# From Ghost Film to the Film as Ghost:
# The Realist Paradigm and Beyond in Korean Horror

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**Introduction: Korean Ghost Film**

As is often the case with a third-world cinema,[1] the authentic value of a Korean film has mostly been gained in view of its probable and meaningful reflection of reality, especially in socio-historical contexts. Even under the long censorship that thwarted direct reference to the reality of sociopolitical situation, mainstream commercial films used to expose more or less the symptoms of the social atmosphere and upheavals. By introducing "the fantastic" to this all-realist spectrum, Korean horror films have held significance since their inception in 1960s.[2] The long-haired, white-dressed female ghost, though too localized compared with Western horror characters as various as a monster, vampire, zombie, alien, etc., has typically vernacularized the unreal territory of the cinema, repeating a Korean theme, that is, struggling to satisfy her resentment rather than yielding to violent spectacles. After the stagnant period of 1970-80s, this genre returned to the fore around 1998 when *Whispering Corridor* (*Yŏgo koedam*, Pak Ki-hyŏng) hit the box office, leading to sequels and epigones that would not cease to depict high school girl-ghosts. *A Tale of Two Sisters* (*Chang-hwa Hong-nyŏn*, Kim Chi-un, 2003) was the second impact that, still influenced by audiovisual effects of the then world-popular Japanese horror, triggered the peculiar poetic trend of "sad beautiful horror" with a psycho-thriller touch. Korean horror – or rather, female ghost film – is now no longer a boom but a well-established fantastic genre guaranteeing itself quite stable reproduction.

Nevertheless, I start this paper with a suspicion that even the fantastic mode as antipode to the reality-biased film culture has been specifically stylized and signified on the horizon of the comprehensive "realist paradigm" in Korea. By this paradigm, I do not mean what the rubric of "realism" as a kind of cinematic *Zeitgeist* would immediately evoke in its form and content: indexical (rather than representational) impulse to record the pro-filmic real (duration) often in a documentary style, namely the Bazinian realism on the one hand, and political film movements to reveal true reality under mere appearances, usually dark sides of a society imbued with deceptive dominant ideology, such as neo-realism, *Cinéma vérité*, and a variety of socialist realism on the other.[3] It is no exaggeration to say that both of these two (sometimes interrelated) realisms have hardly blossomed in Korea as remarkably as in Western or other third-world countries, even in consideration of independent

films or so-called Korean New Wave – the Korean version of social realism – around 1990. Instead, Korean cinema has solidified such a mainstream realist mode as that which these two realist tendencies often even resisted, while notwithstanding representing (hidden) socio-historical domains through the very mainstream of the film industry, though not radically. This somewhat problematic characteristic of the form/content relationship has been far from being marked as a critical theory or creative attitude/movement, so that it may well be called a paradigm in which the film industry as a whole has reproduced certain types of pathos and ethos about reality through certain dramaturgic, audiovisual arrangements.

## The Realist Paradigm: Form and Content

To be more concrete, the formal aspect of this paradigm could be viewed in light of the "realist style" standardized by the classical Hollywood cinema. In terms of David Bordwell's typical formulation – dating back to Aristotle's model which is representational and not indexical – Korean ghost film also highly resorts to the character-driven, goal-oriented, problem-solving narrative logic based on causality and psychology.[4] A ghost attempts to take vengeance because of an unforgettable, enigmatic, traumatic event, which is always disclosed and resolved at the end. Verisimilitude or "truth effect" here unfolds within the scientific, positivist, and commonsensical alignment of linear time and extensive space, and even aberrations like dreams, flashbacks, or perceptual distortions are interpreted according to this alignment of probability and incorporated into it. Therefore an unreal space is constructed through filmic realism, of which compositional, intertextual, and artistic motivations systematize the representational mode of the ghost genre with ever more "realistic" spectacles of audio-visual fantasy generated by new technology. As Paul Willemen points out, the fantastic as genre is in fact only possible in the modern world based on the rationally explicable "real" in view of which the supernatural "unreal" is marked and positioned. No wonder the clear and conventional boundary between reality and fantasy rather makes out of fantasy another reality obeying rules of the realist paradigm.[5]

The problem is not that fantasy here yields realist illusion against which the above mentioned indexical/political realisms (plus formal and intellectual consciousness-raising anti-realist/experimental movements) struggled in film history, but that it loses its ambivalent potential which can make viewers hesitate to decide whether it is natural or supernatural. Indeed Todorov's pioneering definition of fantastic literature is still suggestive to the cinema as well: the pure fantastic, if any, belongs neither to the uncanny (*l'étrange*; eventually explicable according to natural laws) nor to the marvelous (*le merveilleux*; requiring supernatural laws, but "realistic" about the supernatural).[6] These two genres remain acceptable as the real or "the unreal as real," i.e. referential to genres of reality, whereas the fantastic in essence has no frame of reference, no yardstick by which to determine it as uncanny or marvelous; it rather refers to the unrepresentable in presentation itself,

the contradiction between two levels of reality. By its non-referential power that is "uncanny" as unintelligible – the Freudian rather than Todorovian sense of the term – the genuine fantastic could dismantle the realist paradigm; it "confuses and refuses the ideological distinction between reality and fantasy."[7]

As already suggested, however, the realist paradigm is so strong that it absorbs most fantastic elements in literature and film, only degrading them to genre clichés. Clinging to the handy and symmetrical distinction as a genre device between reality and fantasy, horror films take as a goal to present ghosts provoking as strong audio-visual sensation as possible through conventionally reinforced mimesis. Then, instead of leading to a virtual realm blurring boundaries between the real and unreal, being and non-being, self and other, ghosts only attack reality from the past which is restorable by memory while demanding their right to live horribly. Consequently, ineffable fear merely becomes a material, sensual fetish, i.e. an image of fear;[8] spectators just take the "counter-phobic attitude" forming psychological antibody to real fear by experiencing this pseudo-fear in a secure theater. If the fear of ghosts comes across from death, the ghost film reduces unintelligible, non-subjective, unrepresentable death to a physical and psychological event of an understandable subject.

It is this turn from ontological to psycho-somatic death that orients a film to reality outside it in the aspect of contents of the realist paradigm. A female ghost is mostly an extraordinary individual who is in dissension with normal community, like a family or school, and comes back to revenge herself after death, so the film functions as Freudian "mourning" for her and Foucaultian criticism of disciplinary society as well. The oppressive patriarchy or educational system finally turns out to be the true origin of horror, with the ghost's vengeance making room for sympathy rather than simply embodying evil violence; thus horror becomes a sad melodrama. No wonder, unlike the Hollywood slasher, the Korean ghost film has appealed to female students who desire to escape from repressive education towards a "league of their own," to young women who start to question sexual/gender identities and traditional maternity – homosexual nuance and critique of maternity seem no longer taboo, and even fashionable.

This target audience is attracted by the image of somewhat claustrophobic but sophisticated indoor space reflecting economic states and cultural tastes of the upper/middle class, and surprised by the sound filling the enclosed stage more dreadfully than ghost faces. It is thus something like a well-made psycho-social realism that the realist paradigm creates; a realism partly appropriating and mixing "rhetorical realism" – conventional, melodramatic, individual – and "spectacular realism" – epic, socio-historical, high-budget – instead of being "expositional realism" which captures reality objectively.[9]

In this regard, psychoanalysis, which has formulated ghost-being as the return of the repressed, has taken the central key to reading Korean horror, while at the same time expanding to identity theories on gender, sexuality, and collectivity in social contexts, as well as to discourses of modernity on the relation between pre-modern, modern and post-modern in historical contexts. In the highly praised film *Memento*

*Mori* (*Yŏgo koedam 2*, Kim T'ae-yong and Min Kyu-dong, 1999), for instance, a high school girl, Hyo-sin, kills herself after being turned against by her lesbian lover Si-ŭn, getting picked on by classmates, and possibly becoming impregnated by her teacher; she then becomes a ghost who throws the school into chaos. As in other "girlhood" films reflecting school ostracism, Peter Pan syndrome, or resisting growing up into the symbolic system, functions as a crucial motif here, particularly the implication of heterosexual order. It has been pointed out how lesbianism, as opposed to the dominant heterosexuality, is inscribed into, and displaced by, fantasies and symbols resounding around abject maternity, water and monster images, etc.[10] Films about mothers such as *Unborn But Forgotten* (*Hayan pang*, Yim Ch'ang-je, 2002), *Phone* (*P'on*, An Pyŏng-gi, 2002), *Dead Friend* (*Ryŏng*, Kim Tae-gyŏng, 2004), *The Red Shoes* (*Punhong sin*, Kim Yong-gyun, 2005), and *Cello* (*Ch'ello: Hong Mi-ju ilga sarin sagŏn*, Yi U-ch'ŏl, 2005) suggest that with women being brought back to family after the "IMF crisis," institutionalized maternity under capitalist patriarchy is in effect conservatively reestablished or progressively reexamined while being threatened by the increase of abortion and the decrease of birth rate.[11] Especially *Uninvited* (*4 inyong sikt'ak*, Yi Su-yŏn, 2003) is read in its double dilemma: a woman's dilemma of being-mother who resists motherhood as a myth, leaving her baby to death, and a man's dilemma of being-father between pre-modern and modern, who killed his shaman father and younger sister and was adopted by a new priest father. The ghosts then not only break down the border between the present and past, but recall pre-modernity which has been repressed within modernity while proving the "non-synchronic synchronicity" of modernity, that is, the multilayered coexistent temporalities embedded in modernity.[12]

Nonetheless, there remain side effects to think over. In some sense Korean horror dares to create the fear of (ghost) mother, renewing the fears of mother-in-law in classical horrors – *A Devilish Murder* (*Sarinma*, Yi Yong-min, 1965), *Cry of a Woman* (*Yŏgoksŏng*, Yi Hyŏk-su, 1986) – and of stepmother in the traditional Korean folktale ("Chang-hwa Hong-nyŏnjŏn" 薔花紅蓮傳) that the film *A Tale of Two Sisters* adapted. This also alludes to the trend that incestuous love/hate relations between women are represented and explored outside abated masculinity in such more and more direct and autistic ways, as *A Tale of Two Sisters* depicts three women through a girl's multiple personality. It is no longer the age of classical female ghosts brought to death for or by men's success, but the age of women's world where assaulters, victims, police and press, all are female. This feminist shift, however, reiterates the whodunit narrative in which it is a mother believed to be the guardian of "home sweet home" who turns out to be the real criminal destroying her family and causing the advent of ghosts. Likewise, school girl ghosts are always the protagonists' closest friends.

As the genre has overused such stereotypes, psychoanalysis-based critical views have also narrowed the perspective on films via a small rage of references: Robin Wood's classical politicizing horror (monsters as ideological others/minorities in the heterosexual, patriarchal, capitalist society paradoxically represent our desire

to flout social norms); Barbara Creed's appropriation of Kristeva (the "abject" coded as monstrous-feminine is repeatedly and violently eradicated in symbolic form by the male subject); Carol J. Clover's spectatorship study (the female becoming masculinized, male viewers engage masochistic fantasy while also reaffirming their own sense of superiority and power), etc.[13] Consequently, not only films but academic approaches to them schematically stick to unveiling the traumata of problematic female subjects in familial or social oedipal scenarios, and try to recover the depressed and repressed subjectivity within social networks, while posing socio-political agendas about ostracism or modernity, as if these are human rights issues that Korean society should face. This is why films often end with nostalgic or utopian images of happy, non-traumatic moments that cannot be restored in the present.

My task is far from downplaying the realist paradigm in both Korean ghost film and its interpretation; it is rather to point out that the question would not be just an either conservative or progressive political ideology by which a film reacts to motherhood or homosexuality, but an aesthetical and ontological ideology which underlies the perspective and representational mode of human and ghost beings, time and death in the realist paradigm. This ideology unconsciously regulates the film production and consumption in a certain way that makes us believe what a Korean ghost film would or should reference reality. If certain schemata and traumata co-restrain the potential of the ghost, the film, and ghost film from shaking this ideology, it is worth asking whether or not there are any films or at least some elements of them that lead us beyond the realist paradigm. To answer this question, I look less into the typical genre films than into some auteurist filmmakers' appropriation of ghost motifs in their somewhat atypical genre styles and themes. They seem important not only because their ghosts are often male rather than female, thereby expanding the depth and width of the genre confined in the dismal well of psychopathic femininity, but also because they leave room for a more radical approach to subjectivity than psychoanalysis, for the ontological look at ghost and the image at once, and finally for escape from classical norms of the realist paradigm. In brief, the "line of flight" from psychoanalysis to ontology will parallel that of the realist paradigm to the beyond.

## Deterritorialization of Subjectivity

First we must identify the subjectivity that is at the center of psychoanalysis or any other humanist hermeneutics, even though these place emphasis on its hidden side or fission that traditional consciousness-based philosophy ignored. In the aforementioned film, *Memento Mori*, as an example for my attempting a different reading in this regard, Hyo-sin improvises a poem which somewhat evokes Yi Sang, an early 20th century Korean avant-garde poet, at the request of her teacher: "There is nobody. There is anybody. … I don't know. Anybody is me. … I can be everybody, as truth becomes false."[14] Apparently this nonsensical but serious poem

raises a puzzle about her sexual identity as a truth to be revealed in the end, and solving the puzzle would be the main process of the film narrative, as in the classical paradigm. But unlike many subjectivity-bounded "interpretations" of this poem as a key to the traumatized identity that should be recognized and healed, Hyo-sin lets viewers know her lesbianism earlier in the film, which in fact has little interest in creating a reverse narrative with her surprising "coming-out" at the end.

Instead, the poem's deconstructionist syntax might allude to the ghostliness of desire itself that dismantles the conventional binaries of presence/absence, of truth/falsity, of known/unknown, of identity/non-identity. "Anybody is me," that is, "there is nobody" who can be a subject fixed, original, unique and irreplaceable. As the two girls' "secret diary" is often written in collage style with cut-and-pasted letters blurring singularity, their relationship actually keeps less clandestineness than anonymity, through which a third witness girl involves herself in this "open diary" too. What counts is not the sexual identity incorporated into an abnormal subject, but the possibility of any connection among a multiplicity of desires stalking like ghosts, including that lesbianism. The connection sometimes takes the form of a strong pure "intensity," just as the sound of cutting a piano string penetrates between two girls' abnormal senses of hearing. When only Hyo-sin's huge face looks down the chaotic school in the climactic mob scene without her returning as a whole ghost, it looks less like a face of a subject revenging itself on a certain object than like a kind of "Body without Organs" (thereafter BwO) in Deleuze and Guattari's term; a non-organic ground of being on which molecular desires connect and disconnect each other without still making an organic structure. In this case, it might allow us to glance at a social, virtual ground which is overlapped [traversed] by molecular movements of students on screen that deterrittorialize the school system to a schizophrenic state.[15]

Though almost never delved into in film studies, Deleuze and Guattari's anti-oedipal schizo-analysis indeed offers a different view on the subject to think over when the established psychoanalysis is brought into a stalemate in terms of "reading" desire in the film. They point out that psychoanalysis presupposes original lack which cannot be filled up anyhow, which thereby subordinates desire to the oedipal triangle of prohibition and symbolization, making the subject an organism as a certain unity the unconscious of which must be repressed by Oedipalizing systems ranging from family to society.

In other words, Lacan rigidifies a single structure, origin, goal and resignation for the subject – Oedipalization – by binding desire only to the lack resulting from symbolic castration. In a reverse of this "negative" notion of desire, Deleuze and Guattari theorize desire as affirmative and productive. Desire is a productive power and machine; the breast is the machine that produces milk and the mouth the machine that sucks it. Yet, desiring-machines gain their satisfaction only in reproducing themselves without having any identity as part of an organism. Whether a subject or a whole society is at stake, a BwO is the immanent plane where desiring-machines work, at the level of a reality that can be reduced neither to the structure nor to

the subject, and "the Real as such, beyond or beneath the Symbolic as well as the Imaginary." The unconscious is not structured but virtual, disorganized. The "Actual" organization is generated from the "Virtual" of desiring-machines:[16] "the site of productive Becoming," where schizophrenia "against the reified order of being" has a positive meaning.[17] The subject here is not Oedipus, but the Schizo (whose desiring machines incessantly form and re-form *agencement*) or the Nomad (who deterritorializes the social field on his own BwO).

In a slightly different way, *Faceless Beauty* (*Ŏlgul ŏmnŭn minyŏ*, Kim In-sik, 2004) hints at destruction of faciality through a headless ghost of the heroine who was torn into pieces by an accident. She reveals the face of real terror, the faceless face, by abandoning her face as identity, i.e. the face identified as the other's danger and attraction by a male psychiatrist, who wanted to transfer his libido to it. Coincidences with the femme fatale characteristics, these danger and attraction, are still organized meanings of her face. However, before taking on organized, humanized faciality, a face may be fundamentally "a white screen with black holes," a micro-BwO on which pure sensations express their intensities by micro-movements.[18] The film is of course about a worn-out theme of love between a couch doctor and a psychopathic woman (and not about the affirmative power of schizo-desire), but it lets us glace at the moment when subjectivity loses its ground and our humanistic sensibility of beauty and fear collapses in confrontation with the effacement of the organic face.

Though not a horror film, *Time* (*Sigan*, Kim Ki-dŏk, 2006) poses this issue more plainly by critically focusing on the face-lifting trend. The question is whether the face is just a seductive and replaceable image or still an ineffaceable (thus restorable) origin of identity. More interestingly, the male protagonist, Chi-u, only attacks those whom his girlfriend, Sae-hŭi – who changed her face to regain his love – supposes to be him, after changing his face, as if a ghost with an invisible face. It is undeterminable whether the man whose face becomes bloody by a car accident is Chi-u or not (and even if he is Chi-u, his face would be no longer Chi-u's) but nothing other than those of nameless crowd at the ending scene. Two facets of face-lifting are therefore not beauty and ugliness, but Sae-hŭi's obsessive hysteria and Chi-u's molecular anonymity. The face is now mostly subjective but split by traumatism, and at the same time most impersonal, thus exploded by terrorism and accidents. Though not overcoming this dilemma, *Time* at least allows us to pose the ontological question about subjectivity through the face, the question which a typical horror film such as *Face* (*P'eisŭ*, Yu Sang-gon, 2004) totally ignores.

The importance of this ontological view lies in the ability for us to avoid a hermeneutic lure that seduces us into dramatizing a whodunit ghost story psychoanalytically and applying socio-historical allegories to its main character's trauma. I do not mean that this lure is not attractive or useful, but what is problematic is the opposite truth: it is too attractive and useful in reducing a film to social psychoanalysis to open up another gaze at subjectivity, another line of flight from Oedipalization, thus another layer of social reality.

Let us look at *Blood Rain* (*Hyŏr'ŭi nu*, Kim Tae-sŭng, 2005), which is full of psychoanalytic lures set against the backdrop of early 19th century's Korean society: Wŏn-gyu, the detective, realizes that at the origin of a serial killing he investigates is the name of his father, who wrongly executed law, but who he has believed to be right; In-gwŏn, the killer, protects his father's conservative authority against Wŏn-gyu's modern rationality, but it is he who in effect shakes all the social order to avenge his dead love cruelly; Tu-ho, the low-class suspect, betrays his symbolic father and social reformer Kaek-chu's hypocrisy by loving his daughter, a love Kaek-chu cannot tolerate. Diverse phobias and traumata possess them in different oedipal scenarios, with Wŏn-gyu and Tu-ho loving the same girl, which causes a double melodrama. The primal scene that all these traumatized subjects share is recollected at one point: wrongly accused for being Catholic, Kaek-chu is sentenced to be torn into pieces, foreboding bloody vengeance. His dismembered body seemingly requires being rejoined, as if his soul needed to be mourned, his human right to live a posthumous "right" life should be guaranteed. That would be also the only way other people could get out of economical, mental, and ethical debt to him. However, his vengeance is exacted not as a reunified ghost, but via a faceless voice – spiritually possessing a female shaman – and molecules of blood rain. Striking terror into people who want to atone for betraying him by killing Tu-ho, his last accuser, the rain soaks a kind of *socius*, the social "Body without Organs" on which everyone is entangled by the double desire for pre-modernity and modernity, irrational conservatism and progressive enlightenment, private desire and public justice. By "becoming molecular," the ghost becomes immanent in every corner and every subject of the social ground, and the film touches on this ground, going beyond psychoanalyzing a specific subject or politically calling a certain class to account for failed modernization in the Yi dynasty. One might find this solution politically vague, but to disclose duplicity of all social members and classes seems to be the real merit of the film. For it not only focuses on subjective traumata, but on their convoluted yet inter-subjective social basis, and looking at this basis is fundamental even for socio-historical interpretations of the film.

## "Hauntology" of the Image

If the film diegesis of the realist paradigm can be deterritorialized by the ontological reexamination of psychoanalytic subjectivity, the film image of the realist paradigm can be deterritorialized by the ontological reexamination of ghostliness of the image itself. In particular, the photographic image of a dead person is essentially something like a ghost, because it makes what was "there and then" present in the "here and now." What is dead is still alive in a sense. One may call this image "quasi-presence," the ontological state of a specter that is visible but intangible, i.e. not present in flesh and blood. "We are spectralized by the shot," says Derrida, "captured or possessed by spectrality in advance. […] A specter is both visible and invisible, both phenomenal and nonphenomenal: a trace that marks the present

with its absence in advance."[19] The photographic – and also cinematic – image is a quasi-present trace, implying presence after absence. A specter which does not exist at the moment of shooting appears after the fact. When we look at a dead man's photograph, we already know that, in every deed and at every moment, "he is dead and he is going to die." Straddling two tenses, this famous expression of mortality is how Roland Barthes defines the *punctum* he experienced in the photograph of a 19th century assassin awaiting execution.[20]

Instead of visualizing an artificial ghost by media technology, the film *Sorum* (*Sorŭm*, Yun Chong-ch'an, 2001) thrills us with horror through this image-ghost as the return of the dead. It maximizes the uncanny feeling that an image comes out as if it were the very object it refers to, when the hero, who had sex with and killed his half sister, at last recognizes his father, who killed his mother and left him, by comparing her sister's family photo with a similar old family photo in a barbershop. In fact this fantasy-less, reality-rooted horror reaches a traditional socio-indexical realism beyond the realist paradigm of the genre, and the moment of the photo becoming a quasi-presence of the father seems to embody the very Bazinian indexicality even though in a diegetic world and not in the real world.[21] Neither being nor non-being, the ghost father only exists for his son in the future perfect tense as if he had said: "I will have been dead when I am seen to you, that is, when I *am*."

In the Vietnam War horror film *R-Point* (*Arp'oint'ŭ*, Kong Su-ch'ang, 2004), such an aura of image briefly exudes from the photo of the President Pak Chŏng-hŭi (Park Chung-hee), the only real person shown in the entire Korean film. In the film diegesis, this photo only works as an accessory for "reality effect," referring to its contemporary reality, but it is because the film actualizes the ghostly real – the ontological potential of the image – that it suddenly cracks the realist paradigm and recalls the real former president who is already dead, yet still alive in most of Korean spectators' mind. In doing so, these two films allude to the persistent legacy of the dead fathers' patriarchal and military violence passed down to their sons. In Derrida's words, those fathers become "more dead alive than *post mortem*," like Freud's primitive father murdered by his sons, who then becomes more dominant as a phantom that haunts them.[22] To become "more dead alive" amounts to becoming more present without consciousness, more unconsciously present (to us whom they trouble). And this becoming would not be far from circulating through the social Body without Organs.

While still entailing psychoanalysis, this perspective therefore permits us to access it through the ontology of the ghost image in the realist paradigm, that is to say, Derrida's neologism *hauntology* which is a pun on ontology and refers to the paradoxical state of the specter as neither being nor non-being. The Japanese horror film *The Ring* (*Ringu*, Nakata Hideo, 1998) opened up a new page of horror cinema by embodying literally the Bazinian surrealism, the change of image into an object in its last scene, in which a ghost crawls out of a TV monitor into reality. The real horror thus originates from the fact that all images are potentially ghosts, and we

live in the ghost world even if there is no long-haired female ghost. No surprise the genre cycle fettered in the realist paradigm has made this haunting image/fact a spectacular cliché, and now it is not the ghost but this cliché that returns over and over again through Japanese, Hollywood, and even Korean epigones such as *Ring* (Kim Tong-bin, 1999) and so many other Japanese-style Korean horrors, so to speak, J-style K-horrors.

On the contrary, a fresh instance of the ghost-image relationship is found in a non-horror yet ontological ghost film named *3-Iron* (*Pin chip*, Kim Ki-dŏk, 2004). When the drifter Hŭi-jae takes pictures of himself beside family photos in empty houses, this image-making seems to change the subject as well as the families on analog photos into the realm of digital image. It is as if this process deterritorialized the blood-tied yoke of real family so as to make quasi-family relationships in a "nomadic" and "rhizomatous" way in the virtual dimension. Conversely, the drifter, as the generator of virtual family, who appears like a void hole floating over the actual family system, is no different than a drifting empty house and takes pictures of real beings and his quasi-being through the invisible ghost eye (since nobody watches him). The digital photo is still indexical, but it then proves less what happens in the actual than how the actual and the virtual coexist, or rather, how the actual is haunted and reassembled by the virtual. But more precisely, the families in the photos are already ghost-like figures and the digital camera redoubles their ghostliness, which leaves less long-lasting undeletable and irreplaceable traces. If the analogue image changes the real into the ghost, the digital image multiplies ghostliness to the extent that indexicality to reality gives way to simulation of the virtual.[23] Eventually the digital camera embodies the pure gaze of the "specter" who invites not families in the film but "spectators" in the theater to the virtual.

Perhaps this is also similar to the way the ghosts' point of view shots mark themselves while being frequently blue-filtered in *R-Point* and overexposed in *Memento Mori*. It is also notable that Hyo-sin's huge eye in close-up that I already mentioned is an image shot by a digital video.[24] The ghost gaze, that always surrounds characters in these films, invites us to the place of ghosts, and at the same time transposes characters to a strange realm of image that is different from reality. Suggesting that a virtual image world is immanent in reality, the ghost's point of view shot leads both the subject in the film and the subject as the viewer toward becoming ghostlike for a moment. In some sense, the ghost film could not be more ghostly, not when it shows ghosts to us, but when it makes us ghosts.

## Symptoms of a Post-Realist Paradigm

Then how can one draw an overall "line of flight" from the realist paradigm? Above all, what counts is not the ghost as a psychological fantasy of a subject, but the ontologically unconscious plane on which impersonal quasi-beings drift like molecular desires or simulacra images. Reality and fantasy are not in a relationship of mere symmetrical opposition so much as in an asymmetrical relationship, just as

the virtual is the "plane of immanence" in the actual in the Deleuzian terms. In this context, the aforementioned films such as *Faceless Beauty*, *Time*, and *Blood Rain* could be seen cracking the realist paradigm little by little by not visualizing a ghost as undoubtedly recognizable as the real person who it was.

Especially remarkable is *Blood Rain* which, in the form of a scientific detective thriller that anatomizes irrational, superstitious fear and belief by the gaze of modernity, finally yields undeterminable effect of the fantastic on the threshold between the natural and marvelous through blood rain whose falling cannot be explained anyway in the realist paradigm. The fantastic permeating into the plane of immanence is not someone's fantasy corresponding to reality, but the emergence of that plane as such which nobody could claim to possess. In *R-Point*, soldiers repeatedly return to the same place, and ghosts only make ghosts out of people who just do not endure their presence. And what threatens the realist paradigm more than this spatial black hole is the multi-folded temporal Möbius strip found in the film *Spider Forest* (*Kŏmi sup*, Song Il-gon, 2004). Though demanding psychoanalysis more than any other film, *Spider Forest* is of interest less because the female ghost who evokes the male character's trauma is a goddess of cure and redemption than because the shadow-like being in the forest turns out to be the subject himself as a ghost, who appears distorting time after having witnessed his own crime and quasi-death.[25] In such a case that the actual and the virtual convolute each other, a film opens up a time that cannot be normally rearranged by flashbacks, while rupturing causality of classical narratives, as does, for instance, David Lynch's world.[26]

To clarify the value of this temporality in terms of post-realist paradigm, it deserves pinpointing the diverging point between the Lacanian-Žižekian framework and the Deleuzian-Guattarian plane. The key word is the Real – different from the commonly held understanding of the real (in realism/realist paradigm) as opposed to the unreal – which, in psychoanalysis, means the realm of residues, surplus enjoyment, insatiable desire that must be excluded upon the subject's entrance into the Symbolic. Yet the Real can be said to constitute the Symbolic, which is formed by the perpetual movement of signifiers controlling and "foreclosing" the Real. As the unrepresentable unconscious, the Real is therefore "nothing" that works, however, as the constitutive kernel of the Symbolic, and when it appears as "something" in fantasy or the Imaginary, it is called *objet petit a*, an object-cause of desire which the subject desires repeatedly, while the Real returns to the Symbolic. Once the subject enjoys – thus is traumatized by – the Real, it can paradoxically be a political and ethical subject who repeats the trauma as such "in its very 'impossibility', in its non-integrated horror, by means of some 'empty' symbolic gesture," and thereby discloses the fictitious incorporation into the Symbolic and demands its re-establishment.[27]

But the case is more complicated, since the subject mostly constructs fantasy in order to stage the fulfillment of desire without breaking the Symbolic. Narrativized fantasy thus paradoxically proves that the Symbolic is always unstable surrounding the Real, that the subject avoids the fulfillment of desire unconsciously, to maintain

desire as unfulfilled. At the same time, the subject feels the "gaze" of/from the *objet petit a*, the Real, which stages the death of the "look" by which the subject believes he or she can see everything. Thanks to the gaze, the main character of *Spider Forest* experiences his own death. He constructs a fantasy that confronts him with the Real. Consequently, fantasy is no longer a specific visual mode of representing unreal things in the realist paradigm. It is true that psychoanalysis of today has changed the concept of fantasy itself even differently from its Todorovian definition, and the ghost then would have to be taken as an empty device, an indeterminate operator, a shifter or symptom in fantastic narrative, as is the female ghost in this film.[28]

Nevertheless, it is undeniable that even this new aspect of fantasy is still not liberated from the psychic reality of the subject, or rather is more rooted in the sticky relationship between the Real and the Symbolic/Imaginary, the relationship that structures and organizes not only subjects but society in the oedipalizing way. But when Deleuze appropriates the Lacanian Real, he does so through the lens of Bergson's ontology. The point is a new paradigm of time: the present passes because habits and memories of the past contract into the present outside of the subject's awareness. The past is an entity *en soi* that is preserved and endures as such, and serves as the basis of the present. This "pure past" can, in an ontological rather than psychological sense, be called the unconscious, the Real in Deleuze. A virtual partial object, which cannot be recollected consciously, but can be actualized as something like *objet petit a*, is a piece of the past that "has no place other than that from which it is 'missing,' no identity other than that of what it lacks." This way the Real is the Virtual: where no identity is possible and only a generative difference as such exists.[29]

Co-working with Guattari, Deleuze expands the notion of the Virtual to the de-oedipalized BwO as mentioned above, which leads to the virtual space-time continuum beyond the human world but also immanent in it, the plane of immanence, of the unthinkable and insensible, which enables us to think and sense though. More importantly, this ontological plane where the present and past, the actual and virtual, the real and imaginary are mingled with each other links up with Deleuze's concepts of "any-space-whatever," "crystal image," and "time-image" in his Cinema books: "any-space-whatever" loses the certainty of objective reality, deviates from chronological, serial time, and yields pure cinematic signs; the Crystal, revealing the Virtual of time, does not base description or narrative reality or truth. That is, these concepts do not very much represent the realist paradigm which, roughly, depends on the "movement-image" that only indirectly permits us to feel the time as the whole Virtual. To the contrary, the time-image proceeds from the same reality by which the movement-image is shackled, to the plane of immanence of the image itself: the "zero degree" of the image where the pure past of images repeats a schizophrenic becoming while coexisting with the present.[30] The ghost is then, in principle, a time-image that permits us to reach and practice this becoming, the potential of desire, its affirmation, infinity in our being. Although it would be hard to say that *Spider Forest* embodies the time-image by its ghost and

time-twisted fantasy, such a film about the ghost seems to get closer to this new plane of the image paradigm than just a normal ghost film does.

To go further in this direction, let me look at the non-horror genre film *3-Iron* again. It shows a unique ghost referent and space that the realist paradigm has not been able to represent even by the fantastic mode. Hŭi-jae, who enters empty houses in order to make a living, is himself a drifting void space and an invisible ghost-like being already mentioned. Of course, after meeting Sŏn-hwa who is abused by her rich husband, Hŭi-jae seems like a very psychoanalytic object: an *objet petit a* as an ever-floating gap in the Symbolic, gazing at it from his absent place and becoming the object-cause of Sŏn-hwa's desire. He is also an ethical subject in the Lacanian-Žižekian sense, who returns persistently as her husband's antagonist to the Symbolic order of bourgeois patriarchy.

However, rather than cling to psychoanalysis in the social context, the film employs an ontological practice that has never been done in Korean horror. After training himself in prison, Hŭi-jae can become a shadow-being that is totally different from precedent ghosts, by deterritorializing his body into a BwO, which enables him to become an insect, a bird, an eye, instead of an organized, fixed subject. This becoming shows the force of a ghost who returns without passing through death, a virtual being which appears beyond the limit of senses, always 180 degrees behind ordinary people while facing them. By doing so, it also triggers the force of the virtual that reconstructs a new reality in which the ghost underlies and creates an actual family full of synergetic happiness through unconscious interdependence, as the ending table scene shows: Hŭi-jae finds an alternative way of love not by escaping from the family system, but by being a shadow of Sŏn-hwa's husband; Sŏn-hwa satisfies her desire not by refusing her husband, but by accepting him along with his shadow; Sŏn-hwa's husband is happy to regain Sŏn-hwa's smile even without knowing the Real behind him.

Partly still evoking the Žižekian model, this is a new symbiotic relationship in which the drifter becomes a parasite on the couple's house, while deterritorializing the family system in the very place. The point is that Hŭi-jae is not Sŏn-hwa's dream or fantasy, though it is easy to say so, but a quasi-being in itself leading her to the immanent ground on which human subjects stand unconsciously. It is still hard to interpret this ending as a time-image in the strict Deleuzian sense. But if one reconfirms that the potential of cinematic image lies in creating its ghostliness newly, couldn't one think that such images show us the pathway less to just a ghost film than to a film as ghost? The film itself would then become a ghost.

## Conclusion: Film as Ghost in Asian Cinema

Before concluding, let me emphasize again some focal points that would help to briefly trace the trajectory from the established ghost film to a future film as a ghost. Korean horror film, at least in my view, has always taken the realist paradigm rooted in classical Hollywood system as its main representational mode in both form and

content: the appearance of an enigma launches a goal-oriented, character-driven, problem-solving narrative that is depicted through J-horror style psycho-somatic fetishization of ghosts, and the return of these ghosts reflects to various degrees repressed socio-historical aspects of Korean locality that touch on sexuality, familism, modernity, and so forth. Consequently, certain genre conventions have been more and more sophisticated to create a plot-distorting, audio-visualized surprise party with ghosts, while at the same time involving some references to typically Korean reality that yield stereotyped, sociological psychoanalysis in film criticism. What is lost in this production and consumption of ghost genre is the genuinely ontological value of the ghost being, the Todorovian "fantastic" or Freudian "uncanny," which would never gives way easily to a melodramatic, rational ghost story centered on the problem, revenge, or mourning of specific subjects.

In this context, there seem to be four lines on which the established ghost paradigm can be questioned by some atypical films using ghost motifs in more or less auteuristic ways. Firstly, on the level of subject, *Memento Mori, Faceless Beauty, Time, Blood Rain*, etc, leave room for deterritorializing the subjectivity that psychoanalytical reading concerns, towards an "a-subjective" ground of molecular beings and desires. Ghosts also return through this faceless ground, or draw people into it. Secondly, on the level of image, *Sorum, R-Point, 3-Iron*, etc, bring up the ontological issue of the (digital) photographic image that haunts characters and stalks on the threshold between the past and present, the actual and virtual. It is the very image that becomes ghostly, and furthermore makes the spectator become ghostly. Thirdly, regarding the realist paradigm at large, *Blood Rain*'s blood rain remains inexplicably fantastic, and *Spider Forest* leads to the convoluted labyrinth of temporality to the extent that the classical narrative based on the "movement-image" gets lost as do the main character and his subjectivity. Finally, *3-Iron* seems to reach the farthest ontological point among current Korean ghost films – the point where the psychoanalytic framework of the Imaginary/Symbolic and the Real can be and reconfigured through the schizophrenic plane of the Actual and Virtual. The nomadic ghost emerging from the Vitual immanence no longer belongs to a ghost film, but foreshadows a way to immerse the film into ghostliness.

I make sure that the realist paradigm and this paradigm-based psychoanalysis or discourses on modernity are not what should be subverted. Like other genres, Korean ghost films will definitely focus on humanistic psychology and reflection of socio-historical reality in the future as well. Yet as I discussed above, psychoanalysis of the subject is in fact not too far from a-subjective ontology in their common interests in the unconscious world that is absent in reality, but is subsistent as its basis. When this ontology is expanded to that of the image, it also smoothly creates exits from the realist paradigm that confines the potential of cinema-ghost. The paradigm shift of Western cinema from classical to post-classical through these exits would be worthwhile to consider today, as Korean cinema is becoming globalized.

In Asian horror films that share the tradition of female ghosts, this shift could be examined in a more interesting and concrete context. If Hong Kong horror has

unfolded temporality of the pre-modern in modernity by nostalgic ghosts such as in *Rouge* (Stanley Kwan, 1987), Japanese horrors have grasped symptoms of the postmodern within modernity through ghosts that slide over media space, as shown in *Ring*.[31] Now for instance, though far from a genre film, the Thai film *Tropical Malady* (Apichatong Weerasethachul, 2004) not only exposes the modernity that arrived too late in everyday life of a third world and the fluidity of a postmodern society that has already penetrated into the edge of world system, but also guides us to the jungle as a plane that is transcendental yet nevertheless immanent in the entire civilization, a primal world-time beyond the range of discourses on (post)modernity.[32] The ghost there emerges between the pure senses or the insensible, not reflecting modernity, but making us reflect on modernity, and reflect on the ghostliness of cinema through an unprecedented time-image, just at the moment when the death of cinema is at issue in the wake of the digital revolution. On the threshold from ghost film to film as ghost, we should be faced with radical questions on cinema via such films. Ghosts in Korean horror might also pose such questions little by little.

## Notes

[1] The third world cinema has broadly referred to the cinema produced in relatively underdeveloped countries of Latin America, Africa, and Asia. With its long history of highly developed film production system, Japan has usually been considered an exception in this geographical category. It is notable, however, that the notion of the third world, established in the 1960-70s, seems more or less outdated and problematic to be applied to today's globalized and captialized national cinema including Korean film.

[2] The horror genre has been paid critical and historical attentions to especially since Kim So-yŏng's seminal work, [*Phantoms of modernity: fantastic Korean film*], in which she asserts the fantastic mode is not only a dominant characteristic of the ghost/horror, but appears even in realist, melodramatic, auteurist films, so that it can be a new analytical frame by which to dissect strata of Korean cinema. See especially page 52.

[3] Among a number of books on cinematic realism in this traditional sense, see particularly the chapters on Bazin and representation in Dudley Andrew, *The Major Film Theories: An Introduction* and *Concepts in Film Theory*, and historical sources in Christopher Williams (ed.), *Realism and the Cinema: A Reader*.

[4] David Bordwell et al., *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960*, 1-84.

[5] See Kim So-yŏng, [*Phantoms of modernity: Fantastic Korean film*], 19. Though introducing Willemen here, she later regards the fantastic mode as a new, non-realist frame-tool as aforementioned. My argument is to reverse the view, i.e. even fantasy is realist. Richard Armstrong also includes fantasy as opposed to representation in "a possible realist scale." Richard Armstrong, *Understanding Realism*, 32.

[6] Tzvetan Todorov, *Introduction à la littérature fantastique*. In this sense Christine Brooke-Rose in *A Rhetoric of the Unreal* argues that there are few purely fantastic works that can maintain the reader's hesitance till the end, and many other scholars revise or redefine the fantastic in different ways while, however, starting from Todorov.

[7] George Aichele, "Postmodern Fantasy, Ideology, and the Uncanny," 3.

8   Yi Chi-hun, ["Where the 2003 Korean horror film reaches: mass desire for pleasure and the self-consciousness of horror film directors"], 24.

9   As for this categorization, see Julia Hallam and Margaret Marshment, *Realism and Popular Cinema*, 101.

10  See Yonsei Institute of Media Art ed., [*Ghosts Live in School:* Memento Mori], particularly Kim Sŏn-a, "레즈비언, 소녀, 유령, 섹슈엘러티" ["Lesbian, Girl, Ghost, Sexuality"], 62-93 and Kim Chŏng-a, "학교에 귀신이 산다" ["Ghosts live in School"], 10-41.

11  Son Hŭi-jŏng, ["Society promoting female ghosts: the 2002-03 Korean horror film and representation of maternity"], 199-226.

12  For this concept, see John Frow's *Time and Commodity Culture: Essays on Cultural Theory and Postmodernity*. Frow, based on Bloch's notion of *Ungleichzeitigkeit*, points out that modern times in fact consist of layers of heterogeneous and asynchronous times.

13  See Mark Jancovich ed., *Horror: The Film Reader*, particularly Robin Wood's "The American Nightmare: Horror in the 70s," Barbara Creed's "Horror and the Monstrous-Feminine: An Imaginary Abjection," and Carol J. Clover's "Her Body, Himself: Gender in the Slasher Film." These authors underlie many articles of the book edited by Yonsei Institute of Media Art, and Paek Mun-im, ["The girl-monster and the male masochist"], 713-728.

14  The whole translation is like the following: "There is nobody. There is anybody. But there isn't. Yes, there is? There seems not to be. Yes, there surely is. Said there isn't. That's true. Truth is there. To be is a lie. The false is there. To be is truth. Nobody knows nobody is there, so doesn't know there is anybody. Still doesn't know. Truth is, isn't, is there. To be is truth. Not to be is truth. Not to be is truth. To be is the false. Truth is false. The false is truth. I don't know. Anybody is me. I am anybody. Either anybody or me. I can become everybody, as truth becomes false."

15  In a similar but non-Deleuzian context, this mob scene might be read as a pantomime towards/against the system performed through Hyo-shin's collective spirit possession. Paek Mun-im, "상실의 흔적, 생산하는 부재" ["Trace of Loss, Productive Absence"],  140-149, in Yonsei Institute of Media Art, [*Ghosts live in school:* Memento Mori].

16  Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1972), particularly Chapters 1 and 2.

17  Slavoj Žižek, *Organs without Bodies: Deleuze and Consequences*, 27-31. Žižek's reinterpretation of Deleuze will be mentioned afterwards.

18  Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Mille plateaux: capitalisme et schizophrénie 2*, particularly Chapter 7.

19  Jacques Derrida and Bernard Stiegler (1996), 17. Derrida tells a specter as 'spectacular' in its etymology from a ghost, which does not necessarily imply visibility. But I would not take into account this distinction here.

20  Roland Barthes, *La chambre claire: note sur la photographie*,150.

21  André Bazin, *Qu'est-ce que le cinema?*, 9-17.

22  Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Literature*, 198-199.

23  If one disregards this ontological perspective, digital simulacra could be read as offering just another indexicality of material body and ethnic space, the intensive traces of which might only contribute to drawing Western/international attention to the film. See Kim Sŏn-a, ["Translatable space − indexicality of body and cinema: *3-Iron, Virgin Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors,* and *Oldboy*"], 20-24. For a broader context of realism in the photographic and digital image, see Thomas Elsaesser and Warren Buckland, *Studying Contemporary American Film: A Guide to Movie Analysis*, 195-219.

24  Cho Ŭn-sŏn, "성 정체성과 디지털 비디오 매체성에 대하여" ["On the Gender Identity and Media-Specificity of Digital Video"], 42-61, in Yonsei Institute of Media Art, [*Ghosts live in school:* Memento Mori].

[25] Psychoanalytic reading of the film based on Žižek is offered by Pok To-hun, ["13 sequences on psychoanalysis and fantasy: in the labyrinth of *Spider Forest*"], 74-91.

[26] As to classical/post-classical narrative and Lynch's narration, see Thomas Elsaesser and Warren Buckland, op. cit., esp. 26-79 and 168-194.

[27] Slavoy Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do*, 272.

[28] For the psychoanalytic shift from the Imaginary-Symbolic relation to the Real-Symbolic relation and its importance in film studies, see Todd McGowan, "Looking for the Gaze: Lacanian Film Theory and Its Vicissitudes," 27-47.

[29] Gilles Deleuze, *Différence et répétition*, particularly chapter 2. The Virtual in the Deleuzian sense is, of course, not a "virtual reality," which imitates reality in an artificial medium, but "the reality of the Virtual itself," which is the Real in Lacanian terms. Slavoj Žižek, *Organs without Bodies: Deleuze and Consequences*, 3.

[30] Gilles Deleuze, *L'image-mouvement* and *L'image-temps*.

[31] Among notable references to Asian horror films are Nicholas Rucka, "The Death of J-Horror?" Rey Chow, "A Souvenir of Love," 209-229, Bliss Cua Lim, "Spectral Times: The Ghost Film as Historical Allegory," 288-296, and Ackbar Abbas, *Hong Kong: Culture and Politics of Disappearance*, for Hong Kong cinema in general.

[32] This may show a necessity of ontologically remapping the 'geopolitical aesthetic' of Asian cinema, while, rather than resorting to the modernity paradigm of the modern/postmodern distinction as did Frederic Jameson, *The Geopolitical Aesthetic: Cinema and Space in the World System*, searching for a new paradigm that distinguishes the very modernity paradigm and its ontological basis which underlies and deterritorializes it.

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