



DESPERATE MEASURES

Stray Bullet

> By Sean Kim



Stray Bullet, known as *Obaltan* in Korea, has boldly been called the best Korean movie ever made. While that's a lofty claim, the 1960 film is in fact one of the early greats.

The film falls in the neo-realist vein of Vittorio de Sica, and was originally banned by the Korean government for its grim and nihilistic portrayal of life in post-war Korea. The social upheavals taking place at the time become the setting for the two brothers, Chul Ho and Yong Ho. Chul Ho works as an accountant whose wages barely cover his bus fare and yet he must support a family that includes an ailing and pregnant wife, a sister who is a prostitute for American G.I.s, and a mother who has gone insane. He can't even afford to visit the dentist and must deal with a decaying tooth. His younger brother Yong Ho, a war veteran, burns with anger at the state of their lives and in a moment of desperation, attempts to rob a bank in order to save the family. He's arrested and is set to be hung for his crime.

On a technical level, the movie is clumsily made. The edits are confusing, there is a momentary cut-off of sound, the mood lighting is at times swallowed in black and the double-layered English subtitles (one white, one yellow) takes some getting used to. But these are minor issues one can quickly put aside because unlike contemporary films with their slick production values, these old black and whites must rely on the strength of their stories. We watch movies like *Stray Bullet* not for the visual splendor, but for the characters we begin to care for

and the situations they must endure.

Whatever cinematic tools that were available back then were effectively used by director Yu Hyun Mok. His strategic use of lighting, composition and even tracking shots added emotional resonance to many scenes. The kissing scene between Yong Ho and Sul Hee, a nurse he met while wounded in combat, is a testament to the value of shadows. The two cling to each other under a small ray of light surrounded by darkness. Lighting becomes an expressive tool that tells part of the story and illustrates the condition of their lives.

All of these parts come together to give us a stark picture of Korea after the war. The chaotic society is brilliantly captured in a chase scene between Yong Ho and the police. He runs past massive industrial plants (hinting at a country under reconstruction), a parade of newly baptized Christians, a labor protest and a woman who had hung herself in the sewers with her crying child still in tow. It ends with Yong Ho shooting into the air before he's caught, a gesture of helplessness and ultimate surrender.

The film itself ends with Chul Ho wandering through the city after he's finally able to visit the dentist. One among the lonely crowd, he sits in a taxi, roaming aimlessly, his face coming in and out of a shadow as blood streams from the corners of his mouth. Just when you thought the film couldn't get any darker, *Stray Bullet* crosses the boundary from social realism to horror. ☐



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