

On So Yong Kim
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This past couple of weeks, I viewed three films by the Korean American independent filmmaker So Yong Kim. I found them remarkable, absolutely top of the line, and more, I believe these three films have had a significant and lasting positive impact on me personally.

Now in her late forties, Ms. Kim was born in South Korea and at eleven came with her mother to Los Angeles. She now lives in New York City with her husband and their daughter. She both writes and directs her films. The three films of hers that have gotten distribution, and that I saw these past weeks, are “In Between Days” (2006), “Treeless Mountain” (2008), and “For Ellen” (2012). Check Netflix and Amazon for their availability. Ms. Kim’s 2014 short film, “Spark and Light,” sponsored by the fashion house Miu Mui, isn’t available widely, or at least I haven’t been able to find it.

I started with “Treeless Mountain” as a DVD from Amazon. I can’t remember what brought me to it; I’d never heard of the film or So Yong Kim. I didn’t even know she was a woman until I checked her out on the Internet. It must have been a recommendation from Netflix—if you liked that film, you’ll like this film, that sort of thing—thank you Netflix. This recent encounter with So Yong Kim’s oeuvre has gotten me thinking about all that’s out there in the world that I don’t know exists. Who else’s work that I might really take to—and I really took to Ms. Kim’s films—am I unaware of? I spend a lot of time with art that is good but not really for me. How can I get better at finding my films, my books, my poets, my painters? That’s a personal project right now I’m going to take on.

It shakes me to think how close I came to missing my contact with So Yong Kim altogether. The “Treeless Mountain” DVD sat around the house for a week, it could have been ten days, unwatched and I came very close to sending it back to Netflix. The blurb on the DVD cover said it takes place in Korea and is about two Korean sisters—the picture on the DVD made them appear about seven and four—whose mother leaves them with her sister-in-law while she goes off to find their father who has left the family. Am I going to connect with that story? I thought to myself? I don’t think so. I’ll mail it back. Or, well, I’ll give it one more day. I’ll try it for twenty minutes tomorrow night and if it doesn’t work I’ll send it back. This went on day after day.

When I finally gave “Treeless Mountain” its twenty minutes, it was “Oh my gosh, this is very special!” I was riveted, totally there with what was going on with these two little girls. My emotions churned like a washing machine from start to finish. I believed what was happening to these dear little souls, first in a large city and then in a rural area (Ms. Kim traveled back to Korea to shoot the film). I cared deeply about what these sisters were going through and what would happen to them. I’ll always remember them and what they did, including selling grasshoppers to get money to fill a piggy bank because Mom said she would return to them when the piggy bank was full. Beautifully photographed and edited. An ending I’ll never forget. This is art, I concluded. This director is an artist. What’s her name? So Yong Kim.

What else has this So Yong Kim done? I asked myself. Here’s one: “For Ellen,” 2012, with the prominent actor Paul Dana. Never heard of it. Why haven’t I heard of it? I rented it on DVD from Netflix. Again it sat around the house for days. This time I put off seeing it because I was concerned that it would hit too close to home with me. The blurb said it was about a father connecting with his young daughter, who lives with her mother a long way away from him, and I’m personally involved in this circumstance and I didn’t want to be put through an emotional upheaval, and I knew from “Treeless Mountain” that this director was capable of doing that to me. I came within hours of sending it back to Netflix. Here again I thought I’ll give it twenty minutes and if I don’t relate to it or it’s too painful to watch I’ll go to the post office and mail it back.

It was “Treeless Mountain” again--wow. I found myself watching the ending three times. Dana’s performance is a revelation. His character, Joby Taylor, is in town to sign divorce papers giving up to his hostile wife full custody of his six-year-old daughter, Ellen, whom he hasn’t seen in years, or perhaps ever, we aren’t told. After all kinds of lawyer talk, suddenly, unexpectedly, Ellen appears, quiet, dear, which in that context is truly a dramatic moment. Ellen and Joby visit a mall and go bowling and they talk in her bedroom and she plays a piece on the piano for him, and then . . . well, you can see the film.

Two days ago, it was Ms. Kim’s first film, “In Between Days,” 2006, a coming of age story about a Korean girl, perhaps 16, newly arrived in Toronto from Korea. Free on Amazon Prime. Again, it worked in a big way for me. One thing this film brings home is that it doesn’t have to cost big money to produce a fine film. The average Hollywood low budget film costs in the neighborhood of 25 to 30 million dollars to make. I’ve read that “In Between Days” cost \$60,000. I had no sense watching

it that this film was made on the cheap. The photography, acting, editing, musical score--absolutely top of the line. What you need is talent and dedication, and as evidenced in these three films, So Yong Kim has that to the max. I'm picking up from reading I've done online since watching the films that she benefits greatly from the encouragement and support of her husband, Bradley Rust Gray, also a filmmaker, who, among other things, co-edits her films with her.

From what I've read, Ms. Kim's films are autobiographical. All three films involve a young girl and her absent dad. Ellen to her father: "Why haven't you come to visit me?"

Ms. Kim evokes nuanced and true performances from her actors, including, and stunningly, the children, who were non-professionals.

All three films make heavy use of tight close-ups. This helps portray characters that, for all practical purposes, are cut off from their circumstances, and not just the larger social or political contexts within which they live, but also from their immediate circumstance, the people right around them.

They all involve long takes—it's not the cut, cut, cut, which so characterizes contemporary films. It's just these people in this situation and you the viewer for an extended time; nothing to distract you or pull you away.

These films make demands on the viewer. They aren't plot driven or language driven but rather character and circumstance driven. If you aren't willing to engage these, invariably, inarticulate people and their situations and stay with it, and if you aren't sensitive enough to take in what's really happening beneath what appear to be mundane thoughts and action on the screen--crucially important things in these character's lives, life transforming things--you could come away thinking that these three films were boring and that nothing happened in them.

Even if what's going on is boring and nothing happens, that can be a legitimate artistic statement. The late writer David Foster Wallace pointed out that mindfulness comes from boredom, and that the less plot you have the better. If the circumstance establishes the basis for it, and in these three films it does, amid the boredom—or lull in the action, however you want to put it—is the anticipation that something really big threatens to happen. I was on constant edge about what bad might happen in these films. And no matter what was going on on the screen I was highly invested in how things were going to turn out in the end for these people. And I was deeply affected by how things did turn out for

them. And the memory of what happened to them, and what I associated with it, has lasted.

These films made me think, both during the film and afterward. They prompted the mindfulness Wallace talked about. These films moved me emotionally, and they also moved me in a literal sense. I have been moved, shifted, from one place to another as a human being. I'm not quite the same entity that I was before seeing these films. I've different, and I think for the better. I'm more sensitive now, more aware, more insightful, more alive, more human, more understanding and accepting of others, more caring toward them, more dedicated to being good to them and be good for them. I'm clearer about my own life now than I was. I can't remember a film, or series of films, having this profound an impact on me personally.

Art is an exchange between a work of art and a particular person at a particular point in his or her life, and what results from that exchange is a function of what both the art and the person are like. I'm sure that my strong response to these three So Yong Kim films has much to do with where I am now in my own life. Thus you might not take to these films as I did. What I can say with assuredness is that I believe these films to be exquisite, and that I suggest that you check them out when you have a chance, and that you keep an eye out for So Yong Kim's future work.