

***In the Mood for Love* and the “Secret” of Cinematic Affect**

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I teach a class on urban film which charts a history of the relationship between the cinema, the city and affect and every year at the mid-point I screen Wong Kar-wai's *In the Mood for Love* (2000).¹ The “New Wave” of Hong Kong Cinema and this film, charting a love affair that does not happen, always rate as one the most popular of topics we cover—perhaps surprisingly given the more populist content of the rest of the course (including the gangster film, horror, science fiction and Tarantino). The student body at the University of East London is hugely diverse but the dimly-lit, claustrophobic and repressed city of 1962 Hong Kong, with its lack of much of a guiding narrative, is a very distant alien world—albeit one that is punctuated by the impeccable suits and spectacular dresses of the two leads (Tony Leung and Maggie Cheung), an evocative soundtrack and images composed with breath-taking beauty. What the students don't know is that every time we get to the final sequence of the film, as Chow (Tony Leung) whispers his secret into the grey stone walls of the Angkor Wat temples of Cambodia, the proverbial hairs rise on the back of my neck and a lump rises in the back of my throat—every year, without fail, like some neo-Pavlovian response. For me, these two different anecdotal affective responses contain within them some of the most difficult and pressing issues when discussing theories of affect: the relationship between affect and history and cultural context, affect in the globalised city, collective versus individualised responses, and the relationship between affect and emotion. In some ways these are well-trampled debates, and certainly too large and unresolvable for a piece like this. But *In the Mood For Love* feels like a still very contemporary response to them and not the nostalgic evocation of 1960s Hong Kong that we might be tempted to see it as.



In the Mood for Love and the Secret of Affect (In the Mood For Love, Wong Kar-Wai, 2000), via criticalcommons.org

I was once asked by one of the students, “What is affect—in a nutshell?” I am guessing this query was raised in the hope that there was some secret key to unlocking this most elusive, frustrating, contradictory and liberating of concepts. Thinking about this in relation to the final sequence of *In the Mood for Love*, it strikes me that Chow’s whispered secret provides a clue to the answer to this question. The secret in this case is that which cannot be said (love) and an intensity which cannot be grasped. Ackbar Abbas writes similarly that the secret is double edged and “always two things at once....a means of hiding away of impossible emotions that cannot be shared, a displacement of affect” but at the same time “the need for the secret’s protection shows the overwhelming nature of these emotions....”² In one sense, Abbas seems to be making a connection between affect and emotion that is slightly different to Brian Massumi’s position of emotion as “qualified intensity” or affect. The act of Chow burying his secret is “a displacement of affect” rather than an attempt to qualify affect through language.³ Yet I would also argue that Chow’s act *is* also an impossible attempt to fix the immanently disruptive qualities of affect, in the sense that he is also trying to solidify the unstable nature of his secret, by making it part of an immutable history, as visualised in the ruins of the temple, and mixing it with the very materiality of the earth itself as he plugs the hole with a clod of turf. There is also something of the Lacanian Real about this, as the secret is buried and hidden, except for the fact that the secret is not repressed within the individual subject and nor is it yearned for as an original place of plenitude which has been lost forever.

Chow’s attempt to bury and fossilize the affective power of the non-affair with Su Li-zhen/Mrs Chang (Maggie Cheung) is impossible, because affect can never be captured in this way. As Steven Shaviro notes, affect is “primary, non-conscious, asubjective or presubjective, asignifying, unqualified and intensive.”⁴ It is also prone to

constant fluidity, change and is fleeting. Indeed the scene itself goes on to suggest this, as the fragmented and multi-angled shots of Chow, followed by his walk away from the camera under the high arches of the temple, give way to the disembodied gaze of the camera, as it slowly tracks its way through Angkor Wat. The residual melodrama of the film, with its missed moments, incomplete stories and identities, is replaced by an overpowering sense of history as decayed grandeur and the “automatic subjectivity” of the camera capturing the passing of time in its study of the ruined walls. Indeed, throughout the film, the “human” in the form of fleshed-out narratives and individuated psychologised individuals is strangely absent from *In the Mood for Love*. Instead we get fragments of subjectivity, moments of intensity that suggest it is the unspoken which has the real power here.

But it is precisely these fragments that produce the film’s affective substance. History here is not a totalising grand narrative or a backdrop to equally “whole” narratives. In some respects we could be unaware of any the historical context of this particular time and space until we reach near the end of the film and dislocating events of Vietnam and future Cambodia get segued into the last few reels. History, for the most part in this film, is told through the localised, interiorised repetitions of the encounters (and non-encounters) between Mrs Chang and Mr Chow and, in Abbas’ words, the film “investigates the dislocations of the global where the local is something unstable that mutates right in front of our eyes.”⁵ He argues that grand narratives, such as nationalism and modernity, do not make much sense in relation to Hong Kong, with its particular status as one of the node points of the global network of capitalism. Hong Kong, from its days as a port, has been a place of constant transition, with flows of capital, people and cultures destabilizing any sense of cultural authenticity or identity. Hong Kong culture is not nostalgic about the past, because there has never been an “authentic” stable past for Hong Kong to be nostalgic about and never a representable “whole” image that can stand in for Hong Kong. As Abbas says, “the city as such seems to have disappeared” and there are very few recognizable “images of the city,” with the film focussing on the small “capillary action,” in terms of the localised details and encounters.⁶ What replaces narrative and the coherent, whole image of the city or idea of Hong Kong in *In the Mood for Love* are localised moments of intensity, repetitions and change on a localised and interiorised level. Close-ups of hands seen knocking on doors, imagined meetings between illicit lovers, and wanderings to the market for noodles are all repeated with differences, fleeting moments of intensity, often unseen but, to paraphrase Mrs Chang, noticeable if you pay attention.

Dislocations happen at a local level but often it is the fragments of the global and the modern which signal these changes. The new rice cooker, which holds such fascination for the family next door, ties and bags brought from Japan and steak dinners are all signs of a transnational modernity which signals that this space of

intensity will one day be as empty as the ruins of Angkor Wat. But these signs of modernity are not part of a rational progress towards some higher rational state and are juxtaposed with the ways of the past—signified most by the scene where Chow and Su Li-zhen sit cooped up in a room, writing futuristic sci-fi stories whilst fearful of being found out by the “respectable” society people getting drunk in the next room. It is also a city where there is a kind of perverse take on the modern city’s “crowd of strangers” where people live in close proximity to each other and both know and don’t know each other. Again Abbas perhaps sums this up best when he says there is the “evocation of some kind of invisible barrier between people” and that they “are close but apart, connected and disconnected.”⁷

To return to my opening point (and without trying to second guess the students in my class), it is this flux experienced as local that perhaps they connect with. And this sense of fluidity and disconnection is perhaps why the cinema of Hong Kong that has travelled most successfully on a global scale seems to be one where narrative and psychologically motivated individuals are de-emphasized in favour of the materiality and tactility of image and sound. A film like *In the Mood for Love* depends on the fragmented instability and intensity of the localized situation—unlike a lot of Hollywood cinema, which is dependent on its own affective structure of the American Dream and its narratives of individuals able to act and change the milieu in which they are situated. In one sense this Hong Kong of 1962 is not so different from London of the twenty-first century, with the flux of global capital, peoples, and changing architecture where the old is juxtaposed with the new. As Abbas says, “[i]t is by being local in this way that the new Hong Kong Cinema is most international.”⁸

At the same time there is something about *In the Mood For Love*, and its final sequence, which does seem to want to hold on to the idea that film can capture the affective moment—that affective intensities can be held within its frames forever like the secret in the wall. Yet affect changes with history. Those early cinematic moments of imagined “pure” affect, about which Walter Benjamin (1931) argues for the power of the photographic image to open up a new unconscious optics and new thought, seem a world away from what Shaviro and others are calling post-cinematic affect.⁹ And like the rest of cinema, *In the Mood for Love* is contradictory. It is packed full of representations, recognisable signs which make us experience the film as text, as at least fragments of recognisable genres—in this case melodrama. It is surely the tragic story of unrequited love and missed chances, and identifying with the feelings of loss experienced by the characters that partially causes my own physical reaction to the scene above. And on one level, that kind of emotional response to film is a complex one that should be engaged with. There is something to be said for Katrin Pahl’s response to “the affective turn” in film and cultural theory, when she says, “[i]t is almost

too easy to speak of affect—as if, by using this term, one had cleansed all the embarrassment and messiness from the experience.”¹⁰

And yet my response feels like more than that. As Chow recedes from view and the automated subjectivity of the camera takes over, the shots of the empty buildings inevitably evoke Resnais’ modernist work, *Last Year at Marienbad* (1961), where the opening of that film features a similarly disembodied camera passing through an empty structure.¹¹ This repetition of the modernist aesthetic in Wong’s film makes me think that cinema, like the characters in *In the Mood for Love*, is full of dramatic intensities but is fleeting and transitional as we head further into a new media landscape. But like Wong’s “sequel” to the film, *2046* (2004), where Chow finds and falls for another Su Lizhen, cinema keeps trying to attain the impossible in terms of affect.¹² And it is perhaps that impossibility which resonates with my feelings of sadness. As one of the intertitles of *In the Mood for Love* signals, “That era has passed. Nothing that belonged to it exists anymore.”

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Notes

¹ *In the Mood for Love*, directed by Wong Kar-wai (2000; Hong Kong: Tartan DVD, 2001), DVD.

² Akbar Abbas, “Affective Spaces in Hong Kong/Chinese Cinema,” in *Cinema at the City’s Edge*, ed. Yomi Braester and James Tweedie (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010), 25-37: 32.

³ Brian Massumi, “The Autonomy of Affect,” in *Deleuze: A Critical Reader*, ed. Paul Patton (Oxford: Blackwell 1996), 217-240: 221.

⁴ Steven Shaviro, “Post-Cinematic Affect: On Grace Jones, Boarding Gate and Southland Tales,” in *Film-Philosophy*, 14.1 (2010): 3.

⁵ Akbar Abbas *Hong Kong: Culture: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 190.

⁶ Abbas, “Affective Spaces, 31.

⁷ Abbas, “Affective Spaces, 32.

⁸ Abbas, *Hong Kong*, 190.

⁹ Walter Benjamin, "A Little History of Photography," in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 2: Part 2 1931-1934*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Gary Smith and Howard Eiland (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2005).

¹⁰ Katrin Pahl, "Emotionality: A Brief Introduction," in *Modern Language Notes (German Issue)*, 124:3, 2010: 548-9.

¹¹ *Last Year at Marienbad*, directed by Alain Resnais (1961; Paris: Studio Canal, 2005), DVD.

¹² *2046*, directed by Wong Kar-wai (2004; Hong Kong: Tartan DVD, 2005), DVD.