# Peppermint Candy

**Director: Lee Chang-dong**
**Country: South Korea**
**Date: 1999**

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**A review by Rahul Hamid for *Senses of Cinema:***

Lee Chang-dong is the cinema's great poet of disappointment. His films are preoccupied by the ways in which the mores of contemporary South Korean society conflict with morality and the quest for personal happiness and fulfillment. In his most recent works, Shi (Poetry, 2010) and Miryang (Secret Sunshine, 2007), Lee has examined these questions by focusing more heavily on the mysteries of human psychology and behaviour, set against the backdrop of South Korea's economic boom. But in his 1999 film, Bakha satang (Peppermint Candy), which put the former high school teacher and novelist on the international art film map, Lee emphasises the social and historical. The film is a model of "national cinema", narrating the past 20 years of South Korean society through the saga of its main protagonist, Yong-ho (Sol Kyeung-gu). As South Korea prepared to celebrate its emergence as an economic power at the turn of the millennium, Lee reminds his audience that the postwar history of military rule and repression cannot be so easily forgotten.

Peppermint Candy is Lee's most formally innovative work. He based the film's structure on Harold Pinter's 1978 play Betrayal, which charts the dissolution of a marriage, beginning with the divorce. The scenes that follow, each going back in time, climax with some further indication of the already foretold disaster. The audience, then, is not asking how each scene will end, but rather the precise ways in which each situation will lead to the couple's further estrangement. The play is infused with an overwhelming sense of loss and doom. Lee uses the form of this deeply troubling psychological play to retell South Korea's recent past. Yong-ho's story begins in 1999 at the 20th reunion of a youth social club where he first met Sun-im, his first and only true love. He crashes the party, completely distraught and incoherent, unable to connect with the other people there. Eventually, he breaks away from the group and climbs a railway bridge to commit suicide by standing in front of an oncoming train. The last shot of the scene is a freeze on Yong-ho's face just before the locomotive is about to crush him. The rest of the film takes us back in time in order to understand how Yong-ho reached this desperate moment.

The train is a central metaphor in the film. Each sequence begins with a shot from the back of a train, projected in reverse, so that the train appears to be moving forward but cars and people alongside the tracks are moving backwards – a succinct visual metaphor for Lee's critique of the idea of progress. The train also reinforces a sense that everything that one sees must lead inexorably to a single sad conclusion; there is no possibility of deviating from this path. Each scene following the suicide coincides with a key point in South Korea's history. The first takes place three days before the suicide, corresponding with the 1999 IMF crisis and the general downturn in Asian economies, most spectacularly in Japan and South Korea. Like his country, Yong-ho has lost everything: his family in a bitter divorce, his money and his business. After being thrown out by his wife, Hong-ja, and separated from his child, he is approached by a stranger who asks him to come to the hospital with him. The man turns out to be Sun-im's husband. She has fallen into a coma and her husband brings Yong-ho perhaps to say goodbye or in the desperate hope that his visit will help her in some way. Realising that Sun-im too is lost to him, Yong-ho returns to the place they first met in a vain attempt to recapture some part of all he has lost.

The next sequence takes place during the height of South Korea's economic boom in 1994. Yong-ho owns

a furniture business and is busily having an affair with an employee. His mistress is a vapid, inanely coquettish and materialistic woman with whom he is obviously bored. The affair is more an assertion of his power as successful capitalist than it is a matter of the heart. Hong-ja, for her part, is also having an affair for which Yong-ho brutally and hypocritically punishes her. 1994 is only a year after the end of a 30-year period in which one military dictatorship after the next has ruled the country. It is a period of economic growth as well as new freedoms. Lee is skeptical of the idea that a country that has inflicted so much repression and violence on its people can responsibly cope with its new-found economic might. Mindless consumerism and the quenching of repressed desires without a reckoning with the past appears to be no cure at all.

In the following sequence, set in 1987, South Korea is in the midst of massive student demonstrations over the announcement that General Roh Tae-woo – the principle commander behind the 1980 Gwangju Massacre where over 100 young demonstrators were shot by the army – was announced as the ruling party's next presidential candidate. Yong-ho is revealed as a policeman who sadistically tortures a student activist. The cruelty of his work extends to his home life, where he is already becoming a spiteful husband to Hong-ja. He spends much of his time with his policeman friends and secretly yearns for Sun-im. It becomes apparent that Yong-ho's ability to blindly adhere to the ruling ethos of the time is his only defining characteristic. The next three sequences take place at the end of his mandatory military service in 1984, during his service in the Gwangju Massacre in 1980 and, finally, at the picnic in 1979 where he meets Sun-im. Lee provides cues and hints in each section that are further elaborated and given nuance as the audience journeys further back into Yong-ho's past. The last three time periods complicate his idealisation of his relationship with Sun-im, revealing it to be far less romantic than we first imagined. Even the titular peppermint candy, associated with his early days with Sun-im, is shown in a new and much less nostalgic light. In the army, Yong-ho loses his innocence. He is dehumanised and learns ruthlessness, violence and selfishness there. By the time we see the young and shy Yong-ho spiritedly singing with his teenage companions, our understanding of the destruction of his character is complete.

Peppermint Candy is a difficult film due to the graphic emotional and physical violence that it unflinchingly presents. Lee's camera unerringly finds the ugliest residue of industrial life – service roads, parking lots, jammed commercial streets, forgotten patches of crabgrass in the empty lots of cities that grew too fast. Yong-ho is not a likeable character. Lee allows us to understand the external forces and disappointments that he has suffered in making him the man he is, but it is difficult to forgive him for his terrible behaviour. In some ways, the film's overarching national metaphor overwhelms a deeper understanding of the characters. They all symbolise something about South Korean social reality and do not fully breathe as three-dimensional people or characters. Peppermint Candy is a compelling and powerful work and necessary to any introduction to the Korean New Wave. Lee quit filmmaking after the film to become South Korea's Minister of Culture for reformer Roh Moo-hyun – one of the planks of Roh's platform was more humane treatment of student protestors – for two years. After his stint in government, Lee's filmmaking became less strident and philosophical and perhaps, more mature. Peppermint Candy is a work of deep conviction, passion and anger.

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