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# ABOUT THE FILM

Filmmaker Joong-rae, suffering from writer's block, takes a trip to the coast with his production designer Chang-wook, who brings along the vivacious Moon-sook. Soon after their arrival, Moon-sook falls for Joong-rae's advances; however, the fickle hero can't commit and he awkwardly parts with her. What had been a sardonic Jules and Jim turns into a burlesque *Vertigo* when Joong-rae returns to the coastal resort and attempts to recreate the original romance with a woman who resembles Moon-sook, until his jilted lover shows up. *New 4K restoration from the original 35mm negative!*

100 min. | South Korea | 2006

## Twice Told Tales by James Quandt

*The following is an excerpt of an article originally published in Artforum, Summer 2007*

You wouldn't want to hang out with Hong Sang-soo. So cringe-making is the Korean director's acuity about social relations – the petty vexations, vanities, and evasions that constitute most so-called alliances – that one can only infer that he spends much of his time noting others' foibles for use in his films. Hong never exempts himself from this inquisition; indeed, his seven features can be read, if reductively, as a project of auto-excoriation. His work teems with Hong look-alikes, alter egos, and surrogates, most of them self-absorbed, obtuse, feckless, forever doing the wrong thing: insisting on paying a host for a home-cooked meal; crying out the name of another woman in the middle of sex; drunkenly demanding a blowjob from a long-abandoned girlfriend; upbraiding or abusing servicepeople; borrowing money from a grieving acquaintance at a hospital; ignoring the reluctance, discomfort, or pain of the women they fuck. "Life is a challenge," says Sun-young, a married woman being pursued by Kyung-soo, an actor, in the second half of *On the Occasion of Remembering the Turning Gate* (2002). "What?" obliviously replies the distracted Hong proxy, who is determined to bed her. "Do you like my moves?" he inquires once he is thrusting inside her; and when he later suffers a bout of impotence, he blithely asks, "Shall we die together cleanly without having sex?" (a proposal that gets restated by the callow male in the film-within-the-film in Hong's *Tale of Cinema*). Kyung-soo may have memorized as a mantra a line tossed at him earlier in the film – "Even though it's difficult to be a human being, let's not turn into monsters" – but, like many of Hong's men, he doesn't realize that his heedlessness has become its own kind of indignity.

Standing apart from the clamor of current Korean cinema, with its obsessed vengeance seekers, live-octopus eaters, and river-dwelling mutants, forty-six-year-old Hong Sang-soo has secured his international reputation over the past decade with a septet of muted,

structurally complex films – elliptical, exacting work that puts him more in the company of Hou Hsiao-hsien, Jia Zhang-ke, and Tsai Ming-liang. Though his visual style is less distinctive than any of theirs – reticent and functional, if not self-effacing, its long takes in the service of naturalism rather than formal design, its proximate but observational camera achieving a simultaneous intimacy and dispassion – Hong's aesthetic is no less precise, particularly in the intricacy of his narratives. [...]

Hong's is a cinema of missed connections (Kyung-soo and his friend take a ferry to the eponymous temple in *Turning Gate* but turn back before seeing it, convinced there's "not much there"), of inclement weather (off-season and winter predominate, and *Gate* begins and ends in driving rain), of self-deluding conversation. Frequently compared to Eric Rohmer because his ineffectual characters seem to talk more than act, deceive themselves and others, misinterpret motives and events, and take various psychological byways to defer their futures, Hong has built a distinctive world for his inadequate men and resilient, barely enduring women. His keen attention to setting – a series of unremarkable bars and restaurants (as in Ozu, his favorite director), anonymous hotel rooms with slithery chenille bedspreads and fake everything, unlovely streets, deserted alleys, and ironically deployed tourist sites (Kangwon Province, the *Turning Gate* temple, Shinduri Beach) – accentuates the feel of drift and dislocation.

For critics who complain that by the time of *Woman Is the Future of Man* Hong had created a cul-de-sac for himself, his repetitions having become in themselves repetitive, Hong's latest films, *Tale of Cinema* and *Woman on the Beach*, with their insiderish world of filmmakers and routine reliance on the romantic triangle, might confirm a sense of aesthetic stall. But much is new in both films, particularly the radical resurrection of a shot long abjured by contemporary directors. Not only does *Tale* introduce Hong's first use of voice-over, typically viewed as a lazy device – telling, not showing, and all that – but there is also an insistent reliance on the zoom, similarly thought slovenly. On the moral or ethical continuum for shots, the zoom stands opposite to the fixed, long (preferably distant) take, which has been assigned qualities of integrity, even purity, in its noninterventionist, 'whole' recording of reality. The zoom, an intrusive visual punctuation to emphasize emotion, direct attention, and isolate detail, is conversely assigned qualities of artificiality, expedience, and coercion. That Frederick Wiseman, avatar of observational documentary, employed zooms (e.g., in *Basic Training* (1971)), and Rossellini, conventionally described as the father of neorealism, built his late style around the use of the Pancinor zoom lens surely complicates this simplistic schema. But the zoom remains associated with slatternly '70s cinema, so when, midway through *Tale*, it suddenly becomes apparent that the zoom-happy film we have been watching is the creation not of Hong (though, of course, it is) but of the ailing director who is a character in the film proper (i.e., the latter half of *Tale*), one initially assumes, with considerable relief, that the zoom was one of Hong's sly indicators – along with some unsubtle performances and telenovela confrontations – that the first half was made by another (and lesser) director. Not so. In the second half, made by Hong in the style of Hong, the zoom reappears in no less obtrusive and clumsy form. Hong defenders have proffered unsatisfactory explanations for his use of the zoom, and the director has been vague

about his motive for this startling departure from his usual staging in the long take, so the issue remains unresolved. [...]

Few can rival Hong for his portrayals of social awkwardness and embarrassment, of nurtured grievance, fueled by booze, erupting into accusation: the reunion of two school chums in *Woman Is the Future of Man*, for example, their drunken lunch roiling with resentment until it bursts into absurd allegation, that the one hugged the other's wife 'American style.' *Woman on the Beach*, though acclaimed as Hong's sunniest, funniest, most whimsical, generous, and accessible film, has some of the director's crudest moments, in which characters don't seem to care whether it is difficult being human or not – being monstrous is second nature.

The casual ease with which Moon-sook disparages and abandons her mate, openly inviting the seduction of Joong-rae, and the childish pleasure the two take in sending the pathetic, increasingly hysterical boyfriend the wrong way on the darkened beach are (exquisitely) painful to witness. Hong and his actors miss no note of abasement, need, and manipulation, every soju-assisted insight designed to sting and wither: "You're different from your films," Moon-sook tells Joong-rae. "You're a Korean man." She means: vain, insecure, controlling, parochial. "You're reckless but not loathsome," she assures him, which passes for flattery in Hong's world.

Hong's use of the zoom in *Beach* is more assured than in *Tale of Cinema*: a tight shot begins with only Joong-rae and Moon-sook in frame and then zooms out to reveal that the hapless boyfriend is also present, the effect neatly capturing the latter's cruel exclusion by the duo, his 'third wheel' status. And though the film retains Hong's dual structure, with its inevitable reiterations – Moon-sook is alienated from her father in the first half; the woman who becomes her romantic rival is alienated from her mother in the second; and so on – there are enough felicities and mysteries to save it from *Tale's* schematism. Joong-rae's weeping, prostrate prayer before three bare trees complicates our sense of his character, and Moon-sook, at once humiliating and humiliated, is one of Hong's most complex women. (Issues of trust and faith are important to the women in the film but are typically misunderstood by the men.) *Beach*, however, tilts dangerously toward literalism. A motif involving a white dog is both redundant and blatant, a needless restatement of the theme of abandonment. An earlier, more ambiguous Hong would have left uncertain the identity of the man who terrorizes Joong-rae and Moon-sook with his motorbike; an egregious insert reveals what we have already guessed. And Joong-rae's mishap with an unused muscle that has him hobbling through the last part of the film suggests the kind of short-hand lesser artists resort to: physical disability as metaphor for psychic infirmity. Like Yong-sil in *Tale of Cinema*, Hong seems unsure that we can really understand the film. ♦



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