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A Means to an End, A Means to an End, A Means to an End:

Repetition through two filmmakers and four films

by

Alec Buzzell

Wong Kar-wai is an auteur whose body of work constitutes over 20+ short and feature films. Wong is a Hong Kong director with a unique audio-visual style. His audio-visual style works best to enhance and compliment his film's themes of loss, love, and memory. Wong's films are a body of work that can be compared to other filmmakers and examined under many different critical theory lenses. This essay analyzes Wong Kar-wai's films using the lens of psychoanalysis. The focus is on the unofficial Wong Kar-wai trilogy: *Days of Being Wild* (1990), *In the Mood for Love* (2000), and *2046* (2004). Ultimately, this essay is the accompaniment to *Ellipsis* the short film that seeks to recreate the mood and tones of Wong Kar-wai's work using his audio-visual style as a jumping point to think of ways I can develop my own style.

Wong Kar-wai was born in Shanghai, China on July 17, 1958. At age five, his family decided to move to British-controlled Hong Kong because of the growing unrest in China - soon to become the Chinese Cultural Revolution under Mao Zedong. Wong has recounted in interviews about going to the theatre as a child with his mother. "We would watch ghost stories and cultural films, French films, Cantonese films -- all kinds of films. We just wanted to spend some time in cinemas" (Feinberg). Wong's filmmaking career, however, began when he dropped out of a graphic design college program to join the local TV station. Wong worked first as a television screenwriter. His first credit as a film screenwriter is for the 1982 Hong Kong film by Agnes Ng, *Once Upon a Rainbow*. Wong Kar-wai's directorial debut was in 1988 when his Hong Kong gangster film, *As Tears Go By*, was released.

At the time, Hong Kong New Wave directors such as Tsui Hark, Wong Jing, and John Woo had become leaders in the East Asian film scene, and gangster films had replaced the 1970s kung fu films. *As Tears Go By* was released right after John Woo's 1986 film, *A Better*

Tomorrow, which was a huge commercial and international success. Wong Kar-wai's, *As Tears Go By*, tells the story of a gangster in love with his cousin who is also always trying to keep his partner out of trouble. *As Tears Go By* was Wong Kar-wai's highest grossing film until *The Grandmaster* was released in 2013. Wong was nominated for Best Director and Best Picture at the Hong Kong Film Awards. This is interesting in contrast to the words of reviewers in the United States when the film was released on DVD in 2008. "*As Tears Go By* heralds a new vision not yet in perfect focus. Easily summarized, the plot is entirely secondhand...the movie finds its true purpose in a tone (dreamy fatalism), a texture (impressionist grunge) and a pose (so, so cool)" (Lee). And provoking even more that the next film Wong released, *Days of Being Wild* (1990), which was widely advertised for its famous actors, was a flop at the box office.

Days of Being Wild is the first film in the unofficial Wong Kar-wai trilogy. Peter Brunette, author of the book *Wong Kar-wai* wrote, "With *Days of Being Wild*, his second film, Wong plunges unequivocally into what will be his greatest themes, love and time" (16). The film centers on Yuddy, a young twenty-something whose adopted mother won't tell him anything about his birth mother. Yuddy strolls through the film using and throwing aside women, bickering with his adopted mother, and acting without a care whether he lives or dies. There are others that he interacts with too, a young woman, Su Li-zhen, who fall in love with him, but of course Yuddy will never commit. Su Li-zhen goes on to meet a police officer, Chow, who in turn develops a crush on her. Yuddy moves on to another woman, Leung, who quickly becomes as enamored as her predecessor, but jealously so. When Yuddy inevitably dumps her, his best friend, Tide, reveals that he loves Leung. But Leung vehemently rejects him. Yuddy eventually finds his birth mother in the Philippines but she refuses to see him. Yuddy walks away without looking back, and at the end of the film, he is dead on train, murdered for stealing a fake

passport. Wong has said of *Days of Being Wild*, “I could have continued making films like *As Tears Go By* for the rest of eternity but I wanted to do something more personal after that. I wanted to break the structure of the average Hong Kong film” (Brunette 5).

The next film Wong directed was *Ashes of Time*. It was another commercial flop, but an elegant subversion of genre by Wong who took the martial arts film and made it his own. It focuses more on the spaces between fighting, the waiting. It was during the production of *Ashes of Time* that Wong made *Chungking Express* (1994). *Chungking Express* is often regarded as the “happiest” of Wong’s films. It is tinged with an exuberant mood that is much more often calm, inevitable doom in Wong films. *Chungking Express* enjoyed commercial success, as well as the attention of Quentin Tarantino whose production company helped the DVD distribution of the film in the United States. *Fallen Angels* was released next in 1995. This film was a return to the gangster genre for Wong, but again he subverted genre in favor for his aesthetic. The film is in many ways a distant sequel to *Chungking Express*. *Happy Together* was released in 1997 and focuses on two homosexual expatriates living in Argentina. This was a departure for Wong whose heavy focus on romantic entanglements was, until this film, all heterosexual, and centered on the space of Hong Kong. Wong won the Best Director award at the Cannes Film Festival for *Happy Together*.

In 2000 Wong Kar-wai released *In the Mood for Love*. It received international acclaim, competing for the Palm d’Or at Cannes, and swept the 16th Hong Kong Film Awards. *In the Mood for Love* follows a married man, Chow Mo-wan, and a married woman, Su Li-zhen, who discover their spouses are cheating on them with each other. They undergo a process of meeting each other, discovery of their spouses’ infidelity, reenactment of how it could have happened, and ultimately falling for each other and then falling apart because, “I thought we wouldn’t be

like them. But I was wrong” (Chow Mo-wan to Su Li-zhen, *In the Mood for Love*). Reidar Due, author of *Love in Motion* wrote that, “the cinema of Wong Kar-wai is akin to a kind of phenomenology of love. It is a cinema that seeks to include society, sex, emotion, historical conditions and personal character traits within the phenomenon of love, while at the same time suggesting that love in itself as a phenomenon is different in kind from any of these components” (Due 142). This is true especially of Wong’s films, and of *In the Mood for Love* which plays a lot with the constricting social codes of two married adults in Hong Kong in the 1960s.

In 2004, Wong released *2046*. The final segment of the Wong “trilogy.” It follows Chow Mo-wan, again played by Tony Chui-Wai Leung, as he writes about the fictional land of 2046. Chow is in still reeling from his separation from Su Li-zhen, the one he can never forget. Within Chow’s story about the year, or place, titled 2046, there is a man who falls in love with an android. In Chow’s life, he deals with the loss of Su Li-zhen by entertaining the company of many different women, some he loves and many he doesn’t. Chow in this film was the basis for my examination of the individual in a Wong film. Chow does not have a singular love interest that he can try to attain or not attain, he already lost her in a previous film and *2046* is about the fallout.

In 2004, Wong Kar-wai wrote and directed the section “The Hand” that was a part of the film *Eros* featuring work from Wong, Michelangelo Antonioni, and Steven Soderbergh. In 2007, Wong directed his first English speaking film, *My Blueberry Nights*, starring Norah ones, Jude Law, Natalie Portman, and Rachel Weisz. Also in 2007, Wong released the “There’s Only One Sun.” A short film in French that feature a collaboration with cinematographer, Philippe Le Sourd, with whom Wong would work with on his most recent release *The Grandmaster* (2013). *The Grandmaster* is a martial arts film about Ip Man, the man who trained Bruce Lee. It is one of

the more commercial-looking of Wong Kar-wai's films, but certainly retains his style of storytelling. Since then, Wong has not made a feature film, however he is rumored to be the director of the film *Blossoms* which was announced to be in the process of creation in 2015.

There are three scenes, which best describe the impact of Wong Kar-wai on the making of *Ellipsis*. The first is the scene from *Days of Being Wild* of Yuddy walking away from his birth mother's house. The second is the scene from *In the Mood for Love* of Chow and Su Li-zhen sitting in the westernized diner, eating together. The final scene is from 2046 and it is not so much a scene as a series of the same location over time: the rooftop of Chow's apartment building.

The scene with Yuddy begins with a long shot of him walking towards the house in the background, and in the foreground, is the family crest set atop an iron fence. It is immediately clear that Yuddy's birth mother is wealthy. There is a cut to inside the house, a picture hanging on a wall and then a pan down and we get to see Yuddy's mother. She walks through the dark room toward the curtained windows and - cut to - the back of Yuddy's head in a handheld shot as he walks away. Throughout the scene, Yuddy is narrating the event, telling us that while we see his mother, he never does. She doesn't want to see him. As he walks away he doesn't turn back, so that she will never get a glance at his face either. Abbas Ackbar has written that the shot of Yuddy walking away in pairing with similar shots earlier in the film "shows that self-possession is just the other face of a sense of loss" (Ackbar 52). Yuddy's self-proclaimed independence and defiance is the mark of his loss.

The beginning long shot, establishes the birth mother's wealth, and putting Yuddy in the background, overshadowed by the looming family crest states that he is insignificant. Despite being born into this family, he was not, and is not wanted. The first thing we see inside the

house, is the portrait of a woman, perhaps a grandmother. It is huge and prominent and we pan to the next generation, Yuddy's mother, suggesting feminine power here. From how we have seen Yuddy treat his girlfriends and adopted mother prior, he could never survive in such a place. His defiance in walking away is at once satisfying and angering. We are satisfied because Yuddy is our main character whom we might have grown to empathize with, and he is getting revenge. But Yuddy throughout the film has also shown us he is not a good person by any means, and his defiance is turned against us as we are put into the mother's perspective when viewing Yuddy in this scene by only seeing his back.

The opening scene of *Ellipsis* is the main character, Lyle, walking away from the camera while the dialogue from the scene beforehand (that we do not get to see – as we do not see Yuddy's interaction with whoever told him his mother did not want to see him) can be heard. In *Ellipsis*, Lyle's back is at first played to curiosity. Who is he? - is often answered by physical description, but we do not get the satisfaction of knowing just yet. Lyle walks away, in slow-motion, from a stationary camera. Complicating the scene, we are given the point of view of the person Lyle has just left, someone who knows him intimately. Lyle is at the end of a story we will never see. Showing something so final lends itself to the notion that throughout the film, what will be seen is the result of what is now past. The walking away and out of sight at the beginning of the film is flipped at the end when we are treated to jump cuts of Lyle getting closer and closer until his face fills the screen. This face to the audience, and the self-aware accompanying monologue is Lyle's way of pretending that he can fall apart – something we have not seen from the stable if boring man so far. Most of the film Lyle is doing everyday things by himself with little to no other human interaction. This direct interaction with the audience speaks to the nature of his relationship with society.

The visual effect of slow-motion is one I find aesthetically pleasing, and I included a lot of slow-motion in *Ellipsis*. I decided to take the slow-motion a step further and include still images at the end of one scene and as the entirety of another. In using still images that flash like pictures being taken, I allude to the main character's photography background. But this also confronts the notion of film as a moving picture. Within *Ellipsis*, time is captured in a standstill.

The motivation behind this was to visualize time, a theme Wong Kar-wai works with a lot. Wong's films could be described as ones where failure is on display, whether that is the failure of a character's subjectivity or the failure of time itself. While he is notorious for his inclusion of shots of just clock faces, and including dialogue or monologue with allusions to specific dates and times, it is all to reveal that no matter how much we care about or invest in time, it fails us by endlessly repeating itself. Or the subjects of drive fail time by repeating themselves no matter how much time they are given. Cinema has a tricky relationship with time. Todd McGowan writes in his book *Out of Time* that, "the cinema teaches us to value time even as it emphasizes time's fleetingness" (4). What the cinema can do formally is "attempt to introduce spectators to an alternative way of experiencing existence in time" (9). McGowan goes on to argue that "contemporary atemporal cinema is a cinema of the drive, in which narrative is oriented around a foundational moment of traumatic loss" (10).

McGowan explains in his book *The Name of the Game*, that in psychoanalysis, "the object of desire always disappoints the subject, but the obstacle to this object provides a constant source of satisfaction" (McGowan 6). This describes a subject of drive, one who gets enjoyment from repetitive failure, because what psychoanalysis posits is that the future, or the passage of time, offers only one possibility, "that of a new form of repetition" (McGowan 12). Characters in Wong Kar-wai's films are all subjects of drive. They all struggle to make connections and

relationships work. But really, the characters “pursuit of the lost object serves as an alibi for the repetition of loss and the satisfaction that this repetition provides. The desire for the lost object hides the drive to repeat its loss” (McGowan 11). Character’s in Wong’s films are individuals in that they are isolated subjects of drive, however, often it is “dependency that shows itself as independence” (Abbas 52).

The second influential scene for *Ellipsis* comes from *In the Mood for Love* and is the second diner scene. It opens on the camera moving over a booth partition to get a better look at Su Li-zhen examining the menu. Chow is then revealed to be seated across from her in an over-the-shoulder shot. Su Li-zhen wants him to order for her, she wants him to order what his wife would eat. At this point the two know they are being cheated on and are about to engage in role playing each other’s spouses. Chow also wants her to pick out what her husband would eat. The two are then shown seated at the booth, and Chow puts a condiment on Su Li-zhen’s plate that his wife would eat. She uses it, despite clearly not enjoying it herself. The scene then jumps in time to where the two are featured in a different dress and suit respectively, still seated at the same diner just on a different day.

The way that passage of time is shown in the diner scene motivated me towards the scene in *Ellipsis* where Lyle sits at his dinner table eating breakfast. I wanted to use a pan and switch out shirts to show, via mise-en-scene and repetition, the passage of time. This also lent itself to characterization. Lyle is shown to be a man with a routine, boring, predictable. But the passage of time is romanticized with the music and slow-motion and lighting. Something mundane is turned into a compelling image. Wong Kar-wai does this often, taking ordinary moments such as walking down a dirt road, dancing in the kitchen, or sitting in a car, and using his audio-visual eye transforms these actions into beautiful and complex moments.

The scene(s) from *2046* to influence *Ellipsis* is that of Chow and various women on the rooftop of the Oriental Hotel. The shot is repeated several times throughout the film and features the large Hotel sign taking up a large portion of the right half of the screen. In the left half of the screen is the tiptop of a few trees, and in the top left, the character's, standing, leaning, smoking, looking at each other or off at whatever they can see from the top of the building. The recurring nature of this scene speaks to the way Wong Kar-wai formally uses repetition throughout all his films. Throughout his body of work, he uses specific images or sounds again and again. There are his car scenes where one person leans carefully against another. Rain is always featured in a Wong Kar-wai film, usually falling fast while the sound stays at the normal pace, creating a split between audio and visual. On the auditory level, Wong loves character monologue and even his dialogue is seamlessly poetic. Sometimes, it is as if each character is really talking to themselves when they are talking to each other. There is always cigarette smoke wafting through the air in a Wong Kar-wai film. Wong's films also have a certain color scheme to them: a palate of muted neon and occasionally black and white footage.

I utilized the theme of repeating shots, images, and dialogue in *Ellipsis*. The opening scene's dialogue is featured again near the end of the film. There are two songs in the film, one of which is repeated over and over in different scenes. I have two scenes that use slow-motion and panning to convey tone. I also paid close attention to the number of seconds between still images or clips keeping them all consistent for a certain pacing.

Wong Kar-wai's films examine individuals in relation to each other, and to the society around them, namely Hong Kong society, and the distinct cultural and historical factors of that space. What Wong Kar-wai's films evoke are missed opportunities between two people. My question was what would an individual look like in the world of Wong Kar-wai.

Ellipsis is an exploration of the individual. The character of Lyle is embroiled in a cyclical pattern of failure. His trauma is revealed in the repeating scene in the film where he gazes at the photograph of a woman in black and white - the lost object. Throughout the film, he exhibits traits of someone taking care of themselves: sleeping, eating, dressing nicely, working out even. But that is all we see. Nothing extraordinary happens in the film, but this is like Wong Kar-wai who renders the mundane into a story.

At the beginning of the filmmaking process I was working with a script about two characters who discover that they don't know as much as they thought they did about each other. I had actors and was working with a cinematographer I have a good relationship with. However, as a student I quickly ran into the common problem of coordinating others who are volunteering to help. It was also not the right idea. And so, I discussed with Professor Yoo scrapping what I had so far and going back to the beginning with an idea I was passionate about. I also decided to work as an individual entirely. This allowed me the freedom of time, a huge benefit, but also gave me constraints in terms of camera movement and characters.

I decided to only write a treatment for the film and like Wong Kar-wai forgo a strict script for trying to build an atmosphere within and in between scenes while filming. This made me focus a lot more on going to a location and exploring the way I and the camera could move within space. I had to literally be on location and think about lighting, the time of day, mise-en-scene, and then go back and take the time to look at footage in the moment and redo scenes until they were what I wanted. This style of shooting was also conducive to Wong Kar-wai's notorious vice of shooting 3x as much footage as he will ever use in the final film.

At first my character, Lyle, was named Oscar and modeled after the Oscar from *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. In that novel, Oscar is a young boy struggles with his identity as a

fat Dominican virgin. Throughout the novel, he wants to love a woman, he has this desire, but it is also shaped because of society's pressures. I thought my Oscar could be a man who wants to fall in love with a woman because of society's heteronormativity. Oscar would have the goal of wanting to be in love with a woman. But the truth would be revealed in the latter half of the film when Oscar made a friend, a man, and it would be shown he was denying his homosexuality. So, the man is rejected despite Lyle's not completely ignorant admission that he could be happy or at least escape his self-destructive cycle by letting the man into his life.

I showed my footage to Professor Yoo as I filmed it and we knew the first two scenes I shot (the first bedroom scene in slow-motion with the pan, and the eating breakfast slow-motion pans) worked. As soon as I had a draft of the film I wanted to show others I asked for opinions because besides being a film that emulated Wong Kar-wai I also wanted to have created an interesting and engaging film. I was lucky enough to run into a former UVM film and television alum who gave me invaluable feedback. First, he encouraged me to cut what I had down – I ended up going from a 15-minute film to 5-minute film - without losing substance. He also let me know what was working visually and he could comment upon my Wong Kar-wai influences since he was familiar with his films.

Ellipsis as the name of my film, serves several functions. *Ellipsis* as 'the space between any two things' alludes to the spaces throughout the film. The space between Lyle and everyone else, Lyle and himself, the spaces in life that pass unremarkably - or those actions that are repetitious and therefore unremarkable - eating breakfast, waking up, walking, sitting, watching. Wong Kar-wai's *Ashes of Time* "shows, in defiance of the genre, is that between the brief moments of blind action are the long moments of waiting for something to happen" (Abbas 59). *Ellipsis* is doing the same thing, focusing on the moments of waiting. Near the end of the

film, Lyle sits next to a man on a park bench. There is visually a large space between the two which is awkward when hearing the v.o. of intimate dialogue. In scenes using still images there are black spaces between each image. The point of the still images is to visually represent and stop time. It is a moment of the past, irretrievable. Including black spaces in between each image represent lapses in memory, moments even this film cannot imagine, showing there are always moments that are never fully realized.

The title of my thesis “A Means to an End, A Means to an End, A Means to an End” speaks to the adage, but by having it repeat three times creates new meaning, commenting on how despite the illusion of an end, there is always more, or it is ‘a means without end.’ In psychoanalysis, this would be ‘the means becomes the end’ (*Out of Time* 16). Repetition is a large part of psychoanalysis, especially repetition of failure. “As we become speaking beings, we lose the object that we never had, and this loss creates the last object that we associate a past time of plenitude, even though this time of plenitude never really existed” (*Psychoanalytic Film Theory and The Rules of the Game* 43). The need to repeat the loss of the objet petit a is a part of Lyle’s life. His lost object is shown in the black and white photograph of the woman eating noodles.

The Psychoanalyst, Jacques Lacan, came up with the triad of the Symbolic, the Imaginary, and the Real. The Symbolic or the Symbolic Order, is the order of language. What is being signified by what signifiers to create meaning? It is the written and unwritten rules of society. The Imaginary is the ways people believe that the Symbolic is successful, or “the real is symbolic impossibility, and the imaginary is the illusion of plenitude that hides this impossibility” (*Psychoanalytic Film Theory and The Rules of the Game* 39). The Real is the gap between the Symbolic and the Imaginary. The space where the Symbolic and Imaginary are

exposed in their inability to hold or contain meaning. *Ellipsis* is the Real; it focuses on the repetitious, boring, and awkward moments, instead of positing the ideals of a certain genre or symbolic order.

Psychoanalysis is also the examination of desire which is the combination of need and demand. Lyle is the antithesis to the injunction “enjoy!” The Big Other’s demand that we enjoy. In the Symbolic Order heteronormativity constitutes the normative social structure. However, The Big Other allows for homosexuality when it still supports the overall capitalist structure; and because the Big Other’s unwritten rules often demand that we violate the Symbolic Order’s written ones. Lyle refuses homosexuality because he sees his place in the Symbolic Order, but he cannot accept heterosexuality either because he suffers the loss and lack of the little objet a. Lyle is on the trajectory of the drive through which he circles around that traumatic loss/lack. Lyle’s drive is to make any meaningful connection with others, (within normative sexuality) and is a result of his pursuit of repeating having lost his connection with the woman in the photograph.

Wong Kar-wai’s films are immersed in the characteristics of psychoanalysis. His characters are all subjects of drive. They wander throughout his films in despair, haunted by their own objet petit a, and immersed in memories of a lost time and a space they can never regain, if they ever had it in the first place. Wong’s characters are impacted by the changing space of Hong Kong. Abbas Ackbar wrote of Hong Kong as a “...temporary stop, port, space of transit; intersection of different times or speeds” (4). Hong Kong as a liminal space speaks to the way character’s “passion dies and private time is swallowed up once again and becomes indistinguishable from public time” (50-51). The private desires of the subjects of drive are at once highly privatized and yet influenced by the social context. The characters’ failures come from their inability to be a part of the symbolic order by having a proper desire that is

reciprocated or at all successful. The subjects in Hong Kong are experiencing a trauma that is the disappearance of their “history” and national identity. This displays itself in Wong films as melancholy or mourning for a loss of something that is ultimately representing the lack that was always there. Wong takes loss and reshapes it, but only into the image of something else.

Subjects in Wong films are not only subjects of drive, but also each other’s petit objet a. This is apparent most clearly in *In the Mood for Love* (2000) and *2046* (2004) where Su Li-Zhen is Chow mo-wan’s object petit a, and vice versa. This enforces the fact that each subject can never attain their petit objet a. Instead, throughout Wong’s films, they throw their desire onto a supplement. The supplement also tends to be other character’s, leading to the entanglement of love interests and intersecting storylines typical in Wong’s films. The melancholy mood that ferments under the surface of a Wong Kar-wai film is as a state-of-being, conducive to representing the subject of desire. This is because melancholy as a form of mourning is the romanticizing and longing for what has passed.

I believe the process of making *Ellipsis* began four years ago. I can point to moments throughout my four years that made their way into my mind as I considered the making of this film. It is satisfying to be able to take concepts and ideas from various film classes and apply them to the films I make. It was satisfying being able to take what I saw in Wong Kar-wai’s film and do an indirect recreation of his themes. Before deciding upon Wong Kar-wai as the director I wanted to study and emulate, I also watched the films of Catherine Breillat and Claire Denis. Both French directors’ films are incredible and I certainly have not forgotten them. I also want to thank Professor Yoo whose senior seminar class, *The Terrors and Pleasures of Modernity*, peaked my interest in psychoanalytic theory and encouraged me to begin making my own films.

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