

Interview with Mr. Yoon Sung-hyun, director of “Bleak Night”

Reality is much tougher than my film *Interview by Mihai Fulger* Mr. Yoon’s debut feature **Bleak Night** had its world premiere in the “New Currents” section of this year’s Pusan International Film Festival (PIFF) and won one of the two main awards of this competition.



Director Yoon Sung-hyun (left) and one of the main actors of his film

Mihai Fulger: Your film can be found under two different titles: **Bleak Night** and **Boys into the Night**. Which one is your favourite and closest in meaning to the Korean title, **Pasuggun**? Yoon Sung-hyun: I myself made up the title **Boys into the Night**. I was motivated by a title of a novel I liked, **I Walk into the Night** (written, I think, by an American author, whose I cannot remember the name now), which means “I walk into the dark side, into the wicked side”.

However, my distribution company recommended the title **Bleak Night**, because it's shorter and it could be more appealing to the audience. This title is an extension of the film as well, so I love both titles. MF: Your film was produced by the Korean Academy of Film Arts (KAFA) in Seoul. Is this your graduation film? How is it possible for a film school to produce a feature film in Korea? YSH: Yes, this is my graduation film. This was possible because the film had a very low budget. My school is famous for producing a lot of short films, so they have a relevant experience, but I've had many difficulties, because the mechanisms for producing feature films were not functional yet. I went through all the possibilities and I finished by developing a new system, which worked. MF: To what extent would you say that this is an autobiographical film? YSH: The story, as it is structured, is not at all autobiographical, it's 100% fictitious. At the same time, the emotions and the inner conflicts in the film are very much like me, they're an expression of me. MF: Why you chose to tackle such a delicate issue as teenage violence in your first feature film? Wasn't it tough? YSH: I've had a lot of hardships in the writing and production process, because the atmosphere of the film was very dark and very intense, but to me this was very important, as I wanted to really focus on the genre, I tried to make a hard-boiled detective story. While writing the script, I often said to myself: "This is too genre-focussed; it has more style than thought". During that period, there occurred a lot of relevant events, many young people killed themselves and I read a lot of articles on such cases, before choosing the topic of suicide. I've read also studies on the maturing process. Usually, in the newspaper there is only a sentence such as "The high school boy/girl killed himself/herself" and a few things about violence in schools. And I thought: "Is this it? Can death be summed up in a sentence? Is this all what happens?" I thought a lot about the perpetrator and the violence, about crimes that happen very often in society, so they become part of our everyday lives. So, writing this kind of story came kind of natural to me when I started the script. MF: Some of your actors are older than high school kids, but others are almost of the same age as their characters. How was the casting process? And how you managed to direct these actors who are not much younger than yourself? YSH: At first, I tried to audition actual high school students, but the teenagers were too self-conscious of the camera, as compared to professional, well-trained actors. After that, I thought: "Maybe they don't have to be real high school students; maybe I could find some trained actors and let them pulled out what's inside them". So, I moved to drama/acting schools for auditions. I cast three main actors and then we talked a lot about my style of directing, about what I wanted from my actors, about the characters and what I wanted to convey through the film. During filming, there weren't many problems, because all was talked before, in the pre-production stage.



The two award winning directors of the "New Currents" competition, at the closing ceremony

MF: Why you have chosen not to present the events in their chronological order? How you have decided on the manner of editing? You are also the editor of the film... YSH: I chose this structure in order to challenge the conventional thought that the person who kills himself is the victim. To show the audience that this is not always the case, I chose to present the events in this order. I wanted to oppose the preconceived ideas people have about death and suicide, so this naturally led to portraying death in a non-linear way. MF: But the final twist of the story proves this common presumption is right: the person who commits suicide is indeed a victim... YSH: When I mentioned the conventional thought, I was referring to physical, not psychological matters. There are, of course, some deep down reasons that bring inner conflicts... I'm thinking about emotional changes that inevitably lead to self-destruction. But, when it comes to conventional thought, I mean a surface reason, such as a girl is dumped by her boyfriend and that kind of stuff. Of course, the perception of each viewer is subjective, but this is my perspective. MF: Why you introduced in the film the father of the kid who commits suicide? The world of the boys seems self-sufficient, closed and governed by its own rules, so the father is an outsider... YSH: The fact that parents are outsiders to children's world is precisely the reason why I brought in the father, with his story. Without him, the striking discrepancy between the two worlds wouldn't be noticeable. I wanted the audience to be able to imagine that the environment and the overall atmosphere in which his son lives could have influenced his behaviour. MF: Why you chose to begin the film with a very violent fight scene, in which some kids are watching emotionlessly a colleague of them who is beating another one almost to death? YSH: I wanted the audience to think from the start that the dead boy was very violent, that he was a perpetrator, a villain, and not a victim. I also wanted the film to proceed by destroying the conventional perception the audience has on this central character. You mentioned the fact that the other boys are just standing there and doing nothing. In fact, this is what happens very often in Korean high schools: when some boys are fighting, everyone is just standing there and watching. I thought this scene could be a metaphor of the whole Korean society, because tragic things are happening and people are not doing anything to stop them. MF: How do you see actual violence in Korean high schools? And why teachers don't do anything about it? In your film, teachers are almost completely absent... YSH: As regards actual violence in high schools, I believe it is much stronger and much more intense than I have presented it. Some of my friends came to see the film and they told me after the screening: "This is too soft!" Reality is much tougher. I considered that, ironically, if I had depicted reality in all its violence, people would have found it too cinematic, too made-up. As an example, when it comes to weapons, they stick pencils in their opponents' heads. Even while I was writing the script, I was telling myself: "This is much softer than in reality"; but I didn't want it to seem too artificial. To answer your second question, high school teachers are themselves very violent, both in physical and in psychological ways. The level of violence in Korean high schools is so high that, even if some students were fighting, teachers wouldn't think this violent behaviour was such a big deal after all. MF: Which are your favourite Korean film directors? YSH: I like Bong Jong-hoo [**Memories of Murder**, **The Host**, **Mother**] and Kim Tae-yong [**Family Ties**, **Late Autumn**] the most. MF: The world premiere of your debut feature film took place here, in Pusan. How do you feel about the first reactions to your film? YSH: I didn't have any time to actually feel the reactions of the audience, because I was always with my crew members and my actors. However, at the Q&A session after the screening, there was a dark atmosphere in the cinema, and that was probably due to the film. Therefore, I cannot really tell yet whether spectators liked it or not, because they looked just depressed.



Interviewer and interviewee