

# *Exploring the Unique Artistic Style in Wong Kar Wai's Films*

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**Abstract:** The French New Wave movement of the 1950s and 1960s was a breath of fresh wind of innovation for the dull film industry. As one of the critical theories of this movement, the auteur theory provided an essential theoretical basis for expressing individual artistic ideas by film artists. This theory and the movement also had a significant impact on the world, and film director Wong Kar Wai was one of those influences. This paper shall look at director Wong Kar Wai's filmography, using auteur theory as a guide and synthesising the authorship qualities present in Wong's films in terms of thematic concerns, narrational strategies and stylistic features. At the same time, the paper also discusses the relationship between the stylistic formation of Wong's films and his collaborators, as well as the broader cinematic, industrial and cultural contexts in which he can be situated. In conclusion, this study aims to investigate Wong's auteur identity through in-depth textual analyses.

**Keywords:** auteur, Wong Kar Wai's films, theme, narrative, audiovisual style

## 1. Introduction

Since his directorial debut in 1988 with *As Tears Go By* (Wong, 1988), Wong Kar Wai's movies have won several major awards, including the Hong Kong Film Awards, the Taiwan Film Golden Horse Award and the Best Director Award at the Cannes Film Festival, and have set a benchmark in the industry for artistic cinema. At the same time, his unique thematic presentation, narrative techniques and individualized audiovisual style form an artistic expression with distinctive personal traits, which to a certain extent indicates Wong's identity of auteur. Therefore, this paper builds on previous research by placing Wong's film works over the years under the auteur's theoretical vision. Through analysing the plot, audio-visual and other elements of the films, in order to discuss some of the thematic concerns related to human communication that have been used repeatedly in his works, audio-visual tricks that could reflect the inner world of the characters, such as colour and sound, as well as the narrative method of nonlinear narrative, so as to explore the unique artistic style of Wong Kar Wai's works.

This paper uses the auteur theory as a breakthrough point, analyses Wong Kar Wai's film texts in depth, interprets the creative concepts and characteristics of his films, and continuously excavates the aesthetic value of Wong's works under the perspective of the auteur theory. This study is not only a contribution to the recognition of the distinctive charms of Wong Kar Wai's films. However, it may also be conducive to deepening the recognition towards Hong Kong films and even Chinese films. In a broader sense, it also provides a new perspective and reference for observing the theoretical creation

of the entire Chinese film.

## 2. Auteur theory and Wong Kar Wai

Following the rise of the French New Wave film movement, auteur theory became a landmark film theory in the history of cinema, and many filmmakers, including Wong Kar Wai, were given the identity of auteur under the scrutiny of this theory. Auteur theory emphasises the importance and control of the director in the production of a film.[1] In 1962, the American film critic Andrew Sarris clearly stated three criteria for judging auteurs: firstly, whether they have solid technical skills in film; secondly, whether their works have a distinctive character and artistic style that is difficult to replicate and easily recognisable; thirdly, whether the films embody a certain deeper meaning.[2] Helen Stoddart has also pointed out in her article, “It was always within the visual style of the film that the auteurs left their characteristic mark”.[3] Wong Kar Wai's films have been repeatedly cited as examples of auteur cinema, as his distinctly individual style is identifiable in his works. At the same time, many scholars have endorsed his identity as auteur, such as Timothy R. Gleason, Qi Tang and Jean Giovanetti, who have shown in their article that Wong Kar Wai has a firm control and personal style over his works and is one of the contemporary auteurs of Hong Kong cinema.[4] Stephen Teo has also said that “Wong Kar-wai's status as an auteur is not generally in dispute”.[5] Thus, Wong's artistic style of film has allowed him to meet the criteria for auteur to a certain extent and to gain the support of proponents of auteur theory.

## 3. The theme of communication in Wong Kar Wai's films

When creating movies, Wong Kar Wai's concern and reflection on human relationships constitute a unique and consistent thematic implication in his works; as Bo Zhang and Weiqing Sun write in their article, “There is a paranoid theme in his films, namely ‘people-to-people communication’”.[6] One of the most prominent manifestations of this theme of communication in his films is the unattainability of home. The characters in the films are often adrift, paranoid and without a clear sense of direction for the future; they frequently want to communicate with others but are afraid of being hurt.[6] For example, in *As Tears Go By*, Wah wanders around with his brother Fly all day, until his cousin Ngor comes along and gives him the warmth of home and love he has never known. However, identity and destiny have led to the ultimate destruction of Wah's hopes for a better life with his death. Similarly, in *Days of Being Wild* (Wong, 1990), Yuddy spends his life searching for his biological mother, without a stable plan for the future, and the sense of ‘rootlessness’ is particularly strong in him. Another example is the killer and his agent in *Fallen Angels* (Wong, 1995), in which they are full of drifting nature, both of them without a future. Furthermore, the theme was perhaps also shaped by the political context of Hong Kong. As a result of the long-standing colonial culture, Hong Kong residents have always lacked a sense of security and stability, and most people have a ‘rootless’ mentality.[6] As Gleason, Tang and Giovanetti have noted, Wong's films are an expression of his vision of Hong Kong at a time when it was undergoing political and social change.[4] Hence, the thematic issues of character confusion and the search for ‘roots’ embodied in Wong's films prove that his authorship is unique.

In addition to the helplessness of longing for a home that is not available, the theme of communication in Wong Kar Wai's films is also expressed in the outpouring of emotions. Wong demonstrates in his films his belief in the inexhaustibility of love, his view that life is full of possibilities about love and the unpredictability of loss of love.[4] Meanwhile, there are usually communication problems between the characters in the film who have relationships.[4] This difficulty in communication may map onto a wider human issue, the cold and detached state of isolation that exists between people.[7] This state also appears to frame the hesitancy and loneliness of the lovers

in the film within their romantic relationship. For instance, in *In the Mood for Love* (Wong, 2000), Chow Mo-wan and Su Li-zhen's extramarital relationship reflects the loneliness of marriage. In *Chungking Express* (Wong, 1994), the encounter between Woman in Blonde Wig and Cop 223 reveals the desperation of urban youth, while Cop 663 and Faye reflect the estrangement between the two, who are ambiguous with each other but are afraid to approach. In *Happy Together* (Wong, 1997), Ho Po-wing and Lai Yiu-fai explore life in a foreign land, and the uncertainty of their relationship and confusion about life show their inner struggle, loss and desolation.[8] Wong uses the camera to observe the inner waves and silent sorrow of the characters, the expectations and rejections between self and others, as well as the conflicts and alienations between individuals and the world. In summary, Wong focuses the theme of his works on human communication and relationships by showing the rootlessness of his characters' lives and the distance between them. The recurrence of this theme in the film not only reflects Wong's unique artistic style, but also gives the audience a deeper understanding of the thematic connotations of his works.

#### 4. Colour and sound in Wong Kar Wai's films

The loneliness and spiritual secrecy of the characters reflected in the theme are also cleverly presented in Wong's distinctive audio-visual language, especially the use of colour. Shohini Chaudhuri considers Wong Kar Wai as one of cinema's great colourists, and his sense of colour in his films adds further appeal to his works.[9] Peter Brunette also calls Wong a "signature visual pyrotechnics" due to the boldness and saturation of colour in his works.[10] Wong's successful use of colour is also achieved with the help of his production designer William Chang.[9] In this regard, actress Maggie Cheung once said, "Wong Kar-wai films would not be what they are without William".[11] Wong Kar Wai has a knack for using colour to illustrate the inner emotions of the characters. For instance, each character in *As Tears Go By* has a different colour in their world, with the colour peach representing Ngor's romantic mood and blue representing the cruel society in which Wah exists and his mood of wanting to escape.[9] For another example, the green filter in *2046* (Wong, 2004) is also a representation of Chow Mo-wan's lonely soul and sadness.[12] Nevertheless, from the perspective of auteur theory, Wong seems to contradict the theory's scrutiny criteria when it comes to the practice of using colour. This is due to the fact that Wong Kar Wai and his collaborators claim that there is serendipity in their art, a serendipity that occurs mainly in the process of filming and editing and does not conform to the requirement that an auteur director should have a customary film style.[9] It follows that the colour in Wong Kar Wai's works is indeed recognisable, but whether it could be one of the rating elements in determining Wong Kar Wai's identity of auteur remains to be further studied and discussed.

Secondly, apart from colour, Wong also has a distinctive personal style in the use of sound, which is reflected above all in the soundtracks of his films. Although Wong is usually known for his striking visual style, music is also the most fundamental and recognised element of his works.[13] Wong is adept at using music to express the inner world of characters and to identify character traits. For example, in *Chungking Express*, the soundtrack *California Dreamin* not only evokes emotion and creates atmosphere, but also serves as a tool to identify the character of Faye and mark her appearance.[14] Another instance is the soundtrack *My heart was wrongly paid* in *As Tears Go By*, which is probably an expression of Ngor's strong love and Wah's deep regret, expressing the end of love between Wah and Ngor as well as Wah and Fly's sorrowful brotherhood. In addition, the repetition of music might also be a means that Wong uses to express what is unspoken or cannot be presented through dialogue. De Carvalho writes in his article, "In many of Wong's films, we almost feel that the narrative stops so that characters may express themselves through music or dance".[13] For example, in *Days of Being Wild*, Yuddy dances the cha-cha to Latin music in front of a mirror, and the wild and unrestrained nature of Latin appears to show the constraints of Yuddy's life and his

desire to break free quickly. Moreover, the style and rhythm of Latin music could evoke sentimental emotions.[13] Similarly, *Happy Together* features several instances of the beautiful tango, which is supposed to be a dance between two people, but suggests the loneliness and disconnection between Ho Po-wing and Lai Yiu-fai.[13] It is thus clear that Wong Kar Wai attaches importance to the status of music in his films, and the highly expressive musical elements are not only a hallmark of the film's language, but also a reflection of Wong's authorship.

Besides the soundtrack, the monologue in the sound could also be considered a signature element of Wong's works, and it plays a positive role in characterisation and plot advancement. Wong has said that he believes monologues help the viewer to visualise what cannot be seen on screen and are a fascinating tool in the film.[4] For instance, Woman in Blonde Wig's only psychological monologue in *Chungking Express* contrasts with her cold exterior, thus showing her lack of security and uncertainty about her future. For another example, Maggie Cheung's heartbreaking monologue in *Ashes of Time* (Wong, 1994) is one of the most powerful scenes in the film, as it shows her lamenting and sorrow for her mistakes and wasted years.[12] Meanwhile, monologues in Wong Kar Wai's films also contribute to complementing the narrative and thus driving the development of the plot. Gleason, Tang and Giovanetti write in their article, "When there wasn't dialogue, Wong sometimes included voice-overs — discussing both the past and the future".[4] For instance, *Chungking Express* focuses on two love sequences, and Wong inserts a monologue by Cop 223 between the two sequences, which serves as a transitional language linking the two stories and smoothes the transition. Likewise, in *2046*, Wong relies on the character Chow Mo-wan's large narration and monologue to complete the film's plot transitions and assemblage of fragmented episodes. Furthermore, the monologues in Wong's films are generally highly literary and poetic in content, and this style has been shaped by the influence of writers such as Manuel Puig, Jin Yong and Liu Yichang.[7] Therefore, the monologue has perhaps become a stylistic label with a strong presence in Wong's films, which illustrates the uniqueness of the aural language in his works.

## 5. Nonlinear narrative in Wong Kar Wai's films

Apart from his expertise in using audiovisual techniques to express the inner worlds of the characters, Wong also has his own distinctive style and skills in the narrative strategies of his movies, such as the nonlinear narrative. Wong's movies are typically structured in fragments.[15] Although not linear, the stories in the films are all interconnected.[10] Wong's narrative skills were influenced by the Argentinian writer Manuel Puig, whose writing style is to tell stories in fragments.[12] For example, *Chungking Express* and *Fallen Angels* both use the narrative method of two unrelated stories running in parallel. Similarly, *Ashes of Time* alternates the narrative with multiple threads, only linking the previous threads and characters in the second half of the film, with the entire film's passages differentiated by the 24 solar terms. However, some scholars are sceptical about Wong's fragmented narrative approach. They argue that Wong's films lack a plot.[10] In this regard, Brunette also states in his book that "Wong often privileges audio/visual expressivity over narrative structure".[10] Nevertheless, Wong has expressed the view that his works always have continuity and interconnectedness, as different facets or elements of a single work.[16] Hence, while there may still be some controversy surrounding this unconventional narrative, its role in promoting the formation of Wong Kar Wai's personal image style is undeniable.

## 6. Conclusion

To conclude, the purpose of this essay is to explore the recurring and personal themes, narratives and audiovisual language of Wong Kar Wai's films by analysing specific episodes and shooting techniques in films such as *As Tears Go By* and *Chungking Express*. This essay also mentions the influence of

context, collaborators and famous writers such as Manuel Puig and Jin Yong on the formation of Wong's personal artistic identity. His distinctive cinematic style has not only inspired and informed many new generation directors in their filmmaking, but has also defined his identity as an auteur to a large extent. However, the issue mentioned in this essay that colour may not fully be considered as an identifying element of Wong's authorship requires further research and exploration.

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