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Introduction to Film Studies

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### In the Mood for Morality

Aristotle said that moderation is the key to moral virtue, though in the case of Mrs. Chan and Mr. Chow, moderation is not an option; there is only abstinence or complete infidelity. In the dramatic romance film *In the Mood for Love* (Wong Kar-wai, 2000), moral purity is a concrete ideal that cannot be sacrificed for the sake of personal satisfaction and joy. The film sequence from 1:09:30 to 1:11:15 demonstrates the couple's entrapment and resistance to the temptation of extramarital love through the synthesis of a new cinematic reality through editing, lighting and blocking obstruction, confined framing, and fabrication through costuming.

One medium-long shot features Mrs. Chan walking, alone, across the frame from right to left. Her figure is partially obstructed by a series of long, thin vertical black poles which stand between her and the camera; these jail-cell-reminiscent bars provide the same illusion of isolation and confinement that one may expect from an incarceration, and the battered cement wall cluttered with haggard posters behind her further instills a feeling of dreariness and instability. The dim overhead lighting and the shadows cast by the vertical bars shield Mrs. Chan's face from the light, though her long, slow strides, loosely swinging arms, and slightly fallen gaze exude a sense of melancholy contemplativeness. However, her tight neon floral cheongsam pierces through the shadows, providing her with an elegant flare to offset her appearance from the setting. As she sweeps across the frame, the camera pans, tracking her movement—stalking her from the shadows. The camera is engulfed by blackness as she walks

behind a wall, though the continuous sound of her heels scuffing the pavement never ceases. As the camera finds the light on the other end of the wall, Mrs. Chan appears, still shielded by metal bars and still walking towards the left of the frame. Mr. Chow is revealed to be sitting stagnant on the left third of the frame, creating the image of a jail cell for two in which Mrs. Chan and Mr. Chow are isolated together. His slicked-back hair, black suit, and stoic expression provide him with a dignified disposition. For a moment his right-facing profile provides the illusion of meeting Mrs. Chan's gaze as she approaches left, though the distant spacing between the characters makes this impossible in their diegetic reality. Instead it can be inferred that the characters sense each other's presence, for as soon as this moment occurs, Mrs. Chan stops in her tracks, presses her chin to her chest, turns her back to the camera and begins to walk upstage and Mr. Chow tilts his head downward to take a drag of his cigarette all whilst the camera freezes in place. Mr. Chow blows his cigarette smoke in Mrs. Chan's direction as she circles around herself and crosses her arms, closing herself off, while walking towards the rightmost vertical third of the frame, dragging the camera rightward along with her. She pulls the camera in the opposite direction as she turns and walks left once more, crossing behind Mr. Chow and exiting left out of the frame as the camera lingers on Mr. Chow, centered on the frame. Mrs. Chan's off-camera voice can be heard saying, "You'd better not see me again," and soon after, her shadow appears against the cement wall and exits to the left of the frame. The clanking of her footsteps stops, and the camera cuts to the next shot.

Kar-wai creates a cinematic universe in which Mr. Chow and Mrs. Chan are burdened by the extramarital relations of their respective partners, though not nearly to the extent that they are burdened by their developing love for each other, and their physical desire to follow in the adulterous footsteps of their spouses. As mentioned by Michel Chion in *The Third Reality: In the*

*Mood for Love*, Kar-wai creates this cinematic reality of burgeoning desire by using frequent temporal ellipses; while the film does include brief segments of Mrs. Chan and Mr. Chow in their daily lives, the film largely depicts the time relevant to their growing passion—the moments when they pass each other by in a compact corridor, have coded conversations over dinner, and meet outside in the pouring rain (Chion 465). During the sequence of the film from 1:09:30 to 1:11:15, there is not a single shot featuring Mrs. Chan or Mr. Chow in which the two do not share the frame space, further emphasizing that in this cinematic reality they are one unit. In the film as a whole, even their moments apart are marked by their intense desire to be together, or for their circumstances to change to allow for that togetherness to be possible. Long shots through doorway frames of Mrs. Chan crying to herself and Mr. Chow staring into the distance, turning to his cigarette for companionship, evoke a sense of empathy and melancholy for these two characters who have found comfort within each other yet are not comfortable being with each other.

With the exception of the grab of a hand, Mrs. Chan and Mr. Chow are never able to physically act on their desires. Living in Communist China in two adjacent apartments overflowing with people, Mrs. Chan and Mr. Chow—though Mrs. Chan especially—are highly concerned with the environment of constant surveillance. They fear that too much unwarranted time together may appear suspicious, and so they stay in the shadows, both literally and figuratively. The sequence of the film from 1:09:30 to 1:11:15 takes place at night, at a dark tertiary location away from their apartments and workspaces, where Mrs. Chan and Mr. Chow's true desires can be hidden both from their neighbors and from the audience. As Mr. Chow confesses his love to Mrs. Chan, they are almost solely positioned on the rightmost vertical third of the frame, pushed as far from the camera as possible. An over-the-shoulder shot partially

blocks Mrs. Chan as she stands, stiff, refusing to meet Mr. Chow's eyes, providing the illusion that she is trapped in place, cornered between Mr. Chow and the edges of the frame, and likewise trapped by Mr. Chow's love, trying to resist its temptation.

A long take features the two characters separated from the camera by a wall of metal bars, similar to how they are often depicted at a distance through door frames, with their facial expressions partially illegible due to the downcast shadows (Chion 466). As they coexist together, alone, they experience this spatial intimacy, and the audience is pushed away to allow the moment to be private. Many students noted experiencing the feeling of intrusion during this scene, though I did not resonate with the negative connotation of being an intruder. Given the immense amount of empathy Kar-wai constructed into this cinematic reality, I viewed their moments alone as opportunities of indulgence. During this shot, the lack of music and diegetic sound other than Mrs. Chan's footsteps further builds anticipation, for as an audience member I was eagerly waiting for something to happen to fill the space, for a romantic theme to play to cue him to kiss her, or for him to apologize for confessing his love.

Between their instances of innocent intermarital role play in each other's company and their facade of neighborly friendship in the presence of others, Mrs. Chan and Mr. Chow's relationship is largely built on fabrications. Mrs. Chan's vibrant, skin-tight cheongsam in this scene provides her with an elegant, aristocratic flair which allows her to mask her sorrow and inner conflict from Mr. Chow. As mentioned in *Surface, Texture, Weave*, her brightly patterned cheongsams allow her to fashion and project a different version of herself to her society, an image of grace and morality which she strives to live up to given her distasteful circumstances (Bruno 39).

It is through these methods of crafting a cinematic reality of love, using dim lighting and actor blocking to portray inner conflict, filming through confined frames, and costuming based on a character's desired perception that Kar-wai fashions Mrs. Chan and Mr. Chow's relationship in *In the Mood for Love* as burgeoning yet forbidden. The societal expectation for their relationship to remain neighborly as well as the constant surveillance which prevents them from exploring the boundaries of that relationship pushes the two quasi-lovers to opt for moral purity rather than committing to their infidelity. Moreover, this pressure, as well as the betrayal felt after the infidelities of their partners, instills the mentality in the minds of Mrs. Chan and Mr. Chow that two wrongs do not make a right; they have an obligation to do better than their spouses.

Works Cited

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