



Who Wants to Know Wong Kar-wai, The Grandmaster

Description

Wong Kar-wai Wants To Know

By

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Director Wong Kar Wai is a postmodern art cinema auteur. In her Harvard Review of Philosophy article, "What is Postmodernism?" • Eva T.H. Brann defines postmodernism as it relates to art cinema as an "incredulity toward metanarratives." • (Brann) Director Wong's films *In the Mood for Love*, *2046*, *Chungking Express*, and *The Grandmaster* all evoke an aversion to any metanarrative. Using a variety of cinematic techniques including voice-over narration in a self-reflective manner, non-traditional plot structures, eclectic mise-en-scene, and music to evoke loneliness, anxiety, alienation, atmospherics, and sense of powerlessness and insignificance, Wong operates within a deeply embedded commercial cinema with innovation while repressing the reuse of genre films straddling the Hong Kong New Wave and the Hong Kong Second New Wave.

Wong's use of the cinematic, voice-over narration technique is an important aspect of art cinema as it allows an introspective performant into the inner, emotional world of the characters. It serves as a self-confessional and helps break away from the narrative characterization and allows the work to be character-centered and Wong utilizes the voice-over narration repeatedly in his film work. For example, in *Chungking Express*, Wong uses the narrative voice-over with police officer #223 philosophizing about the people he brushes by and whom he may never meet or even become friends with after introducing the cold, industrial world of Hong Kong juxtaposed against a criminal, underworld element embodied by

the woman with the blonde wig-wearing dark sunglasses at night. Wong appears, on the surface to be making a film about cops and gangsters while on a deeper level it's just a film about their lives and existence within a post-colonial identity that has been borrowed from the West and traditional Chinese history simultaneously.

The Hong Kong New Wave and Second New Wave embodied a filmic revolution with jump cuts, long takes, and narrative ambiguity. (Wham)The New Wave movements were representing a social movement structured within a framework of iconoclasm, opposition, and the avant-garde, while the filmmakers were a generation with an unusual sense of unity also identified with international culture and consumerism, and economic self-interest. (Kar) Wong is very attuned to social sentiments. His improvisational techniques seemingly have tapped into the subconscious force shared by all of humanity. His filmic technique was built upon the highly profitable, commercial television outlet shaping a political idealism while he witnessed capitalism replacing culture and tradition. Haihong Li, in his doctoral dissertation "Cinematic Hong Kong of Wong Kar-Ai," discusses how Wong Kar-wai exquisitely exploits the potential of music in his films and its effects on signifying emotions oftentimes adding to actors' performances. In *2046*, Wong introduces Bai Ling with Connie Francis's "Siboney." The music intensifies the seductiveness and passion of the scene and in doing so successfully creates the seductive and passionate character of Bai Ling. Wong allows the music to represent and speak for Bai Ling. The passionate Latin beat highlights Bai Ling's mysterious and exotic allure as she is constantly falling in and out of love. (H. Li)

Moreover, in *Chungking Express* the musical song, "California Dreamin'" by the folk-rock band The Mamas and The Papas, is repeatedly heard throughout the film as Chinese pop star Faye Wong dreamily dances across frames in a totally disconnected manner in relation to her environment and to those individuals who inhabit the same space as she does. Also, Wong uses music to foreground a certain ambiance or some desired characteristics of a place. For example, Indian music calls attention, in the opening of *Chungking Express*, to the multicultural environment of the Chungking Mansion. In "Wong Kar-wai," Stephen Teo believes Wong's distinctive improvisational filming technique leaves no room for subjectivity and it becomes a precedent for showing what is not there. Teo goes on to say most of Wong's filmic characters are elusive and slippery with an ambivalence of the Hong Kong cultural space and are seen as searching for purpose and have taken on lost identities. (Teo)

In addition, Wong never really allows a professional identity for the two police officers to emerge in *Chungking Express*. The two police officers together have no given, formal names and are only referred to as 223 and 663. Also, no concrete details are provided regarding their police work. Another referent is a number that is just a number and can easily be replaced by another number giving little regard for their individual personhoods. This concept of numbers and time serves as a postmodern man's frustration and emotional repression and Wong effectively utilizes them to change people's emotional identification with time using highly accurate figures to quantify. "I was 0.01 cm from her in the closet," "57 hours later I fell in love with this woman," and "Six hours later she was in love with someone else." Wong mixes dark humor and elegance with poetic expression and interpretation and qualifies, therefore, as an art cinema technique according to the framework David Andrews Lays

out in his book, *Theorizing Art Cinema*. (Andrews)

Wong's use of numbers cinematically is also evident in *2046* as 2046 is the adjoining room number that he and Su Li-Zhen occupy and where he searches for Lulu and it's also a metaphor for the never-ending train where his novels take place. A narrative voiceover delivers another instance of dark humor with "love is all about timing. It doesn't matter if you meet the right person if it's too soon or if it's too late. The camera shows Faye Wong breaking the Fourth Wall (looking directly into the lens) and fades to black. Wong wants us to identify with Faye Wong's character. Yet, in the postmodern vein, is it, Faye Wong, from *2046*, or is it Faye Wong from *Chungking Express*? These themes of discordant time and space reverberate throughout Director Wong's entire body of work. And, while *2046* has more in common with *In the Mood for Love*, Wong initiates the number and time references to further obfuscate the viewer and thereby continue the deconstruction consistent with postmodernism as his time and number referents mimic *2046* in a quantitative manner beginning with 24 December 1968 and ending with 24 December 1969. Interspersed along the way are references to the Christmas zone of 12/24 and 12/25 and the next story "2047" (she didn't respond because she probably loved someone else) and the appearance of writer's block one hour after questioning whether the ending to "2047" was too sad and could it be changed. The frame stays the same as the time goes from one hour later to ten hours later to one-hundred hours later.



Again, Wong appears to be traveling in a non-linear realm as another narrative voice-over informs the viewer that Chow's life has now lost all meaning as he's been gambling every day and that Black Spider had his hand cut off for cheating after coming to Chow's rescue. Wong uses rainfall as a flashback device to connect the ending of *In the Mood for Love* in Phnom Penh, Cambodia with *2046*. Unable to speak of his passion for Su, Chow embarks on a journey to reconcile his action with his alter ego and the women he engages within *2046* are all various representations of Su. Yet, Wong can't stop with this simplistic interpretation as it would subscribe to a metanarrative. In keeping with his postmodern bent, he introduces a female character who promises to help Chow recover his gambling losses and to quit gambling for a 10% commission, and under no circumstance will she bankroll Chow. Chow asked the woman her name. Her response, "Su Li Zhen" the same name as his love interest from *In the Mood for Love*. Again, Wong is blurring the lines between films and fictionalized characters in a postmodern manner. Furthering the reconciliation of Chow's innermost self, Wong

shows Chow revealing his love for another man's wife and why he moved to Singapore. With tears, Su tellingly states to Chow, "If you ever escape your past, look for me." The film closes where it began only on a different plane with a push into a gray mattered hole.

While most traditional films are constructed of independent plots and storylines with an introduction, character and thematic development, climax, and denouement, Wong's films focus on a state of mind, an atmosphere. This stylistic technique is at once both postmodern and art cinema and is most evident in *2046* as the film opens in a science fiction setting where nothing changes and dreamscapes are presented without a definitive timeline. In *2046* the same characters appeared in the film *In the Mood for Love*. Wong also uses similar-looking scenes in *2046*. When *In the Mood for Love*, Chow and Su have had a nice dinner, they are seen in a taxi together. Chow tries to hold Su's hand with considerable trepidation. In *2046*, the glamorous Lulu is sexier than Su and dominates her licentious drinking buddy in the back seat of the taxi and he soon passes out of consciousness. Interestingly, in keeping with the deconstructionist vein of postmodernism, *2046* repeatedly shows scenes that appear to be reconciling Chow's unresolved issues from *In the Mood for Love*.

Typically, traditional characters only appear in one movie or in a sequel perhaps. Yet, Chow Mo-Wan appears in both *2046* and *In the Mood for Love*. Chow, however, has two seemingly distinct dispositions as he comes across as cold, complex, and mature in *2046* whereas, in juxtaposition, *In the Mood for Love* Chow is timid and psychologically gentle. In *2046* Chow is very aggressive sexually and the passionate scenes are akin to soft-porn and fall within art cinema film parameters set out by Andrews in "Theorizing of Art Cinema." (Andrews) Moreover, Wong uses a scene where Chow has declined sex after questions of him not being in the mood or it not being the right night. Again, Wong parallels dimensions between *In the Mood* and *2046* with Chow's internal conflict in consummating with Su and the fact he couldn't talk to anyone about his actions.

Moreover, other characters appear in both film characters in the form of Su li-Zhen, Wang jing-wen, and Lulu. Moreover, Tony Leung and Shirley (Faye) Wong have consciously created characters that cross boundaries personality-wise in the postmodern deconstruction of ideologies, knowledge systems as well as the myths of fictional characters. In an art cinema stylistic ambiguous ending, Wong's closing scene *In the Mood for Love* shows Chow whispering into a hole and covering it with dirt to seal what he didn't want anyone to know and begins *2046* with the same action only in a futuristic setting diametrically opposed to the ancient Cambodian Buddhist temple he uses to close *In the Mood for Love*. Still, questions remain about where Hong Kong will end up in the year 2046. In addition, to the above-mentioned films, Wong also addressed various elements and various groups of immigrants in *Days of Being Wild*, *As Tears Go By* and *Fallen Angels* depicting fringe Hong Kong characters who are marginalized with little understanding of where they come from and with little understanding of who they are.

Nevertheless, these characters lived and fought for what they believed in. And while Wong reminisced about the 1960s and the Shanghainese community represented *In the Mood for Love*, he also muses over the dilemma Hong Kongers face as they move into the future. With a fifty-year grace period of self-rule under the Chinese governmental banner, Wong seemingly advocates for the will of the people in his postmodern art cinema films culminating in the epic *The Grandmaster*. Wong uses *The Grandmaster* to explore and present the Chinese martial arts tradition as a cultural artifact depicting seven schools with separate traditions forming the underpinnings of Chinese martial arts fighting society. Wong intimates that the road ahead will not be an easy one. Nor will it be a road to shy away from. He poses the question at the end of *The Grandmaster*, "What do you want your style to be?" In essence, Wong is challenging his viewers, and, more specifically, Hong Kongers, as to what they want the future of Hong Kong to look like. Seemingly, he is subtly advocating a separate and independent Hong Kong comprising both Western culture and traditional Chinese culture — one that is Hong Kong in the present respective of long-standing Chinese tradition combined with the newer Western capitalist consumerism overtly displayed in *Chungking Express* and subtly displayed through highly stylized costuming and sophisticated choreography in *The Grandmaster*.

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