

Unikorea Culture & Art Investment Co. Ltd presents
in association with
DIAPHANA DISTRIBUTION, N.E.W. and KTB Capital LTD.
a Pine House Film production

POETRY

directed by
LEE Changdong

with
YUN Junghee

OFFICIAL SELECTION – COMPETITION
Cannes International Film Festival 2010

Korea / 2010 / Color / 1.85:1 / Dolby SRD / 139min

Director's Comments

These are times when poetry is dying away.
Some lament such loss and others claim, "Poetry deserves to die."
Regardless, people continue to read and write poetry.

What does it mean then to be writing poetry when prospects of an ongoing future seem dismal? This is a question I want to pose to the public.

But in fact, it is a question I pose to myself as a filmmaker: What does it mean to be making films at times when films are dying away?

SYNOPSIS

Mija lives with her middle-schooler grandson in a small suburban city located along the Han River. She is a dandy old lady who likes to dress up in flower-decorated hats and fashionable outfits, but she is also an unpredictable character with an inquisitive mind. By chance she takes a 'poetry' class at a neighborhood cultural center and is challenged to write a poem for the first time in her life.

Her quest for poetic inspiration begins with observing the everyday life she never intentional took notice of before to find beauty within it. And with this, Mija is delightfully surprised with newfound trepidation as if she were a little girl discovering things for the first time in her life.

But when she is suddenly faced with a reality harsh beyond her imagination, she realizes perhaps life is not as beautiful as she had thought it is...

CAST & CHARACTER

YUN Junghee, as YANG Mija

In 1966, YUN Junghee made a spectacular entrance into the world of acting by being singled out of 1200 contestants competing in a fiercely competitive nationwide audition.

Her film debut with KANG Daejin's 1967 film, *Sorrowful Youth* marked the beginning of a great career for YUN Junghee as Korea's leading actress. Seizing the female lead from the start, she has been quite prolific on the silver screen during her heydays, performing in more than 330 films at a time when multiple booking for top actors and actresses in several films at the same time was the norm, and becoming the sole Korean actress to receive 24 awards for Best Performance by an Actress. With such accomplishments, her significance in Korean Cinema has become monumental as proven in a recent poll which the public chose her as the greatest actress in the history of Korean Cinema despite her extended absence from the screen.

Finally, she has broken her long silence as the wife of world-renown Korean pianist and as a mother to come back for the first time in 15 years and transform herself into the unpredictable and inquisitive but girlishly naive Mija in *Poetry*.

Selected Filmography

1994 Manmubang / Manmubang (directed by Um Jongsun)

1977 Hwalyeohan oechul / A Splendid Outing (directed by Kim Sooyong)

1973 Hyonyeo Cheong-I / Sim Cheong (directed by Shin Sangok)

1968 Ssarigorui Sinhwa / Legend of Ssarigol (directed by Lee Manhee)

1967 Angae / Mist (directed by Kim Sooyong)

1967 Cheongchun Geukjang / Sorrowful Youth (directed by Kang Daejin)

DIRECTOR

LEE Changdong

Lee Changdong began a career in theater in his twenties and then moved on to work as a novelist and high school teacher during the eighties. His full-fledged career in film began in 1993 when he joined acclaimed social filmmaker PARK Kwangsu's production of the film *To the Starry Island* as scriptwriter and assistant director – at friend and filmmaker PARK's encouragement. He joined forces with PARK once again as scriptwriter on *A Single Spark* in 1995.

He made his debut as a feature film director with *Green Fish*, a “one of a kind” Korean film noir. If *Green Fish* was an exploration of genre conventions and the real world, he continued his exploration of life and the cinema with *Peppermint Candy*, which experiments with the concept of going back in time, and *Oasis*, which searches for the meaning of true love. It was with these latter two films that he bested the critical and popular success he received for *Green Fish*, achieving both domestic and international acclaim and accolades. *Oasis* earned LEE and lead actress MOON Sori awards for Best Director and Best Actress at the Venice Film Festival.

In 2002, he was appointed as Minister of Culture and Tourism. Upon being relieved from this official position in 2004, he founded his own production company, Pine House Film through which he directed the company's first film and his fourth feature, *Secret Sunshine*. The superb performance of JEON Doyeon as the tormented Shinae in *Secret Sunshine* earned her the Best Actress award at the Cannes International Film Festival in 2007.

LEE currently teaches film directing and screenwriting at the Korean National University of Arts.

Filmography

2010	Shi / Poetry
2007	Miryang / Secret Sunshine
2002	Oasis / Oasis
2000	Bahkha Satang / Peppermint Candy
1996	Chorok Mulgogi / Green Fish

The Bold Serenity of Poetry by Claude Mouchard

A Brief Chat with the Director

Ah... poetry!

Before I had the chance to see the film, it dawned to me how peculiar the title of this film is. I wondered what the audience would expect when they heard this title. Films need the audience, but how can this film even dream it can reach the audience with a title like, 'Poetry'?

From time to time, I think to myself 'poetry' is a word that implies 'that something which people no longer desire'. Of course these 'people' would include the audience of the cinema and the producers and distributors who blame it all on the audience.

Poetry... poetry is closely knit to Mija, the main character in the film. Her life is shabby. She lives alone with her moody adolescent grandson earning a living by taking care of a half-paralyzed old man. However, inside the screen, in her own way, she enjoys her freedom and blossoms like a flower. Others find her grace odd. Her freshness and fragility recalling a corolla or a flower petal in fact, conceals her fierce determination hidden underneath.

Although there is a crime and it is being traced, this film's story is hard to explain. Only moments in the present emerges to infinitely shine. When Mija chats with dead girl's mother-forgetting why she was there -it seems that time has stopped. It is just like there is only pure present-ness there.

This film is as light as the air but also painful. One must feel it by each moment. This film captures the audience with a fluid inner relation that connects each moment to one another. Thanks to the old lady's gaze which is oblivious of her dementia as was the artist, De Kooning, a sensuous rhythm is created within this film. Color, flower, the sound of birds (Virginia Woolf who was going mad is said to have thought she understood the meaning of birds chirping)...

Poetry? Poetry exists in each corner of this film and it also functions as connection. Each character blends into each other like the old lady's Agnes' Song which shifts from her voice to the young girl's. The dead girl comes back to stare directly back at the audience. And we can even see a faint smile on her face.

A strong allegorical strength runs throughout the film. Although it is difficult to express, it is like a question that one takes back with them in his or her heart. I have selected a few pieces from this question to place my own question to the director and hear his reply.

During the process of making a film, when do you decide the film's title? When and how did you come up with the idea of making a film about poetry literally using the title, Poetry?

Normally I decide the film title at a fairly early stage. If I don't do this, I cannot convince myself that the film will be made at all. A few years ago, there was a case whereby several teenage boys from a small rural city, gang-raped a middle school

girl. For quite some time, I've been thinking of this act of violence, but wasn't sure how I would tell this story on film. At first, I thought of a plot in Raymond Carver's short story, *So Much Water So Close to Home*, but it seemed a bit usual. Then one morning in a hotel room in Kyoto, Japan, I was watching TV when the title, *Poetry* just came to me. I think it was a TV program made for tourists spending sleepless nights playing. As I watched the screen playing meditative music to the extremely typical landscape of birds flying over a peaceful river and fishermen throwing their fishnets, it hit me that this film dealing with this insidious crime could have no other title than *Poetry*. The main character and plot was conceived almost at the same time. My companion during that trip was an old friend who is a poet. When I told him about the title and the plot I was thinking of that night, he negatively commented it as an extremely reckless project. He warned me that the several successes I had with my previous films, although they may have been small successes, has made me overly confident. But strangely enough, his words only reinforced my conviction.

When did you first think of working with YUN Junghee? Will the Korean audience recognize her, or will there be a generation that won't?

I assume the young audience in their twenties will be unfamiliar with YUN Junghee. The generation gap is quite deep in Korean Cinema. From the start, or when I thought of a woman in her mid-sixties, I recalled YUN Junghee. It came so naturally as if it was an undoubted fact. It didn't matter whether she had been away from the film scene for the past 15 years. The main character's name is Mija which is in fact YUN Junghee's real name. It wasn't intentional, but a natural coincidence.

When did you first come up with the subject of 'dementia'?

'Dementia' was a word that came to me almost at the same time I thought of all three key elements of the film: the title, *Poetry*; a female character in her sixties attempting for the first time in her life to write a poem; and an old lady bringing up a teenage boy all by herself. As our protagonist learns poetry, she begins to forget words as well. Dementia clearly alludes to death.

The poet conducting the lecture never talks about the techniques of poetry writing, but emphasizes scrupulous attention to 'really seeing things'. Likewise, can we relate poetry to film?

Yes. 'To see things well' refers to poetry, but it also refers to film as well. Certain films help us see the world in a different light. And some films let us see only what we want to see while others keep us from seeing anything.

Through the poetry lecture and the 'Love Poetry' group, poetry becomes the central theme of this film. At the same time, I believe the structure of this film has close relation with poetry. The reason why I prefer this film over your other films is because of the fluidity that connects each moment to one another. Will it do justice to define this as an 'open' film?

Like a page with a poem on it, I thought of a film with a lot of empty space. This empty space can be filled in by the audience. In this sense, you can say this is an 'open' film.

For that reason, perhaps you have left the most important part as a blank. When Mija plays badminton for the last time with her grandson, Wook, the detective, PARK Sangtae who constantly throws sex jokes during the poetry meetings, enters to take Wook away. But it appears that Mija had been expecting him to show up like that. Did Mija report her grandson's crime to him? If so, then why did you choose to be unclear about this to the audience?

Because it is Mija's secret as well as the film's. It is the audience's role to find out what the secret is. Mija would not have wanted to reveal her secret to anyone. However there are a few but perhaps sufficient hints presented in the film. For example, when we see the detective by her side as she is crying alone outside the restaurant or when she suddenly treats Wook to pizza, bathes him, cuts his toenails and summons his mother to visit...But I didn't want to show it directly, but suggest it to the audience as a 'morality play' of the medieval ages. In the face of a film's blank, the audience can make a choice or rather play a hidden game that requires a moral choice, just like the protagonist has to. Of course such game can be too subtle for the audience to even recognize.

In the scene where Mija has sex with Mr. KANG, is she already thinking of asking him for money? In my opinion, it seems she had come up with the idea afterwards...Was she just granting him his 'last gift' as a man?

What thoughts go through Mija's mind when she grants the old macho man this merciful deed? Anyway, before she makes her decision to have sex with him, she goes to the river where the girl had died and stands in the rain deep in contemplation for quite some time. It must have been deep and complex thoughts that captivated her. She would have brooded over the sexual desires of immature boys that drove a young girl to her death, and the sexual desires of an old man who begs her to let him be a man for the last time. For some contradictory reason, she decides to grant him this wish. It might have been nothing but pure compassion, but regardless, when she demands to him for money, she dishonors this deed. Sadly enough, it is an inevitable choice she makes.

I believe this film has a visual echo. For example, the flower works in this way, especially, the red flower referring to blood. And then we see the dishwashing basin in Mija's sink and Mija gazing at the dishwashing basin, and then the poet during a poetry lecture explaining that poetry can be found even in a dishwashing basin. It's like the film is finding its own rhyme. Likewise, Mija's hat falling into the water recalls the young girl's suicide.

As you have commented, the red flower is related to blood. Beauty is often connected to filthiness. And flowers that are considered beautiful often turn out to be man-made. The hat falling into the river recalls the young girl's suicide, but moreover, it hints at Mija's own fate.

Another related issue is that the conclusion of the film's narrative is also left as a blank. Where has Mija gone after leaving a single poem? In the last part, when we hear her voice reading her poem, we can merely feel her absence, but we have no clue as to where she has gone. Can it be that she had committed suicide?

That too I want to leave as a blank for the audience to fill in. Yet there is a hint. The flow of the river in the last part of the film emotionally suggests that Mija has accepted the girl's fate as her own. Like the thoughts evoked from the apricots fallen to the ground.

When you say, Mija and the young girl's fate overlaps, does this have any connection to Mija's last poem, Agnes' Song? And Mija's voice reading the poem shifts to Heejin's. Are you suggesting that these two characters have become one?

Agnes is the dead girl's baptized name. Accordingly, the one poem Mija leaves to the world is written on behalf of the young girl. In the young girl's place, Mija speaks what the young girl actually wanted to say to the world. So we can say the two have become one through a poem.

You asked the question, 'What is poetry in a time when poetry is dying away?' And you also commented that it is a question directed toward the cinema in a time when the cinema is dying away. Then are your thoughts on poetry reflected in the film's ending?

I just wanted to throw this question at the audience. The audience now holds the key to the answer to this question. Nevertheless, one of my thoughts on poetry is that it sings on behalf of someone's emotions and thoughts. If someone were to ask me why I make films, I could answer by saying, 'I am telling your story on your behalf.'

About the Interviewer: Claude Mouchard

Born on 1 February 1941, Claude Mouchard is Professor Emeritus at the University Paris 8, and Associate Editor of Poetry magazine. (Editor: Michel Deguy) He has published several essays (most recently: /Qui si je criais ?/, ed. Laurence Teper) and several books of poetry (most recently: /Papiers !/). He has translated (in collaboration) many English or American, German, Japanese and Korean poems.

Production Company: PINE HOUSE FILM

Pine House Film was founded in June 2005 by internationally acclaimed Korean filmmaker, LEE Changdong.

With the goal of standing strong and firm as a pine tree in the endlessly shifting and evolving Korean film industry, Pine House Film introduced its first feature film *Secret Sunshine* also directed by LEE Changdong which received critical and public fame with its powerful yet delicate depiction of a woman who's quest to find her *Secret Sunshine* earned JEON Doyeon an award for Best Actress at Cannes International Film Festival in 2007.

Currently Pine House Film is preparing the public release of LEE Changdong's latest feature, *Poetry* and is in development of BYUN Seungwook's second feature, *Pet Shop*(tentative title).

**Investment & Co-production Company:
UNIKOREA CULTURE & ART INVESTMENT CO. LTD.**

Unikorea Culture & Art Investment Co. Ltd was established in January, 1999 with the core members comprised of respected Korean actors and directors such as LEE Changdong, MYUNG Kaynam and MOON Sungkeun. Since its advent, the company has consistently invested in acclaimed works from *Peppermint Candy* and the 2002 Venice International Film Festival, Best Director and Best Actress-winning *Oasis* directed by LEE Changdong to *Virgin Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors*, *Turning Gate* and *Woman is the Future of Man* by HONG Sangsoo.

Apart from such art house films, Unikorea has also invested in more commercial works including, *Il Mare* which was remade into the Hollywood produced *Lake House* starring Keanu Reeves and Sandra Bullock, *Singles* and *My Mother the Mermaid* starring Cannes award-winning JEON Doyeon as well as the mega-blockbuster film, *My Boss, My Student*.

Unikorea is now awaiting the domestic and international showcase of its latest film, *Poetry* it has participated in as investor and co-producer.

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IN ASSOCIATION WITH **DIAPHANA DISTRIBUTION, N.E.W. and KTB Capital LTD.**

A **PINE HOUSE FILM** PRODUCTION

SCREENPLAY AND DIRECTED BY **LEE Changdong**

PRODUCER **LEE Joondong**

EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS **YOUM Taesoon, CHOI Seongmin**

CO-EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS **Michel Saint-Jean, JUNG Myungsoo, LEE Seungho**

CO-PRODUCER **LEE Dongha**

CINEMATOGRAPHY **KIM Hyunseok**

LIGHTING **KIM Bada**

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EDITING **KIM Hyun**

SOUND SUPERVISOR **LEE Seungchul** (WaveLab)

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MAKE UP/HAIR **HWANG Hyunkyu**

COSTUMES **LEE Choongyeon**

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