N.C.A.D. Department of Visual Communication

A Super - Talented Hack :
Wong Kar - Wai as part of Postmodern Cinema

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INTRODUCTION

This essay is a study of a filmmaker in the postmodern context. The person in question is the Hong Kong based writer/director Wong Kar-Wai. My discussion seeks to highlight the problems with contemporary critical analysis of films of this nature and the debates which arise from this. I am mainly concerned with the idea of a director using a very stylistic approach to reflect today's society and the validity of this in the post-modern context. I will discuss this in the course of five chapters stating my conclusions about Wong Kar-Wai at the end of chapter five.

I have to make it clear that I am biased when it comes to Wong Kar-Wai's work: I love his films. So while I wish to give as clear as possible an account of the main ideas, I am also aware of my personal likes finding their way in. My writing is concerned with the position that he occupies and the debates surrounding it. Hopefully it will become clear when personal interest and the actual study of the topic meet.

Chapter 1: Wong Kar-Wai - A Brief Biography

Wong Kar-Wai was born in Shanghai in 1958. At the age of five, he and his family emigrated to Hong Kong. After a formal education, he studied Graphic Design at Hong Kong Polytechnic. It was here that he became interested in photography as a pastime. In 1980 he enrolled in TVB for television drama production. He worked on two projects in the first year - a dramatic series named *Don't Look Now* and a more ambitious five-part series, *Five Easy Pieces*, which was shelved after being deemed too expensive (Both of these are unrelated to the Western productions that share the same titles). He was then asked to work on a situation comedy which he gave up after an extremely short time. He was in a limbo and decided to try his luck with a newly-formed film studio, Cinema City, where he began work as a scriptwriter. He learned quickly and after a year he left with the intentions of freelancing. This was quite a big decision to make at the time in Hong Kong. As he says:

> I became a freelance scriptwriter. At that time, people in the industry had the impression that if you worked at Cinema City, you must be a great scriptwriter, but if you left the flock, you must be a bad sheep. So I began to work with film-makers who were not very successful and from them I learned quite a lot of things about life. Cinema City's aim was to emulate Hollywood; but the people I met during my freelance days were interested in how you make a low budget film in a quick period of time. A different kind of reality.
> (Dannen/Long, 1997, page 146)

He wrote several scripts, some of which made it to production but which he never saw. In 1988, he wrote and directed his first film *As Tears Go By*, with the help of Patrick Tam. Tam is said to have latched on to the idea of filming a film about outsiders. He felt it reflected both his and Wong kar-Wai's position in Hong Kong at the time. It was both critically and commercially successful and was intended as the first part of a trilogy. The second film, 1991's *Days of Being Wild* was a commercial failure but loved by critics. He again wrote and directed it, during the three years that followed *As Tears Go By* whilst working on several other script contracts. It is very much a film about mood and atmosphere and had a very different sense to it than that of *As Tears Go By.* It concerns itself with love in a society after war - it deals with a period of unease in Hong Kong's history - which Wong Kar-Wai attempts to recreate in his own modern-day way, an idea central to the postmodern debates considered in this essay. Tony Rayns writes: "*Days of Being Wild* will remain a landmark in Hong Kong cinema; the first film to rhyme nostalgia for a half-imaginary past with future shock." (Rayns. 1994 pages. 41-42)

The films that followed (*Ashes of Time* to *Happy Together (see selected filmography)*) led him to the point in his career that I am concerned with; the fact that he is now an established director/writer in Hong Kong with a certain reputation within that context. Whereas it is not irrelevant that he is a filmmaker from Hong Kong,it is not my main point for discussion. What is important, is the fact that he is considered an "Art Filmmaker" by many, far removed from the main commercial stream of films from Hong Kong and one who is becoming increasingly trendy and

popular in Europe and America. So while not ignoring his nationality, it is by no means central to this essay. His works are very much expressions of the debates which I want to look at in the following chapters.

Chapter 2: Postmodern Confusion

Wong kar-Wai's very age and occupation can have the effect of filing him under a general heading which contains many positive and negative ideas concerning (for example) his validity. This heading, or title is: A post modernist filmmaker.

This term will be referred to during this chapter and throughout the thesis because of the debates within it which are central to the study of any contemporary director or filmmaker. These debates have had the effect, personally speaking but also in general, of highlighting trends, ideas and unanswered (or unconsidered) questions in the films of recent times. Timothy Corrigan states:

> Certain trends in contemporary film culture ... have dramatically realigned the relationship between movies and their audiences ... have forced the movies, for sometimes better and sometimes worse, to admit those shifting and multiple audiences as a presence that determines, in critically revised ways, the form and meaning of movies. (Corrigan, 1991, pg.1)

Godard's sons: Are they all bastards? , is the title of an article in Vertigo Magazine's Autumn 1997 issue. It's use of typography in terms of scale (" Godard 's sons" is dwarfed by the much larger, bold type of "Are they all bastards?") expresses very well, it seems, the sentiments of its author, a Paris-based film critic Laurence Remila. This article has an air of assumption about it as a unit, basically because it is very short and to the point, which is more or less that Wong Kar-Wai, along with some other "bastard sons" of Godard, are thoughtlessly

stealing methods and cinema styles from the past and in doing so, negate themselves as filmmakers. Remila might concur with the title "Postmodernist Filmmakers", but I think he would mean it in its worst possible sense, that being: they are practitioners of what he calls a "surface" cinema (Remila, 1997, pages 21 -23) and they do not deserve to be debated as "auteurs" (which in itself is a term that poses some difficulties - there will be more discussion on this later).

This article and it's title are one, in that they shout out an attitude which is bound to annoy, or at least provoke; and that's what it does - in fact it probably set out to do so. Remila sweeps over ideas and debates and the article therefore becomes relevant to all of these because of the attitude contained within it. It is not a basis for a debate on the "Postmodernist filmmaker" term, but it is in itself more of a fundamental question than the many questions contained within it. It is part of the difficulty and confusion which occur and are occurring in trying to find meaning in the films of today and terms of discourse concerning those films. Remila's article does not admit to the present difficulties of reading films and of film legibility. It is a part of the whole and leads me to a quote by Fredric Jameson, where he talks about the postmodern problem -

> ... if we find ourselves confronted henceforth with 'texts', that is with the ephemeral, with disposable works that wish to fold back immediately into the accumulating detritus of time (historical time) - then it becomes difficult and even contradictory to organise an analysis and an interpretation around any single one of

these fragments in flight. (Jameson, 1991, page 51)

David Lynch very simply states; "I don't know what a lot of things mean" (Lynch, 1991, page 51). At this stage, it is clear how someone like Wong Kar-Wai can be seen as the epitome of this confusion. I will examine this area in point form - the beginning of each point is more of a question than a statement. This serves to clarify what the main debates actually are. I am relying on a few main sources here, because of their relevance. One is James Monaco's essays on Jean-Luc Godard in his book *The New Wave* and the other is E. Ann Kaplan's essay, *Feminism/Oedipus/Postmodernism: The Case of MTV,* from the book *Postmodernism and its discontents (Theories and Practices).*

Chapter 3 : A problem of style over content?

Monaco devotes three chapters to director Jean-Luc Godard in his book and it is clear from his introduction in the first of these, that he regards Godard as one of the most important and influential artists of the Twentieth Century. This only occasionally takes the form of simple praise, however. His main aim is to de-mystify the man (not to be confused with making him more accessible) and separate the art "hero" from the modernist filmmaker. In the opening four paragraphs of the first essay, *Godard - women and the outsider* (Monaco, 1980, page 98), he asks a question which fundamentally concerns our view of films and which highlights an issue which can be seen as postmodern. He writes:

> ... the best-known innovation of *A Bout de Souffle* is the use of the jump-cut - mere filmic punctuation. It is as if a novelist or poet were to be praised for his "revolutionary" use of the semicolon! In all the reams that have been written about the jump-cuts of *A Bout de Souffle* it is seldom mentioned that Godard hardly ever used the device again. Why did intelligent audiences first look at the style of Godard's films for the most part ignoring their content? (Monaco, 1980, page 99)

He goes on to suggest reasons, but the roots of our present confusions and problems can be observed here. This film was made thirty-eight years ago and yet Monaco is describing something which could be termed as a "postmodernist reaction", in the worst sense, to a film (which , to bring us up to date, can be found in many of the reviews of Wong kar-Wai's more recent films). A lot has

changed over thirty-eight years in the film industry, but what has not changed are the many ways in which people can critically look at films. It is often easier to look at the way that something is done than to question its content and in a more complex way, technical skill or innovation can for many negate any "meaning" behind a piece of work. Monaco also speaks about a theory of progress - how there is often, when criticising something new (be it a film, book etc.), an air of expectancy that it should "be 'more advanced' than its predecessors" and that this way of thinking can be linked to the way that Art is sometimes seen as a commodity in modern capitalist civilisation. *A bout de Souffle* was regarded as a cinematic landmark when it was released and while Monaco does not dispute this, he is wary of how many people could have been struck by its visual appearance and how they consequently could have neglected to look beyond this.

Some critics have called Wong Kar-Wai the " Godard of the nineties", an idea which I do not concur with, especially as this idea usually concerns itself with the stylistic content (rather than the intellectual) of both men's films. This essay seeks to demonstrate the meaning in the postmodernist work created by Wong Kar-Wai, and so it is necessary to look at what Godard was attempting to do in his films rather than simply putting the two men side by side and drawing either pro or anti Wong Kar-Wai criticism. Wong Kar-Wai is not the " Godard of the nineties" and one of the best ways to look at Godard's ideas is to read what he has to say about his work. Monaco's book contains many quotes from Godard which help in this regard. There is an interview from 1962, in *Cahiers du Cinema* where he describes his work:

> Today I still think of myself as a critic and in a sense I am, more than ever before. Instead of writing criticism, I make a film, but the critical dimension is subsumed. I think of myself as an essayist, producing essays in novel form, or novels in essay form: only instead of writing, I film them. Were the cinema to disappear, I would simply accept the inevitable and turn to television (as he did in fact ten years later) ; were television to disappear, I would revert to pencil and paper. For there is clear continuity between all forms of expression. It's all one. (Quoted in; Monaco, 1980, page 100)

If Godard stated this about himself, his position as a modernist filmmaker becomes clearer and it can be seen how some preceive his work as "un-humanistic" - that is to say, his work can have the appearance of being just as much a study or "essay" about film as it is filmed work in itself. What is central to his work is the role of the audience as active viewers who are not prepared to just exist as passive spectators and he attempts to do this by distancing them from the work and not allowing them to sit in a darkened room for two hours while being sucked into a film that makes them forget that they have a mind. Therefore, "distancing" can be seen as a huge part of modernist cinema specifically the cinema of Jean-Luc Godard (Lash, 1988, page 326). His films do not tell all instantly but require a dialectical observation. Godard speaks on the Nouvelle Vague which is important here because of the questions his films pose about "fiction" and "reality" -

> Generally speaking, reportage is interesting only when placed in a fictional context, but fiction is interesting only if it is validated by a documentary context. The Nouvelle Vague, in fact, may be defined in part by this new relationship between fiction and reality, as well as through nostalgic regret for a cinema which no longer exists.
> (Quoted in; Monaco, 1980, page 103)

His 1962 film *Vivre sa Vie* (*My life to live*) is seen by many as a good expression of the "essay" idea and demonstrates the filmmaker using distancing devices in order to do this. As a modernist film, it is in stark contrast to the work of Wong Kar-Wai. Monaco lists the Brechtian devices utilised, from its draining of drama to its factual commentary and narration (which is spoken by Godard) (Monaco, 1980, page 122). This "counter-cinema" that shows Godard to have been aware of both his audience and the world in which his films were made (a capitalist society), is an expression of a filmmaker that Lash terms a "high modernist" (Lash, 1988, page 326).

In viewing Wong Kar-Wai as a "postmodernist filmmaker", the developments in cinema become more apparent and my view on this should be clear by the end of this essay: I see him as a part of the difficulty in discussing contemporary cultureal experiences which are "distinctly different from those which were taken for granated in an earlier historical, commonly called modern ..." (Denzin, 1991 page 3). Lash proposes a definition of cinematic works of this kind, specifically referring to the blurring of "real" and the nature of reality. (Lash, 1988, page 329).

If we accept that cinema is a more "realistic" representation of life than a painting, then modernist cinema can be seen to draw our attention to the "canvas" or what the film's construction is asking of us. The postmodern cinema and in this case, that of Wong Kar-Wai, draws our attention into the film and demonstrates how confusing our world is, thus blurring the "real" with what is shown. In this way, Wong Kar-Wai as a postmodernist can be seen to be documenting history - even creating it in his reflections of contemporary society and that is what I wish to look at.

This suggests a few points. Does a postmodernist filmmaker such as Wong Kar-Wai lend himself to "fair" criticism or are there any real bases for criticism in existence in modern-day film theory? Does he simply lend himself to confusion? Can he be termed an "Art" filmmaker? He is quoted as saying that he often considers himself to be a "bad, commercial film-maker" (Dannen/Long, 1997, page 52). Every account of his working methods, dealings with actors and camera crew; his "methods" of scriptwriting and editing - all display a chaotic personality, where order is only very rarely established, usually coinciding with the completion of a film maybe not even then. He is by no means an organised filmmaker, that is, one with a commercial agenda - half of his films have been flops - and because of this I believe that he can be seen as almost the epitome of today's problematic postmodern confusions. The "problem" with Wong Kar-Wai is the fact that he is such a stylish filmmaker.

A valid criticism of his work is reflected in neither the attack of Laurence Remila, nor in the gushing praise of the creator of the "Wong Kar-Wai

website". In these two instances, the former slates the work, specifically its visual appearance, while the latter does nothing except show screen shots and say how great they are. Wong Kar-Wai has been linked to Quentin Tarantino by Tarantino's outspoken praise for his work, which begs the question; does Tarantino occupy a similar position? To categorise like this is awkward and in reference to that previous Jameson quote, it can be "difficult and even contradictory". Timothy Corrigan refers to this difficulty as the postmodern "condition" (Corrigan ,1991, page 3) and then goes on to speak of "bad" or "low" modernism which he says many consider as the Commercial mainstream (he does not draw this conclusion). What is "low" postmodernism? It can, on the surface, seem simple - but judgmental I think. While some would term Wong kar-Wai's work as "low" postmodernism, more would say that the current trend of "Blockbuster" films is a worse form of this. They are examples of an industry and of all that goes with that world. Hong Kong churns out action film after actions film each year, as does Hollywood. Both are now even enjoying the benefits of combined labour - the prime example of that being John Woo, who after several near misses, has established himself in Hollywood with *Face/Off* (1997), which combines the Hong Kong/American methods to full effect. These films however, are coming out at a very fast rate and when one looks at what is *actually* presented, it could be said that this industry, as with any other industry, revolves around profit and loss figures. Are these films a means to huge sums of money or are they, with their brash simplicity (or stupidity), an honest form of film with no pretensions to be anything other than what they claim? And who is worse - John Woo or Wong Kar-Wai who achieves

a "trendy" status, which is happening of late, as an "Art" film director?

Ann Kaplan, though simultaneously concerned with feminist theory, considers many of the postmodernist complexities in her Article and I think her MTV idea emerges as a very valid one. As a postmodern "product", MTV "... defies our usual critical categories while not setting up something we can recognise as liberating in new ways" (Kaplan, 1988, page 38). She recognises how this can stem from the confusion of non-stop imagery and inner contradictions - for example, an anti-TV video - and states; "We can see how difficult it is to make MTV as progressive or retrogressive in its narrative modes. In a sense, those categories do not apply" (Kaplan, 1988, page 39). This can again be seen in the quote by Fredric Jameson. Within a twenty-four hour period of MTV, many "texts" have their short moment on screen. They are viewed along with shows, advertisements and a myriad of others. Does this then mean, that no matter what they are or were, they are now rendered "Postmodern"? Kaplan suggests that this twenty-four hour flow can do just that and to find meaning in any of the texts we have to "stop the flow". This idea can be compared with the flow of films from Hollywood or Hong Kong - the "industries" - whilst acknowledging the obvious differences in quantity and presentation. Therefore, Wong Kar-Wai, even as an "Art" filmmaker, could still form a part of this "low" postmodernism and he could be seen as an individual who treads on ideas whilst stealing them; and MTV could be seen as a collective, with no holds barred, taking all they have seen and churning it out in varying new forms in a thoughtless and very quick way. The MTV idea is important here because of its very pointed

question - is postmodern visual culture simply stealing - without thought - all that has gone before and selling to fresh eyes? Is it an ignorant delving into work that has been created to find quick solutions and create imagery which looks innovative and new? Is that the worst sense of Corrigan's "Postmodern condition"?

These questions are leading me to a set of conclusions, - in these I want to offer my ideas which will illustrate the stance that I have chosen to take (for now) on the questions surrounding the "Postmodernist filmmaker" term, specifically, of course, to the director and his work. I want to now quote Corrigan to finish this chapter, as his writing creates a logical link with the following one. He argues that huge change, both in film production and audience is the major force behind our postmodern problems. For example, many audiences who could once have been easily categorised "no longer care to watch movies as they may once have" (Corrigan, 1991, page 1). One way this manifests itself is in video technology - it has lessened the film considerable as a far-away art "object" and has increased availability of film work. Debates contrary to this suggest that this is part of a negative culture which results in a "too much too fast" aesthetic and subsequent dehumanising. Whatever the "postmodern condition", Corrigan does not argue that postmodern films are the only type of film being made in contemporary culture or that all filmgoers watch films as "Postmodern Spectators".

It is in his introduction that he makes the point where I will leave off to explore my conclusions. Terms such as "Postmodern spectator", Postmodern condition" or "Postmodern criticism" have all been loosely defined by the shifting film-

culture and he argues that if we pay attention to what is actually happening, a new way of looking at film will emerge through the present confusions. He states that, for example, traditional terms have been absorbed by modern-day film culture and have been redefined "in a way that changes fully what they mean and how they can be used as critical concepts today" (Corrigan, 1991, page 4). A term such as Auteurship is changing and the word "Auteur" is not as cut-and-dry as it was - which is due in no small way to the modern methods of film production. An "auteur" can be a commercial term, or one to stress "star-quality", to give a movie a seal. In many ways the term has changed from a traditional idea, to a postmodernist "agency" that helps audiences identify with a work of film, while also contributing to its overall selling power.

Chapter 4: Expressive Works

My study of Wong Kar-Wai, in general, is not a study in Auteurship. This is for several reasons: I do not want to lose sight of the larger debates by getting lost in a debate on film terminology and I will be specifically looking at one of his films, *Chungking Express*, at a later stage in the last chapter. If an auteur theme emerges, it will do so naturally. I am more concerned with referring to the idea of Wong Kar-Wai as this "Postmodernist Filmmaker".

I want to refer back to one of my earlier questions. Put very basically; is Wong Kar-Wai a "low" Postmodernist Filmmaker, guilty of inconsiderate thieving of film styles and methods and should we take him seriously at all? My answer to this pointed question is that he is much more a part, perhaps a product, of a confused, contradictory world, than part of a legion of offenders. He is part of a world where communication methods have evolved to a huge degree and his chosen art form must reflect this. Visual intake, for people in general has increased. Many who would exceed twenty years of age and who have younger brothers or sisters, would agree that they were, when of a similar age, by no means subjected to such an array of programmes, cartoons or childrens' films and all the Commercial Merchandise that now goes hand in hand with all of those. Kaplan speaks of Television as a "reality" for many (Kaplan, 1988, page 40) and it seems that the nature of today's society leads to creators such as Wong Kar-Wai. He is not alone in his current position and if he is part of a Postmodern generation of filmmakers that have perhaps inadvertently created a new cinema aesthetic - then I find myself more ready to examine and accept it, rather than slate it for

blatant plagiarism Wong Kar-Wai's films are among the most expressive works of art, concerning themselves with modern-day life, that I have ever seen. Larry Gross writes:

> ... you feel you are watching the work of a delicious visual mannerist ... the sheer hedonistic absorption in architectural surfaces, in light sources, in decor of every possible fabric and material ... make you feel trapped in the world of a super-talented hack. Then you go back and take another look ... (Gross, 1996, page 7).

I will be looking at these visual treats later on, but I put this quote in for Gross' recognition of beyond surface examination - of taking "another look", the question of Style and Content. We must consider all that Wong Kar-Wai has done. He has an ability to "can" modern life in the warmest way, with his chaotic working methods reflecting the world (especially that of Hong Kong, with its packed population) in which he is filming. The results, when they work at their best, are instinctive and to use the terminology which I have been, I believe these to be the "higher" side of a postmodernist film culture, or film, expression.

Godard often attempted to keep his audiences at a distance, so as to establish a critical perspective. Wong Kar-Wai's world invites everybody in, in the most intimate of ways, which does blur critical perspective. This could be seen to be a tangible part of our present dilemma. For all this confusion, however, his films have a structure; this is often created by his method of writing which changes as the first pieces of footage are seen - it rapidly evolves as shooting begins. This creates the "flow" of his films; not a narrative. A flow which leads to

an end. In terms of this creative construction, it can be said to be akin to the production of ambient music - the ideas revolve around creating an atmosphere which concerns present-day life and life situations. And though this may depict modern chaos, to produce films as beautiful and intuitive as this is a triumph in the age of this Postmodern confusion.

Chapter 5: Chungking Express and Postmodern Problems

In this concluding chapter, I want to look at Wong Kar-Wai's 1994 film *Chungking Express.* It is one of his best and will help to illustrate the earlier discussion. It has gained much publicity and praise in the West and so it is by no means an obscurity. As a concluding point, I will look at the film in relation to visual art and I will use some references from Angela Dalle Vacche's book *Cinema and Painting (How Art is used in Film)* (1996). As an idea, this one very much sums up my feeling for Wong Kar-Wai's work from it's creation to its final appearance.

Chungking Express (Chongquing Senlin)

Chungking Express takes the form of two almost hour-long films put side by side. At a mid point, the first one ends and the second begins. I want to give a brief story outline and then discuss the work. Very briefly; it is April 1994 in Hong Kong. We are introduced (by voiceover) to Qiwu, plain clothes cop #223, as he chases a suspect through crowded streets and subways. He has just been dumped by his girlfriend of many years, May and this becomes an obsession with tinned pineapples that bear the date "May 1st" - he gives himself thirty days to get over it. In his chase, he bumps into a woman wearing a blonde wig whom he later "falls in love with". She is actually a gangster whose current racket is heroin smuggling. She does this by using several Indian families; dressing them in smart suits and making secret compartments in clothes, luggage and the bellies of soft toys, in which to put the heroin. However, they abscond and her search leads her to a shootout where she kills one of the smugglers and then gets away. Meanwhile, #223 has made

himself sick on pineapple and goes to a bar to get drunk. He promises that he will fall in love with the next woman to walk in and it is the woman in the blond wig who does this after her "hard day". They get drunk and #223 hires a hotel room, where she falls asleep and he stays up eating room service. She later pages him on his birthday and this film ends with her shooting the supplier of the heroin and shows #223 at a fast food counter in the city (Lan Kwai Fong) where the manager suggests that his new server, Faye, could heal the cop's heart.

The second film is set six hours later at the stall and concerns a uniformed cop, #663 and his "relationship" with Faye, who falls in love with him, even though he is unaware of this. His air hostess girlfriend leaves him and gives the spare key to his apartment to the food counter manager, along with a goodbye letter. Cop #663 declines to take the letter and Faye finds out his address. She lets herself in and over time she tidies and rearranges his apartment without his knowledge. He barely notices, but arrives home early one day and catches her there. Now realising how she feels, he asks her out, but she leaves for California. A year later, she returns and is shocked to find that #663 is no longer a cop, but has actually bought the food counter. There is an obvious chemistry between them and this film ends with #663 asking Faye to make him a boarding pass to anywhere she wishes to take him.

From this synopsis, it is clear that the film presented is not particularly complex in terms of a plot structure. A basic narrative runs through the two parts and leads to a conclusion of sorts - but by the end of the film there is no real closure. Rather, it is as if we have glimpsed snatches of peoples' lives

and once the actual film is over their story continues. These snatches appear in several forms - one being sequences of real time, for example, the conversations that both cops have at the food-counter. There are also flashback sequences (cop #663 with his old girlfriend) and similar sequences of the blonde- haired woman (Brigitte Lin) and her operations. Her activities are "documented" in the style of someone using a home video recorder which serves to emphasise her erratic lifestyle as she moves from one claustrophobic situation to the next, surrounded by the smugglers whom she is attempting to organise. This narrative has a spontaneity about it which comes from Wong Kar-Wai's method of scriptwriting, one that has greatly evolved from his days with Cinema City. In an interview with Tony Rayns, he says that:

> As a writer, I wanted my scripts to be perfect and fully formed. As a director, I know there are always factors beyond my control ... Nowadays I start from a fairly loose script and tend to write the dialogue on the day of shooting. On Chungking Express ... I would sit in the coffee shop of the Holiday Inn on Nathan Road writing the lines and then go two blocks down the road to Chungking mansions and give them to the actors just before we shot. (Rayns, 1995, pages 12 - 13).

Chungking Express has all the life and character of a modern city, in this case, Hong Kong and Wong Kar-Wai's chaotic scriptwriting method contains the ideas that result in a film that is warm and very human. The conversations and situations within the film seem authentic because of his splicing together of elements (improvisations, re-shoots

etc.). In *Chungking Express* ' second half we encounter a scene set after cop #663 has been dumped and it is obvious that the staff at the food counter are aware that Faye Wong has feelings for him. Wong Kar-Wai uses this scene to demonstrate the humanity that exists amongst the bustle. It is also very funny ; one by one all the staff - manager and chefs - say how they are "just popping out", an action which leaves the confused server on her own at the time when cop #663 usually arrives for his Chef's salad. The manner in which they all file out to aid the romance leaves Faye Wong laughing at the ridiculousness of her situation - including her "redecorating" habit that no one else is aware of. Her smiling reaction is natural and once again appears as a spontaneous one that Wong Kar-Wai has "canned" for his film. It is therefore not unusual that an artist would evolve in this manner, from the constraints of Graphic design and scriptwriting for a company to an independently-minded filmmaker. It is natural, in many ways, to evolve and fight against what was learned whilst still subconsciously aware of the existence of technical devices and methodology. It is like a painter moving from representational to abstract work - in the case of Wong Kar-Wai, today's world has created the term "Postmodernist filmmaker" and because of his way of observing modern life, it can be used with favourable critical connotations. *Chungking Express* is not an abstract film but a film made with intuition. What goes into the make up of both him and his work is the confusion of modern urban life (specifically urban) - the "future shock" element of which Rayns speaks.

This "future shock" idea is central to Wong Kar-Wai's themes of isolation, claustrophobia and the passing of time. He has spoken about how he

associates this last theme directly with loss. The first two can be seen as themes of modern life, particularly the crowded streets of Hong Kong and the lonely (while still crowded) high-rise single apartments. He depicts a world that has much de-humanising potential, but the strength of character (specifically in *Chungking Express*) of the people he depicts - whether they are "good" or "bad" - saves this world from that fate. The jammed city of *Chungking Express* is filled with people that possess a humane warmth or an aggressive refusal to be a part of the whole. The latter often results in violent action or dialogue.

The isolation of the characters in *Chungking Express* becomes apparent through the various stories. Cop #223, dumped, cannot contact anyone for a date, despite manic attempts on the phone. His obsessive eating of pineapples with the May 1st sell-by date is a lonely act of sadness and of being without a relationship. When May 1st actually arrives, he adopts a resigned acceptance of the loss and becomes just another man in a bar. His night with Brigitte Lin is a chaste one - they do not get in any way close, save for a common feeling of drunken tiredness. She then pages him on his birthday, the same day she shoots her drug supplier dealer. One is a kind act, the other a murder and the last shot of the first film is of a can of cat food which the supplier had been opening, dated May 1st. This almost ridicules #223's romanticism, but it definitely demonstrates the gap between the two people. Their paths may have crossed, but they still are in isolation. Claustrophobia is evident in the uniformed cop #663's apartment with its sweaty clutter. Neon lights shine in from outside and the city environment seems packed with objects and colours. However, there is an acceptance of

these conditions. Where postmodern confusions exist, Wong Kar-Wai, by reflecting these in his work, seems to send a message: no matter how crazy our present world may be, we are still human beings with an ability to rise above the constraints imposed upon us, wither by ourselves or society. With Christopher Doyle's camera, the clutter in *Chungking Express* becomes a beautiful thing, a tangible representation of a city.

Cop #663 interacts with his immediate world (his now "girl-less" apartment) while considering his loss and talks to the objects that surround him, sadly questioning a towel which he has hung up to dry, why it is still "weeping". He observes how thing erode and fade away and the transience of things which we care for, but his observations display a warmth that is as funny as it is philosophical. He projects his feeling onto these objects.

The character in *Chungking Express* create this panorama of modern urban life and its problems. They ultimately demonstrate a king of hope, as Rayns writes, they are; "lonely, divided between public and private personae, resigned to disappointment but never less than optimistic (Rayns, 1995, page 48).

Wong Kar-Wai uses voiceover in such a radical yet subtle way (occasionally dramatic also) that it has an important role in the thematic contents which I have mentioned. It gives us an insight into a particular character's mind and how that character thinks or is biased. A director like Scorcese uses it in the most fluid of ways, enhancing his stories with a momentum that is all his own. Wong Kar-Wai's voiceovers appear to "happen" in a very natural way, whether dramatic or calm. The opening of *Chungking Express* has

Cop #233 in the chase mentioned in my synopsis, where he bumps into Brigitte Lin, with whom he later gets drunk. The line goes; " At our closest moment, we were just 0.01 cm apart. Fifty-six hours later, I was in love with this woman". The blurry, rushed chase scene freezes for a few seconds, with stills of Lin and #223 (Takeshi Kaneshiro) flicking back and forth. It has the effect of visualising the cop's memory, in the way we can trawl through images and memories to try and place a face. The voiceover is an affirmation of his thoughts and this sets a mood for a film that looks at encounters and loss. At the end of this first film, cop #223's final voiceover has the same tone and we are left with a feeling that we have been watching a snatch of someone's life and have been very privileged in doing so. Wong Kar-Wai's use of voiceover invites us into the characters rather than keeping us on the outside, listening to a story. Yes, they do relate factual events, but they also occasionally ruminate to themselves. Cop #663's talking to objects may as well, or could be, voiceover. There is no shift in mood when the device is used, merely a heightening of this mood.

In a society that breeds huge social problems, loneliness being just one of them, a director who can vividly illustrate this whilst simultaneously offering hope, is a rare one. The mood of Wong Kar-Wai's pieces is one which we first visually grasp and then with which we become emotionally involved. Therefore the voiceovers are one of the more important elements when considering his "postmodern moviemaking". To read Wong Kar-Wai's discussion of this, is to discover a socially conscious individual who has the ability to mirror aspects of today's world and all its confusions. In one simple statement he expresses the importance of voiceover in what he is trying to say. During an

informal interview with Tony Rayns (which reads almost like a conversation) he says that "... nowadays people are more likely to talk to themselves than others" (Rayns, 1995, page 13). He speaks of 1991's *Days of Being Wild* where the characters were very much "unhappy with their solitude" and how this idea changed for *Chungking Express.* In the latter, he has adopted optimism, or a more hopeful outlook and states; "the people in *Chungking Express* know how to entertain themselves, even if it's just by talking to a bar of soap. They know how to live in a city". In this interview, Rayns notes that Wong Kar-Wai is more optimistic about everything than he has ever been before.

These themes contain continuous reference to temporal change and coincidence. *Days of Being Wild* can be seen as a story of two men with the most obscure of reasons tying them together. The film is full of chance encounters which are both funny and plausible. The word "plausible" is even subjective. Wong Kar-Wai's Hong Kong childhood, among Indian families and his father's rooms for rend have shown him how the most bizarre stories can be true, or even more importantly, how people learn to live in a city. He drew on childhood memories for some of *Chungking Express* and the passing of time has made him look at these in a new way. Rayns writes that he is "so attuned to the effects of time on memory, sensation and emotion" (Rayns. 1995, page 12).

The food counter in the film is a small "base" for the film and is a social comment - how many people do we meet in queues for food or drink each day? To imagine a hypothetical conversation between cops #223 and #663 is interesting - they have a common job, have both

been dumped and are both being "aided" by the matchmaking manager. The device of the food counter gives the film a mood that is that of the busy city. After the end of the first film we don't see cop #223 again, but we do find ourselves back at the counter, at a different time. These people, the passing of their days and lovers and the colourful city are the elements that create the "essence" of *Chungking Express.*

This film does something new in the "Postmodern Context". I cannot view it as a second-rate Godardian rip-off; it is a section of today's society "canned" for us by a director using all the means known to him. The world of *Chungking Express* is a reflection of our present day cities, while at the same time, it does not exclude the viewer but invites them in. It is an expression of post-modern problems and because of this, it turns many of the debates on their heads. Wong Kar-Wai brings us (if we let him) to a new level of emotional involvement which, granted, makes the establishment of a critical viewpoint difficult. Angela Dalle Vacche in her book *Cinema and Painting,* makes the case for a "collage" idea. She points out how modernist filmmakers considered dislocation and fragmentation. In the case of the present-day Wong Kar-Wai, he has put these ideas in a post-modern context and has created panoramas of modern life. A collage goes to make up a whole and consequently each element is as important as the next. Wong Kar-Wai's work has this "oneness" or fluidity. These films capture life in the way that collage forms an image. And when speaking of Godard, Dalle Vacche states how:

> ... collage is his method, but emotion is his goal, for by pushing to the limit of

> signification all the components of his cinema - image, sound, movement, line, colour, editing, scale - the director does not simply strive for a specific style based on discontinuity and transformations, plastic details and glimpses of abstraction, but he also wants to show how the effect of a poem cannot be reduced to any one of its components (Dalle Vacche, 1996, page 113).

To bring us back up to date, Wong Kar-Wai has brought this to a different level. This is also due, in no small way, to Christopher Doyle's camera work. In fact, Doyle himself refers to the work as "ambient", saying that the shots are called "Kongjing" in Chinese - "they're about atmosphere and metaphor, not space. The only thing they "establish" is a mood or a totally subjective point of view. They're clues to an "ambient" world we want to suggest but not to explain" (Doyle, 1997, page 14).

Conclusion

This brings together the points made earlier which concern representation of reality and help to clarify Wong Kar-Wai's position in the postmodern context. The idea of cinema and painting sheds light on what representation means in relation to the reality of everyday life. *Chungking Express* is a representation of modern-day Hong Kong but it is presented to us by a director who has made choices concerning this portrayal. Whereas it is not an abstract film, it is an abstraction of reality, in the same way that a painting is. The medium of film comes "closer" than paint does, however to reality - by way of definition:

> Cinematic signification, especially in the age of high technology and the 30 million dollar film, comes closer than other forms of signification to resemblance of reality.
> (Lash, 1988, page 324)

The point of what Wong Kar-Wai does, therefore, lies in the choices that he made when he shot the film. His specific abstraction of modern urban life is what is central here and the "ambient world" that Christopher Doyle speaks of is a presentation of reality and a blurring of what is real and represented, which in may ways is a postmodernist definition of what Wong Kar-Wai does.

Is this too simplistic in the light of the larger postmodernist problems? Or is it an expression of our age - an expression which observes tragedy and beauty? Wong Kar-Wai is a post-modern "product" - at the heart of new debates and I believe that this is a healthy, if dangerous position to be in. He runs the risk of "folding in" on himself because of his instinctive manner. Perhaps people

will simply not want to see what he has made, because there is no hyper-alternative reality, such as the MTV idea, to escape into. What he offers is something new and different - an acceptance of the world as it is and hope for a race of cops, killers, drug pushers and the people who live in the crowded environment of cities. When asked about his present direction, specifically his second last film, 1995's *Fallen Angels*, Wong Kar-Wai considered the question and answered:
"It's all about ways to keep yourself happy".

Selected Filmography :

1982 Once upon a Rainbow (Writer)

1985 Chase a Fortune (Writer)

1987 Final Victory (Writer)

1988 Haunted cop shop II (Writer, Cameo)

1988 As tears go by (Director, Writer)

1991 Days of being Wild (Director, Writer)

1991 Saviour of the Soul (Writer)

1994 Ashes of Time (Director, Writer)

1994 Chungking Express (Director, Writer)

1995 Fallen Angels (Director, Writer)

1997 Happy Together (Director, Writer)

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