

The great paradox of movies is that, though it is the youngest art, surprisingly few of the greatest directors got their starts in their own youth. This is all the more true in recent international cinema, where the centralization of film financing and production reproduces the multiple hurdles of the studio system. [...]

In “Tale of Cinema,” Hong displays both the frustrations of youth and the exhaustion of middle age, without any signs of flourishing in between. (That would come in his next feature, “Woman on the Beach,” from 2006.) The film suggests that the movie industry’s maturity imposed on him a premature senescence, that the norms of the profession entailed an artistic progeria which Hong ultimately resisted by making the drastic decision to shift to self-production. Since 2008, with his film “Like You Know It All,” he has found financing independently—through his own production company—and worked with exceptionally low budgets, around a hundred thousand dollars per feature. It has allowed him to craft a freer method of production, in which he follows his inspirations day by day, composing films as he goes along and bringing each day’s new material to his actors on location. Hong films very quickly, with a very small crew, and the results have been astounding, both in quality and quantity—his reassertion of control and reinvention of his methods have wrought his cinematic rejuvenation. Since 2009, Hong has made seventeen features and several short films, which have extended the emotionally wrenching and self-implicating dimensions of his earlier films while also intensifying their narrative originality. [...]

Whether a filmmaker builds movies around the memories of past romances or the stuff of present-tense relationships (as Hong has recently done in allusions to his relationship with the actress Kim Min-hee, who, since 2015, has starred in eight of his films), the cinema is the inescapably, essentially personal art. Working as freely as he does, as his own producer, Hong has developed a method that matches the mercurial pace of his ongoing inspirations. He pliantly reflects those inspirations with a combination of extended, often impassioned dialogues and symbol-rich fixation on material details, and with a lurching, probing style of pans and zooms that parse the dialectical action like a musical score. His ramped-up manipulations of time and continuity, fusions of reality and fantasy, and speculative dramatization of alternate worlds show a cinematized mind at work in real time. When a great filmmaker titles a movie “Tale of Cinema,” it’s a red flag to herald matters of great personal implication. With its immediate drama and its far-reaching vision of untapped possibilities, this movie fulfills that promise. ♦

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ABOUT THE PROGRAM

Hong Sangsoo is one of world cinema's most distinguished and prolific filmmakers. His sixth feature, *Tale of Cinema*, uses a multilayered film-within-a-film to tell two stories: that of a depressive young man (Lee Ki-woo) who forms a suicide pact with a friend (Uhm Ji-won) and that of a filmmaker (Kim Sang-kyung) who sees a film he believes was based on his life, and who meets its lead actress (also played by Uhm) in a collision of fantasy and reality.

In *Nobody's Daughter Haewon*, a chamber piece at once eloquently simple and deceptively complex, a young film student named Haewon (Jeong Eun-chae) finds herself at loose ends when her mother moves to Canada. She clings to her married lover, a filmmaker/professor (Lee Sun-kyun), and is bowled over by the insights of another professor (Kim Eui-seong) visiting from San Diego. Meanwhile, she struggles to find her own way and her own identity as we all do when we're young: a little bit at a time, encounter by encounter, experience by experience, in reality and in dreams.

Acropolis presents a special double bill of two rarely screened Hong features on occasion of Dennis Lim's monograph on the film—part of Fireflies Press's Decadent Editions, which cover essential works of world cinema from the first decade of the 2000s. *In person: Dennis Lim*.

Nobody's Daughter Haewon: 90 min. | South Korea | 2013

Tale of Cinema: 89 min. | France / South Korea | 2005

Tale of Cinema by Richard Brody

The following is an excerpt of an article originally published by The New Yorker, May 24, 2021

Avoiding spoilers is always a challenge, but for movies with complex time structures it is a checkerboard dance. That's the delicate but pleasant difficulty of writing about "Tale of Cinema," the 2005 film by the South Korean director Hong Sang-soo. As the title suggests, it's a movie about filmmaking, and it features a film-within-a-film (ostensibly the work of one of the characters) that splits the action between the filmmakers' lives and their onscreen productions. What's more, its narrative structure includes no signposts—the film offers viewers an unmarked journey into undiscovered country and, then, only midway through, maps out the landscape, distinguishing authentic settings from Potemkin villages. These artistic deceptions and revelations are at the heart of the story, about a young filmmaker's personal devotion and disillusionment—and, in the process, a loss of illusions regarding the cinema itself, as art and a way of life.

The nineteen-year-old Sang-won (Lee Ki-woo), an artistically minded student, runs into

former classmate and girlfriend named Young-shil (Uhm Ji-won), who dropped out of high school—because, she tells him, "My teacher was a pervert, always feeling me up"—and is working in her uncle's optician shop. Sang-won invites her to dinner (spending money given to him by his older brother for living expenses); they both drink heavily and spend the night in a seedy hotel, where they blunderingly rekindle their sexual relationship. In bed there, Sang-won suggests that they make a pact to kill themselves, and Young-shil unhesitatingly agrees. Spoiler alert: they don't die. But Hong devotes an extraordinarily pained and astonished attention to the many practical and incongruously mundane steps that the casual lovers take in preparation for carrying out their plan—not just gathering the pills that they plan to use, but also buying soju and dried squid, looking for a pack of Marlboros, getting a notebook in which to write some last words, fretting about the hotel bill—and, amid this banal ballast, going through uncontrollable waves of emotion along the way, while also bringing to the fore the tormented-adolescent family stories that had already pushed Sang-won to the edge of a melodramatic, self-dramatizing precipice.

There's also a character named Dong-soo (Kim Sang-kyung), a recent film-school graduate who runs into another young woman, also named Young-shil (also played by Uhm Ji-won), an acclaimed actress. Later the same day, there will be a gathering at a restaurant to honor—and to collect funds for—an elder and notable director named Yi Hyongsu, who is hospitalized with a possibly fatal illness. Yi was Dong-soo's mentor in school and gave Young-shil her start, but his relationships with both young people ended poorly. The party, attended by movie professionals and film-school students—his devotees and his rivals—is a toxic stew of envy, contempt, and resentment, which boils over in the form of insults and flattery alike. The environment brings Dong-soo and Young-shil together in a complicity of shared secrets and shared ambivalence.

In "Tale of Cinema," Hong brings to the fore a matched pair of ideas that have been at the center of his career—cultural transmission and the eternal battle between the generations. Inchoate, potentially self-destructive adolescent ardor helps to fuel young adults' artistic ambitions. Yet young artists are often bitterly frustrated, struggling to make work while depending on personal relationships and professional connections with their elders in the same field. The elders, for their part, struggle to maintain their positions in their fields, often against the rising tide of the young people who threaten to take their places but on whose inspirations, originality, energy, and youth itself they depend.

In dramatizing these conflicts, Hong positions himself as a man in the middle, caught between stages of life—and also dramatizes yet another odd and decisive aspect of the cinema itself. Born in 1960, Hong started his directorial career in 1996, when he was thirty-six; "Tale of Cinema," his sixth feature, came out in 2005, when he was forty-five. Though he winks at himself in the two younger men's names (Sang-won and Dong-soo) and suggests, in the process, his own adolescent turmoil and early-career struggles, he was looking at them from a position closer to that of the character Yi, longing to tell tales of youth while rushing against the press of time, against his own mortality. The great