



A Phenomenology of the Contemporary Quotidian Korean World:

Within/without Hong's Early films, *Turning Gate*
(2002) and *Woman on the Beach* (2006)*

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1. Introduction

Korean filmmaker Sangsoo Hong is known for his idiosyncratic aestheticism. His debut feature, *The Day a Pig Fell into the Well* (1996), made a public splash particularly because of its unique realist cinematography and non-linear narrative. As many critics have noted,

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Hong developed his trademark style early on, taking form in “a close description of the quotidian world,” a style marked by his unusual cinematography, which includes slow camera movements, long takes, and ample use of off-screen spaces. Hong’s films also employ limited dramaturgy, often lacking a classical narrative structure. Despite variations across his work, Hong’s subsequent films continued the cinematic scrutiny of the quotidian. Moreover, in addition to featuring long takes and long shots, Hong often employs improvisation in plot and acting.¹⁾

Still within his first decade of filmmaking, two of Hong’s earlier follow-ups to *The Day a Pig Fell into the Well, Turning Gate* (2003) and *Women on the Beach* (2006), perhaps best showcase Hong’s unique aestheticism. Unlike *The Day a Pig Fell*, which was adapted from a novel, these later films were shot with only brief lines of often-improvised dialogue, keeping their dramaturgy to a minimum. The films’ episodic structures can seem as though they simply record reality, functioning as what Siegfried Kracauer calls a “slice of life.”²⁾ In so doing, Hong examines his subjects slowly and closely, “just like an entomologist does with insects,” to borrow a phrase from the Charles Tesson in *Cahier du Cinema*.³⁾

Hong’s cinematography has been often compared to the camera work used by Robert Bresson and Eric Rohmer. Korean film critics

1) As many people note, this film was released not long after Korean society experienced the democratic revolution of 1987. At that time Korean popular culture was also beginning to bloom in many respects, as Korean films, music, and other forms of cultural expression were drawing worldwide attention.

2) Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film*. London: Oxford University Press. 1960.

3) Cited in Jihye Sung. “France-ui Hong Sangsoo Pyeonae Eiyu 2 (Why France exhibits a predilection for Hong Sangsoo, 2).” *Cine 21*. 2003. 03.

argue that Hong's films, like those of these French filmmakers, convey the banality and emptiness of the quotidian world, filling the screen with detailed images of minute objects or seemingly trivial movements, an effect often reinforced by 'repetitions' of scenes, lines and events.⁴⁾ Thus, just as Bresson makes his characters repeatedly perform certain otherwise offhand gestures (e.g. in *Pickpocket* (Bresson, 1959), the pickpocket's hands stealing money occurs several times as if it were irrelevant to the narrative progression), Hong shows no hesitation to start over in the middle of a story and have his characters repeat bodily movements and actions. Hong's delightful play with temporality, which include break-downs of chronological narratives, an emphasis on 'duration' (long takes) and insertions of sudden 'breaks' (e.g. focusing tightly on insignificant details), places his films in the second category of what Gilles Deleuze famously describes as the "transition from movement-image to time image."⁵⁾ This transition privileges a form of cinema that eschews motivated action and linear narrative progression.⁶⁾ In this light, Hong's films, like other "time image" films, seem to focus less on tracing the trajectories of cinematic narratives than on depicting temporality itself.⁷⁾

4) In addition, film critics find an affinity with Robert Bresson in Hong's obsession with daily details and cinematic aesthetics. Some contemporary French film critics also agree about this homology between two directors. See Sung, Ibid.

5) Kyung-Hyun Kim also made a similar observation. See Kyung-hyun Kim. 2001. "Gilles Deleuze-ui [younghwa]wa Hong Sangsoo-ui Sigan-image -Banbok-kwa Chai-ui Yoohi, Sigan-ul Chowlhaneun Sigan-image-ui Dochak"(Gilles Deleuze's cinema and Hong Sangsoo's time image -A play of Repetition and Difference, the arrival of time image that transcends temporality" *Kino*. 2001. 11

6) In his two synthetic studies of cinema, "Movement Image" and "Time Image," Deleuze distinguishes films into two categories, early "movement image films" and a more highly developed mode of "time image films." Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema II: Time-Image*, University of Minneapolis: Minnesota Press. 1986.

7) Deleuze, Ibid.

Thus Hong's films, as they avoid dramaturgy while repeating images taken from daily life, appear to show viewers the physical details of life, constructing what might be called a phenomenology of the quotidian. In this sense, Hong's play with temporality and repetition converges on a commonality: the phenomenology of quotidian life, where temporality essentially structures our existence. Based on these observations, this paper examines the cinematic and ontological meanings of 'repetition' in Hong's films and filmmaking styles. In particular, I will explore two of Hong's early films, *Turning Gate* and *Woman on the Beach*, while referring to other works that shed light on my thesis. In the attempt to interpret the ontological meaning of 'repetition' embedded in Hong's films, I will rely on phenomenological understandings about life, including the Deleuzian conceptions of "signs," "repetition," "pure difference," and "singularity." Here, I believe that these concepts are suitable to reveal the structure of human experience and the meaning of the quotidian life conveyed in Hong's films, particularly considering the structural homology embedded in Hong's cinematography and the Deleuzian understanding of signs and repetition. In so doing, I seek to show how Hong's films help capture (true facets of) 'the quotidian life' in contemporary Korea.

2. Repetition Begins

Hong's filmmaking style stands apart whether considered in the Korean or a foreign context. He fulfills his desire for realism through minimalism in mise-en-scène, reduced camera movement, and spare

dramaturgy. In Hong's first film, *The Day a Pig Fall into the Well*, for instance, the camera rarely follows the narrative progression or character movements; instead, it remains static, lingering on long takes.⁸⁾ His second film, *The Power of Gwangwon Province* (1998), also employs a more static and distanced camera. Furthermore, Hong's films keep the dramaturgy to a minimum. His fictional spaces, especially seen from one static viewpoint, appear like two-dimensional planes, failing to instill a stable sense of place. In parallel with this calculated mise-en-scène bareness and flatness, characters barely develop psychologically; their interiorities are rarely outwardly revealed.⁹⁾ This leaves "the actor denuded of all symbolic expression . . . set in a surrounding devoid of any artifice" in the same fashion in which André Bazin famously characterizes Bruno in the Vittorio De Sica's film, *Bicycle Thieves* (1948). Such a filmic character constitutes a mere "face, a silhouette, a gesture, and a way of walking,"¹⁰⁾ which thus registers the phenomenology of existence. For Hong "never condenses the text, he cuts it. Thus, what is left over is a part of the original."¹¹⁾

This reliance on bared reality runs in parallel with Hong's predilection for contingency in his filmmaking practice. Refusing to work with completely prewritten scenarios, Hong makes do with brief plotlines—often no more than a couple of pages long. He also unfolds such narratives following the rules of contingency: events "follow one

8) As Korean film scholars have observed, Hong's camera angles and use of the frame was also very unique: Hong often captures objects from oblique angles and leaves some or all of a given character off the screen.

9) Refer to André Bazin, *What is Cinema 1*, 1967, p. 204.

10) Ibid. p. 65. I am referring here to psychological realism, which, representatively, classic Hollywood film grammars have pursued.

11) Ibid. p. 136. with my emphasis.

another according to a necessary order,” yet they unfold “within a framework of accidental happenings.” Likewise, Hong’s study of reality again registers as a form of ‘phenomenology.’ Confronting viewers with scenes fabricated of phenomenological reality, Hong obstinately films repetitive behavioral patterns (such gestures and acts as ‘waiting’ and drinking) and recurrent locales and happenings. He repetitively depicts how a man and a woman meet, go on a date, and then break up as his own leitmotif. As a result, Hong’s characters usually meet at a pub, chat in the back seat of a taxi, and go to a cheap motel.

It is noteworthy that such repetition derives from Hong’s foundational understanding of people’s lives. Since his debut, Hong has manifested his belief in contingency as not only a mystery but also a core imperative of our existence, which thus eventually becomes an essential structure of life.¹²⁾ Moreover, Hong emphasizes repetitions of the same acts or occurrences as a core maneuver to capture contingency. In this regard, Hong once said that he knows a person who sways whenever he’s drinking; later, Hong confessed, he found himself repeating the same movement. Hong argues that this sort of mutual imitation can extend along a social dimension. Significantly, imitation and repetition can generate a pattern within people’s minds, giving sense to what would otherwise be considered a coincidence or contingency.¹³⁾ Here, let us consider Hong’s trust in repetition and the embedded meaning of repeated elements in his films. Although Hong wittingly invented certain signs, these repetitive signs may also generate alternate meanings,

12) Bongseok Kim. “Kim Bongseok Seanghwal-ui Balgyeon-eul Bogo Dalrajin Hong Sangsoo-reul Malhanda”(Kim Bongseok speaks about changed Hong Sangsoo after having seen *Turning Gate*). *Cine 21*. 2002.3.15.

13) Cited in Bonseok Kim, *Ibid*.

which can be interpreted through post-structuralist understandings—or as this project attempts to reveal, an encounter between the quotidian Korean world and Deleuzian phenomenology.

Hong's predilection for repetition also often deploys a forking-path narrative structure: He unravels alternating perspectives and repeats events in two equivalent scenes or sequences. Hong utilizes this split narrative approach to convey certain profound notions, such as the impossibility of articulating the concept of 'love' (as in *The Day a Pig* and *The Power of Kwangwon Province*) and the mutual incongruity of two lovers' memories, or the question of how memory rests upon a private temporality and orientation (*Virgin Stripped Bare*, 2000), mutual imitation and repetition of language, gestures, and even love (*Turning Gate*, 2002), or parallel events inside and outside of a film (*A Tale of Cinema*, 2005). It should not be forgotten here that 'repetition' (not only in Hong's films but in general) invites viewers to focus on "the true imprint, the most visible mark," as Bazin asserts, about life and being¹⁴) and, in so doing, they open a space in which to contemplate ontological truth and pure reality, which heightens the phenomenological approach to reality of Hong's other filmic styles.

3. *Turning Gate*: Repetition and Signs

Upon its release in 2002, local film critics praised Hong's fourth film *Turning Gate* for taking a humorous turn from the dark cynicism pervading his previous films. Yet, Hong maintains his repetitive filmic

14) Bazin, *Ibid.* p. 133.

style and motifs in this film. *Turning Gate* is a tale about Kyeongsu, an unsuccessful actor. One day, he leaves on a trip for Chun Cheon and later visits Gyeongju (both well-known tourist sites in Korea). Centering on these cities, the film is divided into two parts, in each of which Kyeongsu has a love affair, first with Myeongsuk and then with Seon-yeong. Within this narrative structure, the film takes viewers through several symbolic ‘repetitions’—which again seems to constitute a ‘phenomenology’: the film’s main characters use similar clichés repetitively, unconsciously mimicking each other’s bodily gestures. Similar encounters, situations, and events take place throughout the film.

Early in the film, viewers see Kyeongsu at a filmmaking company that has just fired him. He complains to his friend, whining immaturely, and hears a scathing remark: “Even if it is hard to be a true man, we try at least not to be a monster.” Initially, Kyeongsu is reluctant to acknowledge this remark, but he soon finds himself throwing it at another friend, Seong-il, and then Myeongsuk, a woman Kyeongsu dates later. In addition, Kyeongsu mimics Seong-il’s mechanical swaying. Later, he finds himself doing the same thing unwittingly. Despite this cycle of mimics, the meaning that each sign and gesture actually signifies shifts from situation to situation. Thus, it is hard to identify a definitive signified for a series of signifiers (e.g. consider the awkward moment when Kyeongsu improvises a new meaning for his own swaying gesture, which he has borrowed from his friend). As such, this repetitive circulation of signs reflects a structuralist understanding: the sign contains no inherent meaning, and thus is “a mere replacement for our action or a thought.” Nevertheless, it “claims to be equivalent to its meaning.”¹⁵⁾

15) Gilles Deleuze, *Proust and Signs*. New York: George Braziller. 1972. pp. 6-7

As Deleuze argues, these signs and gestures are categorized as ‘worldly signs’ insofar as we do not learn what exactly the signs mean. We can only *interpret* the signs, creating what Deleuze calls “the narrative of an apprenticeship.”¹⁶⁾

In *Turning Gate*, Hong’s examination of worldly signs soon rises to another level, i.e. ‘love’s signs.’ Just as Myeongsuk suddenly displays some enthusiasm for him, Kyeongsu falls in love with Seon-yeong at first sight. He takes an unplanned trip to Gyeongju in hopes of meeting Seon-yeong there. His search for Seon-yeong seems complicated by secretive happenings and obstacles for which Seon-yeong is primarily responsible but which also arise out of circumstances Kyeongsu cannot control. In this sense, his journey appears dedicated to seeking what Deleuze calls “love’s signs,” which includes the task of individualizing “someone by the signs [s]he bears or emits” even if they are painful and then “try to *explicate, to develop* these unknown worlds which remain enveloped within the beloved.”¹⁷⁾

Kyeongsu’s search for “unknown worlds” ends up producing only frustration (involving Myeongsuk’s nagging requests) or tremendous pain (from the unfulfilled relationship with Seon-yeong). Kyeongsu was left exhausted by Myeongsuk’s sudden and tenacious courtship; he is discouraged that Seon-yeong is a married woman and demoralized by her eventual rejection. The film symbolizes Kyeongsu’s frustration in his journey across the city which stretches endlessly through narrow allies, and thus anticipates the suffering that he will inevitably experience. The dark mood cast over the characters’ interiority extends to the locales they

16) Ibid. p. 4.

17) Ibid. p. 7.

frequent. The film often provides no depth of field to these places: shots are composed on two discrete planes, with a figure in the foreground set against a background that is a simple block of color, breaking down realist perspectival spaces. This flatness, in parallel with the characters' non-expressive faces, reinforces the fatalism of their relationship. As Deleuze puts it, love's signs are "*deceptive signs which can be addressed to us only by concealing what they express: the origin of unknown worlds, of unknown actions and thoughts which give them a meaning.*"¹⁸⁾ Thus, love makes us suffer, causing moments of anguish "whose real meanings prepare an ever greater pain."¹⁹⁾

From here on, Kyeongsu's love functions like 'worldly signs' (e.g. remarks, gestures) that merely replace feelings. Kyeongsu and the female characters go to similar places and engage in similar activities, such as drinking, exchanging clichés for love, and going to cheap inns. Also, they imitate each other: Kyeongsu feels contempt for Myeongsuk's begging for love, but later he performs similarly tenacious begging for Seon-yeong. Kyeongsu receives a note from each woman, which contain the same cliché about love: "you, in my mind, me in your mind" —while Kyeongsu is contemptuous when he sees the cliché in Myeongsuk's note, he is enchanted by the same phrase when it comes from Seon-yeong; this difference (in meaning), however, has no significant consequences in that the sign (the cliché) remains *internal* to this ceaseless circulation of signifiers.²⁰⁾ Thus, this endless network of love's signs

18) Ibid. p. 9, with my emphasis.

19) Ibid. p. 12.

20) In this regard, Deleuze distinguishes between internal and external difference. Whereas internal difference exists between two repetitions, external or pure difference exists outside of all repetitions and maintains the entire chain of

‘stands for’—or ‘replaces’—our existence just as worldly signs do.

Here, facing the fact that we are always encircled and replaced by an endless chain of worldly and love signs, we can say that “*our existence is habitus itself*.” In this regard, Deleuze offers an understanding of our existence as a synthesis of time: “habit as the first synthesis,” Deleuze continues,

[c]onstituted time as a living present by means of a passive foundation on which past and future depended. The second synthesis, that of memory, constituted time as a pure past, from the point of view of a ground which causes the passing of one present and the arrival of another. In the third synthesis, however, the present is no more than an actor, an author, and agent destined to be effaced; while the past is no more than a condition operating by default.²¹⁾

Deleuze adds that, “in all three syntheses, present, past, and future are revealed as Repetition, but in very different modes. *The present is the repeater; the past is repetition itself, but the future is that which is repeated.*”²²⁾ Here, all existences in human life, as “different sorts of signs,”²³⁾ contribute to bringing the pure past in memory back to the present and having it repeated, which manifests in the form of remolding our habits, in the present and the future, in the end. This is the moment where the present is present. Also, in this sense, the truth is

repetitions. Gilles Deleuze, *Difference & Repetition*. New York: Columbia University Press. 1994.

21) Deleuze, 1994. p. 94.

22) Ibid.

23) Deleuze, 1972, p. 14.

always “*a truth of time*” and “signs are always *signs for the present*.”²⁴⁾

Coming closer to a truth of time, Hong inserts another layer of signs into Kyeongsu’s habitual life and loves: familiar daily materials and objects, which alternately appear, disappear and reappear. Kyeongsu boards a duck-shaped boat in Chun Cheon,²⁵⁾ where he encounters a young college student and assumes that she has traveled to Chun Cheon alone. Just when we are about to forget the small events Hong has shown us, they return: even as Kyeongsu suffers the pain of love, Seon-yeong recounts that she traveled to Chun Chon alone in her college days, reminding viewers of the girl Kyeongsu met in Chun Cheon. In similar fashion, Kyeongsu sees another duck-shaped boat in Gyeongju. A man who once asked Kyeongsu for a light in Chun Cheon returns as Seon-yeong’s husband in Gyeongju. Likewise, trivial details that characters unwittingly pass by and leave in the back of their minds return with newly attached meanings. This is “the violence of a sign which forces us into the search, which robs us of peace.”²⁶⁾ Through “the violent effect of a sign,” we are “forced” to seek the sign’s “meaning,”²⁷⁾ which abridges the past and the present, *bring elements of the pure past into the present*, and thus *approaches the essential structure of our existence*. That is, moments at which sensuous signs bring the past back to us immediately deliver “extraordinary joy.” In this sense, sensuous signs register as “fulfilled, affirmative and joyous” feelings among all human beings.²⁸⁾

24) Deleuze, 1972, p. 17.

25) This ship was built especially for tourists. Its presence provides common imagery that symbolizes Chun Cheon as a resort city.

26) Deleuze, 1972, p. 16.

27) Ibid. p. 22, emphasis in original.

Meanwhile, Hong spotlights background details that are irrelevant to the film's narrative progression. Early in the film, when Kyeongsu goes to the studio, the sequence begins with an anonymous female bank teller's profile and silently holds on this woman as she counts money. As the next scene shows Kyeongsu arguing with a film director, her presence disappears. Thus, despite the visual focus on the image of the bank teller, the sequence ends without disclosing further details about her. This shift in semantic ordering also occurs while Kyeongsu is in Gyeongju. There, after he goes to a pub alone, the camera captures him drinking in the left-hand corner of the screen. It captures him at too close a range, however, and thus makes him look blurry. Instead, the film centers on a nameless young couple and lets viewers hear their dialogue as if they were part of the narrative. These seemingly irrelevant signs may return later, however, as material for another contraction, as a part of new repetition, and thus as another sensuous sign.²⁹⁾

Nevertheless, our search for the truth via signs is bound to fail. Deleuze states that "in each realm of signs, we are disappointed when the object does not give us the secret we were expecting."³⁰⁾ This is because "each sign has two halves: it designates an object, it signifies something different."³¹⁾ The disappointment is caused by the fact that "the sign is doubtless more profound than the object emitting it, but it is

28) Ibid. p. 12.

29) Furthermore, as a potential sensuous sign for another story, this scene functions to broaden fictional spaces beyond the diegetic universe of this single film into our actual reality.

30) Deleuze, 1972, p. 33.

31) Ibid. p. 26.

still attached to that object, it is still half sheathed in it. And the sign's meaning is doubtless more profound than the subject interpreting it, but it is attached to this subject, half incarnated in a series of subjective associations.”³²⁾ Thus, “worldly signs, the signs of love, even sensuous signs are incapable of giving us the essence: they bring us closer to it, but we always fall back into the trap of the object, into the snare of subjectivity.”³³⁾

The final sequence synthetically conveys this repetition of signs in our lives. After Seon-yeong enters her house, Kyeongsu waits for her; she never comes out again. It starts raining, as the sky flashes with lightning and thunder. When capturing Kyeongsu closely from a high angle, the camera reinforces the helplessness of his face against the gruesome apparition delivered by the high gate at Seon-yeong's house—built in a traditional Korean architectural style, and thus associated with an ancient Korean temple. This striking imagery reminds viewers of the legend that Seongil (Kyeongsu's friend in *Chun Cheon*) recounted to Kyeongsu on their visit to Cheongpyong Temple: In ancient times there lived a man who loved a princess. The king was furious about this and killed the man. However, the man was reincarnated as a serpent and then wound himself around the princess. To solve this problem, the princess was advised to visit Cheongpyong Temple. After the princess enters through the temple gates, the serpent tries to enter as well, but a sudden rainstorm with lightning and thunder blocks the serpent from going through. From then on, the gate was known as the “Turning Gate”

32) Ibid. pp. 34-35.

33) In this regard, Deleuze argues that “it is only on the level of art that the essences are revealed.” Ibid. pp. 36-37.

after the serpent's retreat.

Similarly, as Kyeongsu turns away from Seon-yeong's house, we viewers witness this legend recur, although we likely paid little attention to it while it was being narrated in Seongil's annoying voice. In conjunction with this reemergence of past occurrences, viewers may experience similar returns in other associative memory scenes: Kyeongsu had 'made a detour' without seeing the (actual) "turning gate" in Chun Cheon. Once again, as he starts walking in the rain, we may associate this with another scene showing Kyeongsu walking down a street soaked in rain—which was inserted seemingly for no reason. Nevertheless, the visual and semantic ambiguity of these recurring scenes discourages us from trying to keep track of when the repetition started and what it means. In this way, as the legend repeats in *Turning Gate*, viewers in a search of the meaning end up with a mere sense of déjà vu, echoing the semantic ambiguity embedded in all 'repetitions' Kyeongsu has experienced: a loop of repetition as a gesture and as conduct, in an endless chain of signifiers. And thus the scene delivers to viewers a claustrophobic feeling of being stuck within an unavoidable closed circuit known as 'daily life.'³⁴⁾

4. 'Triple repetition': C's miracle in *Woman on the Beach*

Hong repeats another game of repetition in his seventh film, *Woman on the Beach* (2006). At first glance, the film exhibits few differences from his previous films. The main narrative is about

34) In fact, the Korean title of *Turning Gate* means 'a discovery of daily life.'

Junglae, a film director. He goes to a trip with Chang-uk and Munsuk. Junglae and Munsuk have a short love affair and break up. Left alone at the tourist site, Junglae meets another woman, Seonhee. Thus far, *Woman on the Beach* has more or less repeated the formula of Hong's previous films.

Something different occurs in the middle of the story when Junglae is with Seonhee. Breaking into the time allowed for Junglae to see Seonhee, Munsuk knocks loudly on Junglae's door and makes him return to her, disrupting the presumably symmetrical narrative economy rotating around each woman. From here on, the story returns to Junglae's relationship with Munsuk. This interruption by repetition occurs in a few more scenes and stops the story on the verge of every repetition. Toward the end, Junglae attempts another reunion after a break-up; Munsuk declines his request, saying, "I am not doing anything like repetition." Here, her refusal takes on an interesting self-reflexivity that resonates throughout Hong's entire body of work.

A straightforward response to this self-awareness about repetition had already appeared earlier in the film, where Junglae recounts his new scenario to Munsuk and Chang-uk: A young man (let's call him 'C') listens to a Mozart piece at a hotel room. Stepping out of the room, he hears the same melody in an elevator, and once again in the street. C, fascinated by this melody, searches in vain for the cause of this 'repetition.' Junglae excitedly calls this 'triple repetition' a miracle.³⁵⁾ This 'three repetition,' ends up, however, with the man's failure to find the cause,

35) Likewise, Hong's seventh film, *Woman on the Beach*, registers explicit self-reflexivity. In doing so, Hong seeks to draw viewers' attention (or even to 'beg' for their attention) to the issue of repetition and subjectivity, which had been long his theme but was not quite appreciated among his audiences.

the origin of the melody. This perplexes Munsuk and Chang-uk, while Junglae attribute's C's failure to ungraspable attributes of our existence. Why then does Hong have Junglae tell this riddle-like story? How does his repetition relate to our being or subjectivity? And why should it occur three times?

In human life, "the essential point", as Deleuze argues, "is the persistence of the triadic structure."³⁶⁾ "The first is necessarily by default, and as though closed upon itself; the second is open and witness to a heroic metamorphosis; but the most important and mysterious lies in the third, which plays the role of 'signified' in relation to the other two."³⁷⁾ Here, let us sift our case of 'triple repetition' through the Deleuzian triadic structure. When C plays Mozart, this act of listening to music happens contingently, with no connection to anything else in the movie. Thus, it can end as one single event until the music next flows. When C hops on the elevator, the return of the same melody registers "witness to a heroic metamorphosis," that is to say, the first time becomes reflected upon the second time: as Briankle Chang in his article "Monet, Deleuze, and Being Repetitive" explicates, the first time needs to be "doubled, for it must necessarily keep this second time close to itself to exist" and furthermore, the first time "can only exist in an unalterable and unadulterated proximity to a second time that reflects to it its firstness."³⁸⁾ Finally C runs into a Pierrot playing the music, the third time, an occurrence that "plays the role of 'signified' in relation to

36) Deleuze, 1994, p. 92. In similar fashion Jacques Derrida states, "We'd have to wait until there were more than two to begin" (cited in Briankle Chang. "Deleuze, Monet, and Being Repetitive." *Cultural Critique*, vol. 41 (1999. Winter). p. 191.

37) Deleuze, *Ibid.* p. 93.

38) Chang, *Ibid.* p. 189.

the other two.” Here, the third time retroactively defines not only the second time but also the first time, giving a pattern to the whole series of repetition. Nevertheless, the first time is to be resituated in the place of ‘the first’ by repressing the fact that not until the third time did the ‘firstness’ come out. Through this retroactive repositioning, the first time serves as ‘the origin,’ or ‘the signifier,’ which allows the repetition to repeat. In this regard, Deleuze states that “the most important and mysterious lies in the third.”³⁹⁾

Likewise, repetition comes out through retroactive contemplation, or what Deleuze calls “contraction.”⁴⁰⁾ There is no repetition in-itself, there is only repetition for-itself.” To be more precise, we *need repetition* to put multiplicity into a pattern, by finding similarities between individual events in our lives. In this sense, Deleuze states, “Through contemplation we ‘are’ repetition, habit.”⁴¹⁾ Furthermore, the first time (or the origin) is a production of this contraction, and the origin did not exist as such in the beginning. To continue repetition, this absence of the origin gets repressed, which is “the secret of the whole system of representation in structuralist binary oppositions which find some similarity (or something familiar) and put it into a network of signification.” In this sense, “all repetitions are a search for the origin.”⁴²⁾ However, whenever we trace something back to the past, the origin perpetually retreats a step back: the origin *does not exist*. Or, “the signified itself is pure repetition.” Nevertheless, the assumption of its

39) Deleuze, 1994. This lack and repositioning of the origin functions equivalently to the primal father in Freudian theory.

40) Deleuze, 1994.

41) Deleuze, *Ibid.* pp. 73-74.

42) Chang, *Ibid.* pp. 190-191.

existence enables all the repetitions to be repetitions, which is to say that “this absence of the origin” enables the repetitions to be repetitions. This is why our hero C fails in his search for the origin of the music, a universal secret for the system of representation, and in turn for the truth of our existence.

5. *Woman on the Beach* II: Difference and Singularity

Hong resumes his contemplation of repetition by showing Junglae dating two women: Munsuk and Seonhee. Unlike previous films that focus on repetitive patterns or situations, *Woman on the Beach* brings to the fore the issue of what sustains repetition: repetition and difference. In addition to the asymmetrical narrative structure that Hong allots to two women, he draws our attention to incongruity in Junglae’s repetition of love with these women. Despite Junglae’s insistence that they look similar, there is at best a vague resemblance between them. Hong even verbally manifests this visual doubt by giving the following lines to his characters: Munsuk asks Seonhee rhetorically: “Do we look alike?” A shop owner asserts that “they do not look alike.” Even Junglae himself, when pressed by Seonhee, cannot point to any similar physical attributes: When Seonhee asks Junglae what features she shares with Munsuk, he enumerates several of Munsuk’s personal traits, none of which can be seen in Seonhee. This perplexes both characters. Now, when Junglae repeats the same questions, the same remarks, to both women, his repetition ends up merely highlighting their *differences* (which is reinforced when their answers

reveal slight differences between them).

In this sense, what sustains repetition is not actual resemblance but “what he *perceived* as sameness,”⁴³⁾ which enables him to shift between the two women. In this sense, the ‘resemblance’ (the signified) does not need to reside in this series of repetitions. Nevertheless, without this resemblance, the repetition cannot be generated. Thus, the absent resemblance needs to be claimed to be present. This is why Junglae compulsively asks around for confirmation that the two women look alike; he also suffers pain by unwittingly noticing a similarity between Munsuk and his ex-wife. Likewise, the demand for resemblance (or the assumed existence of resemblance) enables Junglae to repeat himself. Deleuze encapsulates this doubling operation of an absent cause—“pure difference” in his terms—as follows: “Difference is *behind* everything,” Deleuze puts it emphatically, “but behind difference there is nothing.”⁴⁴⁾

Confronting this “(absent) presence of the cause,”⁴⁵⁾ however, the film takes a lighter and swifter turn. The once static and distant camera becomes more responsive to physical and psychological changes in the characters. Conspicuously, the camera zooms in and out on the main characters, revealing visual details of their facial expressivity (e.g. Junglae in the opening sequence, Munsuk and Junglae while at a rest stop, or Junglae anxiously

43) Deleuze, 1972, my emphasis.

44) Deleuze, 1994, p. 80. In this regard, Chang enumerates the conceptual counterparts of the void or “This dis-placed S_0 , or more exactly, the very nonplace (non-lieu) that the virtual S_0 occupies,” as follows: “[R]oman Jakobson’s zero phoneme, Filippo Brunelleschi’s vanishing point, Marcel Mauss’s mana, Claude Levi-Strauss’s floating signifier, Sigmund Freud’s primal father, Jacques Lacan’s fantasy object a, the xenomoney in financial capitalism, etc.” Chang, Ibid. p. 205.

45) Chang, Ibid.

watching Munsuk from afar on a balcony).⁴⁶⁾ In another scene, Junglae shouts out and Munsuk bursts into tears. Here swift camera movements and emotionality replace the heavy, cynical overtones of Hong's previous films. Accompanied by the ample use of light, up-tempo music, this playful touch washes slapstick comedy-like amusement over the whole story.⁴⁷⁾

The comedic amusement does not end with lighthearted scenes. The film also inserts comic comments in the midst of philosophical contemplations of existence. For instance, Junglae draws a detailed diagram explicating an inevitable gap between the representation and the existence of our being (like any poststructuralist understanding of our subjectivity). In the sequence, Munsuk persistently asks Junglae if he sleeps with Seonhee, and Junglae explains his complicated emotional states through an inevitable mismatch between a subject and its representation, which is reminiscent of post-structuralist discussions of subjectivity. Yet, Junglae's seemingly sophisticated comments on subjectivity are a mere excuse to hide his love affair with Seonhee. In this way, the film highlights the artificiality and pretentiousness of their (claimed) search for the truth, which echoes repeated failures in human intellectual history in illuminating our existence. Nonetheless, the film colors this 'failure' with a pleasant tone—both Munsuk and Junglae express delightful exhilaration about their own discoveries when listening to each other's 'non-sense,' which elicits comical amusement from viewers.

46) The zooming stops, however, before Junglae's face makes its full appearance. In this way, Hong's use of zoom-in/out once again disappoints viewers' expectations, and thus it registers another play with filmic conventions.

47) Hong's previous works very rarely use music, so here the use of music is remarkable.

Here Hong's film encounters Deleuze's core conception, 'affirmation of singularity.'

As discussed earlier, what sustains repetition is nothing but "pure difference," and "we are all habits, repetitions"⁴⁸⁾ in search of the truth or the signified. Nevertheless, repetition can be hardly objectified or totalized. Deleuze claims that (pure) "difference is the object of affirmation, affirmation itself,"⁴⁹⁾ which stands in opposition to a binary system of exchange. Deleuze states:

[e]xchange implies only resemblance, even if the resemblance is extreme. Exactness is its criterion, along with the equivalence of exchanged products. This is the false repetition and causes our illness. True repetition, on the other hand, appears as a singular behavior that we display in relation to that which cannot be exchanged, replaced, or substituted—like a poem that is repeated on the condition that no word may be changed. It is no longer a matter of an equivalence between similar things, it is not even a matter of identity of the Same. True repetition addresses something singular, unchangeable, and different, without "identity." Instead of exchanging the similar and identifying the Same, it authenticates the different.⁵⁰⁾

Hong posits Munsuk at the moment she declares, "I am not doing something like repetition." Having made this remark, she not only *acknowledges where she is in a chain of repetition* but also *makes a*

48) Deleuze, 1972.

49) Deleuze, 1994, p. 74.

50) Deleuze/Mark Lester, (trans.) *The Logic of Sense*. New York: Columbia University Press. 1990. pp. 287-288.

small change in the predestined chain. In doing so, she (knowingly or unknowingly) *preserve and effaces* or “re-marks” “pure difference.” This affirmation of difference is delivered at a swift tempo under pleasant instrumental music. When Munsuk walks in the dark, her imagery shows no sign of disappointment with what she has just found out about her beloved, Junglae—he *betrayed* and lied to her. Rather, the camera captures her marching cheerfully through a swamp, even singing. The beautifully filmed imagery reinforces Munsuk’s positive attitude.

At the beginning of his discussion of repetition and difference, Deleuze explains that “[repetitions] do not add a second time and a third time to the first, but carry the first time to the ‘nth’ power.”⁵¹⁾ Here Deleuze asserts the retroactively situated position of the first time, and the secret of repetition. More significantly, he highlights here “the *singularity* in repetition instead of repetitive universality.”⁵²⁾ In so doing, Deleuze exhibits his trust in potential change not only to a third time but also *to the first time, the repetitive pattern, which confers our subjectivity as a whole*. In this context, Deleuze states time and again that “to repeat is to behave.” “Repetition as a conduct and as a point of view concerns non-exchangeable and non-substitutable singularities.”⁵³⁾ This Deleuzian trust in repetition as singularity, which always brings a new subject, triggers (or visually augments) small changes in characters at the end of *Woman on the Beach*: Junglae completes his scenario; Munsuk’s car gets stuck in the sand, yet she is soon assisted by two anonymous men.⁵⁴⁾ In this way, their repetition makes a small

51) Deleuze, 1994.

52) Ibid. with my emphasis.

53) Deleuze, 1994, p. 1.

difference, marking a singularity and thereby “preserving and effacing” the repetition, which will eventually reach a change in the repetition, pure difference, and our existence.

Beautifully filmed scenery throughout the film bolsters the positive overtones of the narrative. Indeed, Hong seems for the first time to appreciate the natural beauty and excitement associated with tourist sites in *Woman on the Beach*:⁵⁵⁾ The camera portrays the placidity of a seaside that stretches across the horizon, and also shows tourists making merry and setting off fireworks. The film also captures a serene mood when Munsuk is walking on the beach, rather like a poetic documentary; such aestheticized embedded memory in turn reinforces the sole condition that grounds our existence.

In a compelling moment, the film vividly portrays the fleeting moment of the present in the presence of a dog: Munsuk sees a dog called *Dohl* walking with its owners on the beach. A few days later, when she meets it again, it is no longer called *Dohl*—it is instead called *Bada*—because it had been deserted and found a new owner. The film does not question which name would truly represent the dog. Instead, in capturing the dog delightfully running with Munsuk, the film underscores its own phenomenological substance. As the film continues and thus blurs the imagery of the two running, the scene registers the sheer kinetics of energy and the fleeting flow of the present: ‘the presentness of the present,’ or the ‘substance’ which arises beyond naming, the surface of representation.

54) In fact, some critics mention that this difference may register the moment when the subject breaks out of an endless loop of language.

55) It is ironic that Hong most beautifully captures this place, which is one of the lesser-known tourist sites among those he includes in his films.

6. Realism, Hong's films, and the Quotidian World of Korea in the 2000s

As discussed thus far, Hong's mode of capturing reality stands in a liminal space between documentary/fiction, foreground/background, and travel/everyday life, among other dichotomies. Representative of this liminality are Hong's ample use of a static camera and his unique use of the frame—his characters are often partially or wholly off the screen, while their voices can still be heard in the diegetic world. Hong proactively deploys his actors'/actresses' real personas—consider Hong's twist on the star persona of Hyun-Jung Go in *Woman on the Beach*—in scenes that are seemingly irrelevant to the narrative progression, just as he frequently foregrounds peripheral objects and backgrounds.

Here it is worth noting David Bordwell's insightful observation. Bordwell focuses in particular on such background information brought to the foreground—a “decorative” style, as he puts it, which can be distinguished from classic filmic conventions that Bordwell categorizes as “narrative” and “expressive” functions: whereas the former “can solicit attention in its own right,” the latter “can swerve from purely narrative functions.”⁵⁶ Significantly, Bordwell argues that decorative filmic styles stimulate ‘a sense of order’ instead of ‘a sense of meaning’, to reference E. H. Gombrich's distinction between human faculties; decorative styles “outrun the meanings that can plausibly be

56) David Bordwell, “A Cinema of Flourishes: Japanese Decorative Classicism of the Prewar Era.” in Nolletti, Arthur. & Desser, David. (eds.) *Reframing Japanese Cinema*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press. 1992.

attributed to the particular devices and patterns we encounter”⁵⁷⁾ and thus encourage us to search for order.

Bordwell’s explication of decorative filmic styles is applicable to Hong’s semantic reversals of foreground and background objects, as seen in occasional insertions of scenes that are irrelevant to narrative progress and in reversing the order of foreground and background imagery, leading viewers astray from the main plots, forcing them instead to focus on the imagery on the screen. While the camera holds on such scenes, viewers may realize that such imagery celebrates the ordinary stuff of daily life, and further realize that it is an unfamiliar mis-encounter between irrelevant visual details that documents everyday life and secures the narrative’s claim to reality. Here, Hong’s detour from narrative and filmic techniques shifts viewers’ attention to a space beyond the conventional representational space and expands the diegetic universe up to the edge of ‘daily life.’⁵⁸⁾ This understanding of an expanding representational space is applicable to Hong’s other filmic styles, such as his reliance on repetition as a primary motif, all of which let the substance of our being, the prefilmic, contingent, and fleeting present tense, perhaps emerge.

57) David Bordwell, *Ozu and Poetics of Cinema*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. 1988. p. 378.

58) Research on Hong’s use of the frame often touch on his emphasis of the diegetic universe through visual or verbal implications. Kim, Ho-young. “Hong Sangsoo Younghwa-ui Frame Yeongu (A Study of Screen Frame in Hong Sangsoo’s Films)” *France-hak Yeongu*. vol. 37. 2006. pp. 453-474.

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■ 국문초록

한국 사회의 일상성에 대한 현상학적 성찰로서의 홍상수 감독의 초기 작품 읽기: <생활의 발견>과 <해변의 여인>을 중심으로

강 경 래

본 논문은 홍상수 감독의 초기 작품들에 붙여졌던 이름으로서의 “일상성에 대한 고찰”과 그의 특징적인 영화 제작 기법들을 프랑수아 들뢰즈(Gilles Deleuze)의 사유를 통해 다시 고찰한다. 여러 평자들에 의해 지적되어 왔듯이 홍상수 감독은 자신의 데뷔작에서부터 독특한 영화 제작 기법들을 활용해 왔다. 가령 롱테이크나 오프스크린 화면, 불안정한 카메라 앵글을 활용하거나 즉흥적인 대사와 과장되지 않은 연기를 통해 영화의 극적 효과를 최대한 자제해 왔다. 여기서 지적된 여러 기법들은 유럽의 예술영화 스타일의 차용이나 혹은 다큐멘터리 영화 기법들과 자주 비교되며, 이런 점에서 기존의 한국 영화들과 달리 한국 사회의 잔잔한 일상성을 담아낸다고 평가받아 왔다. 본 연구는 홍상수 감독의 초기 작품 <생활의 발견>과 <해변의 여인>이 한국사회의 일상성을 드러내는 방식을 다시 고찰하며, 이를 위해 들뢰즈가 『차이와 반복』과 『프루스트와 기호들』에서 상술한 반복, 차이, 기호, 존재, 시간성 등의 개념들을 활용한다. 가령 <생활의 발견>에 대한 분석에 있어서는 무엇보다도 영화 속에 반복되는 기호들에 주목하며, 이러한 기호들의 위계와 반복이 영화 속 인물들의 삶과 관계 속에서 작동하는 방식에 주목한다. 특히 본 연구는 들뢰즈의 저작들이 천착했었던 무심한 기호의 나열들로서의 반복이 우리 존재에게 의미를 만들어내는 동시에 하나의 (순수) 차이로서의 존재임을 일깨우는 순

간들에 주목하며, 이러한 개념들을 통해 홍상수 감독이 자신의 작품을 통해 지속적으로 드러내고자 했던 반복의 기표들과 일상성에 대한 천착이 갖는 의미를 탐구한다. 나아가 선정된 두 영화가 지닌 차이점에 대해서도 주목하며, 이를 통해 홍상수 영화의 일상성이 실제 우리 삶과 존재방식들에 대해 갖는 의미가 변화하는 과정에 대해서도 주목한다. 이를 통해 본 연구는 기존의 연구들이 지적해 온 홍상수 영화의 일상성과 미장센, 리얼리즘에 대한 연구들을 참조하는 동시에 이를 심화하고 풍부히 하는 것을 목표로 하였다.

주제어 ● 홍상수 영화, 일상성, 현상학, 차이와 반복, 리얼리즘, 질 들뢰즈

| Abstract

Korean filmmaker Sangsoo Hong is known for his idiosyncratic aestheticism. His debut feature, *The Day a Pig Fell into the Well* (1996), made a public splash particularly because of its unique realist cinematography and non-linear narrative. As many critics have noted, Hong developed his trademark style early on, taking form in “a close description of the quotidian world,” a style marked by his unusual cinematography, which includes slow camera movements, long takes, and ample use of off-screen spaces. Despite variations across his work, Hong’s subsequent films continued the cinematic scrutiny of the quotidian. Still within his first decade of filmmaking, two of Hong’s earlier follow-ups to *The Day a Pig Fell into the Well*, *Turning Gate* (2003) and *Women on the Beach* (2006), perhaps best showcase Hong’s unique aestheticism. These later films were shot with only brief lines of often-improvised dialogue. Furthermore, Hong’s films, as they avoid dramaturgy while repeating images taken from daily life, appear to show viewers the physical details of life, constructing what might be called a phenomenology of the quotidian. Based on these observations, this paper examines the cinematic and ontological meanings of ‘repetition’ in Hong’s films and filmmaking styles. In particular, I explore two of Hong’s early films, *Turning Gate* and *Woman on the Beach*, while referring to other works that shed light on my thesis. In the attempt to interpret the ontological meaning of ‘repetition’ embedded in Hong’s films, I rely on phenomenological understandings about life, including the Deleuzian conceptions of “signs,” “repetition,” “pure

difference,” and “singularity.” In so doing, I seek to show how Hong’s films help capture (true facets of) ‘the quotidian life’ in contemporary Korea.

Keyword ● *Hong Sangsoo, the Quotidian Life, Phenomenology, Difference and Repetition, Realism, Gilles Deleuze,*

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