

In the Mood for Love Movie Analysis

Often regarded as a keystone work in Asian cinema, Wong Kar-wei's *In the Mood for Love* is a powerful and subtle movie addressing the complexities of human emotion and the importance of timing in relationships. Set in Hong Kong during the 1960s, the film explores the developing relationship between Chow Mowan, a journalist, and Su Lishen, a secretary, as they realize that their spouses are cheating with each other and subsequently attempt to replay how the infidelity occurred. *In the Mood for Love*, which Wong labels as a period piece, employs close-up camerawork and the haunting, often foreign, music that gives the viewer a feeling of recalling a distant, hazy memory.

The focal point of *In the Mood for Love* is the tension between Wu and Chow as they perform a masochistic dance to try and process the reality that their spouses are cheating. Wong leaves many words unsaid and often skips key information, leading the viewer to feel the same disorientation that the main leads do as they navigate through their tumultuous personal lives. Knowing about their partners' infidelity, the main leads simulate what their spouses would have done during the affair, but the two end up blurring the lines between their imaginations and true feelings. Ironically, in the process of trying to understand how their respective spouses ended up having an affair, Chow and Su fall for each other as well. While infidelity is often characterized as a singularly bad action, and does label Chow and Su's partners as antagonistic characters, Wong creates a dissonance in this assumption as the viewer finds themselves rooting for the leads to act on their feelings and thus commit infidelity themselves.

One of the most weighted scenes of the film is when Chow calls Su, asking her to go to Singapore with him. In a way, this scene marks the first time that Chow acknowledges the growing feelings between him and Su, and is a clear crossing of the boundaries that he had been

so careful to respect earlier. There is a special feeling of anticipation and vulnerability in his question as he offers Su a chance to restart her life with him. Chow's offer represents a turning point in the duo's relationship. If Su had taken his offer, they would have had their happy ending, and if she didn't, it would signify the end of their secret relationship. Despite the weight of Su's response, Wong neglects to include what she says, instead skipping to a scene of Chow walking down a narrow hallway to his hotel. The lack of emotion in Chow creates a chilling atmosphere and emphasizes the reality that love is not enough to bridge all chasms, especially in a situation as complex as Su and Chow faced.

In the end, neither of the characters acknowledge their mutual feelings, though it is evident that Su still loved him as she visits his apartment in later scenes. The final sequence of scenes, in which Su and Chow repeatedly miss the chance to reunite as they visit the old apartment, lends a haunting feel to the conclusion of the story and leaves the audience with a sense of unfulfillment. Overall, Chow approaches the concept of love in a very different way than standard movies do. Rather than idealizing love, he portrays it as a destructive and uncontrollable occurrence between two people who clearly should not fall in love. While unsatisfying, the ending is a realistic take on how relationships end with unsaid words and missed opportunities.

Wong originally developed the idea of *In the Mood for Love* in the late 1990s during the period when Britain officially returned Hong Kong to China. Reflecting on his own childhood spent in Hong Kong, Wong hoped to incorporate the overall ambiance of the city as well as his own experiences with its unique culture. In the 1960s, Hong Kong was shielded from the outside world by its status as a British empire. The colony was largely unaware of the tumultuous situation in China as Mao's government implemented the radical Great Leap Forward initiative

which led to devastating famines and widespread death. Meanwhile, Hong Kong received many Chinese immigrants in the late 1940s as they fled the Chinese Civil war (Breary, 2009). The influx of people, who brought along the various elements of their culture, led to a flourishing of communities in Hong Kong. This diversity is a highlight of “*In the Mood for Love*”, where Chow and Su live in a cramped but lively apartment full of Chinese immigrants from various provinces. Notably, Chow incorporates many different dialects into the film’s dialogue as well. The apartment landlady, Ms. Suen speaks in a Shanghainese accent while Show and Su both use Cantonese. The bustling, cramped apartment also is reflective of the period. As many immigrants moved in, housing in Hong Kong became increasingly scarce and many Chinese lived in similarly close quarters.

A prominent element of *In the Mood for Love* is the dichotomy between Su and Chow’s style of dress. Su’s iconic cheongsam dresses became a sensation after the release of the film. The cheongsam dress originated in Shanghai during the 1920s and quickly became a trend amongst younger women. Seen as a symbol of China’s increasing modernity and gender equality, the cheongsam held significant meaning as it became more popular. Throughout the film, Su wears only the cheongsam, which often has floral and bold prints. In contrast, Chow is always seen wearing a simple, western-style suit with standard, muted colors. In a way, the difference between the main characters’ dress reflects the state of Hong Kong’s culture at the time: a mix of British and mainland Chinese influence. The colorful and eye-catching patterns that Su wears, in contrast to the neutral colors of Chow’s suits, juxtapose the vibrant elements of Chinese culture with the more restrained western culture, a theme that Wong sought to express as he recalled the bustling and active Chinese communities of his youth. Additionally, the cheongsam had become banned in China during the 1960s as the Communist Party required all citizens to wear plain

uniforms. Seen as a symbol of feminism and status, the cheongsam directly violated the Communist Party's policies and those who wore it were labelled as traitors to the party. This further elevates the symbolism of Su's cheongsam as a reflection of her independent nature as well as the cultural distance between Hong Kong and China (Ng, 2018).

In the Mood for Love boasts a powerful combination of excellent cinematography, musical choice, and historical accuracy that makes it one of my favorite films. The depth of meaning behind Chow and Su's relationship, as well as the many words left unsaid between the two, lend the film a haunting and nearly painful quality. Wong's deliberate avoidance of camera panning and focus on close-up shots isolates the lead characters, and notably their spouses' faces are never shown. It is evident that Wong took careful consideration of the cultural scenery of Hong Kong in the 1960s as he filmed this tribute to his childhood home.

Works Cited

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