

Acropolis Cinema and the Cinefamily present



June 25, 2016 ~ 4:00PM ~ Cinefamily

## ABOUT THE FILM

Winner of the Golden Leopard at the 2015 Locarno Film Festival, prolific South Korean auteur Hong Sangsoo's 17th feature is a wry, humorous deconstruction of courtship rituals and the offhand decisions that drastically alter everyday experiences. Structured in two contrasting parts and suffused with the director's trademark flair for situational comedy (often fueled by copious amounts of soju), *Right Now, Wrong Then* centers on an at once ingratiating and enervating encounter between a wayward film director (Jeong Jaeyoung) and an aspiring young painter (Kim Minhee) who meet by chance at a hillside temple and decide to spend an increasingly eventful evening together—before doubling back on itself to tell the same story once more but with slight variations to the characters' dialogue and demeanor, prompting an entirely different, evermore awkward outcome. Playful and of unassuming insight, Hong's latest brings his career-long fascination with the paradoxes of the male-female dynamic and the inherent irony of the human condition to beautifully reciprocal new ends, highlighting the nascent volatility in even the most casual of conversations.

121 min // South Korea // 2015

### **Infinite Worlds Possible** by Roger Koza

*The following article was originally published in Cinema Scope 64.*

Set in Suwon, about 30 kilometres south of Seoul, Hong Sangsoo's Golden Leopard-winning masterpiece is divided into two sections which are almost exactly the same. Even the opening credits are repeated once the film reboots an hour in, though with one subtle yet noticeable difference placed there for attentive viewers to make of it what they may: the title, at first *Right Then, Wrong Now*, has been reversed to read *Right Now, Wrong Then*. Both parts of the film have two main characters, a few secondary ones, and take place in the same public spaces: a temple, a bar, a restaurant, a university auditorium, an alley, and a street. The subject is the usual one for Hong: desire, as articulated in the everyday verbal and non-verbal exchanges between men and women from a specific social class. The verdict is also the same: communications between males and females are often well-meaning but ultimately defective (if not total failures), and thus they contain the potential for both humour and heartbreak.

The plot of *Right Now, Wrong Then* is formed by a minimal situation upon which a delay and a set of variations of brief scenes are established. Hong's narrative method lies in delaying the initial premise that would normally be immediately developed by other filmmakers in order to reach a satisfactory resolution. Rather, Hong's minor-key story is structured in a way that never fully closes what it started; when the main characters have left the screen, the film may be finished, but the ending remains open to all possible universes. In *Right Now, Wrong Then* this entails the premature arrival in Suwon of, yes, a filmmaker, Ham Chumsu (Jeong Jaeyoung), to present his latest film at a festival and deliver a talk. Because he's arrived a day early by mistake and has free time, Chumsu decides to visit a temple where he meets Yoon Heejun (Kim Minhee)—a beautiful, wistful young woman who aspires to become a painter—in the room of the temple devoted to receiving blessings. After a chat in the temple they leave together to have a coffee and then go visit her atelier; later on, they dine and drink together, then pay a visit to some of her friends. Finally, Chumsu walks Heejun home, where she still

lives with her mother. Next day, he presents his film, and has a particularly rancorous exchange with the moderator of his Q and A. That's all.

The narrative power of Hong's film is based on delaying and stretching time, with the idea being to postpone actions in order to intensify some of the characters' behavioural traits in relation to modifications generated by the characters' conversations. What we find in all of Hong's work is an order in this repetition, a grammatical pattern. An hour into *Right Now, Wrong Then*, this gets—literally—duplicated, as if the film contains a remake of itself within itself. While the film's situations are repeated following the exact same order, as is usual in Hong differences are produced within this repetition, caused by reasons that are not fully understood and based to a large degree on chance. Changes happen through minimal variations, both in terms of the emotional construction of the characters and, in some instances, modifications in the development of situations. The premise of this game of repetitions and duplications is the uncertain nature of any relationship or situation. For example, in the first part, when the characters visit Heejun's atelier, she acts insecure, and in reaction Chumsu overpraises her painting, which is seen onscreen in great detail (thus generating the later awkward situation where his words are thrown back at him). In the second version, for whatever reason, Heejun is more sure of herself, and Chumsu's comments on the painting are much more critical, while the painting itself remains off-screen. This minimal difference in Heejun's attitude leads the same situation with the same characters towards a different result, illustrating how reliant Hong's structure and dramatic action is on contingency.

The main gags in Hong's seemingly effortless comedies are linguistic, verbal entanglements based on a slight disconnection between what a character says and does, and the way this disconnection is perceived. As in a number of Hong's other films, the mechanism behind *Right Now, Wrong Then* can be encapsulated in the utterance of a single word, which here is "sensitivity." Uttered at a specific point in a conversation, this word becomes the cause of a misunderstanding because it is also a sign that denotes something else, something unsaid. Such words are always associated with the power evoked through one character's description of the other, a presumably keen observation through which unknown personality traits are revealed, and become a cause of unconscious pleasure. In a brilliant passage set in a café near the end of the first part of *Right Now, Wrong Then*, Heejun's friends realize that Chumsu's advice to Heejun about her art—that she doesn't know where she's headed, and because of this she's bound to discover more in the process, even if this will be a difficult path requiring courage to reach the end—are precisely the same words Chumsu uses to describe his own filmmaking in interviews. Projection here is a discernible mechanism: what he sees in her is what he values about himself.

It should be mentioned that Jeong Jaeyeong, who won the Best Actor prize at Locarno, is extraordinary. The naturalism of his actors is a trademark of Hong's cinema, but Jeong's nuanced performance—most notably during an extended passage in a sushi restaurant where he drunkenly professes love and proposes marriage, his indescribable face juxtaposing shame and happiness distorted by soju consumption—is especially remarkable given that Hong's actors have to perform knowing that, as their director often employs long takes, there likely won't be any close-ups where they can use facial gestures to help them convey a feeling or a deep emotion. The only opportunity for the actors to unveil unsaid feelings at a closer proximity to the camera comes in Hong's characteristic reframings within a single shot, the forward and backward zooms which usually coincide with some alteration in the emotional frequency of the verbal interaction (sometimes with changes in the setting). There are 32 zooms in *Right Now, Wrong Then*, which

almost without exception occur when there are changes in the nature of a conversation's logic or in the emotional consequences provoked by dialogue. In the first version, during the café scene, Heejun finds out the famous director whom she is falling in love with is married with children. When the situation becomes clear, the camera slowly zooms forward on Heejun and relocates her right in the middle of the frame, where her emotional modification is made intensely evident.

Detractors might claim Hong Sangsoo is merely doing the same thing over and over again, but it's clear that he has become a specialist in employing repetition as a filmic and anthropological structure. Paradoxically, the lightness of his films achieves an extreme degree of depth. Repetition is one of the most delicate and difficult devices to deal with in general, because something that appears to be always the same sooner or later ends up drifting away into something unexpected, an unstable transformation that can only be captured and controlled by a patient filmmaker. In creating a remake of his film within the same film, Hong reaches the truth of his subject matter not through words themselves, but by filming failures in human communication between stereotypical characters—here, an arrogant filmmaker and a struggling young artist—particularly in relation to the indirect speech game played during the development of sexual attraction. The secret lies in using stereotypes in order to then move away from them, and through that operation offer a glimpse at a behavioural matrix.

Over the course of its two-hour running time, *Right Now, Wrong Then* renounces any trace of neatness or stylistic affectations, which is not to say that beauty is cast away. The final shot of Heejun walking away from the cinema on a snow-covered street is, without a doubt, an honest expression of all that is pleasant in the world. The same can be said about an unassuming opening insert showing a statue of Buddha on a roof adjacent to the house of Heejun and her mother. Beautiful shots such as these are speckled throughout the film without being over-stressed—they are there for those who look carefully—and taken as a whole these represent a truly astonishing visual regime that traps in its spell those viewers who are open to it. It wouldn't be such a bad thing to stay and live inside of *Right Now, Wrong Then*. This is a kind and beautiful film. And those are in short supply. ♦

## Upcoming Events

July 28, 2016 ~ *Double Play: James Benning and Richard Linklater*

Gabe Klinger's award-winning documentary

7:00pm ~ USC, SCA 108 ~ 900 W. 34th Street, Los Angeles, CA. 90007

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