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오발탄

# Obaltan

## Aimless Bullet

Yu Hyun-mok

**Producer** Kim Seong-chun. **Production company** Daehan Films (Seoul, Republic of Korea). **Director** Yu Hyun-mok. **Screenplay** Lee Jong-gi, Lee I-ryeong. **Director of photography** Kim Hak-seong. **Editor** Kim Hee-su. **Music** Kim Seong-tae. **Sound design** Lee Geyong-sun. **Production design** Baek Nam-jun, Lee Su-jin. **With** Kim Jin-kyu (Cheol-ho), Choi Moo-ryung (Yeong-ho), Seo Ae-ja (Myeong-suk), Kim Hye-jeong (Miri), Noh Hae-sin (Cheol-ho's mother), Moon Jung-suk (Cheol-ho's wife).

1961, black/white. 108 min. Korean.

**Premiere** April 13, 1961, Seoul; restored version: May 20, 2016, Korean Film Archive, Seoul

**World sales** Korean Film Archive

In a Seoul neighbourhood where mostly refugees from the north of the divided country have settled, office worker Cheol-ho lives in poverty with his family – his pregnant wife, his unemployed brother, his mother, who is still traumatised by war, and his sister, a kept woman thanks to the American soldiers. Plagued by toothache, he wanders despondently through the film; it's others who take the initiative – with tragic consequences.

After Kim Ki-young and Shin Sang-ok, Yu Hyun-mok is considered the third pioneer of post-war South Korean cinema. Influenced by Italian neo-realism, his seventh film *Obaltan* is seen as a milestone. Made during the brief period of democracy between the overthrow of the dictator Rhee Syng-man and the military coup of General Park Chung-hee, the film was swiftly censored for alleged sympathies with the enemy to the north and then sank into obscurity. The Korean Film Archive had just a single 35-mm print to work with for its brilliant restoration, which has made it possible to rediscover a lost masterpiece.

*Christoph Terhechte*

## Yu Hyun-mok and the triumph of realism

Yu Hyun-mok sits at the pinnacle of realist Korean film. And at the very centre stands *Obaltan* (1961), Hyun-mok's signature film. Yu Hyun-mok wrapped the spirit of his era in a realism that exposes reality, allowing this film to fly through the sky of Korean cinema. The 1960s, when the film was made, were an era of poverty; the wounds of the Korean War had yet to heal. A corrupt Liberal Party government collapsed at the hands of enraged students, and then an incompetent Democratic Party government also vanished with the coup d'état on 16 May 1961. South Korea was a developing economy with a per capita income of less than US\$70. Survival was the one major concern. Meanwhile, the film industry could not escape from the bondage of teary emotional and unrealistic melodrama.

This was the period into which *Obaltan* was released. With the discourse on the direction of Korean film yet to be established, Yu Hyun-mok portrayed South Korean society in the early 1960s through the story of a displaced North Korean, Song Cheol-ho, and his family. He dove into the world of realism, which Shin Sang-ok and Kim Ki-young had abandoned following *The Flower in Hell* (1958) and *A Defiance of Teenager* (1959). Yu's work was a weather vane; he faced the problems that Korean film had hitherto neglected.

Yu Hyun-mok was born on 2 July 1925 in Sariwon, Bongsan-gun, Hwanghae-do, the home of traditional Bongsan mask dance. He was the fifth of nine siblings, but the eldest son; his one older brother had died young. Yu's father Yu Hui-jun ran both a rubber shoe store and a pottery store near the local market. His father loved to drink, and spent the day accordingly, while Yu's mother was a devout Christian. His mother wanted her son to become a pastor. Yu studied at [...] the Department of Korean Literature at Dongguk University from 1947. In his sophomore year, Yu created a group for the study of film art and then made a forty-minute film called *Sea Breeze* (1948). Afterwards, he worked as Lee Gyu-hwan's assistant director and studied directing for seven years, before making his film debut with *The Crossroad* in 1956. It tells the story of twins who grow up in different families under different circumstances and later meet their parents. Yu was thirty at the time.

Yu then made *Sadness of Heredity*, also in 1956, before realising the possibilities of realism as he was making his third film, *The Lost Youth* (1957). Three years later, he made his mark with *Obaltan*. At the time he was part of a 'troika' with directors Shin and Kim; the three led the Korean film industry into its prime.

*Kim Jong-won*

## Italian neorealism, soviet montage techniques

*Obaltan* is the film adaptation of Lee Beom-seon's short story *Obaltan (Aimless Bullet)*. Yu Hyun-mok said of it, 'After I read the story, I was desperate to make the film.' The film vividly portrays the desperate reality that existed at the end of the Liberal Party government, when society was drenched in the pain of displacement and national division, corruption and poverty. The title sequence is a replica of Rodin's *The Thinker*, with prison bars in the back and a light eerily shining in the dark. The sculpture seems to be a metaphor for the director, struggling in a dark era. The film's story is unfurled through German expressionism, Italian neorealism, and Soviet montage. In one interview, Yu

Hyun-mok said that he studied montage techniques via the books of Pudovkin and Eisenstein, and that he was drawn to Italian neorealism by *Bicycle Thieves*. We can see the influence of German expressionism in the mise-en-scene of indoor spaces like Cheol-ho's house and the café and pub frequented by Yeong-ho. Timber propped up here and there and the image of a bird caught in a cage imply that the characters are trapped in, and cannot escape from, their desperate situations.

The montage technique is highlighted when Yeong-ho robs the bank. It was not possible to rent a bank for the film shooting, so they were unable to shoot the robbery directly. Instead, the film uses the montage technique to show the colourful situation outside the bank while the robbery is in progress. As a result, the director is able to create a very impressive scene. Soap bubbles scattering in the air and balloons popping at the touch of a burning cigarette hint at Yeong-ho's failure.

*Kim Kyoung-wook*

## The digital restoration

*Obaltan* has long been regarded as the greatest masterpiece in all of Korean film. It is a controversial work, one that occupies a position in the history of Korean cinema equivalent to that of *Citizen Kane*. Naturally, the film was regularly put forward as a candidate for restoration after, in 2007, the Korean Film Archive and a few private digital restoration engineers succeeded in digitally restoring film for the first time in Korea. However, the Archive was only able to begin the restoration of *Obaltan* in 2014, having restored fifteen other classics over the previous seven years. At last, in 2015, the restoration project was completed and the film released. From the outside, it may look like a belated success following a fifteen-step run-up, but from a technical perspective the restoration of this film is a miracle. All our problems began with the fact that all we had was a 35mm print. When it was first released in 1961, *Obaltan* was withdrawn from the theatres early for political reasons. The 35mm print with English subtitles was then produced for the San Francisco Film Festival in 1963. It is assumed that the film that remains today was made for a screening of Korean films on the thirtieth anniversary of liberation in 1975, more than a decade later. The Korean Film Archive obtained the film in 1986. The restoration centred on the print [...], which had been damaged by neglect and sporadic screenings over a period of twenty years.

Some of the scenes in *Obaltan* are often cited as the very definition of 'seriously damaged film'. Of course, for historical and cultural reasons, the average classic film in South Korea is not in good condition anyway, and many have been more seriously damaged than *Obaltan*. But a film with such a variety of damage is not easy to come by, and each type of damage was rather tricky to deal with.

South Korea's 'aggressive' restoration standards are most obviously highlighted by how we handle foreign-language subtitles. In South Korea, there are more than a few cases where an original film has been lost and only prints with foreign-subtitles remain, as in the case with *Obaltan*. The subtitles may be a historical trace, but they interrupt the viewing as well, so I think it is right to erase them when we can. [...] At the time, the Korean Film Archive was researching a solution for removing subtitles. Therefore, the Korean Film Archive was probably the first to remove subtitles from a film. Our existing approach

would not do, for it would not only fail to overcome the quality limitation, the amount of work to be done was also unrealistic. After prolonged consideration, we adopted the compositing process [a process whereby parts of frames from various sources are assembled digitally, -Ed.] of visual effects (VFX). As a result, 543 subtitles were removed from a total of 56,827 subtitled frames.

Kim Ki-ho

*All passages have been taken from the booklet accompanying the Korean Film Archive's Blu-ray release of Obaltan*



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Yu Hyun-mok was born in 1925 in Hwanghae Province, in what is now North Korea. While studying Korean at Dongguk University in Seoul, he began working as an assistant director to Korean filmmaker Cho Jung-ho in 1946. In 1949, he graduated from university and assisted on Shin Sang-ok's feature film *Evil Night*. Yu made his directorial debut with *Gyocharo/The Crossroad* in 1956. Two years later, he married the visual artist Park Keun-ja, who had a strong influence on his work. Yu gained international renown with the film *Obaltan* (1961), which was screened at the San Francisco International Film Festival. In addition to directing films, from 1963 Yu Hyun-mok also taught at Dongguk University. His independently produced film *Martyr* (1965) became the first Korean film to be exported to the US. That same year, Yu was arrested on charges of violating the Anti-Communist Law, but was later pronounced innocent. Yu Hyun-mok founded the Korea Amateur Filmmakers Association (KAMA) in 1970. In 1975, he was elected vice president of the Motion Pictures Association of Korea, and a year later he became a full professor at Dongguk University. He took over as director of the Korean Film Archive in 1977, and in 1989, he was elected chairman of the Film Art Society of Korea, and became dean of the Department of Arts at Dongguk University. Yu Hyun-mok made forty-three feature films, and wrote several film history books. He died in 2009.

#### Films (selection)

1956: *Gyocharo/The Crossroad*. 1957: *Irobeorin Cheongchun/The Lost Youth*. 1958: *Insaeng Chaab/The Life Seized*. 1959: *Gureum-un Heulleogado/Even the Clouds Are Drifting*. 1961: *Obaltan / Aimless Bullet*. 1962: *Akkim Eobsi Juryeonda/To Give Freely*. 1963: *Pureun Ggum-eun Bitnari/The Blue Dream shall Shine*. 1964: *Anaeneun Gobaekhanda/Wife's Confession*. 1965: *Pureun Byeolarae Jamdeul-ge Hara/Sleep Under The Blue Star, Sungyoja/Martyr*. 1966: *Teukgeup Gyeolhon Jakjeon/Secret Marriage Operation*. 1967: *Makcharo On Son-nim-deul/Guests Who Arrived on the Last Train*. 1968: *Kain-ui Huye/Descendants of Cain, Mongddang Deuril Kkayo/I'll Give You Everything, Akmong/Nightmare*. 1969: *Nado Ingan-i Doe-Ryeonda/I Would Like to Become a Human*. 1970: *Du Yeobo/Two Husbands*. 1971: *Bunlyegi/Bun-Rye's Story*. 1975: *Bulkkot/Flame*. 1977: *Mun/The Gate*. 1978: *Yetnal Yetjeok-e, Hweo-oi Hweo-i/Once upon a time, Hweo-oi Hweo-I*. 1979: *Jangma/Rainy Days, Dahamgye Bureugo Sipeun Norae/A Song Everyone Wants to Sing Together*. 1980: *Saram-ui Adul/Son of Man*. 1984: *Sanghan Galdae/Ruined Reeds*. 1995: *Malmijal/Mommy, Star, and Sea Anemone*.