Korean cinema of 2016: Women, politics, horror

Description

Posted by Larry Gleeson

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Women, female relationships and political intrigue were the hallmarks of Korean cinema this year.

A number of films that delved into the world of the occult, driven by unfathomable forces of evil, also stood out in a year that saw the return of some of Koreaâ??s most renowned directors, including Park Chan-wook and Na Hong-jin, who each added significant pieces to their idiosyncratic oeuvre.

Spotlight on women

Kim Tae-ri (left), Kim Min-hee star in "The Handmaiden." (CJ Entertainment)

Kim Ha-neul stars in "Misbehavior." (Filament Pictures)

Youn Yuh-jung (right) stars in "Bacchus Lady." (CGV Arthouse)

Arguably the most globally lauded Korean film of the year, Park Chan-wookâ??s â??The Handmaidenâ?• took on the subject of a lesbian thriller romance, featuring two female lovers against a world of demented male figures. Provocative scenes were portrayed against a fairy tale-like backdrop.

â??Handmaidenâ?• has nabbed various international accolades since its screening at the Cannes International Film Festival in May. Vogue.com named it among the â??10 Most Fashionable Movies of 2016â?• for its lavish mise-en-scene, while the Los Angeles Film Critics Awards gave it a best production design award.

The New York Times listed Kim Tae-ri, who stars as Japanese lady Hidekoâ??s earthy, unabashed handmaiden Sook-hee, in a September article titled â??Four Actresses Everyone will be Talking About this Fall.â?•

Female romance also featured in Lee Hyun-juâ??s indie film â??Our Love Story,â?• a subtle, realistic tale of an encounter between an art student and a stranger.

Antagonistic relationships between women were explored in films like Kim Tae-yongâ??s â??Misbehavior,â?• which draws on the jealousy and pride between two female teachers fighting for the affections of a male student. Both Kim Ha-neul and Yoo In-young are excellently cast in their roles: One is reticent and downtrodden, while the other is vivacious, young and self-absorbed.

Director Lee Eon-heeâ??s â??Missing,â?• meanwhile, saw the unlikely reconciliation between two women â?? a mother and the nanny who kidnapped her daughter, played by Uhm Ji-won and Gong Hyo-jin.

In a mature tale of womanhood, â??Bacchus Ladyâ?• explored the world of Koreaâ??s elderly prostitutes and the universal solitude of growing old.

Veteran actress Youn Yuh-jung portrayed the feisty protagonist, who, at 65, turns tricks for a living. Directed by E J-yong, the film offers an emotional reflection on life and death as Korea advances into an aging society. It was screened at the 66th Berlin International Film Festival.

Scandalous politics

Hwang Jung-min (left) and Jung Woo-sung star in "Asura: City of Madness." (CJ Entertainment)

Lee Byung-hun stars in "Master." (CJ Entertainment)

This year also saw a number of films portraying disasters and authoritiesâ?? damnable responses.

Director Park Jung-wooâ??s â??Pandora,â?• set to be streamed globally on Netflix, depicted a nuclear power plant meltdown and the lack of an emergency response system, resulting in the preventable deaths of nuclear power plant workers and residents of surrounding areas.

Kim Seong-hunâ??s â??Tunnelâ?• saw actor Ha Jung-woo trapped inside a collapsed tunnel for weeks on end, with members of the rescue squad wringing their hands at the ineffectual orders from those higher-up in the government.

Kim Sung-suâ??s â??Asura: The City of Madnessâ?• depicted a bloodstained web of criminals and politicians.

The latest political thriller â??Master,â?• helmed by Jo Eui-seok, stars actor Lee Byung-hun as a con artist who amasses astronomical wealth and bribes government officials to exert power in state affairs. The flick which opened last week, rang an eerily familiar bell in Korea, which is currently embroiled in an influence-peddling political scandal surrounding President Park Geun-hye.

Ride into the occult

Hwang Jung-min stars in "The Wailing." (20th Century Fox Korea)

Two of this yearâ??s most striking films were in the horror genre, ruminating on morality and human nature.

Yeon Sang-hoâ??s apocalyptic zombie thriller â??Train to Busanâ?• showed everyday characters â?? from students to office workers â?? fighting for their lives while trapped on a torpedoing train swarming with flesh-hungry zombies. It premiered at the Cannes International Film Festivalâ??s Midnight Screenings section and has been picked up for a US remake by Gaumont, a French film studio.

Na Hong-jinâ??s occult thriller â??The Wailing (Goksung),â?• which also screened at Cannesâ?? Out of Competition section, took viewers on a terrifying journey toward unreasoning evil. Fourteen-year-old actress Kim Hwan-hee delivered a chilling performance as a possessed child.

A period in time

Gong Yoo stars in "The Age of Shadows." (Warner Bros. Korea)

A number of period pieces also sought to reinterpret historical events from the Japanese occupation era.

Kim Jee-woonâ??s â??The Age of Shadowsâ?• transformed the story of Korean independence fighters smuggling in bombs from Shanghai to Korea into a stylish noir.

In â??The Last Princess,â?• director Hur Jin-ho focused on the early stages of the Japanese occupation of Korea through the eyes of Joseon princess Deok-hye, weaving the historical into a personal tale.

â??The Portrait of a Poetâ?• by Lee Joon-ik offered a moving portrait of poet Yun Dong-ju, in colonial Korea where the Korean language was banned.

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