

Letters and a reply on Wong Kar-wai's *In the Mood for Love*

30 May 2001

Below we are posting three letters sent to the WSWS concerning “An exchange on Wong Kar-wai's film In the Mood for Love”
<http://www.wsws.org/articles/2001/may2001/corr-m21.shtml>,
as well as a reply to a reader by WSWS Arts Editor David Walsh.

Dear Mr. Walsh,

Thank you for your review and other comments (in “An exchange on Wong Kar-wai”) on *In the Mood for Love*. Your comments on the film are the first I have read by you, and I agree with many of the sentiments you expressed. Since reading this review I have since read many of your other reviews, and have discovered we share similar views. This is particularly true with regard to Chinese-language films.

What a joy it was to read your views of *In the Mood for Love*. Although the film has had some poor reviews in Hong Kong, they have in the main been as you suggest; sycophantic and vacuous appraisals of a hollow film.

I look forward to reading all your reviews on the web site over the coming months, and in the process learning more about how to interpret a movie from a scientific and Marxist perspective.

I find much that is disturbing in Hong Kong and mainland movies, but even more troublesome is the uncritical praise they meet when played overseas. People with no knowledge of Chinese society have no yardstick by which to measure these products. Many of them are rubbish. They are feel-good movies and cynical in pandering to ignorant audiences. Many Chinese people do not watch these movies, and if they do feel sick.

Thank you for your lessons in interpretation. When I have more time I would like to write you some of my own thoughts on current Chinese movies. By the way, do you speak Chinese; you seem to watch many Chinese movies. Are they all translated into English?

In solidarity,

ZQ

22 May 2001

To WSWS:

I read with interest LT's letter criticizing David Walsh's review of *In the Mood for Love*, helmed by director du jour Wong Kar-wai.

Now, I must admit that ideologically speaking, I'm much

closer to Mr. Walsh's point of view, not only regarding this particular film, but also his world view of society and art. Actually, I believe Mr. Walsh was kind to this piece of trivial banality. But I do want to take issues with both of them on a certain matter.

In his letter, LT asserts that it's “obvious what background David Walsh is from, and how it shapes his view of how movies should be made [emphasis mine].” He continues by saying that Mr. Walsh's critique is “unwarranted precisely because of how Mr. Walsh's limited view is shaped.”

It is, indeed, as Mr. Walsh replies, a rather ominous comment, but Mr. Walsh's answer, as good as it is, omits a fundamental issue which LT has raised unwittingly: ideology.

Perhaps it has never occurred to LT to question what his/her background is and how it shapes his/her view of how movies should indeed be made. Neither, I think, has it ever crossed his/her mind how limited his/her view is or how he/she has acquired it. LT makes the assumption, as almost everyone else in our society does, that he/she is not guided by any ideology (or class politics). The smugness of his/her comment demonstrates that it has never occurred to him/her that the ideas in his head are not the products of his/her own individual brain—though he/she may shape them as such—but the product of social relations developed over millennia. It has never occurred to him/her that his comments are themselves the product of—and are strapped and shaped by—capitalist ideology and that he/she him/herself sees the world, including art, through the blindfold of bourgeois self-justification.

But ideas in people's heads reflect the world, that world is capitalist, and the general ideas of the epoch and its ruling classes are what dominate society and individuals. Why should then anyone even dare question the lack of historical context in a film that begs it? For to place this story in a larger context might, just might, offer a subversive insight into our social existence—the last thing that capitalist ideology and its purveyors would want. So, LT can retreat into his/her own subjectivism and self-satisfied smugness that underlie his/her basic assumption: that ideology is what Marxism espouses, but not what capitalism ever does.

Thus he/she can say that *In the Mood for Love* —or any work that aspires to art—is not the product of ideology and, therefore, should not reflect anything, especially if it's “non-political.”

Unfortunately, this reasoning matches the film in shallowness and smugness. Both film and LT end up so smug about people, art and their larger social connections, that they end up being, not searchers for new discoveries, but justifiers for things as they are.

The ideas that dominate LT's thinking are the same that dominate *In the Mood for Love*!

Of course, the problem is not as mechanical as that. Obviously, new ideas from the material changes in the world enter people's brains, through their practice. They guide individuals and masses of people to change their perceptions and understanding of that world until they eventually overthrow the system—despite the ideological stranglehold that was possible only during relative peace between the classes.

Of course, LT has the right to his opinion any time, anywhere. But is it, in the ultimate analysis, truly his opinion? Isn't it the product of his own ideological biases? Frankly, LT, what is your ideology? What has shaped it? And why such servility to the prevailing winds of ideological conformity?

RNR

22 May 2001

As much as I hate to say it, David Walsh's inane non-response to LT's critique of his *In the Mood for Love* [review] has eroded any faith I may have had in his reviewing abilities.

For example, at one point Walsh says, "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." He then proceeds to write several paragraphs on "how far to the right official [?] intellectual life has swung," complains about how socially conscious works are now derided, etc.

All of this seems rather unwarranted, though, considering that LT never "disapproved" of social criticism in any way, shape or form. He simply recognized that social criticism was not the point of the film and that it was therefore wrong for Walsh to evaluate it from his exclusively "socially critical" point of view, a point of view Walsh cheerfully admits to.

Having not seen *In the Mood for Love*, I honestly cannot respond to any direct criticisms of the film. But to see a "professional" writer like Walsh putting words into the mouths of his readers is a cheap carny trick and severely undermines the respect I have for your site as a whole.

JVM

21 May 2001

Reply by David Walsh:

Dear Mr. VM,

Thank you for your letter, but I find it disturbing in certain regards. Why the abusive tone?

You suggest that my reply to LT "severely undermines" the respect you have for the site as a whole. Even if my reply were so off the mark as you suggest, we are engaged in the serious business of building up an international center of socialism for the purposes of transforming society. You would apparently write that off on the basis of one reply about a film? That seems

a disproportionate response, in my view. Has something touched a nerve?

You refer to the reply as "inane." On what basis? I raised a number of points that I believe are central to any discussion about film today: the manner in which the film industry manipulates public opinion and tastes; the absence of protest and criticism and the general self-satisfaction found in most works; the denigration of the historical and the historical sense; the specific problem of perspective in East Asian cinema (the character of Maoism and Stalinism); the rightward shift by layers of the middle class in the 1990s; the conformism and lowering of critical standards among writers on film.

You may disagree with these points, even reject them out of hand, but, pardon me, they are not inane.

I just received a letter from a Chinese-speaking reader on the film and the exchange. The letter-writer agrees with me on a number of points, including the final one: "Although the film [*In the Mood for Love*] has had some poor reviews in Hong Kong, they have in the main been as you suggest; sycophantic and vacuous appraisals of a hollow film."

I stand by my comments. I did not put words in LT's mouth. I think his message is apparent from the opening sentences: "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."

What do you think is the implication of this opening? LT is free of ideological concerns (and so, by implication, is Wong Kar-wai), he has an objective view of things, while Walsh, who is obviously a left-winger of some sort, has an ax to grind. I reject this argument. I stand by my comment that LT speaks about "social criticism" as if it were a swear word. He obviously disapproves of such concerns. In the first place, he would not have such a reaction to *In the Mood for Love* if he was animated by those concerns. Nor would he have such a reaction to my comments.

LT has the right to his opinion. He is hardly isolated. Most of the film world worships Wong Kar-wai, as witnessed recently in Cannes.

But I cannot understand why criticizing a hollow film and its uncritical defenders should draw such a response from someone who apparently follows the *WSWS*. Perhaps you could write a less abusive letter and explain your thinking in greater detail.

Sincerely,

David Walsh

23 May 2001



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