

Her: Sung Hwan Kim’s Wormhole

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Her: “A wormhole is what connects a white hole with a black hole, so it’s something that connects two opposites and you move immediately from the white hole to the black hole through a wormhole.”

The videotape **Her** is credited to Sung Hwan Kim, but the piece seems to be an elaborate escape vehicle from the self as a discrete comprehensible entity; a jettisoning of conventional notions of gender specificity and ego integrity - and not least authorship.

The point of view is continually shifting and unstable. Indeed a viewer might imagine that the maker has already disappeared before the film has even begun, and that the tape has been posthumously produced by the female subject/object/author/incarnation. “I am her,” states a title card at the beginning over the image of a male protagonist (played by Kim).

The tape begins with the female voice speaking over generic newsreel footage of bombs dropping in slow motion - aestheticized, nostalgic - they could be a flock of migrating birds.

Her: “He said, “This film should start with a motive. Please use this image of bombs falling.”

Then Sung Kim appears in a room facing the camera holding a shotgun microphone. This establishes what purports to be a self-exploration or self-definition - a man (Kim) in a room in an anonymous apartment building recording his spontaneous (?) observations, situating himself in the “here and now” , as it were. However, on-screen text over his image interjects:

“I am her. I am not him.”

This interplay of voice and text and image poses the question that will continually present itself: who is the “I” of the piece? This “I” is a slippery and elusive one, which seems to slide between subject and object, eliding differences and confusing subjectivities.

Running throughout “Her” is an attempt to combine opposites: male and female, the intuitive and the rational, war and peace, sacred and secular, self and other.

This dialectical strategy is called into play most notably by the problem of sexual differentiation and its attendant demands or requirements on the respective sexes - who may or may not be comfortable in their assigned roles.

Sexual love for many people offers a brief release from the solitary self, a merging, however momentary, with the other. Romantic love itself often involves an experience of becoming lost in the love object, a loosening of the boundaries of the ego. But this experience, though sought after, is not to be found by our protagonist in **Her**, at least not through the traditional channels. There are certain problems of communication. To quote from Sung Kim’s text, “**Her**” :

“When there was an agreement, she said “I understand you,” but he was never understood. “I understand” was a theatrical line that created the emotion of agreement without any understanding at work.”

The romantic relationship is understood as a series of empty gestures. The other is never really known and the lovers never really get outside of themselves.

Her (putting fake tears in eyes with an eyedropper):
“I said I did not know anything about him. How will I know him from now on? Romances of this kind have been a repetition of one kind of drama. This is why romantic films are always the same.”

In Chapter 5 the Man and Woman disrobe in front of a backdrop that suggests the Judeo-Christian Tree of Knowledge in the Garden of Eden. The Man undresses with serene aplomb, whereas the Woman, although matter-of-fact, is awkward, uncertain. They scarcely look at each other. For her, it may be demureness; for him, it seems to be disinterest. At one point he finally turns to look at her and reaches toward her. But his hand extends past her and reaches for a cigarette proffered by the hand of an off-screen male. She folds her arms in apparent discomfiture.

Later he offers the cigarette - the traditional symbol of the closure of a successful sexual liaison - to her. She declines and begins putting her clothes on.

After the disrobing scene, which is without erotic spark and leads nowhere, a brief shot shows a phallic stand-in - a model airplane - flying towards (assaulting?) the supine woman.

Then follows a series of shamanistic rituals, as if Sung Kim is summoning the spirits to facilitate his fusion with the Female. Their subsequent dream-like coupling is passionless. A going-through the motions, similar to their empty gestures as they act out scenes from movies about love made impossible by alienation. In these scenes he is unable to look at her. He looks instead into the mirror/camera ? as if to seduce the one just off-screen rather than the present other.

The male protagonist seemingly wants to participate in the world of heterosexual relationships - but he finds it empty, a sham. If romance is a hollow ritual, a ruse to facilitate pair bonding, sexual union is a primitive activity akin to the instinctual behavior of insects. As one of the incidental characters, a Hawaiian woman in a “man-in-the-street” interview sequence, states (though she is obviously parroting the author’s lines):

“...Before I didn’t know this expression, ‘make love’. This must be the process of illusion. And one must realize why they change the verb to its past tense after disillusion: ‘made love’ .”

The tape is punctuated by passages wherein the male character engages in certain rituals suggestive of shamanistic practices in what seems to be an attempt to achieve fusion ? or even

transformation.

However, given all the problems of temporary fusion or coupling, incorporation of the other into oneself turns out to be the only solution.

The Transformation

The transformation is already underway when Sung Kim, armed with an absurdly long and imposing shotgun microphone, interviews Her about her relationship to and feelings for him. This sequence has the feel of an interrogation ? the woman is treated almost as a prisoner of war. As his questions begin to confuse their respective identities they take on a more threatening tone:

HIM: Do you know my eyes?
HER: They’re brown & big.
HIM: Do you know my body?
HER: You’re hips are narrow and your calves are wide.
HIM: Do you know where I’m from?
HER: You’re from Korea.
HIM: What did I learn there?
HER: You learned to speak English.
HIM: Have you been to Korea?
HER: No.
HIM: Why did you go to Korea?
HER: ...
HIM: Why did you interview the Korean student?
HER: ”

This sequence is followed by one of several interstitial segments where Sung Kim engages in various ritual actions, usually wearing or employing some sort of shamanistic accouterment. In this scene, wearing hieratic headgear, he magically bounces across a beachscape, as though performing an incantation to facilitate the transformation.

A brief return to the interview/interrogation is followed by a sequence wherein Hong Park, the Korean student who after winning the Golden Bell (a quiz show testing contestants’ knowledge of facts) sits alone in a room struggling to come up with a single spontaneous utterance about the here and now. One presumes this tongue-tied youth stands in for Kim’s younger self ? full of learning but unable to speak a self-generated observation). The tape returns to the interview:

HIM: Why do you care for me?
HER: I don’t know ...
HIM: Why do you care for me?
HER: 1000 reasons.
HIM: Do you expect me to do the same?
HER: Yeah, sorta ...
HIM: Can you read this?

The expectation of reciprocity seems to be too much, and precipitates the breaking point. In the following scene the transformation becomes manifest. Sung Kim projects himself into the Woman: a final instantiation of a continuing exchange whereby the woman flows into Sung Kim, and vice versa. The tongue-tied fact-monger covets Her voice, her fluency of emotional and physical expression, but refuses to go through the traditional forms of “relationship” . He takes a short cut.

Her (spoken with his voice - lip-sync): I want you to feel something strong. [...] I hope you’re not afraid of inhabiting the same place at once (or the illusion of inhabiting the same place at once). Something...someone bursting thru you being inside of you. Total togetherness...like a penetration. I hope you’re not afraid of that.

His voice literally supplants her own, and from her visage comes his voice, precisely lip-synced to the movements of her mouth. However, whereas earlier the woman speaks Sung Kim’s lines, now he speaks her lines - as her but in his own voice.

In his text accompanying the tape, Kim writes:
“So, in a way, love acknowledged the separation of two bodies. [...] But what he wanted, actually, was for the object of love to have been inside him.”

But what follows is the opposite: rather than receiving or consuming the object of love within him, he has invaded the desired object and taken it over. The question of the authenticity of this transubstantiation remains in question, however. Is he using her image as a vessel, a receptacle or merely as a hideout?

So finally the idea of “relationship” is abandoned; instead there is old-fashioned conquest, even rape. In the end, he remains the penetrating male, which brings us back to war as metaphor.

He is cool, detached, (embodying) with a tradition of Western ratiocination and empiricism within him. He is trapped in phallocentric culture (symbolized by the oversized phallic microphone) in which the Other represents Nature - in touch with mysterious bodily sensations, intuitive and outside of the realm of rationality. The film would be his wormhole, but in the end he has no place to go. Where is the third gender?

The tape begins and ends with bombs dropping - a war is in progress - followed by a sequence of images of Kim prone or prostrate with audio of gunfire and explosions - implying that he has been wounded (penetrated) on a battlefield of some sort. The tape is rife with such references to annihilation and self-erasure, though most not as literal.

“Dealing with the same phenomena in the world that she experienced, he composed a different perception of the world, or re-composed how she saw the world. The sound they heard, things they saw, their eyes, ears, his body, and her body were only tools. He said, “Using these same tools, I can make a different composition of the world. This different composition is the other.” She was his double. He was her double. He was his double.”