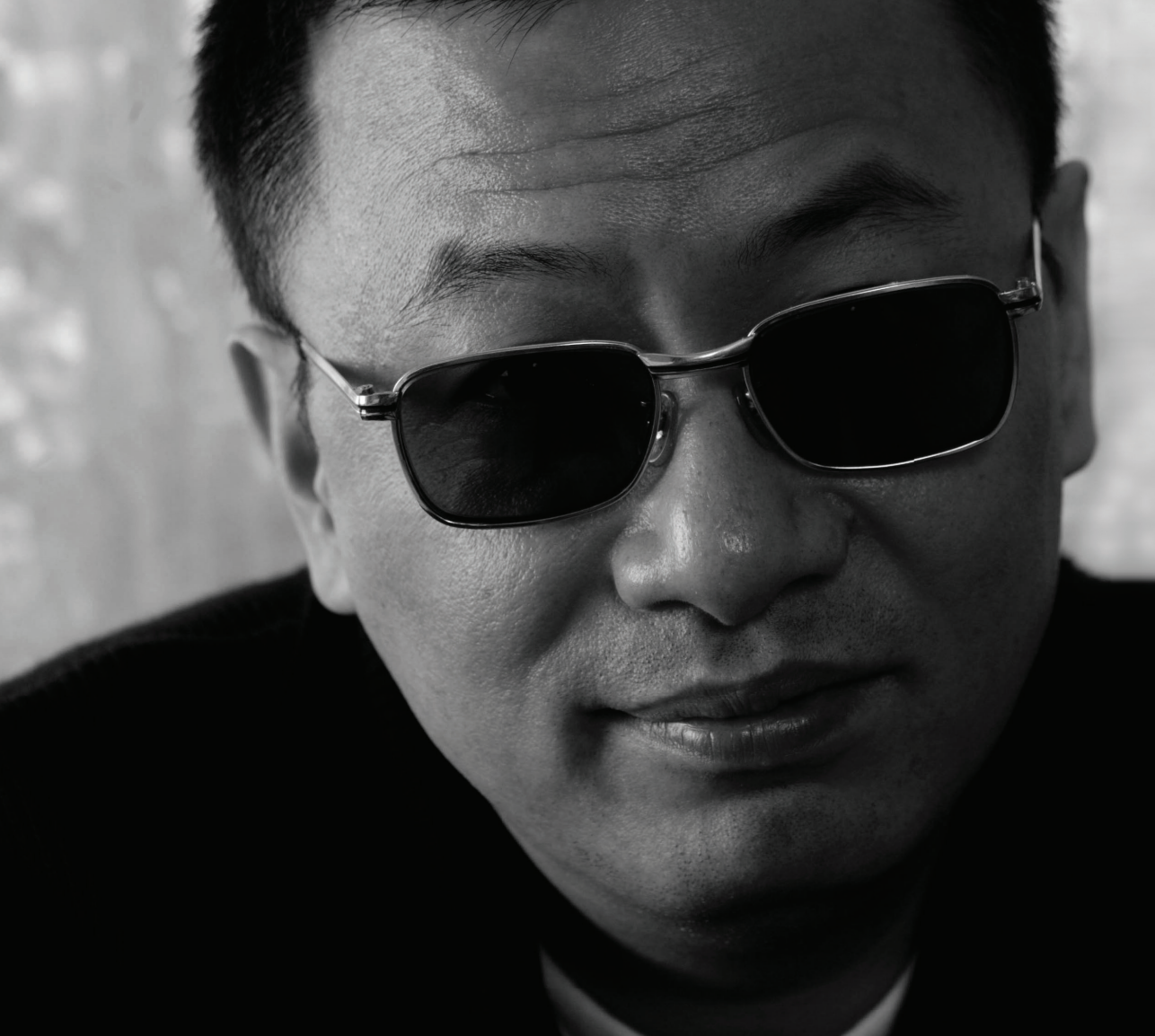




A Companion to
Wong Kar-wai

Edited by
Martha P. Nochimson

WILEY Blackwell

A Companion to Wong Kar-wai

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Part One

Introduction

Wong Kar-wai

Invoking the Universal and the Local

Martha P. Nochimson

Although he had been working in film and television in Hong Kong since the early 1980s, Wong Kar-wai began to come to the attention of the Western world only in 1994 with *Chungking Express*. His rise was meteoric. By 1995, he had won awards for *Express* in Hong Kong, Italy, and Sweden. By 1997, *Express* had also been nominated for several awards in the USA. The corridors of film schools echoed with excitement about his cinema. Since then, Wong has become an increasingly strong presence on the international film festival circuit, collecting nominations and awards at the prestigious Cannes film festival and at many other festivals from New York to Australia. Although he has never had an international following in the millions, beginning with *Express* he began to amass a sizable, devoted, world-wide constituency of moviegoers with a taste for innovation, beauty, and passion, and he continues to exert a powerful influence on young filmmakers.

Asian filmmakers in general only began to make their presence felt outside of their home countries when Akira Kurosawa's *Rashomon* won the Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival in 1951, introducing the West to a history of narrative, visual, and aural presentation very different from that of European and American filmmaking. Since *Rashomon*, these alternate traditions have increasingly inspired Western filmmakers and intrigued Western filmgoers. Wong, with his astonishingly fluid camera, his stunning use of color, his extraordinarily modern sensitivity to the flow of time and the mysteries of objects in space, and his magisterial command of the vocabulary of human emotions, is one of the most prominent of the Asian filmmakers to let a torrent of fresh air into filmmaking practices.

While Wong's fellow directors have been dazzled by the gorgeous surfaces of Wong's cinema, critics have been another story. At first Western critics tended to view him almost entirely through the lens of cultural criticism, in terms

of his Chinese/Hong Kong identity, seizing on the prevalence of clocks and calendars in Wong's films as proof that the engine of his cinema was an anxiety about the 1997 handover of Hong Kong by Great Britain to China. Even after 1997, many critics focused on what they saw as a post-handover malaise. Other early analyses attempted to expose the way Wong embedded images in his films of the modern commodification of Hong Kong by the West. This *Companion* follows in part in that tradition, containing a number of essays that interpret Wong's depiction of the politics of image, and images of politics, and also the history of Wong's achievement of an international niche as an arthouse filmmaker.

For example, in "Wong Kar-wai's Ladies From Shanghai" Gina Marchetti explores how Wong operates within the system of clichés, stereotypes, and historical conventions that have grown up in Asia, as well as in the Western world, about Shanghai. Marchetti points out a general tendency to encapsulate the tropes of Shanghai's glamour and "tendency to decadence" in the figure of a woman, for example Elsa Bannister, the gorgeous femme fatale played by Rita Hayworth in Orson Welles' *The Lady From Shanghai* (1947). Emphasizing how many women from Shanghai appear in Wong's films. Marchetti further illuminates how Wong plays with the existing conventions both to make use of their power and to express historical change in Hong Kong by transforming them.

In "The Sinophone Cinema of Wong Kar-wai" Audrey Yue explores Wong's nuanced manipulation of linguistic systems in a way that, in her words, introduces, "difference and heterogeneities to the singularity of China and Chinese-centrism." Yue traces the ways in which Wong, instead of using different Chinese dialects in a way that reproduces an emphasis on ethnicity and nationality, employs Sinitic variations in a way that "redefines the boundaries of groups, ethnicities, and national affiliations."

David Desser's reception study, "*Chungking Express*, Quentin Tarantino and the Making of a Reputation," explores Wong's transnational existence as a filmmaker from a socio-economic perspective. With the meticulousness of a Holmesian detective, Desser traces the evolution of the reputation of Wong's breakout film, *Chungking Express*, and what it means to Wong's reputation and power as a transnational filmmaker. Marshaling historical and legal facts, Desser argues that the reputation of the film and Wong's reputation as a director were an outgrowth of the interplay of the traditions governing art film, including those that rule the festival circuit: changing laws and movie-going habits in the USA, changing dynamics in the relationship between European and Asian films in the international film community, the ascension of importance of the USA in the commercial viability of international film, and the influence of auteurs like Quentin Tarantino and Jean-Luc Godard.

Like Marchetti, Yue, and Desser, a number of other contributors to this *Companion* seek to expose and explore underlying ideologies in a given work by Wong or a given group of works by Wong. They emerge from a school of

media literacy that has, since the 1960s, held the dominant position among film critics. Its pedigree has many times been traced to the well-known and widely quoted works of, in no particular order, Foucault, Greenblatt, Freud and Lacan, Lévi-Strauss, Marx, Derrida, and many of the foundational texts of feminism. It is therefore unnecessary to review the philosophical map that comprises these familiar thinkers in order to create a context for those essays to follow which have benefitted from their influence. However, not all the contributors to this volume are inheritors of this broadly based, influential school of criticism. Some of the contributors prefer other critical byways, those less taken, that focus not on what is invisible under the surface of the film, but on the meaning and import of Wong's exciting and sophisticated cinematic surfaces. They do call for some extended introduction. This *Companion* has a heterogeneous nature.

Queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick is responsible for inspiring one alternate family of theoretical writings that have a bearing on a number of the alternate approaches to Wong in this *Companion*. These approaches can be defined in contrast to the above-mentioned theorists or at least to the way they have been used to facilitate numerous forms of criticism, but that would be to demean them; it would be to present them as the not-Freudian and/or Lacanian, the not-Marxist and so forth. Sedgwick provides a way to define them from a point of view that engages what they are doing, not what they are not doing. Not that she or this volume is unappreciative of the influence of the works of Freud, Lacan, Marx, and others. It goes without saying that they have provided theory that has been instrumental in exposing the political nature of all film, revisioning patriarchy and its discontents, protecting difference, and protesting carefully disguised injustices. There are, of course, numerous disagreements from various quarters with various aspects of this critical approach. The one pertinent to this volume is its categorical rejection of biology as an inherent reality, its insistence that we only experience what we believe to be the energy of biology through the lens of cultural constructs. Because Wong's cinema is so heavily reliant on promoting in the audience a visceral response to bodies and physical nature through his use of sound and image, the profound distrust of biology in the constructionist school of thought has created impediments for critics interested in excavating this extremely prominent part of his artistry.

The distancing of the cultural critics from the biological is a sticking point for Sedgwick, a point she makes very clear in "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading," an essay collected in *Touching Feeling* (2003, 123–151). Happily, Sedgwick's attempts to recover a belief in direct experience of the biological and the natural have implications for the essays by scholar contributors to this volume that are particularly focused on spectatorial experience of the sensuousness of Wong's images and the visceral affect of his use of sound and music. Particularly useful in this respect is Sedgwick's classification of the ways of making critical meaning into strong theory and weak theory.

Strong theory, weak theory. This classification, invented by Sedgwick, affirms the existence of validly different styles of thinking that some may find oppositional and some may find supplementary. If ever there were a case for the conclusion that they are supplementary, it is the critical literature about Wong Kar-wai. Simply put, Wong's critics fall into both camps. Bypassing the sensuousness of Wong's surface images, some form a necessary part of the critical literature about Wong by looking to the established frameworks and seeking universal statements about his cinema that reveal the ideological structures below Wong's surfaces. This circumnavigation of Wong's physicality in the name of universality is what Sedgwick identifies as the hallmark of strong theory. Those whom she would identify as strong critics in this volume, do just that. They seek to link Wong to the larger context of political and economic beliefs, and follow the same path as the first critics who wrote about Wong's films. Their work is an important part of the story about Wong, but it is a part. As will be clear below, if these estimable ideological analyses, typical of strong theorists and strong theory, add to our understanding of how Wong's cinema interfaces with culture, they leave untouched the lion's share of what appears on screen in Wong's films. When almost all the criticism in print was of this variety, it meant that there was an uneasy silence about much of what we see onscreen.

The alternate criticism in this volume ends that silence. It focuses on Wong's images, taking the approach that Sedgwick has identified as weak theory. To use Sedgwick's vocabulary, weak theory makes meaning from the local, sensual, and emotional textures of life and art, and numerous essays in this *Companion* are local in concept. Taking for their subject what we see, not what lurks invisibly beneath the surface, richly commenting of the textures of specific films in order to suggest ways of making meaning that depend not on abstractions of the symbolic order, but on emotional responses, they supplement our understanding of Wong by exploring his films through close reading. Sedgwick's weak theory, and its resuscitation of close reading, which strong theorists often reject as impressionistic and potentially in collusion with the naturalizations created by patriarchy, throws a new light on their efforts.

While weak theory has established its own intellectual pedigree since the 1980s, it is not yet as familiar as the constructionist debates among the strong theorists, so the first job of this introduction will be to unpack weak theory for the reader and to introduce its pertinence to Wong's art. Sedgwick acknowledges that the direction constructionist criticism has taken has a noble intent that has indeed been useful and successful in its goals. And indeed it would be difficult to deny that the dominant theorists, their cohort, and their inheritors, deploying the universalizing strategies of strong theory, make enormous intellectual gains through their practices of exposing, revealing, and delving into the hidden injustices, repressions, hegemonic tyrannies of naturalized, glamorized, and inordinately valorized cultural constructs, in life and in art. Sedgwick, on the other hand, found the theoretical leap into weak theory necessary because,

as she cautions, the very victories of strong theory have at this point produced an important intellectual imbalance.

In Sedgwick's opinion, the extreme prejudice against the visceral truths of the sensory aspects of art and against any confidence in direct apprehension of nature are not theoretically necessary for maintaining exposure of concealed cultural lies. Furthermore, she contends that abandoning the sensory aspects of art prevent a total engagement with either it or life. The natures of strong theory and weak theory will be articulated more precisely below, but it is beyond the scope of this book to argue all aspects of Sedgwick's case about the advantages and disadvantages of weak and strong theory. That would involve delving into her depiction of the current intellectual climate as one permeated with fear, humiliation, and paranoia that she believes is the result of its dominion, indicated by her use of the words "paranoia" and "reparative" in the title of the essay mentioned above. Since Sedgwick asserts that the imbalances created by the dominant critical style have become counterproductive to the goals of feminism, queer theory, and many kinds of criticism with a reparative intent, debating these issues is seminal to the larger endeavors of philosophy and psychology. But they are tangential to the purposes of this *Companion* and would involve moving away from Wong's cinema and the critical essays contained herein.

What is germane here is Sedgwick's insistence on the simple fact of an imbalance in the way critical practices are carried out, which this volume does endorse. As I have noted above, this volume includes important new contributions to the literature about Wong that adhere to the ideals of strong criticism, but asserts that this is not the full story. We contend that it is necessary also to take a leap into what Sedgwick has labeled weak theory in order to make sense of the insights of the critics who concentrate on the indisputable presence in abundance of sensuousness. As we shall soon see, while the strong theorists in this *Companion* are continuing the strong theoretical traditions of ideological exposure, the weak theorists are recovering for the critical literature about Wong the importance of the persistence of his visual and sound images, which suffuse his cinema, but were almost invisible in early Wong criticism.

At the same time, it is also the contention of this *Companion* that Wong's is a cinema of liminality; liminality studies is still another family of criticism that tends to depart from dominant strong theory. While looking through the prism of strong theory, critics incline toward certainties, even if they are reflexively reconsidering the hard-edged clarity of the symbolic order. In contrast, a number of the critics represented in this volume scrutinize Wong's abundant depictions of the liminal aspects of life, discovering in his films not an either/or portrait of the human condition, but something in between.

Critics in this volume who focus on liminality in Wong's cinema tend to employ close readings of Wong's sensual textures in order to illuminate the threshold positions of his characters, and the threshold nature of the terrain of Hong Kong, the desert, China, and by extension the world, now and further back in history. So it will also be the task of this introduction to introduce, in due

course, the theoretical basis of liminality studies. Wong gives every indication of being on intimate terms with the genre codes, traditions, conventions, and clichés of the symbolic order, but often his intimacy with them is represented through the ways in which he noticeably and irrepressibly depicts fissures in its constructs and blurs the lines it draws, even lines between discreet physical objects and bodies whose boundaries visually bleed off into the space around them.

Ironically, we must, in searching for the theoretical framework for Wong's liminality, also move away from film studies or literary studies because it has not been those disciplines that have been most pro-active in evolving theory that engages Wong's liminality. This is surprising because these would seem to be the disciplines that are most concerned with questions about the indeterminacy of situational textures and the elusiveness of emotional responses. But aside from queer theory, which is an exception, with its many explorations of liminality in art and life, for the most part it is has been the social sciences, including psychology, philosophy, ethnology, and anthropology, that have been most active in pioneering theories of liminality, as an alternate perspective to strong theory and to the critical culture of exposure, just as it has been influences from psychology that have led to the formulation of the concept of weak theory. Sedgwick was profoundly affected by the psychologist Sylvan Tompkins' exploration of affect, and indeed attempted to familiarize more of the public with his ideas by collecting his essays in a reader she titled *Shame and Its Sisters* (Sedgwick and Frank 1995).

In some ways, Sedgwick's choice of the terms strong and weak theory to describe the phenomenon of imbalance she seeks to address is unfortunate. The labels "strong" and "weak" carry with them prejudicial cultural baggage in favor of the former. Those who object to Sedgwick's nomenclature can substitute "universal" for "strong" and "local" for "weak." But it would seem that her word choice is in itself a provocative challenge to the cultural privileging of the quest for domination that is a part of what she identifies as strong theory. Still, if Sedgwick lays down a kind of gauntlet in her nomenclature, she is not as combative as that choice might suggest. She persistently tells us that she is seeking to supplement the exclusive style of the strong theorist with the inclusive style of the weak theorist, not supplant it.

She had her work cut out for her. Strong theory, by its nature, as she points out, seeks pre-eminence. It asks for dominance in the arena of thought and has achieved it to a great extent because of its success in the natural sciences. Albert Einstein's formula for the equivalence of matter and energy, $E = mc^2$, is a good example of that prestige, since it is the gold standard of strong theory. It claims that it can define and predict the reality of matter in a way that is universal and obtains at all times and all places in a way that no other theory can. And it allows for no discussion of the emotional, visual, or auditory experience of matter and energy, and whatever fluctuations that might involve, as it gains from its brand of reductivism a stunning universality. To know that $E = mc^2$ never involves the

reader with visualizing any object or any visual evocation of energy. It is to cut right to the structure of matter and energy that underlies everything. The social sciences and the art-based disciplines have never, however, achieved this kind of success using the styles of the strong theorist, much as they have desired it. On a similar quest for universality, for example, Jacques Lacan sought to establish the symbolic order, including all forms of signification, as the patriarchal law of the father, a law that obtains universally in culture, as he would have it. While many would agree that Einstein has indeed produced a strong universal statement, many fewer would say the same of Lacan, but certainly they would agree that that is what he is after.

Put another way, without detracting from the benefits of strong theory, those interested in approaches that fall under the heading of weak theory, as Sedgwick explains it, are providing what has been lacking in relying uniquely on strong theoretical approaches. To bring this problem into clearer focus, let us contrast the parable of the blind wise men and the elephant, a parable that tacitly proves the superiority of strong theory by illustrating the problem of relying on the locality of experience, with a competing parable in a scene from Charles Dickens' *Hard Times* about a horse. In the parable of the blind men and the elephant, we are encouraged to see the mistakes that occur when the blind men attempt to identify the animal locally, through what is possible for them in direct experience of the elephant, which turns out to be only a small part of the whole. Touching only the elephant's trunk, one thinks the object before him is a snake, another touching only the ears thinks it is a bird, and the third touching only the large, circular leg, thinks it is a tree. The parable potently demonstrates the fallibility of local perceptions which fail to grasp universality and the larger picture. Weak theory is more likely to take for its parable the lesson about the horse at the beginning of Charles Dickens' *Hard Times*. Thomas Gradgrind, a speaker visiting a grammar school class, teaches a guest lesson that makes the sensuous reality of a horse disappear completely. Gradgrind barks at little Cissy Jupe, who has lived with horses all her life, when she cannot find the words to define a horse, and praises another student, Bitzer, who has never seen a horse, but responds in what Gradgrind considers an appropriate manner: "Quadriped. Graminivorous. Forty teeth, namely twenty-four grinders, four eye teeth, and twelve incisive. Sheds coat in spring, in marshy countries, sheds hoofs too. Hoofs hard, but requiring to be shod with iron. Age known by marks in mouth."

It's not really that Bitzer is wrong, at least from one, somewhat limited perspective. It's rather that Gradgrind unqualifiedly endorses an imbalance in his lesson. Dickens clearly hates Gradgrind, and loves Cissy, so the universalizing approach to knowledge is overly demonized in this scene and not at all the spirit of this *Companion*. But what is fascinating for our purposes is that whereas currently dominant strong theory assumes that biology leads to naturalizing injustice, Dickens pulls out of his hat an instance in which justice lies with the silenced natural impulse. In Dickens' version of the universal and the

local, Gradgrind has deprived the class of knowledge because he can't balance Bitzer's recipe from the symbolic order with what might have been Cissy's testimony if he had allowed her to speak, or perhaps we might say if she had the vocabulary that would allow her to say what she has seen, felt, smelled, and experienced. This is somewhat representative of the current critical climate as Sedgwick understands it, and it is, figuratively speaking, the silence of Cissy Jupe to which weak theory seeks to put an end. Weak theory wants a vocabulary that will not use words to obliterate the local perspective. Weak theory seeks the development of a vocabulary of specific experience so that we might know what it could mean for the way we speak to each other, create art, and think and feel about our world. For Wong's cinema, the vocabulary of both strong and weak theory is necessary.

Some of the benefits to be reaped from a "weak" theoretical approach become obvious when we look at two of the essays in the *Companion*, "Chungking Express: Slow – Images – Ahead," by Raymond Bellour and "It is a Restless Moment: Wong Kar-wai and the Phenomenology of Flow," by Joseph Kickasola. While their occupation with flow and images, time and space may also be joined with larger issues of political and economic realities, those abstractions, if brought into the discussion, are arrived at by going through the sensuous surface, not by disregarding it.

The importance of Bellour's and Kickasola's contributions to critical literature about Wong, which this *Companion* insists complement not supplant the earlier commentaries, becomes obvious when we observe their commentaries about *Chungking Express* and *In The Mood for Love*, respectively.

The earlier critics of *Chungking Express* for the most part forced the reader away from the moment-to-moment experience of Wong's strange, disturbing, and exhilarating opening images of a plain clothes policeman running through a crowded urban mall at the same time that an enigmatic woman wearing a blonde wig, sunglasses and a noirish trenchcoat is making her way through the same space. Much critical attention was paid to the presence of a digital clock, in these two minutes, and to several references to clock and calendar time, as indications of the film's subtextual anxiety about 1997. The obviously constructed appearance of the bewigged woman drew comments about Western influence in Hong Kong. Raymond Bellour approaches the opening montage as a poetic evocation of the physicality of space, commenting that the first two minutes of the film convey a:

symbolic fraction of space, this sliver of an image, is transposed into the physical and perceptive timeframe of the film, which functions on the level of the body from its first shots, its first frames.... these units of still, frozen images – carried along by a music of steady, repetitive charm – give birth to a movement that is intermittent by nature, creating from moment to moment a hiatus, a jump, a jolt of varying amplitude contained in the passage from one microseries to another.... Here, apparently, everything is dependent on the handling of the chosen motifs, between one

microseries and the next, the others, that follow. The result of this is that the effect ends up oscillating between moments that come close to smooth motion (at one point when the woman is walking forward, seen from behind, very tightly framed; or the closing doors of an elevator during which the differences between images are reduced to a minimum without however losing any of their charge) and other moments where those differences increase, while maintaining the continuity of the given motif (such as a movement of Qiwu in close-up, seemingly moving forward by jerks, his face traversed by fleeting expressions). The variations in focus between the microseries [various montages], from sharp to blurry, are another constant active principle of contrast and modulation.

Bellour takes us on a tour into the sensuous presence of space in *Chungking Express*. The point of his commentary is not what is ideologically or symbolically hidden beneath the surface, but the surface. His goal is to speak about Wong's creation of an experience and move us into deeper engagement with what actually appears on the screen.

In his essay, Kickasola pays similarly detailed attention to numerous montages in *In The Mood for Love*. An example of his approach is the way he addresses Wong's introduction of characters and circumstances in an early montage in which we meet Mr Chow (Tony Leung Chiu-wei) and Mrs Chan (Maggie Cheung), the film's protagonists, and their virtually faceless adulterous spouses. Shortly after moving day, during which both couples are trying to get their possessions into the tiny sublets next door to each other and the moving men keep confusing what belongs to whom, we see the human equivalent of this confusion as the bodies of each of the men and women who are tenants in the neighboring apartments squeeze past each other while their landlords play cards.

In Kickasola's words, "Without a single word being spoken, the narrative dynamics of the film have been gently rolled out. The first 10 measures reveal 'another woman' and Chan's empty isolation in the doorway (paired only with a standing fan that redundantly spins in place), and the second 10 reveal an intriguing development: Chow's presence and 'crossing' paths with Chan (a motif for the film), his similar isolation (he leaves his wife and the others), and Chan's conscious attempts to reconnect with her husband.

So, 'higher concepts' are conveyed, but are given in the most embodied, sensual, and intuitive way possible. This is also true of the semiotic values in the scene. For instance, we might see the fan in the second *tableau* as a symbol of emptiness (pushing air) and circularity (much like Chan's futile attempts at intimacy with her husband), but it also stands as a critical energetic *plateau*, maintaining some level of constant energy that supports the dramatic energy of this moment of suspicion, even amid the overall stillness of the *tableau*. In this light the circular path of the fan is important for its combination of both movement and relative stasis (that is, a non-directionality that keeps our attention in place), embodying both energy and stasis in keeping with the 'restless moment' idea. Likewise, what of that green vase, blooming in color amid that brown, shadowy

hall, as Chow leaves the room? Perhaps it symbolizes Chow's repressed passions in the face of his wife's betrayal, which he has, perhaps, started to suspect. But it is also a critical surge of attentional and perceptual energy at a precisely timed moment in the scene (just before the anticipated third tableau, an empty door). It functions like a last emotional 'gasp,' an intensifying ramp of energy to the dramatic pause we have been primed to anticipate, by the structure of the flow."

Bellour and Kickasola encourage us to savor and ponder Wong's version of matter and energy through completely localized commentaries pertinent only to the film under discussion. They are not providing a formula for all matter when converted back and forth between itself and energy.

Another contributor who delves into these aspects of Wong with a similar passion for the local is Joe McElhaney, in "Wong Kar-wai: The Actor, Framed," in which he puts Wong's use of space under a microscope. He meticulously catalogues Wong's use of faces and bodies in space, not to create a cultural critique of how film and/or Wong fetishize masculinity and femininity, but rather to demonstrate the way Wong allows us to experience a contrast between the life in these human figures and the opposite, stillness and death.

Angelo Restivo cuts a path into the operation of signs in Wong's films, re-examining the working of signs as vehicles for sensory energy and flows. Restivo engages Gilles Deleuze and Marcel Proust as his partners in excavation of the liminality of signs themselves in order to illuminate the complex forms of signification in Wong's cinema. While the mass media strive for the widest audience possible by truncating the potential for complex and even competing meanings in the significations they use, Restivo is interested in Wong's independent representation of signs *à la* Deleuze who, as Restivo reminds us, investigates signs "as types of 'enfoldings,' whose interpretations are never immediately given: the signs must be unfolded, each in its own time." In speaking of his project, Restivo tells us that "This essay proposes that we look at Wong Kar-wai's style outside the parameters of narrative or representation but instead through the optics of intensities, thresholds, and transfers of energy. Such a procedure allows us to understand the ways in which Wong's distinctive cinematic style opens on to new ways of understanding the geopolitical dimensions of his work, linked to emerging global flows of information and images." Working from the sensory surfaces of Wong's cinema, Restivo finds geopolitical dimensions that do not exclude the inherent validity of direct apprehension of energy.

In "Color Design in the Cinema of Wong Kar-wai," Shohini Chaudhuri provocatively challenges the conventional vocabulary for talking about color. Using a localizing strategy, eschewing the usual dependence on art criticism to enable a discourse about color in cinema, Chaudhuri taps the opinions of Wong's collaborators and the writings of Sergei Eisenstein to arrive at an understanding of the influence over Wong's color of fractal repetitions. Combining close reading of Wong's color images with Eisenstein's theory, her intention is