

RESTRAINING THE MOOD FOR LOVE: A SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS OF WONG KAR WAI'S *IN THE MOOD FOR LOVE*

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ABSTRACT

This article attempts to explore the visual signs in Wong Kar Wai's *In the Mood for Love* in the context of how they support and emphasize the topic of restraint through the film's cinematography and *misè-en-scène*. As the theoretical foundation, Peirce's classification of signs into symbol, icon, and index is chosen in addition to Barthes' five systems of meanings that are applied to cinema. The visual signs in focus are not limited to objects within the film, but also the characters' actions as well as the cinematography. The findings show that certain signs are effectively displayed to signify and amplify the idea of restraint. Not only that, some signs evolve into different signs through intentional repetition to further emphasize the aforementioned idea and the arbitrary nature of the signs, and at the same time open the possibilities of different interpretations of the signs within the film.

Keywords: Visual signs, symbol, index, icon, and restraint

ABSTRAK

Artikel ini mengeksplorasi beberapa tanda-tanda visual dalam film yang disutradarai Wong Kar Wai yang berjudul *In the Mood for Love* dalam konteks bagaimana tanda-tanda visual tersebut mendukung dan menekankan ide pengekangan melalui sinematografi dan *misè-en-scène* dari film. Sebagai landasan teoretis, klasifikasi tanda-tanda dari Peirce yaitu simbol, ikon, dan indeks dipilih sebagai tambahan dari lima sistem makna dari Barthes yang diterapkan pada sinema. Tanda-tanda visual yang akan dibahas tidak terbatas hanya pada objek dalam film, tetapi juga aksi dari para tokoh serta aspek sinematografi. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa tanda-tanda visual tersebut ditampilkan secara efektif untuk menandakan dan memperkuat ide mengenai pengekangan. Tidak hanya itu, beberapa tanda visual sebenarnya berkembang menjadi tanda yang berbeda dengan cara pengulangan yang disengaja untuk lebih menekankan ide yang disebutkan di atas dan sifat sewenang-wenang dari tanda, dan pada saat yang sama membuka kemungkinan interpretasi yang berbeda dari tanda-tanda visual dalam film.

Kata kunci: Tanda-tanda visual, simbol, indeks, ikon, dan pengekangan

1. INTRODUCTION

In the Mood for Love is a film about love and restraint, about uncertainty and memories. Produced in 2000, *In the Mood for Love* brings the audience back to Hong Kong in the 1960s, a tumultuous and yet exciting period for most Asian countries, as

the film, in its opening narrative, refers to as a "restless moment." Set mostly in a cramped Hong Kong apartment, the story revolves around two migrant characters, a young husband and wife, who are seemingly timid and again, as the film opening narrative states, "lack of courage,"

in expressing themselves openly, especially in love. The two main characters, Mr. Chow and Mrs. Chan are tenants in rented next-door rooms of a claustrophobic apartment. They have to deal with each other spouse's infidelity and at the same time restrain themselves from committing the same action albeit proven to be difficult as they grow to like each other over time.

The film is known for its beautiful cinematography and, "...has been named one of the greatest films of the century – and the best Asian film of the century..." (Chan, 2016). Wai's powerful use of colors, costumes, props which are combined with elegant camerawork have resulted in a film rich with symbols and metaphors. These show in numbers of analysis of the film that focuses on the film cinematography.

In her dissertation, Carvalho (2009) focuses on Wai's stylistic traits in his films. She concluded that Wai's cinema is "...based upon a dualistic structure that allows his films to be opposite things at the same time..." (228). Front (2011) attempted to explore the film through Deleuze's theory of time and cinema and compare it with another film of Wai, *2046*. Sara (2015) looked at the film through semiotics and concluded that Wai has successfully delivered meanings through symbols that scattered throughout the film such as the costumes, props, special effects, and camerawork. In another paper, Rihane (n.d.) studied how "...the camera

movement, frames, light, colors, location, depth of field and set design" help in "...translating the abstract emotional tension into a visually concrete one." In a similar tone, Jayadev & Aich (2019) discussed the film cinematography, *misè-en-scène*, and soundtracks to show how the film communicates emotion.

This article, albeit taking the same directions as the previous studies that focus on the film cinematography, will discuss a completely different topic of the film that has never been explored before. This article will see how through its cinematography, the film shows the feeling of restraint which is connected with the main theme of the film about unfulfilled love. In doing so, this article aims to enrich the film analysis of *In the Mood for Love* as seen through Peirce's classification of signs.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The film studies method in the context of this research is related to the film cinematography and *misè-en-scène*. Cinematography is broadly defined as camerawork: how the camera is placed and moved to generate or emphasize certain meanings. *Misè-en-scène* is simply defined as the arrangement of everything seen in the film frame which includes costumes, props, actors, special effects, and sound. Based on the two aspects, visual data are thus collected and analyzed. The conclusion is then drawn from the analyzed

data.

The second method used is semiotics. Semiotics, or the study of sign, is one of the most familiar methods in analyzing films because films are a display of signs that work together to generate meanings. This article will focus on Peirce's fundamental classification of signs that comprises of three elements: (1) symbol, which is "a mode in which the signifier does not resemble the signified but which is fundamentally arbitrary or purely conventional - so that the relationship must be learnt (habitual)" (Chandler, 2019). Example of symbols can be nation flags, morse code, language, and numbers; (2) icon, is "a mode in which the signifier is perceived as resembling or imitating the signified (recognizably looking, sounding, feeling, tasting or smelling like it) - being similar in possessing some of its qualities" (Chandler, 2019). The examples of icons are portraits, cartoons, scale models, and onomatopoeia; (3) index is a mode in which the signifier is not arbitrary but is directly connected in some way (physically or causally) to the signified" (Chandler, 2019). Some examples of index are odors, flavors, medical symptoms, or footprints.

3. METHOD

This research is qualitative research that combines film studies and Peirce's theory of signs which is part of the field of semiotics. As the first step, multiple screenings of the film are required to

identify and collect accurate visual and audio signs that are related to the idea of restriction. Secondly, those visual and audio signs are captured in the form of screenshots as the basis for analysis. Thirdly, the screenshots and audio signs are analyzed through Peirce's theory of signs. Finally, the conclusion is drawn based on the analysis of those visual and audio signs.

4. DISCUSSION

In the Mood for Love is cinematographically designed to be a feast for the eyes with its beautiful shots and scene, perfected by a powerful soundtrack that will linger in the mind of the audience for long even after they watched the film. One dominant issue that the film explores is about restraint. The underlying 'restraint' of the film is the restraint from love, as the story reveals that the young husband's and wife's respective spouses are having an affair. Experiencing the pain and misery of being cheated, the husband (Mr. Chow) and wife (Mrs. Chan) commit that they will not fall into similar infidelity with each other, albeit the growing attachment between them. Thus, through visual signs, this article will show how the feeling of restraint is visually displayed and amplified. What is more interesting, there are different kinds of feelings of restraint displayed and they all pertain to love.

The word "restraint," has at least four meanings that concern with keywords such

as “under control,” “deprivation or restriction,” “limitation,” “unemotional, or dispassionate.” (“Restraint,” 2020). All the keywords above reflect the kinds of restraint that are evident in the film, all of which are anchored to restraint from love. Through the film cinematography and *misè-en-scènè*, this idea of restraint is displayed in most effective and efficient ways. Below, the analysis begins by looking at two of the film elements to show how the visual signs support and emphasize the idea of restraint.

4.1. Icon and Symbol

The *misè-en-scène* of the film provides numerous icons that also serve as symbols or symbols only. There are two visual signs related to the idea of restraint which serves as icons that later develop into symbols: the telephone and cheongsam dress. These two props as visual signs can be interpreted as the film *leitmotif* as they systemically appear in the scenes. Leitmotif “...can serve as a replacement for a visual sign or the highlighting of the visual sign to avoid repetition, as a mnemonic marker, or as a frame in which to construct the plot” (Vilaro & Orero, 2013:57). In the context of this analysis, the leitmotif refers to how the visual signs are highlighted to emphasize certain meanings related to the idea of restraint.

Telephone as an icon is used in the film as what it is supposed to do: to bridge

communication between people separated by a certain distance. The key here is the word distance, which in itself carries a meaning of being restraint visually or physically. In addition, most of the scenes when Mr. Chow and Mrs. Chan are talking with their respective spouses are done through telephone. Only one or two brief scenes are showing the couples are together physically, but the scenes are dialogue-less and the audience never sees the face of their spouses. Here, the telephone as an icon also serves as a symbol of communication restraint between the spouses. When Mr. Chow and Mrs. Chan gradually fall for each other, they do their best to restraint the feeling by not seeing each other too often. What is interesting, to ease their longing for each other, they agree to now and then call each other without having to answer the telephone. They let it ring three times before hanging up to signal that they call. In light of this analysis, the telephone becomes symbolic of Mr. Chow and Mrs. Chan's restrained love.



Figure 1. Mrs. Chan's first appearance
(Source: *In the Mood for Love*, 2000, Timecode: 00:00:40)

The second visual sign is the cheongsam dress. The film opens with a shot of old photos hanging on the wall while the camera pans left and stops at a figure of Mrs. Chan in her cheongsam dress (see figure 1). At first glance, the cheongsam is an icon of a Chinese woman, as Liu (2009) argues, that, "...as long as you see a cheongsam, noble, elegant and exquisite, you will be able to confirm that it is a Chinese woman there." Liu (2009) further argues that the cheongsam, "...highlights the women's beauty of line, so the modern cheongsam is tight to demonstrate the figure of a woman." Mrs. Chan with her tight cheongsam pressing her body has in a way turned into an iconic sign of beauty and elegance. There are 21 different cheongsam that she wears throughout the film (see figure 2 & 3).



Figure 2. Brown with winding vertical lines cheongsam
(Source: *In the Mood for Love*, 2000, Timecode:
00:47:24)

The fact that the only costume worn by Mrs. Chan is a cheongsam, the audience is constantly bombarded by this iconic sign that signifies Chinese beauty and elegance as supported by Liu (2018) that "...cheongsam fully shows the dignity and elegance of the oriental women."

However, besides its obvious icon of Chinese woman and symbol of beauty and elegance, one of Liu's (2009) points above on how "cheongsam is tight" needs to be emphasized, as it strongly suggests a certain kind of restraint. Wearing such a tight dress will consequently result in restraint of movement of the character, and it is evident in the way Mrs. Chan's posture and actions. Liu (2018) supported this by stating that "because the cheongsam is closely sewn and close, it is inevitable that we will have restrictions on people's movement. Therefore, when we wear the cheongsam, we will consciously restrain our own behavior, and the extent of our activities will be reduced..." Indeed, Mrs. Chan is never seen to move freely as the cheongsam gives limitations to her. Thus, the iconic sign of cheongsam here shifts to a symbol, not only of beauty and elegance but also restraint and limitation. It is safe to argue that the feeling of restraining her love for Mr. Chow is effectively supported by her tight costume.

There are two symbols related to the idea of restraint, both of which are seen from the aspect of cinematography. The first one is the tight and cramped space. Most of the film is shot in a cramped and claustrophobic apartment with a narrow aisle that cannot be passed by two persons abreast. The audience will notice small brushes between the two main characters' shoulders every time they pass each other.

This situation is very difficult for Mr. Chow and Mrs. Chan because the tight space may cause them to have an incidental physical touch that they both avoid, especially when they start to like each other.



Figure 3. Flower-motive cheongsam
(Source: *In the Mood for Love*, 2000, Timecode: 01:01:21)



Figure 4 The characters physically brush each other
(Source: *In the Mood for Love*, 2000, Timecode: 00:02:49)

The film opens with Mr. Chow and Mrs. Chan inside a cramped apartment somewhere in Hong Kong. Besides being authentic and showing Hong Kong as it was in the 1960s, Wai brilliantly exploits the cramped space to support the idea of restraint. Being in a cramped and narrow space, the characters' movement is very limited, many times the audience sees how the characters have to press their back on the wall to avoid collision with others (see figure 4 and 5).



Figure 5. Narrow aisle toward the noodle hawker
(Source: *In the Mood for Love*, 2000, Timecode: 00:23:06)

The camerawork also shows shallow space which suggests constriction and the inability to escape from something restraining. In the *mis -en-sc ne* term, space can be manipulated to create depth, size, proximity or proportion of the places and objects within the frame. One of the techniques in cinematography is creating shallow space to generate a claustrophobic atmosphere since the characters are made to be very close to their background. Thus, the use of cramped space and shallow space effectively help to support the idea of restraint, when the two major characters are struggling to escape from the restraint in their life, in terms of job, relationship, and the affair. There are numerous scenes in which Mrs. Chan is standing in front of an open window, with a blank gaze into the faraway, as if signaling the audience that she wants to escape yet is unable (see figure 6). In another scene, Mrs. Chan is looking at a barred window in a shallow space, suggesting restraint and her inability to escape (see figure 7).



Figure 6. Mrs. Chan gazes afar, surrounded by shallow space
(Source: *In the Mood for Love*, 2000, Timecode: 01:01:21)

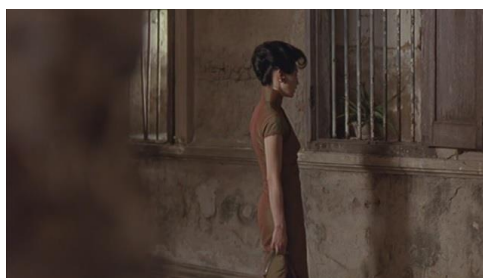


Figure 7. Mrs. Chan's expressing her suffering
(Source: *In the Mood for Love*, 2000, Timecode: 00:38:59)

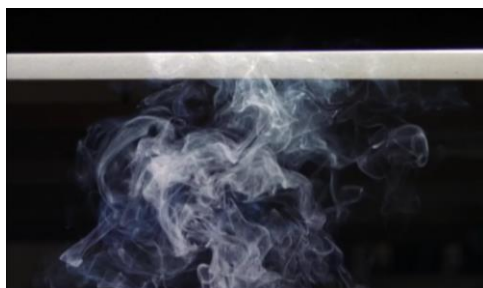


Figure 8. The smoke flows freely
(Source: *In the Mood for Love*, 2000, Timecode: 00:40:58)

Mr. Chow's way of suggesting a desire to escape is through working late in the office and smoking. There is one interesting scene in which the smoke is filling the frame (see figure 8), symbolizing the freedom of roaming around without restriction or limitation.

Another technique in *In the Mood for Love* to show restraint is through

obstructed shots. An obstructed shot is not a typical terminology in cinematography, but it can be defined as a situation in which the camera is intentionally put in a certain position that prevents it from taking a clear shot of an object or character because something closer to the camera is blocking the full view of the object or character. It is sometimes also referred to as "peeking shot" because the audience is made to look like they are discreetly looking at something without being known by the character they see. This technique proves to be efficient to support the idea of restraint, for example, can be seen in figure 9, 10, and 11.



Figure 9. Mr. Chow and Mrs. Chan are having a conversation
(Source: *In the Mood for Love*, 2000, Timecode: 00:40:58)

In those shots, the audience can see Mr. Chow and Mrs. Chan are talking to each other, yet the shots prevent the audience from fully enjoy their interaction because of the obstacles put between them and the audience. In figure 9, we can see the door/wall, and in figures 10 and 11 some bars prevent the audience from looking at them clearly. Thus, those obstacles serve also as a symbol of restraint, that their love is forbidden.



Figure 10. Mr. Chow and Mrs. Chan are seen from behind the barred window
(Source: *In the Mood for Love*, 2000, Timecode: 00:30:07)



Figure 11. Another shot of Mr. Chow and Mrs. Chan behind the barred window
(Source: *In the Mood for Love*, 2000, Timecode: 00:39:13)

4.2. Index

In amplifying the feeling of restraint, how the camera is positioned plays an important part in the film. To emphasize the characters' restraint from love, Wai cleverly positions the camera in places that create distance between the characters and the audience. For example, in the tradition of camera placing for dialogue between two characters, the director will normally apply what is called shot-reverse-shot, which is "an editing technique widely used in dialogue sequences and sequences in which characters exchange looks" (Kuhn & Westwell, 2012). This common style of editing is used so that the audience can see the facial expression and responses

from the characters talking. However, there are many scenes in the film in which the audience is intentionally put in an unusual position where they cannot see the characters to whom the main character is talking (see figure 12, 13, and 14).



Figure 12. Mrs. Chan is talking to her husband inside the room on the left
(Source: *In the Mood for Love*, 2000, Timecode: 00:05:28)



Figure 13. Mr. Chow is talking to Mrs. Chan without the camera ever points at Mrs. Chan
(Source: *In the Mood for Love*, 2000, Timecode: 00:09:38)



Figure 14. Mrs. Chan is talking to Mrs. Chow
(Source: *In the Mood for Love*, 2000, Timecode: 00:19:39)

These scenes occur mainly when the main characters, Mr. Chow and Mrs. Chan, are talking to their spouses. The audience can

only hear their voices or see them from their back and afar (see figures 15 and 16).



Figure 15. Mrs. Chow is seen sitting next to Mr. Chow
(Source: *In the Mood for Love*, 2000, Timecode:
00:03:59)

In figure 16 above, the audience can only see Mrs. Chan from afar when she is accompanying Mr. Chan playing mahjong. The camera is placed far from the major event that is the people surrounding the mahjong table. To add the distance, there are some objects put between the camera and the characters.



Figure 16. Mr. Chan is seen sitting next to Mrs. Chan
(Source: *In the Mood for Love*, 2000, Timecode:
00:04:22)

Similar to figure 16, in figure 17 the audience can only see the back of Mrs. Chan's husband (the man in white shirt), and again, the camera is placed far from the main action as if the audience is peeping from afar. The frame is also tight as the characters are all squeezed between the door frames to emphasize the feeling of

restraint.

By restraining the audience from seeing the spouses' face, the film manages to put the audience in Mr. Chow's and Mrs. Chan's shoes, in the context that they too experience limitation to see their respective spouses, or in other words, restrained from love. This technique also creates a distance, first between the audience and the spouses, and second between the two characters and their spouses. The absence of clear physical visualization of their spouses detaches the audience from them so the audience is forced to focus their attention on the struggle of Mr. Chow and Mrs. Chan to deal with the infidelity of their spouses. At the same time, the technique also literally separates Mr. Chow and Mrs. Chan from their spouses that gradually leads them to the revelation of the affair and their struggle to maintain their fidelity. In other words, the feeling of inharmonious relationship and the enacted affair are amplified through the absence of the spouses. In relation to sign, the indexical meaning of the visual absence of the spouses shifts from being a presence of someone (the spouses) to an idea of an affair.

The second index that amplifies the unfulfilled affair between Mr. Chow and Mrs. Chan is the soundtrack. Wai uses the song "Yumeji" at least nine times throughout the film, particularly in scenes when Mr. Chow and Mrs. Chan come

across each other. The soundtrack repetition in those specific scenes establishes the reference for the audience to the two characters' ordeal and attempt to restrain their love for each other. Thus, the soundtrack becomes indexical in this context. Furthermore, "Umebayashi Shigeru's sad waltz 'Yumeji's theme' is a short, hypnotic string arrangement that sounds both beautiful and unsettling, thanks to the harrowing isolated violin melody at the song's core" (Brindle, 2019). The sad melody of the song clearly emphasizes the overall theme of love restraint between the two characters. To emphasize the restrained mood, the scenes when the Yumeji is played are dialogue-less.

5. CONCLUSION

Considered as one of the best films in the aspect of cinematography, Wai's *In the Mood for Love* becomes an instant classic and is often discussed in film schools all around the world. Thus, it is no wonder that the film are analyzed through many different approaches and theories. This article applies semiotic approach, in particular Peirce's classification of signs, to reveal how the film visual signs can help the audience understand the topic of restraint.

By focusing on the specific parts of the film cinematography and *misé-en-scène* while applying Peirce's classification of signs, the findings show how certain

visual signs serve as icons, symbols, and index. Through analysis, those three aspects of sign support in emphasizing the topic of restraint.

The example of an icon is the telephone and the cheongsam dress. As an icon, they represent what they are supposed to: telephone as the means of communication, and cheongsam dress as the traditional Chinese dress for females. However, through analysis, these two icons transform into symbols that emphasizes the idea of restraint.

The film also shows some symbols that carry the meaning of restraint, first through the choice of the film set in a tight and cramped space that visually makes the audience feels restraint. The second one is through the smoke that flows freely without restraint as a symbol of freedom that Mr. Chow is longing for, and the third one is through obstructed shots in which the audience cannot clearly see the characters in certain scenes as they are hindered by some objects that are placed between the characters and the camera.

As for index, cinematography plays an important role when the placement of the camera is done non-traditionally especially when the main characters are talking to the spouses. The audience is restrained from looking at their spouses or in other words, the camera omits a clear visual presentation of the main characters' spouses to amplify the idea of restraint.

Finally, the film soundtrack, Yumeji, becomes the index as the audience only hears it when the two main characters meet and talk about their spouses' affair and how they do not want to make the same mistake while at the same time restraining their true feeling toward each other. In addition, the unsettling violin melody of the soundtrack further underlines the restrained atmosphere.

In conclusion, the analysis shows that each aspect of signs as seen through the film cinematography and *misé-en-scène* are working together seamlessly in emphasizing the idea of restraint and making the audience personally experience the emotional roller coaster that the main characters feel.

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