

WONG KAR-WAI INTERVIEW

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This interview was conducted over the phone in September 12, 2001 – I was in L.A. Wong Kar-Wai was in Hong Kong.

Wong Kar-Wai is a Hong Kong based filmmaker who does not fit the pattern that we normally attribute to Hong Kong cinema: highly imaginative action films with little or no attention cinematic or emotional subtleties.

Since his first film *As Tears Go By* (1988) Kar-Wai established a film style that is simultaneously complex and populist; his films are enormously appealing because they seem emotionally engaged, full of expressive nuances peculiar to urban life.

Born in Shanghai in 1958 Wong Kar-Wai moved to Hong Kong with his family when he was five years old. He entered the highly competitive Hong Kong film industry as a screenwriter working on comedies, who-done-its and melodramas.

In 1992 he made *Ashes of Time*, gathering together an all-star cast of Hong Kong actors (including Maggie Cheung and Tony Leung the stars of *In the Mood For Love*) *Ashes of Time* is a martial arts film like no other made

before or since. It breaks most of the conventions of the genre while at the same time pushing the traditional action sequences towards more stylized ballet-like movements. He accomplished this by the use of rapid changes in speed and rhythm with editing, something that would become a much copied trademark style.

During a break from the two year production of *Ashes of Time* Kar-Wai made *Chung King Express* (1994) a stunning film which won international recognition from mass audiences all over the world. This film was released in the US through the distribution company owned by Quentin Tarantino. *Chungking Express* is a comedy about people trying to connect emotionally with each other in an up-to-the-minute urban environment (Hong-Kong) not built for the nuances of “small moments”. The film is both laconic and passionately energetic, capturing with great humor the paradoxical longings and frustrations found in contemporary cities better than any work since the great French New Wave films of the 1960’s.

Since then he’s made *Happy Together* (1997) a film about two Chinese gay lovers stranded in Argentina. And most recently he filmed *In the Mood for Love* (2000) which is about a man and a woman who literally act out their

spouses' romantic betrayals with each other in order to better understand their own feelings of confusion. The fluid and uncertain nature of emotions and identity confront a period in China (1962) of rigid role-playing and conformity. The film is a brilliant sequel of sorts to *Days of Being Wild* (1991) also with Maggie Cheung. He is currently working on a science-fiction film to be called *2046*.

Interview:

In In the Mood for Love Maggie Cheung's character reminded me of Natascha in Godard's Alphaville – a woman who wants to express all of her emotions but can't do it. In your films your characters don't have anyone to help them overcome their emotional paralysis; was this emotional restraint built into the script or was it developed by the actors?

Actually I think the two characters in the film do express what they want to say with their bodies and with other things instead of just saying it. In the film the reason you don't see the husband and the wife is that it is not the story of a marriage or an affair, otherwise there would be some kind of moral involved about what is right and what is wrong. In this film what we wanted was to explore how these two people – Maggie and Tony – start as victims of their relationship with their spouses; they have been betrayed by their spouses and they want to know how those affairs happened and why. So they start something like an investigation with rehearsals and in the end they are in the same situation that they are investigating. So there are many possibilities in the same character. Today you can be the victim and tomorrow you are the one betraying.

I thought it was wonderful the way the characters used acting to create moments in which they were finally able to express these emotions that they couldn't otherwise have expressed. There's a wonderful short story by Milan Kundera called "The Hitchhiking Game ...,"

Yes – where they play parts on the road. It's very chilling that story. The end is very dark. He also has that novel with a doctor and it takes place in a spa.

Yes “The Farewell Party”.

Yeah, yeah! It's wonderful. Well actually we learned something from that because he tries to write a story like Hitchcock.

What do you mean like Hitchcock?

He (Kundera) gives you different surprises in the script like the doctor who prescribes the poisons. He reveals things at different stages of the story – you always have these kinds of ideas with Hitchcock. Is it because of the poison that the story happens like this or is it something else? It's very difficult to say exactly what's going on.

Do you like Hitchcock?

Very much.

That's funny because in your work there is so much improvisation and attention to contemporary urban details that are very beautiful. Hitchcock was so controlled, I don't think that he allowed for much of that to happen.

I think he didn't allow people to improvise, but he had those kinds of urban experiences in his mind. And it's funny because we also wanted to make a story like Hitchcock about two people - there is a secret but the only person that you really know is you – the rest is mysterious.

Yes, the mystery is so ambiguous in your film, even more so than with Hitchcock, who always leaves very dramatic clues.

His films make you feel very insecure. It's more than being afraid because I think that nowadays when we see a film we feel very safe. We see what is happening in front of the camera and outside the frame there is nothing so we don't have to worry. In Hitchcock's films there is quite a lot that you believe is happening outside of that space, outside of the frame.

The dream logic of your film works beautifully. After I saw it I kept thinking that there was a scene with Maggie dancing but then I realized that there wasn't.

Maybe dancing by implication!

The slow motion scenes in the film, which are very beautiful, are where Maggie manages to convey the sensuality of her character without saying one word. She said she felt that she had matured with this role and how much fun it was for her to play someone her own age, because she's always playing, as she said, these "girls".

I think that this is the first time that she had to play a role that she played before (*Days of Being Wild*) but ten years older. I can imagine that she feels close – intimate – with this character because she has been with her for ten years!

Are the characters from your parent's generation?

We didn't want to be that conscious of being in 1962 but some of the problems with period films are that they are too conscious of a particular time.

That's right, you can have a car from the forties in 62' but period films don't allow for...

I told Maggie that "you have to be a woman". I also said "remember when we made *Days of Being Wild* you played a girl in that film and the story happened in 1962 also". She said "These two characters are different". I don't see any difference! You can be the same person, but ten years older. Just imagine what happened in those ten years and why you married this guy! And I think it works for Maggie because suddenly the character seems so real! She has to imagine what happened in those ten years.

There's a beautiful "chamber" feeling to the acting between the characters. It was really like a ballet between them.

People asked me if *In the Mood for Love* is a sequel to *Days of Being Wild*. I said no, but I think it's that film ten years older.

That's an interesting way to look at it. In the Mood for Love also reminded me of that because of the different ways you slowed time. Not just using slow motion but different kinds of slow motion like in Hiroshima Mon Amour where there is use of documentary footage and different kinds of time are called into play. Was that something you explored in the beginning or in the editing room later.

At first we think the film is about the period but in the end I don't think so. The film is about my memory of that period. When you really remember something it goes very deep, some things are very detailed and some things are very vague. When we are in Hong Kong there is a great amount of detail and then Tony's character leaves Hong Kong for Cambodia and the things that happen to them together happen very briefly, very quickly, and so nothing registers in their memory.

What about the reoccurring theme of alienation in some of your work? Someone working along similar lines, although very different, is Wim Wenders. What do you think of his work?

I liked *Kings of the Road*.

His early work reminds me very much of Chung King Express and Fallen Angels.

His early films had more freedom. But I want to see *Million Dollar Hotel*. The title attracts me. I wanted to make a film about a hotel.

Really?

Yes – the last time I was in New York a friend of mine gave me a book about the flophouses in New York. It's a good idea for a film.

There's something of that in In the Mood for Love because even though people live in apartments it was very much like a hotel, very cramped with little privacy.

In that period in China, because of the situation you shared a kitchen and toilet.

The use of documentary footage was incredible. I've seen documentary footage used in films before but what made this so extraordinary was that you have this "chamber" work with very private emotions. Everything is very focused and suddenly the film seems to open to this other historical world about which these characters are completely unaware and suddenly these two worlds meet in the film.

Yes, I wanted to make a comparison between these worlds.

Was there any reason that you chose Charles de Gaulle arriving in Cambodia?

First we wanted some footage in Angkor, and this was available. We couldn't have used other footage of the Vietnam War for instance. We wanted something in Cambodia. This documentary section makes a very strong statement about colonialism. Also, when this footage suddenly appears people say "what is this?" Yet it's very natural.

You can't help but think of Viet-Nam at that point.

This is something that belongs to that period.

What do you think of other filmmakers of your generation? I'm thinking of people making films about urban environments like Olivier Assayas in France?

I think filmmakers are more close to each other today. It's not like he's doing something in Paris and I'm doing something in Hong Kong and we don't speak with each other. I think it would be interesting, well I think he's very interested in the things happening in Asia right now.

Are there other filmmakers that interest you at the moment?

Well I'm interested in Quentin Tarantino. To me *Jackie Brown* was very, very good. It's very touching. It's even better than *Pulp Fiction*. In the film there are some characters, some faces, some values that I know very well. These are people that I know even though these characters are very American – I'm very curious to see his next film.

He also has a poetics of urban life that goes beyond genre conventions that people who make Hollywood films fall into.

I think there's something very special about that work. He has a love of cinema. His films are like love letters to the cinema!

Absolutely, which I think is also true for Chung-King Express! Are you reading any books in particular right now?

Well I don't read one book and finish it! That is not my habit. I read many books at one time. At this moment I have a Chinese novel and a book about da Vinci...

Do you like da Vinci?

Yes because he created in many fields: portraits, inventions and he was involved in politics too. So you have to think that maybe the process is the same thing.

And if he were alive today he would probably be a filmmaker as well.

Right!

What did you think of Los Angeles when you were here?

I have problems with Los Angeles! I walk in Hong Kong. You can walk around the city. In New York you can also walk. Los Angeles is designed for driving so I feel closer to New York in that sense. Los Angeles seemed like a big studio.

Is the film you're working on now going to be shot in China?

I'm going to try not to because I think that right now is not the right moment in China. And also because of the topic of the story, I don't want to have any problems with the film.