

## Director KIM Ki-young's de-modernist vision

### 1. Who is KIM Ki-young?

Back when I was studying Korean film history in 1993, it was KIM Ki-young who inspired me the most among all Korean film directors. KIM was born in Seoul in 1919, majored in dentistry at Seoul National University, and was a member of a theatrical group. His film industry debut came in the form of the 1955 film <Box of Death (죽음의 상자, Juk-eom-iui sang-ja)>. During his university years, KIM became interested in Greek Tragedies, and in the works of Ibsen and Strindberg. KIM's <Box of Death (죽음의 상자, Juk-eom-iui sang-ja)> was an anti-Communist thriller produced by Film Unit, a studio established by the U.S. military during the Korean War. By the time he passed away in 1998, KIM Ki-young had directed a total of thirty-one films. KIM's films are filled with grotesque images. In fact, the nightmarish descriptive tools used in his films led him to be regarded as the most avant-garde director within the Korean film industry.

In his landmark work, <The Housemaid (하녀, Ha-nyo)> series, which is composed of <The Housemaid (하녀, Ha-nyo)> in 1961, <Woman of Fire (화녀, Hwa-nyeo)> in 1971, and <The Insect Woman (충녀, Chung-nyo)> 1972, KIM depicted the two-pronged fetters caused by modernity by having two characters who are endowed with traditional characteristics face off against each other. The characters are a man with bourgeois ambitions and a tendency to exaggerate, and a femme fatale (seductive and destructive) from the lower classes who uses her sex appeal to threaten the man's authority. In <The Housemaid (하녀, Ha-nyo)> and <The Insect Woman (충녀, Chung-nyo)>, western-style houses and modern electric appliances are a common sight. The woman in these films is from the lower classes –usually a maid or a prostitute– and is described as irrational, traditional, and instinctive, while the man and his family, who have surrounded themselves with western goods, are from the middle class.

On a personal note, I was fortunate enough while attending the Film Academy in 1984 to have the opportunity to view Korean films produced in

the 1960s during a Korean Film Screening held by the Korean Film Commission. I remember thinking that <Aimless Bullet (오발탄, O-bal-tan)>, directed by YU Hyun-mok, a film that should be seen an important moment in Korean film history, was very impressive. However, it was KIM Ki-young's <The Housemaid (하녀, Ha-nyo)> that left me in shock. I was shocked because the world described by KIM in <The Housemaid (하녀, Ha-nyo)> was different from anything I had ever seen in other Korean films. After completing my Ph.D in the U.S., I began to visit the Korean Film Archive in order to study Korean film history.

Like <The Housemaid (하녀, Ha-nyo)>, <Yangsan Island (양산도, Yang-san-do)>, another of KIM's works, which was produced in 1955, proved to be an irresistible pleasure. Because the last reel of <Yangsan Island (양산도, Yang-san-do)> has been lost, we are left with no other choice but to depend on KIM's own explanation and synopsis: An old woman's son committed suicide after losing his fiancée to the village *yangban* (landlord). One day the mother saw the fiancée in a palanquin, and managed to get it to stop by telling the fiancée that she needed to be consoled over her son's death. When the fiancée stopped, the mother stabbed her to death and yelled, "My son is now married". At that very moment, the son rose from the grave and went up to heaven with his fiancée. Using the story of this young couple sacrificed to the power of the higher classes, KIM managed to overturn the existing societal order by introducing a fantastic ending.

According to film commentator LEE Young-il's recollection, KIM was a coffee lover. LEE had the following to say about KIM:

"KIM is like a shaman. He does not follow any popular customs or traditions. I hold him in esteem because I think that this critical attitude is the root of KIM's auteur spirit. Even in his everyday life, KIM never tried to put on airs or form close relationships with journalists like SHIN Sang-ok and YU Hyun-mok did. Nevertheless, he always drank expensive coffee. Thanks to him, I came to know a certain coffee store that was located behind the Chinese Embassy. I have a special place in my heart for him." (Interview with a reporter from the Image Culture Journal, *Trans*)

Like his contemporaries Yu Hyun-mok <Aimless Bullet (오발탄, O-bal-

tan)>, and SHIN Sang-ok <The Mother and the Houseguest (사랑방 손님과 어머니, Sa-rang-bang son-nim-kwa omo-ni)>, KIM actively produced films during the 1960s. Although his films succeeded both in terms of box office and critical acclaim, KIM did not receive as much attention as YU Hyun-mok or SHIN Sang-ok because of the uniqueness of his films. After KIM's death, I visited his eldest son, Dong-won, to ask for some pictures of his father for a website that was to be dedicated to KIM. In the family albums that his son showed me, I found pictures of KIM cooking a meal for his family, and another of him wearing a red Santa Claus hat. While KIM was a funny and loveable father, he was also a luminary of Korean cinema who described the darker sides of Korean society using the thriller and horror genres. However, KIM was more than just a film luminary, he was also a prominent member of the Korean intelligentsia who criticized and satirized the independence required by modernization, and the development of the dictatorial government, by going beyond the boundaries of modernism to become an anti-modernist.

## 2. KIM Ki-young's work

In <The Housemaid (하녀, Ha-nyo)> (1960), which KIM considered his best film, a maid whose goal in life is to possess a TV and a two-story house is hard at work in a middle class family. Here, the maid, along with the other women laborers in the film, symbolizes Korean society during the 1960s. She uses her sexuality to seduce the husband, kills the son by creating a horrible and fearful atmosphere in which his life becomes unbearable, and eventually leads to the destruction of this middle class family. The space occupied by this maze-like house, which serves as the major backdrop for this film, is transformed into a psychological space. The main issues that are treated in this maze are related to hostility towards gender and the social class system. The term, 'the return of the repressed,' first coined by Sigmund Freud, best explains the social aspect of this film. The maid, as an incarnation of revenge who destroys this middle class family, is a reflection of the fears of the ruling class. As such, the message is that these lower classes who have been oppressed by the ruling class will come back to take revenge on their tormentors. As Korea began to undergo industrialization, modernization, and urbanization during

the 1960s, more and more young women from the countryside started to work in Seoul as maids or factory workers. However, in <The Housemaid (하녀, Ha-nyo)> , these women are depicted as belonging to a monstrously low social class that shakes and threatens the very core of the middle class society.

<Killer Butterfly (살인나비, Sal-in na-bi)> (1978), has widely been seen as a cult film, and is especially popular among younger Koreans who consider it to be uproariously funny. In this film, KIM introduces three episodes in the life of a historian, borrowing heavily from the science fiction, horror, and thriller genres. The second episode revolves around the resurrection of the skeleton who died some 2000 years ago. The skeleton becomes a young, beautiful woman who seduces the main character of this film. All throughout the film, science fiction themes are used to explain these three episodes. However, the gap between the past and the present rapidly collapses, as regardless of the times, men and women have always been oppressed by the patriarchal system, and men have also been threatened by women's survival instinct.

In <The Housemaid (하녀, Ha-nyo)> , we find that modernization plays the most significant role in blocking the maid's efforts to climb in social status. However, in his 1955 film <Yangsan Island (양산도, Yang-san-do)> , a story about agrarian society during the Joseon era, KIM criticized a social structure system that he saw as being hostile to those members of the lower classes wishing to enter the upper echelons of society [or even just wishing to live their own lives]. As such, the female protagonist is forced to marry a *yangban* in order to save her father, even though she already had a fiancé. Upon hearing this, the fiancé commits suicide. The mother of the man then kills his fiancée as she is going to the *yangban's* house to marry him, and yells out, "My son is now married!" In essence, the mother has killed the woman so that her soul could be free to marry her son's. Whether they deal with the city or countryside, or modernized and pre-modernized societies, the backdrop of KIM's films is always very similar. The lower class women in the three episodes of <The Housemaid (하녀, Ha-nyo)> series and in 1984's <Carnivore (육식동굴, Yug-shik Dong-mul)> were sure to drag the male characters down to hell with them. In

other words, KIM used his cinematic pulpit to describe the horrible struggles between the lower and middle classes of the 1960s. Like a flash-forward, KIM was able to predict the sexual and social-class based antagonisms that would become widespread twenty-thirty years later.

If KIM's works are judged as a method of understanding domestic and international problems, then his films can be seen as having provided a new interpretation of how the modernity of Korean society came about. The popularity of KIM's films with the generation of moviegoers from the 1960s and 1970s, as well with the new generation of moviegoers that appeared at the end of the 1990s, would seem to indicate that the social hostility he so carefully depicted in his films remains a significant factor, even in this post-colonization era. KIM's vision was far different from that of other film directors and critics of his time who were focused on anti-colonial and nationalist themes, and who plastered their films with realist notions, films such as Yu Hyun-mok's <Aimless Bullet (오발탄, O-bal-tan)>. As a result, despite his popularity (or *because* of his popularity), many critics and film directors depreciated the value of his work by labeling them as ahistorical, artificial, and sexually exaggerated.

Ironically, KIM's work is currently enjoying a resurgence in popularity both domestically and internationally precisely for these reasons. Writing for the 1998 Berlin International Film Festival, Erica Gregor compared KIM with other directors who broke social mores, such as Rainer Werner Fassbinder, and Douglas Sirk. The 1997 Pusan International Film Festival (PIFF) Retrospective provided many with an opportunity to develop a new understanding of his films, and led to a general conclusion among those who were at the screening of <Carnivore (육식동물, Yug-shik Dong-mul )> that he should be seen as a cult director.

KIM's films created a disturbance between modernity and pre-modernity, rationalism and irrationalism, civilization and primitivism, holiness and heresy, as well as, science and shamanism. Instead of borrowing the freeze-frame method widely found in other Korean films, KIM orchestrated such dichotomous factors, ushering them to blend into each other's characteristics. Armed with incredible analytical skills and a strong sense of irony, KIM was able to put his hand on the pulse of the cultural shock that rose to the surface as a result of the pressure caused by South

Korea's rapid modernization.

### Images of another world (islands)

One of the most mysterious films directed by KIM is 1977's <lo Island (이어도, Iodo)>, a film that does not have the inter-textuality found in <Killer Butterfly (살인나비, Sal-in na-bi)>, nor the critique of established genres found in the three episodes of <The Housemaid (하녀, Ha-nyo)> series. It employs repetitive themes, a technique often found in feminist writings. In fact, <lo Island (이어도, Iodo)> defies any attempts to classify its genre, be that melodrama, horror, feminist speculation, or science fiction, since the film evinces elements of each of these genres. This film is also different from shamanist films, such as <Daughter of the Flame, (불의 딸, Bul-ui dal)> (Im Kwon-taek 1983), which dealt with shamanism as a means of separating the pre-modern from modernity. <lo Island (이어도, Iodo)> takes place outside the boundaries of the modern city. Rather, <lo Island (이어도, Iodo)> is a mythical island said to be located off the southernmost tip of the Korean peninsula, south even of Jeju Island.

Unlike the original script written by LEE Cheong-joon, there is another island called *Parangdo* in the film, <lo Island (이어도, Iodo)> on which primitive women live. *Parangdo*, which is located between Jeju and Iodo, is depicted as an unclear space. However, *Parangdo* shares commonalities with Jeju in that both are islands on which women divers labor to make a living. Moreover, KIM's *Parangdo* shares many other similarities with Jeju, such as the women divers, rocky coast jutting into the surf, and steep, windswept cliffs.

It is impossible for us to expect the description of a pure-hearted agricultural area to emerge in <lo Island (이어도, Iodo)> as the core factor of this journey back in time as is the case with other movies such as *Seo Pyun Je (서편제, Seo-pyun-je)* (Im Kwon-taek 1986). The pre-modernized space found on <lo Island (이어도, Iodo)> is a deformed and chaotic place in which a grotesque situation arises that is impossible to control. In Korean, the term 'Fetish' also carries the meaning 'sexual object', or even 'commodity'. As such, while this film appears to employ an extreme bipolar method, it is also split into multiple and contradictory

images. At this point, <lo Island (이어도, Iodo)> can be regarded as another portrayal of the obstacles that have blocked modernity throughout Korean film history. However, this film also lets us know that it is impossible to restore tradition. *Parangdo* looks like a twisted tabloid edition of the traditional houses that were destroyed and of the village shamans who were exiled as a result of the national campaign carried out by the military government during the process of modernization in the 1970s, as part of its effort to remove all signs of pre-modernity.

For this reason, KIM's films, which are filled with dark, diabolic, ironic, and satirical images, can be seen as an attempt to construct a heterogeneous flash-forward world that challenges viewers' accepted sense of reality. It is because of this that his films will stand the test of time and continue to engage future audiences.