

How 'In the Mood for Love' Transcends the Romance Genre

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Love is undoubtedly one of the greatest desires humans have, if not the most established. Whether it be a childhood crush, a summertime fling, or even yearning for someone who has passed away, every person has felt the powerful, at times debilitating, desire for love. As a result, the vast majority of people have also felt the butterflies in their stomachs, the thrill of their first kiss, and the weight lifted off their hearts when they hear their partner's "I love you." Sometimes, it may even be the only thing we remember about a period in our lives. Wong Kar-wai's *In the Mood for Love* (2000) tackles this feeling of melancholic reminiscence while cementing itself as a very unique romance film. As we'll discuss later on, romance films have many tropes, patterns, and common themes, such as predetermined relationships as well as significant gender norms. *In the Mood for Love*, while taking inspiration from many of these aspects, transcends the normal romance genre by playing with a nonlinear story, adopting nuanced characters who exist beyond the scope of their relationship, and fulfilling a bittersweet ending. Even though there are still plenty of tropes, such as a relationship between a beautiful man and a beautiful woman, Kar-wai decides to focus on the particular feeling rather than the outcome. In doing so, *In the Mood for Love* is able to create not only a spell-binding atmosphere, but it also delivers some of the most genuine characters and scenes ever written, as it lifts itself above its cookie-cutter siblings of the same genre.

Because of it being such a universal feeling, love has evolved into one of the most common themes throughout music, literature, art, and film. Nowadays, it seems like every popular song pertains to love and relationships, as romance has also become one of the most popular genres in film and literature. While music and literature are fantastic at conveying short ideas and themes, film truly excels at visualizing entire relationships and every intimate moment the characters share.

The romance genre for films is nonunique in that the structure of many of the films that fall under its umbrella display a myriad of common themes or "tropes." These tropes include friends-to-lovers, enemies-to-lovers, forbidden love, unrequited love, and many more. These tropes are what drives the film and gives a structure to the story, which, according to Jordan Scharaga of Ursinus College, can be a detriment to the film itself (1). Usually, viewers are able to ascertain what trope is present in the film just

from watching the trailer, which can make the actual film predictable and uninteresting. As for romance films, these tropes also exist to create identifiable and relatable characters. It is often easier to relate to certain scenarios rather than people, and so the use of tropes makes it easier to relate to the characters as the viewer knows what to expect due to the scenarios that the characters experience. Perhaps for most people, romance films involve a damsel in distress falling in love with a knight in shining armor, with the film ending with the two living happily ever after. Regardless, it's irresponsible to ignore the presence of these tropes when considering the genre as a whole.

Romance movies also commonly cement the gender identities of the culture, location, and time period that the characters belong to and where the film takes place. For western films, audiences are in all likelihood most familiar with stories that begin with a beautiful, feminine woman and an equally, if not more, beautiful, masculine man. Quickly, the beautiful woman falls in love with the beautiful man. They will encounter some conflict and then overcome this conflict in order to, again, live happily ever after. As for eastern films, this pattern is usually even more strict as it stays in tune with the social climate of the culture that is present within the film. Nevertheless, the beautiful, feminine woman and the beautiful, masculine man remain. The iteration and reiteration of this expected relationship enforces not only the frequent commonality of heterosexual relationships, but also the historic gender identities that exist within societies all over the world (Hare). It convinces the audiences that this is how the world should work, when we know that reality is often far more diverse and even more so complicated.

Objectively, however, the goal of romance films is to evoke powerful emotions within the audience. The most successful romance films are known for their ability to elicit visceral emotions from the viewer, often sprouting feelings of sadness, heartbreak, joy, and melancholy. They do this by manipulating the innate human desire for love, creating scenarios where the relationship between two characters has to twist and turn, conflict then reconcile, before the final resolution. It is believed that people watch romance movies because they desire to live vicariously through these fictional characters (Scharaga), in that they can experience things that the viewer never can in real life. As a result, it's

paramount to the film's success that it prioritizes creating drama that not only is entertaining to watch, but also intense enough such that the viewer believes they have a stake in the relationship.

In the Mood for Love tells the story of Chow Mo-wan (Tony Leung) and Su Li-zhen (Maggie Cheung Man-yuk) as they rent neighboring rooms in downtown Hong Kong. Together, they discover that their absent spouses have been cheating on them while away for work. As they come to terms with this revelation, they also grow closer together while promising to maintain a platonic relationship in order to not commit similar wrongdoings. While technically classified as a drama-romance, it becomes very clear to the viewer that it is not a typical romance film. Though the main conflict of the film revolves around love and the possibility of romance, it doesn't play into many generic romance tropes. Some examples of this would be the characters' decision to remain platonic, the nonlinear structure, and the bittersweet ending. While it does participate in other tropes, such as a romance between a man and a woman, it's able to successfully flip it on its head by incorporating more realistic details that ensure its unique identity when compared against other romance films.

As discussed earlier, a series of common tropes found in romance films revolve around the structure of the relationship between the man and the woman, and how that relationship develops. In a generic romance film we would expect Mr. Chow and Mrs. Chan to become interested in each other once they begin to spend more and more time together, working together to come to terms with their spouses' infidelity. When it's made clear that the two do develop feelings for each other, one would be pragmatic in expecting them to pursue a romantic/sexual relationship. In the film, however, they choose not to repeat the actions of their spouses that caused them so much heartache and instead agree to remain platonic, as Mrs. Chan says, "We won't be like them." This subversion of the trope shows Kar-wai's dedication to the realism of the characters, and not the expectations, or even possibly desires, of the audience. While in other films characters can begin to lose their own individuality once written into a relationship, by having the two decide to remain platonic, *In the Mood for Love* is able to prioritize the impact the short relationship had on both of the characters, regardless of whether or not it's what the audience wants.

Western romance films are also known for following a strict linear structure, usually following the characters through their introductions, their first interactions with each other that leads to them falling in love, some kind of conflict and its resolution, and then the resolution. Hong Kong films do not shy away from straying from this structure as it is common for “one shot in a scene to reverse the screen direction of the preceding shot” (Blake), as well as feature disjoint editing. We can see this in *In the Mood for Love*, as it takes very little inspiration from the western pattern. First, the film includes a handful of scenes that are edited in a nonlinear manner, making the context of the scene to be ambiguous while enhancing the depiction of the mindset of the characters involved. For example, we can take a look at a scene where we follow Mrs. Chan as she goes to meet Mr. Chow at their private room. The scene begins with shots of Mrs. Chan walking up and down the stairs, seemingly unsure of whether or not to meet Mr. Chow. At the top of the stairs, she bends over the railing, exhausted not by the walking but her feelings for him. The scene cuts to a long shot of Mr. Chow staring into the mirror waiting for Mrs. Chan’s arrival, and then her telling him she would see him tomorrow. The scene ends with her walking down the hallway as she is leaving and literally stopping in time before it cuts to another scene. This scene in and of itself diverges from the linear and logical method of storytelling that is so popular within the romance genre while still doing a great job of depicting the mindsets of both Mrs. Chan and Mr. Chow (Lui). While a generic romance film would choose to show Mrs. Chan walk up the stairs and then struggle with her emotions through a conversation with Mr. Chow, Kar-wai chooses to depict this same struggle with as little interaction with Mr. Chow as possible in order to emphasize their individuality and agreement to stay platonic. This displays a different dynamic compared to other romance films in that the film is more interested in the independent characters rather than their possibility of being together.

Perhaps the biggest influence on the emotions that the film successfully evokes comes from its bittersweet ending, which diverges greatly from the traditional romance film. In the final moments of the film we see Mrs. Chan visit Singapore and after calling Mr. Chow but remaining silent, we see that she left him a lipstick-stained cigarette butt in his ashtray. A few years later, Mr. Chow returns to Hong Kong and inquires about Mrs. Chan’s old room, but leaves after being told a woman and her child live there.

The audience is left nothing more than devastated after it is revealed that it is in fact Mrs. Chan who bought the apartment from her old landlady. The film ends with Mr. Chow in Angkor Wat, speaking a secret into a tree and then covering up the hole with mud, and walking away. This melancholy ending differs greatly from most romance films we have become accustomed to, yet still provides the audience with an intense feeling of regret as they both seem to just barely miss each other. While another romance film would have Mr. Chow successfully run into Mrs. Chan at the last moment, Kar-wai decides to ground his film in realism by making sure they not only physically miss each other, but by having them miss each other by such a small margin. Though he knows this may not be the ending audiences desire, he also knows that that is just not how life plays out for the vast majority of people. The risk of heartbreak is what comes with the gamble of love, and Kar-wai acknowledges these two sides of the same coin by showing the audience a reality that people can relate to, possibly even more so than to the vast majority of fairytale romance films.

While *In the Mood for Love* certainly diverges from many of the mainstream behaviors exhibited by the romance genre, it's important to also note that it builds upon many of them as well. For example, the film is still structured around a beautiful man and a beautiful woman, and their relationship as they grow closer and closer. They also portray common gender norms that were prevalent in Hong Kong at the time, such as Mrs. Chan and traditional femininity. However, it's important to note that Mr. Chow is not seen as especially masculine. He is relatively short, especially compared to Mrs. Chan as there are some scenes where it seems like she is taller than him, and he is usually soft-spoken and pensive. Besides this, the film's main goal is still to elicit intense emotion from the audience. Instead of trying to elicit sadness or happiness, *In the Mood for Love* aims to evoke a sense of melancholy and nostalgia for the past. In doing so, the film succeeds in producing emotions that are more nuanced than blanket happiness or sadness, which other romance films would favor.

In the Mood for Love followed an era of incredibly influential romance movies, such as *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), *Notting Hill* (1999), and *Annie Hall* (1977). While these films undoubtedly shaped the romance genre to what it is today, it's clear that *In the Mood for Love* not only stands on its own, but

stands proudly as a pylon of arthouse romance. It rises above the tropes that other films have set and that audiences expect by implementing a nonlinear story, creating characters with nuance, and a bittersweet ending, to deliver a fully unique and original experience.

Works Cited

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