

Slow boil

by [Matthew Prins](#) in the [May 2, 2001](#) issue

*In the Mood for Love* (2000), directed by Wong Kar-wai

*The House of Mirth* (2000), directed by Terence Davies

In Hong Kong, Su (Maggie Cheung) and Chow (Tony Leung) meet while moving into adjoining apartments. Su's husband and Chow's wife often travel abroad--at the same time, and to the same country. After Chow and Su compare notes, it becomes obvious: their spouses are having an affair. Perhaps because of that bond, Su and Chow start to find each other alluring.

What will they do? Their choices are obvious: Chow and Su can either have a sexual affair or not. The kicker is that the audience doesn't know which of these options they pick.

Viewers of *In the Mood for Love* come away with different opinions on what happens. That may seem awfully coy, but director and writer Wong Kar-wai uses that ambiguity to show how peripheral a sexual relationship can be to a romantic relationship. There is absolutely no doubt the couple is having an emotional affair. They clearly love each other with more romantic intensity than they love their respective spouses. Sex is not immaterial in such an affair, but as Wong shows, it's not essential.

The greatest scenes show Su and Chow acting out their desires through role-playing: she acts as his wife, he as her husband, and they flirt and talk through how their spouses might have met, flirted and talked. These scenes work because they involves their two strongest emotions: their anger at their spouses and their fledgling love for each other. The effect is sexier than any sex scene could have been.

Wong has been unfairly labeled as a director who puts style over substance. What he actually does is use style as substance. There are several slow-motion moments in which Su and Chow pass each other on the same slender staircase. Wong uses the small differences in those moments to demonstrate the couple's emotional life, expressed by a half-glance, or the slight brush of an arm.

Unfortunately, Wong loses his rhythm in the last couple of reels; he layers on so many postludes that I lost count of them. But that doesn't deduct from the artistry and distinction that beams from the rest of the film.

"Isn't marriage your vocation?" Lilly Bart (Gillian Anderson) is asked by one of her admirers in *The House of Mirth*, based on the Edith Wharton novel of the same name. "Isn't it what you're all brought up for? Lilly answers coolly: "You speak as if I should marry the first man who came along."

Lilly lives among the rich young women of early-20th century New York who are brought up mostly to get married. Though she doesn't belong in that world, she feels she must belong. Misery follows. She finds her income overextended, and asks a male friend for financial help. He takes advantage of her and puts her more in debt.

Viewers may conclude that she should just abandon this life and start anew, but the strength of Terence Davies's film is that he shows a way for Lilly to help herself, and also shows why societal constraints make it so difficult for her to leave.

Lilly is the focus of the story, so the film rests on Gillian Anderson's shoulders. Anderson's work on *The X-Files* may make her seem a strange choice for *The House of Mirth*, but she passionately conveys Lilly's strength.

Like Nicolas Cage's characterization of a man aiming to drink himself to death in *Leaving Las Vegas*, Anderson creates a character who is larger than life emotionally but is still grounded in humanity. But also like Cage's performance, Anderson's performance is so expressive that it romanticizes her character's downward spiral.

Like *In the Mood for Love*, *The House of Mirth* is very deliberate in its pacing. Some viewers may call it slow. In the case of *Mood*, there's a logic to this style: it shows how casually acquaintanceship can saunter its way into love. I'm not sure there's an equally persuasive defense of the untorrid pace of *Mirth*, particularly since it lasts 45 minutes longer than *Mood*. It's a film easier to admire than love.