

Katie Carroll

Professor Paul Watkins

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“Out-of-Field”: Cinematography of the Unseen in

*Portrait of a Lady on Fire* and *In the Mood for Love*

All films are effectively the sum of the work of often innumerable artists and technicians. However, it is arguably the cinematography that is the true essence of any film. In its loosest form, cinematography refers to the way that the camera captures moving images. In more specific terms, cinematography describes how the cinematographer angles, places, and moves the camera in order to capture the vision of the film’s director. Importantly, it is not only what is in the frame of any given shot that a cinematographer must consider, but also what is outside of the frame or, as French philosopher Gilles Deleuze describes it, “out-of-field.” Common shots that demonstrate thinking outside the frame are the reaction shot, where the camera shows an action and then quickly cuts to a character’s reaction to the same action, or the shot/reverse shot, wherein two shots are linked together, typically used to show a conversation between two characters. When the camera cuts away, the audience still has a clear idea of what is going on outside the frame because they have literally just seen it. However, as demonstrated by Christopher Doyle’s and Mark Lee Ping-bing’s work on *In the Mood for Love*, and Claire Mathon’s work on *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, there is a myriad of complex ways to play with what remains unseen that can make for a much more nuanced form of cinematography. This paper will examine how the cinematographers of *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* and *In the Mood for Love* utilize the “out-of-field” shot not only to bring to life the vision of their directors, but to

encourage the audience to fill in the gaps with their imagination, creating a unique viewing experience that quietly but effectively turns the audience into participants in the story.

Despite the implications of its title, *In the Mood for Love (ITMFL)* is not exactly a love story, or at least not a traditional Hollywood-style romance. The film follows Mrs. Chan and Mr. Chow who rent rooms with their respective spouses in neighbouring apartments. The cinematography helps to make it obvious, right from the opening of the film, that the story is about the budding relationship between Mrs. Chan and Mr. Chow. Each of them come to view the apartments on their own and both also coordinate their moves into their rooms alone, though coincidentally, at the same time. When their spouses are eventually introduced, it is primarily through dialogue delivered from off-screen and shots that include only the backs of their heads. The unusual choice to never reveal the faces of the spouses signals to the audience that Mrs. Chan and Mr. Chow are the central characters in the story. However, this cinematic choice also goes beyond narrative function to create a much more immersive experience for the viewer. Anton Sutandio argues that “By restraining the audience from seeing the spouses’ faces, the film [puts] the audience in Mr. Chow’s and Mrs. Chan’s shoes,” as the main characters wrestle with the realization that they may not know their spouses as well as they think (9). The camera effectively establishes distance between Mrs. Chan and Mr. Chow and their respective spouses, but also between the audience and the spouses, leaving the audience to question, along with Mrs. Chan and Mr. Chow, what went wrong with their marriages.

From their first interaction, there is undeniable chemistry between Mrs. Chan and Mr. Chow, but even after they realize that their spouses are having an affair with each other, they are determined to maintain their own fidelity and repeatedly declare that they “will not be like them,” and refrain from engaging in any type of physical relationship. Instead, Mrs. Chan and

Mr. Chow spend their time together questioning how the affair between their spouses began. They repeatedly act out scenarios where they roleplay as their spouses to imagine it, but they are never able to reach a definitive answer to that question. Tony Hughes-d'Aeth argues that the “deletion of reality from [Mrs. Chow’s and Mr. Chan’s] concerns is what accounts for the camera’s precise and direct failure to picture the player’s spouses: they are not shown because they are not genuinely known” (25). The cinematography of the film also reflects the element of make-believe at play in Mrs. Chan and Mr. Chow’s interactions. For example, one scene opens on Mrs. Chow’s face in an over-the-shoulder shot where only the back of the head of the man she is speaking to is visible to the audience, and she asks, “Do you have a mistress?” (00:57:43). The shot is clearly meant to make the audience think that she is speaking to her husband, but when the man answers “yes” and Mrs. Chan pitifully slaps his arm, the camera quickly cuts to reveal that she is “practicing” the conversation with Mr. Chow (00:58:39). This scene is particularly effective because it directly involves the audience in the game of make-believe that Mrs. Chan and Mr. Chow are playing. Such highly conceptual cinematographic choices create a viewing experience that is notably different from more traditional styles of filmmaking.

Flannery Wilson argues that *In the Mood for Love* reflects a combination of French New Wave and Neorealist techniques that reflect “narrative alternatives to classical filmmaking” (Bordwell and Thompson as cited by Wilson 146). According to Wilson, *ITMFL* “reaches beyond the cliché” of traditional narrative-driven cinema: through the cinematic use of the “out-of-field,” defined by Deleuze as “what is neither seen nor understood but is nevertheless perfectly present” (Deleuze as cited by Wilson 155), the film celebrates moments of subjective encounter— by both character and view—over narrative continuity. So, it is not just the faces of the main characters’s spouses that Wong-Kar-Wai and his cinematographers Doyle and Ping-

bing hide from the audience; other key moments in the film are also left to the imagination. In an interview about *ITMFL*, Wong states that “it’s all about suspense,” explaining that he learned from famous filmmaker Robert Bresson that “we can only see a close-up, we cannot see the whole thing” and that “there is so much imagination outside the frame” (as cited by Wilson 148-149). Some of the film’s most pivotal beats are deliberately obscured from the audience’s view. For example, the over-the-shoulder shot shows only the face of Mr. Chow’s friend, Ping, when he reveals to Mr. Chow that Mrs. Chow is having an affair. (00:19:10). The audience is unable to see Mr. Chow’s reaction to receiving this news and instead must imagine it. Similarly, instead of showing the audience the illicit affair between the spouses, a simple line of dialogue delivered off screen reveals the fact that Mrs. Chan’s and Mr. Chow’s spouses are involved . The scene opens with an interior of Mr. and Mrs. Chow’s room and the sound of the doorbell. The door opens to reveal a close-up shot of Mrs. Chan’s face who is there looking for her neighbours Mr. and Mrs. Koo. The Koo’s are out so Mrs. Chan ends up speaking to Mrs. Chow who remains off-screen, but their dialogue can be clearly heard. The camera cuts to a profile shot of Mrs. Chan outside the apartment while Mrs. Chow closes the door in Mrs. Chan’s face. As the shot crossfades out, Mrs. Chow can be heard saying, “It was your wife,” presumably to Mr. Chan (00:21:37-00:21:41). By hiding pivotal moments such as these from the eyes of the audience, *ITMFL* clearly employs the “out-of-field” technique for ultimate effect. According to Wilson, “as the cinematic narrative becomes less and less reliant on what is actually shown by the camera, as the framing becomes more subjective, and as plot devices begin to rely more heavily on the mental image, film viewing in general becomes a richer experience” (Wilson 146). *In the Mood for Love* does not show the audience every emotional moment in the story but invites viewers to imagine and experience these moments for themselves.

Although it is markedly different in terms of setting and tone, *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* defies many traditional film techniques in ways similar to *In the Mood for Love*, relying heavily on what is outside the frame to tell its story of forbidden love. Just as Wong cites the work of Bresson as an influence for *ITMFL*, so too, have scholars such as Buckland observed Bresson's influence in *Portrait*. Comparing the unique cinematography of *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* to Brasson's work on *The Trial of Joan of Arc*, Buckland highlights how the film's director, Céline Sciamma, and cinematographer, Claire Mathon, utilize both "optical point-of-view-shots as well as shots whose status is indeterminate" (260). Although Buckland does not specifically reference Deleuze's concept of "out-of-field," he describes something similar when he discusses the opening sequence of *Portrait*: "The film opens with the framing story, of Marianne teaching a drawing class to women. Several students look off-screen (mostly filmed separately), thereby turning a specific area of absent off-screen space into an imaginary off-screen space" (260). Before the audience sees Marianne, they hear her voice and are invited to imagine what she looks like. Marianne's dialogue establishes that the students are drawing her figure, thus adding an additional layer of imagination to the viewing experience as the audience are asked to view Marianne through the eyes of an artist (00:01:15-00:01:50).

The artist's point of view carries on throughout the film and features most prominently in the scenes where Héloïse sits for Marianne's portrait. Notably, Mathon never allows the audience to see a wide shot where both Marianne and Héloïse are simultaneously visible while Marianne is painting. Instead, the scenes alternate between shots of Marianne looking at Héloïse and Héloïse looking at Marianne. Due to Mathon's "oblique camera angles ... the camera's look does not align exactly with the character's look; spectators do not, therefore, identify with the character's optical position; instead they are put in or occupy their own place" (Buckland 258).

The unique camera angles and lack of wide shots work together to create intimacy between the audience and the characters, forcing the audience to assume the gaze of each character rather than allow them to sit back as simple spectators. After Marianne and Héloïse become romantically involved, this shot pattern begins to change. The first time the shot changes, Marianne leaves the easel and the camera cuts to Héloïse alone for a brief second before Marianne walks into frame and sits beside her (01:31:22). When the portrait is nearly finished, Héloïse no longer sits as the subject of the painting, but rather, stands with Marianne and they examine the progress together (01:35:00-01:35:29). The changes in cinematography both align with and represent the shift in Marianne and Héloïse's relationship from artist and subject to equal partners. Meanwhile, the focus is taken off the audience, and allows them to experience the same shift that Héloïse experiences. No longer subjected to Marianne's eye line, the audience ceases to be either artist or subject and instead becomes the observer of Marianne and Héloïse.

Another way that Sciamma and Mathon utilize the concept of "out-of-field," is the omission of any explicitly sexual scenes between Marianne and Héloïse. Although the film plays with audience perception in a close-up shot of fingers rubbing a hallucinogenic drug into an armpit in a way that imitates female genitalia, the characters do not engage in any explicitly sexual acts on screen (01:32:37-01:32:50). The choice to have their lovemaking occur off screen is a large part of what Sciamma calls the female or "revolutionary gaze" (11). As Sciamma discusses in an interview with Marcia Garcia, "The aim is to share the experience of the character," and assume the female gaze rather than take on the objectifying or sexualizing male gaze, thereby avoiding "a triangulation between the director, the woman, and the viewer" (11). In the scene that preludes their first sexual encounter, Marianne finds Héloïse waiting for her in her room. The two embrace and caress each other before they begin passionately kissing. The

camera then cuts away abruptly to a shot of them laying in bed together in the light of a new day (01:24:30-01:31:44). Mathon and Sciamma clearly want the audience to know that Marianne and Héloïse have engaged in physical acts of love, but they feel no need to show it to the audience. Leaving the encounter to the imagination of the audience not only avoids objectifying the female characters but adds to the symbolic message of the film. Sciamma explains that her use of the female gaze is “not about being politically correct” but “about inventing new stories and new emotions” (Sciamma 11). Just as Marianne must accept that she cannot possess Héloïse, the audience is invited to see the women on the screen not as objects but as people.

Both *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* and *In the Mood for Love* stray away from using more traditional shots such as reaction shots or shot/reverse shots and instead utilize the concept of “out-of-field” to engage their audiences in a deep and enriching way. By hiding the faces of Mrs. Chan’s and Mr. Chow’s respective spouses and playing with audience expectations in practice conversations between Mrs. Chan and Mr. Chow, director Wong-Kar-Wai and his cinematographers Doyle and Ping-bing allow viewers of *In the Mood for Love* to participate in Mrs. Chan’s and Mr. Chow’s immediate experiences. Meanwhile, in *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, director Celine Sciamma and cinematographer Mathon play through eye-line shots and implied action off camera, allowing their audience to be both the observer and the observed. Through their clever use of “out-of-field,” both films invite their audiences to reflect and use their imagination, making for a layered and immersive viewing experience.

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