A Study of Film Aesthetics of Wong Kar-wai

--Taking "Fallen Angels" as an Example

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Abstract: This research delves into an in-depth exploration of Wong Kar-wai's cinematic approach, with a primary focus on his distinctive film style. To vividly illustrate Wong Kar-Wai's unique visual language, This research will employ his 1995 film "Fallen Angels" as a case study. This cinematic masterpiece serves as an exemplary showcase of Wong Kar-Wai's unparalleled storytelling prowess and distinctive filmic techniques. The paper aims to conduct a comprehensive examination of Wong Kar-Wai's cinematic artistry, with a specific emphasis on four key elements: frameskipping, color filtering, the innovative use of fisheye lenses, and the strategic implementation of slow-motion sequences. Additionally, this analysis highlights the enduring global influence and significance of Wong Kar-Wai's contributions to the world of cinema, emphasizing his lasting impact on filmmaking and storytelling. The comprehensive analysis on the technical skills applied in Wong Kar-Wai's "Fallen Angels" will further contribute to a alternative approach to Hong Kong cinema in the late 20th century.

Keywords: Wong Kar-wai, Fallen Angels, frameskip, filter color, fisheye lens, slowly shot

1.   Introduction

Wong Kar-wai, a visionary filmmaker hailing from Hong Kong, is celebrated for his distinctive and captivating film style that has left an indelible mark on world cinema. Wong Kar-wai has been reputed as a Hong Kong Second Wave filmmaker, internationally renowned as an auteur for his visually unique, highly stylized, emotionally resonant work [1]. Wong Kar-wai has also been called the most aesthetic director by the mass media. Wong Kar-wai took the world by storm in the nineties with his unique style of cinema." Wong is feted as one of the world's finest directors" [2]. His films, particularly those from the 1990s, redefined storytelling by prioritizing emotion and atmosphere over linear plot, allowing him to delve deep into his characters' inner worlds, thoughts, desires, and vulnerabilities.

Known for his masterful use of mood, atmosphere, rich cinematography, and evocative music choices, Wong Kar-wai explores themes such as love, memory, and longing. His distinct approach to filmmaking has pushed the boundaries of storytelling, offering a new definition of cinema [3].Wong Kar-wai's films consistently exhibit a unified theme, storytelling prowess, and a strong sense of continuity. The particular narrative strategies showcases Wong's film aesthetics are especially associated with atmosphere creation and color arrangement.

This paper takes Wong Kar-wai's "Fallen Angels" as an approach to analyze Wong's filmography. In past studies, analysis of Wong Kar-wai's aesthetics styles as well as analysis on particular texts has lied in the central of academia, for instance, in the book of *Fancy Feast* or *The Grandmaster of the Generation.* Yet, not much research has been done on "Fallen Angels". Filmed in a very specific era, "Fallen Angels" is emblematic of Wong Kar-wai's artistic mindset in the 1990s, showcasing his unique methods of emotional expression, photographic aesthetics, and the use of music in his films. These elements combine to create a profoundly emotional and captivating atmosphere.

The film "Fallen Angels" further exemplifies Wong Kar-wai's exploration of urban issues in post-Chongqing Forest Hong Kong, incorporating emerging technologies and innovative cinematic techniques of the 1990s, such as frame-skipping and color filters. The title "Fallen angels" serves as a continuation of the theme of Hong Kong's struggle for identity and freedom, which Wong Kar-wai vividly captures in his distinct style. The movie revolves around three enigmatic characters with various identities, including killers, lovers, and thieves, who lead fragmented lives on the fringes of society. They represent lost souls in pursuit of freedom, yet they appear to be trapped in their quest. Wong Kar-wai's stream-of-consciousness aesthetics are pushed to the extreme in this film, providing a strong commentary on post-modern Hong Kong while showcasing his unique approach to visual storytelling and abstract expression.

2. An Exploration of "Fallen Angel": Plot, Style, and Theme

The film "Fallen Angel", released on September 21, 1995, won the 32nd Golden Horse Film Festival of Taiwan and the 15th Hong Kong Film Awards Hong Kong Film Awards. It charts the subtly interlacing fates of a handful of urban loners, including a coolly detached hitman (Leon Lai Ming) looking to go straight; his business partner (Michelle Reis), who secretly yearns for him; and a mute delinquent (Takeshi Kaneshiro) who wreaks mischief by night [4]. There are two main storylines intertwined in the movie. One storyline follows a professional killer who is ruthless in his missions but lonely inside. The other storyline follows an ex-juvenile delinquent who travels across the city in the darkness of the night, running various small businesses, but who also longs for a more meaningful existence. The fates of these two characters intersect on the busy streets of the city, creating a subtle connection between them. "Fallen Angels" is a continuation of Wong Kar-Wai's work after "Chongqing Forest", still a classic Wong Kar-Wai-style stream-of-consciousness movie, but the main theme of the movie is the pain of human freedom that is not bound will always be with mankind [5]. "Fallen Angels" does not have a clear and specific narrative logic, but through images and lines, it allows the audience to experience, feel, and understand the life journey of the three angels. The movie profoundly explores emotional themes such as loneliness, longing, love, and the complexity of human emotions. This emotional depth has influenced many directors to focus on the emotions and inner changes of their characters in their work.

2.1. Frameskip

Wong Kar-Wai used a lot of frameskip in "Fallen Angels", a new technology to interpret the movie's images differently, using unstable images to guide the audience to feel the instability of the times. A frame is a single image of a film or video. Framing (a shot) involves composing the visual content of a series of frames as seen from a single point of view, i.e., a fixed camera. In the frame is the term used by screenwriters to indicate the entrance of a person or thing into a framed shot [6]. Frameskip in movies refers to a deliberate technique where specific frames of a film are intentionally omitted or skipped during playback. This technique can be used for various artistic and technical purposes to achieve specific visual effects or storytelling goals. Frameskip can have a significant impact on the viewing experience and the overall mood of a film. Filmmakers may use frameskip as an artistic

choice to create a certain rhythm or pacing within a scene or sequence. By omitting frames, they can manipulate the perception of time and movement, resulting in a more stylized or abstract visual effect. This technique can enhance the emotional impact of a scene and draw the audience's attention to specific moments. The entirety of "Fallen Angels" is edited in jerky frames, in the classic Wong Kar-Wai style, utilizing this psychedelic approach to give an overview of the world of the three special angels. The beauty and impact of the images also convey the brokenness of their lives, the sense of separation from the world, and the "messy" secrets they are trying to hide. A sampling of frames is used to illustrate a chaotic Hong Kong, a chaotic image that is also known as "instability". The characteristics of the three angels are refined by their "non-connectedness to society". Each of the three angels has its features, but what they all have in common is their "inability to integrate into society".

2.2. Color Correction

Wong Kar-Wai's film "Fallen Angels" is renowned for its distinctive visual style, characterized by the prominent use of blue filters. Color correction and grading are terms associated with adjusting color in video and film post-production [6]. Color correction is a fundamental process that involves refining a film or video's colors, tones, and overall visual presentation. By meticulously modifying factors such as exposure, contrast, color balance, and saturation, color correction ensures that the imagery appears natural, well-balanced, and serves to enhance storytelling by establishing the intended mood and atmosphere.

This is exemplified in Wong Kar-Wai's "Fallen Angels," where the predominant feature of his work is the remarkable use of color. Wong is celebrated for his unique utilization of color, a powerful visual and emotional tool in his films. His approach to color is a signature aspect of his directorial style, contributing significantly to the creation of mood, atmosphere, and narrative depth in his works. In "Fallen Angels," the application of a blue filter imparts a dark and chilly ambiance to the film, echoing its themes of emotional isolation and urban desolation. The blue filter intensifies the film's cool tone and establishes a distinctive visual aesthetic. Like Wong's other works, the deployment of this filter has become a hallmark of his cinematic style.

Wong's filmography is renowned for its distinct stylistic qualities and his independent aesthetic. He frequently employs color to convey emotions and symbolism, assigning specific colors to particular feelings or themes. For instance, red often represents passion and desire, while blue may signify melancholy or loneliness. This deliberate use of color coding adds depth to his characters and narratives. Green and red, recurrent throughout Wong's filmography, form a thematic visual thread connecting his works, often representing longing, missed connections, and complex relationships. Color shifts are employed to denote changes in time, location, or emotional states, varying from subtle to striking, thereby enriching the story's meaning.

Wong's portrayal of cities, especially Hong Kong, is heavily influenced by his use of color. Neon signs, bustling streets, and cityscapes are captured in vibrant hues that mirror the energy, chaos, and anonymity of urban life. Lighting plays a pivotal role in Wong's color expression, as he often employs dramatic lighting to create contrasting effects of light and shadow, heightening the emotional impact of scenes and characters. He frequently isolates specific objects or elements within predominantly monochromatic scenes to draw attention to focal points that carry significant narrative or emotional weight. A splash of vivid color in a soft palette can symbolize hope, longing, or a turning point in the storyline. Wong also employs black soft filters to adjust the image, providing a smoother texture to highlights and creating a more graphic appearance in the movie. For instance, in "Fallen Angels," every light source exhibits a distinct halo diffusion due to the soft highlights, rendering the image more atmospheric and mysterious.

Through the use of blue filters, "Fallen Angels" effectively conveys the inner loneliness and sense of loss experienced by its characters, adding depth and emotional layers to the film. Wong often employs color changes to indicate shifts in time, space, or emotional states, a technique that enhances the richness of his storytelling.

2.3. Fisheye Lens

Wong Kar-Wai employed fisheye lenses extensively in his film "Fallen Angels," a unique photographic technique that contributed to the movie's distinct visual impact and emotional expression. A circular fisheye lens, in this context, refers to a fisheye lens that fully captures its image circle on the camera sensor [7]. This type of lens offers an even more pronounced wide-angle perspective, emphasizing the distortion and curvature characteristics inherent to fisheye lenses.

The deliberate choice to utilize fisheye lenses for capturing close-ups and characters from ultra-wide angles represents a potent narrative tool in filmmaking. The slight distortions and obstructions introduced by the lens into the frame create an impression of voyeurism, inviting the viewer to observe the characters from an intimate, almost intrusive perspective. This adds a layer of depth to the story, allowing the viewer to observe the characters from a third-person perspective, highlighting the emotional distance between the characters and their surroundings. This visual approach highlights themes of alienation, loneliness, and unconventional relationships between characters and society at large.

In essence, the use of the circular fisheye lens is more than just a technical choice; it becomes a storytelling device that magnifies the psychological state of the characters, their social roles, and their interactions with each other. By utilizing the unique distortions and curvatures of the lens, filmmakers can vividly portray a world that is both visually appealing and thematically meaningful, capturing the essence of the character's experiences and the underlying themes of the narrative.

2.4. Slowly Shot

Wong Kar-Wai extensively utilized slow-motion techniques in his film "Fallen Angels," a common directorial approach employed to enhance emotional expression and visual aesthetics in cinema. The term 'slow cinema' refers to a model of art or experimental film that possesses a set of distinct characteristics: an emphasis upon extended duration (in both formal and thematic aspects); an audio-visual depiction of stillness and everydayness; the employment of the long take as a structural device; a slow or undramatic form of narration (if the narrative is present at all); and a predominantly realist (or hyperrealist) mode or intent [6].

Slow-motion is a favorite shooting technique of director Wong Kar-Wai, and his films frequently feature numerous slow-motion sequences that convey a sense of "stream of consciousness" through this technique. Slow-motion adds a wealth of emotional detail and intensifies visual aesthetics. Slow-motion is a filming technique used in movies, television shows, or other visual media to make the action in the frame slow and detailed by slowing down the camera. Slow-mo shots often emphasize details, emotions, or important moments. Slow-motion is widely used in movies and TV shows to convey emotion, tension, and drama in a variety of ways. It can be used to highlight important actions and give the audience a better sense of the emotions or tension of the characters. For instance, in "Fallen Angels," there's a scene where Angel Two is calmly eating in a restaurant while her new partner engages in a chaotic fight behind her. The slow-motion here accentuates her nonchalant demeanor, underlining her detachment and resilience in the face of chaos. This scene aligns with the film's title, "Fallen Angels," illustrating the chaotic and depraved cultural backdrop of 1990s Hong Kong.

Slow-motion can also serve to enhance special effects, such as battle sequences, explosions, or chases in action films. In "Fallen Angels," Angel One, an assassin, is involved in multiple gunfights, and slow-motion is effectively used to emphasize crucial details. Wong Kar-Wai, as a filmmaker with a penchant for storytelling, utilizes slow-motion to embellish the visuals and mitigate the viewer's sense of horror. The deliberate use of slow-motion is a potent visual tool that heightens the dramatic impact of a scene, enabling the audience to immerse themselves in the emotions and intricacies of the moment. Another scene should be noted that when Angel Two rests her head on Angel Three's back while riding a motorcycle at high speed, her expression remains cold. However, her lonely heart momentarily seems to warm. Both angels understand that this warmth will be fleeting, but in this instance, the two lonely souls find a brief solace in each other's presence. The use of slow-motion at this moment effectively conveys their sense of isolation amidst the city's unresolved chaos, providing a poignant depiction of loneliness and confusion.

Slow-motion can also be employed to enhance special effects, a technique notably different from the Italian Neorealism style, which often presented slower-paced narratives with characters drifting through everyday life rather than embarking on extraordinary adventures like Hollywood heroes [8]. "Fallen Angels" serves as a prime example illustrating this concept. This is evident in various scenes such as action-packed battles, explosive sequences, or high-speed chases typical of action films. In the film "Fallen Angels," Angel One, an assassin, engages in multiple gunfights where slow-motion is skillfully used to accentuate crucial details. Wong Kar-Wai, known for his storytelling prowess, utilizes slow-motion to adorn the visual elements of the film and alleviate the audience's sense of dread. This deliberate utilization of slow-motion serves as a powerful visual tool, intensifying the dramatic impact of each scene and allowing the viewers to fully immerse themselves in the emotions and intricacies of the moment. Another noteworthy scene features Angel Two resting her head on Angel Three's back while riding a high-speed motorcycle, maintaining a cold expression. However, a fleeting warmth appears in her otherwise lonely heart. Both angels comprehend that this fleeting warmth will not endure, yet in this particular moment, these two isolated souls find a brief respite in each other's company. The utilization of slow-motion during this instance effectively communicates their isolation within the city's chaotic, unresolved backdrop, offering a poignant portrayal of loneliness and bewilderment.

3.   Recontextualizing the Film Aesthetics of Wong Kar-Wai

Local critics wholeheartedly embraced Wong Kar-wai's distinctive style, identifying him as an exciting and innovative new director, part of a vanguard leading a "second new wave" of Hong Kong filmmakers [2]. This assertion underscores the fact that Wong Kar-wai's films prominently featured artistic elements and narrative techniques that garnered recognition and acclaim from critics. His unconventional approach to filmmaking and storytelling set him apart from the conventional norms of his era. This distinction earned him the title of an "exciting new director," signifying that both critics and audiences were enthralled by his work. Wong Kar-wai's films were instrumental in ushering in a "second new wave" of Hong Kong filmmakers who were pushing creative boundaries and reshaping the landscape of cinema.

This period marked a departure from traditional approaches, contributing to the evolution of Hong Kong cinema and its impact on the global film industry. The Cannes Film Festival feted Wong for Happy Together, awarding him the Best Director palm in 1997 [2]. Cannes Film Festival Prestige: The Cannes Film Festival is one of the most prestigious and renowned film festivals globally, held annually in Cannes, France. Being recognized at Cannes holds significant importance in the film industry as it signifies acknowledgment from peers, critics, and international audiences. Wong Kar-wai receiving the Best Director award at Cannes is a testament to his directorial prowess and innovative filmmaking techniques. This honors not only his ability to craft compelling narratives but

also his skill in guiding actors, visuals, and overall film direction. The Cannes Film Festival attracts international attention and showcases films from all over the world. Wong's award at the Cannes Film Festival has helped to raise his global profile, bringing his work to a wider audience outside of his native Hong Kong and fostering international recognition of Asian cinema [9]. Winning the Best Director Award at the Cannes Film Festival reflects Wong Kar-wai's contribution to the art of cinema and his impact on the film industry [10].

The award recognizes Wong's ability to create meaningful and visually compelling narratives that resonate with audiences and critics alike. This prestigious award not only highlights the quality of Wong Kar-wai's filmmaking but also underscores his place among the most respected directors in global cinema. With the creation of the Wong Kar-wai style aesthetic, the movie "Fallen Angels" showed a lot of Hong Kong style in the 1990s, in which the women's looks were very urban, and became a guide for everyone to wear. Yorgos Lanthimos, a Greek filmmaker known for films like "The Lobster" and "The Favourite," has expressed admiration for Wong Kar-wai's work. Lanthimos also creates unconventional narratives with a focus on human emotions and relationships, similar to Wong's approach. While their visual styles may differ, Lanthimos's exploration of psychological depth and unusual dynamics echoes Wong's emphasis on emotional complexity.

4.   Conclusion

In conclusion, Wong Kar-wai's influence on world cinema is undeniable, as his visionary and compelling style of filmmaking redefined storytelling and aesthetics. As a Hong Kong "second wave" filmmaker, he is internationally renowned for his unique, highly stylized, emo, and emotionally resonant work. Wong's films transcend traditional narrative structures and immerse the audience in a realm where emotion and conclusion take precedence over linear plot. His ability to blend visual poetry with complex storylines has earned him acclaim and made him one of the world's finest directors. Wong Kar-Wai's films are often characterized by their rich cinematography, evocative musical choices, and exploration of themes such as love, memory, and longing.

Wong Kar-wai's influence is evident in his unique use of color, his captain's use of emotion, symbolism, and mood. His meticulous attention to lighting and color palette allows him to convey intricate emotions and create a visual language that enhances storytelling. His films feature themes of urban loneliness and the pain of searching for identity and freedom, skillfully captured through the experiences of his characters.

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