

Acropolis Cinema and MUBI present

GRASS

by HONG SANG-SOO

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Downtown Independent

GRASS

66 minutes • South Korea • 2018

In the corner of a small café, Areum (Kim Minhee) sits typing on her laptop. At the tables around her, other customers enact the various dramas of their lives. A young couple charge each other with serious crimes, an old man tries to rekindle a flame with a younger woman, a narcissistic filmmaker works to put together his next project—all while Areum types. Is she merely writing what she hears? Or is she hearing what's been written? As the dramas inside the café unfold, the plants outside grow taller.

Hong Sang-soo's spectral "Grass"

By Daniel Kasman

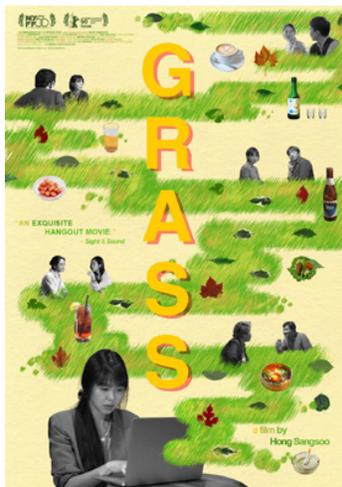
The following is an excerpt from a review originally published in MUBI's Notebook

Grass is the South Korean director's fourth film to premiere in a year—he was in Competition last Berlin with On the Beach at Night Alone, and brought two more excellent films to Cannes. Its 66 minute run-time and section "downgrade" to the Forum (in some circles, a compliment) underscores the unique position of this director whose productivity and willful disinterest in the absurd requirements that world-renowned filmmakers must continually produce bigger, more ambitious or showy films makes him one of the most unabashedly honest and modest of contemporary auteurs.

A miniature ensemble film of couples meeting for coffee, meals and drinks, each observed, to some degree, by Kim Minhee, playing someone who seems to be taking notes on the conversations, arguments, and accusations she overhears, Grass at first seems like a hodgepodge collage portrait of how someone like Hong (but not Hong) constructs his films: by observing the heartfelt, perverse, and innervated relationships around him that people make surprisingly public. But despite his always charming—to this viewer, at least—use of sparse aesthetics and awkwardly self-conscious conversations, nothing is

ever quite so simple as it seems in a film by Hong Sang-soo.

Even though the drama takes place in only a few locations, each couple's conversation seems severed from the space it is in, occurring as if on another plane of reality from the woman who is eavesdropping or, indeed, the other couples that may also be meeting in the same place. The film is



clearly intimate, yet the sense is of vast, disconnected and unexplained distances between the groups. This creates a discordant surreal quality reminiscent of Alain Resnais's Private Fears in Public Spaces (2006), which likewise created a network of characters at once unified through crossed-paths and interests, and utterly separated in their own episodic, artificially staged dream-worlds. With a sorrowful, subdued tone in keeping with 2017's two longer and more serious pictures by the director, and shown in black and white—like The Day After (2017) and The Day He Arrives (2011)—this is a small but unexpectedly spectral film from Hong.

Three separate mentions of suicide darken the edges of many of the couple's conversations, while a cast refreshingly varied in age keeps the divergent groups spry and the audience, no doubt trying to find a pattern or connection between it all, off-guard. Kim Minhee's eavesdropper (who claims she is not a writer yet could also be the author of what we're seeing) realizes multiple times—heard in musing voice-over—that many of the people she's eyeing are in fact professional actors,

calling into doubt, as is so deliciously common in this director's films, just what it is we're seeing. Is this a dream? Imagination? Fantasy? A wake? A brief but truly unexpected use of lens focus and shadowplay, for this usually formally minimalist director, ripples with such uncertainty. Whatever state of existence Grass is taking place on, one thing is for certain: It's Hongian playfulness of surprisingly soulful intrigue.

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