

## In-transcendental narrative: the work of Hong Sang-soo

May in-transcendence constitute nowadays a mode of resistance? In-transcendence invites to humility in relation to others and the planet, moving away the temptation to impose criteria based on the application of supra-human truths or existences. But also frees of responsibilities that exceed people's capacity or undermine their integrity. In-transcendental intelligence cancels the mystery; it reconciles people with their bodies and celebrates them. In-transcendental people affirm life and accept their inevitable finitude and last decay; enjoy love and encounters despite being aware of their cosmic and earthy loneliness; seek the good in spite of their limitations. Burdened by idealism and surrounded by useless fictions, cynical lies and militant dogmatism, their task is not an easy one.

Hong Sang-soo's film production is a crystalline example of In-transcendental thought, materialized in both, the narrative construction and the details that hold it, and in the depicted situations and events. Many of his male characters are shown as in-transcendent apprentices. The clash between In-transcendence and remaining idealism causes them the suffering that opens the films dramatic space, however this drama is always relativized through pathos or humor.



*Woman on the beach*: the speech on stars as a prelude for the first kiss. A phone call from the betrayed friend interrupts the scene. The sea as a de-romantized witness.

"Honestly, I believe in the stars", says Moon-sook in *Woman on the beach* (2006) after escaping from the hotel together with director Joong-rae for a nighttime stroll in the beach during low tide. Moon-sook looks at the sky and remembers her childhood, retrieves her innocence. Joong-rae falls in the trap, allowing Moon-sook to involve him in the game and wrapping his desire for the woman with the idealism projected on the



stars. The characters use the landscape to create a fiction that fits their incipient relationship, and to justify their deceit (to his friend and her pretender). In parallel to transcendental fictions related to love-desire, Sang-won needs another fiction to imagine his death: the sun takes the place of the stars as witness of the protagonist's attempt of suicide in *A tale of cinema* (2005). To the figure of the female lover here corresponds that of the mother. This is what the tormented young shouts before supposedly jumping into the void: "Mother!" We don't see her reaction, but we can guess that such a distant and deaf sun will not be touched by the suffering of a single human, not because of the insignificance of that billionth of the humankind in its current state, but because the sun is matter and energy, not sentiment, nor organic intelligence.



*A tale of cinema* starts with Seoul's communication tower and closes with the sun.

The sun closes *A tale of cinema* first part in the same way the Seoul communication tower opens it. The presence of the sun is punctual, the tower is omnipresent; "you can see it from everywhere in the town", says Dong-su at the beginning of the second part, shortly before repeating the sequence of the hazardous meeting with Yeong-sil. Somehow, the tower constitutes an anchor for those characters that walk around the town as floating because of the overexposed fiction and reality in their lives, their uncoordinated and fallible memories, and the fragility of their relationships. The communication tower substitutes the sun as a symbol of a new kind of intranscendence, one based not in the postulation of parallels or posthumous realities but in the actual possibility of communication from a distance or in the absence. In past time, the individual in solitude could only speak to God or to the dead ones; communication was always through an immaterial heaven. Now communication goes through the atmosphere, which gives color to what we call sky (and not heaven), and we know that is made possible by the waves' movement and the existence of electronic senders and receivers. Electronic communication won the game to art in



their attempt to constitute themselves as an alternative to an impossible transcendence.



*A tale of cinema: communication tower is visible from everywhere.*

The individual, deprived of the transcendental reason, feels the urgent need of life. But living as a human, as a subject of speech, means to gain social existence, and this depends on visibility. First condition is to be visible; second one, to be able to affect somehow the perception, emotion and thoughts of others. In an In-transcendental world, social disappearance means no longer to exist. Therefore, non-reconciled characters must strive to remain visible, but also those reconciled with their way of life sometimes feel the need to make inroads in the field of visibility.



*Turning gate: Myeon-sook dance in front of Gyung-soo and his friend / A tale of cinema: Yeong-sil's karaoke at the homage to Lee Hyong su.*

Being visible does not guarantee interaction, even less communication, neither in the space of urban daily life, nor in its expansion as a virtual net-society. Rather, communication tools seem designed to produce multiplication and dispersion of relationships, fragmentation and atomization of narratives, in short, to transmit information without communicating experience. It is true that Hong's characters are not addicted to mobile phones and seem computer illiterates (except for editing videos); however, their interaction physically translates the forms of fragmentation and dispersion characteristic of virtual metropolis. Even when they leave the city (and many films happen outside Seoul), their behavior is that of citizens alien to the physical environment.





*The power of Kangwon province: tame nature as an extension of urban life.*

Virtual communication led to indistinction between places and non-places.<sup>1</sup> From this point of view, nature doesn't exist anymore: domesticated by use and gaze, becomes a mere escape valve, or a set for human micro-dramas. As for the city, its weakening as a place for the public sphere has reduced it to an exhibition and surveillance space: its inhabitants constantly cross it expecting or hunting true encounters which, nevertheless, can only happen in private shelters, sometimes paradoxically constructed in public spaces. It seems that communication in absence multiplies heterotopias, separating their existence from any physical space. Natural and leisure spaces, historical sites or small villages suffer the projection of the city and its ways of relating, being the big city the non-place par excellence and, however, the place where people do match. Places of relation must be created in each singular case: they depend on the situation and on the effort that people make to generate them, and not on a specific quality of the space.

In the films of Hong Sang-soo, the characters struggle to establish private or semiprivate spaces, rarely doing it in their own homes and almost always in restaurants and hotels (in their apartments characters feel as alien as in public spaces). But these attempts to inhabit a place are separated and interrupted by long waits, walks, or apparently irrelevant actions. One of the privileged means for mediating places and interrupting encounters are the taxis. Lacking dramatic function (we never see the drivers, and the cars are exclusively regarded as transport machines), and of course symbolic function (as a means of transit to a different state or dimension), taxis appear as a ruthless instrument of separation or return. Closing the taxi door states the separation and, therefore, the physical disappearance of the other person, but never in a tragic way (since the passengers can exchange their seats, the taxi may

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<sup>1</sup> Virtual spaces introduced a new layer in the discussion proposed by Marc Augé on places and non-places (Augé, 1992: 48, 100, 135-37).



come back, a second taxi may run after the first one cancelling the distance or separation, or someone else may arrive in a another taxi).



*Virgin stripped bare by her bachelors* (the same scene from two angles in 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> part).

*Woman in the future of man*: the film ends when the woman takes a taxi.

*A tale of cinema*: Sang-won tries to abandon Yeong-sil, but she follows him in another taxi.

Movements around the city, by car or by foot, have the function of spacializing a multifocal communication, which is developed as a constant switch of encounters and mismatches, coincidences and abandons. The body gains relevance again, loneliness becomes physical and the search demands an integral strength. As the taxi establishes or cancels the distance, the shop window (in a shop or a restaurant) facilitates encounters: the exhibition dispositif typical of the spectacular city works also as an axis from where to establish the perspective.



*Woman in the future of man*. Visual relationship through the window. There is a long flashback triggered by the unknown woman between 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> still picture.

But Hong's Seoul is not Baudelaire's Paris, nor even Rohmer's (although sometimes homage is paid to them)<sup>2</sup>: the Korean "flâneur" doesn't bear loneliness, he persistently seeks company for his walks; he doesn't try to find the unknown, he's rather in search of what he already knows; his intention is not to get lost, but to recognize and being

<sup>2</sup> Hong's debt to Rohmer becomes evident in the treatment of situations and relationships, but also in the relation between the characters and the space. Some scenes in Hong's *Virgin stripped bare by her bachelors* and *A tale of cinema* directly refer to previous sequences in Rohmer's *La boulangère de Monceau* (1962) or *La carrière de Suzanne* (1963).



recognized; his is not a gaze exercise, but an exercise of perspective, and this perspective is built on the physical and oral as much as on the visual.<sup>3</sup> However, this “flâneur” is not a privileged individual, no matter if in the majority of Sang-soo’s films his job is filmmaker, writer or artist, and in some cases he believes he’s gifted with a superior intelligence or lucidity: the multiplication of narrative perspectives makes clear that he is one among others, and his physical and biographical itineraries follow the same structural models repeated in many others lives and trajectories.



*Night and day*: The camera makes a movement to meet Kim Sung-nam, a forced “flâneur” in Paris.

The loss of relevance of the individual in the context of the net-society provides Hong’s perspectivism a differential quality compared to the narrative perspectivism from the early twentieth century. This is visible in the fact that the characters share their protagonist role not only with other characters, but also with the objects. Hong’s void shots do not merely serve to punctuate or suspend the action, but also to highlight objects and sceneries. The intention is to show that the realm of inert beings is common to that of humans.<sup>4</sup> His void shots do not open the space of transcendence, they rather close this path and bring the attention back to the only place in which a satisfactory alternative is possible: the space of intersubjectivity held by dialogue. It may be, sometimes, a bitter and painful In-transcendence, but it is also the only

<sup>3</sup> Hye Seung Chung and David Scott Diffrient suggest that the “cubist narrative” practices by Hong results of “a performative mode of storytelling that hearkens back to an indigenous oral tradition, which, steeped in episodicity and fragmentation, looks positively postmodern today. (Chung and Scott Diffrient, 2007: 129).

<sup>4</sup> Hong approaches here R. Bresson’s ideas on Cézanne, when he insists in the equivalent of all things: Cézanne painted with the same eye and the same soul a fruit bowl, his son, the mountain Sainte-Victoire (Bresson, 1975: 101).



dimension in which individuals can momentarily escape their loneliness and enjoy an expansion of the self in the other.

The fact that many shots begin or end in empty spaces, or showing characters who will never participate in the plot, opens the dramatic space to a randomness that points out the condition of mere examples given to the main characters and their lives: lives randomly chosen and not especially relevant rather than examples of certain kind of lives. The interesting thing, of course, is not to reduce all lives to just one model but to insist in the task of translation, where all irreducible differences appear. Hence, the willingness to explore different perspectives and ways of telling a story and to turn a seemingly simple plot into a multiplicity of potential stories. The core of the plot is almost always the same: triangle relationships sometimes interfered by other characters or established in, or crossed by, divergent temporalities. Hong practices fragmentation and repetition to evidence differences: different gazes, different memories. Moreover, as gazes and memories are treated elliptically and syncopated, the reconstruction of a linear action is impossible: actions, as communications, become spatial.



*The power of Kangwon province: Ji-sook and Sang-gwon travel in the same train to the Kangwon province, but they don't get to meet. The first scene of the movie (left) is repeated from a different perspective one hour later (right). In the first part, the camera follows Ji-sook and her friends, while in the second one, it follows Sang-gwon and his friend.*

Spatialization and physicalization are coherent with an In-transcendental narrative, which as such, renounces to idealism when designing the plot and characters, and searches its fundament in the materiality of events, structures and things. This proceeds through the addition of fragments, conceived more as eloquent "tableaux" than sequences (movements are so slow that scarcely transmit dynamism to the images; movement is more a consequence of cuts and omissions). Hong accompanies the adventures of his characters from a certain distance. Close ups and pan shots are seldom used, and generally just to show objects, details, or empty landscapes. In the



middle distance, the camera on the tripod stays fixed in its position, eventually using an approaching zoom or quick pan moves. All this produces the effect of a detached gaze, which turns invisible, not only the witness's body and the director-author's body, but also the viewer's body, transferring all corporality to the characters and all materiality to the objects. The utilization of the first person voice-over does not intend to get the viewer involved in the fiction: this voice works in the oral level in the same way titles, numerated sequences, and other marks introduced by the director, work in the visual: they work as a diagram of the action, offering a graphic support to the succession of fragments, and separating them so much as to indicate possible relations between the narrative parts.

Hong seems determined to save the story; his materialism avoids to turn to lyricism or musicalization as a means to harmonize fragments and perspectives: therefore he turns to structure. Hong makes visible the formal games and narrative scaffoldings: repetition finds its justification in perspectivism; fiction, in the appeal to cinema-inside-cinema; drama, in the fallibility of memory, etc. Each one of these factors could be explained by the one that is supposed to justify. What Hong builds is a system in equilibrium. Without fundament. Because of this the narrative is so depending on the objects, bodies, food, streets, as if the director would like to infect their materiality to the very texture of the film. By doing that, he intends to give continuity to the fragments, as Cézanne gave unity to his colors and figures while being aware of the end of figurative representation. Cézanne absolutely trusted nature, although he knew it was impossible to see it; its image, however, was the only thing that could allow the "materialization" of painting (Hong, 2007: 87). In the same way, Hong trusts the materiality of his plot, and as an investigator, he turns it around once and again until, as a result of turns and repetitions, he finally gets an object; this object is the film.

The director models each fragment with craftsman's patience and skillfulness. Cinematographic crafts are visible in some of his films through the relevance given to the editing room, but also through the handwriting practiced by many characters. They write on notebooks, but hardly, as if intellectual effort should be translated into physical work of the hand pressing to engrave more than to stroke the letters. By transferring thoughts to written words, some materiality comes to the story: the writer confronts the resistance of the matter, but he also inevitably falls into fiction.







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