

Fallen Angels

(1995, Wong Kai Wai, Hong Kong)

Component 2: Global Filmmaking Perspectives Experimental Cinema

Core Study Areas: Key Elements of Film Form Meaning & Response The Contexts of Film

Specialist Study Area: Narrative Auteur

Rationale for study

Fallen Angels represents another stylistically innovative chapter to add to Wong Kai Wai's familiar signature as an auteur. It is a film which also deals with a number of recurring themes in this work such as alienation, memory and obsession. The experimental nature of its storytelling and the claustrophobic mood created in the film, add to its noir feel and the dreamy, nocturnal nature. At first glance, it is not an easy film, but it is one that offers many rewards on subsequent viewings.

STARTING POINTS - Useful Sequences and timings/links

50.25 – 55.13 - This is an interesting sequence which underscores the experimental nature of the film to very good effect. The first scene shows He Zhiwu and his girlfriend Charlie Young attacking a blow-up sex doll who is personified as Blondie, who is Young's mortal enemy. This is achieved with hand-held camera and a fast cutting technique. This is followed with these two characters in a restaurant shot in wide-angle lens. A vicious fight breaks out around them and this uses both fast and slow motion to fine effect. The sequence ends with the two characters shot through the window of a bar, they move very slowly but the extras in the

background move extremely fast. This scene was shot at four frames a second and it lasts two minutes on screen – but it took twelve minutes to shoot.

1.27.17 – 1.30.52 - In many respects this is similar to the first sequence in that it has the Agent shot with a wide-angled lens. We see her eating in a café and this is after the death of her partner, the killer. The shot isn't flattering, and we are drawn to what is behind her as a fight breaks out in real time. Voiceover is employed from both her perspective and that of He Zhiwu, who has been involved in the fracas. Finally some sense of connection is made and we see them leave on a motorbike – shot in both fast and slow motion. A glimpse of the sky is shown as they leave; the only shot of daylight in the whole film is the final one.

CORE STUDY AREAS 1 - STARTING POINTS - Key Elements of Film Form (Micro Features)

Cinematography

- Wong Kai Wai's long term relationship with his Director of Photography Chris Doyle has been a cornerstone of his finest work over the years. The emphasis on a variety of different uses of the camera in this film certainly adds to *Fallen Angels'* overall aesthetic.
- The use of wide-angled lens which conversely distort and enhance the sense of separation on the part of the audience. This is also on occasion contrasted with the long-lens shots, where the depth of field is so short and only the subject of interest is shown in the frame and the background is therefore blurred.
- There is a great deal of hand-held camera movement in the film. This can follow characters and track their faces as they move through a scene. Equally there are a number of tilted shots in the film, which add to the sense of disconnection.
- The film utilises lighting in a dynamic way with a sense of an exaggerated neon-tinted

palette. There is also a very interesting use of colour here, which uses filters to give at times a drenched effect. There is also the use of different film stocks and also a few instances where the film switches to a black and white inserts. There is a constant sense of Doyle's camera being present and this is never disguised. The interview with him on the Artificial Eye DVD of the film gives a very clear sense of what he set out to achieve here.

Mise-en-Scène

- The setting gives a very good indication of the Hong Kong location. At times it feels murky and cramped. The Killer's targets are shown at the back of rundown shops and restaurants; his own apartment seems spatially narrow and is often shown in the same shot with the city in the foreground. The Chungking Mansions where He Zhiwu and the Killer's Agent live is full of passage ways and small rooms. The most overpowering element in the mise-en-scène is the dominant feeling of night and artificial light that fills the film with a woozy, at times surreal atmosphere.
- The personification of the empty shops and idle market stalls that He Zhiwu 'commandeers' as part of his night-time job adds to the sense of dislocation that prevails in the film. His hijacking of an Ice Cream van is especially interesting and at times very funny. There is also the link here (true or not) to the death of his mother and his father's subsequent period of long mourning.
- The emphasis on female costume and also hairstyles is also a key element here. The Killer's Agent is often dressed quite provocatively – with short skirts/dresses, stockings and high-heeled shoes. The scene with the jukebox, with its close-ups of her dress certainly emphasises her longing and obsession with the Killer. This is also true when she is shown masturbating in the film fully dressed but in a deliberately femme fatale style. The female character's hair is also given some prominence too. This is particularly the case in terms of Blondie, who the Killer has a relationship with and who He Zhiwu and Charlie Young are trying to track down.

Editing

- There are a number of very effective editing devices employed in the film. There is the use of both fast and slow motion which is employed right across the narrative. The numerous slow-motion shoot outs and the fast motion shots of

Hong Kong's highways are used to good effect. Jump-cuts and freeze-frames are also used too. Much like Doyle's camera style there is a constant sense that one is also watching a film.

- There are also a number of occasions when there are examples of quick cutting then juxtaposed with long takes.
- The use of ellipsis is also very valuable here adding to the expressionistic temporal stylistics. The movement between the two different narrative strands also adds to this feeling.

Sound

- The actual dialogue in the film is extremely minimal so this is deliberately countered by the use of voiceover narration which is privileged to three of the main protagonists. In these interior monologues, the outsider nature of the characters is given full attention as they discuss their hopes, fears and desires. The mute He Zhiwu is also given this voice.
- Wong Kai Wai's use of music is also crucial in constructing meaning in the film in order to underscore moods. Massive Attack's '*Karma Coma*' is reimagined and re-orchestrated in the early part of the film around the activities of the Killer. There is an example of Canto-Pop song which is used to connect the Killer and his agent (and is used in the aforementioned jukebox sequence). The film ends with the Flying Pickets version of *Only You* which offers melancholy counterpoint to the final sequence.
- This fusing of sound and image directly links into the rhythmic construction of shots and develops what has been noted as a MTV aesthetic, tapping into the influence of music video on his work. Certainly the overall mood of the film is directly linked to the trip-hop darkness of the Massive Attack track and the lovelorn feel of the Chinese songs in tandem with the sombre imagery. The isolating nature of urbanity is enhanced by the use of music here.

CORE STUDY AREAS 2 - STARTING POINTS - Meaning & Response

Representations

- The representations of Hong Kong itself see the modern experience of living in a highly populated city to be one of dislocation, where people are cut off from each other. Isolation and memory are presented as major themes in relation to this representation. The Killer keeps

his distance from the Agent as he doesn't want to complicate their working relationship. His affair with Blondie is in itself fragmentary in terms of her remembering him as a past lover which he has no recollection of. Using parallel editing we see the start of a sexual encounter with Blondie, as the Agent is shown alone masturbating. Co-incidences do also occur, as do fleeting glimpses of what might happen if characters do make connections. This is particularly true with He Zhiwu and the Agent – who live in the same place (she is seen hiding him early in the film) and it is the possibilities of their future relationship where the film ends.

- The women in the film are seen in a variety of ways – but can be said to be linked by a common instability. At various points in the film, they all seem to be on the verge of a nervous breakdown. The Agent is obsessed with the Killer, cleaning his apartment when he isn't there, sitting in his seat at the bar where he drinks. Apart from one brief meeting their relationship is conducted via fax machine and recorded messages. There are hints at happiness at the end of film, but this is uncertain. Charlie Young's erratic behaviour attracts He Zhiwu (as her shoulder to cry on). They have a short-lived relationship which involves unsuccessful attempts to track Blondie and a brutal attack on a blow-up doll. In another nod to *Chungking Express*, she reappears at the end of the film as an airline stewardess, seemingly with no memory of her relationship with He Zhiwu. Blondie with her over-the-top and at times worrying behaviour bites her lover when he abandons her screaming 'I have left my mark okay? You may forget my face, but you won't forget my bite.'
- The representations of men are in part a little bit more low-key. The Killer is rather listless, avoiding emotional ties, wondering if someone in his profession might be able to get insurance. There is some sense of a past when he meets a former friend from school on a bus, after the first shootout that we see him in. However he is very much an obvious construct, faking a relationship with a picture of a woman and child that he could pass off as his wife and son. He Zhiwu on the other hand initially provides light relief in the film with his erratic demeanour, particularly in hassling potential customers to the point where they tell him to go away. His relationships are as transient with women as the Killer, being rejected by Charlie, but making a late connection

with the Agent. That said what marks him out as more interesting is his relationship with his father, which is explored in social contexts.

Aesthetics (i.e. the 'look and feel' of the film including visual style, influences, auteur, motifs)

- The look and feel of the film do echo Wong Kai Wai's previous piece *Chungking Express*. Certainly there is a great deal of pleasure to be wrought from linking the films together. The notion of expiry dates is explored here – with He Zhiwu's muteness being caused by eating an out of date tin of pineapples. His prison number 223 is the same as the police officer in *Chungking*. There is also a lovely intertextual reference to the former film when He Zhiwu plays with the sauce bottles as the changed Charlie (as a stewardess) waits outside his stall. The Agent's anonymous cleaning of the Killer's apartment also echoes Faye's housework at 663's flat.
- Certainly stylistically there is a clear sense of Wong Kai Wai's visual and aural techniques. That said there was a real leap forward for his next film *In the Mood for Love*. What is also fundamental here is his quite loose and minimalist attitude to plot. This film, like much of his early work presents the events in a mosaic fashion, in some ways like a photo montage. That said there can be said to be a structure of sorts – in establishing the main relationships, introducing new relationships, breaking up and then the climax where the two narrative strands do merge.
- There is certainly a sense that this film is also indebted to the influence of the French New Wave and in particular the work of Jean-Luc Godard in its overtly self-conscious spirit. A good example of this in the film is when the police are looking for He Zhiwu who is hiding in the Agent's toilet, but is furiously smoking a cigarette. In Tony Rayns' *Sight and Sound* review (September, 1996) he draws parallels with the Hong Kong created here with the Paris in *Alphaville*, in terms of the complex world created in each film.

CORE STUDY AREAS 3 - STARTING POINTS - Contexts

Social

- Perhaps one of the more touching aspects of *Fallen Angels* is the relationship shown between

He Zhiwu and his widowed father whom he lives with. This is best demonstrated in the video he makes of his father at work, cooking and at one point sleeping. The father is not enamoured with his leading role in this film, but we see a sequence with him watching it and laughing when it is completed. When he dies, He Zhiwu replays the scene with his father frying a steak, pausing and rewinding it as he speaks about of his sense of loss. In a film where the vast majority of relationships are fractured and disconnected, this (relatively) normal relationship does suggest that there is some form of social cohesion on Wong Kai Wai's Hong Kong.

Historical and Political

- *Fallen Angels* in many respects at a surface level makes few deliberate political or social points. Its characters certainly don't have what we might think of as proper jobs, they have no overt political leanings and in terms of citing the film within its historical contexts – its use of pastiche and intertextuality do suggest a post-modern reading. At a deeper level however this film (and the earlier *Chungking Express*) and the mood created may well be implicitly linked to the status of Hong Kong at that time. The nebulous space of Hong Kong as in-between the UK and mainland China may well be seen to be reflected in the transient, dislocated status of the main protagonists. The handover in 1997 is close and there seems to be a feeling of something ending, which is returned to in this narrative a number of times. Hong Kong in this very specific historical and political moment can be seen to act as a clear metaphor for the characters.

Technological

- Certainly the film utilises film stock in a very unique way as well as Doyle's adaptation of wide-lens shooting. While it lacks the lavish mise-en-scène of his latter films, the combination of the various cinematic techniques fits the poetic nature of *Fallen Angels* perfectly.

Institutional

- *Fallen Angels* was originally conceived as the third story in his previous film *Chungking Express*, but it didn't fit into the overall mood of that film and subsequently took on a life of its own. Certainly *Fallen Angels* is a far darker film tonally and although there is a great deal of crossover between the two texts, they are distinct in their own right. Takeshi Kaneshiro (He Zhiwu) played 223 in the previous film. Wong Kai Wai's taste for using people from outside the film industry as leads is also pursued here with Leon Lai – a Hong Kong pop star playing the Killer and Michelle Reis a former beauty queen playing the Agent.

SPECIALIST STUDY AREA - Auteur/Narrative

Starting points

- Much of this has been covered in the sections on aesthetics and film form in terms of the auteur status of Wong Kai Wai and the importance of viewing this film alongside *Chungking Express* in particular.
- The close working relationship between Christopher Doyle and Wong Kai Wai is also vital to understanding how the signature aesthetic is created in their collaborations.
- The narrative style here is interesting because once again it has parallels with *Chungking Express*. The way that the two strands are in opposition to each other and conversing make connections is certainly worth reflecting upon and this may well only become more apparent after another viewing of the film. Certainly it might be worth trying to represent the relationships and the temporal nature of the plot diametrically to get a sense of overlap and implicit and explicit linkage.