



## Untold Scandal

(Seukaendeul: Joseon-namnyeo-sangnyul-jisa)

Director: E J-yong

Production Company: b.o.m. Film Production

Presented by: CJ Entertainment

Co-presented by: CJ Venture Investment,

IMM Venture Capital

International Sales: CJ Entertainment

Executive Producer: Lee Kang-bok

Producer: Oh Jung-won

Co-producer: Lee Eugene

Line Producer: Joh Neung-yeon

Assistant Director: Kim Jun-soo

Screenplay: E J-yong, Kim Deh-woo,

Kim Hyun-jung

Based on the novel by: Pierre Choderlos de Laclos

Director of Photography: Kim Byung-il

Lighting: Lim Jae-young

Editors: Kim Yang-il, Han Seung-ryong

Production Designer: Jung Gu-ho

Production Designer: Park Sang-hoon \*

Costumes: Jung Gu-ho

Music: Lee Byeong-woo

Sound Recordist: Lee Seung-chul

Cast:

Bae Yong-jun (Cho-won)

Lee Mi-sook (Lady Cho)

Jeon Do-yeon (Lady Sook)

Cho Hyun-jae (Kwon In-ho)

Lee So-yeon (Lee So-ok)

South Korea 2003

124 mins

35mm

35mm print courtesy of the

Korean Film Archive (KOFA)

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## ECHOES IN TIME: KOREAN FILMS OF THE GOLDEN AGE AND NEW CINEMA

# Untold Scandal

E J-yong transposes the epistolary novel *Dangerous Liaisons* from pre-revolutionary France to the late 18th-century Joseon Dynasty. A manipulative noblewoman challenges her womanising cousin to seduce a virtuous young lady (2007 Cannes Film Festival Best Actress winner Jeon Do-yeon). Opulence, passion, intrigue, and a high stakes game of power and desire intertwine in this meticulously crafted, wittily written and impressively performed period drama.

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**SPOILER WARNING** The following notes give away some of the plot.

## A contemporary review

An initial voiceover warns us that the characters of this story are 'immoral beyond belief', which is immediately encouraging. *Les Liaisons dangereuses*, Choderlos de Laclos' 1782 epistolary novel on which this film is based, gives us a fascinated distance from its compulsive-repulsive game-players – and semi-reluctant empathy. Because of this, perhaps, it has been repeatedly filmed. Stephen Frears and Milos Forman stayed in period, while Roger Vadim transposed the story to chic Paris and Roger Kumble to overprivileged Manhattan.

E J-yong remains in the late 18th century, but takes the story into courtly Korea, where the juxtaposition of shocking intimacy and heavily swaddled ceremony is quickly established. At the beginning of the film, a hushed backdoors shag is interrupted on the verge of climax as the fearsomely poised Lady Cho approaches, gazing over her heavily embroidered sleeves.

Lady Cho and her unscrupulous cousin Cho-won are the equivalents to Laclos' Merteuil and Valmont. The action broadly follows the original's two-pronged machinations – to deflower a coltish virgin, and to breach the defences of a renowned prude, here called Lady Sook. She has been chaste for so long that, Lady Cho scoffs, 'she is virtually a brick wall now'. Cho sadly loses Merteuil's proto-feminist self-assertion (even Sarah Michelle Gellar in *Cruel Intentions* spat, 'I'm the Marcia fucking Brady of the Upper East Side, and sometimes I want to kill myself').

Nonetheless, Lee Mi-Sook gives a performance of thrilling poise, her hair carefully braided and skewered, eyebrows plucked into permanent disdain. The camera stares unflinchingly at the machinations, staying tight on faces – Cho and Cho-won make us complicit in their scheme by gazing into the lens when apparently addressing each other. As a direct gaze is considered impudent (especially between the sexes), the determinedly lowered eyes only stoke the tension. The slightest smile or turn of the head suggests a hapless unbending.

If the opening sequence wittily replicates the conventions of a western period drama, complete with staccato baroque harpsichord, J-yong puts a distinctive spin on the *mise en scène*. Most scenes involve hushed conversations in small chambers, amid an atmosphere of gleeful surveillance. When the ladies coo over innovations newly arrived from China, Lady Cho typically pounces on a telescope. Immaculate trays of food, cosmetics and calligraphy form chilly still-lives that may recall Martin Scorsese's interrogation of a rigid society in *The Age*

## ECHOES IN TIME: KOREAN FILMS OF THE GOLDEN AGE AND NEW CINEMA

### New Korean Cinema

**Memento Mori** Yeogogoedam dubeonjjae iyagi  
Wed 4 Dec 18:15 + intro by Yi Wang, Director and  
Programmer of Queer East; Mon 23 Dec 20:45

**Christmas in August** 8wolui keuliseumaseu  
Wed 4 Dec 20:55 + intro by Michael Leader and  
Jake Cunningham; Wed 18 Dec 18:00

#### Oldboy

Thu 5 Dec 20:40; Thu 19 Dec 18:10;  
Sun 22 Dec 18:00; Mon 30 Dec 20:35

#### The Day a Pig Fell into the Well

Doejiga umule ppajin nal  
Fri 6 Dec 20:40; Fri 20 Dec 18:00

#### The Quiet Family

Joyonghan gajok  
Sun 8 Dec 18:15; Sat 14 Dec 15:20

#### New Writings: Forever Girls

Mon 9 Dec 18:30 BFI Reuben Library

#### Die Bad

Jukkeona hogeun napeugeona  
Tue 10 Dec 18:10; Fri 27 Dec 20:50

#### Barking Dogs Never Bite

Peullandaseuui gae  
Thu 19 Dec 20:50; Mon 30 Dec 18:00

#### Untold Scandal

Seukaendeul: Joseon-namnyeo-sangnyul-jisa  
Fri 20 Dec 20:35; Sun 29 Dec 15:00

#### Peppermint Candy

Bakhasatang  
Sat 21 Dec 17:50; Sun 29 Dec 18:20

#### The Foul King

Banchigwang  
Sun 22 Dec 15:00; Sat 28 Dec 18:00

#### In partnership with

Korean Cultural Centre UK (KCCUK) and  
Korean Film Council. Special thanks to Eunji Lee.

This landmark season was prepared in  
collaboration with the Korean Film Archive (KOFA),  
which is celebrating its 50th anniversary this year.  
Featured in the programme are 12 digital  
restorations and 5 digital remasters supervised by  
KOFA, as well as unique 35mm prints from its  
archival collection.

of *Innocence*, though J-yong marbles the decorum with a seam of naked flesh  
and discreet sauce.

The film's publicity trumpets its unprecedented costume budget. Hanbok, a  
traditional costume based on wrapping, is perfect for this story, with its layers  
to be unfolded and inviting ribbons. Throughout, colour slashes through dun  
greys, browns and muted blues. Lady Cho wears dazzling emerald and  
primrose, and duplicity provokes her most florid robes of orange and peony.  
Sook, however, is swathed in demure dove grey. A curved dagger secures her  
hair, but she's helpless against Cho-won's insinuating campaign. Eventually,  
publicly humiliated and stripped of dignity, she collapses in a slump of inky  
blue.

*Untold Scandal* stages dazzling central sequences of double-meaning and  
hypocrisy. Lady Cho assures a horny youth that 'men and women are like  
butterflies and flowers – it is natural and you need not be concerned with  
propriety,' even though she speaks from behind a wall-length grille. Sook reads  
Cho-won's ardent letter at a desk backed by a restrained screen of mountain  
views – he devours her reply while enjoying delicious little snacks and a  
blowjob.

'What is the endgame here?' asks Cho-won, as pique and reckless passion  
spur characters towards destruction. As in all the Laclos films, icy Sadean  
machinations are swept into a desolate romanticism. The closing scenes pick  
up on Cho's pitiless demand for proof that her cousin has taken his promised  
maidenheads. Cho-won provides a cloth with a bloodied, dark stain, like a  
florid pressed flower. When he is subsequently stabbed in the back, a damp  
red stain spreads over his white robe, while a suicidal Sook walks on to the ice  
and disappears into a snowy white expanse, leaving only a scarlet swirl of silk  
behind. In *Untold Scandal*, colour is mocking, mournful destiny.

David Jays, *Sight and Sound*, May 2005



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