



Oasis

Director: Lee Chang-dong

Country: South Korea

Date: 2002

A review by Marc Raymond for Senses of Cinema:

The story of Lee Chang-dong's artistic career is a fascinating one. He started as a novelist before moving to the medium of film in his late thirties, first as a screenwriter for Korean New Wave director Park Kwang-su, and then eventually as a director in 1996 at the age of 42. He claims to have made this move because he wanted to have his stories continue to reach a wide audience, and that Korean culture by the 1990s had largely moved from the written word to visual communication. Perhaps even more remarkable is the degree to which he has been successful in this task.

Because of Lee's use of genre conventions (and due to the particular national culture in which he works), he has made films that, while not blockbusters, have nevertheless reached large audiences within his native South Korea. In many ways, his 2002 film *Oasis* is the best example of Lee's provocative combination of genre, stylistic realism, and harsh social critique. It also marks a transitional moment in his career, away from the male protagonists of *Chorok mulkogi* (*Green Fish*, 1996) and *Bakha satang* (*Peppermint Candy*, 1999) and towards the female-centered dramas of *Milyang* (*Secret Sunshine*, 2007) and *Shi* (*Poetry*, 2010).



Oasis tells the story of two outcasts from Korean society who eventually come together to form an unlikely romantic couple. Jong-du (Sul Kyoung-gu) has just been released from prison for vehicular homicide, and finds that his family has moved without telling him of their whereabouts. He goes to apologise to the family of the man he killed, and meets his daughter, Gong-ju (Moon So-ri). She suffers from cerebral palsy and is also ignored within her family, abandoned by her brother even though he lives off her government subsidy. Although they will eventually form a couple, Lee presents their initial meeting in harsh terms, as Jong-du attempts to sexually assault Gong-ju. He later

apologises, and while it is difficult to fully accept and embrace a romance that starts in this manner, it is testimony to Gong-ju's loneliness that she will accept and forgive even this man. And although he does not seem like a traditionally rebellious anti-hero, Jong-du becomes one despite himself as he refuses the hypocrisy of the society that surrounds him.

While others admonish him to think before he speaks, what they are really asking is that he perform the same dishonesty as everyone else. As Lee's very tightly structured plot begins to unfold, we start to realise the full extent of the corruption that surrounds the couple. And it is through this manipulation of this romantic, star-crossed lovers plot that Lee is able to both immerse his audience emotionally and make an intensely angry and political film at the same time.

The best illustration of the film's themes and Lee's stylistic approach occurs in two contrasting restaurant scenes. The first is played out entirely in one shot. The couple enters a restaurant, are told it is closing (because the presence of the physically disabled Gong-ju makes the management uncomfortable), and then move outside. The way Lee plays this scene out in one long, uncomfortable take, and then frames the couple as they are ejected from this social space, expresses visually everything you need to know about their situation. The next restaurant sequence is longer and more complex in its construction. It is set

during a family dinner for Jong-du's mother. The family is visibly unsettled by the presence of Gong-ju, but they at least begin by being somewhat polite. Lee films the scene in a rather conventional shot/reverse shot manner, but the mood shifts when it is revealed Gong-ju is the daughter of the man Jong-du has killed. At this point, his two brothers take him into a hallway and confront him, and the full extent of the family's hypocrisy is revealed. This is played-out in two long takes. The scene with the family ends with the couple once again excluded, as Jong-du's brother refuses to allow Gong-ju in the family picture. However, this time, Jong-du claims a degree of agency, stating that he will not be in the picture either and leaving with Gong-ju into the cold night.

Through these two painful encounters with the world of South Korean society, represented in microcosm by the social unit of the family, the couple's bond is ultimately formed. Shortly afterwards, on a subway platform, Gong-ju fantasises about getting out of her wheelchair and singing with Jong-du. For the first time in the film, they unite in a shared fantasy, a relationship forged by the cruelty of others, yet with a truth and authenticity that the rest of this world lacks.



In describing his approach to the film, particularly its ending, Lee stated that, "It would have been easy to make a touching scene if I wanted to. And there were lots of requests to do so. But I thought what I could do was to present their dream and their cry for help. Nothing more." By remaining true to this rather modest goal, Lee created a powerful and emotional statement that ranks among the greatest of all melodramas that have used the form for political commentary and critique.

From: <http://sensesofcinema.com/2012/cteq/oasis/>