

Exploring Female Representation in Contemporary Cinema: A Comparative Analysis of *In the Mood for Love* and *Lust, Caution*

Sizhe Liang^{1,a,*}

¹*UAL London College of Communication, University of Arts London, Elephant and Castle, London, SE1 6SB, UK*

a. LIANGSIZHE13@126.com

**corresponding author*

Abstract: This paper investigates how visual elements in *In the Mood for Love* and *Lust, Caution* shape the depiction of female characters within their respective historical contexts. Utilizing a case study approach, the analysis focuses on the role of cinematography, colour schemes, and symbolic props in illustrating the complex positioning of women in these films. By examining the use of colour, lighting, composition, and props, the study reveals how these elements reflect social norms and historical realities, and how filmmakers employ them to explore themes of desire, morality, and individual destiny. The paper offers insights into the nuanced portrayals of female characters and underscores how film serves as a mirror of its era, providing a unique perspective on social and emotional issues. Limitations include the narrow focus on two films, which may affect the generalizability of the findings. Future research should expand to a broader range of films and historical periods to gain a more comprehensive understanding of female representation in cinema and the impact of socio-cultural factors.

Keywords: Female Representation, Cinematography, *In the Mood for Love*, *Lust, Caution*, Film Studies.

1. Introduction

In contemporary cinema, film serves not only as a medium of entertainment but also as a reflective mirror of societal conditions, often highlighting underlying social issues and concerns. Through storytelling, films construct various simulations and structured models of idealized worlds, which can be closely related to the conceptual frameworks of the real world. This connection allows films to present an idealized perspective on real-world events and phenomena, offering a unique vantage point on their impact and significance[1]. The use of realism in film is particularly effective in capturing and conveying the spirit of the times, providing audiences with insights into the cultural and social milieu of the era. Through its narrative and visual elements, film can explore and critique contemporary issues, making it a powerful tool for both reflection and social commentary. Realism in film effectively captures the essence of the times by authentically portraying the subtleties of daily life, societal dynamics, and personal struggles. This cinematic style often focuses on the lives of ordinary people, providing a relatable and often poignant perspective that helps viewers understand

and empathize with various aspects of the human experience. Through careful attention to detail in settings, character development, and narrative, realist films often highlight the socio-economic, cultural, and political conditions of the period they depict[2]. They offer a grounded view that contrasts with more fantastical or escapist genres, making them valuable cultural artifacts for examining the lived realities of a specific era. This approach enables filmmakers to explore complex themes such as inequality, identity, and social change, offering either a critique or a celebration of the contemporary world.

This paper examines how visual elements in *In the Mood for Love* and *Lust, Caution* influence the depiction of female characters within their historical contexts. Using a case study approach, the paper analyzes the intricate portrayal of these characters through cinematography, colour schemes, and symbolic props, revealing how these elements reflect social norms and historical realities. By closely studying these films, the paper aims to deepen the understanding of how female characters embody broader social issues within film narratives and how filmmakers utilize distinctive visual storytelling techniques to explore and convey these issues. The study focuses on a detailed analysis of female characters, exploring their significance to the film's narrative and how directors shape their lives and choices within specific historical contexts.

2. Overview of *In Mood for Love* and *Lust, Caution*

In the Mood for Love and *Lust, Caution* are films that delve into the emotional and social struggles of women against historical backdrops of Hong Kong in the 1960s and Shanghai and Hong Kong in the 1940s, respectively. *In the Mood for Love* is based on a novella “Dui Dao” written by Liu Yichang, the film narrates the story of Su Li-zhen and Chow Mo-wan, two immigrants from Shanghai who become neighbours while seeking shared accommodation in Hong Kong. They discover their spouses' infidelity, with Chow's wife having an affair with Su's husband. The two decide to explore how their spouses could have cheated and, in the process, gradually develop a complex relationship[3]. The film highlights the choices and struggles faced by women against male dominance and traditional moral constraints, using visual storytelling to reflect Su Li-Zhen's inner world.

Lust, Caution Directed by Ang Lee, is an adaptation of Eileen Chang's novella of the same name. The narrative revolves around Wong Chia-Chi, a young female student who becomes entangled in a plot to assassinate a special agent. To finish her spy mission, Wang must sacrifice her personal feelings and choice, finding herself increasingly torn between her affection for the special agent, Mr. Yee, and her duty[4]. The film explores Wang's psychological transformation and emotional struggles, depicting her resilience and vulnerability as she faces love, betrayal, loyalty, and treason during tumultuous times. Both films offer poignant insights into the inner lives and societal roles of women during periods of significant historical change. Both films present themes through different narrative structures and methods, each focusing on complex characters and emotional entanglements.

3. In-Depth Analysis of Film Elements

3.1. Visual Language Analysis

3.1.1. Shot Analysis in *In the Mood for Love*

Director Wong Kar-wai has a distinct style in visual framing, frequently employing long takes, tilt shots, and frame-within-frame compositions. The opening scene in *In the Mood for Love* ingeniously uses a long take that incorporates slow motion and frame-within-frame techniques, summarising the entire story in a brief 50-second scene. The film opens with the characters, Chow Mo-wan and his wife Mrs Chow, moving to their new home in Hong Kong, quickly becoming acquainted with their neighbours Su Li-zhen and Su's husband. This scene depicts Chow and Su playing mahjong with

their landlord. The frame-within-frame composition, frequently appearing throughout *In the Mood for Love*, utilises not only the film frame itself but also extensively incorporates doors, windows, and corridors as visual frames within the shot[5]. In the opening scene of *In the Mood for Love*, Wong Kar-wai uses the frame-within-frame technique to symbolically restrict Su Li-zhen's movement, reflecting the cramped living conditions of 1960s Hong Kong and the societal constraints on women. The scene begins with a close-up of Su Li-zhen's cigarette, then gradually zooms out to show her framed by the doorway before she sits at the mahjong table, all captured in a single, continuous long take. This composition draws the viewer's attention and creates a sense of isolation, symbolizing Su Li-zhen's separation from the outside world and her constrained role within society and family.

The use of door frames not only arouses the viewer's curiosity to explore details within the frame but also deepens the understanding of Su Li-zhen's emotional state through visual separation. Limited by the door frame, viewers cannot access all the information inside the room, adding a layer of mystery to the story. Furthermore, the frame-within-frame composition symbolizes the cultural and familial restrictions imposed on women. This is emphasized when Chow Mo-wan's wife enters the mahjong room, causing Su Li-zhen to lean against the wall. The camera then zooms in, maintaining the frame-within-frame technique but with a closer shot, which heightens the sense of confinement and underscores the limitations placed on Su Li-zhen's character within the societal and family context [5]. This continuous use of the frame-within-frame composition throughout the segment not only showcases Su Li-zhen's physical confinement but also hints at the societal and cultural restrictions faced by women of that era.

3.1.2. Shot Analysis in *Lust, Caution*

With similarly to *In the Mood for Love*, *Lust, Caution* begins with a mahjong scene that outlines the relationships between characters. Although placed at the start of the film, chronologically this mahjong game is the last one Wong Chia-Chi plays at Mrs. Yee's home, at a point where she is deeply entangled emotionally with Mr. Yee, and it also happens to be the day she is to carry out the assassination mission - marking the last day of her life. Director Ang Lee skillfully employs a variety of shot techniques to detail the mahjong game, revealing the intricate dynamics between characters. By using close-ups, he captures subtle facial expressions and hand movements, which convey the characters' emotions and unspoken tensions. Medium shots provide a clearer view of the interactions and relationships at the table, while wide shots establish the setting and show how characters are positioned relative to each other, highlighting their social and psychological distances[2]. These varied shot techniques allow for a richer and more nuanced exploration of the characters and their complex relationships, enhancing the storytelling and emotional depth of the scene [6].

This mahjong scene from *Lust, Caution* starkly contrasts with the cinematographic style of *In the Mood for Love*. While Wong Kar-wai explores character relationships through the use of entrances, exits, and composition, Ang Lee employs numerous close-ups and rapid cuts to convey information to the audience. The camera focuses on the mahjong table, highlighting the women's hands as they rapidly shuffle the tiles. This is accentuated by side and overhead shots that emphasize their hands. The editing style, combined with the quick hand movements, enriches the visual experience and heightens the scene's tense atmosphere. Ang Lee uses a series of rapid-cut shots, particularly focusing on the rings, underscoring their significance as vital symbols. Mrs. Yee's prominent diamond ring symbolises her status as Mr. Yee's wife, while Mrs. Ma, as his mistress, is identified by her own distinct ring. The competitive and covert dynamics at the mahjong table are vividly depicted through these swiftly changing shots. The pace of the cuts influences the rhythm of the sequence, injecting tension and highlighting the anxiety among the characters. The use of whip pans adds a sense of urgency, emphasising the strained atmosphere among the characters. Moreover, side close-up shots accentuate the ladies' rings, showcasing the narrative importance of these jewellery pieces. This scene

reveals the complex web of female relationships at the mahjong table in the Yi family through rapid transitions and dynamic shots, illustrating the competition and cooperation among women of that era. Although women are portrayed as passive participants in a male-dominated social structure, the film's language conveys their roles and status in Mr. Yi's life. While the female characters' lives revolve around Mr. Yi, their interactions—marked by jealousy and competition—highlight the challenges faced by women in traditional society and the intricate dynamics of their relationships.

3.2. Comparative Analysis of Film Lighting Atmosphere

In the Mood for Love features an array of vividly coloured scenes and lighting, marking a distinctive personal style of director Wong Kar-wai. The primary colour tone of *In the Mood for Love* is dark grey. The director paints the majority of the story's scenes in shades of black, suggesting the era and the authentic ambience of life while crafting a subdued and poignant narrative tone. The film extensively employs Rembrandt lighting, a technique commonly used in photography and film production. Named after the 17th-century Dutch painter Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn, this method is characterized by its distinctive use of light and shadow, creating a dramatic and visually compelling effect reminiscent of Rembrandt's own works[7]. This lighting style particularly emphasises contrast and shadow play to create deep, dramatic visual effects. Such lighting is a signature method used by Wong Kar-wai, where Rembrandt lighting enhances the contrast in scenes, creating depth and highlighting characters. The majority of Rembrandt lighting in the film is focused on the male lead, Chow Mo-wan, especially when Su Li-zhen and Chow Mo-wan suspect their spouses of infidelity. As Chow Mo-wan leans against the wall in a narrow alley, pondering with a cigarette in hand, the light coming from outside at a 45-degree angle casts a triangular highlight on his left cheek. Rembrandt lighting, amidst the dark environment, highlights Chow Mo-wan's figure while maintaining the subdued atmosphere, reflecting his troubled and helpless state of mind and hinting at his forthcoming emotional entanglement with Su Li-zhen. Colourful lighting is an indispensable element in Wong Kar-wai's films, with red and blue lighting playing a significant role in highlighting the emotional complexities between characters. In the middle of the story, when Su Li-zhen and Chow Mo-wan appear together on screen, a mix of red and blue lighting is used. Blue, often symbolizing melancholy, is prominently featured in scenes involving Su Li-zhen and her husband during the first half of the story. As Su Li-zhen's relationship with Chow Mo-wan deepens, the blue lighting diminishes, gradually giving way to passionate red lighting that dominates the screen. Red, symbolizing passion and desire, suggests the growing intimacy between Su Li-zhen and Chow Mo-wan. By the time they are in the 2046 hotel, the screen is enveloped in red, symbolizing their fervent emotions and signalling to the audience that their relationship has reached a new level. This use of colour visually conveys the intensification of their connection.

Unlike *In the Mood for Love*, where Wong Kar-wai crafts a dreamy, romantic love story with exquisite lighting and cinematography that blur the lines between dreams and reality, *Lust, Caution* is a spy thriller disguised as a love story, filled with danger and tension. In *Lust, Caution*, director emphasises the characters and realism more prominently, which offers richer and more realistic settings, reconstructing the streets of Shanghai in the 1940s to revive a sense of historical authenticity. The lighting design in the scenes also leans towards realism, surrounding cold tones and dark lighting. The director employs lowkey lighting and uses shading and light control techniques to create dark scenes. Unlike *In the Mood for Love*, *Lust, Caution* does not employ warm red or yellow lighting to reflect the emotional warmth between the male and female leads, even at the peak of their emotional connection. The colour scheme remains cool-toned, hinting at the impossibility of love between Wong Chia-Chi and Mr. Yee, thereby emphasising the historical authenticity more starkly. Where Shanghai at the time was under political oppression and scarcity, whether for civilians or antagonists

like Mr. Yee with immense power and wealth, was akin to living in a hellish atmosphere. The film's dark atmospheric tone through lighting accurately reflects history and creates a sense of realism.

4. Analyzing the Characteristics of Female Characters in Film through Props

In film, the portrayal of female characters can be significantly influenced by their clothing and related props, which often reveal emotions through detailed features[8]. In *Lust, Caution* and *In the Mood for Love*, directors Ang Lee and Wong Kar-wai skillfully use three common props—rings, mahjong, and cheongsams—to create deeper layers of symbolism. These props not only drive the narrative but also metaphorically enrich the storyline, integrating core issues related to women that both films aim to explore.

In *Lust, Caution*, the themes of lust and the ring are intertwined, with the ring also representing the "ring" mentioned in the film's Chinese title—a potent symbol that recurs throughout the story. The narrative cleverly uses close-up shots of rings to depict the complex relationships among the female characters in Mr. Yi's life. The size and style of the rings not only detail their personal connections but also reveal their social standings and destinies. For instance, Mrs. Yee's large diamond indicates her primary status, while Wong Chia-Chi's jade ring, later replaced by a pink diamond from Mr. Yee, symbolizes her transition from an outsider to a significant figure in his emotional realm. This use of rings articulates the exploration of female characters' societal positions and personal choices. In contrast, *In the Mood for Love* uses rings to symbolise marriage fidelity and societal expectations. The absence of rings on Chow Mo-wan and Su Li-zhen's hands after discovering their spouses' affairs subtly signifies their disillusionment with marriage and the quest for emotional liberation. Both films use rings to explore different aspects of relationships and personal identity, reflecting their distinct socio-cultural contexts. In *Lust, Caution*, rings symbolize power, control, and the complex dynamics of personal relationships within a historical setting. Conversely, *In the Mood for Love* emphasizes the emotional journey of letting go and self-discovery through the absence of rings, highlighting the complexity of emotions and the reevaluation of marriage in a traditional society. Through these symbols, both directors deepen their narratives, revealing themes of desire, morality, and individual destiny.

Furthermore, the mahjong table is a central social scene in both films, reflecting the leisure lifestyle of the elite. Beyond serving as a backdrop for character interactions, the mahjong scenes symbolize the complexities of interpersonal relationships and psychological maneuvering. Each game reveals potential strategies and deceptions among the characters, representing their navigation through love, politics, desire, and loyalty. For Wong Chia-Chi in *Lust, Caution*, mahjong serves as her entry into high society and a strategic tool for advancing her mission. Her deliberate act of passing her phone number to Mr. Yi during the game highlights her active role in the intertwined games of emotion and strategy. In *In the Mood for Love*, mahjong evolves from a mere social pastime to a connective thread between the families of Chow Mo-wan and Su Li-zhen. Wong Kar-wai uses mahjong as a metaphor to explore the complex emotional and social dynamics of 1960s Hong Kong, prompting the audience to reflect on the subtle undercurrents of relationships revealed in these gatherings.

In both films, the qipao transcends its role as a traditional garment to explore deeper themes of female identity, emotions, and societal positions, highlighting the complexity and multifaceted nature of women against their emotional and social landscapes. The Qipao in *In the Mood for Love* not only showcases feminine grace and conveys a distinct period feel but also reflects Su Li-zhen's evolving emotions, propelling the narrative forward. Wong Kar-wai's nuanced portrayal through the changing qipao patterns and colours narrates Su Li-zhen's journey from disillusionment about her husband's infidelity to emotional acceptance and maturity. Conversely, *Lust, Caution* positions the qipao as a pivotal symbol of Wong Chia-Chi's identity transformation and psychological struggle. Donning the qipao signifies her metamorphosis from a naive student to a sophisticated, alluring "Mrs. Mai,"

embarking on her complex seduction mission. This change, marked by her shift in attire, signifies her deep psychological transformation and the impending challenges.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this article examines how *Lust*, *Caution* and *In the Mood for Love* use audiovisual language to portray female characters, reflecting their social roles and challenges within specific historical contexts. Both films adeptly employ colour, lighting, composition, and symbolic props to illustrate the complex positioning of women in social and emotional realms. They also highlight the directors' exploration of female characters' complexity through filmic techniques. By comparing these techniques, this article uncovers the nuanced and multidimensional portrayals of women in emotional and social contexts, offering new insights into film art and social history. It demonstrates that film is not just an entertainment medium but also a reflection of its era and social context, providing an idealized lens to examine the impact of the real world.

However, this study has certain limitations. The focus on only two films may limit the generalizability of the findings, and the analysis is constrained by the specific contexts of these films, which may not fully represent broader trends in film and female representation. Future research should consider a broader range of films across different genres and historical periods to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how audiovisual language depicts female characters. Additionally, examining the impact of cultural and socio-political factors on these portrayals could offer deeper insights into the evolving representation of women in cinema.

References

- [1] Janse van Rensburg, R. (2021). *Ceremonial cinema: world-creation and social transformation through film as ritual* (Doctoral dissertation, University of the Free State).
- [2] Spottiswoode, R. (2022). *Film and its techniques*. Univ of California Press. Hven, S. (2022). *Enacting the worlds of cinema*. Oxford University Press.
- [3] Kar-Wai, W., Siu, P. L., Leung, T., & Cheung, M. (2000). *In the Mood for Love*. Block 2 Pictures & Paradis films.
- [4] Wang, Y. (2010). *Contention of Lust, Caution: Sexuality, Visuality and Female Subjectivity*. *Situations: Cultural Studies in the East Asian Context*.
- [5] Edwards, N., McCann, B., & Poiana, P. (2015). *The doubling of the frame—Visual art and discourse*. *Framing French Culture*.
- [6] Canini, L., Benini, S., & Leonardi, R. (2013). *Classifying cinematographic shot types*. *Multimedia tools and applications*, 62, 51-73.
- [7] Burnet, J. (2022). *Rembrandt and His Works*. DigiCat.
- [8] Pavis, P. (2003). *Analyzing performance: theater, dance, and film*. University of Michigan Press.