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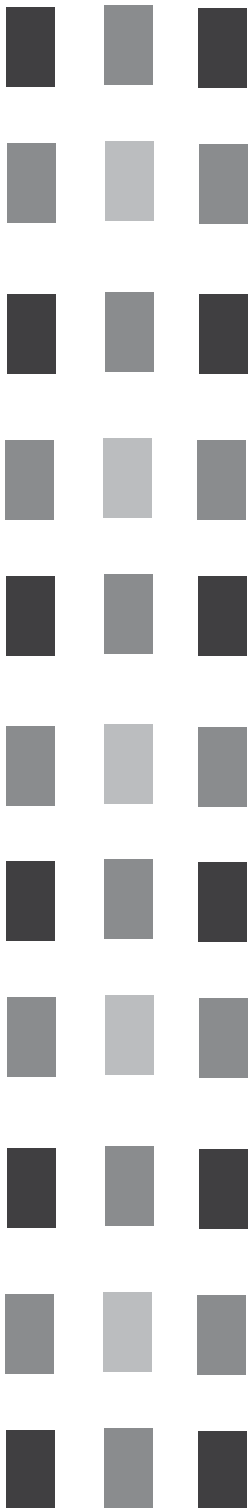
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Reading Perspective and Architecture through the Film "In the Mood for Love"

Simone Shu-Yeng Chung

The undertaking of this essay aims to demonstrate how the use of architecture is relevant to the storytelling in a film, particularly one that relies very much on the local architecture of a specific time period and the landmarks that become significant through repetitive use throughout the story. The spaces used in the film *In the Mood for Love* can be easily related to those used in everyday life in an oriental city from the 1960s. Because of the importance of perspective seen between existing and obtrusive structures, classical sources are used for comparison in how the film adopts certain principles in aesthetics in order to convey a visually dramatic clarity in the composition or framing of scenes.

In the Mood for Love is a nostalgic period piece centred on a relationship between two Shanghai-migrants who become neighbours in Hong Kong, and slowly discover their respective spouses are having an affair with each other. The betrayal brings them unwittingly closer together until they too, are unable to quell their own forbidden love. The movie is set in a delicate era that would soon be caught up in the maelstrom of political unease in Vietnam and China. Dialogue and plot are forsaken for mood and composition in order to bring to the screen, the visual choreography of love confined within an emotional stasis that is perpetrated by the asphyxiating social norms that dictated conservative urban Chinese communities in the 1960s.

Having also migrated from Shanghai to Hong Kong as a young child during the 60's, it is no wonder that the director, Wong Kar-Wai, regards the young city of Hong Kong with a certain child-like nostalgia. That conscious decision resulted in an entire movie set in 1960's Hong Kong shot in selected locations around present day Bangkok City demonstrated a very clear vision for the distinct mood and feel needed for a longed for, bygone era. "That era has passed. Nothing that belonged to it exists anymore". So reads the title caption in the movie.

It is also generally agreed that *In the Mood for Love* is a sequel to his earlier film *Days of Being Wild*, set in the same period, with the same two actors in a larger ensemble. However, for his second outing, Wong explains that instead creating a 1960's Hong Kong, "this film tried to be more realistic. I wanted to create the environment through details."¹

The resemblance to the Hong Kong of then is captured in the detailed close-ups and textural mappings of the actual urban fabric (fig. 1). Completely against on-set constructions, the director chooses to work within on-site constraints, pushing the spatial qualities in real locations discovered during the course of filming. This flexible and natural stage setting allows him to focus on his real-life love affair – the city itself – and with it,

the endless possibilities of chance and opportunity devisable within the cavities and passages of this city-body. His filming technique helps in terms of script development, as Wong often begins filming with only a vague idea of what the film will be about. Fittingly enough too, this movie is roughly based on a short novella entitled *Duidao* (Intersection), about how two strangers' lives appear to intersect in ways determined by the nature of the city. From there, the director continually developed story arcs based either on chosen locations, or was inspired by conditions or objects found *insitu*, to be acted out by equally intuitive actors.

The director's prerogative is to create, through editing – a rhythm – a movement – that celebrates how the human body negotiates itself around the city. This lateral style of non-linear, lattice-like integration of montages and senses is held together by a self-created cinematic spatial dynamic that retains a visual continuity rather than a chronological one. This style of storytelling has become Wong's signature style, where "the idea is to suspend time, to emphasise and prolong the relevance of what's going on"².

Herbert Read, the art historian and philosopher, reminds us that "(film) must be composed directly out of the lumbering material of the actual visible world"³. The movie unfolds through common everyday scenes sensually played out from movements of the two central figures, Mr. Chow and Mrs. Chan – the way in which their bodies occupy and react to the real pockets of spaces in the city. Intimacy is enhanced by the sheer physical tightness of the city alleys and the rooms in their apartments, characteristic of limited habitable spaces in a dense city. The sexual intensity is further heightened by the formal manner in which they conduct these negotiations and the sheer restraint from physical contact. Michael Roemer, writer and film director, expounds that "film at its best uses the language of ordinary experience – but uses it subtly and artfully"⁴.

Unlike Antonioni's famous sweeping panorama that acts as a god-like gesture to illustrate how



1 | Still from „*In the Mood of Love*“, Wong Kar-Wai, 2001

small and insignificant his characters are in the grand scheme of things, the camera here is left to 'mingle' in the thick of community life. This enables us to catch that sense of isolation and imprisonment felt by the principal characters living in shared households. Much of Wong's childhood memories of living in such crowded settlements are of the tight-knitted communities and the inevitable gossiping that pervades in this sort of environment. By directing the camera, hence the audience's eyes, intrusively into windows and openings from another occupant's premises, we may begin to understand the degree of lack of privacy that comes from living in such dense communities.

The physical constraints of the spaces are used to great advantage in producing a 'tight' framing. The edges of the frame become a 'shell' that encases the two characters: we never see the faces of their spouses; colleagues and neighbours are always placed just beyond the frame when interacting with either Mr. Chow or Mrs. Chan. As such, the audience is placed in a unique in-between space where the sense of 'imprisonment' endured by the two main characters is reflected in how they reciprocate to their external environment and vice versa.

Much like a classical painter who meticulously measures his subjects to fit within the area of the canvas (fig. 2), Wong uses the camera to compose his shots in a similar manner. Piero della Francesca's *Flagellation of Christ*, c. 1469, places the main subject in a seemingly subsidiary space. Yet our attention is pulled in through the complex and accurate perspectival depth made by the floor pattern and a strangely brighter illumination in the background.⁵ Likewise in the film, the emphasis on the main characters are manipulated by controlling lighting used within the space.

Christopher Doyle, the director of photography, explains that the lighting in the movie appears uncompromisingly dark because he relies on "natural lighting"⁶, such as streetlights, dim lamps-

hades in the apartments (fig. 3), and fluorescent lighting used by the food stalls. This is lighting which would normally be found specific to the spaces in which they filmed. The sense of depth inferred is maintained by manipulating the point of focus via illumination. Spaces are 'sculpted' through the precise placements of these 'natural' light sources and given a more ambient hue with filters. Like a sculptor who uses the chisel to create sensuous forms out of marble, the camera in the hands of its user controls the impact of light falling on solid objects to achieve the same effect.⁷

Pushing the contrast of their film stock also results in a highly saturated footage, such as the moody red prevalent throughout, creating a highly charged atmosphere. The signature effect causes the audience to feel that the scenes are out of synch with real time and place.

There is also a lot of panning used by the director of photography. Wide-angle lenses are frequently used to provide 'flat' images,⁸ and the panning is incorporated to pull the space into the camera frame, playing on the cramped conditions. The rooms and the city's architecture become important for the story as the events that occurred in these specific locations make the moments significant and equally arresting; and in that manner, events become localised.

By mapping the perspectives used in a series of stills, I can begin to extrapolate 3 kinds of spaces used for particular sequences, and the position of the camera at that particular moment, such as the shared living room, the narrow open street and the rendezvous hotel room. This approach is intended to reveal more about how a creative decision is taken to 'frame' a particular view and how the choreography of events unfolding within these spaces are realised. Wong's use of the interior space plays foregrounds and backgrounds in tune to each other. All events that happen in this movie are directly associated to the specific locations in which these situations occur. The director's predilection for close-ups shots with wide-angle len-



2 | 2. *Flagellation of Christ*, c. 1469, Piero della Francesca



3 | Still from „In the Mood of Love“, Wong Kar-Wai, 2001

ses and continuous slow motion panning eases the task of linking stills for the perspectival make-up, and provides us with more generous glimpses into a room's layout and all the contents within it.

Game of Mah-jong, Anyone?

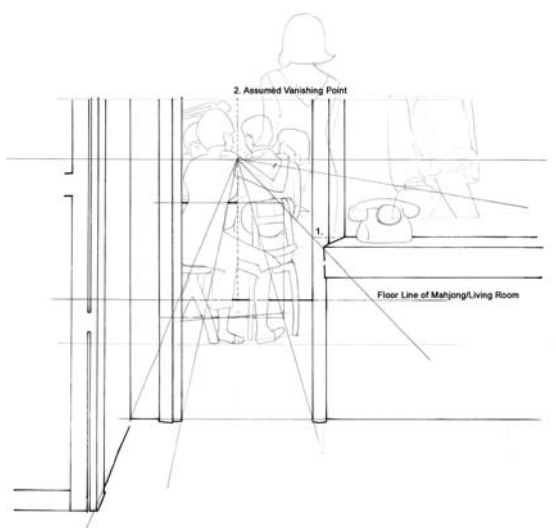
Although the story unfolds swiftly and sparingly through a montage of short segments and calculated splicing, the two scenes that feature the living room of Mrs. Chan's landlady stand out because they were allowed to continue in a single long and uninterrupted take, at an arrested tempo, like a dreamlike sequence. Both scenes involve the social game of *Mah-jong* and dialogue is replaced by music. The absence of the cacophony, such as the merry small talk and the unmistakable clattering of the ivory tiles normally associated with this activity, seems to suggest time is suspended.

The music suggests that the sequences reflect the state of mind of Mrs. Chan. The clip occurs at the beginning of the story. At this point, she is still in marital bliss, having just been reunited with her absent husband and is indulging in a round of *Mah-jong* with her landlady and neighbours. It also forms the integral first meeting between the Chans and the Chows. The camera is positioned just outside the doorway, peering into the centre of the living room where the games table is set up (fig. 4). Never once during the length of this sequence does the camera attempt to cross this physical threshold, to join the little group beyond who are enjoying a typical domestic moment. Positioned around eye level, we see the residents moving gingerly around each other as they edge in and out of the narrow entrance (fig. 5). We, the audience, remain as curious voyeurs, literally ostracised by the walls of the living room. The camera

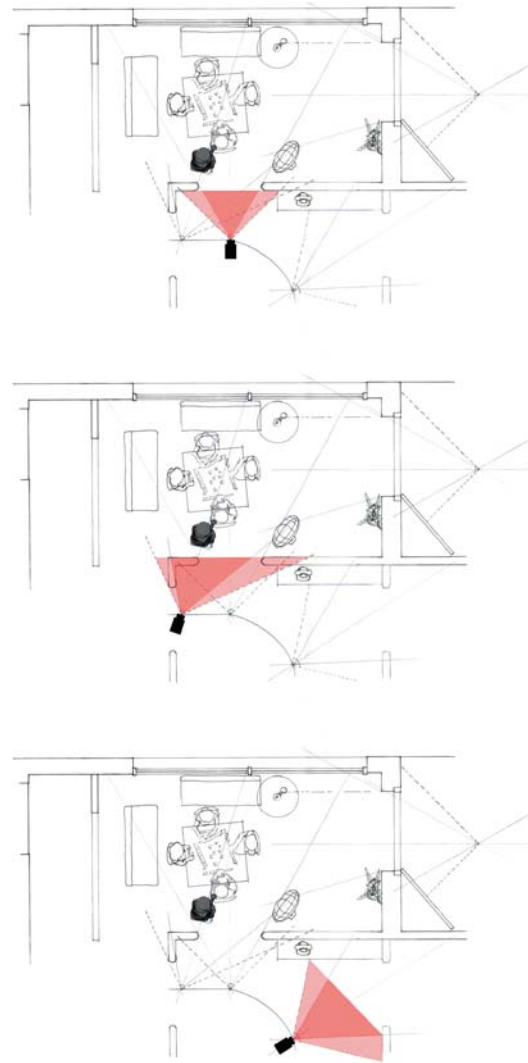
then timidly retreats by following Mr. Chan's movements as he exits through the doorway and literally out of the apartment, as if we have been caught intruding upon them.

Towards the middle of the story, the crowded room is played out again with another game of *Mah-jong*. The music and the camera's position is the same. Except on this occasion, Mrs. Chan is the reluctant participant. She is staying in because her landlady has reprimanded her for going out alone too often, since she is already a married woman. The brevity of slowed time now reflects her feelings of being trapped: trapped within this real physical enclosure of walls and doorframes, and trapped by the conventions of a conservative society. We are allowed to share her loneliness and solidarity as the camera 'moves' into the space for a close-up of her. But in actual fact, the camera still remains hovering by the obstructive doorway.

As she traverses across the room, towards the balcony window at the outer reaches of the lens,



4 | Working sketch to reconstruct layout of Mah-jong room



5 | Plotting movement of camera in Mah-jong room sequence

we are suddenly transposed into looking directly at her framed visage from the outside from another camera angle. This camera is now positioned in the living room window of Mr. Chow's apartment directly opposite from hers. The window frame continues to stress the notion of confinement. She looks up – maybe hoping that he is there – desperately needing to be rescued. But nothing happens and she turns away, disappearing into the background, leaving a sudden void in the window. The *temps mort* suggests a certain futility in her hopes of escaping this situation. Usually, a window opening is meant for views to the outside. However in this case, its function is reversed: they become apertures for us to gaze into what is normally meant to occur 'behind closed doors'.

Boxed Streets

In another of Wong's earlier and more seminal film, *Chungking Express*, the city is filmed as an endless linear blur as the characters speed around. *In the Mood for Love* demonstrates a more deliberate study of the city's architecture through a specific location. The details of the rough concrete walls, peeling paintwork and disintegrating posters are caught under the dim pools of street lighting. This could be any arbitrary stretch of narrow and pedestrianised street within the city, but its architecture is made significant from the chance meetings that take place between the two characters. Blocks of homogenous period buildings flank both sides of the alley, with illuminated window openings patterning the path with shadows of grilles and window frames.

The lengthy facades are broken up by another very narrow alley adjacent to this one. In it, a long, steep staircase leads down into an outdoor cluster of hawker stalls. The extreme difference in ground level is geographically common to the hilly residences of Hong Kong Island. The two characters regularly pass each other on their way to supper, their bodies glistening with sweat from the heat of the food stalls as they negotiate their way, skin against skin, past each other at the narrow gap at the top of the steps. The only discerning clue to the eating area below is the dim lamp at the entrance.

As these outdoor scenes always take place in the evening, the darkness allows the open street to be inverted and internalised. The walls of the buildings help to 'box' in the street. The framing is so tight that we never see the sky. Silhouettes of the windows and their grilles cast by the lights from within the buildings haunt the length of the wall running down the alley. Curiously, this particular stretch of street always remains deserted but for the main characters; and the windows always remain unoccupied.



6 | Still from „In the Mood of Love“, Wong Kar-Wai, 2001

Once again the windows are used to peer 'into' the street from within the buildings whenever the two characters attempt to steal a moment together in the shadows (fig. 6). The labyrinthine characteristic of the city is accentuated and the sense of enclosure is subtly suggested through the use of framing and lighting, or lack thereof.

Room 2046

The most intense emotional development between the main characters begins and ends within this one rented hotel room. Initially it appears to be the most physically limiting of all the rooms featured in the movie. Upon deeper inspection, one begins to uncover social, political and cultural references to that era. Latin scores with Nat King Cole's voice replace most of the dialogue, capturing the mood of an era deeply influenced by the influx of Filipino musicians into the colony. The constant repetition or various takes on their 'what-if' scenarios syncopates them from real time as the audience become more familiar with them. External influences and fads of that era are introduced through the modernist décor, their tastes for Chinese operas and martial arts stories.

Within this tiny room, a microcosm of feelings evolves and the body's role in telling the story is now abandoned. Mrs. Chan's colourful cheong-sam-clad figure now blends into the wallpapered walls – her facial expression becomes crucial in relaying her emotions. In this sequence, an emotional continuity replaces a spatial continuity.

A new spatial dynamic is constructed for a key scene here through the juxtaposition of mirrors. It becomes the instrument for visually conveying the intensely developing feelings between them. The triple-plane vanity mirrors in the hotel room define a space beyond the mirror plane, distilling into their dimension a purer form of reality. Normally the incorporation of mirrors in cinema deals with the notion of deception or misdirection. However, here they are used to capture the most honest,



7 | Still from „In the Mood of Love“, Wong Kar-Wai, 2001

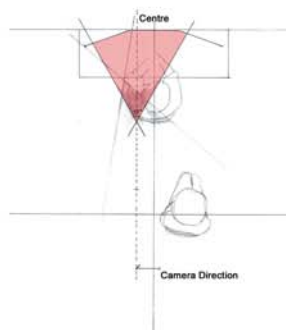
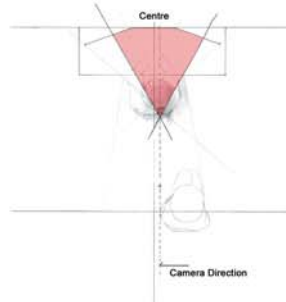
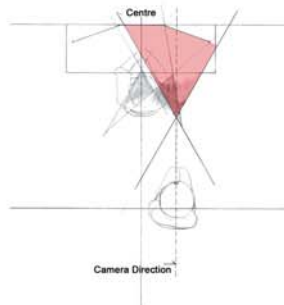
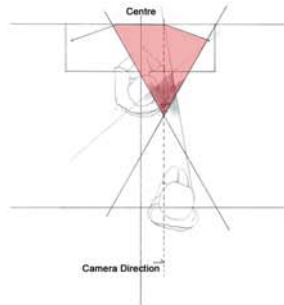
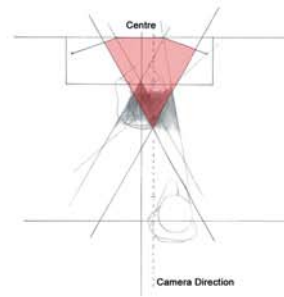
soul-baring emotional exchange between two people.

The camera is fixed directly behind Mrs. Chan's seated figure, whilst she is perched on the bed behind the table, where Mr. Chow is writing intently with his head down (fig. 7). The camera directs its focus entirely at the mirrors as a single plane, and the larger figures in the foreground remain blurred throughout this segment. The first mirror reflects his figure in front of the table. The camera then pans right to the next mirror plane where she looks up from her reading and smiles encouragingly at him, before returning her attention to the draft of his martial arts series in her hands. When the camera pans towards the far left mirror, his longing gaze is now caught momentarily in the mirror, his yearning for his object of desire increasingly obvious to us all (fig. 8).

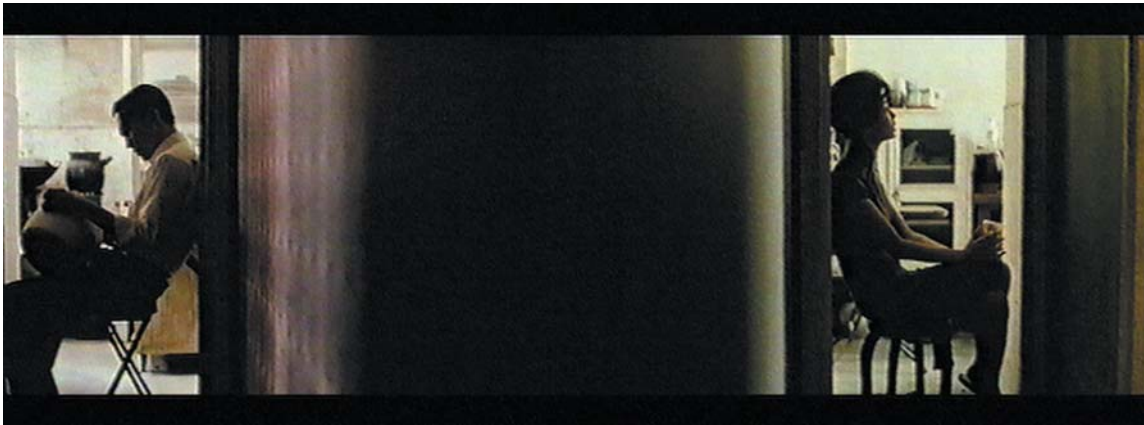
"Projection evokes temporality and boundaries ... (It) is (was) identified with the space of representation"⁹. The 'walls' of the mirrors now function as if they have dematerialised. In this example, the chemistry captured through reflections by the camera is purer than conceptual filtration.

Conclusion

Seemingly arbitrary spaces in the city have been taken out and contextualised to narrate a story. 'Moments' are framed, and frozen in time, becoming a blurred episode, like a distant memory. This fragile and fleeting episode expresses the Chinese title of the movie, *Hua Yang Nian Hua* or *Years that Pass like Blooming Flowers*. A thick dividing wall between them as they sit in their respective kitchen doorways becomes the metonymy for the non-consummation of their relationship (fig. 9). The elliptical storytelling demonstrates the director's restraint in giving the audience just enough introspection to construct their own truth. More importantly, the specificity of each location used for each important scene becomes the key in anchoring seemingly unrelated and non-chronolo-



8 | Plotting movement of camera along mirror-planes



9 | Still from „In the Mood of Love“, Wong Kar-Wai, 2001

gical sequences in the film. "The photographic camera reproduces the purely optical image and therefore shows the optically true distortions, deformations, foreshortenings, etc. , whereas the eye together with our intellectual experience, supplements perceived optical phenomena by means

of association and formally and spatially creates a conceptual image."¹⁰

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Notes:

- 1 Wong Kar-Wai interview from the official film website, <http://www.wkw.inthemoodforlove.com>
- 2 Doyle, Christopher: *Buenos Aires*, Minato-ku, Tokyo, 1997, p. 101.
- 3 Read, H: *Towards a Film Aesthetic*, in: MacCann, R. D. (Ed.): *Film: A Montage of Theories*, New York, 1966, p. 166.
- 4 Roemer, M.: *The Surfaces of Reality*, in: MacCann, R. D. (Ed.): *Film: A Montage of Theories*, New York, 1966, p. 258.
- 5 Kemp, M.: *The Science of Art: Optical themes in western art from Brunelleschi to Seurat*, New Haven/London, 1990, p. 31.
- 6 Op. cit., note 2, p. 102.
- 7 Op. cit., note 3, p. 167.
- 8 Op. cit., note 2, p. 104.
- 9 Perez-Gomez, A., Pelletier, L.: *Architectural Representation and the Perspective Hinge*, Cambridge/London, 1997, p. 6.
- 10 Maholy-Nagy, L.: *Painting – Photography – Film*, Cambridge/Massachusetts, 1987, p. 28.