

Wong Kar-wai's *In the Mood for Love*: Like a Ritual in Transfigured Time

by Stephen Teo

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In Dream Time

It is by no means coincidental that the two most celebrated Chinese-language films of the last two or three months - Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000) and Wong Kar-wai's *In the Mood for Love* (2000) - hark back to old genres and times past. Some grand design of time has brought the films about. Both directors and their films recollect childhood memories of pleasures induced from going to the cinema. Both men are roughly of the same generation (Lee was born in 1954; Wong in 1958), and have come of age as directors at about the same time: this, above everything else, appears to have informed their choices of genre. In the case of Ang Lee, the director's own memories of watching martial arts pictures spawned boyhood fantasies of a China "that probably never existed." (1) Watching the pictures of the *wuxia* (sword and chivalry) genre throughout his formative childhood days evoked a dreaming time for Ang Lee - his film being in his own words, "a kind of dream of China". (2) Both Ang Lee and Wong Kar-wai, each in their own ways and working in radically different genres, have tried to duplicate this kind of "dream time" in their respective movies.

Wong's *In the Mood for Love* is a romance melodrama, which tells the story of a married man (played by Tony Leung) and a married woman (played by Maggie Cheung), living in rented rooms of neighbouring apartments, who fall in love with each other while grappling with the infidelities of their respective spouses whom they discover are involved with each other. The two protagonists are thrown together into an uncertain affair which they appear not to consummate, perhaps out of social propriety or ethical concerns. As Maggie Cheung's character says: "We will never be like them!" (referring to the off-screen but apparently torrid affair of their respective spouses). The affair between Cheung and Leung assumes an air of mystique touched by intuitions of

fate and lost opportunity: is it a Platonic relationship based on mutual consolation and sadness arising out of the betrayal of their spouses? Is it love? Is it desire? Did they sleep together? Such ambiguity stems from the postmodern lining of the picture (its look as processed by Wong's usual collaborators, the cinematographer Chris Doyle and art director William Chang), which is more in line with Wong Kar-wai's reputation as a cool, hip artist of contemporary cinema.

However, there is a conservative core to the narrative that is quite unambiguous, clearly evident in the behaviour of the central protagonists, both of whom act on the principle of moral restraint. In this regard, the film reminds me of the 1948 masterpiece *Spring in a Small City*, directed by Fei Mu, the plotline of which is slightly mirrored in Wong's film. (3) In *Spring*, a wife meets her former lover and flirts with the possibility of leaving her sick husband. In the end, she falls back on the principle of moral restraint. The director Fei Mu was reputed to have ordered his players to act on the dictum "Begin with emotion, end with restraint!" As a result, the film ends on a note of moral triumphalism colored by a sense of sadness and regret, reinforcing the inner nobility of the characters - a theme which Wong regurgitates with the same sense of brevity and cast of subtlety. The soulful nobility of the characters in both films is a touching reminder of the didactic tradition in Chinese melodrama, where the drama serves to inspire one to moral behaviour - and when the actors are as beautiful as Maggie Cheung and Tony Leung, the note of restraint is all the more poignant and all the more ennobling (the attractiveness of the characters preying on our own natural inclinations or baser instincts building up a kind of suspense but finally leading to an anticlimax that is as close to a philosophical statement as Wong Kar-wai has ever got his audience to).

Whether or not one sees *In the Mood for Love* as a film about sexual desire or alternatively, about moral restraint, there isn't that much more to the plot. It lives up to its English title as a veritable mood piece, and is essentially made up of rather passive and variable substances: the characters and their interchange of feelings that are nothing more than fleeting moments of time. Added to all this is Wong's dense-looking *mise en scène* that combines the acting, art direction, cinematography, the colours, the wardrobe, the music, into an aesthetic if also impressionistic blend of chamber drama and miniature soap opera. Wong's key elements - what older critics might call "atmosphere" and "characterizations" - are thus grounded in abstraction rather than plot, and it's hard to think of a recent movie that offers just such abstract ingredients that are by themselves sufficient reasons to see the picture. But it is precisely this quality of aesthetic abstraction that makes up an ideal dreamtime of Hong Kong, which is Wong's ode to the territory.

The Melodrama of Mood

The English title itself, of course, strikes the key to the picture, suggestive of foreplay or a kind of mind-massage. What Wong Kar-wai does for an hour and a half is to butter up his audience for two or three levels of mood play: a mood for love, to begin with; but even more substantially, a mood for nostalgia, and a mood for melodrama. In Wong's rendition of the melodrama, we have a romance picture that works mainly as a two-hander chamber play, illustrated by contemplative snippets of popular music that also help to recreate the ambience of Hong Kong in the 1960s. The elements of nostalgia and melodrama that play on our feelings are Wong's way of paying tribute to a period and to a genre. The Chinese melodrama (known in Chinese as *wenyi pian*) is traditionally more akin to soap opera - a form that assumes classic expression in the

'60s with the rise of Mandarin pictures from both Hong Kong and Taiwan (particularly adaptations from the literary works of the author Qiong Yao, often starring Brigitte Lin).

The terminology "wenyi" is an abbreviation of *wenxue* (literature) and *yishu* (art), thus conferring on the melodrama genre the distinctions of being a literary and civilized form (as distinct from the *wuxia* genre, which is a martial and chivalric tradition). Wong seizes on the literary or "civilized" antecedence of the genre to water down the soap opera tendencies that were characteristic of '60s melodramas. (4) Wong's interest in the genre is not so much narrative as associative. For instance, he equates the melodrama with the '60s, a period that for the director, yields manifold allusions to memory, time, and place. "I was born in Shanghai and moved to Hong Kong the year I was five (i.e. around 1963). For me it was a very memorable time. In those days, the housing problems were such that you'd have two or three families living under the same roof, and they'd have to share the kitchen and toilets, even their privacy. I wanted to make a film about those days and I wanted to go back to that period .", Wong says. (5)

The melodrama genre itself becomes an apt metaphor for the '60s, with many films of the period dealing with just such housing problems and families living under the same roof as Wong speaks of. The invocation of *wenyi pian* carries a sense of period and place. The Chinese title, *Huayang Nianhua* (translated in the subtitles as "Full Bloom" but more accurately meaning "those wonderful varied years"), is more suggestive of period nostalgia and the Shanghai association, pointing to an iridescent, kaleidoscopic age of bygone elegance and diversity (and it is actually the title of a Chinese pop song from the '40s which we hear played on the radio, sung by the late singer-actress Zhou Xuan who popularized the song in a 1947 Hong Kong Mandarin movie). In Wong's hands, the genre itself and the period of the '60s is a stage of transfigured time that isn't fixed diachronically. His '60s happens to coalesce around other synchronic recollections of the memorabilia of earlier periods (such as the '40s or the '50s), through the evocations of popular culture as a whole that largely recalls the glories of Shanghai: in music (citing the songs of Zhou Xuan, for example), in fashion (the *cheongsam*), novels (the martial arts serials that Tony Leung writes with input from Maggie, that recall the methods of the "old school" writers of martial arts fiction in '30s and '40s Shanghai), and the cinema (the unstated allusion to *Spring in a Small City*).

In watching the film unfold, the audience itself is partaking in a ritual in transfigured time (to borrow the title of a 1946 Maya Deren film (6)), and each member of the audience, depending on their ages, could in theory go as far back in time as they wish to the moment that holds the most formative nostalgic significance for them. Of course, Wong's skill in recreating Hong Kong of the '60s seems so assured and so transfixed to those of us born in the post-war baby-boom years who grew up in the '60s that it is more than enough to recall nothing but the '60s (with the rise in our consciousness at the time of Western culture and *accoutrements*, plus the efforts to blend East and West, as evoked by the references to Nat King Cole's Spanish tunes, Japan, electric cookers, the handbag, Tony Leung's Vaseline'd hair, eating steaks garnished by mustard, and eating noodles and congee in takeaway flasks).

So successful is Wong's recreation of the past that we tend to forget that he has only shown us the bare outlines of Hong Kong in 1962 (the year when the narrative begins). Wong has created an illusion so perfect that it seems hardly possible that the director has got away with really just the mere hints of a locality to evoke time and place (the film was shot in Bangkok rather than in Hong Kong with the feeling perhaps that the

former could better convey the idea of transposed time, and not so much to capture 'authentic' details of the seedy alley ways and sidestreets, through which the protagonists pass or meet each other, that have supposedly vanished from modern Hong Kong). In other words, Wong Kar-wai has successfully transfixed his audience in a dreamtime without the necessary big-budget frills so that it actually seems a bit too dissociative to think of *In the Mood for Love* as a dreamtime movie. It doesn't, for example, indulge in the kind of overt symbolism such as one may associate with Dali's famous painting "The Persistence of Memory" where we see time pieces melting in a desert-like landscape, symbolizing time lost. I mention Dali's painting because in Wong's films, we do see persistent shots of clocks in what has now become the characteristic style of Wong Kar-wai (being so persistent, they actually invoke a surreal sense of time melting away, as in the Dali painting): those scenes in *In the Mood for Love* where the camera dollies down from a giant Siemens clock hanging overhead in Maggie Cheung's workplace to catch Maggie in a pensive moment. In Wong's deliberative manner, this is exactly the moment that would conjure up the '60s in his body of work, with the same motif and the same actress (indeed, essentially the same character) from Wong's key work in the early phase of his career *Days of Being Wild* (1990), also set in the '60s.

A Literary Vision

Such visual motifs are the obvious affirmations of Wong's style, denoting his preoccupations with time and space. However, in keeping with his theme of moral restraint, Wong himself appears to show a much more restrained hand in delineating his visual style, which seems less semaphoric and more attuned to the purposes of a narrative, however slight that narrative may appear to be. The film may function basically as a mood piece, with much to wonder at in terms of visual splendours, but there is no visual motif that goes astray. *In the Mood for Love* is a virtual *cheongsam* show, for example, and who among the Chinese of the baby-boom generation could fail to be moved by the allusive and sensual properties of the body-hugging *cheongsam* (or *qipao* in Mandarin)? The array of *cheongsams* worn by Maggie Cheung is Wong's cinematic way of indicating the passage of time, but Wong also milks it for its erogenous impact on the mind and soul. Maggie Cheung clad in the *cheongsam* is surely every Chinese person's idea of the eternal Chinese woman in the modern age, evoking memories of elegant Chinese mothers in the '50s and '60s (when the gown was still in fashion) as well as memories of the Chinese intellectual female still bonded to tradition (recalling the image of the writer Eileen Chang, or Zhou Yuwen, the character played by actress Wei Wei in *Spring in a Small City*).

Much more significant, in my opinion, than all these visual configurations is Wong Kar-wai's predilections for covering his ground with literary references. It is often forgotten that Wong is a highly literary director, and part of the magic that he wields in movies like *Days of Being Wild*, *Chungking Express* (1994) and *Ashes of Time* (1994) is the consummate way with which he induces his audience to auscultate to his narratives. The monologues and voiceovers of those films are some of the most literary pieces to be heard in Hong Kong cinema. Of late, Wong has taken to inserting passages from books as inter-titles studding the course of the film, somewhat in the manner of silent movies, or in the manner of epigraphs in essays - a practice seen in *Ashes of Time* (where he quotes passages from the book by noted martial arts writer Jin Yong that was the source of his screenplay), and now in *In the Mood for Love* where he quotes lines from a 1972 novella, *Intersection*, by Liu Yichang, a Shanghainese expatriate writer living in Hong

Kong. Gone is the voiceover narrative or the multiple monologues that he ascribes to each of his characters (finding classic expression in *Days of Being Wild*). The story of *Intersection*, the Chinese title of which is *Duidao*, tells of the way in which two characters' lives - strangers to each other - appear to intersect in ways apparently determined by the nature of the city, and the structure of the novella provides a direct form of inspiration for Wong's use of the intersecting motif in *In the Mood for Love*.

The influence of Liu Yichang's story cannot be underestimated - so taken by the story has Wong been that he has actually put out an ancillary product in the wake of the film's release in Hong Kong last year: a book of photographs and stills from the film illustrating an abridged English translation of Liu Yichang's story. It's a curious kind of book, seemingly without any theme or focus, which actually contains a hidden title *Tête-bêche: A Wong Kar-wai Project*. Wong explains the significance of the title in a foreword:

The first work by Liu Yichang I read was *Duidao*. The title is a Chinese translation of *tête-bêche*, which describes stamps that are printed top to bottom facing each other. *Duidao* centres round the intersection of two parallel stories - of an old man and a young girl. One is about memories, the other anticipation. To me *tête-bêche* is more than a term for stamps or intersection of stories. It can be the intersection of light and colour, silence and tears. *Tête-bêche* can also be the intersection of time: a novel published in 1972, a movie released in 2000, both intersecting to become a story of the '60s. (7)

Tête-bêche - the intersecting motif that makes up Wong's narrative style in other films, notably *Days of Being Wild*, *Chungking Express*, *Ashes of Time*, and *Fallen Angels* (1995), which are narratives of parallel stories, finally finds its mature expression in *In the Mood for Love* where the motif assumes a diacritical mode. The poetic nature of Wong's images and his style stems from this literary conceit, and the serial-like connotations of Chinese literature where the chapters intersect with one another (the *zhang hui* form) to build up the suspense of "what happens next". Wong's literary sensibility makes him unique among modern-day directors who would probably not have conceived of an ending whose spirit is basically literary in nature, embedded in storytelling and myth. This ending, taking place among the ruins of Angkor Wat (subconsciously calling to mind the ruins of *Spring in a Small City* which similarly endow a sense of melancholic nobility to the chief protagonist), is one of Wong Kar-wai's more conclusive and heart-stopping moments, filled with secrets that must never be revealed in a kind of compact between the director and the viewer, and finally infused with a sense of regret and Zen-like magnanimity.

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See also

Perhaps by Adrian Martin (on Wong's *In the Mood for Love*)

Interview with Tony Leung by Trish Maunder

Wong Kar-wai - 'A Writing Game' Compiled by Fiona A. Villella

Endnotes:

1. Ang Lee, "Foreword," *Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon: A Portrait of the Ang Lee Film* (New York: Newmarket Press, 2000), p. 7 
2. Ibid. 
3. In interviews with the Western press, Wong speaks of being inspired by Hitchcock's *Vertigo*, as in this exchange with U.S. critic Scott Tobias published in *The Onion*, Volume 37, No. 07, pp. 1-7 March 2001: "I wanted to treat it like a Hitchcock film, where so much happens outside the frame, and the viewer's imagination creates a kind of suspense. *Vertigo*, especially, is something I always kept returning to in making the film." 
4. The soap opera tendency remains popular to this day, perpetuated largely by Japanese TV serials that are shown in the Chinese-speaking regions and also by long-standing traditions in Hong Kong and Taiwan cinemas (cf. the recent romance cycle in Hong Kong cinema, eg Sylvia Chang's *Tempting Heart* [1999], Jingle Ma's *Fly Me to Polaris* [1999], Wilson Yip's *Juliet in Love* [2000], Aubrey Lam's *Twelve Nights* [2000], etc.). 
5. Interview with Wong Kar-wai by Scott Tobias, *The Onion*, Vol. 37, No. 07, 1-7 March 2001. 
6. In Deren's film, a woman quite literally walks back in time, as symbolized by the opening shot of the filmmaker herself holding a thread that seemingly unspools in reverse, to mark the flow of the "thread of time" backwards as the chief protagonist follows this thread back in time. 
7. The last sentence in this passage is my own translation of the Chinese foreword that is separately printed on transparent paper inserted into the book which differs from the English text printed on the pages. The last sentence in the English text reads: "*Tête-bêche* can also be the intersection of time: for instance, youthful eyes on an aging face, borrowed words on revisited dreams." See *Tête-bêche: A Wong Kar Wai Project* (Hong Kong: Block 2 Pictures). 