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### **Frozen in Time: National and Personal Memory in Wong Kar-wai's Angkor Wat**

Wong Kar-wai's *In the Mood for Love* (2000), set in 1960s Hong Kong, brings a personal story of failed intimacy between two almost-lovers, Chow Mo-wan and Su Li-zhen, into conversation with a period of sociopolitical instability in Hong Kong and Southeast Asia. In the final scenes of the film, Chow Mo-wan visits Cambodia's Angkor Wat and speaks to a hole in the wall about his almost-affair with Su Li-zhen years earlier, fulfilling his fantasy of burying a secret within nature as in "the old days" (Wong 1:20:12-1:20:14). Chow visits Cambodia in 1966, during the country's turbulent early years of independence, just three years before U.S. bombings on the Cambodian border and four years before dictator Lon Nol's rise to power. News footage of General Charles De Gaulle's arrival in Phnom Penh included in the film alludes to this period of turnover and foreign influence in Cambodia, but the scenes in Angkor Wat juxtapose this instability with their contemplative pace and relative lack of diegetic sound. The setting carries an air of national historical significance; Angkor Wat is a longstanding icon of Cambodian national identity, to the extent that the 12th century temple complex has appeared on every Cambodian flag since the days of French colonial rule in the 19th century, including flags representing the U.S.-backed Lon Nol government and brutal Khmer Rouge regime of the 1970s ("Angkor Wat"; Smith). At the same time, Chow's act of preserving personal memories within the temple ruins distances Angkor Wat from its traditional role as a symbol of collective national memory. In using color to construct an unstable sense of temporality and shot composition to

personify the temple complex in relation to the film's human subject, the Angkor Wat sequence in *In the Mood for Love* transforms a monument of national significance into a timeless space for the negotiation of individual memory, ultimately privileging personal memories over official histories as representations of the human experience.

Scrupulous use of color in the Angkor Wat scenes establishes a tension between the historical significance of Angkor Wat and the timeless nostalgia with which it is portrayed in the film. As Chin-Pang Lei exposit, Wong Kar-wai's film reconstructs Angkor Wat the "nationalized public space" into a conduit for a "fantasized past" that "appear[s] to be mystic and pre-historical" (Lei 9, 2). Chow and a young monk both make a pilgrimage to this site—the monk seeking a spiritual connection to the past and Chow seeking a depository for his own memories. Bright complementary colors like orange and blue negotiate the relationship of a troubled present to this "fantasized past." Whereas neutral browns, grays, and yellows dominate the majority of the Angkor Wat scenes via the temple walls and washed-out yellow sky, the vibrant orange of the monk's robe makes him stand out as one of only two living beings in this desolate landscape. At the same time, his stillness mirrors the temple itself, presenting him as a part of this slice of history when we see him perched on a temple wall in the scene's establishing shot. Orange signals the monk's presence once more in the shot in which he watches Chow speak to the memory hole, where the monk's head occupies a central position in the foreground despite his relative passivity in the scene. The monk thus acts as both a living embodiment of the past and a witness to the making—or recording—of history. Even Chow's skin is lit with a faint orange hue that distinguishes his profile from the muted walls of the temple. He gives some of his life and vibrance to the ruins, leaving behind a clump of bright green weeds after having intertwined his personal memories with the historical legacy of Angkor Wat. Juxtaposition

between the relatively dull temple walls and the occasional pop of color illustrates an interaction between past and present, historical legacy and personal memory.

Meanwhile, the presence of blue in these scenes throws their temporality in question and even grants the setting a timeless quality. After Chow leaves his secret behind, a heavily masked long shot shows his silhouette walking toward the camera with an iconic view of Angkor Wat in the background. This shot disrupts the warm color scheme of the exterior scenes thus far, using a high color temperature to paint the night sky a deep blue and establish a somber, reflective mood. Though the next shot returns to a daytime color temperature, the blue reappears later in a low angle shot which peers up at the rubble and the moon. Not only does the color shift indicate the passing of an unspecified period of time, but the blue sky also provides a counterpoint to the vibrant orange which earlier signals a meeting between individual and historical memory. Even after Chow and the monk leave, nature runs its course, both eroding at the temple walls and preserving traces of an ancient past. In fact, the nighttime silhouette of Angkor Wat is reiterated in a daytime shot from the same camera setup, where the absence of Chow's silhouette allows us to see the temple's outline in its entirety. This unobstructed view calls to mind various depictions of Angkor Wat on the flags of Cambodia, where the monument has enjoyed an uninterrupted position of privilege despite the decades of political turmoil that follow Chow's visit to the country. By offering the temple a similarly privileged position as the final subject of *In the Mood for Love*, Wong confers a mythical significance upon Angkor Wat, allowing it to transcend its man-made origin and become a space which exists beyond time and mortality.

While color confers a sense of timelessness upon the setting, shot composition constructs a unique relationship between character and setting by personifying the physical space of Angkor Wat. At first, Chow occupies an ambiguous position in relation to the temple; when we see him

lean toward the wall in a closeup, half of his face disappears behind the wall, and the framing makes it appear as if he is kissing the hole rather than speaking to it—perhaps reenacting his frustrated attempts at achieving intimacy throughout the film. In fact, the next shot—a long tracking shot of Chow and the temple—places Chow’s profile to the very left edge of the frame, such that we can almost imagine that he is sharing a kiss with someone off screen. As the scene moves forward, new angles provide more and more clarity until an extreme closeup finally reveals that Chow is whispering with his hands cupped around the hole in the wall. In this shot and several others, the temple wall occupies more than half of the frame, giving it equal weight in the scene as a character in its own right and exemplifying Lei’s argument that “space functions as a protagonist, not only as a setting” in Wong Kar-wai’s films (Lei 2). Chow substitutes Angkor Wat for a lover, repurposing a hole in the wall as a depository for his memories of unfulfilled longing; later, the slow, sweeping gaze of various tracking shots in and around the temple simulates this eroticism for the past. Angkor Wat becomes an outlet for what Ackbar Abbas calls the “erotics of disappointment” in Wong’s films, by which “in love it is always either too early or too late, never just on time” (Abbas 32). In using Angkor Wat as his memory hole, Chow transforms the space from a symbol of Cambodian history and national identity into a mystical place that exists beyond time—the only place where his longing may reach some fulfillment, as it cannot come “too early or too late.” He also intertwines his personal memories with those of a nation whose past and future are at a reckoning point, much like Chow’s own Hong Kong. Lei notes that “[t]he news clip in the film displays an official colonial history of Cambodia, while Chow’s secret, the story of ordinary people, will remain unknown and silent” (Lei 10). In other words, the Angkor Wat scenes provide an intimate and authentic counterimage to the grainy news footage of General De Gaulle’s arrival in Cambodia, even as Chow’s

interactions with Angkor Wat reveal little truth to the audience; in fact, his confession is obscured by the score, and the only diegetic sound we hear in this sequence is that of insects chirping at the very end. It is the “silen[ce]” of this sequence which characterizes the nature of human memory: at once unknowable and desperate to preserve itself.

*In the Mood for Love* complicates its protagonist’s relationship with setting by using color and shot composition to intertwine personal and national memory in the timeless environment of Angkor Wat. By calling our attention to historical events of the 1960s outside of Hong Kong, the film pushes audiences to understand Chow and Su’s story of failed intimacy as emblematic of a greater historical period of sociopolitical uncertainty. Furthermore, the film uses the space of Angkor Wat to illuminate the gaps in human memory left behind by official records.

## Works Cited

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