motion, and ghosting effects.

In *Chungking Express*, this effect is used in a sequence where Cop 663 runs through the streets. The visuals stretch and smear, isolating the character in a frozen emotional state. As Bordwell observes, “Time slows not to emphasize action, but to express psychological duration” [5]. Wong Kar-wai distinguishes the mentality of two men after love loss through the speed and slowness of time.

This technique also appears in *Ashes of Time* (1994), especially in combat scenes. Rather than showcasing violence, the blurred motion enhances emotional turbulence. Dissanayake and Wong write that such visuals “transform fighting into a metaphor for internal chaos” [6].

### 2.4. Time as theme

Time is not just a narrative device in Wong’s films — it is often the main subject. His characters are haunted by the past, unable to move forward or live fully in the present. They attempt to preserve time through symbolic acts: eating expired pineapple cans, recording messages on tape, whispering secrets into walls. These actions, as Fuchs notes, “are rituals of mourning for lost love” [7].

In *In the Mood for Love* (2000), the romance between Chow and Su Li-zhen never fully begins, yet never truly ends. Their emotions remain suspended in silent hallways and repeated glances. Martin describes this as “a deferred emotion — unable to erupt, yet unable to fade” [8]. At the film’s end, Chow whispers a secret into a hole in the wall of Angkor Wat — an attempt to bury memory in a timeless space.

In *Fallen Angels* (1995), Wong Kar-wai put the sense of rhythm control is wonderful, the rhythm is divided into fast and slow, fast time in the execution of the mission to pack up the scene to leave Hong Kong, strengthened the killer characteristics, but also means that Killer and The Killer's Agent's partner tacit understanding, the slow content is mainly in the description of the mood and state, such as Killer's loneliness. There are also Killer and The Killer's Agent to perform three missions, the first mission complete filming of the two people's division of labor and process, the second mission will be the two people's work as a whole, the third mission directly presents the results of the mission, the speed of the change in avoiding the film's redundancy so that the content is more fleshed out, but also in the acceleration of the film's tempo.

## 3. Visual and aesthetic techniques

In Wong Kar-Wai's cinematic language, visual style is not only an auxiliary tool for narrative, but also the core means for emotional and thematic expression. Through color, light and shadow, composition, mirror reflection, camera movement and other techniques, he visualizes urban

loneliness, emotional isolation and memory flow, so that the audience can “feel” the psychology of the characters in the picture, rather than just “watch” the story.

### 3.1. Color and light

Wong’s use of color is unmistakable. He favors saturated reds, greens, and yellows to evoke atmosphere and emotional intensity. In *In the Mood for Love*, Su Li-zhen’s qipaos stand out against green walls and dim lighting. Teo notes, “Color in Wong’s films is not about realism, but emotional resonance” [3]. As Brunette points out, “Wong’s colors are not meant to reproduce reality, but to reproduce emotion” [2]. Red symbolizes unspoken passion, green suggests repression, and yellow alludes to nostalgia or warmth [8].

Lighting plays a crucial role. Wong often uses practical lights, low color temperatures, and neon to create moody interiors. Abbas describes this as “a claustrophobic intimacy that reflects urban isolation” [4]. In *2046*, Chow writes alone in a yellow-lit room, with blurred lights and the sound of rain outside the window, and the only sources of light in the room being a desk lamp and a television screen, sealed off from the world, symbolizing his inner closure and stagnation of his memories [1]. In *Fallen Angels*, flickering neon and handheld lamps create a dreamlike disorientation, Immersing the audience in the character’s mental instability [5].

### 3.2. Framing and space

Wong frequently frames characters in narrow, enclosed spaces — corridors, elevators, cramped rooms. Foregrounds are often blocked by doors, curtains, or glass, creating a sense of voyeurism. In *Fallen Angels*, the killer Wong Chi-ming and the killer’s agent Michele Reis never meet face-to-face. Their relationship is mediated through spatial separation. The viewer seems to be trapped behind a sheet of glass, only able to peek into the corners of emotions. Especially in the film’s many “open door” sequences, each bringing a different emotional twist: the first time to open the door to scare the residents, the second time to open the door to no one responded, the third time to the empty corridors cursing, the fourth time directly blocked the door to the residents to interrogate, and step by step to promote the character’s emotions towards the edge of the collapse. As Teo and Yeh & Davis explain, “Wong uses space to reflect emotional distance, not just physical one” [3,9].

Mirrors and glass are recurring devices. Rather than reflecting reality, they reflect inner confusion. In *Ashes of Time* and *2046*, mirrored reflections appear frequently, showing the character’s self-splitting and inner disorientation. Fuchs writes, “Mirrors in Wong’s films reveal emotional blind spots — places the characters themselves cannot see” [7].

### 3.3. Camera movement and editing

Wong combines handheld cinematography with step printing to heighten emotional disorientation. In *Chungking Express*, step-printed slow motion and handheld shots create a floating, unstable rhythm. The shot of cop (No. 663) running in the street uses the technique of step printing, which gives the image a visual effect of blurring and pulling shadows, where time is artificially extended and emotions are stretched out [5]. Hand-held cinematography further enhances the “fluidity” and ‘weightlessness’ of the characters, Teo calls this “a subjective visual poetry of time” [3].

Jump cuts are another staple, often used to break the continuity of time and space and create abrupt changes in rhythm. In the same film, quick cuts and jump cuts between street scenes and

blurred motion express the chaos of urban life. Abbas notes that “Wong breaks continuity to force viewers into emotional awareness” [4].

Chu expands on this by suggesting that urban space in Wong’s films becomes “an emotional container — a projection of the character’s inner world” [10]. Through camera movement, composition and color, the cityscape is imbued with subjective emotions. In *Happy Together*, the exotic space of Buenos Aires is not presented as geographically significant, but rather as a field for Lai’s emotional flow. The city is no longer a backdrop, but a visualization of the character’s heart. Abbas (1997) states, “Wong’s city is not a geographical space, but a psychological space” [4].

#### 4. Soundtrack and musical aesthetics

In Wong Kar-wai’s films, music is never relegated to the background; it operates as a central element in shaping character psychology, emotional tone, and narrative rhythm. Rather than serving as mere accompaniment, music functions as an extension of the character’s inner world. Wong frequently selects retro, foreign, or culturally dislocated tracks, often looping them across scenes to embed emotion directly into the cinematic atmosphere.

In *In the Mood for Love* (2000), Nat King Cole’s Spanish-language version of “Quizás, quizás, quizás” recurs throughout the film, accompanying the restrained, unspoken relationship between the two protagonists. As Stephen Teo observes, “The song becomes the unsaid dialogue” [3], articulating the desire and hesitation that the characters themselves cannot express. Similarly, Martin contends that “Wong’s music choices are not nostalgic props but emotional signifiers” [8], pointing to the way familiar melodies are recontextualized to carry deep emotional weight.

In *Chungking Express* (1994), the repeated use of “California Dreamin’” by The Mamas & the Papas reflects the protagonist’s longing for escape and emotional renewal. The juxtaposition of an iconic American song with the fast-paced, urban setting of 1990s Hong Kong creates a tension between cultural aspiration and local reality. As Brunette suggests, “The American song collides with Hong Kong’s landscape, creating a modern sense of dislocation” [2]. This musical incongruity contributes to what Yeh and Davis term “a de-territorialized modernity” [9], where identities, desires, and cultural references float freely across space and time.

*Fallen Angels* (1995) offers an even more experimental use of sound and music. The track “01 First Killing,” with its pulsating electronic beats, is paired with slow-motion visuals and distorted camera angles to create a dissonant, noir-inflected atmosphere. As Bordwell notes, “The rhythm of the music mirrors the character’s emotional fragmentation” [5], reflecting the disjointed mental states of characters who drift through the city in silence, violence, or longing. Here, music becomes more than a mood-setter; it becomes narrative structure — a sonic architecture that bridges disconnected scenes and interior states.

Wong frequently repeats the same musical track across multiple scenes, allowing it to accumulate emotional resonance over time. Lim refers to this as “emotional fermentation — a slow-building mood through repetition” [1]. Rather than signaling narrative progression, the return of a familiar melody signals emotional stasis or intensification. Through this technique, Wong allows music to function as a kind of emotional memory — one that reemerges, recurs, and resists closure.

As Fuchs succinctly summarizes, “Wong replaces dialogue with melody, and chronology with rhythm” [7]. In doing so, he constructs a cinematic language where music doesn’t simply support emotion — it speaks in place of it. His films become emotional landscapes composed not just of images and words, but of rhythms, echoes, and refrains that linger long after the scene has ended.

## 5. Improvisation and collaboration

Wong's directing style is famously open-ended. He often shoots without a finished script, relying on spontaneous on-set decisions and actor improvisation to accomplish character building and plot development.

During the filming of many of Wong's movie and television productions, Wong did not provide his actors with complete scripts, but rather, through on-the-spot instructions and temporary adjustments, in *Happy Together*, Wong guided Tony Leung and Leslie Cheung through real experiences in Buenos Aires without predetermined dialogue. Brunette comments, "Wong doesn't direct plot — he directs emotion" [2]. Teo agrees: "Scenes evolve from mood more than from script" [3].

His visual style owes much to cinematographer Christopher Doyle. As Wong's long-time creative partner, Christopher Doyle made great contributions to composition, lighting and color design. His customary hand-held photography, diagonal compositions and use of natural light sources create a "floating sense of reality" and "improvisational poetry" for Wong Kar Wai's films. As Yeh and Davis point out, "Doyle's handheld, off-kilter framing and natural light are essential to Wong's emotional texture" [9].

Wong's productions often stretch over years. *2046* took four years to complete, with recasting, reshoots, and rewritten plotlines. This "write-as-you-shoot" approach gives his films a layered, collage-like depth. Similarly in the production of *Blossoms Shanghai* (2023), went through 3 years of filming via experience actors finish filming and then coming back for reshoots. Lim explains, "Wong's films aren't planned; they are discovered" [1].

While this approach to creation is often criticized as unplanned and inefficient, it is also this free spirit of experimentation that allows Wong to create an unprecedented connection between images and emotions. Fuchs concludes, "Wong doesn't tell a story — he builds a mood, a perception of memory and time" [7].

## 6. Conclusion

This study has explored the distinctive narrative and aesthetic strategies employed by Wong Kar-wai, with particular attention to his nonlinear storytelling, visual composition, sound design, and improvisational method of filmmaking. Through a detailed analysis of selected works — including *In the Mood for Love*, *Chungking Express*, *2046*, *Happy Together*, *Fallen Angels* and *Ashes of Time* — the research has demonstrated how Wong constructs a cinematic language that prioritizes emotional resonance over narrative clarity, and subjectivity over linear temporality.

Wong's films offer a sustained meditation on time, memory, and longing, articulated through fragmented structures, evocative visual motifs, and carefully curated soundscapes. Rather than presenting definitive narratives, his films create affective atmospheres that invite reflection, ambiguity, and emotional immersion. In doing so, Wong challenges conventional modes of cinematic storytelling and opens up new possibilities for understanding the relationship between narrative form, temporal experience, and emotional expression in contemporary cinema.

By situating Wong Kar-wai's work within the broader context of auteur theory and Chinese-language cinema, this study highlights his contribution to rethinking cinematic temporality and authorship. His films exemplify a deeply personal yet culturally resonant mode of filmmaking, one that continues to influence both regional and global cinematic practices.

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