

Mirrors and the Aesthetics of Space: The Use of Mirrors in Chinese Director Wong Kar-wai's Film *Days of Being Wild*

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Abstract: As an important part of visual culture, especially after its commercialisation, cinema plays an important role in constructing social ideologies. This article will analyse the extraordinary possibilities of mirrors for the spatial shaping, psychological portrayal of characters and the aesthetic construction of cinema with reference to the use of mirrors in the famous Chinese director Wong Kar-wai's film *Days of Being Wild*.

Keywords: Wong Kar-wai; film aesthetics; psychoanalysis; art in space; visual studies

1. Introduction

Visual culture is concerned with how consumers seek knowledge, meaning, or pleasure from their interactions with visual technologies, which in this case include any technology designed to enhance natural vision, from paintings to films, and even the internet [1]. Film differs from painting, sculpture and photography in that it has a dimension of time and movement, encoding the object being viewed into a screen-based spatio-temporal sequence [2]. The aesthetic character of photography lies in revealing the real, the camera lens our habitual perceptions and prejudices of the object, the photographic technique uses its own language to make nature into a work of art [3]. Film is an art of time and space, and the shaping of space as one of the two main elements of film-making will be the focus of this essay.

Mirrors are an important means of reshaping space, especially in the age of digital cinema, where they not only increase the depth of space but also allow for the folding of different planes of the real world. As the first Chinese director to win the Best Director Award at Cannes, Wong Kar-wai's series of films such as *Days of Being Wild* and *Chungking Express* have been perfect in their use of mirrors in film. The sample to be analysed in this article, *Days of Being Wild*, won a total of eleven awards including Best Film and Best Director at the 10th Hong Kong Film Awards and the 28th Golden Horse Awards, and was voted third of the 100 best Chinese films by the Hong Kong Film Awards Association in 2005. This essay will provide an in-depth analysis of the use of mirrors in *Days of Being Wild*.

2. Externalising the character's closed inner space to show the character's narcissistic identity

From 6 to 18 months after birth, the infant visually identifies the image in the mirror as his or her own, thus completing a compensatory sense of self [4]. The viewing of the mirrored self-places the self in a fictitious direction prior to social determination; the self is nothing more than an illusory construct, a construction based on a false belief in the wholeness of the corporeal body, a fantasy completed by gazing at the mirrored self [5].

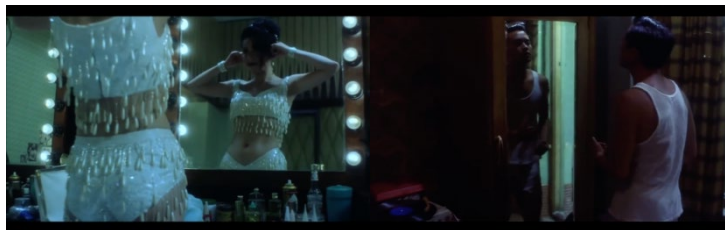


Figure 1: Leung Fung-ying and Yuddy

The two pictures above (See figure 1) are Leung Fung-ying, the dancer, and Yuddy, the male lead. Leung Fung-ying, a cabaret dancer by profession, is very confident and demanding about her appearance and is looking at herself in the mirror before her performance. People perceive their appearance in two ways: by what others reflect about them, and by looking in the mirror. Looking in the mirror is, in Lacan's theory, the mirror image through which people acquire self-perception and self-identity, and through which they project their mental structures outwards to imagine an ideal self.

In Lacan's theory, identification with the imaginary world of mirror images belongs in the attachment relationship with the mother during the first 6 to 18 months of life. During this period, the infant derives his or her own imaginative satisfaction by fulfilling the mother's expectations. In the clinical diagnosis of psychoanalysis, a discordant relationship with the mother or a lack of maternal love can keep a person in the imaginary stage for a long time, without access to the symbolic realm, which represents the socio-linguistic order. In the film, Yuddy is an immigrant from Shanghai to Hong Kong who has never met his biological mother and has been brought up by his adoptive mother Rebecca since he was a child. When he learned his identity, he left Hong Kong to search for his birth mother in the Philippines, where he eventually died. In many of the shots of Yuddy looking in the mirror in this film, his countenance is filled with smugness and narcissism. Yuddy is also harsh in his approach to relationships, as evidenced by his tendency of pursuing and rapidly dumping a number of girls, as well as his inability to develop solid intimate relationships and attachments with women. It is thus clear that Yuddy's reliance on this imaginary mirror image is inseparable from his relationship with his mother, and the metaphor of the mirror perfectly echoes the plot.

3. Compensates for the monotony of scenes in small spaces and extends the depth of space

A medium is an extension of the human being, a particular medium extends the human senses according to its properties, mirrors are an extension of human vision [6]. Mirrors extend the limits of camera imaging by compressing three-dimensional reality into a two-dimensional plane due to their mirrored material properties.



Figure 2: Yuddy beating up a thief in the toilet

Figure 2 shows Yuddy beating up a thief in the toilet who has stolen something. In this scene, the reflection of the mirror allows Yuddy's expression to be included in the shot, and the whole of the small room is reflected in the viewer's eyes. Mirroring expands the space of a scene in a film, extends time and space, breaks the 'single' plane of thought, and suggests the existence of another space beyond this plane, thus allowing for more possibilities of extension within a narrow space.

4. Techniques as transitions in film frames

The organisation of space in the image focuses on two main aspects: the spatial organisation within the image and the way in which the spatial organisation of the image is given a specific viewing position [7]. In *Days of Being Wild*, Wong Kar-Wai skillfully uses mirrors for visual transitions as well as visual guidance of characters' appearances.



Figure 3: Yuddy's mother lies in pain in bed

In the scenes above (See figure 3), Yuddy's mother lies in pain in bed and the director uses a mirror image with a panning shot to transfer to the woman in bed in the real space. This technique avoids the visual fatigue caused by long and static shots of the characters, and stretches the duration of this emotion, fully rendering the sadness and despair of Yuddy's mother.



Figure 4: Yuddy sneaks home from outside

In figure 4, Yuddy sneaks home from outside and his mother is cleaning the clock. The director uses the mirror next to Yuddy's mother to put Yuddy's tiptoeing home and his mother cleaning the clock on the same plane, using a mirror reflection to introduce the characters and to make a logical transition to the conversation and argument between his mother and him later in the plot. Using the mirror's ability to recreate and collapse space, Wang achieves the effect of prolonging static shots with a sense of beauty and characters appearing in transition without being abrupt.

5. Alternatives to shot/reverse shot in dialogue

Wong Kar-wai refuses to present the characters' dialogue in this film with conventional shot/reverse shot, instead focusing the camera on one of the characters to reinforce the facial expressions of the individual characters [8]. Wong Kar-wai ingeniously uses the reflection of a mirror to make the faces of the two characters in the dialogue appear in the same plane.



Figure 5: Yuddy and his girlfriend Su Lizhen

In figure 5, Yuddy and his girlfriend Su Lizhen are having a dialogue, with Yuddy sitting on the bed and Su Lizhen standing in front of it. The director uses the mirror next to the bed to mirror Yuddy, pointing the camera lens only at Su Lizhen, at which point the faces of both characters appear simultaneously in the same plane, thus replacing the traditional shot/reverse shot in dialogue.



Figure 6: a farewell dialogue between Yuddy and his mother

The scene above (See figure 6) is a farewell dialogue between Yuddy and his mother, and the director used an over-the-shoulder shot of the mirror behind Yuddy's mother to complete a dialogue that would have required a shot/reverse shot. The reflection of the mirror is also used to extend the depth of the space. This effective use of mirrors by Wong breaks with the traditional Hollywood film narrative of shot/reverse shot showing dialogue, with longer individual shots and fuller emotions, fully reflecting the uniqueness of art cinema as distinct from commercial cinema.

6. Dividing the film frame space to create a symmetrical composition or to produce a repetitive aesthetic

The mirror has a proven ability to shape and compose film images. In *Days of Being Wild*, this ability is put to good use by Wong Kar-wai.



Figure 7: Leung Fung-ying

The above image shows (See figure 7) Leung Fung-ying looking in a mirror. The director has used the reflection of the mirror to restructure the composition of the film frame, creating a three-part composition, with the mirror image and the real person each occupying a third of the frame, creating a symmetrical aesthetic.

Stacking two mirrors in the same place or stitching two mirrors together creates a repetitive mirror image that can serve to visually enhance the movement and expression of the figure.



Figure 8: Yuddy's mother preparing to leave home

The above scene (See figure 8) shows Yuddy's mother preparing to leave home to follow an old man out of Hong Kong with mixed emotions. On the one hand, she cannot let go of her son, but on the other hand, she wants to pursue her own happiness. At the same time, she doubts whether she really loves the old man. This sequence uses repeated mirror images to show the complex and contradictory psychology of this woman to the fullest.

The repetitive stacking of faces is a metaphor for the helplessness and struggle of Yuddy's mother's multiple and opposite psychological interplay, a cinematographic technique that externalises the inner space of the characters.

7. Folding two different sides of a scene into the same plane

Visual language in cinema translates the three-dimensional world into a two-dimensional plane, in which all information is encoded [9]. But things don't always work out that way, and good directors can exploit the full possibilities of cinematic space, for example by using mirrors to fold scenes from different planes into the same plane, pushing the limits of camera technique.

The fantasy dimension of cinema is reflected in its ability to reveal, in the form of a gaze, something beyond our everyday perceptual experience [10]. The presence of the mirror allows a new connection to be made between the characters and the spatial environment, as it expands space while at the same time dividing it, and it is able to represent other spaces that the realistic image cannot. Two scenes that in reality are not on the same plane appear pieced together, thus allowing the composition of the film image to change.



Figure 9: Yuddy and Leung Fung-ying

In figure 9, after the fight between Yuddy and Leung Fung-ying over the presence of Su Lizhen, the mirror nicely divides the scene into two parts. Yuddy on the left side of the frame is as if nothing is happening, while Leung Fung-ying on the right side is only given a close-up of her shoulder and arm movements, but the viewer can clearly read a sense of unease in her movements, reflecting their different mindsets towards this relationship through the contrasting effect of the mirror.

8. Male Gaze

There are two types of visual pleasure generated by watching films: one is the use of another person as an object of sexual stimulation through the gaze; the other is the identification of the object being watched through narcissistic structures [11]. For Mulvey (1975) [11], there are three perspectives on the male gaze in film: the gaze of the male character in the film on the female character; the gaze of the audience of the film on the female character in the film; and the gaze of the audience of the film on the female vicariously through the lens of the male character.



Figure 10: Triple Gaze

In figure 10, the effect of perspective based on the depth of the frame fully realises what Mulvey calls the triple gaze: the erotically pictured female body, the male gazing at the female body, the viewer outside the frame gazing at the female body and the viewer in the place of the male character.

As Mulvey (1975) [11] argues, the image of woman as the raw material of the male gaze adds another dimension to the ideology of the patriarchal order, which is expressed in the patriarchal order's preferred form of cinema, the hallucinogenic narrative film. This argument returns to the psychoanalytic framework where woman as representation implies emasculation, leading to voyeuristic or fetishistic ways of avoiding her threat. None of these levels of interplay are fundamental to cinema, but only in this form do they achieve the perfection and beautiful contradictions that distinguish cinema from striptease, theatre, performance and other forms of voyeurism. The film doesn't just emphasise how a woman is seen, it incorporates how she is seen into the spectacle itself. The first thing to do to break the male gaze in cinema is to break the pleasure of cinema itself, something that many feminist cinematic practices are trying to achieve.

9. Voyeurism

The camera captures a mirror image in a mirror instead of a direct shot of the scene in real life creating an inexplicable voyeuristic effect. Wong Kar-wai is known for his ability to portray the subtle, weak and delicate emotions of young people in love. For those moments when they do not have the courage to face

up to the truth, those moments of unspeakable loss, the mirror becomes a good tool to peek into the psychology of the characters and to express the speechlessness that they want to say.



Figure 11: Su Lizhen

In figure 11, Su Lizhen feels disoriented by Yuddy's departure. Instead of directly photographing Su Lizhen's expression head-on, the director chooses to shoot a mirror image, thus creating a glimpse into the character's unspeakable inner emotional world. The mirror is the window of the soul and the door to the shadows, it is closely connected to desire, in which people form their self-identity and in which they gaze at and objectify others. It can be both a prop for spatial magic and an accomplice to pornography.

10. Conclusion and Discussion

The case study of *Days of Being Wild* reveals the immense potential of mirrors to enrich the creative techniques of cinema. Firstly, it can compensate for the cramped nature of some interior scenes by creating a mirror image that allows the space in the opposite direction of the camera to enter the frame. Mirrors can also be used to extend the length of a single shot by transitioning from a mirror image to a real scene, or to introduce a character's appearance by collapsing the frame space. More often than not, the director can use the mirror's reflection of a character's face to complete a single shot of dialogue in a single camera position. Last but not least, mirrors can be used to re-compose a scene by repeating the image, enhancing its aesthetic.

In addition to its inspiration for film-making techniques, the use of mirrors in cinema also has the effect of helping to characterise and emphasise the emotional complexity of the characters. Firstly, it allows for the externalisation of the character's inner space and reveals his or her psychological state, such as narcissism. At the same time, it can show the complex and contradictory emotions within the characters through repetitive, stacked close-ups of their facial expressions.

Having explored so many ways in which mirrors can help in the creation of a film, it is equally important to be aware of its darker side. Again, in the case study above, the mirror becomes a powerful force that fuels the male gaze. Whether or not directors can take advantage of the mirrors while resisting their ability to promote the male gaze is a question that deserves further study in the future.

According to Bergson and Deleuze, all images exist on a plane of immanence where the past, present, and future coexist and can be organised in various ways, including linearly. Images exist; they do not represent anything otherworldly, but they do change the world and its contents on a daily basis [12]. As spatio-temporal art - the creators of cinema have to concentrate not only on their proficiency with the camera and the language of audiovisuality, but also on discovering new possibilities for the exploration of cinematic space or practice by concrete objects in real time and space, like mirrors.

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