Hong Sangsoo’s new movies are losing focus

Recently, we’ve been gifted two new works by Korean auteur Hong Sangsoo each year. He loves a small movie, usually comfortably under the 90-minute mark, and a scope that might encompass a novella or even a short story. I personally find them kind of hit or miss. Not to say Hong is inconsistent. In fact, it is remarkable how he can keep making the same kind of movie over and over. Even within the self-imposed constraints of Hong’s manner, there is wild variance in what he puts out. In that sense, his new movies are fitting – though unessential – additions to his prolific filmography.

One of this year’s, *In Our Day*, is fairly standard Hong: low stakes, talky, and cast with familiar actors (if you think Wes Anderson likes recurring players, I’ll raise you any of these). It’s also pure Hong thematically: creatives gently wrestling with their late careers, nebulous self-reflection, and gestures toward alcoholism.

The movie splits its narrative between an actor who has given up on the profession (Kim Min-hee, whom Hong often refers to as his “muse”) and a poet who has gained popularity late in his career (Ki Joo-bong). The connection between the film’s two halves is more thematic than anything else. (They also both mix gochujang in their ramyun.) As they are each asked by younger people how to live a life making art, neither has satisfying answers. One story resolves with the actor’s roommate despairing over a missing cat; the other with the poet’s vices triumphing over his long-term health.

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In Our Day is good stuff if you're a Hong fan, though probably not enough here to convert a hater. And the second film this year, *In Water*, might bewilder even the stans. For starters, it is almost entirely shot out of focus, save for one early scene of its trio of characters sharing a pizza. At first, I thought something must've been wrong with the projector, only realizing it was deliberate when the subtitles came through clear as day. The effect makes the subtler parts of Hong's work blurrier, very literally. Small gestures, facial expressions — the little things that come alive in the mundanity of Hong's work now made opaque. It kind of works; it's also a little annoying.

In Water follows a director (Shin Seokho) who has taken two friends to Jeju Island to make a short film. In the past, director characters have seemed like obvious stand-ins for Hong himself. Here, we're less sure — not because he's out of focus but because he might be a hack. The director is feeling his way around the location for inspiration. There's no script; the other two are enthusiastic but confused when they will even make this thing. The director continues to bumble around, hoping to be inspired.

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That inspiration finally comes during an encounter with a woman who is picking up trash on the beach. From there, he has the idea for his movie, and they proceed to film it. Hong famously does much of the filmmaking himself: he writes, directs, shoots, edits, and even does his own sound design. Is *In Water* a glimpse behind the curtain?

But as the director-character explains what the short film is about, things become even more uncertain. Is the idea a good one or just stuff of pretentious hacks? (It ends with the main

character walking into the ocean…) Does his crew of two buy in, or are they just relieved that their time hasn't been wasted? Your mileage may vary depending on what you believe. The ambiguity could just as easily be the point. Personally, I wanted anything in the movie to come into focus.

I've heard the director's work described as "Korean mumblecore," which doesn't feel quite right but not totally wrong either. They are certainly the film equivalent of lo-fi. In many ways, the work of Hong is to distill cinema to the barest of bones. He strips movies of activating conflict or real plot; production values are kept as low as possible — casual, shot on digital camcorders that give his work a home movie feel. Characters are often strongly imagined but rarely given arcs. It's hard not to see Hong's work as a strong reaction to the way movies are made now: the emphasis on grand, dramatic stakes and high escapism or, put simply, entertainment. Instead, Hong makes the type of thing that every streamer and algorithm is allergic to.

Both movies work best if you're familiar with Hong canon. For *In Our Day*, that's a benefit, but for *In Water*, that's what makes it feel minor compared to earlier films that have had firmer ideas and fewer tricks. Last year's duo of Hong movies — *Walk Up* and *The Novelist's Film* — were two of his best and most inventive efforts to date. Maybe next year's will be stronger. As Hong often projects in his movies, creativity is never a straight line but, rather, a week of meandering until you eventually meet a woman collecting garbage.