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Hurray for Pusan and the Korean New Wave!

Asian Cinema Odyssey at the 6th Pusan International Film Festival

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For nine days in November 2001 (9th-17th), the 6th Pusan International Film Festival (PIFF) rocked the seaside city of Pusan. A record 659 industry guests from 30 countries, 3100 official Korean guests, and more than a hundred thousand moviegoers filled the seats of 332 completely sold-out, or near sell-out screenings in 15 different theatres. Thousands and thousands of curious festival fans filled the small streets and alleyways in the Downtown-Nampodong festival area, enjoying the stars, lights, cameras, and all of the promotional PIFF booths and kiosks. A total of 126,613 paid tickets were sold to 201 films from 60 countries, making the 6th PIFF the largest international film festival in Asia.

PIFF audiences enjoyed a rare collection of shorts and features from all over the world. Special events, including seminars with filmmakers, hand printing ceremonies, open stage events, press conferences, press screenings, scheduled (and often impromptu) Q & A sessions, and ten official theme parties kept invited guests busy before, during, and after screenings. Films were organised around seven unique program sections.

"A window on Asian cinema" featured 28 outstanding films from 11 different countries, encompassing generations of filmmakers from the old and experienced to the young and upcoming. According to Philip Brasor of the *Japan Times* (21 Nov. 2001), the "hottest ticket" at the festival was Hou Hsiao-Hsien's *Millennium mambo* (Taiwan 2001). Hou's feature portrays a confused and suffocated young woman who is torn between two male lovers. One is a dominating drug user and the other is a stable and affectionate father figure. Her inability to choose one man over the other proposes a series of interesting metaphors for the current political and social climate in Taiwan today.

"New currents" showcased the rising stars of Asian cinema who have concerned themselves with the exploration of contemporary social problems. This particular section raised interesting and cogent industry and aesthetic issues because of the large number of films that were shot on digital video. Inexpensive and light weight digital cameras and cheap raw stock have brought a new found freedom to the art of cinema by enabling young filmmakers all over the world to select locations and create stories which may not have been previously possible. In a press conference, Zhu Wen, the director of *Seafood* (China 2001), explained that there are hundreds of Chinese filmmakers shooting on digital video in China at the moment who have not had to deal with the type of institutional bureaucracies of the past.

According to the PIFF Official Daily Cine21, foreign guests chose *Take care of*

my cat (Korea 2001), directed by Jeong, Jae-Eun, as one of the highlights of the "New currents" section. This moving film made by a predominantly female cast and crew centers on the lives of five twenty-year old Korean girls from Incheon, the harbor city which has become the literal gateway of Korea with its new international airport. The girls are faced with the challenge of entering society. Although the film celebrates their friendships which date back to high school, each girl is on the threshold of adulthood and must find her own way through to the so-called outer world.

Meanwhile, there is a single cat which the girls pass around to one another. Each girl is on a sojourn similar to that of the cat which is on its own mysterious walkabout. The film has heart warming and often humorous moments which bring the women together through their shared experiences. Jeong, who graduated from the prestigious Korean national university of arts, has paved the way for a host of emerging female South Korean filmmakers with her first feature and has enriched women's cinema around the world.

"Korean panorama" gave credit to many original Korean "sophomore" story tellers who continue to grow in the shadows of the more prominent filmmakers such as Im Kwon-Taek, Jang Sun-Woo, Park Kwang-Su, and Hong Sang-Soo (all of whom did not have films in the 6th PIFF). Soon, Korean New Wave directors such as Kwak Kyung-Taek (*Friend* 2001), Hur Jin-Ho (*One fine spring day* 2001), Jang Hyun-Su (*Ray-ban* 2001), Yoon Jong-Chan (*Sorum* 2001), Yim Soon-Rye (*Waikiki brothers* 2001), Song Hye-Sung (*Failan* 2001) and Kim Ki-Duk (*Bad guy* 2001, *Address unknown* 2001) will have prominence of their own.

Kim Ki-Duk is one of Korea's most notable and controversial New Wave filmmakers. He is the only filmmaker who had two films invited to this year's "PIFF Korean panorama". His latest film *Bad guy* and his previous film *Address unknown* drew both negative and positive attention from the press and the public. Nevertheless, Kim's popularity was evidenced by the large crowds of fans and critics following him all over Pusan throughout the festival. At one point, there was nearly a riot among those queuing for *Bad guy* because there were more people interested in seeing the film than there were tickets/seats. A small troop of the festival's 363 well-trained and dedicated volunteers were strategically positioned to help manage the crowds.

Bad guy is a love story between a gangster and a beautiful female university student who is forced (tricked) into prostitution by the gangster. The story takes place in a red light district where the girls are put on display behind large colorfully-lit sliding glass doors. The film explores a darker side of Korean society which Kim believes is part of the ordinary world. That is, the characters in the film are real human beings despite the fact that their environment makes audiences feel uncomfortable with the subject matter.

Perhaps Kim's popularity stems from his bold attempts to tackle taboo Korean subjects such as prostitution, rape, sexual harassment, and domestic violence. Audiences are often overheard saying that his films are shot beautifully, but his "vernacular" is difficult to understand. However, in an interview, Kim explained that audiences may be trying too hard to understand his stories. *Bad guy* is simply an exploration of the Korean psyche told from the viewpoint of an alienated man who has an intense desire to hold on to a fantasy.

A rare and insightful interview with Kim Ki-Duk recently translated by [Aegyung](#)

[Shim Yecies](#) and edited by [Brian Yecies](#) (reprinted with the permission of Cine21) appears in this issue of [Screening the past](#).

"World cinema" was the largest section of PIFF screenings with 67 films from 45 non-Asian countries. Highlights included recent Eastern and Western European features with an emphasis on Scandinavian films. A special tribute to Dusan Makavejev included the screenings of *WR: Mysteries of the organism* (Yugoslavia/USA 1971), *Sweet movie* (France/Canada/Germany/Yugoslavia 1974) and *Gorilla bathes at noon* (Yugoslavia/Germany 1993). Along with the latest films by Jean-Luc Godard (*Eloge de l'amour* Switzerland/France 2001), Jan Troell (*As white as in snow* Sweden 2001), Alexander Sokurov (*Tarus* Russia 2001), and Lucien Pintilie (*An afternoon with a torturer* France/Romania 2001), there were many memorable films by newer directors such as Srđan Golubovic (*Absolute hundred* Yugoslavia 2001), Carl Bessai (*Lola* Canada 2001), David Caesar (*Mullet* Australia 2000), Danis Tanovic (*No man's land* France/Italy/Belgium/UK/Slovenia 2001), Arturo Ripstein (*The ruination of men* Mexico 2000), Pan Nalin (*Samsara* Germany/Italy/France/India 2001), and Gjergj Xhuvani (*Slogans* France/Albania 2001).

"Wide angle" consisted of 52 short narrative, documentary, and animated films from 20 different countries. This unique collection of extraordinary films touched the hearts of viewers with their tales of love, friendship, hardship, struggle, and humanity.

Although "Open cinema" was not on the beach this year, the new futuristic looking Bexco (Pusan Exhibition Center) proved to be an ideal and fun place to see thirteen huge films from eight countries. In fact, the Bexco was just about the only venue that could accommodate all of the thousands of young Korean film fans who converged in the city for the nine day event. Highlights included Johnnie To Kei Fung's gangster action-adventure *Full time killer* (Hong Kong/China 2001), Joel Coen's film noir *The man who wasn't there* (USA 2001), and David Lynch's sublime *Mulholland drive* (USA 2001). A special tribute to Jeanne Moreau included the screenings of *The lovers* (France 1958, dir. Louis Malle), *Jules et Jim* (France 1962, dir. Francois Truffaut), and *Cet amour-la* (France 2001, dir. Josee Dayan), all of which looked amazing on the big screen.

The 6th Pusan International Film Festival launched its gala opening at the Bexco with *The last witness* (Korea 2001), a new film by Bae Chang-Ho. This film looks back at the Korean War, revealing a shocking truth about a prisoner-of-war camp located on Geo-Je, a southern Korean island. Bae Chang-Ho skillfully unweaves this mystery by using historical fiction to frame action and suspense around a love story.

Bae made his film debut with *Slum people* (Korea 1982). Throughout the 1980s he became well known for his box office hits *Whale hunter* (Korea 1984) and *Deep blue night* (Korea 1984). Since then he has directed and produced a series of stylistic films which have explored different genres, including the semi-autobiographical film *Love story* (Korea 1996). *The last witness* is a blockbuster film which exceeded the commercial and artistic expectations of PIFF's opening audience.

The 6th annual PIFF also showcased two "Special programs in focus". The first was a retrospective on the Korean director Shin Sang-Ok, a prominent and influential filmmaker not only in Korea, but in Hong Kong as well. After his debut

in 1952, Shin Sang-Ok directed over 70 films and produced more than 300 films. He has since been called the "Prince of Korean cinema" and credited with driving the Korean cinema boom of the 1960s. Nine of his films were featured this year, including the controversial film (and box office failure) *Vanished* (Korea 1994), a semi-documentary based on the ascension and demise of Park Jung-Hee, the last president-dictator of Korea. Although they were only a small sample of the films he has produced and directed over the last 50 years, Shin Sang-Ok's PIFF screenings honored a legend whose work is the foundation of modern Korean cinema.

Thai cinema has recently attracted attention around the world in the same way that Korean cinema has. The second "Special programs in focus", "Bangkok express: close encounter with new Thai films", spotlighted seven Thai features, four shorts, a comprehensive book on the history of Thai cinema, and a seminar with Thai filmmakers. These otherwise inaccessible Thai films and events celebrated the emergence and exploration of new trends and subjects (comedy, historical, horror, crime, and erotic) and a new wave of young directors and producers who have largely come from commercial, TV, and music video backgrounds.

The PIFF climax was a three hour screening of Royal Prince MC Chatrichalerm Yukol's historical epic *Suriyothai* (Thailand 2001). This film describes the enchanting love, marriage, and court life of Suriyothai, the 16th Century queen of King Mahachakrapat, the ruler of the Ayuthaya Empire. Its breathtaking scope included 80 elephants and over 2000 extras that marched in battle scenes between the Suriyothai and Burmese troops. The grand palace and majestic royal boat captivated audiences with their brightly shining golden colors.

Prince MC Chatrichalerm Yukol, the director, explained in an interview that he has always been interested in the life of Suriyothai and, as a member of the Thailand royal family, could easily access rare historical documents dating back to the 16th Century. This lengthy blockbuster is a well-mastered historical film testifying to the emergence and development of Thai cinema. Although the original 185 minute print of *Suriyothai* may be edited down to a two hour version for future festivals and screenings, it will always be remembered as an outstanding achievement of Asian cinema.

According to Kim, Dong Ho, the Director of PIFF, independent Asian cinema is alive. The center of Asian films has moved from China, Iran, Taiwan, and Korea to Thailand.

The awards

Although each and every film at the festival was award winning on their individual merits, the official top PIFF winner was "Flower Island" (Korea, 2001, dir. Song Il-gon). The festival's international jury awarded Song Il-gon the \$US10,000 cash "New current" award (best new film by an Asian director) for his adventurous and complex exploration of women's strength in a modern Asian society. Song Il-gon also won the \$US7,700 PSB Audience award (voted by audiences during the festival and sponsored by the Pusan System of Broadcasting), and the first FIPRESCI -Foreign Press Award (Federation Internationale de la Presse Cinematographique), honoring the outstanding feature for its artistic achievement. The runner-up FIPRESCI Award went to *One fine spring day* (Korea 2001, dir. Hur Jin-Ho).

Take care of my cat (Korea 2001, dir. Jeong, Jae-Eun) received the NETPAC award (Network for the Promotion of Asian Cinema) and received a special mention in the "New currents" section for its fresh insights into the lives and friendships of young women in contemporary Korea.

Kim Ki-Duk's *Bad guy* (Korea 2001) and Yim Soon-Rye's *Waikiki brothers* (Korea 2001) received a special mention NETPAC Award for their unique style in Korean cinema today. Kim Ki-Duk also won the high-profile \$US20,000 cash Pusan Promotion Plan (PPP) 2001 award to help promote internationally his next film which is called *Bow*. The Pusan International Film Festival's PPP is the biggest free market event in Asian cinema, giving new directors and their new projects a chance to meet with investors and producers from all over the globe.

The 7th Pusan International Film Festival is scheduled for November 2002 (14th to 23rd), and will prove to be another important showcase for Asian cinema. Visit the Pusan international film festival web site at www.piff.org. Audiences may also want to check out the Sydney Asia Pacific film festival, now in its third season, which also celebrates the emergence, promotion, and popularity of great new film making all throughout Asia. SAPFF is scheduled for August 2002 (8th-17th). Visit the Sydney Asia Pacific film festival web site at www.sapff.com.au.

[Brian Yecies](#) and [Aegyung Shim Yecies](#)

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