

Wong Kar Wai's Shot Design and Color

Application in *In the Mood for Love*

A Thesis submitted to the Faculty of the Film and Television in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirement of the Degree of Master of Fine Art in Film and Television
at
Savannah College of Art and Design

Yingqiao Ye

Savannah, GA

© May 2020

Professor *Amanda Kulkoski*, Committee Chair

Professor *Steve Stanley*, Committee Member

Professor *Andrew Meyer*, Committee Member

TABLE OF CONTENT

LIST OF FIGURES	1
THESIS ABSTRACT	2
INTRODUCTION	3
FRAME WITHIN FRAMES SHOT: BUILDS THE CHARACTERS.....	4
COLORS: CREATE THE MOOD.....	8
LINES: ENABLE COMPREHENSIVE STORYTELLING.....	13
MARGIE'S CHRISTMAS EVE.....	17
CONCLUSION.....	22
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	23

List of Figures

Figure 1: Wong Kar Wai, <i>In the Mood for Love</i>	6
Figure 2: Wong Kar Wai, <i>In the Mood for Love</i>	11
Figure 3: Wong Kar Wai, <i>In the Mood for Love</i>	12
Figure 4: Wong Kar Wai, <i>In the Mood for Love</i>	14
Figure 5: Wong Kar Wai, <i>In the Mood for Love</i>	16
Figure 6: Lei Zhao, <i>Margie's Christmas Eve</i>	18
Figure 7: Lei Zhao, <i>Margie's Christmas Eve</i>	19
Figure 8: Lei Zhao, <i>Margie's Christmas Eve</i>	21

Abstract

Wong Kar Wai's Shot Design and Color Application in *In the Mood for Love*

Yingqiao Ye

May 2020

This thesis paper focuses on shot design and color application in *In the Mood for Love* (2000), which features Tony Leung and Maggie Cheung, and is regarded as one of director Wong Kar Wai's best films. The remarkable shot design and color application of Wong Kar Wai (who served as both producer and director on this feature) are essential for the success of the film. This research consists of two parts: the first is a discussion regarding the shot design and colors used in *In the Mood for Love*; the second serves to analyze how *In the Mood for Love* exerts influence on the thesis film *Margie's Christmas Eve*.

Keyword: location choosing, Wong Kar Wai, In the Mood for Love, colors, shot design, storytelling, frames-within-frames, lines

Introduction

Filmmaker Ang Lee once stated: “In my generation of directors, the real genius is Wong Kar Wai.”¹ Similarly, director Quentin Tarantino also asserted: “In my mind, Wong Kar Wai is among the most excellent filmmakers since I started my career.” Undeniably, the directorial achievements made by Wong Kar Wai are admired by numerous people. His unique style of filming has also had a great influence on many other filmmakers. He experiments within different genres, makes attractive and beautiful movies, and can generally be taken as a pure example of why Hong Kong cinema has become popular in the West.²

In the Mood for Love, directed and produced by Wong Kar Wai, and featuring actors Tony Leung and Maggie Cheung, hit Hong Kong’s silver screens on September 29, 2000. Its story takes place in 1962 Hong Kong and presents the story of Chow and Su, who discover their spouses are having secret affairs together — and who subsequently, slowly develop feelings for each other.

¹ “Interview with Ang Lee.” *The Guardian*. Guardian News and Media, November 3, 2000. <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2000/nov/03/awardsandprizes.culture>.

² Deppman, Hsiu-Chuang. “Liu Yichang and Wong Kai-Wai: The Class Trap in *In the Mood for Love*.” Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2017, pp. 98-122.

When it premiered at the Cannes Film Festival in 2000, *In the Mood for Love* was rated as one of the best movies ever directed by Wong Kar Wai. Moreover, in 2001 it was frequently mentioned as one of the greatest films in Asian film history. This praise was due to Wong Kar Wai's sensational shot design and color application. The highly stylized thesis film *Margie's Christmas Eve* has been profoundly influenced by the works of Wong Kar Wai. In this paper, an analysis is conducted of how Wong Kar Wai shapes character, deals with the storytelling aspect of filmmaking, and creates a cohesive "mood" through both the shot design and color application on display in *In the Mood for Love*. For the second part of the paper, a discussion of the shot design and color application found in *Margie's Christmas Eve* demonstrates the ways in which that thesis film was clearly influenced by *In the Mood for Love*.

Frames within Frames Shot: Shapes the Characters

In the Mood for Love tells of Chow and Su, who in 1962 move to different apartments in the same house, becoming neighbors. Over time, Chow and Su discover that each of their respective spouses is having an affair with another person. Even more surprisingly, Chow's

wife and Su's husband are found to be having an affair with each other. Chow and Su are keen on unraveling how this adulterous relationship started, and in an effort to understand its beginnings they re-enact what they imagine might have happened between their respective spouses. When the story comes to an end, Chow leaves Hong Kong for Singapore, but Su remains behind.

In the Mood for Love is a highly stylized motion picture. Though the story itself is quite straightforward, the manner in which Wong approaches this narrative is quite extraordinary. It can be said that each member of this film's audience can easily come away from viewing *In the Mood for Love* with their own unique understanding of the tale being told. Certainly, Wong's unique shot design and color application are two of the main reasons the film is seen as being so unique and memorable.



Figure 1 *In the Mood for Love* (2000)

The movie's opening sequence runs nearly five minutes in length and takes place in the landlord's property. It is worth noting that all the shots in those first five minutes apply the commonly-seen technique of "frames within frames," meaning that the main characters are seen physically "framed" within a doorway or window. These frames-within-frames shots provide an added sense of depth to the shot, and thus, the sequence.³ For a movie, it is often essential to decide how much information should be conveyed at the beginning of the film.

Additionally, this frames-within-frames shot takes a direct approach in presenting the environment of our hero and heroine. In general, a specific living environment can provide

³ Lubomir Kocka, *Directing the Narrative and Shot Design: The Art and Craft of Directing* (Paperback Premium Color), S.J.: Vernon Press, 2019, pp. 152-153.

plenty of information about the characters. In this way, the background of the characters is visually explained at the beginning of the story, which instinctively facilitates the audience's cognition of the leading roles to be established.

In the first five minutes, the hero, heroines, landlords, and other moving workers gather in a tight corridor. Crowded, narrow and compact rhythms spread at a slow pace. In the film, people are always stepping in or out of the door. Or, two people can be found talking in the physically restrictive corridor. From the beginning of this shot, the chosen style of filming is demonstrated quickly and connected with the location where the hero and heroine reside.

Moreover, Chow and Su's living environment allows the audience to derive a strong sense of oppression. It is noteworthy that the story of *In the Mood for Love* is filled with such oppression. As the story unfolds, it can be seen that there are a large number of windows in this house. Wong Kar Wai not only utilized plenty of shots taken from the outside of the windows to the interior of the house, but also again used that window to create a frame. From a visual perspective, such an image subconsciously promotes a sense of restriction in the viewer. The film also contains many sequences which are presented without any dialogue.

This lack of conversation fits perfectly with the difficult situation in which the hero and heroine find themselves. Over time, as they come to be acquainted, Chow and Su gradually have strong feelings for each other, which is deemed immoral, as both have their own spouse.

Colors: Create the Mood

If the fans of *In the Mood for Love* were to be surveyed to determine exactly why they like the movie, it is believed that half those fans will admit it is primarily due to the film's delicate expression of emotions. *In the Mood for Love* is quite far from being a dramatic movie about love. The mood conveyed by *In the Mood for Love* is not that of love. It is of solitude, separation, longing and deliberate isolation.⁴ The onscreen colors applied by Wong Kai Wai fit with the emotion which is skillfully expressed in the film. All the locations are set in darker tones, with the structure itself displayed as winding and crowded. As the actors

⁴ Lekshmi, Jayadev. "Wong Kar-Wai's Technique of Communicating Emotions through Frames, Mise-En-Scène and Soundtrack in *In the Mood for Love*." *International Journal of Innovative Technology and Exploring Engineering* Regular Issue 8, no. 11, 2019: pp. 2950–54.
<https://doi.org/10.35940/ijitee.k2258.0981119>.

walk and talk in such a confined space, this visual constriction allows their characters' feelings to be instantly and silently conveyed to the viewer.

The human retina is fastest at capturing color. With this in mind, skillful filmmakers give carefully consideration to the colors and color schemes used in their motion pictures, because emotional clues can be revealed to the audience strictly through the deliberate usage of color. The composition of each individual shot in a film is of great significance, as each individual's ideas are carried by these shots. Whether this is a conscious, aesthetic choice made when coloring the film itself, or via the wardrobe and objects which are placed within the frame, the colors can be used to manipulate the emotions of an audience — on both conscious and subconscious levels.⁵

⁵ Logan, Baker. "Manipulating the Audience's Emotions With Color." The Beat: A Blog by PremiumBeat, September 13, 2016.
<https://www.premiumbeat.com/blog/manipulate-emotions-with-color-in-film/>.

Wong Kar Wai is undoubtedly one of cinema's great colorists. His films are renowned for their distinctive “smudge-motion” style, where different colors segue and blur into each other.⁶

He is also rarely reliant on wording to achieve communication with his audience. More frequently, he prefers to use visual approaches to convey information or emotion. The hint of color psychology he employs in *In the Mood for Love* clearly serves to present a “mood” to its viewers.

For example: In *In the Mood for Love*, red appears in scenes on a frequent basis whenever Chow is shown getting along with Su (as Wong expects). This occurs in the restaurant where they hold their first conversation, in room 2046, and in the sheets Su makes when hiding in Chow's house. Particularly, when Chow enters room 2046 alone, the film's frame is almost filled with red.

⁶ Shohini Chaudhuri, “Color Design in the Cinema of Wong Kar-Wai.” Wiley Online Library. John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, December 25, 2015.
<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/9781118425589.ch6>.



Figure 2 *In the Mood for Love* (2000)

In this scene we see a hotel corridor. On the right side of the corridor is a completely red curtain. It is worth mentioning that red is the stereotypical color used in films to refer to feelings of eroticism. Besides, the corridor is narrow and long. The lights on the ceiling make the actor's figure appear both bright and dark. This is the hotel that Chow rented specifically to get along with Su while avoiding being seen by his neighbors. In this story, Chow's relationship with Su develops at a fast pace. Every time Chow walks through this corridor, and then enters the room where the two secretly meet, his mood is similar to the feeling this location conveys to the audience. Despite being constrained, he is filled with love. Red is the color of passion and drama that attracts the most attention, and is associated

with strong emotions such as love and anger. Red inspires desire with a strong link to sexuality and increases appetites.⁷

Wong's extensive application of red in the frame is designed to reflect the character's intentional self-restraint. Despite both of them desiring love, they are also wary of themselves. They are not allowed to engage in deviant behavior, and Su makes a point to tell Chow as they stand outside the hotel door, "We are different from them!"



Figure 3 *In the Mood for Love* (2000)

⁷ Avoleoo/. "Color Meaning and Psychology." *Graflx*, September 14, 2014.
<https://graflx.com/color-psychology-emotion-meaning-poster/>.

The “use of color can subtly convey dramatic moods and impressions to the audience, making them more receptive to whatever emotional influence the scenes, action, and the dialog may exert.”⁸

Wong intentionally makes these pictures noticeably dim. The usage of such colors in this film suggests the atmosphere displayed in the story. These visuals help to create a dim, low, depressing and saddened atmosphere. The use of dark tones in *In the Mood for Love* promotes a feeling of both dejection and nostalgia among many viewers. In the movie, the characters stay in dim stairwells, corridors and streets. This overwhelmingly dark tone helps to depict the prevailing mood to be found in Hong Kong during the 1960s. Moreover, the tone also guides the audience into the depression felt by the protagonist. Chow and Su are common in that they are both suffering greatly from the infidelity of each of their partners. Nevertheless, they privately develop romantic feelings for each other. For both of them, such feelings cannot be spoken about and must be suppressed.

Lines: Enable comprehensive storytelling

⁸ Nochimson. *A Companion to Wong Kar-Wai*. John Wiley & Sons, Inc. 2015, pp. 158-162.

In *In the Mood for Love*, Wong Kar Wai also includes plenty of lines in the design of his shots. When people view an image, their attention is inevitably drawn to any stark lines present within it. We instinctively follow these lines to see where they extend — these lines are *leading* our gaze towards a particular subject.⁹ The lines in the frame add an additional dynamic. In Chinese culture, lines can embody the true beauty, the beauty of power and even the neurotic beauty of the stage. The linear structure adopted in the film adheres to this rule as well.



Figure 4 *In the Mood for Love* (2000)

⁹ Format, Team. "How To Use Leading Lines In Your Photography." *Format Magazine*, January 16, 2019.

<https://www.format.com/magazine/resources/photography/leading-lines-photography>.

In this scene, Wong depicts two protagonists sitting motionless on either side of the same wall. Su is listening to the song "Happy Family," holding a cup of tea and leaning against the wall. It again shows another frame-within-a-frame structure. The walls on both sides appear to leave her with no place to turn around, making the audiences aware of her depression and her lack of freedom. Wong's mise-en-scene illustrates her psychological dilemma in this cramped space: she is sandwiched between two men and remains in a state of paralysis because of her indecision.¹⁰ At that time, Chow and Su come to realize their feelings for each other. What makes them miserable is their commonality in having their own lovers. When the camera begins to move, the audience is surprised to discover that Chow is also leaning against the other side of the wall. In the same frame composition, the characters are facing opposite directions. Wong applies parallel lines on both sides to restrict Su's figure, which suggests that Su's emotional activities are trapped at this time as well.

¹⁰ Deppman, Hsiu-Chuang. *Liu Yichang and Wong Kai-Wai: The Class Trap in In the Mood for Love*. Honolulu:University of Hawaii Press, 2017. pp. 98-122.



Figure 5 *In the Mood for Love* (2000)

The same parallel lines show up in the scene when Su and Chow are placed in the same frame. The black lines here, as before, also cause viewers to derive a sense of repression.

Displaying many parallel vertical lines (such as these) are frequently regarded as symbolic of being jailed or held against one's will. The parallel lines in front of the camera in this scene are thus reminiscent of a prison, where Chow and Su's emotions are confined.

Moreover, since the line separates the audience from the protagonist, the audience is left in the position as an observer. Particularly, the dim color of the picture and the black lines which separate the audience create a sense of snooping on the part of the viewer. Using the voyeurism inherent in human nature, Wong reinforces the attraction of such an image. The viewers can feel as either the neighbors or the landlords, who hide themselves in the dark to observe the emotional development of the two protagonists.

Margie's Christmas Eve

The thesis film *Margie's Christmas Eve* (2019) presents the story of a weird family's Christmas Eve. The father, Thomas, is a drug addict who hopes to smuggle heroin into the United States when he returns from a business trip to Mexico. He hides the drugs in a newly-purchased teddy bear and—in hopes of evading investigation by Customs Agents—pretends the bear is a Christmas gift for his daughter. Coincidentally, Linda, the mother, also prepares a fuzzy bear as a Christmas present for her daughter. Her plans is to replace the bear's eyes with a tiny camera that will allow her to monitor whether her husband has returned home at any time during her secret affair. Surprisingly, however, their daughter Margie is not an ordinary little girl. She loves to collect knives, and frequently cuts her toys to practice using them. Eventually, Margie sabotages the couple's separate plans on Christmas Eve without even knowing it.

Margie's Christmas Eve, which is also a highly stylized movie, demonstrates various shot designs and color applications that draw on those present in *In the Mood for Love*.

Color



Figure 6, *Margie's Christmas Eve* (2019)

Similar to *In the Mood for Love*, various shades of the color red are also conspicuously present in *Margie's Christmas Eve*. As red is the color of mammalian blood, it tends to imply a sense of violence in many viewers. The scene in the little girl's bedroom shows red as the dominant tone. This sort of crimson is rarely used in most children's bedrooms. On the contrary, in many cases, children's rooms are painted in pastel hues. Nevertheless, Margie has some unusual hobbies —like collecting knives and destroying toys— which can easily be related to violent urges. Thus, at the time of location scouting, we intentionally selected a room which used dark red as its main color for use as the little girl's bedroom. This was designed to highlight the extraordinary characteristics of Margie. In this

play which takes place in her bedroom, Margie uses her collection of knives to hurt the teddy bear. The deep red color scheme of this space can have a stronger visual impact in the frame for many audience members. It plays a significant role in helping the audience to understand Margie's excitement, and also aids in promoting the story arc.

Lines



Figure 7, *Margie's Christmas Eve* (2019)

We also took inspiration from the shot design displayed in *In the Mood for Love*.

When the scene which takes place in Linda's bedroom was designed, I agreed with the director that there should be as many windows as possible in the room, which is due to our

need for a lot of lines to be seen in the picture. In shot design, lines are often used to deliberately guide viewers' eyes to the most important information in a given composition, or to divide a shot into segments and then emphasize or suppress a special character.¹¹ In this episode, Linda puts a camera in Margie's Christmas gift to better facilitate her own cheating. The vertical and horizontal lines created by the curtains and windows behind her can help to focus the audience's attention on Linda's face. Moreover, these lines are purposed to create more dramatic tension for the picture. Rather than simply preparing a gift for her daughter, Linda takes advantage of that situation. The interlaced lines displayed are conducive to showing Linda's mixed mood.

¹¹ Lubomir Kocka, *Directing the Narrative and Shot Design: The Art and Craft of Directing* (Paperback Premium Color), S.J.: Vernon Press, 2019, pp. 153-154.

Frame within frames



Figure 8, *Margie's Christmas Eve* (2019)

In the meantime, multiple doorframes were required of the location used for Linda's bedroom, as that is where she fantasizes of her infidelity. In Linda's fantasy, she is hanging out with her lover while Thomas is away from home. When the bear with the camera installed inside suddenly captures Thomas coming home, she lets her lover hide in the closet. At that time, the pair appear in a frame. While the lover is going into the wardrobe, Linda places herself in close proximity to the camera. The structure of frames-within-frames separates the audience from the role, thus making the audience an observer.

Conclusion:

For a filmmaker, it is a necessity to know where the best part of every film lies. As a highly personalized movie, *In the Mood for Love* is still quite popular and well-received among both standard audiences and professional filmmakers, to this day. While the basic story presented in the film is not particularly unusual or special, Wong Kar Wai revealed in an interview that he did not actually view *In the Mood for Love* as a tale of extramarital affairs. In actuality, his intent was to present a vision of the reality of people's lives in the 1960s. He cares much more about the time and people. Thus, he endeavored to achieve those goals through both the shot design and the color application. In *In the Mood for Love*, he exercises color and tone skillfully to create a certain mood for the audience. His control of lines and frames makes the depiction of the characters more intriguing, which contributes significantly to the success in storytelling which was achieved. For filmmakers who want to produce stylized film, his work is worth drawing on

Bibliography

- Avoleoo/. "Color Meaning and Psychology." Graf1x, September 14, 2014.
<https://graf1x.com/color-psychology-emotion-meaning-poster/>.
- Baker, Logan. "Manipulating the Audience's Emotions With Color." The Beat: A Blog by PremiumBeat, September 13, 2016. <https://www.premiumbeat.com/blog/manipulate-emotions-with-color-in-film/>.
- Chaudhuri, Shohini. "Color Design in the Cinema of Wong Kar-Wai." Wiley Online Library. John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, December 25, 2015.
<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/9781118425589.ch6>.
- Calvin, Zerodegree. "'In the Mood for Love' Cinematography and Voyeurism." GlobalCinema, September 22, 2015. <https://gtglobalcinema.wordpress.com/2015/09/22/in-the-mood-for-love-cinematography-and-voyeurism/>.
- Deppman, Hsiu-Chuang. *Liu Yichang and Wong Kai-Wai: The Class Trap in In the Mood for Love*. Honolulu:University of Hawaii Press, 2017. pp. 98-122.
- "Interview with Ang Lee." The Guardian. Guardian News and Media, November 3, 2000.
<https://www.theguardian.com/film/2000/nov/03/awardsandprizes.culture>.
- In the Mood for Love = Fa Yeung Nin Wa*. France: TF1, 2000.
- Jayadev, Lekshmi. "Wong Kar-Wai's Technique of Communicating Emotions through Frames, Mise-En-Scène and Soundtrack in In the Mood for Love." *International Journal of Innovative Technology and Exploring Engineering Regular Issue* 8, no. 11 (2019): 2950–54. <https://doi.org/10.35940/ijitee.k2258.0981119>.
- Kocka Lubomir, *Directing the Narrative and Shot Design: The Art and Craft of Directing* (Paperback Premium Color), S.J.: Vernon Press, 2019, pp. 153-154.
- Williams, Stanley D. "How Filmmakers Connect With Audiences." Movie. Outline.Screenwriting Software. Accessed April 30, 2020.
<http://www.movieoutline.com/articles/how-filmmakers-connect-with-audiences.html>.