

Aesthetic Analysis of Wong Kar-wai's Films and Reasons for Western Popularity: A Case Study of "Chungking Express"

Lang Luo^{1,a}, Jiayin Wu^{2,b}, and Jiatian Zhang^{3,c,*}

¹School of Accounting, Guangzhou College of Technology and Business, Sanhua Road, Leping Town, Foshan City, China

²International College of Chinese Studies, Fujian Normal University, University City Keji Road, Shangjie Town, Fuzhou City, China

³College of Fine Arts, Ewha Womans University, Ewha Womans University Road, Seodaemun-gu, Seoul Special City, South Korea

a. 1911431127@mail.sit.edu.cn, b. 1912100120@mail.sit.edu.cn, c. jangganyeon@ewhain.net

*corresponding author

Abstract: Wong Kar-wai's films are characterized by his unique filming techniques and captivating script dialogues, showcasing his distinctive cinematic style. Through personalized expressions, Wong introduces Eastern aesthetics and philosophical thinking to international audiences, resulting in enthusiastic reception. Taking "*Chungking Express*" as an example, this film is one of Wong's masterpieces, vividly portraying the urban landscape of 1980s Hong Kong. Despite its short production cycle, the movie has garnered numerous awards on the international stage. This paper delves into the reasons behind the international popularity of Wong's films, using "*Chungking Express*" as a case study. It analyzes foreign reviews of the film and explores Wong Kar-wai's personal experiences, focusing on his filming techniques and scriptwriting style. Through personalized expressions, Wong presents Eastern aesthetics and philosophical thinking to international audiences, leaving a profound impression of Chinese elements in his films and contributing to their enthusiastic reception.

Keywords: Wong Kar-wai, *Chungking Express*, filming techniques, emotional expression

1. Introduction

Filmmaker Wong Kar-wai's cinematic works have consistently captivated the industry with his unique visual language and engaging narrative style. Among them, one of his masterpieces, "*Chungking Express*," is a brilliant gem in his creative portfolio. This paper delves deep into the filming techniques and aesthetic style employed by Wong Kar-wai in "*Chungking Express*" while also analyzing the emotions and ideas he endeavors to convey through these techniques.

1.1. Filming Techniques and Aesthetics

"*Chungking Express*" leads the audience into a surreal urban dreamscape through its dreamlike visual texture and unique filming techniques. From camera movements to changes in focal length,

Wong Kar-wai's adept manipulation of imagery imbues the film with a highly emotive tension. The utilization of color, the delineation of light and shadow, and the mastery of pacing together form the distinct aesthetic experience characteristic of Wong Kar-wai's cinema.

1.2. Conveyance of Emotions and Thoughts

In "*Chungking Express*," Wong Kar-wai explores themes of interpersonal relationships, loneliness, and desires through his distinctive mode of expression. By interweaving emotions and altering perspectives, he outlines the emotional fluctuations of individuals within the urban setting, carrying profound insights and contemplation into human nature. The uniqueness of this film lies in its unconventional narrative approach, as Wong Kar-wai creatively depicts subtle shifts in characters' emotions. Remarkably, while the director's previous works often took years to produce, "*Chungking Express*" was shot in a mere month, devoid of a fixed script, showcasing the director's emphasis on improvisational creative processes.

2. Manuscript Preparation

This paper aims to conduct a comprehensive analysis of the cinematographic techniques and aesthetic style employed in the film "*Chungking Express*." This paper will discuss elements such as camera movements, composition, color grading, and dialogue, exploring how they contribute to the film's unique visual style and dialogue, subsequently influencing the filmmaking techniques and dialogue of many subsequent films in the vein of Wong Kar-wai's style.

2.1. Cinematographic Techniques and Aesthetics

This paper aims to thoroughly explore the cinematographic techniques and aesthetic elements present in "*Chungking Express*." From camera movements to composition and color grading to language application, these elements collectively contribute to the film's unique visual style and dialogue. Not only did this style attract widespread attention at the time, but it also exerted a profound and lasting influence on the filming techniques and dialogue composition of many subsequent films.

2.2. Conveyance of Themes and Emotions

Furthermore, this section will delve into the underlying themes and emotions in "*Chungking Express*." It will analyze how Wong Kar-wai employs his distinctive visual language to portray fleeting interpersonal relationships and the passage of time among urban men and women. Through specific scenes and segments, this paper will elucidate how these thematic elements are manifested within the film [1]. Finally, this section will discuss Wong Kar-wai's artistic intent within the film, elucidating why his films have gained significant popularity in the Western world.

3. Film Plot

The film's story originates from the "Chungking Mansions" in Tsim Sha Tsui, Hong Kong. During the early 1960s, this building was a high-end commercial complex. However, over time, it evolved into a diverse and mixed place, attracting many immigrants, primarily of Indian descent. The first segment of the story depicts a chance encounter: while police officer He Qiwu is pursuing a fugitive, he brushes past a blonde woman within the Chungking Mansions. Despite being strangers in this fleeting intersection, an indescribable emotional resonance emerges. The story's protagonist is He Qiwu, a mere 24 years old. After breaking up with his girlfriend, May, he has been deceiving himself by treating the breakup as a joke. This is because He Qiwu's birthday falls on May 1st. To

prevent the relationship from ending altogether, he purchases a can of pineapple with an expiration date of May 1st every day. He sets a rule: if after buying 30 cans, may hasn't reconciled with him, then the relationship will expire on that day, formally announcing the breakup. However, things don't go as he wishes. On April 30th, when He Qiwu goes to buy pineapple cans, he is given a box of cans that are about to expire due to the impatience of the store clerk. This silent hint makes He Qiwu feel the unease of impending love's end. Through this plot point, director Wong Kar-wai underscores a significant theme of the film: What is it that doesn't fade away in the fast-paced urban life?

A blonde woman, acting upon the direction of a foreign man, arrives at the Chungking Mansions to hire a group of Indian laborers, aiming to assist them in taking measurements and crafting garments. However, these Indian workers eventually flee due to their involvement in drug smuggling, leading to the failure of the plan. On a desolate night at a bar, He Qiwu crosses paths with the emotionally downcast blonde woman. Through awkward conversation, He Qiwu brings forth a pivotal line: "Understanding a person doesn't mean anything. People change. Today, they like pineapple, tomorrow they might like something else." This dialogue underscores the mutability of human nature and the uncertainty of emotions. The following day, May 1st, He Qiwu's birthday finally arrives. He receives a succinct birthday wish from the blonde woman: "Happy Birthday." This concise greeting triggers profound reflection about his past and future. Subsequently, He Qiwu leaves behind the film's third classic line: "On May 1st, 1994, a woman wished me happy birthday. Because of that, I'll always remember her. If memories could be canned, I hope this won't expire. And if an expiration date must be added, I hope it's for ten thousand years."

The second segment of the story delves into the emotional narrative between Ah Fei, the cousin of the snack shop owner, and Officer 663. Ah Fei, while working at the shop, enjoys playing the song "California Dreaming." Officer 663 frequents the snack shop, buying salads for his flight attendant girlfriend. This routine introduces him to Ah Fei. One day, Officer 663 returns to purchase a salad, and the shop owner recommends other dishes, providing more options for his girlfriend. This recommendation gradually alters his girlfriend's eating habits from solely salads to various choices. In this process, Wong Kar-wai astutely reveals the intricacies of urban relationships, resonating with the previous story, highlighting that love, like time, is fleeting. After losing his lover, Officer 663's girlfriend hands over her house key to Ah Fei. Henceforth, Ah Fei regularly cleans Officer 663's residence, and they embark on a unique form of remote cohabitation. Shortly after, Officer 663 notices the changes at home, and his demeanor in the film reveals his readiness for a new romance. To embrace this fresh start, he invites Ah Fei to the California Bar, yet Ah Fei doesn't appear, leaving behind a letter and a boarding pass. In the letter, she informs Officer 663 that she has gone to California, USA, and a year later became a flight attendant. Simultaneously, Officer 663 resigns from the police force and takes over the snack shop's management. The narrative returns to Hong Kong as Ah Fei returns. She asks Officer 663 where he wants to go, and his response is, "Wherever you want to go." This succinct line profoundly conveys their openness to the future and their steadfast commitment to each other. Through this scene, Wong Kar-wai once again depicts the ebbs and flows of love, as well as the choices and decisions people make in the pursuit of happiness.

3.1. Filming Techniques and Aesthetics

3.1.1. Handheld Camera Movement and Intense Shaking for Emotional Expression

The film employs handheld camera movement and intense shaking shots right from its opening scenes, such as during Officer 223's pursuit of a suspect and the scene where Indian men chase the blonde female drug dealer. These techniques skillfully evoke feelings of panic and restlessness,

effectively establishing a tense atmosphere for the audience. The use of vigorous camera shaking not only immerses viewers in the characters' heightened emotions but also sets the stage for subsequent plot developments, as seen in Officer 223's initial encounter with the blonde female drug dealer [2].

3.1.2.Slow Motion and Tracking Shots for Emotional Depiction

In the film, Wong Kar-wai employs slow-motion and tracking shots as techniques to convey the story's backdrop and characters' emotions. For instance, in the scene where Officer 223 repeatedly dials his friend at a fast-food restaurant, the utilization of slow-motion and tracking shots, achieved through frame-skipping effects, cleverly portrays the character's loneliness and desolation [3]. Furthermore, the application of tilted compositions further intensifies the release of these emotions, evoking a spontaneous, empathetic response from the audience.

3.1.3.Squeezed Framing and Authentic Depiction of Character Emotions

The use of squeezed framing in the film offers the audience an alternative voyeuristic visual experience. For instance, in the scene where Officer 663 talks to objects around his home, the squeezed framing accentuates the character's sense of relaxation and negative emotions. This framing technique, achieved by constraining the visual perspective, allows the character's emotions to be presented in a more natural and unforced manner, facilitating a more profound sense of resonance for the audience.

3.1.4.Creating a Dreamlike Atmosphere with Glass Foregrounds and Mirroring

In the interactions between Ah Fei and Officer 663, the techniques of glass foregrounds and mirroring are extensively employed. As Ah Fei's curiosity and emotions deepen towards Officer 663, the use of glass foregrounds contributes to creating a dreamlike atmosphere in the film, akin to her assertion that she finds herself in a dream from which she will never awaken. Additionally, the application of mirroring guides the audience's focus towards the characters' inner worlds. Mirrors on the streets, aquariums indoors, and symmetric compositions provide the film with more imaginative space, enhancing the depth of emotional expression.

3.2. Visual Design and Construction of Color Atmosphere

3.2.1.Personalized Visual Design Reflecting Self-Expression

Director Wong Kar-wai's visual design exhibits a distinct personal style, showcasing his unique self-expression. Each scene in the film seems meticulously crafted, presenting distinctive visual compositions. From Officer 223 in the rain to Officer 663 at night, Wong Kar-wai employs careful scene arrangements and skillful color usage to create a mesmerizing and profound visual effect, blending the characters' emotions with the urban environment.

3.2.2.Interplay of Emotional Expression and Color Atmosphere

The construction of color atmosphere in the film plays a crucial role in emotional expression. Director Wong Kar-wai skillfully employs the contrast between cool and warm colors to highlight the characters' loneliness and desires amidst the bustling urban environment. From the somber rain to the vibrant night scenes, the color shifts resonate with the characters' emotional fluctuations, enabling the audience to sense their inner vulnerability and confusion [4].

3.2.3. Fragmented Narrative Presents the Theme of “Serendipity”

The narrative style of “*Chungking Express*” is characterized by fragmentation, where scattered scenes and images convey a theme of “serendipity” to the audience. The relationships between characters in the film are not preordained but rather develop gradually within the complex urban setting [5]. This uncertain narrative approach lends the film a sense of authenticity and vitality, allowing the audience to resonate with the ebbs and flows of the characters’ emotions.

3.2.4. Profound Reflections on Time and Love

The film delves into the relationship between time and love through the fragmented actions and emotions of its characters. The dynamic between police officer 663 and Faye results from the accumulation of time and the choices driven by self-rationalization. This contemplation is vividly portrayed in the film through the contrast of warm and cool color tones, as well as the shifts in the characters’ emotions. As a result, the audience not only resonates emotionally but also contemplates the meaning of life and love.

3.3. Emotional Expression Through Dialogue

3.3.1. Emotional Attachment to Pineapple Cans by Officer 223

Taking the dialogue of Officer 223 as an example, his monologue poignantly reveals his evasion and dependence on emotions. Officer 223 expresses his yearning for warmth and reliance in the bustling city by purchasing pineapple cans, entrusting his feelings to these objects. This emotional expression vividly portrays the character’s inner vulnerability and sense of loneliness, creating a striking contrast with the fast-paced urban environment [6].

3.3.2. Fateful Love Between Ah Fei and Officer 663

The love between Ah Fei and Officer 663 is also deeply expressed through dialogue. Ah Fei’s line, “Some dreams are never meant to wake up from,” portrays her persistence and yearning for love, showcasing her emotional pursuit of Officer 663. Simultaneously, Officer 663’s internal transformation is highlighted in the dialogue as well. He eventually confronts his inner pain, choosing to face reality rather than continue to evade it. This portrayal of emotions, conveyed through dialogue and emotional interaction, allows the audience to sense the characters’ evolution and growth profoundly.

3.3.3. Interplay and Reflection of Love and Reality

Through these iconic lines, the film weaves together love and reality, presenting the intricate emotions of the characters. The depiction of love in the dialogues of Officer 223 and Ah Fei encompasses contradictions and uncertainties, as well as authenticity and longing. This attitude of going with the flow and genuine expression reflects the urban dwellers’ endeavor for emotional fulfillment amidst the bustling city life. Simultaneously, it prompts the audience to reflect upon their emotions and perspectives.

3.4. Expressive Techniques

3.4.1. Expression of Emotions

The film’s dialogues directly convey the characters’ inner emotions and conflicts. For instance, the monologue of Cop 223, “On May 1st, 1994, a woman said ‘Happy Birthday’ to me. Because of that,

I'll always remember her. If memories could be canned, I hope they can be preserved for a lifetime, if not longer." In these succinct lines, the desire of Cop 223 for enduring love amidst the clamor of the city is conveyed. This unique expression style stimulates the audience to contemplate love in a fresh light, raising the question, "Does love truly have an expiration date [7]?"

3.4.2. Humor and Irony

The film is replete with humorous dialogues that illustrate the absurdities and quirks of real life. For instance, when Cop 663 invites Ah Fei to the California Bar, but she ends up in the U.S. state of California, he humorously remarks, "She did come, in a way. It's just that she went to the wrong place. That night, we were all in California, just that there was a 15-hour time difference between us. It's 11 AM there now." This characteristic self-irony in expression has the profound ability to resonate with viewers who have experienced heartbreak or unfulfilled aspirations.

3.4.3. Symbolism and Metaphor

Wong Kar-wai's dialogues often carry deep symbolism and metaphors, sparking contemplation among viewers about life, emotions, and society. For instance, when the Blonde Woman says in the bar, "Knowing a person is not the same as understanding them. People change, liking pineapples today and oranges tomorrow," this dialogue metaphorically conveys her realization about being deceived by love, gradually recognizing that her past love was a lie. Her eventual act of shooting and killing the man who exploited her to sell drugs also implies that without decisive action, there will be another victim [8].

3.4.4. Emotional Communication

Dialogues effectively convey the emotional communication and interaction among characters, allowing audiences to sense the subtle connections, emotions, and conflicts between them. For example, when 663 provides multiple late-night food options for his girlfriend, only to be rejected himself, he mockingly comments to the snack shop owner, "She said she wanted a change, and rightly so. There are so many options for late-night snacks, let alone boyfriends. A perfect salad, why switch to fried fish and chips?" By likening himself to a late-night food option, 663 expresses his disappointment over a lost love, cleverly metaphorizing the common plight of urban romance.

4. Reasons for the Popularity of "*Chungking Express*" in the West

4.1. Evaluation of "*Chungking Express*" on IMDb

Super GoodfeelinzyWimzy18 December 2003"Stunned. *Chungking Express* should be seen at least once for the experience. Caution: may cause smiling and frequent laughter.

What a contrast to *Fallen Angels*, which was the first Wong Kar Wai film I've seen. Talk about polar opposites. The characters here are your everyday working people living ordinary lives. I love the idea of the people we walk and pass by every day. Who knows what a random meeting will lead to? The chemistry between the actors is key. Takeshi Kaneshiro (I never thought of jogging that way) and Tony Leung are both great as two fellows going through a down of sorts. No one wants to be alone. Or have you ever thought to yourself and asked, "What do I want in life? Where do I want to go?" If anyone can relate to that, Wong Kar Wai captures that in his film.

Also, I love the contrast between the leading ladies; Brigitte is as mysterious as the enigmatic blonde and she still shines through. On the other hand, Faye's charismatic, bouncy personality is so infectious and definitely made her my favorite. It all comes out through her facial expressions, her dancing, her bright-eyed look, and her super smile is awesome! My mindset is fixed with that song

by Mama and the Papas and Faye. That and her Cranberries' tribute. When she and Tony are onscreen together, it's magic. My favorite thing about Tony is for all the different roles he's played; he always comes off as himself. I'm sure the ladies love his scenes in the apartment!

I wouldn't consider this a great Hong Kong movie. This is a great film, PERIOD. *Chungking Express* has replay value and there's so much more to love and appreciate upon later viewings. See it for Faye [9]!"

From these evaluations, it can be discerned that Western audiences are particularly drawn to the opportunities presented by those who cross paths with ordinary individuals in their daily lives, as well as the uncertainty of "who knows what will happen next?" In Wong Kar-wai's "*Chungking Express*," love takes on distinct characteristics from his other works, no longer manifesting as fervent expressions but as whimsical aspirations. The film employs expressions like "0.01" multiple times, underscoring the delicate distance between people. In urban life, one brushes past countless strangers daily; this proximity is physical yet distant in spirit. These emotional contradictions and feelings of distance give rise to a unique emotional atmosphere in the film.

Director Wong Kar-wai adeptly molds the intricate emotional entanglements among characters through this narrative technique while also conveying the loneliness and yearning for affection experienced by modern urban individuals. This emotional expression resonates with audiences, reflecting the unique and fragile nature of interpersonal relationships in contemporary society.

The film is imbued with an atmosphere of "randomness," much like our lives. There are no preordained events, and before each moment arrives, we cannot predict what will unfold. Outcomes might change due to a sudden shift in weather, fluctuating emotions, or even an inexplicable sensation. This fluid transition of emotions precisely constitutes the charm that captivates foreign audiences in this film. By presenting these intricate interpersonal relationships, Wong Kar-wai, with his distinctive narrative style, profoundly delves into the fragility and capriciousness of love in urban life. This portrayal of emotions prompts viewers to delve deeply into contemplations about life, love, and destiny, engendering a profound resonance among foreign audiences [10].

4.2. Wong Kar-wai's Impact on Hong Kong Cinema and Reasons for International Recognition

4.2.1. Innovative Visual Language and Narrative Style

This film stands out with its distinctive visual language and narrative approach, immersing the audience in a captivating visual and sensory experience. The rapid editing techniques not only generate excitement but also imbue the film with a dynamic rhythm, compelling viewers to become emotionally invested in the characters' destinies and emotional journeys. The creative and avant-garde nature of the storytelling not only leaves a profound impression but also prompts viewers to contemplate the multiple layers of meaning and symbolism within the narrative. This bold spirit of innovation goes beyond mere visual spectacle; it challenges conventional narrative conventions and constraints. The success of this film has inspired subsequent directors to embark on fresh explorations of cinematic language, encouraging them to fearlessly experiment with new cinematographic techniques and narrative structures. In doing so, it has injected renewed vitality and creative inspiration into Chinese cinema.

4.2.2. Profound Emotional Portrayals and Exploration of Humanity

When Wong Kar-wai portrays these emotions and psychological dilemmas through his films, he doesn't merely create characters; he opens a window that allows us to glimpse the resonances deep within each person's heart. Audiences are not only drawn into the narrative, but they are also guided to reflect upon their own life experiences and emotional journeys. This impact extends beyond the

confines of the movie screen, influencing viewers' everyday lives and encouraging them to contemplate the significance of humanity, love, and existence on a deeper level. Wong Kar-wai's works transcend the realm of cinema; they constitute a journey into the human soul, a profound analysis of human emotions and human nature. In doing so, they bestow upon the art of filmmaking a heightened emotional depth and a more authentic reflection of life.

4.2.3. International Success on the Global Stage

"*Chungking Express*" not only achieved success domestically but also garnered widespread recognition on the international stage. Its unique style and profound exploration of human nature captured the keen interest of Western audiences. The international acclaim of this film propelled Chinese cinema onto a broader global platform, positively contributing to the international dissemination of Chinese films.

5. Conclusion

Wong Kar-wai's filmography has garnered widespread recognition in the international film industry due to his unique narrative style and visual aesthetics, encompassing commercial and artistic value. His directorial style and filmmaking techniques have found favor with audiences around the world, and this popularity can be attributed to several factors:

(1) In modern society, Wong Kar-wai's films convey profound emotions and thoughts of contemporary individuals that transcend cultural differences, resonating with audiences both domestically and abroad. This genuine portrayal of modern human emotions sets Wong Kar-wai's films apart.

(2) Wong Kar-wai's personal talent greatly enriches his films. His works not only excel in visual presentation and storytelling but also convey profound philosophical undertones. In the era of globalization, he skillfully integrates Eastern philosophical thoughts into his works, guiding audiences to understand his values within emotions and circumstances.

(3) Taking "*Chungking Express*" as an example, Wong Kar-wai delves into the spiritual state of individuals and social issues within the modern society against the backdrop of Hong Kong's internationalized urban environment. He balances local culture and international audience interests, sparking curiosity and resonance among viewers. He provides international audiences with a unique aesthetic and spiritual experience.

Authors Contribution

All the authors contributed equally, and their names were listed in alphabetical order.

References

- [1] *Analyzing the "Modern Transformation" of Chinese Film's Expressive Aesthetics: A Case Study of "Chungking Express"* by Wei Jianqiang
- [2] *The Eastern Bet: Wong Kar-wai as a Paradigm* — Francisco Javier Gómez Tarín
- [3] "Narrative Style Analysis of Wong Kar-wai's Films" written by Wang Nannan in 2014
- [4] "Decoding the Visual Map of Wong Kar-wai's Films from '*Chungking Express*'" by Yang Liu Jun
- [5] "Elusive Fragmented Images: An Analysis of Wong Kar-wai's Film Style" written by Zhou Qing in 2011
- [6] "The Jar of 'Drunk Dreams and Illusory Lives': Wong Kar-wai's Hong Kong Stories" written by Yang Dejian in 1997
- [7] "The Poetics of Wong Kar-Wai's Cinema" — Santiago Jesús Lecuona Doble
- [8] "Wong Kar-Wai's Films and Oriental Thinking in the Context of Modern Visual Language" by Xu Xin, "Film Literature" Volume 15, 2022, Issue 15.
- [9] IMDb, founded in 1990, has evolved into the world's largest and most comprehensive online movie database website. It encompasses data from millions of films and features personal pages of film professionals worldwide.

- [10] Laurent Tirard: *“Wong Kar-wai’s Master Class,”* translated by Zhang Ying, published in *“World Cinema,”* 5th issue of 2014.
- [11] *“Negative Existence, Elegance, and the Cultural Competitiveness of Wong Kar-wai’s Films: A Sample from the North American Foreign Language Film Market,”* by Chen Linxia, published in the 9th issue of 2017 in *“Literary Studies”* journal.