

Nose Nose Nose EYES!: Korean Horror and Naturalist Sensibility

Seung-hwan Shin

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***Nose Nose Nose EYES!*: Korean Horror and Naturalist Sensibility**

Seung-hwan Shin

In theorizing naturalism in his cinema book, Gilles Deleuze notes that it originates from what he calls “the originary world,” or the world of primordial impulses that realism proves powerless to represent and idealism remains powerless to make felt (123). Deleuze’s concept of the originary world offers some useful clues to the eccentric aspects of Moon Ji-won’s 2017 short horror film *Nose Nose Nose EYES!* This film confirms that the spectral or the supernatural is not always necessary to invoke a deep sense of horror. Unlike many other Korean horror films, the film has no enigmatic force that horrifies us as a fatal threat to our being or society. It instead owes much of its shock effect to the way in which some uncontainable raw impulses emerge at the heart of our ordinary milieu.

The film starts with Ji-hyo, a little girl haunted by a recurring dream about a mysterious man repeating “Nose nose nose ... lips,” the chant from a popular children’s game, “Nose Nose Nose,” in South Korea. As the mysterious man resumes the play, he slowly turns around with his eyes covered by his hands. When the ghastly man reveals his face with the word “eyes,” he turns out to be the girl’s Daddy with only the whites in his eyes. Upon waking up screaming, she runs to her mother, who comforts her assuring her that Daddy is fine and just needs some rest. Yet she soon learns that her Daddy is far from fine, but instead, bedridden with some unknown illnesses. When she sneaks into the parents’ room, she finds her Daddy with his legs and hands all tied to the bed posts and unconscious with an oxygen mask covering his face. The real shock, however, is yet to come. As her mother enters the room, she hides under the bed, from where she secretly witnesses her mother trying to stab Daddy’s eyes with a brooch pin. Yet when her mother catches her, she tells her that it is all Daddy’s idea intended to get insurance money. Now unable to trust her mother, she asks her not to hurt Daddy. But her revolt against her mother pushes her into a situation where either she or Daddy must give up the eyes to secure insurance money, to which she eventually responds, “Do it to Daddy.”

This film, as director Moon acknowledged, draws on a true story of a real-life serial killer known as Lady Uhm (MSSF). From 2000 to 2005, she murdered two husbands and even stabbed the eyes of her own family for insurance payment, which shocked the entire nation. However, the film’s

primary concern does not rest with replaying the appalling story itself. At its core, the film reimagines through the eyes of a child—which is eloquently foregrounded through Ji-hyo’s POV shots, such as her observation of her mother through her shadow cast on the wall, which feels like children’s shadow puppetry—the rise of perverse impulses in the depths of our ordinary milieux, more specifically, home.



Figure 1: Hiding under the bed, Ji-hyo witnesses her mother’s shocking deed through her shadow projected on the wall of the opposite side of the room.



Figure 2: The uncle seen from the inside through the opaque window glass.

the outside in contrast becomes bleary or shapeless. Notable in this regard is the uncle’s appearance seen through the opaque window glass. Taken from the inside, the blurry image of the uncle trying to open the locked windows and peer through them becomes evocative of Francis Bacon’s amorphous figures.

The family ties, the most intimate form of social relation, dissipate in this claustrophobic space governed by primordial impulses, and so do people’s identities shaped through social relations. A consequence of this overpowering interior is that any attempt to understand it *in relation to* the outside proves futile,

Nose Nose Nose EYES! is a film of enfolded interiority. This film never steps out of the house and its interior becomes a space sealed off from the outside, as hinted through all the blockades between inside and outside such as the phone call for deception, bolted doors, and closed windows. They are not for opening or connecting, but for closing off or hiding from the outside. The enclosed interiority is further accentuated as the inside grows into a clearer shape, while

as the outside remains powerless. Herein lies a justification for the film's refusal to situate or explain the interior within a larger historical or social context. The absence of outward linkage in the film is a result of the fortified inside as its primary concern, which also clarifies the special validity the short form has for this film. Mainly concerned with scrutinizing the interior under the reign of originary impulses, this film defies the impulse to build continuity with the real milieu on the outside. Watching this film thus feels like being abruptly stranded and helplessly trapped in an unknown interior space.

We are mistaken, however, to think that the outside is completely abolished or destroyed. This is neither a dark fantasy film nor an apocalyptic drama. The world of raw impulses, as noted above, arises and grows in the depths of the ordinary milieu. The enfolded interior world defies the determined world on the outside. But then again, it is only valid through its immanence in the real milieu since the determined milieu are the medium of the originary world's existence. The originary world causes the outside to become exhausted and powerless. Yet its destruction is not in the mother's interest. After all, it is the insurance money that awakens and fuels her primitive impulse in the first place. Instead of devastating the outside completely, she reconstructs it into a hunting ground and in the social forest, she becomes a highly skilled hunter who effectively uses the regulations and norms of the determined world to catch her preys. It is not a coincidence that her living room is carefully decorated with a wealth of references that help us to easily recognize the film's temporal and cultural setting, Korea's typical middle-class household in the 1990s. In contrast, the parents' room, where she holds her prey captive, looks much further detached from the real milieu. The innermost part of her world, the room feels surreal as the connection to the outside becomes more tenuous and things are deprived of their original meanings or values. Instead, they are in service of the manifestation of her primitive impulses or their extraction from the established modes of behavior, as suggested in the primacy of the mother's perverse deed. Then again, the primordial impulses cannot exist independently of the real milieu. As Deleuze noted, the originary



Figure 3: The living room, despite its Gothic color tone, feels like any living room of the middle-class household in 1990s Korea.

world may feel marked by the artificiality of the set as much as by the authenticity of the real milieu and the established behavioral customs in it (124). Motherhood, for example, is not useless to the mother. She relies on it to have her little daughter under her tight control. She, or the originary world in general, is parasitic.



Figure 4: The parents' room and its surreal overtone.

This eccentric relationship between the original world and the determined milieu is also responsible for the special kind of violence involved in the manifestation or extraction of the raw

impulses from the real milieu. Essential to the impulses is an obsession with special parts. Their emergence comes with an act of tearing away, fragmenting, and dislocating. That is, the fetish on partial objects taken from the determined world is an essential attribute of the originary world. In the case of *Nose Nose Nose EYES!*, the fetishistic desire is channeled toward the eyes. Above all, Daddy's eyes are the ultimate object of the mother's obsession. Even prior to that, however, the repeated use of close-up tears the eyes away from the whole body and renders them partial. That is, the fetishistic impulse is eloquently reflected in cinematography, and this emphatic use of the eye fetish clarifies the deeply perverse quality of the originary impulses. This perversion, in turn, renders the originary world replete with mutilated and disfigured bodies as a consequence of the uncontainable impulses to possess specific parts. This fetishistic impulse, however, is not purely for the object itself. Nor is it purely accidental. As noted above, it emerges only in relation to the determined milieu. The values of Daddy's eyes are only valid as the means to secure insurance money. In brief, it is the determined milieu that trigger and nurture the fetishistic impulses.

In this world of raw fetishistic impulses, humans cannot remain whole. They cannot help constantly tearing and being torn. Humans are simply like animals. They morph into a being that precedes all differentiation between human and animal. Yet words like "degeneration" would not be right for this transformation. The originary impulse is not without intelligence. Its intelligence instead becomes diabolic as it is used to nurture primitive impulses at the heart

of the real milieu. Children are an exception. The originary world does not spare them innocence. Their unfledged intelligence rather causes them to be deeply vulnerable to the dominance of the raw impulses. Ji-hyo witnesses things yet remains incapable of deciphering their meanings. She also questions her mother's lies to the uncle yet her mother quickly subdues her curiosity with another lie. She then shares a rotten apple with her mother. At the end, she rebels against her. Yet when forced to choose between her eyes and Daddy's, she begs her mother to stab Daddy's. It is truly cruel to expect a little girl like Ji-hyo to be able to reject the pact with the devil. What feels more chilling here, however, is the girl's implication in the originary world through her own action. Her action is not entirely innocent. Instead, it is embryonic, for it is not out of her own impulse but not fully involuntary, either. In other words, the little girl is locked or absorbed into a vicious relationship with her mother. If the mother's heinous action at the end denotes the climax of her impulses, Ji-hyo takes us back to the nascent stage of the originary world with her embryonic action. And the establishment of this cycle leaves no exit to the outside.

To return to Deleuze, he closes his reflection on the originary world with the difficulty of becoming a naturalist (133-140). The originary world is too brutal or indecent to idealism, and it is too illogical or unintelligible to realism. Filmmakers thus have often repressed their naturalist sensibilities, sometimes with a moralizing view, and other times a disavowal of the unknowable that lurks beyond the parameter of the perceptually and ideologically suitable. *Nose Nose Nose EYES!* is not a full-blown scrutiny of the world of raw impulses. Yet it presents us a compelling glimpse into the originary world, which is not accidental or transitional but always immanent to our ordinary determined milieu.

Dr. Seung-hwan Shin lectures in East Asian Languages and Literatures at the University of Pittsburgh. He specializes in Korean film, media, and culture. His recent work includes "Singing Through Impossible Modernization: *Sopyonje* and National Cinema in the Era of Globalization" in Andrew Jackson, ed. *The Two Koreas and Their Global Engagements* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2022). He is currently working on a monograph, *Disenchanted Times, Reenchanted Cinema: New Korean Cinema Reframed*.

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