

“About Miracles”: Seeing the “real thing” in Hong Sang-soo’s *Woman on the Beach* and Éric Rohmer’s *Le Rayon vert*

Jacob Hovind, Towson University, jrhovind@gmail.com

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Abstract

Hong Sang-soo’s cinema is one in which his characters consistently avoid reality, whether by constructing explanatory narratives and patterns or by turning other people into emotionally projected images. *Woman on the Beach* (2006), this article argues, openly diagnoses this tendency and finds instead what one of its characters calls “the real thing.” Placing this film in the context of Hong’s oeuvre as a whole, I explore Hong’s cinema as an ethical one, whose overarching interest lies in trying to see “the real thing” instead of imaginatively constructing it. And thus, in a career frequently compared to Rohmer’s, *Woman on the Beach*, with its search for this almost mystical encounter with reality, emerges as Hong’s variation on Rohmer’s own search for what’s real in *Le Rayon vert* (1986).

Keywords: Hong Sang-soo; *Woman on the Beach*; Éric Rohmer; *Le Rayon vert*; reality; vision



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“About Miracles”: Seeing the “real thing” in Hong Sang-soo’s *Woman on the Beach* and Éric Rohmer’s *Le Rayon vert*

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Introduction

In Hong Sang-soo’s *Hill of Freedom* (2014), Japanese visitor Mori spends his days in Seoul aimlessly waiting for the woman he came there to see, stumbling into so many ways to pass the time with the locals around him. His small adventures are told via a series of letters he writes Kwon, the woman he’s waiting for, though at the film’s start Kwon drops the letters and we see their events in the achronologically jumbled order in which she reads them. The structural device’s purpose is suggested by one of the books Mori happens to be reading during his stay. “It says time is not a real thing,” he explains, “like your body, my body, or this table. Our brain makes up the mindframe of time continuity, past and present and future. I think we don’t have to experience life like that, necessarily, as a species. But at the end we cannot escape from this frame of mind because our brain evolved this way, I don’t know why.” Our mind may naturally want to turn things into organized patterns and linear, cause-and-effect structures, but as Mori’s book suggests, solving any of these patterns’ puzzles wouldn’t necessarily bring us any closer to complete understanding of all the frequently messy lived reality contained within them. Instead, he later tries to explain that he’s happiest when he simply looks at flowers, or trees: “I can look at them for a very long time, and after maybe five minutes, I feel I am really with that flower. I forget about everything else, who am I, what I did before, what the world is about, and time, and everything!” And in a film that structurally performs the idea that the events of Mori’s days in Seoul might have meaning independent of an arbitrarily imposed chronological structure, Mori identifies a tension that in some way

haunts Hong's entire oeuvre. His films consistently explore the frequently vast gulf between the games and structures we tend to impose on reality, and the meaning of this reality on its own. Mori finds happiness by gazing at a flower that just is, independent of any context, in contrast to so many of Hong's protagonists, who awkwardly, frequently drunkenly, miss out on Mori's bliss by failing to see what – or more specifically in matters of the heart, *who* – is right there in front of them.

If Hong's cinema is justly celebrated as a structuralist one, then this reputation frequently elides all the ways his various structural gambits serve to perform what is ultimately a profoundly ethical vision. While Mori's able to see the flower for nothing more than what it is, more frequently Hong's protagonists (and almost solely his male ones) experience what we can call a missed perceptual encounter with reality, one that ultimately occurs because of the ways they impose their ideas of other people onto one another instead of facing up to each other's realities. Whether they're chasing a constructed ideal or turning a person into a character, Hong's men consistently fail to actually notice what's real, seeing instead only so many refractions of their own headspaces and emotional projections. It's a perceptual failing that's ultimately an epistemological one, with so many failed romantic encounters that are ultimately failed ethical encounters; so many ways of avoiding the reality of other people, so many ways of remaining trapped in the narrative dead-ends and recursive feedback loops of their own claustrophobic narcissism. And it's in his seventh film, *Woman on the Beach* (2006), that Hong most explicitly diagnoses the logic behind his characters' perceptual-ethical failures, while also staging an alternative path toward approaching reality on its own terms, free from the blind spots of those arbitrarily imposed "mindframes" described by Mori. And if Hong's mis-seeing men and all their over-intellectualized avoidance of reality consistently mark his

cinema's affinity to that of Éric Rohmer's, that Hong indeed might be the twenty-first century's great moralist filmmaker taking on the mantle of the French master's project, then in learning how to approach what one of its characters repeatedly calls "the real thing," *Woman on the Beach* looks back to *Le Rayon vert* (1986) specifically; while Hong's men are consistently left trapped more or less in their own heads, then *Woman on the Beach* imagines a woman, like Rohmer's Delphine before her, who learns instead to gaze out to sea, getting a glimpse of something real.

Hong Sang-soo's ethical games with reality

From his feature debut, *The Day the Pig Fell into a Well* (1996) and its oblique narrative strategy of switching from one character's seemingly isolated plot to another until their relations only gradually become clear, to his most recent exercise in Cézanne-like cinematic cubism, *The Woman Who Ran* (2020), Hong has gained a reputation as one of contemporary cinema's great structuralists and puzzle-makers. Christopher Small, for instance, describes Hong's reputation "as a reliable art-house brand" built of "a handful of pet themes and formal eccentricities" (Small, 2016), while Marshall Deutelbaum, one of Hong's earliest scholarly critics writing in English, has written a number of essential articles exhaustively close reading the patterns and structures of films like *The Power of Kangwon Province* (1998), *Virgin Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors* (2000), and *HaHaHa* (2010). Meticulously documenting the "careful organization" of the latter film's narrative chronology, Deutelbaum finds that Hong, despite the filmmaker's claims toward the looseness of his production methods and his affinity for embracing chance and the aleatory, "remains as self-conscious of a cinematic craftsman as he ever has been" (Deutelbaum, 2012, p. 165). Because of this self-consciousness of his narrative craft, and the frequently experimental nature of his narrative

structures' complexity, Hong has been variously read by critics as a filmmaker whose familiar bag of narrative and formal tricks – his repetitions and doublings, his characteristic seemingly unmotivated zooms within long takes, his narrative bifurcations and splintered paths – mark him as belonging to the self-reflexive tradition of essayistic filmmaking (Marc Raymond, 2014), or, as Terez Vincze has recently argued, to the post-classical storytelling mode of “the puzzle film trend” (2019, p. 174).

David Bordwell, similarly, includes Hong within the school of “Asian minimalism,” along with such towering figures of slowness as Hou Hsiao-hsien, Tsai Ming-liang, and Jia Zhang-ke, sharing their penchant for long takes, fixed cameras, and medium distance. “Accepting the visual premises of the style,” however, Hong “has developed a strikingly original approach to overall narrative architecture” (2007, p. 22). But just as important as the narrative architecture is the way his characters see their worlds within the intricately constructed games and puzzles that ensnare them. Throughout his oeuvre, I argue, Hong’s films are primarily about what his characters see and how they see it, or even more importantly, what his characters fail to see, or how they mis-see both the things and people they look at and what’s in their mind’s eyes. Indeed, if Hong’s most widely celebrated signature is his toolbox of structures, then these structures are ultimately a means to translate into narrative terms the ethical consequences of all these failures of vision his characters suffer from. Hong himself, early in his career, described his cinema as one ultimately uninterested in reality as an objective, Newtonian entity, but rather as a thing each of us organizes according to our own principles, desires, projections, and emotional baggage: “People tell me that I make films about reality. They're wrong. I make films based on structures that I have thought up.”¹ In his films, especially those in the first half of his career, we experience reality not as it actually is, but as

his characters fail to see it, as filtered through all the knowledge and projections and presuppositions that cloud their vision.

And all his soju-soaked narrative gamesmanship, these repetitions, uncanny doublings, bifurcations, and significantly insignificant detours, becomes the vehicle through which he formally performs this intersubjective trap. Writing on Hong's earliest films, Akira Mizuta Lippit similarly suggests how his formal strategies mirror his ethical concerns, arguing that Hong's characters consistently run up against "an impenetrable force, one that overwhelms the subject." And each time, confronted with the demand of the unknown, they "turn around, turn their backs, turn away," such that "Hong's cinema is not one of limits and ends, but of repetitions, returns, and resumed lines" (Lippitt, 2004, p. 26). *A Tale of Cinema* (2005) marks the purest distillation of his early-career structural play, a structural gambit as bold as it is elegant in its simplicity; a film cut straight down the middle, with life on one side and cinema on the other. Notably, as Tong-su goes about trying to recreate in reality what he experienced watching his old friend's film, chasing a feeling art gave him and trying to make it real, this film also marks Hong's introduction of the seemingly arbitrary or unmotivated zoom into his films, a tic that will soon come to define his cinema. While Tong-su uses the mediated experience of art to try to make sense of his life by arranging it on his own film-inspired terms, Hong's camera begins to work more independently, almost unpredictably and untethered to any logic, as if wondering what's important in what it looks at without ever quite being able to know for sure.

But it's Hong's following film, *Woman on the Beach*, that makes a startling break from the structural experimentation that has most commonly come to define his cinema. A straightforwardly linear pastoral, its seaside setting reminiscent of his second film, *The Power*

of *Kangwon Province*, the film is perhaps the least narratively experimental of his career. And yet for all its superficial simplicity, the film becomes a kind of meta-commentary on the tendencies introduced in the first third of Hong's cinema thus far, and those that will become ever more elaborate in the following years; without his cinema's usual doublings and divisions, Hong seems to be wondering why he ever introduced them at all as a means of organizing his world of feckless men and wryly bemused woman. No formally imposed repetitions or echoes here, as the characters freely find ways to do it themselves, organizing their own reality with so many unbreakable behavior patterns and discursive feedback loops, so many ways of avoiding the work of seeing what's real right in front of them.

Writing on parallelism in Hong's structures, Michael Unger has identified three main methods by which parallel structures emerge in Hong's films. Unlike the "twice-told tales" of *HaHaHa* or *Virgin Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors*, or the "circular loop" of *The Day He Arrives* (2011), he places *Woman on the Beach* in the group of films that unfold linearly but in two distinct narrative blocks: "But shared repetitions of gestures, characters, locations and bits of dialogue between the two narrative blocks make them bend on themselves" (Unger, 2012, pp. 145-146). But what needs to be added to Unger's taxonomy of Hongian parallelism, as we shall soon see, is that Jung-rae's frustrated filmmaker invents these very repetitions, even going so far as to try to create in his second narrative block's reality bits of dialogue from the first. It's a kind of parallelism as projection, not so far from Tong-su's bungled attempt to make a film become real; trying to mold one slice of reality into a more successful version of one that didn't quite work the first time around. And beyond its sly employment of repetition within linearity, the film also notably continues Hong's experimentations with the zoom effect he had introduced in his previous film, as if the camera's struggling to find whatever it is that his

characters keep on missing. Indeed, as Marc Raymond suggests, it's in *Woman on the Beach* that Hong's use of the zoom becomes an essential way of diagnosing the failures of its male protagonist, revealing "the politics of this aesthetic" (Raymond, 2014, p. 26). The zoom both becomes a way of seeing characters more clearly than they can see themselves, and, like Mori with his flower, a way to focus on what's there independent of whatever narrative we create around it, seemingly unimportant objects or characters caught in casual gestures; and it's a way of looking the film will suggest its characters might benefit from emulating if they could ever find such clear-eyed focus.

The film begins in Seoul, where filmmaker Kim Jung-rae decides he needs some peace and quiet in order to work on his next screenplay; though evidently not too much peace and quiet, as he's so quick to let his friend and colleague Chang-wook bring along his girlfriend Mun-suk. Soon after the three arrive in the seaside town of Shinduri, largely depopulated during the overcast off-season, we learn that the screenplay is called "About Miracles," a title that seems initially jarring for Hong's thoroughly earth-bound cinema of the quotidian. And when Mun-suk asks him what kind of miracle he's interested in, he gives a long explanation that sounds like it could be the set-up of some as-yet-unmade Hong film:

A man travels to a foreign beach and stays at a hotel. And in his room he plays Mozart on his CD player. Then he leaves his room he hears the same music on the elevator. He walks out of the hotel, then takes a turn at the corner, and on the street is a clown. He's doing his mime to the exact same music. It's an incredible coincidence. But this man doesn't think it's a mere coincidence. He wonders why he hears the same music three times. And he concludes that if he can find the reason why this happened, he can

unravel a secret to the world. And he's obsessed with that thought. So he starts tracking hints.

"Sounds like a real mystery," Mun-suk says, and indeed Jung-rae goes on to describe the detective work of his protagonist, finding as much information as he can about the clown's life and even the manufacturer of the hotel's stereo equipment, as if such material facts might lead to this almost cosmic "secret of the world" whose existence he dimly suspects. "Anyway, in the end, he finds this very thin string that links everything," he explains. "But that string, even if he finds it, well, it's something like a soul. There is nothing bodily, it's very, very light." Jung-rae betrays himself as, like Hong, "a *metteur en order* – an imposer or maker of order, a finder of hidden forms" (Quandt, 2007). And of course, where does such a need to impose order come from but a nagging suspicion that you're dealing with things that have none on their own, or at least have some order that remains frustratingly hidden. "A maker of order" justifies his actions by convincing himself he's a "finder of hidden forms," equating the two as Quandt's parallelism does. In the case of Jung-rae's film, this reality whose orderlessness he can't bear is the inexplicable repetition of minor coincidences, these things that Hong himself once celebrated in an interview with Huh Moonyung: "I welcome strange coincidences, and think that they are like a wedge driven into the frame of a banal and conventional mind." And in foregrounding such coincidences in his films, especially insofar as they defy any narrativizing or logical explanation, Hong states that he "would like the audience to feel the space that is open beyond the broken structure" (Huh, 2007, p. 57).

Like little shards of reality that only throw into relief how unreal our narrative constructions and arbitrarily imposed patterns are, coincidences in Hong's universe suggest all the ways in which the world frequently defies explanation. Things, more often than not, don't mean any specific thing, but they just simply are. In the mostly Paris-set *Night and Day* (2008), the film he made after *Woman on the Beach*, small, inexplicable coincidences abound, both within the events of the film's narrative and the rhythms of Hong's mise-en-scène. A wounded bird Seong-nam accidentally saves from falling to its death finds its uncanny echo in a songbird trapped in the terminal of Charles de Gaulle airport; a trail of water streaming around a pile of dog feces as it runs down to a gutter will later be mirrored when Seong-nam aimlessly sends a paper boat off on its own meandering path to the gutter; and eventually one woman's pregnancy becomes doubled by another's, the fact that one turns out to be a made-up lie implicitly haunting the other one. Like that space "open beyond the broken structure," these small and – narratively speaking – ultimately unimportant oddities seem suggestive of the fact that reality has some kind of design or rhythm of its own, one whose machinations remain beyond Seong-nam's grasp. While he goes about imposing his needs and desires on all the women around him, they each in turn end up having their own intractable realities and motives independent of what he needs them for. Just as the small things of reality resist our wish for meaning-giving patterns, people, similarly, are never an exact mirror image of our libidinal projections and emotional needs, but exist with their own self-contained realities.

"It seems to me that reality can only appear between the cracks of discrete, hypothetical, uncertain elements," Hong explains in an interview with Jean-Michel Frodon. "I never try to share a truth, but only approximations" (Frodon, 2003). In contrast to Hong's more frequently-cited statements mentioned earlier, where reality, dream, and imagination are all granted the same quality of importance, here he suggests that there is indeed some kind of

objective, true reality beyond our mental projections, but it's one that remains elusively out of grasp, glimmers of something true appearing through the cracks of how our minds arrange and narrativize the things and people around us. Jacques Aumont, building on Clément Rosset's *La Réel: Traité de l'idiotie* (1977) and Roland Barthes's famed theory of the photographic "punctum" from *Camera Lucida* (1980), has identified this kind of reality in Hong's films as "idiotic," in the sense that it's often stupidly without reason, and etymologically in the sense that it betrays itself as so many singular, "idiomatic" fragments. This idiotic reality both resists explanation while at the same time indicates "that which is typical of someone, of a singular being, that which makes someone different from all others and which is ineffable almost by definition" (Aumont, 2017). Aumont finds this idiotic reality in the little details that don't necessarily matter to a film's narrative or semiological machinery, like these paired birds in *Night and Day* that become free-floating signifiers of whatever either Seong-nam or the film's viewers need or want them to be. Like Hong's open space beyond our meaning-giving structures that he finds coincidences point to, these idiotic realities open Hong's films "up to something unknown, which can have no other name than *the real*, if by *the real* we mean that which we will never know because we are too busy dressing it in an imaginary reality" (2017, emphasizes Aumont's). However, Hong's films consistently suggest that this real that exists outside our own desires and narrative constructions can indeed be known and grasped, if we could only take the time and the work to look at what's right there in front of us, like Mori in *Hill of Freedom* finding happiness by getting lost in a flower. And what we can do with flowers, we might be able to do with other people as well.

Searching for “the real thing”

Indeed, in *Woman on the Beach*, while Jung-rae goes on to spend the rest of the day avoiding writing about this quasi-Borgesian secret of all things, some immaterial essence that binds everything together and would explain its mysterious links and doubles and coincidences, Mun-suk repeatedly references what she calls “the real thing.” First, in a rambling discussion of both her dissatisfaction with her physical appearance and her emotional loneliness, she comes to the conclusion that “we should earn the real thing without any help from others.” She doesn’t explain exactly what this “real thing” is for her, but she laments the fact that she still looks for it in other people (“I know I shouldn’t expect it of them”). Notably, she quickly comes to realize her own disappointment in Jung-rae, seeing up-close the vast gulf between her ideas of him, largely based on his films she’s seen and his planned film’s emotional intelligence, and the reality of his own bumbling, drunken insecurities and hang-ups: “You’re different from your films. Sorry, but you’re actually just another Korean man.”

Of course, old habits die hard in Hong’s world, and she still ends up with him later in the night for a clandestine rendezvous on the beach, bristling with seductive possibility while they leave Chang-wook back at the hotel. Gazing up into the nighttime sky, uncontaminated by the city’s light, she marvels at the beauty of the universe, and suggests that humans have some fundamental moral responsibility to appreciate that beauty: “If we’re not conscious of it, it’s meaningless, isn’t it? If we occasionally look into space and think about it, then the universe will be less lonely.” It’s a kind of *esse est percipi* associated with Bishop Berkeley’s anti-idealism, suggesting that nothing exists unless there’s someone to think about it. But then, echoing her earlier mention of “the real thing,” she goes on to muse, “The really real thing that I have absolute faith in is the stars.”



Figure 1. Mun-suk pondering the stars' "real thing," while Jung-rae remains stuck in his seductive games.

Whatever her implicit theory of “the real thing” might turn out to be, she suggests that, on the one hand, it lies in the stars’ eternal thereness, while on the other, it’s something she wants to discover in her own person, without any assistance from others or without having to understand herself in relation (romantic, sexual, or otherwise). Jung-rae, meanwhile, believes “a secret to the world” lies in *the relations* between things and people, the way nothing really is on its own, but only comes to matter until it’s turned into a part of some plot or narrative (there’s something of the paranoid apophenic about Hong’s typical protagonist, convinced of plots and conspiracies that probably don’t actually exist).

The next day, after deciding the trip wasn’t as conducive to writing as he thought, the three head back to Seoul, with Jung-rae promising Mun-suk that he’ll be in touch once he clears his head. But just two days later, he’s back at Shinduri, though this time on his own and ready to get to work. His second trip, notably, begins with him in an unexpected moment of something like prayer, supplicating before a grove of three trees and crying for help, as if

desperate for the creative spark that's been eluding him. As Hong remarks of this seemingly discordant scene: "The sudden feeling of loneliness overwhelms him when he returns to the beach all by himself. Then he sees these three trees he feels mystical about and he kowtows on his knees. And he spills everything out" (Huh 84). Whether he realizes it or not, perhaps he's found that "real thing" Mun-suk described, an almost "mystical" moment of recognition that these three trees stand there apart from him both with their own inextricable thereness and their own quiet beauty. If it is a "mystical" moment as Hong describes, then it's a mysticism of the most ordinary, quotidian kind, like Mori's happiness with a flower. The scene, imbued with melancholy as it is, finds its graceful echo eleven years later, in *The Day After* (2017). In that film, publisher Bong-wan and his new assistant Areum have their own discussion about the nature of reality, Areum doubting in Wittgensteinian fashion whether what we can't describe can be said to actually be real: "If reality is unknowable, then it must not exist." "Words can't describe it," Bong-wan counters, "but we can feel it."

And after the pair's complicated misunderstandings over the course of her first day on the job, the result of so many mistaken and preconceived ideas of who people are assumed to be rather than who they actually are, Areum's left alone, riding home in a cab as the snow starts faintly falling over Seoul.



Figure 2. Areum's moment of grace in *The Day After*.

“It’s such a blessing,” she muses. Leaning her head out the window, her face graced by passing lights and falling flurries, we even hear her pray to God in voiceover narration, as if she finds divinity in all this beautiful, ordinary reality. She can’t describe in words why it’s so meaningful, but she can certainly feel it. “Whatever can be defined, it is bullshit,” Hong bluntly explains to Huh (2007, p. 80). In what we might call an “immanent transcendence” that characterizes the meaningfulness of reality in Hong’s cinema, Hong suggests the failure of his characters like Jung-rae, who search for explanatory patterns and systems to be imposed from above. Instead, as Areum comes to realize in her own exquisite moment of grace, and as Mun-suk sees in the stars above and seeks to find in herself, all reality’s accidental, messy, and frequently beautiful people and things are already meaningful enough before we go looking for definitions and explanations.

Jung-rae proves himself capable of such an encounter with reality, seeing it so clearly that it becomes a kind of earthbound sacred experience, during his supplication before the trees, but all he can do is ask it for help rather than celebrate it, as Areum does, for what it is. After

his moment of tearful grace, he even goes so far as to call Mun-suk, leaving her a rambling voicemail in which he decries the fact that “there are so many idiots who take life for granted.” And yet, when it comes to other people, and women especially, he consistently remains blinded by his expectation of, or hope in, that “very thin string that links everything” he describes looking for in “About Miracles,” resulting in his inability to resist imposing narratives and patterns on his own experience. So, while *Woman on the Beach* has clearly progressed forward linearly, it’s as if Jung-rae remains determined to turn his own experience into a more conventional Hong film (and thus given a less conventional structure, or just any at all). During his second trip, after he meets two young women traveling in Shinduri together (two women we had seen briefly walking past him during the first trip), he becomes convinced that one of them, Sun-hee, resembles Mun-suk (even asking a confused restaurant owner to verify his vision). He quickly decides to ask to interview her, claiming she resembles a character in the film he’s trying to write. Jung-rae’s gambit has led Tony McKibbin to aptly describe *Woman on the Beach* as “*Vertigo* by other means” (McKibbin, 2013), while it also echoes *A Tale of Cinema*, in which Tong-su tried to transform his own haphazard experience into the film he’d seen. Grilling her at first about her attitude toward dogs and her parents, echoing moments he shared with Moon-suk, he soon turns to weightier matters, with Sun-hee’s answers initially suggesting he’s found in her a kind of idealized version of her quasi-double, the woman who Mun-suk wanted to be: “What do you believe in?” “Myself,” she responds. “I’m not perfect, but it’s still me. It’s up to me to improve myself.” Her answer to the next question, though, throws a wrench into the operation: “Do you like stars, up in the sky?” “I’ve never really thought about them.” A repetition, but an imperfect one; a double who refuses to totally coincide with her original. Sun-hee has found what Mun-suk yearns to find, the comfort of self-understanding and thus self-acceptance, knowing exactly who she is and able to live her life

with the kind of clarity that comes with such self-possession; and yet she sees no link between her self's "real thing" and the stars in the sky. And Jung-rae, like so many of Hong's protagonists before and after, is still left only with so many emotional idealizations and libidinal projections.²

The inevitable complications ensue, of course, once Mun-suk also returns to Shinduri for her own private reasons, and her reality runs up against Jung-rae's attempt to manufacture his reality in the form of Sun-hee ("I do not really see her as a woman at all," he says in his attempt to assuage Min-suk's jealousy). The two ultimately confront the messy love affair they've inaugurated, though he's unable to get past the idea of her having slept with foreign men in the past (and especially the myths regarding foreign men's "dick size"). Attempting to convince himself that her sexual past hardly matters when she's right here in front of him in a situation that that's very real, he suddenly mounts an elaborate argument against being so in thrall to subjective images of other people: "Your actions now and my obsession with purity are all images. We're repeating images imprinted on us by others." He goes on to draw a diagram to attempt to illustrate his convoluted point, coopting her own language from their first visit to town. "The real thing," he suggests, while drawing a messy blob, "constantly changes and has infinite curves." But our problems arise when we focus too much on only specific points of the blob, like the face of a lover, or a specific body part. "Then, there is an image that recurs."

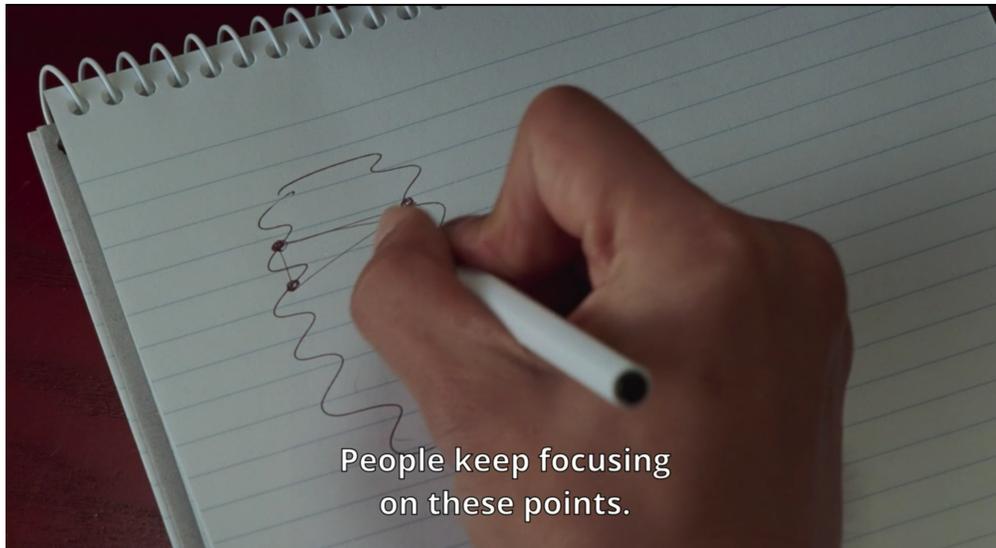


Figure 3. Jung-rae's attempt to diagram our image-making tendencies.

Rather than seeing the thing itself – such as Mun-suk – he’s left only seeing his worst fears and emotional projections of it, in this case one small detail of her sexual past. And so he adds more points to that blob, ones that are a part of it but wholly unrelated to his image built of jealousy derived from only a few isolated parts: “Your happy face after those spicy rice cakes. And here is your nice face worrying about a sick friend.” Connecting ever more points with one another, we get a more elaborate shape than jealousy’s small one, until “we can overcome this stereotypical and evil image.” The resulting shape may still not be “the real thing,” but it may be the closest approximation we can get. “That’s a really good way to look at it,” she gushes in the moment. But once she talks to Sun-hee, and gets a few more of the facts of the matter, she becomes haunted by her own image, of Jung-rae and her almost-double having sex while she waits outside their door, and then furtively stepping over her sleeping body the morning after (“I thought I was dreaming, but it was real”). Confronting Jung-rae with her own image, one very much grounded in “the real thing” of their relationship in the present, rather than constructed guesses at a past that’s no longer here, she sends him into a fit of self-righteous indignation: “Don’t you remember? I told you how hard it is to fight with images!” And rather

than admiration for his intellectual game, Min-suk instead sees it as the cheap sophistry it really is: “So just give me the facts. Not your bullshit philosophy.”³

And ultimately, as Jung-rae silently rushes back to Seoul once his two-page-long script is jotted off in a few hours, Mun-suk’s left alone in Shinduri, finally having learnt what “the real thing” is and where it lies. As with the political function of the zoom as analyzed by Raymond, stylistically diagnosing Jung-rae’s “attraction-repulsion dynamic” with Mun-suk’s previous sexual experiences and his “inability to confront and deal with erotic desire” (26), seeing him more clearly than he can see himself, Mun-suk has ultimately learned to wrest control of herself away from the filmmaker’s imposed narrative. “I hope I don’t offend you,” she tells the director in one last phone call, “but I don’t respect Korean men too much.”



Figure 4. Mun-suk on the beach alone, just "the real thing" itself.

Liberated from Jung-rae's construction of reality, she's left only with the fact of her own reality, with the self-knowledge of existing outside of relations both crudely sexual and emotionally constructed. Recalling Hong's claim that he makes "films based on structures that I have thought up" rather than reality, in a strange metatextual twist to a film that's otherwise resisted such tricks, it's as if Mun-suk hasn't just resisted the directorial control of Jung-rae, but she's also asserted the importance of her own reality against Hong's own interest in the structures his men use to organize and make sense of it. Jung-rae's own project, that "About Miracles" described earlier, exists as a wish for some cosmic explanation, an insistence that all life's messy, accidental things are part of some meaningful narrative. And when he fails to find it, he just invents his own version of the stability it would promise, the way he turns women into who he thinks they are or needs them to be instead of seeing them as they are.

I. Ways of avoiding reality in Hong's cinema

This tendency, inherited from *A Tale of Cinema*, abounds in the films that follow *Woman on the Beach*. It's as if Hong has identified some distinctively masculine narrativizing impulse, a determination to make all of life's messy, aleatory stuff explicable or at least bearable by imposing upon it some kind of story that would organize everything and thus make meaning out of it. In *The Day He Arrives* (2011), for instance, Seong-jin argues against the existence of coincidence, echoing Jung-rae's own diagram: "Random things happen for no reason in our lives. We choose a few and form a line of thought." He knows, like Seong-nam suspected in *Night and Day*, that these ghostly doublings don't really mean anything but just are, but rather than find the meaningfulness of what seems to have none, he instead just invents his own. Hong's women, on the other hand, do the hard work of actually looking at what's in front of them, what's undeniably here and very real without it having to be part of some vast narrative of which his male characters always think they must be the protagonist. "Why can't

people see the good things in front of them?” Mihye wonders in the short film *List* (2011), learning to abandon her overly ambitious to-do list as she chooses instead to just let each day happen on its own and decide on her own terms what matters about it and what it means. Or as Claire explains of her “vaguely magical” instrument in *Claire’s Camera* (2017), “the only way to change things is by looking at them slowly.”⁴ It’s a way of seeing and a way of being that finds perhaps its most powerful culmination in Areum’s quiet observer in *Grass* (2018), not having to impose any invented stories on all the lives she overhears, because all this human messiness is meaningful and important enough on its own. The quartet of stories she observes are certainly not tidy ones, and they find neither resolution nor insight, but she still achieves a kind of autumnal compassion toward all this real and ordinary folly. “I envy you two, you insignificant things. You’ll be dead someday,” she ultimately muses of one especially volatile couple after she’d earlier ruthlessly judged their behavior. “Enjoy yourselves.” It may all be insignificant and ephemeral, but it’s also the only life we’re going to get; so surely it must matter, in and of itself. It doesn’t have to mean anything more than itself because it simply is.

Areum’s compassionate gaze ultimately suggests a spiritual significance to Mun-suk’s solitary climax on the beach, finding that “the real thing” can be both her life as it is and the beauty lying in the cosmic vastness of the nighttime sky. This is all very real, and it’s happening, and it’s simply her life, without having to be part of something imposed on it from without. Having sworn off any tendency to manufacture duplicates and repetitions (“Should I try to find someone here who resembles you?” she jokingly asks Jung-rae on the phone. “Don’t worry. I won’t”), just herself alone is also enough. She earlier thought that the stars’ reality needed to be seen to become meaningful, but maybe remaining unseen doesn’t have to mean loneliness or meaninglessness after all; especially when being seen in Hong’s world more often

than not entails being mis-seen, turned into projection and almost-double. Shinduri has been left mostly emptied out during the off-season, but it's not winter yet and no snow falls from the sky as it does for Areum's moment of grace in *The Day After*, but just a small, unexpected moment of kindness from two strangers can also be enough. When her car gets stuck in the sand as she's about to leave Shinduri behind, two men rush over to help her out, refusing her insistence on repaying them. Like the stars, this too is really real, a moment without a narrative, a human encounter without an emotionally transactional framework. It may be idiotic, in Aumont's sense, but that doesn't mean it can't be as beautiful as a flower or a snowfall. Explaining the ending, Hong describes how we wanted "Mun-suk to experience a sincere kindness from a total stranger. Although it may not solve everything for her, it would encourage her to feel the sweetness of life" (Huh, 2007, p. 87).⁵ It may not solve anything larger than this moment's small challenge, and it certainly doesn't mean much of anything for her life back in Seoul as a whole, but despite its smallness, or maybe even because of its smallness, the human encounter becomes something overwhelmingly real. It's that "something like a soul" Jung-rae pondered in "About Miracles," but it's material rather than ethereal, immanent rather than transcendent. And by virtue of seeing it, she also sees herself as a part of it all. Hong and all his men look to structures rather than reality, while he's slyly let his women hold the secret all the men use art to fumble toward; comfortably inhabiting what actually is, as opposed to what they might wish it to be. He believed this soul's string "is nothing bodily," but is what ties these otherwise discrete material things – a person, the sound of a bar of music, a moment of kindness – together. Mun-suk, on other hand, realizes it's very much bodily, that it's her and Jung-rae, and these two strangers on the beach and Sun-hee and Chang-wook as well; each here, mattering in and of themselves before they have to mean anything for one another. Jung-rae wanted to make a film "about miracles," and Hong's great joke ends up that

they're right here, all the time; they need no elsewhere to find their significance. And so, in a climactic triangulation mimicking the more complicated ones preceding it, Mun-suk gets to drive off joyously on her own, with the knowledge that she's real enough, as real even as the stars. It took two men to help her get unstuck, though they notably expect nothing in return; and once free she can go wherever she wants, while they stay behind with their car still stuck in the sand.

Speaking with Christopher Small, Hong again makes his oft-repeated claim that “there is no such thing as reality:” “We are bound to feel certain things by our circumstances. We work and move around, not really believing in things, just automatically doing them and thinking them based on this false conception of reality.” But a few moments later, he goes on to muse on the way reality, not in the sense of some secret order but rather reality in its idiotic thereness, can indeed become present to us: “Sometimes, when come across, say, a poetic moment in life, you see things differently from just an everyday setting. You can discover something totally different. You can feel it, but this feeling goes away quickly and you return to that normal state” (Small, 2017). If those “false conceptions of reality” largely dominate all the perceptual and ethical failings of Hong’s men like Jung-rae, only at moments dimly able to awaken their irrealities, but never for long enough, then it’s this attentiveness to these “poetic moment[s] in life,” everything that can help us “discover something totally different” that characterizes Mun-suk’s radiant smile during her moment of reality on the beach. Such moments, notably, mark a key correspondence between Hong’s cinema and that of a filmmaker to whom he's frequently compared, *Éric Rohmer*. Both filmmakers, beyond their myriad stylistic and thematic affinities, embrace chance and the accidental, welcome an attentiveness

to moments of idiotic reality in its simple thereness, and ultimately, we might even say, choose always to believe in the possibility of those miracles that consistently eluded Jung-rae.

Éric Rohmer's art of chance and awareness

It's become something of a critical commonplace to describe Hong's very talkative cinema as having its closest affinity to that of Rohmer. James Quandt suggests the reasons for the comparisons lie in the fact that Hong's "ineffectual characters seem to talk more than act, deceive themselves and others, misinterpret motives and events, and take various psychological byways to defer their future" (Quandt, 2007).⁶ Greg Gerke, similarly, writes that "like Rohmer, Hong wants to eviscerate the male ego," while at the same time, both are "romantics who capture the improvisatory moments in life, the coveted and the delusional love-at-first-sight moments" (Gerke, 2019).⁷ And if their career's myriad resemblances can find elective affinities in specific films, then this mutual interest in the male ego's diagnosis and evisceration would mostly clearly link Hong's first six films with the French filmmaker's six *Contes morales* made from 1963 to 1972, while *Woman on the Beach*'s newfound feminine-led approach to "the real thing" would surely make it Hong's *Le Rayon vert* (1986).⁸ Each film, in staging one woman's seaside discovery of a moment of true feeling, might be said to be "about miracles" in a way that Jung-rae's fumbling search for networks and correspondences would never be able to achieve.

Like *Woman on the Beach*, *The Green Ray* begins in a banal urban office; indeed, Rohmer's own office, as the film was made largely intimately and inexpensively, built on improvisation and a small, bare-bones crew, with the friends and family of star and co-creator Marie Rivière playing themselves.⁹ Delphine, one of the office's secretaries, just receives the news that her plans for a summer holiday in Greece have been cancelled by her friends, though

the brightly colored tulips on her skirt in the opening shot already indicate some possibility of hope amid the disappointment, a belief in beauty amid the office's clinical drabness. And indeed, as Rohmer invites us to live with her so intimately as she sets about to salvage her summer – she appears in nearly every frame of the film, often pinioned by these subtle zooms that will come to characterize Hong's own probing eye – it's her hope and belief that will come to define her worldview and spirit, a persistent stance of openness to the new and the unexpected, maybe even the possibility of miracles.

When it comes to how she makes plans for her future, whether summer holidays or romantic possibilities (we eventually learn that she ended things with her fiancé two years earlier, despite the fact that she repeatedly feels compelled to lie about this), Delphine notably rejects the power of astrology and tarot cards to map out the story of her life, professing instead a faith in the accidental. Early on, she wanders past a bright green astrologer's advertisement posted on the street, promising to “rediscover contact with yourself and others.” She notably doesn't take down the number, insisting later in conversation with her friends that she places little faith in astrology, tarot cards, or the stars.



Figure 5. Delphine's private superstitions, finding significance not in the séance's promise but in the accidental fact of its advertisement's greenness.

When her friend Manuella suggests using a séance “to find a man” for her and Delphine demurs, she’s asked whether she believes in anything at all. “I believe in,” she struggles to articulate, “things that just crop up out of nowhere in life, that just happen by themselves, like matters of the heart.” As she goes on to elaborate when her friends, in thrall to their magazine horoscopes and astrological readings, press her further:

I believe in personal superstitions. I do believe in things like playing cards you find in the street... Sometimes, when I least expect it, I’m just walking along and I find a card. It always means something. Like on the way to my sister’s, I found a queen of spades. The queen of spades is bad luck... I was attracted to it. What’s more, the card was green. Which is weird because I had a friend who is a medium. He told me green would be my color of the year. It’s strange, because since then, and maybe I’m just noticing it

now, I keep finding little green things. So, on the way to my sister's, I spotted a little green card. Next to a green lamppost, and I was dressed in green.

Neither the card's signification according to some widely known system of good-or-bad fortune nor the astrologer's promise of star-assigned connection matters to Delphine, only the more personal superstitious logic whereby the greenness of both the card and the advertising leaflet become the site of their meaningfulness. And while that greenness, of course, points to the miraculous flash of the green ray that Delphine will witness at film's end, it also suggests just what Delphine hopes for in placing her faith in these "things that crop up out of nowhere in life." She points out the strangeness of the medium's prediction becoming correct, while in a pointed aside she also acknowledges that it might just be a matter of her simply noticing now what was all along there to see. Greenness, after all, is there all around, and one's ordinary days are more likely than not filled with little green objects; but the world's abundance of random greenness only becomes significant, only becomes worth caring about, when one chooses to notice it, when one decides it's significant for oneself and for oneself alone.

Resisting pre-packaged and universally applicable signifiatory systems the same way she rejects her friend Béatrice's suggestion of a group holiday program, Delphine holds out hope, as Mun-suk holds out up, that she and her life – her actual experience, however sad and ordinary it may be – is meaningful on its own, without having to be given meaning from without. As Tony McKibbin has argued, all Delphine's moments of green throughout the film even before the climax come to "represent a way of not interpreting the world and universalizing the interpretation, but intuiting the world and singularizing the interpretation" (McKibbin, 2010). She places her faith in the accidental and the unanticipated, not because

they might point to some larger meaning-giving system, but because the accidental and the unanticipated is mostly all that ordinary experience gives, and she wants her ordinary experience to be valuable enough on its own.

While Jung-rae is similarly haunted by the accidental, for him its rearing its head is always the sign of some sinister plot; the thing means nothing in and of itself, and no coincidence or repetition matters until he can invent a plot that explains it. Delphine, on the other hand, like Mun-suk, thinks all these little accidents (“personal superstitions,” “like playing cards you find in the street”) are all more than enough, even if they don’t necessarily mean anything. “It’s a question of awareness,” she later explains to an incredulous group of meat-eaters about her vegetarianism. “You should never stop caring!” Paying attention is Delphine’s guiding principle in life, whether regarding her idiosyncratic eating habits (“It’s all very mystical”) or her newfound interest in noticing the green that’s always been there, but also in how she interacts with others around her, and tries to find and articulate her own value in the midst of so many intersubjective misunderstandings and mistranslations. She dreams not of setting out to find a man to ease her lovelorn loneliness, like the dreary roundelays of date-by-numbers promised by Berénice’s suggestion of a group holiday, but she hopes simply to stumble into love. Even the very idea of planning any summer holiday at all ends up becoming something like a false promise, looking for some new experience that she’s had to manufacture the possibility of ahead of time, instead of simply waiting for or being able to wander into according to a more organic logic. Ewa Mazierska has most thoroughly explored this disenchantment of the vacation throughout Rohmer’s holiday-heavy oeuvre, distinguishing between the traveler who’s “guided by some personal quest” as opposed to the “published guide” of the tourist (2002, p. 226). And ultimately, she suggests, Rohmer’s world is one in which “there are no intrinsically good or bad locations for a holiday,” since what she terms

“spiritual centres,” sites where “one’s emotional and intellectual requirements are fulfilled” (Mazierska, 2002, p. 242) can ultimately be found anywhere, wherever one arrives at the feeling of finally feeling at home with and in themselves.¹⁰

Delphine may spend the film trying to salvage her plans for summer holiday, but that’s only as a means to ultimately put to the test her belief in salvaging experience itself; that meaning doesn’t reside only in the pre-planned, the exceptional, or the sought-after, but in the realm of ordinary actual experience itself as it naturally happens. Like choosing to find significance in the green that’s always been there and suddenly finding small moments of private meaning everywhere you go, or recalling Hong’s Mori in *Hill of Freedom*, finding happiness not in the superimposed frameworks and cognitive meta-narratives with which we organize our experience but simply in getting lost gazing at a flower. Delphine’s faith in chance can ultimately be read, much like Hong’s own belief in finding “the space that is open beyond the broken structure,” as an ethical stance characterized by perpetual openness, as opposed to how the friends and family around her are always trying to impose their logic on her. Béatrice, for instance, during the long conversation in the Paris garden that winds toward Delphine’s idiosyncratic belief system, insists that Delphine must be lonely and thus fundamentally lacking, but only according to the logic of loneliness that Béatrice knows. “You can’t go on feeling lonely forever. You can’t live on your own forever. Look at you, you’re sad,” the well-intentioned friend insists, to which Delphine can only respond, “I’m not sad.” “Look, all is fine,” she goes on to elaborate. “Maybe I’m a bit lonely at the moment. But it’s not as if I’m completely on my own. I have someone in my life, even if I’m not seeing him just now. So, you don’t know what you’re saying.” While of course Delphine is obfuscating the truth here about her broken-off engagement with Jean-Pierre, if we can indeed take her words at face-

value as some truthful expression of her worldview, she's also suggesting a private conception of human relations and being with other people. Béatrice places the be-all-and-end-all of human plenitude and satisfaction on the socially sanctioned institution of the romantic relationship, while Delphine insists (quite correctly) that even without a romantic partner, she still has "someone" in her life, even spectrally, and surely that must matter enough to mean that she's not entirely on her own.

When Manuella ironically asks whether Delphine's "going to sit around waiting for Prince Charming," the answer, of course, is an emphatic yes, because to try self-consciously to seek him out would go against all the principles she's used to define her life and its value. As opposed to Hong's Jung-rae, who, aside from his moment of grace with the grove of three trees, is always already going to see exactly what he wants or needs reality to be, Delphine insists on the value of trying to discover reality as it is, without actively searching for one thing in particular. Of course, waiting for things that actually might matter to crop up becomes an invitation for perpetual disappointment, but Delphine believes, as Rohmer does, that all the disappointment in the world is worth it for those moments when openness – toward the new, the unexpected, the aleatory, the marvelous – ends up actually rewarded. What looks like passivity to frustrated observers such as Béatrice and Lena is actually more like a position of attentiveness and openness, what McKibbin has identified as Rohmer's belief, inherited from a Stoic tradition stretching from Epictetus to Kierkegaard, that "we mustn't over-determine our lives; if anything we have to un-determine them, create holes in their expected flow, gaps in cause and effect. Above all else, perhaps, we need to create an evolving subjectivity that will allow us to be open to another's subjectivity" (McKibbin, 2010). And where one creates "holes" in the flow of their lives, without pre-arranged networks of meaning or interpretations

or plans, one might indeed end up finding miracles, if only in the unanticipated arrival of another person as open to your own subjectivity as you are to theirs.

Rohmer and the ethics of openness

After her failed attempts at planned holidays in Cherbourg and the Alps, too lonely surrounded by kind strangers in the former and too uninspired by the obvious grandeur of the latter's offerings (not to mention too haunted by the specter of bad romantic memories, planning to stay there in the vacation apartment still owned by her ex-fiancé, Jean-Pierre), and still too stranded and bereft in an emptied-out Paris, she ultimately ends up in Biarritz thanks to a serendipitous encounter with an old friend, offering her brother-in-law's unused apartment. Biarritz may be the pre-planning tourist's summer destination par excellence, but for Delphine it emerges as a happy accident, and thus one worth pursuing, no matter the crowd sizes she must know she'll find there. Her aleatory hopes, though, for the bustling resort town at first appear to be yet another disappointment, with a long, dreary sequence marking her arrival as a stranger in yet another strange land, alone in the vast crowds overtaking the beach. The sense of compounded loneliness reaches its apex when, in one of the most touching of the film's sequences, wandering around her friend's brother-in-law's apartment in Biarritz, she finds herself compelled to hide all the strangers' family photos away in drawers, as if she can't bear the reminder of even other people's happy memories. "I'm not stubborn, life is stubborn," she had earlier told her friends back in Paris, and in Biarritz she seems to have found more of reality's intractability, its silent refusal to offer what she hopes for and its intractable stinginess regarding the surprise of things that leap up from nowhere, moments of reality surprising enough to stir the heart.

Delphine's final trip turns into even more of a blunder once she starts spending time with fellow solitary traveler Lena, whose cheerful openness both seems to bring Delphine out of her shell while also reinforcing just how little there is for her worth emerging for. Sharing drinks after a day at the beach, the Swede presses Delphine on her attitudes toward men, asking how she can tell whether she likes a guy when she first sees him. Stressing once again her stance of expectant waiting for life's possibilities, a stance that can look a lot like passivity to those who doubt her, Delphine pensively reflects that she's "not very proactive:" "I look at people, but I never make any determined steps to find someone or something." But when Lena counters by asking whether she expects people to come to her, Delphine tries to explain that that isn't what she meant at all, though she struggles to put into words what it is she does mean. "I'm very open to people," she eventually elaborates. "I feel how they are. I'm receptive. And I listen. I'm open toward people." Lena, on the other hand, suggests how little such openness and receptivity will get you, but only according to her own theory regarding how little people can be trusted, a theory Delphine emphatically rejects. In the absence of trust, Lena explains her own attitudes toward the dating game, the ways she "play[s]" with people: "To find the right person, someone who is good, you shouldn't show your feelings straightaway... I live my life. I have fun. And I see how others react. Then I decide: Is it good, or is it bad? It's like a card game. You shouldn't give away what you have in your hand." For Delphine's naked sincerity, not to mention her belief in the possibility of stumbling into romance as a moment of mutually encountered openness, such mechanistic game-playing is incomprehensible. So quietly receptive, employing that patient sort of compassionate gaze Areum finds at the end of *Grass*, may consistently end up getting her so little in return, but so passionate are her practically Levinasian beliefs in the idea of a truly soulful encounter with another person, that she couldn't imagine deigning to play anything resembling Lena's game.



Figure 6. Delphine's tears in Biarritz, waiting for a miracle and getting instead only a tourist's holiday.

Such game-playing ends up, like Jung-rae's own misguided attempt to mold Sun-hee's reality into Mun-suk's model in *Woman on the Beach*, turning people into characters or pawns, if not totally reifying them into props on the stage of one's emotional and romantic life. While for Delphine, on other hand, as with her larger philosophy on the meaning of ordinary experience, other people must be real if anything like a meaningful matter of the heart is going to happen. As McKibbin writes, for Delphine, "love isn't a game we play or a social transaction fulfilled, but a belief system set in motion" (McKibbin, 2010). Love needs to arrive like a playing card in the street or an epiphanic flash at sunset, not anything that means according to some already existing meaning-giving system but only in and of itself, wholly on its own terms. If Delphine's stance is, as I have repeatedly mentioned, an ethical one, then it is indeed a Levinasian ethics committed to the otherness of the other; seeing other people not

with the violence of objectification, or the implicit definitions and models of romantic expectations, but with the powerlessness and responsibility of openness, paying attention because you understand that there's a world worth paying attention to.

Otherness, for Levinas, famously reveals itself in the naked, pre-signifying presence of the face; an eruption of the other within the world of the same that doesn't signify any meaning in particular but simply announces the significance of the fact that it is. "The absolute nakedness of a face," he writes, "the absolutely defenseless face, without covering, cloth or mask, is what opposed my power over it, my violence, and opposes it in an absolute way, with an opposition which is opposition in itself" (Levinas, 1987, p. 21). Perception, then, can be neither an act of ownership nor objectification, but a conversational encounter, a relation that's mutual rather than hierarchical.

The face, for Levinas, as a kind of signifying force without any specific significant context, "is not that to which I oppose myself, but what is opposed to me. It is an opposition inscribed in its presence before me. It does not at all follow my intervention" (Levinas, 1987, p. 19). Always arriving without warning or already imposed definition, but also arising without reference to one's own self-conceptions and conceptual frameworks, it arrives as the welcoming presence of complete otherness. It arrives, indeed, as something like a miracle, like those improbable coincidences Hong marveled at, the ones that open up the world-organizing (and world-obfuscating) structures that otherwise occupy our minds, and the ones that so befuddled Jung-rae in his own planned film; all those things that, as Delphine cherishes, "just crop out of nowhere in life." Like Levinas's face, these ordinary miracles are eruptions within our expected reality, while still remaining wholly immanent within that reality, a transcendence-within-immanence. To encounter reality in a way that wouldn't "subject it to tyranny," for Levinas, is to be put "in contact with a being that is not simply uncovered, but

divested of its form, of its categories, a being becoming naked, an unqualified substance breaking through its form and presenting its face” (Levinas, 1987, p. 20). It’s perhaps, ultimately, like Moon-suk finding “the real thing” in the stars, or the possibility that Jung-rae could ever see Moon-suk without the distorting images he’s already built in his mind, or the way Delphine welcomes all these unanticipated flashes of green.

The existence of the miraculous within the material world of the everyday notably occupied Rohmer during his early years as a critic for *Cahiers du Cinéma*. Writing on Rossellini’s *Viaggio in Italia* (1954), for instance, in an article titled “The Land of the Miracles,” Rohmer is especially preoccupied with the seemingly unmotivated miracle of Alex and Katherine’s reignited love for one another as they get swept up in the San Gennaro festival in Naples: “If the film succeeds – logically, you could say – through a miracle, it is because that miracle was in the order of things whose order, in the end, depends on a miracle” (Rohmer, 1986, p. 207). If the ordinary order of things, Rohmer’s gnomic pronouncement suggests, is one in which love fades and the bickering couple was doomed to grow ever further apart until nothing remained to tether them to one another at all, then that order of things is only apparent rather than actual, much like Hong Sang-soo’s pronouncements earlier regarding the falsely constructed realities that we go around imposing on the world and calling “the real thing.” What seemed to be the inexorable order of things, ultimately, precisely depends on its own flimsiness, and the inherent possibility of its own disruption. Some, like Lena and Béatrice in *Le Rayon vert*, or Jung-rae in *Woman in the Beach*, are happy never to face the possibility of such a disruption; they’ve decided what the world means to them and the categories they’ll use to organize its things and its people, and reality then always appears to be the very thing they already assumed it would be. Love is never much more than a game, emotional completion can

only come with romantic partnership, and potential love interests are always reducible to the image of them we've constructed to define them.

For others like Delphine, though, in her non-search for a marvel to suddenly erupt in life, enough even perhaps to stir her heart, or Mun-suk's wish to find herself as "the real thing" prior to any character all the men around her turn her into, the disruptive force of the disorder lurking beneath seeming orders is what makes reality worth cherishing. In an interview regarding *Conte d'hiver* (1992), Rohmer remarks that his characters "can be wise or 'mad.' It's never madness as such, but a sort of exaltation, a spiritual fervour, the refusal of a flat reality, sometimes even a Don Quixotesque madness. I think Félicie has this kind of gentle madness" (Curchod, 2013, p. 112). As does, Delphine, of course, in her own refusal of a "flat reality," the stubbornness of a way of living that wouldn't be open to all that chance and accident might make possible. As she says late in the film, once she's met the friendly young man in the Biarritz train station, an encounter that inspires her to delay her disappointed trip back to Paris and spend the afternoon with him in the nearby port town of Saint-Jean-de-Luz, "it's better to wait for something than settle for reality." A Hongian dictum par excellence, suggesting all the ways that reality only appears to be the way it is, that marvels and surprises and disruptions are lurking all around, and that those might actually be the "real things" amid all that leaves Rohmer's mad hearts so disenchanting and unfulfilled.

Reality's ordinary miracles

And it's on that afternoon trip, in a place she never planned to be with a man chance put in front of her like a playing card picked up from the street, where her principle of true and genuine attention, the hard work of actually looking rather than inventing your own psychic version of what you see, finally pays off.¹¹ Back in Biarritz, she had overheard a group of

elderly travelers discussing Jules Verne's novel *Le Rayon vert* (1882), named after the optical phenomenon in which a brief shaft of green-tinted light appears, only under very specific circumstances, at the last moment before the sun disappears past the horizon. "Do you know what Jules Verne said?" one of them explains. "He said when you see the green ray, you can read your own feelings, and those of others." Another playing card found by accident in the street, another piece of accidental reality, but one that seems to give Delphine hope that what she's looking for is really out there; if not a gaze that gazes back then at least her own gaze reflected back on herself, a moment of clarity when she might see just how much she matters whether anyone's looking back at her or not. "It's a love story," the Verne reader had said of the novel. "There are characters who are searching for something." The same, of course, could be said for Rohmer's film, and Hong's too; though their characters are the kind of searchers who aren't searching for any one specific thing, and if theirs are love stories, then they're ultimately most in love with being alive.

And when Delphine finally has her own blissful vision, not on a beach but on a bluff overlooking the harbor in Saint-Jean-de-Luz, it amounts to the same sort of radiant clarity that Mun-suk finds when she's left alone in Shinduri. She had earlier wept at the fact that she must be nothing because no one seems to see anything in her: "We're talking about showing things and I have nothing to show. If I had something to show, then people would see it. That's all." But in one ecstatic moment, one so accidental, and one that could never be planned, she realizes that the fault lies in everyone else's way of seeing rather than her way of being. Like the women Hong's men chase after, she's seen (and thus mis-seen) through so many distorting lenses, the depressingly myopic eyes of desire, the befuddlement of those who question her curious eating habits, her emotional volatility that more laidback friends seem unable to

understand. But just as Jung-rae believed his cosmic string is not the same thing as the entities it holds together, reality doesn't just have to be these quick pairings-off in cheap clubs in busy resort towns at the height of summer, the dreary machinations of Lena's game-playing. So, what does she see at that brief moment when the sun sinks past the horizon, its flash of green "like the blade of a sword?" What brings this trembling burst of tears to her eyes? "What do you learn?" asks her new male companion, one who's spent the day just casually being with her rather than trying to get her somewhere. "I'd really like to know." "So would I," she answers, her eyes still fixed on the horizon. And what she finally sees is nothing she can express in words aside from a joyful "Yes."



Figure 7. Delphine's bliss upon seeing the miracle of the elusive green ray's flash.

Surely what she sees is the “real thing” that Mun-suk sees in the world’s small moments of beauty, and the very same thing both she and Delphine find in themselves; an accident, something you can’t define, a thing that needs no narrative context to explain it, an idiocy, Mori’s happiness and Areum’s compassion. She waited long enough and held out hope for long enough, and in one miraculous flash, the world has finally stopped being stubborn, and all her efforts have paid off. The film’s sublime final moments don’t necessarily even mean the end of her loneliness, as her future with Jacques of course remains unknown, at least beyond her evident acceptance of accompanying him for a few extra days to Bayonne. Maybe he’s the one and maybe he isn’t, though his thoughtful attentiveness toward Delphine at least suggests the likeliness of the former; but, no matter what, the green ray’s epiphanic flash at least proves to her that the way she’s chosen to live her life has been worth it. Witnessing such an ordinary miracle may not even offer much like enlightenment, but having learned how to see miracles whenever they come might be meaning enough.

In an interview with Anne-Christine Loranger, Hong explains a moment in *On the Beach at Night Alone* (2017), when Young-hee kneels on a bridge in Hamburg in a moment of supplication echoing Jung-rae’s experience at the three trees in *Woman on the Beach*. “She is looking for a miracle,” Hong says. “A miracle obtained a little too easily. But, of course, she is sincere. I can understand her. I can understand why she’s doing this. But the miracle doesn’t come by leaning over a bridge. It takes more than that” (Loranger, 2020). And when Loranger presses him on what more it takes to arrive at a miracle, Hong offers instead his own tautological definition of a miracle, much like Rohmer’s own paradoxical definition regarding Rossellini’s film: “A miracle is a miracle because you don’t know how you get it. It’s something that comes to you when you don’t expect it” (Loranger, 2020). Like a playing card

picked up in the street, or an unexpected day spent in a small fishing village with a compassionate man, or a moment of unreciprocated kindness from strangers; all these fragments of life that need no purpose beyond themselves and that need no meaning but what they are in their own ephemeral thereness. So many Hongian miracles all around, waiting to be seen by the kind of eye that's willing to look for them. Jung-rae wanted to explain miracles, but both Mun-suk and Delphine know that just being able to see them is enough, and that being able to see them means being a part of them. If time isn't a real thing, as Mori's book argues, then none of our other explanatory narratives or projected frameworks are either; the real thing, like each of us, like all the stars, like all this inexplicable reality, is just what's hiding there in plain sight.

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ENDNOTES:

¹ The quote, frequently cited but of unclear provenance, is linked to a press kit assembled by Adrien Gombaudo to accompany the release of *Woman is the Future of Man* (2004). See Hartzell and Pacquet. Similarly, Hong elsewhere remarks that “fragments of memory, dream, imagination, and fragments of reality are just different in name only, but they all share homogeneity” (Huh, 60).

² Hong's later films will come to be more frequently grounded in their female characters. *Our Sunhi* (2013) and *Yourself and Yours* (2016) each explore women confronting men's persistent habit of turning them into projections, with one heroine asserting her own independence against men's desire-driven uselessness and the other playfully asserting her own kind of revenge.

³ In an interview with Roger Koza for *Cinema Scope* in 2015, Hong somewhat hilariously resorts to constructing two diagrams of his own in order to illustrate his ideas behind the doubled reality of *Right Now, Wrong Then* (2015): “Imagine this rectangle is real life. I try to come as close as possible to it.”

⁴ Mori, in *Hill of Freedom*, with his moment of communion with a flower, seems an exception to this usually gendered rule. Though given that Mori is Japanese rather than Korean, he might end up proving the normal distinction after all, given the fact that Hong's withering judgment is always aimed at a distinctively Korean kind of masculine type. For the most detailed reading of the Korean specificity of Hong's crisis of masculinity, see Kyung Hyun Kim, *The Remasculization of Korean Cinema*, Chapter 7: "Two Early, Too Late: Temporality and Repetition in Hong Sang-soo's films." Placing Hong's earliest films within the context of South Korea's rapid modernization after the end of its dictatorship, Kim suggests that Hong's deflated masculine egos are exemplary of a society that hasn't yet fully overcome its traumas by being able to move into any substantively meaningful future. His characters "become fully entrapped by their retroactive circuit," such that "their movements fail to thrust forward and return only to the point of origin even after their desires have been physically fulfilled through sex" (210).

⁵ Touchingly, Hong goes on to explain how the film's ending was inspired by two seemingly innocuous moments of what we could call "idiotic" reality in his own life. One is a moment directly echoing Moon-suk's, with his car trapped in a beach's sand and his crew rushing to help him out, but the second suggests more ineffable connections: "I was surprised when someone hit me in the arm really hard. It was summer and I was wearing a short-sleeved shirt. I looked back and saw a middle-aged woman with a baby on her back turning red. I found out that she slapped me to catch a mosquito biting my arm. She apologized by saying, 'I'm so embarrassed.' She was a stranger to me, but when she saw a mosquito sucking my blood, she slapped me in spite of herself. Her look and her words stayed with me for a long time" (Huh 85-87).

⁶ Elsewhere, writing about *The Day He Arrives*, Quandt even suggests that Hong inherited his idiosyncratic use of the zoom from Rohmer: "Odd as it may seem, Hong's inspiration for reviving this cheesy device might be none other than the ultra-subtle Eric Rohmer, who has often been cited as the Korean director's formative influence. Rohmer's slow, discreet zooms delicately pinion his characters within the frame, prodding them to disclose their inner beings, which they falteringly, sometimes fatuously do. (See, in particular, *Le Rayon vert*) Hong turns his frames into traps, employing his static shots, long takes, and zooms to lock his similarly

garrulous and self-deluding creatures in the inescapable image, intensifying their physical unease and social awkwardness with his relentless inspection” (Quandt 2012).

⁷ See also, Marco Grosoli, “Moral Tales from Korea,” for a detailed reading of the points of convergence of the filmmaker’s approach to mise-en-scène, especially in Hong’s *Night and Day*.

⁸ Rohmer’s film, notably, appeared on Hong’s submission of his ten favorite films for *Sight & Sound*’s “Greatest Films of all Time” poll in 2012 (a list that, notably, also features Dreyer’s *Ordet* (1955), one of film history’s most famed on-screen miracles.

⁹ For a thorough account of Rohmer's improvisatory methods in making *Le Rayon vert*, his first film without a script since *La Collectionneuse* (1967), see Jacob Leigh, *The Cinema of Éric Rohmer* (pp. 127-32).

¹⁰ See also Fiona Handyside, "Rohmer à la plage," where she explores the way that the city's ills have a way of following Rohmer's characters to the promised freedom that the idea of the beach vacation's escape represents: "The beach is turned into an urban site precisely through the presence of a crowd, all of whom are trying to escape each other.... The beach is a place onto which [Delphine] projects her romantic longings, which contradict the reality being shown to us by the documentary force of Rohmer's camera" (154).

¹¹ Jacques first notices Delphine in the train station because she's reading Dostoevsky's *The Idiot*, itself the result of a happy accident in the film's production, as Rohmer himself was struck by the fact that Rivière happened to be reading it. As Rohmer explained: "It wasn't a choice, it was a coincidence, a miracle. In this film, there are only coincidences. This was pure chance. It happened that she was reading the book, I don't know why. If she had been reading a book which I didn't like, perhaps I would have said 'let's find another.' But when I saw her reading *The Idiot*, I said 'Ah, it's fantastic that Delphine would be reading *The Idiot*'" (quoted in Leigh 302).