

## MIRROR PLAY, OR SUBJECTIVIZATION IN *3 IRON*: BASED ON LACAN'S ANALYSIS OF *LAS MENINAS* AND HIS OPTICAL MODEL

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Though Kim Ki-duk (Kim Kidök) has been most notorious as a filmmaker for his bleak and misogynistic imagination, most notably in *The Isle (Söm)*, *Address Unknown (Such'win pulmyöng)*, *Bad Guy (Nappün namja)*, *The Coast Guard (Haeansön)*, and *Samaritan Girl (Samaría)*, *3 Iron (Pinjip)* seems rather a moderate and romantic love story. Nevertheless, the film still remains problematic mainly because of its enigmatic narrative line. The sensational poster image of the female protagonist embracing her husband, while at the same time kissing her lover, epitomizes what is at stake in *3 Iron* from a Lacanian perspective. This article is devoted to the task of identifying the logic of subjectivization and different directions of freedom operating in that strange love triangle.

What is noticeable in describing the subjectivity of protagonists is *3 Iron's* elaborate use of mise-en-scène through windows and mirrors. The function of reflective materials is to show the protagonists in love as alienated, split and spectral. Being spectral means being related to the status of the Real as otherness or nothingness. In that regard, the personages in *Las Meninas* could be applied to the characters in this film in terms of their topological status: the royal couple and Min'gyu, Velasquez and T'aesök, the princess and Sönwha. The first pair has the status of the Other, the second the Real and the third the Symbolic shifting to the Real. In addition, Lacan's rotated double-mirror device helps us to understand why subjectivization, or the psychoanalytic cure, means separation, or freedom, from the mirror of the Other. The transgressive couple seems to achieve freedom in the end.

However, the different choices made by the masculine and feminine subjects need to be analyzed more closely on the basis of Lacan's theory of sexuation. T'aesök finally becomes a ghostly existence and leaves the symbolic reality completely, whereas Sönwha decides to return home while letting her life and house remain open to the spectral being of T'aesök. According to Lacan, Sönwha's way of living could be interpreted as having ultimate freedom because she treats the Symbolic as being 'not-all', that is, as being a reality containing an infinite gap that changes the reality from inside. By contrast, T'aesök's choice is subject to the idea of reality as being 'total', thus he subtracts himself

as an exceptional blot in the Symbolic. T'aesök's way of enjoying freedom is limited because his resistant position is still inherently bound to the existent reality. In that sense, *3 Iron* represented a crucial moment for the appearance of feminine subjectivity in Korean cinema during the 2000s, when so much effort had been made to rebuild the masculinity lost mainly as a result of the social decline following "the IMF crisis".

Keywords: *3-Iron*, *Las Meninas*, Jacques Lacan, Žižek, Interface-screen, mirror, subjectivity, spectrality, freedom, sexuation

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Kim Ki-duk's *3 Iron* (*Pinjip*, 2004), like many of the director's other films, raises intriguing questions through its unrealistic narrative. Why does T'aesök, the male protagonist, lead his life as an illegal occupier? Why does Sönwha, the female protagonist, elope with T'aesök only to come back to her abusive husband? Why does she take a nap in front of the speechless owner of the house, and, most mysteriously, how is T'aesök able to become invisible and make his total weight 0 kg even with Sönwha standing on the same scale? The simplest answer may be to attribute the implausibility of the events to the fact that this is 'just a movie', and is therefore meant to be fictional and illusive. However, from the Lacanian point of view, which posits that "every truth has the structure of fiction" (Lacan 1992:12), such a superficial explanation proves evasive. Not only can fiction coexist with truth, but this truth must be recognized as residing behind consciousness, at the unconscious level of desire. Besides, just as a Moebius strip is inevitably reversed, the unconscious truth intrudes upon reality, overturning the existent order and moment-to-moment subjectivity of that reality. In that sense, *3 Iron's* unrealistic, or even preposterous, narrative may read as a profound statement on the unconscious truth.

Then how does this film unveil the truth? I would claim that *3 Iron* has gained its prominence from its reflection on subjectivization, in other words, the ultimate freedom from the existent order of reality. What is remarkable in this film is the strategy of its imaging scheme employing mirroring materials in order to illustrate how subjectivity is alienated and later liberated. To be more specific, windows and mirrors are used as the film's most accessible interface-screen in the *mise-en-scènes* where the protagonists reveal their spectrality as otherness or nothingness. Arguing the topological status of subjectivity related to this visual spectrality, I would depend on Lacan's analysis of *Las Meninas* and the double mirror set-up, along with his key concepts of screen, gaze, frame, montage, etc., and Žižek's concepts of spectrality and interface-screen. This probe into these concepts is

expected to help us to recognize the misreading of Lacan in 1970s film ‘Theory’ and understand how to appropriate Žižek to establish a new ontology of cinema.

Following this will be an exploration of the protagonists’ enigmatic activities, with a particular emphasis on their different ways of enjoying freedom. In fact, Kim’s previous films tended to conclude in fantastical situations wherein the protagonists would either destroy themselves or enter into a harmonized co-existence with their opponents through some dramatic exchange, or depreciation, of their respective social positions. These endings were akin to closing the curtains just as the Moebius strip began to reverse upon itself. In contrast, *3 Iron* extends the story to the next stage, showing how to move on from such disastrous moments and, ultimately, cope with them.

This next stage begins when T’aesök and Sönwha are caught by the police by accident. Here, we should pay attention to a big difference between the choices T’aesök and Sönwha make shortly afterwards: T’aesök decides to erase his physicality from the Symbolic (or the social reality, in sociological terms) while Sönwha goes back home and ends up living together with her husband and her phantom-lover. Again, via Lacan’s theory of sexuation, which explains why radical resistance and systemic change should be exerted by feminine subjectivity, I would like to interpret the female protagonist’s freedom not as a mere deviation in order to maintain her trans-gressive love but a metaphor of feminine subjectivity which makes it possible for her to refuse reality without leaving it and to alter its dominant signifying system from inside. From this point of view, Kim’s entire oeuvre can be exonerated from the earlier disparaging criticisms made against it, including feminist ones,<sup>1</sup> and be appreciated in a more balanced way. Furthermore, a feminine-focalized reading of this film can demonstrate *3 Iron*’s dissimilarity to other Korean films made during the 2000s which were still eager to rebuild masculinity especially after Korean society had undergone the “IMF crisis”.

## 2. IN-BETWEEN TWO MIRRORS: VISUAL SPECTRALITY REFLECTED ON AN INTERFACE-SCREEN

T’aesök, presumably in his late twenties, is a totally unknowable man until a policeman provides the minimal information that he is a college graduate. He drives a seemingly-expensive BMW motorcycle, and dares to break into a temporarily vacated house when the takeaway restaurant flier he has hung on the door as a test is not removed. Once inside, he makes himself at home cleaning the

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<sup>1</sup> Chöng Hae-süng provides a good recapitulation of diverse opinions on Kim’s films in both Korean and western academia (H-S Jöng 2012: 16–22).

house, washing the dirty clothes and sneakers, spraying the plants, and fixing the appliances. He moves onto other homes, repeating the same pattern. On one of these occasions, in an upper-class residence, an unexpected incident occurs: even though T'aesök thought no one was there, Sönwha, whose face has been bruised by her husband Min'gyu, is inside. Considering that the Korean title of this film is 'empty house' (*pinjip*) and the Korean word '*jip*' (house) also means home, this situation describes exactly what the title overtly designates: the abused existence of Sönwha makes her equivalent to "nobody"; thus the house, which lacks any loving relationships, is equivalent to an empty home.

Then, who is indeed living in this house? Is it the seemingly autistic resident Sönwha, or the active intruder T'aesök? Insofar as they don't belong to the house properly, their presence is ghost-like in a way. The elaboration of this ghostliness or spectrality can be claimed to be the most outstanding achievement of *3 Iron* in terms of its form as well as subject matter. Why is spectrality so important? According to Lacan, reality is already constructed by symbolic mechanisms, but this symbolization always involves some non-symbolized part, which is the Real foreclosed from reality. Slavoj Žižek compares this unsettled part to spectral apparitions which return as a guise for the Real, or emerge in the gap or hole that separates reality from the Real: "The spectre gives body to that which escapes (the symbolically structured) reality," or to "the irrepresentable X on whose 'repression' reality itself is founded" (Žižek 1999: 74). As far as the spectre-Real is related to the failure and incompleteness of the Symbolic, the spectral apparitions can also be conceived as "the positivization of the abyss of freedom," which urges the subject to react in one of two ways: by ontologizing it as an accessible project or promise, or by gentrifying or coping with its traumatic and antagonistic impact (ibid.: 79–80).

According to Bliss Cua Lim, who explores "spectral time" relying on Henri Bergson's philosophy, "the temporality of haunting ... refuses the linear progression of modern time consciousness" and is linked to "an undoing of homogeneous space" (Lim 2009: 149). In *3 Iron*, spectral time for Sönwha begins with the appearance of T'aesök and the heterogeneity of space is com-pressively represented on the window of the living-room. The mise-en-scènes of Figure 1 portray the spectral status of T'aesök and Sönwha as outsiders for the first time in the film. Both characters are behind the window, which takes on the role of a barrier not only between themselves, but between their space and the spectators' space in spite of its transparency. Here Sönwha's vulnerability is revealed. In the mise-en-scène of shot 2, she is triply cornered: by the canvas, by the white wall and by the window. Moreover, the shadowy or ghostly presence of T'aesök makes Sönwha's image blotted. The order of their appearances is also meaningful. Shot 1

is Sönwha's subjective perspective, showing T'aesök hanging the washing, and shot 2 is an objective view containing Sönwha and T'aesök in the same frame. The general editing principle is to set the objective shot of the viewing subject first, followed by the subjective shot of the viewed object. Here, the reverse editing seems to undermine Sönwha's status as a viewing subject because her capacity as a viewer has been conditioned by T'aesök's preceding appearance.

Similarly, one can observe interesting *mise-en-scènes* when Min'gyu grills Sönwha after coming back from his business trip and T'aesök happens to see them [Figure 2]. The married couple inside and T'aesök outside are demarcated by the window, but then all three of them appear reflected on the same window. Finally, Mingyu looks at T'aesök through the window on which Sönwha is vaguely reflected beside him. The first shot distinguishes the residents from the intruder, yet the second and third shots proclaim that the real outsider among them will be Min'gyu eventually. This recoupling is indicated by the relationships they form with the spectrality mediated by the window: Sönwha and T'aesök are blurry, while Min'gyu is clear. It is extremely difficult to see the dark outside scene, allocated to the incorporeal and de-physicalized, from the lit inside of the house allocated to the corporeal/physical. Their relationship is basically antinomic, so they cannot share anything. In that sense, *3 Iron* is all about Sönwha, who decides to follow T'aesök into the spectral world, when confronting the miracle of freedom incarnated by the spectre-T'aesök, in order to acquire her own time and space she is willing to enjoy. It is nothing other than "the act of freedom qua real" (Zizek 1999: 80) breaking the chains of the Symbolic.

The use of the window frame as a medium of reconfiguring or splitting the diegetic homogeneous spaces reminds us of Zizek's concept of "interface-screen" (see Zizek 2001: chap. 2) derived from Lacan's concept of "the screen" on which the binary opposites in Lacan's image theory hinge.<sup>2</sup> Since Lacan would only describe this concept in reference to a few paintings, Zizek contrives the term

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<sup>2</sup> To summarize, Lacan claims that the vision of the subject is divided between the "look" as the eye "that is satisfied with itself in imagining itself as consciousness" (Lacan 1977: 74) and the "gaze" as the unapprehensible "underside of consciousness" (ibid.: 83). The look is related to the vanishing point of perspective based on classical geometry, the gaze to the infinite point in projective geometry. That is why Lacan spoke of "the representative of representation" (*Vorstellungsrepräsentanz* in Freud's terms), which takes the place of representation. This is the demonstrable appearance of the Real: the unsignifiable and irrepresentable void; the nothing or zero around which the Symbolic as fictitious fantasy of the subject is constructed. Therefore, the "screen" as "the locus of mediation" (Lacan 1977: 107) of the gaze has nothing to do with the physical canvas or screen, but refers to the virtual level of space where the representative of representation takes place.

‘interface-screen’ to apply it to cinematic images.<sup>3</sup> Since these images are not mere snapshots—contrary to Lacan’s emphasis on “the effect of arresting movement and, literally, of killing life” (Lacan 1977: 118)—, Zizek needed to take the problem of editing into account by reinterpreting the suture theory formulated in the 1970s.<sup>4</sup> In reference to the suturing process, however, Zizek focuses on the failure of proper suturing when the point-of-view shot (shot 2) is not clearly signified or subjectified by the objective shot (shot 1), and thus “will evoke the spectre of a free-floating Gaze without a determinate subject to whom it belongs” (Zizek 2001: 33). Operating as “the direct stand-in for the absent one” (ibid.: 52), the function of the interface-screen is to undermine the standard procedure of suture and introduce the spectral dimension of gaze into reality in a single shot with the shot and reverse shot condensed together. Consequently, this stand-in not only destroys the stability of the world to which the characters belong, but also annihilates the ideological and fantasmatic effect operating within that world because it arouses the idea that “our universe is not in itself fully ontologically constituted” (ibid.: 53) and makes us aware that “an interface-artificial moment” as a fantasmatic supplement is essential to “suture-stitch” for an appearance of consistency in the universe (ibid.: 54). How does this take place?

With regard to the interface-screen effect, Zizek mentioned the exemplary shots from *Possessed*, *The Double Life of Veronique* and *Blue* [Figure 3]. At a glance, they are clearly filmic versions of *The Ambassadors*. There are two antinomic levels juxtaposed, one of which is the symbolic reality where the character lives in consciousness, and the other which is the interface-screen— passing windows, a crystal ball or a pupil— all disrupting the ideologically-formulated integrity of the background world. If one wishes to view the latter without any distortion, then one must give up perspective in order to see the background space properly, just as the straight viewpoint of *The Ambassadors* must be abandoned when choosing to view the anamorphosis of the skeleton, “the phallic ghost” (Lacan 1977: 88) straightened and normalized [Figure 3].

<sup>3</sup> For closer research on Zizek’s broader application of Lacan’s theory of painting to the theory of film, a spatiotemporal medium, see Kim (2013).

<sup>4</sup> The kernel of classical suture theory is that the presumed “absent one” as the gap between shot 1 and shot 2 is obliterated or suppressed in the exchange of looks, allocating the place of the threatening Absent Cause to the viewing character within the space of diegetic fiction in shot 1; and this suppression, or suturing, engenders the ideological effect of the structure as a self-contained totality of signifying representation. In order to track down the history of discussion about the suture theory, the following list would be helpful. Miller (1977–78); Oudart (1977–78); Dayan (1976); Salt (1977); Salt (1978); Rothman (1976); Heath (1981); Bordwell (1985); Carroll (1988); Allen (1995); Zizek (2001).

Yet, there is an apparent difference between the window-screen in *3 Iron* and the screens in Žižek's examples, since Žižek's examples show a clear boundary between the symbolic dimension and real screen that it encompasses, whereas the entire frame is mediated by the window-screen in Kim's films. This difference engenders triple topological levels in Kim's shots, based on the assumption that the image in and through the window is somehow related to the Real: the symbolic reality on this side and the other side of the window, the blurred Real reflected in the window and the distinct Real shown through the window. From this point of view, one could articulate the double image of Sŏnwha in Figure 1: the symbolic image behind the window and the real image through the window. That is to say, one could observe this split in her minimal difference from herself.<sup>5</sup> In the third shot in Figure 2, the division of the subject mediated by the window-screen can be more easily grasped. The shot consists of the symbolic image of Min'gyu unmediated by the window, the spectral image of Min'gyu, Sŏnwha and T'aesŏk mirrored on the window-screen, and the symbolic image of T'aesŏk on the other side of the window. Therefore, Žižek's concept of the interface-screen should be revised: the structure of juxtaposition expressed through the binary opposition of the look and the gaze in a frame cannot deal with the variety of ways in which the level of gaze appears. To overcome this limitation and find a new approach, it is helpful to refer to Lacan's interpretation of the painting *Las Meninas* [Figure 5].<sup>6</sup>

*Las Meninas* is very famous for its seemingly realistic but technically enigmatic description. One of the most renowned explanations was provided by Foucault whose view<sup>7</sup> was later employed by Jean-Pierre Oudart (Oudart 1990b; Oudart 1990c),<sup>8</sup> who initiated the debate about the suture theory in his 1969 article (Oudart 1990a). However, Lacan, who is said to have been a major theoretical influence on 1970s European film theory, was not persuaded by Foucault's

<sup>5</sup> One cannot differentiate 1 and 1+0, but still there is a logical difference between them. That is the minimal difference created by the addition of 0, the level of the Real. One of the famous examples of minimal difference is 'the shadow at noon'. Common sense tells us there is no shadow at noon, but there is the logical existence of shadows at noon, which makes the minimal difference from no shadows.

<sup>6</sup> About Lacan's analysis of *Las Meninas*, see Lacan (1965–66), May 4, 1966; May 11, 1966; May 18, 1966; May 25, 1966. Further references to *Seminar XIII* will be to the date of the oral transmission since the English translation has no page numbers.

<sup>7</sup> Foucault considered the king and queen to be confronting the entire scene being painted on the reverted canvas in front of the artist, and therefore reflected at the back in the mirror.

<sup>8</sup> Oudart depended upon Foucault in order to argue about the characteristic of bourgeois representation by showing how the imaginary figures of the king and queen taking the place of the real painter, who is playing the fantasy role of king, lure the spectator, excluded from the visual field that has been turned into a spectacle, without knowing anything of the reality effect.

explanation in 1966 and thus tried to “deform” or “reform” it (Lacan 1965-66: May 18).<sup>9</sup> Lacan refused the existent explanations about this intricate painting<sup>10</sup> and came out with self-contradictory assumptions: the one assumption was to locate the couple and the artist as both facing the big mirror [Figure 6], that is, to assume that the couple was actually present behind the half-mirror window connecting the spying room and the studio; while the other assumption was to presuppose the big mirror to reflect the whole scene as well as the small mirror to reflect the royal couple. The incompatibility between these assumptions was, in fact, intended by Lacan to ensure that the only way to work out this trick of construction was to give up the Foucauldian “realist sight in the mirror” and to take “a paranoid surrealist insight regarding the deception of optical appearances” (Levine 2011: 102). Lacan seems to prefer the second assumption, though the presence of two mirrors at the same time is illogical and impossible, in order to conclude that “this picture in the picture [the reversed canvas] is ... the one that we see [*Las Meninas*]” (Lacan 1965-66: May 18). This is why one could associate *Las Meninas* with the situations in Figure 1 and 2 of *3 Iron* in the sense that the full scenes in both cases are mediated by some reflective materials.

However, as screens to capture the division of the subjects, the big window in the film and the big mirror in the painting function differently. The transparent window makes the split subjectivity appear as being literally divided between the physical and the spectral, as mentioned above. In comparison, according to Lacan’s analysis, the opaque surface of the painting contains the division as a set of paired antinomic relationships in a frame: *Las Meninas* itself and the reversed canvas; the small mirror at the back and the canvas in the foreground; Nieto Velasquez and Diego Velasquez; the radiant princess Margarita at the center and the artist Velasquez in the penumbra; the royal couple and the princess; and the small mirror at the back where the vision of the royal couple resides and the canvas which nobody but the artist Velasquez can see. The former involves the Symbolic, the look and the perspective, while the latter involves the Real, the gaze, and the scopic drive. This is why Lacan defines the structure of the painting as

<sup>9</sup> When Lacan asks Foucault if he is ‘deforming’ Foucault’s comprehension of *Las Meninas*, Foucault answers that Lacan is ‘reforming’ it.

<sup>10</sup> The reason for Lacan’s objection is that, first of all, he estimates that the royal couple in the mirror should be reduced in scale to be twice as small as Nieto Velasquez, who is next to them, considering the distance between the mirror and where the couple is supposed to be (May 11). Concerning another hypothesis that there is a huge mirror in front of the whole scene, and that the artist is trying to draw the people as they appear in that mirror [Figure 6], yet again, Lacan finds it to be contradictory because there is no historical record to prove that Velasquez was left-handed in reality and at least two figures from the trio of a supposedly large mirror, the king and queen, and the painter cannot be placed at the same location.



“the perspective montage” (ibid.: May 11), or the montage between the representation in perspective and the representative of representation.<sup>11</sup>

Then, how can the different topological status of the various personages, especially the royal couple, little Infanta, and artist, be applied to the characters in the film? If *3 Iron* is superimposed on the space of *Las Meninas*, Mingyu should stand at the position of the king, Sönwha at that of the princess, and T’aesök at that of Velasquez. In other words, Mingyu owns and rules the legitimate space including his beloved wife in contrast to T’aesök as a spectral being who does not belong to the legitimate space, and Sönwha is the lack in Mingyu’s world exposing the failure of his violent mastery. To be more detailed, let’s listen to Lacan’s analysis of the topological relationships between the painted personages.

First, the presence of the royal couple plays the same role as the God of Descartes which corresponds to the function of the Other, therefore being supposedly omnipresent, omnivoyant and omniscientific. However, the couple’s presence is possible thanks to the intervention of the artist who dares to ignore the realistic representation and paints the illusionary couple in the mirror as if they are reflected. Lacan also denigrates the God as “a pure articulation of a mirage” (ibid.: May 25) with “the empty eye which, like all eyes, is made to see nothing” (ibid.: June 1). In fact, the royal couple in the position of seeing the backs of the other personages cannot see anything, insofar as the latter exist only as paintings without any substantial backs and even the reversed canvas, on which the couple is likely to cast a look, offers nothing to be seen with its right side out. The visual incompetence of the king and queen indicates the fundamental incompleteness of the Other. Dylan Evans summarizes that “the symbolic phallus is that which appears in the place of the lack of the signifier in the Other” (Evans 1996: 143). The lack of the signifier of “the royal couple = the Other”, that is, their blindness or the frustration of the desire to see, is incarnated by “the princess = phallus” (Lacan 65-66: May 25). Intriguingly enough, Lacan notes that the beautiful central personage has her hidden legs encompassed by the dress, or “the slit” (ibid.) as the signifier of the castrated phallus.

Meanwhile, the princess is about to cry, exclaiming, “let me see” what is on the canvas that Velasquez is painting. In reply, the artist says: “You do not see me from where I am looking at you” (ibid.: May 18). Why not? Firstly, because she wants to see it as a representation in perspective, yet the canvas has nothing to do with this but instead with the representative of representation; and, secondly,

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<sup>11</sup> Lacan also applies the notion of montage to the structure of the fantasy (“something like a montage ... is essential for what we are aiming at having the experience of, namely, the structure of the fantasy” [Lacan 1965–66: May 4]) and to the drive (which is “not an instinct, but a montage, a montage between realities of an essentially heterogeneous level” [ibid.: May 18]).

because the little Infanta is still the subject of the look believing in her mastery of the whole scene with her eyes, while Velasquez is the subject of the gaze, a “phantasmagoria personage” (ibid.: May 25) “in a state of absence” (ibid.: May 18), using his gaze as a trap for captivating the spectators. In addition, the fact that Velasquez placed himself in the middle among many slits or gaps between the personages, and that his portrait seems to be escaping towards the outside, posed as if in parallel to the gap in front, support his specific relation to the topological level of the Real. Hence, Velasquez is defined paradoxically as a “bad painter” who produces “a bad painting”, “a bad conception of the world”, and who “sees in the world the macrocosm of the microcosm that we are supposed to be” (ibid.: 25 May). In that regard, the portrait of the artist shares the topological status connected to the Real with another “*Las Meninas*” on the reversed canvas. As the canvas is an opening in the entire picture, the artist is a spectral being who is differentiated from the others in the picture. In short, the scene of *Las Meninas* is an antinomic montage of the entire mirrored scene and gaps of spectrality within it.

From the above analysis, one could read the parallel relationship between *Las Meninas* and *3 Iron*. Here one might still have a question about which there is only one mirror-like surface in Figure 1 and 2 unlike *Las Meninas* which presupposes two mirrors, one of which is a big mirror of the Imaginary and the other of which is a small mirror of the symbolic Other. However, I would rather answer that the two roles of the mirrors in *Las Meninas* are integrated into the one window-mirror in *3 Iron* because there is no need to allocate the small mirror thanks to the physical existence of Min’gyu who takes the part of the illusionary royal couple and the transparency of the window which lets him see through the others.

Yet, there still remains a problematic hurdle to jump because unlike the painting, the film does not stop with the immobility of *tableau vivant*, but develops its narrative further when Sönwha elopes with T’aesök. After escaping the space of Min’gyu, the homeless couple begins to break into other empty homes, where they are ready to enjoy the new freedom they have obtained. The next section discusses the different paths to this freedom taken by the masculine and feminine subjects, respectively, as understood through Lacan’s theory of sexuation.

### **3. OUT OF MIRRORS: DIVISION IN PERSPECTIVE SYSTEM AND TACTILE VISUALITY AS ALTERNATIVE**

Let us rewind to a point when T’aesök has not yet encountered Sönwha. The film shows T’aesök sneaking into an empty flat, whose family has left for a trip. Applying Lacan’s antinomic concepts of the Symbolic and the Real once again,

the fact that T'aesök can occupy an empty house only, in other words, that he should take the risk of being beaten and thrown out of the house, once the original family returns, indicates that he involves in the Real, which must be suppressed and foreclosed in the Symbolic. However, he enjoys living there in exactly the same way as the original residents do: wearing their clothes, eating their food and using their bed, as the vanishing point and infinite point are distinguished only in their minimal difference. Surely, the house will never be the same following the intrusion of the Real, resulting in fatal changes as the mother is wounded by her boy playing with the toy gun that T'aesök repaired.

Interestingly, in most houses where T'aesök takes up residence, there is a big photo of the family members in the living room. This photo has been taken in an artificially happy atmosphere which conceals the family's troubling issues, metaphorically exposed by the broken things and unwashed clothes remaining in the house. When staying in such places, T'aesök always takes photos of himself against the background of the family photo. What a spirit of recording! According to Lacan, the system of perspective is premised on the transparent and omnivoyant subject which is, however, merely imaginary because the world in perspective is always already dislocated from itself by its minimal difference or otherness. In that sense, T'aesök's recordings are interpreted not just as a simple collection of his temporary residences, but effective moments of subverting the topological status of the subject. A new family photo with T'aesök framed in as if he is one of the family members visualizes how T'aesök as the Real "ex-ists" (exists outside), though foreclosed by the fantasy-family [Figure 7]. At that moment of pushing down the shutter, the framed photo on the wall becomes out of focus, and the camera-screen is instead privileged as an interface-screen showing the family and T'aesök together in one frame.

In that sense, Sönwha's elopement with him can thus be understood not as a beautiful upper-class housewife's impulsive running away, but as a beginning of some kind of topological overturn in her life. A few iconographic clues, exploited similarly in Kim's other films, are presented to connote this fundamental change in her: the tunnel, the running motorbike, the colors of blue/green and yellow/red, the lake/water, and the wings [Figure 8]. In short, Sönwha breaks away from Min'gyu's 'reign' by passing through the tunnel on T'aesök's motorbike with a blue light, the vehicle of free movement, and then stops by a lake full of blue/green water, the material and color of de-reality in Kim's films.<sup>12</sup> What is perceptible is that the entire scene by the lake is filtered in pink, part of the range

<sup>12</sup> Kim Seoyoung (Kim Söyöng) indicates that the use of water as a metaphor of life or a healing force is obvious and consistent in *3 Iron*: T'aesök takes a shower as soon as he breaks into Sönwha's house, and then waters the plants and washes the clothes (S-Y Kim 2007: 125–26).

of the color red that signifies libidinal energy in Kim's iconographic color application. In addition, the sculpture of a woman, with its wings spread, indicates her enjoyment of freedom.

The couple happens to enter the studio of a photographer who took nude pictures of Sŏnwha when she used to be a model. Her picture on the wall of the studio reminds us of the photo-frame and album that attracted T'aesök at Min'gyu's house. However, these pictures do not show us the bruised and cracked body of an abused housewife, but the alluring and sensual body of a proud model—a body of maximum exchange value—with which both Min'gyu and T'aesök build their sexual fantasy. Then, is the body an object of nostalgia, which Sŏnwha wants to recover? It seems unlikely. Rather, she chooses to cut it into pieces and display them like a puzzle. That is how she expresses her rejection of the mastery of perspective. T'aesök, who once took his picture against Sŏnwha's portrait at Min'gyu's, now welcomes the puzzle(d) woman into his interface-screen [Figure 9]. Meanwhile, Sŏnwha, liberated from the old perspective associated with her former life, stands by T'aesök, capturing the space leading into his interface-screen [Figure 10]. Later, at the apartment of a boxer's family where she tries to take their photo while holding the camera herself, the robust figure of the boxer in the background blacks out when the camera screen comes into focus. It seems to be suggesting that reality has been completely overwhelmed by the Real.

Again, one can translate different forms of *mise-en-scène* composed by Kim via *Las Meninas*, insofar as the shot located on the camera-screen is intended to be the same as the one outside of the screen. In effect, is the camera-screen equivalent to the reversed canvas? Undoubtedly, there are differences between the film and the painting: first, what is on the camera-screen is exposed to the spectators, unlike the canvas turned around; and second, the spectators can make eye contact not only with T'aesök and Sŏnwha, sharing the status of Velasquez in spectrality, but also with the original models of the photo who stared at the camera lens when it was taken.

Nevertheless, Figure 9 and 10 are sufficient to reveal the similarity between the experience of “an architecture of looks” (Elsaesser 2009: 15) and the procedure of what Lacan called ‘the subversion of the subject’ or ‘the dialectics of the subject’ in *Las Meninas*. As the spectators are trapped by the reversed canvas, the spectators of *3 Iron* may feel like they are gazed at by the personages in the photo, and then they are drawn and included into the filmic space. Once the visual field of the film and that of the spectators become continuous by way of eye contact, the notion of an objectively-observing spectator as *cogito* with a totalized vision outside of the diegetic space cannot help being undermined.

Furthermore, that is also when the moment of ‘the subversion’ is triggered. Insofar as what is on the reversed canvas is not observable and the camera-screen is focused on condition that the family-photo is focused out [Figure 7, 9, 10], the painting in a painting and the interface-screen can be identified only by the gaze animated by the spectator’s scopic drive. Here, Lacan’s analogy between the canvas and the face-down card sounds reliable: curiosity about the face-down card forces the spectators to lay down their own, sustaining themselves in their division around this canvas-card as “in effect the point around which one has to make turn the whole value, the whole function of this picture” (Lacan 1965–66: May 11). Again, *Las Meninas* hinges on the structure of the Moebius strip. The half-turn outward journey to the canvas or the camera-screen, originating from the spectators’ consciousness, is not identical to the return journey. Rather, the return forces the subject, having undergone the mechanism of scopic drive, backwards to be stitched to her unconsciousness which circumscribes the spectators’ imagination (what is painted on the canvas?) and their identification (who are more desirable: the families in photo-frames or the couple in the camera-screen?).

Another important sign of Sönwha’s determination to be free is when she has her hair cut by T’aesök [Figure 11]. Since the head represents the metonymy of the core of the personality in Kim’s iconographic system (see Kim 2010), the changing of a head-related body part is often used as a key moment in narrative development. So, it is important to note color changes in the wigs used (*Bad Guy* [*Nappün namja*]), the gift of hairpins (*The Birdcage Inn* [*P’aran taemun*]), tacks placed through the head in order to hold photos on the wall (*Time* [*Sigan*]), the wrapping of heads with bed-sheets or scarfs (*Samaritan Girl* [*Samaria*]; *Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter...and Spring* [*Pom yörüm kaül kyöul kürigo pom*]; *Time*), and even hanging oneself (*Dream* [*Pimong*]). In that context, the fact that Sönwha never divided the section of her head in the nude photo alludes to her will to be free, rather than her frustration and desire to go mad [Figure 9]. Significantly, Sönwha asks no one but T’aesök to cut her hair, and leans her head on his shoulder: obvious signs of love blossoming between them.

At last, the male and female protagonists are arrested at the humble apartment house of a deceased elderly man. The mirror play continues at the police office. Sönwha, released to her husband, casts a look at T’aesök being investigated and beaten through the half-mirror. Now, their positions are inverted as compared to Figure 1 and 2: with the full frame mediated by the half-mirror, T’aesök is physically inside, whereas Sönwha is now spectrally outside [Figure 12]. From this description of her as a spectre in the mirror, it can be anticipated that her return home will not be just a retroactive re-symbolization or re-stabilization of the wild freedom she gained on the street with T’aesök. Nonetheless, another question

may arise: is it sufficiently persuasive to have Sönwha reunite with Min'gyu? Can we say that she will maintain her ghost-like presence, liberated from the Symbolic order? Why can't she be more independent and choose to stand on her own two feet? Is this yet further evidence supporting accusations about Kim's antifeminist perspective? Before consulting Lacan, let us first make a small detour by examining the choice T'aesök makes in the film.

After all, while Sönwha is once again in a black dress at home, T'aesök is in a blue uniform at a local prison. Interestingly here, *3 Iron* unpacks this new phase of narrativization with a new ontology of mirror, in which Min'gyu suddenly begins to appear inside the mirror-windows. Besides, his attitude towards Sönwha has definitely softened, although his violent disposition has not changed at all. Only now, the target of his explosive aggression has moved from Sönwha to T'aesök. What caused this change in the scheme of how Min'gyu is portrayed? It can be explained only in comparison with how T'aesök and Sönwha are visualized from this point onward. In contrast to Min'gyu's new presence inside the mirror, T'aesök is increasingly dragged out from it [Figure 13]. The bridge in the background reminds us of a double mirror effect, engendering an infinite abyss into which T'aesök will eventually fall. So, does it not make sense that T'aesök trains himself to disappear from the warden's visual field in the prison cell, and finally belong to a gravity-free world? This is why even the window-screen cannot capture his presence, and Sönwha cannot see him without the help of a mirror when she feels that T'aesök is around [Figure 14].

Then why has it suddenly become a mirror-screen, instead of a window-screen? What is the difference between them? The role of the mirror in which Sönwha makes contact with T'aesök seems similar to that of the horizontal mirror in the double-mirror device suggested by Lacan,<sup>13</sup> which is neither imaginary nor symbolic, but real [Figure 15]. By placing a plane mirror in front of the concave mirror, Lacan reconstructed Bouasse's 1947 experiment.<sup>14</sup> Now, the viewer, or the observing ego, can discern that the image of a vase projected around flowers, reflected in the concave mirror in the first place, is shown in the plane mirror. This double-mirror set-up is designed to indicate that the real image in the concave mirror is utterly imaginary, while the virtual image in the plane mirror—the image of an image—is symbolic. Thus, the angle from which the observer looks at the properly combined image of flowers in a vase is nothing other than

<sup>13</sup> This optical model was discussed first in *Seminar I* (1953–54) and was then repeatedly mentioned in *Seminar VIII* (1960–61) and in his 1960 article “Remarks on Daniel Lagache's Presentation: ‘Psychoanalysis and Personality Structure’” (Lacan 2006).

<sup>14</sup> The key effect in Bouasse's experiment is that the separated vase and flowers appear to be combined together when the observing ego looks at the concave mirror.

the symbolic world, and the plane mirror functions as the Other, by which what was formerly imaginary is validated to appear as the Symbolic. In fact, ‘in-between two mirrors’ is the inevitable precondition for all living beings, in the sense that every subject leads a life compromising between the ideal ego projected imaginarily onto the concave mirror and the ego ideal mediated symbolically by the mirror of the Other.

Then, how can the subject overcome the structure of misrecognition? Lacan suggests a rotated mirror set-up as an alternative, which is achieved through rotating the plane mirror by  $90^\circ$  so as to make it horizontal, and making a slow  $180^\circ$  movement in the position of the eyes from  $\$1$  to  $\$2$  [Figure 16]. While adjusting the plane mirror and repositioning the subject, the viewing subject experiences that the illusion of the flowers in a vase on the plane mirror begins to fade, and instead perceives not only the inverted vase illusion on the concave mirror, but also the virtual image of the same vase,  $I'(a)$ , in the now-horizontal mirror, “inverting the real image anew, as it were, and opposing it, like its reflection in water (whether still or moving) gives dream roots to a tree” (Lacan 2006: 570).

Once the plane mirror (A) is laid horizontally, its position as the Other is given to the analyst, who no longer takes the role of the knowing Other providing the psychic truth to the analysand. The rotated mirror aims to show how psychoanalytic treatment is related to creating an absence through which the singular subject begins to recognize her own desire, separated from the desire of the Other. To put it in Lacan’s words, “he [the analysand] is called to be reborn in order to know if he wants what he desires” (ibid.: 571). Lacan also describes this curative process of “paying the steep ransom for his desire” as “an overhauling of ethics” (ibid.: 572) demanded by psychoanalysis, which is completely different from the general notion of ethics as aiming for a thorough subjection to the moral codes of the Other. In addition, when the topological status matters, the horizontally rotated mirror shares the same topological position not with the mirror on the wall, but with the window-canvas in *Las Meninas*. Understood this way, the mirror in which ghost-T’aesök is reflected [Figure 14] is analogous to the rotated mirror. However, with Mingyu in the mirror, T’aesök cannot help but disappear from it due to their topologically antinomial relationship. Even Sönwha releases her spectrality by doubling herself as the one in the mirror and the other in reality. Here, the difference between disappearing and doubling is crucial; this will be articulated later based on the theory of sexuation.

Meanwhile, an eye-catching fact in Figure 14 is that Sönwha perceives T’aesök by touching his face (again, the head!). Hands are the other privileged body part in Kim’s films: they are the organ for connecting one person to another. According

to Kim's iconographic signifying system, eyes are doomed to fail at seeing due to the necessity for distance, but hands can overcome this incapability of eyes thanks to direct tactility. Eyes are connected to the geometral perspective, but hands lead to "what was elided in the geometral relation" (Lacan 1977: 96), sometimes depicted as anamorphic images. From this, one can understand why T'aesök draws an eye on his palm while ghost-training; why he cuts out the eyes from the boxer's photo; and why he takes out Sönwha's photo, which the photographer corrected from its earlier fragmented state, and instead leaves the frame empty [Figure 17]. It might be T'aesök's way of resistance against the open-eyed blindness from which gravity-bound people suffer, and Kim's way of transferring the problematic of visuality to that of tactility.

Finally, we have reached the most sensational and recondite scene where Sönwha kisses T'aesök over the shoulder of her husband [Figure 18]. It consists of three shots. First, the married couple stands in front of their photo and the wife says 'I love you', staring at her husband. Then, the overwhelmed husband clasps her while the wife looks for her lover with her outstretched hand. The camera is intended to track-in so that the family photo will be out of frame in the third shot. This bizarre cohabitation of the three characters is depicted again at the dining table the next morning [Figure 19]. Such situations are too abnormal and absurd to make the diagnosis that "Sönwha seems to become insane".<sup>15</sup> Moreover, the scale impossibly reads zero, even with Sönwha and T'aesök together on it [Figure 20]. If one wishes to be literal, the zero sum of their existence should be interpreted as "Sönwha's committing suicide" (ibid.).<sup>16</sup>

Yet, this end scene is not sudden or surprising if viewed in terms of the spectral visuality that we have examined so far. Like T'aesök removing his physicality in the prison cell, Sönwha also makes an attempt to exist like an immaterial ghost when she visits the traditional Korean house that she once occupied with her lover, and takes a nap on a sofa, ignoring the speechless landlord's gaze [Figure 21]. In this light, the ending might well be understood as demonstrating the spectral subjectivity and the protagonists' freedom that this film has consistently pursued, rather than as an aesthetic packaging of tragedy.

Nonetheless, there still remains the earlier question about Sönwha seeming to live under the patriarchal system and to rely on her husband's economic power. In a way, she appears liberated from her old pattern after returning home. Her resistance to her husband's rules changes from passive muteness to willingness to aggressively slap him back. However, reciprocating this violence has nothing to do

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<sup>15</sup> This is the film critic Chöng Söng-il (Jung Sung-Il)'s opinion stated while interviewing the filmmaker. [http://www.cine21.com/news/view/mag\\_id/26410](http://www.cine21.com/news/view/mag_id/26410)

<sup>16</sup> Again, the film critic Chöng's opinion.



with her capability for freedom. What matters most is that she decides to live with two men—a person and a spectre—simultaneously. This is how she is different from T'aesök: she does not seek to escape reality, or the house, to be free, but rather frees that reality from its self-containment by accepting T'aesök as the essential gap or fissure in it.

In contrast, T'aesök leaves the Symbolic completely, so as to have no relationship at all with the world under the Other's control. One might say that T'aesök is freer than Sönwha, but Lacan would say that T'aesök's freedom is just imaginary, or even subordinate insofar as he considers reality as a flawless whole. Why does he repair all the dysfunctional things and wash all the filthy things? Because he wants the place he breaks in to be perfect. Why does he decide to be invisible, to the extent that he takes the risk of being ruthlessly beaten by the warden? Because he wants the symbolic order to work ideally in the absence of violators like him. This belief in the wholeness of the Symbolic is exactly what Lacan discovers as the masculine epistemology. Therefore, the desire to go beyond the legitimate order intends ultimately to position the masculine subject as the transcendent ruler of the Law, whether in reality or in fantasy. However, paradoxically enough, his freedom is still conditionally bound to the symbolic reality from which he removes himself by living as an unreachable and un-governable spectre.

This interpretation depends on Lacan's theory of sexuation. His basic premise is that sexual difference is characterized by the different ways of dealing with desire and *jouissance*. The masculine subject molds this difference into the dimension of exceptions which not only confront but also complement universality; he thereby totalizes the universe. Meanwhile, the feminine subject does not exclude the difference from universality, but contains it within, thereby infinitizing the universe. In this regard, man is defined as "the prohibition against constructing a universe," and woman as "the impossibility of doing so" (Copjec 2003: 118). The prohibition and impossibility constitute the reason why sexual relations ultimately fail.

From this, one can understand why man's freedom and woman's freedom are necessarily dissimilar. For man, freedom is positioned as "the irreducible difference *of* (or *to*) the Other" (Zupancic 2003a: 149), "the one-less of the exception," or "a minus One" (Zupancic 2003b: 69) which is nothing other than the negation or contradiction turning a totalized set into an indefinite set by subtracting the exception from the set of 'all'. By contrast, for woman, freedom is positioned as "the irreducible difference *within* the Other" (Zupancic 2003a: 149) or "the immanence of the exception" (Zupancic 2003b: 74), which turns 'all' of the finite into 'not-all' by including One. After all, man cannot achieve the ultimate freedom to change the set itself because the masculine way of trans-

cendence remains only in struggling to acquire and expand the dimension of exceptions defined by the universal. However, woman can lead to the limitless possibility of enjoying freedom, or the Other *jouissance*, because the feminine way of transcendence postulates the open set as 'not-all' due to its infinite splitting. Here, in order to illustrate this somewhat difficult theory, I would like to use two photos of pizza as examples: Figure 22 shows how the cut-off piece of pizza (the masculine subject) still remains as pizza, while Figure 23 demonstrates how the singled-out blots of pepperoni slices (the feminine subject) turn the whole pizza into something like a letter or a painting from within. Lacan's lesson is as simple as this: if you, as a radically free subject, want to change the signifying mechanism of an existent system, you should take the feminine way.

Now, no one would deny that T'aesök is a man and Sönwha a woman biologically, but they are also distinguished in terms of their sexuational difference. Their otherness in community, or their social status as the insignifiable Real in the Symbolic, has already been manifested by their embodiment of spectrality. In addition, the bluish clothes that they wear in the end scene signify their ongoing uncompromising attitude toward the existent symbolic order. Nonetheless, their respective decisions to become spectral take different routes: T'aesök wants to live as an exception subtracted from the Symbolic; Sönwha as an exception within the Symbolic.

In that context, Min'gyu's request to Sönwha not to open the door to any stranger sounds absolutely devoid of sense, because his house is already shared with, or haunted by the stranger T'aesök as a spectral being or the gaze itself his wife welcomes most. This gaze, which is the minimal difference of the look in the field of vision, cannot be manifested by any determinable object, but can be perceived only "through sensible indications" (Copjec 2002: 211) like the sound of a creaking door or furtive footsteps, a peeping eye, rustling leaves, etc. That is why even Sönwha needs the magical mirror to see T'aesök, and moreover needs Min'gyu, whose look conditions T'aesök's gaze, to reach him. Then, the odd kissing scene is nothing other than a psychoanalytic metaphor for living as the feminine subject. In that sense, the Korean title of this film, 'empty house', now becomes truly paradoxical, in that the emptiness does not signify a certain loss to be avoided or filled up, but a certain liberation to be pursued or opened up. This is why Sönwha, the subject of gap-opening, should not be denigrated as a vulnerable and helpless housewife who could not save herself from patriarchal domination. Instead, she should be valued for her courage and capacity to accept such a lack, void or nothingness and adjust herself to it in the house as her universe.

#### 4. CONCLUSION: A WAY OF AVERTING THE VICIOUS CIRCLE OF MIRRORING

Until now, I have traced the critical moments of Sönwha's subjectivization and tried to elucidate its significance from the Lacanian viewpoint. In the process of recapitulating the narrative of *3 Iron*, one may find this film relatively moderate and restrained in terms of describing hatred and violence when compared with Kim's previous corpus. There are not such cruel scenes that include rape, murder, cannibalism, mistreatment of animals, amputations of body parts, and carnal abuse. Besides, the class distinction is not quite obvious (I'aesök's BMW motorcycle is undeserved for a homeless person, and he doesn't touch the money in the houses into which he breaks).

Admittedly, however, Kim has been notorious for his ferocious and fierce imagination and disturbing misogynistic depiction of female characters. His films were not only pinpointed as "sexual terrorism" (Rayns 2004), "penis fascism" (Ju 2003) or the orientalist mythicism of the machoistic margin (Kwön 2004), but were also diagnosed as revealing a sadomasochist appetite (Sö 2002; Choi 2005). Thus, it is not surprising that the original title of a biography published in New York, Madrid and Seoul simultaneously (Merajver-Kurlat 2009), "Kim Ki-duk: On movies, 'The Visual Language'", was translated into "Bad Filmmaker: Kim Ki-duk Biography 1996–2009" for the Korean version. Even though this translation is intended to remind the reader of the film *Bad Guy*, it still leads to the implicit association of the filmmaker as a bad guy similar to the protagonist in that film, which brought heated antagonistic criticisms and comments mostly from feminist critics.<sup>17</sup>

What is awkward is that not only the audience but also the critics tend to identify Kim's life and personality with his films' nasty stories and characters. More often than not, the filmmaker is implicitly suspected of being a pervert, whether in the psychoanalytic sense or in popular belief. The interest in Kim's individual history can be explained from this biographical approach to his films. In fact, considering the fact that few biographies of Korean filmmakers have been published in Korea before the death of the subject of the biography, Kim in his early forties, quite exceptionally, had a biography written and an interview with

<sup>17</sup> *Ssine 21* (Cine 21) and *P'illüm 2.0* (Film 2.0), the leading film magazines at the time, offered a good number of pages to the critics and collected a variety of reactions, whether positive or negative, to this film. The list of the critics who participated in the debate is: Yu Un-söng and Chu Yu-sin (*Ssine 21*, no. 336), Chöng Söng-il and Sim Yöng-söp (*Ssine 21*, no. 337), Yi Sang-yong, Mun Il-pöng, Yi Chi-hun, O Tong-jin, Kim Söng-uk, Kim Sön-a (*P'illüm 2.0*, no. 57).

him focusing on his life experiences published as separate book chapters (Chŏng Sŏng-il et al., 2003).

However, the biographical facts have not always been used in a negative fashion. The critics who want to support the way his films function as the critical debunking of grim reality also tend to rely on the experiences the filmmaker himself went through as an adolescent factory worker and a homeless painter in Europe and in the red-light district in Seoul. Therefore, however brutal and inhumane his films were, his films' seemingly-excessive depictions could be justified as being realistic by the fact that they were showing the underbelly of (post)modern Korean society. Chung, Hae-seung (Chŏng Haesŭng) is one of those critics. While making attempts to trace the filmmaker's original experiences adopted in the films and by borrowing Nietzsche's concept of *ressentiment* (resentment), she claims that "Kim's cinema can be read as a politically poetic, poetically political statement about social marginalization" (H-S Chung, 2012: 7).

Nonetheless, the sociological and realistic approach to Kim's oeuvre is liable to having a certain tendency: the more graphically appalling and hideous the narrative events and characters are, the more they might be highlighted as politically sincere and serious. That is probably why his later films like *Spring, Summer, Autumn, Winter ... and Spring*, *The Bow (Hwal)*, *Time, Breath (Sum)* and *Dream*, which have only loose and abstract connections to "a visceral, bottom-to-top critique of social stratification in South Korea" (ibid.: 24), have been relatively alienated from detailed critical attention, even though *Spring, Summer, Autumn, Winter ... and Spring* and *3 Iron* attracted many art-house patrons in western countries and were welcomed by some critics as a sign of moderation in Kim's cinema. However, as Kim said in an interview, he has "always talked about political issues in every one of his films" (ibid.: 129), however moderated they were. In that regard, Chung, Hae-seung is quite right when she focuses on the abstraction of class *ressentiment* in *3 Iron* (H-S Chung 2012: 55–61).

Yet, I would rather insist that the meaning of 'political' should be expanded beyond the conception of abstraction which, to some degree, depends on the social and historical references in the texts. I think Kim's films are political not only because of their direct or indirect linkage with reality but also because of their challenging signification on the psychoanalytical level where unconscious desire is explicitly problematized in terms of ethics. For instance, a sociological reading might be satisfied with *3 Iron* because the film points out the fundamental failure of the patriarchal system and the impossibility of affiliation between different classes in Korean society. In comparison, the psychoanalytical point of view would not cease to scrutinize the film until it discovers the protagonists' innermost desire and its ideological signification: for instance,

T'aesök's subordinate desire of being ultimately linked to the patriarchal reality as opposed to Sönwha's radical desire of being transcendent in the community she belongs to.

Taking Kim's filmography into account, especially when comparing with the dead-end unlikely endings of Kim's previous corpus extending through *Samaritan Girl* (2004),<sup>18</sup> one can find that *3 Iron* is a step forward in the narrative patterns of Kim's films. *3 Iron* seems to continue the story of *Samaritan Girl* which was produced and released right before *3 Iron*: Sönwha might be considered as a grown-up Yöjin. *Samaritan Girl* ends with an extreme long shot showing Yöjin abandoned by her father, who was the only family member with whom she had ever lived. What should she do to move on with her life? One could imagine that Yöjin/Sönwha becomes a model and happens to meet her future husband who is rich, but too obsessive about his beautiful wife to abuse her. From the story that follows in *3 Iron*, one may conclude that Kim's chained narratives have functioned to complete the process of subjectivization by the end of that film. This insight leads us to ponder upon the similarity of the endings in Kim's other films; in particular, *The Bow* (2005), *Time* (2006) and *Breath* (2007), where all of the heroines end up rejoining the person or family to whom they were formerly connected, despite having been internally changed and externally marked on their changed bodies by way of certain experiences of destroying and rebuilding themselves through, for example, sexual intercourse or plastic surgery. I would categorize these films as 'the return-home narrative' representing the commencement of feminine subjectivity.

What is distinct in the return-home narrative in Kim's films is that the protagonists do not have any intention of (re)establishing their masculine subjectivity in despair as in other contemporary Korean films. Moreover, in *Time* and *Breath*, even the male characters come to identify themselves as the good 'living' partners of the female characters: they are accepting and cooperative enough to change their corporeal or mental state in accordance with the female characters who no longer have the same bodies or memories. Therefore, these males could finally be defined as being feminine in the Lacanian sense. This is how Kim's narratives advance little by little and one by one. And that is why they can be still regarded as being radically political although these films are upper-class or middle-class oriented and there are not any cruel descriptions of reality in them at all.

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<sup>18</sup> It snows in summer (*The Birdcage Inn*, 1998) and the male protagonist's boat enters the female protagonist's genitalia (*The Isle*, 2000). *Bad Guy* (2001) blurs the possibility of distinguishing reality from non-reality by doubling the time and characters in order to realize the impossible love in reality.

In fact, what motivated Kim's narratives and its resulting feminine subjectivization has hardly ever appeared especially in the early 2000s and mid-2000s, when the desire to establish an undefeatable masculinity emerged and prevailed in Korean cinema.<sup>19</sup> The phenomenon of (re)masculinization at the time was surely influenced by and also formulated the social and cultural climate since the country's bailout by the IMF in 1997. To put this situation in psychoanalytical terms, without any hope that there would be some credible mirror of the Other offered to ordinary subjects who were undergoing the dysfunctional, irrational and unjust symbolic reality in Korea, the anguished and anxious public was eager to rebuild an intense masculinity to identify with, embodied in a lone and innocent individual pitted against the institutional system or large organizations. However, the crass and coarse portraits of Korea reflected in its cinema, which were rampant with insane aggressions, private vendettas<sup>20</sup> and catastrophic disasters, represented nothing more than a desperate struggle to "pass the buck" to the Other when it comes to responsibility and blame for what was going wrong in Korean society. This situation is reminiscent of the popular mirroring gesture-language among Korean teenagers. They show one palm and say 'mirror!' to the person who has said or done something unpleasant. Needless to say, this gesture is to impute the subject's regret and guilt about this irritating situation to her counterpart and to avoid what might induce the counterpart's offence in the first place, maybe the subject's own attitude, tone or mistake.

In comparison, the way the (fe)male protagonists in the return-home narrative deal with the perplexing intrusion of the Real—for example, encountering the housebreaker, love affairs of his wife or full-scale plastic surgery of his lover—and the way they determine to change their 'sexuational' identity through true love can be interpreted as being analogous to bringing a fundamental reconstruction of the existent ideological and/or substantial order of the Symbolic. In a sense, the ethics of subjectivization these characters show is beyond the politics of denunciation. Therefore, *3 Iron*, which won Kim the Silver Lion for best director at

<sup>19</sup> The phenomenon influenced not only mainstream blockbuster movies whose genre categories used to be war films, gangster movies or thrillers appealing mainly to male movie-goers, but also the so-called "well-made" (K-W Kim 2007: 385–87) films whose characteristic is to twist and play upon basic genre conventions through each filmmaker's unique style of creativity and to combine this with local politics. The list of box office greatest hits from 2005 onwards still proves Korean spectators' thirst for intense displays of masculinity: *King and the Clown* (*Wang ūi namja*, 2005), *The Host* (*Koemul*, 2006), *D-War* (*Timō*, 2008), *The Good, The Bad and the Weird* (*Chobūn nom nappūn nom isanghan nom*, 2008), *Tidal Wave* (*Haeundae*, 2009), *The Man from Nowhere* (*Ajōssi*, 2010), *Arron*, *The Ultimate Weapon* (*Ch'oejong pyōnggi hwal*, 2011), and *Nameless Gangster: Rules of Time* (*Pōmjoe wa ūi chōnjaeng*, 2012). [www.kmdb.or.kr](http://www.kmdb.or.kr)

<sup>20</sup> Especially about the private vendettas, see J-S Kim (2010).

the 61st Venice Film Festival in 2004 and at the same time, ironically, ranked 60<sup>th</sup> for Korean movie sales in South Korea with fewer than 100,000 viewers, and its female protagonist Sönwha, who entailed the ‘male but feminine’ characters in the following Kim’s films, could be recorded as the pivotal appearance of the feminine subjectivization in Kim’s oeuvre as well as in 2000s Korean cinema. The film proved how the use of mirror-play without any mirroring gesture could be achievable.

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Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3: From the left, *Possessed*, *The Double Life of Veronique* and *Three Colors: Blue*.



Figure 4: Hans Holbein, *The Ambassadors*, 1533.



Figure 5: Diego Velasquez, *Las Meninas*, 1656.



Figure 6: The image is from <http://www.nigelkonstam.com/cms/index.php/the-museum-of-the-true-history-of-art>.

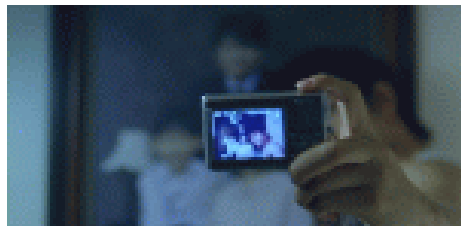
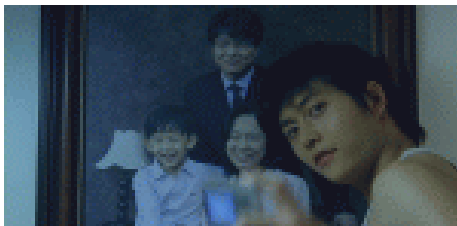


Figure 7



Figure 8



Figure 9



Figure 10



Figure 11



Figure 12



Figure 13



Figure 14

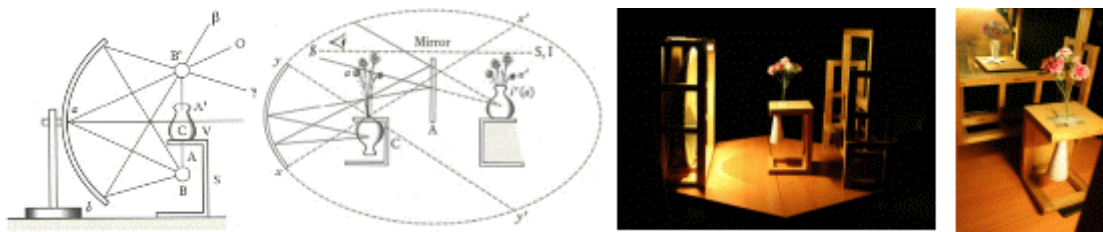


Figure 15: The first image illustrates Bouasse's experiment and the second is Lacan's double-mirror set-up, which is built in reality as in the next two photos. The first two figures are reprinted from Lacan, 2006. The next two photos are reprinted from Vanheule, 2011.

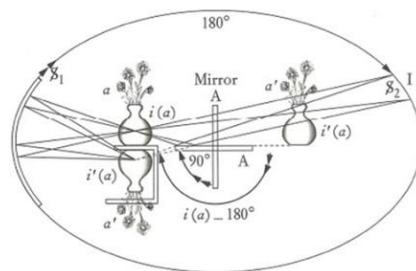


Figure 16



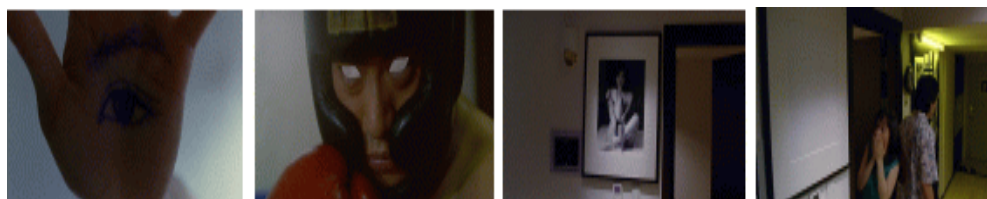


Figure 17



Figure 18



Figure 19



Figure 20



Figure 21



Figure 22



Figure 23