

Wong Kar-wai's Film Aesthetics: An Analysis of *Chungking Express* from the Perspective of Film Studies

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Abstract. *Chungking Express* is a strong stroke in Hong Kong films, whether it is the choice of characters, the deep meaning of the shooting technique, the suspenseful metaphor or the subtle and rich emotion, all make this film bring a unique look and feel to the audience. Since its release in the 90s of the 20th centuries, *Chungking Express* has received wide attention in society and film academia and has also triggered a boom in appreciation and analysis by many audiences and critics. The external characteristics and internal significance of the film are still worth studying and reading in the 21st century. This paper will explore the narrative characteristics, color and composition of the *Chungking Express* in the film. Emotional and gender elements and other dimensions analyze Wong Kar-wai's early style and the charm of Hong Kong films' works in their heyday, analyze the practical application of Wong Kar-wai's film aesthetics and the distinctive vitality of some Hong Kong films under the influence of regional and contemporary backgrounds, and draw on their reference significance for films in the new era, based on the present, look to the future, learn from the experience of predecessors, tap the potential of new film elements, and help high-quality films to achieve great progress and development.

Keywords: Film Studies, *Chungking Express*, Wong Kar-wai Films

1. Introduction

Today, the development of China's and even the world's movie industry is ever-changing. Whether from the positioning of the theme, the choice of roles, or shooting techniques can be said to be rich and colorful. Recently, director Wong Kar-wai's first movie and TV drama have once again drawn the media's and the audience's attention to the prominent position of the Hong Kong movie industry in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. When it comes to director Wong Kar-wai, many of his famous works are worth savoring over and over again. Among them, *Chungking Express* was once described as "the best movie in Hong Kong". It is an urban romance between Cop 223, played by Takeshi Kaneshiro, and a female assassin (fugitive), played by Brigitte Lin, as well as between Patrolman 663, played by Tony Leung, and Faye, a fast-food girl, consisting of lost love and phantasmagorical dreams. It is a prominent manifestation of Wong Kar-wai's early style, and it was released in 1994 when Hong Kong's golden age of regional movie development was underway. *Chungking Express* retains some of the elements of his cinematic explorations more explicitly. In terms of storyline, it is still a postmodern patchwork, but quite storytelling. Significantly different from the anti-plot of his later films, the dramatic side of Wong Kar-wai's early films can be seen [1].

In today's era where commercial films are proliferating and dramas are gradually becoming patterned and standardized, *Chungking Express* is cluttered and narratively too slow for some groups. At the same time, though not rare, the research of film academics on *Chungking Express* is still limited to some aspects and does not analyze the elements in depth. Coupled with the diminishing influence of Hong Kong cinema, it is not easy to find more scholars from other countries in the global film studies section. As a highly iconic literary film masterpiece, *Chungking Express* also makes people think about how to make "good", "valuable" and "meaningful" literary films in the 21st century, when the fixed audience group of literary films shrinks and the mainstream media focuses on more educational and commercially valuable films. Therefore, based on the current situation, the works of Wong Kar-wai represented by *Chungking Express* also allow the audience to examine the issue of "whether one needs to understand it" as well as "resonance". In this paper, we will explore the deeper

core and modern significance of *Chungking Express* from the visual effects of color and composition, as well as the narrative perspectives of emotion and style.

2. Reshaping Narrative Time: Emotions are Extremely Reflected by the Camera

French photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson once mentioned, "There is nothing in the world without its decisive moment." Photographers need to capture the decisive moment. Movies, on the other hand, are composed of and linked to expressive moments. In movie narratives, the trade-offs between different times often produce different stories. Movies sometimes reshape time in the narrative, so that time in the movie is no longer fixed but malleable, which allows the audience to more intuitively and profoundly feel the emotions conveyed by the movie. Time is fluid, and emotions are also fluid.

A professional cinematographer who has a rich understanding of the meaning of a movie and is able to interpret and express it perfectly is indispensable to the success of an outstanding movie. *Chungking Express* is no exception. Cinematographer Christopher Doyle in this film truly grasps the director's sense of urban life. He makes full use of shoulder-carrying shots, and the camera language of turbulence and floating is utilized to imply the inner loss, confusion, and loneliness of the main character [1].

Movies are often composed of multiple narrative units, which in turn involve a large amount of time omission, the concealment, and disclosure of narrative information. *Chungking Express* uses slow speed shooting and "Step Printing" to "slow down" time. In the film, the main characters are relatively still, the moving objects form a drag, and the time is prolonged. "Step Printing" is the most impressive filming technique in *Chungking Express*, which uses an ultra-low frame rate to record the dragging of movie footage. As Brigitte Lin portrays a blonde who is being chased, when a crisis arises, slow door framing creates a sense of chaos and tension. Handheld shooting, imitating the perspective of a person running and escaping, makes this scene of escaping from the tiger's mouth extremely tense. Moreover, here echoes the plot of the very beginning of the movie when Police 223, played by Takeshi Kaneshiro, is chasing a fugitive in the market, one chasing and one fleeing, and at the same time, Police 223 is also laying the groundwork for the narration of the emotional world with Blonde in this chase through the market and the crowds. In addition, both locations use the technique of the draw-frame lens to make stationary objects look clear while moving objects look blurry with drag, creating a clear contrast that utilizes the draw-frame lens to reflect the characters' feelings of anxiety and loneliness. Strong subjective color, shaking, blurred picture have a strong visual impact. In the same group of characters that have correspondences (i.e., Cop 223 and the blonde), Cop 223 is shown to be disillusioned, lonely, and confused.

Another urban male/female crossover occurs when Tony Leung as Patrolman 663 and Faye Wong as Snack Bar Girl are silent and thoughtful as they face each other in a crowded snack bar. The moments of silence on both sides are prolonged, as if the audience is there to observe their movements. Through such a lens, the film freezes and solidifies the moment when he and she meet, leading the audience to explore the wonderful story between the two people. Patrolman 663 is timid to face the reality of his lost love, and Faye takes an interest in it, watching the man with meticulous attention. Since then, the depictions of these two men have been very intriguing. The lightness and darkness of the shots represent the active emotion of one person and the passive emotion of the other. Static and dynamic, blurred and bright images coexist or alternate, and the subtle emotional relationship between the man and the woman is accounted for with advanced camera work detailing. By creating foreground occlusion through glass, the camera pans down to the snack bar girl snickering behind the counter after hearing that Patrolman 663 has been stabbed with a large headpin, and the implied intimate feelings are shown to the fullest.

Some scholars analyze: "In the control of Wong Kar-Wai, time has completely broken the natural order of the flow of time and is closer to a psychological state." In the author's opinion, in *Chungking*

Express, the objectivity of time is dissolved by such movie techniques as montage, which can be extended indefinitely or shortened rapidly [2].

3. People and Objects under Psychedelic Colors and Composition: Utopia of Urban Loneliness and Romance

The use of multiple colors helps to highlight the film's stylistic features, sublimate the emotional theme, and enhance the visual impact [3]. In *Chungking Express*, Wong Kar-wai uses the language of color to build a colorful neon world, which conveys the phantasmagoric dreams and redemption of the urban lovelorn to the people through excellent visual effects.

The overall color tone of *Chungking Express* is dark, and the picture is cold. The director uses the dark color tone to film the busy and crowded streets of Hong Kong, conveying to the audience that in the bustling city, the distance between people is very close, but the distance between people's hearts is "far away from each other" [4].

Brigitte Lin plays the female fugitive, a mysterious woman who wears a yellow wig, a raincoat, and sunglasses, and who is forever shuttling around the building. Also, she is a blonde who always wears a yellow wig. Her splash of yellow is a symbol of desire, and she is always on the verge of anger and indulgence. As she led the group of Indians through the various shops to prepare for their drug trafficking business, the background color was always the same neon yellow, and the flickering light shone on the blonde's yellow wig and raincoat, revealing the strong desire in her heart. Moreover, when the group of unruly Indians fled with drugs, whether the blonde was walking alone in the dim aisles, or holding a gun to escape the pursuit of the enemy on the glittering street, or finally gaining temporary indulgence in the noisy bar, the yellow fire lit by the cigarette, the eye-catching yellow marking line on the ground, and the yellow on the body were never dimmed, just like the angry desire and desire for revenge in her heart. When she meets Cop 223, the encounter between yellow and black collides with warm and soft tones. Black is a symbol of the loneliness and confusion of Cop 223, and it also echoes the black night sky at this time. When he removes the beige shoes for the blonde, he is also helping her to abandon her inner desires and find a brief moment of peace.

However, the yellow color of the snack bar girl played by Faye Wong is again different from that of the female fugitive, with the innocence and energy of a daydream. Afei is a girl who works in a fast-food restaurant, loves to listen to Carlifonia Dreaming, dances to the music, breaks into her favorite man's house to clean up the house and buy goldfish. In the midst of her boring daily life, Faye's optimism and spontaneity are like rays of sunshine pouring into the room in the afternoon, jumping and dancing to the noisy music.

Furthermore, Tony Leung's character is a patrolman who often wears a blue uniform, so that his hue is always blue. On the one hand, to highlight his personal primary color, his ex-girlfriend just happens to be a stewardess who travels through blue skies and white clouds, and on the other hand, blue is often a symbol of the color of melancholy, and in the movie, he is often stuck in the misery of his lost love talking to himself until he finally comes out of the haze and switches to a relaxing blue plaid shirt.

The most unavoidable thing about *Chungking Express* is the color green, which is also the main color of this movie. This color is mainly shown in the part of Takeshi Kaneshiro's Cop 223, who, out of love, often wanders the city like a trapped beast, talking on the phone in a phone booth, squatting in front of McDonald's to eat fast food, and so on. The most prominent scenes in green are when he is eating canned pineapples at home, whether the light coming through the goldfish bowl or the light emanating from the roof in the kitchen. In terms of compositional treatment, the movie is composed in a way that conveys the depressed and anxious mood of the characters when they fall out of love [5].

The movie is very characteristic of the use of seam composition, the main characters in a fictionalized foreground seam, can not only highlight the characters but also guide the focus of the audience's line of sight, and at the same time created a kind of voyeurism of the third point of view.

Glimpsing the lives and behaviors of the film's protagonists in the cracks not only allows the audience to immerse themselves in the lives of ordinary people in urban Hong Kong as well as their depressing and despondent emotions but also has a sense of penetrating deeper into the inner world of the characters. For example, the scene in which Patrolman 663 irons his clothes at home is shot from a darker room where he is working alone, and under the broken cabinet and the not-so-bright light, the room here is actually his 'heart room'.

In addition, the image of Cop 233 at the snack bar when he calls a different friend is a tilted composition. It differs from conventional composition in that tilting is visually perceived as a deviation from vertical and horizontal directions, which creates an unstable visual sensation and creates a sense of imbalance in the image, while at the same time conveying the male protagonist's dissipated sense of loneliness and despondency with the turbulence and wanderlust of urban life.

With the carrier of urban daily life, the changing and dark emotions are conveyed by the psychedelic colors and special composition, letting the "objects" speak for the heart.

4. Female Beauty in Urban Love-Gender Perspective in Wong Kar-Wai's Films

Wong Kar-wai is very good at portraying female characters, very good at showing their beauty, very recognizable beauty. These female characters are shown vividly and uniquely because of the appropriate lighting, costumes, music, shooting techniques, and character settings in the movie. At the same time, Wong Kar-wai's image of women also follows the trend of the times, integrates rich postmodern culture, expresses feminist ideas under gender balance, and has rich value implications for the integration and development of culture [6].

Afei in *Chungking Express* is a new waitress in a snack bar, with neat short hair, smart eyes, likes to play super loud music, and likes to dance to the music from time to time. On the surface, she does not care about her surroundings, but in fact, she secretly pays attention to every move of her crush, Patrolman 663, and pricks up her ears to eavesdrop on his conversations with the owner of the snack bar and knows everything about his life but pretends that nothing happened. A girl's crush is vividly presented in front of the audience. Later, she sneaks into 663's home, helps him clean and decorate, immerses herself in her own little world, enjoys simple happiness and excitement, she likes him, in her own way, warm and not crazy. Such a girl is destined to be bright, and later, she really went to California and became a flight attendant (the same profession as 663's ex-girlfriend), and she still appeared in front of 663 with more confidence and lightness. The image of Afei in *Chungking Express* is very similar to the image of the heroine in Jean-Luc Godard's *À bout de souffle*, both with neat and agile short hair, both bursting with feminine charm amidst chaotic love and ambiguity. She sometimes appears in front of the audience with a pair of funny glasses, and this pair of glasses not only connects the plot before and after and confirms the passage of time but also the psychological externalization of the character of Afei. When she deliberately creates an opportunity to meet Patrol Officer 663 in a restaurant, the glasses at this time express her lack of confidence and uncertainty, and she is worried that her crush will see through her little tricks hidden in her heart. A year later, she became a flight attendant and returned to the former snack bar to see Patrolman 663, still wearing the same glasses. At this time, the glasses represent the meaning: her appearance has become stronger and better, but amidst the whirlpool of feelings, she remains unchanged, obsessed with Patrolman 663.

Throughout the movie, the blonde played by Brigitte Lin is of few words, but she always carries a cold and unfeeling aura, confirming her identity as a murderess. This is the most prominent point of gender perception in *Chungking Express*, and it has the meaning of "anti-stereotyping". The identity of the "assassin" is very sensitive, and here, it is a blonde woman who has lost in her love life. This setting is slightly different from that of ordinary movies. She is cold, silent, and detached, and on her, the audience can always see the same golden wig, unfathomable black sunglasses, and a yellow raincoat that sets off the charm. She closes the door of her heart to the outside world, disguises herself as an unapproachable person layer by layer, lingers in the urban forest but considers herself a strong person, which seems out of place. But underneath such a cold appearance, she also has a broken heart

that has been hurt by love. She falls in love with a foreign man, and he uses her to sell drugs, and she will do anything to work for him; He liked the blonde dress of foreign women, so she always wore a wig; Wearing sunglasses is to cover her black eyes and want to be what the other person likes; She also wears a raincoat to be able to be ready for him rain or shine. In the end, she knew that the man she loved had already fallen in love with someone else, so she raised her pistol and killed him. She could finally take off the golden wig that represented the hypocritical life in a chic manner and began to face the truth in her heart and to be her original self. In fact, she is not a female killer but a woman who dares to love and hate; she is a woman who is infatuated and lost in love; she is a tender woman who only wants to change for love and realizes how unbearable her previous feelings were only when she is bruised in the end. This subversive maverick is actually a kind of liberation, increasing the separation between modern women and traditional women. However, at the same time, these female images are not a true portrayal of women and can be regarded as an exaggerated existence, pinning on the strength and pursuit of women in the new era [7].

The feminism in *Chungking Express* is that women can wander in their feelings, and may even be hurt by love, but ultimately, they can still choose their own life path and move towards the future in alignment with their inner true selves' expectations. Wong Kar-wai's depictions of emotions in his films are very delicate, and although the portrayal of love in many of his works is relatively negative, his pursuit of gender equality is evident. The dilution of femininity is played to the extreme in the film (Happy Together). Although Wong Kar-wai is not intended to reflect homosexual life, this film reflects the director's awareness of gender equality to some extent. Its excellence lies in the fact that he does not deliberately show the gender role positioning of the two protagonists in the story. Although the audience can find some basis in some subtleties of the film, for example, from the endless dispute between the two on the tram after Po Wing Ho was beaten, his female identity can be discovered, the director does not seem to have this as the purpose of the performance, so gender is largely downplayed [8].

It can be seen that Wong Kar-wai guides the audience to think more about the love dynamics between the characters in his films, rather than distinguishing between men and women, blurring the stereotype of gender to a certain extent, avoiding binary opposition, and allowing the audience to appreciate the richness of emotions in the mixed gender perspective.

5. The Unique Charm of Wong Kar-wai's Film Aesthetics: the Postmodern Characteristics of *Chungking Express* and the Modern Significance of Other Elements

Hong Kong, a post-modern metropolis, has been colonized throughout its long history and has broken with tradition. This historical rupture has led to a discontinuous postmodern view of time in Hong Kong culture, with no sense of history. Therefore, in *Chungking Express*, Wong Kar-wai's deconstruction of time also conveys his concern about the cultural situation in Hong Kong from another angle [9].

The reshaping of narrative time in *Chungking Express* mentioned above reflects Wong Kar-wai's deconstruction of traditional notions of time. At the same time, the sense of wandering embodied by the characters in *Chungking Express* against the backdrop of the city is also a metaphor for the withdrawal of many people's inner emotions in the early days of Hong Kong's return to the motherland. Running day and night in the vast city, lost in the forest of feelings, here, macro historical factors can also be reflected in the micro ordinary people.

Borrowing a unique narrative technique, *Chungking Express* shows the changes in emotional relationships between people, between people and themselves, and between people and the city. Wong Kar-wai's film narrative breaks the basic rules of conventional films, conforms to the global and post-modern context of film creation, and the unique "Wong-style" narrative is very different from the viewing experience of ordinary audiences. Its artistic charm is irresistible and has also had a profound impact on the new generation of filmmakers [10].

In addition, whether it's the poster of the film or the narrative technique in the film (such as splicing two stories together), the audience can feel a kind of hidden interest in "collage." Klimovsky, a master of European graphic design, believes that when various art forms come to an end, the interception and integration of fragments have become one of the hallmarks of postmodernity. The flow of collage art offers another possibility to reconstruct the world [11]. Whether it's the film itself or the exquisite movie poster, the visual impact is added to the "collage," and the unique charm of different perspectives can be presented through the collision and friction of elements on the seemingly messy and disorderly surface. Therefore, on the question of "whether Wong Kar-wai's films need to be understood," the author believes that in *Chungking Express*, Wong Kar-wai focuses on the postmodern urban landscape, extracting abstract realities from various metaphorical substances, and endowing specific beings with new relationships and meanings. He uses diverse and unique narrative techniques to create a dreamy urban story where fiction and reality coexist. A variety of rich symbolic elements are vividly displayed in the *Chungking Express* through superb art techniques of the director and cinematographer, leading the audience into many special artistic conceptions. The audience gets spiritual resonance in the artistic conception created by the film, and at the same time appreciates the symbolic meaning of diverse elements and characteristics. This is the charm of the film itself, and it's also the symbiosis and co-prosperity of emotions and each individual. Therefore, behind this kind of "understanding" is the resonance of every detail in the film with people.

6. Conclusion

Through the appreciation of the different dimensions of *Chungking Express*, it can be understood that this film integrates many unique elements within a complete and clear framework to depict two ordinary yet profound urban love stories. Many viewers, amidst the vague and hazy narratives that Wong Kar-wai employed in his early days, might assume that his films do not require analysis, and merely evoke feelings in those who can relate to them.

However, from the perspective of film scholarship, when people explore the film from various angles, it is not difficult to discern that this resonance and emotional depth are also crafted by Wong Kar-wai through various expressive techniques. Firstly, the initial frame extraction in the film enables viewers to follow the shaky camera into the urban setting and then focus on the protagonist sprinting. This captivates the audience's attention and sets the stage for a cohesive storyline.

Additionally, the color palette of the entire movie presents a chaotic yet aesthetically pleasing state. Color serves as a direct reflection of the visual impact and provides insight into the characters' emotions. Audiences can discern character traits and plot directions through scene colors, costume colors, and so forth.

Furthermore, *Chungking Express* employs numerous uniquely shaped compositions, alleviating the need for constant metaphorical analysis often required in contemporary cinema. Thus, the distinctive and typical compositions of the film also serve to engage the audience's interest.

Even from the perspective of gender representation, the vivid portrayal of male and female characters in this film transcends gender stereotypes and character frequency, offering fresh insights into character representation in cinema.

While *Chungking Express* may not overtly embody feminist themes, Wong Kar-wai's pursuit of gender equality, understanding, and appreciation of women, as well as his sensitivity to beauty and expressive prowess, are still commendable. In this movie, the allure of the two female characters is particularly notable, as they possess striking appearances, whether in attire, identity, or intrinsic qualities like charm and agility.

This article still has room for improvement due to the author's limited research in the professional field of film art and their nascent analytical abilities. Looking ahead, the author hopes that filmmaking in the 21st century can embrace inclusivity, draw from the wisdom of predecessors, welcome fresh perspectives, and engage with the complexities of existence and the world with keen insight.

The study of Wong Kar Wai's films will continue to evolve and deepen in the future, while the exploration and practice of filmmaking in the new era can draw valuable lessons from exemplary works to advance and diversify the field, propelling cinema, the 'sixth art,' into new heights in contemporary times!

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