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SEARCHING OURSELVES IN OTHER PEOPLE –  
A FEMINIST AND MARXIST KEY OF *TIME* (2006)  
DIRECTED BY KIM KI-DUCK

**Abstract.** The hypothesis of the article is that dynamic images reveal their meanings with the aid of an array of methods supporting the analysis. The selection of the methods finds its reasoning in the idea that a film suggests a fantasy story within the ideology of an era. In this context the spectator assumes a second-degree position, via his culturally structured desires and visions. Thus, the objectivity and the validity of the research is generated by the implications and the interpretation of various methods (formal and intuitive), methods supported by the scientific arguments of the initiators of these methods, as well as of those involved in producing images. Using the Korean director Kim Ki-Duk, in this case, this “coagulation of data” is used to explain, in terms of ideology, a vision of time, love, and ones own identity against a background of individual Asian cultures.

**Key words.** Kim Ki-Duk, Marxism, feminism, psycho-analysis, violence.

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The dynamic images imply a higher degree of complexity among visual and cultural products, since they find support for their imaginary in a component that is absent in static images, namely the evolution in time, space, and that of the characters. The methodological approaches of the dynamic images share a common ground with the ones of designed for the static images, yet are also specific and individualized in the use of specific language (such as the compositional analysis). This is done in accordance with the discourse construction techniques, mainly the setting and staging of certain frames and sequences.

This article proposes an interpretation of the movie *Time*, directed by the South Korean Kim Ki-Duk, by using formal methods of interpretation, like compositional interpretation, and intuitive methods. This approach is consistent with the modern issues of the dynamic images, integrated in a coherent ideology

(aesthetic, cultural). The in depth interview from the psychoanalytic method is "applied" to the characters of the movie, by means of the director's confessions about his own life, his world view. The cultural and gender studies from feminist theories, and the cultural critique of Marxism are also applied.

As a primary method for understanding dynamic images use compositional interpretation as defined by Monaco. This is presented in accordance with his point of view expressed by Gillian Rose in her seminal book, *Visual Methodologies*. The former offers a detailed vocabulary, meant to describe the spatial configuration, also known as *mise-en-scène*, and the temporal configuration, the montage connecting the two other components of a film: the sound and the narrative structure (Rose 48). For the staging, which involves using the frame and the structure of the virtual sequences, Monaco emphasizes three key aspects of the frames: screen ratio, how the frame works (open or closed), and the screen planes (frame plane, geographical plane, distribution of forms in dimensional space, and depth plane) (Rose 48-49). Another aspect of the *mise-en-scène* is filming the scene, and in this particular case, the shot distance (extreme long shot, long shot, full, three-quarters, medium, head and shoulders, close-up shot), the effects of shooting, according to Monaco, maintain a certain state (claustrophobia for recurrent close images, alienation and emptiness for the far away frames) (Rose 49). Some of the most important elements are: shot focus (deep or shallow),

shot angle (angle of approach, angle of elevation, angle of roll), filming point of view (character, third person, establishing, reverse angle) (Rose 49-50).

Regarding the montage, Monaco speaks about continuity cutting, which gives the impression of narrative flow and spatial fluency, he also discusses the role of jump cuts, where the images are unrelated, and the role of unmarked cuts, where one image ends and another starts. It is equally important the rhythm of the cuts, determined by how long each shot is held; for instance, a series of short scenes contributes to the accumulation of tension as the narrative climax develops (Rose 51).

As for the sound, Monaco notes three types: music, environmental sound and speech, and the background sound effects where one has to follow the concordance with the image, the counterpoints sound, for instance, contributing to the interpretation of the visual product (Rose 51).

The narrative structure of the film, for the films that have one, aims for the understanding the story that is being told and what happens to the characters.

Gillian Rose stresses that the method should be linked to other moving image analysis methods (semiology, for instance), since these components are relevant in the case of the film narrative, and that of the visually supported ideology.

Psychoanalysis, the second methodology used, consists of a series of theories that have to do with subjectivity, sexuality and the unconscious. Many of its key concepts were developed and revised by Sigmund Freud (1856-1939). Later, other

researchers have taken up and resumed his ideas, one being Lacan, furthermore nowadays psychoanalysis comprises a body of work which generates other directions in scientific analysis, especially that of the visual interpretation, where the method finds a strong relevance. In this direction we should mention Stuart Hall's cultural criticism or the feminist directions, among which the most significant is on gender studies, theorized by Laura Mulvey. Gillian Rose in *Visual Methodologies* justifies the "strong" readings of films from the psychoanalytic point of view, because Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis puts the visual is the center of subjectivity (Rose 102).

In defining subjectivity, psychoanalysis starts with seeing individualities as subjective, where we give meaning to the world and to ourselves through a range of complex and often irrational ways of understanding the universe. In this sense, psychoanalysis focuses on the emotional effects of visual images (Rose 103).

The unconscious, another psychoanalytical concept developed by Freud, is defined as a resultant of disciplining the impulses through cultural values and rules. Freud claims that gaps may arise between the conscious and unconscious, and that the unconscious is expressed in gestures, language mistakes, and dreams. Psychoanalysis, and implicitly the image analysis from the perspective of this methodology, is preoccupied with confusions, blind points/areas and mistakes (Rose 103). Referring to the process of reception, Stuart Hall, quoted

by Gillian Rose in *Visual Methodologies*, talks about the double determination of the image and of the viewer, since the visual discourses already contain possible interpretations, (culturally grounded after Lacan), and the subjects bring their own desires and subjective capacities, triggering situations where the images adopt a standpoint of identification with the message. (Rose 104).

Psychoanalysis also take into consideration the concept of sexuality, seen both as establishment and maintenance of sexual difference. Freud, as quoted in Gillian Rose's, *Visual Methodologies*, talks about the concept of castration in order to explain the process of differentiating children into boys and girls. Freud assumes that all humans begin life in an undifferentiated relationship with their mother. He associates the break from the mother and the beginning of subjectivity with the father's intervention. (Heterosexual) masculinity is a result of the boy-children feeling threatened by the father with castration, if they do not give up closeness to the mother (a threat made effective by the sight of mother's genitalia, as apparently lacking); (heterosexual) femininity, in ways less convincingly theorized by Freud, is produced by girl-children seeing themselves as lacking – as already castrated – and transferring their attachment from the mother to the father (Rose 106).

The discipline process, solved by Oedipus' complex, suppresses the deep desires of the child and thus produces the unconscious it (Rose 106). Moreover,

Jacques Lacan pertains to Freud's psychoanalysis, to structural linguistics and to structural anthropology via Oedipus' complex, as presented by Stephen Mitchell and Margaret Black in *A History of Modern Psychoanalytic Thought*. Lacan is placing the phallus in the center of symbolical understanding and gives meaning to genders by using cultural and linguistic terms (Mitchell et al. 203). Or, as mentioned by Elizabeth Grosz in *Jacques Lacan: A Feminist Introduction*, with Lacan, the masculine and feminine subjects are social and historical effects rather than a biological, pre-established given. The academic and political discourses are justified by sexuality. In order to be "I", the subject has to assume a sexual position, identifying himself with the social attributes meant for the man or the woman (Grosz 148).

The advocates of feminism later rejected Freud's theory, because it naturalizes women's inferiority, considering it an absence against a biological background.

Laura Mulvey's gender theory is derived from the feminist methodology. Presented by Gillian Rose in *Visual Methodologies*, the reference being made to the essay 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', published in *Screen* magazine, in 1975. This article is key to understand the culturally built subjective effect of the narrative cinematography (Rose 107). Mulvey researches the reciprocal make up of the psychic and of the social, and although a feminist, furthermore considers patriarchy as the most important social group engaged in shaping the subject.

Laura Mulvey carries on Freud's point of view, by stating that the man's role is that of watching and the woman's role is that of being watched, and that the feminine is perceived as absence (Rose 108). Yet according to Mulvey, in the cinema, the alienated subject gets closer to satisfaction through formal beauty and its play on his own formative obsessions either by choosing voyeurism (the woman's investigation of the castration complex followed either by punishment or salvation) or fetish scopophilia (the feminine figure is represented as a object that can be exhibited) (Rose 110).

An important element of this theory is the idea of a mirror, its origins being found in Lacan's theory. The mirror level is achieved when the children recognize themselves in the mirror, but this recognition is not accurate since the child is also aware that the image is not as such and this leads to alienation, when the subjectivity of the image is recognized. Psychoanalysis emphasizes the contradiction, the visual incertitude that develops between the identification with the mirror image and alienation (Rose 113).

This conception finds reflection when creating an image from a spatial point of view, or when having in mind the perspective adopted and the focalization standpoint. Following to Mulvey, the masculine hero takes over the depth of cinematic space (like the image in the mirror), and this idea captured in Kim Ki-Duk's film *Time*, in contrast with the surface representation of the woman. The

room is identified with the masculine hero, and the focalization is, in his case, deep (Rose 114). Other supporters of feminism shifted from the patriarchal centrality. Kaja Silvermann, in Gillian Rose's *Visual Methodologies*, shows that men too can be images; both women and men can watch, but never see completely (Rose 123).

If feminism neglects the class and race concepts, these are targeted by the Marxist methodologies, remaining in connection, linked with other ties to feminism. David Ames Curtis in *The Castoriadis Reader* defines Marxism as a set of ideas related with reality, not to enlighten the latter, but to change and justify it as not being real, allowing people to say one thing and do another, to pretend to be something, even which that they are not. Marxism became an ideology, an official dogma of the pre-established powers in the countries portrayed as socialist (Curtis 141). The founders of cultural studies that derive from Marxism (William, Hogart, Thompson), can be identified, as does Stuart Hall in his work, *Cultural Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, with an absolute and reductionist system of thought (Hall 78). Hall states that technology does not change social hierarchies, the common human values finding their expression in the cultural life of the working class (Hall 85). Hall later on moves away from Althusser's ideological theory, and maintains the idea of indetermination in decoding, which means that the experience of the audience is in direct relation with different ways of reading the text (Hall 88). According to the feminist theories, especially Cary Nelson

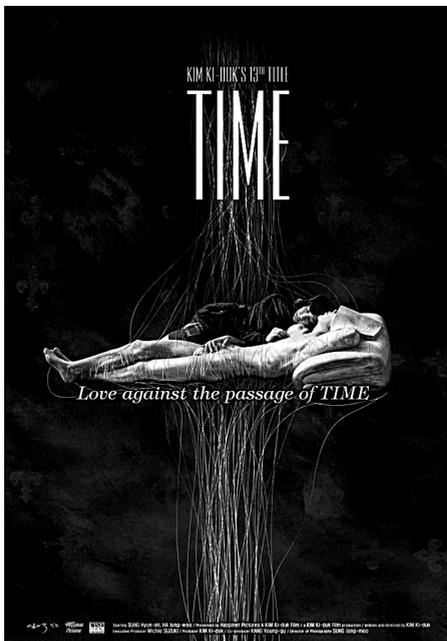
and Lawrence Grossberg, in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, we must make reference to the understanding of Marxist power as an absolute masculine power, whereas women are seen as powerless (Cary et al. 118).

Kim Ki-Duk, South Korean director, born in 1960 in Bonghwa, he lives in Seoul and studied in Paris, is passionate about painting. Yet he says he is more impressed with the sculptures seen in a Hungarian village, or in the street in Paris, than he is with the paintings exhibited in an art gallery, noted as by the biographer Marta Merajver-Kurlat in *Kim Ki Duk. On Movies, the Visual Language* (Merajver-Kurlat 17). The world he lives in, his life and artistic experiences, reverberate in his films, characterized as metaphysical and philosophical, and with a strong depiction of the cultural ideology of the Asian space.

*Time* is his thirteenth movie and the premiere of this picture was at the Karlovy Vary International Film Festival, on June 30th 2006. The narrative structure of the movie captures a love story that ends up in a routine. The feminine character, Seh-hee, turns to plastic surgery in order to change her face, hoping to reinvigorate this way her relationship with Ji-woo. Six months later, she comes back as See-hee, the waitress in the coffee shop where Ji-woo is a manager. She is more cheerful, adopting a different style, clumsy, playful, all this up until the terrifying exposure that triggers a burst of violence and a personality crisis in Ji-woo. He will, in turn, make use of plastic surgery, and when See-hee tries to find him again,

she fails because she cannot recognize his face. The encounter happens briefly, in the subway station, and finalizes with the death of “the second” Ji-woo. The only things left are the memories and the place where Se-hee was supposed to meet Ji-woo again.

The story seems to be inspired by the movies that have marked the experience of Kim Ki Duk, movies mentioned by Marta Merajver-Kurlatin in the director’s biography, *Kim Ki Duk. On Movies, the Visual Language: The Silence of the Lambs*. His films are about conscience, *Les Amants du Pont Neuf*, about love’s mysteries, *The Lover*, the love that reaches the universal, a feeling that can be achieved by everyone regardless of age, race and time (Marajver-Kurlat 12-16). This conception, as a starting point with a personal vision based upon cultural precepts, is symbolically illustrated by the movie’s playbill.



The initial shot already inserts clues opened to a complex methodological approach, favoring psychoanalytical, Marxist and feminist inroads in understanding the development of the movie. The door of the clinic placed to the left portrays a face representative for the yellow, mongoloid race, and the one to the right, represents the “right” one, from a social point of view, the same way the human psyche is “disciplined” by interdictions and taboos - in Gillian Rose’s terms, as presented in *Visual Methodologies*, in a Freudian and Lacanian descendency (Rose 104) - entailing a dominant model of white, Caucasian superior beauty. The wish for a face change is only apparently effect of an jealousy. In essence, the revolt against ones own face is a sign of a double rupture coming from the unconscious, as a sign of the subjects’ inoculated obsession via the same disciplinary measures: fighting time, in acceptance of a physiognomy inferior in terms of beauty, psychoanalytical problems projected against a feminist and Marxist background - the woman is what the man sees, but this object of the masculine projection has to be beautiful all the way to narcissism (one must mention here the mirroring - he sleeps, she looks in the mirror, while aware of the presence, respectively the absence of the man). According to feminist theories, the woman is just an object in a narrative cinematography who has as key attributes power, patriarchy and heterosexuality, as mentioned by Laura Mulvey (Rose 115), or a mask, a decorative layer that hides a non-identity, as stated

by Mary Ann Doane (Rose 117), the only identity that can be achieved is the image projected towards her by the masculine hero. This vision is also sustained by the film composition of frames, the close-ups, which, from Monaco's perspective, quoted by Gillian Rose in *Visual Methodologies*, emphasize claustrophobia (Rose 49), here the phobia of disintegration of the same face. Moreover, the camera assumes the masculine perspective, according to voyeurism and fetish socophilia, as mentioned by Laura Mulvey, and as briefly presented in Gillian Rose's *Visual Methodologies* (Rose 110). These close-ups insist upon parts of the woman's body, excluding the face (Rose 112), because the face now is being "done". Mary Ann Doane speaks about this spatial and visual organization as being specific to fetishism, because the framing of the camera is only for parts of the body, without including the face (Rose 112). Also, the sound is musical only in the classification made by Monaco, briefly mentioned in Gillian Rose's, *Visual Methodologies* (Rose 51) - harmonious, peaceful, opposing the dramatic aspects of the presentation, because the traumatizing experience creates a new complex, the feeling of eternal conquest of beauty, which breaks down all barriers of time and keeps love. Beauty is an obsession in the Asian culture and in the interview given to Jung Seong-II, published in the Korean magazine *Cine 21* (2002), and on the site [latrobe.edu.au](http://latrobe.edu.au), Kim Ki-Duk says that in the Korean society there are such inferiority complexes. Also, in a commentary posted on the site [koreasociety.org](http://koreasociety.org), the author

states that the movie is an obsession of Korean society for its physical beauty and metaphysical violence correlated with one's own identity. The obsession of inferiority is the result of an enrollment, the requirement that the Korean society is guided by the motto "think globally, act locally", after many years of conflict with the West and the northern part of Korea. This aspect is ideologically analyzed in the Asian cinematography by Jinhee Choi in *The South Korean Film Renaissance*. A more beautiful face is an illusion, because the photo (broken for a moment, suspended in time) that Seh-hee shows Ji-woo keeps the features of the Caucasian race, still not pure, and the woman that once looked different, returned to the clinic, to get back what she lost once, maybe because this face is not perfect either.

A central motif of the movie, with all the psychoanalytical, Marxist and feminist implications, remains the mirror. The movie begins with the eye that opens up, an institution of the double from the very start. From the scene of the surgical intervention, everything is doubled, everything is an illusion, a fantasy, false and continuously running towards finding the self. It's an universal symbol, each of us is trying to discover wishes hidden in the unconscious, and the sign of a defensive reaction in front of our own ego, mirrored, alienated in relation with time - as a flow of instants. The dual character of the symbol is associated in psychoanalysis with Freud's theories and is presented as universality and as an unconscious defensive substitute by Agnes Petocz

in *Freud, Psychoanalysis, and Symbolism* (Petocz 24). The same dual aspect matter/spirit, mind/body is defined in relationship with Freud's psychoanalysis by Toby Gelfand and John Kerr in *Freud and the History of Psychoanalysis*. Jones, quoted here, states that the psychological process is not separated from the physical process, and that the latter precedes the former. (Gelfand et al. 242-243). The same happens to *Time's* heroine, the decision to change her face is preceded by anger, outbursts of the unconscious that enclosed frustrations. In the work *The Cinema of Japan and Korea*, Justin Bowyer illustrates this idea with Kim Ki-Duk's cinematic examples, violence is a reflection of emotional pain (Bowyer 209), and in *Seoul Searching: Cultural and Identity in Contemporary Korean Cinema*, Fances Gateward affirms that the diabolical wish and the violence represent the cruelty of the life and the world we live in (Gateward 253). The mirror has several occurrences in the film. The eye will be followed by another mirroring, when the character Seh-hee becomes a double, See-hee, in Korean is only an inflection of the voice, she can see unhappiness in the mirror, because the man by watching won't find his face mirrored in that of the woman. The masquerade doesn't bring happiness. The evil is advancing, and, from a focus on the man, whose perspective was taken by the camera so far, there is a glide towards the other feminist theories that deny the absolute power supremacy of the man. He can't watch either. He also goes through plastic surgery, and the two cannot find each other anymore. The ritual

of the touching of the hands empowers the conception that the ego is established by watching the woman, and here also the man. They lose their identity, do not recognize themselves when the face becomes "another", the short scenes, the agglomeration of frames, rather simple at the beginning of the movie, build upon the tension of the final moment when the doubled Ji-woo dies, and this way he is triggering the punishment of the woman that lived with the illusion that she can gain power, that she can be something else, that she can fight the time and society.

As a proof of Kim Ki-Duk's passion for art in the film we have the sculptures from the park-museum, otherwise real, placed in Baemigumi, on Mo island, at 30 miles distance from Seoul, the artifacts belonging to Lee Il-ho. In the analysis posted on *koreasciety.org*, the sculptures are seen static figures, unchanged, silent witnesses of the love adventure. In these representations, the woman, and even the man, is without a face, a sign of universality given to this feeling regardless of appearances. The same idea is underlined in the film by the scene where Seh-see covers the face, a intertextual reading of Magritte's *The Lovers*.

*Dream*, another movie by Kim Ki-Duk, from 2008, can presented as a key of interpretation, retrospectively, for the idea of a unity between the passive (woman) and the active (man), whose androgyny is rebuilt at a certain moment, only after death. This time around the heroes are not able to live separately, because what he has in mind is put into practice by her, unconsciously, while sleeping.

*directed by Kim Ki-Duck*

In conclusion, by diversifying the methodologies, respectively the methods that correspond to the specific theories, the dynamic image reveals its meanings, tracing backward the route between the author's biography, reflected in his work, and the theories of time and the cultural conception of the era. *Time* is a film about anguish (a repressive social regime and an authoritative father), about human frustrations (searching of the self, overcoming culturally inoculated complexes), about the psychoanalytical

conceptualization of some cultural (Asian) ideologies that condemn the individual to closure and to behaviors that don't characterize him. It remains regressive, taking us towards a primitivism that doesn't oppress the individual. So far as the movie sustains that freedom is only beyond the objective time, the sacrifice and the violence transferred to the screen build upon this message: Orpheus can watch Eurydice only as being in another world.

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