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Showing the Complexity of the Simple – The Art -puzzle of Hong Sang-soo

Probably the first two words that comes to mind when one looks at the works of renowned South Korean film director, Hong Sang-soo, are simplicity and confusion. He has shown deep interest in complex (or some might say: confusing) storytelling since the beginning of his career, and this interest is still clearly detectable in his work up until today. Since modernist art cinema has an affinity with unconventional narrative structures, it is not surprising that an *auteur* like Hong is attracted to complexity. What is significant is his consistency in developing a personal, and sometimes very experimental concept in relation to complex narratives, puzzle structures and modular forms. He often uses extreme variants of certain stylistic devices in order to challenge conventions of film perception and creates experimental lessons in narrative construction that borders being didactic.

In a way Hong's (often black and white) films are the analog answer to the challenges of digital culture, and the modernist art cinema version of puzzle films and database narratives. In my article I intend to demonstrate the very Hongian strategy of producing *auteurist* puzzle films by creating confusion on the perceptive and narrative level.

Producing puzzle

A certain trend of films that use innovative narrative techniques have become more and more visible in international film culture since the mid-1990s. The phenomenon has many names in the scholarly literature from puzzle films, to mind-game cinema, from complex storytelling to database narrative. (The starting point of the trend is interesting here because it coincides with the launch of Hong's film making career – his first film, *The Day a Pig Fell into a Well* [*Doejiga umul-e ppajin nal*], which premiered in 1996.)[1]

The origins of the narrative strategies that characterize these films are explained from many different perspectives in scholarly literature, and are very often connected to the new era of the digital image, the digital culture of databases, and the overall interactive character of digital culture. When summarizing the features of these films Warren Buckland writes: "A puzzle plot is intricate in the sense that the arrangement of events is not just complex, but complicated and perplexing; the events are not simply interwoven, but entangled." (2009, p. 3). When writing about "mind-game films" Thomas Elsaesser further notes that these works have the common feature of having delight in disorienting and misleading their spectators (2009, p. 15). Considering their intriguing plot structures it is not surprising that the early films of Hong Sang-soo attracted the attention of scholars interested in the trend – a text about his debut movie (*The Day a Pig Fell into a Well*) was included in one of the early collections of essays devoted exclusively to the trend of puzzle films (Detelbaum, 2009).

What we also have to note in the case of such *auteurs* as Hong, is that the presence of puzzle structure in their work must also be understood historically, in the framework of art-cinema's style and narrative structure. When Buckland states that "[t]he puzzle film is made up of non-classical characters who perform non-classical actions and events. Puzzle film constitutes a post-classical mode of filmic representation and experience not delimited by mimesis" (2009, p. 5) – the "post-classical" can be related to the two concepts formulated by David Bordwell in connection to narrative strategies that are "post", or rather "beyond" the classical mode: art-cinema narration and parametric narration (Bordwell, 1985).

The question of whether the features spotted in Hong's films connect them to the puzzle film trend or plainly define them as art-cinema, will always linger around in studies analyzing his works. Nevertheless, I believe that since the con-

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[1] When referring to Hong's films I use the English titles and the romanization of Korean titles according to the Korean Film Database maintained by the Korean Film Archive: www.kmdb.or.kr.

nection is evident it is worth taking it as an opportunity to understand the works of Hong more, on the one hand, and the formal and historical embeddedness of the puzzle trend in art-film history on the other.

Hong's character as an art-cinema *auteur* also makes place for some thinking about a factor in relation to puzzle films that Elsaesser claimed to be usually missing from scholarly approaches. He stated that theoretical interest mainly concentrates on the narratologist approach, that is interested only in definitions and general rules of how these films operate and create unique effects. This approach is not interested in interpretation. The other dominant approach, however, what Elsaesser calls "high theory and social commentary", are only interested in interpretation and "promote the cinema – across such films – as examples of »doing philosophy«" (2009, pp. 35–36). In Elseasser's opinion what is missing is the consideration of the material conditions and economic implications that might play an important role in the proliferation of this kind of cinema. Hollywood has its own (economically founded) logic to use the format (pp. 36–38), and also has the international film festival circuit of which Hong's films are obviously a part. His filmmaking is based on a unique working practice that not only provides greater (economic, artistic) independence and freedom for the author, but at the same time is sculpted as a structure that is able to deliver high complexity at a low production cost. Hong always works with very limited resources – very simple locations, a limited number of characters, a rather simple story, and an extremely small staff of seven-eight people – that gives him maximum freedom in financial terms. The intriguing, complex effects are always created through (easy to produce, simple) repetitions, and repetitions with variations. His films are art-cinema versions of what Allan Cameron calls modular narrative: "'Modular narrative' and 'database narrative' are terms applicable to narratives that foreground the relationship between the temporality of the story and the order of its telling" (2008, p. 1). It can be said that the constant use of modular narrative is one of the major features of Hong's authorial style. The combination of a very cheap and flexible production style with his modular thinking has been developed into a flexible mode of writing, an *écriture* that is constantly taking shape on the spot by way of the (digital) *caméra stylo* in the real Astrucian sense (Astruc, 1948).

In his first three films before the *Turning Gate* (*Saeng-hwal-eui Bal-gyun*, 2002) Hong used to write long scripts but then switched to start production with only a treatment and write the day's script every morning on location (Huh, 2007, p. 42). His very flexible and quick method led to an increasing number of films

being produced per year, especially after 2008 when he switched to shooting digital – he sometimes makes two, or even three films per year.[2]

Hong spoke about his production method in detail at the 55th New York Film Festival in 2017 (Directors Dialogue). His average film has a budget under 100 000 USD, shooting usually takes two or three weeks[3].Actual preparations of a film project start one month before shooting starts: Hong chooses the locations and actors, and reserves them for the planned shooting period without knowing what exactly he will shoot. One week before shooting he starts to concentrate on themes, topics and ideas that might be included in the film, but leaves these ideas floating freely without deciding on any fixed concept. One day before shooting he makes up his mind and informs the owner of the location where the next day's shoot will take place, and the actors that should be on location the following day. On the first day of shooting Hong writes the first day's script (three or four scenes) between 4 a.m. and 9 a.m., then the actors start memorizing the first scene for one hour, and shooting starts at around 10 a.m. This process is repeated every day during shooting.

In a way this method truly embodies the idea of a *camera stylo* as a flexible and personal tool of the filmmaker enabling him to create as freely in the context of the highly technical medium of film as a writer creates their story with a pen on paper. This process also invokes some connections to the phenomenon that Marsha Kinder calls database narrative: "Database narratives refers to narratives whose structure exposes or thematizes the dual processes of selection and combination that lie at the heart of all stories and that are crucial to language: the selection of particular data (characters, images, sounds, events) from a series of databases or paradigms, which are then combined to generate specific tales" (2002, p. 6). She also notes that this structure can be found in a wide range of European art films, experimental documentaries, and more mainstream independents such as Groundhog Day, Pulp Fiction, Run Lola Run, and the like. "Such narratives reveal the arbitrariness of the particular choices made, and the possibility of making other combinations which would create alternative stories" (p. 6).

The Hongian "database" of locations and actors is created one month before shooting starts, then a database of ideas are collected during the week before shooting starts, and finally this pre-constituted collection of elements are combined day after day, on the spot during the shooting process: the result usually is

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[2] 2019 was the first year since 2008 when Hong did not make a film; he finished three in 2016, two in 2017, and one in 2018.

[3] During the opening titles of *Hotel by the River* voice over narration states: "the film was shot between January 29 and February 14, 2018".

a network of close similarities, repetitions and variations of spaces and actions. "People tell me that I make films about reality. They're wrong. I make films based on structures that I have thought up." – says Hong (Hartzell, Paquet).

This puzzle structure might be applied, on a more general, transtextual level, to the oeuvre of Hong Sang-soo as often happens in *auteur* cinema. Bordwell's remark applies not only to European films but Hong's oeuvre as well: "The force of the European art film lay in large measure in making not genre but the author's oeuvre the pertinent set of transtextual relations" (1985, p. 232).

Puzzled senses: perceptual reeducation

"The less you know, the more you see."[4]

The characteristics of art-cinema on many levels show similarities to the concept of the puzzle film structure. According to Bordwell's description, in art-cinema narration the syuzhet is less redundant than in classical cinema, gaps are permanent and suppressed, exposition is delayed and distributed, and narration is less generically motivated (1985, p. 205) – in general, understanding the story may require more effort. The parametric form goes even further and has more strong affinities towards the puzzle structure. Its alternative names such as "dialectical" and "permutational" (1985, p. 274) sound suggestive in this regard. Hong's style seems to fit into this category: in parametric form "the film's stylistic system creates patterns distinct from the demands of the syuzhet system. Film style may be organized and emphasized to a degree that makes it at least equal in importance to syuzhet patterns" (p. 275).

The main elements, – organization and emphasis – create this effect in most of Hong's films are the uncertain relation between shots (unmarked jumps in space and time between shots), unmarked switches to flashbacks and imaginary sequences. But most of the time these confusing occurrences take place in the context of very simple and realistic situations. We could say that Hong creates a feeling similar to surrealistic occurrences in Bunuel films meanwhile staying distinctly realistic.

What creates the uncomfortable and partly unrealistic feeling on the viewers part is the provocation the film's formal elements create. These films test the audience on a perceptual and cognitive level. Marshall Deutelbaum gives a very appropriate name to this strategy: "perceptual reeducation" (p. 208). Hong's whole oeuvre starts with a gesture that introduces in 80 seconds one of the major elements that will be present basically in all of the 23 full length features produced

4 Jo Moon-kyeong, the director in *Hahaha* (*Hahaha*, 2010).

by Hong up until today. His debut film, *The Day a Pig Fell Into a Well* starts with an enigmatic soundtrack: under the title credits three different, unconnected soundbites can be heard. The first one is an announcer at a bus station that immediately evokes the space of a bus station and a possible story of traveling; the second is a completely mysterious sequence where a female voice lists enigmatic commands; and finally, the third part contains a screeching noise followed by the sound of foot steps and knocking on a door – at the same time modernist, inauspicious sounding music also can be heard. Right after the title credits all expectations created by the soundscape of the title credit are erased by a close up of a pretty fruitbush on a rooftop.

The film has four major characters whose parallel storylines are presented as consecutive plot sequences: the first part introduces the not so successful writer who has a married lover; the second is the sequence of a man's business trip to the countryside; the third is the story of a girl who works in a cinema and is in love with the writer; and finally there is the sequence of the married lover who turns out to be the wife of the businessman from the second sequence. The attentive viewer will recognize some 38 minutes into the film the repetition of the first sound bite from the title credits: during the journey of the businessman we hear the voice of the same announcer at a bus station. The sound of the strange commands will return some 63 minutes into the film when it turns out that the girl in the third sequence records voiceovers for videogames at a studio. And finally, the third soundbite with the screeching noise and the footsteps returns at 103 minutes in the fourth part, just before the dramatic revelation (that is visible only to the viewer and not to the character of the married lover, who came to the flat of the writer to look for him) that the writer and her young lover have been killed and their bodies are lying inside the flat. Hong plays with these sound bites just like he plays with the blocks of the story – building a carefully designed structure where the connecting pieces of the big picture are not necessarily arranged in a way that makes it easy to understand the connections and causes.

The film is a typical example of the delayed and distributed exposition where viewers are kept in the dark for a long time in relation to the exact causal connections of the events. For example, the second sequence of the businessman takes place between the 36th and 57th minutes of the film, but we have to wait till the 92th minute in the fourth sequence to see that the storylines of the married lover and the businessman meet, and we learn that they are actually husband and wife.

The exact timeline of the story is probably impossible to figure out on first viewing, even for a very attentive viewer. There are some verbal hints, but only the strategically, but not so demonstratively, placed wall calendars of each se-

quence are the ones that could help to figure out that the story starts some time in September and ends in November. The only date that probably can be easily recognized even on first viewing by way of a very visibly placed calendar is the date 26th of October, the writer's birthday. We learn this in the third sequence when the young lover buys a birthday present for the writer but in the evening finds him with the other woman in his flat. At this moment in the film (at around 76 minute), on the 26th of October in the story, three of the major characters' storylines meet spatially, and probably this is also the day the husband's business trip to the countryside starts.

The whole structure of the film amounts to a difficult memory test that is – I believe – impossible to fully comprehend on first viewing. The overall structure can be understood but spotting the sophisticated little details needs repeated viewings. On a second viewing one can easily recognize hidden repetitions and refrains: the writer and the husband had already briefly met in the first sequence; the first sequence actually ends with a shot where the writer and the man who later turns out to be his killer are in the same space; and the third sequence about the young lover ends with a shot where she makes love to the killer – it means that at the end of their respective episodes the writer and the young lover are both in the same space with the man who later turns out to be their killer, but this connection most probably remains hidden on the first viewing. The pieces of the puzzle are placed at great (temporal) distance from each other that makes it extremely difficult to match them together during the first viewing.

Although the four major sequences of the plot are clearly separated by shots of a dark screen, because of the loose connections and lack of redundancies the viewer is kept in constant limbo. Furthermore, in each sequence the editing technique from time to time makes it really difficult to decode even simple plot events. For example, at the beginning of the third episode when the married lover sets off to go and look for the writer at his home, a mysterious and slightly suspicious man is introduced in a few shots who seems to be following the woman to the taxi stand, he stands one step behind the woman in the last shot. After a cut, the taxi arrives with the woman inside and she realizes that her wallet is gone – probably the suspicious man had stolen it. This episode seems to have no function in the syuzhet, but here again comes to mind what Bordwell write about the role of stylistic elements in parametric form: "If a film's stylistic devices achieve prominence, and if they are organized according to more or less rigorous principles, independent of syuzhet needs, then we need not motivate style by appealing to thematic considerations" (p. 283). These elements are part of Hong's overall style that work not on a thematic level, but

play a part in the "perceptual reeducation" of the viewer, and as a commentary about cinematic representation.

Even though these editing and cutting methods keep the viewer on edge, an unmarked dream sequence – another constantly used stylistic devise throughout Hong's carrier – can always make the audience vigilant again. Such an episode is a central piece of the last sequence of the film in which the married lover dreams about her own funeral where all the major characters of the story come together. The scene not only foreshadows the tragic outcome of the film's story but also suggests that it is death (probably the death of the young child of the couple) that initially destroyed the marriage of the businessman and his wife.

In Hong's oeuvre, even when a film seems to have a rather conventional narrative style, unmarked dream sequences and repetitions still evoke a mysterious, puzzled feeling: in *Nobody's Daughter Haewon* (*Nuguui ttaldo anin Haewon*, 2013) only unmarked dream sequences and constant repetitions create the feeling of a complicated narrative concept; *Our Sunhi* (*Uri Sunhi*, 2013) the constant repetition of certain elements of the narrative (dialogue, situations) causes the same feeling; in *Right Now, Wrong Then* (*Ji-geum-eun mat-go geu-ttae-neun teul-li-da*, 2015) the film repeats the same story twice with a different moral message, and its effect is partly created by the alertness of the viewer looking for differences and similarities between the two parts; in *Hotel by the River* (*Gang-byeon ho-tel*, 2018) it is the constantly repeated motif of falling asleep and waking up that makes the status of certain shots questionable and the narrative structure more ambiguous looking.

In all of these cases the attention of the spectator is sharpened by the mechanism that is a characteristic of art-film narration: "In general, as causal connections in the fabula are weakened, parallelisms come to the fore. The films sharpen character delineation by implementing us to compare agents, attitudes, and situations" (Bordwell, 1985, p. 207).

Although Hong's third film, *Virgin Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors* (*O, Su-jeong!,* 2000) is one of the most striking memory tests for the audience – the amazingly complex and playful narrative labyrinth of the film is analyzed in detail by Marshall Deutelbaum (2005) – and one of the most complex time-puzzles of the oeuvre, these early films, and actually most of Hong's films, do not eliminate temporal linearity. The linear story line can be – with more or less difficulty – reconstructed, it is the gaps in plot structure created through misleading techniques of narration and cutting that confuse the audience. According to Deutelbaum these methods ultimately result in a strengthened realism: the film "presents viewers with a narrative whose uncertainties of meaning and mo-

tivation mirror the limits of understanding what viewers encounter in everyday reality" (2009, p. 214), and calls it "epistemological realism that asks them [the viewers] to ponder the nature of knowledge, its presuppositions, the extent of its validity, as well as its inevitable uncertainties" (2009, p. 215).

As mentioned earlier the puzzling methods that Hong uses are connected to strategies of parametric narration that sometimes subordinates the syuzhet to stylistic structures.

Parametric syuzhet "tends to be recognizable by its deformities. One symptom is an abnormal ellipticality. Causes and effects may be disjoined, major scenes may be omitted, duration may be skipped over. […] has an episodic construction that yields only glimpses of character psychology and presents unmarked excerpts from an indeterminate fabula duration. A contrary symptom is an abnormal repetitiveness […] the syuzhet is telling us too little too often, flattening big scenes and trivial gestures to the same level. Some filmmakers are notable for using both tactics." (Bordwell, 1985, p. 288). Bordwell mentions Ozu and Bresson as examples, and we can add Hong Sang-soo to the list. We have seen above that constant repetitions and variations are present in most of his films, but at the same time omissions and ellipses are also major stylistic features.

Hong uses a limited amount of formal elements in visual storytelling. He likes and often repeats ensemble shots of people sitting around tables eating and drinking (a group table shot)[5], shots that show two people from the side as facing each other at a table are also frequent. Camera movements are limited, the camera is often fixed – the fixed long take is a prominent feature[6]. Because of the limited range of the techniques used, when a new tool is introduced it makes a strong effect: *Tale of Cinema* (*Geuk-jang-jeon*, 2005) is a memorable moment of the oeuvre in this regard. Hong introduced two new stylistic features that had never been used before but became regular devices after this film: voice over narration, and the perplexing and ubiquitous use of the zoom lens.

Based on his last film, *Hotel by the River*, I also suspect that he is probably about to introduce a new device: the strategic use of slightly out of focus images. The film is a simple story about meetings between a poet, his two sons, and two women at a countryside hotel. Towards the end of the film, at a deeply symbolic moment when the poet is reading his poem about a mysterious boy to the two women, shots of a young man working at a gas station appear on the screen.

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[5] Detailed discussion of one of the group table shots of *Virgin Stripped Bare by her Bachelors* can be found in: Bordwell, 2005. pp. 3–7; Raymond, 2015, pp. 196–217.

[6] Raymond's article 'Two-Shots and Group Shots' contains detailed analysis of shot length throughout Hong's career.

First, we see totals of the gas station slightly out of focus, then a medium shot of a man in which he is clearly out of focus. At the closing shot of the film, after we have been informed about the death of the main character (the poet), we see the two women sleeping, while the image slightly falls out of focus and a film ends. Considering the sparse palette of Hong's stylistic devices, the appearance of such a tool at a very significant moment in the film always makes a strong effect – especially for viewers who follow the developments in Hong's films regularly. The use of these out of focus images at the end create a mysterious coda that urges the viewer to reorganize their interpretation of the film, and creates the usual airy feeling that there must be a lot more hidden under the cunningly simple surface. It is similar to what Elsaesser wrote about 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" (2009, p. 21). But it is also a symptom of the minimalist parametric strategy that is present in the films of Ozu, Mizoguchi, Bresson, and also Hong: sparse parametric strategy "are often seen as creating mysterious and mystical films. It is as if a self-sustaining style evokes, on its edges, elusive phantoms of connotation, as the viewer tries out one signification after another on the impassive structure. The recognition of order triggers a search for meaning" (Bordwell, 1985, p. 298).

Puzzlingly simple: lessons in narration

"Naught shall go ill when you find your mate."[7]

When defining puzzle films Warren Buckland states: "the complexity of puzzle films operates on two levels: narrative and narration. It emphasizes the complex telling (plot, narration) of a simple or complex story (narrative)" (2009, p. 6). Hong's specialty is to tell an extremely simple story (men want women) either in a complex or in a confusing way. As shown above, the confusion is often created by those techniques that target the audience's perceptual conventions. It is obvious from the start of his career that on a thematic level Hong was probably interested exclusively in romantic relationships between men and women, meanwhile he is obsessed with the creation of as many different narrative structures as possible to tell compelling stories about this eternal topic.

From his early films one of his main obsessions has been to interpret simple love stories by creating intriguing episodic structures by reorganizing the plot into, sometimes mechanical, structures that go against easy and conventional

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[7] Written insert/chapter title in *Virgin Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors.*

understanding. Films such as *Virgin Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors* are proof that he is "less interested in dramatic structure than a pattern" (Bordwell, 2007, p. 24). While the film suggests that it repeats the same story from two points of view (a man's and a woman's) and, by way of seemingly mechanical numbering of episodes, suggests that we see the same time periods and the same events differently in the repetition because of the different points of view and differing memories of the two characters, it seems that – as Marshall Deutelbaum convincingly argues (2005) – that is not the case, and actually almost the whole plot can be rearranged into a linear storyline without the need of interpreting the repeated episodes as different interpretations of the same event from different points of view. But again, on first viewing it is impossible to fully understand the operations of the extremely complex structure that seems to be a puzzle created by an engineer. Such patterns and geometric models of narration are so evident in Hong's films, that Bordwell even labeled the phenomena "geometric model of story-telling" (2007, p. 24).

Elsaesser also notes that in mind-game films "the most intriguing and innovative feature is this insistence on temporality as a separate dimension of consciousness and identity, the play on nonlinear sequence or inverted causality, on chance and contingency, on synchronicity and simultaneity and their effects on characters, agency, and human relations: we are in worlds that often look just like ours, but where multiple time-lines coexist, where the narrative engenders its own loops or Möbius strips" (2009, p. 21). Even if plots ultimately can be "solved" and rearranged into a linear storyline, as is possible in many of Hong's films, the complicated temporality that the viewer experiences, has the above mentioned effect on characters, agency, and human relations – for Hong the puzzle structure becomes the interpretative tool for understanding human relations. All of Hong's stories are about rather simple male-female relationships and desires, and evidence the crux of the art films so that "its attempt to pronounce judgments upon modern life and la condition humaine, depends upon its formal organization" (Bordwell, 1985, p. 207).

Thanks to the fragmentary structure of the plot in most of Hong's films, his characters' psychological motivation is also part of the mystery created by the unusual structure. There is a film that seems to be a demonstrative exercise in how to deconstruct one of the most important building blocks of a narrative: the coherence of a character. As *The Day a Pig Fell into a Well* and *Virgin Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors* can be seen as exercises in deconstructing temporal structure of a narrative, *Yourself and Yours* (*Dang-sin-ja-sin-gwa dang-si-nui geot*, 2016) seems to be an exercise in deconstructing the concept of a coherent character in

a narrative structure. This film's love story develops further the usual tricks of unmarked dream and imagination sequences that constantly keeps narrative reality in question. This time Hong even creates spatial continuity between reality and imagination: inside the same shot the film switches between narrative reality and imagination by camera movement only. However, the main puzzle feature, the whole structure of the plot is built around, is the complete deconstruction of the coherence of the female character who is the object of many male characters' desire in the film. During repeated encounters the girl seems not to recognize a man but provides the explanation that the man is mistaken since she has a twin sister and the man must have met her sister earlier. The film creates a structure where the viewer, together with characters of the film, are kept in constant suspension whether the girl actually has a twin sister or is simply trying to mislead the people around her. The film even hints at a third explanation of the girl having some kind of illness that might include memory problems. The confusingly overlapping imaginary scenes, the contradictory occurrences and the suspended coherence of the character makes this film another primary example of the experiments conducted in the narrative laboratory of Hong Sang-soo.

Another narrative feature that Hong seems to be obsessed with is the modular structure. According to Allan Cameron "[t]he characteristic structures of modular narratives can be created through temporal fragmentation, through the juxtaposition of conflicting versions of events or through the organization of narrative material by non-narrative principles" (2008, p. 4) – all three are frequent features of Hong's cinema.

Temporal fragmentation is a feature that is present from the first scene of his first film and has played an important role ever since. *Virgin Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors* could be considered an interesting step in the direction of juxtaposing conflicting versions of events, but *The Day He Arrives* (*Bukchonbanghyang*, 2011) was the real definitive step. This was the first film where, unlike in his earlier works, "the pieces of the puzzle do not really fit together. Instead, they are separate visions of the same event" (Raymond, 2014, p. 32). Marc Raymond reads the film in relation to Timothy Corrigan's concept of the essay film (2011) and interprets the strategy as a "commentary on the cinematic recreation of events that can never really be more than representation", and concludes: "Hong increasingly places less importance on understanding his fictional constructions as part of a reality in which there is a 'correct' interpretation and more on having the audience remain open 'to multiple positions and incarnations" (2014, p. 32). As the films directed by Hong since *The Day He Arrives* can testify, he kept his interest in both types of film structure:

sometimes it is only the plot that is puzzling and a linear story is still there, but sometimes multiple realities are in play.

When connecting the phenomenon of the mind-game film to digital culture and database structures, Elsaesser argues that the new technologies of data storage and retrieval naturally engender new forms of narrative that sequence and link data differently into structures where a story is not necessarily composed of a beginning, a middle, and an ending (2009, p. 22). According to him, the new challenges to narrative can be defined in three directions: embracing the rhizome, the archive, and the database as we are already experiencing it in the forms of hypertexts and networked structures of cyberspace; see it as a complement to (modernist) narrative that is "accommodating seriality, multiple options, and open-endedness within a broadly telic and goal-oriented storytelling format"; and the "third direction would reassess the present state and future potential of the material object and symbolic form which has largely shaped linear narrative in both word and image: the printed book" (p. 23).

An interesting development can be spotted lately in Hong's films: the motif of traditional, linear, verbal culture in the form of the written/printed book is becoming more and more prominent. In *The Day He Arrives* the central location that was the axis of the perplexingly repeated episodes was already called: "Novel", *Claire's Camera* (*Keul-le-eo-ui ka-me-la*, 2016) featured a book that helps to bond two characters coming from different cultures when the Korean man asks the French woman to read for him, and *The Day After* (*Geu hu*, 2017) even takes place at a publishing house. However, the most intriguing film where narrative experimentation with modularity is connected to the concept of the written text is *Hill of Freedom* (*Jayu-ui eon-deok*, 2014). Here the modular structure that is often associated with digital culture and databases is related to a traditional, analog format: a collection of letters. The whole film can be interpreted as a certain kind of mockery of the modular thinking of the digital age by creating a fun, modular story out of a very analog joke.

As usual, the story is about a man (desperately) looking for a woman. Mori arrives from Japan to Seoul to look for a woman (Kwon) he used to work with two years earlier and whom he has romantic feelings for. He can not find her at home and decides to stay in a guesthouse close to her place while waiting for her return. In the meantime, while waiting, he writes letters to the woman about the things happening to him. The plot of the film starts with Kwon arriving back from her travels to the place she works and where Mori left the letters written to her throughout his waiting. As Kwon starts to read the letters their content comes to life on the screen – this is how we get to learn the story of Mori. But

after Kwon reads the first letter and we see the first episode of Mori's story on the screen, Kwon takes the letters and decides to leave the office. On her way out she trips up on the steps and drops the letters – this moment (accentuated by the first ever crossfade in Hong's oeuvre) becomes the axis of the plot. We gradually realize that when Kwon dropped the letters the order of them became mixed up, so during the rest of the film the episodes of Mori's story appear in a random order as Kwon is reading the mixed-up letters.

The film becomes a playful exercise in plot construction and narrative complexity, teaching a lesson to the viewer about the role that order and linearity play in the understanding of stories. As *Yourself and Yours* seemed to be a lesson about what role character coherence plays in narratives, this one is a very direct lesson in plot arrangement. An extra layer of lesson is being taught by Mori who reads a book titled "Time" in the film. When asked what the book is about, he answers: "It says that time is not a real thing (…) Our brain makes up a mind frame of time continuity: past, present, and future. I think you don't have to experience life like that (…) But at the end we can not escape from this frame of mind because our brain evolved this way."

The entire film is a direct reflection on Hong's own filmmaking practice that constantly experiments with the possibilities of manipulating the time structure of storytelling, the limitations of understanding stories whose structure go directly against the conventions or frame of mind that postulate the understanding of reality as a linear concept.

In the film an extra twist further added to the randomized plot structure created by the mixed-up letters. In the crucial scene when the letters are being mixed up on the steps, it is clearly visible to the (attentive) viewer that one letter was left behind by Kwon. At the end of the film, after the plot (and the story) seem to have been closed – Kwon had read all the letters, gone to meet Mori, and they had left together for Japan and lived happily ever after – suddenly a shot appears on the screen that seems to be an episode (the lost letter?) from Mori's story. The shot starts with an image of the sleeping Mori – Hong's favourite technique to alert his viewers that some of the events they have just seen probably were the dream of the sleeping character. But when did the dream start? Maybe everything that happened in Mori's story after the scene that he is waking up at that moment was a dream? But what does "after" mean in this context where there are so many timelines – the timeline of Mori writing the letters, the timeline of the mixed up letters through which Kwon and the audience experience Mori's story, and the timeline of Hong's film in which the status of this last shot seems to be questioning the hierarchy between plot and story, between narrated fiction and the filmmaker's reality?

At first, it might sound that this film is a rather mechanical exercise in modular, non-linear story telling that plays with the idea of "the organization of narrative material by non-narrative principles" (Cameron, 2008, p. 4), but obviously it is more than that. *Hill of Freedom* can be read as an *ars poetica* and a research report from the narrative laboratory of Hong Sang-soo, where he experiments with film form in order to convince audiences that non-conventional cinematic storytelling can make a difference in understanding the seemingly simple stories of our very complex reality.

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Showing the Complexity of the Simple –
– The Art-puzzle of Hong Sang-soo

Renowned South Korean film director, Hong Sang-soo, has shown deep interest in complex (or some might say: confusing) storytelling throughout his entire career. Since modernist art cinema has an affinity with unconventional narrative structures, it is not surprising that an auteur like Hong is attracted to complexity. What is interesting here is that Hong's (often black and white) films are a kind of analogue answer to the challenges of digital culture, a modernist art cinema version of puzzle films and database narratives. The article analyses the very Hongian strategy of producing *auteurist* puzzle films by creating confusion on a perceptive and narrative level.

Firstly, the article summarises how Hong's unique film making practice not only provides significant (economic, artistic) independence and freedom to the author, but at the same time proves to be a structure that delivers high complexity at a low production cost. Secondly, the article analyses the puzzling techniques used by Hong that work on a perceptual level, and often turn his films into high level memory tests; and how these structures play a part in the "perceptual reeducation" of viewers while also serving as commentaries on cinematic representation. And finally, the article concludes with an analysis of the narrative techniques used by Hong to tell extremely simple stories about the eternal topic of "men want women" in a complex, confusing and compelling way.