

technical assistance. This immediate bond leads to yet another chance meeting, with an elder poet (Ki Joo-bong) and former “drinking buddy” whose bombastic arrogance swells to fill his artistic self-image.

In short, the artistic world that Jun-hee finds, in this little city away from the metropolis, is one of personal problems and needs that are taking the place of art. She passes through this small world like a star, albeit an involuntary one, whose public image intensifies and complicates her relationships, both the new ones and the renewed ones. She cuts loose with a majestic fury against the commercial filmmaker, who presumes to reproach Kil-soo’s “waste” of her talent. She finds herself praised for her “charisma” by several of the people she meets, and, even though she brushes off the compliment, she also soon discovers what it means: it’s the very essence of art but translated into the terms of daily life, the practical power that attracts other people to help turn her conceptions into realities.

She has an idea for making a film—by sketching a simple, everyday story but modelling it closely on the personalities of her actors, who have to be people with whom she feels an affinity. Spoiler alert: she makes the film, and it’s here that Hong casts the entire movie of “The Novelist’s Film” in the ironic light of his own artistic efforts. He shows some footage from Jun-hee’s film, and it’s graceful, lyrical, sensitive; it’s . . . O.K.? But it doesn’t suggest the originality of Jun-hee’s cinematic concept. Alongside the intensity of the relationships—and the hard work—that gave rise to it, it’s anticlimactic.

The core of Hong’s film, however, isn’t Jun-hee’s film but his filming of these relationships, in a way that’s exemplary of his later style. It’s rooted in a handful of scenes of extended conversations, mainly with a static frame, in which characters unleash torrents of feeling and depths of experience with a bracingly terse and casual pugnacity. The apparently simple realism of Hong’s work is a distilled and rarefied mannerism, built around quietly exquisite and incisive visual compositions that highlight luminous performances of a simultaneous precision and freedom. Moreover, Hong’s emphasis on the extraordinary emotions of ordinary encounters and discussions yields and conceals his sly, highly constructed sense of form—he builds his seemingly plain stories around skips, gaps, leaps, and also dreams and fantasies, alternate narratives and rearrangements of time. “The Novelist’s Film” is straightforwardly chronological and naturalistic, but that makes it no less intricate or sophisticated a reflection on the nature of movies, both intellectual and practical. As a filmmaker, Hong is a walking infrastructure, a method man whose experience is naturally crystallized into cinematic form; without any such infrastructure, Jun-hee, for all the revitalizing power of her new adventure, is out on a cinematic limb, a cinematic void. The novelist’s film is, above all, the stuff of the novelist’s next novel—and of “The Novelist’s Film.” ♦

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ABOUT THE FILM

Junhee (Lee Hyeyoung, last seen in Hong's *In Front of Your Face*) is a novelist who's grown disenchanted with her own writing. On a trip to see an old friend, she runs into a film director who was set to adapt one of her novels before the project fell through. One chance encounter leads to another and soon she finds herself having lunch with Kilsoo (Kim Minhee), a well-known actress also questioning her role as an artist. It's then that Junhee has an epiphany: she will make a film starring Kilsoo. It won't be like other films. It will be the novelist's film. For his 27th feature, Hong holds a mirror up to his own artistic process and asks what exactly it is we're looking for from a work of art. As his characters discuss their lives and work and the ways they intertwine, Hong sets down a sort of manifesto for his own inimitable oeuvre before exploding it (or perhaps fully realizing it) in a moving final flourish. With sparkling performances from Lee, Kim and an incredible cast of Hong regulars, *The Novelist's Film* is a summation of Hong's career-long artistic project, even as it signals bold new directions.

92 min. | South Korea | 2022

The Novelist's Film by Richard Brody

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This Friday, “The Novelist’s Film,” by the South Korean director Hong Sangsoo, is opening at Film at Lincoln Center, just a few weeks after it screened at the New York Film Festival. This is the third film of his to be released here this year, and one of two that was shown at the festival. (The other, “Walk Up,” is scheduled for release in 2023.) He’s the most prolific major director in recent years, with fifteen features since 2013. Yet “The Novelist’s Film” is a story of artistic creation built on the fallow ground of crisis and idleness—a drama of what it takes, personally and artistically, to relaunch oneself amid doubt and despair.

It’s a peculiar form of bittersweet confession, and one that rests on the underlying circumstances of its genesis. One of the secrets of the French New Wave, which is usually (and wrongly) bound solely with the cult of the director, was its emphasis on producing. From the start, its young luminaries recognized that the art of cinema involves something more fundamental than creative control—namely, control of time and money, of the administrative and technical processes of filmmaking. They discovered that, in reconceiving and personalizing the “how” of film, the “what” of it—the art—would follow. That’s what Hong has done, with a quiet vengeance. It’s all the more noteworthy insofar as he did so as part of a mid-career shift, in 2008, as he was nearing fifty years of age. Until then, he had worked within the local film industry and, starting relatively late as a director (in his mid-thirties), made eight films in twelve years.

Beginning with “Like You Know It All,” from 2009, Hong has created a system of his own, and that’s what has made him so prolific: he raises small sums (that movie reportedly cost a hundred thousand dollars) and works rapidly with small casts of characters and small crews. Hong has also developed a style—or, rather, extending, exaggerating, and refining the style of his earlier films—that both befits his material circumstances and offers his cinematic world an even more advantageous and focussed mode of expression.

“The Novelist’s Film” is, for starters, a story of its casting. The novelist in question, Kim Jun-hee, is played by Lee Hye-young, a celebrated actress of the nineteen-eighties and nineties who had been in very few films this century before she joined Hong for “In Front of Your Face” (2021). Her presence and her performance in that film gave it, and his cinematic world, a jolt. She and Hong are of the same generation (born in 1962 and 1960, respectively), and, along with her quietly commanding actorly presence, her public persona offered Hong ready-made substance for grand drama: her character in “In Front of Your Face” makes several sorts of returns, personal and professional, after long absences, and the film, though very much of a piece with his other later efforts, reaches tragic heights that are unusual in his (or anyone’s) movies. In “The Novelist’s Film,” too, the symbolic power of Lee’s persona plays a crucial role in the drama.

Jun-hee, the novelist turned filmmaker, plans to model a movie on the actors she gathers. “The Novelist’s Film” is a story of filmmaking, then, but first it’s a story of encounters: of the personal and artistic connections between will and chance, between activity and passivity. Jun-hee travels to a town outside Seoul to visit a long-unseen friend (Seo Young-hwa), a writer (whose name is never heard) who now owns a small bookstore and café that’s also a local artistic meeting place. Jun-hee is an acclaimed writer; the bookstore owner’s young assistant (Park Mi-so) recognizes her at once. The bookstore owner stopped writing long ago and moved out of town without a word to friends; she’s virtually in hiding and is dismayed that her whereabouts have leaked out in literary circles. It soon becomes clear why Jun-hee made the trip: she herself, despite a long and celebrated career, has hit a fallow patch, has lost her motive to write, even doubts whether she’ll write again. She has, in effect, gone to see what a former writer’s post-writing life looks like.

Short answer: it doesn’t look good. The first thing that Jun-hee finds at the bookstore is the pettiness, the backbiting, the conflicts of running a small business. But she also discovers, in the course of a single day in the provincial town, a stronger, deeper, and more powerful current—one that flows beneath the surface of artists’ frozen lives. The shopkeeper’s assistant is a thirty-three-year-old former theatre student who has stopped acting. At a park, Jun-hee has a chance meeting with a filmmaker she knows, Park Hyojin (Kwon Hae-hyo), and whom she considers a commercial sellout. She also meets a celebrated actress, Kil-soo (Kim Min-hee), who has stopped acting (they recognize each other), and who is strolling with her nephew Gyeong-woo (Ha Seong-guk), a film student. That encounter sparks an instant friendship between Jun-hee and Kil-soo, which inspires the novelist to announce her longtime desire to make a film, for which she hopes to recruit Kil-soo and her husband, a potter, for a brief shoot, with Gyeong-woo’s