

KOREAN CINEMA NOW

Monthly series presented in cooperation with The Korea Society

POETRY (SHI)

Sunday, January 23, 2011

4:00 p.m. Special Preview Screening

2010, 139 mins.

35mm print courtesy Kino International.

Written and directed by Lee Chang-dong. Produced by Lee Joon-dong. Photographed by Kim Hyung-seok.

Edited by Kim Hyun. Production design by Sihm Jeom-hui.

Principal cast: Yun Jung-hee (as Mija), Lee David (Wook), Kim Hira (M. Kang)

A Conversation with Lee Chang-dong, by Claude Mouchard:

During the process of making a film, when do you decide the film's title? When and how did you come up with the idea of making a film about poetry literally using the title, Poetry?

Normally I decide the film title at a fairly early stage. If I don't do this, I cannot convince myself that the film will be made at all. A few years ago, there was a case in which several teenage boys from a small rural city gang-raped a middle school girl. For quite some time, I'd been thinking about this act of violence, but I wasn't sure how I would tell the story on film.

Then one morning in a hotel room in Kyoto, Japan, I was watching TV when the title, *Poetry*, just came to me. I think it was a TV program made for tourists spending sleepless nights. As I watched the screen playing meditative music to the extremely typical landscape of birds flying over a peaceful river and fishermen throwing their fishnets, it hit me that this

film dealing with this insidious crime could have no other title. The main character and plot were conceived almost at the same time. My companion during that trip was an old friend who is a poet. When I told him about the title and the plot I was thinking about, he [told me that he thought it was an] extremely reckless project. He warned me that the several successes I had with my previous films—although they may have only been small successes—had made me overly confident. But strangely enough, his words only reinforced my conviction.

When did you first think of working with Yun Jung-hee? Will the Korean audience recognize her, or will there be a generation that won't?

I assume the young audience in their twenties will be unfamiliar with Yun Jung-hee. The generation gap is quite deep in Korean cinema. From the start, or when I thought of a woman in her mid-sixties, I recalled Yun Jung-hee. It came so naturally, as if it was an undoubted fact. It didn't matter that she had been away from the film scene for the past 15 years. The main character's name is Mija, which is

in fact Yun Jung-hee's real name. It wasn't intentional, but a coincidence.

When did you first come up with the subject of dementia?

'Dementia' was a word that came to me almost at the same time I thought of all three key elements of the film: the title, *Poetry*; a female character in her sixties attempting for the first time in her life to write a poem; and an old lady bringing up a teenage boy all by herself. As our protagonist learns poetry, she begins to forget words as well. Dementia clearly alludes to death. The poet conducting the lecture never talks about the techniques of poetry writing, but emphasizes scrupulous attention to 'really seeing things.' Likewise, can we relate poetry to film? Yes. 'To see things well' refers to poetry, but it also refers to film as well. Certain films help us see the world in a different light. And some films let us see only what we want to see while others keep us from seeing anything.

Through the poetry lecture and the 'Love Poetry' group, poetry becomes the central theme of this film. At the same time, I believe the structure of this film has a close relation with poetry. The reason why I prefer this film over your other films is because of the fluidity that connects each moment to one another. Will it do justice to define this as an 'open' film?

Like a page with a poem on it, I thought of a film with a lot of empty space. This empty space can be filled in by the audience. In this sense, you can say this is an 'open' film.

In the scene where Mija has sex with Mr. King, is she already thinking of asking him for money? In my opinion, it seems she had come up with the idea afterwards... Was she just granting him his 'last gift' as a man?

What thoughts go through Mija's mind when she grants the old man this merciful deed? Before she makes her decision to have sex with him, she goes to the river where the girl had died and stands in the rain, deep in contemplation, for quite some time. It must have been deep and complex thoughts that captivated her. She would have brooded over the sexual desires of immature boys that drove a young girl to her death, and the sexual desires of an old man who begs her to let him be a man for the last time. For some contradictory reason, she decides to grant him this wish. It might have been nothing but pure compassion, but regardless, when she demands to him for money, she dishonors this deed. Sadly enough, it is an inevitable choice she makes.

I believe this film has a visual echo. For example, the flower works in this way—especially the red flower referring to blood. And then we see the dishwashing basin in Mija's sink and Mija gazing at the dishwashing basin, and then the poet during a poetry lecture explaining that poetry can be found even in a dishwashing basin. It's like the film is finding its own rhyme. Likewise, Mija's hat falling into the water recalls the young girl's suicide.

As you have commented, the red flower is related to blood. Beauty is often connected to filthiness. And flowers that are considered beautiful often turn out to be man-made. The hat falling into the river recalls the young girl's suicide, but moreover, it hints at Mija's own fate.

Another related issue is that the conclusion of the film's narrative is also left as a blank. Where has Mija gone after leaving a single poem? In the last part, when we hear her voice reading her poem, we can merely feel her absence, but we have no clue as to where she has gone.

That too I want to leave as a blank for the audience to fill in. Yet there is a hint. The flow of the river in the last part of the film emotionally suggests that

Mija has accepted the girl's fate as her own. Like ground.
the thoughts evoked from the apricots fallen to the

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