

Critique

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The Blue River of Love Flows in A Flamboyant World Revisiting *The Chunking Express*

A young police officer in Hong Kong is anxiously awaiting his estranged girlfriend's return. They broke up a month ago. Desolately he mentally notes the date in May when his love ceased to exist. Munching on tinned pineapple, her favourite food, he waits for his girlfriend. The expiry date of the pineapple tin coincided with that ill-fated day in May.

His girlfriend does not come. However, just two hours before his love expires, he sees a mysterious woman- a drug dealer who is always conspicuously clad in a raincoat and wears dark sunglasses. "You cannot tell when it rains and when it shines," the mysterious woman mutters.

The young cop meets this woman at a bar and approaches her in a friendly manner. Initially, the woman expresses her apprehension, but eventually, she loosens up and accompanies him to his room. After eating salads and binging on old movies on his television set, the woman spent the night in his room in deep slumber.

The young man goes to the jogging track in the morning to run and shed away his sweat. He once pronounced his belief that it is better to shed sweat instead of shedding tears in love and that sweating through physical rigour leaves no water in the body for tears. Just as he was about to leave the jogging track with his sweaty body, he received a message from a woman on his pager - Happy Birthday. The young man feels intoxicated with the joy of finding

love. The drug dealer shot dead her business partner and disappeared on the street.



The second young man is also a police officer who shares a similar story. He has been abandoned by his air hostess girlfriend. The listless young man talks to himself in a lonely room and remembers his

girlfriend. Now a waitress in a restaurant is attracted to him. However, he is oblivious to this fact and discovers it only by chance. Ironically the day he decides to talk about love and meets her/the waitress in the evening at the *California Restaurant*, his girlfriend goes to a place called California in search of a new life.

A year has passed by. The owner had sold the restaurant to the young police officer and embarked on another business. In the meantime, the policeman meets his ex-girlfriend with her new friend. During the meeting, he feels that a little residue of love may still be alive in the deepest corner of his ex-girlfriend's heart. The restaurant waitress returns; this time, she is an air hostess! They both move towards a reunion.

These two love stories were the central theme of director Wang Kai War's film *Chungking Express*. Wang Kar Wai's films have won a slew of coveted awards at many film festivals and competitions at a national and international level. Wang Kar Wai is one of the leading directors of the contemporary world, and *Time* magazine has rightly commented that Wang is the future of cinema'.

The innovative interpretation of love, frustration, loneliness, longing and achievement in these two stories and the palpable sense of energy translates to an unforgettable viewing experience. The unique and rather unconventional portrayal of these two love stories convinces the audience why Wang Kar Wai is respected as a world-class film director.

At the outset, a common thread binds both stories- for both are love stories. Love can be lost for once, but the loss cannot be concluded immediately. After a period of waiting, it may come back, sometimes in how you think and sometimes in how you least anticipate. But it carries fresh possibilities and promises of a new life each time. There are two stories of the same tone in a single movie with no narrative connection to each other. Hence it is natural to wonder - wouldn't this treatment loosen the structure of the film?

Chang Ching Mansion is a famous market in Hong Kong that attracts people worldwide. This market is the main background against which the stories unfurl. Wang Kar Wai's camera moves relentlessly to convey the excitement, turmoil and movement of this market that is always surging with people and their interesting activities. The visual imagery, a combination of blurred and sharp images in vibrant colours, reflects the scene's mood and places the principal character in a focal point (thus maintaining the spine of the story). The two principal characters are lonely amidst this busy and colourful market, and this juxtaposition is achieved deftly through visual imagery. The camera almost constantly follows the characters to capture their moods in the loneliness that they are living in. This contrast is the main driving force of the film.

In the first story, the two characters have extreme differences: one is a policeman, and the other is a criminal. The canvas of contrast is quite expansive. One character is soft-hearted, and the other is cold and cruel. One's house is calm, while the other's is restless. One is lost in the past; the other is busy with the present. These contrasts are expressed through the movements of the camera. There is also an unprecedented skill and aesthetic beauty in using colour. The scenes are brightly coloured whenever

the market or some open space is captured. And whenever the narrative describes the characters' inner world, the camera abandons all attention to colour and captures everything in an almost monochrome form. This colour is sometimes blue and sometimes green. The camera maintains the same character in both stories. Throughout the film, the camera speaks to the audience in a diverse tone of cinematic language. Sometimes the camera uses the language of prose, sometimes the language of poetry, sometimes the language of mystery novels and so on. Every shot of the film is pregnant with the subtlety of thought and depth of feeling.

It will not be an exaggeration to say that this film demonstrates near-unparalleled sophistication and dexterity regarding camerawork. In other words, the camera angles and movements directly aid in subtly and overtly interpreting the narrative.

The protagonist of the first episode is tired of waiting for a message from his girlfriend and calls another old acquaintance. His friend is married now, and his second friend is busy with her family. The first shot is taken from the outside of the restaurant. The hero is standing and making a call- traditionally, the main object should be in the prime space of the frame; however, in the first shot, the hero is standing in the corner of the frame. The second shot is taken in the same environment; the hero sits in the corner of the frame as if he is completely exhausted. The camera's perspective instantly reveals everything. The camera connects to the protagonist's mental state by keeping him in partial darkness and partial light (amidst the colourful environment), and this interplay of light and shade add a different dimension to the cinematic narrative.

The second scene is from the second part, where the hero recovers a piece of paper (coming from the heroine) which contained important information. However, the information is indecipherable as the paper is soaked in water. In this scene, the protagonist is inside the restaurant, and the camera captures the scene through the window from the outside. The rain is flowing down the window, and it seems to be soaking the entire shot and spreading it. In subtle juxtaposition, the hero is standing dry beyond the window. The colourful

surroundings outside the window flow with the water, and a sense (somewhat alarming and swift) is conveyed that this colourful frame will soon disappear into the water. The story says the same thing- all the colours of the hero's vibrant and lively world disappear before his eyes like the paper melting in the water.

These are just two small examples of narrative patterns structured with visual elements. Every shot in the film is shot with equal attention and equal importance. Every attempt is an unimaginable application of colour and camera movement. The camera is sometimes moving fast and sometimes unexpectedly still. The camera moves forward almost constantly as if the audience slowly enters the protagonist's mind.

The heroine of the second part loves Western music; she listens to songs at high-volume decibels. Music is quite her elixir, for she works with music and often dances to the beats of the songs. She accidentally finds the keys to the hero's house. The heroine, who is secretly attached to the hero, stealthily enters his house and enjoys working there in his absence, which reveals her ardent desire to become his wife. However, ironically there is no expression of 'working secretly' as a feeling and sense of cheerfulness pervades the scene. There is Western music playing in the background, and the camera follows the rhythm of its movement. The camera movement and music are so inextricably linked to the story's mood and the characters' behaviour that they cannot be separated. They complement each other at all times and strengthen the structure of the film's narrative.

The director resorted to Hindi songs for the background score, showing the drug dealer heroine with Indian workers. This portion also includes a fast beat portion of a '*khayal*' form of Indian classical music.

The fast rhythm introduced/used during a murder scene makes the scene incredibly dynamic. An altogether different and unfamiliar sound is added, which is rarely used in the background music of films. In the lonely moments, the sad notes played by the

saxophone rise from the background and translate to a visual image. Director Wang Kar Wai has used the camera, sound and colour to such an extent that it is impossible to explain the sheer magic he has created in words.

The screenplay is not a traditional three-act screenplay. It's a two-act script. The first part includes the first act, and the rest consists of the second act. Two completely different stories are contained in this two-act script. The emotion of romantic love and the restaurant in the market are the only two cementing factors of these two distinct and separate stories. The waitress is not seen in the first act, but after the film ends, her absence is felt throughout the movie. The first episode is like a prelude to the film, taking the viewer into a familiar but newly discovered world of love and its background. The second part seems to be another version of the same story. Wang Kar Wai moves the story forward so passionately but indifferently that none can tell when the first story ends and the second story begins. In other words, the transitions are seamless. Both episodes have flashback scenes. In the first episode, the ex-girlfriend is absent; it seems that she will appear at any moment, and the hero's waiting transforms into the audience's waiting. The second part features the presence of the ex-girlfriend in the opposite environment, once expected, once unexpected.

Although the film incorporates two different stories (addressed in two other parts), the appeal created by both elevates the movie to another level altogether. The film is organically one film despite the juxtaposition of two stories. Rich in imagination, this film is not a narrative of a linear story but a visual explosion of deep feeling. The expression of the feeling of love in many unconventional ways, with unprecedented excellence in artistic and technical aspects, translates to a cinematic marvel. The primary colours in this film are blue, red and yellow. This is the colour of the appearance, the colour of the inside is blue, and the colour of love is blue. The blue colour that flows throughout the film is like the blue river of love that flows through the earth.

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