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Surface, Texture, Weave

The Fashioned World of Wong Kar-wai

It is all in *The Hand*, in that expert tailor's hand. Shaping her dresses, he lovingly fabricates her image. She, in return, has taught him the feel of fashion by the touch of her hand. This woman can mold herself to a cheongsam, turning the enveloping fabric into her second skin. For these two, fashion is a permeable, erotic bond, a play of hands. Although they cannot be together, garments connect them. Haptically threaded between bodies, clothes are, indeed, transitive matter, and fashion is a form of intimate contact. It can ferry much across bodies and spaces and carry the very scent of being in its cloth.

The tailor knows this secret story of fashion. When he stitches her dress, he can get close to the texture of her being. She, in turn, can trust him to hold her in the threads of the fabric. And so he lovingly handles the cloth, caressing that inner sense of her, embracing the trace of her fleeting existence stitched in the fabric of her dress. Life, like fashion, is not only transitive but transitory. She may die of her illness, but her clothes will remain, a loving trace. Like a shroud, stained by her presence, her garments will endure as a residue, imbued with the energy they absorbed as she moved through the space of her life. Through this continuing fiction of fashion, in the transitive motion of clothes, the story itself will continue, as if following an invisible thread. By now we may be in *2046*, but still he dreams of her, elegantly clad in her retro cheongsam and still, unrequitedly, *In the Mood for Love*.

A Matter of Tailoring. In the world of Wong Kar-wai, tailoring rules. In his films, the living fabrics of being and memory are endlessly fabricated in sartorial ways, held in the texture of clothes. Unfolding as a tapestry on the screen, fashion, as we will see, creates many forms

2.1. Wong Kar-wai, *The Hand* (segment from the omnibus film *Eros*), 2005.

35mm film, color, sound, 42 min.

Film still. Courtesy of Photofest.

of “wearing” the image and activating surface, which are woven across the textured filaments of time. Images are fabricated as if they were textiles. Time itself moves in folds, as if it were cloth, suspended between pleats of narrative fabric, veiled in opaque transparency. It is layered in “sheets” of a future past and interlaced with clothes, in and out of films. A sartorial world unfolds in tessellated form here, stitched in patterns on the fibrous surface of intersecting screens. Ultimately, in this form of striated “fashioning,” the fabric of the visual comes alive. For after all, as the story of the tailor shows, everything in film is designed, tailored.

Film itself can be said to be a form of tailoring. It is stitched together in strands of celluloid, woven into patterns, designed and assembled, now even virtually, like a customized garment. The filmmaking process has been linked in this intimate way to the pattern of tailoring since its inception. When speaking of fashion and film, we should first observe that cinema, historically, has been literally “manufactured”: in the silent era and beyond, film was worked on largely by women editors, who labored on strips of film in production houses that resembled fashion houses, where they cut and stitched together materials, mimicking the very process of clothing construction. The language of cinema thus can be said to have developed out of the mode and model of tailoring.

Film language is fashioned in many ways. Not only the pattern of editing but also the movement of film can be said to issue from the undulation of cloth. The motion of motion pictures is, in fact, inextricably linked to a modernist variant of the “skirt dance” born of the vaudeville stage. At the origin of film, Loïe Fuller’s Serpentine Dance was transferred into cinematic rhythm as film production companies imitated her stage creations, creating numerous filmic versions of her performances.¹ Fuller’s elaborate, modern version of the skirt dance, a sort of fashionable dance of veils, had the potential to activate a kinesthetic sense as the motion of her garb, folding and unfolding, made for shifting figures and patterns, whirling in spirals. When we watch an electric rendering of the whirling clothes, in Thomas Edison’s versions of the Serpentine Dance as performed by Annabelle Whitford Moore (1894, 1895, 1897) and in many others of the era, including the Lumière brothers’ *Danse serpentine* (ca. 1897), we can see how fashion activated film. The translucent folds of a woman’s dress, dancing across the frame, tangibly animated the surface of the film screen and gave it a moving texture. The folds of the clothing, rippling through luminous projections, brought the wave of painted fabric and the fabric of painted light into the language of film. As Fuller’s Serpentine Dance was translated into cinema at the very inception of the medium, fashion was charged with becoming the living fabric of film.

Film, Fashion, and Visual Design. In a sense, Wong Kar-wai has picked up the cinematic paintbrush from where Loïe Fuller put it down. He has used it to expand the practice of filmic tailoring and drive it forward, into the realm of the visual arts. The artistic nature of this work urges us to consider style in cinema within the large and growing field of intersections between art and fashion, to which it makes an important



contribution.² Fashion is here an art form in the sense that it is a form of imaging, as much as visual art is. As Ann Hollander has pointed out, fashion can in fact work as art, for it has the potential to be a “visual fiction, like figurative art itself.”³ Its creations, as she suggests, should therefore be viewed “as paintings are seen and studied—not primarily as cultural by-products or personal expressions . . . but as connected links in a creative tradition of image-making.”⁴ Wong Kar-wai conceives of fashion precisely in these terms, as an expression of visual representation and an interactive form of image making. In his films, fashion is an aesthetic form of visual fabrication that is aligned with the history of art and the language of visual culture.

Wong’s artistic sensibility for fashion reflects a vision of cinema itself conceived as an art of visual tailoring. In a way, he aims to stand in the place of the tailor-designer as a maker of visual dressing, montage, and collage. While Wim Wenders fantasized about the relationship

2.2. Auguste and Louis Lumière, *Danse serpentine*, ca. 1897. Hand-painted film, silent, approx. 1 min. Film still.

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between fashion designer and film director in *Notebook on Cities and Clothes* (1989), Wong has made it into a practice.⁵ He conceives of filmmaking as a total work of visual design, laboring on fashion not only as an art but as an architecture. Refusing to distinguish between costume and set design but rather treating them jointly, he tailors them together in filmic assemblage. For *In the Mood for Love*, which we introduced in the previous chapter; *2046* (2004), a sequel of sorts to this earlier work, with science fiction overtones; and *The Hand*, the segment he directed for the omnibus film *Eros* (2005), he worked with William Chang Suk-ping, who in each case assumed the triple role of costume designer, production designer, and editor and was essential in creating the visual texture of the films. His work, also in collaboration with cinematographer Christopher Doyle, has enabled a rhythmic form of fashioning that results from the fluid visual intersection between clothes and settings. Costume design is redefined in this view of filmmaking. Fields of vision, art forms, and professions that are usually considered separate, and kept apart in both film production and criticism, are here put into aesthetic dialogue on spatiovisual grounds.

Fashioning Surface Space. The cinema of Wong Kar-wai configures a world out of clothes and reveals all that is layered in the intimate creases that clothe the image. *In the Mood for Love* is emblematic of this vision of enhanced surfaces and permeable spaces. As we began to show in the previous chapter, in this film attire is carefully constructed, as if it were a tangible form of architecture, while the city's fabric, in turn, is fashioned as if it were an enveloping dress, a second skin.

In fact, tailored in the guise of one of Maggie Cheung's cheongsams, the city of Hong Kong appears itself encased, wrapped tightly in time and sheathed in space, somewhere in the 1960s. Fashion is a marker of time period, and the cheongsam represented the trend of the moment, as popular in Hong Kong throughout the decade as it was in Shanghai or Taiwan.⁶ Women in the vanguard of fashion at this time paraded the tightly fitted one-piece garment in multicolored forms and fancy patterns. Su Li-zhen, also known as Mrs. Chan, is no exception. Whether flaunting her exquisite wardrobe of variously patterned dresses in the street, as she strolls for takeout, or sashaying around the apartment, she is always, as the French say, *bien dans sa peau*.⁷

In this film both the self and relationships are fashioned. Fashion is shown to be a dermal, haptic affair as well as a subjective experience, and, in this tangible sense, it is also revealed to be a connective thread between persons and things. Our trendy Mrs. Chan and the equally married Chow Mo-wan, played by a dapper Tony Leung, enact an erotic dance of missed encounters across hallways and alleyways that are designed to match the tone of their attire. At some point, this ballet turns into a swapping of identities and objects of design. As Mr. Chow notices that his wife possesses a handbag similar to the one Mrs. Chan received from her husband, and Mrs. Chan notices that her husband has a tie that Mr. Chow also wears, the two conclude that their respective spouses are having an affair. The transfer of accesso-

ries creates an uncanny link between the pair, which, ultimately, becomes a transmission of affects. Mrs. Chan and Mr. Chow are drawn to each other and become hooked on a game of exchange themselves. In a play of mimicry rather than mimesis, each makes use of fashion to act out the character of the other's spouse, performing these roles until each is able to enter the skin of the "other." She tries out what it would feel like to be the other woman, who carries that handbag and likes meat, and he enacts a similar game. In the process, the two end up "suited" themselves to each other and falling in love. Fashion here acts in performative ways as a connector, becoming a vehicle for putting oneself in the place and taking the affective space of a loved one. And thus, in the erotic fold of object relations, a new relationship is born.

Over the course of *In the Mood for Love*, fashion unfolds as a transitive matter that conveys the "transport" of affects. When the fashionably attired bodies draped in exquisite textures travel through an equally designed space, seamlessly set against the surface of the urban fabric, this fashioning makes mood. It fabricates not only the tone but also the tenor of the city. Veiled by a rain that coats its surface like gauze, its inhabitants shrouded in delicate fabrics, Hong Kong emits the feeling of a surface space. The architecture of the clothes and the architectonics of the space become ever more permeable and connected on the surface as the film progresses. Together, they end up casting a mental image of the city as the atmosphere of longing and melancholic mood for love enfold us.

Fashion Theory and Sartorial Philosophy. In the hands of the filmmaker-tailor, fashion ultimately emerges as a way of fashioning the space of the surface. This is achieved via atmospheric, textured forms of imaging that are stitched together in filmic assemblage across costume, production, and editing design. It is a process that calls into question what fashion usually means in the language of cinema, and the restrictive way in which the term is generally used. It asks us to revise a common understanding that fashion in film is simply costume design. Here fashion goes beyond costume and becomes an altogether different object for the circulation of meaning. What is at stake in Wong Kar-wai's work is a form of desire that is not simply attached to the costume as an object or commodity but concerns the larger sense of the fabrication of the surface of design. An agent of imaging and a maker of worlds, fashion, as we have argued, is akin to architecture as a form of material dwelling and as a visual design that can convey mental atmospheres through the sensible world. As it tailors this world of surface materiality in film, fashion does not dwell exclusively or separately in clothing but resides in the architectonics of the film language, contributing to the shaping of its aesthetic texture.

This use of fashion as a form of fashioning urges us to rethink not only the object of fashion but also the methods of fashion studies. As fashion goes beyond the mere use of costumes, it exceeds a strict concern with personal, social, gender, or national identities; it cannot be explained as only a question of identity and identification or as a function of voyeurism, exhibitionism, and fetishism—topics that have traditionally been the focus



2.3. Wong Kar-wai, *In the Mood for Love*, 2000. 35mm film, color, sound, 98 min. Film still. Courtesy of Universal Studios Licensing LLLP.

of much fashion theory. It is time to propose a different “model” for the theorization of fashion, one that is able to account for the way fashion works as a fabric of the visual in a larger field of spatiovisual fabrications.⁸ In thinking of fashion in this new way, we need to move beyond issues of spectacle and commodity and elaborate a playful form of sartorial theorization, concerned less with sociology or the semiotics of clothing and connected more closely to the history of art and the design of space, and to their theorization. This sartorial theory should be able to address forms of fashioning that include the relationship of clothes to the production of (mental) space; the clothing of space and the layering of time; and the tailoring of visual fabrics and the dressing of surface.

In order to further theorize this kind of fashioning and grasp how it materializes in the cinema of Wong Kar-wai, I suggest we return once more to Gilles Deleuze’s philosophy

of the fold, recapping those aspects that are relevant to advance our analysis. Inspired by Baroque architecture and Leibniz's concept of the monad, *The Fold*, as we have seen, can be interpreted as a form of sartorial philosophy, for here, where pleats of matter and folds of the soul are treated, the world emerges as a body of infinite folds, a set of "in between" spaces. Here we have a delicate fabrication: a canvas of interlaced textures that is layered as an interwoven surface and ultimately becomes a screen of pliable materials. As in the cinematic world of Wong Kar-wai, this sartorial world is full of connective threads: it holds folds of space, movement, and time. Here, motion and duration go hand in hand to create not only a textural language but also a language for texture. In fact, the philosophy of the fold can account for the way cinema is fashioned, for it contains an understanding of, and a feeling for, moving images. Ultimately, the fold is itself a moving image, for it is an image of thought. It projects that inner sense of motion that the act of thinking contains, as a feeling of being alive. In this sense, the fold finally represents the unfolding of experience. It can thus render the way we actually experience the world—in life as in film—as fashioned, indeed, in transitive forms of material transformation.

Folds of Time, Connective Threads. Constantly folding in upon itself, *In the Mood for Love* engrains the rhythm of the fold: in this work of moving images, all is pleated. Space and motion appear to unfold as an emotion, and so does the sense of time. The film reminds us that the fold issues from the material of clothes and from their function as timepieces, and it shares their quality of being objects activated by the motion of the body in the air. Here, time ripples like the folds of clothing or waves in the wind. It moves rhythmically, drifting across narrative space in undulating patterns. Knit to the fabric of the city, this kind of time is an experiential matter: a way to sense an atmosphere, time here is more a tonality, a rhythm, than a specific moment. One never really knows what time it is in this city, despite the ever-present clocks. Time is endlessly unfolding as a form of infinite duration or pervasive ambience.

Clothes punctuate this repetitive folding of duration. We are mesmerized by what Mrs. Chan wears, and through her outfits we become aware of the existence of time. We sense that time is passing, that hours or even days might have gone by, because of a change of clothes. Just as we seem forever wrapped in an endless feeling of temporal drift, a new cheongsam appears, marking time. In this film, then, the cheongsam, more than just a period piece, becomes a real matter of temporality. A wardrobe holds not only the sense but also the motion of being in time. In this way, clothes, themselves foldable, are finally turned into intervals—the seams of time's folds.

Skirting the Memory: Remembrance of Clothes Past. In the melancholic atmosphere that issues from folds of time, fashion can also become a representational vessel



2.4. Wong Kar-wai, *The Hand* (segment from the omnibus film *Eros*), 2005. 35mm film, color, sound, 42 min. Film still. Courtesy of Photofest.

for bygone and mnemonic time. As Ulrich Lehmann has elegantly argued in his book *Tigersprung: Fashion in Modernity*, one of the crucial ways in which *mode* becomes a language of *modernité* concerns the shape of time. In showing the significant role that fashion holds in the design of a philosophy of modernity, Lehmann stresses that the sartorial emerges in the culture of modernity as a metaphor for the construction of time, history, and memory. As he puts it, for many of the writers of modernity the “emphasis on remembrance is inseparable from the sartorial.”⁹

It is not only fashion per se but the theoretical discourse on fashion that is knit together with a sense of time passing. Georg Simmel, who delivered the first articulated philosophy of fashion in 1904, considered fashion’s ever-changing quality to be as fleeting and fugitive as time itself.¹⁰ Simmel, who was sensitive to the psychic dimension of adornment, especially for women, insisted on “the *tempo* of fashion” and the way it depends on a “sensibil-

ity to nervous incitements.”¹¹ In some ways, fashion’s constant search for novelty implies a sense of the ephemeral that skirts finitude and mortality. Its transient nature is a morbid affair. For Simmel, fashion carries death within itself. This sartorial sentiment is carried on in Wong Kar-wai’s cinema, as the tale of the tailor shows in *The Hand*. Here, the fabric of clothes not only weaves a sense of time past but binds the cherished memory of things past as an affect. Death is written as a text into the texture of the cloth that smells of the departed woman whom the tailor loved.

But beyond the scent of death, there is another profound way in which Simmel’s view of fashion is helpful in interpreting Wong’s own. This pioneering theory of fashion renders a sense of time that is spatial and in movement, and this closely suits the filmmaker’s way of folding fashion into moving urban atmospheres. Early on, Simmel understood the power and fascination of fashion in the modern urban world; a writer sensitive to “the mental life of the metropolis,” he considered fashion transitory also in the sense that it is an active means of expression.¹² Writing about rhythm and psychic tempo, he could grasp for us this fundamental, inner mechanism of fashion: “the power of the moving form upon which fashion lives.”¹³

Fashion, like the city, lives on the movement of transitive relations. In this sense, Simmel, despite some differences, shares theoretical ground with Walter Benjamin, who also related fashion to the fashioning of modern urban life and the affect it conveys. Fashion appears in *The Arcades Project* as an actual “passage,” and it does so substantially. Its transient nature is an essential component of the “passages” that constitute Benjamin’s vision of modernity and metropolitan life. Benjamin also observes the fact that “to the living, fashion defends the right of the corpse.”¹⁴ He notices that “clothing and jewelry are . . . as much at home with what is dead as . . . with living flesh.”¹⁵ His conclusion is that death “appears in fashion as no less ‘overcome’ and precisely through the sex appeal of the inorganic, which is something generated by fashion.”¹⁶ When interpreted beyond fetishism, this affirmation of the relationship between organic and inorganic matter reveals the profound sense in which fashion is closely bound to a form of psychic severing and joining. This binding is a folding form of in-betweenness, and it can stand for the bridge of remembrance—the type of material separation and connectivity that creates the process of mourning. For Benjamin, in fact, a theory of fashion eventually unfolds as a form of historical remembering; in his philosophy, fashion becomes the material of time and history, a passage that is a temporal fold. And when fashion ends up embracing memory in its folds, it can weave it within its texture. Benjamin constructs a fragmentary text of passages, itself redolent with folds and moving like pleats of fabric, while making fashion a central metaphor for the weaving of mnemonic time. In such a way, a sartorial, material philosophy is born that can ultimately convey in the folds of its fabric the capacity to fabricate the texture of cultural memory.

Benjamin’s mnemonic twist on the fold reveals an important aspect of Wong Kar-wai’s material way of fashioning the image, for the Benjaminian idea of fashion foreshadows the filmmaker’s own fascination with mnemonic textures as expressed in visual form. This is a matter of the “wearing” of images, for as Siegfried Kracauer also noted, “photography is



bound to time in precisely the same way as *fashion*.¹⁷ Over the course of *In the Mood for Love*, clothes in many ways absorb time, and the city of Hong Kong itself becomes lived in, consumed, and worn as if it were cloth. Here, cloth is used as in the folds of Baroque architecture and sculpture: as both erotic and funerary drapery. At the hotel where Mrs. Chan and Mr. Chow might have made love, the fabric of the red curtains holds the memory of an affair that couldn't materialize. When the red curtains, matched by her red coat, move in the wind, becoming the emblem of mourning for an impossible, unrequited love, this reminds us that "the fold is inseparable from wind" and the wave of time.¹⁸ In the end, the whole film unfolds in this way, like a memory fabric, sensuously joined to mourning and



melancholia. It moves as if it were retroactively told to us in folded mnemonic form, from the conclusive moment when Mr. Chow whispers the secret of their story and deposits its memory in a hole in the wall at Angkor Wat, thus fashioning a process of mourning.

In the sartorial world of Wong Kar-wai, fashion embraces the folds of time as its very model insofar as it shows how the fold of cloth embodies the actual pattern of memory: its iterative way of returning in repetitive pattern, like undulating pleats. The iterative matter of folding stories characterizes Wong's cinema in a way that goes beyond intertextuality to reach into a space that we may call "intertextuality." In a way, *In the Mood for Love* is a souvenir of the events that occurred in his earlier film *Days of Being Wild* (1991). And

2.5. Wong Kar-wai, *2046*, 2004.

35mm film, color, sound, 129 min.

Film still. Courtesy of Photofest.

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2.6. Wong Kar-wai, *In the Mood for Love*, 2000. 35mm film, color, sound, 98 min. Film still. Courtesy of Universal Studios Licensing LLLP.

in retroactive fashion, Mr. Chow's love for Mrs. Chan is mourned in the future time of *2046*, knit into the memory of a cheongsam, as also occurs in *The Hand*. As the cheongsam reappears in *2046*, framed and worn in the same fashion, on the street or in a car, it turns the object into a remnant and all women into the Su Li-zhen of *In the Mood for Love*. As the train of the future of *2046* travels back from the memory land of lost loves, narrative elements are threaded between films and interwoven between them. It is not by chance that the hotel room of the red curtain that matches her red coat is numbered 2046 in *In the Mood for Love*. This space held in its fabric an anticipated memory and unfolded, in Benjaminian ways, a future remembrance. Ultimately, then, it is the folding texture of the editing that is at play here, tailored by the director, in collaboration with William Chang Suk-ping, to be as mnemonic as fashion. They have even created intervals of the future, embedding them in the past and foreshadowing them in mnemonic folds, as in the case of a pair of pink slippers in *In the Mood for Love*, a cherished souvenir that disappears

before it can be taken away. In the cinema of Wong Kar-wai, we could be offered no better testimony that objects of clothing are indeed, à la Benjamin, the melancholic form of collection that is our future recollection.

Dressing the Surface. In Wong's cinema, the fashioning and wearing of the image takes shape in folding patterns, in a moving aesthetic of visual fabrication that engages the surface of design. Here, as a theoretical sartorial concept, the fold appears not only as a mobile, iterative, temporal structure, as we have just argued, but also as a pliable surface that can sustain a play of reversibility. Let us be reminded that in folds of cloth, as in folds of paper, there is no real distinction between exterior and interior surface. The fold, as we suggested earlier, is a pliant, even reversible construction. As a surface, pleats of matter can be said to stand for both an inside and an outside, and to register their transits.

Wong fashions his visual world in such a pleated manner when he uses fashion as a surface related to architecture, employing the structure of the fold to create a fluid relationship between inside and outside. The atmosphere of *In the Mood for Love* is especially fashioned as an "inside out." If the exterior of the city feels internal, at the same time the interiors are permeated by exterior motifs. Su Li-zhen often wears floral patterns on her dresses that match curtain folds and wallpaper textures. The natural motifs and variously shaped flowers that decorate both her lavish cheongsams and the interiors turn things inside out.

This wearing of an exterior surface in the interiors creates a particular affect in the film. Atmosphere, issuing from the haptic quality of cloth, is as permeable and membranelike as skin. After all, folds of cloth are transitive matter, for they create a surface that lies in between inside and outside and thus is potentially connective as well as reversible. As Hélène Cixous put it, there is a translatability to fashion, for "the dress does not separate the inside from the outside, it translates. . . . In this way, the dress, like the dream . . . hides in its folds the great voyage in proximity and intimacy."¹⁹ Because it relies on foldable structures, fashion—an agent of the transmission of affects—is able to create porous, reversible, intimate atmospheres that can be transformative.

Every time Mrs. Chan puts on another cheongsam an atmospheric shift occurs as a subtle change of disposition. The mood of the space changes as the geometry that sculpts her figure gives way to vibrant patterns and colorful blurs. Her dresses seem to exteriorize her inner world and, reversibly, make it come to the surface in translation. The design of the pattern adorning her body interprets the way she seeks privacy in the crowded apartment or, conversely, shows how she tries to open herself up. Matters turn inside out most explicitly in an iterative, moody scene that rhythmically flows to the sound of melancholic music. As Su Li-zhen drifts away into a reflective state of mind, the floral pattern of her dress blends into the flowery folds of the curtains, the vase of flowers, and the lampshade, likewise decorated with floral motifs. Enveloped in this pleated environment, she is folded into textured atmospheres of surface space. As she weaves her way into this interior world

representing external space, she ends up by a window, framed in a tessellated shot against an outdoor plant, with all the natural interior scenery visible in the background. In the permeable fabric of exteriors that turn into interiors, and vice versa, we sense her yearning for an exit from her own enclosure, and from the constraints of her marriage, into the space of desire. In this enveloping surface we are able to access her inner state of mind—the fabric of her inner landscape, itself adorned with its own tapestry of affects.

Texturology: Tapestry, Texture, Weave. In the sartorial atmospheres of Wong Kar-wai, visual text is actual textile. Here we have what Deleuze calls a “texturology”: a philosophical and artistic conception in which matter, as we have seen, is clothed in the sense that it is a fabric, an enveloping texture.²⁰ The filmmaker’s use of fashion reflects this enveloping design, consistently figuring a fibrous form of visual representation. This is most evident when Su Li-zhen is seen outdoors in Hong Kong, clad and framed against the ruinous texture of dilapidated city walls. In a scene dense as a tapestry, the peeling layers of paint, rendered even more textural by the peeling fabric of the posters attached to their surface, are set against, and threaded to, the fabric of her cheongsam.

The same tessellated pattern, almost like a form of braiding, is repeated in the interiors, beyond floral motifs. If Su Li-zhen’s patterned cheongsam is woven in an undulated form, you can be sure that the curtains behind her will reprise the wave. If she reads a magazine, the graphic design is transferred onto the design of her dress. The crimson brocade of her dress gives volume and surface thickness to the ornate wallpaper she stands against. And, finally, the geometry of the cheongsam enhances minimal figures and minimalist shapes, as when the light that shines on the gray wall matches a translucent, splendidly monochromatic cheongsam design. In collaborating closely with William Chang Suk-ping and Christopher Doyle, the director has created a real visual tapestry: a filmic canvas that is actually “textural” as it emerges out of overdressed, saturated surfaces, where clothes are turned into walls and walls into fabric.

The sartorial surface of this cinema joins dress to address in ways that engage the fundamental meaning of decoration. In dressing lived space while dwelling in clothes as modes of inhabitation, this cinema finally reminds us of the origin of fashion as a form of architecture. As the nineteenth-century German art and architectural historian Gottfried Semper showed, walls have an origin in textiles, as hanging cloth or woven mats.²¹ In speaking of dressing walls, Semper fashioned a textural theory of space, activating the vital connection between surface and ornament.²² And let us not forget that in establishing a relationship between ornament and mobility, he termed the wall a *Wand*, that is, a partition or screen, and set it in relation to *Gewand*, meaning garment or clothing. When Wong fashions a world of ornaments and décor, Semper’s theory becomes materialized in film. We experience precisely this textural form of space: the activation of a sartorial surface. In these films, as clothes turn into wallpaper, walls become partition. They are never tectonic

but rather lightly built as panels, and often function as if they were screens. Walls breathe, as fabric does. They are dressed in clothes and act, as does fashion, as connective thread between people. Their surfaces are enhanced by a play of light and shadow, in the same way that the fabric of the cheongsam is activated. Decorated in a luminous manner, walls become as enveloping and riveting a canvas as the fabric of dresses, in a play of surfaces that elegantly fuses ornament and adornment.

Surface Tension: Screening and Veiling. In the interlacing of wall, garment, and screen, a material depth is visualized, for when luminously dressed, surface has materiality. In the activation of ornament, we can experience another aspect of Deleuze's "texturology": folds of matter characterized by the fact that "matter is a buoyant surface."²³ A flowing depth of surfaces comes into being in this sartorial philosophy, as it does in the sartorial aesthetic that practices fashioning as wearing. In the fashioned world of Wong Kar-wai, the fold works at producing a dense, floating surface in which one senses the material of light and the fabric of color in a rich play of hues and shift of shades. Visual pleating and folding create volume and depth, grain and granularity. Residue and sedimentation appear retained in the saturated surface. This practice of folding is a layering of the image that ultimately makes for the thickness of surface.

As fashion folds fluidly into architectural veneer, an aesthetic of coating is activated on the screen. In the connective thread between the patterned cheongsam and the textured walls, the screen becomes as layered as painted walls and as condensed as wallpaper. The textural materiality that issues from the latticed quality of the image eventually turns the surface of the screen into actual wallpaper. We almost never see clearly through the fabric of this screen. Several coatings and planar surfaces are constructed out of different materials, and all are folded together. To enhance the effect of partition, the frame is often obscured on one side. Door or window frames are also used to create an opacity of surface. Cigarette smoke accentuates the density. Glass and mirrors create reflections, and curtains veil the space. There are always so many layers to traverse on the surface of this screen that its apparent flatness is defied. The screen itself, layered like cloth, takes on volume and becomes a space of real dimension. The screen is activated in such a way that the play of surface can also appear to show coats of paint, as occurs often in painting. Like Loie Fuller's cinematic version of the skirt dance, fashion is indeed for Wong Kar-wai an electric way of creating dense, luminous surfaces by painting with light. As in Fuller's *Serpentine Dance*, with its whirling, transparent, shining folds of cloth, this sartorial surface is characterized by reflections and iridescence, which become space and fill the planar surface of the screen. This pervasive technique of fashioning the image finds full expression in Wong's *Ashes of Time* (1994), which was rereleased in 2008 after a digital visual remastering that enhanced its color effects. Here, the textural materiality of the surface is pushed to the limit. Scintillation and translucency enhance the compositional luminosity of the screen. In drafting an almost abstracted play of hues, the camera acts like an actual



2.7. Wong Kar-wai, 2046, 2004.
35mm film, color, sound, 129 min.
Film still. Courtesy of Photofest.

painterly tool, turning into a brush that glides across the screen surface. As the camera sweeps across the frame there are no longer definite shapes or contours but only blurs on the screen. It is as if we can feel the motion, the texture of the brushstrokes. As we become aware that this motion resembles the tension of the brush against the grain of the canvas, we sense the deep working of the surface and, in the end, can even perceive a set of finishes and patinas. Thick with visual residues that resemble deposits of pigment, this surface is, literally, “coated.”

The depth of the surface is the result not only of coating but also of veiling, for the layers of partition through which we see can be as light as a veil in Wong’s cinema. This veiling of surface can be usefully interpreted in light of Semper’s view of the architecture of the screen as partition and shelter, a reading that can help theorize the film screen. Such play of surface shows that the film screen itself can act as a veil. Here, screening is understood as a form of shielding and concealing, utilizing a property that belongs not only to the fabric of the veil but to the function of veiling. The surface of the screen is “dressed” as if shrouded in an actual “serpentine dance” of translucent collisions between dress surface and veiling. In this sense, the use of fashion in Wong Kar-wai’s cinema can make one feel the presence of the screen, rendering it not only visible but as palpable as tissue. After all, the screen is itself a material made of reflective surface. Historically, it was even an actual sheet of cloth, hung on walls to receive projected images of light. No wonder the screen can now act like a real canvas. In this dressing and veiling of surfaces, cinema joins fashion as a way to project imaging on canvas—activating that textile support that is shared by painting, clothes, and screen.

The sinuous dance of film’s origin thus materializes in a sartorial filmic aesthetic that shares a dressing of surface with painting and architecture. In this fashioned world, we finally experience the material of the screen in surface tension. The effect of the surface dressing and the visual tapestry of *In the Mood for Love* is further enhanced in *2046*, where, as in *Ashes of Time*, swipes and superimpositions create additional effects of textural depth and tension, like striation and distress in the projected image. The surface of the screen becomes a stretched-out canvas, elastic and tensile, and thus, in the end, appears really “worn.”

Such wearing of surface is an important phenomenon that cinema shares with architecture and art: today, surface tension has emerged as a concept in the visual and spatial arts and is shaping their aesthetic development.²⁴ In the contemporary fashion of architecture, the façades of buildings have become lighter and more tensile, energized by luminous play, texturally decorated as if they were canvas, and treated increasingly as envelopes and membranes.²⁵ When a surface condition is activated in this way on visual planes, it turns façade and picture frame into something resembling a screen. But this filmic screen is no longer a window. It is configured like a canvas in which distinctions between inside and outside temporarily dissolve into the depth of surface. Hence, the screen itself is becoming a fold. And thus, in this contemporary fashioned world, all can fold back into screen surface—that reflective, fibrous canvas spectacularly dressed by luminous projections.



Surfaces of Light

