

My Blueberry Nights: Not very much there, but was there ever?

By David Walsh
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Directed by Wong Kar-wai, written by Wong and Lawrence Block

Prominent Hong Kong filmmaker Wong Kar-wai has made an English-language film, *My Blueberry Nights*, set in the US. A young woman, Elizabeth (popular singer Norah Jones), becomes a regular at a Brooklyn eatery managed by Jeremy (Jude Law). She's suffering from a broken heart; her boyfriend has left her for another woman. Jeremy has his own lingering heartache. The pair develop a certain closeness, but Elizabeth abruptly takes off on a cross-country tour of sorts.

In Memphis, she finds work as a waitress in a bar where a policeman (David Strathairn) drinks himself into a stupor every night; his wife (Rachel Weisz) has left him, tired of his overbearing embrace. Each night he promises himself to stop drinking. A minor tragedy unfolds before Elizabeth's eyes.

Heading west, she ends up employed in a casino in Nevada where she meets Leslie (Natalie Portman), a young professional gambler, with issues of her own, including a dying father. Some thousands of dollars richer, and presumably several life lessons wiser, Elizabeth returns to New York, more or less into the open arms of Jeremy, with whom she has maintained contact through a series of postcards.

Wong's films (*Chungking Express*, *Happy Together*, *In the Mood for Love*) have a distinctive look. The filmmaker has always made lively and varied use of color, motion and texture to create certain suggestive effects. There are attractive images here, of objects (the elevated New York City subway, for example) and human faces (Portman's at least).

The drama and its themes are not interesting. From her time in Memphis, Elizabeth presumably comes to understand the danger of attempting to hold on to someone at all costs; in Nevada, she learns the value, nonetheless, of trust and commitment. Hovering over all the events is a sense of the arbitrariness and chance character of love and relationships. None of the characters have much solid ground beneath their feet; they spend much of their time struggling against the isolation and emptiness that threaten to engulf them. The latter theme, which might be promising, is not worked through. The floating atoms are not attached to any particular social milieu or historical moment.

The various characters and their emotional lives are trite. The dramatic framework itself—a series of brief, chance encounters with problematic characters in 'unlikely' settings (but, in fact, by now entirely 'likely' and even predictable: an all-night restaurant in a big city, a 'dive' in a Southern town, an out-of-the-way casino, stretches of panoramic Western desert, etc.)—is a cliché. As each particular sequence gets under way and the spectator first catches sight of the over-familiar settings and cast of characters, he or she experiences a sharp intake of breath: 'This can't be all there is ...'

In one of the film's longer speeches, the distraught Sue Lynne (Weisz) tells Elizabeth about her relations with her former husband, the Memphis cop. She was 17 when they first met. They fell in love, they married, but she eventually found the relationship suffocating. "I used to daydream of dying." "You must have hated him," says her companion. "I didn't hate him," responds Sue Lynne, "I just wanted him to let go of me. Now that he has, it hurts me more than anything else in the whole world."

Earlier in the film, in the New York restaurant, Jeremy has explained to Elizabeth that the blueberry pie is generally left intact at the end of the night. Elizabeth: "So what's wrong with the blueberry pie?" Jeremy: "There's nothing wrong with the blueberry pie, just people make other choices. You can't blame the blueberry pie, it's just ... no one wants it." Elizabeth: "Wait! I want a piece."

Jeremy's lost love, Katya (Cat Power), comes by to say hello, and goodbye. Katya: "Sometimes, even if you have the keys those doors still can't be opened. Can they?" Jeremy: "Even if the door is open, the person you're looking for may not be there, Katya."

The reader will perhaps begin to get the picture of the rather banal goings-on. The colorful imagery and varied locales cannot conceal the film's meager contents.

Although pleasant enough, and endearing at certain moments, Norah Jones is weak and rather bland. Law appears a little embarrassed at times by the silly lines he's required to repeat. ("A few years ago, I had a dream. It began in the summer and was over by the following spring. In between, there were as many unhappy nights as there were happy days. Most of them took place in this café. And then one night, a door slammed and the dream was over.")

The matter could be more or less left at that, except that great claims were once and perhaps are still being made for Wong Kar-wai. Born in China in 1956 and moving to Hong Kong at the age of five, Wong first worked in Hong Kong television. He began directing feature films in the late 1980s (*As Tears Go By*, 1988) and hit his critical stride in the 1990s. His "elliptically plotted mood pieces, with lush visuals and music," as one commentator describes them, struck a chord with a portion of the critics and the film-going public.

An artist is not solely or even primarily responsible for either the popular and critical success or failure that he or she encounters. Certain artists, through no particular exertion of their own, may be borne aloft by retrograde currents that originate in painful social and historical circumstances.

No doubt Wong developed a following in part for his portraits of alienated and disaffected youth, imaginatively set to pop tunes and arranged in fragmented images. In a generally rather bleak cinema landscape, some young people responded to this.

For others, however, Wong's arrival on the scene in the mid-1990s—and the arrival of others like him—came as something of an ideological and artistic godsend. His films unfortunately captured and confirmed a certain state of mind: social indifference, renunciation of previous 'radical' principles, the discovery of the 'politics of the personal.' For those, in the wake of the collapse of the USSR, the 'death of socialism' and the all-too-evident decay of the official Socialist and Labour movements ('Goodbye to all that!'), who found themselves in need of consolation or, in some cases, felt relieved to be free of the burden of world-altering responsibilities, Wong's films served a purpose.

These middle class individuals discovered, what they had perhaps suspected all along and only concealed from themselves, that Life was, above all, about its small 'privileged moments,' the chance (and presumably erotic) encounters in bars, cafés and 'one-night cheap hotels' at 3 a.m. Or, if one had run out of such moments or had never experienced them at all, one could still be reminded of them vicariously through a trip to the cinema.

One could breathe freely again, no longer having to beat one's head against the stone wall of a social structure that was now recognized to be eternal. Once again it became possible and, soon, acceptable, to elevate "the private corners and little spaces we call our own," in the words of one admirer, to the level of the world-historical. The growing emphasis in the 1990s on the frenetic, everyday soap opera of personal couplings and uncouplings went hand in hand, for much of this petty bourgeois stratum, with an increasingly secure and comfortable economic position.

Wong's films became a focus for a portion of the wishful thinking, self-indulgence and search for a refuge from complex social problems. In 1997, writing of his *Happy Together* and more general trends, I commented:

"Thus, if there is a huge gap between market-oriented and artistic cinema, there is also a significant gap within the so-called art cinema between the minority of directors who have something to say and the majority who would like to appear as though they had. One sees, in fact, the emergence of an international school of filmmakers who are skilled at creating the outward appearance of real feeling and thought, but whose films are fundamentally empty. ...

"I had the same reaction, more or less, to Wong Kar-wai's *Happy Together*, the story of two gay men from Hong Kong who take off for Argentina and have a generally unhappy time of it. Wong, who has a growing international reputation, has made a film which is intended to be thought of as sensitive, but merely comes across as glib and opportunist."

Wong's reputation reached its apogee in 2001 with the release of *In the Mood for Love*, the story of two neighbors in 1962 Hong Kong who discover their spouses are both having affairs. He was referred to as "the most romantic filmmaker in the world" by Richard Corliss of *Time*. Other critics, who should have known better, praised Wong in lavish terms.

At the time I wrote: "The characters float down hallways and streets to Nat King Cole in Spanish. They pass and re-pass one another, on the way to the noodle stand or wherever, never touching. They stand meaningfully on rainy street corners. He smokes cigarettes. She wears form-fitting outfits. This is 'delirious,' 'hallucinatory,' 'mesmerizing,' say the critics. All the much-vaunted color and music and camerawork leaves me cold. Because it is at the service of affectation and petty concerns....

"One never really comes to care very much about this pair. Nothing

about their lives provides insight into the general obstacles to and possibilities for human happiness. This sort of idle 'romanticism,' which isn't going to trouble anyone's sleep, is rampant at present. Numerous details and secondary characters ... are thrown in to give the appearance of 'life.' They don't contribute to the film's principal concerns, such as they are, but serve as mere decoration, again, so we will be confused and mistake this for a serious film. The central relationship is not convincing. I don't believe these people have the air of 1962 about them, they are extremely modern hipsters, too cool for words. This woman is a clerk in a shipping office? It's unlikely enough to be laughable."

In regard to *My Blueberry Nights*, one erstwhile Wong admirer now chastises Norah Jones for being "the big zero at the film's center." This is unfair. Jones is simply doing what she's been asked to do. Other critics blame the strange language and strange country for the work's failure. That misses the point. It's rather that the inadequacies and haziness of Wong's conceptions, the essential barrenness that has always been present, become far more obvious in a film stripped of exotic locales and unfamiliar language.

Also, there is a progression, or a deterioration. A relationship exists between social life, historical developments and the viability (or tolerability) of artistic approaches and imagery. What can still bear some weight at one moment, seems frivolous and insubstantial at another. Something that was possible to pull off in the late 1990s, even with a certain forcefulness, when masses of people were set back on their heels by events and 'disappointment' with history and society was rife, may no longer be possible. The artist too, at some level, feels these processes. The program of social indifference is clearly not intellectually or artistically feasible. A work based on such a program must lack genuine conviction.

There is no reason to gloat over the decline of Wong's reputation. Much of this was not his doing. His talents, under different conditions, might have found (and might still find) far more rewarding outlets. The adulation of the international 'critical' fraternity certainly has done him no favors. What was necessary in the most difficult days of the 1990s was to state the harsh truth: 'This is a very bad time for filmmaking. We're not going to flatter anyone, or pretend, or build up reputations, we're going to criticize what exists and prepare the ground for something new and substantial and comprehensive.' And such an attitude, as a matter of fact, would still be a healthy one.

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