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Different strokes

We like to look — at Wong Kar Wai's exquisite "Hand" job in *Eros*.

By Kimberly Chun

Eros: Greek mythology viewed him as a troublesome imp otherwise known as Cupid, while for moderns, he signifies that fuzzy, funky, far-from-immaculate conception of love and sex. Plato saw him as embodying the creative impulse with a certain sensual kick, though Google has a completely different take, defining the scamp as the acronym for the U.S. Geological Survey's Earth Resources Observation Systems center, and a "small, secure, real-time operating system that provides orthogonal persistence."

So it follows that *Eros* — a multinational compendium of medium-length films conceived by Michelangelo Antonioni's producer, Stephane Tchal Gadjeff, as a two-handed tribute to the octogenarian director by self-confessed acolytes Wong Kar Wai and Steven Soderbergh — demonstrates that it takes all kinds. The coupling of creativity and desire is the focal point, although, unfortunately, here it's also predictably entwined with hetero desire, and, yawn, girlie nudity — and admittedly anything short of an on-screen coupling involving this omnibus's odd filmmaking troika will probably fail to satisfy San Francisco's progressively, polymorphously perverse audiences.

Still, each part of *Eros* speaks volumes about the individual filmmakers. One, maestro Michelangelo, is now clearly happy just to connect the dots between his oeuvre and his libido. He phones in the so-called poetry with "The Dangerous Thread of Things," an unintentionally self-parodic meditation on male-female miscommunication, bad dubbing, and the existential dilemmas of the rich and full-bodied — and those happen to involve horse ownership, beachfront property, Italian sports cars, and breasts. Lots of breasts. You wonder whether the elderly Antonioni is returning to a childlike adoration of the udder — or least looking to pick up some of the viewers left stranded by the passing of Russ Meyer.

Beyond the valley of the mondo Michelangelo, another auteur, Soderbergh, is content to almost completely bypass the sticky subjects of love and lust, and instead take refuge in the yuks of psychoanalysis. Is this so surprising from the man who made *Sex, Lies, and Videotape*? Soderbergh is less directly interested in Greco-Roman grappling and mammaries — despite the obligatory '50s nudie cutie — in his "Equilibrium" than in milking lite humor from a shrink skit with Robert Downey Jr. and Alan Arkin that's almost comically amateurish. There are more genuine chuckles and a greater erotic charge — as well as firearm discharge — in Arkin's scenes with Peter Falk in *The In-Laws* than in Soderbergh's 26-minutes-plus exercise in insomnia relief.

Love-him-or-hate-him Wong is the only director who seems to have a, ahem, grasp of the concept. His sumptuous "The Hand" not only made Nicole Kidman swoon, drawing her into his next leisurely, cinematic sortie, but also provides the somewhat-on-screen sexual consummation *In the Mood for Love* fans have been waiting for. That 2000 film delivered a slow, steamy, and sensual build, and absolutely no on-screen release, working an emotionally obsessive loop of seemingly random images of actors Maggie Cheung and Tony Leung strolling halls and streets, ascending and descending staircases, and posing prettily in form-fitting cheongsams and beautifully cut suits.

Romantic love is all about tone, mood, and coloration, Wong seemed to posit, while everything else is reserved for suckers willing to suffer through lousy lays, morning-after breath, and cold, gray, flaccid reality. *In the Mood for Love*'s seductive yet clashing wallpaper patterns — like the mesmer-



PHOTO BY BLOCK 2 PICTURES

Watch the hand: A courtesan (Gong Li) finds a direct line to the desire of a young tailor (Chang Chen) in Wong Kar Wai's "The Hand," one of three films in *Eros*.

izing floral and geometric prints on Cheung's frocks — visually mimicked its lovers' ritualistic routines, the formalized repetition of gestures that take on greater meaning over time, as the film unspools.

And "The Hand" picks up where *Mood* leaves off, as Gong Li's gorgeous yet housebound courtesan, Miss Hua, erotically imprints a young tailor, Zhang (Chang Chen), on a visit to her home for a dress-fitting. As the camera scans the apartment's hothouse mauve-and-green decor — its striped walls and protea bouquets make it seem like a Venus flytrap ready to spring — Zhang waits for Hua and listens to the sound of her lovemaking. Sizing him up as an innocent, the postcoital Hua quickly turns sex into a kind of whip, ordering him to take off his pants, her long neck resembling the stem of a blossom or a phallus. Placing her hands between his legs and contemptuously surmising that he's never touched a woman, so how could he possibly make clothes for the female body, the glamazon intones, "One day you'll become my tailor. Remember this feeling and you'll make me beautiful clothes."

So, oh yeah, he remembers, even as Hua snubs him, she grows ill, her clients fall away, and her circumstances grow dire, leading her to sell the exquisite gowns he takes pleasure in creating and grows to fetishize. It's telling that Wong began shooting his ambivalent yet altogether erotic episode in the midst of the SARS epidemic, as hands — conjuring associations with the "hand," or sensual properties, of a fabric, or the digits that become a delivery system of, and defense against, contagion or corruption — end up playing the final, crucial part in Hua and Zhang's last embrace of sex and death. Less imaginative, clinical types might complain that Wong reduces passion to fashion, but here, amid the stitches and giggles of *Eros*'s two other pieces, he makes a compelling case that they're sometimes irreducibly — or sublimely — cut from the same cloth. ❖

'Eros' opens Fri/8 at the Lumiere Theatre, 1572 California, S.F., and Act 1 and 2, 2128 Center, Berk. See Movie Clock, in Film listings, for show times.

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