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Analysis of Wong Kar-Wai's Film Narrative Style in Ashes of Time

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Abstract

The film *Ashes of Time*, released in 1994, holds great significance as the first martial arts film directed by Wong Kar-Wai. This article interprets the intricate narrative structure of the film and analyzes the story of love, hate, and complex emotions portrayed through the interplay of temporal ashes and spatial fragments, which are constructed by the multifaceted relationships among characters such as Ouyang Feng, Huang Yaoshi, Murong Yin, Hong Qi, and The Woman. The aim is to analyze Wong Kar-Wai's unique filmmaking style and provide new insights into interpreting his directorial approach.

Keywords: Wong Kar-Wai, *Ashes of Time*, Film Narrative Style.

1. Introduction

Director Wong Kar-Wai (Wong)'s film works are renowned for their unique "Wong Kar-Wai style" of cinematic artistry, making him one of the most prominent directors in contemporary Chinese cinema. Since the release of his first film in 1988, Wong has directed a total of 10 films: *As Tears Go By* (1988), *Days of Being Wild* (1990), *Chungking Express* (1994), *Ashes of Time* (1994), *Fallen Angels* (1995), *Happy Together* (1997), *In the Mood for Love* (2000), *2046* (2004), *My Blueberry Nights* (2007), and *The Grandmaster* (2013).

This article analyzes the unique "Wong Kar-Wai style" of film narrative employed by director Wong, using his 1994 film *Ashes of Time/Dongxie Xidu* as an example. *Ashes of Time*, as Wong's first martial arts film, holds great significance. When it was released in September 1994, Wong conducted numerous interviews, stating that the film represented a culmination of his previous three works², and it remains the only film he has re-edited and released in 2009 under the title *Ashes of Time Redux*. This article will begin by introducing the background and content of the film *Ashes of Time*, and then proceed to analyze Wong's film narrative style based on its content.

2. Ashes of Time

Ashes of Time (1994/2008) is the only film directed by Wong that has been officially designated as an adaptation⁷. This film is classified as a martial arts film, and the names of its main characters are taken from Louis Cha's (Jin Yong) popular novel, *Eagle-shooting Heroes*. The Chinese title of the film, *Ashes of Time/Dongxie Xidu*, is composed of the titles of two important characters in Jin Yong's novel, namely, "Malevolent East" (*Dongxie*) and "Malicious West" (*Xidu*). This led to high expectations from devoted followers of Jin Yong's novels, as they anticipated a close connection between the film and the familiar plotlines of the novels. However, the outcome was that the film had little resemblance to the expectations of Jin Yong's novel fans, which left them greatly disappointed. As critic Chen Mo stated, "There is no way, and no need, to compare it with the original novel"⁴. Nevertheless, this indirectly reflects the significance of Wong's decision to consider *Ashes of Time* as an adaptation, as it provides valuable insights for analyzing and exploring Wong's directorial style.

The numerous characters in the film are derived from Jin Yong's novels, but their personalities and modes of expression are characteristic of Wong's style.

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The plot portrays the tragic stories unique to each character, showcasing their tangled emotional transformations and the poignant beauty of their lives.

Ouyang Feng: Ouyang Feng is a professional killer agent and the owner of an inn. On the day of his brother's wedding, Ouyang Feng left home because the woman he loved married his brother. He then operated the inn in the desert, catering specifically to guests and conducting business as a broker for assassins. After a series of events, he burns down the inn, returns to his hometown, and is known to the world as "Malicious West."

Huang Yaoshi: He is a dashing swordsman and a good friend of Ouyang Feng. Every year, they make a pact to get drunk together. He is infatuated with Peach Blossom, the wife of another friend, and secretly admires Ouyang Feng's brother's wife. In the end, Huang Yaoshi drinks a wine called Intoxicated Dream in hopes of forgetting everything for the sake of the woman he loves, but it is ultimately self-deception. The final outcome is that Huang Yaoshi retreats to Peach Blossom Island and is known to the world as "Malevolent East."

Murong Yin: She falls in love with Huang Yaoshi, but her brother opposes their relationship, leading her to seek Ouyang Feng's help in having her brother killed. However, her brother is merely a reflection of her internal struggle with this love. In the end, she gives up everything and becomes a renowned swordsman known as "Invincible."

The Woman/Ouyang Feng's sister-in-law (The Woman): She has a sense of hopelessness in her emotions but seems to see through everything. In endless time, she is entangled with the question of whether or not to seek Ouyang Feng, yet deeply feels a sense of weariness and eventually becomes powerless to yearn for him any longer.

The Sunset Warrior: The Sunset Warrior is Peach Blossom's husband and a killer hired by Ouyang Feng. He is determined to see his wife one last time before going blind, but ultimately meets his death in a one-on-hundreds battle against bandits.

Hong Qi: He is a newly recruited killer who can't even afford shoes. Due to his kind-heartedness, he agrees to a job offered by The Peasant Girl, with a basket of eggs as the reward. Although he manages to kill all the enemies, he loses the index finger of his right hand and can no longer hold a knife. In the end, he becomes the leader of the clan of mendicants and is also known as the "Nine-Finger Mendicant."

From the perspective of the entire film, it is not the traditional martial arts film that people have in mind, but a film that tells the love-hate relationships of each character. The film embodies Wong's consistent visual style, completely subverting the conventions of traditional martial arts films.

3. Wong Kar-Wai's Film Narrative Style

The narrative style of a film refers to the "structure (organization) relationship and expressive methods" of a specific film³. It can be roughly divided into two categories: linear narrative structure and non-linear narrative structure. In films such as *As Tears Go By*, *Days of Being Wild*, *Happy Together*, *My Blueberry Night*, *In the Mood For Love*, and *The Grandmaster*, Wong predominantly adopts a linear narrative structure⁵. However, compared to linear narrative structure, Wong is more adept at non-linear narrative, which is a distinctive

feature of his film narrative style. For example, *Ashes of Time*, analyzed in this paper, adopts a typical non-linear circular narrative.

In the circular narrative structure, the director employs various techniques such as montage, flashback, and intercutting to break away from the traditional unified narrative time and create chaotic and confusing temporal scenes⁷. Just as the English translation of *Ashes of Time* suggests, the film portrays the main characters as time itself and the ashes left after time burns⁶. The temporal and narrative elements in the film are fragmented, using the sequential appearance of the traditional Chinese lunar calendar solar terms like "立春" (the Beginning of Spring), "惊蛰" (the Waking of Insects), "夏至" (the Summer Solstice), and "白露" (White Dew) to introduce characters and the stories they tell, but the spatial settings and storylines are not unified along this timeline.

Firstly, from the perspective of individual characters, the entire story revolves around the character Ouyang Feng and is narrated and driven by his voiceover. The opening of the film features Ouyang Feng's self-narration of his friend Huang Yaoshi coming to see him with a jar of wine called "Intoxicated Dream", and they agree to meet and drink every year on "惊蛰" (the Waking of Insects). Huang Yaoshi comes because both he and Ouyang Feng are infatuated with Ouyang Feng's sister-in-law (The Woman), and the wine is brought by her. From this narrative, it is implied that Huang Yaoshi has already met the sister-in-law before his arrival. On the other hand, Murong Yin's appearance is to hire Ouyang Feng to kill someone, driven by her unrequited love for Huang Yaoshi. When Huang Yaoshi decides to drink the wine, he dreams of the shadow of Peach Blossom, but Wong does not reveal Peach Blossom's identity. Such fragmented storytelling prevents the audience from viewing the film with clear and logical thinking, leading to a sense of confusion.

Now, if we look at the relationships between the characters, Peach Blossom and Murong Yin admire Huang Yaoshi, but Huang Yaoshi loves Ouyang Feng's sister-in-law (The Woman), who loves Ouyang Feng. Ouyang Feng evades this love but imagines The Woman through Murong Yin and Peach Blossom¹. Then the story is divided into several segments of love, family, and friendship, narrated through the cyclic relationships between the characters. In the film, Wong further utilizes these cyclic relationships to interweave the narrative segments, creating the following five intersecting character relationships:

Ouyang Feng - Elder Brother – The Woman - Murong Yin - Peach Blossom

Huang Yaoshi – The Woman - Murong Yin - Peach Blossom

Murong Yin - Ouyang Feng - Huang Yaoshi

The Sunset Warrior - Peach Blossom - Huang Yaoshi

The Peasant Girl – The Peasant Girl's Younger Brother - Hong Qi

By alternating and collaging these intricate character relationships, the film presents a more fragmented narrative structure, with interwoven and interconnected character relationships. The story begins with Ouyang Feng hiring an assassin, but it is entangled in complex love relationships, and the story ends with Ouyang Feng hiring an assassin once again. The ending of the film is the beginning, returning everything to the starting point. This manner

ultimately forms a circular structure that connects the beginning and the end of the film.

Wong intentionally employs such techniques in multiple instances throughout the film, creating a chaotic temporal effect and complex character relationships. It is only when the audience finishes watching the entire film and combines the fragments of time and the chaotic narrative details that they discover the unified logic of the story. This circular narrative technique gives the audience a sense of complexity, mystery, and vagueness, showcasing Wong's extremely unique personal narrative style.

4. Conclusion

In general, this article primarily examines the narrative style of the film from the perspective of *Ashes of Time*, focusing on the ashes and fragments burning in the fragmented imagery, which correspond to the intoxication and despair of the characters in the temporal and spatial fragments of the film. Through this analysis, we aim to explore Wong's unique narrative style.

Although this study has conducted a certain analysis of Wong's narrative style in films, it only occupies a small portion among numerous research works. This is because Wong's films hold profound aesthetic significance, and every frame and dialogue in his films deserves our repeated study. As stated by Berlin Film Festival President Dieter Kosslick, "His unique personal style and poeticism in his works captivate everyone, making him one of the most esteemed film directors of our time."

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