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Doors and Dreams

Review of Wong Kar-wai's *My Blueberry Nights*

By Thorsten Botz-Bornstein



Had somebody told me a year ago that one day Wong Kar-wai will make a film in which a young woman saves up \$2,200 for a car, I would have said that this is simply impossible. Still, it happened. Wong going American is definitely less Wong, less Asian, less manga... The unreal atmosphere of modern Asia or the Hong Kong “culture of disappearance” permitted a playfulness that cannot be reproduced in New York or in the Midwest. In *Happy Together*, the other film Wong made in the New World, he had incorporated something of China into Buenos Aires, in particular a 1940s Shanghai atmosphere transported through tango. In his new film he uses atmospheric jazz. At times the film looks like an imitation of Wong or as if someone had told Wong how to make a “real” film, which doesn’t necessarily mean that the outcome is bad.

The big surprise is that everything is so coherent. Nothing is out of place, no unexpected characters pop up, no unfinished sketches are juxtaposed, no possibilities are left open, all characters are able to speak and no discourse has an unqualified status. However, this does not mean that this is not Wong at all. We are still plunged in a hallucinatory world of decadence, hysteria, and exhaustion, into spaces that are erotic (though less crowded), into an urbanity composed of neon lights, fast foods (with occasional cops) and coaxing characters, into low life (which is less low), and into ritualized speeches (which are less

fragmented). And all this is edited in stroboscopic stop printing. The feel of the avant-garde or the experimental is still present, but it is now left to visual stylization, which makes it more artificial. Wong's earlier play with closeness, distance, framing, as well as Christopher Doyle's tinted photos or stains, were simply more spontaneous. The malleability that we appreciated in Wong's earlier films has given way to a world in which things do not just happen (sometimes without reason) but are calculated like...in a film. In *Chungking Express*, we had two Mays, two wigs, two flight attendants... In *My Blueberry Nights*, the characters are carefully chosen and contrasted and relatively well oriented in their state of disorientation. No confusions, no overlaps are possible. Even the gambler Leslie is more calculating than anything else. With nostalgia we remember that only one film ago people would risk anything to get to a place called 2046.

We appreciated Wong's earlier films because they were "abstractly melodramatic," which means that they were not melodramatic at all. Things happened – like in a manga – from moment to moment, from aspect to aspect. Sometimes we found this metaphysical. Can we learn to appreciate the new Wong Kar-wai? We should try, because perhaps what has happened is simply that Wong has grown up. Wong's new invention is Elizabeth, a girl who saves up money for a car, the most unmetaphysical thing that any human being can do. Beth's unusual enthusiasm for real life gives the whole film a realist perspective. Without Beth, most people would vegetate in the usual Wongian autism – passionless, passive, detached, and unable to get involved in anything tragic. In *My Blueberry Nights*, people are still irresponsible, mourning unrequited love, searching for their identity, but they are more human. In other words, they behave like adults and not like children, and with such people one can create a real drama.

Elizabeth is amazing. She remembers others not out of a narcissistic desire (because she wants to be loved) but for their own sake. She goes even beyond that by asking: "I wonder how people will remember Arnie". During the film she is able to change from a Wongian childish character, writing monological letters to Jeremy without giving him the opportunity to respond, into a considerate adult woman. Until now, no character in Wong's films has ever been able to change; and, usually, his pathetic, self-enclosed creatures were rather obsessed by the desire "to be remembered."

Elizabeth becomes adult, which means that she overcomes ambiguity. But this is a long way. Ambiguity is the big metaphysical value that permeates this film, symbolized by the

swinging doors that should never be shut, by the camera shots through the window that locate people simultaneously inside and outside, and by the keys in a jar that belong to nobody. When you go through a door you might never come back (as does Arnie). Or you can be shot as it almost happens to Sue Lynne. Elizabeth tells her lover unambiguously, “I hope you both drop dead,” which is exactly what is *not* happening. Later she sees both him and his new lover in the house and does not dare to push the door. Arnie is living between death, and life and Sue Lynne wants to “send him through the door” by telling him “you are nothing.” When he is really gone, Sue Lynne tries to keep him alive by keeping his check hanging on the wall in the bar. The liberty she gains is ambiguous. When she finally leaves the town, Elizabeth says: “for her leaving this town was like dying.” The ambiguous attitude towards death becomes most obvious through Leslie, who declares “dying or not dying, who cares?” when told about her father. But even this is not certain because, as she says later, “you can’t even trust yourself.”

The pivotal character is Jeremy, the axis towards which Elizabeth travels. He is only moderately affected by Wongian unrequited love troubles and eternalizes the world of his café by having filmed its interior from morning until night. But the café itself is called “Klyutch”, which means key in Russian, and Jeremy seems to spend as much time inside it as in front of the door. His ephemeral encounter with Katya takes place *outside* the café in spite of the cold. Jeremy’s strong point is that he knows from the beginning what Elizabeth yet has to learn: he understands the metaphysics of doors. When he tells Katya his dream, he ends like this: “a door slammed and the dream was over.” That’s what it’s all about: the doors separate *dream* from *reality*. The world inside the café is the dream and reality is outside.

What is the conclusion? In the very end, we cannot avoid living our lives like more or less autistic, self-enclosed beings, but from time to time we have to go outside in order to recognize that this dream *is* a dream and not reality. Elizabeth learns this, though it takes her a year. When she reenters the door of Café Klyutch, she has undergone the most unlikely thing we would expect from a Wong Kar-wai character: a change towards maturity.