

Korean Cultural Centre UK presents

KOREAN FILM NIGHTS 2019

JULY TO AUGUST

LOVE WITHOUT BOUNDARIES

KOREAN FILM NIGHTS 2019: LOVE WITHOUT BOUNDARIES

The Korean Cultural Centre UK would like to welcome audiences once again to *Korean Film Nights*, our year-round programme of film screenings and talks which aims to foster a deeper knowledge and appreciation of Korean cinema amongst London audiences through thematically curated strands on a plethora of topics. After 2019's first season, *Home Truths*, welcomed us into the Korean domestic space, this year's second season, *Love Without Boundaries*, invites us to take an even deeper look into the Korean psyche and to open our hearts to love – the kind of love which thrives on the margins of society, that challenges our preconceptions, that shocks us with its intensity and amazes us with its capacity to forgive and transform.

Through our selection of films (predominantly from the last two decades), we celebrate courageous representations of transgressive love rarely depicted in mainstream Korean cinema, or indeed in most mainstream pictures. From maternal love to same-sex romance, this season showcases stories which boldly challenge the socially-accepted views on a range of taboo topics from disability to sexual identity and trauma. Not always offering a happy ending, these narratives present an honest reflection of the hardships faced by those living on the fringes of Korean society, and pay homage to love and passion as key forces in pushing norms and expectations.

As in other cinematic traditions, the issue of love has long been a staple of Korean cinema. Following the devastation of the Korean War, and amidst increasing American influence on the social fabric of Korean society, cinema was seen as central piece in the government-sanctioned rebuilding of South Korea's image as a nation. Romantic films and melodramas safely flourished in an industry subjected to high levels of censorship and government scrutiny, especially following the first systematized Motion Picture Law in 1962. Nevertheless, filmmakers found a way to work within the rules and imbue even popular melodramatic tales with defiant characters who pushed the boundaries of what was socially acceptable.

One notable example is director Han Hyeong-mo. Working in the Golden Age of Korean Melodrama, Han is well remembered for his classic *Madame Freedom* (1956), but it was his lesser-known work *Hand of Fate* (1954) which shocked audiences with the first on-screen kiss in Korean film history. In the guise of a spy, who in keeping with the national patriotic narrative is doomed to defeat, the film features the most dangerous 'Other' in modern

Korean history —North Korea. Nevertheless, this *femme fatale* spy is endowed with remarkable intelligence, charisma and more agency than any of her male counterparts. It is through the power of love that this spellbinding female is redeemed from her past and allowed to face fate on her own terms.

During the 60s, 70s and 80s, it was often films of a highly explicit sexual nature that were able to pass through the increasingly rigid censorship of successive military regimes in South Korea, as their inherent escapism was seen as more preferable than politically critical depictions of poverty and class difference. However, in the wake of the democratisation movement in the late 1980s in South Korea came a *New Wave* of film directors, such as Park Kwang-su and Chung Ji-young, who used cinema as a platform to reinterpret historical events and to reflect on the perils of rapid modernisation and the impact of the shifting socio-political environment on the lives of everyday Koreans. Benefitting from the relaxation of state censorship in the early 2000s, and inspired by the social realism and aesthetics of the New Wave movement, the novelist and screenwriter Lee Chang-dong first shook audiences with his second film, *Peppermint Candy* (1999). His follow-up film, *Oasis* (2002), was also a critical and box office success and made waves across the festival circuit with its sober depiction of the heart-wrenching romance between a former convict with learning difficulties and a woman with cerebral palsy. The film's success was due in part to the deft mixture of stylised realism and romantic dream sequences, drawing audience sympathy to a pair of unlikely protagonists whose desperate, uncomfortable love defies the boundaries set by a conservative society.

As audacious contemporaries of Lee such as Park Chan-wook and Kim Ki-duk gained international prominence through their examinations of masculinity and violence, more meditative studies of complex relationships and forbidden love by younger filmmakers emerged. Their naturalistic depictions and focus on characters on the margins of Korean society were closer in spirit to the works of the pioneers of the New Wave, and just as political in nature, if not more shocking, given the taboos they addressed.

One example is *No Regret* (2006), which levels a harsh critique at Korean society and its attitudes toward homosexuality and class divisions. Leesong Hee-il's first feature —and the first Korean mainstream film made by an openly gay director— *No Regret* gave an unflinching look at same-sex relationships, but also a sensitive and nuanced portrayal of the lives of gay sex workers. It was a seminal work for the emerging Korean Queer Cinema.

Another directorial debut, July Jung's *A Girl at My Door* (2014), explores the ambiguous relationship between an abused child and her protector — a disgraced lesbian policewoman. Setting her film in a stifling provincial town, Jung skillfully combines suspense and drama to shed light on the darker side of Korean society, one littered with alcoholism, xenophobia, prejudice, and the chilling lack of love which can produce monsters.

A more positive love story is Kim Yong-gyun's *Wanee and Junah* (2001). Weaving in charming animation and an open-minded acceptance of queer relationships, it portrays a long-suffering and patient love, one that is capable of acceptance and forgiveness.

We continue to explore queer love stories in our evening of shorts. Through five films, including works from female filmmakers such as Kang Ji-sook and Oh Su-yeon, and openly gay filmmakers Leesong Hee-il and Kim-jho Kwang-soo (also the producer of *No Regret* and *Wanee and Junah*) we take a look at gay, lesbian and transgender characters, examining the many barriers still faced by the LGBTI community in Korea, as well as changing attitudes towards non-heterosexual relationships.

Through our selection of features and shorts, we celebrate the importance of love stories in Korean cinema as a platform for addressing taboo issues and the plight of marginalised social groups. These universal stories of connection and loss make space for sympathetic and full-bodied portrayals of characters on the margins of society, pave the way for tolerance and compassion, and serve as a reminder to domestic and foreign audiences alike that love truly knows no boundaries.

Denitsa Yordanova and Fernando Chaves Espinach

4TH JULY, 7PM | KCCUK

A GIRL AT MY DOOR

도희야



SOUTH KOREA, 2014
DIRECTOR: JULY JUNG

CAST: BAE DOONA
KIM SAE RON
SONG SAE BYUK

119 MINS / ENG SUBS

ALSO SHOWN AT DEPTFORD
CINEMA ON 30TH JULY AT 7:30PM

Following a personal scandal which disgraces her in the eyes of her colleagues, lesbian police officer Young-nam (Bae Doona, *The Host*) is stationed to a quiet provincial town in Yeosu as the new Police Chief. In a sleepy town beset by drunkenness, narrow-mindedness and corruption, she becomes the reluctant protector of Sun Do-hee (Kim Sae Ron, *The Man from Nowhere*) - a timid schoolgirl who harbours mysterious secrets and traumas of her own.

July Jung's film demonstrates the importance of empathy and compassion over blood ties, fully embracing the sometimes ambivalent and unexpected forms of love that can disrupt our lives. This sapphic mystery plays its intimacies out on a political stage, elucidating the prejudices that haunt Korean society through the depiction of the stigma attached to Young-nam's sexuality, which threatens to destroy the life she has built for herself. Screened in the Un Certain Regard section at Cannes in 2014, this directorial debut also gained the accolade of being the first Korean film to receive the Best First Film Award at the Stockholm International Film Festival.

Katie Driscoll

11TH JULY, 7PM | KCCUK

NO REGRET

후회하지 않아



SOUTH KOREA, 2006
DIRECTOR: LEE SONG HEE-IL

CAST: KIM NAM-GIL
LEE YEONG-HOON
KIM JUNG-HWA
CHO HYUN-CHUL

114 MINS / ENG SUBS

ALSO SHOWN AT DEPTFORD
CINEMA ON 27TH AUGUST
AT 7:30PM

At 18, Su-min is forced to leave the orphanage where he lives. Unable to afford university, he travels to Seoul where he works as a factory worker and as a 'taeri'- a designated driver for wealthy patrons after a night of drinking. Both of his worlds collide when he runs into former driving patron Jae-min, the factory owner's son. Jae-min's interest in Su-min is more than platonic and when he intervenes to save Su-min's job at the expense of another worker, Su-min's pride is hurt and he resigns. Forced to take on a job in a gay host bar to survive, he thinks he is free of Jae-min. But Jae-min will not give up so easily...

Based on Lee Song's early short film *Good Romance* (2001), *No Regret* is regarded as the first South Korean feature to be directed by an openly gay filmmaker. Although it was Lee Song's feature film directorial debut, he had previously explored homosexuality in Korean society with his first short film *Sugar Hill* (screened as part of the shorts night on 25th July).

Jesus Manuel Blazquez Adan

THE HAND OF FATE

운명의 손



SOUTH KOREA, 1954

DIRECTOR: HAN HYEONG-MO

CAST: YOON IN-JA
LEE HYANG
JOO SEON-TAE

85 MINS / B&W / ENG SUBS

The opening scenes of *The Hand of Fate* reveal the ingenious method by which the madam of a hostess bar, Margaret (Yoon In-ja) covertly passes messages to the North Korean army, by coding the information she has gleaned from others into classical music scores. She befriends a young student, Young-chul (Lee Hyang), and decides to help him. She is intent on seducing Young-chul, but is it out of love or to recruit him? Famous for showing the first onscreen kiss in a South Korean film, this work challenges perceptions of love beyond the boundaries of social status, personal beliefs, geography and politics.

This melodramatic spy-thriller love story - with its visually striking, film-noir style, is not only anti-communist propaganda, but also a commentary on the shifting roles and expectations of Korean women. Made at the time Korean society was only just emerging from the horrors of the Korean War - which left it separated by the Demilitarized Zone, this film reflects the tension, suspicion and uncertainty that would be recognised by the audience in such a recently divided country.

Joanna Dugher

LOVE WITHOUT BOUNDARIES: SHORTS NIGHT

QUEER LOVE: LOVING OUTSIDE THE MAINSTREAM

While homosexuality in South Korea is not illegal – outside of specific regulations relating to the military – same sex love is not condoned by South Korea's largely conservative society. Same sex couples cannot marry or adopt children. In addition there is no specific protection against discrimination in the workplace for members of the LGBTI community. In fact for some, homosexuality is still viewed as a disability and/or mental disorder. It is no surprise therefore that members of the LGBTI community see themselves as *i-ban-e* or second class citizens (Tal, SCMP, 2018). In Korean TV dramas, love is restricted to the heterosexual couple, while in KPOP queer love is celebrated as a performance rather than a reality. The fact that amongst the hundreds of idols in the KPOP industry only one, Holland, is openly gay, further demonstrates the rigid contours of South Korean society. And it is only against this background that the importance of representations of queer love in South Korean cinema can be understood.

Representation we know 'matters' because it is important for people to see themselves within the cinematic frame: absence from the frame echoes the reality of life at the margins of society. The five films in this strand of 'Love Without Boundaries' situate queer love at the centre rather than at the margins of the frame. The earliest short, *Sugar Hill* (2000) is by one of the most famous openly gay directors, Leesong Hee-il. Here the focus is on the relationship between two men, Kim and Lee, and the lengths they go to in order to remain together. This involves Lee marrying Kim's sister. However things do not go smoothly and the marriage is just the beginning rather than the end of their troubles. Leesong Hee-il's ground-breaking feature film, *No Regret* (2009) – an insightful and at times brutal look at gay love - is being shown as part of the main feature programme.

Another film from the same time period, *A Space Man A Space Man*, is one of the four chapters in *Yellow Hair 2* (Kim Yoo-min, 2001). This chapter looks at the love between J, who is a transsexual and M, a relationship which begins when M sees J singing in a bar in Thailand. M arranges to introduce J to his parents, who discover J's status beforehand and acceptance and tolerance prove to be in short supply.

Just Friends? (Kim-jho Kwang-soo, 2009), focuses on two young men, Min-soo and Seok-i, coming out about their sexual identities. The film asks whether the love between a mother and son, or same sex love is more powerful than the need to abide by Confucian family values.

The remaining two more contemporary films explore female same sex relationships. *First Love* (2016, Kang Ji-sook) deals with a forty year relationship between two women, one that is first forged during their school years. The focus of *A Blind Alley* (Oh Suyeon, 2017) is on the sexual awakening of two best friends, Moonyoung and Eunjae, whose relationship is tested when Moonyoung discloses her true feelings.

These five films offer a kaleidoscope of non-normative sexual identities, providing a lens through which difference is celebrated, sexuality is interrogated and the humanity of those under inspection is verified. Being able to love openly is something that many of us take for granted. We don't have to consider the implications of gestures of affection in public or whether our families will disown us because of who we choose to love. These short films explore and expose the boundaries which same-sex or non-traditional love encounters, the limits of which define a society's conception of the normative and the human. In *Gender Trouble* (1999) Judith Butler points to the violence of gender norms within the heterosexual paradigm which restricts desire and defines deviancy. She suggests that showing how power works in and through bodies can be seen as transformative, if not necessarily inherently subversive. In these short films, filmmakers reveal how power operates in South Korean society to marginalise those who desire differently. By offering vignettes of the lives of couples whose love situates them outside of societal boundaries, filmmakers allow the possibility of change and transformation. It might take time, but such films have an important role to play in preparing society for such transformation, as well as giving members of the LGBTI community figures to identify or empathize with.

Dr Colette Balmain
(Senior Lecturer in Film and Media at Kingston University and film critic for Asian Film Vault and Eastern Kicks)



FIRST LOVE

깊고 오랜 사랑

SOUTH KOREA, 2016
DIRECTOR: KANG JI-SOOK
CAST: SEO WOO-RIM, JEONG HAENG-SIM
28 MINS / ENG SUBS

Written and directed by a young female filmmaker, this beautifully acted short film is a heartbreaking tale of the devastating impact of illness and death on loving couple Young-hee and Sun-jung. These two women, who have loved each other for forty years, face extreme prejudice and discrimination when Sun-jung is diagnosed with lung cancer, revealing the desperate need for legal recognition for same sex couples.



SUGAR HILL

슈가힐

SOUTH KOREA, 2000
DIRECTOR: LEE SONG HEE-IL
CAST: PARK JAE-HYUN, JIN KYUNG, BYUN JUNG-JOO
23 MINS / ENG SUBS

The film is based on the true story of Kim and Lee, two men who have fallen in love. In a desperate attempt not to lose Lee, who is under pressure to get married, Kim, after much agony, introduces Lee to his unmarried sister as a prospective husband. With great tenderness toward his characters and a claustrophobic atmosphere, Lee Song Hee-il explores, in his first short film, the consequences of the societal pressure placed on homosexual men in Korea.



A BLIND ALLEY

골목길

SOUTH KOREA, 2017
DIRECTOR: OH SUYEON
CAST: OH WOORI, LEE HAEUN
27 MINS / ENG SUBS

The intense relationship between two best friends Moonjung and Eunjae is tested when Moonjung's behaviour suddenly becomes out of character, due to an incident she can't bring herself to reveal. At their school, rumours begin to circulate that one of the students is a lesbian. Moonjung tentatively broaches the subject of her own sexual identity to Eunjae and together they must recalibrate their friendship.



A SPACE MAN

THE SECOND CHAPTER FROM
YELLOW HAIR 2

노랑머리 2

SOUTH KOREA, 2001
DIRECTOR: KIM YOO-MIN
CAST: HARISU, YUN CHAN, SHIN YI
17 MINS / ENG SUBS

A Space Man is the second chapter of the feature *Yellow Hair 2*, which explores eroticism and complex relationships through a fragmented narrative. Famously, Korea's first transgender entertainer Harisu made her film debut here as "J", whose identity is put into question by the many characters who do not expect her unabashed strength to show.



JUST FRIENDS?

친구사이?

SOUTH KOREA, 2009
DIRECTOR: KIM-JHO KWANG-SOO
CAST: YEON WOO-JIN, LEE JE-HOON
30 MINS / ENG SUBS

The second in a trilogy of gay short films drawn from director Kim-jho Kwang-soo's own experiences, *Just Friends* depicts the relationship between Min-soo, a young man in the midst of his compulsory military service, and his lover Seok-i (played by star-to-be Lee Je-hoon [*Bleak Night, I Can Speak*] in his acting debut), and the strain caused by the discovery of their more-than-friendly relations by Min-soo's devoutly religious mother. Director Kim-jho deftly utilises both camp musical sequences and a moving, naturalistic portrayal of both characters, while exploring the short-sightedness of Korean institutions and the discrimination faced by gay men in love in Korean society.

Joanna Dugher, Jesus Blazquez, Liz Baker, Fernando Chaves Espinach,
Denitsa Yordanova

1ST AUGUST, 7PM | KCCUK

WANEE & JUNAH

와니와 준하



SOUTH KOREA, 2001
DIRECTOR: KIM YONG-GYUN
CAST: KIM HEE-SUN
JOO JIN-MO
CHO SEUNG-WOO
CHOI GANG-HEE
KIM SOO-JIN
114 MINS / ENG SUBS

Wanee is a disenchanted animator living in the city with her scriptwriter boyfriend Junah. While she seemingly only lives for her successful career, Junah meanwhile, is having less luck as a screenwriter. The cracks in their outwardly peaceful, yet mundane relationship begin to show when childhood friend So-yang visits. This causes old wounds to resurface as Wanee emotionally retreats further. Shrouded in secrecy and guilt, Wanee must confront her troubled past in order to overcome the emotional distance that has consumed her relationship with Junah.

In *Wanee and Junah*, Kim Yong-gyun shifts between the present and the past and bookends the film with beautifully animated scenes. In a refreshingly original gender reversal, it is the emotionally unavailable woman who has to be won over. With a cast drawn from Korea's prominent television industry, notable aficionado Kim Hee-sun challenges herself in this forbidden love drama. Confronting the traditional norms of Korean society, the film celebrates the hidden sides of love; from cohabitation to homosexuality to forbidden love, *Wanee and Junah* is a taboo-breaking debut.

Nicole Atkinson

8TH AUGUST, 7PM | KCCUK

OASIS

오아시스



SOUTH KOREA, 2002

DIRECTOR: LEE CHANG-DONG

CAST: MOON SO-RI
SUL KYUNG-GU
AHN NAE-SANG

132 MINS / ENG SUBS

Jong-du (Sul Kyung-gu, *Memoir of a Murderer*), introduced to the viewer as he finishes his sentence for manslaughter, traces the family of his victim and meets Gong-ju (Moon So-ri, *Little Forest*), a woman with cerebral palsy. A surprising maturity occurs as a significant bond grows between the two characters; both considered a burden by their own families. Luckily, they find each other, but how will others react to this unconventional attraction?

Premiering at Busan Festival in 2002, *Oasis* has been an international success; as have Lee Chang-dong's other blockbusters - *Peppermint Candy* (1998) and his recent *Burning* (2018). It won Lee the 2003 Venice Film Festival Silver Lion for Best Direction and the film's star, Moon So-ri, the Marcello Mastroianni Award.

Oasis paints a picture of a taboo kind of love; a type of love that is rarely portrayed and is often neglected in cinema. Whilst the love presented in the film is sparked by a moment of confusion and rage, it later blossoms into something life-affirming for both protagonists - a love that only Jong-du and Gong-ju can understand.

Eliza Saunders

CREDITS

INTERIM DIRECTOR, KOREAN CULTURAL CENTRE UK: SUNGHO MIN

FILM CURATOR: HYUN JIN CHO

PROGRAMMED BY: BIRKBECK FILM PROGRAMMING & CURATING MA STUDENTS (NICOLE ATKINSON, LIZ BAKER, ROSE BAKER, JESUS BLAZQUEZ, KATIE DRISCOLL, JOANNA DUGHER, FERNANDO CHAVES ESPINACH, TUYET HUYNH, ELIZA SAUNDERS, DENITSA YORDANOVA)

PRESS & MARKETING COORDINATOR: CHRISTOPHER O'KEEFFE

FILM COORDINATOR: CLARE RICHARDS

FILM INTERN: FRANCESCA GURDON

GRAPHIC DESIGNER: JULIA (JULIA.STUDIO)

WITH THANKS TO: HELEN DEWITT (ASSOCIATE LECTURER IN FILM STUDIES, BIRKBECK), JANET MCCABE (SENIOR LECTURER IN FILM & TELEVISION STUDIES, BIRKBECK) AND THE KOREAN FILM ARCHIVE

ATTENDING KOREAN FILM NIGHTS

Admission is free, but booking is required for each screening.
To reserve your place, please visit www.kccuk.org.uk

Selected titles from this programme will be shown again at various venues outside the KCCUK. Please check our facebook and twitter pages for the most up-to-date information. The programme and venue may be subject to change, please confirm at the time of booking.

Deptford Cinema www.deptfordcinema.org
39 Deptford Broadway, London SE8 4PQ

Birkbeck Cinema <http://blogs.bbk.ac.uk/bimi>
43 Gordon Square, London, WC1H 0PD

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