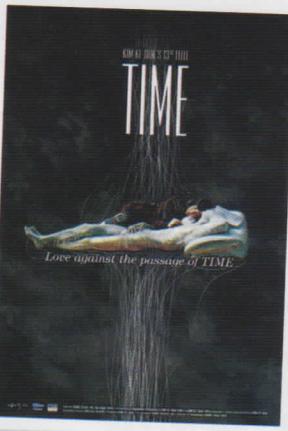




WHAT LIES BENEATH

Time

> By Sean Kim



We're all vain creatures, that's nothing new. But can the sin of vanity destroy us?

Writer/director Kim Ki-duk addresses this question in his latest film *Time*. Hubris abounds in many of the characters, who together become the volcanic center of the story. Sehee, played by Sung Hyun-ah, attempts to revive the romance in her relationship with Ji-woo (Ha Jung-woo) by suddenly disappearing from his life and getting plastic surgery. She then re-enters Ji-woo's love-lorn existence as a new woman, recreating the love they once shared. The only thing she didn't count on was that he would still hold a torch for the old Sehee.

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Without giving any more away, I'll stop short by saying *Time* was a pretty good film. It might even reach beyond that thanks to its technical aspects and the light, dreamy pacing that has become Kim's distinctive style. We'll always find at least one transcendent moment in his films that jolts us out of our complacent viewing habits. These moments are often dispersed throughout, punctuating mundane progressions of action and plot. This is no different with *Time*, but what's new here is that Kim is moving into uncharted territory with a film that verges on psychological horror. The story isn't just about vanity, but about how people attempt to stop time in order to hold moments in their perfection. In doing so, they often go too far and their lives end in tragedy.

A very surreal morality play, *Time* shows how age and familiarity can strip people of their beauty and appeal. The awareness of these changes leads to ugly jealousies and desperate acts. Here, the vanity of Sehee and Ji-woo verges on Shakespearean, where even the slightest problems in their relationship explode into something much bigger. Whims move the story, leading to quick and hasty decisions that lead to incredible disaster. These people live their lives in a state of panic and unending desperation.

One qualm I have with *Time* is some of the heavy-handed message delivery, which betrays Kim's more vulgar tendencies. Holding the camera on a city crowd to nail down some point about masking our identities was a technique that felt clumsy and forced. It's this kind of overloaded symbolism that draws the film down from its light, airy progression. Characters pull blankets over their heads, speaking through covered faces. These flesh-colored masks we wear are meant to hide human horrors, which in the Buddhist conception, are desire, love and emotional attachment.

It's this kind of self-consciousness that brings us out of the story. I never liked message films, especially when they unfold like childish Aesop's fables. As movie-goers, we're not looking to be preached to. We're there to be entertained and, more importantly, to be shown something new.

That aside, the movie was well done. It's one of Kim's stronger films out of the hundreds he's written and directed. What's especially interesting about *Time* is it indicates a shift in Kim's focus, which is moving away from Buddhist allegory and more towards genre, possibly horror. I think it's an interesting turn and a possible sign he's becoming a better filmmaker. ☐



A STORY THAT SHOWS YOU CAN CHANGE HOW YOU LOOK, BUT YOU CAN'T CHANGE WHO YOU ARE.