

# An exchange on Wong Kar-wai's film *In the Mood for Love*

21 May 2001

The following is a letter on the WWSW review of the film *In the Mood for Love*, followed by a reply by Arts Editor David Walsh.

Some thoughts on David Walsh's review on *In the Mood for Love* "Once More, The Emperor's New Clothes"—see the original review at <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2001/mar2001/mood-m20.shtml>

It is obvious what background David Walsh is from, and how it shapes his view of how movies should be made. His critique on *In the Mood for Love*, is in my humble opinion, unwarranted precisely because of how Walsh's limited view is shaped.

Walsh starts with criticizing the American film industry for imposing their view on the American film audience, with the excuse that "we simply give the audience what they want." He then goes on to say how "artistry will remain subordinate and essentially hostage to profit." Is this a criticism towards *ITMFL*? If so, it is ironical that Wong Kar-wai is blamed for being commercial, considering that a few years ago audience demanded their money back after watching *Ashes of Time* and it is not only until recently that the Hong Kong mainstream audience started appreciating him a little bit.

Walsh's point of view is summed up in one sentence in his article where he states that *Chungking Express* is a flashy, shallow work.

The whole argument about style over substance has been raised ever since Wong Kar-wai started to make films, and is certainly not new. In this aspect, Walsh adds nothing new to the argument.

Walsh blames *ITMFL* for demonstrating "stylishness," being opportunist, because Wong choose to depict lower-middle-class life. Walsh seems to think that Wong was attempting to shoot a socially critical movie. He argues that *ITMFL* is lacking in showing the social and political aspect of that time, implying that because "wars and revolutions" are not shown the movie is bad. "Only 13 years after Maoist taking of power," and Walsh criticizes that we don't "learn about any of that, directly or indirectly." Is he kidding? Only 13 years? He is blaming a movie for not showing anything that happened 13 years ago?

Walsh is criticizing *ITMFL* for something Wong never intended *ITMFL* to be in the first place. Social criticism. It is obvious Walsh would like to see more "profound social currents." Unfortunately for Walsh, *ITMFL* wasn't intended to

show "profound social currents" in the first place. And is a movie necessarily bad because it doesn't show any socially critical elements?

He also contrasts himself at one point by saying first that "One never really comes to care very much about this pair" but then he doesn't understand "Why do people fall for this silly and insipid stuff?" Perhaps because the filmgoer can identify himself with the pair?

"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. [...]"

I hope for Walsh he hasn't got the chance to see *Ashes of Time* yet. ;-)

LT

David Walsh's reply:

I read with considerable interest the response of LT to my comments about *In the Mood for Love*, but I do not agree with it.

In the first place, LT seems to be under some misapprehension about my critique. I would hardly blame Wong Kar-wai for the manipulations of the American film industry. I was simply making the point that *In the Mood for Love* has rather neatly suited the purposes of that industry (or at least its "art" wing): i.e., Wong's film has "East Asian" credentials, which carry some weight (and cachet) at the present moment, while at the same time, in my view, it has little of the genuine bite of the more complex and critical Taiwanese and Chinese films of the past 15 years or so.

The essence of LT's disagreements lies in these two paragraphs:

"Walsh seems to think that Wong was attempting to shoot a socially critical movie. He argues that *ITMFL* is lacking in showing the social and political aspect of that time, implying that because 'wars and revolutions' are not shown the movie is bad. 'Only 13 years after Maoist taking,' and Walsh criticizes that we don't 'learn about any of that, directly or indirectly.' Is he kidding? Only 13 years? He is blaming a movie for not showing anything that happened 13 years ago?"

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show 'profound social currents' in the first place. And is a movie necessarily bad because it doesn't show any socially critical elements?"

My criticism of *In the Mood for Love* had different aspects. First, I felt it borrowed from better (Taiwanese) films certain external features (the "genre" scenes, eating and preparing food, the figures of Mrs. Suen and Ah Ping, etc.) simply for the purpose of impressing certain critics and audience members. These sequences do not add up to anything, they are decoration.

Second, I found the relationship of the two central figures unconvincing and unenlightening. No one has yet revealed to me, including LT, what light this film sheds on love, memory or anything else. We are simply supposed to take this on faith. I for one do not see any great insights or emotional depth. I see a rather sentimental and self-pitying love story, kitsch and melodrama without criticism. I contrasted to that Fassbinder's work, but one could cite Douglas Sirk and others.

I made the point in the original comment that stories of adultery or repressed desire have often formed the basis of significant art—*Madame Bovary*, *Anna Karenina*, *Effi Briest*, *The House of Mirth*, to mention only a few of the novels. In each of these latter works, however, the author was making a larger point, about a distorting or mutilating social situation and its consequences. The extraordinary feature of *In the Mood for Love* is its general lack of protest and air of complacency. This is summed up in the title on the screen at the beginning of the film: "That era has passed. Nothing that belongs to it exists any more."

If this is not meant ironically, one would be obliged to ask the director: then why are you making this film? Simply out of nostalgia? If one thinks about it for a second, it is an absurd position that thoroughly undercuts the purpose or at least the urgency of the work. The filmmaker is saying, in essence, this particular kind of unhappiness once occurred, but the further development of the society has taken care of the problem. Can one imagine Flaubert or Hardy, or, for that matter, Sirk or Josef von Sternberg, making such a comment?

LT suggests that my big weakness is that I want "social criticism" and nothing less. First of all, as a general proposition, I plead guilty. I think one should weigh one's words carefully. If LT disapproves of social criticism, that can only mean he is not critical of society, i.e., he approves of the way things are. Is that what he means? If so, he is welcome to that position. As he hints darkly ("It is obvious what background David Walsh is from"), I write for a socialist publication and am, in fact, a socialist critic.

It is astonishing how far to the right official intellectual life has swung. One is now accused of being "socially critical," like US politicians are accused (falsely) of being "liberals." These words or phrases have become swear words in certain mouths.

In any event, it was not so much social criticism I was asking for from *In the Mood for Love* as any sense of the historical and social as they might have played themselves out in Hong Kong

in 1962 even in personal relations. One of the more remarkable features of LT's letter (and entirely representative of contemporary attitudes) is his astonishment that I should be concerned with the impact of the Chinese Revolution on life and social relations in Hong Kong, which, after all, had taken place eons before ... 13 years.

At certain moments one does not quite know what to say.

I am an opponent of Maoist Stalinism and I do not believe the Chinese revolution placed the working class and the peasantry in power. I do not consider China a "socialist," much less a "communist" country or ever to have been one. And now the Chinese "Communist" Party has openly and enthusiastically embraced capitalism. Nonetheless, the Chinese Revolution of 1949 was one of the more significant events of the century for the entire globe. For a tiny colonial enclave on its southeastern coast, it meant *everything*. That a filmmaker should not deem it of interest to consider even the psychological implications of these events, however he should choose to materialize them in a drama, says all I need to know. Such a work will not endure. Audience members in a somewhat more enlightened future (a not so distant future) will simply look at one another and wonder what the filmmaker was playing at.

In general, the film says nothing substantial about Hong Kong in 1962 and could have been set, aside from its external trappings, in Berlin in 1895 or Cairo in 1922.

The other feature of the whole business I find disturbing is the general chorus of approval that has risen up from film critics in regard to *In the Mood for Love* and the sense I get that it is impermissible to criticize this work. Why this unanimity and mood of conformism? Such an uncritical attitude cannot be healthy.

I think *In the Mood for Love* is a poor work, self-conscious and empty.

David Walsh



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