

Dirt in the soul

Green Fish, written and directed by Lee Chang-Dong

David Walsh
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Lee Chang-Dong

One of the most accomplished fiction films presented at this year's San Francisco film festival was the South Korean work, *Green Fish*, directed by Lee Chang-Dong. Lee is a novelist and wrote the screenplays for two films directed by Park Kwang-Su, *To the Starry Island* (1993) and *A Single Spark* (1996).

The story of *Green Fish* is not enormously original, one might even say that it is a little clichéd, but it is told with conviction, honesty and a discerning eye. A young man, Makdong, fresh out of the army, finds his family broken up and his old neighborhood the victim of economic progress. A new town has grown up on the site virtually overnight. Unable to find suitable employment, he falls in with a group of Seoul gangsters. Unfortunately for him, he becomes infatuated with the chief thug's masochistic girl-friend, Miae.

At one point Makdong and Miae take off by train for another town. It looks as though they might actually be happy together. The boss, Bae, who calls himself 'Big Brother,' contacts Makdong on his beeper. The latter obediently phones in. He returns to Miae and tells her, 'He says to come back immediately.' 'Are we going back or not?' she asks. 'If Big Brother says so,' he replies. She spits the phrase back at him scornfully. But, as a matter of fact, she's no rebel either. They return together and this act of cowardice or conformism more or less seals Makdong's fate.

When Bae's gang becomes embroiled in a bloody conflict with a rival outfit, Makdong takes upon himself a murderous assignment. In a final phone-call to his family, he recalls in tears certain moments from his childhood. 'Don't hang up! Don't hang up!' he insists. He remembers a red bridge and angling for green fish, losing his slipper and his sister getting stung by some insect. But it is too late for such innocent pleasures.

Lee presents a critical picture of Korean society. His theme crops up again and again in East Asian cinema: the old way of life, whatever its value, has been destroyed and replaced by a soulless, materialistic one. The new culture is a non-culture: Coca-Cola, freeways and cellular phones.

And in this brave new world people would much rather beat each other's brains in than talk things out. The small fry who congregate in Seoul's night clubs and gangster hangouts have obviously been watching too many second-rate American movies. They are handy with their fists and feet and with clubs and pipes, but nothing is going to stop them from being used-and later disposed of-by crime bosses, politicians, real estate developers and the like. That same milieu exists everywhere and those who inhabit it are never very bright or perceptive.

Makdong is naïve and unprepared, but not an innocent. He has no capacity or apparent desire to reflect on his own social dilemma; he simply resorts to violence. This makes him susceptible to the gangsters' appeal. He wants to be indispensable to Miae and Bae, two destroyed human beings, and that effectively destroys him. His conscientiousness and lack of guile make him the perfect patsy.

Green Fish stands out because of the care and thought that have obviously gone into its creation. One remembers distinct images and dramatic moments-the look and feel of a garish Seoul night-club, a gangster's humiliation at the hands of a rival, a woman's despair, a pointless killing in a men's room. It is nearly a beautiful film.

The films of both Lee Chang-Dong and his countryman, Park Kwang-Su, owe a considerable debt to film-maker Hou Hsiao-hsien and the Taiwanese cinema in general. There is the same attempt to establish a milieu, often a criminal or marginal one, with great accuracy. The same attempt at a multi-textured, sensuous grasp of reality. The same attempt to capture the universal in the banal particular. The same relatively unmoving and 'objective' camera, corresponding to much the same non-judgmental and unsentimental view of human foibles, although the Korean version is perhaps a little cruder, even, at times, a little heavy-handed.

Green Fish has its share of clichés. The relationship between Bae and Miae is somewhat familiar. In general Lee perhaps leaves too little to the spectator's imagination. It would be very difficult not to get his point at certain moments-in the final shot, for example, in which the camera takes in Makdong's family scurrying subserviently about their little restaurant against a backdrop of imposing and impersonal high-rise apartment buildings. But *Green Fish* has intelligence, concreteness and an air of urgency. Lee, unlike so many others who are in a position to do so, has a reason for making films.

In a conversation I asked Lee Chang-Dong, through an interpreter, what had been his artistic background. He explained that he planned to be a writer from a very early age. Since his brother was involved in the theater, however, he grew up within that culture. He began to write prose in 1983. For the next ten years or so, he said, 'what it meant to live and work as a writer in Korea was to be an activist. That was the cultural situation.'

The end of the CIA-backed dictatorship apparently produced an intellectual crisis. 'I felt like I had lost my direction as a writer,' he remarked. 'It was at that point that I felt I should turn to making films. I've never been to film school or studied film on a formal basis. But I didn't find film strange or unusual as a type of work. Because from an early age I'd been involved in a theater culture. I had worked as a director and also had done some acting. I felt that making films was the same as writing a novel, in terms of conveying a story through people.'

I asked him what had been the starting-point for this film-an image, an incident, something autobiographical?

Lee replied, 'The background to this film is Il-San, which is a new development city. A city that grew up overnight. Which is where I live

right now. Watching the movie you may have picked up on this, but Il-San was originally agricultural land, farm land close to Seoul. Now it's become a big city where 300,000 people live, or more. I feel that it really is typical of Korean society right now, typical of the sorts of spaces people inhabit.'

He continued: 'After moving to Il-San I wondered-where have all the people gone who used to live here before? What traces are there of the people who used to live here? I started thinking about those people, and then about the people who remain, like the family of the main character. These people who lived there before the area became built up are now running a restaurant for the new people who have moved in. The original people are now servicing the people who have taken away the land. I felt that was ironic. That symbolizes something essential about Korean society.'

I asked Lee about the source of the film's violence, which begins in the very first scene and never lets up.

He explained that he had two points to make about violence. 'In the first place,' he began, 'the theme of the film is the nature of violence. We have had about thirty years of economic development in Korea. A unique value system has formed around modernization. The whole ideology is to get results at any cost. Of course there is a diversity of violence, from political violence to gangster violence. But I think violence is violence, regardless of who is committing it. I wanted to show the nature of that violence to my audience.'

Second, and very important, Lee explained, he had not wanted to aestheticize (beautify) violence, in the way it has been in many different genres of films, gangster films, Hong Kong films. He wanted to take away the glamour of violence. 'I wanted to show the horror of violence,' he said. 'Instead of the glamour of the gangster culture, I wanted to show the ordinariness, the banal quality of violence. And I wanted to show the universality of violence.'

'Is the gangster 'family' a legitimate symbol of Korean institutions in general?' I asked.

'Yes, the gangsters form a family, and it is not just the gangsters that are a family,' he observed. 'In Korea the multinational corporations also have a family structure. They call themselves families. Korea as a whole, as a society, is like a big family. It doesn't matter whether it's a military 'family' or structure, or a corporate family, or a gangster family. Whatever the structure, the basis is violence.'

I noted that numerous Korean and Taiwanese films in particular had treated the consequences of economic development. What, I asked, did he think would be the consequences of an economic crisis, such as the one unfolding in Asia?

He responded, reasonably enough, that because the crisis had erupted so recently it was difficult to see what its precise consequences would be. But he had definite ideas about the source of the crisis. The view he put forward is no doubt popular among Korean intellectuals and probably many workers too.

He said: 'I think the crisis has something to do with our identity, wondering what that identity is, what we own ourselves. The economic crisis is about losing our cultural, national identity so quickly. The only objective in Korea for years was to have economic development and modernization, there was nothing else involved. In that process the idea that it was not good to lose what we ourselves had was lost, because of the single-minded obsession with growth. What I wanted to say in *Green Fish* is that the things we should not lose as a culture, we are losing.'

What is the current atmosphere? I asked.

Lee replied: 'Everybody is very insecure and very nervous right now. There's a lot of fear about the future.'

Green Fish is very pleasing to the eye, I commented. 'So many films today, even some with interesting ideas, are dull or carelessly made. What is the significance of aesthetic value?'

He stated that he was not specifically looking to create beauty. 'There are film-makers,' he went on, 'who make films for the sake of a beauty that exceeds the beauty of reality. You can say reality is boring and ugly and dirty. However, if you can find beauty within that ugliness and dullness then that is good. What is called film is something with which you can represent reality as it is, like a photograph. Or film can be something with which you take reality and transform it into something more beautiful. I don't want to make a film in which you defraud reality or betray reality through an illusion.'

I asked Lee what he felt was the responsibility of the artist to society.

He paused before answering. 'That is a very difficult question,' he began. 'I don't think an artist can fully estimate the changes in society, or change society, in that sense. But what an artist can do, if his art is good, is cleanse a person's spirit, a person's heart. He can also bring out a person's true heart. Or even if it is not possible to get to that level, at least you can affect a person's heart or feelings.'

'Do you admire other film-makers?

He was hesitant about responding to that. 'There are so many,' he finally said. Not surprisingly, the first name he came up with was Hou Hsiao-hsien.

Along those lines, I asked: 'What are the biggest differences between Korean and Taiwanese films?'

Some things are lost in translation. He understood that to be a question about the nature of the two film *industries*.

'The difference is that,' he explained, 'outside of documentaries, Korean films have to have commercial value. All of our films are made contingent on commercial success. Taiwanese films are made without having to worry about that. That essential fact divides the two cinemas. The commercial Korean film industry is still alive, while it is dead in Taiwan. In Korea you can't make a film like Tsai Ming-liang does [*Vive l'amour*]. Government money is not available.'

What had been the reception to *Green Fish* in South Korea, I asked.

It was very well received critically. In terms of popular response, it wasn't bad. But it didn't break even. Compared to the average Korean film it is a very serious, very sincere film. Despite the fact that it is a gangster film, it makes certain social criticisms. 'Let's think about the problems of society.' It also deglamourizes the violence of the gangster culture.'

I commented that I had never seen any of the products of the Korean commercial film industry. I asked him about its current state.

Lee noted that the Korean film market was among the top ten in the world. Right now, despite the fact that there are so many Hollywood films in Korea, Korean films still take up 20 percent of the market. Even in Asia that's unusual. Even though the number of films being made is decreasing, the number of people going to Korean films is not decreasing.'

'Are you optimistic that there is an audience for serious films?'

Rather than speak about the audience for such films, he made note of the situation within the industry. 'Everybody agrees,' he commented, 'that the commercial viability of a film is important. However, nobody knows what's necessary to make a really good film. People who create policy don't know, the investors don't know, the film-makers themselves don't know. What kind of films we should make, people don't know.'

'Some people know,' I suggested.

'Even I don't know,' he replied modestly.

What lies in the future?

'I'm writing a new screenplay. After I finish it, I have to find an investor.'

See Also:

Korean filmmaker Park Kwang-su:

'If something is wrong, we have to act'

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