

## Secret Sunshine/ Milyang (2007)

“Are you looking? Do you see?”

### Major Credits:

Director: Chang-dong Lee

Writer: Chang-dong Lee, from a novel by Chong-jung Yi

Cinematography: Yong-kyo Cho

Cast: Do-yeon Jeon (Shin-ae/ Mrs. Lee), Kang-ho Song (Jong Chan/ Mr. Kim)

### Production Context:

Chang-dong Lee (b. 1954) was a successful novelist before turning to the cinema in 1992, when he became part of the Korean New Wave that includes Kim Ki-duk (*Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter... and Spring*), Bong Joon-ho (*Memories of Murder*), and Hong Sang-soo (*Hill of Freedom*). Lee was drawn to filmmaking following a political shift in Korea away from socialism around the time of the 1988 Seoul Olympics. For Lee, the cinema replaced literature as a means of conveying his social concerns, as becomes clear in his second feature, *Peppermint Candy* (1999). In contrast to the striking flashback narrative structure of that film and the socially marginalized protagonists of *Oasis* (2002), *Secret Sunshine* was designed with “normality” (Lee’s term) in mind. Both lead actors were well known to Korean audiences. Kang-ho Song’s role as Mr. Kim marks a departure from type, since he was best known for gangster and detective roles (most notably in Joon-ho Bong’s excellent *Memories of Murder*, 2003). Do-yeon Jeon, who won the acting prize at Cannes for her portrayal of Shin-ae, reportedly “hated” the director during their time together shooting the film.

### Cinematic Aspects:

1. Long Take: Lee deploys these unedited shots at key moments in the narrative (Interestingly, the director has testified that he had decided *not* to use long takes to preserve the film’s “normality”). Viewers may argue whether the shots of nearly a minute or more contribute to the intended sense of realism or rather place the film in the genre of art cinema. Careful spectators will notice how the editing rate slows down as the narrative continues and, metaphorically, the film “winds down” off the reel.
2. Composition: At several key moments, Lee deliberately removes the desired object of attention out of the frame. The most striking of these long shots occurs in the storefront church, where the camera is positioned at the back of the congregation so that the source of the anguished sobbing cannot be seen. Similarly, near the end of the film, the object of Shin-ae’s terror in her own kitchen is not revealed.
3. Casting: Aside from the two leads, many of the people who appear are non-professionals and residents of the nondescript town of Milyang. Note that their names are simply listed alphabetically in the credits without referencing their characters in the film.

### Questions for Discussion:

1. Although *Secret Sunshine* employs many melodramatic elements, the two main characters do not consistently conform to type. In fact, they usually act out of mixed motives. Shin-ae is certainly the victim of almost unbearable suffering, as in the Hollywood “woman’s weepie,” but she is also, at times, proud, negligent, flirtatious, and unjust. Similarly, Jong Chang at various times evokes suspicion, contempt, and sympathy. What is your ultimate understanding of these two characters and the significance of their relationship?
2. Korean society has long been marked by patriarchy, and Shin-ae’s initial position as a single mother dependent on the help of a male stranger invites a feminist interpretation of her story. (Chang-dong Lee’s next film, *Poetry*, more directly confronts the effects of patriarchy). On the one hand, Shin-ae rebels against an unquestioning submission to patriarchy, but the process leads her to disillusionment and the brink of madness. Does *Secret Sunshine* affirm the integrity of Shin-ae’s quest for independence or instead point to the necessity of a re-defined, balanced masculinity as embodied by Jong Chang?
3. The film ends with a rather anti-climactic scene and a strange pan down and right to a patch of earth. How might you explain Lee’s choice for an ending?
4. Note how Shin-ae’s progress through the film is marked by a series of “performances”: 1) as frightened mother when Jun plays dead at the side of the road or hides from her at home, 2) as wealthy, independent land speculator, 3) as accomplished pianist in recital, 4) as “Tortured Soul” and re-born Christian, 5) as forgiving martyr, 6) as seductress. In addition to providing structure to the screenplay, how do these successive performances point to the “spine” of her character and suggest a relationship between being and role-playing?
5. What is the film’s attitude towards religion?