

IN BETWEEN DAYS REVIEWS

SCREEN INTERNATIONAL: Berlin Film Festival 2006 Review

by Lee Marshall

A slow-burning and memorable gem on the loneliness of a stranger in a strange land

Some of the most interesting films in this year's Berlinale screened in the supposedly off-off Forum sidebar, with *In Between Days* - a small but memorable teen romance - a case in point.

So Yong Kim's feature is, as the title hints, a work that takes its time getting not very far, and impatient audiences will find its crawling pace a problem. But the film is so good on the loneliness of the stranger in a strange land, and the subtle changes of temperature that regulate teen love affairs, that it makes a convincing case for the slow approach. It's never going to play the marquee, but has the back-burner potential to play well in mature arthouse territories. *In Between Days* premiered in competition at Sundance.

One of the fascinating things about this emotionally truthful little gem is its between-continents setting. Most of the dialogue is in Korean, the rest in an unplaceable global American idiom; and the impersonal, snow-spattered cityscapes, the flyovers and pylons that provide the backdrop to the story, could be anywhere in the northern world.

But this is the whole point. Aimie (Jiseon Kim), the apathetic, doodling teenage girl who is the film's central focus, is a displaced young Korean living in an immigrant netherworld that happens to be Canada but might as well be Mars. We watch her take English lessons, wash the dishes, fail to communicate with her separated mother, and hang out with Tran (Kang), a cool but probably rather superficial boy of her own age. Aimie is clearly smitten, but Tran just sees her as a friend who happens to be a girl.

Hardly an original plotspring; but director So Yong Kim and his co-writer and production partner Bradley Rust Gray manage to freshen up the old chestnut by observing the dynamics of unrequited first love - the gifts, the jealousies, the unanswered phone calls, the laconic choreography of passion - in authentic, slow and often painful detail.

Visually, the story is narrated largely by alternating external shots of anonymous suburban wastelands with tight close-ups on faces - mostly that of Aimie, whose puffy teen features keep most of what she feels inside.

Emotional pointers are spare but effective, like the correspondence Aimie sends to her absentee father; or the tragic fact that after Tran buys her Aimie a day-glo cookie as an impulse gift, she gives up her English course to buy him an expensive silver bracelet with her refunded fees.

Faces are viewed through glass - suggesting not only the distance between Aimie and Tran but the observer status of both in this alien society, which is not so much uncaring as totally absent. The one time that we might expect them to interact with the locals - when Tran steals a car radio - it turns out to belong to an immigrant African family.

(<http://www.screendaily.com>)

FIPRESCI PRIZE JURY REVIEW: Berlin 2006

By Gabriele Barrera

A Waste Land Between You and Me

The black on the screen. A noise of steps. Finally, a close-up of a little Korean girl. She walks at a good pace in a waste land, an alien land: the foreign country where she lives, now, and where she's immigrated with her mother. A place of loneliness and sorrow. And now, she strides on the snow. The noise of the steps increases. Quickly, in the direction of a foreign school. The eye of the camera follows the girl always at close range, like in the movies of Luc and Jean-Pierre Dardenne (*Rosetta*, 1999) for example. But, in the meantime, the camera waves in the space and gives expression to the state of the uneasiness and of the mental sorrow of the girl, with free and unusual movements, like in *Millennium Mambo* (2001) by Hou Hsiao-hsien. *In Between Days*.

A very interesting, an absolutely rigorous style which characterizes from the beginning all the sequences of *In Between Days* (USA/Canada 2006), the first full-length film directed and written and also edited by So Yong Kim. For this reason, the attention of the spectators is slowly captured by So Yong Kim's *In Between Days* (presented in the Forum section of the 56th Berlin Film Festival) and by her cinematographic paradox: the total simplicity of style and language, a style that shows clearly and in an exemplary way the big complexity of the sentiments and the sensations of all the immigrated people.

"The inspiration for *In Between Days* came from my teenage years", says director So Yong Kim, a little and bashful young Korean girl perhaps like the protagonist of her movie. "It came from my teenage years of growing up in a suburb of Los Angeles, raised by a single Korean mother. When I began writing *In Between Days*, I used that experience as the basis to build a backdrop for the characters. My intention in making *In Between Days* is to share an immigrant story that is personal and honest. With that in mind, I tried to create an intimate character study of a young girl who is coming of age adapting to life in a new country". She directed her first feature film in Toronto last winter, after a not so long, but very peculiar experience as director, writer, producer and also composer.

And so, Aimie, the little Korean immigrant teenager, observes the world in two different ways. First we see the world of every day: Aimie's eye can't view the waste land of her isolation — also in the special circle of the Americanized Korean girls. For this reason she views only and exclusively her best-friend Tran, the only source of warm affection in the cold country of her loneliness. The cinematographic style follows her denial of a spacious view (the space of the anxiety and the eradication), with the stylistic choice of the close-up. But Aimie has fallen in love with Tran, she tries to express her feelings for him, and she's scared of losing their friendship. The misunderstood affection for each other creates a delicate relationship: an ingenious allegory of the delicate relations between the normal life in a foreign country of the immigrated people (the friendship) and the strong desires of integration (the love). This is the way of the reality.

The second way is Aimie's dreams: Aimie's eye can view, finally, the waste land of her home-sickness. And Aimie is homesick for her country and her father. In her dreams she talks with her absent father. On the screen, the spectator views a crystallized landscape with a creative composition of big pixels. Another brilliant allegory of the frustration (the still-images) of the same desires and dreams.

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HOLLYWOOD REPORTER: 2006 Sundance Film Festival Review

By James Greenberg

PARK CITY - At their best, independent films have the power to make foreign cultures seem not so distant. So Yong Kim's look at Korean teenagers growing up in America presents a unique and specific experience, but at the same time it's not all that different from other kids. A satisfying and very skillful piece of filmmaking, "*In Between Days*" is a natural for cable outlets after making the rounds on the festival circuit.

Based on her own experience moving to Los Angeles at age 12, Kim has created a documentary-like reality of a young Korean girl's dislocation. A first generation immigrant, Aimie (Jiseon Kim) has to adjust not only to the teenage angst of dating and sex but also absorb a culture she doesn't really understand. Although Aimie is inarticulate in either language, the director manages with intense close-ups and painterly composition to get under her skin to her inner feelings.

Aimie lives alone with her mother (Bokja Kim) in a low-income housing project in a frozen Northeastern city (the film was shot in Toronto). Every morning as she traipses off to school she hears the frozen ice snow crunching under her feet. She's an indifferent student, spending most of her time doodling in class, and only comes alive when a classmate Tran (Taegu Andy Kang) starts showing some interest in her.

He's also first-generation and together they listlessly wander around, staring in store windows at luxury products they can't afford. Their bond is their isolation and together they have a few moments of relief, smoking, playing video games and light kissing. Their most intimate moment is when Aimie gives him a homemade Korean tattoo, which symbolically becomes infected.

But Tran has his eye on Michelle (Gina Kim), a prettier and more assimilated girl. When Kim's heart is broken she has no one to turn to. She barely talks to her mother and holds her responsible for her father leaving them. She communicates only in the dreamy letters home she composes to her father, asking about relatives and if he will come and visit.

The one time Aimie's sense of loss and longing pours out and she raises her voice is to sing along with a Korean pop song on a music video. It's a remarkable performance from Kim, especially since she had never acted before. The whole trajectory of the film is played out in her eyes as her moon-shaped face fills the frame. Kang, also a newcomer, is equally impressive, capturing the sullen disappointment of his character. Perhaps they identify with these people.

Production, shot on a Panasonic mini-camera, is a bit of a mom and pop operation. Kim's husband Bradley Rust Gray produced and co-wrote the screenplay. Sarah Levy's camerawork is perfectly expressive, suggesting a kind of Korean neo-realism. Kim chose not to use a music soundtrack to emphasize the silence of the characters, but expert sound design by So Young Kim gives the film an added dimension in creating their environment. "In Between Days" beautifully and impressively demonstrates what filmmakers with more vision than money can accomplish.

Read the full article - http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/thr/awards/sundance/reviews_display.jsp?vnu_content_id=1001842994

NEW YORK TIMES: Sundance, Now a Study in Paradox

By A.O. Scott

-But in the American dramatic competition, trouble — especially the trouble facing young people in small towns and tough neighborhoods — predominates. The earnest, closely observed coming-of-age story is one of Sundance's defining genres, represented this year most notably by Dito Montiel's "Guide to Recognizing Your Saints" and So Yong Kim's "In Between Days."

"In Between Days" is a quieter film, a wisp of a story about a young Korean girl living in a wintry American city and trying to figure out her feelings about her best friend, a boy named Tran, and herself. Ms. Kim generates an extraordinary sense of intimacy without seeming invasive or prurient, and without insulting the audience or the character with too much explanation. It's a small, serious film that shows great promise and that may have a hard time being seen outside this festival. So maybe not much has changed, after all.

Read the full article - http://www.nytimes.com/2006/01/27/movies/27sund.html?_r=1

VILLAGE VOICE: Friends Without Money

by Dennis Lim

- As the title suggests, the terrain of So Yong Kim's IN BETWEEN DAYS—the best film in the dramatic competition—is the ghost world of teenage alienation. The coming-of-age mopefest is a Sundance staple, but the first-time Korean American director's watchful, intelligent minimalism modestly reanimates the genre. Recently arrived from Korea, Aimie (a wonderfully ingenuous performance by Jiseon Kim) lives with her single mother in a bleak Toronto housing block, sending video diaries to the father who left them, unsure of how to handle a growing crush on her best friend. Like *Old Joy*, it's a portrait of a friendship under subliminal stress, and like *Man Push Cart*, a study of the daily trials of assimilation. Like both, it derives much of its power from daring to leave a lot unsaid. Painful, funny, un sentimental, perfectly measured in its ambiguities, it's exemplary low-budget filmmaking, the rare DV movie with an assured visual style and a strong sense of place, moving between the claustrophobic sanctuary of a teenager's pink bedroom and evocative in-between spaces like bus shelters and highway overpasses. (The cinematographer is Sarah Levy, and the skeleton crew also includes Kim's husband/co-writer/producer, Salt director Bradley Rust Gray.) Dismissed by *Variety* but praised by the *Times*, it won a "special" prize for "independent vision." Still without a distributor, it now goes on to compete in Berlin's Forum sidebar.

Read the full article - <http://villagevoice.com/film/0605,lim,72000,20.html>

LA WEEKLY: The Old Joy of Sundance

By Scott Foundas

- Many of the qualities that graced Reichardt's film could also be seen to strong effect in So Yong Kim's *In Between Days*, which somehow did manage to sneak into the competition, where it even ended up winning a Special Jury Prize for "independent vision." The story of Aimie (Jiseon Kim), a teenage Korean girl newly immigrated to Canada, *In Between Days* seems, true to its title, to be constructed entirely of the ineffable and intangible, of those moments out of time that most movies treat as throwaways, but which are perfectly suited to So's tender portrait of lives in transit. Aimie drops out of a class and uses the refunded money to buy a bracelet for Tran (Taegu Andy Kang), the boy friend she wishes were her boyfriend; against painterly post-card images of Canadian winter, she narrates letters to her absent father; and sometimes, she just trudges through the freshly fallen snow, enjoying the crunching sound it makes beneath her boots. For years, I've wondered what kind of movie the Chinese director Jia Zhangke might make if he followed his ever-migrating rural Chinese characters into the great Asian-American diaspora, and more than once while watching *In Between Days*, I felt I was seeing the answer. But So — who also co-wrote the film with her filmmaker husband, Bradley Rust Gray — is unmistakably a gifted filmmaker in her own right, with a rare appreciation for the poetic possibilities of digital video. And in her screen debut, the 21-year-old Kim proves a remarkable screen presence, her face like a river whose course, once determined, immediately shifts.

Read the full article - <http://www.laweekly.com/index.php?option=com LAWcontent&task=view&id=12566&Itemid=9>