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# WOMAN IS THE FUTURE OF MAN

YEOJANEUN NAMJAU MIRAE DA

2004

## CAST

**Yoo Jitae** Lee Munho

**Sung Hyunah** Park Seonhwa

**Kim Taewoo** Kim Hyeongon

## CREW

Written and directed by **Hong Sangsoo**

Produced by **Marin Karmitz, Ahn Byongjoo, Choi Seongmin, Hanna Lee**

Executive Producer **Nathalie Kreuther**

Cinematography **Kim Hyeongu**

Sound **An Sangho**

Editor **Hahm Sungwon**

Music **Jeong Yongjin**



# TALE OF CINEMA

GEUK JANG JEON

2005

## CAST

**Kim Sangkyung** Kim Dongsoo

**Uhm Jiwon** Choi Youngshil

**Lee Kiwoo** Jeon Sangwon

## CREW

Written and Directed by **Hong Sangsoo**

Produced by **Hong Sangsoo**, **Marin Karmitz**

In Charge of Financing **Choi Yongbae**

Cinematography and Lighting **Kim Hyungkoo**, **Kim Youngrho**

Sound **An Sangho**

Editor **Hahm Sungwon**

Music **Jeong Yongjin**

Mix **Choi Sung Rok**



# MEN BEHAVING CADLY

## TWO FILMS BY HONG SANGSOO

By Michael Sicinski

One bit of lazy critical shorthand that buzzes around the films of Hong Sangsoo is that “he makes the same movie over and over.” Now, we can put such a claim in a positive light if we were so inclined. After all, Jean Renoir famously claimed that every director essentially makes one film again and again. And the BBC’s late, great John Peel once said of his favourite band The Fall that they were “always different, always the same.”

Nevertheless, to argue that Hong’s films are all just iterations of a single set of themes – say, male misbehaviour and soju consumption – is hardly enlightening, and is in fact quite misleading. You, the purchaser of this special edition Blu-ray set, are in an enviable position to put this evaluative stereotype to the test, since you are now in possession of not one but two of Hong’s most interesting films. If possible, watch them back-to-back. See how they differ in tone and ambiance. Appreciate the subtlety and nuance with which they assert their own cinematic identity.

Granted, there are some shared concerns. *Woman Is the Future of Man* (*Yeojaeun namjaui miraeda*, 2004) and *Tale of Cinema* (*Geuk jang jeon*, 2005) are Hong’s fifth and sixth features, respectively. Over the course of his 22-year career, Hong has gone through phases, and his earlier work marks a much more dramatic contrast from his recent work than any given film differs from the one immediately before or after it. For example, his first few films – *The Day a Pig Fell into the Well* (*Daijiga umule pajinnal*, 1996), *The Power of Kangwon Province* (*Kangwon-do ui him*, 1998), and *Virgin Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors* (*Oh! Soo-jung*, 2000) – entail much more location shooting than his most recent films – *Claire’s Camera* (*La caméra de Claire*, 2017), *The Day After* (*Geu-hu*, 2017), and *Grass* (2018) – which tend to confine themselves to one or two intimate locales.

Hong has developed a quicker, more concentrated style of filmmaking, one that places more emphasis on script and performance than visual maneuvering. With his mature style, which arguably came together with his first bona fide masterpiece, *On the Occasion of Remembering the Turning Gate* (*Saenghwalui balgyeon*, 2002), Hong began drawing comparisons with Éric Rohmer, the great French observer of human foibles and misplaced







pride. And like Rohmer, Hong developed a stylistic language that punctuated and underscored his narrative voice, rather than amplifying or contradicting it.

We can observe this visual punctuation almost immediately in *Woman Is the Future of Man*, as Lee Munho (Yoo Jitae) and Kim Hyeonong (Kim Taewoo) are seated in the café by the window. They are discussing Hyeonong's return to Seoul after having studied in the United States. The scene is conducted in one long take, and as the two of them discuss Hyeonong's career prospects, Munho (whose large house we saw in the very first scene) takes the upper hand. Then, once Munho leaves, Hyeonong tries to reassert his power by asking the waitress if she would like to be in a movie he's making – a recurring pick-up line among Hong characters. Aside from a slight upward tilt to allow the standing waitress's head to enter the frame, Hong doesn't move the camera view.

By contrast, the first table scene in *Tale of Cinema*, which happens after a number of outdoor meetings and establishing shots, is at a bar, between Sangwon (Lee Kiwoo), the protagonist of the film-within-the-film, and Youngshil (Uhm Jiwon), the lead actress. They have reunited after Sangwon's return, and the two of them are rather inebriated. After Youngshil asks Sangwon, "Are you mad at me?" the camera zooms in for a tighter shot of the table, mirroring the now-increased tension of the scenario. (The zoom concludes on the line, "Answer. Tell the truth!") Next, we hear Sangwon in voiceover explaining why a relationship with Youngshil would never work. At this point, the camera pans left and zooms in on his face as he lights a cigarette. When the voiceover is complete, the lens zooms back out to the two-shot. The two-shot holds until Youngshil asks, "Do you want me to be your mistress?" At this point, the camera zooms in on her as she waits for an answer. (The next shot is a close-up of empty beer cans.)

For a viewer familiar with the Hong Sangsoo oeuvre, the table shot tends to come to mind as the emblematic visual feature of his film work. In fact, the frequency with which he uses this shot can account for the uncharitable judgment of "sameness" between his films. However, if we consider these two scenes, we can learn a lot about Hong's style and see that they are actually quite different. In *Woman*, the camera remains stationary in order to establish a basic equality between the two men. It is only when this equality is disrupted that the camera moves slightly, and Hyeonong must act in order to reestablish equilibrium.

By contrast, in *Tale*, Sangwon and Youngshil are in a contest of wills, one that ping pongs back and forth. More than this, the pans and zooms serve to punctuate the grammar of the script for the viewer. For Youngshil, the close-ups are a question mark; for Sangwon, it is a thought bubble. In any case, they help make the speech more visually legible.

In many respects, these scenes are emblematic of the films from which they are taken. *Tale of Cinema* is a more complex film, which is not to say that it is a better film than *Woman*. But Hong employs more visual embellishment because *Tale* simply has more moving parts. There is another aspect of Hong's cinema that has been sufficiently consistent as to yield charges of self-plagiarism, and that is his depiction of the hapless sexism of Korean men. However, again this is an oversimplification of a theme that is treated with many subtle hues. *Woman Is the Future of Man* may benefit from being Hong's most straightforward depiction of male boorishness.

Disturbingly, *Woman* displays its pro-woman stance precisely by showing just how loutish men are and how susceptible women can be to their deceit. In the course of their reunion, Hyeonong and Munho discover that they both dated the same woman, Seonhwa (Sung Hyunah) and, in a fit of frat-like highfiver, decide to go track her down. Upon finding her, they both begin putting on the moves, and Hong shows us how little difference there is between Munho, the cocky ladies' man, and Hyeonong, the sensitive nebbish.

In one of the most unsettling scenes in Hong's entire filmography, Seonhwa is accosted on the street by an old school acquaintance just out of the army. He forces her into a taxi and, when she arrives late for her rendezvous with Hyeonong, she tells him that she was raped. In an act that is intended to convey sensitivity, he takes her to a hotel room, showers with her, and has sex with her to "make her clean". Seonhwa experiences a range of emotions through this process, from shame and discomfort to what we might call enthusiastic acquiescence.

It is one of the bluntest iterations of Hong's primary thesis, that men are generally clueless cads who cannot or will not understand women as human beings. Over the course of *Woman*, Seonhwa reveals just how deeply Hyeonong has hurt her over the years, and all he can do is drink and grovel, even demanding to be burned by a cigarette. But then, as one pivotal scene shows, Munho is no better, only more direct. Both men see Seonhwa as an object to compete over, not as a woman with her own desires. And the longer she is associated with them, the more unclear her own feelings become even to herself.

*Woman* cannot be considered a feminist film, although Hong will go on to make subsequent films that could be classified as such, like *Ok's Movie* (*Ok-hui-ui yeonghwa*, 2010) and *On the Beach at Night Alone* (*Bamui haebyeoneseo honja*, 2017). But Seonhwa is not a weak character. She is simply damaged, and as the film is quick to point out, it is because she has put her faith in men who have proven spectacularly unworthy. Hong is not looking at Korean masculinity from the outside, however. His decision to make the spineless Hyeonong a filmmaker can be understood as a bit of self-criticism, and this is something we will see





throughout the Hong filmography. Film directors, writers, professors – these films are filled with men from the intellectual class who are cruel to women and generally good for nothing.

And if this is another sticking point for those who believe that Hong is endlessly repeating himself, then certainly Freud would have something to contribute to the debate. Trauma, after all, is characterized by endless repetition, the usually futile attempt to master a damaging event. But more often than not, we are stuck in an endlessly looping script. Only through the deep introspection of therapy can we break that cycle, and Hong's men instead use their intellect to analyze everything *but* themselves.

*Tale of Cinema* operates in the same vein, but with a twist. Above I described the scene between two major characters, Sangwon and Youngshil. In the first half of the film, Sangwon struggles to rekindle a relationship with Youngshil but ends up failing to do so, largely because of an unexplained sexual incompatibility. Then the two embark on a failed suicide pact. Despite missed connections, there does seem to be a genuine rapport between these two characters, a respect that holds absolute tragedy in abeyance. Sangwon is a bit different than the usual cads who populate Hong's world.

Alas, we discover that we have been watching a film within a film. This is part of a retrospective of a director who is dying in hospital, and we have been watching it along with the two main characters of the second half of the film: Dongsoo (Kim Sangkyung) and the real Youngshil (Uhm Jiwon), an actress who played a character with her own name in the preceding film. She has since become an actress of some renown.

To say that Dongsoo has limited social skills would be an understatement. With his blunt manner and apparent lack of understanding of physical proxemics, one might reasonably conclude that he occupies some position on the autistic spectrum. He becomes obsessed with Youngshil, following her around to various locations (including an optometrist that was featured in the original film) and begins to badger her.

Once again, the primary engine of Hong's film is a man who does not comprehend his own distasteful behaviour, but in this case, we have a stronger woman character who is better able to handle his brusque questioning and antisocial outbursts. And, unlike the rather static visual framing in *Woman*, *Tale* consistently uses various pans and zooms, like the one described above, to isolate characters, mostly Dongsoo, in order to establish an exterior judgment of his actions. That is, the 'real' second half of *Tale* borrows the dominant style of the 'fictional' first half in order to bring Dongsoo uncomfortably close, demanding that we as viewers adopt a stance toward his unsavory actions.

It is sometimes said to be a symptom of the postmodern age that we all live our lives as if mediated by screens. This is not only because of smartphones and the Internet, but because of our historical imbrication with movies and TV as well. We can lapse into thinking that we are the protagonists of our own 'movies', and that we are performing our way through life. *Tale of Cinema* in a sense addresses this very problem by giving us Dongsoo, the 'bad actor', who does whatever he wants without thinking about the impact on others. *Of course* the leading lady welcomes his attention. *Of course* the sick kid should give him his scarf back. *Of course* everyone at the party is thinking about him.

When Dongsoo admits to Youngshil that he believes that their old director friend "stole" his life to make the movie they just saw, he is admitting that he lives in his own head, in his own internal tale of cinema. This is why, at the end of the film, Youngshil's final line to him – "You didn't really understand that movie" – is so withering. Dongsoo quite literally does not understand the 'movie' of which he is the star, that is, his own life.

If *Woman Is the Future of Man* demonstrates that the duality of Korean masculinity is an illusion, that so-called 'alpha' and 'beta' males are just two sides of the same coin, then *Tale of Cinema* shows that the dichotomy between fiction and reality has become just as tenuous. We learn how to be men (or women, for that matter) through the images we consume, and then we ourselves become mere images of ourselves. In his next film, *Woman on the Beach* (*Haebyeonui yeoin*, 2006), Hong's latest male protagonist will "mansplain" to his would-be girlfriend that she is not fighting with him, only an "image" of him. And so, the conflict continues, always different, always the same.

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# ABOUT THE TRANSFER

*Woman Is the Future of Man* and *Tale of Cinema* are presented in their original aspect ratio of 1.85:1 with optional 2.0 and 5.1 audio. The masters were prepared in High Definition by MK2 and delivered to Arrow Films.

## PRODUCTION CREDITS

Discs and Booklet Produced by **James Blackford**  
Executive Producers **Kevin Lambert, Francesco Simeoni**  
Technical Producer **James White**  
Production Coordinator **Liane Cunje**  
QC Manager **Nora Mehenni**  
Blu-ray Mastering **The Engine House Media Services**  
Design **Obviously Creative**  
Artwork **Scott Saslow**

## SPECIAL THANKS

Alex Agran, Chris Edwards, Madeleine Lourenco, Anthony Nield,  
Tony Rayns, Michael Sicinski





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