Planet of Snail

A film by Seungjun Yi

87 minutes / HD Video / 16:9 / Dolby Digital / South Korea / 2011 / Not Rated
In Korean with English Subtitles / Stills available at: www.cinemaguild.com/downloads
Synopsis

A love story like no other, *Planet of Snail* is a mesmerizing documentary about an accomplished young poet who can no longer hear or see and his relationship to the world around him.

Young-Chan is deaf and blind. He learned to speak when he was very young, but soon after lost his sight and hearing. He lives with his wife, Soon-Ho, who is his soul mate, an inseparable part of his life, and a window to the outside world. Young-Chan and Soon-Ho communicate through finger braille, a unique form of touch-based sign language in which words are tapped out on each other’s hands.

They rely on one another completely. Even simple domestic tasks require complex collaboration, like the changing of a light bulb on the ceiling. And everyday moments that most of us hardly notice become tender shared experiences, like feeling the bark of a tree, smelling pine cones on a spring morning, or the sensation of raindrops on the skin. However, Young-Chan must be able to survive on his own. One day, as Soon-Ho waits anxiously at home, Young-Chan embarks on the biggest adventure of his life.

Breathtaking imagery coupled with Young-Chan’s personal writings create a transfixing portrait of life on what seems like another planet, where touch communicates everything and love conquers all.

About the Film

*Planet of Snail* was the recipient of the VPRO award for Best Feature-Length Documentary at the 25th International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam (IDFA). It is an official selection of the Tribeca International Film Festival and other festivals worldwide.
INTERVIEW

Ahead of its theatrical release in South Korea, Seong-hoon Kim of Korean Cinema Today (KCT) met with director Seungjun Yi to talk about *Planet of Snail*.

**KCT:** The documentary is about a husband who cannot see or hear, and a wife who has a spinal impediment. How did you come to tell this story?

**YI:** In the spring of 2008, I did a science documentary for EBS. The subject matter was about the human finger - a story explaining fingers scientifically. While I was researching fingers, I discovered that Cho Young-chan, the protagonist in *Planet of Snail*, talks with his fingers. It’s called “tactile sign language”. I shot him tactile signing for about two days. Then at the end of that year, he came to mind as I was thinking of what to do for my next film. The fact is deaf-blind people have never really been known in Korea. With the vague thought that it might be good to cover the stories of such people in a documentary, I met again with Young-chan and his wife. As I was talking with them, I felt and realized what a great deal of human charm Young-chan has. If you see the documentary, it’s obvious he writes very well. The way he talks, too, is philosophical but not difficult. He has a handicap, but he reads and expresses the world in his own way. And it was so beautiful to see how he behaves and talks with his wife in that way, too.

**KCT:** When you told them you wanted to make a documentary, did the couple agree to it happily?

**YI:** At first, I was refused. They were offended by the way established media like newspapers and broadcasters looked at physically challenged people with pity and compassion. I mean how people have become so accustomed to media’s manipulations and can only feel comfortable if they see the physically challenged having a hard time. I disliked that, too. I launched into the project excluding that, but when I was in the middle of shooting, the thought that it would be moving if I showed Young-chan’s tears did occur to me despite myself. There was a temptation to shoot that, but as we carried on shooting for about a year, I got rid of all those kind of thoughts.

**KCT:** *Planet of Snail* observes the couple’s everyday lives without any great events to steer the story. In a way, it is far from a classic sort of narrative development.

**YI:** Their everyday lives were so uneventful. Going to school, eating, reading. That was what concerned me at first. But one of the beliefs I have is that ‘if you observe daily life for a long time, a story unfolds naturally. Even if you don’t lean on a traditional narrative structure.”
KCT: When you were shooting them, was the couple ever self-conscious?

YI: In situations such as when he’s taking an exam or they are going to the hospital, they weren’t self-conscious at all. Soon-ho said, “It’s the most embarrassing when you shoot me eating.” Despite that, on site it was only me holding the camera and the assistant director holding the boom mike, so I got to be friendly with the couple quickly. We ate together, too. On some days, Soon-ho would say, “I’m not feeling good, I wish you wouldn’t shoot today,” and I would say, “Alright then,” and turn off the camera.

KCT: What’s your next project?

YI: I haven’t thought about one in detail yet. There is a subject similar to that of *Planet of Snail*, and I plan to meet with them once I have some time. Also, my mother is from the North, one of the people who have lost their hometowns. You know a lot of people who have memories and recollections of North Korea are dying away. I have a vague idea that I would like to make a film with that kind of theme for my mother.
The Filmmakers

Seungjun Yi

Seungjun Yi is one of Korea's emerging directors in the world documentary scene. Among a dozen TV length documentaries and shorts, Seungjun directed Children of God (2008), a story about children living in the crematorium of Nepal. His interest in filmmaking has always focused on the life of the ‘unseen minorities.’ Yi's experiments in Planet of Snail broadened his views on documentary filmmaking.

Min-Chul Kim

Min-Chul Kim was born into a family that runs a record shop, a video rental store, and a photo shop in a small village in South Korea. Thanks to the rich cultural environment of the family business, the country boy spent his teenage with American pop and Hong Kong films while watching his father developing black and white negatives in his kitchen turned dark room. He worked for film and TV productions to survive in Amsterdam while studying communication management. After a number of jobs including party promoter and literary agent, he is now an independent producer based in Seoul and Amsterdam. Min-Chul's filmography as a producer includes Bong-Nam Park's 2009 IDFA mid-length competition winner Iron Crows.
Production Crew
Producers: Min-Chul Kim, Gary Kam
Co-producer: Janne Niskala (Vaski Filmi)
Director/Cinematographer: Yi Seungjun
Editors: Simon El Habre, Yi Seungjun
Music by Min Seongki (Transistor head)
Sound designer / Sound editor: Sami Kiiski (S.Y.T.M.Ä)
Executive producer: Dongsung Cho

A co-production of:
NHK / Imamura Ken-Ichi

In association with:
YLE / Ikka Vehkalati, Finnish Film Foundation / Miia Haavisto, Elina Kivihalme

With support from:
BCPF&EIDF Documentary Fund
Sundance Documentary Film Program
Cinereach Documentary Grants