

## Interview with Wong Kar-wai

(Cannes Film Festival, 2001)

The following interview took place before a packed audience at the 2001 Cannes International Film Festival under the rubric “Leçon de cinéma.” It appears here in its entirety for the first time. The interview was conducted in English and has been silently edited for consistency in grammar and usage. Questions from the audience were entertained near the end of the discussion and have been included here as well. Prior to the interview, a short film entitled *In the Mood for Love 2001* was shown. The subject matter of the short was largely the same as that found in *In the Mood for Love*, but it takes place in a present-day convenience store. (Permission to publish this interview, from Gilles Ciment, the authorities at the Cannes Film Festival, and Jet Tone Productions, Wong Kar-wai’s production company, is gratefully acknowledged.)

GILLES CIMENT: So this was not a sequel, but I think perhaps you should explain where this short film comes from in the birth of *In the Mood for Love*.

WONG KAR-WAI: Well, actually, when we started the project I wanted

to make a film about food, so I called the project *Three Stories about Food*, which is the regional title of *In the Mood for Love*. The idea was to have three stories which described the way food affects people. The story happened in Chinese communities and was about Chinese people. Since the 1970s, I think there have been two inventions which have changed Chinese and Asian life in general. One is the rice cooker; the second one is instant noodles. It used to be that women would have to spend lots of time at home cooking for their families. Without the rice cooker you have to spend hours in the kitchen. After we got rice cookers, the women had more time for themselves.

And then, as in *In the Mood for Love*, people used to go out for noodles. It was like a family outing, because they lived in a very small space. So they needed an excuse to go out at night to have a cup of noodles. Actually, it wasn't the noodles, but they wanted to get some air. After we got instant noodles, people didn't go out for noodles anymore. And so the last story is about fast-food shops. We can see that a lot of people now, especially the young people, don't care about cooking. They prefer to go out.

The three stories are from different periods in Hong Kong, and we can see that the roles of men and women have changed a lot because of the habit of eating. The project actually has three stories, and the short film we've just seen is supposed to be the last one. It's like a dessert. We shot this short film in the first two days when we started our production. So it took only two nights, then we finished it, and then we worked on the main course, which is *In the Mood for Love*. But somehow *In the Mood for Love* became longer and longer, it has noodles and it has a rice cooker in it, but it became a film in itself. Actually, when the [Cannes] festival told me that I had to give a lesson here, I didn't have any lessons. I don't have anything to teach people because I don't think I'm a good example. We made a lot of mistakes. So I want to share my experience with you, and I think it's better to show you the way we make films and the process we have to go through. So we showed the short film in the festival.

GC: So this reveals a way of shooting film. Starting with three stories, which is kind of a habit in your career, or two or three parts. So this is the first thing, that you start shooting without real scripts, and you are writing during the shooting.

WKW: First of all, normally we shoot without a script, or without a real script or [even] a fake script, but we have an idea. My way of working has always started with short stories, because today I think that to make a film for ninety minutes there must be a lot of substance in it. I always have short film ideas, I don't know why, and we start with two or three stories. Sometimes it has only one.

GC: Like *Chungking Express*, for example.

WKW: Right, exactly.

GC: And sometimes you just forget the second one.

WKW: I don't forget it. Somehow it just becomes another film, like the relationship between *Chungking Express* and *Fallen Angels*. *Chungking Express* at first had three stories in it, but we finished two, and it was already a feature film. So we skipped the third one, and at the end we made another film called *Fallen Angels*, which is the third story of the original *Chungking Express* idea.

GC: Speaking of transmission and learning/teaching, what is strange is that you first learned graphic arts, and then you started working as a scriptwriter. Now that you're a director, you don't write scripts at all. So what kind of way through is this?

WKW: Well, actually, there are a lot of mistakes in it. The reason I studied graphic design at Hong Kong Polytechnic was because I thought that to be a graphic student you didn't have to write, and you didn't have to do a lot of homework. I had a friend who was a graphics student, and I admired his way of learning because they just went out to take pictures. It seemed very easy. But obviously it's not, and I'm not good in graphics. I don't have the patience to draw. So I became a writer because television in those days in Hong Kong had a training course for writers and directors. So I was trained as a writer, and I wrote scripts, but I hated writing. So I tried to be a director, and I thought, "Well, someone will write the script for me," but it didn't happen. You have to write the script by yourself. Even though we are shooting without a script—actually, at the end of the day we have a script. But it's only when the film is finished, [then] the script actually is very detailed.

GC: What's the difference for you between writing scripts for another director and writing a story for yourself?

WKW: [When you're] a writer, you know that when you finish the script, the director will turn the paper into images. And so, as a writer,

you want to make sure that the film looks more or less the same as you imagined when you were writing. So you try to restrict the director in certain ways. You have a lot of dialogue in it, and you try to make it as precise as possible. But writing a script and directing it are different things. When I began directing, I always imagined myself as a director like Hitchcock, who was very well prepared and knew everything about his films. Very technical. But after the first day I realized that was the wrong idea because I would never be Hitchcock, since I changed [things] all the time. And also because I was the writer, I knew how to change it on set. So finally I said, “Why bother?” And also, you can’t write all your images on paper, and there are so many things—the sound, the music, the ambience, and also the actors—when you’re writing all of these details in the script, the script has no tempo, it’s not readable. It’s very boring. So I just thought, it’s not a good idea [to write out a complete script beforehand], and I just wrote down the scenes, some essential details, and the dialogue. I give the rhythm of the scenes to the actors and skip all these technical things.

GC: The scripts you used to write for others, were they as labyrinthine as your films? Were they linear scripts, or the kind of scripts you now write for yourself?

WKW: I was a writer for eight years, so I wrote a lot of scripts. There are comedies, horror films, kung fu/martial art films, action films, all kinds of films. And I had a very good experience working with a director called Patrick Tam. He actually is one of the most important directors in the Hong Kong New Wave. He taught me a lot of things about directing and how to turn words into images. I wrote a script with him called *Final Victory*, and this was the first time that I realized that even with the same script, the film could look very different with different directors.

GC: Your first film was quite simple, with a simple and straight script. After that you developed a new way of deconstructing. What happened in your mind to change your way of telling stories?

WKW: Well, my first film [*As Tears Go By*] was made in 1988, the golden time in Hong Kong cinema. In that year, there were a lot of new filmmakers becoming directors because we were producing three hundred films a year in Hong Kong. In those days, Hong Kong films were financed by pre-selling the film to the traditional market, that is,

the Asian market. The producer needed only a story, a genre, and the name of the cast. The idea I had for a film was a gangster film. So we started as a gangster film, but somehow in the process of making the film I thought, “Well, I want to change this, and I want to change that.” But this was my first film, so it was very difficult to change it. For the second film [*Days of Being Wild*], I had more tricks I wanted to do, and I knew how to change my script.

GC: So without a real script, what takes the place of the script? Is it music? Is it the music which helps you to explain things?

WKW: No, I don’t want to give the wrong idea. Actually, we have a script. But the script is not in written form. Before you start a film you should have an idea of what the story is about. I’m quite experienced as a writer, so I know how the story should go. It’s in my mind, but it’s not written down as scene one, scene two, scene three . . . If you don’t have a clue about the story, it will be very risky to make a film because you will waste a lot of time and effort.

GC: So in practice, what is your collaboration with the cinematographer or actors on the set without a written script?

WKW: Well, first of all, I think we are very lucky. We have been working with mostly the same crew since my first film, so it is a team that has worked together for fifteen years. And most of the actors and actresses know each other very well, so normally before we start shooting, I tell them the story will be like this, and the characters will be like that. And then we create the situations. When I was a writer, Hong Kong films were made like this because we had to produce the films in a month. So mostly, we had a story and we started shooting. But because we had to shoot in certain locations, we had to structure the films in a certain way that we could tell them, “We have scene twenty-one, scene four, and scene seventy-six in this place.” We had to write all the scenes in that location, so we divided everything by locations instead of the numbers. It became a habit for me to know how many locations there were in my films and how we structured stories according to these locations.

GC: Which would not be very easy if you change during the shooting.

WKW: So you have more scenes in it. Then you [sometimes] have to find one more location to find the missing link.

GC: Do you rehearse with your actors?

WKW: No.

GC: And how many [takes]?

WKW: Well, it depends. When we start shooting we have to find the rhythm, so it's very slow. Every day can have ten or twelve setups. But when everybody's going in the same direction, the shooting actually moves very fast.

GC: What's the role of the music in the process of shooting and editing?

WKW: To me, music creates the rhythms. So if I want to explain to [director of photography] Chris Doyle the rhythm of the film, then I would play the CDs, play the music instead of showing him the script, because he wouldn't read the script anyway. It's very effective in a way, and also it helps me because I think the rhythm of the film is very important. So you have to get the rhythm, and then everything comes out slowly after that.

GC: So you are writing during the shooting, and also you are editing during the shooting. You don't divide the work step by step.

WKW: I don't have any patience, so I want everything to be done at the same time. You can also understand immediately whether it's the right rhythm or not. So whenever we find the rhythm, and we're just shooting and waiting until the end of production, then we start editing.

GC: And eventually you also start another film.

WKW: Of course. Actually, I'm always thinking about making films, sometimes a real movie, or like a circus in the old times. So we work together with a team, and then we can keep shooting. I have always dreamed of making ten films in eighteen months. You know, traveling along. People ask, "Do you ever take a vacation?" Making a film for me, the actual process of production, is a vacation. I enjoy the process very much.

GC: So that's why the shooting lasts so long?

WKW: Yeah, sometimes it's because you just fall in love with the film. You don't want to let go. Like *In the Mood for Love*, we made it longer and longer. We [originally] wanted to make the film end in the 1970s. So we just kept running, and at the end of the day we knew it was too much because we couldn't afford it, and so we had to stop. That doesn't mean the stories stop in my mind, because that story can go on forever. In the future maybe we can make that happen.

GC: So twice you started a new film during the shooting of a film—*Chungking Express* during *Ashes of Time*, and your next film *2046* you started during the shooting of *In the Mood for Love*. How can you manage to combine two films at the same time?

WKW: The experiences were different. The case with *Chungking Express* and *Ashes of Time* [happened] because we spent like two years making *Ashes of Time*. We finally finished the shooting, and we had our postproduction and editing [done], and we knew the film was going to the Venice Film Festival six months later. And during that time I thought, well, we have nothing to do, and I want to make a film which is very fast. I wanted to refresh myself. Because I knew if I stopped at *Ashes of Time*, it would take me two years to make another film, because that experience was quite terrible. I wanted to make a very simple film, just like a student film, and so we made *Chungking Express* in a month.

In the case of *In the Mood for Love* and *2046*, we didn't expect the Asian financial crisis. So we had to stop the production of *In the Mood for Love* because our financiers in Asia had problems. So we had to find the finances from Europe, and then we [started making] the film again. But because we had [also] committed to making the film *2046*, at a certain point we had to work on both films at the same time. That experience was really terrible because it was like falling in love with two women at the same time.

GC: And one is jealous of the other?

WKW: No, because whenever you are shooting *In the Mood for Love*, you are thinking about *2046*. And there are some locations—at first we went to Bangkok for *2046*, but in the whole process of looking for locations we found all of these places which we thought would be good for *In the Mood for Love*. So at the end, we had to move the production to Bangkok. And when we were shooting *2046*, we were thinking about *In the Mood for Love*. So it's very messy.

GC: I think everybody remembers that last year you finished *In the Mood for Love* at the last minute and came with your print to Cannes.

WKW: Well actually, I have to explain to you [turns to the audience] . . . Gilles, actually, was working with us, and I still remember the day when we got to Cannes because we were the last film showing in the festival. We arrived the day before the last day. Our print was still in Paris, [where they were] doing the electronic press kit. So even I hadn't

seen the finished film. It was a terrible experience, but very exciting. But I don't want to try that again. And this year, Gilles was working on another film, the Hou Hsiao-hsien film, and he had the same experience. I think you should tell the audience about your experience dealing with directors like this.

GC: It's your fault, because I think you spoke with Hou Hsiao-hsien, and you told him that that was possible with us.

wkw: Well I think for directors, you spend two years making a film, of course you want to make sure of everything. And so you will wait until the last minute to make sure that it is the best you can do.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: I've been told that you actually shot footage [of the missing spouses in *In the Mood for Love*], and for the voice of the husband you were using Roy Cheung.

wkw: Yes, right. And actually, in some of the scenes, the husband, even though we can't see him, is Tony Leung himself. And in some scenes it is Maggie Cheung playing the role of the wife. At first I wanted to have all four characters in the film played by Maggie and Tony, both the wife and Mrs. Chan, and the husband and Mr. Chow.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: You spoke earlier about your dislike of scripts, or rather your preference for spontaneity on the set, and how you're not a Hitchcock [kind of] filmmaker because you were constructing things as you went along. One of the things I like most about *In the Mood for Love* was the way you slowly reveal the characters and the world within which they live. Both the art direction and the script are constructed like a crossword puzzle in some ways. There's so much left to the imagination, and there's so much that we don't get to see. It seemed to me that that was incredibly meticulously planned. Was that spontaneous? And how did you go about constructing that in the narrative?

wkw: The thing is, even though I know I can't be Hitchcock, I wanted to make a film like Hitchcock. So *In the Mood for Love* to me is actually like a thriller, a story with a lot of suspense. So we always kept the spouses, the husband and wife, somewhere outside of the frame. We can't see them, but there's always a kind of clue. The two [central] characters in the film want to know why, and they want to find out the truth. So it is a very typical Hitchcock story structure.

I always have to look for some music before we start shooting a film [to serve as a reference point]. We build the whole rhythm of the film

so Chris Doyle knows how to dance with the camera. Because otherwise he would just do it like *Chungking Express*. I told him that this film was not *Chungking Express*, you have to be very quiet. You have to be very stable. Chris Doyle is like a jazz musician. We don't discuss the light, we don't discuss the camera angles, because we have worked together for more than ten years, and we know each other very well. For him, he needs to know the rhythm and the color of the film. The color is not actually the color red or blue, it's his feelings toward the film. And normally our process of working together, Chris, William [Chang, production designer], and me, is not always that I create the ideas and they follow them. Sometimes I will tell the story to William. I said, "Okay, the story is about two married couples, they're living in Hong Kong, they're from a Chinese background." So he creates the space, and then we react to the space. The way William works, he creates all of the existing light sources of the films. So when Chris walks into the space, he knows how to play with the lights and place his cameras. It's a very organic process.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Can you talk about your first American film, *The Follow* [a six-minute short in a series of ads, called *The Hire*, sponsored by BMW and available on the Internet], which I believe premieres this week with Mickey Rourke and Forrest Whitaker, and how it was to work in L.A. with an American crew?

wkw: Actually, it's very interesting, because at first I wanted to make the film because they told me there's a script already. There's a script, and you shouldn't change the script. And so I thought, well, that's good, I don't have to write the script. I looked at the script, and it was very simple, and it had a lot of room for me to work on it. So I agreed to do it, and it took me only eight days. And I said, well, that's fine, it's like a vacation to me. So I go there with William [Chang], and we start shooting. At first we thought we should work like Hollywood directors. This is your role, that's my role, and I just follow the script. But the script had some problems, and the locations had problems. So we began to change the script, and we began to change the locations. So at the end I said to William, hey, we are doing the same thing that we did in Hong Kong. Even though every day on the set there's like thirty trucks. I don't know why, because we were only shooting two people. But there are thirty trucks, it's like a whole army. The way people make films in Hollywood,

they have their structures, and they have a reason for them. If you are going to make huge movies, like fifty-million-dollar-budget movies, you have to work like this. In Hollywood there's a lot of people working on one thing, and they don't want to interfere with others. In Hong Kong, one person works on a lot of things. This is the difference. But if you are going to make very big movies, huge productions, you need structures like this so you can work very smoothly. If we were to use Hong Kong structures to make films like this it would create a lot of confusion and would be very messy. But if you are going to make a very personal film, a small film, I think the Hong Kong structure is better.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: [Speaking of the music,] you must go to the composer first, if you have the music ready to feed into the space when the space is ready.

WKW: Yes. This time [2046] it's much easier, because we have to deal with Wagner. We don't have to deal with Brian Ferry.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Can you say anything more about the film?

WKW: Well, we wanted to make it as an opera because in opera there's always the structure, a stage work, act one, act two. And the theme of opera, most of the time, is promise and betrayal. The idea of 2046 is about promises. We had the idea for the film in 1997, when Hong Kong was going back to China, and the Chinese government promised Hong Kong fifty years unchanged. I think it is a big promise, so we wanted to make a film about that, and we wanted to see if there's anything that would change [over the next fifty years].

GC: So is it three stories again?

WKW: Yes, we have three acts.

GC: How is it to be your own producer? It's comfortable, of course, but is it also a problem in the process of making a film?

WKW: I think producing a film is a full-time job. So I have three full-time jobs by myself—writer, director, and producer. So I'm too slow. I can't make a lot of films. Also, it gives me a lot of freedom and responsibility. My first two films, there were a lot of people saying, "Okay, you can make the films that you want, but you don't care about the producers." And I said I'm going to be a producer myself, and I want to make sure I can survive.

GC: This morning, we saw "The Lesson" by André Delvaux. He spoke a lot about music in films. He says that he works a lot with music, and

you are working a lot with music. Tell us something about music and your films.

WKW: Well, cinema is a mixture of sounds and images. Music is part of the sounds. To me, music can be used to describe a certain time, a certain period. Sometimes it can create colors. So if you are going to make a film now, about the contemporary world, you can still use music from different eras to put a color on it. I'm not so crazy about using music in a very functional way that follows the image. You know, whenever you have something very sad you have sad music, or when you're very happy you have exciting music. I think the music and the image actually have a kind of chemistry. I'm very interested in exploring this.

GC: What do you think about film school?

WKW: Actually, I didn't go to film school. I think spending some time in film school is good. You can see a lot of films. You can make some friends there. But honestly, I think you can't learn how to make a film in school. You have to learn how to make a film in daily life.

GC: How did you learn to make films? What films did you see when you were young and where?

WKW: My experience comes from my background. I was born in Shanghai, and I came to Hong Kong when I was five. Like those characters in *In the Mood for Love*, we were Shanghainese, and we didn't speak the local language. My mother liked movies a lot, so we spent almost every day watching films, different kinds of films. In Hong Kong we could see Hollywood films, Mandarin productions, local productions, European films. So actually, I think my advice to film students is, if you have a chance, see as many films as you can, bad films and good films. Good films can teach you something, and bad films can teach you something too.

GC: And I think that's a good place to conclude this interview.

WKW: Thank you very much.

[Interviews transcribed by Matt Condon and edited by Peter Brunette.]

