

*Sound used in the movies: Hou Hsiao-Hsien and Wong Kar-Wai's film works,*

Chun-Wen Fang\*<sup>1</sup>, Li-Chieh Chen\*<sup>1</sup>, Min-Chih Lee\*<sup>2</sup>, Yu Di Huang\*<sup>2</sup>

\*<sup>1</sup>Tatung University, Taiwan, \*<sup>2</sup>Chung Chou University of Science and Technology,  
Taiwan

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### Abstract

Hou Hsiao-Hsien and Wong Kar-Wai's film work has always been full of topics and controversial. Their filming technique often raise extensive discussion including the connotation of the script and the characters scored showing a special film language. This article analyzes the film text, using Hou Hsiao-Hsien's *Millennium Mambo* and Wong Kar-Wai's *Chungking Express* as the research topic, to explore whether the sound performance practices and the theme of the film representation has absolute correlation? How does sound become a cohesion filed of cultural imagination? This research will also investigate the interaction between different levels of sounds in the movie and its use of film language practices; to verify the position and importance of sound elements in the film.

Keywords: Sound, Hou Hsiao-Hsien, Wong Kar-Wai, Millennium Mambo, Chungking Express

## Introduction

Elements of sound in a film can be categorized into voice of dialogue, sound effect and music. The sound synchronously recorded by naturally or man-made during the filming is called “direct sound”, while the “post dubbed sound” is the sound recorded or produced after the filming. (Timothy Corrigan:1997) The relationships among scene, narrative and voice are multiple and complex, so the source of sound appearing before or after associated scene can be categorized into voiceover, dialogue, music or sound. For the needs of story or special effect in the film, the level of application of sound element can also be different. Moving from silent film to the movie with sound, the process of this evolution allows us to distinguish the sound and elements other than sound that interacts with movie which include using voiceover to render the original meaning of the movie.

Mr. Hou Hsiao-Hsien is one of the most important leading representatives of Taiwan’s new wave cinema movement during the 80s. He uniquely creates his personal movie aesthetic with his “long shot” style, which is also most widely discussed subject by others about his works. Hou’s filming style is just like an observation of life attitude and vision that is outside the space of camera lens, voice, or film story itself. He utilizes voiceover to across the time and space of scene to allow audiences to link each segment and each shot. (Chu Tien-wen:1994) Hou Hsiao-Hsien is specialized in directing the films that are mostly related to the history of Taiwan from different era. Directing the film with modern topic is something he seldom does. To him, due to time (or generation), the modern story does not always give him a perfect angle to cut into story, and is somewhat difficult to grasp the whole story properly. Hou Hisao-Hsien once mentioned about the filming style of the famous Hong Kong modern film director Wong Kar-Wai during an interview. Hou thought Wong Kar-Wai was not directing the modern movie; rather Wong was filming his “nostalgia”. The background of Wong’s film was today’s fast modernized Hong Kong which was once colonized by the British. The background of this fast path of modernization and continues of development and progress, created Wong Kar-Wai’s special filming style. (Michael Berry:2007)

Films start with screenplay and Wong Kar-Wai is good at screenplay. Generally speaking, a screenplay is based on characterization and dialogue. It is the element that constitutes the development of a play or film. Wong Kar-Wai has a very special way in characterization; usually, it doesn’t take long for a role to establish a distinct personality and characteristics. Voiceover and music are auxiliaries that allow the character’s personality to be more prominent and obvious. Wong Kar-Wai screen-write and direct all his featured dramas. His films are often topical and controversial. In Wong’s films, the script content, figure depicts, voiceover, and unique film language always impress the audiences and are widely discussed by others.

## Sound

*Millennium Mambo* was the work of director Hou Hsiao-Hsien in 2001. Movie started with voiceover accompanying with the appearance of music to present that in the turn of century, people in Taipei, with their limit, to look for the rule of survival in

the city. In this movie, Hou presented scene of status that emphasized the mood of time and space of the story. In “Millennium Mambo”, Hou Hsiao-Hsien utilized voiceover to create a mood of tension and poetic atmosphere. In the beginning of movie, leading actress Vicky walking alone on a pedestrian bridge, Hou smartly used voiceover as the retrospect of her past and echoed that with the rhythm of background music. The background music was the electronically synthesized music genre. Hou Hsiao-Hsien once said that in *Millennium Mambo*, quite often the dialogues would be re-recorded by actors themselves. They wore earphone and listened to the dialogues previously recorded and then re-recorded their dialogues one sentence at a time. They walked and talked from scene to scene. There was no rehearsal at shooting scene and there were no dialogues except scenarios in the screenplay; but clearly with details in it. Therefore, the actor’s dialogues were directly and reflectively spoken out. Actors would affect or be affected by others (actors) and dialogues were not thought out in advance. This movie has three core sound levels or tracks: the techno music which belongs to disco pub or dance club’s electronic music, especially the DJ character of Hao-Hao; the often chaotic and mixing of noise or voices in ambience; and the voiceover narration from Vicky’s socially insulated, intimate and distant voice, which remind us of what we see in the images from years ago. (Adrian Martin:2008)

Wong Kar-Wai is expert in using events or behavior to present characters’ repeated living situation; a type of life that cycles through and repeats itself again and again. To certain extent, it is also a stereotype life style. Characters in the film are mostly trustworthy narrators; simple and direct. David Bordwell once said “these films, either within or in between large sections of story, all have various scales of repeating traces. Characters in the story return to same place; do the same thing, speak same dialogue.... Wong Kar-Wai usually stacks these cyclic scenes together to emphasize its repeatability.” (Pun ,Li Zhaoxing:2004) As a film maker, Wong Kar-Wai uses “repeating” technique in his film making to differentiate himself from others. Wong Kar-Wai likes to use event or behavior from the stories to present the plots involving characters’ repeating behavior or to present a particular character in the movie. This usually exists in the same context, cycling through life; looking from another angle, it is just like a static and never changing life. Wong Kar-Wai uses this repeating style of topics to package or re-touch the characters or emotion to deepen audience’s impression about this movie.

In Wong Kar-Wai’s movie, characters often live in a closed world, and often like being along but afraid of not knowing how to express themselves, and psychologically result in an aphasia phenomenon. In *Chungking Express*, Tony Leung repeatedly had dialogues with himself in multiple occasions. One occasion was when he returned to his place and thought that his girlfriend was playing hide and seek with him secretly (in fact, Faye Wong had already sneaked into his house). Tony muttered to a piece of soap, a towel, dolls or house, and wandered within his own space. This film used “internal monologue” to present character’s state of aphasia. Using character’s soliloquy to show alienated relationships in the modern urban life is Wong Kar-Wai's usual yet unique style. Soliloquy complements the part that film itself can’t express which mostly portrays the state of mind of the character. It opens up a new era in film making that enriches the feelings of character’s inner world to another level. The film thus is full of literary language because of extensive usage of soliloquy.

## Music

*Millennium Mambo* was different from the usual movie themes he used before. Director Hou Hsiao-Hsien used metropolis as background of the screenplay and leading actress's mentality as the theme. He used more close-up shots in this film than the long shot which he commonly used before. This film's soundtrack was produced by Mr. Lin Chiang who has been involved in the movies such as *The Puppet master*, *Good Men and Good Women*, *Goodbye South*, *Goodbye* and others. The 1995 *Goodbye South*, *Goodbye* was Lin's first soundtrack work for director Hou Hsiao-Hsien's film, and the *Millennium Mambo* was the second one. This was his first attempt to use *Mambo* genre as the film music that was related to the title of the film. When Hou Hsiao-Hsien shot *Millennium Mambo*, he took into account the music rhythm of Mambo. Lin Chiang used more objective point of view to deal with his work; therefore when making the soundtrack, he tried to find a way to meet Hou's elements and fused to form another Mambo special rhythm. Lin Chiang once said that the reason why the song *A Pure Person* would match to the story of the film was due to the utilization of electronic music genre. It had a sense of four-beat tempo, just like character Vicky's sense of youth and feeling of tradition. (Huang Ting:2001)

The stage of *Millennium Mambo* was in 2001's Taipei. In this film, the leading actress Vicky used "she" as third-person with great amount of voiceover narrations to elaborate what had happen to her in that year. The first theme song *A Pure Person* was a similar style of electronic dance music but sung with seldom seen local Taiwanese singing style. It well portrayed Vicky's sense of youth and feeling of tradition. The movie scene and music came from Taiwan's disco genre in 1970s. Some of the background music was produced with live DJ re-mix. When Vicky was dating her boyfriend, the scenes in the film were mostly shot in the dim lighting and noisy pub. Lin Chiang utilized electronic rock and roll style music to interpret the younger generation's emotional confusion in the film. Human voice mixing with sound of music presented young man and woman indulging in the atmosphere of self-liberation and another wasted life style of life in the metropolis. Film and art critic Adrian Martin once described the music in *Millennium Mambo* as "in virtually every scene-block of *Millennium Mambo*, is that what we take to be diegetic techno music begins very slowly to fade up from an extremely quiet volume level, But the music never hits the right volume level, or attains the correct ambient edge, to ever really reassure us that it is, in fact, part of the scene. And whenever the voiceover punches in, this techno music immediately dips." (Adrian Martin:2008)

*California Dreaming* and *Dreamer* were two representative theme songs in the movie *Chungking Express* by Wong Kar-Wai in 1994. The theme songs, throughout entire movie, related the element of sound and film story; in particular, the relationship between story and characters. Sung by American musical group The Mamas and Papas during 60's, *California Dreaming* was repeatedly echoing in the story as a narrative for the strange circumstances. Echoing between drama and song title and lyrics, the story wandered as if it was in the real life or in the dreams. Another dream (or dreamland) in this part of film was the *Dreamer*. Covered from Irish rock band The Cranberries' famous song *Dreams* in the 90's, the *Dreamer* expressed the feeling of endless strange dreams. Wong Kar-Wai chose Faye Wang as leading actress in the film and settled the theme song *Dreamer* into her daily practice. Since Miss Faye

Wang was the singer of *Dreamer* in real life, including this song in the film would further project the meaning of the song onto Faye Wang's role in this movie. Tony Leung was Faye Wang's *Dreamer* in the film and Faye herself was another *Dreamer*. In the story, both of them were dreamers living in different dreams. After all, both of them had to walk out of dreams and face the real life in the end. In *Chungking Express*, music throughout entire scene, two main theme songs, regardless of titles or lyrics, all integrated with the plot or the emotional drama together, showing a seemingly simple but in reality, some special techniques.

Wong Kar-Wai's films utilize repeated presence of music or song to express some stories or some hints. Using music's repeatability (including characteristics of numbers of repeats and repeating tune) to increase audience's impression about movie (character and its inner world). Wong Kar-Wai selected Faye Wong as the leading actress and mixed her Cantonese cover version of *Dreams* into her character. In this film, leading actor and actress were just like each other's *Dreams* (lover). When Faye Wong sneaked into Tony Leung's house for the second time, it came with another type of usage of music. This section of *Dreams* dub music could not be heard by the leading actress; it's a non-diegetic sound. The music in the film is the diegetic sound of the drama world. The sound of drama world and non-drama world staggered emerge, and establish the characteristic of dubbed music; it is also considered as a montage technique in film audio. In this part of movie, Faye Wong was a character expressed feeling of free, informal, arbitrary, or simply just an unrestricted freedom of musical atmosphere. (Pun ,Li Zhaoxing:2004)

Using *California Dreaming* in the movie had its symbolic meaning. This song was also the keepsake of the love affair between Tony Leung and Faye Wong. It was also played while Faye Wong cleaned Tony's room. She listen the song while playing Tony's airplane model; it somehow prophesied her future career as flight attendant and expressed her cumulative emotion or feeling about this relationship. Wong Kar-Wai cleverly showed a graceful charm by adding *California Dreaming* onto Faye Wang's body. (Pun ,Li Zhaoxing:2004) Faye Wong's nonstop indulging in *California Dreaming* was just like a self-defense to establish her "closed" world. In the end, she opened up her mind to the world through her feeling about California. This type of happy ending was unusual and seldom seen in Wong Kar-Wai's films.

Music often appears in Wong Kar-Wai's movies in different styles (singing songs or playing music) to enhance the film's narrative. Whether they are vocal music or pure music, in Wang Kar-Wai's film, they all become powerful narrative work adding multiple implications to polish the films. As the film critic Noel Carroll said: "this type of music has certain expression of its traits, it can be modified or replaced by screen characters, objects, events, image, and scenarios for shaping the descriptions...this modified music in "servicing" the screen gives the film a deeper personality and polish." (Pun ,Li Zhaoxing:2004)

## Conclusions

Sound and music play important role in film making. Sound tells the story while music creates atmosphere. Both sound and music tell audiences what emotion or feeling they should be experiencing. Interesting enough, audiences seem to be more annoyed by the poor sound quality than by poor cinematography. Two internationally

recognized film directors Hou Hsiao-Hsien and Wong Kar-Wai has similar filming style of using sound and music but with different approaches. They both have preference of using voiceover in their films. Hou Hsiao-Hsien uses sound to portray character's story or feeling and music to emphasize the scene (i.e., *Millennium Mambo*). It gives audiences a deeper impression of what happen in the story. Wong Kar-Wai, on the other hand, utilizes sound to demonstrate the state of mind of the characters and music (songs) to connect the scenes throughout entire film (i.e., *Chungking Express*). It often gives audiences long lasting thoughts about story even after seeing the movie. The preference of using voiceover by both directors has become a special feature of their films from narrative aspect. The difference is the language used by the characters. Hou Hsiao-Hsien often renders the process differently according to the screenplay background or characters. No doubt, both directors' creativity in the use of sound and music has produced the special artistic effect in their films that are so unique and stylish in today's film industry. It is authors' recommendation that a further study of the interpretation technique of using voiceover and sound in the film from a cross-cultural perspective.

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