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Film Review

Hong Sangsoo's *The Woman Who Ran*: Finding Pleasure, Kinship, and Solidarity in CCTV

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Hong Sangsoo's feature film *The Woman Who Ran* (South Korea, 2020) follows Gamhee (Kim Minhee), who is away from her husband for the first time in five years to visit friends. In this film, women encounter and see each other outside of and against an aggressive and angry patriarchy, sometimes through the lens of closed-circuit television (CCTV). Through such a lens, women's care and pleasure are ambiguously and strikingly linked together in ways that recall adrienne maree brown's (2019: 11) conception of pleasure activism—where women “offer each other tools and education to make sure sex, desire, drugs, connection, and other pleasures aren't life-threatening or harming but life-enriching.” *The Woman Who Ran* models a vexed yet vital form of pleasure activism where the tools and pleasures of surveillance produce not a life-threatening vision upon women but instead a potentially life-enriching one that women themselves can effectively control. Via such repurposing of CCTV, a potent queering of surveillance occurs and new (if still fraught) possibilities for kinship and female solidarity emerge.

The Woman Who Ran begins with a lesson about the kind of look cast upon and sometimes shared between the characters in the film. The opening scene features Youngsoon (Seo Youngwa), one of the friends that Gamhee visits on her solo getaway, tending to her back garden. A young next-door neighbor approaches her to announce that she has a job interview coming up later in the day. Youngsoon notably scrutinizes her appearance, commenting on her “puffy” face. After Youngsoon wishes her luck, the neighbor walks off-screen. The camera rapidly zooms in on Youngsoon attentively watching her neighbor depart. The film catches her smile quickly fading from her face, replaced with a taciturn expression. Culminating a scene where words of encouragement are intermingled with those of judgement, the zoom upon the dropping of a watcher's social mask signals a film where the look seems suffused with a fraught care. We soon learn that Youngsoon builds her home around surveillance, further foregrounding how her caring look has an unsettling edge of detached omniscience.

In the scene that immediately follows, Gamhee arrives in a car to visit Youngsoon. After she pulls into Youngsoon's carpark, Gamhee starts walking away from the house onto the street to find her bearings. Youngsoon calls out to Gamhee, startling her. To elide Gamhee's confusion about how she was spotted, Youngsoon explains, “There's a CCTV at home.” In the film, home is aligned with CCTV. Before we enter Youngsoon's home, the outward-facing camera eye is foregrounded as its defining feature. Home, in Youngsoon's tacit definition, is the place where one might be a sovereign of a digital eye. Or, to put it perhaps more tritely, home is where the eye is. The very awkwardness of their meeting—Youngsoon goes on to impugn Gamhee's hairstyle and express disappointment with the food she brings—underlines that a home marked by surveillance is one of fraught connection. The scene ends with an emphasis on

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Youngsoon's CCTV camera. After the friends move inside, the film lingers on the door, which features a camera lens. The door makes an automatic locking noise when it shuts, heralding Youngsoon's home as one of heightened security. Hong thus underlines that the look driving the film intermingles compassion with control. Over the film's opening two scenes, the film's first surveyor and CCTV user, Youngsoon, evinces a genuine investment in the wellbeing of those she watches—she cares for her neighbor's success and greets her long-absent friend who she first glimpses on camera with excitement. In how Youngsoon scrutinizes, judges, and startles those she watches, as the final shot of the closed door metaphorically signals, she may lock in the loved ones who fall under her vigilant gaze.

In later scenes that foreground CCTV, *The Woman Who Ran* presents the security camera as a surprising vehicle to establish new bonds of kinship. Through such a machine eye, the female surveyor is offered a perch to appreciate the practices of care that underpin female solidarity within the patriarchal context of often stifling heterosexual relationships. Indeed, a chief pleasure of CCTV in this film lies in its position as witness to the strength and dominance that the women can hold over patriarchal forces. As initially suggested in the opening scenes, however, Hong's film does not fall into utopian terms when articulating such a look. During scenes that point to this vision's limits, *The Woman Who Ran* posits that a solidarity gained through such surveillance risks always being tainted by power asymmetry. Still, even with its pitfalls, Hong's film productively envisions a look wherein the marginalized can redeploy patriarchal tools of power to achieve a new sort of burgeoning compassion as underlined when they resist men and admire each other's caregiving abilities through CCTV.

The women build their CCTV-armed homes in a world defined by a looming masculine presence. All of Gamhee's friends react with shock at the codependent relationship with her husband that Gamhee describes. For example, her husband has set the rule that they must never leave each other's side. Youngsoon comments, "For me, spending all day with someone is unbearable." Gamhee, meanwhile, seems to long for an alternative home, often expressing envy toward her single friends' male-free living spaces. When men are seen—such as when Youngsoon's harsh neighbor and an ex-lover of Gamhee's friend Suyoung (Song Seonmi) knock at their respective doors and make demands—they are positioned with their backs to the film's camera, creating a depersonalized stance that suggests a threat to the female characters. The women of *The Woman Who Ran* are either directed by or on the defensive against their male counterparts.

Pointed allusions to the natural world, as well as prison-like imagery, further highlight the way men and the masculine are represented as an oppressive force. Youngsoon's roommate Youngji (Lee Eunmi) vents about the neighbors' loud rooster who pecks at the hens' necks, concluding, "He's just doing it for show. He does it on purpose to prove he's the strongest. He's so mean!" A masculinity modeled by the natural world is built on a hyper-display of a male's power over females. Marriage, meanwhile, is presented as confinement. At the start of a vignette featuring Woojin (Kim Saebuyuk), Gamhee's estranged friend now married to Gamhee's ex-partner, a point-of-view shot from her perspective frames the city through a series of bars. The motif of bars continues when the married women meet at a cinema café. Bar-like slats in the windows behind them emphasize their shared condition: they both may be trapped by their men.

The friends express a frustration with the stifling heteronormative status quo and gesture to a need for different kinds of kinship. As Gamhee tells Suyoung, "We need to take care of ourselves." Judith Butler (2002: 15) considers new kinship practices "that emerge to address fundamental forms of human dependency, which may include... relations of emotional dependency and support." Butler (2002: 39) also notes that "the relations that bind are no longer traced to heterosexual procreation." Hong's film highlights how new kinship bonds are created and sustained between women. His typically still camera comes alive during moments of care—zooming in on hands held, a sudden embrace, and everyday expressions of solidarity, as when Gamhee passionately defends (the cooking of) Suyoung.

It is in and around CCTV where a feminine solidarity against men is most clearly portrayed and where new kinship frameworks that allow women to support each other and take care of themselves are formed. At Youngsoon's home, CCTV is positioned as a mechanism of defense against men. When a man first appears

on screen—Youngsoon’s new neighbor—he is situated against the front door and its CCTV camera lens. The neighbor has come to complain about how Youngsoon and Youngji feed the neighborhood’s stray cats. Youngji comes outside the door to negotiate, quietly refusing to change the way they behave. Youngsoon and Gamhee eventually also come out to lend their support. The CCTV lens and the women face the same direction—mechanical and female eye share an alignment against the man. Although they appear small compared to the man, the women form a wall and successfully shoo the aggressive man away. Again, Hong’s camera stays outside the door when they go back inside. The camera pans down to a relaxed stray cat until it is in the frame’s center: the cat’s source of sustenance, despite the man’s efforts, remains secure. Empowered by the CCTV camera and each other, the women can carve out a way of being with the world on their terms.

Immediately following this presentation of CCTV as an arm of defense against men, the film also presents it as a route to a new kind of intimacy between women. In so doing, it illustrates how such imagery can pleasurably visualize a friend’s practice of care. Gamhee lays on the couch at dawn, wide awake. When Youngsoon comes in to check on her, Gamhee reveals that she sees a “creepy” figure on the off-screen surveillance monitor—she initially reads what appears on the monitor as threatening; for her, CCTV delineates only what is dangerous. For Gamhee, the CCTV image projects what John R. Gold and George Revill (2003) call surveillance’s “landscapes of fear,” where perceived threats to the social order are visualized and regulated. However, in the scene’s closing moments, Gamhee gleans some new emotional possibilities of CCTV. As Youngsoon tells her that the surveyed “creepy” subject is actually the neighbor’s daughter who has had a very troubled home life (and who appeared in the aforementioned opening scene), Gamhee moves off the couch and onto her knees in front of the monitor. With the context that Youngsoon has provided, her fear dissipates. After Youngsoon goes outside to check on the neighbor, the camera zooms in on the monitor and the sound of the automatic lock unlatching can be heard, metaphorically marking this moment as one where CCTV psychically opens rather than forecloses. Something new in Gamhee’s vision of Youngsoon, who has often treated her with passive-aggressive critique, is being unlocked. On the screen through an infrared filter, Gamhee watches Youngsoon embrace her neighbor who crumples into her arms. Through CCTV, Gamhee glimpses depths of Youngsoon’s emotional life and can potentially reimagine her feelings of belonging toward her friend.

During the final scene featuring CCTV, the film frames it as a forum to observe feminine strength. Gamhee meets her friend, Suyoung, at her apartment. Their visit is interrupted by a man ringing the doorbell who angrily complains that Suyoung has humiliated him and demands entrance. Despite this man being more aggressive than the earlier cat-concerned neighbor, Suyoung always stands above him in the frame. The visual cue highlights how she maintains command over the man she repeatedly calls a stalker. When Suyoung lets out a sigh of frustration, the camera cuts to the CCTV monitor just behind the door. Again, the framing of the CCTV image shows her visually dominating the angry man. The camera pulls out to reveal Gamhee in profile, literally watching her friend’s back. Compositionally, Gamhee now fills the frame and the male aggressor in the monitor is made to seem even more minuscule by comparison. The space in front of and beyond the CCTV camera is established as a feminine one that leaves man diminished. When Suyoung comes back into the apartment, she reveals her brief sexual history with the young man. For Gamhee, Suyoung recontextualizes the initially intimidating CCTV imagery. It becomes a winning testament to the sexual freedom of Suyoung’s single life wherein she can find and stand up to the advances of young male lovers. With a smile, Gamhee comments, “It looks like fun!” Via the security camera, one can stand ready to protect an aggrieved woman while also admiring her strength and sexual power.

For all the pathways to solidarity that CCTV offers, the film also denotes the limits of a community founded on surveillance. In the CCTV image of Youngsoon’s embrace of the neighbor’s daughter, the black-and-white infrared imagery, as well as the shot’s high angle, lend the scene a far away and spectral atmosphere. A distance, therefore, remains embedded within the closeness fostered by CCTV. Indeed, after she has seen her friend through this new emotional prism, a half-awake Gamhee asks, “What’s the secret of the third floor?” Youngsoon brushes off her friend’s question about the blocked-off third floor. Indeed, Youngsoon never reveals what is upstairs—the topic mentioned only once carries with it a certain weight, becoming a

structuring absence in their friendship. Like the inaccessible third floor, Youngsoo ultimately remains a mystery to Gamhee. During this exchange where Gamhee questions how much Youngsoo actually trusts her, the neighboring rooster cries out. With the surveyor Youngsoo's establishment of a boundary that cannot be crossed, the male animal explicitly linked in the women's earlier dialogue to a hyper performative masculinity defined by its subordination of females reemerges. Youngsoo's refusal to be completely open to Gamhee about her home is thus a pointed comment on how their friendship, grounded within frameworks of surveillance, cannot quite transcend the boundaries established by the patriarchy that separates watched and watcher. Here, the patriarchy's cry flutters into Youngsoo's home, a cry defined by an unshaken and cruel hierarchy. To take a cue from Audre Lorde (2018), "the master's tools [of surveillance] will never dismantle the master's house." Indeed, as the lingering tensions between Youngsoo and Gamhee reveal, they cannot even unlock its hidden floors!

While aware of CCTV's limits for connection, the film presents us with a pleasurable practice of looking at one's intimates. The in-person conversations in *The Woman Who Ran* are filled with underlying tension—Youngsoo chides Gamhee for her appearance and how she eats, and Suyoung makes cutting comments about how Gamhee does not need to support herself thanks to her husband. In the third vignette, when Gamhee visits a cinema that is programmed by her old friend Woojin, their dialogue is strained by a rupture in their past that involved Woojin's husband, who was Gamhee's former lover. While the women do negotiate these conversational impasses, uneasiness dwells between them. In its detachment allowing Gamhee to simply observe in silence, CCTV creates a potent space of reflection to explode the subjectivities of those close to her.

Ultimately, *The Woman Who Ran* helps surveillance scholars respond to a challenge issued by Gary Kafer and Daniel Grinberg (2019) when theorizing queer surveillance. In their expansive understanding of queerness that includes feminist subjects, they argue that "surveillance studies must begin to incorporate scholarship that can speak to the incommensurable ways that communities and individuals experience systems of control" (Kafer and Grinberg 2019: 597). Hong's film offers a nuanced model for scholars in the field to see how such systems of control can be queered—redeployed by those they seek to marginalize and subordinate. Surveillance, the film reveals, can provide a potent but always vexed form of pleasure activism, a means to see other marginalized individuals running out of bounds. Hong crucially reminds us, however, that the practices of life-giving care glimpsed through surveillance may be tainted by the life-threatening, deadening distance that such tools are designed to create.

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