



THE CINEMATHEQUE (Summer 2008)
(National Cinema: Locations, Explorations, Interrogations)

presents

**THE IMAGING OF CONTEMPORARY SOUTH KOREA:
MEMORY, WANDERING, RESENTMENT, VIOLENCE**

- * All screenings are free and all films will be projected from DVD with English subtitles.
- * Screenings begin Thursdays at 8:00 pm (June 12–July 31) in 120 David Lawrence Hall (LAWRN).

The Cinematheque for Summer 2008 introduces the South Korean (SK) Film Festival. SK cinema today is one of the most successful local film industries. It was not until recently, though, that the widespread belief in its impending demise in the face of an overwhelming influx of foreign films in the globalizing era has turned out to be misled. Its development had been continually stultified by political, cultural suppressions of military rule; only after the fall of the authoritarian regime in the early 1990s, SK filmmakers could start addressing and commenting on unspoken histories. Ironically, however, the newfound freedom alone could not revitalize SK. In fact, the social shift rather left SK cinema with new, tougher issues to solve; along with democratization came the rapid decline of the interest in previous collective imperatives, official or oppositional, which forced SK filmmakers to search for new ways of articulating, and resonating with, emergent and multidirectional discontents obscured by/deepened under the illusion of the victory of democratization. Metaphorically put, SK cinema awoke into darkness, preoccupied with mournful, horrific, violent stories and images. Screening seven films produced around/after the democratization (the late 1980s to present), the Cinematheque expects them to clue us in on a complicated, paradoxical evolution of a new film culture in the local niches.

***The Host* 괴물 (Bong Joon-ho 2006) 110 min.**

June 12

The third film in *Cahiers du cinema*'s 2006 list of best films; one of the top 10 best foreign films of the year according to *Kinema Junpo*; the top-grossing film ever in SK film history. Following the stunning success of *Memories of Murder* (2003) that had brought to Bong Joon-ho great attention from critics and the public alike, *The Host* (2006), his third feature-length film, has confirmed his status as a most noteworthy SK film director, not only domestically but internationally as well. Stylistically, he may deserve to be called a magician of genres, considering his interests in and abilities of rediscovering/reinventing socio-cultural implications of generic conventions through (re)contextualizing them in specific historical conjunctures of South Korea or *vice versa*: black comedy in his debut film *Barking Dogs Never Bite* (2000) and murder mystery in *Memories of Murder*. In *The Host*, a sci-fi creature film, Bong's genre experiment becomes much more sophisticated; relocating and hybridizing various generic leitmotifs borrowed from creature films, political satire, comedy, family melodrama, detective stories, and so on, it creates a unique contrapuntal montage of contemporary SK culture.



***Chilsu and Mansu* 칠수와 만수 (Park Kwang-su 1988) 109 min.**

June 19



Park Kwang-su is well known as a co-founder of the Seoul Film Group (an independent cinema collective created in 1983 under the influence of the *Minjung* Movement, the grassroots democratization struggles against military despotism), and often cited as a central figure of so-called Korean New Wave. Accordingly, his works, particularly early ones, often appear politically engaged. But his realist impulse is not limited to a simple indictment of unjust powers, but rather often becomes convoluted through his unrelenting attention to the multilayered nature of subaltern reactions to such issues. In his debut film, *Chilsu and Mansu*, some may find somewhat typical victim characters used as a way of evoking the audiences' attention to such issues as Cold War ideologies, national security paranoia and cultural imperialism: Chilsu has a drunkard father and a prostitute stepmother at a service industry area near a US army base; Mansu is a son of a long-time, unreformed political prisoner, which keeps robbing him of any chances to get a stable job; the routes of their life converge through painting billboards for Hollywood movies. Under such clichés, however, resides what complicates this film. Denying the temptation of highbrow criticism, Park examines varied, often conflicting ways in which the subaltern sentiments manifest, which allows us to take Chilsu's American dream and Mansu's political skepticism as an important archive of antithetical initiatives rather than a sign of cultural colonization or reactionary pessimism.

A Petal 꽃잎 (Jang Sun-woo 1996) 89 min.

June 26

At the dawn of the 1980s, South Korea witnessed one of the most traumatizing incidents in its modern history: the Kwangju Massacre (May 1980), the new military government's brutal suppression of democratization protests in a local city which caused a large number of student and citizen casualties. And the horrific event had to remain unspoken on the screen for more than 15 years. With the newfound political freedom around the mid-1990s, however, SK cinema found that resistance and liberation already belonged to the realm of history. Having been in jail himself during the incident on charge of organizing student rallies and thus being strongly drawn to the historical moment, Jang Sun-woo also had to face the irrevocable flow of history. For him and many other South Koreans thus, *A Petal* has become, to use his term, a *ssikkim*



-gut, a shamanist ritual to relieve the unduly dead of their unrequited resentments. Or it is his desperate effort to take the last snapshot of the vanishing Kwangju of 1980 through imaging a little girl who loses her brother in the army, witnesses her mom shot to death in the Kwangju Massacre, goes insane due to the mental shock, wanders around from one place to another, and eventually disappears without a trace, leaving us only memories.

Sopyonje 서편제 (Im Kwon-taek 1993) 112 min.

July 10

Along with realism, the national cinema movement constituted another major trend in Korean New Wave, at the center of which is Im Kwon-taek. A man whose life was held back in society due to his family's leftist background and who took up film to survive, he himself is a living history of SK cinema's frustrations, struggles and successes. He could neither finish middle school nor receive any formal film education. Ironically, however, it was the unfavorable conditions which have made him preoccupied with the mission of filming the life of underrepresented classes. His personal history also eventually allowed him to become a principal pioneer in rejuvenating SK cinema through *Sopyonje*, which attracted more than a million people (almost one in five South Koreans) back to SK cinema for the first time in its history. A culmination of his life-long struggles to capture key historical moments and cultural motifs through a camera, *Sopyonje* follows the travels of a *p'ansori* family throughout the countryside in efforts to keep alive the dying story-singing folk art. However, this film is not simply about *p'ansori* itself, or the rediscovery of the beauty of lost traditions as authentic properties of Koreanness; today, detached from the present life of low class people, and archived in museums or driven into music halls, the art form itself has lost its original cultural nature as a folk art. What made *p'ansori* and *Sopyonje* sensational was rather its current relevance that allowed the unfamiliar art form from the past to somehow echo and articulate the anger, grief, and hope in the present middle- and lowbrow imaginations.



The Day a Pig Fell into the Well 돼지가 우물에 빠진 날 (Hong Sang-su 1996)

115 min. July 17



Unrelentingly prying, skeptical, and thereby realistic, Hong Sang-su's brutally anatomical camera never leaves the moments of void disjuncture in our everyday life covered, even when, as everybody needs at least a couple of coats in cold winter, we just strive for small bits of comfort such as romance, belief, or hope. With hollow, blank cracks wide open, oftentimes frustrating or disturbing the unprepared minds of the audience, his narratives and image sequences also necessarily become disjointed, which often turns his characters into awkward drifters who can never find the right time, right place, and right form of action to settle down on the plane of normal life. Produced in the mid-1990s when collective imperatives for democratization were losing their historical effectiveness, Hong in his debut film, *The Day a Pig Fell into the Well*, examines the common narratives such as marriage, love, or friendship that, emptied of meaning, still interweave people's lives. Or he plays with the unbridgeable gap between the persistent existence of the narrative clichés in our everyday life and their emptiness. All characters are entangled with each other through such narratives, but their relationships never seem firmly grounded or right. Always carrying their own wells, characters meet others only to find themselves stuck in the continuation of unbearably disjointed liaisons, which also leaves the audience emotionally, morally puzzled and unhinged.

***I'm a Cyborg, But That's Ok* 사이보그지만 괜찮아 (Park Chan-wook 2006)**

105 min. July 24

Having immersed himself in the vengeance motif for about a half decade (the vengeance trilogy: *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance* (2002), *Old Boy* (2003), *Lady Vengeance* (2005)), Park Chan-wook in *Cyborg* seems to be stepping a little away from this heavy theme. Among the features that make this film distinct from his previous works is the use of a variety of zany inmates in the mental institution where Young-goon is confined due to her fantasizing herself as a cyborg. For instance, we meet a mythomaniac with a memory loss problem, a backward-walking apologist, an obese bully who believes she can fly by rubbing her socks, a kleptomaniac who can even steal others' Thursdays, etc.

Although fraught with comic, fairytale-like motifs both narratively and visually, the question of vengeance still constitutes the backbone of this film. With a self-imposed mission to get her grandmother's dentures back to her in a sanitarium, Young-goon plans to remove the white men (doctors and nurses in white) blocking her way to the grandmother, which first requires her to deal

with her inner struggle with her guilty conscience. Sympathetic to her vengeful mind, Il-soon, the kleptomaniac, helps her surmount the barrier of morality by stealing her guilty conscience, which in turn entails Il-soon's loss of his theft urge. Not a clichéd love story, but a grotesque romance between a would-be avenger and a theft maniac, this film shows a heartfelt love grounded on, if not vengeance itself, then "sympathy" for vengeance.



***Secret Sunshine* 밀양 (Lee Chang-dong 2007) 142 min.**

July 31



Winner for Best Actress at the Cannes Film Festival in 2007.

Lee Chang-dong's films always begin with hopeless returns: Mak-tong's discharge from military service to a no-less-brutal society in his directorial debut *Green Fish* (1997), Jong-du's unwelcomed return from prison in *Oasis* (2002), and Young-ho's frantic will to remember or return to the age of innocence in *Peppermint Candy* (1991). *Secret Sunshine*, Lee's come-back film after about three years of service in the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, also unpacks its story by showing Shin-ae moving with her only son from Seoul to her late husband's local hometown, Miryang (密陽; Secret Sunshine). Ironic in that her husband had an affair with another woman, her move to the late husband's

hometown in a way exhibits her desperate intention to seek the ground of hope among the ruins of their shattered life and thereby turn her despair and anger into peace. However, as with other protagonists in Lee's oeuvre, Shin-ae's post-loss return only leads to another loss and more poignant despair; she is a helpless stranger in her husband's hometown, the locale is no less greedy and deceitful than her former hopeless world, and eventually her only son is kidnapped and murdered. Then it is only when there seems to be no hope left that one can witness a bit of the sunshine Shin-ae has been seeking so badly, as she falls down, secretly, on the jumbled yard in her home. As a signature of the director, this image of sunshine captured on the muddy ground after a long, painful meditation on loss, grief, and anger reveals to us much about the formation of Lee's unique cinematic imagination and the evolution of film language in South Korea through its tragic history as well.

한국영화페스티벌

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