



Moral Tales from Korea. Hong Sang-Soo and Eric Rohmer

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Abstract. The films by the Korean filmmaker Hong Sang-Soo have always been recognized as “Nouvelle Vague-ish” as for narrative and style. His intimate minimalism, his low-budget filmmaking, his scarce use of editing, his extreme attention to space and *mise en scène*, and above all the serial practice of repeating the same patterns from film to film just to make but small variations, make him someone close to Eric Rohmer (as also often noticed by critics). Significantly, one of his movies was even called *Conte de cinéma* (*Geuk jang jeon*, 2005), as it were one of Rohmer’s *Contes morales*. *Night and Day* (*Bam gua nat*, 2008) especially deals with this very similarity. Actually, this Paris-based tale about a young Korean painter stuck in the French capital with no money and split between his wife and his would-be lover, not only is stylistically very close to the *Contes morales*, but also merges narratively all six of the *Contes* films (plus *The Sign of Leo* [*Le signe du lion*, 1961] and *Rendezvous in Paris* [*Les rendez-vous de Paris*, 1995]). The article closely analyzes this confrontation Hong-Rohmer revolving around *Night and Day* (but also all the rest of Hong’s filmography), and the peculiar relation of continuity on one side, but of discontinuity on the other, between these two members of different “new waves” in space and time.

1. Six contes moraux... or More?

Eric Rohmer’s *Contes moraux*, “moral tales,” is a cycle of six films shot from 1963 to 1972: *The Baker’s Girl of Monceau* (*La boulangère de Monceau*, 1963), *Suzanne’s Career* (*La carrière de Suzanne*, 1963), *The Collector* (*La collectionneuse*, 1967), *My Night with Maud* (*Ma nuit chez Maud*, 1969), *Claire’s Knee* (*Le genou de Claire*, 1970), *Love in the Afternoon* (*L’amour l’après-midi*, 1972). Six filmic variations on always the same basic scheme: a man vaguely flirting with a girl before returning to a former girl, mostly his wife or fiancée. The tale had to be told from the man’s point of view, both in the images and by his voice over (*Claire’s Knee* excepted).

The critical contributions on this cycle, such as the excellent study by Pascal Bonitzer (Bonitzer 1991), generally converge on the meta-representational nature of these films¹. On the one hand, the story of a man whose marriage, or straight union, is strongly reinforced by an adulterous transgression that had to stay at the level of pure possibility, even though a rather stubbornly and deliberately pursued one. On the other hand, a would-be novel whose narrative closure is not contrasted, but rather reinforced by what eludes it, i.e. the physical world caught visually. “Bref, si le héros des *Contes moraux* est narrateur, c’est-à-dire ‘un peu’ auteur, c’est dans la mesure où il évacue toute évaluation objective au profit d’un récit autoréférentiel. On dira dans les termes de la linguistique oxfordienne qu’il substitue à la forme *constative* (description des faits) l’assertion sans preuves du discours *performatif* (‘quand dire, c’est faire’). Un genou caressé: la caméra ne fait rien d’autre, bêtement, que le montrer. Mais pour décider de la portée exacte et du sens de ce geste, il faut la parole, le récit, il faut l’art de la narration. Et c’est le narrateur qui se réserve, en dernière instance, le droit d’évaluer la signification, l’importance que revêt ce geste, cet acte en apparence (ou en fait, mais c’est justement le *fait* qui est ici comme évidé) minime.”² (Bonitzer 1991, 38.) The marriage between space and language granted by their very ontological having nothing to do with each other. “C’est qu’en effet le témoignage visuel, ou le document photographique qui l’objective, sont empreints d’une irréductible ambiguïté. La photo de la femme blonde ne dit rien sur la femme blonde, elle se contente de montrer la femme blonde. Elle ne dit même pas que c’est une vraie blonde. Elle la montre, c’est-à-dire qu’elle se contente d’affirmer silencieusement

¹ “L’analogie est frappante à cet égard entre l’amour romanesque [...] et l’aspiration à l’écriture telle qu’en parle Rohmer dans la préface des *Six Contes moraux*: ‘De l’écriture – écrit-il à propos du texte de ces pseudo-nouvelles – il n’a que le fauz-semblant, ou, si l’on préfère, la nostalgie. Il se propose comme modèle une rhétorique vieille de plus d’un siècle, et s’en tient complaisamment là, comme si, de la chose littéraire, il préférerait le fantasme à la pratique.’ Il suffit de remplacer ‘écriture’ et ‘chose littéraire’ par ‘amour’ et ‘passion’ pour avoir la psychologie et le secret des héros de Rohmer.” (Bonitzer 1991, 126) “There is a striking analogy between romance [...] and the aspiration to *écriture* the way Rohmer talks about it in the *Six contes moraux*’s preface. This is what he writes concerning the text of these pseudo-novels: “As for the *écriture* here, there is but its simulacrum, or better its nostalgia. The model of a rhetoric which is more than one hundred years old, consciously kept at a certain distance, as if the phantom of the literary thing were to be preferred to its practice.” It would be enough to replace ‘écriture’ and ‘literary thing’ with ‘love’ and ‘passion’ to obtain the psychology and the secret belonging to Rohmer’s heroes.” (My translation, M. G.)

² “Briefly, if the hero of the moral tales is the narrator, that is ‘a little’ the author, it is insofar as he gets away with any objective evaluation in favour of a self-referential tale. Oxford linguistics would say that the *constative* form (description of facts) is replaced by the assertion without proof of *performative* discourse (‘saying is doing’). A caressed knee: the camera just shows it. But, in order to decide the exact range and the meaning of this gesture, words are needed. The tale, the art of narration are needed. And it is finally the narrator who takes upon himself the right to evaluate the meaning, the importance of that gesture, this apparently (or in fact, but it is the *fact* itself that is emptied out, as it were) minimal act.” (My translation, M. G.)

son existence, de témoigner de sa présence auprès de Christian l'aviateur. Là-dessus, tout est permis dans l'ordre du discours: le rêve, le déire, le mensonge, et même la vérité.”³ (Bonitzer 1991, 25.) And whose wedding ring is the *mise en scène*, the staging principle that carefully organizes the visual and makes any Rohmerian shot unmistakable because of its classical clarity (Aumont 2005).

But Rohmer's transparency is an ambiguous one. In fact, in a truly Bazinian fashion, Rohmer's transparency does not flatly “reveal” reality, but rather unravels its structural ambiguity as reality, its own possible lacking something essential the very moment everything is clearly displayed (Bonitzer 1991, 69–75). That is why marriage itself is undermined from within: true, it is made transparent as a system in which the symptom (that is, what exceeds a certain system) is made to belong to the system itself. But, as Pascal Bonitzer notices, the system itself then becomes something ambiguous, no less ambiguous than Rohmer's ambiguous transparency. If a system, a marriage, is so dependent on this “almost-nothing”, on this virtual deviation inconsistent in itself, then its own solidity is put into question. “Bref, pourquoi ne pas voir dans l'*image* de bonheur sans nuages que donne le couple avec son enfant, un spectacle factice, comme les paisibles habitants de la petite ville du film de Siegel, *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, ne sont plus que les images d'eux-mêmes, et sous leur familière bienveillance, désormais tout en trompe l'oeil (puisque ce n'est plus eux mais des *aliens* qui les ont remplacés), cachent les plus sombres, les plus malefiques desseins? [...] Mais si le sens profond de cette 'image de bonheur' n'est pas le bonheur et la plénitude amoureuse mais le ressentiment, est-ce bien là ce que veut montrer l'auteur, ou bien le commentateur se livre-t-il ici à une extrapolation? On devine la réponse de Rohmer: je ne dis rien, c'est mon film qui parle, et toutes les interprétations sont recevables.”⁴ (Bonitzer 1991, 128.)

So the system, in the guise of the marriage and of the narrative closure, is both confirmed and falling into an ontological uncertainty. But this uncertainty, at this

³ “The thing is that actually visual evidence, or the photographic document by which it is objectified, are imbued with irreducible ambiguity. The picture of the blond woman does not say anything about the blond woman. Not even that she is a real blond. It shows her, i.e. it just silently affirms her existence, it just testifies her presence next to Christian the aviator. As for this, anything is permitted in the order of discourse: dream, frenzy, lies, and even the truth.” (My translation, M. G.)

⁴ “In other words, why couldn't the *image* of cloudless happiness given by the couple and their child be a fictitious spectacle, like the quiet inhabitants of the village in Siegel's *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* are nothing more than their own image, hiding the most obscure and evil plans under a family good-will which is by now only illusory, since they have been replaced by *aliens*? [...] But if the underlying meaning of this 'image of happiness' is not happiness and loving fullness, but rather resentment, did the author really want to express that or maybe it is just the commentator who is over-interpreting here? One might guess Rohmer's answer: I don't say anything, my film speaks for me, any interpretation would do.” (My translation, M. G.)

more general level, does not manifest itself through a symptom bursting out of the system. Because any of the moral tales deal with a man directly facing the symptoms, facing the possibility to deviate from the right path, facing the virtual romance with another woman, just in order to neutralize them, to test the consistence of it all, which is only and strictly imaginary. There is no dream in any of these narratives because any of them is a big dream in itself, a momentary deviance that one makes to be immediately coming back to the right path. No dream because the whole film in itself is a dream that must be faced to be neutralized, as well as the film systematically neutralizes the symptoms composing the narrative texture. "... la science de Rohmer est justement dans un récit d'apparence objective d'inscrire de tels 'symptômes,' crises ou scandales, qui révèlent soudain 'ce qui se passe dans la tête' du héros ou de l'héroïne. Et si héros ou héroïne il y a, c'est par de telles explosions, par de tels empourprements, qu'ils se dénoncent comme tels."⁵ (Bonitzer 1991, 33.)

So, if on the one hand all these films explicitly deal all the time with symptoms in order to find a spatial and narrative way to make all the opacities into an opaque transparency, on the other hand, and on a more general level, the structural uncertainty of such a system is to be found somewhere else. That is, in the serial nature of the project itself. The system achieves its closure in each film, and yet it must be reconfirmed film after film. In spite of the closure that the scheme actually achieves at the end of any of the single films, the scheme has to be repeated six times. Freudian psychoanalysis has a name for this impossibility to erase the unwanted enjoyment, causing the unceasing repetition of always the same impasse: death drive (Freud 1975).

2. Hong Sang-Soo

Some decades after, Korean filmmaker Hong Sang-Soo carries out nine long feature films until today, all of them as different variations on a scheme involving unfailingly a man and two women, a woman and two men or something like that. All of them are staged according to a rather Rohmerian minimalism, with rarefied and calm master shots resorting to few editing cuts and a careful organization of space inside the frame, seemingly both natural and meticulously staged and composed. The camera moves with a certain rigidity, especially with semi-pans, like yet another mean to articulate and point at the relations the bodies and the

⁵ "Rohmer's science resides in putting in an objective kind of narration such 'symptoms,' crises or scandals, suddenly revealing 'what goes on' inside the hero's or heroine's head. And if ever there is a hero or a heroine, it is because of such explosions, such blushes, denounced as such." (My translation, M. G.)

objects are taken into; in other words, there is an evident *mise en scène* overworking, tracing lines and vectors and staging them intricately, but never sacrificing the quiet stillness of every frame, largely occupied by emptiness. All his films are studies on characters dealing with the inevitable impasse of desire, caused by the doubling that desire by definition enacts, shot with a peculiar kind of cold and abstract humour, and with a certain taste for symmetries and narrative deliberate schematicity. This impasse finds its way through repetition: even though there is no predetermined serial project like Rohmer's moral tales, we do have, like in Rohmer's cinema, the constant variation and repetition of always the same scheme.

2008's *Night and Day* is an explicit attempt to come to terms with Hong's Rohmerian filiation. The story, told also by the voice over of the male main character like in the moral tales, deals with Sung-nam, a Korean painter stuck in Paris because of some marijuana fuss, with no money and in summer's heat, like in Rohmer's *The Sign of Leo*. Like in the third moral tale *The Collector*, his egomaniac pretentiousness as an artist bangs with the bland but irresistible beauty of an insignificant (and quite despicable) younger girl, that plays with infinite coyness with him, who is attracted specifically by her feet like Jerome was by Claire's knee in the fifth moral tale of the same name. In the end, he gets from her what he was desperately looking for: sex. She gets pregnant, but then his wife, who has been phone-calling him throughout the film, tells him too that she is pregnant, fixing an uncanny parallelism between wife and lover like the one in the fourth moral tale, *My Night with Maud*, is based on. He flies back to Korea and finds out that that was only a lie his wife made up just to make him come back. So, after having repressed all his remorse in a dream that limpidly symbolizes his past infidelity and the impossibility to come to terms with it, he can hug his wife again and live happily with her ever thereafter, like in the sixth moral tale, *Love in the Afternoon*.

It is worth noticing that this film too, *Love in the Afternoon*, the last of the moral tales, was supposed to end the series and the repetitions once and for all. In the film's prologue, the main character imagines to sexually conquer all the girls he meets on the street. In the film, these girls are the heroines of the previous moral tales, *The Collector*, *My Night with Maud*, *Claire's Knee*. So, this sixth and last moral tale explicitly declares the intention to sum up all of the moral tales series. This is the film in the series in which most deliberately the man deviates from his neat and bourgeois path only to better adhere to it. Nowhere in the series like in *Love in the Afternoon* the parable is more limpid, the system more unbreakable, the symptom more directly faced and neutralized. This is why Dudley Andrew (2007, 136–137) has compared this film to *Eyes Wide Shut* (Stanley Kubrick, 1999).

But with an important difference. In Kubrick's film, dream had a huge importance. For the aforementioned reasons, we have no dream in the moral tales' narrative. And, significantly enough, in *Love in the Afternoon* that imaginary scene in the prologue is not dreamt by the main character, but consciously imagined. While he imagines, his eyes are wide open, as particularly stressed by a close-up on his eyes at the very beginning of the imaginary sequence. It is Hong Sang-Soo, some decades later, who would eventually re-open and re-question Rohmer's system, placing back right at the centre of it the hidden logic Rohmer's system tried to avoid and erase by embracing it overtly: dream, and symptom. So *Night and Day*, entirely built around dream and symptom, is supposed to be the last word concerning the ceaseless repetition of always the same impasse common to Eric Rohmer and Hong Sang-Soo.

3. Two Different Ways of Transparency

The decisive matter here is the notion of transparency, which is sensibly different in Hong's case. Transparency comes with opacity: this line of thought common to Bazin and Rohmer roots back to phenomenology, and, according to what has become by now a philosophical commonplace, finds in Courbet's *L'origine du monde* one of the highest manifestations of this paradox. Courbet's proto-surrealist hyperrealism estranges its object by depicting it with ultra-fidelity. The origin as a void that can be revealed only by veiling it again, the transparency as something that can be rendered only by its own betrayal. In her acute *Le spectateur séduit*, Maria Tortajada analyzes Rohmer's transparency as something whose consistency is only granted by the gaze of the spectator, just like the seduction game is based on the gaze of an absent third (Tortajada 1999, 122–164). This does not mean that transparency is a cheat: it just means that it is an actual illusion, an illusion carrying a real weight, something “objectively subjective,” as Lacan used to say. This “third,” this absent spectator, is ambiguously placed also inside the filmic texture: it is his own unstable position in and outside the film that constitutes the structural ambiguity of transparency.

During a brief scene in which Sung-nam and a girl go to the Musée d'Orsay to see Courbet's *L'origine du monde*, we are confronted with the paradox of the spectator as the “unstable third.” When placing themselves in front of the picture [Fig. 1.], the spectator is placed behind their back, and cannot see the picture properly because Sung-nam's head covers it – better: his head covers the key spot of the picture: the female sex. Then, without any editing cuts, the girl moves out

[Fig. 2.], and Sung-nam takes her place; now the picture is perfectly visible for the spectator as well. When both are staring at the picture, the picture is hidden from the spectator, because the gaze of the spectator IS precisely the absence matching together the gazes of the two characters, exactly like the void that is represented in the picture – that is, the female sex. So the spectator is both absent and coincident with the picture. In fact, some seconds later, the girl moves away and we literally take her place: the spectator, as an unstable third, is both outside the relation it grants and inside it, as part of it. So, within a single uncut shot, he can shift from granting the relation from an absent point gazing at the terms of that relation, to being one of the elements of the relation gazed by the absent gaze. Both modalities are a different way by which the picture confronts the absent gaze of the spectator with itself, the transparency of gaze revealed as such, and thus revealed as opacity.

In another brief scene during Sung-nam's visit to an atelier, the interdependency of the picture and its own frame is confirmed. The scene begins with a brief close up on what seems like a bunch of incoherent yellow and black signs. Then, the camera zooms backwards, up to letting us realize that we were staring from too close at a picture representing a cathedral. Behind that picture we now can see another, barely intelligible picture: only some seconds later, when the camera zooms forward towards it, the spectator can realize that it is a picture showing two giraffes eating grass. We cannot clearly distinguish the first picture by looking at it from too close, but we can if we move backwards; on the contrary, we cannot clearly distinguish the second picture from too far, but we can if we get close. The frame determines the content of the picture, but the picture determines the frame itself⁶.

Even beyond these revelatory moments, the whole film insists on this in basically each scene. It does so thanks to the camera work. While on the one hand, and from the relative exteriority of an external directorial gaze, the *mise en scène* traces lines and vectors through careful frame compositions and analytic camera movements mostly by rigid and quick semi-pans from point A to point B, in order to depict visually a system of relations, on the other hand the camera enters this system through a frequent, violent and abrupt use of zooming. The texture of limpid movements to the right and to the left is then frequently and traumatically broken by backward and forward movements. The result looks deliberately stiff, spongy as it were. Few things would be as unimaginable in an early Rohmer's film as frequent zooming: the rare exceptions, like in *Love in the Afternoon's* imaginary seduction scene, are so striking that they but confirm the rule.

⁶ This formulation was famously given by Jacques Lacan, to whom Pascal Bonitzer refers literally while explaining the paradox grounding the moral tales: the narrator is also *inside* the tale he is (subjectively) telling while it is being framed by an objective (the camera's) eye (Bonitzer 1991, 72).

So, Hong translates Rohmer's paradox of transparency, of the spectator as the unstable third, into a specific way of camera working.⁷ In doing so, on the one hand it makes it transparent because he finds a visual shape for it, as the *mise en scène* principle prescribes. On the other hand, he makes it opaque, because of the jarring appeal of that visual solution, a kind of jarring that would have never taken place in Rohmer's extremely and classically balanced visual texture, in which every symptom had to fit in its right place.

The more Hong seems to restore the Rohmerian cinema and the Rohmerian system, the more he seems to be detaching from it. Hong makes explicit what in Rohmer had to remain implicit, for instance the macho traits of the male characters. In Rohmer we mostly had a bunch of almost pathological but in the end harmless male narcissists, whereas Sung-nam is obsessed by the need to concretely prove his physical strength: he asks basically anybody he meets to engage into arm-wrestling, including a North Korean student to whom he roughly and without justification addresses an almost violent aggressiveness. We do have in *Night and Day* an attempt to get close to an adulterous possibility only to better stick to marriage like in the moral tales – but it all ends up to be almost a parody of Rohmer's fierce Catholicism.

At the beginning of the film, Sung-nam meets by chance a woman he used to be engaged with, a woman who is by now older, married and unattractive. They decide to meet in a hotel room, and while she takes a shower, he sits and reads the Bible. When she comes out of the bathroom, he says something like "You know, we must overcome temptations... here in the Bible they say that if your

⁷ Some passages of Tortajada's description of the spectator as "unstable third" literally seem to claim the zooming solution. "L'instabilité du spectateur, hésitant entre deux places incompatibles, tient plutôt à la distance qu'il garde face à la représentation. Cela malgré son état de sous-motricité: il est en effet assis dans la salle obscure, et le fauteuil qu'il occupe se trouve à une distance fixe de l'écran. Le paradoxe est ici rapidement résolu. Cette condition qui lui impose l'immobilité favorise son investissement imaginaire dans le mouvement qui lui propose le film. Ceci, nous l'avons vu, parce qu'il s'identifie comme regard à la caméra. Le régime d'identification primaire qui lui permet d'assumer la place et les mouvements de l'objectif est lui-même variable. Ainsi, la distance psychique qui sépare le spectateur de la représentation se modifie: il peut entrer dans le monde de la fiction ou rester extérieur, assumant une position critique de recul. Nous admettons ainsi que certaines formes de la représentation suscitent tel ou tel investissement de sa part." (Tortajada 1999, 239.) "The instability of the spectator, hesitating between two incompatible places, has rather to do with his distance before representation. This despite his under-mobility: actually, he is sitting in the theatre, and the chair he sits on is at a fix distance from the screen. The paradox here is rapidly solved. This condition that immobility imposes on him favours also his imaginary investment in the movement the film proposes to him. This is because he identifies, as gaze, with the camera. The primary identification regime allowing him to take the place and the movement of the camera is itself variable. This way, the psychic distance separating the spectator from the representation can change: he can enter the fiction's world or stay out and assume a critical withdrawing position. Thus it is possible to admit that to different representational forms correspond different investments on his part." (My translation, M. G.)

hand commits a sin you must cut it off...” So, on the account of such arguments, he basically rejects her.

Night and Day then begins with frontally enacting the Rohmerian scheme of getting close to adultery without having sex only to reconfirm a previous engagement, so that its inherent hypocrisy could come to the surface, so that it could be recognized as basically unusable. In fact, a younger and prettier girl, someone who was introduced to Sung-nam by his former fiancée some times before the hotel room events, is going to take that woman’s place quite soon. She is the one Sung-nam eventually seduces and betrays his wife with.

Here comes the big difference: in the moral tales, adultery is never consummated, and neither is sex, whereas Sung-nam does commit adultery, does dream too (in contrast with the moral tales, where this never occurs) and does make sex with the other girl, even though this is hidden from our sight thanks to a very Rohmerian ellipsis,⁸ i.e. one that overtly shows that it is hiding something – suffice it to think of *The Marquise of O* (*Die Marquise von O*, 1978). In other words, it seems that Hong tries to react to the idea that the woman can only be a symptom of man:⁹ it seems he is saying that there actually exist women who, despicable as they might be, cannot be reduced to the male narcissistic fantasy scheme, as one can also make love with a real and concrete woman.

Interestingly enough, the results of this assumption are exactly like Rohmer’s. Thanks to a secret and mysterious affinity between wife and lover (shared also by the first, the fourth and the sixth moral tales), i.e. the simultaneous revelation that they’re both pregnant, the male panics and comes back to the family nest for good. That the girl is a real person, and not only the man’s symptom, eventually reveals to be not at all the point: in any case, Sung-nam leaves her for his wife. So Hong’s connection with Rohmer’s transparency gets opaque again, because he rejoins it rather than detaching from it as it seemed before.

4. Clouds

To solve this enigma we have to consider what Sung-nam paints. Sung-nam is a highly specialized painter: he only paints *clouds*. Art historian Hubert Damisch wrote a renowned *Theory of Cloud*. More than three hundred pages to show how the rationalist effort of western painting, dominated by the linear perspective and

⁸ A semi-pan shifts from the couple starting to have sex to the open window of their hotel room, staying some seconds on it while we can only hear offscreen sounds from the couple.

⁹ The title of one of his films was *The Woman Is The Future Of Man* (*Yeojaneun namjaui miraeda*, 2004), a sentence from Louis Aragon famously reprised by Jacques Lacan as “The woman is the symptom of man.”

its very theatrical staging principle, had a huge figurative symptom, that is, what has a bodily consistency but not the kind of contour a perspective system would need to be fit into shape. That is, *clouds*. Damisch collects and explains countless figurative occurrences to show how clouds have worked into western art history the same way the symptom has in Rohmer's system: as an inherent transgression, an internal impediment that, far from deranging it, grants the system's consistency itself. "Cloud cannot be depicted by means of geometry; such a body 'without a surface' cannot be 'described' or reduced to the coordinates of an experimental setup that only reproduces objects as the clearly delineated, outlined shapes that are apprehended by any observer positioned at a particular spot (that is to say, whose view must be defined as from one specific point). Yet even so, cloud does find a place in Brunelleschi's representation: the mirror image accommodates it by means of a supplementary duplicating ploy, as a reflection of a reflection [...]. The significance of the plaque of darkened silver that Brunelleschi inserted into his painted panel in place of the sky did not merely have the role of a parody or even a criticism. However perfectly it was adjusted to the other elements in this perspective division of the picture, this plaque introduced into the network of the *intarsia* as it were an alien element, which manifested the closed nature of the 'code' and, at the same time, the fact that it was impossible for representation to remain within the limits of the field as it was defined" (Damisch 2002, 127). But there is more. Clouds are not a symptom whatsoever: the most gigantic symptom sprung from western art history and granting its own consistency is also the main organizing figurative principle of eastern art history, the Chinese one especially. "But all the indications are that the extent and, even more, the nature of the specifically pictorial functions imparted to mists and cloud and – as we shall see – their cosmological connotations suggest that Far Eastern painting, on the contrary, regarded this element both as a particularly prized motif and as a particularly prized principle. Even where it is introduced into a picture by mechanical or conventional means, in the West cloud marks the limitations of a representation that is governed by the finite nature of linearity. Beyond a certain point, a proliferation of clouds, more or less deliberate and controlled, seems to be a symptom: it signals the beginning of the dissolution of an order (but not its deconstruction). In other words, at first sight the Chinese system appears to function, practically, in a fashion that is quite the opposite to that of the Renaissance system, for it seems to begin and find its way forwards at the very point where the latter meets its limit, its closure" (Damisch 2002, 202–203). So, the clouds actually link the western and the eastern pictorial tradition, and thus

the western and eastern ways to conceive representation. Of course Sung-nam does not paint the clouds the Chinese way, and of course it would be impossible to open such a vast and complex topic as what stands for the eastern notion of representation here, though we still roughly recall the latter as a non-analogical way to intertwine the also highly sexualized binary couples yin/yang, male/female, full/empty and so on, so that space is not what articulates these oppositions but the direct, inherent deployment of their distinction. However, it is inevitable to think that the clouds in this film indicate a possible short circuit between the western and the eastern way of representation, between the western notion of transparency and the eastern one, between Rohmer's and Hong's.

It is easy to notice the over-recurrence of symptoms in Hong's cinema. That is, of elements candidly out of place. In this film: Sung-nam at the airport waiting room suddenly struck by the unexpected presence of a sparrow walking on the floor, two dogs barking to each other briefly interrupting a pleasant conversation in a café, and many other examples. If Rohmer's transparency relies on the capacity to reabsorb the opaque symptom into a highly refined literary-derived structure, Hong's transparency relies on abstracting the opacity of symptom, on letting the symptom literally float amidst the emptiness. Hong does not care about leading the symptoms back to making sense, his way of neutralizing them is just to let them be framed and visualized as if they weren't a rupture of meaning. For him, transparency is just about filming something opaque in a transparent way, as if suspending it, whereas in Rohmer's cinema there is a constant struggle to symbolize, especially verbally, the relation incurring between opacity and transparency. Whereas Rohmer's spatial staging connects together, in Hong's case it just rarefies and exasperates the distance among the elements. That is why even Hong's voice over, far from putting together some meaning, just sketches here and there some fragmentary notations. Far from Rohmer's strong and classical narrative coherence, Hong just adds amorphously little anecdotes to little anecdotes, most scenes last just a few seconds and appear to be almost pointless. Indeed, for him emptiness is only form, and form only emptiness, as Buddhism would prescribe.

On the one hand Hong makes the symptom stick out from Rohmer's perfect system, but on the other he neutralizes it in a different, more eastern way. Nonetheless, he achieves a kind of representational closure, meaning a happy marriage, just like Rohmer does, but differently. Transparency is achieved not through the integration of the symptom into the system, but through the direct dissolution of its own opacity into the void.

The final dream sequence that allows Sung-Nam to remove his moral nightmares and infidelities, and thus to be able to lie to his wife and to go on living a happy marriage, is framed at the beginning and in the end by a painting depicting clouds. Husband and wife are lovingly lying in bed, then the camera moves up, discovering a painting showing clouds. Then the dream sequence begins. Sung-nam re-establishes his Confucian supremacy over his wife with a little rite and the decision to make his wife and his former lover meet. The wife reluctantly agrees and goes to the public bath. While bathing, the wife sees an unidentifiable object (vaguely resembling a pig) knocking an opaque window from outside. Then she and her husband walk toward Sung-nam's former woman carrying a little present, which gets accidentally broken. Sung-nam furiously shouts at her, who goes away. Then we see the painted cloud again, and we return to the now waken up husband next to his wife. The entire dream sequence symbolizes the impossible meeting between wife and former lover, an imaginary way to discharge his guilt to his wife, accused to have broken the little present that she was supposed to donate the rival on occasion of the meeting. And, most importantly, during the dream an opaque symptom is seen while pressing from outside the window. The overall dream sequence is a fully Rohmerian solution – that is, giving a spatial shape to symptom in order to neutralize it. But the unrecognizable symptom pressing from outside the window signals something that cannot be made transparent in itself except for its own irreducible opaqueness, and thus denies a full and thorough symbolization, in open contrast with Rohmer's perspective. That unrecognizable blot signals some kind of opaqueness that can only be suspended as such, like Hong's style so typically does, and not made into transparency through the contrary action of space and language as the Rohmerian perspective would require. Thus both notions of transparency are involved, Hong's and Rohmer's, as inextricably connected. Hence the painted clouds positioned right before and right after the dream sequence, belonging crucially on a pictorial account to both East and West.

Finally, it is as if Hong's oriental transparency worked as a symptom for Rohmer's western one. And, in reverse, only by sticking closely to Rohmer's transparency Hong has been able to find himself and his own oriental way to transparency. A bit like one would indulge in a little catholic escapade into guilt and repentance only to better enjoy the Confucian marriage, which is overtly alluded in the film according to its commonplace, i.e. a surface submission of the bride to the groom, covering the real power of the woman at a more subterranean, implicit, hidden but also more effective level. The short circuit between two

representational impasses, Hong's and Rohmer's, both condemned to repeat its own perfect and unachievable scheme film after film, can finally find a simultaneous and utopian way of achievement, by recognizing each other as its own reciprocal symptom.

This short circuit, in which a kind of representation is implicitly linked to the other, western to eastern and the other way round, reminds what Žižek, following Lacan following Freud, calls *Vorstellung-Repraesentanz*: "the symbolic representative of an originally excluded, primordially repressed representation." (Žižek 1993, 56.) Significantly enough, the film ends with another perfect example of *Vorstellung-Repraesentanz*: Sung-nam is awoken from his dream by his wife asking him why he continued to pronounce the name of a mysterious girl (obviously his former mate) while sleeping.¹⁰ Not simply a symptom, but a signifier, a name in this case, representing a missing representation. The closure is accomplished, and so the happiness of the marriage. Or maybe not: there is still a substantial ambiguity as for Sung-nam's managing to keep hiding the truth. Similarly, the vicious circle between those two different kinds of transparent representations, is at the same time perfectly closed and never closed.

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¹⁰ Hong's third film (2000) was entitled (in Korea) *Oh! Soo-Jung!*, from the moment in the film (which also happened to be its narrative pivotal point) when the main character pronounced the name of a girl while having sex with another girl. However, the international title of the film was *Virgin Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors*.

List of Figures

Figures 1–2. Hong Sang-Soo: *Night and Day* (*Bam gua nat*, 2008). In the scene in which Sung-nam and a girl go to the Musée d’Orsay to see Courbet’s *L’origine du monde* we are confronted with the paradox of the spectator as the “unstable third.”

