

Wong Kar-Wai's Days of Being Wild

A Kino International Release

by Peter Brunette

Though Wong Kar-wai is best-known for his art-house hit, In the Mood for Love (2000), his mastery didn't start there. In fact, as far back as Days of Being Wild, his second film, which appeared in 1991, Wong was fully immersed in what would become his greatest themes, love and time. One could say, in fact, that from this point on his films become "Wong Kar-wai films." As British critic Tony Rayns has put it, "nothing in Wong's previous work as a screenwriter or director anticipated the structure or poetic density of Days of Being Wild."

Based on the unexpected financial and critical success of Wong's first film, As Tears Go By (1988), across Asia, and following the original commercial model established in the earlier film, Wong's producer signed six of the best-known pop singers in Hong Kong for this new venture. Unfortunately, the film--a deliberately-paced, experimentally-conceived narrative that now looks brilliant--dumbfounded its original audiences. It was, as Wong told a French interviewer, "a complete failure: In Korea, the spectators even threw things at the screen."

GENRE VS. ART FILM

In As Tears Go By, Wong had been primarily interested in finding a compromise between his background in gangster genre films and his interest in expressing himself in a more self-consciously artistic vein. As befits Wong's near-total transcendence of genre in Days of Being Wild, the film's plot is more intricate and emotionally nuanced than that of the earlier film, but its most salient feature is the constant, much-remarked theme of the implacable impossibility of love. Multiple romantic pairings are suggested, begin to form, and then collapse. Both Li-zhen and Mimi/Lulu want Yuddy, but what Yuddy really wants is his mother. Tide the policeman wants Li-zhen, and Zeb wants Mimi/Lulu. (In In the Mood for Love, the only natural pair in the film decide voluntarily to keep apart, never consummating their relationship, as though Wong has finally given up altogether on the possibility of love.) Even more tantalizing, perhaps, Rebecca, Yuddy's aging aunt and foster mother, also seems to want Yuddy, since their frustrating and highly charged emotional bonds, based on lies, selfishness, and covert sexual desire, appear at least as complex as the more conventional relationships in the film. And the

chance meeting of Yuddy and Tide in the Philippines hotel near the end of the film has a homoerotic flavor that looks forward to Wong's 1997 film Happy Together. Perhaps the only selfless act of love in the entire movie—and, characteristically for Wong, it's an act of renunciation--comes when Zeb gives money to Mimi/Lulu to go to the Philippines in search of Yuddy.

Yet while the characters think and talk about love from beginning to end, perversely (and similarly to In the Mood for Love, though for completely different reasons) we never see even a hint of sex on screen. Days nevertheless remains ultra-sensual, as when Wong is able to invoke decades of steamy-jungle films set in south Asia merely through the noisy blowing of a hyperactive fan. Even a simple cut to a close-up of Auntie can invoke a certain sensuality, as for example the insinuating jump from Yuddy lounging suggestively in medium shot to a close-up of Auntie, a cut that implies a certain movement and proximity of bodies, even if it's only a visual effect.

THE THEME OF TIME

Interlaced with this theme of the hopelessness and perversity of love and desire, or embedded within it, is the relentless passage of time, evoked, occasionally, almost to the point of parody. The loud ticking of a clock during indolent post-coital scenes, for example, is often used as an aural effect, similar to the frequent hammering of the rain. And like the rain, time impinges on the characters, saturates them, almost like an alien force that lays siege from the outside. A cleaning woman ostentatiously cleans a clock, again and again. Auntie visibly ages and incessantly checks her downward progress in a mirror. A scene begins with a bizarre, angled close-up on Zeb's wristwatch. As in many Wong films to come, there is constant talk of starting "from this minute," or, "let's remember this very moment." This unceasing desire to capture the present moment, for whatever reason, is of course always defeated, as the present is always already gone as soon as we begin to look for it.

In his remarks about the film, Wong seems intensely aware of the passing of his own youth, which is perhaps a chief psychological motivation for the film's fascinating exploration of temporality. He told French critic Michel Ciment that he was acutely conscious of having turned thirty when he came to make this film, which is set in the 1960's, shortly after Wong's arrival in the colony from Shanghai at age five. More than anything, he said, "I wanted to evoke the things that I was afraid of forgetting later."

THE WORK OF MEMORY

Wong says that he originally wanted to set the film in 1963, when he came to Hong Kong as a five-year-old, but moved it back to 1960, because of the election of John F. Kennedy (as he says in one interview) or the Apollo space mission (as he says in another). In any case, "there was a sense that we were moving into a new page of history. . . . Since I didn't have the resources to recreate the period realistically, I decided to work entirely from memory. And memory is actually about a sense of loss--always a very important element in drama. We remember things in terms of time: 'Last night I met. . . .' 'Three years ago, I was. . ..'" More explicitly, he told Bérénice Reynaud that "the Hong Kong of Days of Being Wild is set in the sixties, but the society as shown in the film never really existed like that, it's an invented world, an imaginary past." Memory and time thus become fully intertwined here, as of course they always are.

RHYTHM AND TEMPO

Wong's concern with time is also formally echoed in the film's tempo, which alternates dramatically between long moments of stasis and sudden, powerful outbreaks of violent movement. This tempo is also manifested in the alteration between very tight shots and extreme long shots, both of which seem primarily expressive rather than narrative in intent. As further evidence of the rigorous calculation of Wong's approach,

which may superficially seem rather helter-skelter, he described the film as having a rather slow tempo that corresponded with my idea of the sixties. I tried to divide the film into four movements. The first was very Bressonian, with lots of close-ups. The second had the look of a B movie with very complicated camera movements and long takes. The third was filmed in deep focus. The fourth looked more like the second, with lots of mobility. The story moved equally from one character to the other, which made the different movements more visible.

This elaborate system (whose accuracy is borne out by close examination) was apparently meant to serve as structure for the film, supplementing the languorously-paced, non-eventful narrative that must have baffled its original audience, expecting, as they were, to see their favorite stars doing things, performing, rather than just standing around talking. But apart from the rigorous aesthetic schema of the film, what keeps a viewer involved? Is it the cool attractiveness of the characters? This is certainly a factor in our fascination with Yuddy. Zeb confesses to Mimi/Lulu that though Yuddy has given him his car, it's hopeless because he'll never be able to "match" his friend behind the wheel because he is just too cool. So part of the film's attraction obviously lies in its devotion to "cool," in other words, to style. Yet it also seems clear that along with indulging it, at some level Wong is probing this stance as well, suggesting that it, like the superficially exciting macho code of honor in

As Tears Go By, also gets in the way of authentic human encounters.

Everything in this film, however, always eventually comes back to the confluence of love and time. In a clear reversal of Henry James' classic dictum to show rather than tell, here "we have had the narrating of the love story instead of the story itself," as Larry Gross has succinctly described the affair between Yuddy and Lu-zhin in Sight & Sound. "We have seen the characters project into the future and reflect on the past as if the present is too fragile to be directly represented. Narration, here as elsewhere, has performed a strange surgical incision into different fragments of time."

HONG KONG POLITICS

The theme of time also goes beyond its ageless philosophical expression, for in any Hong Kong movie of any artistic pretension made during this period, time will also have a political dimension. In 1984, mainland Chinese and British authorities agreed to the handover of Hong Kong to the former in 1997. Hence, the ticking clock, in Wong's films and the films of other directors, became a natural metaphor for all the fear and anxiety attached to this change.

In any case, from various comments Wong has made, it's clear that this political dimension was in his mind from the beginning, though in more nebulous terms than those proposed by many critics. Wong seems to have been more vaguely interested in linking the present

with the past, and geography with history. The director told Tony Rayns that "Days centers on various feelings about staying in or leaving Hong Kong I tried to evoke two different families from the first postwar generation. One is Cantonese and is originally from Hong Kong, and the other, Leslie Cheung's [Yuddy's], comes from Shanghai. They're separated by language and in the second part [never filmed] they end up getting to know each other." Expanding a bit, he told Reynaud that Yuddy is Filipino, his stepmother is from Shanghai, and Tide is from Hong Kong. "The character played by Maggie Cheung is in between since she is from Macao. I wanted to see how they would interact, since, in the 1960s, it was still rare to see Hong Kong natives and immigrants mix."

REPEATING CHARACTERS

If the characters are historically determined, they are also curiously intertwined through repetition, as so often happens in Wong's films. At the end, six years later, the barely-glimpsed Smirk repeats Yuddy's familiar haircombing gesture, suggesting that he will be taking over for the dead Yuddy where he left off. Mimi and Yuddy share a strange narcissism, even when they're apart, both dancing lasciviously, and alone, before the camera, in front of mirrors, everywhere, in that 1960s swaying gesture that follows the Hawaiian-guitar style music on the sound track. Mimi also has three names, with which she identifies herself to different

people, as though consciously repeating herself. Like the binary opposition between Yuddy (romantic) and Tide the policeman (practical realist), which is always also a kind of repetition, Mimi is clearly paired with Su Li-zhen as her double and polar opposite (sexy good-time girl vs. plain beauty, Violet vs. Mary in Capra's It's a Wonderful Life, Chihuahua vs. Clementine in Ford's My Darling Clementine), even down to the carefully articulated differences in body language.

SEARCH FOR IDENTITY

One aspect of this repetitiveness is that, like Hong Kong itself, the characters of Days share a common search for their identity. This ancient theme, which goes back at least to Homer's Odyssey, is brought up to date by Wong. As we've seen, Mimi has at least three names. Tide restlessly wanders the globe after his mother's death frees him to be a sailor. To achieve psychological integrity, Li-zhen must establish herself as a being separate from Yuddy. Yuddy himself is the figure most conspicuously looking for an identity. The orb around which this entire constellation revolves, he is a thoroughgoing romantic, yet he has an ugly streak of violence in him that is reminiscent of the central figure in As Tears Go By, as when he beats up Auntie's gigolo lover in the bathroom very early in the film. His way of being in the world is primarily that of a heartless seducer, but what motivates his most decisive

actions is his desire to know his mother, and thus his origins. When Auntie finally reveals his mother's identity, and he does go to find her in the Philippines, we share his crushing disappointment in not being able to meet with her. Since this too is a moment of unrequited love, the Hawaiian guitar theme that marks moments throughout the film when sexual love is frustrated is heard here as well.

Yet if we are invited to share Yuddy's individual consciousness and inner search, the film's title also suggests that he is a specific type. The "A Fei" of the Chinese title A Fei Zhengzuan, according to Hong Kong critic Stephen Teo, is a phrase that was a "common euphemism for vaseline-haired and rock-loving delinquents and unsavoury teenagers with gangland connections." Teo points out that Yuddy is "A Fei," but vulnerable too, and in that combination reminds us of no one more than James Dean in Rebel Without a Cause. American critic David Bordwell has also helpfully pointed out that the Cantonese title of Wong's film, translated literally into English, is "The Story of Rebellious Youth," the same title that Rebel Without a Cause is known by in Hong Kong.

LIGHTING

Much of the visual effect of the film comes through its lighting, or better, its lack of it. An amazing amount of time is spent in the dark or in the rain, or both, which leads to a slow, stylized expressivity--so similar

to later films like Happy Days and In the Mood for Love--that never contains more than a modicum of narrative information and perfectly matches the mood of the rest of the film. Contrasting moments of intense light, as for example when Yuddy visits his mother's palatial estate in the Philippines, are very powerful and seem to betoken an unreal world beyond the grasp of the characters and perhaps beyond our ken as well, since we have learned in this film that the real world is nearly always murky and difficult to decipher (a knowledge abetted by all the mirror shots that remove us even further from a direct perception of "reality").

Regarding the lighting, Wong has said that "Days of Being Wild was a reaction against my first film, As Tears Go By, which was full of harsh light and neon. I told Chris [Doyle, his cinematographer and cameraman] I wanted to do a 'monochrome' film, almost drained of colour. It's a film about different kinds of depression, and it needed to be very blank, very thin in texture. That created many problems for Chris: many filters, few lights, very hard to control focus. That's one reason it took so long to shoot." In fact, Wong explained to Austrian critic Andreas Ungerböck, he originally wanted to make the film in black & white but the producer wouldn't let him. He wanted "the light to be very weak, without contrast, as in the paintings of Edward Hopper. I didn't want the light to disturb or to be too obtrusive."

SOUND

Beyond the stunning visuals, much of what is most powerful in the film, as always, comes from Wong's brilliant handling of sound, especially music, a talent that was soon to become his trademark. Here the film is bound together by the late 1950's-style romantic Hawaiian guitar music that begins and ends it and that regularly pops up in between, along with other lushly orchestrated music of the period. What is created is thus an authentic sense of contemporary popular culture that adds to the film's presentation of the psychological texture of its historical setting, as well as an unconventional universe of sound of a sort rarely heard in film.

Wong's mastery of sound extends to the poetic voiceovers, as well, which are, somewhat bizarrely, spoken by more than one of the film's characters. Rather than fragmenting the film's effect, however, which might be the result of such clashing points of view, they serve to connect these otherwise disparate figures while articulating the film's themes. It is here that the film's principal poetic effect resides, I think, especially in the repeated, in principle very "uncinematic" (because literary) use of the self-consciously mythic bird motif which helps to structure the narrative. Yuddy, ever the Romantic, begins by telling us early in the film of a mythical bird who never stops flying because it has no legs. It sleeps while it flies and it only stops once, when it dies. Clearly, he is describing his own situation, and

in the most romantic terms possible. At the end of the film, however, Tide, the clear-eyed former policeman who comes from a poor family, interrupts Yuddy with a surprisingly complete knowledge of the myth after Yuddy has barely begun to recount it. The effect is to demean the tale, mythmaking in general, and, more specifically, Yuddy's dangerous romantic approach to life. Tide cynically asks Yuddy, "Are you a bird? If you could fly you wouldn't be here." Tide also brutally insists that given the way Yuddy treated his two girlfriends, he is nothing more than "garbage picked up in Chinatown." Once Yuddy is dead, the truth, now articulated in voiceover by Tide, becomes clear: the bird has always already been dead.

The entire finale of the movie oozes romanticism but, as with As Tears Go By, it's difficult to say how much Wong is indulging it and how much he is critiquing this sometimes irresponsible attitude toward life. As with his ambivalent use of the bird myth, described above, it is probably equal parts of both. In any case, the film's themes are intricately and quite poetically expressed in its last ten minutes, which are too complex to go into detail here.

Though consistently named by critics as one of the best films ever made in Hong Kong, Days of Being Wild was an utter failure at the box office. Incredibly, this seems to have come as a surprise to its director. When asked if he had been prepared for the commercial failure of the film, he replied "No,

I felt it was going to be a very commercial movie. I thought at that time the gangster movie was approaching a low phase, and there was need for a romantic love story."

There is of course always a need for a romantic love story, but despite winning five of the awards that are Hong Kong's equivalent to the Oscars, Wong nevertheless had to return to screenwriting for a number of years before he was able to find the financing for his next project, Ashes of Time.

Tony Rayns' succinct summation says it all: "Days of Being Wild will remain a peak in [Wong's] filmography, and a landmark in Hong Kong cinema: the first film to rhyme nostalgia for a half-imaginary past with future shock."

PETER BRUNETTE, the author or editor of seven books on film, is Reynolds Professor of Film Studies at Wake Forest University and chief film critic for indieWIRE.com. His book on Wong Kar-Wai will be published by the University of Illinois Press in spring 2005.