

THE ORGANIZATION OF SPACE IN KOREAN CINEMA (FROM THE 1980s TO THE PRESENT DAY)

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This thesis is based on the Chinese character for space *jian* (or *gan* in Korean). It represents a door opening on a sun. In this thesis I try to explain the richness of *jian/gan* through an analysis of Korean films in the past two decades. This character helps me define Korean space as an “in between space,” a place of non-stop motion and perpetual transformation.

Even though the topic is Asia and cinema, the argument is also based on comparisons with other art forms such as painting, calligraphy, and aesthetical sources from the East as well as from the West. The question of landscape (mostly urban landscape) is the key to understand Korea’s modern spatiality. Therefore it is analyzed through every chapter of the thesis.

The first chapter is called “frame and screen,” because these are the two bases of cinematographic space. I first argue that the notion of frame is very recent in the Far East, and that the absence of frame in the history of Korean arts has a great influence in Korean film composition. The directors use different tricks to make us forget about the presence of the frame, one of them is to put material frames within the frame (windows, doors...). The use of symmetry and asymmetry creates emptiness. The cinematographic space is then opened to the viewer, the spectator is a guest who accepts himself as a looker, as the subject (the actor) accepts himself as a represented figure (he knows he is being watched). The screen then becomes an interface instead of a surface, a place where the inside world of fiction meets the outside world of the spectator. A door *jian/gan*.

The second chapter focus on material space (decors) and on Interiors and Exteriors. The very notions of interiors and exteriors reinterpreted from an Asian perspective becomes very vague. When I am inside I am in an interior, but what is architecturally true for a westerner is not socially exact in the East. Being inside means being *out* of society, out of it’s look. The attitude of the characters is opposite if they are in or out. Therefore the closed place is an intimate secured space (like the Korean love hotel *yogwan*), as the outside space is opened to risk (like the big city or the mountain landscapes). These two mustn’t be seen as opposite but as complementary and alternative. The use of recurrent places and accessories is analyzed: mirrors, aquarium...

The city of Seoul is considered as the center of every Korean space. Everything is organized around the verticality of the city. Seoul is a space of contradiction: of attraction and repulsion, of destruction and construction, of loneliness and nameless solitude as well as fame and social progress.

The countryside is analyzed as a religious landscape (where two complementary Korean aesthetics are defined: Buddhism and Shamanism). Spirits and humans are sharing the same casual space, so there is no place for fantasy in Korean cinema.

The last chapter is set on the notion of “rhythm”. To understand the Asian rhythm one must go back to alternation as it is expressed in the first hexagrams of the Yi King, and the theories of cosmological correspondences that include man in the big flow of time and space where everything alternates on the rhythm of seasons considered as natural cycles. From a modern (i.e. urban) perspective space and movement are organized on three different times “Attraction-Collision-Repulsion.” This is the basic rhythm of the Korean story.

Korean cinema is then defined as a calligraphic art of “trace.” From the landscape to the scars on the actors’ bodies, time leaves its traces everywhere. This is how alternation is never repetitive, but creative through this accumulation of traces. In complicated flashback structures, Time is recomposed by the viewer from all these pieces of space and the traces left. The dynamic of the film comes from the *distance* between these traces of spaces, compared to Zhuang Zi’s notion of *emptiness*. To create this dynamic the purpose of the director is to break space and movements with brutal flashbacks, still photos, text boards, multiplication of places, characters and points of view. The story is then constructed on the important idea of *rupture*.

This organization of space gives birth to stories with no end or beginning. In these films landscape is mostly a space of sensations. The body of the character is a receptacle which is opening out to the power and sensation of space. This is the unique sensuality of Korean cinema.

In conclusion I show that the values of Korean aesthetic are imperfection and ephemera. I compare cinema to the Buddhist “sand mandala”, constructed by the monks to be destroyed. Seoul, a city of perpetual construction and destruction, then becomes the symbol of Korean cinema. The big challenge of contemporary Korean cinema is the reconciliation of man (*in*) and space (*gan*) to create a modern humanity (*ingan*) and by doing so, breaking the equation modernity = westernization. In this new space the hero will triumph not by conquering space but by renouncing and accepting it.