

Blue Moon, written and directed by Ko Yi-cheng

A self-assured experiment in film

Richard Phillips
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Blue Moon by respected Taiwanese director Ko Yi-cheng--his first film in more than six years--is an appealing and self-assured film.

Set in contemporary Taiwan, *Blue Moon's* characters are young people, mainly lower middle class, attempting to deal with the pressures of urban life. Guen-shu (Leon Dai), a recently divorced novelist, and A-gua (David Wang), an ambitious although naïve film producer, are vying for the affection of Yi-fang (Tarcy Su), a beautiful, strong-willed, but indecisive young woman. A gangster and a restaurant owner are supporting characters in the film; they too are attracted to Yi-fang.

The film is named after the belief that special opportunities are granted following the appearance of two full moons in a month. Ordinarily, there is one full moon each month; occasionally there are two. In Taiwan, the second full moon is called a 'blue moon'. According to local custom, when a person sees a blue moon and prays sincerely, they are given a second chance in life.

At first glance, this synopsis could describe a television sitcom or some other inconsequential film. *Blue Moon*, however, is not so simple. In fact, the film provides the viewer with opportunity for a lifetime of second chances--to see a different plot and character development each time the film is screened.

Blue Moon is organised in five 20-minute reels, but the film has been created so that these reels can be projected in any order or sequence. This means that there are 120 possible different story combinations. In other words, the story line and character development are determined by chance, thus providing its characters with countless possibilities or second chances. At the Sydney Film Festival, a member of the audience chose the reel sequence.

This technique is not entirely new. Many filmmakers, beginning with pioneers of the Soviet film industry such as Lev Kuleshov and Dziga Vertov, have used this or similar devices to confront their audiences and compel them to examine the role of the accidental in art, cinema and life.

Blue Moon raises many issues and challenges the conventional notions of plot development and cinematic rules. The boundary between reality and fiction is also obliterated in numerous ways, including by the fact that A-gua, one of the central characters and a filmmaker, is producing a film also called *Blue Moon*.

Ko Yi-cheng's film is not some dry, self-conscious or inaccessible theoretical statement. The characters are complex, convincing and challenging. The problems they confront transcend their immediate surroundings and Taiwan. In *Blue Moon* the director is commenting on what appears as the random or uncontrollable character of life confronting humanity at the end of the twentieth century. Nothing is as it appears; all seems unpredictable; life is cold; individuals fail to establish relationships with any depth; love and companionship are constantly sought, yet disrupted by random or accidental events.

Strong performances by the cast and Ko Yi-cheng's highly developed visual sense and technical skills have produced a challenging and emotionally satisfying film. The self-contained nature of each section and strong direction ensure a seamless interchange between each reel. In the hands of a less skilled or artistically competent director, *Blue Moon* could have been a disjointed disaster of a film.

Ko Yi-cheng is not a newcomer. In 1981 he co-directed *In Our Time*, a seminal work from this period and considered by many as the first of the 'new wave' films from Taiwan. Along with Edward Yang and Hou

Hsiao-hsien he has been a key figure in Taiwan filmmaking. His other films include *The Boy with the Longest Sword* (1982), *I Love Mary* (1983), *Reunion* (1985), *Last Train to Tan-Suei* (1987) and *The Piggy Tail* (1991).

Ko Yi-cheng is determined to push beyond the boundaries dictated by the market. As he explained in a recent interview: 'If you want to make films in Taiwan, you have to explain the plot to your producers. I don't want to do that, and that's why I stopped making movies for a long time. Now I am the proud owner of a super 16mm camera. That enables me to make low budget films, so I am back in business again.'

Blue Moon marks an important return.



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