

Chunking Express, Hong Kong, 1994, Wong Kar-wai

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It is probably not only down to the fact that my own birthday is on 1 May, but it surely matters. Seeing handsome Takeshi Kaneshiro piling up pineapple cans expiring on 1 May (also the birthday of his protagonist in this film) most certainly made a difference for a viewer like me. All of a sudden, my birthday lost its workers day credentials and turned into an alluring landmark on the romantic timeline of this gorgeously looking loner.

The only other film by Wong Kar-wai I knew then was *Ashes of Time* (1994), a nice representative of a genre that I did not particularly care for. It was, I think, at the Dobie theatre downtown Austin, Texas; it was known that the film was being brought by Quentin Tarantino, who was still making a name for himself and often visited. It was my first encounter with the dynamics of present-day Hong Kong, with its creatively staged scenes on the mid-levels escalator and around the crammed spaces of tiny shops and apartments. It was my discovery of Tony Leung Chiu-Wai, another treasured heartthrob who was to earn worldwide recognition with roles in later films by Wong Kar-wai, but also by Hou Hsiao-hsien, Ang Lee, and others. And it was a film that flagrantly dealt with falling in love, with longing and loneliness, and with the impossibility to stay together. Both male protagonists were policemen, constricted by the public identity they have to maintain even when off-duty. Both stories featured people who were lonely yet unable to open up and who stayed stuck in fantasies.

A few years later, in 1998, I ended up in post hand-over Hong Kong for a first time. An American expat friend, who was making his living by dubbing kung fu films, took me to eat at an Indian place somewhere on the upper floors of labyrinthine Chunking Mansions. During lunch, he explained the importance of this tangled Babylon tower and pictured it as a fiefdom of brave independent spirits who stood together in defiance against evil city developers, who were salivating over the prospect to take possession of this prime location. It was only then that I realised that the two-stories structure of the film also closely reflected the two main settings of Hong Kong – the island side at Central and the mainland Kowloon side, at Nathan Road, in the heart of Tsim Sha Tsui. All marked by the erudite photography of Australian Christopher Doyle, whose ability to make the most of the moody darkness and city lights has turned him into a definitive style godfather of the new Asian cinema. With all that, *Chunking Express* remains one of the most atmospheric Asian films, one that is permeated, from beginning to end, with the relentless energy of Hong Kong.

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