

VIEWER ORIENTATION IN FILM SPACE

HOW VISUAL STRUCTURE CREATES MEANING

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ABSTRACT

This bachelor thesis discusses the visual strategies and techniques, a filmmaker applies in order to enable the audience to be orientated in film space. Initially, these „visual components“ will be analyzed with the help of concrete examples of films. In a next step the achieved findings will be used as a basis for a discussion of the relationship between visual and narrative structure.

Keywords: film space, color, light, composition, movement, camera, dramaturgy

ABSTRAKT

Předmětem této bakalářské práce je výzkum specifických vizuálních strategií a technik, které filmař používá, pokud chce divákovi zprostředkovat orientaci ve filmovém prostoru. V práci je nejprve podána podrobná analýza těchto „vizuálních komponent“ na příkladu konkrétních filmů. Získané poznatky pak slouží jako základ pro závěrečnou diskuzi, jejíž centrum tvoří souvislost mezi vizuální a narativní strukturou.

Klíčová slova: filmový prostor, barva, světlo, kompozice, pohyb, kamera, dramaturgie

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PROHLÁŠENÍ

Prohlašuji, že jsem na své bakalářské práci pracoval samostatně. Prohlašuji také, že odevzdaná bakalářská práce a verze elektronická nahraná do IS/STAG jsou totožné.

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INTRODUCTION

"A film is difficult to explain because it is easy to understand"

Christian Metz

Any screen, be it in a movie theater, a television or a computer is basically a two-dimensional plane on which the film is projected. Despite this obvious two-dimensionality, the audience usually does perceive the world of a film in three dimensions. For the viewer the objects, actors, their relationships and actions on screen are as real as their equivalent in everyday life. This paradox manifests usually unconsciously, but it has the power to absorb us, to transport us into another world and to make us care for the hero, hate the evil guys, be scared of the monster and so on. In order to be able to understand this process, it is necessary to become aware of the underlying elements of any visual work, be it a motion picture, a TV series or even a video game.

But what exactly are these elements?

Film theoretician David Bordwell differentiates between the unit of *mis-en-scene*, e.g. **what** is filmed and the unit of *cinematography*, eg. **how** is it filmed. Among *mis-en-scene* he includes Setting (Set design), Costume and Makeup, Lighting, Screen space and time and staging of the actors, whereas cinematography for him is made up by three factors: (1). The photographic aspects of the shot, (2). The framing of the shot, (3). The duration of the shot (Bordwell 162).

While his approach makes perfect sense for general film analysis, it is on the one hand too ample and on the other hand not sufficient for the goal of this bachelor work, as it focuses on the specific visual strategies and techniques, a filmmaker applies in order to enable the audience to be orientated in film space.

METHODOLOGY

In his book *The Visual Story*, Bruce Block offers a more suitable categorization of the basic elements in an audiovisual work, by identifying six visual components:

space, line and shape, tone, color, movement, rhythm

For him the basic unit of a visual component "communicates moods, emotions, ideas, and most importantly gives visual structure to the pictures." (Block 2-3)

The component of *space* he then splits up again into four different types:

flat space, deep space, limited space and ambiguous space.

I would like to elaborate on this concept of visual structure by discussing, how these visual components are used to enable viewer orientation in film space. By orientation I would not only like to consider the physical dimensions of film space, but also the mutual relations between film subjects and film objects. In other words: how does orientation enable the viewer to create meaning? How does it engage the viewer emotionally in the film's story? In order to find an answer to these questions, I would like to analyze these contemporary films:

- *American Beauty* (1999) by Sam Mendes
- *In the Mood for Love* (2000) by Wong Kar Wai

I have chosen these films because

- they share a common theme: imprisonment of an individual in a social structure, that does not allow him/her to be, who he/she wants to be
- they originate from different cultural backgrounds and follow different traditions
- they were not only highly successful in their respective production countries, but also aroused international public interest
- they were also highly acclaimed by critics all over the world and won numerous

international prizes (among them the Oscar and the Palm d'Or)

By examining essential key sequences of these films, I hope to find commonalities, but also differences regarding the visual space and how it is presented to the viewer. Conventional compositional rules, techniques and traditions (180° rule, rule of thirds, match of eye-lines, and many more) will of course be considered in this thesis -just like editing and sound issues will not be ignored, if they are relevant for the comprehension of the analysis. The main focus however is on the visual components mentioned above and the way, they are applied by the director and the director of photography in order to create visual structure and meaning.

The flat space of family life

American Beauty is a film about people, who are trapped in their existence, about people whose life to a certain extent resembles a prison.¹ This theme of the story is reflected in the visual design of the film. A high percentage of the images in "American Beauty" is presented in flat space.

Flat film space is characterized, by an absence of depth cues like vanishing points or a striking image division in background, middle ground, foreground elements or tonal/color separation (warmer colors and brighter elements in the foreground, cooler colors and darker elements in the background). Instead the composition is dominated by frontal planes, similar tones, characters at the same image level.

The tendency towards flat space cinematography is already visible in the introductory sequence of the film: The camera is flying over an unnamed city, in the background we can see a landscape. The very first seconds of the film are presented in deep space (the row of trees creating longitudinal planes, the horizon line dividing the image), but interestingly the camera does not rest in this position to show us the wide country of America ("the land of the free", as it is portrayed in many other American films), but almost immediately tilts down, diving into the suburbs. The subsequent shot introduces us to the protagonist, presented in flat space.



Figure 01 *American Beauty* (1999)



Figure 02 *American Beauty* (1999)

¹ In the original script version, the story even begins in a prison. For details, please look at Appendix I.

After the individual introduction of the main characters, the following shot sequence introduces the entire family and their relationships. The shot shows a combination of flat and deep space, also referred to as "limited space". There are some depth cues (longitudinal planes, foreground/mid-ground/background separation, camera tracking towards the object, slight tonal separation, actors are staged on slightly different levels), but anyway the overall feel of the image is flat. The tracking of the camera is immensely slow, thus depth is not really emphasized, but rather the audience is slowly pulled right into the family dinner scene. The composition is very symmetrical, the heads of the actors are all at the same height. With this shot of a "ordinary family dinner" lots of visual subtext is transferred, so that the

audience immediately can identify relationships within this family: Mother and father are positioned at opposing sides of the table, as far away from



Figure 03 *American Beauty* (1999)

each other as possible. The daughter

in the middle, physically and emotionally detached, at the same distance from both of their parents, seems somewhat stuck in this triangle as an element that keeps everything together. This idea is supported by the fact, that the constellation is falling apart, as soon as she leaves the table.

Another interesting aspect is the use of color and tone: the predominant colors in this sequence are cool and desaturated, the overall tone is rather dark. The big exception are the brightly lit and fully saturated red roses at the center of the table (respectively the center of the frame), which can be interpreted as a visual metaphor for the remaining amount of life (energy) that is still present in the family.

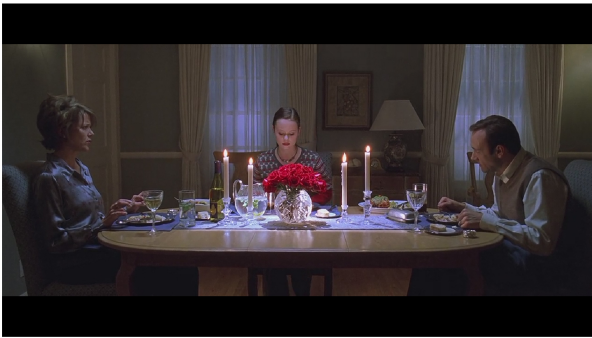


Figure 04 *American Beauty* (1999)

In an almost identical shot one hour into the film, we can see a very similar setup, except for one striking difference: the tone is brighter and the colors are a little warmer, reflecting the characters' change of mood.

In a later sequence we are introduced to the neighbor family, the Fitts, and once again it is filled with visual subtext. The constellation of the Fitts family resembles the previously shown constellation of the Burkham family, with a few important differences: First of all the symmetry in this image is virtually perfect, second the father is here the dominating element in the dead center of the image. He is the one, that holds the family together, but as it is clearly visible, that both his wife and his son keep distance, while the father's body language (crossing of arms, when the son enters) shows signs of insecurity and repulsion.



Figure 05 *American Beauty* (1999)

The actors are all positioned at one level, no one is looking at another, they all watch an old military show on TV, which is presented in the foreground, between two armchairs still wrapped in plastic. All these elements combined, transport perfectly the emotional state within this family to the audience.

Another visual element in the film, which adds to the feeling of imprisonment, are

combinations of vertical and horizontal lines, grid-like or prison bar like structures, that reappear frequently in the film.

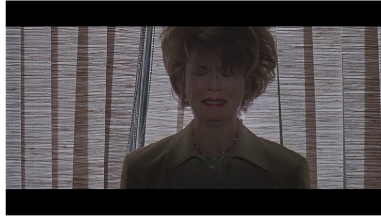


Figure 06-08 *American Beauty* (1999)

Be it at Lester's work space, where his reflection on the computer screen creates the notion of him being behind bars, Carolyn after she failed at her job of trying to sell a house, or be it Ricky and Jane, that can only observe each other through the distance, their state and feeling of imprisonment is always visually presented.

There are also scenes of deep(er) space, but they are really very rare in number. One important example might be the sequence, in which Ricky and Angela have for the first time a longer conversation on their way home from school. The one-point-perspective in central composition creates depth and draws the audience's attention to the very center of the frame.



Figure 09 *American Beauty* (1999)

The two characters -Ricky and Jane- seem like miniature people surrounded by high trees. As they are walking down the road, funeral cars are passing by and so they talk about the beauty of death, while at the same time they are able to connect and live the beauty of life. This very special scene foreshadows the way they will share together and can definitely be considered a plot point within the narrative frame of their love story.

Angles of status and power

As we have seen so far, the visual components are really essential in establishing and communicating the relationships and constellations of characters. But there are also examples, in which the visual narration is simply steered by the positioning of the camera. Camera angles are subtle tools to influence the audience's perception, as they subconsciously transport information about the power and/or status of the framed character (Thompson, 23). In the first third of the film, Lester is portrayed as a "loser", as a man, who does not have what it takes in order to make himself and his family happy. On the one hand this information is transmitted by Lester's body language: he is not sitting upright, but rather ducking down during the conversation at the family dinner table (cf. figure 003 and 004). His almost childish mumbling as a reaction to the scolding from his wife points in the same direction. On a visual level it can be detected, that whenever Lester encounters an authority, the camera is in a higher position, looking down on him, making him appear smaller and somewhat helpless and/or insignificant. In the reverse shot the camera is in a lower position, thus emphasizing the opponent's superior status:



Figure 10 *American Beauty* (1999)



Figure 11 *American Beauty* (1999)

In this early sequence Carolyn is the one in charge. She is scolding Lester like a little boy. All he can do is defend himself with a shameful smile.

In his work space, too, Lester is visually presented as "looked down upon" by careful use of different camera angles, while he is defending himself and trying to save his job.



Figure 12 *American Beauty* (1999)



Figure 13 *American Beauty* (1999)

Interestingly, the camera angles are reversed in the second third of the film. The moment, that initiates this change is, when Lester is caught masturbating by Carolyn. As before Carolyn starts to take over the dominant role, accusing him, but unlike the last times, Lester does not give in, instead he starts to attack his wife in return. Carolyn is obviously surprised by his reaction. She sinks down onto a chair and the camera tilts down with her. From this very instant they are on the same level, psychologically and also visually.



Figure 14 *American Beauty* (1999)



Figure 15 and 16 *American Beauty* (1999)

Later in the film, Lester is serving in drive-through of a fast food restaurant. There he is accidentally witnessing Carolyn and Buddy kissing in the car: this is, when the position of power between them is finally reversed: from that point on he is morally superior, which is visually reflected in the chosen camera angle.

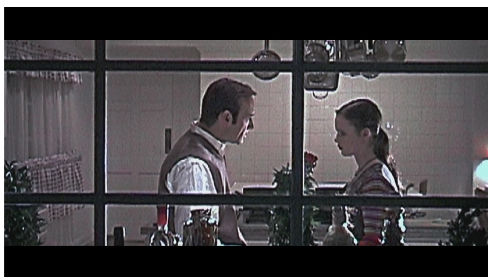
The mentioned change in Lester's self image is also represented visually in his workspace: It is now Lester, who is in charge, looking down upon his new and

inexperienced boss, the higher camera position helps to convey this change of power to the audience, and so does the lighting: the colors are now slightly warmer, and the tone is brighter in comparison to the cool, blue and greyish light in the previous work place sequence.

Figure 17 *American Beauty* (1999)

Beauty in the space between

Another important visual technique in *American Beauty* is the use of DV camera sequences. The film begins with such a shot, in which Angela seems to order the murder of her father. (It is not until much later into the film, that we find out, that this is not the entire truth). The DV cam is closely connected to the character of Ricky Fitts. Ricky is a person, who manages to find beauty for himself, despite of the fact that his family is more than dysfunctional. He is an outsider and as such an observer. The camera is his bridge to get into contact with other people.

Figure 18 *American Beauty* (1999)Figure 19 *American Beauty* (1999)

The first time we meet Ricky is in the first ten minutes of the film. He is outside observing the fight between Lester and his daughter Jane. The sequence starts with the DV-Cam in a wide shot, zooming in to a medium shot. Then there is a cut to the close-up of Ricky and the camera tracks backwards to reveal, that he is the one filming. This movement forward (the zoom) and then backward (the tracking), has an interesting effect: it is

almost as if the audience is positioned in between, which is of course physically and logically impossible, but emotionally we are sucked into the world of these three people.

Ricky's „zooming in“ can be seen as a visual metaphor for his ability to go deeper than any other character (except for maybe Jane and to some extent Lester), to look behind the outer shiny facade in order to discover the hidden inner beauty. This becomes very clear in the following sequence:



Figure 20 *American Beauty* (1999)



Figure 21 *American Beauty* (1999)

By the use of of this visual narrative technique, the director enables the audience to share one of the main character's perception of the world. There are numerous other scenes, where the ugly, low quality image of the DV Cam reveals the beauty of life, but for now only one very central example shall be analyzed.



Figure 22 *American Beauty* (1999)



Figure 23 *American Beauty* (1999)

This scene occurs exactly in the middle of the film and dramaturgically also marks the midpoint. Ricky shows Jane the „most beautiful thing I have ever filmed“. It is a plastic bag, floating through the air. It could have easily got out of control and ended up in kitsch, but the genuine dialogue written by screenwriter Alan Ball and the amazing performance

of actor Wes Bentley prevent this and turn it into a powerful statement about the magic and beauty of life. From the visual perspective, the scene is presented in a very, very slow (hardly perceptible) tracking in shot towards the screen, that is pulling the viewer right into space between Jane and Ricky, and also right into the middle of the beautiful „life behind things.”²

Dream space

Three dream sequences play an important role in the film, as they represent the protagonist's desire to feel again the beauty of and the lust for life, something that got lost on the way from adolescence to middle age. The first dream sequence about 17 minutes into the film differs greatly from all the sequences before. The pace is much faster, there are jump cuts, many different shot sizes from detail to long shots and also repetitive shots, that follow the beat of an exotic sounding piece of music. On a visual level, the gradual reduction of background elements and the abrupt change of light is most striking:



Figure 24-26 *American Beauty* (1999)

Under normal circumstances this kind of sudden change of tone and film space would irritate the viewer, but in this case it manages -combined with hypnotizing music, skillful editing and of course the extra-ordinary mimic abilities of actor Kevin Spacey- to break (film)reality and pull the audience right into Lester's phantasy.

² It is also important to be aware of the fact, that even if the camcorder shots are handheld and seem improvised, they have been carefully designed by the cinematographer Conrad L. Hall. In this regards it is also interesting to notice, that the colors in the DV-Cam sequences seem much warmer and less saturated, than those in the other shots.

The sequence ends with a Visual Effects shot in which a stream of rose petals is floating towards the audience, that is: towards the point-of-view shot of Lester.

This theme is picked up for the second dream sequence: again petals are floating through the frame, this time down onto Lester from above. This shot is highly interesting as it induces the notion of a virtual space that extends the "natural" border of the frame lines, creating an open space that only exists in the minds of the audience.



Figure 27 *American Beauty* (1999)

According to Bruce Block, "open space occurs when something in the frame is visually powerful enough to temporarily erase the frame lines and create a sense of visual space outside the frame" (86).

That is exactly what is happening here, the audience is led to accept the illusion of a space, that does not exist, a "dream space" if you want. Also the reverse shot with Angela "lying on the ceiling" adds to the surreal, dream-like notion of this sequence.



Figure 28 *American Beauty* (1999)

The visual symbol of the red rose petals occurs one more time roughly in the middle of the film: Angela is sitting in a bathtub, covered with rose petals. Lester enters the room and approaches Angela sexually, after she encouraged him to do so. This dream or phantasy sequence is created rather conventionally: a room filled with smoke and bright light through venetian blinds create an unreal atmosphere.

Red is life, red is death and red is beauty

In numerous scenes, the combination of red, blue and white plays an important visual role, representing the colors of the American flag and alluding to the American Dream. This is most obvious in the shots outside of the Burkham's home: there is a striking red door, blue window shutters and a white fence. This color scheme is also shown inside the house: the couch shows blue and white stripes, the dark red roses stand next to it. As already shown, the color red is a very important visual element in *American Beauty*, it is almost omnipresent. The red roses in the garden, that are trimmed and cut (castrated?) by Carolyn and then arranged all over the house could be seen as a visual metaphor for life energy and the way it is kept under control by the woman of the house. The rose pedals that are floating freely in Lester's phantasies/dreams about Angela could be interpreted as arousal of sexual energy and/or a free flow of life energy (the same might be true for the red blanket and the red lamps in Carolyn's and Buddy's hotel room). The red "firebird" in front of the garage as well as the red toy car could be seen as the joyous child energy of Lester, after he rediscovered his freedom. The blood of Lester, spreading all over the clean white kitchen table seems to be the aesthetically beautiful color of death, the flow of "life juice" out into the open.

THE SOCIAL SPACE OF HONGKONG 1962

The second film I have chosen to discuss viewer orientation in film space, is Wong Kar Wai's *In the Mood for Love*. This film deals with the repressed feelings of love, loneliness and longing of a man (*Chow Mo-wan*) and a woman (*Su Li-zhen*), but even more than an unfulfilled love story it is a period piece, showing the social atmosphere of Hongkong in the 1960ies. Wong Kar Wai is known for his improvisational shooting style, which long time DoP Christopher Doyle summarizes as such:

"What happens with a Wong Kar Wai film is: you don't have a script, you don't know, when you are going to finish shooting, you don't know where you gonna shoot it... so all you have is the location. If once you get the location right [...], the location [...] pushes you in a certain direction." (*In the mood for Doyle*, 00:18:00).

The location is at the same time the anchor and the katalysator of the film's story, a natural starting point, that allows all the other elements to develop and grow and as such it has a high influence on the film space. Wong Kar Wai himself is Shanghainese, who emigrated with his family from the Chinese mainland to Hongkong in the 1960ies, just like the characters in his film. His goal is not to present an accurate reconstruction in the sense of a historical drama but rather to recreate the mood, the *zeitgeist* of this era. This is why in the entire film there are no shots of the city itself, its monuments, its buildings or its public life in general.³ *In the Mood for Love* could theoretically be settled in any city, but in order to find HIS story and the way he wanted to tell it, Wong Kar Wai had to recreate the mood of this era, the way he envisioned it. This could not be achieved in modern day Hongkong as it is a fast evolving and highly developed metropolis, where almost nothing reminds of the 1960ies. So in order to be able to film the exterior shots, the shooting had

³ Of course, it also would have been financially and physically almost impossible to recreate the urban space of 1960ies Hongkong from an exterior perspective in all its detail.

to be transferred to Bangkok in Thailand, as there existed still streets, hotels and apartments that resembled those, which he remembered from his past and which he wanted to show in his film.

One of the visually most striking points in *In the Mood for Love* is the absence of classical establishing shots: Instead of using long shots to introduce a new location or situation, Wong Kar Wai on many occasions prefers to first show a detail and then go to a wider shot size. He either does so by cutting from a closeup to a wider shot or, even more frequently the camera is panning (or tracking or tilting) from a detail into a wider shot, revealing the space behind it. This even occurs in the very first scene, right after the introductory graphical inserts, that foreshadows the

story. After a fade in from black the camera is already dollying parallel to a wall, while showing old photographs in a close up shot. As the tracking shot

continues the back of the head of an older lady is revealed. What follows is a hard cut to the lead actress, looking from inside the house out onto the street. This is quite an unusual way of beginning a film: the audience is put immediately into the world

of the protagonist, without any further visual

narrative introduction, thus we get to know the world of the film from the in- to the outside. A great majority of the following interior shots is presented in limited space. Limited space combines in a specific manner the characteristics of flat space and deep space elements. Critical in this regard, is the elimination of longitudinal planes and their replacement by frontal planes (Block 52).



Figure 29 *In the Mood for Love* (2000)



Figure 30 *In the Mood for Love* (2000)

In this example shot, film space consists of foreground, mid-ground and background planes. The shot includes depth cues like tonal and color separation, textural diffusion and overlap, but the most important depth cue



Figure 31 *In the Mood for Love* (2000)

"perspective" is absent and with it diagonal

lines leading to the vanishing point. Horizontal lines also are of minor importance, vertical lines however, are visually predominant in the film: The door frames, the window frames, the walls, the corners of the street, etc. They all create a strong sense of verticality. Also the body of the main actress in her traditional *Cheong Sam* supports this vertical linear motif, which in many incidents is also emphasized by vertical camera movement. The fact, that throughout the entire first part of the film, Li-zhen is seen only wearing these tight traditional dresses and her hair is knotted up just as tight, might give an hint towards the patriarchal system and her desperate try to fit in. In the last quarter of the film, when she returns to Hongkong in 1963, her hair is open and her style of clothing has changed. In visual design, vertical lines represent strength and power, but also a certain rigidity. Furthermore they seem to extend towards the sky (Bradley).

In the situation of *In the Mood for Love* -except for the very end of the film- there is no sky visible. The vertical lines work here as a sort of barrier and as such they also characterize the social space. They force the characters to be closer together, as there is no place of escaping to the left or the right.

Hand in hand with this linear motif goes the feature of surface division: by the application of limited space, very often the screen frame changes size from a rectangle to a quadrangle. A quadrangular frame is much less dynamic, as there is no space to the left

or to the right, space that could either be occupied by new elements or space to which the characters could move. This new framing supports the notion of emotional stagnation of the main characters and their being trapped in a world of morals, that surrounds them.

NONVISIBLE SPACE

By limiting the audience's view, the film manages to transport the feeling of a narrow, enclosed living space, where privacy seems impossible. We as the audience can voyeuristically observe the action through the hallways, the doors and window frames, sometimes even through veil-like curtains. The audience is being allowed to have a glimpse into this world, its perspective however, is limited as well. As the camera usually does not allow the viewer to follow the protagonists, he or she only can perceive a confined section, while hearing (eavesdropping?) what is going beyond the visible space. To give an example: in the entire film Su Li-zhen's husband and Chow's wife are not seen from a front view. At best they are seen from behind or a detail of their body is shown.



Figure 32 *In the Mood for Love* (2000)



Figure 33 *In the Mood for Love* (2000)

By keeping the husband and wife faceless, Wong Kar Wai avoids characterizing them as "evil cheaters", that might evoke a feeling of antipathy with the audience. Nor does he want them to gain the viewers' sympathy as "misunderstood true love" couple. Instead he rather leaves it to the audience alone to decide, what to think or feel about them, while at the same time inviting the viewer to reflect about the main characters: both Chow and Li-zhen are repeatedly stating "We are not like them". Is this really true? If yes, in what

respect are they different? What makes their love special?

The limitation of visible film space is especially drastic in certain dialogue situations:

In this sequence Li-zhen is talking to her husband through the door of their private room within the shared household before leaving to work. After a short conversation, she leaves the frame, goes back inside the room and most likely kisses/hugs



Figure 34 *In the Mood for Love* (2000)

him good bye, before she she comes back into the frame and then finally leaves through the main door in the background. This goodbye is not visually presented. Instead the audience is left alone with an empty space, invited/forced to interpret what is going on in the non-visible space. Wong Kar Wai uses this and similar stylistic means repeatedly throughout the entire film, thus managing to pull the viewer into the center of the action, while at the same time keeping him at a emotional distance.

Wong Kar Wai also uses conventional composition techniques in a rather unique way in order to convey the social atmosphere of the time. In one occasion even the protagonists face is being excluded from viewers' perception: In this scene Su Li-zhen is lectured by her landlady Mrs Seung to remember what it means to be a "good wife". Mrs. Seung's character -being from an older generation-, represents the rigid moral



Figure 35 *In the Mood for Love* (2000)

authority in the film. In a conventional over the shoulder shot, the person facing the camera is usually in focus, whereas the other participant is usually out of focus. Wong Kar Wai reverses this setup, thus omitting the protagonists emotional reaction. In a tense social situation like this it is important not "to lose face": by making Su Li-zhen lose her

face for the audience, the director manages to pull the viewer right into this situation, the viewer becomes the one, that is "being caught" and/or accused under false pretense. But Wong Kar Wai even goes a step further: in a later scene we as the audience seem to observe how Su Li-zhen finally confronts her husband about his affair, but actually she and Chow are only rehearsing this confrontation.



Figure 36 *In the Mood for Love* (2000)



Figure 37 *In the Mood for Love* (2000)

Again considering a conventional dialogue scene, one might expect a reverse shot to the man to see his facial/emotional reaction to her accusations. But the camera stays on her throughout the entire dialog, while his reaction is only audible. It is not until the final moment, that a reverse shot reveals the entire truth. By implementing this elliptical structure, the director is playing with the viewers' expectation: Instead of offering clear orientation to the viewer, he deliberately chooses to momentarily disorient the audience, thus forcing us to reconsider what we have experienced so far and to question the conclusions we might have drawn.

Another filmic device, that seems somewhat extraordinary within a dialogue scene can be recognized in the restaurant sequence. This is their first official "date", in which both of them discreetly try to find out, if it is really possible that their spouses are having an affair, while at the same time sitting in a restaurant booth, drinking a cup of coffee.

Figure 38 *In the Mood for Love* (2000)Figure 39 *In the Mood for Love* (2000)

The camera is positioned in between them framing only one of them in a profile close up static shot. Once their conversation gets to the point of the affair of their spouses there is a sudden whip pan from Su to Cho and then back from him to her. This kind of camera movement is usually not applied in dialogue scenes, it is more common in action oriented sequences and often used as transition between two shots, sometimes with the aim to hide the cut inbetween. By using it in a dialogue situation -that could easily be represented in a medium two shot or by cutting back and forth between them- the visual intensity is drastically heightened, just like the emotional intensity between the characters, as they come to realize, that both of them know about their spouses' affair. A similar technique is used later in the restaurant scenes, when the camera tracks fast from "outside" into the middle of their conversation, functioning as a transition, that directs the viewer's attention to the middle of the screen, right between the two main characters.

AMBIGUOUS SPACE, AMBIGUOUS TIME

Another stylistic device, supporting the theory, that Wong Kar Wai intentionally disorients the viewer is the use of ambiguous space. Ambiguous space is created, when the audience is not able to identify the dimensions of the film space or is unable to "understand the spatial relationships of objects in the picture" (Block 55).



Figure 40-42 *In the Mood for Love* (2000)

The sequence above, consisting of three static shots, perfectly illustrates this phenomenon: after a fade in from black, it starts with a door bell ringing, shortly after that a door is being opened and a ray of light slightly illuminates the left half (the background) of the shot (cf. figure 40), in the foreground we recognize an object, probably a lamp, that is in focus. A silhouette of a person (not in focus) is entering the frame from the left, coming towards the camera. Then there is a cut to the next shot (cf. figure 41), the left side of which is dominated by an unidentifiable, out-of-focus object, the middle ground is built up by a wall and the right side is covered by a framed mirror. In the mirror we see a person -now recognizable as a woman- entering the frame in the frame. From the way she moves and with the help of sound, we can infer, that she is opening another door. Up to this point, the viewer has no idea, who the person is, where the person is or what the action on the screen means for the story. A straight cut to a third shot (cf. figure 42) finally reveals, what is going on: Li-zhen was knocking on the neighbours door, because she thought she had heard voices there. The following conversation is banal, it is Li-zhen's facial expression, that makes us sense, that something is wrong. A cut back to a variation of the first shot (cf. figure 40) follows and offscreen we here Mo Chowan's wife say -supposedly to Li-zhen's husband: "It was your wife".

On the one hand, Wong Kar Wai does here everything possible to disorient the viewer: the lack of light and the focus on the foreground object in the first shot, the extreme camera angle, the limitation of the field of view and the reflection in the mirror in

the second shot, all together create a sense of confusion and tension, that is characteristic for ambiguous space. This confusion, tension and notion of unease might be the same or at least similar to what Li-zhen is feeling, suspecting her husband of having an affair with the neighbour.

But even if Wong Kar Wai does everything to disorient the audience, he is at the same time following rules, that help to create orientation: in both the first two shots, Chow's wife enters the frame from the left side. In the third shot Li-zhen is positioned slightly on the right half of the frame, leaving the left half open, so that we can presume, she is there -even if we do not see here. If he had put Li-zhen on the left side or if Chow's wife would have changed direction (that is: have moved from right to left) in the shot before, the confusion would have been too profound and too disturbing for the viewer. But still there is another level of disorientation: Right after the sequence described above, the film continues with a cut to the hotel, where Chow's wife is working. Again the viewer cannot see her face, but observe the interior from the outside through the round shaped window, that was introduced earlier in the film. This short intercut is immediately followed by the next sequence:



Figure 43-45 *In the Mood for Love* (2000)

After a very fast fade in from black, the camera is tracking from left to right along an interior wall towards a mirror, while it is at the same time panning from right to left until the entire mirror surface fills the screen. Through the mirror, the viewer can see in a kind of long shot the interior of the room, slightly blurred at some points, as the mirror

seems not to be clean. There the image rests for a couple of seconds. While the camera is tracking forward, the sound of water and a woman's voice can be heard. Again, the audience has no idea, where this is, who there is and what the action is until a cut to a final close up shots, suggests an answer: Now it is clear, that a woman is crying. But the image is blurred and very dark, the viewer still cannot recognize by



Figure 46 *In the Mood for Love* (2000)

the given visual information, who the person is, as the space within the frame is highly ambiguous. But despite the spatial and chronological confusion the viewer is **emotionally** aware, that it is Li-zhen, who hides in the shower and cries desperately. This sequence and especially the last image and the way it is presented visually, reflect perfectly her state of confusion, shame, isolation, and imprisonment.

To a certain extent *In the Mood for Love* could be called a "non verbal" film: the words spoken are vague, they are mostly phrases of polite social conduct. Much more indicative for the audience are signs, especially body signals: the characters' glances, gestures, their way of moving (or the absence of all these features) reveal much more of what is going on, than actual words spoken out loud. This is another reason for the numerous close ups, which are anything but mere insert shots, but are always important carriers of meaning. In the first sequence, quite early in the film he is trying to take her hand, but she immediately pulls back.



Figure 47 *In the Mood for Love* (2000)



Figure 48 *In the Mood for Love* (2000)

In the second sequence much later in the film, she takes his hand and holds it tight. For the audience this is a clear indicator, of how much their relationship has changed and how close they have become.

These close-up shots are quite often static shots, but even more frequently they are combined with some sort of camera movement. In this shot, they shake hands and say good bye, the camera pans upwards, staying on her hand, that digs into her arm, further up to her sad face, while he walks away in the background.



Figure 48-51 *In the Mood for Love* (2000)

By showing a combination of physical reaction and the emotions in her face, the film manages to raise the visual and emotional intensity.

THE DANCE BETWEEN THE ACTORS AND THE CAMERA⁴

Camera movements in general play an important role, as they are omnipresent and serve several important functions: they (re-)introduce the characters or places, underline the change of time or also "hide a cut" in the film, among others.

The visually most striking sequences with camera movement are the "mahjong" and the "noodle vendor" sequences. These sequences are repeated in a variation and are accompanied by a musical piece called Yumej's theme, a waltz with a characteristic 3/4 beat, which is the musical *leitmotif* of the entire film. In the first "mahjong sequence", in the first quarter of the film, the camera -after a fade in from black- begins on a close up of

⁴ "The dance between camera and actors" is the term Christopher Doyle uses, when he talks about camera movement (cf. Doyle, *Masterclass in Cinematography*, 00:04:30).

Li-zhen's hands, while she is in the process of passing by in front of the camera from right to left. The camera immediately pans with her, while at the same time it is tracking backwards (away from the characters) and slightly tilting down (through the door frame a company of mahjong players is revealed, Li-zhen sits down next to supposedly her husband). The camera rests for a moment, then from the left side a woman in a red dress enters the frame and crosses it. The camera very slowly follows her movement, that is it is tracking forward and at the same time tilting up, as we see Li-zhen getting up, letting the woman in the elegant red dress pass her in this moment, Chow is entering the frame from the left behind the door frame and passing Li-zhen, he is coming towards the camera. Then the camera pans with him from left to right, until he leaves the frame. From there the film cuts back to the door frame, the camera pulls back and slightly moves upwards. There is a lot of movement going on in this sequence, camera and object moving lead to an intense moving of the viewer's point of attention across the screen, from left to right, up to down and vice versa. Interesting is, how we as the audience are so close to the threshold, but still we are not allowed to enter the room and have to stay in the position of the observer. Considering the fact, that the entire sequence is filmed in slow motion, and edited perfectly to the beats of the waltz, it leads to a heightened visual intensity and seems like an almost hypnotic dance between camera and actor, that pulls the audience right into the world of the film. It is very interesting and also important, that Wong Kar Wai shows Li-zhen and her husband as a devoted couple this early in the film.

At the end of the film this sequence is mirrored under completely different circumstances: It is again a "mahjong meeting", but neither Chow, nor his wife, nor Li-zhen's husband are present. It is only her, who watches the others play, isolated from the rest of the group:

The camera now -for the first time- crosses the threshold of the living room, as she turns towards the window, looking outside in a pensive mood.



Figure 38 *In the Mood for Love* (2000)



Figure 39 *In the Mood for Love* (2000)

The following cut shows Chow at his work, the camera -still in slow motion- pans from left to right, while he turns away from his colleagues, faces the camera and remains staring.

The montage and the virtual eye line lead to the idea, that they are not "there", present in the moment, but instead thinking/dreaming of each other.

Their longing becomes even more visually obvious in the following scene: it is her birthday and she is at home in the kitchen, the camera tracks from right to left, "through the wall" and shows him sitting there the same way, in the same mood, before the camera tracks back from right to left, ending on her.



Figure 38 *In the Mood for Love* (2000)



Figure 39 *In the Mood for Love* (2000)

This sequence perfectly summarizes the notion, that however close they may get, there will always be this invincible barrier between them.

THE SPACE OF ROOM 2046

The hotel room 2046 is of special importance in the film for a variety of reasons:

For one, Wong Kar Wai started to work on a film titled *2046*, while he was still shooting *In the Mood for Love*. This film can be seen as a variation on the theme of unfulfilled love and as such bears many crossreferences to *In the Mood for Love*.

In the film itself room 2046 is a hotel room, a neutral space, free from the pressure of social norms and restrictions. Here they can live, laugh and work together, writing martial arts novels. The writing of stories becomes the compensation and symbol for their unfulfilled love, as they are still meeting under the premise: "We are not like them" (e.g. we are not like our unfaithful spouses). There is no direct sign of sexual attraction: In the images presented by the film, they are not even sharing a kiss with each other, but anyway it is clear to the audience, that there is a special kind of intimacy and love between them. Visually it is striking, that the shots in this sequences are more saturated and thus more vivid in comparison to the rest of the film, probably due to footstock manipulation.

Another striking feature is the predominance of the color red: The curtains in the hallway, the carpet in the room, the flowers of the wallpaper, and not to forget the red coat, she is wearing, the first time she visits there: all these might represent the energy (also the lust?) of love and life between them. Regarding mise-en-scene and composition we find a cumulation of the elements that have been mentioned in the previous chapters: there is limited space (we, as the audience are observing them through the window, sometimes with a semi-transparent curtain in the foreground), frequent camera movement (panning from left to right and back), revealing and hiding what they are and there is a complex set of reflections in mirrors, that arose feelings of ambiguity. But interesting

enough, this is the only part of the film, where strong deep space elements can be found:

The corridor in the hotel room is presented in one-point perspective, the vanishing point being exactly at the end, at the door to room 2046. The diagonal lines and the visual rhythmisation provided by the



lights all seem to lead to a place, where their love

Figure 40 *In the Mood for Love* (2000)

can be fulfilled. The corridor is later also shown in central composition -something unique, compared to the rest of the film. In one version she is in the middle, -as she is leaving, we see her from behind- in the other shot it is him, exactly in the same position. In both shots the camera tracks back, away from them, thus creating physical and emotional distance between the characters and the audience.

The (empty) corridor finally appears in a static shot: nobody is there, but the curtains are moving in the draft of the wind, creating the notion, that their spirit, their "mood for love", is slowly dissolving.



Figure 41 *In the Mood for Love* (2000)

Whereas these sequences are shown quite late in the film, around minute 55, the first time, this corridor appears is actually much earlier in the film around minute 37. Right before Li-zhen asked Chow "What might they (=her husband and his wife) be doing right now?". The subsequent scenes from the hotel are rather a phantasy, than an actual occurrence. Again, the director leaves it to the audience to interpret: is it a phantasy about what their spouses are doing? Or is it a phantasy, that shows their own desire and secret wishes? This non-chronological presentation of (seeming) events is a creative device, frequently used by the director and as such it adds to the dream-like notion of the film.

DISCUSSION

A major part of the interpretation work of this thesis was already carried out within the results section, simply in order to facilitate comprehension. This is why at this point, I would like to summarize the most important results of both films and discuss their makers' approach to enable viewer orientation in film space. I would like to do this by using a comparison between *story graphs* and *visual structure graphs*.

Every film's story has the tendency to follow an arch-plot structure (also referred to as *Aristotelian story shape*), consisting of an expository part, a major conflict part with a climax and a resolution part⁵.

These three parts of story structure also have their equivalent in the visual structure of a film: there is visual exposition, in which the basic decisions are made, in regards to the choice and use of the basic visual components for the rest of the film. Just like the main characters are introduced in the story's exposition, the basic visual design elements are introduced in the visual exposition and thus determine mise-en-scene and cinematography. Bruce Block illustrates this beautifully: "A story begins: 'Once upon a time there was a happy family.' The exposition could be expanded to: 'Once upon a time there was a happy family who lived in flat space with square shapes and warm colors.' Now there is both story and visual exposition" (Block, 233).

Visual conflict in comparison to story conflict can be best described by *visual intensity*, in analogy to *story intensity*: the stronger the contrast between visual components, the higher is the visual intensity of the image. Bruce Block argues, that visual intensity runs parallel to story intensity (cf. Block 234-235).

The same is valid for the resolution of a film: the decrease of *story intensity* is mirrored by the decrease of the *visual intensity*.

⁵ For a detailed chart of a classical arch-plot structure, please have a look at Appendix II.

The plot of *American Beauty*, being a film produced according to the standards, convention and rules of Hollywood, follows this dramaturgy for the most part: there is a clear exposition, a rising conflict with a climax and a short, but strong resolution.

Visually, *American Beauty* is for the most part presented in flat space, especially during the beginning of the film, but the further it progresses, the more Lester frees himself from his flat life, the deeper the shots are composed. Deep space and flat space are rarely absolute, but usually gradations and combinations of space. Right in the middle of the film however, there is an extreme version of deep space, presented in a shot with one-point perspective (cf. Figure 09). This incident in

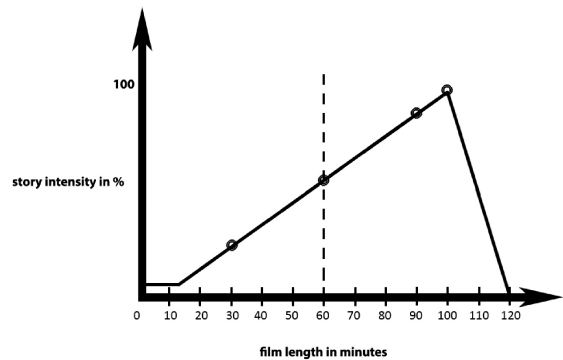


Table 01 Story Structure Graph

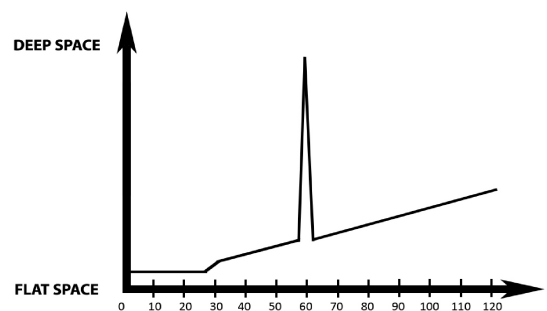


Table 02 Visual Structure Graph A

the story's structure, sometimes considered as "Moment of Enlightenment" (cf. Appendix II), represents the moment of opening up of Jane and Ricky. Even if Ricky is not the main hero of the story, this does not matter for the function of this moment, as he represents Lester's younger alter Ego. The contrast in the use of space creates visual intensity, which perfectly supports the heightened emotional intensity at this point in the story and thus creates meaning for the audience.

Such comparison could be done also with the other visual components (line, shape, tone, color, movement, rhythm), but at this point it should suffice to show, that this principle can be applied to rather "conventional" cinematic techniques, like for example camera angle, which plays an important role in *American Beauty* within the Lester and

Carolyn dialogue scenes. The Visual structure graph indicates how Lester's position of power is changing in the course of the film. For the first third of the story he is portrayed as a loser in comparison to his wife, a notion psychologically supported by high camera angles ("shots down on him"). In the second third, he struggles and partly frees himself: he is

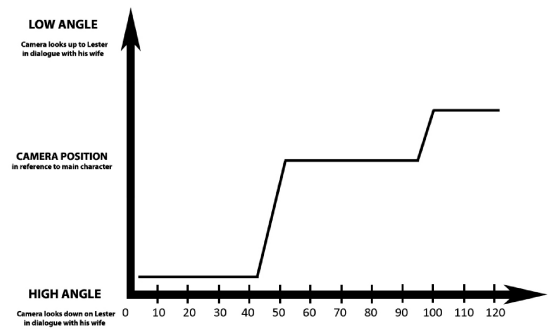


Table 03 Visual Structure Graph B

now visually on the same level as she is. Finally, he takes the (moral) position of power, a fact that is reflected in low angles, as the camera "looks up to him".

Talking about the second film, *In the Mood for Love*, things get slightly more difficult: where *American Beauty* follows -for the most part- a linear story development, the story structure in *In the Mood for Love* is far more complex, rather rhizomatic, due to its partly non-chronological order with flashbacks, visual anticipation and what-if scenes ("the rehearsals"), that are sometimes even repeated in variations. The same is true for the visual design of both films: where *American Beauty* as a Hollywood film follows the tradition of the "invisible technique" (Ward 4), that allows the audience to fully get immersed in a film's story, *In the Mood for Love* as an auteur film does not consistently follow these rules, which results in jump cuts, ignoring of the 180° rule and other forms of visual discontinuity.

But despite these complications in the story and its visual presentation an underlying arch-plot story structure can still be recognized: there is exposition (Li-zhen and Chows meet as neighbors), there is a first plot point (finding out about the affair), a rising conflict (their feelings for each other grow stronger), a mid-point (meeting in room 2064) a second plot point (saying goodbye) and a resolution (they miss each other). But

additionally there is also a kind of epilogue, a sequence in which Chow goes to Cambodia in order confide the secret about his love to the immortal stones of the temple complex of Ang Kar Wat.

Another important fact, that makes an analysis of *In the Mood for Love* difficult is the fact, that Wong Kar Wai sometimes intends to visually **disorientate** the audience by the use of ambiguous space and or elliptical space. This graph shows, the relationship between visual disorientation and story structure: By either not showing a certain aspect or by disguising (=not clearly showing it), Wong Kar Wai manages on the one hand

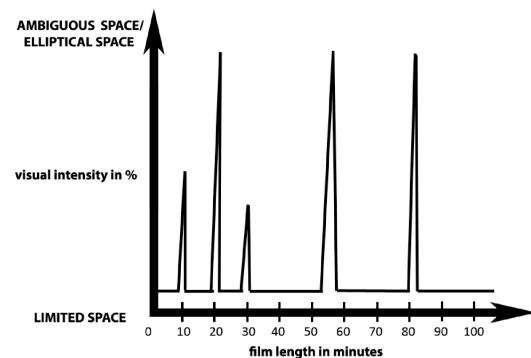


Table 04 Visual Structure Graph

to stimulate the viewer's interest and curiousness,

as he/she is being led to the process of inferring for example the omitted reaction of the husband/wife: his/her facial expression, body language, glance, etc. On the other hand: even if we as the audience do imagine the unseen, there is and always will be a certain degree of uncertainty or dubiousness, in our intellectual and emotional response as an audience, a cloudiness, that exactly reflects the emotions and the uncertainty of the protagonists.

Gary Bettison argues, that Wong Kar Wai has established a film language, that becomes more and more radical with each new film, calling his technique "aesthetics of disturbance": "Wong exploits restrictions built into the traditional OTS schema to throw our comprehension into flux. He shows us that an aesthetic of disturbance can spring directly from apparently legible techniques." (Bettinson 8)

This strategy of disorientation (or aesthetics of disturbance) or is one of the most striking

and powerful cinematic devices in *In the Mood for Love*, and as such supports the emotional (dis)orientation of the audience.

CONCLUSION

"Think about visual structure, but more importantly, use it." (Block 254)

In my bachelor thesis I have tried to show the complexity of orientation in film space and raise awareness for the fact, that a filmmaker has to choose between a multitude of possibilities, in order to decide how to visually present the film's story. I furthermore intended to point out, that visual structure is closely connected to story structure, as it is the key for the audience to create emotional and/or intellectual meaning.

The visual components, that were discussed are a set of tools, that cannot only help to analyze a film, but they can also be useful in the (pre-)production process: just like a musician uses his sheet music in order to be able to play a harmonic piece, we as filmmakers can use a visual concept in order to communicate ideas, moods and emotions.

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APPENDIX I

In this part, I would like to add information, that is not absolutely necessary for understanding my bachelor work, but still helpful in regards to a better understanding of the analyzed films.

Notes on *American Beauty*

In the original script of screenwriter Alan Bell, *American Beauty* starts in a prison cell, where Ricky Fitts is held in custody for the murder on his neighbour Lester.

Also: in this version Lester did have sex with Angela.

Sam Mendes changed this in order to free the film from the "dark tone" it would have had and thus made it a more placable experience for the viewer.

(Cohen, 37-53)

Notes on *In the Mood for Love*

The major part of the film plays in Hongkong, whereas Su Li-zhen is from Shanghai (that is: from the mainland China), whose culture and traditions are not entirely the same as the ones in Hongkong. Even the spoken language differs, she is obviously speaking with a strong dialect. During these days, Hongkong was packed with immigrants from the mainland, due to oppression and censorship by the Chinese mainland government. This is why people had to share minimal living space in shared households, where strong moral values prevail and privacy is almost impossible.

It is important to be aware of the fact, that there are many details like this that a western audience might overlook, while watching this film. Another important fact is, that an Eastern audience can easily recognize the season or even the month of the year by the

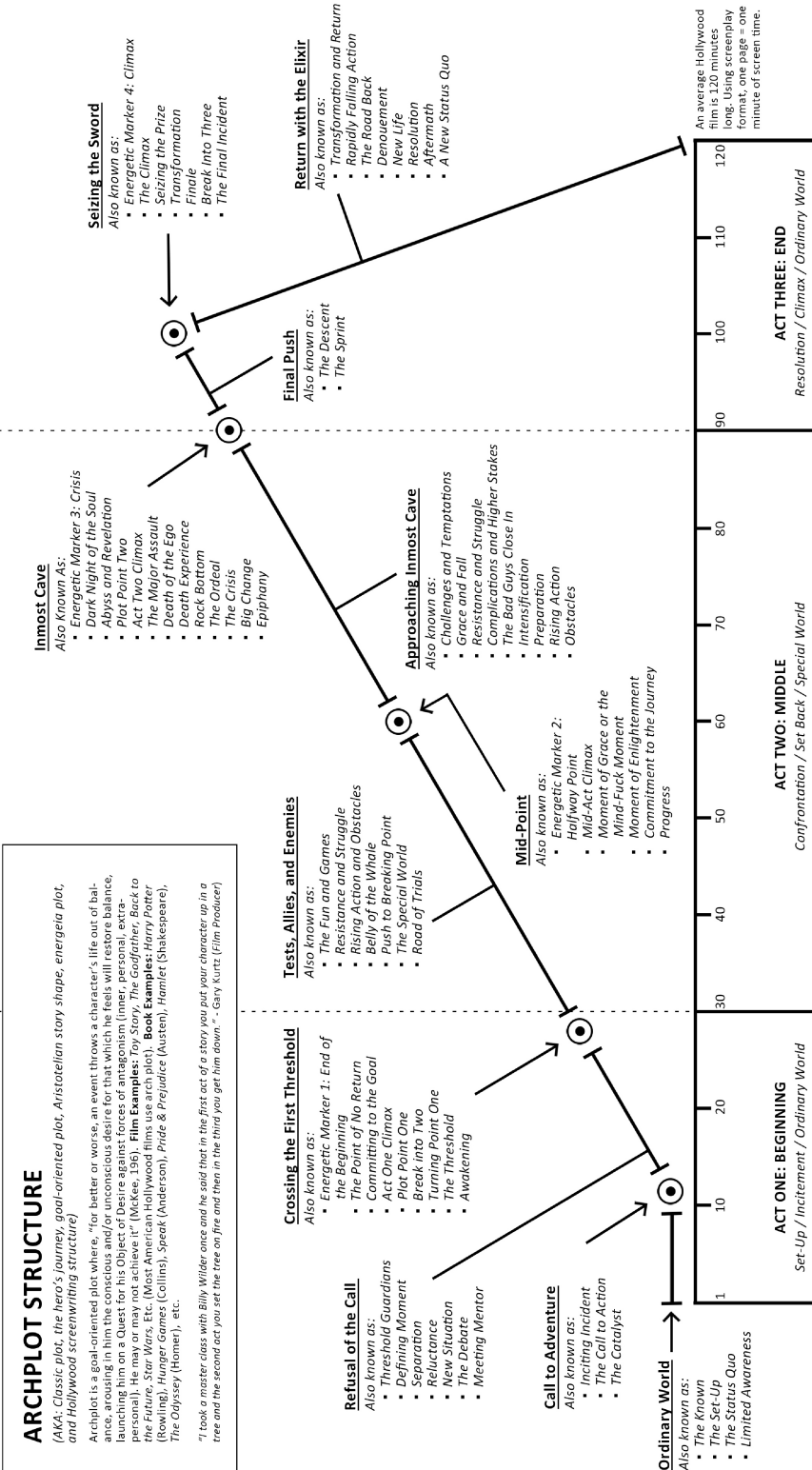
food the main characters are eating, due to the fact, that certain Asian fruits and vegetables are only available at a specific time of the year. A western audience however most likely will not catch this cue, as this information is not included in the subtitles. (cf. "20-Minute Wong Kar Wai interview on 'In the Mood For Love')

It is also important to consider the special way of production of Wong Kar Wai and also his collaboration with camera man Christopher Doyle and production designer/art director and editor William Chang. All three of them have been collaborating in Wong's earlier films and are familiar to his specific way of working: Wong Kar Wai is considered to be an "auteur" filmmaker and is well known for his improvisational, largely script-free style of film shooting. He initially only follows an idea or outline of an actual story, then elaborates on it, lets it grow and develop in whatever direction, in order to give it its final form during the editing process. In this sense, he does not follow any tradition, (Hollywood) rules are largely neglected or just not of importance to him.

This way of shooting has a huge impact on the mode of production: whereas *American Beauty* was filmed within three months in approx. 50 shooting days, *In the Mood for Love* was filmed within one and a half years during countless shooting days. Wong Kar Wai intention is not to **make** a film, but rather to **find** a film.

"... this is what I have learnt from Wong Kar Wai: you cannot make a film, you have to find it." (Chris Doyle, *Interview* 00:05:00)

APPENDIX II



Information on this handout comes from the following sources: *The Plot Whisperer* (Alderson), *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Campbell), *Movie Writing Help* (Chapman), *Screenplay* (Field), *The Sequence Approach* (Gullino), *Writing Screenplays that Sell!* (Hauge), *Inside Story* (McKee), *Story* (McKee), *Tools for Analyzing Prose Fiction* (McManus), *Save the Cat* (Snyder), *Three Act Structure* (TV Tropes), *The Writer's Journey* (Vogler), and *The Moral Premise* (Williams).

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