Somewhere Between Fiction and Fiction:

Disentangling Partial-Geometric Narratives in the Cinema of Hong Sang-soo

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ABSTRACT

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Predominantly linear narrative arrangements used to direct the spectator's comprehension are but one of many options made available to filmmakers. Opposing this convention, the films of South Korean director Hong Sang-soo are characterized by their complex narratives as much as the romantic triangles that inhabit them. This thesis addresses the "optional path" narratives observable in Hong's films, which deny the audience the ability to reconstruct an objective, verifiable timeline. Whereas established theories of film narratives foreground the limitations placed on storytelling in order to guide comprehension, key works in Hong's cinema will be understood to adopt a "partial-geometric" model that emphasizes the agency of the spectator in creating meaning in the film text. A style-based narratological approach, operating under Formalist assumptions, will be interrogated for the fissures that emerge when it is applied against these texts. The objects of study are understood as realizing multiple diegeses, or story worlds, the boundaries of which are made speculative through the use of space. Although building upon the existing narratological insights of key scholars David Bordwell and Edward Branigan, this thesis will instead distance itself from limiting narrative frameworks in favor of optionality. The spectator is able to attribute or disarticulate the "truth value" of key events, and is encouraged to recognize the unlimited narrative arrangements and their own subjective agency. This thesis will also make initiatives to extend its insights beyond the borders of Hong's filmography, recognizing film festivals as a discursive site for expanding narrative models.

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INTRODUCTION

The fragments of memory, dream, imagination and fragments of reality are just different in

name only, but they all share homogeneity.

—Hong Sang-soo[1]

Discussing film critic André Bazin, Inez Hedges notes that "he [Bazin] came up squarely

against the paradox that the film image is a frame, even when it is a 'window'—any image

operates within the constraint of selection from the elements of the real world that it

reproduces."[2] As fully realized as the fantastical—or banal—environments within the borders of

this window or frame may be, they inevitably remain a mediated transformation of our

immediate reality. There is also the question of who (or what) chooses which properties to retain

and which to excise from the real world, a responsibility we often displace onto the abstract

notion of a "camera" (that is, not the tactile, profilmic camera) or an authorial voice. Regardless

of whether we interpret this intermediary as a lens or through its borders, there exists a "world

between the perceived space that the actors and characters occupy on the screen and the space of

the viewers in watching it."[3] This becomes the aesthetic dimension of the mediation of reality

and the cinema screen—a property we will come to understand as essential to style-based

theories of narrative. Building upon existing narratological methodologies, this thesis shall make

[1] Quoted in Huh Moonyung, *HONG Sangsoo: Korean Film Directors,* trans. Yook Jin-young (Seoul: Seoul Selection, 2007) 60.

[2] Inez Hedges, "Jean-Luc Godard's *Hail Mary*: Cinema's Virgin Birth," *Jean-Luc Godard's* Hail Mary*: Women and the Sacred in Film*, ed. Maryel Locke and Charles Warren (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1993) 62.

[3] Daniel Yacavone, *Film Worlds: A Philosophical Aesthetics of Cinema* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014) xxi.

a case study of prolific South Korean filmmaker Hong Sang-soo in order to articulate how an interpretive flexibility emerges out of this "world between." It will be argued that the films explored herein have the uncommon property of cuing the viewer to recognize their own role in the establishment of a narrative frame or window, enabling them to determine and organize a narrative hierarchy within.

A survey of Hong's corpus—unified through a limited selection of formal conventions and storytelling options—clarifies that this study is not interested in the fantastic potential of the medium of film, wherein certain genres hope to replicate history or produce impossible worlds. Instead, the features of this South Korean filmmaker are, on the level of content, defined by the mundane lives of the characters that populate them. These figures regularly orbit academia and the margins of the film industry as teachers, students or directors of film, leading many to perceive them as surrogates for the filmmaker himself. The unspectacular quality of the stories, coupled with the perceived autobiographical element, encourages an understanding that the narratives of Hong's films faithfully replicate the ontological ordering of our own existence. That is to say, we—the audience—can comfortably recognize the reproduction of our immediate reality, wherein an assumed subjectivity (that of its author) reinforces the existence of a referent for the story world. I conjure the existence of this real-world comparison—a credible, specific milieu within which we can conceive Hong himself operating—not to encourage biographical readings of these films, but rather as a method to insist upon their realistic dimension at the level of aesthetic and content, creating the initial impression of the film text as a window.

Tony Rayns' summation of the characteristics of Hong's cinema introduces the complexity that make these films of interest to narratology: "He [Hong]'s known for the uncertainty

principles in his storytelling but equally for his wry, droll insights into the career paths and mating rituals of men and women."[4] The films are often characterized by their preoccupations in their subject matter, but it is instead the recognizable approach to how these stories are told that motivates this thesis. A compelling example of this "uncertainty principle" is visible in the structuring of *Virgin Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors* (*Oh! Soo-jung*, 2000), for which "what might have happened is indistinguishable from what could or should have happened, not to mention what actually did or didn't happen."[5] The epigraph at the outset of this thesis indicates the cinematic convention that I perceive Hong's uncertainty principles to be operating against, inclusive of the one cited by Rayns: the projection of the heterogenous and hierarchical nature of reality onto film narratives. Cinematic storytelling can be (and often is) realized in nonlinear fashion, through the use of flashbacks and other digressions. Likewise, ruptures with the reality of the story world, manifesting the memories, dreams and moments of imagination indicated by Hong, are measured against the base reality that we recognize as verifiable. The narrative tropes that recur throughout this filmmaker's body of work—nested stories, parallel futures, films within films, intentional discontinuity—can be seen as oppositional to the otherwise mimetic tendencies at work on the level of content in Hong's cinema. This contradiction can be understood as a challenge to the spectator, directing them to actively navigate the film texts.

This project is then motivated by two related fascinations: how do the films of Hong Sang-soo operate, and what does this tell us about larger tendencies of how we as spectators engage with cinematic narratives? If "the fragments of memory, dream, imagination and fragments of

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[4] Tony Rayns, "Funny Valentines," *Film Comment* 51.3 (2015): 55.

[5] Rayns 56.

reality are just different in name only," as Hong suggests, then how do we—as the audience—operate in the capacity of assigning value and labels to these levels? It is my belief that the unconventional narrative structures of these films, which masquerade as banal comedies about love triangles at the intersection of academia and the film industry, encourage a cognizance of our own position of "spectator-as-storyteller." The measurement of this thesis' success, then, is in how the elucidation of this cognizance—vis-à-vis the work of one filmmaker—can extend to other films and the broader field of narratology.

Methodology

It must be acknowledged that this thesis, as a consequence of its scale, subject and methodology, does not endeavor to make significant interventions in Korean film studies pertaining to historicization, cultural studies or transnationalism. For reasons that will be alluded to throughout, Hong Sang-soo is an outsider to the South Korean film industry and his output has had limited commercial prospects globally. Hye Seung Chung and David Scott Diffrient's recent publication, *Movie Migrations: Transnational Genre Flows and South Korean Cinema* illustrates this incongruence by virtue of Hong's absence.[6] The book, which manages to incorporate all of the aforementioned methodologies in a critical and meaningful way, nonetheless relegates Hong to a footnote—he exists as a figure who is internationally visible yet is not demonstrative of dominant discourses surrounding Korean cinema. As such, a narratological approach is instead prefigured herein as the most salient point of entry in Hong's body of work, and stands as a discourse in which the films maintain an ongoing impact as a result of the director's prolific

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[6] Hye Seung Chung and David Scott Diffrient, *Movie Migrations: Transnational Genre Flows and South Korean Cinema* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2015).

nature and film festival placement.

As stated at the outset, this thesis is an emphatically narrative study of the filmography of South Korean director Hong Sang-soo. As individual films are the objects of study, textual analysis—narrative composition, in addition to precision of *mise en scène* and staging—will play a critical role in the ensuing study. In accordance with David Bordwell's academic output, the subject here is encountered through a style-based approach to narratology, and one that is indebted to the Russian Formalist school. This method, and the influence of Bordwell, will be made further known both later on in this introduction and in greater detail in the body of the thesis; for the sake of redundancy, I will not describe it in depth here. However, it is necessary to introduce another analytical tool that is particularly practical in the case of Hong's cinema—redaction criticism—and clarify its impact on the authorial framework employed.

Appropriate for a narratological analysis of films that exhibit parallel or forking story paths, the differences between each optional direction will be interrogated for their insight into the purpose or meaning behind that particular storytelling strategy. In their investigation of Hong Sang-soo's *Tale of Cinema* (*Geuk jang jeon*, 2005), Robert W. Davis and Tim Maloney rightly identify this methodology as "redaction criticism," one which "students of Classics and History of Religion have profitably employed for decades in order to isolate the specific tendencies of individual works in evolving literary traditions."[7] The process requires one to itemize the differences between two versions of a text, after which "they consider whether these changes, additions, and omissions are systematic, whether they may be evidence of certain ideological,

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[7] Robert W. Davis and Tim Maloney, "Hong Sang-soo's *Geuk-jang-jeon* [*A Tale of Cinema*]: redaction criticism and production analysis," *New Review of Film and Television Studies* 12.1 (2014): 10.

philosophical, sociological, narratological or other tendencies."[8] By this understanding, redaction is equatable to an editorial choice, rather than drawing on the word's contemporary connotation of censorship.

Although it is not always cited as such, I observe redaction criticism as the default approach to disentangling the complicated narratives in Hong's cinema and is employed in the analysis of each film discussed herein. In the case of *Tale of Cinema*, Davis and Maloney latch onto its film-within-a-film structure, attributing authorship of the interior, "fictional" feature to the diegetic director and the exterior layer of fiction to Hong. The cited essay endeavors to clarify the illusion of style created by the film-within-the-film through the use of this methodology, articulating "the limitations of any single point-of-view."[9] In contradiction to the above application, redaction criticism is doubly appropriate for this thesis for the manner in which it divests significance of the author away from the text. This characteristic is a by-product of the methodology's conventional operation in the analysis of classical and religious texts, for which the authorial status is complex and typically irresolvable. This isn't to say that Hong Sang-soo's films are "authorless," rather, that the filmmaker's intended interpretation is not manifest in the text, if one exists at all.

Following on the devaluing of authorial intent inherent to the methodology of redaction criticism, the status of the filmmaker in the creation of the text will be further clarified through two frameworks, both of which will be further explored in the first chapter. The unifying principle of narrative and thematic patterns observable across Hong's body of work will be

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[8] Davis and Maloney 10.

[9] Davis and Maloney 9.

understood through the concept of "schemata," which, as explained in Bordwell's *Narration in the Fiction Film*, is often applied to how we classify and comprehend film genres.[10] Through this framework, it is understood that the spectator's ability to comprehend a given film is informed by his/her familiarity with conventions applicable to the set of texts of which the film belongs. This position will then be read through Roland Barthes' dichotomy of "connotative" and "denotative" works of fiction. In the former category the reader determines meaning, whereas with the second, the author is the dominant creative agent.[11] For the purposes of this project, Hong's cinema is understood as connotative fiction. Cumulatively, it will be argued that the degree of repetition in Hong Sang-soo's films runs counter to disposable, close-ended cinema, and further, the audience is encouraged to apply their prior knowledge and creative agency towards disentangling these complex narratives. Appropriate to this position on authorship, insights by the filmmaker regarding his own work, such as those gathered from interviews, will only be used sparingly in order to best avoid shortcomings related to intentionality.

Literature Review

This thesis primarily engages with two conversations, and therefore two bodies of writing within film studies: cinematic narrative theory, as well as the emerging discussions surrounding the work of Hong Sang-soo. Certainly, these two discourses exist on different scales and don't inherently overlap.[12] However, it my ambition to display how developments in narrative theory

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[10] David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985) 31-39.

[11] Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974) 6-9.

[12] As will be elaborated upon later, David Bordwell nonetheless stands a vital proponent of both narratology and its deployment in Hong's films.

aid in disentangling Hong's cinema, and in turn, how this understanding in turn deepens one's understanding of how filmic storytelling operates. The study of narratives is not the exclusive domain of cinema, and the foundational English-language texts of narratology as it pertains to film—specifically, the early writing of David Bordwell and Edward Branigan—articulate themselves as an extension of (and sometimes in opposition to) pictorial and literary narratives. As an example, Branigan's *Narrative Comprehension and Film* indirectly draws attention to the porous nature of these borders by illustrating how disparity of knowledge operates with the Marvel comic book *Nick Fury, Agent of S.H.I.E.L.D.*[13] With the exception of the importance of Roland Barthes (who also serves as a key influence on Branigan's post-structuralist position) towards developing a reader-based narrative model, the narratological background of this study remains the work of English-language film theorists and not those of literature, or otherwise.

As they synthesize the narrative discourses of multiple media and accounting for a multitude of approaches within film studies, these foundational works serve as an ideal jumping-off point. Whereas Branigan diverts emphasis from the Formalist tenets which underpin Bordwell's writing, his scholarship is particularly constructive as an overview of narratology in its various facets, such as theoretical frameworks and inquiries into point of view and the polysemic notions of camera and frame. Branigan's writing is engaged herein for its articulation of the levels of narration, which serve to separate the diegesis, or story world, of the text from its "fiction," which can be understood as the film as a whole, inclusive of the diegesis (or diegeses) and non-diegetic elements. Notably, he relates both the spectator and author via this narrative

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[13] Edward Branigan, *Narrative Comprehension and Film* (New York: Routledge, 1992) 76-85. This example, as opposed to a novel or painting, is particular unusual in that the comic book medium also borrows from established pictorial and literary arts.

hierarchy, which will be essential in relating Barthes' previously mentioned notion of connotative (reader-based) texts to the active procession of narration.

Alongside *Narrative Comprehension and Film*, significant attention is also paid to Bordwell's *Narration and the Fictional Film* for its Formalist and style-based conceptualization of narration. This position is employed as motivates a theoretical enigma that gives cause to investigate Hong's films. Specifically, in the dichotomy of *syuzhet* (story) and *fabula* (plot) in his films, the latter becomes fluid and unfixed, as the spectator is unable to assign a definitive, objective arrangement to the films' plots based on the complicated, often contradictory narrative paths present in the *syuzhet*. As proposed earlier, the intricacies of this distinction will be explored in depth in the first chapter and beyond, in order to unravel certain narrative assumptions leveled against the Hong Sang-soo's films. The imbalances between these two seminal books—for example, Branigan's levels of narration are not framed by the Formalist notion of *syuzhet* and *fabula*—become opportunities to articulate gaps in narrative comprehension exacerbated by the insoluble narrative puzzles manifest in Hong's films.

These two scholars often exist in dialogue with each other and notably converge in a discussion of the "forking-paths" narrative model put forth by Bordwell (and responded to by Branigan) in an issue of the journal *SubStance*.[14] This theory, rooted in the labyrinthian fiction of Argentine author Jorge Luis Borges, will serve as a jumping-off point for the concept of the "partial-geometric" narrative in Chapter Three. At this point, Nitzan Ben Shaul's investigation of the cognitive pleasurability of optional narratives in the mold of forking-paths films, *Cinema of Choice: Optional Thinking and Narrative Movies*, allows one not only to argue for the beneficial

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[14] Barsky, Robert F. and Eric Méchoulan, eds., *SubStance* 31.1 (2002).

nature of the structures of Hong's cinema, but also to understand more clearly the value of their themes and motifs.[15] Ben Shaul's book on "optional thinking," while primarily concerned with the same texts that comfortably conform to the forking-paths model, offers key insights into the cognitive value of films with complex narratives like those studied herein.

The relative paucity of writing on Hong in the English language, particularly in the academic domain, might be viewed as a consequence of the limited or nonexistent distribution his films regularly receive in those territories. Conversely, they are regularly screened in French art-house cinemas, a result of the films' habitual visibility as selections of marquee film festivals like Cannes, Berlin and Locarno, as well as often receiving a modicum of Gallic financing. As such, longstanding French-language publications *Cahiers du cinéma* and *Positif* print features, interviews and reviews on Hong's cinema as frequently as the films are produced and released, typically annually. Although these articles are situated within a classical auteurist tradition inherent to French film studies—the kind of which this study intends to circumvent—the insights gained from them will nonetheless contribute to this thesis' understanding of how the films are understood and received outside of South Korea.

The preexisting link between narrative theory and English-language scholarship on Hong is, unsurprisingly, David Bordwell, which further points to the saliency of his cinema in regards to narratology. Besides a handful of mentions on his blog,[16] Bordwell also contributes a chapter to the only book-length publication on Hong, *HONG Sangsoo: Korean Film Directors*,

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[15] Nitzan Ben Shaul, *Cinema of Choice: Optional Thinking and Narrative Movies* (New York: Berghahn, 2012).

[16] David Bordwell, *Observations on film art*, 25 June 2015 <http://www.davidbordwell.net/blog>.

positioning the director within the tradition of minimalist Asian *auteurs*.[17] This study, published

in 2007, up to and including *Woman on the Beach* (*Haebyonui yoin*, 2006), reveals one of the

challenges of analyses of the filmmaker; specifically, the academic publication cycle cannot hope

to keep pace with his output, with the aforementioned book covering only seven of Hong's

seventeen features.[18] One solution to this is, of course, to write on isolated films, a tactic which is

employed by a special issue of *New Review of Television and Film* devoted to Hong Sang-soo,

edited by recognizable Hong scholar Marshall Deutelbaum and spotlighting a variety of

approaches to the filmmaker's work.[19] However, my thesis' reliance on a schematic

understanding of Hong's corpus requires that its argument reflects the engagement of the "ideal"

spectator, one who has a degree of familiarity with the tendencies that unify the South Korean

director's films.

Another significant academic who publishes frequently about Hong Sang-soo's

filmography is Kyung Hyun Kim, who positions the filmmaker as a key exponent of

contemporary South Korean cinema in books such as *Virtual Hallyu: Korean Cinema of the

Global Era*.[20] As evident from the title of this book (*hallyu* is a term that refers to Korean

cultural exports), Kim's scholarship is vital for contextualizing Hong Sang-soo amongst an

increasingly visible Korean cinema, especially as Hong's work—by virtue of its modesty,

banality, and lack of political content—does not encourage such a reception. Moreover, the films

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[17] Huh, *HONG Sangsoo.*

[18] Hong Sang-soo's seventeenth film, *Right Now, Wrong Then* (*Jigeumeun matgo geuttaeneun teullida*, 2015) will premiere at the Festival del film Locarno in August of this year.

[19] Marshall Deutelbaum, ed., *New Review of Film and Television Studies* 12.1 (2014).

[20] Kyung Hyun Kim, *Virtual Hallyu: Korean Cinema of the Global Era* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

of Hong Sang-soo cannot ascribe to the commercial claims (in South Korea, or elsewhere) applicable to a film such as *The Host* (*Gwoemul*, Bong Joon-ho, 2006), which is "considered a watershed, constituting for [Darcy] Paquet the 'high water mark of Korean cinema's post-democratic boom,' both because of its box-office performance […] and because of its 'quality,' its 'contradictory mix of commercial power, artistic precision and sociopolitical commentary.'"[21]

Although Bong trades within the same film festival circuit that regularly hosts Hong's cinema (*The Host* debuted internationally as an official selection of the Quinzaine des Réalisateurs during the 2006 Festival de Cannes), Hong's output does not travel to the same extent as other *hallyu*. Following on this understanding, my thesis borrows insights from the collective English-language writing on Hong Sang-soo, whether it approaches individual films as exemplary of particular lines of inquiry or as a byproduct of a specific cultural moment in South Korea, but primarily positions the filmmaker as exhibiting a universal narrative trend that is most visibly tethered to the film festival, international art-house *milieu* within which he is most widely accessed. Likewise, the idealized spectator referred to throughout does not ascribe to any particular national position, but remains ideal for how s/he has a practical familiarity with the trends in Hong's body of work.

Structure

This thesis is organized into three chapters, with the intentional symmetry that each one engages its ideas with two films. Chapter One will present a framework within which to discuss the cinema of Hong Sang-soo, in order to best evade biographical interpretations associated with

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[21] Michelle Cho, "Genre, Translation, and Transnational Cinema: Kim Jee-woon's *The Good, the Bad, the Weird*," *Cinema Journal* 54.3 (2015): 48.

classical *auteur* theory through which the filmmaker is liable to be understood. Certain tendencies consistent in the filmmaker's corpus will be understood as an interpretive schemata, not unlike genre, and further, that the films de-emphasize the role of a perceived author in the establishment of meaning. Following that, the study shall be anchored in a number of theoretical concepts that are necessary for interrogating cinematic narratives. The first of these are the Formalist notions of *syuzhet* and *fabula* vis-a-vis the writing of David Bordwell. The differentiation will be explored through Hong Sang-soo's most recent film, *Hill of Freedom* (*Jayueui onduk*, 2014), in which the random ordering that a character retrieves a sheath of letters determines the arrangement of the *syuzhet,* or the narrative as it is arranged within the fiction. The tradition of narrative arrangements within the South Korean director's cinema will also be historicized in the context of his first two features, *The Day a Pig Fell into the Well* (*Daijiga umule pajinnal*, 1996) and *The Power of Kangwon Province* (*Kangwon-do ui him*, 1998).

The remainder of the first chapter is devoted to establishing a distinction between the fiction and diegesis of the filmic text, standardized through Edward Branigan's levels of narration. This model also relates these levels to the position of a subject and object, a dialogue which will be understood to empower the spectator in navigating and assembling the narrative. The agency of the audience will then be enforced through an analysis of *In Another Country* (*Dareun naraeseo*, 2012), which presents three variations on a scenario, with the exclusivity of each narrative "riff" being drawn into question. The film's evocation of space and *mise en scène*, in which landmarks are unclear to exist in each story and objects pass between them, makes a case for the potential of multiple story worlds to exist within a single fiction.

Chapter Two then further explores and synthesizes these assumptions in the context of two

representative features, which are aesthetically unified by their monochromatic photography: *Virgin Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors* and *The Day He Arrives* (*Bukchon banghyang*, 2011). The former film will be explored in depth for its narrative structure, which presents a series of "chapters" out of order, with the first, third and fifth as fixed points and the second and fourth as variations. This structure will be historicized as the first post-formative instance in Hong Sang-soo's filmography in which the spectator is forced to make decisions on how to reconcile contradictory moments in the *syuzhet* and become cognizant of the subjective and indeterminate arrangements of the *fabula* of the text. A similar level of engagement in *The Day He Arrives* will first be cued by the black-and-white cinematography, understood as connotative of both fantastic and realistic tendencies in contemporary international cinema. The insistence on repetition and key instances of discontinuities in it suggest a discreet, optional example of twenty-four hours on repeat. Such ambiguity of fabulary duration will lead into an exploration of "truth value," understood as the spectator's assignation of realistic import to levels, or even individual moments, within a narrative.

The third and final chapter will reintegrate these various understandings with Bordwell's forking-paths theory of complex narratives. In order to achieve a re-framing of how we conceptualize narratives such as those in the films of Hong Sang-soo, I shall return to the short stories of Jorge Luis Borges as the inciting influence of Bordwell's formula, with particular attention paid to the dialogue between comprehensive limitations and the significance of the word "infinite." This reading of Borges' writing, coupled with a key shot from *Virgin Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors*, will lead to the conceptualization of what I term the "partial-geometric" narrative. As a final note, *Night and Day* (*Bam gua nat*, 2008) and *Nobody's Daughter Haewon*

(*Noogooui daldo anin Haewon*, 2013) will each be interpreted through this model, leading to a more constructive understanding of the gender relations and creative impulses that the structures of Hong's films are conventionally read through.

The conclusion will then return to one of the original ambitions of this thesis; specifically, it shall explore further potential applications of the partial-geometric narrative, which serves as a response to existing narrative theories which do not wholly satisfy the complexities of the model exemplified by Hong's films. A reception study of Hong's cinema as it relates to genre and various national/film festival contexts will be proposed as an avenue for further exploration. Examples from two other films—*Les Salauds* (Claire Denis, 2013) and *Under Electric Clouds* (*Pod electricheskimi oblakami*, Alexei German Jr., 2015)—will be briefly analyzed as further examples of the partial-geometric narrative, raising the question of how marquee film festivals function as key sites of dissemination for emerging narrative practices, particularly as a response to challenges against cinema's privileged position in a network of moving image platforms.

On Language, Naming Conventions and Translation

In advance of the main body of this study, it is necessary to say a few words regarding its relationship to the language and accessibility of the film texts. Firstly, I am not a Korean speaker and this thesis is reliant on the localization practice of subtitles in order to access the film texts, which inevitably establishes a level of mediation. The majority of Hong Sang-soo's filmography has failed to secure theatrical distribution in English-speaking territories such as the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom, with his most widely-traveling work external to the festival circuit being *In Another Country*, presumably as a consequence of Isabelle Huppert's

presence. Subsequently, the films also regularly fail to receive licensed releases on home video or through video-on-demand (VOD) platforms in the aforementioned countries.

Thankfully, South Korean entertainment companies have filled in this gap by producing DVDs or Blu-rays of every Hong film (except, thus far, *Hill of Freedom*) with optional English subtitles. It is through these releases that the films have been reviewed and analyzed in this thesis. These elaborately packaged editions are primarily marketed towards collectors in the South Korean market and as a consequence, the transliteration in the English subtitles is not— and should not have the expectation of being—held accountable to the same localization expectations of the releases of *The Day He Arrives* or *In Another Country* offered by boutique American DVD labels. With this in mind, direct quotations drawing from such subtitles are kept to a minimum throughout this study, and only in the chapter titling of *Virgin Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors* is a significant investment made in the specificity of language. Although this study agrees with the localization as it is ratified by the existing scholarship on Hong Sang-soo, which in some cases are interpreted by Korean speakers, the inherent abstraction of meaning herein remains a challenge that further studies might clarify.

The spelling of Korean words throughout this thesis, excepting where quotations may differ, follow the Revised Romanization style instituted by the South Korean Ministry of Culture in 2000. Similarly, any Korean names throughout this thesis are typically rendered as the family name, followed by the given name, as is the custom.[22] Exceptions are made for scholars such as Kyung Hyun Kim (where "Kim" is the family name), among others, whose publications credit

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[22] The same rule applies to the name of Hong Kong filmmaker Wong Kar Wai. Mentions of Japanese filmmakers Akira Kurosawa, Shohei Imamura and Nagisa Oshima have the given name followed by the family name, as this is how these figures are most commonly credited commercially in the West.

their authors via Western naming conventions. Lastly, the spelling of the name of the filmmaker at the center of this study shall be consistently captured as "Hong Sang-soo," although aberrations in direct quotations shall retain the hyphen-less "Hong Sangsoo"—or the McCune–Reischauer variants "Hong Sangsu" or "Hong Sang-su"—as per their source.

CHAPTER ONE

The critical reception of Hong Sang-soo's cinema offers clues into how his films are prone to be understood by their spectators. The so-called "bottom line" in a *Hollywood Reporter* review of the South Korean director's 2014 film *Hill of Freedom* reads: "Short, slight and shock-free comedy retreading the Korean auteur's much-trodden tropes."[23] This statement, a subjective, Twitter-ready summation of the film, is targeted at a readership that is primarily interested in the commercial viability of the work. The critical position of the review's author, Clarence Tsui, is largely negative, evidenced by the redundant use of the terms "retreading" and "much-trodden." Despite its pejorative tone, value can be gained from the ways in which this statement is objectively correct: *Hill of Freedom* is a comedic film that is indeed short (barely a feature at sixty-six minutes) and it certainly exhibits tropes consistent with other works by the same filmmaker.

The traits observed by Tsui in this trade review are an effective entry point into exploring the deployment of cinematic devices and their impact on narration. As I will argue, certain uncommon configurations of style can open up new possibilities for narrative in cinema. This study will explore a body of work that is unified by the directorial credit of South Korean filmmaker Hong Sang-soo and the narrative arrangements of the film texts therein. These sixteen feature films—from *The Day a Pig the Fell into the Well* to *Hill of Freedom*—collectively display a set of preoccupations on levels of aesthetic style and subject matter that operate to challenge conventions of classical narration in the cinema.

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23 Clarence Tsui, "'Hill of Freedom' ('Jayueui onduk'): Venice Review," *The Hollywood Reporter* 1 September 2014, 25 June 2015 <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/review/hill-freedom-jayueui-onduk-venice-729359>.

Rather than adopt the problematic term "*auteur*" used by Tsui to label the director and reinforce his authorship, the stylistic insistence observable in Hong's cinema will instead be understood as a schematic pattern that aids the spectator in navigating the text. The objectives of this chapter will then be two-fold: to establish a schematic conception of authorship and outline a series of style-based narratological assumptions that inform the study as a whole. The Formalist distinction between *fabula* and *syzuhet* and one's familiarity with a peculiar schema recognizable throughout Hong Sang-soo's cinema mutually contribute to the process of narrative comprehension and the spectator's position as a producer of meaning. Finally, the differentiation between the fictional and diegetic levels of a film text will be observed in *In Another Country*. This distinction will be later exploited in a case study of the aforementioned film to explore the consequences of diegetic uncertainty.

Reframing the *Auteur*: Narrative as Schematic Trope

Conventional studies of authorship, such as Linda Haverty Rugg's recent *Self-Projection: The Director's Image in Art Cinema*, emphasize a romantic notion of the filmmaker-as-*auteur*. Rugg observes of this interpretive mode: "[...] metanarrative references to the work or apparatus of filmmaking point to the presence of a director behind the scenes, even as the evocation of the apparatus seems to suggest at the same time that it is the machine, and not the director, that makes the film."[24] The filmmakers that Rugg deploys to articulate her argument—Ingmar Bergman, François Truffaut, Pedro Almodóvar, among others—incarnate what Peter Wollen identifies as one notable authorial model: "the European director, with open artistic aspirations

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[24] Linda Haverty Rugg, *Self-Projection: The Director's Image in Art Cinema* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014) 10.

and full control over his films."[25] Hong Sang-soo satisfies these conditions by operating his own production company and liberating himself from the commercial demands of the Korean film industry:

> I work with a very small number of people working for me on almost every film. I have some actors who are willing to work with me for almost nothing. So the cost can be that low, and there are some audiences who regularly see my films in Korea, and some come from foreign countries. So I can make another film, so I don't have to go for funding or things like that.[26]

This astute awareness of the steady viability of his work within a global art cinema marketplace allows Hong to operate outside the generic formulas that characterize popular South Korean cinema. As such, the filmmaker sets himself apart from his nation's cinematic output—one that is remarkably popular within its own borders—and secures his annual placement on the international film festival circuit, even if it limits significant commercial growth.

It would be convenient to apply the biographical method of auteurist analysis—Rugg's so-called "self-projection" of the director's image—to Hong Sang-soo's cinema, which presents a corpus overpopulated with teachers, directors and students of film whose art struggles to reach an audience. As mentioned in the introduction, the presence of these creative figures is often considered to be a reflexive acknowledgement of the authoring presence of Hong Sang-soo and the milieu within which he works. Frankly, this autobiographical line of inquiry represents the

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[25] Peter Wollen, "The Auteur Theory," *Film Theory and Criticism*, 6th ed, ed. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004) 566.

[26] Quoted in interview with Christopher Small and Daniel Kasman, "The Day the Snow Fell: Hong Sang-soo Discusses 'Right Now, Wrong Then,'" *MUBI Notebook* 18 August 2015, 3 September 2015 <https://mubi.com/notebook/posts/an-interview-with-hong-sang-soo>.

least interesting approach to a collection of films that are banal in content yet rich in style. A caution towards receiving the films along reflexive lines is cued by the director's own observation on an influential Cézanne painting, which he calls "without movement, without purpose, without a message, but beautiful to look at."[27] This remarks suggests an idealized authorial role in the production of an artwork in which intentionality is not perceptible in its brushstrokes or, in this situation, camera movements and *mise en scène*. I do not mean to suggest that the spectator is oblivious to Hong Sang-soo as the credited author of his films. Rather, further inquiry is necessary to understand how the films operate at the level of narrative structure, in which interpretation extends beyond the restrictive categories of biography and authorial intention.

In lieu of employing biographical assumptions to substantiate this narrative inquiry into the films of Hong Sang-soo, I instead propose to frame the occurrences of theme, content and style as a schematic framework for spectatorial comprehension. David Bordwell introduces the notion of "schemata" as the preexisting knowledge and experiences through which "we make assumptions, erect expectations and confirm or disconfirm hypotheses."[28] This foreknowledge is then fragmented into the categories of prototype, template, procedural and stylistic schemata. The aforementioned aspects of theme, content and style inform the spectator's understanding of a Hong Sang-soo film: the anticipated social and cultural behaviors of the characters, the ordering (or rather, disordering) of the way in which the narrative is arranged. One's existing familiarity or ignorance of these tendencies as they are deployed in Hong's films informs the capacity of the

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[27] Hong Sang-soo, "Témoignages," trans. Cyril Béghin, *Cahiers du cinéma* 700 (2014): 104. My translation.

[28] Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* 33.

viewer to engage with the film text on multiple levels.

In *Film Worlds: A Philosophical Aesthetics of Cinema*, Daniel Yacavone establishes that authorship plays an important role in the symbolic ordering of a cinematic text. He justifies this understanding through a continuity of authors that advocate "a particular kinship between the view that experiential reality (as well as knowledge) is the result of an unending, humanly relative process of symbolic construction,"[29] adding that cinema displays an exceptional propensity for this undertaking. It should be noted that not every filmmaker by default establishes an authorial schematic, as many films find themselves organized within different systems of meaning more akin to the categories offered by Bordwell. Similarly, the analytical approaches to the films discussed herein are not limited to a schematic understanding; academics have also successfully approached Hong's cinema through alternative, successful frameworks. However, in the context of establishing a unique model of narrative comprehension embodied by the South Korean director's work, this foundational understanding becomes necessary for explicating said narrative model. Further, the subtle interplay between persistent stylistic qualities and genre in Hong's cinema renders this understanding exceptionally salient.

The process of narration itself is a significant area of inquiry within the larger discipline of film studies. The scale and motivations of this project are perceptively captured by Bordwell in his *Poetics of Cinema*: "Elsewhere I've advocated that film scholars could pitch a project at a middle level, asking questions of some scope without deep commitments to broad doctrines, and using the answers to those questions to build hypotheses of great generality."[30] Although this

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[29] Yacavone, *Film Worlds: A Philosophical Aesthetics of Cinema* 56.

[30] David Bordwell, *Poetics of Cinema* (New York: Routledge, 2008) 56.

study aims to intervene and explore an unstudied possibility of narration, it is not intended to reinvent the concept itself. Similarly, the ambitions are grander than a restrictive *auteur* analysis. Instead, the insights gained from a close study of the films of Hong Sang-soo can be applied to unconventional tendencies in other cinematic narratives.

This investigation of assumptions of narrative theory, as it pertains to hierarchies of fiction within film texts, is indebted to the ground work laid by a number of critical thinkers, particularly Bordwell and Edward Branigan. For the purposes of this exploration, the concept of narration does not necessarily refer towards any one explicit narrating act, such as voiceover, but instead speaks to the process of storytelling that emerges from the moving image. The subjective mode and focalizing agent that is associated with voiceover narration is only one dimension of this undertaking, which involves all aspects of cinema. Branigan establishes that narration emerges on a fundamental level with the "disparity of knowledge."[31] The most fundamental narrative scenario in which this imbalance emerges is through an uneven relationship between a subject—most recognizably a character or explicit narrator—and an object, with an obstacle acting as a barrier to the flow of knowledge. The shifting balance of information drives the narrative, as the subject on any level—for our purposes, the audience—is driven to redress this inequity.

A primary interest of this thesis is in how the film viewers themselves come to occupy the role of knowledge-seeker in the most basic narrative dynamic as illustrated by Branigan, who lists them among potential "perceiving 'subjects'."[32] This position is substantiated on a textual

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[31] Branigan, *Narrative Comprehension and Film* 66.

[32] Branigan 66.

level via an understanding of authorial capital in which both the author and spectator play a significant role in the creation of the film object. If the author can be credited for the production of a film in the material sense, it is then the audience acting as subject that ultimately establishes meaning in the object through the interpretative act. The narrative ambiguity consistently evident in the films of Hong Sang-soo tends to foreground the process described above, as the spectator must make critical choices about how to perceive the text. Specifically, I refer to the uncertainty of truth value that emerges from the films' material construction, which then activates a multitude of interpretations. At the level of the film text—in equal parts auditory and visual—narration directs and controls the ways in which the spectator acquires knowledge. Spectators, as they are referred to throughout this study, are not to be understood as any one specific audience in a defined context. More abstractly, they are reducible to the subject in Branigan's aforementioned narrative equation, inhabiting an idealized role without whom the operation of making meaning is impossible. Concepts established in existing studies of narratology serve to highlight the dialogue between reader as subject and text as object, particularly the relationship between the *syuzhet* and *fabula*.

Formalist Distinctions Between Plot and Story

Bordwell, in the seminal book *Narration in the Fiction Film*, offers a succinct working definition of narration, stating that it "is the process whereby the film's syuzhet and style interact in the course of cueing and channeling the spectator's construction of the fabula."[33] This definition reveals both the position of Bordwell in his narratological study and introduces a few

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[33] Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* 53.

key concepts that are critical in exploring narration. In a comprehensive taxonomy of approaches to narrative theory, he is rightly identified as one who assumes a style-based approach to comprehending the complexities of narration. The strategy of style theorists of narrative, which includes Bordwell, is to investigate "how the devices and techniques which are *specific*, or intrinsic, to a given medium operate to convert a 'plot' into a 'story'."[34] Style emerges as the most efficient term to account for the spectrum of cinematic devices that can be deployed to impact the narrative process. Style also introduces the problematic notion of who or what is affecting this mediation between subject and object. Clarence Tsui's review of *Hill of Freedom* suggests the film's stylistic affectations, or tropes, are attributed to the filmmaker. As stated previously, style will be understood as a schemata, or generic pattern, that informs specific modes of narration, rather than directly crediting this role to the director as an authoring agent.

The distinction between plot and story is addressed by Bordwell through the terms *syuzhet* and *fabula*. The two critical concepts, and Bordwell's position in general, draw upon the work of Russian Formalists who worked in the domain of cinema and larger theories of art. Early Formalist inquiries into film employed the distinction between these narrative concepts as a way to emphasize an abstraction specific to the medium, in opposition to photographic reproduction.[35] Edward Branigan notes that with this type of narrative theory the plot is distanced "from what is visibly and audibly present in the film."[36] However, Branigan's observance does not elucidate the Formalist distinction between plot and story. Through a Formalist understanding, the plot, or *syuzhet,* is in fact what is directly illuminated in the film's

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[34] Branigan, *Narrative Comprehension and Film* 119.

[35] Ben Shaul, *Cinema of Choice* 55.

[36] Branigan, *Narrative Comprehension and Film* 119.

projection, whereas the story/*fabula* assumes a different role in the narrative process.

Differentiations are made between the plot and the story in order to better comprehend the narrative process. In this dynamic, the *syuzhet* is a patterning of narrative events organized by stylistic principles, in which these events are ordered and represented in a manner that controls the spectator's access to information. Conversely, the *fabula* is a linear ordering of the events in the text which may or may not have been directly represented. Historical or off-screen occurrences referenced in the *syuzhet* contribute to the spectator's comprehension of a story and therefore aid in the construction of the *fabula*. A seminal example to illustrate this critical difference is *Citizen Kane* (Orson Welles, 1941); the *syuzhet* begins with protagonist Charles Foster Kane's (Welles) on his deathbed, whereas the first moments of the *fabula* are of his childhood, later glimpsed in the film's *syuzhet* as flashbacks.

As acknowledged above, Edward Branigan observes an estrangement between the plot and immediate reality of the text in which the *syuzhet* is not directly represented. Through a Formalist understanding, it can be clarified that it is the story, not the plot, from which the spectator is denied direct access. S/he is then required to reconstruct the imaginary *fabula* from information provided by the *syuzhet*, which can also be understood as the narrated reality present on-screen. The dynamic between the *syuzhet* and *fabula* involves two-directional movement that emphasizes the roles of an authoring agent and a spectator in the creation of the text. The reconstruction of the story by comprehending fabulary events observed in the *syuzhet* is, as Bordwell notes, a process undertaken during spectatorship. Through the reverse operation, an authoring agent responsible for the introduction of style arranges the fabulary events into the *syuzhet*.

The author's role in the narrative process then becomes challenged if, as Roland Barthes suggest, the reader is "no longer a consumer, but also the producer of the text."[37] Instead of emphasizing the authority of an *auteur*, a schematic organization of Hong Sang-soo's cinema intuits that a spectator interprets one of the director's films through his/her understanding of the filmmaker's other work. The high degree of intra- and intertextual repetition in Hong's movies creates a sensation of "re-reading," which Barthes notes as "contrary to the commercial and ideological habits of our society, which would have us 'throw away' the story once it has been consumed."[38] Due to its emphasis on the plural nature of a text, the operation of repetition in the films encourages the agency of the spectator as a producer of meaning.

Hill of Freedom, which can be seen as exemplary of Hong's cinema as a whole, provides a compelling example of the distinction between *syuzhet* and *fabula* and their interplay in the text. In the film, Kwon (Seo Young-hwa) receives a handful of unread letters from her former lover, a Japanese man named Mori (Ryo Kase). It becomes clear that the film's plot is unfolding on two temporal levels: the past, during which Mori returns to Seoul in the hopes of reigniting a relationship with Kwon, and the present tense as she is reading his letters. The spectator is able to reconstruct a general temporal understanding through the stylistic device of Mori's voiceover and the reprised shots of Kwon reading, preceding and following (in the *syuzhet*) the sequences narrated by Mori. Curiously, the voiceover is in English; it is the language in which he speaks and writes due to his lack of fluency in Korean, but not necessarily the one in which he thinks.

After the first instance of Kwon's reading and Mori's narrating, the female focalizer drops

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[37] Barthes, *S/Z* 4.

[38] Barthes 15.
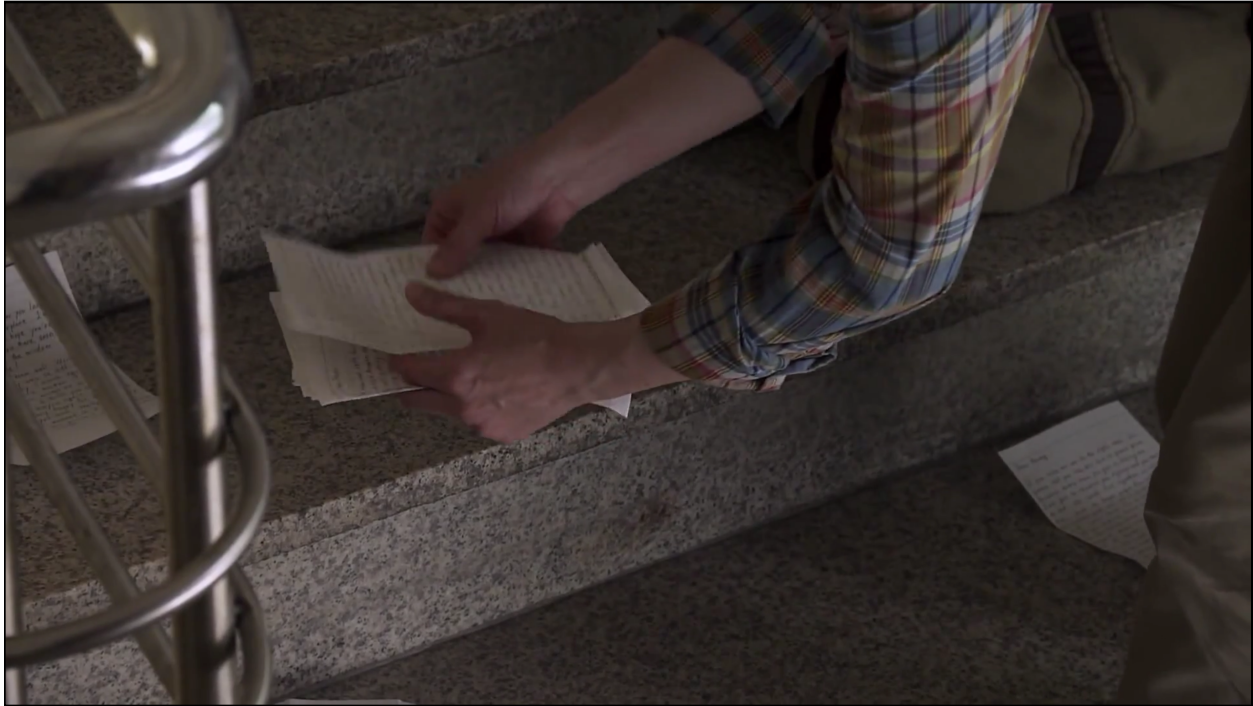
Fig. 1 Kwon (Seo Young-hwa) retrieving a sheaf of letters, in turn creating a justification for the non-linear narrative arrangement of *Hill of Freedom* (2014).

the sheath of letters on the stairs and retrieves them in an indeterminate order (see fig. 1). A close-up shot of a solitary letter on the steps suggests that it will be left behind and remain a gap in the fabulary reconstruction. Nonetheless, it is generally interpreted that the Mori sequences precede (in the *fabula*) the Kwon sequences, although all these shots at the very least render ambiguous the precise ordering of the letters. In the context of the *syuzhet*, the disorganization of the letters conveys an impression of chance, wherein the resulting arrangement (and loss of one) of the documents plays a role in the construction of the narrative that is imparted to Kwon through reading them. If there is a fateful quality to the ordering of the letters, it is not apparent in the film, particularly in relation to engendering the unification of the former lovers. In the construction of the film—referring to the profilmic shooting space, as well as the editing process —there is inevitably a decision-making process behind this action and the organization of the

syuzhet. Viewed then as a metaphor to larger claims of authorial intentionality and extra-textual intervention, the fumbling of the letters suggests that there can be no absolute meaning; the narrative discontinuity resembles chaos, rather than determination.

In accordance with the theoretical mode within which he operates, Bordwell emphasizes the significance of a stylistic mediation in the arrangement of fabulary events in the film text, with this film's arrangement serving as one example. The events told in the letters, occurring throughout the span of *Hill of Freedom,* compose much of the film's *syuzhet*. Although it commences with Kwon's receipt of Mori's letters, the *fabula*—not directly present in the text—begins with the off-screen events of the characters' initial encounter. Rather than simply present Kwon and Mori's coming together and falling apart, their relationship is arranged through an ambiguous flashback structure, a device that is consistent with the narrative approach of other films directed by Hong Sang-soo. Despite this ambiguity, a spectator who has already understood (or "read," in keeping with Barthes) another of his films will be more inclined to look for stylistic patterns and actively construct the story. The ideal audience would be able to access the film on multiple levels: recognizing tropes on the level of content, engaging in the narrative assemblage and deriving pleasure from the sly comedy.

Akira Mizuta Lippit identifies a number of the narrative tropes that characterize the South Korean director's films, such as the presence of unsuccessful artists, triangulated romances and symbolic journeys, most of which occur in the domain of content. Although Lippit has inferred these patterns in 2004 and from observing the only four features released at that time, it is revealing that all of these qualities can still be recognized in *Hill of Freedom*. However, it is the observation of "a frustrated and frustrating inability among the characters to communicate

directly"[39] that transcends the level of content and takes on an organizational dimension in the

arrangement of the *syuzhet*. The film's division between two focalizing agents separated by time

draws attention to the illusory roles of author and spectator inhabited by Mori and Kwon; the

former has written a story of his life in order for her to better gain insight into his intentions. The

female focalizer is not merely the audience of her suitor's letters, since she also undergoes a

process of active narration through a "mental reconstruction of some of the events of narrative

which are not witnessed."[40] This particular stylistic intervention in the construction of the plot

highlights the film's themes, such as the barriers of communication and their relationship to

narrative comprehension.

Describing the *syuzhet* of *Hill of Freedom* is simple: it is inarguably the arrangement of

scenes in the order in which they appear during the film. The plot begins with Kwon receiving

the letters and continues as they are realized in an indeterminate order through the device of

flashbacks. The stylistic conceit that structures the fabulary arrangement is Kwon's reading of

Mori's letters, with the spectator encouraged to reconstruct the male character's movements

through knowledge gained from the flashbacks. It is through the process of reconstruction that

the fascinating complications of the film emerges—namely, if a number of the flashbacks are

lacking in definite temporal markers, how can we be certain what the story of the film is?

Towards the end of the film, Mori narrates his reunion with Kwon, as his voiceover indicates that

they live happily together beyond the bounds of the narrative; this scene is, however, revealed to

be a dream. With the contours of the *fabula* already ambiguous, the truth value of the film's

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[39] Akira Mizuta Lippit, "Hong Sangsoo's Lines of Inquiry: Communication, Defense, and Escape," *Film Quarterly* 57.4 (2004): 22.

[40] Branigan, *Narrative Comprehension and Film* 119-120.

alternate or false ending remains disputable alongside its position in the story.

Narrative Construction in the Formative Works of Hong Sang-soo

A brief narrative analysis of Hong Sang-soo's formative features to be presented through the following section, *The Day a Pig Fell into the Well* and *The Power of Kangwon Province*, highlights the significance of the ordering of the *syuzhet* as a schematic trope and foretells the complexity that will be visible in successive films. These two initial works are comparable and complimentary in their challenging narrative approach, although neither goes as far as to suggest the diegetic uncertainty that will be visible in *Virgin Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors* and beyond. Together, the two first films establish a number of schematic tropes and act as a bridge between broader non-linear tendencies in contemporary cinema and the specific narrative strategies in Hong's later work that will be explored in depth throughout this thesis.

The Day a Pig Fell into the Well, Hong's debut feature, appears to be ordered in a relatively conventional way by the breaking up of one cohesive diegesis into multiple blocks which are rearranged in a puzzle-like fashion. In this film, the spectator is encouraged to tease out the arrangement of these segments through clues in the *mise en scène*, most emphatically seen in the visual prominence of calendars and clocks. The emphasis on dates—birthdays occur, a man waits for the results of testing for a sexually-transmitted infection—serve to motivate and aid us in reconstructing the *fabula*. This organization is comparable to *Pulp Fiction* (Quentin Tarantino, 1994), made two years prior, and other contemporaneous films that challenge linear narrative conventions.

Hong's second feature film, *The Power of Kangwon Province*, further complicates this

puzzle-narrative strategy by introducing the significant elision of fabulary information. In fact, a significant tangent introduced in the plot cannot be fully reconstructed in the story—that of the potential suicide (or murder) of a young woman. In the first half of the film, which follows a student named Jisook (Oh Yun-hong), the crime is mentioned, yet the specific circumstances are unclear and remain unrealized in the *syuzhet*. The second portion of *The Power of Kangwon Province* is then focalized through the male protagonist, at one point reprising the train ride that opens the film, now from a different perspective. Through Sangwon (Baek Jong-hak), we encounter both the victim and suspect in the crime. In one key moment, the camera disrupts its identification with Sangwon to show the two figures fatefully meeting. Ultimately, the objective truth of the crime is unknown and becomes an obstacle to a complete fabulary reconstruction.

In the moment that the focalization moves away from Sangwon to observe the encounter between the man and the doomed woman, attention is drawn to the structuring conceit behind the film. The unfolding of fabulary events is controlled and framed in its arrangement within the *syuzhet*, with this break in focalization exposing the deliberate elisions of story information. Marshall Deutelbaum, positioning *The Day a Pig Fell into the Well* as the incipient moment in such a mode of storytelling, observes: "Rather, the gaps are designed to wean viewers from their habitual, virtually automatic habits of perception learned from years of watching traditional narrative films."[41] Here Deutelbaum defines the unconventional approach to narrative, which he roots in the ambitions of a first-time filmmaker. However, this is only the first step in elucidating the complexity of the films' narrative strategies. Hong's films not only continue to reinforce in

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[41] Marshall Deutelbaum, "The Pragmatic Poetics of Hong Sangsoo's *The Day a Pig Fell into the Well*," *Puzzle Films: Complex Storytelling in Contemporary Cinema,* ed. Warren Buckland (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009) 208.

the audience a cognizance of the film's construction through complicated storytelling, but also reveal the limits of the spectator's comprehension. Through familiarity with generic schemata, one may be able to conceive of a cinematic, fabulary arrangement for the crime story. However, this speculative imagining does not carry the same weight or veracity of events that are visually represented in the film.

The limits of fabulary comprehension are tested further by the recurring images of goldfish in *The Power of Kangwon Province*. In the early moments of the film, Jisook and her friends inexplicably discover a dead goldfish on a trail on the mountainside, which she then proceeds to bury. We later see Sangwon place an ordinary bowl with two goldfish on the windowsill of an office. Midway through the second half of the feature, a close-up shot of the bowl is reprised. However, in its third instance, which also serves as the film's concluding shot, it is revealed there is only one goldfish remaining. If, as Kyung Hyun Kim notes, "a sense of unity is achieved [...] by disclosing at the end the missing knot between the two ex-lovers,"[42] this satisfaction then becomes undone as a result of the confounding absence of one of the goldfish and by the decision to end the film on such an image.

The spectator, having been trained and subsequently rewarded for their ability to read the puzzle arrangement of the film, is left straining to trace the movement of the goldfish from the bowl to the mountain trail. There are then two options: it is either the same goldfish, or a different one. In the first scenario, fabulary reconstruction becomes implausible. By contrast, the presence of three (or more) goldfish renders the highlighted object as an empty signifier. The second reading is in accordance with Hong's assumed position within a South Korean national

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[42] Kyung Hyun Kim, "Too Early/Too Late: Temporality and Repetition in Hong Sang-su's Films," *The Remasculization of Korean Cinema* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004) 219.

discourse, as a filmmaker whose work embodies a postideological moment in Korean history.[43]

This understanding of the fish is also an extension of the system of signification in Hong's other

films, observed by Huh Moonyung:

> To put it simply, HONG Sangsoo is a director who concentrates on the materiality of
> cinematic signifiers. He doesn't entirely reject the customarily signified of individual
> signifiers. Nor does he make a system of the newly-signified. He only focuses on the
> glittering surface of materialness. The signified snoops around, slips or disappears.[44]

Whereas Huh emphasizes the fluid, non-fixed meaning of signifiers, such as the titular gate of

On the Occasion of Remembering the Turning Gate (*Saenghwalui balgyeon*, 2002),[45] I propose

that, in this system, the signifiers often serve a reflexive function. Instead of being positioned as

a symbol of entrapment or estrangement, artifacts such as the goldfish direct attention towards

the process of narrative comprehension, where no fixed meaning is attainable.

The goldfish in *The Power of Kangwon Province* is characteristic of the demands that the

cinema of Hong Sang-soo regularly places on the spectator. Regardless of whether there are

multiple goldfish or that a goldfish has been inexplicably deposited on the mountain path, the

audience is left with two unsatisfactory hypotheses for finding meaning in a significant object

that is highly visible in the narrative. *The Day a Pig Fell into the Well* offers another example of

tenuous conjectures encouraged by a lack of fabulary information. In his analysis of the film,

Kim infers that Po-kyong (Lee Eung-kyung) commits suicide in part due to the death of her

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[43] Kim, "Hong Sang-soo's Death, Eroticism and Virtual Nationalism," *Virtual Hallyu: Korean Cinema of the Global Era* 125.

[44] Huh, *HONG Sangsoo* 9.

[45] Huh 7.

child, with neither event being made visible in the *syuzhet* nor explicitly stated.[46] The destruction

of the family portrait is cited as evidence and for Kim, assumes a symbolic dimension leading to

the suicide act that is expected to follow the last image of the film. The disordering of the

newspaper on the floor to create a path to her death (if she is to walk off the balcony) instead

draws attention towards the disordering of the preceding narrative; the pages are taken out of

order, not unlike the blocks of the film. Marshall Deutelbaum makes similar inferences in order

to organize a coherent *fabula* for *Virgin Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors*.[47] These attempts at

comprehension illustrate how the primacy of the narrative process within Hong's filmography

supersedes expectations of unfamiliar subject matter, which can be superficially perceived as

simplistic or repetitive.

Separating Diegeses from Fiction: *In Another Country*

As evidenced by *Hill of Freedom* and the director's first two features, the problem of

arranging a coherent *fabula* is not exclusive to any one film of Hong Sang-soo's work but rather

emerges as one of the most identifiable schematic tropes to recur throughout his corpus. This

preoccupation suggests that the complications of definitively organizing narrative information

within the film texts remains one of their primary objectives. The flashbacks used in *Hill of*

Freedom to confound the spectator are only one instance of many structuring conceits observed

in Hong's films, which include parallel narratives, films-within-films, episodic storytelling and

dream sequences. These devices expose a hierarchy of narrative levels within a text, where one

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[46] Kim, "Too Early/Too Late" 205.

[47] Marshall Deutelbaum, "The Deceptive Design of Hong Sangsoo's *Virgin Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors*," *New Review of Film and Television Studies* 3.2 (2005): 190.

stratum can be observed to carry more truth value than another. Consider the structuring principle that dictates the arrangement of fabulary events in *In Another Country*, in which Won-joo (Jung Yu-mi) sets out to write three brief film scripts set in a seaside town, all about the visit of a French woman named Anne (Isabelle Huppert). Through a comparative context, we interpret that the outermost frame tale involving Won-joo to be the most real, and that the variations she writes on the same premise are equivalently fictive within this cinematic reality.

In order to investigate and classify the stratified, relative nature of reality within the films, terminology must be introduced to distinguish the film text as a whole from the stories that emerge within the text. Edward Branigan organizes narration into eight levels[48] of which the outermost tier—or most removed from the story world—-is the text itself as a historical object, while the innermost is an internally focalized thought. As diagrammed, the hierarchy relates the narrative agent to the spectator, with the level of narration being the connection between these two operators: text, fiction, story world, event/scene, action, speech, perception and thought. Branigan's model illustrates that, whereas the first four external to the story world involve a narrator, the second and inner set pertain to a focalizing agent and the spectator's identification with them. Focalization becomes the narrative role of a character and how he tells a story "through 'living in' their world."[49]

In establishing this hierarchy of narrative levels, two terms are deployed of which the distinction is critical: diegesis, or story world, and fiction. Bordwell notes that diegesis has developed from literary studies to become the appropriate word to describe "the fictional world

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[48] Branigan, *Narrative Comprehension and Film* 86.

[49] Branigan 100.

of the story."[50] Branigan's inquiries into narrative theory further explore this understanding of diegesis by clarifying the diegetic and non-diegetic bounds of the narrator through his levels of narration. For the purposes of the eight-tiered narrative hierarchy, the non-diegetic narrator emerges at the level of the story world, whereas the diegetic narrator is interiorized at the level of event/scene. However, this stratification challenges the understanding of diegesis proposed by Bordwell, as within the fiction (the rung below text and above story world) we can find narrative agents working within and without of the diegesis. Branigan deploys the opening moments of *The Wrong Man* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1956) as an example. In this scene, a bystander is identified as an (implied) diegetic narrator due to how he is perceived to incriminate the film's protagonist, Manny (Henry Fonda), by virtue of his presence, even though Manny is the "wrong man." Conversely, on-screen text that establishes the events of the film is to be identified as non-diegetic narration. This imposed writing contains fabulary information which "functions to *orient* us with respect to the present state of affairs in the story world."[51] A similar device surfaces in Hong Sang-soo's *Virgin Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors*.

Following on Branigan's insights, a critical distinction must be made between the fiction and the diegesis of the film text. *In Another Country* presents itself as an effective example for illustrating the value of differentiating between fiction and diegesis. First, the fiction is seen to be a step removed from the narrative level of the text as a historical object. A reference to the "fiction" of *In Another Country* is then understood as being inclusive of the frame tale and the three fictive variations. From there, a multitude of diegeses are observed within the fiction; for

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[50] Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* 16.

[51] Branigan, *Narrative Comprehension and Film* 99.

the sake of simplicity, we can observe four between the external diegesis and Won-joo's three stories about Anne. Momentarily ignoring the complicating factor of Anne's dreams in the second telling, as well as the trans-diegetic movement of a *soju* bottle and an umbrella, which will be addressed at the conclusion of the chapter, these diegeses are seen to be exclusive of each other. Although all three of the stories imagined by Won-joo feature the same setting and a number of the same characters that emerge from the scenario of a French tourist in Mohang, each variation is independent and does not require an external diegesis in order to be comprehensible. Won-joo functions as an extra-diegetic, albeit fictional narrator, as she never intrudes into the story worlds of the three diegeses involving Anne.

However, the classifying of the multiple story worlds of *In Another Country* as diegeses becomes complicated when we consider all of them to occupy a unifying space. The initial shots of the framing tale verify that Won-joo is writing from the same coastal community of Mohang; the billboard of the opening frame appears in the third story, alongside parallel shots framing the beach from a table on the balcony. I propose that the diegetic exclusivity of each story is a natural extension of their hierarchical distinction from the external narrative of Won-joo and her mother, as the writer is motivated to create scripts occurring in a space which reflects the reality she inhabits. The exclusivity of these story worlds is best illustrated by aspects of the *mise en scène*, in which elements constituting and existing within these spaces highlight their differences. Further, the spatial comprehension of the film as it relates to the constitution of multiple diegeses shall be an understanding that extends to the entirety of this thesis and its investigation into narratology.

Three facets dominantly populate the *mise en scène* of the story of each Anne in *In*

Another Country and play a critical role in a comparative analysis: character, space and wardrobe/props. Only the characters of Anne, the lifeguard and a concierge (Jung Yu-mi, again) appear in each variation. A film director named Jong-soo (Kwon Hae-hyo) and his jealous, pregnant wife (Moon So-ri) have critical roles in the first and third telling, whereas another filmmaker, Moon-soo, (Moon Sung-keun) and a university professor (Yoon Yeo-jeong, also portraying Won-joo's mother) only appear in the second and third stories, respectively. Their presence adjusts to the variable circumstances of each Anne; she is first a filmmaker herself, then having an affair with a Korean man and finally, a guest of the lecturer after Anne's marriage dissolves due to her husband's infidelity.[52] These events, with the exception of the second variation, are removed from the film's *syuzhet* and assume a position in the off-screen *fabula*. The histories can claim an exclusivity to their respective diegeses. This suggests that, despite physical, nominal and in some ways, behavioral similarities, each personality exists only in that specific, albeit parallel, story world.

A redaction criticism of the three fictional stories within *In Another Country* also accentuates internal modifications or consistencies in wardrobe. It can be assumed that, despite meteorological markers, each Anne visits Mohang in similar temporal circumstances, in the sense that the three variations exist in parallel worlds and cannot be arranged consecutively within one world. Following this presupposition, the three Annes are each limited to a single, distinct outfit. Whereas clothing can serve as a confounding marker of realism, as is the case with Mori's limited wardrobe recycled over an uncertain span of time in *Hill of Freedom*, *In*

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[52] The three exclusive stories, when described in this manner, appear to illustrate a *fabula* of their own and one which would not function if rearranged. This can be seen as another playful act on the part of the film, and one which operates against its efforts to enforce each Anne's exclusivity.

Fig. 2 The second Anne (Isabelle Huppert) at a crossroads in *In Another Country* (2012).

Another Country does not indicate that Anne has a different outfit for multiple days of a visit to Mohang. Instead, each outfit—a lavender blouse, a red dress and another with a green floral print —is worn by only one of the three Annes during and throughout each story, underlining the distinction between each woman by virtue of their difference. The clothes act as empty signifiers and fail to offer insight into the psychology of each woman, which is further obscured by barriers of language. This function is not unlike the lifeguard's orange T-shirt, which is consistent through the three stories. It only communicates the facile detail of his occupation in written terms ("LIFE GUARD" is printed on the back of his shirt), which nonetheless goes on to be redundantly stated by himself and others multiple times.

Just as each of the three interior tales has unique and similar characters, these figures occupy different environments representing the same profilmic space of Mohang. In the example

of the tourist condominium complex, Jong-soo's living space is only visible in the first story, whereas Anne's unit is only entered in the second variation. In each telling, there is a shot of Anne at a junction, most often in search of a lighthouse (see fig. 2). Invariably, all three Annes find themselves searching for this landmark. It is precisely in this pursuit wherein I perceive a distinction between the materiality of Mohang and the successive levels of fiction, which are not guaranteed to be spatially identical—activating the potential to produce exclusive diegeses. The first and third Annes search for the lighthouse, yet never happen upon it. In all of Won-joo's stories, Anne asks the lifeguard where to find it and after protracted exchanges of verbal language and gesturing—most humorously with the initial variation—he understands what she is looking for but does not know where it is. Considering that he is a local and otherwise static presence, emphasized by wardrobe and a matching tent, his ignorance of the presence of such a monolithic structure brings into question its verifiable existence in any or all of the diegeses.

The presence of the lighthouse in the second story does not offer a claim to its status as real versus imaginary, as the shot is nested in a complicated dream sequence structure. After being told by her lover that he will be arriving late from Seoul, Anne goes down to the waterfront and happens across the lighthouse without asking for directions, as occurs in the other variations. As she is sitting on a post and admiring the beauty of the landscape, the camera zooms out to accommodate her partner emerging from the left of the frame, surprising her. Their passionate embrace at the end of the continuous take is interrupted by a cut to a close-up of Anne's shoes on a rock, from which another zoom reveals that Anne is still alone and has been daydreaming. A few shots later there is a close-up of her sleeping in her cabin. This is followed by a cut to the exterior, with the concierge leading Moon-soo to his cabin, after which Anne is awoken by his

knocking.

Later in the story and following a heated discussion over a meal characteristically marked by scattered bottles of *soju*, there is another shot of Anne rising from her slumber. This reveals that Moon-soo still has yet to arrive, suggesting an increasingly ambiguous portion of the preceding *syuzhet* to have been a dream and therefore, less verifiably real. This destabilizing moment draws the existence of a definitive *fabula* into question, a problem which only becomes more apparent when read against the narrative strategy of the frame tale. The only certain boundary for Anne's dream is the beginning of the story, following a shot of Won-joo writing. It can be said that the lighthouse must only exist in the imaginary of any or all of these three variations, with the status of the individual diegeses as being spatially identical to be a fallacy. The ramifications of this dream structure, which also be seen in *Night and Day*, *Nobody's Daughter Haewon* and *Hill of Freedom*, will be further explored in Chapter Three.

As Daniel Yacavone accurately notes: "[…] the represented, fictional world of an 'aesthetic object' (that is, an artwork as it is experienced) is instead a kind of pseudo-world," and further, that it is "unavoidably incomplete and schematic."[53] Similarly to Bordwell, Yacavone also foregrounds the stylistic dimension in mediation between the referential world and film worlds.[54] Through this, we can understand that the multiple fictional realities manifested in *In Another Country* are not equivalent to the real world referent of Mohang, and further, that they exist in varying degrees of representation.[55] The audience becomes empowered to infer the

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[53] Yacavone, *Film Worlds* 27.

[54] Yacavone xiii.

[55] There are further questions regarding the film's fidelity to the "real" Mohang, including the manipulation of space (in the reality, which fork leads to the lighthouse?) and, of course, if there really is a lighthouse—specifically, the lighthouse glimpsed in Anne's dream—there.

presence of the lighthouse through the repeated suggestion of its schematic existence, as Anne is constantly searching for it. Similarly, its persistent absence or banishment to a further fictional level permits various interpretations and intensifies the nature of each diegesis as a so-called "pseudo-world."

With this fluidity of comprehension in mind, I propose that the confounding nature of the film's final shot does not unify the multiple diegeses so much as it draws further attention to their assumed exclusivity. In a long take, the third Anne casually retrieves an umbrella that her double in the second variation had inexplicably concealed along the side of the road, after deeming it unnecessary for the current weather (the threat of rainfall hangs over each segment of the film). This impossible action in which an object seems to cross diegeses is more explicit than an earlier, implied transgression, in which a broken bottle on the beach glimpsed in the first story might have been left behind by Anne and the lifeguard in the last tale, creating an uncanny feedback loop in which the third story impacts the first. These artifacts are rendered exceptionally visible through schematically-characteristic cinematographic tendencies such as the long take and, in the case of the first appearance of the *soju* bottle, zooming, highlighting their importance within the film's system of meaning.

Conclusion

Rather than proposing a rationale for the appearance of the umbrella and the bottle, I instead argue that their presence makes the spectator aware of the ongoing process of fabulary comprehension. The visibility of the cinematic devices that expose the transgressive movement of artifacts work against the principal that Henry Bacon identifies, namely how characters "tend

to occupy our attention to the degree that we are not aware of gappiness or even inconsistencies of other aspects of the diegetic world when a film seeks to create the impression of a coherent and continuous fictional world."[56] *In Another Country* confuses the notion of of an absolute Anne, instead creating three distinctly identifiable characters and depriving us of the basic convention of a "complete" focalizer to establish comprehension and focus a single, coherent diegesis. Even if we can recognize that these are meant to be three different stories authored by Won-joo, these strategies collude to draw attention to the disunity of story worlds within the fictional text.

Nonetheless, the audience recognizes the overt authorial presence of Won-joo within the film as a guide for identifying and hierarchically arranging exclusive story worlds which are not guaranteed to be spatially identical, even though they are understood to be more or less temporally parallel. Likewise, the film's asymmetrical structure—ending with the aforementioned shot of Anne at the conclusion of the third story, rather than a shot of Won-joo— is lacking in balance and closure. It has been suggested that "the fictional story world is not always, in its appreciative experience, the most important or primary aesthetic object of viewer attention."[57] Through the methodology of redacting differences between these similar worlds, it becomes apparent that *In Another Country* ultimately foregrounds this cognizance alongside the author-reader dynamic in a narrative about the act of storytelling, establishing a precedent that can be observed across Hong Sang-soo's entire filmography, and potentially, in other cinema corpora.

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[56] Henry Bacon, "The Extent of Mental Completion of Films," *Projections* 5.1 (2011): 36.

[57] Yacavone 19.

Edward Branigan could be speaking directly of the diegetic transgressions of the umbrella in *In Another Country* or the existence of the lighthouse in Mohang with his observations on the status of such objects:

> Hence, in a fiction film it makes no sense to ask whether a camera, or a prop, might have lied to us, or to ask what a camera might have concealed (or made explicit) in a shot, for a fiction is neither true nor false in the simple way that a physical camera either does or does not take a photograph of a thing.[58]

In one frame—for example, a long shot of Anne sitting on a post, idly gazing at a lighthouse— objective statements can be made on the substance of the image. The narrative process places this one shot in a matrix of dichotomies: diegesis and fiction, plot and story, author and spectator. All of these binaries and systems of comprehension, whether actively or passively perceived, assist the audience in deciphering the narrative. As the following two chapters will further investigate the act of narration in other films by Hong Sang-soo, it will become increasingly apparent how these systems speak to the relativity of truth value.

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[58] Edward Branigan, *Projecting a Camera: Language-Games in Film Theory* (New York: Routledge, 2006) 168.

CHAPTER TWO

A central question recurs when watching the films of Hong Sang-soo: what is "real," and why does it matter? This notion of reality is held to be relative; the diegesis of a film is not intended to be equivalent to the reality we experience, but instead a fictional and mediated reproduction of it. A study of the narrative construction of *In Another Country* reveals the existence of multiple story worlds, or diegeses, within a cohesive fiction. This configuration suggests that the status of realities within a film text isn't always fixed to be singular. In the instance of a film with multiple story worlds, a hierarchy can be assigned in order to aid in narrative comprehension. As an example, *In Another Country* presents an outermost layer of fictional reality, three stories created within, while dreams are further submerged within those realities. Through the order established within the fiction, the exterior reality—Won-joo writing stories of the three Annes—is the most proximal to our reality and therefore the most "real." However, the placement of the dreams within the various stories and the transgressive nature of objects moving between diegeses—that have otherwise been identified as exclusive—complicate the hierarchical value assigned to the realities of the text.

This chapter is primarily constituted of close textual analyses of two aesthetically complimentary Hong Sang-soo films, *Virgin Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors* and *The Day He Arrives.* Both recognizable for their monochromatic cinematography, the films will be analyzed in depth as evidence of explicitly and discreetly unconventional narrative strategies, respectively. As one example, titles are employed to organize the *syuzhet* of *Virgin Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors*; this naming strategy is critical to the ways in which the film cues the spectator to comprehend the text and reflect on their own position in the creation of it. Further, a redaction

criticism of two parallel chapters of the film reveals the impossibility of a coherent *fabula*. Alternatively, the *syuzhet* sequencing of *The Day He Arrives* confuses the duration of its *fabula*, which, upon closer inspection, reveals an uncanny repetition of events that have a similar narrative function as the clearly alternate paths in the earlier film. An investigation of the narrative strategies employed in these two essential Hong texts will underline the schematic conventions at play and their ramification on the relationship between truth value and interpretation.

Perhaps Narrative Ambiguity: *Virgin Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors*

In the first chapter, I briefly addressed Hong Sang-soo's output chronologically, as the early features evidence the development and centrality of certain narrative tendencies. Following on from that introduction, it is the filmmaker's third feature, *Virgin Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors*, which emerges as the first in his corpus to display explicitly optional narrative paths. As unsubtly cued by the English-language title, the film examines the relationships between Soo-jung (Lee Eun-ju) and her two suitors. The men are typical Hong archetypes: an older film producer, Young-soo (Moon Sung-keon) and a younger, successful painter, Jae-hoon (Jeong Bo-seok), with both exhibiting possessive tendencies towards Soo-jung. It should be noted that the film's Korean title, *Oh! Soo-jung*, refers to the female protagonist in a more direct way and carries different (and less sexual) connotations. The naming strategy used throughout the film—which makes allusions to other significant artworks—will play an important role in the ensuing analysis of the text.

The film is composed of multiple chapters which are separated by a cut to black and a

reprisal of music that first occurs during the opening credits. The initial segment, "Day's Wait,"

and the third and fifth segments, "Suspended Cable Car" and "Naught Shall Go Ill When You

Find Your Mare," respectively, are unique fabulary events in that they only occur once. However,

the second and fourth chapters, "Perhaps Accident" and "Perhaps Intention," act as variations of

each other. Further, these two optional narrative paths are composed of seven numbered

sequences which are also signposted by imposed text. This titling device employed to demarcate

separate chapters of the film is also later used in *Oki's Movie* (*Ok-Heeui younghwa*, 2010) to

distinguish the nesting doll-like unfolding of exclusive diegeses. The explicit nature of the

forking narrative can be aligned with the strategy of engagement observed in Hong's first two

features, through which the spectator is encouraged to puzzle out a purpose to the non-linear

syuzhet.

      In his detailed analysis of the "deceptive design" of the film, Marshall Deutelbaum

proposes that *Virgin Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors* does not present two or more narrative

paths. Instead, he contextualizes that, following on the trend of non-linear narrative films in the

1990s, that "[...] the chronology of past events is quite precise; rather than different versions of

the same events, the intercalated or alternated lines of past events form a single, coherent

chronology with a few minor exceptions."[59] Deutelbaum goes on to rationalize this hypothesis

through a reconstructed timeline that emphasizes discreet artifacts in the *mise en scène*, such as

dishes and *soju* bottles at the initial restaurant, alongside performative gestures that articulate

drunkenness. As I have suggested earlier, the significant investment in the narrative role of

objects in this particular analysis echoes the importance of the goldfish in *The Power of*

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[59] Deutelbaum, "Deceptive Design" 190.

Kangwon Province or the umbrella in *In Another Country* to comprehending a verifiable fabulary arrangement and diegetic boundaries.

Deutelbaum's understanding of *Virgin Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors* has its own challenges; specifically, that there are inevitably going to be scenes present in the unconventional narrative arrangement which cannot be reconciled. He underplays other exceptions to the cohesive *fabula* that he cobbles together, which in turn shall form the backbone of my interpretation of the film, in which the *mise en scène* is often seen to be contradictory rather than unifying. The variety of understandings of the film, as opposed to being objectively verifiable— or in error—direct us towards the interpretive versatility of the film's narrative structure. Hong Sang-soo stated that the film was shot sequentially, even if it was not the most economical decision: "Returning to the site two or three weeks later for the same event would have meant that something could have happened to me and my actors over those two weeks."[60] Rather than entirely dismiss Deutelbaum's work, this scholar's intense desire for fabulary comprehension instead serves as further motivation for an investigation into the relationship between the film's style and the audience's engagement.

The visual presentation of chapter titles in the image is one significant strategy for foregrounding the film's narrative play, while also encouraging the spectator to engage the names as clues for the process of fabulary reconstruction. "Day's Wait" is unequivocal and direct in that it describes Jae-hoon's wait in a hotel room; it later becomes apparent that this might be understood as the present tense of the film. This sequence is mostly detached from the rest of the narrative and offers few immediate clues to its position in the story. The male protagonist is

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[60] Huh, *HONG Sangsoo* 62.

lounging around in a hotel room and talking to Soo-jung on the phone, who cannot meet him as planned. By comparison, the center block of the film, "Suspended Cable Car," is not only direct in regards to the narrative moment it refers to—Soo-jung becomes stuck in such a vehicle that breaks down part way along its route—but also its position as the fulcrum of the *syuzhet*. In this transitional segment between "Perhaps Accident" and "Perhaps Intention," the narrative momentum of the film is indeed suspended before "restarting" in a reprisal of the previous segment, with significant variations in focalization.

It is in the final episode, "Naught Shall Go Ill When You Find Your Mare," that Soo-jung is observed reaching her destination and the succeeding fabulary events occur. The name of the segment is adapted from Puck's lines in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*: "Jack shall have Jill, / Naught shall go ill: / The man shall have his mare again, and all shall be well."[61] This reference to Shakespeare's play echoes the allusive strategy of the film's English-language title, which itself is a reference to a painting by Marcel Duchamp. Rather than being exactingly descriptive like the borrowed name of the feature (as both Young-soo and Jae-hoon do attempt to disrobe the titular virgin), the audience has been coached through the pattern of a schema to understand that "naught shall go ill" is playfully ironic.

Virgin Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors displays its comedic sensibility with the constant emasculation of the "Jacks" of the narrative (Young-soo and Jae-hoon, especially) during their pursuit of Soo-jung. A perceptive understanding of romantic irony is encouraged at the level of individual scenes, particularly by the awkwardness of the sexual interactions between Soo-jung and various men. The most uncomfortable of these encounters occurs as she masturbates her

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[61] William Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream: The New Cambridge Shakespeare*, ed. R.A. Foakes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) 3.2.461-63.

brother at the beginning of "Perhaps Intention," an asymmetrical moment that recasts the spectator's sexual portrait of the virginal Soo-jung. The incestuous encounter is also linked to the contradictions and unclear focalization of the second and fourth segments due to its specific placement. Overall, this narrative instability suggests that an idyllic ending to Jae-hoon and Soo-jung's romance cannot be assured.

If the segment titles of *Virgin Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors* function to guide the spectator and aid with the process of fabulary reconstruction, the names of "Perhaps Accident" and "Perhaps Intention" are both leading and *mis*leading.These two headings suggest that in the first unfolding, the encounters between the characters are enabled by happenstance whilst the second retells the same events as purposeful. However, the film does not otherwise exhibit a preoccupation with themes of fate and agency; amongst Hong's films, this interest only takes on a significant dimension with a visit to a medium in *On the Occasion of Remembering the Turning Gate*. While binary dynamic between fate and agency is not a dominant theme, it bears a schematic affinity to the discourse on authorial interpretation that is continuous throughout Hong Sang-soo's filmography.

A comparison can be made to Barthes' dichotomy of interpretation, through which an alignment is observed between accident/fate and connotation, serving "as a way into the polysemy of the classic text."[62] Conversely, intention/agency is comparable to a denotative model of interpretation in which the film is objective and the meaning is determined by the author. It must be noted that if one of the narrative paths is perhaps accidental and the other is perhaps intentional, then the deployment of the word "perhaps" suggests that both incidences

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[62] Barthes, *S/Z* 8.

have the capacity to be accidental *and* intentional. Barthes' observations on interpretation inadequately capture the ambiguity of the naming device and the vocabulary employed to deemphasize a binary understanding.

The seven numbered segments that compose the two narrative paths feature many of the same events, although differences can be observed. Hong Sang-soo acknowledges this disparity, which emerged in the editing process: "Numbers seem to show exact parallel, but the parallel continuity veers off from what is expected."[63] The many significant narrative events occur parallel in both episodes. In (1), Jae-hoon, Young-soo and Soo-jung go for lunch after leaving Jae-hoon's art gallery. Jae-hoon and Soo-jung reencounter each other in a park during (2), where Soo-jung is involved in a film production. Soo-jung accompanies Young-soo to a Christmas party where Jae-hoon is already present in both "Perhaps Accident" and "Perhaps Intention." However, this moment occurs in (6) in the former and (5) in the latter segment. In the first telling of (7), Soo-jung is unwilling to copulate in a hotel room with Jae-hoon because she is menstruating. This moment does not find its match in "Perhaps Intention," with the female protagonist later losing her virginity (following the trip in the cable car) during "Naught Shall Go Ill When You Find Your Mare"; notably, this occurs in the same hotel room that Jae-hoon is waiting in at the beginning of the film. It is then to be inferred that he has been waiting for Soo-jung since the opening frames of the *syuzhet*.

The variations between "Perhaps Accident" and "Perhaps Intention" can be organized into two categories: new scenes occurring within the same timeframe in different locations, and uncanny repetitions of existing scenes in which major or minor differences are observed. An

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[63] Huh, *HONG Sangsoo* 59.

example of the former is evidenced in the second subsegment of both paths, with the encounter between Jae-hoon and Soo-jung in a park near his gallery. Both iterations are communicated through an almost identically composed long take, in which she enters the right of the frame and he moves in the image from the left before they settle in a two-shot. In "Perhaps Accident," Jae-hoon acknowledges the coincidence of their encounter and abruptly demands the gloves that Soo-jung is carrying; she found them on a bench and they apparently belong to him. He conveys his excitement by saying: "I can't believe that you, Soo-jung, brought them to me." She is, in turn, surprised that he remembers her name. She insists that she has to return to work, ultimately leaving the left of the frame. It should be noted that the limited level of familiarity between the two corroborates the assumption that "Day's Wait," placed at the beginning of the *syuzhet*, in fact occurs later in the *fabula*.

In the reprisal of this moment occurring during "Perhaps Intention," Jae-hoon instead first greets Soo-jung and uses her name, much to her excitement. In turn, she offers the gloves to him, in a key alteration of the initial iteration. The reversal of the order of these critical gestures— greeting first, exchange of article second—suggests that the first telling of the encounter, dominated by the awkwardness of his interaction, is deprecating towards Jae-hoon. Conversely, the second representation of this moment, in which he does not display such maladroit behavior, sees that eagerness instead emerging from Soo-jung. Her offering of the gloves to Jae-hoon and her desire that they belong to him is the best evidence of her affection for him. The repetition of this specific happenstance also suggests that the authenticity of the ritual surrounding the gloves is dubious, and the characters alternate in their desperation for interaction. That chance is mentioned during the two meetings, both of which are ritualistically contrived, further implies

that accident and intention are neither exclusive nor absolute.

The specificity of this particular take, occurring in both narrative paths of *Virgin Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors,* exemplifies a strategy of uncanny repetition. Alternatively, the moments that precede and follow this shot consist of new or reordered sequences that have a significant impact on perceived focalization and narrative economy. The (2) of "Perhaps Accident" begins with Jae-hoon leaving his gallery to wander towards the park where he will come upon Soo-jung. In this scenario, the spectator is not made so explicitly aware of the context of her presence; Jae-hoon stumbles into the path of a film crew and is told by an off-screen voice to remove himself from the shot. His narrative position as focalizer is suggested by the camera immediately following his presence as well as the placement of the film production outside of the frame. The strategy of deemphasizing the intertextual film production is consistent with the entirety of this narrative path, as Jae-hoon is removed from the filmmaking community that unites Soo-jung and Young-soo.

The elision of this element from the overall narrative is made more obvious through the differences observed in "Perhaps Intention." This alternative segment opens with a shot of Soo-jung in the backseat of a car with the production crew, debating on where to go to shoot. This alteration enforces an impression of events being re-focalized through the female protagonist, while the initial telling remains aligned with Jae-hoon—an impression which will be exposed as largely misleading due to key breaks in focalization. In an interview with Huh Moonyung, Hong Sang-soo confesses to a modicum of subjective alignment intended in his creative process, with the film gestating from the concept of differing recollections of a courtship.[64] However, this

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[64] Huh 59.

stated authorial intention is an abstraction which is not present in the narrative as it is being discussed here. Similarly, it can only aid in one subjective comprehension of the film's *fabula*, for which an objective reconstruction is not possible. This investment in the author's creative agenda is ultimately counter to Barthes' notion of re-reading and the plural nature of a text.

The pronounced difference between the opening shots of each (2), as well as the moments that follow, exhibits a trait that is characteristic of forking-paths narratives—as defined by David Bordwell—which shall be explored in further depth in the third chapter. One of the tenets of this model of uncommon narratives is that successive tellings assume knowledge acquired from earlier paths. Bordwell notes that this is a feedback system, involving each representation: "What comes earlier shapes our expectations about what follows. What comes later modifies our understanding of what went before; retrospection is often as important as prospection."[65] Along these lines, it becomes unnecessary to reprise Jae-hoon's arrival in the second (2) as the lack of interaction to modify would render the representation redundant.

As noted above, the interplay of similar shots with changes in dialogue and performative gestures with new scenes serves to complete the spectator's understanding of the relationship between the two characters. Following the analyzed two-shot, the arrangement and content of shots again diverge, with "Perhaps Intention" advancing further forward in time. In "Perhaps Accident," Jae-hoon suggests that Soo-jung meets him and Young-soo again before she exits the frame; the next shot is a two-shot in a restaurant of the principal male characters. Comparatively, the second path cuts directly from the two figures conversing in the park to the restaurant. In this second telling, the spectator can reliably assume that their conversation lead to the same location,

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[65] David Bordwell, "Film Futures," *SubStance* 31.1 (2002): 98.

with the elision of Jae-hoon's soliciting Soo-jung's presence reinforcing the impression of her adulation of him.

The Illusion of Focalization and Fabulary Reconstruction

The complicated narrative structure of *Virgin Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors*, involving two potential narratives paths, challenges the spectator to assign a purpose to the device. A keen observer, or one who has revisited the film on multiple occasions, is expected to make initiatives to parse out a coherent *fabula* from the events as they are arranged in the film's plot. Peter F. Parshall's thorough analysis of the narrative structure makes the sensible assumption that the first, third and fifth chapters are told in a linear order, with the second and fourth chapters acting as complimentary and contradictory flashbacks for which the conclusion is the same.[66] The logical first step in rationalizing the film's storytelling strategy is to observe a pattern in "Perhaps Accident" and "Perhaps Intention," as they serve to offer "two versions of the courtship that has led to their [Jae-hoon and Soo-jung] meeting at the hotel."[67] This particular inquiry into the function of the *syuzhet* invests the two alternating paths with "his" and "hers" perspectives which contribute to "indeterminate characters, floating through life with no clear objective."[68] Parshall's assumption is that there is an intentional relationship between the uncertainty of the narrative and the confused portraits of the protagonists, one created by alternating focalization.

I propose that, instead of strictly aligning the two narrative paths with distinct focalizers, the film is instead establishing an additional layer of narrative illusion through the uncanny

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[66] Peter F. Parshall, *Altman and After: Multiple Narratives in Film* (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2012).

[67] Parshall 148.

[68] Parshall 171.

repetition. Point of view, rather than encouraging psychological access to the admittedly static, stock characters that populate Hong's cinema, further obfuscates the process of reading and comprehension. As an example, Parshall states that "Perhaps Accident" "may be Jae-hoon's version of events, although it is not specifically told from his point of view—there is no voiceover, for example—and he is not present to witness some of the events portrayed."[69] Edward Branigan recognizes that multiple levels of narration exist and shift between objective and subjective, with one establishing a fiction of the others. He notes: "This one narration is, in fact, just everything the viewer knows about the underlying structure of the text."[70] Already, *Virgin Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors* challenges this convention with its two dominant "narrations"—a term which is equivalent to Parshall's "versions"—that carry equal weight as real. Nonetheless, the spectator can be relatively confident that both paths lead into the film's three fixed chapters, which instead become the reference point for truth value.

The assumption of "Perhaps Accident" and "Perhaps Intention" assigned to the subjectivity of Jae-hoon and Soo-jung, respectively, could only be evidenced on the four lower levels (action, speech, perception and thought) on Branigan's hierarchies of narration. This is because the two figures must be acting as focalizers, not narrators, for this level of reflection "involves a character neither speaking (narrating, reporting, communicating), nor acting (focusing, focused by), but rather actually *experiencing* something through seeing or hearing it."[71] Certain sequences and shots, such as the beginning of (2) exclusively featuring either Jae-hoon or Soo-jung, support Parshall's theory of a focalizing structure.

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[69] Parshall 148.

[70] Edward Branigan, *Point of View in the Cinema* (Berlin: Mouton, 1984) 49.

[71] Branigan, *Narrative Comprehension and Film* 100.

However, other moments can be seen to disrupt Parshall's interpretation of the film. One example is an event in both paths' (1), where all three principal characters go for lunch. In "Perhaps Accident," Jae-hoon leaves the table sick, with only Soo-jung and Young-soo remaining in the frame. By comparison, Young-soo rushes to the washroom in "Perhaps Intention." This moment, which occurs in both narratives, exemplifies the types of differences between the two narrative paths, and it is not an alteration that can be explained by focalization. This particular shot can only be explained by an understanding of the camera as objective and non-focalized. The alteration, which is largely arbitrary, foregrounds the process of re-reading the text while refusing an authorial-intended meaning. Further, the character-aligned interpretation of the two narrative paths are reliant on a psychological understanding that is refuted by the stylistic insistence on long shots, long takes and a paucity of close-ups.

Returning then to the distinctions that dominate this study—between *syuzhet* and *fabula*, fiction and diegesis—the narrative processes in *Virgin Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors* becomes both more and less clear. As I have already investigated, the spectatorial process of reconstructing the *fabula* from events evidenced in the plot is foregrounded in the film through an unusual structure. Three segments of the narrative assume reliable fabulary positions, as "Day's Wait," "Suspended Cable Car" and "Naught Shall Go Ill When You Find Your Mare" occur in that order. Jae-hoon calls Soo-jung from the hotel room, Soo-jung gets stuck on the cable car on her way to meet him, all of which culminates in a sexual rendezvous that results in the loss of her virginity.

I contend, however, that a dual narrative-path structure leaves the film without a coherent *fabula*. One strategy observable in other films is to emphasize an ambiguity of knowledge

through what is elided; as an example, in *Hill of Freedom*, a letter is left behind and the information found therein is assumed to be inaccessible to the narrative. However, in *Virgin Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors*, the presentation of events twice in the *syuzhet*, with minor alterations, threatens realistic value that would be assigned to these segments of the narrative, rendering them equally disputable. Marshall Deutelbaum proposes an alternative theory of the first lunch meal in (1), where different characters leave the table in each version: "Internal evidence indicates, however, that rather than alternate versions of the same moment, the two scenes are separate, sequential events."[72] Although this is a functional interpretation, other instances—such as the exchange of the glove—damage the truth value of represented images to the point where such an interpretation cannot be absolute. Further, it runs counter to a strategy of re-reading in which the spectator is central and privileged with interpretative power.

Destabilizing fabulary certainty through the alternative narrative paths of "Perhaps Accident" and "Perhaps Intention," *Virgin Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors* displays an unusual dynamic between the fictional and diegetic levels of the film text that is consistent with the open-ended understanding of *Hill of Freedom* and *In Another Country* developed in the first chapter. While there is only one overarching fiction, the uncertainty of the story can be explained by the actualization of multiple diegeses in the narrative. The device of naming the separate parts of the film with imposed text is viewed through Branigan's model as a role that is assigned to the actions of an extra-fictional narrator, acting on the level of fiction. It is from this higher level of fiction, which, like the *syuzhet*, is cohesive and unambiguous, that a more complicated story world emerges.

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[72] Deutelbaum, "Deceptive Design" 195.

Following on from the comparable circumstances of *In Another Country*, I propose that there are at least two diegeses in *Virgin Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors*. These are structured around the second and fourth segments, with the certain narrative events existing simultaneously in both. Therefore, both story worlds manifest events that occur in the same way, events that occur in different ways and perhaps, events that don't occur at all. The implications of this diegetic uncertainty become further reaching as the spectator is empowered to synthesize story worlds in which the occurrence of events witnessed in the plots of "Perhaps Accident" or "Perhaps Intention" are selected to be objectively real or not. The end result of the unclear fabulary status is a privileging of the audience to create an infinite of subjective fictions. The banality of numerous moments and gestures in the film which can be empowered with a subjective measure as reality undermines Bordwell's claim of one potential narrative path carrying more truth value than another.[73]

The Day He Arrives: Monochromatic Aesthetic, Spectral Narrative

One of Kevin B. Lee's claims in "Viewing Between the Lines," his video essay on *The Day He Arrives*, is that the film's aesthetic foregrounds a superficial realism which slowly reveals a confounding narrative structure.[74] The occurrence of stylistic tropes consistent with Hong Sang-soo's films, such as sequences of shots of banal events like eating and drinking, likely motivate Lee's statement. However, I challenge the understanding that the film's most aberrant aesthetic choice—black-and-white photography—is evidence of a realistic visual

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[73] Bordwell, "Film Futures" 100.

[74] Kevin B. Lee, "Viewing Between the Lines" (visual essay), *The Day He Arrives,* DVD (Cinema Guild, 2012).

strategy. Rather, this unconventional stylistic property underlines the speculative nature of *The Day He Arrives*' narrative, which is suspended between the monolithic notions of "reality" and "fantasy"

In *Chromatic Cinema*, a historical account of the deployment of color in cinema, Richard Misek notes that the connotative relationship between a monochrome palette and realism is tied to a specific historical period.[75] Relating the visual mode to Bordwell's categories of motivation, Misek states: "Black-and-white was cinema's technological and aesthetic default, and so exempt from the need to be motivated. Color, less common and so more noticeable, was not."[76] In order to justify the aesthetic deviation, color was then typically employed to cue the spectator to the presence of a dream state or fantasy sequence. The dynamic between color and black-and-white of signifying normative or deviant aesthetics then becomes reoriented in the early 1970s, as color came to assume the default realistic mode.[77]

Black-and-white is still occasionally employed as an aesthetic mode in contemporary cinema. For recent films, monochromatic cinematography inevitably expresses a stylistic audacity on the part of the production. This decision can also make a claim counter to normative realism, albeit rarely. Such a case could be made for the Hollywood studio production *Nebraska* (Alexander Payne, 2013), although I otherwise would insist that black-and-white no longer has an exclusive claim on this notion in a larger system of signification. This aesthetic now most often serves to reflexively acknowledge a historical mode, fashionably evidenced by internationally successful films *The Artist* (Michel Hazanavicius, 2011) or *Ida (*Paweł

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[75] Richard Misek, *Chromatic Cinema: A History of Screen Color* (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010).

[76] Misek 30.

[77] Misek 94.

Pawlikowski, 2013).

Alternatively, contemporary black-and-white photography is found in austere art cinema, best exemplified by the films of Béla Tarr. I wish to read beyond the art cinema dimension of Hong Sang-soo's films (approaches of which are typified by reductive comparisons to the work of superficially similar filmmakers like Éric Rohmer or Woody Allen) and the interpretation of the choice of black-and-white as mere affectation. Further, it can be observed that black-and-white interacts with and compounds the impact of other stylistic devices, particularly narrative, on the spectator. As James Quandt points out, some of the advertising materials for the film exist in color[78]; the desaturation of the filmed image signals black-and-white as a central direction for making meaning.

With the history of the signification of black-and-white cinema in mind, it should be observed that *The Day He Arrives* indicates to the spectator that the film can be operating on a heightened level of fantasy, and that the cinematography does not exclusively cue realistic connotations. Alongside *Virgin Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors*, *The Day He Arrives* distinguishes itself from the rest of Hong Sang-soo's films by virtue of its monochromatic photography. The film's *syuzhet* then goes on to present a number of lapses that further encourage the spectator to question the relative reality of the narrative. The primary argument raised by Kevin B. Lee—of whether the ambiguous structure of the film challenges the span of the *fabula*—is in fact a measurement of the truth value of the narrative. In *The Day He Arrives*, filmmaker Seong-jun (Yoo Jun-sang) returns to Seoul for an indeterminate length of time; at one point he tells a character three to four days, and to another he says he doesn't know. Voiceover

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[78] James Quandt, "Déjà Vu" (liner notes), *The Day He Arrives*, DVD (Cinema Guild) n. pag.

narrations informs us that his only wish is to visit his friend Young-ho (Kim Sang-joong), but in his aimless wandering he repeatedly comes to encounter faces new and old. An implication is made that the same day is replaying itself, most convincingly manifested in the *syuzhet* by three successive visits to a bar named "Novel." In each instance, Seong-jun, in voiceover, speaks as if it were the first time he and his friend had been there.

This question of truth value and how to organize the *fabula* resonates with the narrative conundrums of other Hong Sang-soo features. Of the three stories and the frame tale in *In Another Country*, we are encouraged to question what is real and what is comparatively fictional. How does the reading of the scattered letters contribute to a verifiable story for *Hill of Freedom*, not to mention the positioning of a dream sequence near the end of the film? What is the function of the contradictions in the narrative paths of *Virgin Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors?*

As observed in the above narrative obfuscations, truth value is best understood as a measurement of the validity of the diegesis within a film text. In a film that presents multiple diegeses—such as the film-within-a-film structure of Hong's *Tale of Cinema*—this creates a hierarchy wherein the perceived reality of one diegesis is relative to that of another. Edward Branigan raises the concept of truth value as a way to more effectively comprehend examples of non-narrative cinema, such as Chris Marker's *Sans soleil* (1983):

> This division between understanding and belief—between comprehending that a pattern is narrative as opposed to judging its accuracy or relevance in a world—directly raises the problem of how a text may be taken as true, if at all, in one or another interpretation and how it may have consequences for our conceptions of the ordinary world.[79]

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[79] Branigan, *Narrative Comprehension and Film* 192.

In other words, a conventional narrative film presents a *syuzhet* that enables the spectator to construct a coherent *fabula* from the events as they are arranged in the text. This comprehension does not lead the spectator to question the fictional boundaries of the text, which subsequently do not direct towards optional narrative paths of interpretation. As such, the reader maintains both an understanding of and a relative belief in the truth value of the fiction.

By contrast, certain films—including those directed by Hong Sang-soo—lead the spectator to question the truth value of the potential diegeses as a result of their construction. Branigan's example of *Sans soleil*, as a touchstone of non-narrative films, draws the boundaries between documentary and fiction cinema into question. In this dichotomy, two poles of relative truth can be observed: comparative to the "reality" of a documentary, an overtly fictional text is endowed with comparatively minor truth value. The confusion of documentary and fictional modes leads the spectator to actively measure the truth value of such a film; in the example of Marker's feature, images that we recognize from our reality are conformed to a fantastic visual essay that transcends the limitations of a conventional documentary. Alternatively, a film such as Shohei Imamura's *A Man Vanishes* (*Ningen jōhatsu*, 1967) is a black-and-white fiction masquerading as a documentary, which in its concluding moments exposes the fictitious nature of its *vérité* aspirations. Imamura's film refuses the generic labels that enable the spectator to identify the text as real or contrived, or to identify at which point in the narrative the documentary element becomes manipulated and the truth value then fluctuates.

Truth value in the films of Hong Sang-soo cannot be understood in the same manner as the classical binaries of fiction/non-fiction. Whereas *A Man Vanishes* employs black-and-white to misdirect and cue the spectator to imbue the narrative with greater truth value—in the

historical moment of its production, indicating a newsreel-like honestly—then *The Day He Arrives* functions inversely by utilizing monochrome cinematography to query one's belief in the truth value of the film's banality as an unspectacular narrative. In the film, which primarily consists of a handful of characters wandering the streets of Seoul by day and drinking *soju* by night, a spectator with schematic expectations appropriate to simple comedies—rather than to Hong's cinema—would not expect to observe an assault on the relative reality of the fiction that is offered. Robert Koehler remarks: "In the brave new world of films that have escaped from the categories of 'narrative' and 'documentary,' the matter at hand isn't one of—to use another quotable word—'reality.'"[80] Hong Sang-soo's work is yet one step further outside this dichotomy; rather than existing somewhere between the fiction/non-fiction binary, his films appear to inhabit the space between fiction and fiction.

One exchange in *The Day He Arrives* can be interpreted as a warning against the dangers of such an understanding. During the second of three evenings at Novel, Joong-won (Kim Eui-seong) explains to Young-ho and the bar owner, Ye-jeon (Kim Bo-kyung) about the fallibility of interpreting two extremes; particularly, that most people will observe themselves within two poles of behavior if someone proposes that they are characterized by such diametric oppositions. Young-ho suggests, "We fall for it because of our opposing tendencies," and indeed, Ye-jeon is convinced when Joong-won describes her as overtly practical and discreetly emotional. Reading this dialogue as an intra-textual cautioning, the spectator is empowered to interpret the text through its shades of grey—gradations of fiction that unsettle the cohesion of the narrative and again, manifest as a potential multiplicity of diegeses.

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[80] Robert Koehler, "Agrarian Utopias/Dystopias: The New Nonfiction," *Cinema Scope* 40 (2009): 13.

Ambiguities of Fabulary Duration

Moving beyond the signification of its aesthetic, I propose to analyze *The Day He Arrives* for the ambiguities in its *syuzhet*, so as to better illustrate the impact on the truth value of the film text. Characteristic of Hong Sang-soo's cinema, the film registers multiple interpretative paths. In the process of reconstructing the *fabula*, the spectator can infer that as many as five days pass during Seong-jun's visit, or that the *syuzhet* is in fact presenting the same day multiple times—the *days* that he arrives, rather than the *day*. Using the filmmaker's propensity for the zoom as one impetus for his argument, James Quandt suggests that the ambiguity of this text is of a kind with the films of Alain Resnais, such as *Muriel ou le Temps d'un retour* (1963) and the pinnacle of modernist narratives, *L'Année dernière de Marienbad* (1962). Quandt also makes a distinction between the more recent Hong films and his earlier work, namely that the later works "often repeat episodes more than twice—literally, *déjà vu* all over again—varying the version of events to cast doubt on their veracity or to offer scrutiny of his complicated characters."[81]

It is worth reiterating that the repeated days which serve to render ambiguous the span of the *fabula* are not linked to character subjectivity. There is a danger in an excessive investment in the significance of character subjectivity in the films of Hong Sang-soo, where I have previously suggested as motivation to dis-align the two narrative paths of *Virgin Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors* from "his" and "hers" perspectives. The reductive perspective of male/female paths cannot be observed in *The Day He Arrives* and *In Another Country*, in part due to these films being primarily focalized through one character. Both films also further complicate the notion

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[81] Quandt, "Déjà vu" n. pag.

and importance of character by having actors playing multiple roles within the film, such as the three diegetically-exclusive Annes of *In Another Country*. In the case of *The Day He Arrives*, we are forced to acknowledge the challenge of accepting Kim Bo-kyung portraying both Seong-jun's ex-girlfriend and the bar hostess within (what may be understood as) one diegesis. The likeness between the two characters further further challenges realistic interpretations of the film. In the third chapter, I will go on to propose a more productive integration for issues of gender and unconventional narratives in Hong's cinema.

I have already acknowledged the three visits to Novel and its introduction through voiceover as a strong indication that fabulary events are being repeated—evidence which is also noted by both Lee and Quandt. Lee's video essay, which visually presents the software the critic uses to catalogue the similar shots employed in the film, accounts for both recurring frame compositions as well as the reprisal of exact frames. Although this repeating of images is likely to escape the scrutiny of a casual spectator, the uncanniness of similar images becomes more apparent upon successive viewings. Additionally, the compositions that Lee cites, including three-shots of figures as they drink and eat, are schematically associated with other films of Hong Sang-soo and encourage active connections to similar images in the director's other work.

Of the film, Lee suggests that "serendipity is like a cheap aphrodisiac," and remarks on the compelling nature of narrative patterns in relation to efforts to mine the text for meaning. In the case of his analysis, the repetitions provide a structure through which to trace the transforming relationship of the characters. I propose that if this line of character-centric study must be followed, one shall instead observe a cycle of repetition in which Seong-jun's evasive relationship with Ye-jeon becomes not unlike the one he shares with his ex-girlfriend. Instead of

displaying growth, a character like Seong-jun is trapped to repeat performative, canned outbursts of emotion that signify stagnation; this includes his quickly-forgotten interaction with his former partner early in the film. Overall, the spectator is motivated to move beyond the explicit parallels of the narrative, such as the case of two women performed by the same actress, and unearth the discreet examples of repetition along the lines of Lee's discoveries in his visual essay.

If the repetitive structure of *The Day He Arrives* renders ambiguous the temporal span of the film's *syuzhet*, what evidence can be seen to work against the interpretation of one day recurring? An understanding of the film through an emphasis on characterization does not necessarily provide compelling cues in either direction. For the argument in favor of the *fabula* occurring over five days, one can look towards Seong-jun's interaction with the students he encounters. When he runs into them a second time, he is evasive and avoids conversation as if to shy away from his outburst at their apparent imitation of his behavior the previous evening. Recall, however, the protagonist's objective cued by early voiceover—Seong-jun intends to avoid interaction wherever possible except with Young-ho. Through any temporal understanding, Seong-jun fails in this goal, though it is conceivable that in one iteration he engages with the students and in another, avoids them.

Conversely, the protagonist's kiss with Ye-jeon on the second visit to Novel encourages the interpretation of the span of the film's *fabula* as measuring five days. One night, they share a romantic kiss in the snow—the rehearsed and fantastic nature of the moment is underscored by the black-and-white aesthetic—while the next evening, she appears to not recall the moment just as Seong-jun expresses embarrassment over it. Hye Seung Chung and David Scott Diffrient's interpretation of Hong's cinema as a gendered "'double-directed' discourse [...] in which two

contending voices can be heard"[82] isn't pertinent, as such moments as the ones I have cited fail in evidencing the gender binaries that the authors associate with forgetfulness and South Korean modernism. The branching narratives and optional paths continually work against characterization, appearing to unfold without any meaningful order or arc. This strategy is particularly notable in a film that is almost exclusively being focalized through one character, Seong-jun, just as the absence of larger cultural referents foregrounds the film's narrative construction in a banal context.

In the first chapter, *In Another Country* was analyzed for its presentation of story worlds and space, in which the perceptual similarities between parallel versions of Mohang function as a *trompe l'oeil* that conceals diegetic distinctions. In *The Day He Arrives*, spatial (dis)continuity—in conjunction with temporality—illuminates the intricacies of the film's narrative play and its impact on spectatorial interpretation. Clues in the *mise en scène* following the second evening at Novel are significant to constructing either of the oppositional understandings of the film's fabulary duration. An emphatically romantic moment between Seong-jun and Ye-jeon in the smoking area of the bar is heightened by the coincidental commencement of a snowfall. The visibility of the snowfall—the most obvious distinction between this evening of insobriety and the others—carries over as the characters not only close the bar but appear to revel into the following morning. The slushy precipitation is one marker of a continuity of action through space; it serves as a link between the end of one day and the beginning of the proceeding one. This meteorological device connects the shots in a way that defies the structural interpretation of

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[82] Hye Seung Chung and David Scott Diffrient, "Forgetting to Remember, Remembering to Forget: The Politics of Memory and Modernity in the Fractured Films of Lee Chang-dong and Hong Sang-soo," *Seoul Searching: Culture and Identity in Contemporary Korean Cinema*, ed. Frances Gateward (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007) 133.

Figs. 3 and 4 In the first frame, Seong-jun (Yoo Jun-sang) and Ye-jeon (Kim Bo-kyung) wait for a cab in dire weather. In the next shot with Seong-jun and Young-ho (Kim Sang-joong), all the snow has completely disappeared. Is this meteorological discontinuity, or is it evidence that the same day is repeating itself?

the narrative as repetitive. Working alongside the visual contrast of the bar at night and the street by morning, the stylistic deployment of shots of varied composition and content operate counter to the reprisal of framings within familiar spaces that characterizes Kevin B. Lee's analysis of the film.

As much as the spectator is encouraged to infer linearity from the snow that links the second *syuzhet*-occurring evening at Novel to what may be the day *after* he arrives, the continuity evidenced in the diegetic space is quickly ruptured. In the morning after the second visit to Novel, the characters are hailing taxis as the snow falls around them with the sequence ending in a long two-shot of Seong-jun and Ye-jeon (fig. 3). This image is followed by a cut to Seong-jun and Young-ho again wandering Seoul (fig. 4). The conventional assumption is to infer that a significant amount of time has passed, with this transition at the very least substituting for duration necessary for the two characters to reunite; within the same take, Young-ho had caught his cab before Seong-jun and Ye-jeon.

However, the discontinuity marked by the absence of snow in the image—and all the

remaining shots in the film—leads one to speculate about the nature of the elision that is created between these two shots. Logic precludes that, if these two moments happened on the same day within the same narrative path, no measure of time or temperature change could justify the absence of evidence of a snowfall. Perhaps more than other narrative events in the film, the connection (or disconnection) between these two shots destabilizes the spectator's confidence in the text as a presentation of a linear continuity. The interpretation of this discontinuity as an error of the film's production (the absence of intentionality, whereas the rest of the film would be marked by nothing but) raises similar concerns of the goldfish in *The Power of Kangwon Province* and the objects on a table as clues to reconciling the diverging paths of *Virgin Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors*.

Conclusion

The closing images of the film, in which a woman takes the photograph of Seong-jun, functions as a terminating reflection on discourses of fabulary duration emerging from *The Day He Arrives*. Immediately, this is observed as an ironic play on the character's slippery presence in Seoul, with the final moments of the plot seeing him trapped in an encounter with a stranger. Politeness deprives Seong-jun of a measure of agency (he cannot act out of insobriety as he did with the students) and the medium of photography then becomes a record of his presence, heretofore ephemeral. Just as the film does not visualize for the spectator Seong-jun's moment of arrival at the outset of the narrative, his moment of departure is equally elided from the film's *syuzhet*.

Consequently, no certainty is offered as to if, where or how his departure would manifest

in the *fabula* of the narrative. All that remains is this event of photography, a reflexive commentary on the mimetic act that cinema in many ways also incarnates. However, films operating in a speculative mode like *The Day He Arrives* highlight this illusory misconception as it is propagated by conventional cinematic patterns. The accepted structures of the medium can assume the form of familiar narratives that encourage objective comprehension, or aesthetic strategies that are associated with conventions of realism, such as the presence or absence of color. It is in these recognizable principals that I have illustrated Hong Sang-soo's film operates counter to, through its skepticism of narrative truth value.

The ambiguity of the fabulary status of *The Day He Arrives* is paralleled by the truth value of the photos of Seong-jun, serving as a representation of a reality. The image as it is taken within the diegesis speaks to the precise moment in which the photograph was captured, positioned in a chain of events as a narrative process. Likewise, this replication keeps Seong-jun in Seoul perpetually—the same day over and over, which is consistent with one interpretation of the narrative's *fabula*. We must also consider the act of taking the photograph in the diegesis, and during the making of the film.

As with the conundrum of the disappearing snowfall, these extra-textual levels have an impact on the spectator's interpretation of the film. As Edward Branigan explores, the image— and I also propose, the narrative—is enhanced by this radial meaning.[83] The spectator's double recognition of both primary readings of the film, as with *Virgin Stripped Bared by Her Bachelors*, creates an interpretive spectrum in which the audience is privileged to explore the contours of the film's fictional world and its schema-enforcing intertexts. It is in this final

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[83] Branigan, *Projecting a Camera* 103.

moment in which a diegetic camera is directed at Seong-jun—our inert surrogate in the film—

that we are lead to acknowledge the reflexivity of the text and our own agency in its

construction.

CHAPTER THREE

Up to this point, I have addressed the unique narrative circumstances of the cinema of Hong Sang-soo. In order to best observe the intricacy of the storytelling strategies evidenced in the films discussed, terminology necessary for a style-based interrogative framework has been established. These concepts include the Russian Formalist notions of *fabula* and *syuzhet*, observable boundaries of diegeses within a larger fiction, as well as clarifying truth value as the measurement of the relative reality of the separate diegeses. An analysis of the arrangements of the *syuzhet* of *Virgin Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors* and *The Day He Arrives* complicates the notion of an objectively-verifiable *fabula* and challenges the spectator to attribute truth value to the multiplicity of diegeses that may emerge from the process of re-reading the film texts. Hereon, I will reintegrate the understanding of a narrative mode that is thus far tied to an individual filmmaker with preexisting models undertaken by established narratologists, namely David Bordwell's intervention with the forking-paths narrative and Nitzan Ben Shaul's concept of "optional thinking." Through this comparison, I will further frame both the originality and persistence of what is observed in the work of this director and its implications for broader studies of cinematic narratives.

At this juncture, it is necessary to address in depth Bordwell's concept of forking-paths narratives from the article "Film Futures" as the most ingrained model for investigating films presenting multiple reading options. The name of the narrative pattern is itself indebted to a short story by Jorge Luis Borges, "The Garden of Forking Paths" (1941). Using the Argentine author's fiction as a conceptual blueprint, Bordwell establishes seven conventions that structure "how the exfoliating tendrils of Borges's potential futures have been trimmed back to cognitively

manageable dimensions."[84] One of these conventions—that of individual paths presupposing the existence of their predecessors—have previously been established as observable in the narrative construction of *Virgin Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors.* Further conventions of the so-called forking paths include: linearity, signposting, inevitable intersection, unification by traditional cohesion devices, parallelism and that the last path taken is the least hypothetical. A film might not ascribe to all of these conventions, but the majority will be observed. Key works cited in Bordwell's canonical essay include *Blind Chance* (*Przypadek*, Krzysztof Kieślowski, 1981) and *Too Many Ways to Be No. 1* (*Jat go zi tau di daan sang*, Wai Ka-fai, 1997).

Bordwell's model is exceptionally constructive due to the breadth of his examples, which cover various national cinemas and genres: Hong Kong cinema, European art cinema, in addition to both mainstream and independent American filmmaking. A study such as Garrett Stewart's *Framed Time: Towards a Postfilmic Cinema* also attempts to explain unconventional narrative trends, albeit as a manifestation of the cinematic apparatus shifting from analog to digital: "Across the historical transition from filmic to digital screen imaging, it remains the case that—within narrative cinema—the visual can *make reference* to its own history and conditions only by passing through its inherent materialization as *text.*"[85] He notes that the images of both celluloid or digital film texts inexorably drive towards closure or a narrative terminus (the end of the film), with the key difference being how the subject matter of the film expresses its technological mode.

Stewart's postfilmic motivation for temporally-challenging narratives models is rooted in

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[84] Bordwell, "Film Futures" 91.

[85] Garrett Stewart, *Framed Time: Toward a Postfilmic Cinema* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007) 19.

the shifting technical circumstances of film production and exhibition. While compelling in the case of a certain subset of films, this approach can at best only latch onto the misleading intentionality of the film industries expressed within the narratives in Hong Sang-soo's work. As recently as 2012 with the premiere of *In Another Country* at the Festival de Cannes, Hong's work had been both shot and projected on film in spite of a growing trend towards DCP formats.[86] I suggest that this exhibition serves as circumstantial evidence to challenge the notion of a causal relationship between digital filmmaking and alternative narrative models in the films of this South Korean director. In the example of Hong's films, digital as a filmmaking practice is best (and most simply) explained away as little more than a convenience to accommodate the speed and budgets at which the director works.

Further, the two generic trends that Stewart proposes as encapsulating this postfilmic moment—big-budget, technologically complex American films and European arthouse clichés— are problematic. These limiting categories would then have already excluded the work of Hong Sang-soo, not to mention other millennial films identifiable for their temporally playful narratives, such as *Amores perros* (Alejandro González Iñárritu, 2000), *2046* (Wong Kar Wai, 2004) or *Monsoon Shootout* (Amit Kumar, 2013). Although absent from Stewart's inquiry, efforts could be undertaken to unify these contemporary films into a cohesive movement that is not bound by national borders. An alternative argument could be made that we are witnessing an interplay of transnational cinema cross-pollinating with films displaying concerns of temporality through narrative. Subsequently, the sites of dispersal are plausibly the competitive film festivals at which Hong's work, amongst that of the others cited, is initially disseminated. However, for

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[86] *In Another Country,* press kit, (Finecut, 2012) 3. I was also personally for present for this projection in the Grand Theatre Lumière at Cannes.

the purposes of this study, the focus will remain the play between style and narrative. This is independent of the medium of production and exhibition, just as the national context of these films will remain largely unexplored herein.

In chorus with Bordwell's inquiries on forking-paths narratives, Peter F. Parshall's *Altman and After: Multiple Narratives in Film* offers an alternative taxonomy centered around the "'90s narrative revolution."[87] Parshall's framework is more expansive than the forking-paths model, as suggested by the inclusion of a category of mosaic films best exemplified by Robert Altman's *Nashville* (1975). The other two models are network and database narratives; it is in the second that *Virgin Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors* is discussed. Even though the term "database" is generally (albeit not completely) synonymous with a forking-paths approach and the trappings therein, Parshall tellingly observes: "Hong is far more radical, presenting differences so profound that one must question whether any knowable 'reality' exists at all."[88]

In conforming the forking-paths theory to the films of Hong Sang-soo, the largest objection doesn't emerge in the presence or absence of its seven characteristics; rather, what is incongruent is Bordwell's assertion that the narrative structure is limiting in order to best guide the spectator's comprehension. In her response to "Film Futures," Kay Young notes that Bordwell's essay is interpolated through the method of folk psychology—an understanding of mental processes that is logical rather than scientifically observed—which "seems to carry with it an understanding of cognition that is fairly monolithic and quick to shut down alternatives."[89]

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[87] Parshall, *Altman and After* 4.

[88] Parshall 15.

[89] Kay Young, "'That Fabric of Times': A Response to David Bordwell's 'Film Futures,'" *SubStance* 31.1 (2002): 115.

She further isolates the interpretation of Borges' "infinity," which becomes (contradictorily) constrictive in Bordwell's compelling efforts to render the narrative structures of these open-ended texts digestible. I have already strongly suggested that the permutations of interpretations accessible in *Virgin Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors* or *The Day He Arrives* are indeed infinite, multiplying through the entanglement of complimentary and contradicting events in the *syuzhet*. Even if the spectator can only fathom a limited number of permutations, other arrangements nonetheless conceptually exist.

Measuring these two films against the conventions of forking-paths narratives, the deviations of Hong's films from this model clarify the fissures that appear in Bordwell's patterning. Both black-and-white features analyzed in the second chapter are linear in their paths, they repeat scenes, they run parallel in their presentation of events and are marked by similar formal conventions. *Virgin Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors*, more easily read as a forking-paths narrative, also employs signposting—a device which I have exposed as simultaneously misleading and cuing the spectator to the narrative's structuring. Conversely, distrust of the truth value of *The Day He Arrives* is contingent on a more attentive spectator. This idealized audience is better informed of the schematic demands of a Hong Sang-soo film, or at least is motivated to re-read the film in an investigative manner upon recognition of the uncanniness of its repetitions.

The most prominent aberration from the seven tenets of the forking-paths model observable in both films is Bordwell's claim that "the 'recency effect' privileges the *final* future we see."[90] This proposed phenomenon, assuming an escalating quality to be observed in forking-paths narratives, is in opposition to a crucial proponent of this thesis—namely, in which the truth

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[90] Bordwell, "Film Futures" 100.

value of any narrative path is nonpartisan, creating a basis from which the spectator is able to access a multiplicity of readings. The individual paths evidence no moment or error on which the narrative pivots; the successive paths do not function to rectify a mistake in search of an ideal timeline as there is no such major failing. In the case of *Virgin Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors*, the sexual encounter is an inevitable conclusion from which no permutation of events in the *syuzhet* offers respite. Only the nested film-within-a-film structures of *Tale of Cinema* and *Oki's Movie*, by their nature, suggest a diegetic hierarchy; in these films, truth value is more conventionally attributable.

The author of "Film Futures" himself acknowledges Hong's relationship to forking-paths narratives in a recent reflection on that original essay: "Hong Sangsoo has explored the what-if possibility with unusual energy, but he's less explicit about setting up the structure than Hollywood films are. With his movies, sometimes you don't realize you're in a parallel-world plot until you notice repetitions of action with tiny differences."[91] I maintain, however, although in some ways homogenous to the forking-paths model, the persistency of the deviations in Hong Sang-soo's corpus renders the films ultimately unsolvable by Bordwell's (justifiably) rigid theory.

Always in dialogue, Edward Branigan expands upon the diegetic uncertainty of other films that do not conform to ideas of "Film Futures":

> I would prefer to retain the name "forking-paths" narrative as a way of marking a conservative, generic form of narrative (as exemplified by the films Bordwell discusses), while leaving the name "multiple-draft" narrative as a way to cover a more general

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[91] David Bordwell, "What-if movies: Forking paths in the drawing room," *Observations on film art* 23 November 2014, 25 June 2015 <http://www.davidbordwell.net/blog/2014/11/23/what-if-movies-forking-paths-in-the-drawing-room/>.

phenomenon.[92]

Even if Branigan's response to "Film Futures" does not necessarily elucidate the scale and specificity of a "more general phenomenon"—something impossible to do in the space allotted to him in the pages of *SubStance*—he is apt to notice the limitations of Bordwell's model and the necessity of further consideration. I suggest it is logical, then, to return to Borges as the inspiration for the "forking-paths" label and consider how interpretive power and the framing of "infinity" can be re-conceptualized.

Infinite Stories, Infinitely Branching

The link created between the writing of Jorge Luis Borges and Hong Sang-soo through the notion of forking-paths narratives is not an unconventional one. The omniscient prose style of Borges' fiction is quickly identifiable with his writing, while the labyrinthine narratives echo each other in a way that is not unlike the repetitive stories of filmmakers and film professors in Hong's cinematic output. Bernardo Bertolucci's *The Spider's Stratagem* (*Strategia del ragno*, 1970), adapted from Borges' "The Theme of the Traitor and Hero" (1944), is observed to generate "an ambiguous, gamelike process of narrative construction"[93] and utilizes similar obfuscating strategies to *The Day He Arrives*. The most significant advocate for a cinematic realization of Borges' style in the cinema, transnational filmmaker Raúl Ruiz, similarly challenges the notion of truth value in key films like *Trois vies et une seule mort* (1996).

For my reconfiguration of the forking-paths concept, I instead put forth Borges' equally

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[92] Edward Branigan, "Nearly True: Forking Plots, Forking Interpretations: A Response to David Bordwell's 'Film Futures,'" *SubStance* 31.1 (2002): 108.

[93] Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* 88.

pertinent "A Survey of the Works of Herbert Quain" as cementing the Borgesian motif of optional readings. This brief piece of prose masquerades as non-fiction—an essay on the literary works of the fictitious Herbert Quain. In recalling a work by Quain, the essay's "author" recollects a quality that conjures the experience of re-reading Hong Sang-soo's film texts:

> Once the mystery has been cleared up, there is a long retrospective paragraph that contains the following sentence: *Everyone believes that the chessplayers had met accidentally.* That phrase allows one to infer that the solution is in fact in error, and so, uneasy, the reader looks back over the pertinent chapters and discovers *another* solution, which is the correct one. The reader of this remarkable book, then, is more perspicacious than the detective.[94]

Note how this passage is concerned about the reader's engagement through an emphasis on their recognition of being in a position of superior knowledge to the narrative agent. Moreover, the reader's awareness of their own agency is developed through the act of re-reading; the weight of one sentence—comparable to the spectator's investment in the role of a critical shot, cut or element in the *mise en scène*—retroactively alters the meaning of an entire text. The only limitation is that the fictive Quain story, *The Siamese Twin Mystery*, is restricted to two interpretations.

The essay's author then goes on to detail another, more intricate work of Herbert Quain, *April March*, which takes on an exponential structure: a series of three books which are composed of several evenings in which strangers converse on a train platform. The chapters are purportedly "retrograde" as they go on to recount "different possible evenings[s] before the

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[94] Jorge Luis Borges, "A Survey of the Works of Herbert Quain," *Collected Fictions,* trans. Andrew Hurley (New York: Penguin Books, 1998) 108.

first,"[95] recalling films such as *In Another Country* or especially *The Day the Arrives*. As a final statement on *April March*, it is noted: "Quain had second thoughts about the triune order of the book and predicted that the *mortals* who imitated it would opt instead for a binary scheme—while the *gods* and demiurges had chosen an infinite one: infinite stories, infinitely branching."[96] The observances on this made-up magnum opus, again, sound remarkably similar to the qualities found within the work of Hong Sang-soo, particularly with the fictional essayist's mention of "pallid jokes" and "instances of pointless exactitude"[97] in Quain's writing.

There is, however, the question of how we are to understand the distinction between so-called "mortals" and "gods" in the above quote, who can be seen to engage with this or any other text. Rather than excessively investing in the hierarchy of the diction chosen by Borges (and the translator, Andrew Hurley), this is yet another exponent of the ideal reader/spectator conditioned to re-read the text. The man/deity binary is not reducible to a thinly-veiled assault on the capacity of the casual spectator and the critic. Recall the relative crudeness of Clarence Tsui's remarks about *Hill of Freedom* regarding its disposability; Tsui would be best placed in Borges' binary as a man choosing the simplest path through the text. The narrator of "A Survey of the Works of Herbert Quain"—also a critic—serves as a counterpoint, the so-called "god" who recognizes the speculative potential of the work of his subject. This ode to the writing of a fictive author is ultimately consistent with Borges' own objective voice. In addition, "A Survey of the Works of Herbert Quain" details the also-fictive essayist's subjective recall of a body of work alongside a more studied and objectively argued analysis of the infinite paths that emerge in the process of

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[95] Borges 109.

[96] Borges 110. My emphasis.

[97] Borges 110.

reassessing a given text.

The ideal audience therefore can be anyone, as the distinction between "mortal" and "god" is ultimately defined through the audience's commitment to their own subjective agency as a reader. This can be reflected, then, on the constraints that Bordwell has placed on the potential number of forks in a narrative as a condition assumed necessary for the spectator's comprehension of the text. Specifically, these limitations are considered to be determined by the author: "Storytellers' well-entrenched strategies for manipulating time, space, causality, point of view and all the rest reflect what is perceptually and cognitively manageable for their audiences."[98] Not only do Borges' stories—serving as a stated inspiration for Bordwell's forking-paths narrative model—emphasize the readerly in the construction of said paths, they situate the initial fork at the outset of the process of reading.

The audience is given the choice to subscribe to the limitations placed by the author in the writing of the text, or not. This can be observed in Borges' "The Garden of Forking Paths": "In all fictions, each time a man meets diverse alternatives, he chooses one and eliminates the others; in the work of the virtually impossible-to-disentangle Ts'ui Pen, the character chooses— simultaneously—all of them."[99] For a key forking-paths film such as *Blind Chance,* the choices are limited to the three represented fates for the young Polish doctor, of which Bordwell notes enforce how "every choice turns out to be political."[100] The distribution of truth value in Kieślowski's film is arguably simple, at least when considered within the forking-paths matrix; the fabulary span leading up to the reprised freeze frame on the train platform is supremely real,

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[98] Bordwell, "Film Futures" 91.

[99] Jorge Luis Borges, "The Garden of Forking Paths," *Collected Fictions* 125.

[100] Bordwell, "Film Futures" 90.
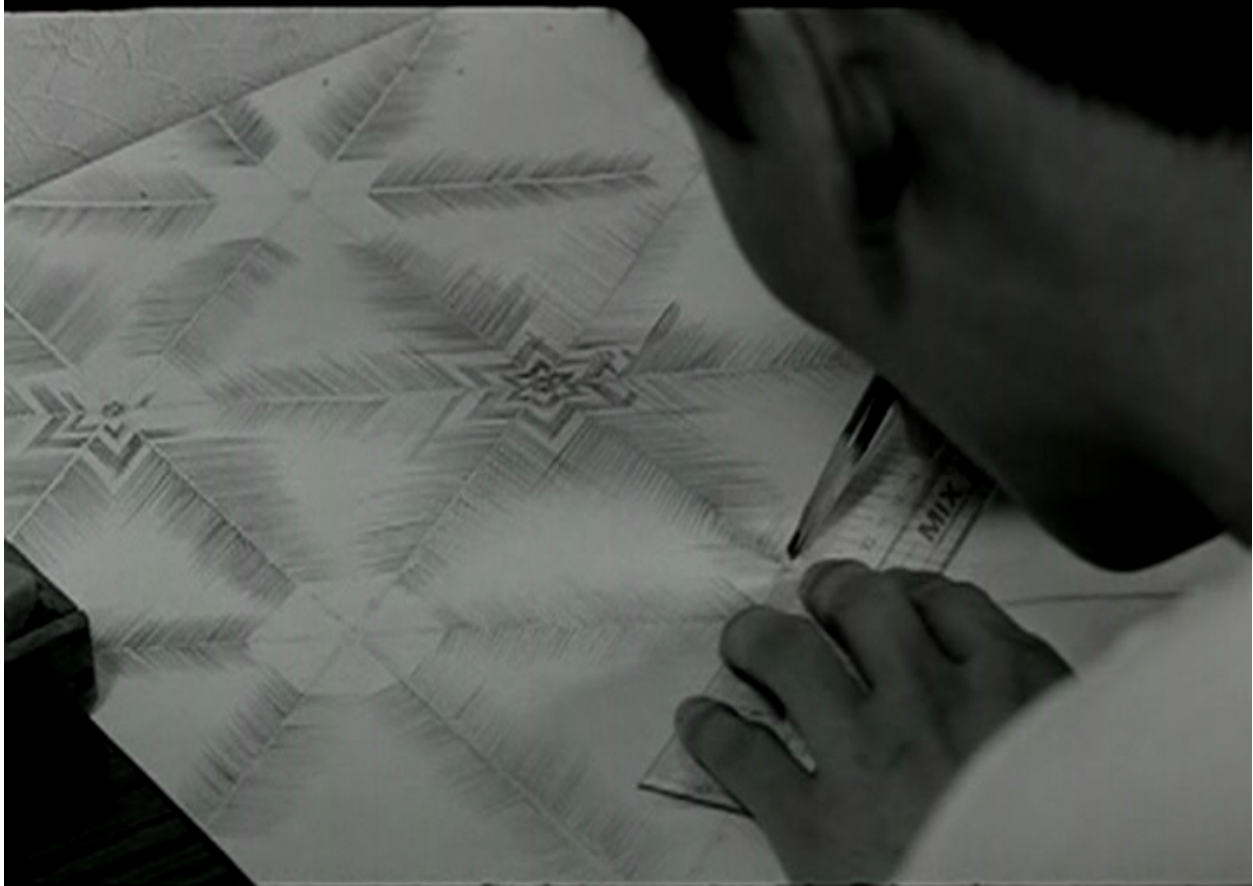
Fig. 5 A partial geometric pattern from *Virgin Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors* (2000) as inspiration for a narrative model.

whereas the subsequent paths are equally speculative. Conversely, a spectator confronted with any number of films by Hong Sang-soo is offered an initial fork, significant of the binary in "A Survey of the Works of Herbert Quain": to interpret the text through its limitations (one, perhaps two readings), or to speculate on the many paths, even if only a fraction may be comprehensible. Though they may not recognize more than a handful of options within it, a text such as *Hill of Freedom* triggers an uncanny recognition that possibilities of narrative paths are infinitely branching.

An otherwise unassuming moment in *Virgin Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors* proves itself

constructive in the quest for a taxonomy to best elucidate the narrative intricacies of Hong's body of work. In fig. 5, we see Soo-jung's brother progressing on the drawing of a kind of fractal pattern. This image, appearing in "Perhaps Intention," is significant in that it finds no parallel in the "Perhaps Accident". Likewise, there is no appearance (or mention) of a sibling in the first half of the film, supporting theories of a gendered focalization in which "Perhaps Intention" is perceived through Soo-jung. The imbalance created by the character's presence exclusively in the second telling is doubled in the image of what he creates, encouraging the spectator to investigate this image in relation to its asymmetrical inclusion.

All four of the stars visible in the sketch are in varying states of completion. Further, we can surmise that this pattern is infinitely branching, evidenced by the further fragments of the pattern discernible on the right of the frame. The individual star shapes can be seen to signify the paths evident in the film, "Perhaps Accident" and "Perhaps Intention," where the absence of a line or heavier pencil work both indicate the addition or alteration of an event placed in the *syuzhet*. Presented with an image such as this, the audience is encouraged to visually distinguish the connections within the pattern as well as speculate on how these fragments might be further filled in.

Alternatively, each star can also be identified with an individual Hong Sang-soo film, where the schematic deployment in one pattern can be used to fill in the blanks of another. As an example, in *Hill of Freedom*, numerous characters speculate that Mori must be an artist. Without further exposition (and as an act of economy) one can surmise that this is true, just as it is of the other male protagonists in Hong's work. Most significantly, and again telling of the "perhaps" titling of *Virgin Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors*' two paths, although the artist appears in the

frame, there is no discernible motivation for how the sections of the pattern progress. Recalling Hong's memory of the Cézanne painting, the cleanness of the ruled lines and overall arbitrariness functions to erase the intentions of the artist. Nonetheless, resonances between texts can be observed, some of which will be clarified later in the analysis of *Night and Day* and *Nobody's Daughter Haewon*. The insistent use of a theme from Beethoven's Symphony no. 7 in both films is one fascinating example, where the presence of the composition is more significant than its contextual meaning.

I propose, then, the concept of a "partial-geometric" narrative as a means to satisfy the deviations from the forking-paths model observed in Hong Sang-soo's films. This is an advance on David Bordwell's earlier observations on Hong's cinema in relation to Asian minimalism, not exclusively related to narrative: "This geometric model of storytelling has pushed him beyond his contemporaries' looser, more anecdotal and additive narrative strategies."[101] Although Bordwell qualifies that the structuring of *Virgin Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors* doesn't provide "any subjective motivation for the disparities,"[102] he does not expand upon the incomplete nature of these narrative "geometry lessons" which have since become even more characteristic in Hong's recent output.

As has already been noted, the primary deviation in Hong Sang-soo's films from David Bordwell's principles of a forking-paths narrative is in how the last path presented is not the most plausible, or that it does not carry a disproportionately greater truth value. Therefore, a partial-geometric narrative is seen to delimit the interpretive possibilities of a speculative text, for which

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[101] David Bordwell, "Beyond Asian Minimalism: HONG Sangsoo's Geometry Lesson," *HONG Sangsoo: Korean Film Directors,* ed. Huh Moonyoung (Seoul: Seoul Selection, 2007) 24.

[102] Bordwell 26.

the parity of truth value in the individual narrative paths enforces the agency of the reader in creating the text. It is not my intention to rigidly delineate a narrative model in the fashion of Bordwell's existing work. Rather, a partial-geometric narrative is to be understood a) for the way in which it highlights the parity of truth value within the text and b) for its lack of definition, wherein the absence of overt paths may still yield opportunities for spectatorial engagement similar to Ben Shaul's concept of optional thinking. The remainder of this chapter will explore these ideas further in two films, *Night and Day* and *Nobody's Daughter Haewon*. These two partial-geometric features, which are also not signposted in the manner of forking-paths narrative, reveal the diegetic implications exposed by the partial-geometric strategy characterizing Hong's body of work.

Hong Abroad: *Night and Day* and Focalized Fantasies

Night and Day is a unique film amongst Hong Sang-soo's oeuvre in that it is primarily shot and filmed outside South Korea, in Paris. At a production level, this is a result of its being commissioned by the Musée d'Orsay (see also, *L'heure d'été* [Olivier Assayas, 2008]). Conversely, it is motivated in the narrative as a result of protagonist Sung-nam (Kim Yeong-ho) fleeing South Korea in order to escape arrest for smoking marijuana. Unlike contemporaneous Paris-set French co-productions by Taiwanese minimalist filmmakers Hou Hsiao-hsien (*Le voyage du ballon rouge* [2007]) and Tsai Ming-liang (*Visage* [2009]), *Night and Day* only modestly engages with its dislocated context. Instead, the film unfolds almost exclusively within the Korean diaspora in Paris, which serves as a new setting for familiar tropes. During his self-imposed exile to France, Sung-nam (Kim Yeong-ho)—an unsuccessful painter, as opposed to a

filmmaker—becomes one point of a love triangle, is involved in moments of extended inebriation and at one point, embarrasses himself as a result of his conduct towards a North Korean man (Lee Sun-kyun, to be later seen in *Oki's Movie*, *Nobody's Daughter Haewon* and *Our Sunhi* [*Woori Sunhee*, 2013]).

The narrating process in *Night and Day* is foregrounded through the devices of voiceover and intertitles. Like *Hill of Freedom*, the narrating voiceover is realized in the voice of the film's protagonist, who acts as a diegetic narrator at the level of story world. Likewise, irregularly-spaced intertitles, which are set against the same textured green background as the main titles, trace the passage of time during Sung-nam's banishment. We are then made aware that the film begins on the ninth of August with the protagonist's arrival at a Paris airport. This dating device operates on the non-diegetic fictional level, according to Branigan's narrative model. However, the voiceover and intertitles collude to create the impression of the film as a journal being kept by Sung-nam, detailed his alienating experiences and reinforcing an awareness of his own mediocrity. This strategy can be seen in pronounced contrast to Mori's narration in *Hill of Freedom*, which provides the audience no aesthetic or narrative aid to reconstruct an objectively coherent *fabula*.

How, then, does *Night and Day* fit into a partial-geometric narrative model? The motivation to investigate the film is not a result of it being the most exemplary of this tendency in Hong's body of work (it isn't). Similarly, the film is not positioned in a pyramid of subjective quality in which one film is of more value than another, the kind of which Guillaume Brac grapples with as he clarifies the influence of Hong's cinema on his own creative output, particularly *Our Sunhi*: "Is it the best tribute to make to a beloved filmmaker to defend blindly

and unconditionally each one of his films, risking to suggest their equivalence, interchangeability and not returning to his major films, which would be shortchanged by the most minor?"[103] Rather, this analysis of *Night and Day* exposes how a partial-geometric narrative emerges in an otherwise discreet, unexpected text, one which doesn't foreground its partial-geometric quality in the overt manner of a film such as *Virgin Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors.* The film does not emphasize the truth value of any specific narrative understanding by labelling ambiguous fabulary events as real or unreal. *Night and Day* is instead positioned primarily as an interrogation of a simultaneously masculine and artistic crisis, for which the spectator's ability to recognize unclear boundaries between narrative levels enforces an understanding of protagonist Sung-nam's hesitation.

The film remains an assertion of Sung-nam's focalized fantasies, nonetheless de-centering the concept of an authoritative, creative male figure. Consider a moment early in the film, where the protagonist by chance runs into a former lover (Kim Yoo-jin). As he catches up to her, he asks (framed in a characteristic two-shot): "You're Korean, right? Do you know me?" This is revealed to be motivated by an uncanny recognition, wherein Sung-nam cannot place the exact relation. The comment is equally absurd because the man cannot even be certain of her Korean-ness, even though he is only seen to operate in a markedly insular Korean diaspora in Paris. Everyone he meets is Korean, so why ask? Their ensuing conversation at an outdoor café exposes his selective recognition, signaling a fantasy in which he has elided the humiliating elements of his past. In this example the lover was motivated to have an abortion at the end of their relationship, while her subsequent suicide is mentioned as an offscreen event existing only

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[103] Guillaume Brac, "Si petit, si grand," *Cahiers du cinéma* 706 (2014): 24. My translation.

in the *fabula*.

As much as Sung-nam's flight to France may be seen as a means of escape, the milieu within which he finds himself reflects his Korean identity as well as his identity as a man and an artist. He encounters artists almost as exclusively as he encounters Koreans; most prominently, his coquettish object of desire, Yoo-jeong (Park Eun-hye), is a painting student at the École nationale supérieure des Beaux-Arts. Significantly, Yoo-jeong's work is revealed to be plagiarized, contributing to the film's discourse on the indistinguishability between an image from its reference. Sung-nam's pursuit of Yoo-jeong is undeterred by this revelation, again suggesting a selective recognition in the creation of his fantasy.

The prominence of pictorial art in the film can be most conveniently rationalized through the filmmaker's collaboration with the Musée d'Orsay. Indeed, Sung-nam and Yoo-jeong wander through the museum on one occasion. This visit is only present as a brief scene, during which they pause at Gustave Courbet's "L'Origine du monde" (1866), a painting more graphic and honest in its presentation of female sexuality than any Hong film since *Tale of Cinema.* The moment exteriorizes a mutual sexual tension while simultaneously suggesting a falseness to their performative artistic sophistication. Painting and the creative drive takes on a more essential function later in the film, feeding into the relationship between a narrative skepticism of reality and the focalizer's crisis. In another instance, a pair of unanswered questions is posed: "What is a painting?" and, "What is a painting to you?" Sung-nam is ill-equipped to answer these questions, as a painter who doesn't paint and one who is confronted and humbled by the talent and success of other Korean artists within the Parisian milieu. I propose that he is doubly-confounded by these questions; they challenge his *métier* as well as, in a larger sense, the ontological properties

Fig. 6 Sung-nam's (Kim Yeong-ho) head in the clouds in *Night and Day* (2008).

of his existence.

It is at the end of the film, which echoes the use of dreams in *In Another Country* as a method to provide markers for diegetic boundaries, where the film's themes of evasion and fantasy are clarified. In what functions as an epilogue for *Night and Day*, Sung-nam returns to South Korea believing that his wife, Han Seong-in (Hwang Soo-jung), is pregnant. This is revealed to be a ruse intended to trick him to return home, away from other women and to face the misdemeanor related to the marijuana charge. A two-shot shows the couple lying in bed; as they begin to kiss passionately, the camera tilts up (in an act of modesty) to frame one of the protagonist's signature cloud paintings (see fig. 6). A series of local encounters with women follow this shot, suggesting Sung-nam is readjusting to his life in South Korea. However, only a few cuts later, the shot of the cloud painting is reprised, from which the camera tilts in reverse to

reframe the lovers. Sung-nam is chastised for a dream he may have had about a woman, with his wife asserting, "Dream or not, it still upsets me." After he successfully consoles her within the same take, the image is recomposed once more to rest finally on the clouds.

Seong-in's accusation against her husband is a veiled acknowledgement of the arbitrariness of truth value, where the substance of his dreams as verifiably real has no bearing on her emotional engagement with them. A schematic understanding of the film suggests, of course, that the bounds of the dream may in fact extend to the entirety of the film and the affairs he attempted to initiate in Paris—this issue has been raised in regards to *In Another Country* and is pertinent in *Nobody's Daughter Haewon* as well. To ascribe to only two dominant interpretations of *Night and Day*—the span of the *syuzhet* set in Paris is real, or it is in fact a fantasy—suggests a relatively closed system that works counter to an open-ended partial-geometric narrative understanding. The title of the film itself is connected to the ambiguity of truth value sustained throughout. In one instance, it is mentioned: "We can't easily tell night from day during summers here." *Night and Day* then refers to a liminal moment where a hierarchy cannot be established, nor is it significant to do so.

Whose Daughter Haewon?: Dreams and Gender

Nitzan Ben Shaul's theorization of optional thinking offers an explanation as to how partial-geometric narratives can be understood as pleasurable to an idealized spectator. The term, which the author borrows from Jerome J. Platt and George Spivak, refers to "the cognitive ability to generate, perceive or compare and assess alternative hypotheses that offer explanations for

real or lifelike events."[104] Optional thinking is placed in opposition to the cinematic convention of narrative closed mindedness, in which suspenseful structures "encourage a disturbing uncertainty concerning future outcomes, resulting in an enhanced need for gratifying relief through closure."[105] Recall that Garrett Stewart also emphasized closure as a quality inherent in narrative cinema of both the filmic and postfilmic moments, reinforcing the conclusion that the narrative mode of these films is not equivocal with their format of production.

This dichotomy of optional thinking and closed mindedness can be seen as a parallel to, or extension of, Barthes' categories of connotation and denotation in relation to the reader's role in the creation of a text. Optional thinking, like connotation, can be seen as a realization of "the namable, computable trace of a *certain* plural of the text."[106] For the binaries proposed by Ben Shaul and Barthes, it should be noted that both categories must exist and interact with each other. Throughout *Cinema of Choice*, it is put forth that optional thinking "is one favorable value a movie can have,"[107] but not exclusively pleasurable or preferable to closed mindedness. Similarly, Barthes notes that his two oppositions "operate like a game, each system referring to the other according to the requirements of a certain illusion."[108]

Where this study diverges from the limitations placed on the optionality—or polysemic nature—of the text put forward by both aforementioned scholars, is a result of the importance of the notion of infinity in theorizing beyond forking-paths narratives. Commenting on a "chaos

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[104] Ben Shaul, *Cinema of Choice* 2.

[105] Ben Shaul 25.

[106] Barthes, *S/Z* 8.

[107] Ben Shaul, *Cinema of Choice* 12.

[108] Barthes 9.

theory" approach to optional thinking, Ben Shaul notes that "attempts to actually devise such narratives are impossible, nor will a viewer be able to comprehensibly trace such process."[109] In the case of Hong Sang-soo's cinema and partial-geometric narratives, the spectator is not being challenged to comprehend the infinite nature of possible fabulary arrangements (by consensus, an impossible task). Instead, they are understood to recognize the text's potential for limitless and subjective paths. Further, an astute viewer can recognize how their own creative agency is enabled, rather than limited, by such optionality, wherein their comprehension is a reflection of their own engagement and investment in the film text.

Critical to Ben Shaul's argument for optional thinking is the interplay between cataphora and anaphora, which can be most simplistically restated as an anticipatory event and the subsequent recall of that earlier moment, respectively. Cataphora is "the less polysemous associated idea of 'foreshadowing,'" whereas the fulfillment of this telegraphing—anaphora— enforces that initial moment's "pertinent signification for the evolving narrative trajectory."[110] The author further elaborates on the relationship between the two poles:

> This interplay imparts a sense that what occurs within the narrative is not mere happenstance or arbitrary and that the chain of events has an internal logic that proceeds along a probably causality whereby the grounds for advanced events derives optionally from what previous events have established.[111]

This feedback system is therefore designed to both trigger a well-reasoned hypothesis in the spectator and in turn reward their plausible inferences.

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[109] Ben Shaul, *Cinema of Choice* 107.

[110] Ben Shaul 39.

[111] Ben Shaul 39.

Cataphora and anaphora are most conventionally observed at play in the suspense structures of the cinema of closed mindedness. In the context of a partial-geometric narrative strategy, it is instead a recall of foregrounded moments that destabilize diegetic boundaries. Objects discussed in the first chapter can be revisited as examples of this principle, such as the goldfish of *The Power of Kangwon Province* or the umbrella in *In Another Country*. This strategy is again deployed in *Nobody's Daughter Haewon*, where the zoom-in on a still-ignited cigarette butt suggests both its importance and that of a young bookshop clerk as a love interest for the the titular protagonist, Haewon (Jung Eun-chae). This shot is reprised twice as Haewon passes through the same space with other companions, although the man is not seen in the film again. In this instance, the recall of a formally-pronounced shot and visible camera movement does not reward the spectator in the manner that Ben Shaul proposes, instead figuring as a sort of red herring.

The anaphoric reprise of these objects does not serve to confirm hypotheses encouraged by the preceding fabulary construction but rather, to confound them. That is not to say that the function of the interplay between cataphora and anaphora in these films is entirely contrary to Ben Shaul's definition, which would entail that the lack of a suspense system is equivalent to happenstance. Instead, the reprisals of such objects, or images, mobilize the spectator's agency in creating meaning through a recognition of narrative optionality. The destabilizing strategy of dreams, observed in both *Night and Day* and further clarified in *Nobody's Daughter Haewon*, is consistent with the cataphora/anaphora relationship.

It is the device of cuing dreams and its deployment in the guise of a cataphoric/anaphoric dialectic that complicates the otherwise straightforward narrative of *Nobody's Daughter Haewon*.

The principal character referred to in the film's title is a young woman studying acting; within the span of the narrative *fabula*, her mother migrates to Canada and she resumes an affair with her former film professor and director, Seong-jun (Lee Sun-kyun). The main protagonist being female is an uncommon quality for Hong Sang-soo's cinema, and something that can only be seen in four of the films he directed between 2010 and 2013: *Oki's Movie, In Another Country Nobody's Daughter Haewon* and *Our Sunhi*. This property of the film will be understood as essential to the film's pleasurability.

Dates that place the events of the film in a later winter/early spring setting are communicated through Haewon's voiceover as she writes in a journal. This seasonal indecision at a moment of change is well-expressed through the drab *mise en scène* and unsubtly echoes the crossroads at which the female protagonist finds herself. This is an aesthetic accomplishment that Jordan Cronk valorizes in his review in *Cinema Scope*, the seasonal quality also framed in connection to the cycles of Éric Rohmer.[112] This reductive point of comparison may also explain why Cronk suspects the dream sequences are "mostly a means of contextualization,"[113] rather than an extension of visible structures in Hong Sang-soo's preceding films.

In opposition to the interpretation of the film put forth in the *Cinema Scope* article, I propose that *Nobody's Daughter Haewon* articulates (or disarticulates) itself around moments in which the protagonist is shown slumbering. The first instance occurs in the second take after the credits, in which Haewon is framed in a long shot, sleeping at a desk after recording a journal entry. The subsequent event—an impossible run-in with actress Jane Birkin, playing herself—is

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[112] Jordan Cronk, "Women Under the Influence: Hong Sangsoo's *Nobody's Daughter Haewon* and *Our Sunhi*," *Cinema Scope* 56 (2013): 30.

[113] Cronk 29.

Fig. 7 Haewon (Jung Eun-chae) dreaming, but what is the substance—and the truth value—
of her fantasies?

easily rationalized as a dream because it is followed by a medium shot of Haewon, still asleep.

This fantasy interpretation is supported by the symmetrical nature of the shots bookending the

interstitial sequence. Between these two shots, a continuity of *mise en scène* is maintained, as

Haewon wears the same red sweater in both images. In fact, the piece of clothing is also worn in

the dream, temporarily maintaining the illusion that narrative has not migrated to an imaginary

level. At this juncture of the film, however, the dream sequence is not assumed to intervene in an

otherwise conventional (comprehensible) interpretation of the film.

　　　　With the third shot of Haewon asleep, the film's structuring principle begins to more

visibly assume its shape, most significantly because this particular moment of Haewon napping

in a library arrives shortly following the halfway point of the film's runtime. A number of parallel

events can be observed on either side of this sequence, which occupies a similar (albeit

unlabeled) fulcrum-like role to the cable car episode of *Virgin Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors*.

Haewon visits the same bookshop, café, and park and the final act of both halves of the *syuzhet*

are emotionally-charged encounters between Haewon and Seong-jun at Namhan Fortress. The

medial sequence then follows from the first of these encounters, as the protagonist is framed in a

medium shot slumbering at a library table (see fig. 7) on which also lies Norbert Elias' *The

Loneliness of the Dying* (1985). In the following take, Haewon turns into one of the library

aisles. She walks towards the front of the frame, pulling the aforementioned volume off the shelf.

At this point, one of her peers emerges from the left and middle plane of the frame, as the

composition settles into a characteristic two-shot. He recognizes her ability to read English and

then confronts her rumored affair with Seong-jun, which she reluctantly confesses to. The

impossible movement of the book is then ratified by a cut to the initial shot of Haewon dozing at

the table.

In both analyzed sequences, the reprisal of the framing shot functions according to the

cataphora/anaphora dialectic. In the second shots of the protagonist asleep, the spectator's

skepticism of uncanny occurrences is confirmed; Jane Birkin would surely not happen upon

Haewon and make reference to the similarity of her appearance to Birkin's daughter, Charlotte

Gainsbourg, nor would Haewon retrieve a book from the library stacks that she was already

assumed to have been reading. The celebrity-inflected and confessional nature of each sequence

reinforces their idealized status.

The final dream sequence can then be seen as a response to the sensation of *déjà vu*

triggered by the film's second half, as the titular figure recirculates through the same spaces with,

perhaps, an altered sense of purpose. The last, sustained image of the film is a return to the

framing seen in figure 7 with Haewon, accompanied by her voiceover, stating: "Waking up, I realized he was the nice, old man from before." Two questions are being posed, variably on the levels of sound and image. The first is a signature query raised throughout Hong Sang-soo's cinema: where do the dreams *really* begin and end, and how do we attribute truth value to the proceeding *syuzhet*? The second interrogative, emerging from the voiceover, is likely a reference to an old man that inhabits the areas surrounding Namhan Fortress and is the less interesting of the two questions raised by this last shot. If one chooses to interpret the second half of the film as a larger dream and the first half as "real"—one of a multitude options—then Haewon is recognizing the projection of a reality into her dream.

This last shot pulls the rug out from under the spectator, so to speak, serving as a confounding example of anaphoric recall in a manner comparable to the deployments observed earlier. Rather than confirming the heretofore plausible hypothesis that the fabulary events following the fourth shot of Haewon sleeping are imbued with proportionately great truth value, the final image instead draws attention to the optionality and open-endedness of *Nobody's Daughter Haewon*. The shot asserts itself retroactively as a leitmotif and structuring device, creating two equally tenable halves. The repeated shots of Haewon slumbering inevitably negate their own ability to clarify the boundaries of dreams and reality within the text, which, as we have observed in other Hong Sang-soo films, becomes impossible. This stylistic deployment recalled Henry Bacon's observation of the "meaning affect," for which the use of stylistic devices "triggers the mind to seek for a meaning when the narrative explicitly fails to provide such a thing."[114] Truth value, then, becomes subjective; as a result, the spectator's selective attribution

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[114] Bacon, "The Mental Completion of Films" 44.

of it is the way in which they navigate the meaning of the text.

We can observe two relationship dynamics in the film, one assigned to each side of the nap in the library. In the first half, Haewon relapses into an unhealthy relationship with Seong-jun after her mother emigrates to Canada. His verbally-violent outburst upon hearing of Haewon's relationship with another man clarifies the negative qualities of their affair. In the second portion, she reencounters the film director, with the absence of references to their interactions prior to the dream in the library insinuating, like *The Day He Arrives*, that this is an alternate path. Further, Haewon asserts her independence and terminates her relationship with Seong-jun. Here, "nobody's daughter" becomes connotative of agency as opposed to abandonment. In this instance of navigating the unexpectedly unclear fabulary arrangement of *Nobody's Daughter Haewon*, optionality proves pleasurable, just as Ben Shaul argues in *Cinema of Choice*. The spectator is empowered to exert their creative dimension in the text by attributing truth value to the moments in which the female protagonist displays agency, an interpretation which the text does not strictly mandate. Similarly, the infinite nature of the text's optionality allows the audience, in their writing of the text, to build their ideal narrative and ensuing portrait of Haewon by stratifying the events of the *syuzhet* as real or imaginary.

Conclusion

In *Night and Day* and *Nobody's Daughter Haewon*, we can observe a practical manifestation of the gendered discourses critics have been quick to observe in the cinema of Hong Sang-soo, yet thus far have only been tenuously justified by the delicate patterning of the films themselves. Typically, gender binaries are applied as a method for rationalizing the

structures which I have instead classified through the label of partial-geometric narrative. These two films, with their narration tied exclusively to a male and female focalizer, showcase, respectively, Sung-nam's masculine crisis and Haewon realizing her own agency. The relationship between gender as a schema—exemplified by emasculated males and rare glimpses of dynamic female figures—and the optionality of a partial-geometric narrative is more complex than a binary signaled through the signposted chapters of a film such as *Virgin Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors*. It is therefore clear that a remapping of the gender discourse in Hong Sang-soo's cinema following the narrative investigation into these two films is a worthy project for further research.

Despite neither film holding rigorously to the forking-paths rubric defined by David Bordwell in "Film Futures," it is apparent that they both display what I have insisted as the primary characteristic of the partial-geometric narrative. In both films, the hierarchy of truth value is effectively leveled by the insistent cuing of dream sequences, signaling any moment as belonging to a dream or reality. This strategy goes beyond the disrupting convention of signposted intertitles or glaring discontinuity that has been identified in other Hong films to lend agency to the spectator, who is able to, if so obliged, understand the texts through their linearity.

There are advantages to recognizing a cinematic text to be a partial-geometric narrative and laced with optionality. As Nitzan Ben Shaul notes: "[…] encouraging optional thinking may enhance rather than reduce the cognitive pleasures afforded by movies."[115] The ensuing lack of definition seen in a partial-geometric narrative and its alternate paths through the text—the same day repeating itself in *The Day He Arrives*, the majority of *Nobody's Daughter Haewon* as a

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[115] Ben Shaul, *Cinema of Choice* 13.

dream, or not—nonetheless stimulates spectatorial engagement. Rather than condemning the "retreading" that Curtis Tsui observes in *Hill of Freedom*, we can instead perceive the film itself as another anaphoric moment, another pattern in a larger text. How does reflecting on the dream sequences in this film reframe the text, or other Hong Sang-soo movies? How should we interpret the cameo appearance by Jung Eun-chae—last seen as Haewon—still adrift? To reprise Jorge Luis Borges' fictional essayist: "That phrase allows one to infer that the solution is in fact in error, and so, uneasy, the reader looks back over the pertinent chapters and discovers *another* solution, which is the correct one." What the correct one is remains up to you.

CONCLUSION

Lines and relief do not exist. Drawing is a relation of contrasts, or simply the relation of

two tones, white and black.

—Paul Cézanne[116]

The manageable surface goal of this thesis project has been to aid the reader in navigating

and comprehending the unconventional narrative patterns in the cinema of Hong Sang-soo. I

have established that they should not be seen for what at times may be a superficial linearity—as

can be the position of the South Korean filmmaker's critics—but instead for their entanglements

and reflexivity: optional paths, unclear dreams and irreconcilable organization of banal schemas.

Further, the narrative arrangements have proven to be incongruent with established conventions

of a style-based approach to narratology and the Formalist assumptions that are integral to key

thinkers like David Bordwell and Edward Branigan. Despite a simplistic guise, these films

encourage us to rethink how we understand and theorize cinematic narratives. Largely, it is an

operation against classical narrative theory, which begins to appear retrograde as art cinema

exhibits new approaches to storytelling and story worlds as it struggles to maintain its cultural

significance in the face of transforming media.

Two general storytelling approaches can been evidenced in Hong's body of work, which I

collectively characterize as partial-geometric narratives: fabulary arrangements with optional

paths that are signposted and conversely, films without signposting, in which seemingly minor

moments have a significant impact on comprehension. In the former, most clearly exemplified by

the early feature *Virgin Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors*, the overwhelming parity of the optional

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[116] Quoted in Philip Callow, *Lost Earth: A Life of Cézanne* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1995) 155.

paths forces a reevaluation of Bordwell's forking-paths theory as an absolute method to comprehend challenging narratives. It is not my intention to diminish the accomplishments of Bordwell, Branigan and other narratologists, and as the role (and types) of film changes, it is necessary to reassess how narrative process intervenes in making meaning and audience engagement.

Rather than working towards a hierarchical terminus, in which the arrangement of possible paths compounds to resemble closure, Hong's films emphasize the spectator's agency in attributing truth value to individual events of the *fabula* regardless of their arrangement in the *syuzhet.* In contrast, a film like *The Day He Arrives* or *Nobody's Daughter Haewon* is more flexible in its optionality, in which the initial "fork" proves to be the most significant. It is the impasse at which the spectator chooses to look past a liminal linearity and becomes aware of their own readerly role in the creative process, a realization in tune with Jorge Luis Borges' non-fiction stories and their illumination of our agency in assessing the scope of impossible narratives.

As I have foregrounded in the first chapter, it is a stated ambition of this thesis to move beyond the realm of auteurist analysis and speak to broader narrative tendencies. Admittedly, this project evolved from an auteurist impulse—a specific fascination with Hong's work, where each successive film triggered uncanny resonances with previous films. A biographical reflection, although transparent, is nonetheless useful for how it illustrates my own developing cognizance of the interpretive dynamic between text, author and spectator in relation to the films of Hong Sang-soo and others. Writing about *Our Sunhi* in a festival review for *Synoptique* in October 2013 and referring to the repeated use of a song in that film, I observed: "This acts as a fixed

variable, further provoking the question that is so prescient in Hong's cinema: Do these moments belong to a linear narrative, or create parallel ones?"[117] Certainly, the question has become more complex in my opinion, as a researched investigation reveals the number of parallel narratives to be incomprehensible, if not limitless.

This investigation was triggered, reducibly, by the recognition of patterns. Initially, I was fascinated by the organization of the love triangles within *Woman on the Beach*; this film was my first exposure to the filmmaker, in the context of mini-retrospective at the Northwest Film Center in Portland, Oregon in 2010. Upon viewing *Night and Day* years later, the motif of the romantic entanglement came to echo between the two films, and then so on and so forth throughout the filmography. Each additional work by Hong Sang-soo encouraged the perception of a more general pattern, one which I have come to term "partial-geometric"; it refers to the narrative process as a whole, whilst being inclusive of schematic resonances. In the course of this study, I have come to reflect on the motivation of what I had first understood to be a cinephilic impulse, but now envision as a cinematic text working counter to its own expected disposability. Hong Sang-soo's corpus stimulates retroactive consideration as a result of the repetition of tropes and narrative patterns. The challenges imposed by these films inform a newfound perspective on narrative, one that is counter to the traditional assumptions of cohesion determined by an authorial presence.

Advocating Further Paths for Narratology

Reflecting on the concerns raised by this thesis—primarily, ambiguity of truth value and

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[117] Bradley Warren, "Is It Dead Yet?: The 42nd Festival du nouveau cinéma," *Synoptique* 3.1 (2014): 168.

flexibility related to partial-geometric narratives—I would like to briefly extend this evaluation to two additional examples from contemporary cinema that merit reflection: *Les Salauds* (Claire Denis, 2013) and *Under Electric Clouds* (Alexei German Jr., 2015). These two supplementary films are not meant to merely propose alternative objects of study that could have constructed elements of the preceding discussion of narrative. Instead, the ensuing texts, both recent productions, resonate with the ongoing and current necessity of reconsidering narrative comprehension and film, specifically contemporary international art cinema. Both features, not unlike Hong's filmography, have received high-profile film festival premieres—a sidebar of the Festival de Cannes and main competition at the Berlinale, respectively. These selections are intended to illustrate the prescience of a renewed position on narratology.

Despite these films challenging their audience through a strategy of visual poetry akin to *To the Wonder* (Terrence Malick, 2012)—a trait absent from Hong's cinema, despite its many virtues—they still operate against Vivian Sobchack's summation of the conventional role of narrative, namely: "Narrative meaning in our culture is thus generally understood as a cognitive and cumulative enchaining of events through cause and effect that is ultimately reflective—that is, an after-the-fact mode of making sense."[118] I propose that these films nonetheless illustrate an "after-the-fact" mode, albeit one that is counter to the disposability of the text. However, it is instead one in which the spectator recognizes the moments of the *syuzhet* that remain insoluble to the *fabula* and manifest an awareness of their role in the assignation of truth value. This shifted comprehension is one that ultimately cannot be satisfied by classical narrative theory.

One example is merely a curious scene, whereas the other involves the entirety of the

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[118] Vivan Sobchack, "Stop Making Sense: Thoughts on Two Difficult Films from 2013," *Film Comment* 50.1 (2014): 50.

film's narrative. The first example, as earlier proposed, is from *Les Salauds*. Characteristic of the French filmmaker's work, the film's *syuzhet* is organized in a non-linear fashion. The narrative catalyst—the rape of the niece (Lola Créton) of the protagonist, Marco (Vincent London)—is displayed on a CCTV recording only in the film's closing moments, while its aftermath serves as a traumatic *leitmotif* throughout the narrative. One enigmatic sequence is bookended by medium shots of Marco lying in bed. In between these shots, a handful of police and a tracking dog trample through foliage at night before coming upon a abandoned yellow bicycle. Raphaëlle (Chiara Mastroianni) enters the frame and weeps over the bicycle, a sound which is still present on the soundtrack following a cut back to the initial image of Marco.

The sequence in the forest is not a flashback or flash-forward, as we will come to know that Raphaëlle's son (the boy who owns the bike) suffers no harm during the span of the *fabula*. The most rational hypothesis is that this is a fantasy on the part of Marco, who believes that the boy's father is somehow culpable for Marco's niece's tragedy and the ruin that has come upon his family. However, there is no evidence thus far that Marco knows of the bike, even though he will later repair it. Assignation of truth value to the sequence—the question of it being a fantasy and therefore less "real" than the rest of the film—is complicated. Where does this moment emerge from? How does it relate to the fabulary comprehension and the challenging organization of the *syuzhet*? At the very least, the deployment of what may be a vengeful fantasy queries the text's levels of fictions and the spectator's ensuing navigation.

The second example is *Under Electric Clouds*, a film set in the post-apocalyptic, capitalist wasteland of near-future Russia. I admit to appropriating the Cézanne epigraph which sets off this conclusion from German Jr.'s work, which, for my purposes, speaks to the narrative's

role in the film's leveling of history and informs a skepticism of truth value that is symptomatic of contemporary cinema. The film is broken up into various signposted chapters, beginning and ending in its future erstwhile traveling back through history and, in regards to a segment revolving around a living museum, a reflexive recreation of the past. By utilizing title chapters, the film isolates each period just as the resonance of characters and themes creates a unified narrative. However, the truth value of each segment—that is to say, that the film is establishing a comprehensible continuity from past to present through its nonlinear structure—is complicated by a relative understanding of history. The past, as it is represented in the film, may be a dream, or roleplay, or a construction, the value of which is dictated by the present.

Scholarship on Paul Cézanne may help us better understand *Under Electric Clouds* and the partial-geometric narrative vis-à-vis a discourse on subjective history. Jonathan Crary's *Suspensions of Perceptions* details the historical moment of Cézanne's late-period art, alongside the work of Edmund Husserl. This moment of technological change in light of modernization can offer clues to the interventional opportunities of the unconventional narratives described in this thesis. Crary highlights the creative output of these two figures as an attempt "to escape from reified, habitual patterns of perception inherent in various aspects of rationalization and commodification of experience."[119] One could argue that contemporary cinema finds itself at a comparable juncture, in which it must justify its continuing cultural significance and commercial liability in the face of increasingly-rapid technological progress. One potential solution illustrated in this thesis is a new way of understanding the medium that runs counter to narrative strategies of closed mindedness, one which Husserl would idealize as "stripped of all the

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[119] Jonathan Crary, *Suspensions of Perception* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999) 285.

accretions of habit and socialization."[120]

I propose, then, that Cézanne, in the contexts of the pictorial arts of painting and sketching, is also—as German Jr.'s film hints—speaking of history, or more generally, of truth value. Recall, as well, the significance of painting in *Night and Day*, standing in for the conventionally-employed standard of filmmaking as a means to work through a creative and masculine crisis throughout Hong's cinema. It is noted that Cézanne "sought to rid himself of ready-made schema and traditional solutions for pictorial organization."[121] This is a trait which the film *Night and Day* exhibits through its narrative arrangement, even if Sung-nam himself cannot achieve this abstract ideal. The scene with the bike in *Les Salauds* has value as a consequence of its placement between the identical framings of Marco, which dictates its status as fantasy or reality. Similarly, the spectator of *Under Electric Clouds* is motivated to question the relevant nature of history, in which the barriers between chapters serve as clear as markers of "contrasts" and "two tones," as the epigraph suggests. I would argue that the film's relevancy moves beyond the very specific Russian circumstance and approaches a universality through narrative.

It is not my intention to imply, through the subject and structure of my argument, that Hong Sang-soo is the progenitor of such inquiries into hierarchization and truth value of narrative. Indeed, the significance of Bordwell's forking-paths model as a standard for unconventional strategies speaks to an evolution that can be traced back to films like Akira Kurosawa's *Rashōmon* (1950) which is inarguably an iconic example of the challenges of

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[120] Crary 282.

[121] Crary 287.

objective truth. Hong's remarks on Cézanne in the pages of *Cahiers du cinéma*, alongside German Jr.'s epigraph at the outset of *Under Electric Clouds*, are only two potential examples that illustrate the larger artistic continuity from which these films emerge.

Rather, Hong Sang-soo exemplifies a modern art cinema—inclusive of (but not limited to) the cited examples by Claire Denis and Alexei German Jr.—that goes further than rearranging or splitting paths in puzzle narratives to questioning its cohesion and diegetic unity. It is a return to a moment of indecision which Branigan notes in a Modernist work such as *The Man Who Left His Will on Film* (*Tōkyō sensō sengo hiwa*, Nagisa Oshima, 1970):

> "The fundamental problem, then, is that there is no way to determine from anything *internal* to a level of narration whether we see anything at all or are only seeming to be seeing. This is true for *any* level of narration; for what is presented at any time be revealed to be only a dream. Any narration, no matter how 'objective', may suddenly be framed by another narration, say, of a character who dreams or is mad, in which case there is raised the threat that we were initially misled, or we saw nonsense, or saw nothing at all."[122]

Assumptions of conventions are made to the exemplary works studied in Branigan's work. *The Man Who Left His Will on Film* is clearly marked as an aberration in which such fabulary uncertainty is raised, remaining a progressive and relevant work more than forty years following its release.

Oshima's film is marked by a political interrogation, which is clearly intertwined with the artistic crisis and de-centering of authorship, as the diegetic source of the footage and author is

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[122] Branigan, *Point of View in the Cinema* 183.

confused in an irresolvable fashion. I suggest that the contemporary films that I have cited (Hong, Denis, German Jr.) go further than Oshima—or even Branigan's other author-centric art film example, *8½* (Federico Fellini, 1963)—to be emblematic of a decidedly modern querying of the truth value in cinematic narratives and the role of the reader. It is an interrogation of the gradients and not the absolutes, as Cézanne posits. Returning to Hong's position on the painter as shared in *Cahiers du cinéma*, the relationship of contrasts should also betray the notion of intention.

In the third chapter, I hinted that marquee film festivals may play a significant role in unifying the trends of unconventional narratives in contemporary cinema. This site creates an identifiable tension, though perhaps a productive one. In these spaces, cinema can be seen to organically manifest trends symptomatic of other factors, such as the digital tendencies Garrett Stewart has suggested, with varying degrees of exchange across cultural borders (*international film festivals*)—ideally limitless, though we must acknowledge centers of cultural capital, such as France. However, these film festivals are notorious for their elevation of the *cinéma d'auteur* and valorize the author's role in the creation of the text, which operates counter to an understanding of a transforming narrative cinema as a natural phenomenon. Regardless, these high-profile film festivals remain a space of confluence and at the center of their numerous facets and functions—authorship, international cinemas, markets, audience—lie narrative and storytelling.

Of course, a pursuit of this line of inquiry remains outside the margins of this thesis, but indicates a productive integration of various sub-fields beyond narratology and investigations of authorship. Such a trajectory would inevitably touch upon the economics of international

distribution via film festivals and further clarify the fluctuating role of film as a medium in the new media landscape, on operation which further resonates with the ambitions of Paul Cézanne as observed by Jonathan Crary and evoked by the films analyzed herein. It is my hope that the preceding investigation into the narrative circumstances of the cinema of Hong Sang-soo, truth value and a partial-geometric strategy has been deceptively specific, not unlike the South Korean filmmaker's films which have often been characterized as "slight". Subsequently, these properties are meant to display insight and motivate further research into the transforming role of narratology and the process and impact of making meaning, which inevitably remains, in my opinion, the beating heart of film studies.

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