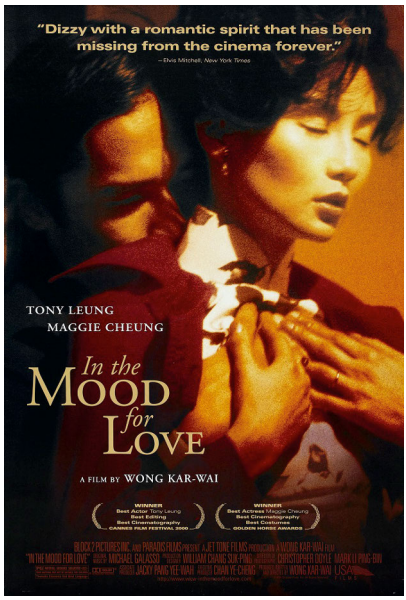
In the Mood for Love (花樣年華, *Fa yeung nin wa*, 2000)

Norbert M. Schmitz

dir. Wong Kar-wai; prod. Wong Kar-wai; screenplay Wong Kar-wai; photography Christopher Doyle, Mark Lee Ping Bin; music Michael Galasso, Shigeru Umebayashi. 35mm, color, 98 mins. Jet Tone Production, distrib. Paradis Films.



Courtesy of the Everett Collection

In the Mood for Love—the original Chinese title of which translates literally to »Flowery Years«—is at once a work of consummate, perfected aestheticism and an uncompromising melodrama. Despite an unreserved display of the most intense feelings, a suspicion of kitsch, which figures in every unbroken work of this genre, does not even begin to arise. The categorization of the film as melodrama is quickly realized: The story of love that does not become real, the focus on completely pure and unreserved feelings, the melting away in longing for connection to other lifeworlds, are all well-known ingredients of melodrama.

Much could be said about this complex masterpiece, this unconventional melodrama and unquestioned artifact of high art—but the main question of this article is what the film can tell us about the structure and function of melodrama as such. In the usual hierarchy of genres, melodrama sits toward the bottom, due in part to the fact that modern art, in the sense of critically reflexive aesthetics, fundamentally rejects the unbroken emotionality of classical Hollywood cinema, or melodrama in general. The question, therefore, is: What does such aesthetic sentimentality signify in so-called art cinema?

For stylistic reasons, the critically acclaimed *In the Mood for Love*, which won several awards (among them a César and European Film Prize), was primarily shot in Macao. The story is set in British Hong Kong in 1962, and stars Maggie Cheung as Su Li-zhen, the head secretary of a shipping company, and Tony Leung as print journalist Chow Mo-wan. When their two paths cross as tenants in the same apartment building, a friendship develops between them. The sense of abandonment Su Li-zhen and Chow Mo-wan share in their daily lives, due to their spouses' regular absence—one on weeks-long business trips to Japan, the other a hotel receptionist working night shifts—is the

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starting point for a bond that grows ever stronger (see Marschall 401-03). As the story unfolds, they find more parallels, such as their love of martial arts stories and their tendency for lonely dinners in a close-by soup kitchen. But what makes them grow even closer is the painful realization that their spouses have ventured on a love affair. Not wanting to be like them, Su Li-zhen and Chow Mo-wan end their own emotional, but still platonic, liaison. Convinced that she will never abandon her husband, Chow Mo-wan leaves for a work assignment in Singapore, and the question of whether she would consider accompanying him is audible only as an off-camera comment. Even though Su Li-zhen later secretly follows him to Singapore, she avoids meeting Chow Mo-wan, only leaving silent messages of love, like lipstick-stained cigarette butts, which reveal her presence in his apartment. As Susanne Marshall writes: »Calls not taken, silence at the other end of the line, and finally a silenced telephone narrate the slow loss of contact. In 1966, when both return to the place of their shared memories, they miss each other again and once and for all. The former landlady [played by Siu Ping Lam], whose vigilance previously stood in the way of their love's happiness, leaves Hong Kong in the face of the uncertain political situation and gives her apartment to Su Li-zhen, who moves in with her son who has been born in the meantime. Also Chow Mo-wan seeks out the old tenement but leaves when he learns that a woman with a child lives there now. The film ends at the Angkor Wat temple complex in Cambodia, the largest sacred structure on earth and a ›museum of jealousy, passion, and love‹ (Wong Kar-wai). Here, Chow Mo-wan whispers his secret into a hollow in the stone, which he then seals. The love between him and Su Li-zhen remains forever preserved in a secret place« (401-03).

This story, which is melodramatic in the literal sense, is forced into a strict and artificial corset of form, marked by an almost claustrophobic permanence of glimpses through small rooms, narrow corridors, and steep staircases. The protagonists move naturally through the narrowest side streets in the quiet alcoves of a Chinese-European city of modern, international trade. The convoluted corridors and rooms hardly allow for a clear view, either. Only towards the end, when the actual plot is already concluded, and during the dreamlike journey to the temple of Angkor Wat, does this closed space open some. Throughout the film, the reality of the story rather resembles a rapturous memory. The strictness of the formal order, the focus on the glances of the male protagonist, and the fixation on the beauty of the female protagonist together become the vanishing point of a permanent desire, the elegiac mood of which almost renders an actual fulfillment seem redundant. The idiosyncratic lack of seriousness and the simultaneous heaviness of the role play with which the two envision the end of their relationship—the imagined end to the interplay of desiring and being desired—only highlights the loss of a stringent temporality, a loss that the psychologist Ludwig Binswanger once identified as the core of melancholy (Binswanger 23; Kirchmann). The almost cyclical repetition of tango and pop music render the past idiosyncratically present. The film takes place more in the temporal mode of the past—beyond an ordinary present, which has been characteristic of cinematography since its beginnings. In this respect, the film reminds us more of the temporality of the photograph, with its reference to the depicted as something lost in the past—an experience of time also reflected in the film through the almost excessive celebration of 1960s design and music. Even for Western viewers of this film, which is aimed at a global audience, this stylization contains the picturesque strangeness of a bygone era rather than the exoticism

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of a foreign China. This is also evident in the nearly excessive presentation of Qipao dresses: not only because these fashionable 60s patterns characterized contemporaneous Western dresses, but also because the Qipao—with its tight and close-fitting cut—marks the European incursion into China's dress culture at the beginning of the 20th century. Or, even better: Because, as an external sign of reform and the individualism of modernity, it has become the costume and symbol of the emancipation of a new China, as the Sun Yat-sen suit has.

In this sense, art house cinema has long been global art cinema. Wong Kar-wai's references in the film are thus to European art cinema or the European novel—rather than to Chinese cinema or the literature of the Far East—which became part of Chinese modernity through the mediation of Chinese reformers and Westerners beginning in the second half of the 19th century. An original Chinese tradition is mentioned only in passing, in the enthusiasm that the main characters share for martial arts, a genre quite different from melodrama—in which action destroys a dwelling in deep feelings, and thus with it the essence of melodrama.

Usually, such exclusive focus on emotions, in works like Käutner's *Romance in a Minor Key* or Cameron's *Titanic*, is made more appealing to a broader audience through social drama or a morally charged plot. However, these feigned fractures allow viewers—and often also male viewers of this »women's genre«—to indulge without restraint in an otherwise tabooed »pornography of feeling,« where pornography refers to an unbroken, direct, and never critically questioned display of feeling. Won Kar-wai's stylish choreography and Christopher Doyle and Mark Lee Ping Bin's perfect camerawork thus transform trashy sentimentalism into subtle emotion. On a meta-level, the film openly exhibits its aesthetic structure—especially through its numerous redundancies in content and form—that the structure of the work of art as the subject of the same becomes one with the hypostasis of the pure feeling of love. Melodrama as pure artistic form!

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