In the Mood for Love (Fa yeung nin wa)
Hong Kong/ France/ Thailand 2000
Produced, directed and written by Wong Kar-wai
Production companies: Block 2 Pictures Inc., Jet Tone Production Co., Paradis Films
Cinematography by Christopher Doyle, Pin Bing Lee
Film Editing, Costume and Production Design by William Chang
Original Music by Mike Galasso, Shigeru Umebayashi
Runtime: 98 min
Language: Cantonese

In the Mood for Love is a film about dreams and memories – and also about repression and restraint, uncertainty and exile. It is at once the high point of Wong Kar-wai’s achievement in presenting a personal cinema and in creating a universal melodrama. In the UK, it is quite possible that a growing group of fans consider it to be a companion piece to Brief Encounter (UK 1946) as a film to swoon over, a heady plunge into cinematic romanticism.

In the Mood for Love is a rich and rewarding experience in its own right, but it becomes even more fascinating when placed in context. Wong Kar-wai was around 5 years old when his family moved from Shanghai to Hong Kong in the early 1960s. Much of his film output has referred directly or indirectly to that family move and the uncertainty of living in Hong Kong with its mixture of the traditional and the modern, looking back to the mainland and forward to a global future. Many Hong Kong films have been read as representing ‘uncertainty’ about future control by Beijing, especially after the 1984 Sino-British Agreement. Wong’s films explore that uncertainty through ‘personal’ stories and In the Mood for Love represents the middle section of a trilogy of films that directly address these concerns. These films most clearly display Wong’s trademark ‘doubling’, which Audrey Yue explores via the concept of the tête-bêche, (the term for two postage stamps printed together so that one is upside down in relation to the other). Throughout the discussion below, there are several ways in which this kind of doubling is evident.

The first film of the trilogy is Days of Being Wild (1991), which centres on a ‘wayward youth’ played by Leslie Cheung. At the start of the film he seduces Su Li-zhen (Maggie Cheung), a young woman running a drinks stall in a seemingly deserted building. Having previously told her that she will see him in her dreams, he persuades her to look at his watch for one minute. As she does so the big clock on the wall ticks loudly. When the minute is up he tells her that he will always remember this moment (one minute before 3pm on April 16, 1960). As he turns away, we hear Su Li-zhen’s interior monologue recounting how their love developed over the next few weeks. The young man eventually deserts her for another woman and later travels to the Philippines looking for traces of his mother who he has never known. At the end of the film, in a brief coda, Tony Leung is shown as a young man preparing for a night out.

Wong had intended to make a second film around this theme and these characters, much as Fallen Angels (1995) is a companion to Chungking Express (1994). But Days of Being Wild was not a success in Hong Kong (few of Wong’s films have been big box office at home) and the follow-up was abandoned. Nearly ten years later, In the Mood for Love reunites Maggie Cheung and Tony Leung in the same location in time and place. She is still Su Li-zhen, but this time she is married to a Mr Chan. Tony Leung is married too, as Chow Mo-wan. The two characters will then appear again in the third instalment, 2046 (2004), the title of this film referring to the last of the 50 years following the handover of Hong Kong to China (as well Mo-wan’s hotel room number). (Gong Li also appears in this film, playing another Su Li-zhen.)

All three films are melodramas, but each mixes in another genre repertoire which gives the overall film a different tone. Days of Being Wild is a youth melodrama and 2046 references science fiction, but In the Mood for Love is a ‘romance melodrama’. This is the categorisation suggested by Stephen Teo, who has written extensively about Wong Kar-wai. Melodrama is all about the play of emotion which
is displayed on screen through music (mélodrame), camerawork and mise en scène. Each of these is very evidently stylised in In the Mood for Love. All the emotion that might arise from conflict between characters is suffused in the look and sound of the film. As if to emphasise the cinematic dimensions of time and space in which the characters are caught like insects, in amber, the camera photographs the couple ‘captured’ in mirrors, doorways, alleys etc. in patterns of light and shade and often overlooked by or associated with various clockfaces.

As Teo (2001) suggests, the succession of tight-fitting cheongsams worn by Maggie Cheung is Wong’s way of signalling the passage of cinematic time (like many of the film’s references these point back to the 1940s and 1950s, when the culture enjoyed by the exiles in Hong Kong had been produced) as well as a kind of erotic memory for Chinese audiences. Maggie Cheung’s family had also come from Shanghai originally and as well as costume it is the music which conveys nostalgia, whether it is the haunting score by Shigeru Umebayashi, Shanghainese songs on the radio or the impossibly romantic sound of Nat King Cole’s Spanish language album ‘Cole en Espanol’ which provides three songs.

A great deal of the emotional power of the film comes from the music and it too plays a part in the tête-bêche. The music is nostalgic and part of the ‘looking back’ to Shanghai as in the radio broadcasts of Zhou Xuan, Shanghai’s ‘Golden Voice’ of the 1930s and 1940s. But the music also looks ‘outwards’ with ‘Yumeiji’s Theme’, borrowed from a Japanese bio-pic about an artist of the Taisho period (1912-26) steeped in romanticism. In the film, Japan is a trading partner signifying modernity. Other music looks outwards to the Chinese diaspora elsewhere in South East Asia. In another link to Days of Being Wild, Rebecca Pan, who played the ‘aunt’ or surrogate mother to Leslie Cheung, is here cast as the landlady of Chow and Mrs Chan. Rebecca Pan is also a singer and it is her version of a famous Indonesian song that is playing as Chow is shown in Singapore. The Days of Being Wild link to the Philippines also emerges in the Nat King Cole songs.

A further set of ‘intersections’ (as Yue terms them) involves the literary inspiration for the film in the form of Dauido, a novel by Liu Yichang, another Shanghainese exile. The novel’s title refers to a Chinese translation of tête-bêche and the story features an older man from Shanghai, a journalist who yearns for his youth, and a young woman who lives with her parents and dreams of becoming a pop star. Yue suggests that the film’s “historical and cultural mode of production” draws heavily on the ideas in the novel, including the use of music and cross-cultural references. The film also begins and ends with texts adapted from the novel.

To summarise Yue’s arguments about the tête-bêche, the film offers three ‘sites’ of intersection. First, there is the tension between marriage and the possibility of an affair – between ‘sanctity’ and ‘restraint’. Next there is a spatial intersection with Hong Kong as a hub and movement to Japan, Cambodia and Singapore signalled in the narrative as well as the references to Shanghai (and the fact that the film was mostly shot in Thailand). Finally, there is the historical intersection – looking backward and forward.

Much of Yue’s analysis is not easily available to Western audiences without the detailed cultural knowledge needed to decode many of the references. However, other dimensions of the film’s importance are concerned with more current issues, such as the screening of the film at Cannes and its presence alongside several other high profile East Asian films, signalling a general international acclaim. But this too has a sense of ‘intersection’. Following Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon (Taiwan/US 2000), a ‘crossover’ film bringing a popular Chinese genre, the wu xia or martial chivalry film, to an international audience, In the Mood For Love’s Cannes Awards replaced Hong Kong’s usual association with action cinema with recognition of its arthouse status. Yet, in some ways Wong Kar-wai was following Ang Lee in re-visiting the film genres he had enjoyed as a child.

At the centre of In The Mood For Love is Maggie Cheung. Born in Hong Kong, schooled in the UK, briefly married to French director Olivier Assayas, she is also perhaps the most famous female face in contemporary East Asian film culture. As a film icon, Cheung is unusual in speaking English, French, Cantonese and Mandarin. In one of her most critically acclaimed roles as 1930s Shanghai melodrama star Ruan Ling-yu in Centre Stage (Hong Kong 1992) she shifts between Cantonese, Mandarin and Shanghainese with ease. It’s a comment on the insularity of UK film distribution that this performance has not been seen by cinema audiences in the UK. But as the camera lingers on her face (also made famous by Lux shampoo adverts) and her sublime body in an ever-changing display of cheongsams, it is worth thinking about how this supremely talented modern woman now represents the changing image of Hong Kong in a world in which, as Yue suggests, there is a convergence of the “Oriental, neo-Oriental and self-Oriental commodification of pan-Asian popular culture”. Here is the final intersection – the carefully composed reflection on the Shanghai/Hong Kong community’s past and and future and the way in which this is viewed across the world.

This complex discussion has attempted to explore the fascination of In the Mood For Love as a film potentially rich in interpretation. But, of course, it is also a film full of pleasures, visual and aural. So sit back and enjoy and perhaps later try to work out precisely what the ending of the film might mean.

References

Roy Stafford 6/7/07