

FILM REVIEWS

In the Mood for Love

Written, produced, and directed by Wong Kar-wai; cinematography by Christopher Doyle and Mark Li Ping-bin; production design and editing by William Chang Suk-ping; music by Michael Galasso and Umebayashi Shigeru; starring Tony Leung Chiu-wai, Maggie Cheung Man-yuk, Rebecca Pan, Lai Chin, and Siu Ping-lam. Color, 97 mins. A USA Films Release.

How do you write a love letter to a movie? Not a boffo review brimming with blurbable superlatives or a fine-grained analysis attuned to visual felicities, but something more appropriate—if hopelessly inadequate—to the sensual pleasure, emotional attachment, and fierce admiration (love?) occasioned by a work of stunning achievement. When I first saw *In the Mood for Love* at last year's New York Film Festival, it seemed as lyrically gorgeous as Wong's other films, mysterious but also a bit stilted. As often happens with complex art, a return engagement yielded patterns and implications only vaguely sensed the first time around. Then strangely, miraculously, I began dodging other scheduled movies or carving out a slot in a busy day to see it again; it was like having a slightly obsessive attraction to a new friend with whom you simultaneously feel at ease and erotically on edge in the face of a swoony intimacy which, for ethical or other reasons, must remain physically muted. In short, Wong's movie had entered that tiny but cherished phylum of esthetic ravishment, governed as much by personal taste as reasoned argument, to which the lifelong movie nut will turn in good times and bad for sentimental as well as professional reassurance.

It is perhaps no accident that *In the Mood for Love*, like *Vertigo*, *Letter From an Unknown Woman*, and in a less-exalted register, *Last Year at Marienbad*, is rooted in the dynamics of subjective memory and desire, desire in and for the image of the beloved trailed by its inevitable erosion, the mournful procession of ecstatic moments merging into the wider river of time. The story, structured as a series of brief encounters between two married neighbors whose spouses are conducting a barely-concealed affair, is nearly devoid of dramatic conflict yet draws surprising momentum from the charged repetition of gestures, body language, objects, settings, and musical phrases. Although never explicitly bracketed as someone's remembered images, the story

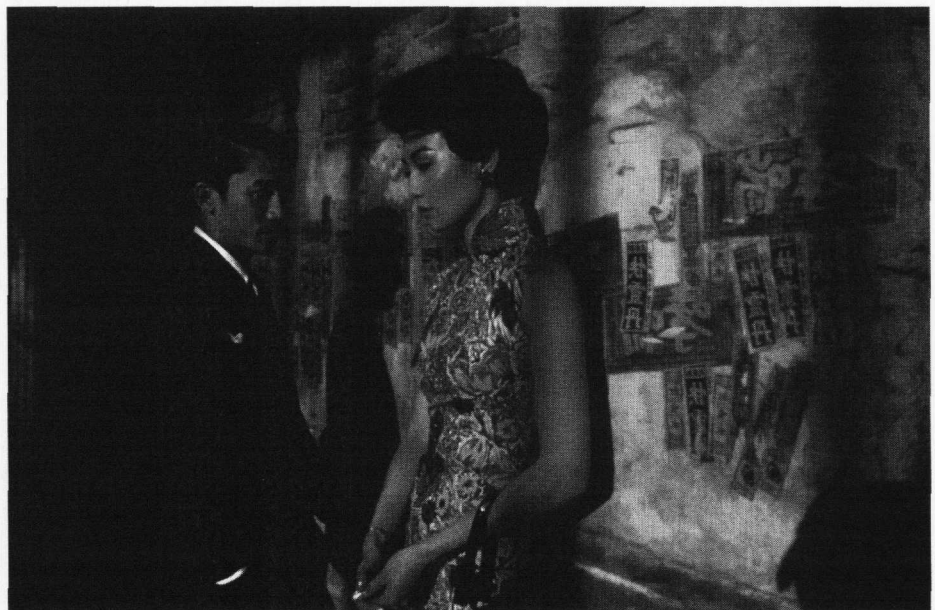
emanates as if from the coils of a dream or a trance-state.

Set in 1962, newspaper journalist Chow Mo-wan (Tony Leung) and shipping company secretary Su Li-zhen (Maggie Cheung), part of a growing community that fled Communist-ruled Shanghai for the illusory comforts of Hong Kong, rent adjacent rooms in a crowded tenement on the same day. Introduced by nosy, garrulous apartment owner Mrs. Suen (Rebecca Pan), they begin making small talk in narrow corridors and cramped rooms and along equally narrow passageways leading to an open-air noodle stall. Over a 'Western' meal at a nearby restaurant, they exchange shopping tips about gifts for their respective spouses while suspecting that the other's tie or purse were indeed love tokens bestowed by the wayward mates. Su's innocent knock on Chow's door is answered by his surly wife as Su's husband lurks offscreen, presumably in Chow's bedroom. The spouses are present only indirectly or by voice.

Coincidental 'business' trips to Japan provide the all-too-patient partners with ample opportunity to commiserate by deflection. As it becomes impossible to deny, to themselves or to each other, either the existence of the affair or their own romantic yearnings, they act out poignant little skits in which Chow takes the role of Su's husband confronted with his adultery. When asked "Do you have a mistress?" his answer, like her question, fosters a double-edged truth. Exhausted from an attempt to impersonate an outraged wife, Su's admis-

sion that "I didn't know it would hurt so much" carries a similar second meaning. They decide early on that "for us to do the same thing would mean we are no better than them," then spend the rest of the film attempting to overcome their mutual shyness and reticence. He is unwittingly urged on by a boozily vulgar friend, Ah-ping (Siu Ping-lam), whose aggressive hedonism—"I don't have secrets like you, I just go get laid"—is completely alien to Chow's ethical resolve. He wants to write a pulpy martial arts story and Su agrees to help. But when fellow tenants arrive home earlier than expected, Su has to spend an excruciating night hiding in his room. Even Chow's rental of a second flat, on the pretext of having a quieter place to write, does not sufficiently loosen their inhibitions. Or their overweening fear of exposure.

In the end Chow leaves his wife to take a job in Singapore, tentatively asking Su to come with him. She demurs, and by the time she screws up her courage, he has already departed. There are three elliptical, temporally-splayed epilogues: she surreptitiously invades his dismal room in a strange city, stealing his slippers and leaving behind a lipsticked cigarette; they separately revisit the apartment house where they loved and suffered so mightily; and Chow tours the ruins at Angkor Wat, whispering his 'secret' into a chink in a wall before sealing it with mud. Plot summaries are rarely very telling; in this case the exercise is almost misleading. In a terrific year for boldly elliptical narrative structures—examples include *Beau Tra-*



Su Li-zhen (Maggie Cheung) and Chow Mo-wan (Tony Leung) resist a romantic involvement despite the adultery of their own marriage partners in Wong Kar-Wai's *In the Mood for Love*.

veil, *Ratcatcher*, and *Time Regained*—In *the Mood* has the distinction of withholding so much crucial information that our only choice is to hunker down in a lustrous, transient here-and-now. Wong, who has said, “I sometimes treat space as a main character in my films,” teases the outlines of dashed romance from a nimbus of vivid but highly truncated incidents in which the slow-motion brushing of Su’s hand over a railing or the rhythm of her descent into an alleyway expresses far more than anything the couple says or does together. Close-ups are reserved for things unnoticed except by the hypersensitive lovers; slow pans build a delicate tracery of looks and spectral retreats; mirrors, foreground obstructions, and frames-within-frames create a thicket of individual isolation amidst human congestion. Scenes are connected by languorous fades; ambient sound is frequently banished in favor of aching ‘mood’ music.

If even master filmmakers tend to limit their sensory address to cinema’s unsurpassed dominion over sight and sound—in contrast to the novel, which has a decidedly broader, if less spectacular, arsenal of sensory resources—Wong, with redoubtable help from his cinematographers and set and costume designer, manages to saturate steamy boathouse encounters with suggestions of smell, touch, taste, temperature. References to cooking oil and to sweet or spicy foods mingle in a pall of cigarette smoke and a visible glaze of body sweat. For the reserved would-be lovers, especially as stored in Chow’s wispy memory bank, this otherwise rankly pungent atmosphere is pure aphrodisiac, their ardor spurred anew rather than dampened by intermittent rain showers.

An entire essay could, and should, be written about Su’s wardrobe of *cheong-sam*, high-necked yet revealing classical Chinese dresses in bold floral or geometric patterns. Her clothes are meant to evoke a particular era as well as to reinforce the theme of geographic displacement, Hong Kong’s cultural collisions of East and West, but in Wong’s overall scheme they do much more. Visually fetishized like nothing else in the film, their variations in successive scenes install a kind of hidden syntax or paramours’ code, in a fashion similar to the way flower arrangements ‘speak’ in Scorsese’s *The Age of Innocence* (one of several tantalizing connections between the films). As brilliant designer William Chang Suk-ping put it, “The colors I am using are very vivid to contrast with the characters’ restrained emotions.” Framed repeatedly in medium-long shot against dark or clashing backgrounds, Cheung’s lithe martial-arts trained body assumes the status of a Platonic form or, less abstractly, a 3-D burst of solidity in a 2-D medium. The shape Cheung projects—along with her posture, movements, accompanying fabric textures, and so on—remains indelible even as words and actions dissolve in the mind.

In an article in *The New York Times*, Wong explained that the film’s vector of

remembrance is predicated on his own Hong Kong childhood among Shanghai refugees: “We were always prepared, as kids, that we would move on, to someplace else or back to Shanghai. There was no sense that you belonged to this place or city.” An aura of penumbral impermanence hovers over the film as both object and effect of memory, and it is augmented not only by stylistic and narrative choices but also by the uncanny grace of the musical track. Among three Nat King Cole selections sung in Spanish—Cole was the favorite pop singer of Wong’s mother—“Quizas, Quizas, Quizas” (“Perhaps”), with its almost whispered triple refrain, nestles the couple’s ambivalent behavior in a moist vocal shimmer. Further, the weird slippage of an American icon singing in a non-native language to Hong Kong lovers perfectly encapsulates the liminal condition of displaced, romantically unmoored characters. Shigeru Umebayashi’s silky sad waltz-time theme is beautifully extended in Michael Galasso’s haunting string interludes. Especially noteworthy is Galasso’s repeating three-note plucked-string progressions which function like a ticking clock, reminding us at every turn that the couple’s heightened sensations are already ebbing into the past.

As is well known, the cinema bears a morbidly skewed relationship to questions of Presence and Permanence. The figures up on the screen are at once immediate and absent; they are ostensibly ageless, held in an eternal groove of representation, while in actuality they are several steps closer to the grave than when the camera fixed their images (if they aren’t already dead). This twofold apperception of time is also intrinsic to operations of memory, especially the recall of distant events. Wong is notorious for starting production with little more than a vaguely sketched script, then steering his actors through a prolonged process of improvisation and revision. His latest took an unusually long and circuitous path to completion, causing at least one participant, Maggie Cheung, to publicly vent her frustration and her reservations about the final outcome (she said it took four screenings to finally “get it”). Some residue of the film’s sluggish ontogeny, and its director’s personal attachment to the material, seeps into the experience of the work.

As Wong admits, “Maybe that’s why it took so long. I didn’t want to let go of it.” As critics have noted, compared to earlier films *In the Mood* is remarkably restrained in style and pacing, his “days of being wild,” the balls-out romanticism celebrated in *Chungking Express* or *Fallen Angels*, reined in to match the contours of two unflamboyant white-collar drones locked in a slow dance of thwarted desire. Its guiding consciousness, Mr. Chow, is desperately trying to hold onto a moment of supreme promise in an otherwise humdrum life, as embodied by the sensuous image of his neighbor Su Lizhen. The film looks and feels overripe, on

the edge of decay, because no amount of repetition, long fades, or slow-motion epiphanies can keep the images—the time, place, characters they inscribe—from wafting into thin air. Not for him and not for us as viewers. Without slipping into a quagmire of psychoanalytic film theory, our romance with the movie image parallels that of Chow and his lost love: impossibly vivid, suffused with desire, yet disturbingly ephemeral.

That Wong evokes an *interiorized* landscape of desire as memory should be obvious. The narrow passages and cloistered chambers in which most of the action takes place are subtle, if by now rather familiar, tropes for the labyrinthine quality of the mind, its ceaseless movement along the same unending pathways of remembered experience. The accumulated weight of this motif is gloriously capped by the concluding sequence at Angkor Wat, built in the twelfth century as a vast architectural microcosm of the universe. Disembodied tracking shots glide along deteriorating walls of the temple complex, punctuated by fleeting glimpses of deep untended gardens. Magnificent, fragile, deserted, echoing with the ghosts of obscure ambition, it is a perfect setting in which to declaim and seal up for eternity the lifeblood of what might have been. Jaded as we are by a cultural glut of reminiscence, *In the Mood for Love* gives nostalgia a good name. Make that a great name.—Paul Arthur

Traffic

Produced by Edward Zwick, Marshall Herskovitz, and Laura Bickford; directed by Steven Soderbergh; screenplay by Stephen Gaghan; cinematography by Peter Andrews (a.k.a. Steven Soderbergh); edited by Stephen Mirrione; production design by Peter Messina; costume design by Louise Frogley; music by Cliff Martinez; starring Michael Douglas, Don Cheadle, Benicio Del Toro, Luis Guzman, Catherine Zeta-Jones, and Erika Christensen. 147 mins. A USA Films release.

Since its release last fall, Steven Soderbergh’s *Traffic* has achieved the status of a fullfledged media event, a film that is as likely to be discussed on the op-ed pages of newspapers as in the entertainment section. At a time when most dispassionate observers agree that the United States’ much-ballyhooed, but interminable, War on Drugs has failed miserably, Soderbergh’s thriller with epic pretensions is a sexy departure point for the often dry-as-dust discussions of drug interdiction and funding for rehabilitation programs that flourish in the mainstream press and on Sunday political-chat shows. The critic for the online magazine *Feed* lauded *Traffic* as a brilliant film that is also an effective “public service announcement.” Even the well-regarded Mexican daily, *La Jornada*, chimed in, claiming that *Traffic* is inspiring usually complacent American