



NEW RELEASES

In Front of Your Face

SPOILER WARNING The following notes give away some of the plot.

Have you ever done a handstand and realised the world looks completely different upside down? Change your perspective and everything looks different. Or something momentous happens – god knows, we’ve all experienced that, these past 18 months – and something like a soup stain on a blouse suddenly appears inconsequential, even charming, even beautiful.

This is how things appear to Sangok (Lee Hyeyoung), the protagonist in South Korean auteur Hong Sangsoo’s latest feature film, *In Front of Your Face*. The film marks Hong’s 11th time at Cannes and 26th feature, continuing his personal and minimalist register and a nimble methodology that foregoes much scripting in favour of a vivacious play of manners and emotion.

As its title suggests, *In Front of Your Face* is about proximity and distance – spatial, temporal, and emotional. Its premise has the sparse simplicity of a short story. Sangok is a middle-aged, smartly dressed sometime actress. She returns to Seoul to visit her sister, having spent an extended period of time in the US. The city’s rapid development renders it slightly foreign to her.

The film takes place during the course of a day and a half, shot in a few extended takes, mainly in bars and cafes. Periodically throughout the film we hear Sangok’s inner monologue as she counts her blessings and takes in what she describes as the beauty and grace and perfection of all she sees around her. Even the spot of soup she spills on her blouse, before meeting with Jaewon – a film director interested in casting her – ceases to matter. (Jaewon is played to perfection in a combination of naïveté and arrogance by Hong regular Kwon Haehyo.)

The stain’s being rendered inconsequential is explained when Sangok discloses to Jaewon – and us – the fact that her world is turning upside down. Seoul’s steep alleys and tiny bars (Hong continues his filmic catalogue of them expertly), a cigarette under a bridge, a sudden flurry of rain – all is tinged with the beauty and sadness of transience. ‘Every moment is beautiful,’ Sangok whispers to herself, holding her waist, her chest, her abdomen, as if steadying a world fast slipping from her.

On delivering us her prognosis, Sangok’s starchy pale pink t-shirt suddenly looks less Cos and more hospital gown. The tune she picks out on a guitar for Jaewon – some hesitant notes plucked from memory – becomes her swan song. Jaewon knows it. He cries. Fills his glass and refills it. Promises to make a short film with her in the morning. (He won’t.) Mortality stares him in the face – and she is beautiful. He admits he wants to sleep with her.

As in so many of Hong’s films (*Oki’s Movie*, 2010; *Our Sunhi*, 2013; *Right Now, Wrong Then*, 2015; *Hotel by the River*, 2018) the female protagonist is far, far stronger than her male counterpart, who succumbs to soju and messes up. Sangok has a resilience that Jaewon mistakenly pronounces purity in a patronisingly reductive gesture of the kind Hong captures so

hilariously, painfully, accurately in his films. You have authenticity, Jaewon tells Sangok, and innocence. That's why I want to make a film with you. But Sangok's face and body are stronger, older, more storied than Jaewon's tipsy hyperboles could ever allow. It is as if she has seen something he hasn't.

'Let me see what is in front of my face,' she whispers, alone again. In front of her, Seoul is remapping itself in Lego block apartment towers and landscaped greenery, garish in the young sun. Sangok visits her childhood home. Its garden is the only thing left, and that too is dwarfed by her 'heavy memories' and the city's gentrification.

Sangok has felt this rush of beauty and gratitude before, she tells us. Years ago, she experienced an episode of wanting to die. But on passing Seoul Station she saw the faces of strangers in the crowd and they suddenly appeared to her so beautiful 'I could almost lick them.' Sangok decided not to die that day. In front of her face, their faces saved her.

This time Sangok has no choice and must confront the abbreviated perspective now facing her. This scenario, and its rendering, constitute one of Hong's most moving films. *In Front of Your Face* is a love letter to Seoul and a superb character study of the beatific presence of mind and body with which one woman faces death.

The bar Jaewon takes Sangok to, incidentally, is called 'Novel'. He wants to make a feature film with her – an ambition rendered impossible by her prognosis. The short film he proposes, and cancels the next morning, represents the opportunity he misses in reaching only for grand projects. Sangok – and Hong – understand that great beauty can come in smaller packages.

Becca Voelcker, *Sight and Sound*, 15 July 2021

Eight scenes, set in seven locations over 24 hours, make up this 85-minute film by the Korean director Hong Sangsoo. In *Front of Your Face* is his 26th feature; his 27th and 28th have already premiered since this film opened at Cannes last year. Hong works quickly, instinctively and improvisationally with a small, nimble crew; he is credited here as writer, director, producer, editor, director of photography and composer. His films are low-budget and low-key, and aim to present scenarios of everyday life with a purity and simplicity that higher production values and higher-stakes plot points might obscure.

Each Hong film is best considered not solely on its own terms but in the context of his ongoing project: a cumulative collection of sketches with recurrent themes, locations and character types, constituting a growing anthology. *In Front of Your Face* continues this endeavour, featuring two staples of Hongian filmmaking: a lengthy, drunken conversation and two characters with experience in making cinema themselves. But there is something new and special about this film – namely Lee Hyeyoung, who in her first collaboration with Hong plays Sangok, a fiftysomething former actress who has returned to Seoul from the US to visit her sister Jeongok (Cho Yunhee) and a filmmaker, Jaewon (Kwon Haehyo). Almost omnipresent in the film – we only lose sight of her in brief moments when the camera lingers elsewhere at the end of scenes – Sangok travels from place to place, arranged meetings altered by chance encounters.

In Front of Your Face begins in Jeongok's living room, where Sangok has been sleeping on the sofa. Soon after waking, she intones a mantralike prayer, which we hear through voiceover: 'Everything I see before me is grace. There is no tomorrow. No yesterday, no tomorrow. But this moment right now is paradise.' Her prayers recur throughout the film, illuminating her thought process and – for reasons that are revealed later in the film – giving Lee's calm and cheerful expression added poignancy.

During breakfast at a café and a stroll in a nearby park, the two sisters converse, revealing how little they know about each other's lives. Jeongok has no idea where her sister lives, or what she does for money; Sangok is resentful that some of her transpacific letters have gone unanswered and blames this for their estrangement. But the frost always thaws, and the recurring image is of the sisters' broad, warm smiles. Lee and Cho are masterful in their use of body language, making the way the characters interact seem like a kind of dance.

These scenes, like all the film's scenes (and indeed all of Hong's films), are shot from one vantage point, with a zoom out from the centre at the start of each and camera pans where necessary to refocus the action. Shot digitally in relatively low quality, the images are thoughtfully composed, if never beautiful; the high saturation gives the greenery in some scenes an unpleasant luridness. Colourful high-rises can be glimpsed through apartment windows; looming over the sisters' conversations, they indicate how much the city has changed, throwing Sangok's financial situation into sharp relief, and – once Sangok declines Jeongok's suggestion that Sangok move into one of the high-rise flats – causing Jeongok's resentment at her sister's move to the US to bubble to the surface.

After taking leave of her sister, Sangok heads to her meeting with filmmaker Jaewon, who has requested an appointment. There is some awkward politeness about a last-minute change of venue, but a jump-cut propels the pair's conversation forward. Jaewon wants Sangok to act in an upcoming project; Sangok declines. But the sudden presence of four empty liquor bottles suggests a new openness between the two.

This beautiful, lengthy scene (almost half of the film's total runtime) plays out like a conversation between two sides of Hong Sangsoo's personality. Jaewon is a clear stand-in for Hong the filmmaker – his work is described by Sangok as 'like novels; short stories', and Jaewon refers to his ability to shoot and edit his own films – whereas Sangok seems to represent Hong's filmmaking ethos and ideals, at one point paraphrasing the film's title by saying, 'I believe heaven is hiding in front of our faces.' The beautiful can be found in the mundane, says Hong through Sangok, and never is that clearer than in the moments during this drunken encounter when Sangok clumsily plays the guitar. She's rusty, and plucks gingerly at the strings, but her focus and sincerity make the tune's roughness all the more beautiful.

Thomas Flew, *Sight and Sound*, October 2022

In Front of Your Face (Dangsin-eolgul-apeseo)

Directed by: Hong Sangsoo
Produced by: Jeonwonsa, Hong Sangsoo
Production Manager: Kim Minhee
Written by: Hong Sangsoo
Photographed by: Hong Sangsoo
Editor: Hong Sangsoo
Composed by: Hong Sangsoo
Sound: Seo Jihoon

Cast

Lee Hyeyoung (*Sangok*)
Cho Yunhee (*Jeongok*)
Kwon Haehyo (*Jaewon*)
Shin Seokho
Kim Saebyuk
Ha Seongguk
Seo Younghwa
Lee Eunmi
Kang Yiseo

South Korea 2021
85 mins

A New Wave release

NEW RELEASES

Decision to Leave (Heojil Kyolshim)

From Mon 17 Oct

Triangle of Sadness

From Fri 28 Oct

The Greenaway Alphabet

From Fri 11 Nov

What Do We See When We Look at the Sky? (Ras vkhedavt, rodesac cas vukurebt?)

From Fri 25 Nov

RE-RELEASES

The Others

From Mon 17 Oct

Poltergeist

From Fri 21 Oct

Nil by Mouth

From Fri 4 Nov (Preview on Thu 20 Oct 20:20; extended intro by Geoff Andrew, Programmer at Large on Fri 4 Nov 17:50; intro by Kieron Webb, Head of Conservation, BFI Archive on Mon 7 Nov 18:00)

The Draughtsman’s Contract

From Fri 11 Nov (+ intro by Kieron Webb, Head of Conservation, BFI National Archive on Fri 11 Nov 17:50)

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