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SPECTRES OF INSURRECTION IN BONG JOON-HO'S CINEMA

Raphaël Jaudon

Spectrality

It is a banality to say that Bong Joon-ho's cinema is a political cinema. His movies are full of characters diversely struggling against domination, capitalism, authority and the inner violence of the social order. Looking back at his whole career, from *Barking Dogs Never Bite* to *Okja* and *Parasite* (Bong, 2000; 2017; 2019), we cannot fail to notice the constancy of his critical work (Coppola, 2017, p. 109). Bong himself even happened to make it public in several occasions, supporting the Korean Labor Party, standing to condemn the drifts of financial capitalism, or firmly opposing Korea's involvement in the Iraq War (Jeong, 2016, p. 362). After his latest film *Parasite* won the Palme d'Or and the Academy Award for Best Picture, Bong was even mocked by U.S. President Donald Trump, who mainly attacked the film for being South Korean, but probably also for deploying a fierce condemnation of the upper- and middle-class contempt towards the poor.

However, I would like to show that Bong's commitment is not just about political themes, plots and public stance. Apart from these obvious signs, we can wander along another trail, consisting of faint

traces and half-erased footsteps, leading to a global picture of Korea and the world's most recent history. Following up these traces, I will try to reveal the presence of spectral images of insurrection in Bong's movies, i.e. images that bear the tormented memory of a political event in both content and form.

One interesting example can be found in *Memories of Murder* (Bong, 2003). The film deals with a criminal investigation which begins in 1986, during the last period of the Korean dictatorship. Politics is never the main topic, but draws something like a parallel scenario: at some point of the story, one of the characters briefly finds himself confronted to a political parade, disrupted by the rain and then by protesters. At the time, this seems to be of no further consequence. But much later in the film, as a new crime is about to happen and the policemen call for backup, they are told that not a single patrol is available, since all forces are requisitioned to repress a protest in Suwon, not far from Seoul. Thus the social and political context shows up bit by bit and briefly interferes with the main plot, inviting the audience to think about the paradoxical status of the police, dedicated to protection as well as repression.

The film welcomes the vivid memory of a time of struggle, and brings it back to its present viewers when they least expect. Yet this is not any revenant, but one that was facing the threat of oblivion: along with the success of the democratization movement in Korea came the will of «national reconciliation», the desire to move on and pardon former political criminals. *Memories of Murder* is released in this context, and Bong somehow seems to feel that the past is not ready to be forgotten, because it remains emotionally relevant. This is how ghosts are born. As Georges Didi-Huberman wrote, «*what survives in culture is above all the tragic*»: pathetic feelings, frustrations, unfulfilled desires and unpunished crimes (2017, p. 90). Hence the numerous links the film draws between the detective's work and historical inquiry, resting on what a commentator called «spectral historiography» (Jeon, 2011, p. 78).

There are two other movies by Bong that are haunted by political and insurrectional gestures. And strangely, both can be qualified as fantastic movies: *The Host* and *Snowpiercer* (Bong, 2006; 2013). I shall now seize this unexpected convergence as an opportunity to discuss possible relationships between politics and the fantastic genre.

Repression

In *The Host*, a giant amphibious creature emerges from the Han River in Seoul, then starts eating and kidnapping people, including the main character's daughter Hyun-seo. Many commentators have noted the critical background of the film, since it is an American scientist who unwillingly gives birth to the monster by dumping chemicals into the river, and later on the government tries to kill it by spreading another chemical called «Agent Yellow» -a name which explicitly refers to Agent Orange, a carcinogenic herbicide used by the U.S. Army during the Korean and Vietnam Wars for tactical purposes. Thus one can easily see *The Host* as a satirical, anti-American horror movie.

However, America is just the most obvious target. Another one would be the Korean dictatorship and the Gwangju massacre of May 1980, when pro-democracy student protesters were beaten and fired upon by the police, leading to an estimated death toll of at least a few hundred, perhaps closer to one or two thousand (Plunk, 1985, pp. 5-6). Unlike the reference to the U.S., this one is not an allegory, but a spectre: «something or someone that one cannot forget, and yet is impossible to recognize clearly» (Didi-Huberman, 2017, p. 12). Popular culture, novels and movies have long depicted ghosts as unappeased spirits, tied to the physical world until they can fulfill their desire for justice. The fantastic figure itself is inseparable from its political and philosophical imagination. Historical events, such as the ones that occurred in Gwangju, can therefore be considered «spectral» as soon as the truth has not yet been established fully, regarding the number of victims, the location of the bodies and the guilt of the perpetrators (Déotte, 2002, pp. 112-114).

In the early sequence of Hyun-seo's abduction, a thrilling shot shows the helpless girl staring at her father as the monster is swooping on her. The impression of fragility is reinforced by the choice of close framing, the creature being too big to be shown in its entirety. In a chapter of the book *The Global Auteur*, Jeong Seung-hoon claims that, in a Korean spectator's mind, the attack of the monster «overlaps with the image of a 1980s college girl protesting on the street, about to be killed by brutal riot police» (2016, p. 367). Although he does not give any precise reference, one could think of a picture taken by photographer Hwang Chong-gun during the Gwangju massacre, which appears in a series of photographs from the uprising edited by the May 18 Memorial Foundation (Katsiaticas and Na, 2006, p. 159), and is quite famous today because it served in various commemoration acts. It is clear that both images share a gesture of contortion, resignation and desperate struggle against an overwhelming power.



Figure 1: *The Host* (Bong, 2006).

We may go further in the interpretation process. This is not only the shot with the monster, but the whole sequence, that welcomes the ghostly presence of the past. Before the arrival of the girl, there is a fight between the monster, the father Gang-du and a few bystanders.

The fight takes place between two big trucks that firstly seem to draw a line of possible assault, but soon turn out to function as a trap for the characters (Figure 1). Again, Bong's *mise en scène* echoes the events of Gwangju, when protesters were brutally charged by the police, and found themselves caught between the buses they originally chartered to gather for the protest.

But rather than the historical events, what is implicitly summoned here is the fictional reconstruction proposed by Jang Sun-woo in *A Petal* (1996): in this movie, adapted from a novel by Ch'oe Yun, the Gwangju massacre is seen through the eyes of a 15-year-old girl and her mother who try to escape the police by running helplessly between buses and other urban elements (Figure 2). Whether Bong was specifically inspired by this scene, we cannot tell for sure, but the composition of the shot distinctly recalls both Jang's images and some of the best-known photographs of the Gwangju events. This detail, along with the general atmosphere of panic and violence, allow us to acknowledge the presence of the spectre.



Figure 2: *A Petal* (Jang, 1996).

In Korea, *A Petal* is one of the most famous movies about the Gwangju Uprising, and it can be identified as the matrix of memory

(Kim, 2002, pp. 104-110): Bong summons images of the protests, but only in a vicarious way, through the mediation of Jang's fictional work.

Now that we have identified this process, we can go back to the abduction of Hyun-seo. The narratives of *A Petal* and *The Host* are very similar: following a dramatic burst of violence, a young girl ends up separated from her family, and a small group of people is formed to rescue her. In both cases, characters don't even know whether the girl is still alive and worth looking for. This is a common feature of dictatorship eras: when caught by the police, political opponents are neither dead or alive, but disappeared. Well, this is precisely the type of situation when a memory is to become a spectre. According to philosopher Jean-Louis Déotte, spectrality is always related to disappearance: there is a ghost when a corpse is missing, which denies the living the right to even mourn the loved one's death (2004, pp. 356-357). In both movies, the story is mainly concerned by the consequences of these disappearances, and so are the characters. But we have to remember what Didi-Huberman wrote, in the wake of Aby Warburg's epistemological work: one can only comprehend the surviving of a pathetic energy through time by addressing problems of form (Didi-Huberman, 2017, pp. 115-125). This advice can prove useful in film analysis, allowing us to see *A Petal*, not as a mere source of inspiration for *The Host*, but as an aesthetic program.

In the abduction sequence, the attack of the monster repeats the framing and composition of the panic following the uprising: the frame focuses on the parent holding the hand of his/her daughter, then the camera moves in order to follow the characters, but too slowly, and seems to be overtaken by the global rush. When the characters finally drop hands, we understand that the girls have been left behind but we don't witness it directly; instead of it, we have a close shot of the parents' faces overwhelmed by terror, all of it filmed in slow motion. What is interesting in the comparison is that, in *A Petal*, the reverse angle never occurs: we don't see how the girl is caught up by the policemen, but only see it through the eyes of the mother. And later in the film, as the girl remembers the dramatic events, Jang abruptly

cuts from her weeping face to an animated enemy that combines the features of a soldier and a beast. Every menace thus tends to be allegorized, postponed or even to remain off-screen. The whole movie rests on a series of absent reverse shots.

Consequently, *The Host* not only summons the ghost of a past insurrection, but the one of an insurrection that was already a ghost, a forbidden or absent image. So, as Bong films the girl about to be crushed by the monster, he represents the exact moment that Jang could not represent in *A Petal*, except that military violence is now personified under the traits of a slimy creature. He accomplishes the missing reverse shot, thereby finding the strength to stare at a power that could not be stared at.

To deal with the Gwangju trauma, Jang also uses the motif of the «hole»: the girl cannot admit her mother's death, and refers only to her body «with a hole» –i.e. that was pierced by a bullet. At this point it is only a literary metaphor, but in *The Host*, the whole sequence rests on the idea of the hole as a figurative event. The monster's oral cavity, of course, is an unfathomable pit where people simply disappear without even fulfilling any alimentary purpose. But the most visible element is the father's mouth, which remains largely open as his daughter is being attacked. The whole body is stunned and turned into a yawning gap, a hole in the character's face as well as in the image itself. The political wound of the mother is incorporated by Gang-du, in the form of a figurative loss: he is not the one who took the bullet, but his body is pierced as if he was. Bong's aesthetics thus combines the victim and the viewer into a single body, which now bears the stigmata, and the responsibility of a coming revolt.

Rebellion

In a word, this early scene lays the foundations of the whole movie's spectral aesthetics. Bong sets the ghost of the Gwangju Uprising up, so that its memory can be reactivated anytime, when needed.

The end of the movie provides such an occasion. During the final fight, Gang-du and his family manage to harm the monster by uniting their talents. At this time, his brother Nam-il, who was previously defined as a former college protester, reconnects with his own past by ardently throwing Molotov cocktails on the creature. The spectre of insurrection comes back in the spotlight. Bong's aesthetics isolates the protesting body by playing on luminous contrast and the neutrality of the background, only made of industrial wilderness and a pale but dense mist (Figure 3). This contributes to the glorification of the gestures of revolt.



Figure 3: *The Host* (Bong, 2006).

One can also notice a formal scheme that unites all the fighting sequences. Several times the characters try to oppose the monster, with unequal determination and success: Hyun-seo is taken in the beginning of the film, then two homeless boys are attacked and only one of them survives, a few minutes later Hee-bong, Gang-du's father, tries to shoot the monster and gets killed, and finally Nam-il manages to harm and scare it with his Molotov cocktails. In any case Bong stages the confrontation with a strong sense of depth of field, repeating the same composition, with human figures in the foreground and the giant beast's jaws right behind their head. The first three encounters

lead only to defeat and death. Yet the final confrontation is slightly different: while keeping the same composition, Bong deeply alters the balance of the shot. The enemy is repelled and cornered in the back of the frame, whereas the characters are getting the active power they previously missed.

Following the hypothesis of a ghostly political scenario, we can assume that this ending sequence embodies Bong's response to history. In the Gwangju events as staged by Jang –and perhaps as thought of by the Korean people– there was still a missing image of the enemy, be it the assaulting policemen or, more generally, the dictatorial state. The past itself was a spectre, a history without images (Lee, 2014, pp. 109-110). *The Host* thus carries out the protesters' posthumous rebellion, turning what originally was an image of resignation into a possibility of victory. A commentator once wrote that the monster created by Bong was strangely weak, from a certain point of view: like human characters, it happens to slip on a wet floor or a strip of grass (Brinig, 2011, p. 95). It may be strong, but it remains subject to the laws of physics. And it is finally destroyed by ordinary people, not by any military squad or nuclear weaponry. That might be one of the reasons why it is able to welcome a political reading: as dangerous as it may be, the struggle for equality and justice is never a losing battle.

It may not be a coincidence that Bong Joon-ho kept on exploring political themes, a few years later, with *Snowpiercer*. The story is set in a post-apocalyptic future when humanity has been nearly wiped out by a massive failure in an attempt at climate engineering. The few survivors live in a train that is endlessly spanning around the globe to prevent people from freezing to death. The whole movie deals with the revolution led by lower-class tail section passengers against governing people of the front. The protesting energy that remained implicit in *The Host* is now led to its plain potential. What shall draw our attention is the bursting of violence, the instant when an inequitable situation turns into vibrant rebellion. In the film, this happens when Andrew, one of the confined poor passengers, throws his shoe towards one of the visiting officials of the front section.

Once again, Bong summons the spectre of a real political event: the very famous moment when Iraqi journalist Muntadhar al-Zaidi threw his shoes at American President George W. Bush Jr., in Bagdad, on December 14, 2008. This incident happened only a few years before *Snowpiercer* was released, so we can suppose that a large part of the audience still had it in mind; but as far as I know, its presence in the film has never been fully analyzed in an academic way.

Let's begin by pointing out that the shoe-throwing episode does not appear in the comic book *Le Transperceneige* (Lob and Rochette, 1984), from which the film is adapted. It is likely that Bong willingly set it up to echo the political actuality. We shall also note that the protester is shot from behind, thus imitating the framing of the available footage of President Bush's press conference; in both case the face of the so-called aggressor is hidden, and what is emphasized is the gesture itself. The fictional shoe is confusingly similar to the real one: a brown leather man shoe with a thick sole and curvy, highly visible seams (Figure 4). As the guards bring back the shoe to serve as a warning and prevent any further attempt to destabilize the train's social order, a series of two close-ups allow us to examine the item carefully, and reinforces the impression of *déjà-vu*. Moreover, a few minutes after the incident, Bush Jr. called for silence and pretended to resume his speech, but immediately made a joke about the fact that al-Zaidi threw a size 10 shoe -probably bringing up this detail to divert commentators from the political meaning of the event-. Well, in *Snowpiercer*, Minister Mason played by Tilda Swinton fittingly observes that this is not only a common shoe, but «size 10 chaos».

But what seems to have drawn Bong's attention is not only the actual incident between Bush Jr. and al-Zaidi; it is also the way it was absorbed and twisted by popular culture. For example, the silver plate in which the shoe is presented to Minister Mason can recall the copy of al-Zaidi's shoe displayed in «Mmuseumm» in New York City. The very fact of sanctifying the item ironically emphasizes the overdramatic and pathetic dimension of power. It also demonstrates the malleability of the political gesture, that can be qualified as effective as soon as it is fictionalized, distorted and played with by artists.



Figure 4: *Snowpiercer* (Bong, 2013).

Similarly, one could first be surprised that the throwing episode takes up a very short time in the film, and is barely visible because of the camera movements and the lack of light. The gesture is not as glorified as it could have been. But the reason is to fit to the original footage. Indeed, what made the al-Zaidi incident so famous is that it was immediately broadcast on the Internet, on CBS News YouTube channel, reaching high popularity among people from all over the world (the video has now passed 6 million views). The footage is of a poor aesthetic value: it is shot from some place in the audience, and the operator clumsily tries to zoom out to record the action. As a result, almost all the video is dedicated to the President's speech after al-Zaidi has been evicted from the room. The same narrative structure occurs in *Snowpiercer*, the incident leading to a long speech by Minister Mason, in a half-humorous, half-authoritarian manner that accurately reproduces Bush Jr.'s *ethos*. Bong's movie thus raises the problem of the circulation of images in the digital era, and states that the spectre of insurrection is only real when massively shared.

Gestures

Both *The Host* and *Snowpiercer* are based on a gesture of throwing. Here Bong's aesthetics pertains to a political iconographic tradition that

can be traced far back in time. It relates to a fundamental structure of domination, since the very fact of having to throw an object at one's opponent means that one does have access to (or doesn't want to use) regular weapons. The agonistic dimension of any gesture of throwing therefore mingles with a critical purpose: what matters is the dialectic between the strong and the weak, the dominant and the dominated, the professional fighter and the militant. For example, we find such a motif in the 19th century pictorial iconography of the French «barricades»: while royal guards have got horses, sabers and bayonets, the insurgents of 1930 and 1948 are often represented with rocks, simple work tools and shelters made out of daily objects –the unfairness of the fight can have both a rhetorical and comical function (Pauquet, 1997, pp. 103-107). Bong's characters make a similar use of makeshift weapons, be it Nam-il's handcrafted Molotov cocktails or Andrew's desperate shoe-throwing attack. In the ending sequence of *Parasite* too, the characters use kitchen tools as weapons to get revenge for their social humiliation. In doing so, they all claim the heritage of past revolutions and lay the foundations for an aesthetic community of insurrectional gestures.

One could also read gestures from an anthropological point of view, stating that the repetition of a same body configuration draws a link between protesters from different times and spaces. Every new occurrence reinforces the evidence that all these bodies form a political community, regardless of the context they live in and the enemy they fight. In times of massive political commitment, e.g. in the end of the 1960s, newspapers often displayed similar images of young people throwing rocks at the police, some of them shot in Paris, New York, Rome, others shot in Warsaw or Belgrade: «since the gestures are identical, so would be the political motivations» (Leblanc, 2009). In a more philosophical way, Georges Didi-Huberman's most recent work demonstrates how powerful this idea of surviving gestures is to our visual culture. Gathering images from various ages and artistic fields, he shows that the will to rise up is not only a permanent feature of human societies, but also of the human body (Didi-Huberman, 2016, pp. 133-141).

From this perspective, Bong's science fiction movies provide continuity as well as originality. The persistence of old figurative patterns both confirms their initial relevance and takes their critical potency into imaginary situations that address present issues (class struggle, authority, American imperialism...). It is of no coincidence that this spectral process occurs most vividly in two of the three fantastic movies directed by Bong Joon-ho. Because the fantastic genre allows him to create situations of a greater threat than reality can provide, the characters' ardent will to fight becomes even more inspiring. Gang-du's family and the poor inhabitants of the train thus establish themselves as continuators of the protesters that fought against the Korean dictatorship in the 1980s, then against American imperialism, and never retired from fighting. As he orchestrates the recurrence of all these ghosts, Bong demonstrates that fiction can be a powerful way of reviving and reshaping the people's protesting energies.

Bong also tries to draw our attention to the various uses that can be made of insurrectional gestures: we rapidly pass from a heroic celebration of the people's potency to a both comic and tragic meditation on human weakness (*Snowpiercer*), or the other way around (*The Host*). For it is one thing to lean on the ghosts of our predecessors, and it is quite another thing to learn how to deal with their heritage -*a fortiori* in the form of moving images-. As far as cinema is concerned, it means that any attempted revolt must come with a reconfiguration of the body and its dynamic potential.

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