

A CRITICAL FILMOGRAPHY OF KOREAN CINEMA

EDITED BY FRANCES GATEWARD

FORTHCOMING FROM CABOOSE

© CABOOSE 2009. REPRODUCTION WITHOUT PERMISSION PROHIBITED.

Juyuso seubgyuksageun

Attack the Gas Station

South Korea, 1999, 113', colour

Dir Kim Sang-Jin (b. 1967) *Scr* Park Jeong-woo *Cinematog* Choi Jung Woo *Ed* Ko Im-Pyo
Art dir Oh Sang-man *Mus* Son Mu-hyeon *Prod* Kim Mi-hee, Lee Kwan Soo, Cinema
Service *Act* Lee Jung-jae (No Mark), Yu Oh-seong (Mu Dae-po [Bulldozer]), Kang
Seong-jin (Ddan Dda-ra), Yu Ji-tae (Paint), Park Yeong-gyu (Gas station owner)

Through aggressive marketing and word of mouth, Kim Sang-Jin's fourth feature, *Attack the Gas Station*, emerged as the surprise hit of 1999. While it could not touch the unprecedented success of Kang Je-gyu's *Shiri*, its political drama or high-budget action sequences, it proved in many ways to be the anti-*Shiri* of the year, featuring no big-name actors and no bullets and seemingly lacking in any moral or political commitment. It became the third most-attended film in 1999, particularly because of its popularity among Korean students. Enthusiasts cite its satirical humour, critical analysis of group dynamics and the film's overall attempt to keep things light-hearted and entertaining, even in its most violent and gauche moments. In this, *Attack the Gas Station* proved to investors and venture capitalists that the local film industry could produce undemanding 'popcorn' movies and even make a profit in doing so.

As promised by its title, the film follows four young punks attacking a small gas station, stealing money and tearing the place apart. Several nights later, out of sheer boredom, they decide to attack the station again. This time, however, a thorough search of the office reveals that there is no money to be found. The manager discloses that the day's profits are held by his wife for safekeeping and that none of it remains in or near the gas station. A call home only frustrates the young thugs, for the wife cannot be reached. They take the manager and the station's high school employees hostage, determined to wait until the money is definitively located. To pass the time, they are forced to keep up appearances: donning gas attendant uniforms and filling up cars that enter the station, deflecting the suspicion of the police, ordering Chinese take out noodles and dealing with the cranky delivery boy, and taking other oncoming gangs hostage. The bad attitudes of all the characters and the lengths the four go to keep the situation under control keep the proceedings humorous. The film finally ends in a large

brawl scene, with gangs attacking each other not only with hand weapons but also by spraying each other with gasoline. The clash, however, is abruptly and dutifully ended with the flick of a lighter, held above the dripping gasoline by No Mark, the leader of our young tough guys.

Why attack the gas station? The terse answer to this question is given at the very beginning of the film: 'just because'. While some may find in such apparent flippancy exactly what makes it fun (such that one is relieved from 'thinking' in this film), others will point to these words as indicative of the aimlessness of late-1990s South Korean youth. One's position on this matter is perhaps itself a generational question. Some critics have rightly underscored the film's misogynist underpinnings and the seemingly uncritical celebration of youth violence throughout. Given its popularity, however, it is clear that *Attack the Gas Station* did speak to audiences of its time. As such, it is essential to remember the film's historical place, for it is also clear that this is an 'International Monetary Fund film'. In this it is essentially transitional, uneasily adapting social commentary for the logic of calculated financial success. Concomitant to the increasing liberalization of the Korean market, the social malaise that was the source of the New Korean Cinema is deflected in the name of maximising local box-office sales and providing entertainment in the wake of national economic crisis. And while the cinema of the previous generation would have provided a stronger moral and political basis on which the violence of *Attack the Gas Station* could be justified, it is the 'just because' of 1999 that makes Kim's film, structured essentially as a series of monstrative attractions, so successful.

This, however, is not necessarily to criticise. For it could be argued that this is exactly where the novelty of the film lies. While it does have an overarching narrative structure, *Attack the Gas Station* proceeds as if aimlessly, as a series of unconnected episodes culminating in its grand conclusion. A high school gang is beat up in a car wash, the gas station owner sings to provide background music for Ddan Dda-ra, No Mark lies down underneath a police car because they drove off without paying for their gas, and an ad hoc boy band is formed with high school gang members, which just happens to be heard and appreciated by a record producer. One is never sure what will happen next, or who will pull into the gas station. But this not knowing is what gives the film as a whole a wonderfully improvisatory quality, as if it were following its own rhythm and not that of a pre-determined script.

Part of the reason for this is the film's continuously shifting hierarchies. At any moment, those in charge—a gang leader, the station manager, the most charismatic delivery boy—can be usurped by others below or above them. Characters are seen to be constantly at risk, and their position in relation to others remains tenuous and fragile at best. A critique of patriarchy could be gleaned from Kim's film. Throughout, dominance over others is shown to be purely discursively constructed, which in turn must be constantly tested and proved. In this the film consistently resists any easy

spectatorial identification, for none of the four young punks comes across as redeemable, even with the short flashback sequences which attempt to locate a traumatic source for their criminal behaviour. And while the status of the scenes played over the ending credits, showing the four assimilated back into 'normal' jobs, remains unclear (are they flash-forwards or mere fantasy?), they nevertheless reveal that such 'punks' are part and parcel of Korean society.

It must be conceded, though, that the structure of power itself does not change at all throughout *Attack the Gas Station*, only the characters who occupy it. And No Mark remains unquestionably the supreme master of them all.

Steve Choe