

Confronting the Ephemeral: The Crystal-Image of the Present Moment in Hong Sang-soo's Recent Films

Viraporn Kitikunkamjorn, Bangkok University, Thailand

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Abstract

Hong Sang-soo's minimalist films, known for their non-linearity, slow pace, and everyday settings, delve into the complexities of memory, time, and mortality. For this paper, I would like to explore how Hong Sang-soo articulates the elusive concept of the present moment in his films, focusing on three recent works: *In Front of Your Face* (2021), *In Water* (2023), and *In Our Day* (2023). Drawing on Gilles Deleuze's concept of the "crystal-image", this paper will analyze how Hong Sang-soo's stylistic choices, including long takes, static framing, and fragmented narratives, create a cinematic experience that confronts the audience with the present moment. Through these techniques, Hong constructs a cinematic space where multiple temporalities coexist, fracturing the linear flow of time. By engaging with Deleuze's ideas, this paper argues that these films offer a unique experience of the present, not as a singular point, but as a multifaceted and dynamic encounter with the interplay of past, present, and possibility, to wit: past memories, fleeting encounters, and the uncertainty of the future. Through this analysis, we gain a deeper understanding of Hong Sang-soo's artistic vision and his ability to invite viewers into a contemplative engagement with the immediacy of existence.

Keywords: Hong Sang-soo, Crystal-Image, Temporalities, Cinematic Experience

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Introduction

Hong Sang-soo's films are a unique blend of minimalism and profundity. His stripped-down aesthetic, characterized by long, static takes, repetitive scenarios, and a focus on the mundane details of everyday life, often belies the rich emotional and philosophical depths his films explore. Conversations in cafes, chance encounters, and the consumption of soju are recurring motifs that, through repetition and subtle variation, reveal the complexities of human relationships, memory, and the passage of time.

One of the most intriguing characteristics of Hong Sang-soo's films is their ability to offer an experience rather than simply telling a story. This paper explores how Hong articulates the elusive concept of the present moment in his films, focusing on his recent works. Utilizing Gilles Deleuze's concept of the "crystal-image," this paper examines how Hong's stylistic choices and themes create a cinematic experience that confronts the audience with the present moment.

Deleuze's Crystal-Image Concept

Gilles Deleuze's concept of the crystal-image fundamentally transforms the viewer's experience of time in cinema. Traditional pre-World War II films often presented time as linear and rational, subservient to the spatial logic of action and movement. This mode of representation created a coherent, continuous narrative that aligned with a classical, clock-based understanding of time (Deleuze, 2002).

In the postwar era, Deleuze argues that our experience of time became more fractured and complex, influenced by the trauma and disorientation of the period. The crystal-image reflects this new temporal experience, encapsulating moments where the past (the virtual) and the present (the actual) are intertwined to the point of being indistinguishable. This creates a multifaceted, almost kaleidoscopic view of time that challenges the viewer's perception and understanding (Deleuze, 1989; Rodowick, 1997).

Encountering a crystal-image means engaging with a cinematic representation where memory, perception, and imagination are seamlessly blended. This effect is achieved through various cinematic techniques, such as non-linear narratives, fragmented editing, and the use of optical and sound images that do not merely signify external meanings but instead form a self-contained world within the film (Deleuze, 1989). For instance, in Alain Resnais's *Hiroshima mon amour*, scenes shift fluidly between a character's memories and current experiences, creating a disorienting yet immersive experience that mirrors the complexity of human consciousness and memory (Rodowick, 1997).

The crystal-image disrupts classical narratives' conventional cause-and-effect logic. Instead, it presents time as a continuous flow where the boundaries between different temporal moments are blurred. This aligns with Deleuze's interpretation of Henri Bergson's philosophy, which views time as duration (*la durée*), an unbroken and indivisible process (Deleuze, 1989). By breaking down the clear distinction between past and present, the crystal-image allows viewers to experience a form of temporal coexistence. This experience can evoke a sense of *déjà vu* or a profound connection to the characters' inner lives, as viewers are not just observing a sequence of events but are immersed in a temporal atmosphere where past and present resonate and reflect each other (Rodowick, 1997).

Overall, Deleuze's concept of the crystal-image transforms the viewer's experience of time in cinema, making it more reflective of the complex, non-linear, and intertwined nature of real-life temporal experiences. This cinematic approach challenges viewers to rethink their perceptions of time and memory, engaging them in a deeper, more contemplative viewing experience (Deleuze, 2000).

Temporal Experience in *In Front of Your Face* (2021)

Hong Sang-soo's *In Front of Your Face* is a poignant exploration of time, memory, and perception. The film's narrative structure and visual style create a temporal experience that aligns with Deleuze's concept of the crystal-image. *In Front of Your Face* follows Sang-ok, a middle-aged former actress who has returned to South Korea after spending many years in the United States. She is staying with her sister, Jeong-ok, and the film explores her interactions and experiences over the course of a single day.

Present and Immediate Experience

The present in the film is experienced through the protagonist Sang-ok's interactions and sensory perceptions. For instance, the extended scenes of Sang-ok walking with her sister Jeong-ok or sitting in a café with Jae-won employ long takes and minimal cuts. This technique immerses the viewer in the continuous flow of the present moment, reflecting Deleuze's idea of Bergsonian duration, where time is an unbroken flow (Deleuze, 2000). These moments of unedited continuity create an experience akin to Henri Bergson's concept of *durée*, which Deleuze uses to describe a form of temporality that resists fragmentation and emphasizes continuity and change (Bergson, 1911).

Sang-ok's encounters and conversations are also characterized by a sense of immediacy and presence. The camera often holds on the characters' faces, capturing subtle expressions and gestures that convey the nuances of their emotional states and inner experiences. This visual and narrative approach allows the viewer to engage with the present moment alongside the characters, fostering a heightened sense of awareness and connectedness with the unfolding events (Martin-Jones, 2007).

Intertwined Temporality and Memory

While the film's emphasis on the immediate present is prominent, *In Front of Your Face* also explores the interweaving of past and present through Sang-ok's memories and reflections. Sang-ok's recollections of her past career as an actress and her relationship with her sister are woven throughout the film, creating a temporal palimpsest where the past constantly informs the present.

The past in *In Front of Your Face* is not presented through conventional flashbacks but is evoked through dialogue and reflections. Sang-ok's memories surface organically in her conversations, illustrating how the past continuously informs and reshapes her present experience. This method aligns with the crystal-image's duality, where the past is always interwoven with the present (Deleuze, 2000). This technique can be seen in films discussed by David Rodowick, who highlights how memory and perception intermingle in modern cinema, allowing the past to become an active, living presence within the present (Rodowick, 1997).



Figure 1: Reflection in the Park

While walking in the park with Jeong-ok, Sang-ok reminisces about her past life and career. The park serves as a reflective space, both literally and metaphorically. As they converse, the serene environment and natural reflections (e.g., in the water) visually represent the merging of past and present. This scene embodies the duality and reflection characteristic of the crystal-image, where the physical act of walking through the park is layered with the internal journey through memory (Deleuze, 2000). Such scenes echo the techniques described by Laura U. Marks in her analysis of "haptic visuality," where the visual and the tactile merge to evoke a deeper sensory and emotional response (Marks, 2000).

Future and Anticipation

The future in the film is hinted at through Sang-ok's aspirations and fears, particularly her contemplation of her terminal illness. This anticipation is not linear but intertwined with her present state and past memories, creating a sense of indeterminate temporality. This non-linear approach to temporality is a hallmark of the crystal-image, as described by Deleuze, where the boundaries between past, present, and future are blurred, creating a continuous temporal flow (Deleuze, 2000).



Figure 2: Evening Conversation with Jae-won

In the evening, as Sang-ok and Jae-won continue their conversation over drinks, Sang-ok reveals her terminal illness. This revelation brings a new layer to their interaction, where the future's uncertainty casts a shadow over the present moment. The scene's melancholic tone and introspective dialogue highlight the interplay of past memories, present realities, and future uncertainties, epitomizing Deleuze's concept of indiscernibility, where different

temporal layers are indistinguishable (Deleuze, 2000). This blending of temporalities aligns with theories on cinematic time, such as those discussed by Mary Ann Doane, who explores how cinema can manipulate and represent different temporal experiences (Doane, 2002).

In Front of Your Face exemplifies Deleuze's crystal-image through its intricate portrayal of time. The film's narrative and stylistic elements create a complex temporal experience where the past, present, and future are interwoven and reflective. By invoking memory, perception, and anticipation, Hong Sang-soo's *In Front of Your Face* engages the viewer in a contemplative exploration of the ephemeral nature of the present moment and the fluidity of time (Hibberd & Beugnet, 2022).

Narrative Structure and Temporal Fluidity in *In Our Day* (2023)

Hong Sang-soo's film *In Our Day* continues his exploration of human relationships and the passage of time, employing his signature narrative techniques of fragmented timelines and parallel stories. The film is structured around two interwoven storylines that reflect the experiences of two characters at different stages of their lives, exploring themes of memory, identity, and the flow of time. The film's structure, which intercuts between the younger and older versions of the protagonists, creates a disruption of linear chronology. This non-linear approach to time mirrors the way memories and recollections often surface in the present, blurring the boundaries between past and present.

Storyline 1: The Elder Artist. An aging artist reflects on his past while facing present challenges, such as creative blocks and regrets about past relationships. His interactions with a young admirer reveal his contemplation of mortality and how his memories continuously shape his current identity. This storyline underscores the artist's internal struggle between his past achievements and present stagnation, highlighting how memory and identity are inextricably linked (Deleuze, 2000).

Storyline 2: The Young Woman. A young woman at a life crossroads faces societal pressures and personal aspirations. Her encounters with friends and family highlight the uncertainty and fluidity of youth, blending discussions about the future with reflections on past decisions. This storyline emphasizes the formative nature of experiences and how the anticipation of the future is often colored by past choices and regrets (Marks, 2000).



Figure 3: Juxtaposition of the elder artist and the young woman scene

In Our Day employs a dual narrative structure that follows two interwoven storylines: an elder artist reflecting on his past and a young woman navigating her present. This structure allows for a continuous dialogue between different temporal perspectives, emphasizing the cyclical nature of life. The elder artist's memories and regrets are juxtaposed with the young woman's aspirations and uncertainties, creating a dynamic interplay between past experiences

and present realities. This narrative approach reflects David Bordwell's (1985) theory of cognitive film studies, which suggests that films can manipulate temporal structures to reflect the subjective experience of time. By intercutting between the two storylines, Hong Sang-soo creates a sense of temporal fluidity, where the past is not a distant memory but an active, living presence that shapes the characters' present experiences.

In *In Our Day*, dialogue plays a crucial role in blending past and present. Characters often reflect on their past experiences during conversations, seamlessly integrating memories into the present narrative. For instance, the elder artist's discussions with his young admirer frequently trigger reflections on his past achievements and failures. These reflections are not presented as separate flashbacks but are woven into the ongoing dialogue, creating a continuous temporal flow. This technique aligns with Laura U. Marks's (2000) concept of haptic visuality, where the sensory and emotional qualities of memory are vividly brought to life through film. By integrating past reflections into present conversations, Hong Sang-soo creates a haptic experience that allows viewers to feel the weight of the characters' memories. This approach enhances the film's immersive quality, inviting viewers to engage deeply with the characters' internal landscapes.

Hong Sang-soo's use of cinematic techniques further reinforces the blending of past and present. Long takes, static framing, and naturalistic dialogue immerse viewers in the characters' present moments while simultaneously evoking their past experiences. These techniques create a temporal atmosphere where the boundaries between past and present are blurred, embodying Deleuze's concept of the crystal-image.

In one scene, the elder artist and his young admirer discuss his past work. As the artist speaks, the film transitions seamlessly into visual and auditory flashbacks of his creative process and past relationships. These flashbacks are interwoven with the present dialogue, illustrating Deleuze's notion that the actual and virtual coexist and reflect each other within the crystal-image (Deleuze, 2000).

The seamless integration of memories into the present narrative in *In Our Day* reflects the characters' internal landscapes, offering a nuanced depiction of time and memory. This approach aligns with Mary Ann Doane's (2002) exploration of cinematic time, which emphasizes how films can manipulate temporal structures to reflect psychological and emotional states.

By blending past and present, *In Our Day* invites viewers to experience time as a fluid process, where memories are not isolated events but integral parts of the present moment. This blending challenges conventional linear narratives, offering a more complex and realistic portrayal of human consciousness and memory. The film's narrative and stylistic elements create a contemplative space for viewers to appreciate the intricate interplay of temporalities that define each moment.

Hong Sang-soo's *In Our Day* exemplifies the blending of past and present through its narrative structure, dialogue, and cinematic techniques. By employing a dual narrative and integrating memories into the present dialogue, Hong creates a film that reflects Deleuze's concept of the crystal-image, where the actual and virtual coexist in a continuous temporal flow. This approach enhances the film's immersive quality, inviting viewers to engage deeply with the characters' internal landscapes and appreciate the complex interplay of temporalities that shape human experience.

Temporal Experience in *In Water* (2023)

In Water is a 2023 film by South Korean director Hong Sang-soo that follows a young man, Seon-woo, who travels to a small coastal town to scout locations for a movie he plans to make. Accompanied by his friends, Ji-yeong and Seung-jun, Seon-woo spends his days exploring the picturesque surroundings, discussing their creative ambitions, and reflecting on their lives and relationships. The narrative is characterized by its minimalist style, a hallmark of Hong Sang-soo's work. The interactions between the characters are naturalistic, often unfolding in long, static takes that capture the subtleties of their conversations and emotions. The film's contemplative pace allows for a deep exploration of the characters' inner worlds, highlighting themes of artistic struggle, the passage of time, and the complexity of human connections (Marks, 2000). As the story progresses, Seon-woo's vision for his film becomes intertwined with his personal journey, blurring the lines between reality and imagination. The serene coastal landscape serves as a backdrop for moments of introspection and quiet revelation, emphasizing the film's meditative quality (Deleuze, 2000).

Present, Past, and Future in *In Water*

Hong Sang-soo's *In Water* effectively creates the crystal-image by integrating the characters' present actions and conversations with their memories and future aspirations. This integration can be observed in various scenes throughout the film.

The Present: In "Water," the concept of the present is conveyed through the everyday interactions of Seon-woo, Ji-yeong, and Seung-jun as they explore the coastal town. Drawing on Deleuze's (2000) notion of the time-image, the film's long, static takes and naturalistic dialogue create a sense of immediacy and presence, immersing the audience in the characters' experiences. A prime example of this is the seaside conversation scene, where the camera lingers on the characters as they discuss their film project. The deliberate pacing and unhurried framing allow the audience to fully inhabit the scene, to experience the present moment alongside the characters. This aligns with Vivian Sobchack's (1992) phenomenological approach, which emphasizes the embodied nature of film viewing. By eschewing traditional narrative techniques in favor of a more observational style, "Water" invites the audience to engage with the film not merely as a story, but as a sensory experience, a lived moment in time.



Figure 4: Seaside conversation

This focus on the present also resonates with Laura Marks' (2000) concept of haptic visuality, which suggests that films can engage the viewer's sense of touch through visual cues. In the

seaside scene, the gentle lapping of waves, the warm sunlight on the characters' faces, and the rustling of leaves in the wind all contribute to a tactile experience, further grounding the audience in the present moment. By prioritizing sensory immersion over narrative momentum, "Water" creates a cinematic experience that is both immediate and enduring.

The Past: The portrayal of memory in *In Water* resonates with Henri Bergson's concept of *durée*, which describes time as a continuous flow. Memories dynamically interact with present perceptions (Bergson, 1911), a key aspect of Deleuze's crystal-image. Instead of using traditional flashbacks, the film uses dialogue and character interactions to evoke memories, creating a continuous temporal flow that mirrors real-life reminiscence (Bordwell, 1985).

A notable scene illustrating this technique occurs when Seon-woo discusses his new film project. He recalls a previous project that failed, and the dialogue fluidly transitions between his past disappointment and present aspirations. This merging of past and present exemplifies the crystal-image, where memories are integral to the current experience (Rodowick, 1997). Laura U. Marks' concept of haptic visuality (Marks, 2000) supports this, suggesting that film can evoke the sensory and emotional qualities of memory. The naturalistic dialogue and intimate cinematography in *In Water* create a haptic experience, allowing viewers to feel the weight of Seon-woo's memories.

Vivian Sobchack's phenomenological approach posits that cinema is an embodied experience (Sobchack, 1992). In *In Water*, memories are woven into the present narrative, engaging viewers in a reflective process that invites them to consider how their past influences their current perceptions. Mary Ann Doane (2002) highlights that films can manipulate temporal structures to reflect psychological states. In *In Water*, the seamless integration of memories into the present mirrors the characters' internal landscapes, offering a nuanced depiction of time and memory. By blending past and present, *In Water* exemplifies the concept of film as an experiential medium. It invites viewers to experience time as a fluid process where memories actively shape the present. This approach aligns with theories of sensory cinema and phenomenology, demonstrating how film can engage viewers on multiple sensory and emotional levels.

The Future: The future in *In Water* is suggested through the characters' plans and dreams, particularly Seon-woo's envisioned film. The act of scouting locations and discussing potential storylines embodies their hopes and uncertainties about the future. A scene that encapsulates this is when Seon-woo and his friends imagine different scenarios for the film they intend to make. They discuss various possibilities, blending their current creative process with future projections. This discussion creates a virtual layer of future possibilities that coexist with the present, highlighting the crystal-image's interplay of actual and virtual (Doane, 2002).

In Water exemplifies Deleuze's crystal-image through its intricate portrayal of time. The film's narrative and stylistic elements create a complex temporal experience where the past, present, and future are interwoven and reflective. By employing a minimalist style and focusing on naturalistic interactions, Hong Sang-soo captures the fluidity of time and the complexity of human experience, providing a contemplative viewing experience that resonates with Deleuze's philosophical insights on cinema.

Conclusion

Hong Sang-soo's films present a profound exploration of the ephemeral nature of existence through his distinct stylistic choices and thematic focus. By employing long takes, zooms, naturalistic dialogue, and narrative repetition, Hong creates a cinematic experience that immerses the audience in the complexities and layers of real life. These techniques capture the fluidity of the present moment, enabling viewers to experience both the actual and the virtual simultaneously. This approach not only heightens the audience's awareness of the present but also invites them to reflect on its richness and transience.

Through this method, Hong's films embody Gilles Deleuze's concept of the crystal-image. By presenting a layered, multifaceted depiction of time, where the present moment becomes a dynamic intersection of past, present, and future, Hong challenges traditional cinematic narratives. His films dissolve the clear distinctions between different temporalities, creating a continuous temporal flow that resonates with the audience's own experiences of time and memory.

The seamless integration of past memories and present realities, as well as the anticipation of future possibilities, invites viewers to engage deeply with the immediacy of existence. This intricate interplay of temporalities, where past influences present and future aspirations are woven into current experiences, offers a more holistic and realistic portrayal of human consciousness and memory. By doing so, Hong's films provide a contemplative space for viewers to appreciate the transient beauty of each moment.

In conclusion, Hong Sang-soo's cinematic articulation through the crystal-image serves as a powerful tool for confronting the ephemeral nature of life. His films depict the fluidity and complexity of time and encourage a deeper engagement with the present moment. This approach aligns with contemporary theories of sensory cinema and phenomenology, demonstrating how film can profoundly engage viewers on multiple sensory and emotional levels. Through his unique cinematic language, Hong Sang-soo challenges viewers to embrace the immediacy of existence, fostering a deeper appreciation for the intricate tapestry of temporal experiences that define human life.

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Contact email: viraporn.k@bu.ac.th