Uncertain Love in Liminal Space
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Abstract. The This essay examines Wong Kar-wai’s use of interior space in the film In the Mood for Love (2000) to interpret the diasporic identity of Shanghainese in Hong Kong during the mid-1960s. To describe the secretive and intimate relationship between two neighbors living in small apartments, the director makes the cinematic space the reflection of the complexity of the emotions involved. Through voyeuristic camerawork, the film not only successfully captures the plight of the couple who is torn between moral norms and passion but also, on a larger scale, the liminal space and uncertainty of diasporic life in Hong Kong.

Introduction
Wang Kar-wei’s obsession with city space and romance is self-evident throughout his films, among which In the Mood for Love (2000) is a very special romantic melodrama that depicts a rather ambiguous relationship between two neighbors, Mr. Chow and Mrs. Chang, whose spouses are having an extra-marital affair. The director’s use of interior space to tell a secret love affair also reveals the characteristics of the diasporic life of Shanghainese in Hong Kong. Those diasporic Shanghanese residents refrain from reaching out to the outside, are often confined to tight and closed space.

City and Love
In the Mood for Love, first of all, is a private story that takes place in private space. The interior spaces, rather than the outdoor spaces of Hong Kong, dominate the whole film. As a result, throughout the film, the audience never has the chance to see how the city is like in the time when story takes place but only broken pieces shots of the city. The city is characterized by the absence of any recognizable scenery that distinguishes Hong Kong. This spatial arrangement serves to externalize the characters’ inner world and to reflect the lack of local identity in collective memory in 1960s Hong Kong. To the central characters, Hong Kong, similar to any other anonymous town far away from home, remains an imaginary city where they find themselves stranded.

Under the pressure of social norms, Mr. Chow’s and Mrs. Chang’s internal turmoil is never fully expressed in words but inscribed in the cinematic space. In the film, Mr. Chow and Mrs. Chang speak carefully and politely with one another. Their psychic worlds are concealed underneath superficial and meaningless conversations. For instance, although Mr. Chow and Mrs. Chang are suspicious about their spouses, to not to lose face, they are never direct about what is on their minds before they team up for the investigation of their spouses’ love affair. In one scene, the two are about to open their doors at the same time. In a medium shot, Mrs. Chang in the foreground is out of focus, whereas Mrs. Chow is seen clearly in the background. Mr. Chow takes a glance at Mrs. Chang, pauses, and says, “I haven’t seen Mr. Chang lately.” Mrs. Chang answers, “He’s been busy with his work.” Mr. Chow pretends to be casual and continues, “No wonder I often see you at the noodle shop.” It cuts to the next shot with Mrs. Chang in the background who is now in focus. Mrs. Chang smiles, “I am too lazy to cook for myself. What about your wife? I haven’t seen her lately.” A close-up shows Mr. Chow’s hesitation, and he says, “She doesn’t feel well and goes to her mother’s place.” Both of the characters figure their spouses must be spending time together, but neither of them is direct and honest about it. They have to disguise their true purposes in their
seemingly casual conversation. With such a mood of restraint, the expressive cinematic space provides the only access that we have to the characters’ inner worlds. Commenting on the construction of space in this film, Paul Arthur notes, “The narrow passages and cloistered chambers in which most of the action takes place are subtle…tropes for the labyrinthine quality of the mind, its ceaseless movement along the same unending pathways of remembered experience.”[1] Wong’s cinematic city is constructed as a landscape that speaks of anxiety and desires that are well hidden and suppressed under the surface of beautiful dresses and seemingly tranquility.

For instance, when Mr. Chow invites Mrs. Chang to his hotel room, her cab not only travels across the town but also traverses moral boundaries. Underneath her red trench coat, a symbol of passion, is a white cheongsam with dark blue prints, the colors of chasteness and solemnity. This attire externalizes her inner struggle. On one hand, she is aware of the moral expectations of her elderly neighbors, who require her to remain chaste in spite of her husband’s infidelity. On the other hand, she cannot resist the temptation of love and suppress her own desires. In shots of her inside the cab, Wong casts heavy shadows to whittle down the space she occupies. Maggie Cheung’s acting also heightens the character’s anxiety with her constant blinking and touching her lips. When Mrs. Chang arrives at the hotel, the vertigo staircase and the curious stare of the clerk both add to the tension. Her hasty movement up and down the stairs and her hesitation on the top floor, organized through rapid editing, present a character. He is tormented by the conflicts between her desires and ethical expectations.

Wong’s slow motion also helps to show the characters’ inner worlds in the film. Unlike John Woo, who uses slow motion to give aesthetic expression to violence and pain in action films, Wong employs slow motion to set the overall tone and rhythm, which is essential in his construction of urban space. Explaining its functions in his film, Wong states in his interview with Michel Ciment and H. Niogret that “There are some details that I wanted to show. The slow motion doesn't express the action, but the environment…I was there to capture a certain space, a certain ambiance.” [2] Although the director does not specify what kind of ambiance is created by slow motion, it is not difficult to see its effects. When seen in slow motion, action is amplified and divided into smaller details, which invites keen observation. Unlike violence, the brutality and damage of which is often amplified and brought to the foreground in slow motion, the slow body movements of Mrs. Chang and the slow curls of cigarette smoke both prolong the action and suggest that nothing changes in the daily routine. However, things do change in these seemingly repetitive activities in quotidian life. This use of slow motion heightens the central characters’ meaningless, repetitive daily routines and highlights their profound loneliness.

Closed Space

In In the Mood for Love, the closed space dominates the characters’ urban spatial experience. The closed form, indicated by interior shots, cramped spaces, tight composition, low lighting, foregrounds the characters’ poor living conditions, uprooted lives, and their diasporic identities. In his book An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking, Hamid Naficy examines how filmmakers with diasporic experience translate their own experiences of dislocation into films. He suggests two aesthetic forms of space in accented films: open form and closed form. The former shows outdoor landscapes of the homeland whereas the latter emphasizes the claustrophobic spaces to which the exiles are confined in the host country. According to Naficy, The spatial aspects of the closed form in the mise-en-scène consist of interior locations and closed settings, such as prisons and tight living quarters, a dark lighting scheme that creates a mood of a constriction and claustrophobia, and characters who are restricted in their movements and perspective by spatial, bodily, or other barriers. Tight shot composition, static framing, and barriers within the mise-en-scène and in the shots foreground suggest closedness. [3]

This closed form is prevalent throughout Wong’s trilogy, especially in the above film. Although there are a few depictions of claustrophobic space in Days of Being Wild, there are wide open spaces like the Philippines to which the characters can escape. However, in the discussed film, both
public and private realms are closed spaces. Rooms are cramped not by furniture but by people, whereas city streets are enclosed by walls. For example, at the beginning of the film, the hallways are blocked by those who help Mr. Chow and Mrs. Chang move in. The communal living room is crowded with the tenants who come to play mahjong. In the streets where Mr. Chow and Mrs. Chang act out their spouses’ roles in the love affair, medium shots show the two trapped by walls in the foreground and the background. Therefore, no matter where the characters go, they are forever confined in closed space either by actual walls or the metaphorical walls constructed by their judgmental neighbors.

The ubiquitous voyeuristic gaze also restricts the characters’ behavior alongside the closed form of diasporic space. In the film, both Mr. Chow and Mrs. Chang are being watched. The camera eye represents a curious investigative neighbor who follows them and watches their every move. Mr. Chow and Mrs. Chang are captured in medium shots or long shots since the camera eye always has to keep a safe distance from the objects it is spying on. The objects are observed from the most peculiar positions. A good example is the shot shows Mrs. Chang’s slippers on the floor from a camera that is hidden under Mr. Chow’s bed when Mrs. Chang is stranded in Mr. Chow’s place. As a result of this obscured viewing point, the upper half of the whole picture is blocked by a blanket that is hanging over the bed. Throughout In the Mood for Love, the camera eye is torn between the desire to see and the fear of being exposed and the consequent retribution.

This illicit gaze that violates the privacy apparently makes an impact on Mr. Chow’s and Mrs. Chang’s behaviors. Mrs. Chang is the one who internalizes the gaze and becomes her own overseer. In his study of knowledge, power, and space, Michel Foucault points out, “There is no need for arms, physical violence, and material constraints. An inspecting gaze, a gaze which each individual under its weight will end by the point that he is his own overseer” [4]. Since the neighbors’ gaze is ubiquitous, the community wields power and control over its members. Inside the apartment building, Mrs. Chang feels that she is being watched all the time; she has to exercise extreme caution and avoid being seen with Mr. Chow. In one scene when the neighbors are away, Mrs. Chang visits Mr. Chow to discuss martial arts. Suddenly, Gus and Mrs. Sun return home earlier than expected. Although Mrs. Chang does nothing wrong, she dares not walk out of Mr. Chow’s apartment like a normal neighbor would. Instead, she is stuck in his place over night and only sneaks back to her room when all the neighbors have gone to bed after several hours of mahjong.

Private Space

As private space is no longer private because of the watchful eyes of the community members; public spaces, where strangers congregate, ironically, become places to express true feelings. Mr. Chow and Mrs. Chang never talk about their private feelings inside the tenant building. However, in public spaces, such as restaurants, although still cautious, they discuss sensitive topics regarding their private lives. Also, in a semi-public space inside a cab, the most intimate moment takes place as Mr. Chow tries to touch Mrs. Chang’s hand. In this scene, artificial lights set up the back seat like a small stage to present the characters’ faces clearly, whereas the cab driver is completely out of the picture as if the two have the cab all to themselves. Wong employs a close-up shot to show Chow carefully moving his left hand toward Mrs. Chang’s. Also, the street around the corner is one of the very few places in which the two dare to hold each other’s hands.

Wong’s use of deep-focus highlights the sense of confinement within the film and shows that the characters are embedded in their environment as well as their own predicaments. Because film produces two-dimensional images, it often provides flat and horizontal representations of space. However, in In the Mood for Love, space is divided into different planes with clear focus on the action, while the background and/or the foreground is blurred. This style of camerawork vividly depicts the diasporic life, showing the characters trapped in their surroundings, from which there is no escape. For instance, Mrs. Chang and Mr. Chow often role-play as their spouses in the street near their building. The camera watches them from behind the window. In the scene, the frame is divided into three components: the foreground window in a blur, two characters in the middle in
focus, and the foreground wall in a blur. Thanks to this clever division of planes, the characters are literally sandwiched between the window and the wall, which most accurately points out their dilemma. Furthermore, in the communal living room well lit by a floor lamp, the deep-focus shot shows Mrs. Chang and Mr. Chow discuss novels. However, the camera stays far away from the room, using the dark hallway and the lamp inside the room to create a spectacular example of depth of field. These two characters are embedded in their dark surroundings, and the lamp, probably a symbol of their romance, gives light and warmth within an oppressive society.

Summary

Overall, Wong’s cinematic city is a perplexing space that refuses any easy mapping. It starts with the confusing floor plan at the beginning of the film when both the Changs and the Chows move in on the same day. This coincidence creates chaos as the movers keep moving furniture into the wrong couples’ apartments and have to redeliver it to the other wing of the building. The traffic in this enclosed space only adds to the sense of bewilderment. The building is not only disorienting to the movers but also to the audience. The filmmaker confuses the audience more by not following a consistent camera position while filming the scenes. In some scenes, we see Mrs. Chang’s apartment on the left side of the hall way but in some other scenes it appears on the right. For a moment, one thinks that he or she knows where the apartment is located, but in the next minute, one only becomes completely lost again. Sometimes, contradictions seem to be deliberately placed in the film to confuse the audience.

References