

In the Mood for Love /Faa yeung nin wa (2000)

“You notice things if you pay attention.”

Major Credits:

Director: Wong Kar-Wai, from his own screenplay
Cinematography: Christopher Doyle, Pung-Leung Kwan, Ping Bin Lee
Production Design and Costume Design: William Chang Suk-ping
Music: Michael Galasso, Shigeru Umebayashi
Cast: Maggie Cheung (Mrs. Chan/Su Li-zhen), Tony Chiu-Wai Leung (Mr. Chow)

Background:

[There are many specific details about the conception and production of In the Mood for Love on the Criterion Collection 2-disc edition that clarify the director's intentions and provide ways of discerning the historical and psychological dimensions of the plot. Suffice to say that the “meanings” are much less obscure for Chinese audiences than for westerners, many of whom regard the film as an art house classic. Enthusiastic viewers should be encouraged to seek out the Criterion boxed set, recently updated.]

Despite its languorous pace, hypnotic images, and elliptical storytelling, the film remains, for its director, rooted in a particular time and place: beginning in Hong Kong in 1962, ending in Angkor Wat, Cambodia in 1966, signified by the newsreel footage of DeGaulle's visit to the country. This period was marked by the dramatic influx of people from Shanghai and elsewhere re-locating to Hong Kong following the Communist Revolution. Wong-Kar Wai grew up in this historical milieu, which he recalls in exquisite, sensuous detail here. He had already become a celebrated *auteur* of Second Wave Hong Kong cinema through a succession of successful art films during the 1990s—*Chungking Express*, *Ashes of Time*, *Happy Together*—which had featured Maggie Cheung and Tony Leung, both major martial arts stars in Asia. This film has often been regarded as his masterpiece; in any case, it has proven to be the apex of his critical reputation.

Wong Kar-Wai's working methods were notorious, which may explain why his career has apparently declined in the twenty-first century. His screenplays were constantly being revised, leading his actors to complain about following their characters' motivations and memorizing new lines; his investors became disillusioned by production delays and postponed release dates. The story of *In the Mood for Love* was supposed to extend to 1972, but the director ran out of time to meet the Cannes Film Festival deadline and simply aborted the narrative. He was reportedly editing footage days before the Cannes premiere. A sequel, *2046*, starring Maggie Cheung, Tony Leung, and several other cast members from earlier films, appeared in 2004 but proved both critically and financially disappointing.

Cinematic Aspects:

The director deploys nearly all the devices in a filmmakers' tool box to ravish the spectator into submission to the oneiric passivity imposed by the aesthetic experience. (Conversely, some in the audience may experience the slowest 93 minutes they have ever endured in a movie theater.) In addition to the slow fades between scenes, close-ups of apparently quotidian objects or reflexive gestures, visual motifs of clocks, mirrors, and frames-within-frames, and repeated slow motion scenes, consider these particularly prominent strategies:

1. *Mise-en-scène*: The interior scenes, especially those in the apartment building, employ strikingly tight framing to emphasize the confinement imposed by restricted space and to disorient the spectator. Wong deliberately eschews establishing shots. He has said, “I sometimes treat space as

a main character in my films.” Note how, because of the camera placement in such tight quarters, Mr. Chan and Mrs Chow, the adulterous spouses, are barely glimpsed, never fully revealed.

2. Costume design: Perhaps the most memorable images from the film—literally, the visual detail most likely to be recalled years later—are the varied *cheong-sam* dresses Maggie Cheung wears in every scene, more than forty different designs in all. These high-collared, clinging sheaths were especially popular during the time period. In addition to fetishizing the woman as an object of desire, the striking floral and geometric designs in brilliant, dramatic colors serve to contrast with her character’s emotional restraint. *Pay attention*: The change of outfits also indicates the otherwise slippery passage of time.
3. Music: Three motifs orchestrate the narrative and contribute to the film’s uncanny aura: 1) the cello and violin waltz theme (from Japanese director Suzuki Seijun’s film *Yumeji* 1991), heard nine separate times; 2) The recording of Nat King Cole singing in Spanish, heard six separate times, establishing the story in a particular time and place when they were popular in Hong Kong but also expressing the dislocation and restless yearning of the protagonists; 3) Michael Galasso’s 3-note plucked string progressions, haunting as the ticking of a clock, that serve to reinforce the film’s expressionistic ambience.

Questions for Discussion:

1. The title suggests the theme, but what kind of “Love” is depicted here? Are the repressed protagonists rewarded for their restraint? Do they really love one another or only the projected ideals of their unfaithful spouses? Does the film make a statement about the nature of human desire? Or is it the “Mood” of love that the film ultimately enshrines? Finally, is it all an elaborate *tease*?
2. Perhaps the only clear social theme in the film is its depiction of gossip. “We won’t be like them,” Mr. Chow declares, feeling the pressure to maintain his self-image, but later he acknowledges, “I was wrong.” Wong depicts the moral pieties of the Mrs. Chan’s busybody landlady and the lascivious vulgarity of Mr. Chow’s co-worker, but he seems uncertain whether the couple ever transcends their society’s narrow perspectives.
3. The film has a rather indeterminant denouement consisting of three parts: her visit to his new residence in Singapore; their separate returns to the Shanghai apartment building; his sojourn at Angkor Wat, the 12th century temple in Cambodia. Does *In the Mood for Love* provide any sense of resolution? What is the “secret” Mr. Chow packs in the wall of Angkor Wat?
4. In his brilliant review for *Cineaste*, Paul Arthur suggests how “our romance with the movie image parallels that of Chow and his lost love: impossibly vivid, suffused with desire, yet disturbingly ephemeral.” Nat King Cole’s rendition of “Cissas, Cissas, Cissas”—“*Perhaps*”—repetitious and unsettled, along with the slow-motion figures may allude to our own cinephilia as well as the ephemerality of love, both involving the lost object we crave. Examine how the film fetishizes its own status as a movie and also transcribes objective objects—lunch pails, rice cookers, radios, cigarette smoke—as subjective images.
5. The narrative flow is disrupted twice when the couple “rehearses” scenes that express their repressed emotions—Mrs Chan confronts her unfaithful husband; she and Mr Chow say farewell to each other—moments that remind us we are watching a movie precisely by abstracting the moral and emotional issues at stake. How does Wong employ these scenes differently than Berthold Brecht’s renowned “alienation effect,” which interrupted the plot to foreground his play’s political concerns?

