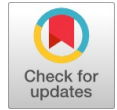


Wong Kar-wai's Technique of Communicating Emotions through Frames, Mise-en-scène and Soundtrack in *In the Mood for Love*



Lekshmi Jayadev, Shibani Chakraverty Aich

Abstract: Motion pictures and the art of movie making started communicating with the audience and entertaining people decades before the first movie with dialogues came into existence. Pre-eminent directors and movie maestros reveled in the art of expressing emotions through their cinematic pieces without explicitly constructing them into dialogues. Wong Kar-wai, Chinese film director, is one such movie maker who gives his creations the wholeness and beauty of a painting. Through “*In the Mood for Love*”, “2046”, “*Chungking express*”, “*Happy Together*” etc. Wong Kar-wai, held art house audiences across the entire globe captive in his enigmatically beguiling form of art. His films are noted for its rhythmic unveiling of plot, photographic and semi-mask techniques and an intense personal flare. In the *Mood for Love*, often referred to as one of the greatest cinematic productions of the era, instantly earned the title of being a chef-d'œuvre with its unconventional take on a rather conventional story. The movie, starring Tony Leung Chiu-wai and Maggie Cheung Man-yuk, is deemed to be a classic for its unsurpassable cinematography, hauntingly messianic soundtrack and transfixing mise-en-scène which act as the major mediums through which the characters communicate their inner lives to the audience.

Keywords: *Mise-en-scène, Wong Kar-wai, In the Mood for Love, Soundtrack, Frames*

I. INTRODUCTION

One of the greatest directors ever in world cinema, Federico Fellini, says: Talking about dreams is like talking about movies, since the cinema uses the language of dreams; years can pass in a second, and you can hop from one place to another. It's a language made of image. And in the real cinema, every object and every light mean something, as in a dream (Cott 48). Even though the movie industry is novel compared to other major forms of art, it is indisputably an indispensable element of modern society and culture. Movies appeal to human emotions in a unique way as it influences directly and effectively how we perceive life in general. Film

makers, right from the inception of this artistic universe, endeavored to present the mysteries of life and nuances in men to provide the audience with an almost dream like world of infinite possibilities.

No other foreign director had such a tremendous influence and stand in the realm of international cinema as the Chinese film maker Wong Kar-wai. Exceptionally known for his various stylistic characteristics such as shallow focus, frames within a frame technique, voiceover monologues, intricately designed narrative structures etc. Wong Kar-wai attracted the interest and appraisal from critics and movie viewers alike. Wong Kar-wai left an indelible mark of his own in contemporary art cinema in general. The British writer, critic and screenwriter Antony Rayns diverted his focus on how temporality gets mysteriously and effortlessly manipulated in the hands of Wong Kar-wai and gave him the title “poet of time” (Rayns 12-7).

II. ANALYSIS

In the Mood for Love witnessed Wong Kar-wai at “the zenith of his cinematic art”(Brunette 70). For Wong Kar-wai, the movie paved way towards the glory of eternal international recognition as one of the greatest, innovative and versatile film makers ever. Through this groundbreaking film, Wong Kar-wai created for himself a new phase for his artistic evolution and development. The movie, starring Tony Leung Chiu-wai and Maggie Cheung Man-yuk, took more than fifteen months to shoot and was premiered at the 2000 Cannes Film Festival on May 20th. Tony Leung became the first actor from Hong Kong to win the Best actor in the Cannes Film Festival and the movie was also nominated for the most prestigious Palme d'Or award.

Wong Kar-wai reportedly began shooting for the film without a proper script or plot ready at hand. The movie captures 1960s Hong Kong in its complete essence and presents the story of a journalist Chow Mo-Wan or Mr Chow (played by Tony Leung) and a shipping company secretary Su Li-zhen or Mrs Chan (played by Maggi Cheung) who rent adjacent rooms in an apartment of a building in a primarily Shanghainese community on the same day. Even though the plot of the movie might give away the impression of being a romantic drama, it is one among those rare pieces of art that completely transcend the boundaries of being limited to one particular genre.

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In the Mood for Love is an almost poetically beautiful depiction of how a man and woman get enmeshed in a strange mood for love as they try to figure out how their respective spouses fell for each other. The story develops through Mr Chow and Mrs Chan roleplaying each other's spouses to understand the cause of their infidelity while slowly falling into the same abyss of love which they promised not to fall: "We won't be like them" says Mrs Chan to Mr Chow (*In the Mood for Love*).

Even though the plot and the title of the movie suggest the theme of the movie being that of a complex affair between two married people, Wang Kar-Wai himself has told,

I am not trying to tell the story of an affair. I am trying to tell certain attitude in certain periods of time in history of Hong Kong and how people take these things." (EyesOnCinema, www.youtube.com/watch?v=ofFalBSNFw).

Wang Kar-wai is too labyrinthine a movie maker to spend fifteen months on a movie dealing with clichéd romance or affairs. The movie, for Wong Kar-wai, is primarily a graphic depiction of the 1960s Hong Kong and its society of gossips and secrets. Wong Kar-wai wanted to present the Hong Kong in which he grew up with complete precision and sincerity through this movie.

Repression, frustration, ambiguity and secrecy play major roles in the movie. All these elements are conspicuous in Mr Chow's and Mrs Chan's frequent act of role playing their spouses. Mr Chow's and Mrs Chan's relationship has its foundation on their spouses' unfaithfulness and it is rather amusing to note that most of the dialogue exchanges in the whole movie between the two protagonists take place when they are reenacting the various instances that might have led to their spouses getting close. The reenacting of what might have happened between their spouses has such a major role to play in the movie that the audience are deliberately left confused most of the time whether the characters are talking in a roleplay or as their own selves. The gradual development of feelings between the protagonists is almost as subtle as a whisper because from the very beginning itself the characters along with the audience are made aware of the fact that there is no love, but only a mere miserable possibility of being in love for the duo since they live in a surrounding that observes each and every actions committed by them.

Wong Kar-wai does not make the movie rely on words for its communication with the audience. *In the Mood for Love* is not about lengthy dialogues or conversations. It is a movie that evolves through delicate actions, elusive expressions and precise body movements. The cinematography, music and mise-en-scène are the major mediums through which Wong Kar-wai delineates the story. Shigeru Umebayashi's and Michael Galasso's music along with Christopher Doyle and Mark Lee Ping Bin's cinematography act as the dialogues of this movie through which the spectators are given information on how the romance develops and how the surroundings react to it.

The frames and music of this movie is so crucial to the entire tone of the movie that Wong Kar-wai has confessed to

having only the music and framing techniques in his mind instead of a script, as reference for the movie while filming it. The primary elements of suspense and secret in the movie are introduced and developed through the almost haunting sound track, intricate mise-en-scène and unique framing style.

Five minutes in and every shot is a frame within a frame—meaning that every single shot featured characters not only framed by the rectangle of the film itself, but by smaller, internal shapes as well (Nerdwriter1, www.youtube.com/watch?v=01E5otZCpqw).

The riveting framing technique of placing smaller physical objects inside the mise-en-scène as internal frames within the primary frame is used by Wong Kar-wai throughout the movie. Wong Kar-wai's visual pyrotechnics is a result of the brilliant synthesis of atmospheric colors with the "frame within a frame" technique. An anomalous sense of voyeurism is stimulated in the viewer as the secret story of Mr Chow and Mrs Chan unfolds before us. The characters are framed in such a way that the audience get a feeling of being first hand observers of the whole affair (Fig. 1). By obstructing a complete view of the characters, their actions and surroundings, the director makes the audience feel like they are intruders or rather spies striving to gather information regarding the entire dalliance.



Fig. 1

The technique of "frame within a frame" not only adds more depth to the whole scene, it also succeeds in revealing the limitations and bondages experienced by the protagonists through the little screen space. Christopher Doyle's and Mark Lee Ping Bin's cinematographic brilliance, that contributed each and every shot with increased intensity, is a crucial element that lead to the birth of a timeless classic. Though the "frame within a frame" technique is novel to Hong Kong cinema, Wong Kar-wai applied it in such an ingenious manner that it reminds one of Paul Thomas Anderson who was a pioneer of this technique.

The act of framing is a personal choice and conscious process of the filmmaker and it affects the cinematic experience of the audience. The image presented on screen is affected through the size and shape of the frame, its definition of onscreen and off-screen space, and other factors (Treske 26).

A frame is the first thing a viewer focuses on while watching a movie and it is the cinematographer's responsibility to make the frame as profound as possible. Most of the frames in the movie are deliberately congested with numerous objects providing the characters a very limited space for action. There are several shots of long narrow stairways and corridors in which the protagonists encounter each other. This limitation of space induces a claustrophobic sense in both the audience and the characters, and it succeeds in denoting the restrictions of the societal taboos and conventions that hinders any distant possibility of their union.

The frames, very often, never let the audience capture the entire scene of action. Since secrecy is a recurring motif in the movie, the audience are also made a part of that web of secrets by hiding most of the important things; the movie doesn't even show the faces of the protagonists' spouses as they are always shot from behind. Wong Kar-wai extensively uses the "hidden camera" technique as well to intensify the ambiguity and secrecy of the movie. In some of the scenes, like figure, the frames show the characters from behind a window or door or bars giving away an impression of being imprisoned (Fig. 2). The characters' plight of having to incarcerate their passions and sincere emotions and real identities are captured through such a technique.



Fig. 2

The setting, expressions and body movements, makeup and costume and lighting constitute the mise-en-scène of any movie. *In the Mood for Love* is not the first movie in which Wong Kar-wai's brilliant arrangement of mise-en-scène won him tremendous accolades. Wong Kar-wai never reveals much information regarding the characters, time period or the environment through dialogues, he leaves certain minute hints and precise detailings in the mise-en-scène about it for his viewers to observe and understand by themselves.

Though the viewers are given information that the movie

takes place during 1962-63 Hong Kong, the exact time frame of the whole action is not revealed explicitly. In the movie, Wong Kar-wai makes use of certain food items prepared using various seasonal vegetables to reveal the time during which the action takes place. Wong Kar-wai, initially, intended to make a movie revolving around food so it is of no surprise that in *In the Mood for Love* food is one of its recurring motifs.

Disguise and secrecy loom over Mrs Chan throughout the movie and are vouchsafed by Wong Kar-wai through her external mannerisms and dresses. She is excessively conscious and concerned about her neighbors and society in general who are looking for each and every opportunity to gossip and spread rumors. Mrs Chan creates for herself a false front with fake rectitude and self-abnegation. She is always impeccably dressed in elegant cheongsams or qipao: "She dresses like that to go out for noodles?" one of the neighbors whispers to another lady (*In the Mood for Love*). All her cheongsams are made with evidently rich fabric with elaborate patterns in flamboyant hues and are tightly wound around her body in a completely form-fitting manner. She attempts to fortify the vulnerability and frangibility of her façade with the close fitting, high necked dress.

The movie is a combination of several relatively short scenes and the viewers are not given any explicit details about the shifting between scenes. Wong Kar-wai utilizes the twenty-one cheongsams Mrs Chan changes during the movie to indicate the change in scenes and transit of time. "In fact, we had 20-25 dresses for Maggie for the whole film. Because we cut the film short, it becomes like a fashion show; she changes all the time." (IndieWire). Mrs Chan's dresses are always somehow related to what she is going through. Wong Kar-wai transforms the beautiful dresses into an external manifestation of her inner repressed chaos and emotions. Out of the twenty-one dresses of Mrs Chan about seven of them have floral print all over it. Mrs Chan wears these floral printed dresses at either office or at the apartment around her own husband and the landlady. The floral print is a symbol of Mrs Chan's fragile façade which she experiences the most at these places. The dress Mrs Chan wears while she decides to separate herself from Mr Chow also has intricate floral patterns representing her extreme helplessness and frailty.

Analysis of *In the Mood for Love's* mise-en-scène cannot be completed without mentioning the extensive use of mirrors and clocks in the movie. Time and imitation play climactic roles in Wong Kar-wai's cinematic universe. Mirrors and clock are recurrent objects throughout the movie. Many scenes in the movie shows the protagonists' face and expression only through their reflection in a mirror (Fig. 3). The relationship between Mrs Chan and Mr. Chow exists solely in their fantastical world and they are far removed from the inordinately restricting society they live in. The mirror images are in compliance with the double lives they are leading.

Social taboos, stigmas and prohibitions that impede the maturation of a romance is something very familiar to people. By placing the movie's focus predominantly on the time period in which the action takes place, Wong Kar-wai makes time an inexorable villain for the characters. The movie often falls into a stream of consciousness narrative as the scenes unfold like a series of fragmented pieces disjointed by time.



Fig. 3

Cigarette smokes, shadows, radios, calling bells, ringing telephones saturates the mise-en-scène of the movie at so many places and deliberately gives the movie a perpetual aura of being a noir film. Wong Kar-wai's virtuosity in the art of film making is evident in the way he metamorphoses a romantic/dramatic movie into an almost detective one with lighting, properties, music and framings typical of noir genre.

The soundtrack of the movie is so overwhelming and soul-stirring that it seems like the music is impregnated with the entire involuted emotions of the characters as well as the audience watching it. Wong Kar-wai's obsession with music is perceptible in the manner in which he makes his movies dependent on its music for essential attachment and communication with the audience. Instead of drenching the background of the action with music Wong Kar-wai almost personifies the soundtrack as an inevitable central figure in the movie. The soundtrack, by Michael Galasso and Shigeru Umebayashi, justifies the enigmatic and secretive complexion of *In the Mood for Love*. The ninety-eight-minute movie has only about thirty minutes of dialogues, the rest of the movie revels in the adroit amalgamation of seductively tantalizing music and penetrating silence.

Composer Shigeru Umebayashi's famous waltz, named "Yumeji's Theme", plays nine times in the movie and is considered to be the main theme song. The musical piece is originally from another movie named *Yumeji* (1991) by Japanese film maker Seijun Suzuki. The music is said to have influenced Wong Kar-wai so much that he wanted *In the Mood for Love* to be just like a waltz. It is a slow soothing yet poignant track performed by a violin and another string ensemble. Whenever the music plays in the background the pace of actions are reduced to slow motion as if they are adjusting themselves according to the rhythmic flow of the track. Initially, Yumeji's Theme is played in the scenes that

show the protagonists passing each other shortly after they arrive at the apartment.

As the relationship between Mrs Chan and Mr Chow advances, Yumeji's Theme becomes a manifestation of the repressed passion they harbor for each other. Wong Kar-wai never explicitly displays the existence of a sexual tension between the protagonists. By playing this music in the private moments of the pair or when either of them is immersed in thoughts about the other, the intense longing and concealed desires experienced by the characters become obvious to the audience. The track is last played in the scene where the agonized protagonists perambulate down a street cognizant of the bavardage about them spreading through their apartment, and conscious of the fact that Mrs. Chan's spouse is arriving back from the business trip. As Mrs. Chan is held close by Mr. Chow, aware about their impending separation, the indelibly evocative music plays and disseminates in the air not only the fervent physical yearning the two harbor for each other, but also the covetousness to love beyond the boundaries of carnal pleasures.

The movie plays twenty-nine soundtracks, either as a particular scene's central theme music or as a secondary background music or as being played in a radio placed in the room. Though only Umebayashi and Galasso are credited for the movie's soundtrack, Wong Kar-wai played a vital part in selecting the music played throughout the movie. The music is chosen in such a way that it is archetypal of the age Wong Kar-wai endeavors to portray through the movie and it also relates to what the characters are going through at that particular moment. The same tracks are often played both diegetically and extra-diegetically at different sequences and enhances the quality of the movie to be a musical at various levels. The songs furnish the silence of the movie with meanings and its lyrics become the words that are left unsaid by the protagonists to each other.

The sensuousness and seductiveness of the Yumeji's Theme are contrasted with the subtle innocence and delightfulness of the Nat King Cole songs.

They don't know the sadness,
that in my soul they left,
those green eyes,
that I will never kiss
(translation by <https://lyricstranslate.com>).

This is one of the three Spanish recordings by American vocalist and jazz pianist Nat King Cole that is played in the movie. This track, called "Aquellos ojos verdes" (Those Green Eyes), is the most famous among the three and was originally written by Nilo Menéndez and Adolfo Utrera. This song is played as the background music in various scenes when the central characters start discussing about their spouses. The lyrics of the song is a foreshadowing of how the relationship between the protagonists would eventually become.

The song is first played in a radio at the focal scene of the film; Mr Chow and Mrs Chan mutually realizing the infidelity of their spouses. This song marks the film's conveyance of interest from two crumbling marriages to the possibility of a relationship between the protagonists. All the three Nat King Cole's songs are love ballads describing the longing and soothing of love and the feeling of being loved and caressed by the lover. These songs become the almost poetical manifestation of all the smothered emotions inside the lovers that are struggling to liberate themselves from the bondage of time and fake morality.

"Quizas, Quizas, Quizas" by Cole is another song that has an intricate attachment with the fate of the protagonists. It is played at three of the most pivotal scenes in the movie in which the characters lack the courage to confess their genuine feelings, and are left silent letting the lyrics to extra-diegetically fill in the void.

Every time I ask
What, when, how, and where
You always reply
Perhaps, perhaps, perhaps
(translation by <https://lyricstranslate.com>).

In every scene this song is played, the characters are given an opportunity to act in accordance with what their emotions are advising them to do, but in all the three scenes silence and weakness emerge victorious as the lovers are left separated for eternity. Each and every song played in the movie delineate, with all sincerity, the spirit of the age and earnestly contributes to Wong Kar-wai's attempt at making a movie that genuinely depicts the 1960s Hong Kong with all its peculiarities.

In the Mood for Love is far from being a dramatic movie about love. The movie portrays two lovers, but the element of ambiguity and complexity is so paramount at multitude levels that it is often confusing whom the protagonists are in love with; if they are actually in love with each other or the persona of their spouses they created in each other through roleplaying. The mood concocted by *In the Mood for Love* is not that of love; it is of solitude, separation, longing and deliberate isolation. The emotions communicated by the movie are far beyond the reach of mere coalescence of words. The soul-stirringly perforating music, dexterously pioneering cinematography and imposingly inextricable mise-en-scène personifies themselves to assume the form of all the secrets and words unsaid by the protagonists and hauntingly adhere to the audience even after the movie ends.

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