Once more, the emperor's new clothes

In the Mood for Love, written and directed by Wong Kar-wai

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A favorite ploy of American film industry types, when pressed about the generally dreadful state of contemporary filmmaking, is to blame the public. “It's not our fault!” they protest. “We simply give audiences what they want.” This rings a little hollow when the limits of what audiences are permitted to see (and therefore *able* to “want”) are set almost entirely by large conglomerates with definite economic requirements and social interests. As long as moviemaking continues to be a business, artistry will remain subordinate and essentially hostage to profit. No discussion of cinema has meaning unless it takes this reality into account.

How cinematic public opinion, so to speak, is manipulated by commercial and ideological concerns can be seen presently in the case of East Asian filmmaking. The public relations and media apparatuses are currently informing North American audiences, or that specific portion residing in a handful of large cities, that films such as *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (Ang Lee), *Yi Yi* (Edward Yang) and *In the Mood for Love* (Wong Kar-wai) are representative of the best in Chinese-language filmmaking from Taiwan and Hong Kong. Since filmgoers, aside from specialists and those able to attend film festivals on a consistent basis, have no means of challenging this claim and indeed no reason to, many will derive a significantly false picture from this marketing campaign.

Crouching Tiger is a fairly insufferable film, in my view. This patronizing attempt to combine “art” and martial arts adds up to very little. *Yi Yi* has some valuable and truthful moments, embodied particularly in the performance of screenwriter and director Wu Nien-jen in one of the lead roles. It also has complacent and fundamentally soothing elements.

From the mid-1980s a number of Taiwanese filmmakers made important films, films that demonstrated a poetic and tough-minded attitude to problems of history and society and their impact on individual psychological life. For example, Hou Hsiao-hsien's *A Time to Live and a Time to Die*, *Dust in the Wind*, *A City of Sadness*, *Good Men, Good Women* and *Goodbye South, Goodbye*; Tsai Ming-liang's *Vive l'amour*; Yang's *Taipei Story*; Hsu Hsiao-ming's *Heartbreak Island* and *Homesick Eyes*; Wan Jen's *Super Citizen Ko*; Wu's *A Borrowed Life*, Chang Tso-chi's *Darkness and Light*. From Hong Kong, there is Fruit Chan's *Little Cheung*. Several younger Chinese filmmakers have made serious and critical works, including He Jianjun (*Postman*), Jia Zhang Ke (*Xiao Wu*) and Wang Xiaoshuai (*So Close to Paradise*), as well as Zhang Yimou and certain of the better known directors.

Many of these films took up the conditions and lives of working class or poor people, and took them up seriously. Certain of the Taiwanese works also exposed the brutal and repressive character of the US-backed Nationalist (Kuomintang) regime, established in 1949.

For 15 years American distributors largely ignored these Asian films, preventing US audiences from seeing more critical viewpoints. Now that work from Taiwan and the region has a certain reputation, now that a number of artistically presentable, palatable and basically harmless works have made their appearance, the latter are packaged to North American audiences as the best from the region. And the popularity of these films will be used in the future as part of the argument about what people “want” and “don't want,” as if they'd ever had any choice in the matter! The whole process is indescribably cynical.

In the Mood for Love, by Hong Kong director Wong Kar-wai, is a poor film, in my opinion. It has been praised to the skies.

“It is a restless moment,” says a title on the screen, followed by “Hong Kong 1962.” The film follows the relations of a Mr. Chow (Tony Leung Chiu Wai) and a Mrs. Chan (Maggie Cheung). These two, next-door neighbors, discover their spouses, whose faces we never see, are conducting a love affair. The betrayed pair begin spending time together. They act out the parts of the unfaithful couple, trying to imagine how the affair began. But Mrs. Chan says, “We won't be like them.” They rehearse confronting their spouses about the infidelities. Mr. Chow, a journalist, moves out and starts to write a martial arts novel, and asks Mrs. Chan to assist him with the writing. Eventually, he takes a job in Singapore. Although tempted, the wronged twosome suppress their feelings for each other.

In the Mood for Love fails by every standard. Wong Kar-wai is a clever director. He proved that with films like *Chungking Express*, a flashy, shallow work. At a certain juncture (between, let's say, *Chungking Express* [1994] and *Happy Together* [1997]) the director perhaps sensed a change in the wind. Indeed at some point in the mid- to late 1990s a flock of

filmmakers around the world (in France and Scandinavia, for example), with nothing particular to say, felt the need to alter course. They recognized that attention was being increasingly directed toward certain socially detailed and serious-minded films from Taiwan, Iran and elsewhere. The appeal of "postmodern" flippancy was waning. Seriousness became fashionable. Unfortunately, these directors still had little to say, they remained at heart careerist and self-absorbed.

In any event, they had little to fear from critics and "film experts," because the latter, for the most part, have the same limited vision. Determined at all costs to be on the "cutting edge," which simply means today demonstrating a feeling for style—or, more properly, stylishness—the critics are by and large incapable of distinguishing between a serious investigation of social life and mere imposture. If Wong Kar-wai chooses to depict lower-middle-class life, centering on meals and the details of everyday life, in a handful of scenes in *In the Mood for Love*, which superficially call to mind certain sequences in films by Hou Hsiao-hsien and others, then the average critic seems incapable of identifying this as the opportunist maneuver it is. Such scenes are *intended* to give a veneer of "realism" and authenticity to an essentially hollow work.

In the Mood for Love begins in 1962. Why (aside from the fact that Wong, born in Shanghai in 1958, was a child in Hong Kong at the time)? What is the basis of the "restless moment"? The director devotes attention to the clothes, the decor and other secondary matters, but virtually none to the larger issues of the history or even the social psychology of the area. This would have been only 13 years after the Maoist taking of power on the mainland, Hong Kong remained a British colony. What do we learn about any of that, directly or *indirectly*? This is a film for those who find events such as wars and revolutions and their consequences simply inconveniences.

The characters float down hallways and streets to Nat King Cole in Spanish. They pass and re-pass one another, on the way to the noodle stand or wherever, never touching. They stand meaningfully on rainy street corners. He smokes cigarettes. She wears form-fitting outfits. This is "delirious," "hallucinatory," "mesmerizing," say the critics. All the much-vaunted color and music and camerawork leaves me cold. Because it is at the service of affectation and petty concerns. Mr. Chow and Mrs. Chan don't find it within themselves to consummate an affair, today, such types would—this seems to be a theme of *In the Mood for Love*, and I don't find it a compelling one.

"That era has passed. Nothing that belongs to it exists any more," says a title on the screen at the end. Besides being wildly untrue, of course, this is banal. Many things didn't happen in 1962 that would happen today, and vice versa. Gasoline prices were lower, doctors made house-calls and shoppers probably received better service in department stores. So? Morals and manners mutate, the immediate social climate changes. Recognizing that rather self-evident truth is hardly by itself the substance of enduring art. What about the more profound social currents and trends?

One never really comes to care very much about this pair. Nothing about their lives provides insight into the *general* obstacles to and possibilities for human happiness. This sort of idle "romanticism," which isn't going to trouble anyone's sleep, is rampant at present. Numerous details and secondary characters (Mrs. Suen, Ah Ping) are thrown in to give the appearance of "life." They don't contribute to the film's principal concerns, such as they are, but serve as mere decoration, again, so we will be confused and mistake this for a serious film. The central relationship is not convincing. I don't believe these people have the air of 1962 about them, they are extremely modern hipsters, too cool for words. This woman is a clerk in a shipping office? It's unlikely enough to be laughable.

So much here has to do with marketing and image and career. Why does almost no one see through this? Why do people fall for this silly and insipid stuff? This is a film designed to flatter a section of the middle class public with the thought that its concerns and illusions are truly of world-historical importance. The targeted filmgoer thinks: "I'm just like that! I once nearly had an affair, and I've always regretted it. That would have been my great love. If I'd pursued it, things would have been *entirely* different. My life has a tragic element, after all!" (Artists once understood the role of this sort of manipulated fantasy. See R.W. Fassbinder's *The Merchant of Four Seasons* [1972].)

Art and tragedy need to make some point of contact with *necessity*. The notion that love and desire can be treated in an insightful fashion apart from historical and social analysis is a fallacy to which many of our contemporary artists have succumbed, and is in part responsible for the large number of tedious works on movie screens, stages and bookstore shelves. The relationship between two individuals is a social relationship in which many processes, perhaps hidden from the participants, play parts. Stories of adultery or repressed desire can form and obviously have formed the basis of significant art, but only when they are associated in some fashion with a larger viewpoint and beyond that, dissatisfaction and protest. Both of those aspects are absent here. This is a filmmaker pleased with himself and his place in society and cinema. He merely expresses regret that others in the past were not so fortunate. Self-satisfied nostalgia, designed mostly to impress the susceptible, is not the stuff of great art.