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The Mechanism of Visual Confinement and Affective Accumulation in the Cinematic Viewing Experience: An Analysis of the Film In the Mood for Love

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Abstract. Wong Kar-wai's *In the Mood* for Love is often discussed as a film about restrained love, nostalgia, and memory. Its emotional force comes less from direct confession or dramatic conflict than from the way the film makes desire difficult to see, approach, and complete. This paper adopts mise-en-scène as its main analytical framework to examine how the film turns unspoken love into a restricted viewing experience. In particular, it focuses on three formal mechanisms: confined space, obstructed framing, and repetitive temporal delay. Through these mechanisms, the paper argues that the film constructs an intimacy that is physically proximate yet emotionally inaccessible. First, narrow corridors, rented rooms, and staircases repeatedly bring Su Lizhen and Chow Mo-wan into close physical proximity, while the pressure of social visibility prevents their relationship from becoming openly expressed. Meanwhile, doorframes, windows, mirrors, and foreground objects interrupt the spectator's view, making the act of seeing incomplete and limited. Furthermore, recurring gestures, musical motifs, costumes, and encounters postpone narrative resolution, allowing emotions to accumulate gradually. Through these cinematic strategies, *In the Mood for Love* renders repression visual and temporal, leaving desire suspended in space, image, body, and memory.

Keywords: *In the Mood for Love*, Wong Kar-wai, Mise-en-scène, Repressed desire

1. Introduction

Wong Kar-wai's *In the Mood for Love* is set in 1960s Hong Kong and follows Su Lizhen and Chow Mo-wan, two married neighbours who learn of their spouses' affair. As they gradually develop an emotional connection, their relationship remains caught between intimacy and restraint. This paper adopts mise-en-scène as its primary analytical framework. Mise-en-scène refers to the arrangement of spatial elements, lighting, costumes, settings, objects, and bodies within the frame [1]. As Gibbs further emphasises, mise-en-scène provides a way to understand how visible elements construct meaning and shape mood [2]. Within *In the Mood for Love*, desire is expressed via corridors, staircases, doorframes, mirrors, costumes, gestures, and repeated movements rather than through direct dialogue.

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Furthermore, recent studies have explored the film's visual language through different approaches. Existing research suggests that elements such as colour, composition, camera movement, and lighting collectively shape the characters' psychological states and emotional development [3]. Based on these observations, this paper turns to the spectator's experience of the film. It examines how *In the Mood for Love* transforms desire into a restricted viewing experience shaped by distance, interruption, and delay. The paper argues that the film constructs a form of spectatorship in which intimacy is repeatedly approached but never fully accessed. Through its use of spatial arrangement, framing, and temporal repetition, the film creates a tension between emotional closeness and physical restraint. In this way, the film demonstrates how cinematic form influences not only what viewers see, but also how they experience desire, waiting, and memory.

2. Spatial confinement and the structuring of experience

Through confined domestic and urban environments, *In the Mood for Love* constructs an atmosphere of emotional restraint. Rather than serving as neutral backgrounds, rented rooms, corridors, staircases, and other enclosed locations function as part of the film's visual structure. This spatial arrangement reflects Sutandio's argument that cramped spaces, shallow compositions, obstructed shots, and other stylistic elements contribute to the film's system of emotional control [4]. Focusing on these elements, this section examines how spatial confinement shapes the characters' experience of desire through limited movement and interaction.

2.1. Domestic space as a closed social field

The rented apartment is one of the film's most important spaces because it transforms domestic life into a socially regulated experience. Though the apartment appears to belong to private life, its limited structure prevents it from becoming a fully independent personal space. Instead, Su and Chow's daily encounters take place within a domestic environment shaped by shared routines, social expectations, and established codes of behaviour. As a result, their intimacy does not develop freely but remains careful, indirect, and controlled. The apartment does not simply restrict physical movement; it also regulates emotional expression by defining what can and cannot be openly acknowledged. In this sense, domestic space becomes part of the film's moral structure, where desire must be contained before it can be expressed.

The film's narrative situation further reveals this function of domestic space. Su and Chow become neighbours after moving into the same rented building, and their relationship develops within a framework of everyday domestic order. Their emotional connection is shaped not by the absence of private feeling, but by the difficulty of separating private desire from social rules. This spatial condition also reflects Hong Kong's urban modernity. Lei Chin-Pang argues that Wong Kar-wai's nostalgic films often use space to organise memory and emotional experience [5]. In *In the Mood for Love*, compressed apartments and narrow corridors reflect a modern urban condition in which traditional neighbourhood structures coexist with psychological pressure [6]. Therefore, the apartment functions not merely as a realistic representation of 1960s Hong Kong, but as a closed social field where private desire is constantly shaped by external norms.

2.2. Spatial proximity and controlled distance

The film's most significant encounters often occur in transitional spaces, including corridors, staircases, doorways, and streets at night. Unlike private rooms or public locations, these spaces are

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designed for movement and passage. They provide temporary points of contact where Su and Chow can encounter each other without creating a fixed place for interaction. In this way, transitional spaces structure their meetings as brief and repeated interruptions within everyday movement.

The staircase and corridor scenes demonstrate how space organizes these encounters. Su and Chow often pass each other, stop briefly, or exchange only a few words within these narrow passages. Rather than allowing the scenes to develop into extended interactions, the spatial arrangement keeps the characters in motion. A corridor leads from one place to another, while a staircase connects different levels of the building; both spaces bring the characters together while directing them toward separation.

Through this repeated spatial pattern, the film creates a sense of delay. Encounters occur, but they remain temporary and incomplete because the characters are constantly placed within spaces of transition. A brief pause in a corridor, a meeting on the staircase, or a walk through the street does not lead to a final moment of resolution. Instead, these spaces prolong the process of encounter itself, turning movement and interruption into central elements of the film's visual structure.

2.3. Movement restriction and narrative stasis

The characters' movement through space is narrow and controlled. Su and Chow rarely move through the city freely; instead, they are repeatedly shown entering and leaving rooms, passing through corridors, descending staircases, or remaining within confined interiors. Their movements follow fixed routes determined by the structure of the apartment building and surrounding spaces. These spatial arrangements limit the directions available to their bodies and organise how they encounter one another.

Different locations create different patterns of movement. In the apartment, movement is restricted by shared domestic routines. In the corridor, the narrow passage allows only brief crossings and limited physical interaction. In the restaurant, the fixed seating arrangement places the characters within a formal social setting. Even the hotel room, which appears to offer greater privacy, remains a controlled space with clear boundaries. Each location offers a specific range of possible actions while preventing unrestricted movement.

Through these spatial structures, the film represents movement as a regulated process rather than a free activity. The characters are not physically immobilised, but their routes, positions, and encounters are shaped by the spaces they occupy. Spatial confinement therefore operates through the organisation of movement, directing where bodies can go and how interactions can occur.

3. Obstructed framing and the governance of vision

If space controls how characters move, framing controls how they are seen. In *In the Mood for Love*, doorframes, windows, mirrors, curtains, and foreground objects repeatedly interrupt the frame, hence producing a visual structure of limited visibility. Rather than providing direct access to the characters and their interactions, the film uses obstructed framing to regulate the spectator's view. This section examines how framed vision, foreground obstruction, and visual absence shape the way intimacy is presented on screen.

3.1. Framed vision and partial visibility

Frames within frames appear repeatedly in In the Mood for Love. Characters are often shown through doorways, windows, mirrors, or narrow openings. These internal frames divide the image

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into smaller visual areas, directing attention while limiting the amount of information available within the shot. In this way, composition becomes a mechanism that controls visibility.

Beyond this visual arrangement, this structure is significant because it gives spatial boundaries a visible form. When Su is seen through a doorway or Chow is positioned within a corridor frame, the image places the characters within clearly defined visual limits. The viewer does not receive a direct or unrestricted view of the scene; instead, perception is shaped by architectural lines, reflections, and divisions within the frame. Dong's discussion of the film's visual language is useful here, as she notes that partial composition, doorframes, and window lattices create a sense of distance in viewing [3]. These techniques demonstrate how the film organises visual information via limitation and separation.

At the level of spectatorship, partial visibility also determines how the spectator accesses the image. The viewer is given only fragments of the characters, their surroundings, and their interactions rather than a complete view of the scene. Thus, framing functions not simply as a way of arranging images, but as a method of controlling what can be seen and what remains outside the frame.

3.2. Foreground obstruction and visual interference

Foreground obstruction functions differently from framed vision. While framed vision organises the image through internal structures such as doorways, windows, and mirrors, foreground obstruction introduces physical elements between the camera and the characters. Curtains, walls, door edges, railings, lamps, and other objects partially block the view, creating multiple visual layers within the frame. The image is therefore not simply divided by composition, but actively interrupted by elements placed in the foreground.

While framed vision organises the composition through visual boundaries, foreground obstruction disrupts the image by placing objects between the viewer and the subject. Su and Chow are often visible only through gaps, reflections, or partial views created by surrounding objects. This technique shifts attention from the characters themselves to the spaces and objects that mediate their appearance. Jayadev and Aich argue that the film communicates emotion through frames, mise-en-scène, and soundtrack [7]. Their observation helps explain how obstruction becomes a formal device that controls the presentation of visual information.

This effect is further connected to Bettinson's discussion of Wong Kar-wai's cinematic style. He describes Wong's film poetics as sensuous and disruptive, with stylistic choices often interrupting smooth narrative absorption [8]. In *In the Mood for Love*, foreground obstruction creates a viewing experience shaped by interruption and incomplete access, making the image itself a site of visual restriction.

3.3. Asymmetric looking and spectatorial positioning

The film also controls vision through selective absence. Su's husband and Chow's wife are central to the narrative situation, yet they are rarely presented through clear images. Instead, they appear through voices, partial bodies, objects, and traces. Their affair initiates the story, but their visual presence remains limited.

This selective visibility creates an asymmetric structure of looking. The viewer is informed about the betrayal, but is denied a direct visual representation of the event itself. The absent spouses function less as fully developed characters than as unseen forces that shape the actions and

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encounters of Su and Chow. By keeping them outside the centre of the frame, the film redirects attention toward the consequences of the affair rather than its direct depiction.

In addition, this also positions the spectator within a limited field of knowledge. Important narrative information is provided, but visual access remains incomplete. The viewer must understand the situation through fragments, traces, and indirect signs rather than through explicit scenes. In this way, *In the Mood for Love* constructs a mode of viewing based on uneven access, where seeing and knowing do not fully coincide.

4. Repetition, temporal delay, and the accumulation of affect

The third major mechanism of the film is repetition, which shapes the experience of time and emotion. Recurring gestures, movements, music, and encounters appear throughout *In the Mood for Love*, thus creating a sense of return rather than linear progression. Instead of developing through conventional romantic escalation, the film builds emotional intensity via delay and variation. This section examines how repetition and temporal suspension contribute to the accumulation of affect.

4.1. Recurrent gestures and visual motifs

Among the film's recurring visual motifs, Su Lizhen's cheongsam is especially significant because it connects costume with bodily movement. Its high collar, fitted cut, and narrow silhouette shape the way she walks, turns, and pauses, making each gesture appear measured and composed rather than spontaneous. Through its design, the cheongsam contributes to the visual rhythm of Su's movements and creates a distinctive bodily presence within the frame.

This relationship between costume and movement is further examined by Kang Hanyin, whose study of the qipao in *In the Mood for Love* argues that variations in colour and style reflect Su's changing circumstances and contribute to the film's narrative development. Kang also notes that the qipao expresses period culture while carrying associations with traditional values [9]. This perspective highlights costume as a visual structure rather than decoration. The cheongsam defines how Su's body appears on screen, thus influencing her posture, movement, and interaction with surrounding spaces. Her repeated appearances in corridors, staircases, and streets become visually connected through the relationship between costume, gesture, and movement.

Beyond costume, other motifs also recur throughout the film, including cigarette smoke, patterned walls, dim corridors, and repeated musical elements. These elements work together to connect different scenes through recurring visual patterns. Instead of explaining characters' experiences directly, they shape the rhythm of the images and maintain the film's visual consistency.

4.2. Temporal suspension and narrative deferral

The film's repeated scenes are structured through small variations rather than major changes. The noodle-stall passages, staircase encounters, passing bodies, slow-motion walks, and recurring music appear at different points in the narrative, creating a pattern of return. Each repetition revisits a familiar situation while delaying further development of the story.

This use of repetition is closely connected to the film's narrative structure. Zhang Mengyao and Yu Chenxuan argue that the film builds emotion through repeated shots, lighting, and composition [10]. Their observation helps explain how recurring scenes organise the pace of the narrative. Instead of moving directly toward resolution, repetition delays narrative development by placing the characters in recurring situations. The noodle-stall scenes provide a clear example. Su's repeated

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walks along the same route and Chow's repeated appearances in the same environment establish a recurring pattern of action. As these scenes return, the narrative remains focused on continuation rather than advancement.

Through this structure of repetition and delay, the film suspends major turning points. Su and Chow become increasingly connected through repeated encounters, conversations, and meetings, yet these moments do not lead immediately to a decisive change in their relationship. The story moves forward through small developments while repeatedly postponing resolution. Temporal suspension therefore becomes a narrative device that extends the process of waiting and prevents the relationship from reaching a final outcome.

4.3. Affective accumulation and visual memory

By the later part of *In the Mood for Love*, the viewer begins to recall the relationship through recurring images rather than through major plot developments. Elements such as the corridor, the cheongsam, the staircase, the music, and the repeated encounters gradually gain significance through their return across the film. These details move beyond individual moments and become connected with the viewer's accumulated experience of the story.

This relationship between repetition and memory is reflected in Stephen Teo's description of Wong Kar-wai as an "auteur of time" [11]. In *In the Mood for Love*, time is not only presented through narrative progression but also through the recurrence of visual and sensory details. Instead of leaving the viewer with a complete romantic resolution, the film creates a series of fragments that remain through images, movements, and sounds. A familiar gesture, a repeated route, or a recurring melody carries the traces of previous scenes and extends their presence beyond the moment in which they appear. The ending at Angkor Wat further links time with memory. Chow's act of whispering into the wall preserves the unspoken past, transforming a private experience into a lasting image. As Letteri and Huang suggest, the film connects private emotion with broader questions of expression and meaning [12]. However, the significance of the ending lies less in external interpretation than in the way it transforms an unfinished relationship into an image that can be remembered.

Through this process, affective accumulation emerges from the relationship between repetition, time, and spectatorship. The film's emotional impact does not depend only on what happens within the story, but also on the images and rhythms that remain with the viewer after the film ends.

5. Conclusion

This paper has examined how *In the Mood for Love* visualizes repressed desire through mise-en-scène. Through its formal organisation, the film constructs a restricted mode of spectatorship in which intimacy is shaped by spatial limits, incomplete visibility, and delayed resolution. Specifically, spatial confinement restricts movement and interaction, creating encounters that remain controlled rather than fully accessible. Meanwhile, obstructed framing limits the spectator's view by presenting intimacy via partial images and visual barriers. Furthermore, repetition and temporal delay extend these restrictions by allowing recurring images, gestures, and movements to accumulate meaning across time. These formal strategies make desire appear distant, unresolved, and constantly delayed. More importantly, the film's mise-en-scène shapes how viewers experience this restraint rather than simply showing a story of unfulfilled love. By organising space, framing, rhythm, and repetition, the film creates a sense of proximity without possession, where desire remains through images and memories rather than narrative resolution. Future research could further

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explore how editing and sound design contribute to the film's construction of temporal experience, particularly the role of music in shaping repetition and emotional rhythm.

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