

# Examining the Colour Imagery in Film - Wong Karwai's 1960s trilogy

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**Abstract:** Wong Karwai has garnered considerable attention in the world of cinema as a 'authorial' Hong Kong director, and his singular visual style has been extensively studied by scholars. As a critical component of traditional aesthetics, imagery is rooted in extensive theoretical resources, and the term 'imagery' has been explored and used by numerous academics. Hegel, Freud, and other scholars took a more psychological approach, emphasising the psychological mechanisms at work, such as symbolism and imagination, which endow imagery with additional connotations. By contrast, film imagery is based on imagery associated with traditional aesthetics and psychology, combined with the creative characteristics of the film itself, in order to reveal the film's unique aesthetic connotation and functional value. This is why examining Wong's film imagery has multiple aesthetic, theoretical, and cultural implications. Cinema, as the seventh art form, encompasses all other forms of art. Without the creation of visual and auditory symbols, Wong Karwai's films would lack their distinct image temperament. As a psychological term, temperament is classified into four broad categories: bilious, polycystic, depressive, and mucous. According to the overall situation, Wong Karwai's image temperament is clearly depressive, i.e. more detail-oriented and emotionally rich. Cinematic imagery employs all artistic mediums - literature, painting, music, and theatre - and is replete with its own long shots, montages, and other techniques in an attempt to communicate the creator's abstract feelings through objective and concrete objects. This emphasises the fact that film imagery encompasses more than just characters, props, scenery, and other physical entities; it also encompasses the various modes of expression used in the picture, such as colour, music, light and shadow, and camera movement. These modes of film expression can be used to create a chain of associations, thereby achieving a particular artistic realm. This essay examines the colour imagery in Wong Karwai's Trilogy and demonstrates its critical role in conveying meaning and shaping image quality. By examining the imagery in three of Wong's 1960s films, we can not only explore the films' unique qualities and aesthetic connotations, but also provide a new perspective on the long-running debate over Wong's films' "content and form." On the other hand, with commercial culture in full swing, it is critical to investigate the aesthetic paradigm and cultural significance of Wong's films through the lens of colour imagery, in order to better provide new perspectives and research horizons for the author's films' personalized service and modern expression and transformation of the traditional aesthetic spirit. This will open up new perspectives and research avenues for the author in terms of creating a personalized his films as well as revamping and transforming traditional aesthetic spirit.

**Keywords:** Wong Karwai's films; colour; imagery; emotion

## 1. Introduction

Wong Karwai's diverse and unique films are highly regarded in the film world, and each of his ten feature-length films has a distinct visual quality. Wong's complex and vast visual system is inextricably linked, with similar elements, subject matter, and themes explored across his films, to the point where the viewer can see parallels between them. However, regardless of the subject matter, time period, or setting of their films, the propositions they explore all point to individuals' inner states and emotional worlds. This essay examines the imaginative worlds created by Wong Karwai's films, focusing on three films set in the 1960s: "Days of Being Wild", "In the Mood for Love", and "2046". All three films are set in the 1960s, and scholars regard them as a trilogy. The trilogy is an extremely ambitious temporal and spatial construction, with Su Li-zhen (Mrs. Chan) and Chow Mo-wan serving as the connecting characters. The story spans two centuries, travelling between Shanghai, Hong Kong, Singapore, and Cambodia to recreate Wong's own memories and emotions during that era. Tony Leung's appearance at the conclusion of Days of Being Wild set up the subsequent film, and although it was never completed,

he saw "In the Mood for Love" as "a continuation of the spirituality" of "Days of Being Wild". As Wong Karwai puts it, "I hope that in '2046' I can see what is in 'In the Mood for Love', and that in 'In the Mood for Love' I can see what is in '2046'." Clearly, the trilogy is a continuation of the same story from beginning to end.

"Days of Being Wild" takes place between 1960 and 1961, "In the Mood for Love" takes place between 1962 and 1966, and "2046" takes place between 1966 and 1969 and is set in a future time of 2046. One could argue that the three films not only encapsulate the 1960s in Hong Kong, but also transcend time and space to evoke eternal propositions. Wong Karwai's films depict memories of the 1960s that are not entirely real; rather, mental images and emotional marks precipitated and embellished over time serve as objects, and the imagery of the 1960s city is constructed through imagination and association[1], conveying his profound personal nostalgia and psychological aspirations on the one hand, and highlighting the ideology, urban landscape, cultural environment, and era of the 1960s on the other. Wong's trilogy spans 15 years, beginning with "Days of Being Wild" in 1990, "In the Mood for Love" in 2000, and "2046" in 2005. If nostalgia for the 1960s served as an internal motivator for Wong Karwai's trilogy, Hong Kong, which spans the 1990s and the new century, served as an external catalyst for the construction of his images. The 1990s marked the start of Hong Kong's golden age, marked by rapid economic development, the prevalence of mass culture and consumerism, and the unique history of 150 years of British colonial rule. This, combined with Hong Kong's unique historical background of 150 years of British colonial rule, has resulted in the city developing a pluralistic cultural form that is eclectic and combines East and West. Wong's interest in both Chinese and foreign literature, art, and music has provided him with a global perspective and creative materials. Thus, the trilogy embodies the nostalgia of the 1960s, the mood of the 1990s, the fusion of Chinese and Western elements, and the strong cultural atmosphere. Using the Trilogy as a case study from the 1960s, this essay examines Wong Karwai's world of images through the lens of vibrant imagery[2].

## 2. Colour imagery

Michelangelo Antonioni once stated, "Something must be done with colour films to displace the conventional reality and replace it with the current reality." That is, while colour scheme in film is never intended to restore the material world's realities, it can serve as an imagery with stylistic and ideational value. From this vantage point, colouration is typically symbolic and can be used to convey the character's emotions, reveal the film's theme, create a specific atmosphere, or evoke or act as a transitional medium." Color expands the psychological dimensions of the film's characters' desires and emotions, and its presence as an ideogram serves primarily as symbolic and referential." Color, as a significant means of artistic expression in Wong's films, contributes significantly to the development of his personal image quality. Color imagery is used to create the nostalgic atmosphere of the Trilogy, to develop an expressionist style, to convey sorrowful emotions, and to express the director's personal expression.

### 2.1 The Colour of Life Imagery in "Days of Being Wild"

One could argue that Wong Karwai's memories of the 1960s are not entirely authentic; rather, mental images and emotional markers from that era, which have been precipitated and embellished over time, are used in colour to create the 1960s' overall atmosphere through imagination and association, in order to convey his profound personal nostalgia and attachment. The film's overall colour palette is dominated by yellow and green, with low saturation settings emphasising the characters' relationships and the perplexing nature of their fate.

The film begins with a conversation between Su Li-zhen and Yuddy, followed by a large, yellowed green wall with scuffed paint and Su Li-zhen dressed in a dark green top sorting through a mountain of green soft drink bottles, alongside two green chairs and six panes of green glass set into the wall. The close-up of the clock is yellow-green, and the kiosk is furnished with yellow flags, plastic wrapping, and pickled food in glass jars. Wong Karwai strives to recreate the nostalgic atmosphere of the 1960s in the opening scene of "Days of Being Wild", with the low saturation of yellow and green and the contrast between light and shadow. In the following shot, a 20-second-long green coconut grove enters the viewer's field of vision, and Wong takes an expressionist approach to the green coconut grove, blending all the objects, including poles, wires, and coconut groves, into one through the use of green.



Figure 1 Opening of the film "Days of Being Wild"

In the midst of the green, the yellow fog creates a damp, depressing, and uninspiring visual experience. The film's title is then revealed: "Days of Being Wild" The opening sequence's green coconut grove serves as a precursor to the large coconut grove that appears just before Yuddy's death, a metaphor for Yuddy's lifelong obsession with the search for green, his control over his destiny, and his search for hope. The omnipresence of green in Yuddy's room is reflected in the walls, iron bars, blinds, and even the light reflected in the bathroom. Green coconut groves begin to appear in abundance in the shots of Yuddy departing Hong Kong for Singapore, implying that Yuddy is getting closer to hope. As Yuddy passes away, the train's darkness and isolation are contrasted with the lush coconut grove outside, and the 'root' of life that Yuddy has sought his entire life is finally lost. After all, the greenery is also impenetrable[3].

Wong Karwai uses yellow and green as the primary colour imagery in "Days of Being Wild" to convey the 1960s atmosphere. On the other hand, green is used as a metaphor for the characters' lives, highlighting their profound inner memories. At the film's conclusion, Tony Leung's unidentified character enters the room, and the scene as a whole takes on a yellow-green hue, implying the appearance of another Yuddy.



Figure 2 The appearance of Tony Leung at the end of the film "Days of Being Wild"

## 2.2 The Colour of Emotion in "In the Mood for Love"

Marx once stated that colour is the most prevalent manifestation of the collective sense of beauty. Wong Karwai fully exploits the aesthetic value and symbolic significance of colour imagery in "In the Mood for Love" and the film reflects the nostalgic sentiment of the 1960s. The vibrant imagery contributes significantly to conveying the characters' inner emotions and rendering the atmosphere, lending the film an overall oriental and poetic flavour of "light make-up and thick colour." As with "Days of Being Wild", Wong Karwai continues to use yellow and green as primary colours in his scenes, but adds a more passionate red to emphasise his characters' hot emotions. The office where Su Li-zhen works in "In the Mood for Love" is still predominantly green, with light green blinds, typewriters, telephones, lamps, and door frames, while the walls are a brighter, darker green, as are the green vegetation outside Boss Ho's office, the green globe atop the vegetation, and even the green globe atop Su's office. The green vegetation outside office, the green globe atop the vegetation, and even Su Li-Zhen's work cheongsam are all shades of green. Along with the expressive use of colour, the green colour of the office contributes to the film's calm atmosphere and represents Su Li-Zhen's

rational and calm side. By contrast, Wong Karwai's setting is saturated with red[4]. Su Li-Zhen enters room 2046 wearing a bright red coat over a black cheongsam with a white background and black high heels. The hotel's corridor is flanked on one side by trailing red curtains and on the other by crimson walls. Additionally, Room 2046 features red walls on all sides, which are complemented by red table lamps. The red of the setting and Su Li-body zhen's fervently reveal her inner stirrings and hot emotions. Wong not only uses highly uniform colours in his scenes, but he also uses the contrast between red and green to add tension to the scene and to reflect the characters' inner conflict. The hotel where Chow Mo-wan and Su Li-Zhen are having a date is decorated in red and green; the sofas on which they sit are a dark red, as are the hotel's walls and the light behind Chow Mo-wan. The light, the menu presented to Chow Mo-wan by Su Li-zhen, and the plates they eat on are all green, and even the taxi they take is a mix of red and green. On the one hand, the contrast between red and green creates a visual impact; on the other, it symbolises the attraction of reason and emotion between Su Li-Zhen and Chow Mo-wan. In this regard, Wong Karwai does not restore the original colours in "In the Mood for Love" but instead uses the colours of remembered Hong Kong and Shanghai to express the gorgeous and dazzling city and the smitten man and woman beneath it with a poetic nostalgia, sadness, and loneliness.



*Figure 3 Maggie Cheung in cheongsam in the film "In the Mood for Love"*



*Figure 4 Tony Leung as a newspaper clerk in the film "In the Mood for Love"*

According to Alexander Petrovich Dovzhenko, colour in film is like music to the eyes. Su Li-Zhen's cheongsam, which is an external manifestation of her state of mind, exemplifies the emotional flow of colour and music. Su Li-zhen's cheongsam, which she wears when purchasing noodles alone, is grey in

colour, reflecting the alleyway's grey walls and the drizzling rain[5], highlighting her loneliness at this time, when her husband abandons her; however, with Chow Mo-wan, the colours of Su Li-zhen's cheongsam become more open, either in high-key reds and greens, or in warm purples and pinks, or in bright floral. The colours range from subdued red and green to warm purple and pink to vibrant floral patterns, all of which reflect the searing heat of her inner emotions. Su Li-zhen arrives in room 2046 after Chow Mo-wan departs Hong Kong. Dressed in a bright green cheongsam and surrounded by bright red walls, her presence, like the sensible calmness of the green, seems out of place in this environment. Su Li-Zhen's appearance is not only an expression of the character's emotions, but also one of the most beautiful shades in the film, trying to emphasize the allure of oriental women[6]. In comparison, Chow Mo-wan's black and white greys are more rational and consistent with his film character of a newspaper reporter. Color is a powerful emotion transmitter and mood indicator, and the contrasting colours of the male and female costumes suggest the delicate and rich emotions of women and the calm and introspective emotions of men[7].

### 2.3 The Colour of Memory in "2046"

Wassily Kandinsky[8] writes in "Concerning the Spiritual in Art": "Colour can produce a corresponding shock in the mind, and physical impressions have meaning only as a result of this mental shock." Color imagery has the ability to substitute psychological reality for reality, thereby expressing the director's more complex and allegorical creative ideas. The final film in the trilogy, 2046, is divided into two time periods: 1960s Hong Kong and 2046 on the train. On the one hand, Wong has attempted to recreate the overall atmosphere of the 1960s using realistic colours; on the other hand, in order to represent the future of 2046, the film's colours are more bold and impactful, of course, with the goal of creating an imaginary world of the future. The colour imagery reflects not only Chow Mo-wan's fantasies, but also Wong's inner impressions as interpreted by Chow's brush.



Figure 5 Wang Jing-wen in the film "2046"

The film's choice of colours for the train to 2046 is surreal and expressionistic, with red and green dominating, but Wong's colour construction is inextricably linked to light and shadow, highlighting the light and darkness of the future world and meant to symbolize the train's complex state, just as people's inner state and emotional world are complex. The train to 2046 is painted in two vibrant shades of green and red, and when Chow Mo-wan's tourist and the robot Wong Jingwen reveal the secret of the tree hole, the carriage's background and lighting are predominantly green. The following shot shows the robot alone in the red-covered carriage, the red light flickering on and off as the traveller's words instantly ignite and rekindle her heart. Wong makes extensive use of color's ideographic effect to convey the characters' inner state. The mood of the characters inside the train is similar to the train's background, with red evoking passion and heat and green evoking sanity and calmness. Wong portrays Lulu, the other robot on board, as an emotionally charged presence, with her space in the train always dominated by red tones. All of the passengers on the train are based on the characters surrounding Chow Mo-wan, and their emotional states are identical to those of the characters in reality. Because Lulu was always a daring and passionate woman in the 1960s, Wong Karwai gave her a red colour scheme for flamboyant occasions, whereas Wang Jing-wen was more introverted and reserved with her emotions, as evidenced by the green shirts she frequently wore. Wong only wears a red shirt when she

is about to part ways with her Japanese boyfriend, who asks her if she wants to accompany him. It is obvious that Wong uses colour to externalise his characters' inner states and to enrich their meaning and connotation through his subjective treatment of colour[9].

If, as Stanley Kaufman puts it, "colour becomes a character in the play," then the three black-and-white scenes in 2046 are Chow Mo-wan's mental image of the eternal Su Li-zhen. Additionally, Gabriel Honoré Marcel wrote: "The true invention of colour in cinema should begin the day the director understands that colour does not have to be real, that is, identical to reality, but must be used in accordance with the value of various shades, such as black and white, psychological and dramatic meanings, and cold and warm colours."

The three black-and-white shots contrast starkly with the film's overall glitz and glamour, creating a strong visual impact; psychologically, the three black-and-white shots represent Chow Mo-wan's memories and inner state. The first black-and-white shot is a fantasy depicting Chow Mo-wan's memories of himself with Bai Ling. He and Bai Ling are seated in a car, with Chow Mo-wan leaning on Bai Ling and his hand twice placed on Bai Ling's thigh, and Wong Karwai provides a close-up of Chow Mo-wan's hand, a scene that also appears in "In the Mood for Love". The two hand touches in the car during "In the Mood for Love" authenticate the emotion between Chow Mo-wan and Su Li-zhen. In "2046", Wong Karwai colourizes this scene in black and white to convey Chow Mo-wan's unforgettable feelings for Su Li-zhen and his attempt to find a reflection of Su Li-zhen in Bai Ling. The black-and-white shot makes a second appearance in Chow Mo-wan's fantasy of Su Li-zhen. After Chow Mo-wan learns that Wang Jing-wen has married her Japanese boyfriend, he rides alone in the car, but the scene cuts to a black-and-white shot of him and Su Li-zhen sitting together in the car, with Chow Mo-wan leaning on Su Li-zhen's side. At this point, the off-screen voice is Chow Mo-wan's inner monologue, a recreation of the memories in his mind during this period, intended to convey his regret and regret. The final black and white shot in the film is also the final shot of the film, in which Chow Mo-wan bids farewell to everyone - Wang Jing-wen, Nan Yang Black Pearl, and Bai Ling - as he sits alone in a taxi, with no one else to rely on, leaning against the window and gazing out blankly. Su Li-zhen lives in Chow Mo-wan's memory in perpetuity, and Wong Ka Wai uses three black-and-white shots to depict Chow Mo-wan's inner state and emotional world, specifically his eternal memory of Su Li-zhen and his eternal search for her.

### 3. Conclusion

Wong Karwai has a total of ten feature films to his credit, each with its own distinct aesthetic and personality. "Days of Being Wild" established Wong Karwai as the founder of Hong Kong's literary cinema in 1990, and as the first instalment of a trilogy, it was the first manifestation of his 15-year nostalgia. It is the first manifestation of Wong Karwai's 15-year-long nostalgia, followed by "In the Mood for Love" and "2046", which structured childhood memories and the love/hate relationship of the 1960s[10].

This essay examines Wong's 'trilogy' through the lens of imagery in the 1960s. By examining both traditional aesthetic theory of colour imagery and film imagery, it is clear that imagery has distinct meanings, both from the creator's and aesthete's perspectives. It can achieve its objective through psychological mechanisms such as imagination and association, or through expressive techniques such as symbolism. So, Film imagery is not merely a visual medium; it carries a deeper psychological and cultural significance. A study of Wong Karwai's trilogy in the context of the 1960s through the lens of film imagery has multiple theoretical, visual, and cultural implications, as film imagery is indispensable for the exploration of emotions, their expression, the construction of time and space, and the revelation of meaning, while Wong Karwai's nostalgia for the 1960s has multiple dimensions. Wong's nostalgia for the 1960s is also reflected in his filmography. Scholars have examined Wong's work from aesthetic, narrative, and postmodernist perspectives, and there is unavoidably a debate over the 'content and form' of his images. A close examination of the imagery in Wong Karwai's 1960s trilogy can serve as a springboard for this. Cinematic imagery, as a medium, carries emotions and meanings that transcend the physical. A study of cinematic imagery requires the text to be refined and combined with historical materials in order to reveal the image's deeper cultural significance. Content and form are inseparable entities that interact and influence one another, and there is no distinction between good and evil. Form is a form of content, albeit a more elevated form of content. The study of Wong Karwai's film texts through the lens of imagery entails an in-depth examination of both form and content in order to decipher the aesthetic paradigm and deeper cultural significance of his images, thereby opening up new research horizons and perspectives on the author's films' personalisation, the ethnicity of film art, and

the modern expression and transformation of the traditional aesthetic spirit.

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