

A bit of Spring everywhere: subjectivity as an effect of time in Kim Ki-Duk's films

Aeon: the indefinite time of the event, the floating line that knows only speeds and continually divides that which transpires into an already-there that is at the same time not-yet-here, a simultaneous too-late and too-early, a something that is both going to happen and has just happened. *Chronos*: The time of measure that situates things and persons, develops a form, and determines a subject In short, the difference is not at all between the ephemeral and the durable, nor even between the regular and the irregular, but between two modes of individuation, two modes of temporality.

(Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*)

Nothing happens, as if time were at a standstill. A man lives without the company of human beings, only sharing his days and nights with a child, a little creature we would not dare to include in the human sphere. As we will discover, children have something divine in them, and can enter our mundane condition only at the price of losing (at least) part of their divinity. The man is a Buddhist monk living on a mobile platform which floats like an island on the waters of a lake, and the child is his disciple Sisal. In their little house/temple, time flows slowly and life seems eternal. This temporal immobility is interrupted only by the chronological rhythm of day and night and of the four seasons, and by the continuous crossings of the lake with a little boat. Individuated by a few traits outlining the quietness of their gestures and the stillness of the landscape which surrounds them, the two figures are the main characters of *Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter... and Spring* (2003), a film by Korean director Kim Ki-Duk.

With a quick spatio-temporal jump, we land on a different scenario, a contemporary Seoul which is the set of Kim Ki-Duk's last film, *Time* (2006). In apparent contrast with the quiet initial description of the two monks' life in *Spring...*, *Time* starts with an abrupt episode: Seh-Hee, a young and beautiful woman, bumps into another masked woman who is coming out of a plastic surgery clinic. The latter has just undergone an irreversible transformation, an event that will return again and again in the two women's lives. In this case, transition does not coincide with the chronological passage of time, but with a violent artificial transformation of the face. Two lives are condensed in a few, decisive instants: a woman tries to stop time by repeating the same 'surgical ritual' again and again, another woman meets her, always at the same moment, at the clinic exit, when her face is still covered by a mask. The metamorphosis of a face

transforms the clinic into a theatre, or a temple, where the same technical/aesthetic procedure and the same encounter are endlessly performed...

For Sisal and his master monk, for Seh-Hee and the mysterious masked woman, time flows as a rigid chronological oscillation made of immutable cycles and of endless returns. A continuous return of episodes and scenes (the four seasons and their periodicity, the surgical operation as a recurring obsession, but also the re-occurrence of situations, faces, places, climatic conditions and lights) characterises the original montage adopted by Kim Ki-Duk. The returning theme of time and its regular cycles gives to the films the flavour of a reflection on repetition and difference. In *Difference and Repetition*, Gilles Deleuze argues that “repetition at the level of external conduct echoes, for its own part, a more secret vibration which animates it”.¹ Time is not immobile or cyclical but flows at different speeds, revealing every enduring presence in life to be an illusion. The seasons of *Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter... and Spring* and the faces of *Time*, and also all the rituals and operations, things and persons, forms and subjects appearing and disappearing together with them, are caught in the temporal flow, becoming the ungraspable and extemporary effects of time. In Henri Bergson’s words, subjectivity itself is only a temporary stoppage in a continuous process of inter-change (of bodies that always change while ex-changing something).²

In Kim Ki-Duk’s cinematic poetics, even the apparent certainty of cultural belonging and subjectivity, at times seem only to appear as flickering illusions. In both the mainstream cinema and the more ‘avant-garde’ tradition of South-Korea, his films represent a cinema of the interval, of the in-between where subjectivity is cinematically and philosophically viewed as nothing more than a condensation in the continuous flow of time, and time as nothing less than the mode in which subjective individuation takes place. A perspective that, in Iain Chambers’ words, “announces the very undoing of a subject-centred occidental humanism.”³ Rather than a representation of the world and of its (dominant or subaltern) subjects, cinema appears as a means of reflection endowed with all the creative and destructive force of philosophy.⁴

Drawing on Deleuze and Guattari and on Bergson’s conceptualisations, this article analyses the way in which both *Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter... and Spring* and *Time* compose and, simultaneously, destroy the subjectivities of their main characters. Among the most visually and thematically suggestive of Kim Ki-Duk’s works, the two films appear as the cinematic realisations of an idea of time actualised by both repetition and ‘becoming’. At the same time, subjectivity appears in the films as an effect of time, the residue of a repeated process of subjectification rather than a pre-given and stable formation.

An ‘indefinite time of events’ disperses the characters’ personalities and lives into an intensive dimension of affects and gestures, beyond the

¹ Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition* (London and New York: Continuum, 2001), 1.

² Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory* (New York: Zone Books, 1991).

³ See Iain Chambers, this issue.

⁴ Kim Ki-Duk’s cinema has conquered the favour of Occidental audiences, particularly for its original visual style and its mixture of ‘Oriental’ and ‘Occidental’ aspects. After a debut in 1996 with the film *Crocodile*, he reveals his talent thanks to a personal aesthetic view of cinema and a knowledge of the classics of international cinema, in significant opposition to both mainstream culture and historical heritage. For a more detailed account of South-Korean cinematographic tradition, see Huh Moon-yung, “Il cinema coreano degli anni novanta”, in Luca Mosso and Lorenza Pignatti (eds), *Il volto e l’anima*, (Milano: Feltrinelli, 2007).

chronological order 'that clearly situates things and persons'. Along this volatile temporality, *Spring* and *Time* weave their multi-dimensional woofs of untimely stories and fleeting images, of universal themes and instantaneous impressions: the divinity of Sisal's childhood and his fall into human adulthood, the sudden destruction and re-appearance of a woman's face as a marker of her precarious 'human' identity, the destructive force of a young monk's love as a 'hole' in his repetitive life and its recuperation into the linearity of monogamy, the geometric and linear stratifications of a park as the landscape of Seh-Hee's love story and its capture by her omnipresent camera, the 'Oriental' quality of calligraphy and its capture by the linearity of writing as an 'Occidental' technique, the stratified chronology of photographs and their precipitation into the 'phantasmatic' dimension of the image as a 'double', the virtuality and actuality of cinematic images and events as the two faces of a unique crystal of time...

Events and faces: the human and the divine

Two different temporalities, or modes of individuation, respectively link cinema to the positioning of identities, subjects or things on one side (a chronological order obtained for example through montage), and to the occurring of events on the other (an indefinite time of events rendered through the qualitative modifications of light and sound).⁵ These two temporalities represent the coexistence of repetition and difference in Kim Ki-Duk's films. In the concept of the eternal return introduced by Nietzsche, re-conceptualised by Bergson and re-written by Deleuze's philosophical analyses of film, eternity is not the perennial nature of what returns, but only indicates the return of the different.⁶ Cinematic chronology is characterised by repetition: the metric repetition of frames, the sequenced repetition of scenes edited one after another. On the other side, Aeon, the time of the event, discloses the appearance of novelty and difference, for example through the creation of pure optical and sonic modifications. Without being limited to its chronological extension, the singularity of an event is given by its intensities (or 'degrees'). The intensity of a luminosity or a shade (such as the green and yellow gradations colouring Sisal's Spring) can make a moment last for ever, the intensity of a passion or an obsession (for example Seh-Hee's self-destructive passion) can sweep away a whole life in an instant. A moment, but also a season or a whole life, acquire the same force and fugacity of events.

The most significant effect of this double temporal conceptualisation is not the variation of subjective identities, but the revelation of the redundant and illusory nature of identity itself. The subject is de-composed, scattered into a myriad of singular moments, into hours, days, seasons whose coming

⁵ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* (London and New York: Continuum, 2002), 261.

⁶ See Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche e la filosofia*, (Torino: Einaudi, 2002), 36. English edition: Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy* (London, The Athlone Press: 1983).

and going makes identity (every identity, even that of a child) emerge on the surface as only a returning residue or side-effect. The same conception visualised in our two films animates the Bergsonian philosophy of 'duration', a mutable temporality constituting, in the philosopher's words, the 'spiritual' side of life. For Bergson, the potential differentiation sensed in the duration of one moment, independently from its extension (minute, hour or day), is opposed to the chronological measure by intelligence.⁷ Having this intuitive perception of time, feeling time as the return of an infinity of differences in every moment, gives to human perception a sort of 'divine' capacity. Lingering on the qualitative duration of events, on the colour and sound of every moment and on their different intensities, the subtle sensitivity of the camera in the two films immerses them into a sort of 'divine' time.

⁷ Bergson, *Matter and memory*, 207.

Spring

The metamorphosis of things and subjects along the variations of luminous and acoustic intensities gives us the most profound sense of time and its visualisation in *Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter... and Spring*. As the director himself points out, at a first glance, the feelings of yesterday, those we are experiencing now, and those of tomorrow are not so different among themselves, in the same way as the four seasons seem to repeat themselves with a conservative cyclicity. From a closer look (a cinematographic close-up?), however, a season or a life become, with their intensive qualities, the durations of more 'divine' metamorphoses.

In the first of the four episodes of the film, dedicated to "Spring", the child-monk Sisal appears endowed with the 'divine' capacity to establish a connection with nature and the elements: land and water, plants and animals, all become part of a microscopic world of sensations and discoveries beyond the spatial and temporal barriers of everyday life. Living in an ecstatic condition of forgetfulness out of time and beyond subjective consciousness, he is caught by the vernal force, careless about human preoccupations of moral causality or temporal consequentiality.⁸ His whole life has the intensity of a season, a Spring, a moment which is followed by the camera through an infinity of light and colour gradations: the yellow light of the sun, the green brightness of trees, the crystalline sound of flowing water. One day, an event occurs: the energetic *puissance* of Spring pushes the child to act in a cruel, inhuman way, torturing a fish, a frog and a snake to death. At this point, the fast montage of the episode, full of rapid cuts and of close-ups, is followed by the sudden appearance of music and becomes 'tonal', colouring the event with a strong emotional significance.⁹

The event is full of consequences. Depriving the child of his divinity, the master's punishment that follows brings about the capacity to share pain or feel guilt and to perceive time humanly, by teaching that actions

⁸ See Friedrich Nietzsche, "La visione dionisiaca del mondo", in *Verità e menzogna* (Milano: BUR, 2006).

⁹ In his book *Cinema 2*, Deleuze summarises Eisenstein's classification of four main types of montage: metrical, rhythmic, tonal and harmonic, of which the 'tonal' corresponds to 'intensive movements' in the shot (like movements of light or heat) that appeal to a tonality. See Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image* (London: Continuum, 2005).

have a before and an after. From that moment, the child becomes a conscious subject. The episode is part of a process of growth that strings all the events of his childhood along the thread of a linear subjectification, transforming the seasons of life into subjective stages. Representing the flow of life as an innocent, divine game that can only be perceived in its 'aesthetic' force rather than in its moral sense, the episode illustrates an Eraclitean conception of time.¹⁰ Still, in the last day of Spring, Sisal's cry announces an imminent future of guilt and redemption, the formation of a mature subject and his insertion into a linear time. This imminent destiny is now drawn on his tearful face, which has now become human to the point of 'inhumanity'.

¹⁰ See Deleuze, *Nietzsche e la filosofia*, 36.

The face

The inhuman in human beings: that is what the face is from the start. It is by nature a close-up, with its ... emptiness and boredom To the point that if human beings have a destiny, it is rather to escape the face, to dismantle the face and facializations, to become imperceptible, to become clandestine, ... by strange true becomings that ... make *faciality traits* themselves finally elude the organization of the face - Yes, the face has a great future, but only if it is destroyed, dismantled.¹¹

¹¹ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 171.

At the beginning of *Time*, a sudden event marks the destiny of the main character: Seh-Hee bumps into a masked woman who is coming out of a plastic surgery clinic, and whose face we cannot see. The successive scenes show Seh-Hee as a jealous and neurotic character obsessed by one thought: feeling tired of having the same boring aspect, and fearing to lose her boyfriend Ji-Woo, she wants a new face. In her delirious love, the woman comes to a self-destructive decision: destructing her face (and identity), or making it disappear, by replacing it with a new one.

According to Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, 'faciality', the codification of the body through its identifiable features, is a particular mechanism which allows the production of identity and signification, a mechanism which guarantees the recognisability of a subject and the production of meaning as the 'conditions of possibility' for human life to acquire a sense.¹² Through faciality, the authority acquired by the subject can in its turn ensure the power of the signifier, simultaneously sacrificing corporeal expressivity and its semiotics of gestures and perceptions, in favour of verbal language: the face as the flat surface of a speaking mouth.¹³ Particularly in cinema, with its immobility and sameness, the face neutralises the 'divine' capacity of the body to surrender to the flow of time. On the screen, it constitutes the flat, too human support for an equally flat metaphysics of time as a sum of frozen moments: "by nature a close-up, with its inanimate white surfaces, its shining black holes, its emptiness

¹² Ibid., 167.

¹³ Ibid., 168.

and boredom.”¹⁴ Even the affectivity of the close-up, despite its microscopic nervous twitches, is overcome by the immobility of the face; even the plasticity of its wrinkles freezes into the unavoidable significance of the face.

¹⁴ Ibid., 171.

One day, while she is in bed with Ji-Woo, Seh-Hee disappears under the sheet, as if the white fabric had become a mask to hide her face. As argued by Deleuze and Guattari, in no case does the mask serve to dissimulate, to hide, even while showing or revealing “[Rather], the mask assures the head’s belonging to the body”.¹⁵ From this function comes the difference between the face as a surface with its identifiable human features and traits, and the head, a multidimensional and impersonal entity, whose volumes and cavities are filled with the spirituality of tribal shamanistic rites. When Seh-Hee’s eyes, but also nose, mouth, cheeks, disappear, what is left is her head: the face returns to the multidimensionality of the body as a head, a sort of ‘flesh piece’ wrapping an emotional turmoil and giving it a plastic, or volumetric, consistency and a spiritual, sacred value. An intensive temporality animates this scene, where the masked face becomes inseparable from the atmosphere of the moment: Seh-Hee feels oppressed, almost suffocated, by her own face. For a moment, time flows intensely rather than being mechanically beaten by words, Seh-Hee and Ji-Woo cease to be two isolated speaking subjects and are taken into a sensuous spiritual connection. A luscious chromatism (white sheets, black eyes and hair, red lips and pillow) and a ‘material’ sonority (noises of love and cry) intensely replace words, marking the scene with a palpable quality. Covered by the sheet, Seh-Hee’s head becomes a voluminous surface to the touch of Ji-Woo’s (and our own) eyes. Ceasing to be a silent and flat expressive surface for a myriad of affective impulses (as in all the film’s close-ups), and breaking its link with verbal language and speech, it becomes the fleshy object of a voluptuous haptic vision. An intense gap is suddenly opened that plunges the linear development of their love story into a ‘divine’ dimension out of chronological time but full of sensations and affects.

¹⁵ Ibid., 176.

Affects and landscapes: holes and lines

Distinguishing two levels of reception of cinematographic images and identifying them respectively with meaning and affect, Brian Massumi defines ‘qualification’ as the signifying content of a visual or audiovisual image (usually conveyed by the verbal expressions of a face), and ‘intensity’, or ‘affectivity’, as the strength and duration of its effect (usually passing through the sensations of the body). These two levels are also temporally different: “Intensity is qualifiable as an emotional state, and that state is

¹⁶ Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual. Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2002), 26.

¹⁷ In Spinoza's theory, affection is the state of the affected body and implies the presence and image of the affected body (idea, representation). But the nature of affect is transitive and non-representational, experienced in a duration which includes a difference between states. See Spinoza, *Etica* (Roma: Editori Riuniti, 2000).

¹⁸ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 131.

static – temporal and narrative noise. It is a state of suspense, potentially of disruption. It is like a temporal sink, a hole in time, as we conceive of it and narrativize it.”¹⁶ With its strong affective force, Kim Ki-Duk's cinema is full of scenes which develop beyond the linearity of culturally defined meaning, opening measureless gaps in and between qualified bodies and things, intervals of pure change and virtuality. The paradoxical relation of affect to the body (as being ‘of’ it but always escaping ‘outside’ of it, in its past or in its future, always felt as a memory or a potential) unfolds as a vibratory event, an intensive state of the body exceeding itself and its own subjective confines or positions.¹⁷ The temporal dimension when flesh vibrates is a moment of inability to act or reflect, a ‘spasmodic passivity’, a total receptivity that paralyzes the body in what we, in a Spinozian way, might call a passion. The intensity of the cinematic image strikes us with the force of a ‘passion’, the in-between of activity and passivity, of body and screen. On the screen, the close-up can thus be rendered as a ‘reincorporation’ of the face into an affective, bodily dimension. Intensive (im)mobility, the affective temporality of the body, is different from linear action and speaking, the stratified temporality of the face.

In Kim Ki-Duk's films, the difference between meaning and affect is also coupled to a parallel, fundamental distinction between the meaningful, socially qualified nature of love and the intensive, unqualified force of affect. Deleuze and Guattari distinguish the linearity of love from affect and its de-subjectifying force, where the identity of the beloved object of desire is much less important than the strength of the affect felt. In this sense, love is associated to a form of re-subjectification, a relationship where one's body is captured by the image of the lover's face: “The most loyal and tender, or intense, love assigns a subject of enunciation and a subject of the statement that constantly switch places, wrapped in the sweetness of being a naked statement in the other's mouth, and of the other's being a naked enunciation in my own mouth.”¹⁸ In its cinematographic version, love appears as a means of qualifying and subjectifying affectivity between two bodies, submitting it to a chronological narrative that gives it the meaning and the sense of an eternal duration: ‘Till death...’

Summer

When, in “Summer”, the young boy Sisal passionately falls in love with a girl, his feeling acquires the force of an affect that involves his whole body into a further ‘becoming’. The metamorphosis of the character is transposed into a conventional narrative technique almost without duration and limited to a series of short, incomplete shots. It is the agitated sphere of adolescent love, an adolescent desire which sweeps subjectivity away in an instant, giving the lethargic body an energy, a velocity and a capacity to transmit and receive affect.

A woman, or rather an adolescent, draws Sisal into an affective vortex of transformations. The girl appears in the film not as a particular 'stage' towards the maturity of the woman-subject, but as the embodiment of the feminine metamorphic capacity to avoid enclosure into one age group, sex, or kingdom.¹⁹ The 'girl' that is in both woman and man gives the linear process of subjective development and growth an instant of reverse direction: as if possessed, contaminated at the sight of her image, Sisal blushes, laughs, trembles and jumps around, being moved by an intensity, a spasmodic activity/receptivity that takes him and his whole life out of their path. The camera follows him while he becomes a child again, and also an animal and a girl, dismantling all behavioural references and all social conventions of age, sex or humanity, crossing a threshold...

Although the rooms of his house/temple are divided by a door, the other side is always visible because there is no wall.²⁰ The door is a symbol of social conventions: when he crosses the invisible wall to follow the girl to the city, he breaks the social rule, while passing to a different condition, falling into a hole, becoming someone else... Making a hole in the straight line that is his life, love is the only force which can distract Sisal's face from the fixity of its human, male identity, and from its reflection in the repetitiveness of its habitual landscape.²¹

The landscape

The young Seh-Hee is crossing an irreversible threshold too. After the operation has cut and re-assembled her face, she must wait, before becoming 'someone else', for six months. This interval constitutes a virtual zone of non-existence, a hole in the film's narrative, a gap where she has been introduced by plastic surgery, and where she seems to disappear. Immediately before the operation, the image of her face reflected in a mirror made her sink into the simultaneous virtuality of her past and future, a suspended zone suggested by the intense, almost blinding, lighting of the scene. And when, during a six month recovery, Ji-Woo once meets her, her face is covered with a mask, a sign of her imminent re-identification. Rather than hiding or dissolving it, this time "the mask assures the erection, the construction of the face, the facialization of the head and the body: the mask is now the face itself, the abstraction or operation of the face. The inhumanity of the face."²²

The masked Seh-Hee appears to Ji-Woo in Baemigumi Park, the same place where the two lovers took pictures of themselves in the past, and which is full of sculptures shaped with giant bodies and faces. In its subjectifying role, the masked face of the woman finds an important correlate in the natural or architectural features of the environment. For Deleuze and Guattari, face-landscape combinations are related to the connection of 'faciality' with 'landscapity', the positioning of subjects/

¹⁹ On the concept of the 'girl' as the in-between of sexes and ages, see "1730: Becoming-Intense, Becoming-Animal, Becoming-Imperceptible..." in Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*.

²⁰ Federica Aliano, "Feriti dalla vita. Conversazione con Kim Ki-Duk", in Mosso and Pignatti (eds), *Il volto e l'anima*.

²¹ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 277.

²² Ibid., 181.

²³ Ibid. objects in space.²³ Face and landscape, the face as landscape, the face of a landscape: the redundancy of the combination is reinforced by a play of repetitions and variations, a repeated visit to the same place which creates the persistence of the characters and the exact temporal location of their love. Cinematographically treated with a series of close-ups, the park is thus 'facialised', and becomes a flat, mono-dimensional and stratified surface of expression.

After six months, a woman with a new face and a new name appears. It is See-Hee (not Seh-Hee) with whom Ji-Woo goes now to the park, and the new pictures they take in the familiar landscape form another temporal stratum superimposed on their past. Photographs become another instrument of capture, reinforcing the power of the lover's face, while also working as expressive supports for the faciality/landscapity and the subjective love/frozen temporality circuits. With its capacity to freeze time, photography distributes the affects of a life into quantifiable and qualifiable strata, filling its temporal holes with precise dates and names.²⁴

²⁴ See Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Kafka. Per una letteratura minore* (Macerata: Quodlibet, 1996).

Gestures and pictures: the Oriental and the Occidental

'Faciality' and 'landscapity' are not a universal semiotics but, according to Deleuze and Guattari, a code belonging to the normative identity of White, Occidental Man, whose biunivocal relationships and binary choices (black/white etc.) are reflected in the necessity to always distinguish and identify faces and places.²⁵ Being simultaneously influenced by Korean tradition (see, for example, the Buddhist characters and setting of *Spring*) and by Western culture (the bourgeois characters and the urban setting of *Time*), Kim Ki-Duk's cinema entertains a complex and somehow conflictual relation with the Oriental/Occidental separation. This relation is cinematographically rendered through the interwoven temporalities of his works, suggestively affected by the alternating presence of Chronos and Aeon. Under the influence of Chronos, the founder of Occidental time, a chronological tendency seems to prevail in the two films, in the ordered ritual and seasonal cycles of *Spring*, as well as in the repeated attempts to 'surgically' defeat and immobilise time, in *Time*. At the same time, the cosmic totality of Aeon, a god of a more Dionysian essence, overcomes the identity of the Buddhist monk and the meaning of his actions, also corresponding to the sense of continuous mutation that emerges from repeated plastic surgery. Drawing on Gregory Bateson's analysis, Deleuze and Guattari define the 'plateau' as a tendency to continuous intensity and mutation which is proper to the 'Orient', as opposed to the Western 'orgasmic orientation' (i.e. a tendency to discontinuity, climax and repetitiveness): an Occident and an Orient which are both condensed in Kim Ki-Duk's cinema.

²⁵ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*.

Apparently reinforcing ‘orientalist’ oversimplifications, the difference between (Oriental) climax and (Western) plateau defined by Deleuze and Guattari as two styles of moving, thinking, conceiving life and time, is not simply related to two geographical, historical or cultural entities.²⁶ For the two philosophers, the Orient is a concept, the definition of a quality, a trait or a gesture which is predominant in certain cultures, but which can be found or translated elsewhere.²⁷ A culture appears as an ecology of bodily rhythms that cannot be enclosed into any particular confine, and are endowed with a viral capacity to pass between different sites and times: culture as a function of variation, rather than the essence of an identity or a population. A ‘qualitative’ analysis of movements and gestures, actions and thoughts, reveals thus in the two films a transversal map of similar cultural tendencies crossing different times and places.

Fall

In order to cure Sisal from the excessive passion that finally led him to kill his unfaithful lover, in “Fall” the master paints a Buddhist *sutra* on the floor, and tells him to carve it with the same knife he used to kill, slowly and painfully, letter after letter. Transforming the rhythm of natural or bodily cycles (annual, diurnal, affective) into written lines and columns, the calligraphic gesture partakes of the divine, affective capacity to immerse man into the world, therefore appearing as a practice with a typically ‘Oriental’ rhythmicity. At the same time, writing is also always a striation of space, because it introduces in it a spatial and temporal orientation: “as if ineluctantly, inscription tends to striation – whence the mythic status of writing as a bearer of order”.²⁸

Taking calligraphy out of the realm of body and heart, the *sutra* scene shows it in its more disciplined, ‘Occidental’ aspect and in its metrical value, as a means of temporal stabilisation and spatial striation. Through a broken series of takes with different durations, angles and perspectives, calligraphy is represented in its ‘rigidity’, so that “the idea of calligraphic balance conjures up an almost Cartesian grid: one often learns ... to produce the outlines of a square bisected horizontally and vertically, and the character is to be centred around the centre of this square”.²⁹ The gesture of Oriental calligraphy is thus ‘Occidentalized’, while the subject is given his proper path and learns how to repent. Only after, when each letter is covered by the master and by two policemen with green, purple, orange and blue paint, Sisal’s gestures reacquire the fullness of their sensorial, qualitative dimension.

On the bi-dimensional surface of a sheet of paper (for us, a carved wooden floor), writing is always able to show, according to Jacques Derrida, a complex simultaneity, the synchronicity of many directions that will never belong to the same chronological line.³⁰ For the philosopher, a

²⁶ Thomas Lamarre, “Diagram, Inscription, Sensation”, in Brian Massumi, ed., *A Shock to Thought. Expression after Deleuze and Guattari* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002).

²⁷ This definition dissolves the rigidity of categories such as ‘the Occident’ and ‘the Orient’, in the delineation of two different ways to think, move and create, which can transversally cross different regions, and which are linguistically defined as West and East only to make them unrecognisable as definite geo-cultural entities: a style, a velocity, a plateau, are not cultural stereotypes but intensities that can be attributed to different individuals or group cultures.

²⁸ Ibid., 155.

²⁹ Ibid., 161.

³⁰ Jacques Derrida, “Scrivere sulla carta”, *Aut Aut* 291-292 (1999), 15-39.

cluster of lines and trajectories can thus inhabit the same written surface, simultaneously given to the eye in a temporal dimension different from the visual linearity of lines and columns. To the reading eye, Sisal's ideograms filled with colour seem to visualise a multidimensionality of many senses crossing the same surface at once, constructing a *trompe l'oeuil* that is only equal to the immediacy of a painting or a photograph.

The picture

From the multi-dimensionality of writing and calligraphy to a chronological technique such as photography - which, for its 'linear' relation with time, could also be defined, according to Deleuze and Guattari, as 'Occidental'.³¹ At a first glance, before the appropriation of the picture into the personal meaning of a recollection and into a linear subjective story, a perception of many elements at once nevertheless seems to emerge, establishing an immediate 'haptic' contact with the photographic print. In *Time*, this material quality of the photographic image seems to affect the whole film, not only in the extreme attention for the photographic composition and chromatism of every single frame, but also for the continuous appearance of pictures which, passing from hand to hand and from scene to scene, beat the time of the entire story.

When See-Hee is back with a new face, her past reappears with her. She goes to a date with Ji-Woo with an old photograph of herself covering her new face, showing her old self as a recollection, a fantastic image. Superficially, the photo-mask seems to indicate a stereotypically Occidental world where even the change of a face becomes a simple formality. At a deeper perceptual level, everything - the face and its illusory nature, the woman and her image, present and past - is given, simultaneously, in a *trompe l'oeuil* scene. The 'image', defined by Maurice Blanchot as the 'genetic doubling of the thing' (or of the face), and as a 'more' than it, is brought to surface.³² The paradoxical nature of Seh-Hee's photo-mask is reflected into an immobilised dimension, the impossible moment when the image, rather than disappearing into the 'dim evanescence of time', appears together with the real body of its own 'possessor'. Paralysed by the appearance and unable to recognise his girlfriend, Ji-Woo remains incapable not only to remember, but also to think and act, captured by the magnetic light lines that draw a phantasmatic, virtual presence on Seh-Hee's paper-face.

For Blanchot, the image is related to 'nothing', recalling an emptiness where it immediately disappears, erasing reality and reducing the whole world to an indifference where nothing can really be affirmed or can affirm itself. This 'emptiness' is shared by all phantasmatic images, such as ghosts, dreams or artistic images. Being always present behind everything, dis/incarnating the dissolution of every thing and its simultaneous

³¹ On photography as a technology of Western mass culture, see Walter Benjamin, "Piccola storia della fotografia", in *L'opera d'arte nell'epoca della sua riproducibilità tecnica* (Torino: Einaudi, 1991), and Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (London: Vintage, 2000).

³² Maurice Blanchot, *Lo spazio letterario* (Torino: Einaudi, 1975).

persistence, the image forces us to abandon ourselves, depriving us of all our subjective power and will. It is for this reason that the appearance of Seh-Hee's phantasmatic image provokes in Ji-Woo a state very similar to that of Zen *satori*: a revelation that precipitates him into an abyss. We can therefore echo Roland Barthes's conceptualisation of a close relation between photography and the 'Oriental' calligraphy of *haiku* poetry, where "everything is given, without provoking the desire for or even the possibility of a rhetorical expansion. In both cases we might (we must) speak of an *intense immobility*". Immobility as the affective capture of movement and gesture by the face and its image, or its virtual double.³³

³³ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 49.

Films and the crystal of time

The crystal-image may well have many distinct elements, but its irreducibility consists in the indivisible unity of an actual image and 'its' virtual image. But what is this virtual image in coalescence with the actual one? What is a mutual image? ... Contracting the image instead of dilating it. Searching for the smallest circuit that functions as internal limit for all the others and that puts the actual image beside a kind of immediate, symmetrical, consecutive or even simultaneous double There is a formation of an image with two sides, actual *and* virtual. ³⁴

³⁴ Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 66-76.

In cinema, the relation between Chronos and Aeon is reflected in two ways of conceiving the image: a dilatation which puts us directly in contact with narrative development and with the creation of a story; and a contraction which, in Deleuze's words, makes us see the smallest temporal unit. Rather than the atomic unit-frame, the smallest element of this contracted cinematic time is the relation of the actual image with its virtual double, not the shortest unit but the smallest circle, the image with two coexisting sides.³⁵ It is the image in a mirror:

³⁵ Ibid., 67.

The present is the actual image, and *its* contemporaneous past is the virtual image, the image in a mirror Our actual existence, then, whilst it is unrolled in time, duplicates itself along with a virtual existence, a mirror-image. Every moment of our life presents the two aspects, it is actual and virtual, perception on the one side and recollection on the other...³⁶

³⁶ Ibid., 76-77.

The virtuality of time and its represented images seems to be one of the main technical and thematic traits of Kim Ki-Duk's cinema. The virtual image is defined by Bergson as 'pure recollection' and does not coincide with mental images (such as subjective recollections or dreams), because the latter are actualised images that are already part of conscious or unconscious psychological states. In contrast, in both *Spring...* and *Time* the actual-virtual circuit is a crystal-image, a temporal hole outside chronological order.

Winter

In a luminous white “Winter” Sisal, now an adult, comes back to the temple and finds his dead master’s clothes waiting for him to be worn. The lake has frozen, solidifying its waters into a crystalline mass full of reflections and refractions, where Sisal’s life seems ‘virtually’ contained. The lake does not have to be traversed anymore, but he can walk on its surface: land and water, the world and its transient course, have now become one and the same thing. At this point the film realizes its crystalline consistency and makes it visible. A woman with a little baby walks on the frozen lake, hands her son over to Sisal and leaves in the night, falling and dying in the cold waters. The cycle is apparently closed; the film ends with a crack in the ice that absorbs the corpse as a bearer of painful recollections, while announcing the coming of another Spring. The story repeats itself, but with a difference: a new Spring, a new disciple living his childhood, a new life actualising the same seasons again and again...

Death

After Seh-Hee’s re-appearance behind See-Hee’s new face, Ji-Woo decides to undergo plastic surgery and change his own features. Six months after the operation, he is knocked down by a car and dies, his face totally disfigured, made unrecognisable by the incident. Death appears as the furthest stage of a becoming which takes the body to the unrecognisability it had aspired to. Breaking the relation of the subject with its self, death is, as Deleuze and Guattari and also Blanchot define it, the un-reality of the indefinite, not an irreversible passage but a movement which is never completed, an infinite, interminable process where “Everything becomes imperceptible, everything is becoming-imperceptible.”³⁷

³⁷ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 252.

Following the incident, See-Hee decides to become unrecognisable again. After a new operation, at the clinic’s doors a woman bumps into her. It is a repetition of the initial scene: the woman she meets coming out of the clinic is the old Seh-Hee. After one year (the same chronological period described in *Spring...*), the film ends at the same point where it started, with an apparently closed cyclical structure: the future has come, but it is a future that was already past in the first scene, where the same event had already happened, and is now about to happen again and again... A present image simultaneously appearing as a renewed past and a renewable future, the present and its virtual side.

In *Spring...* and *Time*, a whole year, a whole life, a whole film are condensed in one final moment, a crystal of time. By showing how perceptions are always doubled by memory, Kim Ki-Duk’s films make us perceive, as if reflected into a crystal, the event of subjectivity in its own process of formation, because “the only subjectivity is time, non-chronological time grasped in its foundation, and it is we who are internal

to time, nor the other way round”.³⁸ Sisal’s, Seh-Hee’s, Ji-Woo’s subjectivities are exposed through a doubled temporality, involving our own subjectivities as well. When subjectivity is shown as non pre-existent but as an emerging effect of time’s split between past and future, feelings and emotions can also be perceived as non-subjective forces, affects or tendencies without phenomenological and social qualifications, to be grasped in their intensities. The heavy affect, or sensation, of time and its indecipherable passage, becomes thus a force taking the body and giving it a speed, a velocity of change, a capacity to pass from sudden spasms to catatonic plunges. In both Sisal’s and Seh-Hee’s metamorphoses,

³⁸ Ibid., 80.

feelings become uprooted from the interiority of a “subject,” to be projected violently outward into a milieu of pure exteriority that lends them an incredible velocity, a catapulting force: love or hate, they are no longer feelings but affects so that the Self (*Moi*) is now nothing more than a character whose actions and emotions are desubjectified, perhaps even to the point of death.³⁹

³⁹ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 356.

Through this common de-subjectification, *Spring...* and *Time* actualise two different stories and times, exemplifications of the forces of Chronos and Aeon simultaneously at work in cinema. This double temporality is conveyed for example by the conventional, almost conservative, montage-cut of the two films, with its insistence on a narrative punctuation made of detailed shots and close-ups. Simultaneously, this narrative logic coexists with the qualitative, haptic treatment of photography and its a-temporal expressive chromatism. In this double crystalline temporality, the director manages to condense the intensive style of an Orient and an Occident which are not situated in any particular geographical or temporal location, but are dissolved across the world. It is like catching everywhere a bit of an Oriental Spring, the silence of a lake’s cold waters, a face and its exotic gaze, in the remotest corner as well as in the biggest metropolis of the planet.