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# The Sensuous Cinema of Wong Kar-wai

Film Poetics and the Aesthetic  
of Disturbance

Second Edition

Gary Bettinson

## Praise for *The Sensuous Cinema of Wong Kar-wai*

“Seldom has the sensuous been subjected to such a scientifically rigorous and yet moving account as Gary Bettinson’s analysis of Wong Kar-wai. Chapter by chapter, the logic of specific choices underpinning Wong’s cinema produces a sense of revelation perfectly complementing the intense pleasures of watching the films. In this expanded edition, Bettinson focuses on the actor’s work, a stroke of genius for understanding an oeuvre where body language and gesture are so crucial.”

—Chris Berry, King’s College London

“Gary Bettinson’s *Sensuous Cinema of Wong Kar-wai* is a major step forward in our understanding of this director. Bettinson scrutinizes Wong’s unique place in world film culture, his unusual production methods, and his debts to several cinematic traditions, both Asian and European. A close examination of Wong’s style shows, in unprecedented depth, how these lyrical, apparently loosely-constructed films are underpinned by a strong formal and emotional coherence. The result is an unequaled study of a filmmaker whose work, from *As Tears Go By* to *The Grandmaster*, has redefined contemporary cinema.”

—David Bordwell, University of Wisconsin–Madison

“In this carefully written study, Gary Bettinson offers a critical assessment not only of the stylistic features of Wong Kar-wai’s films but also of the scholarship that has developed around them. Arguing against the facile culturalism that tends to dominate such scholarship, this book does full justice to Wong’s cinematic methods in a series of impressively well-informed and informative readings.”

—Rey Chow, Duke University

“Not only the best—and indisputably the most ambitious—monograph on Wong Kar-Wai’s work and work practice, but also a model of grounded historical poetics. *The Sensuous Cinema of Wong Kar-Wai* shows Bettinson to be a careful writer and sophisticated thinker with broad and deep knowledge of film culture, theory and aesthetics. His book represents a substantial contribution to screen poetics, a touchstone work thoroughly informed by questions of authorship and culture.”

—Mark Gallagher, author of *Tony Leung Chiu-Wai* (2018) and *Another Steven Soderbergh Experience: Authorship and Contemporary Hollywood* (2013)

“Drawing on the ideas of film theorists David Bordwell (whose ‘film poetics’ method is adopted here) and Kristin Thompson, and also the Russian formalists, Bettinson’s close analysis of the films’ aesthetic qualities is both informative and thought-provoking . . . Bettinson’s carefully researched and meticulously written study turns our attention back to the basics: the sights, sounds, and emotions with which the movies captivated us in the first place.”

—Edmund Lee, *South China Morning Post*

“In *The Sensuous Cinema of Wong Kar-wai*, Gary Bettinson reprioritizes the principles of film poetics in a brilliant account of the director’s “aesthetic of disturbance.” This book is a methodological breakthrough in the study of one of Hong Kong cinema’s most prominent auteurs.”

—Vivian P.Y. Lee, author of *Hong Kong Cinema Since 1997: The Post-Nostalgic Imagination* (2009)

“In this essential study of acclaimed filmmaker Wong Kar-wai, Gary Bettinson exquisitely captures the director’s cinematic sensorium and digs deep below a seductive visual surface to uncover a creative roughness that disturbs narrative and generic expectations. Bettinson’s perceptive analyses of individual films conjure the sounds, sights, smells, tastes, and textures of Wong’s Hong Kong. This book convincingly demonstrates how Wong Kar-wai took the international festival circuit by storm and why he made a lasting impact on global film aesthetics. Three cheers for this updated edition!”

—Gina Marchetti, author of *Citing China: Politics, Postmodernism, and World Cinema* (2018)

“Gary Bettinson’s monograph on Wong Kar-wai’s films is a tour de force of poetic analysis and auteur theory.”

—Eleftheria Thanouli, *New Review of Film and Television Studies*

“A groundbreaking study of one of the world’s more original film auteurs in recent decades. Analyzing carefully the films as *films* first and foremost – not merely as cultural emblems or allegories – Bettinson provides a deeper understanding of the multifaceted complexities of Wong Kar-wai’s dazzling yet mystifying oeuvre.”

—James Udden, author of *No Man an Island: The Cinema of Hou Hsiao-hsien* (2017)

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## Preface to the Second Edition

Since the publication of this book a decade ago, Wong Kar-wai's cinematic output has seemingly stagnated. Prone to sluggish production practices, Wong has not directed a feature film since 2013, when *The Grandmaster* became the most profitable film of his career. Some critics speculate that this box-office milestone stymied his creativity. Others argue that Wong's creative energies have simply been rerouted—Wong spent much of the decade turning out rococo commercials for Louis Vuitton, Dior, and other designer brands. (“These assignments are very well paid, and he has become trapped doing them,” contends critic Shu Kei. “Whether it is the money that has corrupted him, I couldn’t say for sure—but it has become a bad habit.”)<sup>1</sup> Wong’s decision to mount the long-gestating *Blossoms Shanghai* (2023) as a Mainland Chinese television series also attracted critical scrutiny. Critics now pose the question: Does *Blossoms Shanghai*—set and shot in the Mainland, flaunting Shanghainese and Putonghua dialogue tracks, and targeted primarily at the China market—signal the root-and-branch “Mainlandization” of his career? Veteran film critic Li Cheuk-to insists that Wong remains at heart a Hong Kong filmmaker, but Shu Kei demurs: “I don’t think Wong considers himself a Hong Kong filmmaker anymore.”<sup>2</sup>

I take up these controversies, among other issues, in the Afterword to this new edition. This substantial new chapter brings the story of Wong’s career up to date, revisits some of the first edition’s arguments in light of subsequent research and critical responses, and introduces fresh lines of investigation. As for the rest of the book, I have opted not to meddle with the original text, whose integrity remains intact, faults and all.

There are many people to whom I owe thanks for guidance, information, and encouragement. This new edition would not exist without the support and

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1. Interview with Shu Kei, Hong Kong, March 21, 2024.

2. Interview with Li Cheuk-to, Hong Kong, March 20, 2024; interview with Shu Kei, Hong Kong, March 21, 2024.

enthusiasm of Michael Duckworth at Hong Kong University Press; I greatly appreciate his patience and encouragement. Early on, Murray Smith shaped my thinking about Wong Kar-wai in substantive ways. I am grateful for his enduring friendship and intellectual inspiration. I thank my stimulating colleagues at Lancaster University, as well as my friends Timmy Chen, Nicholas Godfrey, Mike Ingham, Jack Lee, Vivian P. Y. Lee, Wing-Ho Lin, Yiping Lin, Daniel Martin, Kristof Van Den Troost, Luka James Vujcic, Mike Walsh, and Jessica W. Y. Yeung for engaging (or indulging) me in many lively conversations about Asian cinema. I will be forever grateful to Shirley, Robert, Paul, Lucie, Louise, and Ellie, whose love and support I reciprocate in spades.

When I first journeyed to Hong Kong as a PhD student in 2004, David Bordwell took me under his wing. In spite of a jammed schedule, he shared his insights on Wong Kar-wai and Hong Kong film culture. Unsolicited, he supplied me with the contact details of the industry's major players, introduced me to key personnel at the Hong Kong International Film Festival, and offered me the tape recordings of interviews he conducted for his monograph *Planet Hong Kong*. I would come to learn that such kindness was wholly typical of his interactions with students, even ones (like yours truly) he hardly knew. Unfailingly supportive, he showed a belief in my research when there was probably much evidence against me. Later, in London, he served as external examiner of my PhD thesis. When that thesis became a book—the volume you hold in your hands—he wrote a characteristically generous endorsement for the cover. Across two decades, he provided comradeship, sage advice, and much cine-talk during frequent visits to Hong Kong. His passing impoverishes our field and our world. I am ever grateful for his friendship and example.

*Lancaster, September 2024*

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In recent years I have presented my research on Wong Kar-wai at various conferences and symposia, and I am grateful to audiences at the University of California, Los Angeles; the University of Glasgow; Queen Mary University of London; Queens University, East Sussex; Coventry University; Beijing Normal University; the University of Shanghai; National Central University in Taiwan; Assumption University in Thailand; and the University of Pecs in Hungary. In 2010 I undertook research on this book as scholar-in-residence in the David C. Lam Institute for East-West Studies at Hong Kong Baptist University, where I would particularly like to thank Emilie Yueh-yu Yeh. Since 2007 I have taught a course on Hong Kong cinema, and I am grateful to my students for many spirited discussions of Wong Kar-wai and Hong Kong movies.

Additional thanks go to Michael Grant, Debbie Andrews, Nigel Mather, Yiping Lin, Timmy Chen, Kristof Van Den Troost, Wing-Ho Lin, Yvonne Teh, Tim Youngs, Law Kar, Shan Ding, Bey Logan, David Chiang Da-wei, and Peter Chan.

Sarah Sardar, Russell Sardar, Nicola Tapsell, Rob Greens, and Peter Masters have my love and friendship always. Last but not least, I thank my family—Shirley, Robert, Paul, Tracy, and Lucie—for more than words can express.



# 1

## Wong Kar-wai and the Poetics of Hong Kong Cinema

In May 2004 Wong Kar-wai arrived at the Cannes Film Festival, exhausted. His new film *2046* was a competing entry, but Wong delivered the print twelve hours late. Festival organizers hurriedly arranged a last-minute screening. Official selections had to be rescheduled. Disgruntled delegates carped about Wong's tardiness. Worse, the film was not finished. Crucial computer-generated (CGI) sequences had yet to be added; the sound track was defective; whole scenes remained to be shot. Wong had started production in December 1999, but *2046* had become a behemoth, impossible to finish. His crew had been working twenty-four-hour shifts. Now Wong was fatigued and facing censure from critics and festival delegates. The film would win nothing at Cannes, and industry experts forecast retribution against Wong. Commentators debated the long-term effects on Wong's career: Would Cannes ever accept him back again?

The Cannes debacle has become part of Wong's legend. To Wong's detractors, this episode highlights the faults of a self-indulgent filmmaker. By their account, Wong is a notorious wastrel, adopting a shooting ratio so high that entire plotlines are excised from the final cut. His productions balloon over schedule and over budget. He is disorganized; the shooting commences without a script, and he may shoot forty takes of a scene, looking for something ineffable. His method can be "taxing on the actors," Tony Leung wearily notes (Yoke 2000: 30). However, Wong is feted as one of the world's finest directors. As a personality he is iconic, the omnipresent sunglasses an indelible trademark. As a beacon of Hong Kong cinema, he has kept that industry in the public spotlight, even when its fortunes were flagging. Critics hail him as a master of film technique and a romantic artist of the first order. His critics might decry his purported profligacy and self-indulgence, but without his unique production methods—the relentlessly varied takes and rough cuts, the protracted shooting schedules—Wong's films would lose the distinctive aesthetic that makes them so singularly exhilarating and elusive. Put simply, Wong makes splendid films.

Two years after the Cannes fiasco, he was invited back to the festival . . . as president of the jury.

This book treats Wong's films from the perspective of a poetics of cinema. It is concerned with his films as artworks and as aesthetic objects. It seeks to illuminate their narrative and stylistic systems and to account for how they affect spectators. The book places his cinema in context, tracing patterns of influence to pertinent cinematic traditions. More polemically, the book theorizes a poetics of Wong's cinema to fruitfully provide a greater appreciation of the director's artistic achievement. This broad conceptual approach—what David Bordwell calls a poetics of cinema—has so far been marginal to studies of Hong Kong films and filmmakers. Since the early 1990s the reigning approach to Hong Kong film has been culturalism, which posits broad correlations between films and social phenomena. Throughout this book, I aim to show that a poetics can shed light on aspects of Wong's cinema typically neglected by culturalist criticism. Another task of this monograph is to explicate and critique the dominant theories applied to Wong's films. These theoretical stakes frame the book's practical criticism, its formal analyses of Wong's films. These analyses, in turn, provide the marrow of the book. It is only by closely attending to Wong's films that their artistic richness and complexity can be appreciated.

## A Biographical Sketch

Wong Kar-wai was born in July 1958 in Shanghai. At age five he immigrated to Hong Kong with his parents; two older siblings remained behind, stranded in Shanghai's French Quarter as the Cultural Revolution gathered force. Raised in effect as an only child, Wong grew up in the teeming Tsim Sha Tsui District, his isolation compounded by the region's alien dialects. (Wong would not become fluent in Cantonese and English until his teens.) His father managed a trendy nightclub; his mother adored movies, ushering the child to matinee shows. The local theaters served up a diverse menu—Hollywood epics and westerns, British Hammer studio films, Japanese ghost movies, French *policiers*, Mandarin and Cantonese films. In his late teens Wong began studying graphic design. He earned a diploma in the subject, graduating from the Hong Kong Polytechnic in 1980. Shortly after, he enrolled in the training program of local terrestrial station TVB. A stint writing serials and soap operas led to permanent employment at Cinema City, an independent film studio specializing in comedies with a local flavor. Though Wong chafed at the studio's house style, he spent much of the 1980s dutifully hammering out scripts. The finished films were occasionally diverting and mostly disposable—*The Haunted Cop Shop of Horrors* (1987), *Just for Fun* (1983), and *Rosa* (1988) are typical titles. More important was Wong's introduction to colleagues such as Jeff Lau, Patrick

## Afterword

In the decade since this book's first publication, the global veneration of Wong Kar-wai has not waned. Buoyed by critical lionization and unwavering support from festival programmers and cinephile filmgoers—and buttressed by no small measure of shrewd self-promotion—Wong's reputation within world film culture remains formidable. A *Sight and Sound* poll of “the greatest films of all time” promoted *In the Mood for Love* to a vertiginously high ranking (number five) in 2022. Wong retrospectives speckle the theatrical landscape, screening everywhere from London to Dubai. 4K restorations of the seminal works circulate in deluxe home video formats and on streaming platforms. Newspapers publish commemorative articles canonizing the films as classics of Hong Kong cinema. Wong scholarship, too, continues to swell. Student dissertations mine the films for cultural critique; video essays dissect Wong's audiovisual strategies. Then there is social media, which has thrust Wong onto the radar of a new generation of online consumers. YouTubers and TikTokers freely cannibalize and cross-fertilize his oeuvre, distilling episodic scenes into alluring, quickly digestible chunks. Wong's influence is absorbed by fashion designers and songwriters; his films give names to cocktails, menu dishes, and pop-up markets. Not least, the Wong Kar-wai brand continues to be sustained by Jet Tone, which orchestrates judiciously appointed interviews, press releases, and public appearances by the filmmaker. On the company website, a boutique store peddles a potpourri of Wong-themed esoterica.<sup>1</sup>

In short, Wong retains his relevance in the contemporary mediascape. This may surprise us given that he has directed not a single feature film in the years since the first edition of this book was published. Instead, he has funneled his energies into the production of glossy, upscale commercials, which, as

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1. For information on Wong retrospectives, see Rashid (2021); for restorations, see Radaelli (2023). Journalistic articles commemorating Wong's classic films include Havis (2023), (2022a), (2022b), and (2022c). Details of a *Chungking Express*-themed market can be found in Chak (2023). Wong's influence on the world of fashion design is reported in Suen (2023).

Chih-ting Chen points out, “are more conducive to cash flow than his feature films” (2016b: 569). Wong remains active as a producer, conferring cachet upon various movies disseminated by Block 2, Jet Tone’s distribution arm. And in 2023, he directed *Blossoms Shanghai*, a handsomely mounted, long-form television drama pitched at Mainland viewers. At the time of writing, he is expected to refashion the series into a theatrical feature film.

Though Wong’s filmic output atrophied in the wake of *The Grandmaster*, there is much for us to take stock of since that film’s release. In this Afterword, I detail Wong’s recent activity and the enduring legacy of his directorial corpus, updating the cases of appropriation canvassed in Chapter 6. I proceed to survey some of the major trends that have dominated the Wong literature over the past decade, along the way rebutting a cluster of objections that my book encountered in its first iteration. Finally, I seek to open a new line of inquiry, nudging the poetics program onto fresh analytical terrain.

## Recent Activities and (More) Appropriations

If Wong Kar-wai has spent the past decade *not* directing movies, what has he been doing? What accounts for his retreat from the director’s chair? In hindsight, his prolonged layoff from film directing seems to be part of a pattern. The 1990s witnessed Wong at his most industrious, but he began to taper his directorial output following the heady success of *In the Mood for Love* in 2000. Now the hiatuses between new projects became chasms: a three-year interval separated *2046* and *My Blueberry Nights*; a further seven years lapsed before *The Grandmaster* debuted at the Berlinale.

Critical explanations for Wong’s flagging work rate vary. One theory points to the dread march of time: in 2025, the former *enfant terrible* turns sixty-seven years old and may justifiably be slowing down, flirting with retirement. Another opinion holds that the critical encomiums lavished upon *In the Mood for Love* have assailed Wong with an inhibiting sense of “creative pressure.”<sup>2</sup> Call this the *Citizen Kane* syndrome: having created one of “the greatest films of all time,” the filmmaker is obliged to compete with his own *pièce de résistance*. How to match, let alone surpass, so rarefied an achievement? Then there is Wong’s assertion in 1994 that “my biggest *nightmare* is to make a film that I don’t want in my filmography” (Yeung and Lau 2017: 31, italics in original). Like fellow cinephile Quentin Tarantino, Wong fastidiously curates his own auteurist body of work, such that each new film becomes a studied exercise in self-mythologizing and legacy building. According to this view, an excessively self-conscious mode of practice begets artistic paralysis and stagnation.

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2. Author interview with Shu Kei, March 21, 2024, Hong Kong.

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