

A PINEWOOD DIALOGUE WITH WONG KAR-WAI

Wong Kar-wai is one of the most influential film directors of his generation. His impressionistic, evocative movies capture the fleeting nature of time and love and the chaotic swirl of contemporary urban life. The Hong Kong director is best known for his dazzling romances *Chungking Express* (1994), *Fallen Angels* (1995), and *In the Mood for Love* (2000). He spoke about his career at a Museum of the Moving Image program on the eve of the theatrical release of *My Blueberry Nights* (2007), his first English-language film. Academy Award-winning director Ang Lee introduced the evening.

A Pinewood Dialogue with Wong Kar-wai introduced by Ang Lee and moderated by Chief Curator David Schwartz (April 3, 2008):

DAVID SCHWARTZ: Please welcome, to introduce Wong Kar-wai: a great filmmaker in his own right, Ang Lee. (Applause)

ANG LEE: Thank you. Thank you. Save that for Wong Kar-wai. It is my great pleasure to be here tonight to introduce to you a brilliant filmmaker. Now, I don't know any contemporary filmmaker/auteur that draws more interest, argument, articles, even essays, admiration and, as you say, imitations. So over the years, as a fellow filmmaker, I don't know whether I turn my admiration of him into jealousy, (Laughter) or turn jealousy into admiration. I don't know which one.

I mean, I want to do those cool things. How come I don't get to do those cool things? (Laughter) Like going out shooting with big movie stars, without a script. Like, "Nah, I don't feel like shooting today, let's just go home or whatever." (Laughter) Or let me think of something legendary... Like shooting for weeks, months, years, and then throw it away and start over again. Like putting some of the most astonishing images and metaphors and beautiful, romantic acting scenes together, and when it doesn't make sense, just throw in some dreamy dialogue, a dreamy monologue, and beautiful music and it will be brilliant. (Laughter) Or if the actors are leaving the set and doesn't come back and I don't know how to finish the film, he'll just hire another actor and another ending just to wrap it up... (Laughter)

And winning all the awards! I wish I could do that. I wish I could wear those sunglasses at night! (Laughter) My producers, even my editor won't let me do it. They're like, "Here, it's your film... Just forget it." I say, "Why won't you let me do it?" (Laughter)

Well, to introduce him, I have to tell you my admiration for him, my first experience watching his film. I had just made my first movie, *Pushing Hands* (1992), a little film I made in New York. It got nine Golden Horse nominations. So I'm flying back, attending the Golden Horse Awards, but everybody is talking about *Days of [Being Wild]* (1991). "Looks like we're going into a new era. This is the filmmaker, this is the auteur, this is the beginning of a new era." So I must see this movie. I rent it—it's a VHS—and I had such jet lag. And I'm watching. Half of the time I was asleep, watching it. And I was listening to the music, watching those shots and... I don't know, I was dreaming or I was asleep or I was watching... I just felt it was, like, the most opium-coated film I'd ever seen. (Laughter) I was like, in such a great trip. This is, like, a great experience I had with the movie.

And then, when I went back to New York, of course, I rent it again. I watched it diligently, and I could never get that feeling back again. I think Wong Kar-wai has touched me in a dream kind of level. In other words, he touches us in a sub-conscious level. I think Wong Kar-wai's film is... How do I put his film? I think he enchanted us with the most romantic and beautiful, mystic mood. The ambiguity stimulates so many feelings and imaginations.

And the characters talk to themselves. Even though they're doing that, they're self-centered, but it's so universal.

And the 1990s, Hong Kong—[is so] specific. Drifting, cut off, elusive sensation, along with the 1960s—particularly before '66—the innocence of Hong Kong that he recreated as impression really crept up into the world's collective consciousness.

I think his film is just... The ambiguity... I'm not a film critic. I'm not like you. (Laughter) It's worth being jealous about. I think he created a mental space for us, in which a lot of colors and beautiful scenes and many elements are in there—elements like romance, love stories, relationships, pursuit, and loss, and identity, and national history—on and on and on, where everything collides and compensates each other, feeding off each other. And it's so rich and beautiful that everybody can just take whatever they want from it.

I wish I could do all those things. So without taking too much of your time... Watching his films can be vigorous, can be tiresome, because it's so exhausting. So here's the man, the man who redefined coolness: Wong Kar-wai, my hero. Could I borrow those sunglasses? (Applause)

WONG KAR-WAI: Thank you Ang, and thank you for coming.

SCHWARTZ: Well, thanks for coming to New York to make a film. We're very excited about seeing it. You've talked a number of times about how important going to see movies was to you when you were young—reading and also seeing movies a lot, I think with your mom. Could you talk a bit about the types of movies, or where you saw films during that period?

WONG: Well, actually, that was when I was very young. I was born in Shanghai; I moved to Hong Kong when I was five. Basically, we don't have any relatives, and we don't speak Cantonese. And my mom is a film fan. And we lived in an area called Tsim Sha Tsui which is, in those days, where people shot—consider this—*The World of Suzie Wong* (1960). Later on, I made a film, *Chungking Express* (1994), in Chungking Mansions, because that's the area where I had grown up.

In that area there are cinemas for local productions—Shaw Brothers, Mandarin films. There are also productions from Taiwan. There are also films showing from mainland China. And, of course, there are big cinemas showing American films. And I remember there was a cinema showing European film. The place actually is owned by the father of the producer of Ang's film, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000), Mr. Bill Kong.

So in those days, my mom actually was like, "Wait for me," because we only had a half day of school. So I go to school in the morning, and she would wait for me at the end of—like around one o'clock. And then we would just get something to eat and go into watching movies.

So we watched films almost every day. So for me, it is a very, very intimate experience. Because just imagine for a child who came from China, who hasn't seen films before. I remember we saw one film the first night we went to Hong Kong.

It's very amazing, because you could see films about cowboy stories—it's what happened in Shaw Brothers, with all this kung-fu action...

So those have become very major memories of myself, of my childhood. At the end of the day, it's so I want to make films. I want to make films just like an audience. I just want to recollect the feelings when I sit in cinemas, watching this amazing image.

SCHWARTZ: Were there particular films that made a big impression that you remember?

WONG: Yes, I still remember the first night we watched a film which was not supposed to be seen by kids. It's something like a Chinese remake of *Dial M for Murder* (1954). (Laughter) This is the first time I saw a naked woman in a bathtub being murdered. (Laughter) It's not totally naked, it's only half-naked, but it's impressive enough. (Laughter)

Then later on, I still remember, one film that really impressed me is *The Thief of Baghdad* (1940), because I identified with the kid always trying to get all these rubies out of these big statues—and it's amazing. Cowboy films were my mom's favorite. She liked handsome leading men—Errol Flynn, and

Robert Taylor, and William Holden. So I've seen all these films.

SCHWARTZ: You've talked also a lot about the importance of reading to you, because you really got into films as a screenwriter before you were directing. But you've talked about reading Russian and French great novels. You have, I think, had many literary influences.

WONG: At that time, my elder brothers and sisters stayed in China; because of the Cultural Revolution, they were not able to join us in Hong Kong. So the only connections between me and my family, or my sisters, were through writing letters.

I was very young in those days, and in China, the only novels they were reading were French novels, French literature, or Russian literature—Balzac and Gorky. We don't teach things like this in Hong Kong, but I wanted to communicate with them. So I just read all these novels, and tried to have a conversation with them. But it's amazing, because a few months ago, I just made a short film and I thought, "Well, I want to make this short film in Russian, because I think Russian is a very beautiful language. And some day, I want to make a film in Russia, too."

SCHWARTZ: Hmm. How do you sort of make your way into directing? Because the Hong Kong film industry wasn't known for personal films; their films were being cranked out, kind of generic films. You wrote for a number of years before you directed *As Tears Go By* (1988).

WONG: Actually, I was studying graphic design at Hong Kong Polytechnic. I don't know why, because actually, I have no talent in drawing. (Laughter) But I can take good pictures. So they said, "Well, you come to be our student." At that time, this is the beginning of the so-called Hong Kong New Wave, because it's—we went into like, the television era.

At that point, there were a lot of very important directors, like Tsui Hark, Patrick Tam and Ann Hui. They studied cinema in England or America, and they came back to Hong Kong to work in television stations. It became a very trendy business. It's almost like IT business, ten years ago. It's like, wow. All the kids want to do it.

Somehow, they had a training class to train writers and directors. It's not a film school, because they pay you. The only thing you have to do is to watch films and to be like a film student. I think, "Well, that's very cool."

So I quit being a graphic design student and joined the television stations. From there, I meet a lot of directors and writers, and one year later, a lot of people leave. That's, I think, the beginning of the Hong Kong New Wave in the film industry, so they need a lot of new writers and assistant directors. So I become a writer. I become a writer for more than ten years.

SCHWARTZ: So how did you get the chance to do *As Tears Go By*? And talk about what you were trying to do. The reason I showed two different clips was we see action scenes that are typical of many of the Hong Kong films, but also very kind of tender, romantic scenes. We already see the makings of your style I think, right away, right off the bat.

WONG: The idea of *As Tears Go By* came from a script which I developed with Patrick Tam. I was the writer for Patrick Tam and we developed a project about two gangsters, small time gangsters. I still remember it was after *A Better Tomorrow* (1986), the film by John Woo. In those days, the main finance of Hong Kong films was coming from Asian markets. So after *A Better Tomorrow*, everybody's trying to make films like *A Better Tomorrow*. The figures have to be heroic gangsters.

Our idea is, try to do the opposite, to write a story about two small time gangsters. The first part is in their teenage years, and then in their twenties, and then in their middle age. But it's very difficult, because it's quite opposite to what people expected. So Patrick managed to make the second part. It's called *Final Victory* (1987). And then later on, the producers say, "Well, that's it." When I have the chance to make a film, I think, "Well, I want to do the first part about these two gangsters." And that's *As Tears Go By*.

SCHWARTZ: (Laughs) Specifically, I have to ask you, since you're in New York—the Scorsese influence. I guess any time you have a fight in a pool hall, there's going to be a comparison to *Mean Streets* (1973). But you have said that Scorsese was an important influence.

WONG: Yes, yes. I think what really inspires about this trilogy is it's based on *Mean Streets*. We both love *Mean Streets*. And in a way, when I look at this image it's still very close to me. Because I think that's the first day or the second day of shooting and basically—

SCHWARTZ: The pool hall fight?

WONG: Yes. You know, Patrick is a very, like, detailed director. He's well-prepared; he's very meticulous about his shot. So he would stop—two days before shooting, he said, "Well, I need to plan all my shots." He knows exactly what he will do on set. So when I become a director I think, "Well, he's my model; I think I can do something like this."

But I realize I'm not, because I'm still—the night before shooting, I am still working on the script, because I kept changing it. I said, "Well, I'll wake up in the morning and I have two hours; I can do all this shot list." And then I wake up like, half-an-hour before the shoot. (Laughter) So I go to—it's total panic.

Because I learned some tricks before, as a writer, because as a writer, you have to be on set all the time, you know, on call. It's because you are the psychiatrist of the director. (Laughter) So you learn some tricks. I said, "Well, this shot is going to be very complicated. I want to see the action, so we are going to make a long track." It's almost as long as here. So we just follow these two guys jumping around on these tables or set up the shots. So they will have... Because it is going to be a big set-up, so it will take at least three hours, so I can have time. (Laughter)

I still remember—the DP of *As Tears Go By*, actually, was Andrew Lau [Wai-Keung] who later on became a very successful director, who made films like *Infernal Affairs* (2002). And I still remember Andrew, at that point, was very, very young and very energetic. Basically, we are very primitive to shoot this shot because normally, if you were following the action with a dolly, people would have a lot of, like, cushions at the end, because the camera would just—*phoom!*—hit the wall, like this.

But we don't have this kind of thing, because I didn't tell them the night before. (Laughter) So actually, we lined a few of the stunt men over

there... (Laughter) So the cameras go like this and then—*phroom!* They would run into the stuntmen and start over again.

But in those days, it was really fun, because we were all very, very young and we felt like, "Wow, we are doing something very amazing." In those days, all these filmmakers were very close. Tomorrow it would become like a legend, everybody talking about, "Wow, they did a great shot, a very cool shot, yesterday." Those were the days in Hong Kong that making films is—we were very close, and there were new communities, you know.

SCHWARTZ: Now, you said that you didn't have talent in graphic design. But in the second we saw from that film, it's very strikingly graphic. I mean, it's a chase scene, but you have—the way the bus comes in, the kind of filling the frame with color, the fade to white at the end... There's a lot going on.

WONG: I said I don't have talent in drawing but I can take pictures.

SCHWARTZ: But there's a very strong idea there about playing around and doing something stylistically adventurous.

WONG: Well, I think since I was five, I'd watched more than a thousand pictures, so more or less, they had some influence on me.

SCHWARTZ: (Laughs) *Days of Being Wild* (1991), which was the next film, was a movie that was very bold in a lot of ways. Not just visually, but also the story-telling style. It was a movie that was not a commercial success, to say the least, in Hong Kong. But it got you attention around the world, at film festivals and it really... You got recognition as a significant director. Could you talk about what you were trying to do with that film?

WONG: At that point, I was influenced because I discovered writers like Manuel Puig and [Gabriel Garcia] Márquez.

I'm very impressed by the way they tell a story, because I realize, for the Chinese especially, our education is we always want to know *why* or *what*. *What* is the story about? So there is always a theme, there is always an idea, and we have to work according to that.

But not very much attention is on *how* to tell a story. What I learned from Latin-American literature is they also have a way to tell stories: the form and the substance are interrelated. So that's why I wanted to make a film that... Because at the very beginning, *Days of Being Wild* was supposed to be in two-parts. There would be Part One and Part Two. Part One happened in the 1960s and Part Two happened in 1966. [The project] involved six characters, and some of them had no relation at all at the very beginning. It was a very ambitious approach.

And it's after *As Tears Go By*—because *As Tears Go By* at that point was doing very well, and so the producer gave me this chance to make a film like this. I still remember, at that point in Hong Kong, mainly people made films as dubbed films, and I didn't think it was right. So I said, "Well, why don't we just make this film sync sound, and also make it like something that I know?" Because when I watch films, I always think, "Well, sound is a very important element. It cannot be dubbed afterwards." So that's the approach.

Because a lot of people expect the film—we released the film at Christmas. They think this is against the film; it's going to be something like *As Tears Go By*. But to their surprise, it is not, because it's more about a few young men in the sixties, and their relationships to their family, and also it's about memories. I still remember; it had a very strong impact in a lot of markets.

A few weeks ago, we were speaking with some Korean audience. I said, "Well, I still remember the first time when they released *Days of Being Wild* in Korea. The audience was so angry that they just threw cans at the screens, and then just shout, and leave." But somehow, I think it made an impression on a lot of people that it was something very different from what most of the Hong Kong productions were at that time, and afterwards, I think it got appreciated.

SCHWARTZ: The title of the film was very close to the Cantonese title of *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955), the Nick Ray film.

WONG: Mm-hm. Right.

SCHWARTZ: Was that film specifically in your mind when you were making it?

WONG: In fact, I'm very lazy with the titles. Just imagine, like the first film, the title is borrowed from a Rolling Stones song—"As Tears Go By," right? And this one, actually, is... It's very hard, because I realized when I first became a director, they always ask you the question, "What is your next film?" (Laughter)

You feel guilty when you have no idea, and you have to make up some names. (Laughter) I think, "Wow, this is a good title." So we make it [that]. I still remember, this is in Cannes, and they asked me, "What is your next film?" "*Days of Being Wild*." It seems very good, right? (Laughter)

SCHWARTZ: It does, yes!

WONG: Sometimes we have the title before we have the story, or... (Laughter)

SCHWARTZ: Now, one thing that you do in *Days of Being Wild*—which I think you do in a number of your films, including *My Blueberry Nights* (2007)—you are making a film that's about a city. But instead of recreating Hong Kong specifically, in an almost documentary style, you say it's a sort of "memory film". So you create a city that's rooted in a real time, but it's also a city of the imagination.

WONG: No. Each picture has a different approach. Like in *Chungking Express*. The original idea of this film is it is two-parts. One part is showing the *day* of Hong Kong and one part is showing the *night* of Hong Kong.

I wanted to make a film about where I live, and where I grew up, and what is very close to me—because Tsim Sha Tsui is very close to me. I know the streets by heart. Every day I just—we shoot at night, because we have this Kowloon part at night.

So I would wake up at twelve o'clock in the morning, at noon. I would stay in one coffee shop at the Holiday Inn Hotel. I would write until six o'clock, and then I would walk to the set, and then we'd start shooting. So my producer would actually sit with me and give all the orders, what kind of props we were going to order. Because I said,

“Well, I know this place so well, and I want to make a film just according to this map.”

And then Chris, at that point, moved to Hong Kong. He stayed in Central, which has...

SCHWARTZ: [Cinematographer] Chris Doyle, yes.

WONG: ...all these elevators, so we could go to the mid-level of Hong Kong. So I think this is something very new, and so we create another part, the day in Hong Kong side.

So that film actually is a Hong Kong that is my impression of the city, which is close to me. For, *In the Mood for Love* (2000), it's about my memory of my childhood. This is a Hong Kong which has been lost. So it is about an era. Sometimes a film is not about the characters themselves, it's about the whole period, you know.

SCHWARTZ: Just to jump to *My Blueberry Nights*, then, because here is the first film that is set in New York. So what was your approach to how you would visualize New York?

WONG: First of all, because my wife's family lives in New York, so I've been here for a lot of time. So I must say, New York is the city that I am familiar most with in the United States. Also, it reminds me of Hong Kong, because even though it's much, much bigger, I feel that visually, it's also vertical. Also it's a space where people from different parts of the world living together.

The idea of *My Blueberry Nights* actually came from a short film I made a few years ago in Hong Kong, which is a story that happens in a diner between two [people]. So I think, “Well, it would be interesting to expand the story, to adapt the story in this city, because I want to see what the language, or the subtext, or the space would change in the ideas, and see where it will bring me to.

So we start in New York, and we shot in SoHo, a small café. At a certain point you just mix up... It's like, “Well, this is a café in New York, but at the same time, it can be a café anywhere.” Then we just have the second chapter, seeing Norah Jones trying to run away from New York and start her journey. We can see the landscape change from

vertical into horizontal. It also reflects what she feels at that time.

SCHWARTZ: The whole question about style is always discussed with your films. One thing that was striking to me when I watched these clips was that there was a sort of emotional through-line, an emotional intensity, that's almost more important than the visual style. You're kind of famous for things like a particular type of slow motion that you use, or a particular type of camera work. And you've talked about how that has come about pragmatic reasons on the set. So could you just elaborate on that?

WONG: Well, I think a lot of people think, “Well, the film is beautiful, your visuals are beautiful, you must pay a lot of attention to these things.” But in fact, it's not true. I have to say, after *Days of Being Wild*, because the film was not doing very well at the box office, so it was very difficult to find someone to produce our film. So we start our own company and we produce our own productions.

So most of the time we are working with a very tight budget. Like *Chungking Express*: basically, we made this film just like a student film. We don't have time to set up, like big set-up. We just shoot—at that point, we call ourselves CNN. We just do it like CNN: just bring the camera (Laughter) and shoot it—without permits, without any licenses. And we even got caught, because we shot in the subway without any license. We had a warning from the airport because we just bring it to the airport and shot it. So every day is like planning a robbery. (Laughter)

In fact, some of our style actually came from there. It's a lot of handheld, and we shoot with step printing. In fact, step printing is not something that's very difficult to understand. When you are shooting with existing light and you don't have a lot of light sources, you have to shoot it with a fast speed negative, and then you have to turn the shutter speeds from twenty-four frames. Normally it's twenty-four frames per second; we just slow it down to twelve frames. That means it allows the exposure longer, and so we can deal with these situations. But later on, we use it organically, and it becomes our style.

SCHWARTZ: Could you talk about what the process is like? Ang talked about it a bit, about what it must be like to work on a Wong Kar-wai film. Christopher Doyle, who is your insane and brilliant cinematographer of many of your films, said once that your process was—he compared it to a fat man’s feet, and he said it gets you where you need to go, but you don’t really see the feet until the end of the day. (Laughter) So, I don’t know, it’s an interesting metaphor—but could you talk about what it was like? Sort of what that means to you, in terms of how you collaborate?

WONG: I think Ang and I are coming from very different schools. The way he makes films, it’s very different from my way. I presume, in the last few years, Ang has a very good producer working with him. Basically, he focused himself entirely as the director and the writer. So he works with a certain team and forms it.

In our productions—because we produce our films—basically, every day is like a war. We have to fight for what we want. It’s not that romantic thing that—we don’t have any chance to say, “Well, I’m not in the mood and I’m going to stop.” It’s impossible because we work with the money, which is very limited.

The thing is, we try to do as much as we can, and so we roll until the last minute. I still remember when we shot *Happy Together* (1997) in Argentina, we shot one day a place called Ushuaia, which is the [most southern] part of America—because after that will be Antarctica, right.

It’s so far away from Buenos Aires. We shot and shot until we realized, with Chris, I said, “Do we have enough film stock?” “No, we ran out of film stock.” “But we still have one scene. What we are supposed to do?” Then we sit down and then Chris comes up with an idea. So we go to all these photo shops to buy film rolls.

SCHWARTZ: Individual rolls.

WONG: It is like film rolls—but film rolls normally have thirty-six frames, or twenty-four frames. So we just rolled it and make this whole scene in still shots. So each shot lasts one second. And this is the way to do it. (Laughter)

And we had fun, because I think at that point, we all feel this is an accomplishment! (Laughter) Sometimes people think, “Well, this is your style.” But I always want to explain—to students, especially—I say, “Well it’s not only an aesthetic decision. Sometimes it is a practical solution to solve your problem.” One of the jobs of a director is you have to solve problems.

SCHWARTZ: I remember seeing *Fallen Angels* (1995) at the Toronto Film Festival in early September, and I think you were shooting in August.

WONG: Mm-hm.

SCHWARTZ: Yes. (Laughs) So you like getting it down to the wire, I guess.

WONG: Yes; *My Blueberry Nights* can be seen as a love story—but for me, I would say this is a film about *letting go*. I think for myself, and for a lot of people, it’s very hard to let go of something. Especially when they mean a lot to you, and at a certain point, you have to let go of them.

This is a hard decision, and it’s like making films. How can you decide this is the best choice? Can you do better? We can always ask ourselves, “Can we do better?” So I can only do as much as I can. One of the reasons we always present our films in Cannes, because it becomes a deadline for us. We have to finish the film at a certain point.

SCHWARTZ: Yes. (Laughs) Do you think of your films, often, as sort of one kind of ongoing, evolving, transforming movie? Because you’ve done, you know, some films that can be paired with earlier films, and you’ve reworked films; I think, now you’re reworking *Ashes of Time* (1994).

WONG: I think, more or less, each director has certain things that they are very concerned about, and which matter a lot to them. In a way, I don’t see each film as an individual. I think they are like different chapters of a long book.

Even though like Ang, when I look at his films, even though they are in different genres—it’s Jane Austen, period [drama]; through the eighteenth-century Chinese swordsmen; or two cowboys, right? But I can see all these connections. I can feel that this is Ang. You can recognize the film directly.

Because I know him, I know this is a film from Ang; I can see him in this film. But he has different genres—but still, I can notice that.

SCHWARTZ: One thing that runs throughout your films is this idea of the fleeting nature of time, and it seems to be tied in with the process of how you work—always the sense that you can only live in the present, but you can never really capture it.

WONG: No, no. Actually I'm not... I think what I'm trying to say is about *timing*. I think this is very Oriental thinking. There's a Chinese poem about how the blossom is the same but the face is different. It's always about timing. It's like things happen in the right time; or the wrong time, but the right [people]. But I think this is a very universal theme for dramas. Right? It is also a theme for tragedies or comedies. Depends how you put it.

SCHWARTZ: So sort of that life can go in many different directions, but the place you happen to be at, and the time, will determine who you wind up with?

WONG: Right. Right, yes.

SCHWARTZ: Okay. Glad I got that. (Laughs) Could you talk about working with musicians? The performance by Norah Jones is really wonderful in this movie, the new movie. But you've worked with musicians a number of times, as early Jacky Cheung, who plays Fly in *As Tears Go By*, and Faye Wong, and Leon Lai. Could you talk about what that is like? Is there anything about working with singers...?

WONG: What really strikes me is I realized that in the United States, people have a very specific idea about, "Okay, this is a singer, and she's an actress."

But in Hong Kong, or in our world—maybe in my world—it's like I work with all these great actors, and [it] so happens they all have music backgrounds. Like Leslie [Cheung] is a great singer, and Tony [Leung] is also a singer, and Faye Wong is a singer.

I don't see them as singers; I just see them as, like, exceptional personalities. They are very talented, they have very interesting faces, and they have a

certain way of expressing themselves. Of course, as musicians, they start with this background. They have a very good sense of rhythm. I think for an actor, rhythm is very important, because film is about rhythm.

SCHWARTZ: Your films have such a sense of rhythm, even though the narratives can be complicated. One thing I love about your narratives is that you don't have a feeling like everything has to be tied together and explained. In *Chungking Express*, there is a gangster drama in the beginning, and then another section that's a cop story. Usually when we see different stories in a film, they all kind of tie together, but you don't work that way.

WONG: I have my logic. (Laughter) Like for *Chungking Express*, my idea is it's a day and night. The structure is very identical, and then I just put it as days and night intertwined like this.

Days of Being Wild started with, like, three different story lines. But at the end, they will just meet together. I just wanted to show that within a certain period of time, it's like you see changes through the unchanged, or vice versa.

SCHWARTZ: Okay. Let's open it up. We can take some questions from the audience. (Repeats audience question) Could you say anything about Godard?

WONG: Godard is God. (Laughter) Godard is a poet, I think. He makes films like a poet does. Amazing.

SCHWARTZ: Okay; right here. (Repeats audience question) Okay, the relationship with Christopher Doyle, who has shot most of your films. He didn't shoot *My Blueberry Nights*, but he shot most of the other films.

WONG: I think I have explained a lot, and you can tell all of the times that we've been through together—we've been through some of our most crazy and most difficult, and we work nights and days on a film.

I'll just give you an example. I still remember the last day of shooting of *Ashes of Time*. We were trapped in this desert in the north of China for, like four months. Finally, [it's] the last day. It's

supposed to be the last scene of the film, and the character [played by] Leslie will leave this place, and will set fire and burn the whole building. And so we set up the camera, because we're supposed to shoot at five o'clock in the morning, when the light is right. So we have four cameras set up. And then we go back to pack our things.

And because we worked there for a long time, the local crew just wanted to have a farewell party. And then Chris got drunk that night. (Laughter) Really drunk. At two o'clock in the morning, my line producer called me up and he said, "Big problem. Chris is lying in the bathtub." So I go to his room, and he's very drunk. So I drag him and get him in the car.

By the time we got to the set, it's already four-something. So he said, "Well, I can do it, I can do it." (Laughter) But, you see, we have to rehearse. He's Camera One, which is the key camera—and he'd just fallen asleep on that. (Laughter)

So I asked, I said, "Chris, are you okay?" And he said, "Well, I can manage." Because he's very tough, you know. Chris has a very good spirit. I appreciate him for this. And he said, "I can do it." But I know he cannot do it, so I just put him on the B Camera.

Then we set fire, and then we shot that scene. And then during this shot and after this, he wakes up. And he feels very, very bad about it. He said, "Well, I'm totally sorry. What shot do you want? So I'm going to do it. I'm going to take the camera."

So he takes off his clothes, in front of everybody, puts on some water, and then brings the camera, running, to the set with fire. (Laughter) And then he takes one shot, which is a very—he knows the theme of the film is about... So he just takes that shot.

And he comes back to me and says, "Well, I'm sorry. But this is what I want to do." And I still keep that picture, because everybody's taking pictures of him. Naked Chris with a camera. (Laughter) But that's a very memorable morning, and also it tells you a lot about the person that Chris is, about my partner. He really is crazy about making films, and he is a very passionate person.

SCHWARTZ: I just want to ask if you had to adapt at all, making a film in America, just in terms of the sort of union rules, or the styles of crews. I don't know if the unions let the cameramen run around naked. But was it—

WONG: I don't see there's a problem about the dress code!

SCHWARTZ: (Laughs) Right, right. But was there a difference in terms of the working method of this film than your other films?

WONG: Actually, I don't feel that—surprisingly. At first, I thought it would be very different because they have unions; they have certain rules on working hours. But at the end, I didn't feel a big difference. The only difference, really, is about the lunch break. I remember, my producer kept telling me that, "You have to break for lunch on time, because otherwise we will have penalties, we will have problems."

SCHWARTZ: Right over here. (Repeats audience question) The question is about the selection of music, specifically for *In the Mood for Love*, but it's critical in all of your films.

WONG: My mom is responsible for that. (Laughter) She passed away before that film. My mom had very good taste about music. Nat King Cole was her favorite. And when we were very young, we always go to restaurants to have a quick lunch, because this was her habit.

In those days, in those restaurants, especially those serving Western food, they had music. There's a [large] Filipino population in Hong Kong, and Spanish music is actually very popular. In a way, I wanted to recapture that period. So I used several very popular Spanish songs in the film. Somehow I discovered there's a Spanish version sung by Nat King Cole, so I used that in the film, as a memory of my mom.

SCHWARTZ: Hm. Okay, back there? (Repeats audience question) The question is about your sensibility changing?

WONG: I think to be a filmmaker, first of all, you have to be open. And also you have to take risks. You

might lose something. But you never know until you try it, right?

SCHWARTZ: Okay, down here.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Is it your background as a screenwriter that gives you confidence as a director even when you're working without a script?

WONG: Yes, somehow it helps because I know. First of all, I think for most directors the dream is to wake up in the morning and have a perfect script there. But it never happened to me. (Laughter) I think not every screenwriter [would] like to work with a director who can write scripts himself. So mostly, I have to deal with it. And you know he will always return calls; you will have problems, he will just run away.

To be the writer of Wong Kar-wai is not very encouraging, because even though you work very hard, people say, "Well, he works without a script, so you won't have any credit."

But the thing is, I believe that to be a director, it's very important you have at least the skill or the craft to be able to write the script. At certain points, it gives you freedom, too. You won't be restricted, because you know how to make certain changes. I don't think films can be made just one by one, according to the script. Otherwise, we'd just make a novel; why shoot a movie?

I think in the process, there will be a lot of sparks, or there will be accidents, or there will be situations. You have to make certain adjustments, to make it smooth. So I think that that's very helpful. I always give advice to students and young filmmakers: Try to be involved in this process and try to learn the craft of writing scripts.

SCHWARTZ: But you've made big structural changes. Like with *Chungking Express*, originally it was going to have five stories, I believe?

WONG: No, three.

SCHWARTZ: Three, and you dropped one. And I guess in the *Days of Being Wild*, I think—

WONG: But I saved it for *Fallen Angels*. I would never waste things. (Laughter)

SCHWARTZ: Okay. But wasn't *Days of Being Wild* going to be partly set in the nineties? Is that true?

WONG: No, no. *Days of Being Wild* actually—a lot of people ask me, "Well, why don't you just make a sequel, the second part of *Days of Being Wild*?" I think I made it already.

SCHWARTZ: With *In the Mood for Love*.

WONG: *In the Mood for Love* and *2046* (2004) basically, to me, is like the second part of that dream.

SCHWARTZ: (Repeats audience question) Is there a lot of change during the editing process in your films?

WONG: Basically, as I described to you, during shooting we are just like a hungry man, because we don't know if we can go back to this location or not. So we just shoot as much as we can. During this editing process, then we have all these materials lined up for us, and then we select what actually is essential to the stories. Sometimes it's really about—editing—is also about rhythm. Because the film can be seen in this way or that way, but you have to find which is the best rhythm for you and for the audience.

SCHWARTZ: Okay, over here. (Repeats audience question) A question about some of your performances.

WONG: This is also one of the reasons I don't want to work with a very precise or detailed script at the very beginning, because normally, in the normal process (or what film school told you) is: have a script first; and then you have the characters, you have the role; and try to find someone to play that role.

And I don't like that. I prefer to custom-make my roles for the characters, for the actors, because I have that person in my mind. I have a vague idea about this girl, and then I know that it will be Zhang Ziyi playing it. Then I will make certain changes of these characters, based on my observations of these actresses and actors.

Just like *My Blueberry Nights*, I had this story, I shot this story, years ago. But once I thought, “Well, I want to work with Norah, I think this is the right project for her,” then I would create Elizabeth with her face in my mind, and I’d just do all this development based on that.

SCHWARTZ: Could you say a bit more about specifically how you direct? A lot of times you really seem to be capturing very private, internal feelings. There’s a lot of that, I think, in Norah Jones’ performance. I don’t know if you could just talk about that?

WONG: Well, I think basically, the reason you want to work with this actress or you are attracted to this person is because there are certain personalities and there’s certain qualities that attract you. So...

The first thing for an actress is that [she] inspire imagination. You can imagine the story with this face and with this look. So then you can create a character out of that. And I have no interest in creating an idea and then to ask someone to fit in this. It is not my method.

SCHWARTZ: (Repeats audience question) Specifically, why did you choose to do a film, *My Blueberry Nights*, at this time and film in the United States? And then was there any difference in the directing process?

WONG: It happened, like, three years ago, when I have a chance to have a meeting with Norah in New York. We both were intrigued [with the prospect of making] a film together. And obviously, I cannot ask Norah to speak in Chinese or in Cantonese. (Laughter) At that point, she was also working on her album. So I thought the most logical way was to make a film in English and in this country.

At first, it is something—it seemed very wild for me because it is not my language. But I also thought, “Well, but it could be a very interesting experience. It gives me a chance to do something which is very different from my previous films, try to express myself in a different context, in a different language. Also it is a very good opportunity for me to work with a bunch of talented artists in this country. Why not?” So I decided to make this film here.

SCHWARTZ: Hm. (Repeats audience question) Well, the question was how are you able to keep your style so fresh?

WONG: This is one of the reasons I want to make *My Blueberry Nights* at this point, because normally people, after five years of working on certain things, they would need a vacation—so I just make a film, which is very different. To me, *My Blueberry Nights* is a refreshment, to refresh myself from the experience of *2046*.

SCHWARTZ: (Repeats audience question) I think there’s a myth that you don’t have a script at all. You don’t have a script at all, but—

WONG: No, no. I think sometimes people think about things very drastically. It’s like, “Well, when you are working without a script that means there’s no paper, there are no words, and you just walk on the set and just tell them, ‘You do this and you do that.’” (Laughter)

No. What I mean about working without a script is you don’t have something called a script which is *definite*, “You have to do it like this.” We still have pages and we still have scenes. We still have a script, and send it to the cast before shooting. Especially for *My Blueberry Nights*, because it is in English, so I needed to work with Larry Block. Larry is a very active marathon runner, I had to make sure he finished the script before we start shooting, because we were on the road for seven weeks, and otherwise I’d have to deal with it myself.

But even though we had a script, during the seven weeks we made a lot of changes, and we made a lot of adjustments. First of all, it was a very intense shoot, and there were so many things we had to solve.

Also, when I see my cast in front of the cameras, when they deliver these lines, sometimes I think... Lines are important, but what’s more important is between lines. How to deliver a line, how to control the pause is very, very important—and especially in this film, because English is not my language. I can understand the words, but I am not so sure about the subtext and the way to deliver it. So I have to ask my cast to be involved in this process, because I am sure they understand the behavior more than me.

And so we make adjustments. I still remember when—there's a scene in Memphis. It's a long scene with Rachel Weisz and Norah Jones talking about the story between Rachel and her husband. And she has to leave next morning. It's very late; we shot like, fifteen hours, but that's a very important scene.

It's basically her monologue but somehow, we feel the lines are not strong enough. At that point, the emotions and everything... So we just sit down together and we just co-write the line again. She writes a certain part and I write a certain part and we put it together. I think this is a very organic way to make a film. I'm not sure this is a normal practice in the United States or a normal practice in the Hollywood system. But to me, this is the most satisfying process, because that character becomes so real and so close.

(Responds to audience question) The first things I noticed when I came to America is I realized, Americans like sweets. (Laughter) Even the Coca-Cola here is sweeter than the one in Hong Kong. But it is not the intention.

I think we have seen films about Chinese made by foreigners. Sometimes it looks quite weird to us. I just don't want to repeat these kinds of mistakes, so I just want to make sure that it is authentic. That's why I needed to work with Larry Block, and also to involve my crew and my cast during this process.

But in a way, it's not... The way we end the film is not basically decided by me. I must say, we shot the first three chapters in the summer. And then we

shot the last chapters in the winter, for one week in New York. So after the first three chapters, we stopped. At that point, the ending was still open. Either there will be a reunion or there will be a disappointment. But I don't want to get into details, I was told. (Laughter)

So I cut the film during the process, during the break. And at the end, it's the characters of Jeremy and Elizabeth who convinced me that the ending that we have now is the most sensible and logical. This is how it works, because sometimes you have to be honest and you have to follow the characters.

I read a novel last year in China, a Chinese novel, very interesting. It's about a writer who's always visited by the characters he creates. They complain, "It's not well-written. We want our life *this* way. (Laughter) We don't want to be this miserable." And so he has to change it.

I think it works a certain way, because when you are involved in projects and you create all these characters, at a certain point these characters will lead you, because they become something very solid. You cannot do it just by, like, "I want it this way, I want it this way." At a certain point, this is the direction, so you have to go that way.

SCHWARTZ: Don't worry, there's plenty of heartbreak too, in *My Blueberry Nights*, so... Okay, well, I know you're going back to work on the mix of *Ashes of Time* tomorrow. So I really want to thank you for being here tonight, and good luck with the movie.

WONG: Thank you very much. Thank you.
(Applause)

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