

The films of South Korean director Lee Chang-dong in New York City

David Walsh
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South Korean filmmaker Lee Chang-dong, also a novelist and screenwriter, directed several films in the 1990s and early 2000s that were highly and deservedly praised. A number of those films, along with a few later works, are currently being screened at the Metrograph theater in New York City.

The WSWWS previously spoke to Lee twice, in San Francisco in 1998 and in Buenos Aires in 2001. We commented favorably on *Green Fish* (1997), *Peppermint Candy* (1999) and *Oasis* (2002). The latter was the South Korean submission for best foreign language film at the 75th Academy Awards.

Lee was also involved earlier—as co-writer, assistant director or producer—with the making of two important South Korean films, *To the Starry Island* (1993) and *A Single Spark* (1995), directed by Park Kwang-su, about the period during which a bloody dictatorship ruled the country. The CIA- and Pentagon-backed “white terror” regime in South Korea was responsible for the execution alone of at least 100,000 people suspected of “supporting communism,” and the arrest and abuse of countless others.

Peppermint Candy, one of the first films that Lee directed himself, was concerned with official repression and brutality. It treats in reverse the life of a policeman and eventual businessman.

A wave of sensitive and humane films emerged from South Korea, Taiwan, Iran and China in the 1990s and early 2000s. Not informed by a strong historical or social perspectives, the filmmakers ended up for the most part in a blind alley. Expressing in an especially sharp form some of the difficulties, Lee accepted the post of Minister of Culture and Tourism in the “reform” government of President Roh Moo-hyun in 2003, a government that implemented harsh labor laws, set riot police against striking workers and agreed to send South Korean troops to assist the US-led occupation of Iraq. Lee served as a government minister for two years.

His later films revealed a growing complacency and social vagueness. Writing of *Secret Sunshine* in 2007, the WSWWS noted that “Everything ... is reduced to the level of personal dilemmas and choices, which are separated from their driving forces in social life.”

Notwithstanding his subsequent development, Lee’s early films are worth viewing.

We include some of our comments on his films, and portions of our interviews with the South Korean writer-director.

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1998: **Dirt in the soul: *Green Fish*, written and directed by 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 cliched, 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 moment—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.” ...

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.” ...

2001: Buenos Aires 3rd International Festival of Independent Cinema—Part 2: Intuition and consciousness in filmmaking

South Korean filmmaker Lee Chang-Dong’s *Peppermint Candy* tells its story in reverse. During a party in 1999 reuniting a group of old friends, a man in a business suit, Yongho, climbs up on a railway bridge and lets a train hit him. The next scene takes place three days earlier. Yongho buys a gun. “Which one to pick? Which one should I shoot?” he asks himself, going through the list of those, mostly in business, who have helped destroy him. A stranger appears. He’s the husband of Yongho’s first love, Sunim, now gravely ill. He goes to see her in the hospital. “It’s too late.”

Yongho’s history now rewinds five years, to 1994. He’s on his car phone a great deal. It seems he’s hired a detective to spy on his wife, who’s having an affair. We learn he’s an ex-policeman, now in business. Another seven years in reverse: 1987. Yongho, the policeman, tortures a young man suspected of being involved with student protests. After the latter’s confession, Yongho asks him: “Do you really think life is beautiful?” At night, in the rain, he goes in search of his first love, finding a prostitute instead.

In 1984 Yongho is a rookie cop. The other cops learn that he once worked in a factory. “In the union?” they ask. “You want to try this one?” He tortures his first prisoner, a worker. His victim defecates on Yongho’s hands. Then he goes to have lunch with Sunim, his girlfriend at the time. She praises his sensitive hands. He’s sickened by himself, by everything. He crudely breaks up with her.

Four years earlier Yongho, a scared kid, is in the army. Sunim comes to visit him. The soldiers are treated like dogs. Mindless discipline and brutality. Each pledges to give “my life to the nation.” Major protests have broken out. The soldiers, including Yongho, are called on to put down the demonstrations. By accident, Yongho shoots and kills a girl student, someone not involved in the protest. A year earlier, at the picnic in 1979 whose twentieth anniversary is being celebrated in the film’s

opening scene, Yongho and Sunim talk and flirt. She works in a candy factory. He has dreams. "I hope your dream is a good one." He wanders off, a train roars by.

The film is quite powerful. The transformation of a human being into a monster, thanks to the social order and its requirements. A film that takes history and *an historical approach* seriously. In some ways it is a little too neatly done, everything in Yongho's psyche and subsequent conduct thoroughly explained and accounted for. But, all in all, this is a devastating work.

2002: Toronto International Film Festival 2002: Even in success, problems

Oasis, from South Korean filmmaker Lee Chang-dong, treats people who have been excluded in a different fashion: a woman with cerebral palsy, essentially abandoned by her family, and an ex-convict, a psychically wounded individual who finds it almost impossible to act "acceptably." Both have dreadful families, whose prime concerns are money and appearance. These two wounded souls conduct a strange, exhilarating, pitiful love affair, with a tragic outcome.

With this film, following upon *Green Fish* (1997) and *Peppermint Candy* (2000), Lee confirms his position as one of the most intelligent and humane directors currently working. He has gone to great lengths in *Oasis* to portray realistically and painfully the relations between his two principal characters. None of that effort goes to waste, but at times the film concentrates so precisely and intensely on the physical difficulties of the woman, for instance, that the larger picture, of a society geared only to financial success and brutally indifferent to its victims, is somewhat lost sight of.



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