

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.¹ 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

¹ 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 1st and 2nd 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 is the future of man. Visual relationship through the window. There is a long flashback triggered by the unknown woman between 1st and 2nd still picture.

But Hong's Seoul is not Baudelaire's Paris, nor even Rohmer's (although sometimes homage is paid to them)²: 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

² 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.³ 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 “flannêur” 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 perspectivisms 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.⁴ 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

³ 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 episodcity and fragmentation, looks positively postmodern today. (Chung and Scott Diffrient, 2007: 129).

⁴ 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.



A tale of cinema: San-wong writing on his notebook before committing suicide / Woman on the beach: Joong-rae writing his film treatment.

Writing is a solitary act, even when one does it physically close to others. Isolation cancels the relationships that create reality and opens the abyss of incommunication and fantasy; one must be very aware or very convinced not to be swayed by idealism. Hong's characters decide to write what for them is too important to talk about. But absorption leads them to solipsism and incommunication. When the potential suicide Sang-won, in front of the notebook on the small table in the hotel room, says to his girlfriend "I will say everything before dying", she indifferently replies: "Do I go on drying my hair?" And when Joong-rae explains to Moon-sook his theory on reconfiguration of traumatic images, drawing on the same notebook in which he tries to write his script, she admires his imagination; but with a stronger determination rejects his words and images after realizing that they are not coherent to his actual behavior.

Woman is the future of man (2004) is not only the title of one of Hong's film, but also a way of expressing something more internalized in his narrative conception. Since his first production, men appear as insatiable seekers, unadapted, burden by a complex or an obsession, unaware of their own body and fearful of woman's body. They are incomplete characters: a lack or a defect forces them to a search that they try to interrupt by finding ephemeral salvation in women.⁵ The cast opens with the two male characters in *The day a pig feel into a well* (1996): Hyo-sub is an unsuccessful novelist, insecure in his relationship and fond of drinking; Dong-woo, a seller alienated by his job, obsessed by cleaning and unhappy in his marriage. Hyo-sub is the first in a series of writers, filmmakers, teachers, actors and artists with self-esteem problems, or portrayed in weak moments of their professional career or emotional life. In each of those films, they are accompanied by other men who may be stronger, richer, more

⁵ Hong: "There are men who feel that only with women can they feel an absolute sense of connection. I think it's a good experience to go through that absolute kind of connectivity, be it one hour or a year" (Hong, 2007: 80).

resigned or more pragmatic, but also less talented and less loved by women: trader Dong-woo, producer Jae hun, teacher Moon-ho, art director Chang wook or painter Yang, among others. They are incomplete characters, not only because a lack impels them to seek support and comfort in women but, as the film's narrative itself, they are build out of fragments: each of these character could borrow a fragment of personality and biography from the others without significantly changing the model.⁶



The day a pig fell into the well: Hyo-sub patronized by his editor. Sentenced by the judge.

A tale of cinema: Sang-won humiliated by his mother in front of his family.

The incompleteness that affects the male characters derives from their idealism; they don't understand the meaning of a life without transcendence yet but they pursue it in different ways: when they believe it is unreachable through art, they seek it in women. But both ways are wrong when understood in an idealistic mode: when artistic practice is conceived as a way of remaining beyond physical object (or death) and when men project onto women everything they lack (and recreate them as angels). Even when they seem to have everything (love and art), the obsession with the past prevents to enjoy the present. One could suspect that this obsession with the past is an alibi for a type of character that refuses to leave the irresponsible behavior of

⁶ The fact that the exchange of fragments does not alter the model does not imply that the characters themselves are exchangeable: each story results from the differences, sometimes minimal, which separate some characters from the others in a certain situation. And this is the relevant aspect: each film somehow repeats the narrative model but always in different ways, so each character repeats a model without, for that reason, being identical to any other. Models can be thought, but they are not real: reality is displayed as an infinite web of variations, and these variations are made visible from movie to movie, but also inside each movie and in each character's behavior. Their struggle to make themselves visible, to keep an identity that ensures communication runs in parallel to their effort to alter their own image and thus to transform what makes them recognizable.

adolescence, disguised as freedom, and aspires to the rewards of maturity without risking an engagement with his/her present.⁷

Because of this idealism, and in return for freedom and recognition that they demand, many of these men become pathetic and are victims of humiliation. It is true that in many cases they propitiate it with their behavior, their words or their persistence. Their inability to relativise their position or projects brings them a suffering that they conceive as incomprehension or abuse, and makes them behave rudely, cruelly or even violently. Alcohol, omnipresent in all the films, offers them an alibi or an excuse for relief. In the narrative level, alcohol works similarly to humor: it serves to relativise idealism and dissolve pain. Both alcohol and humor are addictive, although their effects, it is well known, are limited in time. Something similar happens to love and passion. Hong combines all these elements to reach a certain narrative stability; but at the bottom, inevitably, some bitter sediment remains.



Turning gate / Woman is the future of man / Woman on the beach / Like you know it all: alcohol is omnipresent.

Female characters seem more aware of reality and their limits. This awareness doesn't avoid loneliness, hard work or suffering but, in opposition to the male characters, they don't stage their suffering and their effort; on the contrary, they seem ready to value times of peacefulness, conversation or joy. Female characters are more complete than

⁷ The pathological condition that Bourdieu attributes to Flaubert characters (their persistence in adolescence and their incapacity to enter "true life") has become structural in a society without fundamentals. In the context of developed societies, "social adolescence" (or even "social childhood") is no more a bourgeois pathology, but a general one (Bourdieu, 1992: 33-35).

the male ones, and therefore it is more difficult to propose models. Occupation is not so defining, because they don't give their jobs the importance that men give to theirs and, in many cases, they don't have a consolidated job: they are too young, or they got married or related to male characters at an early age. Yeong-sil (*A tale of cinema*), Moon-sook (*Woman on the beach*) and Sung ok (*Hahaha*) break this model but, even in these cases, their jobs (actress, musician, tourist guide) are not so relevant in defining an identity as their boyfriends' ones. Yeong-sil plays her role of an actress very professionally outside the stage and behind the camera, for example, when she comes to the Lee Hyong-su's friends meeting and performs her karaoke scene singing a song chosen by Dong-su; but when she accepts to go to bed with him, she must remind him: "we actresses, are normal women". On the other hand, musician Moon-sook resigns valuing her professional merits (in contrast with Joong-rae's obsession, as for him the writing of his script is above any relationship); she doesn't need to stage her artistic aims and she doesn't do it. As a consequence of her honesty, Moon-sook is humiliated by Joong-rae who, as she repeats later, "pass over her" together with his new lover after she falls asleep before the room's door where they make love.



Woman on the beach: Joong-rae and Sun-hee leave the room through the net room's balcony and look at Moon-sook, sleeping drunk in front of their room's door.

In fact, women are also humiliated and abused in Hong's films, but for different reasons, more because of men's prepotency (derived from insecurity) and frustration (derived from ambition). So happens to Min Jae who, in vain, loves Hyo-sub; to Min-sum, rejected by Sung-nam in a hotel's room in Paris; and to Yu-jeong, when she breaks a vase that belongs to the same Sung-nam (although this happens in a dream). In other cases, it is not humiliation, but a hyperexhibition, in which they risk their position before men. Two of these women, Bo-kyeong and Min-sum, don't find other exit than suicide. In contrast to Lee Hyong su, who pushes his character to the void and later cries as a child embraced by Dong-su and terrified by the imminence of real death. Bo-kyeong prepares hers with serenity and executes her objective without trying to get other people involved or expecting anybody to stop her.



The day a pig fell into the well : Bo-kyeong prepares her suicide.

Death is indicated, but barely represented. Only in Hong's first film corpses are shown. In other films characters disappear before they die and we only know about their death through news or testimonies. Death representations have been used by religions to justify and maintain the transcendence's business. Fear of death, or of what could happen after losing consciousness at the end of life, opens the field of fantasy as revelation. What most of religions propose as a way to exorcise that fear is to die little by little, to anticipate death: with the aim of gaining eternal life, people have to resign to an important part of it and accept prohibitions, limitations and sacrifices. Fasting, sexual abstinence or love to inexistent beings attacks all what is necessary for life: nutrition, sexuality, rest, communication with other people. It is understandable that an In-transcendental narrative banishes that representation. Death is only important insofar affects others, the live ones, the only possible protagonists of the dramatic action. Therefore, funerals are avoided (except in dreams), as well as the sight of corpses.



The day a pig fell into the well : Bo-kyeong dreams her own funeral.

Sex scenes, on the other hand, are shown frontally, sometimes harshly.⁸ This is the true place for encounters, the moment when tension between men and women dissolves but do not close the story, as men expected: they never find comfort to their frustration, nor are healed from their obsession. Female characters live those moments with pleasure or patience, depending on each case. Hong shoots sex

⁸ "Sex scenes are explicit, remitting complicated signals that are separately justifiable, but mutually conflicting. Sex is never an impassioned affair between two lovers, but a site where power is constantly negotiated" (Kim, 2004: 223).

sequences without ornaments, as a silent observer who attends the body transactions (although inevitably the spectator recognizes his mocking touch in some characters clumsiness or others' excessive expectations).



The power of Kangwon province / A Tale of cinema : the camera as a harsh witness.

The idealism that affects the characters results positively in a sublimation of desire or negatively in a stigmatization of sexuality. Many sex sequences have a prologue in dark alleys and occur in narrow hotel rooms, on mattresses set on the floor, covered by dirty sheets, sometimes with traces of semen. Cleaning obsession seems pathological in some characters. Hong plays with it, for example, when the neat Dong-woo sees the broken condom and must go to an urology clinic to make analyses (where his wife happens to discover his betrayal), or when Jae hun (*Virgin stripped bare by her pretenders*, 2000) takes a shower before going to bed with Su Jung and scents the bathroom with a spray; he gets later astonished by the blood spread by the virgin and prefers to wash the sheet himself in the hotel bathroom rather than taking it home to wash it by machine, as his inexperienced lover recommends. On the other hand, the effort of some characters for imagining his sexual desire as a mysterious attraction, pure love or existential needs sounds ridiculous. Sang-won asks Yeong-sil to die clean, and this means first to have a shower and then to refrain from making love before committing suicide by swallowing pills.



The day a pig fell into the well: Dong-wu trying to clean the dirty sheets and washing himself after discovering the broken condom.

Women can't escape the traps of idealism, because it is deeply inscribed in social representations and behaviors, although they are less fastidious and obsessive, and seem more reconciled with their own bodies and corporality. Apparently passives, when they go to bed with their partners they look more natural and less pretentious. Passivity is then revealed as a waiver of useless battles or unnecessary fictions. Almost all are strong women: young Min Jae corrects the last novel manuscript by Hyo-sub, who considers her inferior (she works with her voice, waking up people by phone or dubbing X-cartoons); Moon-sook chooses between two men, she struggles to preserve her relationship and takes the decision to give up when she measures the amount of suffering implied; and Oki (*Oki's film*, 2010) says the last word by filming her short movie and speaking by herself to close the love triangle's overlapping perspectives. Trying to be honest, women don't accept the apparent sincerity of artists (writers or teachers), used sometimes to justify their deceit or hypocrisy. However, women cannot resist them. Now, they do prefer men that treat them as women and not like angels: therefore Yu-jeong gives herself to Sung-nam, Moon-sook to Joong-rae and Yeong-sil rejects Dong-su, unable to occupy the place of agonizing Lee Hyong su. These two separate before the statue of an angel situated at the hospital door. In their first meeting, when the actress comes from visiting the director, Dong-su tells her: "Yeong-sil, you look like an angel". "You say that because of the statue of the angel", she replies. We can't see the statue in this sequence but somewhat later, after they've had dinner together, drunk together, and made love, he has discovered that her body is not marked by scars (as his friends told him), and she has left very early, again, to visit her friend in the hospital. Only then the camera focuses on the stone angel, and then again, on the woman, who, fed up with Dong-su's pathos still following her, snaps: "You have enjoyed it. Enough!" She takes a taxi and disappears. He enters finally in the hospital and faces his friend's death.



A tale of cinema : Dong-su meets Yeong-sil under the statue of the angel at the hospital's entrance.

Death is not the end. The end is loneliness. But the end is not such important. Or at least this comes out from Hong's narrative proposal. The angel remains, because it was already dead, or rather it was never alive, or it never existed. The woman moves on. And the man must decide.

If death and its representations are the leading proponents of religion in its fundament and persistence, women and their acts have always been the great enemies of prophets and church officials: voluntarily constrained to the purity of celibacy, they condemn women, their bodies and their desires, and represent them as the origin of all evil that human beings suffer. As stated in the Bible, woman is a devil's ally, she is the embodiment of evil; the mere sight of her body, or even parts of it, can take people into sin. It is, therefore, preferable to hide her, to avoid her. Woman may only be accepted as a virgin or as an angel, that is, deprived of her sexuality, deprived even of her body. Celebration of women in Hong's film performs an antitranscendental function. Characters are exposed to be mocked as womanizers or ridiculed for permanently falling in love. Sometimes they add to this condition a bad reputation because their addiction to alcohol. But what they seek is a kind of connectivity that, for them, is only possible through sex. In-transcendental thought is accompanied by an In-transcendental desire, a will of pleasure and vitality, but also an effort to overcome isolation and solipsism. Sexual love opens a communication space that does not erase the differences, but that makes them productive. For a limited time, lovers are able to learn from the perspective of the other, alterity softens the edges, and the satisfaction of communion with other people makes transcendence unnecessary.

An In-transcendental narrative space is that one created by people in their social, sexual, intellectual and emotional relations. The moments of sex are not black holes, but rather nodes of hyperconnectivity that contribute to maintain the network without turning to transcendence. Although sex by itself cannot, obviously, ensure connectivity or always be associated to love, nor even is possible to match love and desire, both often run in parallel. Actually, in Hong's films they rarely match, and in some of them the opposite is shown: paid sex, frustrated sex, casual sex, allowed rape or actual rapes. Commonly the character arrives to sex as a moment of fiction that they build or find by themselves, in a process of knowledge or recognition. Connection problems between the characters arise from the different times each one experiment or inhabit. Most of the narrative task of Hong's work is to construct and articulate those times in a complex temporality shown as a continuous present.

Present is the time of In-transcendence: the “here and now”, living without the concerns of extra-individual pasts that can burden us, and without worries of an extra-chronological future. Indifference to past and future is also transferred to life experience, resulting in a lightening of responsibility that increases the chance and hope of happiness or immanent well-being. In compensation we must accept the weakening of our individuality; we must acknowledge that we naturally belong to a species, and socially to one or several networks. That is, that we are members of an ecological system, and maintaining its equilibrium is our entire responsibility.



The power of Kangwon province: mismatch (1st part) and match (2nd part).

Liberation of metaphysical temporality (and eternity perspective) opens the time of opportunity but in the form of a present full of memory and anticipation. To live this present with nostalgia or pragmatism, with anguish or pleasure, depends on each individual and on the narrative built together with their current partners in his/her social network. Hong’s fragmented narrative is also a result of that search to match different stories, the search for a perfect present which is only visible when it has not happened yet or once it is already past. In its imperfection, present appears as full of memories and desires crossing each other, as a time of coincidences and mismatches.

The most obvious condition of this imperfect present is that of waiting.⁹ Characters are here in their bodies and thoughts, but only in terms of something that has already happened or has yet to occur. There are lonely waits and waits in company: what a sad destiny that of those characters (married male friends, single female friends) whose only role is to accompany the one who waits! They wait a job opportunity, inspiration,

⁹ Kyung Hyun Kim has written on the importance of these scenes of waiting in the definition of characters and thematic motifs in Hong’s movies: Kim, 2004 a: 203-207.

love, change or, in some pathological cases, death. And wait opens a *dead time*, that is, a suspended daily life.¹⁰



The power of Kangwon province: characters wait more than act.

Daily life depicted by Hong is not normal but exceptional; it is always conditioned by the time of lost or expected opportunity. Hence, in his movies people and objects are not leveled in their insignificance but in their significance. “What is most important?” asks one of the students to director Ku in *Like you know it all*. “Freedom”, he replies. “What is most important?” insists another student to master Yang: “Everything is important”, says the master, but above all “sincerity”. “Everything is important!” clinches director Ku realizing he is being questioned in his authority. “Everything is important!” said Gog to him at the beginning of the film but he did not pay enough attention. Indeed, small and seemingly irrelevant details build narrative in the same way small actions (some times involuntary or not completely conscious) may string a dramatic or tragic fate, as the rape of Gong by director Kim (“Everything is important!”, will she remind Ku at the end of the first part, throwing in his face to have abandoned her alone and drank in the bathroom of his colleague’s room).¹¹

¹⁰ This is filmed by Hong very differently to Ozu. The films of the Japanese master rarely focus on character’s dead times, but they rather depict their whole lives as occurring in a suspended time: a cosmological perspective is applied leveling actions and passions (in the same way natural and artificial landscapes, people and objects were for other reason). The impermanence of human beings and things comes out of a timeless vision that covers the film with a gentle melancholy (Ishagpour, 1994: 9). And narrative ellipsis work to hide what the viewer would like to see, but he cannot because it would break the daily flow. In a way, Ozu’s films take place in a fictional present that is already past. Hong’s ones occur in a fictional past that is always present.

¹¹ “J’entends par là mon désir de montrer que chaque chose, chaque événement, même les plus infime épisode de notre vie, contient tout à l’intérieur. Quelque chose de très concret, d’apparence très banale, a toujours la possibilité de contenir plus. Un petit épisode de vie peut cacher un ensemble de symboles et de sens qui s’empilent comme des couches, des surfaces superposées. Elles forment ensuite un bloc, une structure, qui donne une impression d’entité. Mais cette entité ne contient jamais juste une seule idée ! Or, en employant des narrations plus conventionnelles, je n’ai jamais réussi à inclure toutes ces surfaces dans mes films » (Hong, en Gombeaud, 2003 : 35).



Like you know it all: "What is important" "Freedom"? "Sincerity"? "Everything is important!".

Everything is important and everything is available for everyone but not everyone goes through the same places at the same time, not all stop at the same things, not all react in the same ways and not all remember the same details. These differences, as Oki makes them evident in her film, constitute the basis for the cinematographic narrative, but also the basis of a continuous motion upon which biographical narratives are constructed. Action is revealed then as a delayed reaction or constant search. To make one self-visible does not guarantee to be seen, nor does the action undertaken have always the expected consequences. Dramatic conflict is replaced by a game of temporalities that Hong shows using repetition and overlap of fragments: by following different characters in the same chronological time but with different temporal cuts that reduce to the minimum a possible simultaneity; or by cutting space and time in such a way that coincidences (almost impossible in a probabilistic account) seem to happen spontaneously. Hong's perspectivism is not a return to the past but an iteration of the present. Past and present are leveled in the same way different fictional layers are (dreams, visions, cinema inside cinema): differences are not negated to deliberately produce confusion but the same treatment is, indeed, given to all sort of sequences to show them as part of the same reality. Reality is made out of everything that socially matters, and dreams or films can be so effective as everyday actions or experiences.

Present is the sum of what every character has seen, thought, dreamed, lived, and what everyone feels, thinks, imagines and desires but it is also the result of a permanent negotiation with the social and physical spaces in which each situation takes place. This present may be so complex that needs to be scanned and made visible in different resonant layers, that is, fragmented and spatialized. Faced to this chain of presents always in course, the spectator visualizes a temporality based in differences: is not the succession of seconds or moments what constitutes time but the finding of differences. It might seem that once again it is about spatialization, but this is not entirely true, because only leaving the cinematographic machine, through a negation of the dispositif, we could actually spatialize action; only by stopping it and

overlaying different moments or actions, in a way that avoids the present, would lead to its display as past, to the conversion of fiction into document. The director's choice is precisely to emphasize the ephemeral and elusive condition of present without resigning to represent its complexity. Understanding of complexity takes place in time, in the experience of duration, no matter how the spectator's experience of duration is confronted to the duration's disruption of the action represented in the film.

The writing method practiced by Hong-Sang-soo is consistent with his commitment to the present. As he has explained on many occasions, for the film preproduction he only works with a very basic idea of the plot and the work plan (Huh 2007: 42-42). The completion of each scene takes place during the filming process, and the dialogues are written by him every morning before shooting each scene. Actors barely have time to memorize the lines. Besides that, the materiality of the locations and the experience shared with the crew inevitably affects the construction of the fiction. This urgent writing, under the pressure of a production plan, also explains the fragmentation of Hong's narrative: a certain closure of each sequence on itself, and how links are created through details and not through a dramatic development that would require a previous plan. It also explains the relativity of temporal chaining: writing always establishes an absolute present. Past only exists in the memory of the author, the viewer, or, in the realm of fiction, in the character's memory. But all those memories are particular and fallible.



Virgin stripped bare by her bachelors. Jae-hun meets Su-jung and she gives him the gloves. Up: first part. Down: same scene in the second part.

The difference between experience and memory, between experienced life and regained life, constitutes one of the narrative main lines of *In search of lost time* (a work that, for its monumentality and the author's ambition to maintain the big narrative in times of its dissolution, is very close to Cézanne efforts to ensure the representations in times of its impossibility). Retrieving the past time and progressing towards the present, the narrator achieves a tight and resonant temporality, very similar to an extra-temporality and, then, to a dimension in which transcendence could be experienced. However, what matters in Hong's work is not how life and memory of one individual alone match, but how the imprecision of memories leads to intersubjectivity. Unlike Proust, Hong is committed to a temporary construction whose premises are intersubjectivity and irreversibility. Past only exists as memory, is never represented, and is only significant if affects the present. Time circulation does not generate an "immanent transcendence" (Ricoeur, 1984: 534), it rather makes visible an alternative to transcendence manifested in the recognition of other's temporal existence, and by showing the asynchrony of shared experiences. *Virgin...* is entirely built on the fallibility and selectivity of memory: the multiplication of perspectives, in addition to multiple possibilities of sequencing the time of action, results in a myriad of potential narratives that can also be structured according to different forms (parts, chapters, temporary rules within each chapter), and to different principles (by need / by chance). Hong faces the spectator to a range of differences to be discovered, without reducing them in synchronization: there is no other choice than to participate in a memory game similar to that played by the characters themselves, and also by the director (given his writing method).

Sometimes, diverging memories could be apparently irrelevant or anecdotic: Dong-su remembers eating steaks at his friend's place (something neither he nor his wife can remember at all). Or so relevant that its incredible that one of the partners has forgotten; Kyung-soo tries to remember something so important as the first time he met Sun Young, the woman he now obsessively desires, fifteen years ago, when he did similar movements to those now done after her. What is crucial is that memory does not imply coming back: we could rather consider that past repeats present in the same way that future may repeat both.





Tale of cinema: Sang-won makes an appointment with Yeong-sil (character) after meeting her by chance as optician's assistant. / Dong-su repeats the same scene after following Yeong-sil (actress) to the same optic where the previous scene was shot.

Repetition may affect the experience of an individual, but may also affect other people. Actually, the divergence of memories is indicative of a constant mobility of individuals: they remember different things because they were in different positions, and if they are now able to recognize what in another moment they didn't see is because their position has changed. Changing position can alter even the identity of a person. People change in the same way that different individuals may occupy the same position. Can we understand then that people and positions are interchangeable? When recognizing this possibility, the old individual is faced to the dilemma between alienation or tragic sacrifice. And one of the few exits to this dilemma may be found in the practice of humility. Only a humble individual can be aware of people and times that constitute and inhabit him, but also of those that exceed him. It is the exploration of this excess in the others what opens the way of the In-transcendence; that one of knowledge freed from ideals and passion freed from torments.¹²

The way of In-transcendence not only liberates the individual from the responsibility of maintaining his integrity in relation to the society he enrolls in, but also frees art from the mission assigned in modernity. This liberation can be understood as degradation, or even as humiliation, if it is considered from the arrogant perspective of an old model of art. But can also be regarded as the opening of a new field of formal exploration in a society that renounces mystery. Hong's decision of building up his narrative on the divergences between memories and perspectives, and not on a mystery that only he could access and reveal, points in this direction. In-transcendental intelligence not only suppresses the religious thought, but also questions the

¹² David Scott Diffrient proposes the term "mundane transcendence", borrowing it from Bergson, to refer to those everyday moments burden with special relevance or significance (Diffrient, 2008: 98).

possibility of literature and art considered as substitutes of religion, thus preserving a transcendental attitude. Most of modern literary and artistic creation was founded on the existence of pockets of mystery in the consciousness of contemporary societies. What happens if every mystery is eradicated, if science and thinking can explain everything? What kind of artistic production is possible in this new situation? Hong's In-transcendental narrative constitutes one of the possible answers to this question. But what Hong offers is, at the same time, an example of In-transcendence and the representation of the final battle of transcendental being against itself. Like Cézanne, who did not want to resign to figurative painting of nature, neither does Hong to film narrative as an artistic form. However, his characters contradict him: Oki contradicts him, and her film seems more suited to contemporary experience than to learning film shot by her fellow student Jingu.



Oki's Film: Jingu interrogated by an audience member about his personal life. The sequence consist in just one shot, using pan movements and zoom.

At the end of the first of the four sections of *Oki's film*, director Jingu stands in front of the audience, after the screening of his last feature film, ready for some questions. One spectator, a young woman sitting in the first row, asks him about his personal life, specifically about how he feels after having slept with the main actress, who stands silent beside him during the talk, and have caused the break of her former relationship. He tries to avoid the question, arguing that artistic practice and aesthetic criteria cannot be mixed with personal life and ethical criteria. But the spectator reminds him that his films are about daily life and about morality in human relationships. Young director's angry reply does not serve as a convincing explanation, but rather as a headlong rush that does not satisfies anyone, neither himself. Only the intervention of the chairman saves the situation. The director's refusal to answer is also a refusal to see, a desperate attempt to keep that small share of mystery to which

contemporary artist doesn't want to renounce; he can always appeal to it when receiving some critics and reply: "they don't understand me", and refuses then to explain what is not understood, because in that silence, supposedly, resides his freedom and his authority. Also his ignorance, his ignorance of himself.



Oki's film: Oki takes her two lovers to the same place. With the younger, she climbs higher.

Unlike Jingu, Oki makes a crystalline film in order to understand herself and explain to others her relationship with two men whose perspectives, somehow, have been reflected in the first three sections of the film. Oki's voiceover accompanies the deployment of parallel situations, contradictory but possible, and justifies, in the incompatibility of different personalities and temporalities both her behavior and her final decision. Her proposal is a porous narrative, open to simultaneities, to the coexistence of opposites, and interested in translations. To an art conceived as instrumentalization of life in benefit of the form, Oki responds with the invention of a form that serves to understand life. Obviously, both Jingu and Oki are characters created by Hong, the forms of both films have been decided by him, as well as the topics. And yet, when *Oki's film* finishes, a question strongly resonates: does it make sense at this stage an art not useful for life? Or: is to be useful for life the only choice for art in the time of In-transcendence?

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Versión inglesa revisada por Jennifer McColl

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