In the Mood For Love: Crash Course Film Criticism #5

Crash Course: Film Criticism
https://youtube.com/watch?v=98QmnyyIXsY
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The history of film is full of tragic love stories, from *Casablanca* to *Brokeback Mountain, Brief Encounter, Ghost, An Affair to Remember, Titantic* or *Amour.* The list goes on and on.

Movies seem to capture that mix of yearning, anguish, and exhilaration that comes with falling in love so well. Especially when that love can't last. And that's because film is, at its core, an emotional medium. It immerses us i na world with intricate settings and sounds. And we live vicariously through characters as their stories unfold before us.

No one can chart the complex course of the human heart quite like the filmmaker Wong Kar-Wai. And the film *In the Mood for Love* is a great example of his skill, whether we see it as a deep meditation on human longing, or a reflection of the sociopolitical tensions in our world.

[Opening music]

In the Mood for Love tells the story of a doomed love affair set in 1960s Hong Kong. It was released in 2000 and hailed an instant classic, winning awards all over the globe, from Cannes to Chicago.

But the film's journey to the screen began years before that. In the mid-1990s, Wong Kar-Wai, the film's writer-director, was riding a wave to the forefront of international cinema. Films like 1990's *Days of Being Wild* and 1994's *Chunking Express* put him on the maps as an exciting young filmmaker with a distinctive voice.

He achieves that voice by working in a very unusual way. He often goes off-script and follows inspiration as it strikes, sometimes changing the nature of a film in the middle of a shoot. As a result, many of his films end up playing with time, repeating moments or scenes. He's not afraid to fragment a narrative to illuminate deep yet simple truths about the human experience.

In his book on Wong Kar-Wai, the film scholar Stephen Teo notes that "Wong's films are best seen as a series of interconnecting short stories."

In the Mood for Love fits that bill. It's a movie made up of gestures, like closely observed looks between characters, and moments, like shots of people walking down the street or racing up a flight of stairs. Individually, the shots are gorgeous and atmospheric. Collectively, they take on new meaning and depth, and build a portrait of intense longing.

The film's story came together slowly over many years. At one point, it was going to be a sequel to his breakout film, *Days of Being Wild*. Later, it would be a romance called *Springtime in Beijing*. Wong Kar-Wai even started shooting some of the movie under the title *Secrets* at the same time he was making *Happy Together* in Hong Kong.

Eventually, he found inspiration in a novella by Liu Yi-chang called *Dui Dao*, or *Intersection*. True to its title, this vaguely stream-of-consciousness work follows the interior monologues of two characters whose paths keep crossing in the streets of Hong Kong. And from this spark, he created the film *In the Mood of Love* as we know it today.

Tony Leung plays Mr. Chow, a married man who rents a room in one of Hong Kong's famously overcrowded apartment buildings. Mrs. Chan, played by Maggie Cheung, and her husband rent the room next door. Mr. Chow and Mrs. Chan often find themselves home alone, their spouses off traveling for business or working late.

In fact, their spouses are so absent from the film that the movie never shows us their faces. Eventually, Mr. Chow and Mrs. Chan discover that their spouses are having an affair. So our heroes embark on an affair of their own. Sort of.

Rather than jumping into each other's arms or beds, they skirt the edges of an actual romantic relationship. They play-act the roles of each other's spouses, and they improvise ways that affair might have started. When they go to dinner, Mrs. Chan orders Mr. Chow the steak she imagines her husband would have had. And Mr. Chow orders her a spicy dish his wife would enjoy.

Later, they act out an imagined confrontation between Mrs. Chan and her husband, where she accuses him of having a mistress.

Mrs. Chan (in Cantonese): I didn't expect it to hurt that much.
Mr. Chow (in Cantonese): This is just a rehearsal.

And finally, in an emotionally brutal scene, they rehearse the end of their own affair. It leaves Mrs. Chan devastated, as make-believe hits too close to home.

Throughout their relationship, they collaborate on a serialized story Mr. Chow is writing and spend a single night together in a hotel. What they do that night is left a mystery. And while it's clear to us that these two are falling in love, they keep denying it to themselves, even as their ambitions and fears become more intertwined.

In the end, their love can't survive and they go their separate ways. A devastating coda shows them just missing each other over the years, and eventually makes it clear that their affair will never be rekindled.

On the surface, *In the Mood for Love* is a straightforward story of repressed love. And, as with most Wong Kar-Wai films, it's meticulously designed, arranged, and shot. Wong is a known fan of film noir and melodramas from Hollywood's Golden Age, like Douglas Sirk's *All That Heaven Allows*.

And he saturates this film with dark urban streets, deep shadows, and almost lurid reds and blue-greens - the colors of passion, guilt, and jealousy. Wong has often cited Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* as a chief inspiration for *In the Mood for Love*. It's another film drenched in color, built on suspense, in which characters play-act a relationship.

In this film, the camera embraces the central affair in ways the characters never do. It slides back and forth between them at dinner. It tracks them in slow motion through the street. And it observes them thinking alone, their faces betraying none of the emotions roiling under the surface. Instead, those emotions spill forth through those brilliant colors and a lush romantic soundtrack that spans Japanese and Chinese period pop songs and Spanish-language ballads sung by Nat King Cole.

Time and again, Mr. Chow and Mrs. Chan are photographed through other objects - like doorways, windows, furniture, or mirrors - as though they're being watched. Because, of course, they are. By us.

As wonderfully designed and shot this film is, its real power is revealed in how the characters act out their spouses affair with each other. In *Film & History: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, humanities scholar Tony Hughes-d'Aeth looks at the film through a Freudian lens. By reading the story this way, you can see how the same fatal flaw that has doomed their real marriages dooms their fantasy affair too. Hughes-d'Aeth writes, "Both Mr. Chow and Mrs. Chan are, beneath their suave mannerisms, paralyzed by a single, devastating idea: I am not enough for the other."

So the movie could be a deep examination of tragedy, of two people who can't escape the sense of insufficiency they feel toward their spouses, even when they have the chance to start over with someone new. In this reading of the film, the romanticism of the design, camerawork, and soundtrack are in sharp contrast to the characters' inability to accept that romance in their lives. In other words, the mood is set, and the love may be real, but Mr. Chow and Mrs. Chan can't bring themselves to act on it.

In the end, they keep missing each other - first in Singapore, and then back in Hong Kong. And this reading suggests that this is because they're more comfortable loving the imagined versions of each other, rather than the real people. Basically, the fantasy is what's driving their affair.

And, as much as *In the Mood for Love* zeroes in on Mr. Chow and Mrs. Chan's story, another way to look at this movie is to examine how their relationship is a prism that reflects the geo-politics of Hong Kong at the time. The film is explicitly set in Hong Kong between 1962 and 1966, a pivotal time in the history of the territory. And even though the politics of the era take place entirely in the background of the film, some critics argue that they're key to fully understanding it.

The film begins in 1962, a period of relative stability in the region. At the time, Hong Kong was a British colony and a way point for emigrants leaving the economic and political uncertainty of mainland China for other countries. And those who settled permanently in Hong Kong found themselves in an unusual place - one where east met west and communism met capitalism.

The music and film studies scholar Giorgio Biancorosso described Hong Kong at the time as: "a political, social, and cultural space that has become distinctly local, a space defined both by the immigrant's desire of starting from scratch and the islander's sense of being separate." This idea of being stuck between two worlds also drives the central conflict of *In the Mood for Love*. Mr. Chow and Mrs. Chan find themselves caught between their own failed marriages, their desire for each other, and their allegiance to the restrictive social codes of the time and place.

When the film jumps to 1966, not only has their love affair become deeply broken, but the political realities of Hong Kong have become chaotic too. 1966 was the start of the Chinese Cultural Revolution, a violent class struggle that gripped mainland China for the next decade.

Now, in 1966 in the world of the film, Mrs. Chan returns to Hong Kong. She visits her former landlady, who essentially set Mrs. Chan's affair in motion. Her former landlady says she's leaving Hong Kong for the United States because of the political instability.

So, just as the safe harbor of Hong Kong is going through major changes, the space that first incubated the love between Mrs. Chan and Mr. Chow is coming to an end. That sense of uncertainty and of lost possibilities infuses the film from its first carefully-crafted frame to its last.

So, whatever lens you use to analyze *In the Mood for Love*, the film holds up. It's both a technical achievement and a poetic examination of two people who fall deeply in love but are unwilling or unable to accept happiness together. Which is, ultimately, kind of haunting.

Next time, we'll trade the restrained longing of 1960s Hong Kong for the raucous, scorching, hip-hop infused Brooklyn of Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing*.

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This episode of Crash Course was filmed in the Doctor Cheryl C. Kinney Crash Course Studio with the help of these nice people and our amazing graphics team is Thought Cafe.

[Theme music]