MINIMALIST ABSENCES AND DERRIDEAN DECONSTRUCTION IN THE FILMS OF HONG SANG-SOO

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ABSTRACT

This paper reconsiders the recent work of Hong Sang-Soo, focusing on subtle yet significant stylistic shifts since Right Now, Wrong Then *(2015) and the arrival of his muse, Kim Min-Hee. Hong's cinema now embraces absence and minimalism, paring down images, words, and actions to evoke a perpetual present. His narratives resist fixed meaning, inviting viewers to engage with the image as presence rather than representation. Drawing on the philosophy of Jacques Derrida, the paper explores how Hong's films challenge conventional temporality and subjectivity. Objects and spaces become surfaces within a larger puzzle, accessible only through a layered temporality akin to Derrida's différance. Moving beyond regional or global frameworks like Asian Minimalism or slow cinema, Hong's recent work—particularly its subtle shift toward female subjectivity—offers a redefinition of presence and absence, opening up a cinematic space where reality is experienced rather than simply depicted.*

KEYWORDS

Korean cinema, Hong Sang-Soo, slow cinema, minimalism, Jacques Derrida

1. INTRODUCTION

Hong Sang-Soo is a filmmaker who epitomizes the divide in contemporary film culture noted by Bordwell and Thompson [3]: a split between "aggressive cinema for the mass market and slow, more austere cinema for festivals and arthouses." While celebrated by film critics and a favorite at festivals, his work often underperforms at the box office and remains underappreciated in his home country. Hong's work embodies what Bordwell describes as 'parametric narration' [2, pp. 274–310], where consistent use of certain cinematic techniques—such as his restrained use of zooms, fixed frames, and specific positioning of characters—creates a self-reflective cinematic experience. This approach avoids straightforward interpretive cues, resisting clear emotional signaling and narrative closure.

While Hong Sang-Soo's minimalist style has been extensively studied, this paper argues that his recent works, particularly since *Right Now, Wrong Then* (*지금은 맞고 그때는 틀리다*, 2015) with the arrival of Kim Min-Hee, mark a subtle yet significant shift in his cinematic approach. To assume that Hong always makes the same films over and over again [4] is to disregard the subtle shifts which pervade his filmography.

Raymond [22] has already observed a significant change in the treatment of rape between Hong's early films and those made toward the end of the 2000s, noting that the gradual erasure of rape—from explicit depictions to mere suggestions—diminished the feminist agency of his works. Furthermore, Hong began integrating nuanced shifts toward female subjectivity even before his collaboration with Kim Min-Hee, as exemplified in films like *Our Sunhi* (*우리 선희*, 2013).

Over time, Hong's style has become increasingly minimalist, refining his focus on the understated complexities of life and human relationships. Since *Oki's Movie* (*옥희의 영화*, 2010)—his last film to rely solely on direct sound—Hong's work has evolved, with shots growing longer, image quality improving, and settings moving from public cafés and bars to more intimate spaces, such as friends' homes. *Grass* (*풀잎들*, 2018), shot in eighteen long takes, and *The Woman Who Ran* (*도망친 여자*, 2020) further this minimalist approach, focusing on the minutiae of human interactions while underscoring Hong's continued exploration of repetition, language, and subjective experience. These works further blur the boundaries between form and content, presence and absence, and past and present, challenging the viewer to embrace a more fluid and open-ended mode of interpretation.

Through a refinement of his narrative and cinematographic techniques, Hong's recent films challenge fixed meanings, emphasizing a contemplative temporality that defies easy categorization within slow cinema or Asian minimalism. Hong's films incorporate elements of Asian minimalism, such as long takes and subdued storytelling, yet they differ in narrative complexity and thematic coherence. Although he shares slow cinema's contemplative pace, his focus on middle to upper-class urbanites, rather than marginalized labor, distinguishes him from slow cinema practitioners like Tsai Ming-liang or Béla Tarr. Michel Ciment's term 'cinema of slowness' captures the genre's emphasis on marginalized lives, while Flanagan's [14] and Lim's [18] analyses emphasize the silence, stillness, and social critique inherent to slow cinema—elements that diverge from Hong's focus on character psychology and interpersonal relationships.

Hong's fragmented temporality, ambiguous dialogue and refusal of fixed meaning, are particularly suited to analysis through the lens of Derridean deconstruction. Jacques Derrida's critical method interrogates the binary oppositions foundational to Western thought—presence/absence, interiority/exteriority, form/content—revealing their instability and interdependence. Drawing from René Descartes's transcendental philosophy, Derrida builds on the *épochè*, or suspension of judgment, not to affirm a unified self, as Descartes does, but to expose the divisible limit where the self (*auto-affection*) is always mediated by the other (*hetero-affection*). This fundamental instability, where the assertion of presence is haunted by absence, resonates deeply with the interpretive challenges posed by Hong's work.

This paper argues that Hong's increasingly minimalistic approach exemplifies deconstruction in practice, offering a space where binaries dissolve and meaning emerges as fluid, contingent, and relational. In studying Hong's recent films, we gain insight into a filmmaker continually refining his art to challenge traditional frameworks of narrative, form, and interpretation. By applying Derrida's deconstruction, this paper seeks to illuminate how Hong's cinema engages viewers in an active questioning of boundaries and meaning, crafting a cinematic experience that embraces multiplicity and perpetual becoming.

2. CRAFTING ABSENCES

While it might be an overstatement to suggest that the improved image quality in Hong's films marked a fundamental shift in the nature of the actions he portrays, there has been a subtle evolution in the way these actions are framed and observed, particularly as Hong increasingly adopts a female perspective. His thematic focus remains grounded in the complexities of human relationships—men and women negotiating love, infidelity, and the tensions that lead to grief, despair, and even the occasional threat of violence. However, the overt displays of sex, nudity, and aggression that characterized his earlier films have gradually given way to scenes of quiet, repetitive action: characters talk, drink, smoke, and then talk some more. This shift underscores Hong's deliberate use of absence—both in the dwindling intensity of action and in the increasingly ambiguous and fragmented nature of dialogue. Conversations often seem to lose their meaning, as characters speak without clarity or resolution, further deepening a sense of interpretive void.

This sense of absence extends to Hong's restrained formal style, as his cinematography and mise-en-scène avoid expressive techniques that might provide interpretive anchors. The framing is often neutral and unembellished, with fixed compositions and minimalist camera movements that refuse to offer visual cues about characters' emotions or relationships. By pairing linguistically opaque conversations with an inexpressive visual style, Hong crafts a cinematic space where meaning is elusive, and viewers are left to grapple with the subtle, sometimes frustrating voids within both dialogue and form. This absence is not a lack of content but rather a deliberate withholding, inviting contemplation of what lies beyond words and beyond the immediate image.

2.1. The Spoken Word and the loss of signification

Dialogue in Hong's films serves as a grounding mechanism, reinforcing the visual anchoring of the image in the immediate present. In *Right Now, Wrong Then,* this effect is clearly illustrated when Hee-jung (Kim Min-hee), upon meeting Chun-soo, deflects questions about herself with responses that confirm what is already apparent. When asked, "What are you doing here?," she responds, "What does it look like I'm doing?... That's right. I'm drinking banana milk." This interaction underscores a common characteristic in Hong's work: dialogue that not only confirms what viewers can already see but also reinforces what characters perceive and experience in that precise moment. Through this, Hong's dialogue captures a slice of reality, prioritizing the immediate over the narrative or psychological backstory.

This focus on the present moment, especially through dialogue, is reminiscent of what Susan Sontag calls 'doubling' in Bresson's films [25]. Paul Schrader further elaborates that Bresson uses narration not to provide new insights, but to reiterate the familiar, offering a "cold reinforcement of the everyday" rather than fresh revelations [24, p. 72]. Similar to Bresson, Hong constructs dialogue that avoids building character backstories or hinting at future events. Instead, his dialogue elevates the mundane, the ordinary, and the spontaneous moments of life. This approach aligns with Hong's practice of finalizing the script on the morning of the shoot, allowing him to incorporate contingent elements like the weather or his own emotions into the narrative.

This emphasis on the banal and the present, largely absent of references to the characters' pasts, situates Hong's work firmly in the here and now. We are placed *in medias res*, piecing together characters' relationships as they unfold through realistic, non-expository dialogue. This is why characters of Hong's recent films have often remained nameless. By resisting the impulse to reveal backstory, his dialogues deepen the sense of immediacy and temporality, aligning closely with his minimalist aesthetic and lending his films a unique, almost documentary-like authenticity. This approach captures the transient nature of human interactions, reinforcing a perspective in which dialogue is less about what is being said than about the moment in which it is spoken.

Similarly, spectators are never given direct access to characters' emotions, not even through voice-over. Ah-Reum's voice-overs in *Grass*, for example, are limited to observations about what she sees in the coffee shop. Only later, in a conversation with her brother at a restaurant, do we learn more about her, revealing that her seemingly objective observations may be colored by bitterness. For instance, she notes in voice-over that she'd enjoy drinking with the lively group next to her, yet when invited to join them, she declines and leaves. This gap between what she says and how she behaves suggests that the content of voice-overs is less important than their presence; it is significant that we hear one character's thoughts over another's. This is why, in the second part of *Right Now, Wrong Then*, the absence of Chun-Soo's voice-over creates a more diffuse sense of agency between him and Hee-Jung.

Words are casually tossed around with ambiguous meanings, hindering effective communication. Lippit describes questions as "lines of inquiry" that never reach their intended endpoint, serving only to "keep the silence from consuming the world" [19, p. 25]. While Hong's work consistently explores relationships between men and women, the scope of these connections broadens after *Right Now, Wrong Then*. Romance, though still central, shifts from courtship and first encounters to endings, as seen in *Grass* with ex-lovers and through the lens of divorce in *The Woman Who Ran*. This helps explain why the "lines of inquiry" identified by Lippit are replaced by a lack of signification and shared universals—since the characters already know each other, asking questions would feel unnatural or unnecessary. In *The Woman Who Ran*, for instance, Young-Soon's male neighbor disapproves of the women feeding stray cats, calling them "robber cats" to suggest they don't deserve food. Yet this doesn't elicit the response he expects from Young-Jin, who counters that she and Young-Soon see the cats as "children." The struggle over labeling the cats, either with a pejorative or endearing term, demonstrates that the concept of "cat" lacks a universal meaning; it becomes so open to interpretation that its essence dissolves.

Conversely, the particular is also eradicated. When Gam-Hee's friend mentions that the young neighbor's mother "ran away," the film's title, *The Woman Who Ran*, comes to mind. Could this nameless, absent figure be the eponymous woman? Yet, Young-Soon also "ran" from a disrespectful husband, and Su-Young rejects a young poet who wanted commitment after their brief encounter—are they, too, "women who ran"? By the final episode, even Gam-Hee might be seen as a woman who ran, as her ex-boyfriend, now married to Woo-Jin, has become unpleasant. The phrase "the woman who ran" does not point to a single character but seems to apply to them all, creating a linguistic ambiguity that defies the identification of one specific "woman."

2.2. Inexpressive form and the Everyday

The conspicuous absence of meaningful communication in Hong's films invites viewers to linger on the image itself, searching for subtle cues or details that might offer a sense of interpretation or certainty. In earlier works, sequences of dreams and memories injected a playful surrealism into the narrative—introducing incongruous elements, such as the sudden appearance of a pig in *Night and Day* (*밤과 낮*, 2007) or a sixteenth-century naval commander in *HaHaHa* (*하하하,* 2010), which humorously exposed characters' hidden desires and fantasies. However, such surrealistic intrusions have become less frequent in Hong's more recent films, giving way to a deliberately banal, unembellished image that becomes an object of contemplation in its own right. The visual field in Hong's films now often eschews overt symbols or metaphors, leaving scenes to unfold in a mundane, undramatic rhythm where meaning feels just out of reach.

Yet Hong's images remain dynamic, their indeterminate nature inviting interpretation without providing clear answers. For instance, in *Hotel by the River* (*강변 호텔*, 2018), certain shots ambiguously blur the boundaries between dream and reality, further destabilizing any sense of narrative certainty. Beneath this surface of the eternal present, there seems to be an elusive significance, though one that refuses to fully reveal itself. It is perhaps why drinking and smoking have become quintessential "Hongian" actions—they are rituals that allow narrative to unfold in a minimalistic, unforced manner, without necessitating meanings or dramatic resolutions [15, p. 14].

Lippit suggests that drinking serves as a mechanism of interiorization, containing the "horrors of expression" by keeping emotions inside [19, p. 25]. In Hong's earlier films, nausea and vomiting were common and served as a means for characters to "reach the outside" and express their interior struggles (ibid.). However, this kind of "dramatic" release is no longer available to characters in his recent work. In *The Woman Who Ran* (2020), the most dramatic moment occurs when Young-Soon, the first friend Gam-Hee (Kim Min-Hee) visits, becomes drunk at a barbecue. Yet, we never actually see her intoxicated: in one shot, she is simply eating lunch, and in the next, Gam-Hee casually mentions her flushed face—a stark contrast to the graphic vomiting scene in *Virgin Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors* (*오! 수정*, 2000).

In *The Woman Who Ran,* for example, Young-soon's roommate Young-jin emphasizes the slowness of her actions as she cuts apples, stating that she is "slow by nature." This unhurried action is devoid of narrative importance, yet it draws the characters'—and the audience's—attention. Rather than producing boredom, her deliberate pace prompts a contemplative gaze from Gam-hee and Young-soon, as a zoom-out reveals their intent focus on this simple act of cutting apples (Fig. 1-2). Through this moment, Hong demonstrates how slowness itself can provoke a heightened attention to the seemingly insignificant, suggesting that even the most mundane actions contain the potential to reveal something beyond their surface. In Hong's films, the act of waiting and observing these banal actions becomes a meditation on time, where the lack of conventional meaning opens a space for deeper, often ambiguous reflection.

Figure 1. Still from Hong Sang-Soo, *The Woman Who Ran* (0:12:51)

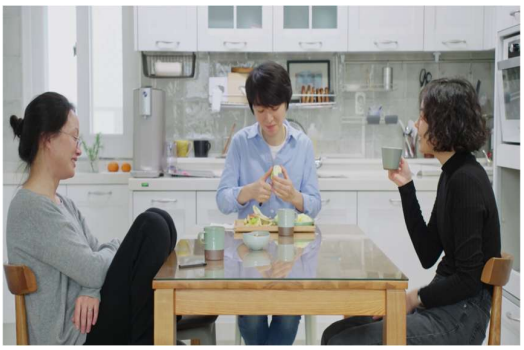

Figure 2. Still from Hong Sang-Soo, *The Woman Who Ran* (0:13:05)

In contrast to traditional filmmaking, which often manipulates framing, lighting, or camera angles to express characters' internal states, Hong's style emphasizes neutrality and observational distance. This detachment, combined with the lack of expressive cinematographic techniques, curtails interpretive engagement and invites viewers to focus on the surface of interactions rather than seeking underlying meanings or emotional revelations. Hong's systematic use of fixed frames, symmetrical compositions, and restrained camera movements, creates a visual consistency that extends throughout his filmography. His characters are grounded within the cinematic apparatus; for example, the heads of characters are typically positioned in the top half of the frame, adhering to a compositional balance that avoids conventional close-ups or shifts in focus that might otherwise emphasize psychological or emotional nuances. In two-shots, each character occupies a designated half of the frame, and the camera frequently makes subtle pans to adjust the framing whenever a character shifts, effectively keeping them anchored within their respective spaces. Only when the camera zooms in are characters allowed to leave the frame, creating a spatial stability that discourages dramatic imbalance or interpretive depth, and reinforces an equality of presence.

Hong's use of zooms, introduced in *Tale of Cinema* (*극장전*, 2005), has been widely acknowledged as a notable evolution in his cinematic techniques, as noted by Kim [16]. Diffrient [12] highlighted that much of the humor in Hong's earlier works derived from cinematographic choices that intentionally disrupted the viewer's suspension of disbelief, enabling the director to subtly comment on the on-screen events. However, in Hong's more recent films, this element of "directorial performance" has been significantly reduced. The zoom, in particular, has shifted away from its earlier role as a tool for meta-commentary, thereby diminishing the sense of complicity traditionally established between the audience and the director.

Instead, the zoom increasingly serves to exclude a character, creating a visual absence that is often gendered. The association of excessive speech with male characters becomes

particularly pronounced when they articulate their desires—desires that, in Hong's more recent films, are not always sexual. In *The Woman Who Ran*, a recurring pattern emerges where men interrupt women, initiating some of the most pivotal narrative moments in their respective episodes. For instance, one man insists that Young-Soon stop feeding stray cats, citing his wife's fear as justification, while another demands that Su-Young take responsibility for his broken heart. In both cases, the men rely on what Rival describes as "a simple 'it's me,' as if [their] mere existence exercised a right over her" [22, p. 77; my translation].

Similarly, in *Grass*, two men in separate conversations try to persuade younger women to let them into their homes. One example involves an actor asking his long-time friend for a place to stay, to which she replies, "I'm sorry," avoiding direct eye contact as though deliberately excluding his feelings from her considerations. This rejection is captured through Hong's signature zoom, which simultaneously isolates one character's emotions while visually excluding the other. Communication between men and women is driven by desire and its rejection. The dynamic underscores Nuñez Alberca's assertion that "as long as there is desire, there will be narrativity" [21, p. 51; my translation]. Hong's nuanced use of zooms thus becomes a tool for exploring the asymmetrical interplay of presence and absence, highlighting the tensions inherent in gendered interactions.

3. RETHINKING PRESENCE

Hong's cinematography and dialogues are characterized by an ambiguity that resists fixed meanings. The gap between the signifier and the signified creates interpretive uncertainty, making it difficult for spectators to draw definitive conclusions. This ambiguity draws attention to the seemingly empty frame and the slow, deliberate actions—or "micro-actions"—that often appear inscrutable when viewed in isolation. Yet Hong's films are far from simplistic; their complex dramatic structures further complicate interpretation.

Vincze describes these as "puzzle films," designed to confuse and disorient viewers [26]. In *The Day a Pig Fell Into a Well*, for instance, Vincze notes that spectators are often left uncertain about the "exact causal connections of the events" (178), requiring a second viewing to uncover "hidden repetitions and refrains" (179). However, in Hong's more recent films, this need for reconstruction has diminished, as patterns and repetitions are made more apparent within episodic narrations. Vincze highlights that in *Right Now, Wrong Then*, the film's repetition leads to the reconstruction of two distinct moral messages. Yet I argue that the effect of repetition in Hong's films, as Deutelbaum suggests, is less about reconstruction and more about "perceptual reeducation" [11, p. 208]. If, as Elsaesser posits regarding mind-game films, "the spectator's own meaning-making activity involves constant retroactive revision, new reality-checks, displacements and reorganization not only of temporal sequence, but of mental space" [13, p. 21], then Hong's films place spectators in a different situation altogether. Rather than engaging in after-the-fact reconstruction, viewers are put in a state of waiting, gradually coming to anticipate and constantly reinterpreting patterns.

This multi-layered temporalization of the visual event can be enriched by Derrida's critique of the traditional metaphysical hierarchy of essence and appearance. Throughout his career, Derrida continually redefined the concept of deconstruction, yet in the interview *Positions*, he provides an early and foundational definition. He describes deconstruction as a two-step process: first, reversing the hierarchies inherent in Platonism, and second, re-inscribing the previously subordinate term as the origin or

foundation of the hierarchy itself. In this framework, essence is not distinct from appearance but instead resides within it, immanent and inseparable [6, pp. 41–42]. This perspective implies that what we understand as essence emerges from the variations of appearances, shaped by the interplay of memory and anticipation.

Derrida's concept of *différance* plays a crucial role in this reversal. *Différance* emphasizes the temporal nature of experience, where the present is always contaminated by traces of the past and anticipations of the future.

3.1. Repetition and Différance

Hong's films depict fragments of reality interwoven into intricate patterns, inviting interpretation while deliberately avoiding clear solutions, often leaving viewers to wonder if they are overinterpreting them. In *The Woman Who Ran*, for instance, men interrupt women in every episode, and the mise-en-scène underscores this by repeatedly showing men standing at women's doors, faceless and interchangeable (Fig. 3). These interruptions, coupled with patterns such as Young-Jin's analogy of a rooster asserting dominance over hens, suggest parallels between animal behavior and human gender dynamics. Yet these repetitions refuse to resolve into fixed allegories, leaving viewers in a state of interpretive suspension. This refusal mirrors Derrida's claim that repetition—through its "iterability"—always disrupts the possibility of singular meaning:

> "Iterability alters, contaminating parasitically what it identifies and enables to repeat "itself"; it leaves us no choice but to mean (to say) something that is (already, always, also) other than what we mean (to say), to say something other than what we say and would have wanted to say, to understand something other than [what we understand, and so on]..." [8, p. 62]

Figure 3. Still from Hong Sang-Soo, *The Woman Who Ran* (0:16:31)

Repetitions in Hong's films often seem self-contained rather than serving dramatic structures. In *Right Now, Wrong Then*, the second part does not simply follow the first as a continuation, or offer a different perspective on the first part, but reframes it, forcing viewers to recall and reinterpret earlier events. Bordwell [1] likens this to a "stringent memory test," where spectators must identify subtle differences in the repetitions, questioning whether these differences are meaningful or incidental. The repeated scenes engage audiences in a process of interpretive oscillation, where the "now" is continually shaped by the "then" and vice versa.

Through this lens, Hong's films align with Derrida's assertion that experience is never confined to the present. The "now" is always inflected by what Derrida calls the "trace," the residual presence of what is absent—whether past or future. This "trace" disrupts the possibility of immediate, self-identical presence, embedding all experiences within a network of iterability. For Derrida, repetition and singularity are inseparable; every repetition is marked by difference, making each moment unique yet inherently relational: in *Right Now, Wrong Then*, the second part leads spectators to interrogate what exactly changed the outcome of Hee-Jung and Chung-Soo's meeting, and why they only manage to connect in the second part, but not in the first. There is a search for the origin of this shift, whether they stem from altered states of mind, as suggested by Hee-Jung's choice of green paint instead of orange, or a deeper honesty in character interactions, as Lee suggests: it is because both characters 'acted in conformity with the desire that is in them' [17, p. 144] instead of hiding in 'self-deceptive fantasies' (ibid, 149).

Hong's minimalist style provides a fertile ground for the emergence of *différance*, a concept Derrida defines as the incomplete and perpetually deferred structure that produces differences: "*Différance* is the non-full, non-simple, structured and differentiating origin of differences" [7, p. 11]. In Hong's films, this dynamic is evident in how his repetitions transcend mere narrative reconstruction. Instead, they immerse spectators in a state of active waiting, cultivating an awareness of patterns that are simultaneously familiar yet evolving, always in flux and never fully resolved. Through his consistent use of recurring spaces, familiar actors, archetypal characters, thematic preoccupations, and signature cinematic devices, Hong's minimalist approach reinforces this interplay of the "then" within the "now." For example, in *Grass*, two-shots map past conversations onto present ones, creating a "Then" that is recognized in the "Now." This interplay suggests that images are never static but remain in a constant state of becoming, as future images reshape their meaning. This secret mobility within ostensibly still frames reflects a narrative cubism that rejects linear progression, instead creating a fragmented temporality where "seemingly different times and spaces have the same quality in truth" [15, p. 14].

These repetitions operate not only within individual films but across his entire body of work, creating a sense of temporal layering. Watching a Hong film becomes an experience of navigating the differences that emerge in relation to his previous films while also anticipating new variations in future works. For instance, Vincze [26] anticipated that the blurring of images might become a recurring feature of Hong's style, and this prediction materialized with *In Water* (*물안에서*, 2023), a film Hong shot entirely out of focus. In other words: Hong makes films for people who have already watched his films and will continue to watch his films, creating a cinematic dialogue that rewards familiarity with his oeuvre while inviting ongoing engagement with the subtle evolutions and variations that define his minimalist style.

3.2. Spacing and the Materiality of the Sign

In Hong Sang-Soo's films, narrative cubism leads to a porousness of the cinematic frame, where the boundaries between what is shown and what is implied dissolve. This porosity extends temporally, opening the frame to past and future images, and spatially, constructing a dynamic interplay between what is shown and what is withheld. Characters often gesture toward off-screen spaces, such as in *The Woman Who Ran* (Fig. 4), evoking unseen locations that remain inaccessible yet suggest a world beyond the frame. These gestures extend the two-dimensional cinematic image into a three-dimensional world, suggesting an interconnected reality beyond what the frame captures.

This resonates with Hong's desire for "the audience to feel the space that is open beyond the broken structure" [15, p. 57]. This also echoes Derrida's notion of *spacing* (*espacement*), where space is understood not as a fixed container but as a site of relationality and deferral. Presence, in this framework, is always contingent on what is elsewhere. In Hong's films, this creates an expansiveness where meaning emerges not from what is explicitly presented but from the interplay between absence and presence.

Figure 4. Still from Hong Sang-Soo, *The Woman Who Ran* (0:50:38)

The off-screen world in Hong's films functions as an interdependent presence, providing a background to human actions while transcending its narrative function. The mountain in *The Woman Who Ran* exemplifies this independence. The two friends Gam-Hee visits have both chosen to live near mountains, prompting reflection on the potential metaphorical significance of the mountains: might they symbolize a longing for freedom and independence from men? Introduced before Gam-Hee's arrival, the mountains exist outside her narrative perspective, resisting reduction to a metaphor for female desires. They regain their presence as material signifiers rather than as simple narrative settings. As Huh [15, p. 9] notes, Hong's films focus on the materiality of cinematic signifiers:

> "Although it feels like all objects take on new meanings in his films, they are not given a fixed meaning. To put it simply, Hong Sang-Soo is a director who concentrates on the materiality of cinematic signifiers. He doesn't entirely reject the customarily signified of individual signifiers. Nor does he make a system of the newly signified. He only focuses on the glittering surface of materialness."

Objects in his films—whether mountains, cats, or everyday environments—are treated as surfaces of material presence that invite but do not dictate meaning.

Paul Schrader's concept of "stasis" [24] captures this idea, describing the downplaying of narrative-driven meaning in favor of objects' quasi-transcendental presence. In *The Woman Who Ran*, the camera lingers on a cat after the women leave the frame, emphasizing the animal's autonomous existence; it was present in the frame because the women originally were (*relationality*) but regains a form of independence through Hong's lingering camera. Similarly, in *Right Now, Wrong Then*, Chun-Soo exits the frame, but the camera remains fixed on tourists photographing a temple, shifting the focus from human activity to the surrounding environment. These lingering shots illustrate Hong's resistance to subordinating spaces and objects to the narrative, instead allowing their materiality to speak for itself.

Hong's use of transitions further underscores the materiality of the cinematic signifier. In *Right Now, Wrong Then*, Chun-Soo's departure from the palace to his hotel is marked by an upward pan to a tree, while in *Grass*, Ah-Reum's return to the coffee shop is signaled by a downward pan from an electrical tower. These panning shots function like Ozu's transitional images, which Bordwell and Thompson [2] describe as elevating space

and time to aesthetic prominence rather than subservience to narrative. Like Ozu, Hong "opens out" the narrative, embracing a world of interconnected spaces, objects, and temporalities.

Derrida's critique of metaphysical presence aligns closely with Hong's cinematic approach. For Derrida, the materiality of the signifier—its physical and sensorial elements—undermines the idealist aspiration for pure presence or transcendental signifieds. Meaning emerges not from an essence but from the differential and iterative relations among signifiers. In Hong's films, the iterable nature of cinematic images reflects this "movement between the materiality and ideality of the sign" [27, p. 218]. By focusing on the materiality of the signifier, Hong's films challenge the traditional hierarchy between material presence and ideal meaning. This exemplifies Derrida's insight that intelligibility is intrinsically linked to the materiality of the sign, offering a meditation on the possibilities of cinematic meaning through their proliferation and until their (im)possible depletion.

4. GHOSTS AND THE ETHICS OF THE HONGIAN IMAGE

Hong Sang-Soo's films resonate deeply with Derrida's concept of hauntology [9], emphasizing absence, deferral, and the ethical dimension of engaging with the spectral. Derrida defines hauntology as a framework that replaces the traditional metaphysical emphasis on being and presence with the figure of the ghost—an entity that is neither fully present nor absent, neither alive nor dead. Hong's films, through their use of repetition, shadows, and fragmented narratives, exemplify this engagement with the ghostly and the unseen, crafting a cinematic experience that invites viewers into an ethical encounter with absence and ambiguity.

Derrida described cinema as a medium of simultaneous loss and recovery, where the trace persists as both present and absent [5, p. 27]. This paradoxical relationship aligns with the cinematic experience, where the visible and the invisible, the present and the past, coexist dynamically. In *Right Now, Wrong Then*, for instance, the second part begins by projecting characters' shadows on the ground, preceding their physical presence. These shadows function as traces, collapsing distinctions between past and present. Similarly, in *Grass*, a man's shadow on a wall (Fig. 5) becomes a metonym for other characters, intertwining earlier interactions with the current scene. These spectral presences illustrate Derrida's assertion that the trace disrupts linear temporality, inviting viewers to reconsider how absence informs meaning.

Figure 5. Still from Hong Sang-Soo, *Grass* (0:35:36)

Derrida's hauntology is also an ethical framework, urging responsibility toward the Other—an entity whose otherness cannot be fully known or subsumed within familiar categories. In Hong's films, sight becomes an avenue for this ethical engagement. Characters often observe others indirectly or incompletely, fostering both curiosity and restraint. In *The Woman Who Ran*, Gam-Hee watches her friends' interactions with neighbors through CCTV. The silent footage fragments the narrative, creating fear and misjudgment, as when she sees a young woman standing at the door and assumes a threatening presence. Young-Soon reassures her by explaining the woman's circumstances, underscoring how sight alone, detached from understanding, can mislead.

This mise-en-abyme reflects the duality of vision in Hong's films: it both limits and enables ethical awareness. Sight can reduce others to objects of voyeuristic curiosity, as Gam-Hee's use of CCTV illustrates, but it can also prompt recognition of their independent existence. For instance, Young-Soon's decision to become a vegetarian stems from seeing the beauty of cows—a realization born from direct perception rather than abstract reasoning. Hong's films, through such moments, suggest that sight can postpone judgment, encouraging spectators and characters alike to acknowledge the otherness of those they observe. In *Right Now, Wrong Then*, Chun-Soo watches Hee-Jung through a window, his reflection on the glass merging with her unseen presence. This act of indirect observation underscores the ethical dimension of seeing: Chun-Soo's gaze strengthens Hee-Jung's presence without reducing her to an object of his sight (Fig. 6).

Figure 6. Still from Hong Sang-Soo, *Right Now, Wrong Then* (0:36:22)

Hong's minimalist style further amplifies the hauntological aspects of his cinema, where absence becomes a space for ethical and contemplative engagement. This is reflected in the endings of *Right Now, Wrong Then* and *The Woman Who Ran*, where Kim Min-Hee's characters find solace in watching films. In *The Woman Who Ran*, Gam-Hee returns to a movie theater after meeting her ex-boyfriend, drawn to an image of the sea—a liminal space representing her conflict between attachment and independence. Her friends' choice to live near mountains, (almost) symbolic of freedom from men, contrasts with Gam-Hee's ties to her husband in the city. The sea becomes a metaphorical middle ground, reflecting the unresolved tensions in her life.

5. CONCLUSION

Ultimately, Hong Sang-Soo's films invite viewers into a contemplative space where the boundaries between subject and object, past and present, and presence and absence dissolve. Engaging with his cinematic language through Derrida's framework reveals a mode of filmmaking that not only deconstructs conventional binaries but also foregrounds the indeterminacy and fluidity of meaning. Hong's minimalist aesthetic, in its persistent gestures of repetition, fragmentation, and restraint, gestures toward a cinema of becoming—one that resists closure and embraces the spectral, the deferred, and the relational.

This philosophical resonance extends beyond Derrida, finding fruitful intersections with Jean-Luc Nancy's ontology of *being-with* [10; 20] and his meditations on touch as the essence of relational existence.

In Hong's cinema, touch is not merely tactile but phenomenological: a way of being attuned to the silent proximities, absent presences, and shared materialities that structure human and nonhuman relations alike. His films, then, do more than reflect philosophical ideas—they enact them, offering a cinematic practice that is itself a site of ethical and ontological inquiry.

Looking forward, further scholarship might expand this analysis by situating Hong's work within broader philosophical or aesthetic traditions, such as East Asian philosophies of impermanence, Zen aesthetics, or the ethics of care. Comparative studies with other filmmakers who explore non-linearity, spectrality, or minimalism—such as Tsai Ming-Liang, Chantal Akerman, or Abbas Kiarostami—could illuminate additional layers of Hong's cinematic philosophy. Additionally, exploring the role of technology, memory, and digital mediation in his recent works may offer insights into how contemporary cinema reconfigures our experience of time, presence, and relationality.

By opening his films to these ongoing dialogues, Hong Sang-Soo not only deepens our understanding of cinematic form and meaning but also invites a reconsideration of how we inhabit the world—with others, with things, and with the traces that always exceed our grasp.

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