

## **Locating cosmopolitanism in the films of E-J Yong**

SHIN, Chi Yun <<http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0629-6928>>

Available from Sheffield Hallam University Research Archive (SHURA) at:

<https://shura.shu.ac.uk/13268/>

---

This document is the Accepted Version [AM]

### **Citation:**

SHIN, Chi Yun (2015). Locating cosmopolitanism in the films of E-J Yong. In: JACKSON, Andrew David and BALMAIN, Colette, (eds.) Korean screen cultures : interrogating cinema, tv, music and online games. Bern, Peter Lang, 77-94. [Book Section]

---

### **Copyright and re-use policy**

See <http://shura.shu.ac.uk/information.html>

CHI-YUN SHIN

## Locating Cosmopolitanism in the Films of E J-Yong

### Introduction

South Korean (hereafter Korean) film director E J-yong (aka Lee Je-yong)'s filmography has been described as 'curious' by some commentators. This mainly stems from the fact that his films vary widely in terms of genre, sources, and subject matter. A rundown of his feature films seems to prove that there is no clear thematic or stylistic continuity in E's films. His 1998 debut feature *An Affair* (Chǒng-sa) is a quietly subversive melodrama about a married woman who falls in love with her younger sister's fiancé, while his second film *Asako in Ruby Shoes* (Sunaebo, 2000) is a slow-paced art-house film that details lives of a Korean civil servant living in Seoul and a young Japanese woman in Tokyo who turns to performing for a live-cam porno website to fund her trip to Alaska. E's third and most successful film to date, *Untold Scandal* (Sŭk'aendal: Chosŏn namnyŏ sangyŏlchisa, 2003), is a historical costume drama based on the French epistolary novel *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* (1782) by Pierre Choderlos de Laclos and inspired by Stephen Frears's 1988 film *Dangerous Liaisons*, while 2006 film *Dasepo Naughty Girls* (Dasep'o sonyŏ) is a musical comedy based on a popular web-comic (or Internet comic strip). His next projects – *Actresses* (Yŏ-pae-u-dŭl, 2009) and *Behind the Camera: Why Mr E Went to Hollywood* (Dwit-tam-hwa: kamdok-i mich'yŏt-sŏ-yo, 2013) – are types of documentaries about celebrities and the filmmaking process as well as an exploration of (or experimentation with) mockumentary formats and aspects of reality shows. Shifting gears again, E's latest film *My Brilliant Life* (aka *My Palpitating Life* / Dugŭn dugŭn nae insaeng, 2014) tells a story of a 16-year-old boy, who suffers from the rare genetic disorder progeria, which causes rapid ageing, and his young parents who had him

when they were both seventeen. Dubbed as ‘the story of the youngest parents and oldest child in the world’, the film is a relatively straightforward ‘heart-warming’ drama.

Notwithstanding such an eclectic filmography, I would argue that what binds his feature films together is cosmopolitan aspirations towards multiplicity and acceptance of difference, transcending received/localised loyalties and attachments. The notion of cosmopolitanism, which derives from the Greek word *kosmopolitês*, meaning ‘citizen of the world’, has evolved ever since its inception in Ancient Greece and takes many different forms in contemporary thought such as cultural, legal and political cosmopolitanism that cover a broad range of moral and practical issues.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, as the political philosopher Samuel Scheffler puts it, ‘there is no consensus among contemporary philosophers and theorists about how the precise content of a cosmopolitan position is to be understood’ (1999: 255). Nevertheless, in most versions of cosmopolitanism, it presupposes universalism, ‘the idea that we have universal duties to all human beings’ (Brown and Held, 2010: 3), and what is the most relevant and salient cosmopolitan thought in E’s films is cultural cosmopolitanism that ‘argues for moral duties and obligations that supersede or transgress localized obligations based solely on aspects of ethnicity, culture, and nationality’ (Brown and Held, 2010: 10). More specifically, as Garrett Wallace Brown and David Held observe, cultural cosmopolitans ‘assert that all individuals are made up of multifarious cultural identities and influences and that human beings already identify with a multiplicity of cultural obligations ... and the existential worth of an individual does not have to be psychologically anchored to only one

---

<sup>1</sup> Although not a main concern here, cosmopolitanism has been under criticism for its ambiguity (uniting difference and equality) and apparent paradox (of attempting to reconcile universal values with cultural and historical differences), for which some view it as an impossible project, while others see it as an elitist representation. It is also often conflated with imperial inclinations and globalization. Nevertheless, with its inclusive drive and the principles of universal and equal justice, cosmopolitanism remains a compelling notion and relevant approach to contemporary global challenges. There is a considerable body of research around cosmopolitanism from a variety of disciplines, largely in the fields of philosophy and political and social sciences, and notable scholars include Kwame Anthony Appiah, Ulrich Beck, David Held, Martha Nussbaum, and Samuel Scheffler.

cultural identity or obligation' (2010: 10).

E's films by no means convey any blatant messages, but they contain a cosmopolitan outlook that rejects the restrictive conceptions of cultural identity and defies rigid or one-dimensional interpretations, be it stories of love affairs or what life is like to an actress in Korea or a prematurely ageing teenager. In what follows, I will discuss multiplicity and ambivalence prevalent in E's films, the main aspects that inscribe cosmopolitanism in E's films. In particular, I will explore the palimpsest characteristics manifested in E's films, not only in thematic matters but also apparent in the films' formal and stylistic elements. It will also examine how E's subjects engage in the connection with the other (which is fundamental to cosmopolitanism) and how the films articulate the inter-textual dynamics with their source material, as well as the films' transgressive and paradoxical nature in deconstructing and reconfiguring familiar generic codes.

### **Towards Irreverent Multiplicity and Stylistic *Mise-en-abîme***

E's debut film *An Affair* begins with an arrivals announcement at the airport – Korean then English statements that a flight from Los Angeles has arrived. The following images are blue-tinged CCTV images of passengers with luggage 'crossing' the automatic arrivals doors. As the last person passes the doors, the camera pans left to show the 'real' arrival scene, where the same passenger is met by someone, which also reveals that two people are still waiting – the female protagonist Sŏ-hyŏn (played by Lee Mi-sook, who returned to screen acting after a decade-long career break) and a young man called U-In (played by Lee Jung-jae in his breakout role). They do notice each other, but as the security guard informs them that 'it's all finished', they leave separately without exchanging a word. It later transpires that Sŏ-hyŏn's sister, Chi-hyŏn, who was supposed to be on the flight, has been held up with an important

business and needs to stay in LA for another month. It also turns out that Chi-hyŏn is engaged, and U-In is her fiancé.

This opening credit sequence is minimalist in the sense that it does not explain the situation or how the characters feel. Nevertheless, its layered *mise-en-scène* adds an interesting complexity to the relationship between Sŏ-hyŏn and U-in that will unfold. By opening up the film with the transmitted or mediated monochrome CCTV images, and then moving onto the ‘live’ scenes of what’s been shown, the film references the two different looks of the same event with just one camera movement – the one focused on the people arriving and the other on the people waiting. Their love affair, as it unfolds, is also two-fold: illicit and forbidden, yet, as Darcy Paquet (2014) puts it, they ‘find in each other’s presence a sense of meaning and consolation’. The constant opening and closing of the automatic sliding doors on the CCTV image works as a metaphor for Sŏ-hyŏn’s mechanical life; at the same time, it suggests her waiting for someone to arrive and open up her life. As shown soon afterwards, Sŏ-hyŏn lives with her successful architect husband and their ten-year-old son. Her stable yet dull existence is implicated through her surroundings rather than any dialogues. She is seen in her everyday life – sorting out the contents of their refrigerator, making beds, arranging her fossils and rocks, watching TV with her son and driving him to activities – all allegorising the routine and order that characterises her life.

In his conversation with U-in, Sŏ-hyŏn’s husband, Jun-il (Song Yŏng-ch’ang) indirectly sums up her life by describing the ‘happiness’ to be in the environment within which his tropical fish are kept, where the right temperature and food is provided with nothing to worry about. Sŏ-hyŏn is indeed kept, albeit very comfortably. Her domestic confinement is visualised spatially: when with her family, she is always seen inside – inside their house, her car, husband’s office or his social functions, suggesting she is trapped within bourgeois conformity. With U-in, however, Sŏ-hyŏn is often outside – outdoors by the lake,

in open space or looking outside. When U-in (unexpectedly) kisses her for the first time through her open car window, he literally ‘invades’ her space, transgressing her boundaries. Indeed, once Sŏ-hyŏn eventually starts having an affair with the much younger U-in, it marks the beginning of a new phase in her life. She considered herself as someone who always took the same road and listened to whatever radio station that happened to be on; now she forgets to record her son’s favourite cartoon programme and sneaks out of a big family event (the ancestral rite) to see U-in. Her lovemaking with U-in at the empty videogame arcades highlights her subversive irreverence to the family ritual and what it stands for in Korean society. In any case, no one seems to have noticed her absence, further underlining the insignificant position Sŏ-hyŏn has within the family.

As the relationship develops, however, the passion inevitably turns into guilt and the tension mounts as Chi-hyŏn returns from the US, and Sŏ-hyŏn’s husband begins to grow suspicious. Under pressure and guilt, when her father passes away, Sŏ-hyŏn resumes her duty as a good wife, mother and sister, visualised through a montage sequence starting with her arranging refrigerator contents and fossils and ending with a shot of her husband contently looking at the aquarium, just as her life was introduced at the start of the film. This return to normality, however, does not last long and she decides to leave her family. Sŏ-hyŏn also rejects U-in’s wish to leave together, although it is hinted at the end that they are heading to the same place. In many ways, the film departs from earlier conventional Korean melodramas in the sense that Sŏ-hyŏn falls in love without any special reasons (e.g. abusive husband) and she decides to leave her comfortable life, almost like a modern day Nora (from *A Doll’s House*). What is subversive though is that the film does not present the married woman’s abandonment of her husband, and more importantly her son, as a traumatic event.

E’s second feature *Asako in Ruby Shoes* also begins with a visual trick. After a series of moving shots of the open road over credits, the film starts on an image of a snow-laden

(Alaskan) landscape. Over this image, a young woman's voice-over announces that in a month's time she will be dead on the day she was born in a place where it is neither yesterday nor today. She will hold her breath and die. As the camera pulls out, however, the scenery turns out to be a calendar picture for December. The arm by the calendar, which turns it back to where it was – July, belongs to U-in, a low-level civil servant in a municipal office in Seoul. Presenting the paralleling dichotomy of what is seen and heard – winter vs. summer and the female voice vs. male presence, the opening sequence foregrounds the tension between what is 'real' and what is represented both thematically and aesthetically. U-in, played by Lee Jung-jae – the same actor who played 'U-in' in *An Affair* – is not such a confident, serious or attractive man this time, but a blank-faced government employee whose night-time hobby is to look through Internet porn sites. Casting the same actor to present two very different masculinities (one romantic and the other creepy and a little pathetic) is not accidental. Apart from clearly showcasing the actor's versatility (and the director's ability to draw out convincing performances), it is a deliberate manifestation of E's attitude towards multiplicity inherent in all of us.

In the midst of his rather lacklustre existence, U-in comes across a striking-looking redhead Mi-a, who is a teaching assistant in a baking class run by his office. He frequently spies on her and tries to attract her attention but fails miserably. When Mi-a comes to him for a new residence ID card, he learns all her personal information (her name, date of birth, etc.), and eventually he also finds out that she is a lesbian. After learning of her unattainability, he uses Mi-a's age, physical traits (slim, redhead), and astrological sign to 'design' his 'perfect' cyber-girl – Asako in Ruby Shoes – in a 'Members Only' porn site. The woman who 'becomes' Asako is a young Japanese woman called Aya (played by Tachibana Misato) who is equally bored and unfulfilled in her life.<sup>2</sup> She intends to follow her grandfather, who is

---

<sup>2</sup> To my eyes, the Japanese actress, Tachibana Misato who plays Aya has remarkable

believed to have committed suicide by holding his breath. To achieve the ‘ambition’ of taking her own life while crossing the International Date Line on her birthday (making it ‘neither yesterday nor today’), she takes a job at a sports centre to fund her flight to Alaska.

Soon, however, she gets fired from her job, and after spending her savings on an expensive pair of ‘ruby’ shoes, she reluctantly decides to pose for ‘Internet modelling’. According to her employers, she is now a ‘spiritual healer [for] men around the world tormented by loneliness’. She wears a red wig, her ruby shoes and white fur accessories; and her fabricated image will be matted with shots of an Alaskan landscape later, as explained by her employers. In fact, this image of Asako was ‘consumed’ by U-in earlier in the film, providing him with the illusion that he had created or found his ideal girl. As Chung Hye Seung and David Scott Diffrient (2005: 197) point out:

By retroactively shuttling between the Korean consumption and Japanese production of a surreally minimalistic striptease, the film deconstructs this male fantasy which is predicated on a simultaneous awareness of, and obliviousness to, the artificial nature of any sexual gratification induced by commercially fabricated, technologically mediated imagery.

Juxtaposing Aya’s desire to escape her life in Tokyo with U-in’s attempt to get closer to his unattainable crush, the film does reveal the very mechanism of the production and consumption of fantasy in a way that is not necessarily judgmental but with an understanding that there are certain needs and reasons behind such activities. As U-in explains to his curious little niece, Asako is ‘a doll that shows up on the computer screen to console him whenever he is lonely’. What Choi Jinhee (2010: 107) calls ‘the “doll” motif’ continues when the scene where Aya/Asako floats in the big swimming pool [of the sports centre] is ‘doubled-up’ with the shot of a Barbie doll [left behind by U-in’s niece] floating in U-in’s bathtub. Aya in fact gets sacked from the sports centre when she’s found out (via CCTV footage) that she used the

---

resemblance to Lee Mi-sook who plays Sō-hyōn in *An Affair*, particularly in her hairstyle, providing a possible intertextual reading that Aya could be a younger version of Sō-hyōn.



swimming pool fully clothed after hours.

There are other images that evoke the film's mirroring/double structure: redheads of Mi-a and Asako, the appearance of twins in the office where U-in works and the watermelon, which itself represents duality with a contrasting inside and outside. Both U-in and Aya consume watermelons in the film, but U-in eats his with a spoon, naked in the bathtub with a half watermelon between his legs, covering his crotch, shown in a overhead shot that is filled with a bright natural light (Fig 1); while Aya with her friend Rie (played by Awata Urara) are in their business suits, lying down on the floor, eating small triangular pieces of watermelon with a seed under each eye, again shown in a overhead shot, only lit by candle lights (Fig 2).



**Figure 1: Eating watermelon in Seoul**



**Figure 2: Eating Watermelon in Tokyo**

Jumping back and forth between Korea and Japan, these parallel motifs link the two characters throughout the film, until U-in and Aya eventually run into each other at the airport in Alaska, although there are moments of indirect and/or imaginary encounters (in fact, it turns out that they had met before, when Aya visited Korea for a school trip.)<sup>3</sup> As such, the film subtly links a deep sense of helplessness and entrapment, which permeates the two disparate lives in Seoul and Tokyo. In the final scene, the couple stand side by side on a hill overlooking an Alaskan forest – the same image that appeared in the calendar U-in was looking at the beginning of the film. U-in's voice-over ends the film: 'this is how our story began'.<sup>4</sup> While their story starts, the film ends where it began, coming back full circle.

E's third feature *Untold Scandal* closely follows the narrative structure of the

---

<sup>3</sup> When Aya is clearing up her desk while packing for her Alaskan trip, she finds photos of her trip to Korea, in which she and her friends posed with a Korean man who turns out to be U-in.

<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately and perhaps not surprisingly, this unusual 'love story' did not fare very well in the box-office, but it garnered critical success and was invited to several film festivals.

original French novel but imaginatively invokes the manners and formalities of the aristocratic world of late eighteenth-century Korea – towards the end of the Chosŏn Dynasty (1392–1897). Lady Cho (played by Lee Mi-sook), the vengeful wife of an important official, sets a challenge for her notorious playboy cousin Cho-wŏn (Bae Yong-jun) to deflower the young virgin who is to become her husband's concubine. Knowing that she has been the love of his life, she offers herself as a prize, but he thinks the girl would be too easy a prey and has plans to seduce Lady Suk (Jeon Do-Yeon), who is a famously chaste woman, having remained celibate for nine years since her husband's death. What is interesting about these three main characters is that they gradually reveal their complexities throughout the film. On the surface, Lady Cho is a virtuous and devoted wife, but underneath she is a ruthless manipulator with a string of secret lovers. Well-versed in classics and brilliantly witty and elegant, she is a character who is limited by, yet manages to transgress, the rigid Confucianism that prescribes the roles of men and women. In other words, despite her intelligence, being born a woman, she is not allowed to be anything but somebody's wife, but behind the scene she ridicules the strict gender roles by entertaining herself with sexual conquests in a time when the virtue of a woman was held in high regard and the stakes of being found out of sexual 'misconducts' for the aristocratic women were extremely high. Meanwhile, her younger cousin Cho-wŏn is an accomplished scholar and martial artist but rejects a high government post for a life of leisure and pleasure. A skilful artist, he also paints a series of erotic drawings of his own affairs, which counter and satirise the restraining moral codes of Confucianism in the Chosŏn period. When he experiences true love with Lady Suk, who was supposed to be another pawn in his games, however, he is thrown into deep turmoil.

As a virtuous widow, the character of Lady Suk also provides an interesting twist. She adheres to Confucian morals by remaining faithful to her late husband's memory, for which she is awarded a Gate of Devotion by the state. Yet she also lives according to her

conviction as a Catholic. Catholicism, introduced to Korea in the eighteenth century, was banned during the late Chosŏn period, regarded as heterodoxy that threatened the existing order. In particular, its refusal to carry out ancestral rites (the ritualized commemoration of, communication with and sacrifice to one's deceased relatives), which is prescribed as the fundamental Confucian tradition by the Chosŏn society, as well as its egalitarian beliefs, were considered to be a direct clash with the ideals and social hierarchy of the day.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, Catholicism at the time was associated with western immorality, particularly that of sexual promiscuity, which causes a problem for Lady Suk's reputation and 'identity' as a chaste widow, which is imposed (however involuntarily) by the Confucian morals of the day. As a Catholic, she is indeed boldly transgressing, carrying out forbidden activities of attending church meetings and charities. In this respect, her character embodies contradictions of the period, a time when rigid Confucianism was clashing with encroaching new ideas and beliefs. Her inconsistency is pointed out in the film when Cho-wŏn rebukes her, albeit gently, for not making any effort to see good in him, while she is open and generous to lay people at church gatherings. As she gradually succumbs to Cho-wŏn's advances, however, she discovers a passion she had kept buried deep within her.

Besides the complexities and multi-layering of the characters, the film announces its palimpsestic characteristics as a cross-cultural adaptation. From the beginning, the film highlights its literary origin by marking itself as historical fiction through an opening prologue that features an ancient manuscript on which its story is supposed to be based. Over the images of written text, however, the voice-over announces that: 'the characters [in this story] are so unbelievable that one is led to doubt whether indeed they existed'. As such, the

---

<sup>5</sup> Consequently, the Catholic Church suffered persecution for about 100 years until the 1880s when the freedom to practice the religion was officially granted. During the century-long persecution, about 8,000 Catholics were known to be executed. In the film, Lady Suk's activities as a Catholic are indeed clandestine. In order to approach her, Cho-wŏn donates money for, and later participates in, the secret gatherings of the Catholics.

opening sequence explores many dimensions of the text – the literary text being verbally effaced or erased, providing an example of palimpsest, a ‘multi-layered record’, to put it simply. As the director E comments, the film also explores unexpected juxtapositions:

I like creating a clash between conflicting elements... the concept of ‘scandal’ and traditional costume dramas, western music and Korean aesthetics, and so on. My second film *Asako in Ruby Shoes* has the Korean title ‘Pure Love Story’, but it’s a very modern film about love and pornography on the Internet... I enjoy this sort of clash (Paquet 2003).

In addition, the film actively engages in a dialogue with western cinematic adaptations of the novel, alluding to Frears’s *Dangerous Liaisons* (1988) and Miloš Forman’s *Valmont* (1989).<sup>6</sup> Transporting the French aristocratic milieu to Korea, *Untold Scandal*’s opulent production and costume designs vividly mirror the sensuality of the previous adaptations. For instance, the scenes of Lady Cho and Cho-wŏn getting dressed and made up are presented in great detail. This elaborate and extravagant process evokes the parallel scenes of the Marquise de Merteuil (Glenn Close) and Vicomte de Valmont (John Malkovich) in *Dangerous Liaisons*. The scene of Cho-wŏn’s predatory tempting of the young virgin So-ok (Yi So-yŏn), under the false pretense of helping her write a love letter to In-ho (Cho Hyŏn-chae) – the youngest son of Lady Cho’s next-door neighbour and Lady Suk’s relative – also makes an interesting intertextual reference to Forman’s *Valmont*. Just as the Vicomte de Valmont (played by Colin Firth) takes undergarments off Cecile de Volanges (Fairuza Balk) to reveal her buttocks while ‘helping’ her to write a love letter to her music teacher Danceny (Henry Thomas), Cho-wŏn exposes So-ok’s rear end when she is writing a letter lying down on her front. In the process of referring to previous adaptations, the film dispels the commonly held assumption that adaptations are based on a single ‘source text’. The film’s *mise-en-scène* also accentuates

---

<sup>6</sup> On an extra-textual level, the promotional material of the film provides the list of who’s who of its main characters in relation to Frears’s version and *Cruel Intentions* (dir: Roger Kumble, 1999), foregrounding the intertextual dynamics between the Western version and *Untold Scandal*.

its layered-ness, by utilising in particular traditional costume (e.g. the *hanbok*, which envelops the body in layers) and architecture (many rooms are layered with a set of doors within doors, creating an example of *mise-en-abîme*), not only to highlight the meticulously stylised production that emphasises traditional grace and beauty but also to underscore the multiplicity inherent in, as well as the hypocritical and double-standards of, the turbulent era.

After the commercial and critical success of *Untold Scandal*, E's hotly anticipated next project was another adaptation: *Dasepo Naughty Girls*, a musical comedy based on a popular and controversial web-comic called *Multi-Cell Girl* (Dasep'o sonyŏ), which is also the Korean title of the film. With colourful, campy, and whimsical musical numbers, *Dasepo Naughty Girls* appears to be a drastic change of direction for E, but the film continues to explore similar issues regarding the hypocrisy around sex and morality tackled in his earlier films. Following the antics of the students (and teachers) at Mussŭlmo (literally 'No Use' or 'Useless') High School, the film pokes fun at venereal disease, under-age prostitution, S&M, cross-dressing and trans-sexualism. The film's irreverent tone is set from the beginning: a substitute teacher walks into a classroom and announces that their English teacher has contracted an STD. He adds that they should be sympathetic, as this could easily happen if you sleep with a teenage prostitute, and incidentally, Class Monitor Girl might want to get herself checked out too. At first, she strongly denies that she slept with the teacher. But when the replacement teacher adds that the English teacher is being treated for syphilis, the girl sheepishly and swiftly excuses herself to the nearest clinic. And, this kick-starts a mass-exit of concerned students, until there are only two who remain unaffected: Cyclops (played by Yi K'yŏn), who has only one eye, and 'Poor Girl' (Kim Ok-bin), who is so poor that she actually carries 'poverty' in the shape of grey, soft toy around on her back. 'Poor Girl' soon leaves too, telling the teacher that she is going off to meet a 'client'. Encouraging her departure, he is almost proud of her for selling her body to support the family, while Cyclops bemoans the

fact that he will be the lone virgin in the whole school!

Indeed, anything goes at No Use High, but it has its own outcasts. For instance, Cyclops is a social outsider not so much for being one-eyed, but for not being able to get laid. His beautiful sister, 'Two Eyes' (Yi Ŭn-sŏng), is in fact his transgender brother, who is saving up to get gender-reassignment surgery. Whatever other people think, she has no qualms about being a transvestite, and goes to the gents to urinate, donning the school uniform skirt. Witnessing this in the gents is Anthony (Pak Chin-u), a rich, handsome transfer student from Switzerland, who prides himself on his appearance and his ownership of luxury items. Falling hard for her despite himself, Anthony struggles with his sexuality and his feelings for 'Two Eyes'. In the meantime, despite (perhaps because of) his shallowness and arrogance, 'Poor Girl' has a big crush on Anthony, but it later emerges that he might be her brother who was given up for adoption as a baby. Although very sketchy and episodic in its structure, by presenting a huge class difference between star-crossed (potential) lovers who might be siblings separated at birth, the film parodies Korean television dramas/soaps that often employ similar far-fetched and 'dramatic' subplots.<sup>7</sup>

The film also comments on the 'high school films' with another strand of the story: Anthony's two friends became suspicious of their classmates who are suddenly interested in studying and getting into university after meetings with the headmaster of the school in his office. As revealed later, the headmaster is possessed by an *imugi* (Korean mythical creature that resembles a giant serpent; it aspires to become a fully-fledged dragon) that turns the students into hard-working nerds, who willingly abandon their promiscuous ways, by

---

<sup>7</sup> A hugely popular South Korean TV drama series called *Winter Sonata* (Kyŏul yŏnga), which was aired on KBS2 in 2002, features two lovers who might be long-lost siblings, starring the actor Bae Yong-jun, who plays the playboy Cho-wŏn in *Untold Scandal*. The unprecedented success of the drama led the actor Bae to be the face of Korean dramas abroad, particularly in Japan. Other numerous Korean TV dramas feature a 'high-class boy meets a lower-class girl' plotline, which involves the transformation of the 'plain' appearance of the girl into a glamorous one, thereby reflecting the widespread aspiration for the so-called luxury goods in Korea.

inserting a ‘Virgin’ chip! Facing such ‘adversity’, the diverse students of the school come together to ‘attack’ the creature with their ‘force of yang’ dance, in order to return to their ‘normal’ school life. Such tongue-in-cheek treatment of their school life and sexual promiscuity playfully transgresses the general perception of high school in Korea. As Choi Jinhee (2010: 120) points out, the film ‘not only acknowledge[s] it as a prevalent narrative trope exploited in many Korean youth films but also poke[s] fun at uniformity and conformity imposed in high school and in Korean society at large.’ In addition to the film’s radically hybrid nature, the aspiration for and celebration of diversity and unconventionality is also apparent in the film’s title ‘dasepo’, a Korean word for multi-cellular as opposed to uni- or single-cellular. No Use High’s acceptance of multiple faiths – each class is comprised of Christians, Buddhists, Muslims, Confucians, Hare Krishna and so on, as well as the atheist class the students of which are the focus of the film – underlines the film’s multifaceted, cosmopolitan ethos. Yet the fact that the teachers in these classes are all played by one actor – the director E’s homonymous actor Yi Jae-yŏng – suggests a certain bind or connection amongst these disparate religious groups.

### **Formal Ambivalence: Between Fact and Fiction**

In 2009, E gathered an ensemble cast of six leading Korean actresses – Yun Yŏ-chŏng, Lee Mi-sook, Ko Hyŏn-jŏng, Ch’oe Chi-u, Kim Min-hŭi, and Kim Ok-pin – for his low-budget, semi-improvisational mockumentary *Actresses*. Apparently inspired by the off-screen personalities of these actresses that he had worked with and known over the years (particularly Yun and Ko), E asked the six women, ranging in age from their twenties to sixties, to simply play themselves.<sup>8</sup> The set up is that the six actresses are brought together

---

<sup>8</sup> All six actresses are credited as co-scriptwriters.



for a fashion photo shoot for Korean *Vogue* on Christmas Eve, but the special gems ordered for the shoot are stuck in a snowstorm in Japan, while the actresses are stuck in the studio, forced into each other's company. The film features individual interviews with the actresses, but much of it takes the reality TV style, fly-on-the-wall documentary format that captures the tensions arising from the insecurities, jealousies and clashing egos of the actresses who are more used to enjoying the spotlight alone. Their conversations also include a lot of references and in-jokes made about real life events such as their divorces and media appearances that had made it into the headlines or gossip columns. As they gather at a table to share Christmas drinks, some shed tears over having to face personal issues in public and others open up about rivalries with other actresses. But how much is fake or acting? Purposefully blurring the line between fact and fiction, the film weaves its way through improvisation and 'personal' stories. Regarding the 'reality' of the film, director E has said that nobody but the actresses themselves know how much of what they say is true. Such ambivalence extends to the film itself: on one hand, *Actresses* is an exploration of the public and private lives of the actresses and the challenges of being celebrities in modern Korea; but it also conveys the multi-faceted 'reality' of the actresses. In fact, they themselves might not know where exactly their perceived personalities stop and their 'real' personalities start. In an interview, E sums up his attitude towards his subjects:

My personal opinion is that, depending on who you're meeting, there will be different interpretations of the person you are, regardless of what the reality is. I also believe that every person has a number of different characters within themselves, and you'll naturally show a different side of yourself whether you're meeting a friend, your parents or your partner, and that interests me (Hangul Celluloid, London Korean Links 2012).

E's next film *Behind the Camera* is a follow-up to *Actresses* in the sense that it mixes what is staged/played up with improvisation, featuring a group of real-life technicians, producers, visiting film directors (such as Yi Jun-ik, Ryoo Seung-wan, Kim Jee-woon and Yim Pil-sŏng)

and journalists as well as actors. The project has its origins in E's short film called *How to Fall in Love in 10 Minutes*, which was commissioned by Samsung to promote Galaxy Note (an Android smartphone and tablet computer hybrid) as part of the three short film project *Cine Note*.<sup>9</sup> Inspired by the fact that these days we can get all the information from the Internet without leaving one's desk, the film's premise is that E J-yong is making a promo film for a new smartphone and has the idea of making it the world's first film directed remotely from Los Angeles via Skype rather than in person on set (Vélez 2013). In other words, E has made *Behind the Camera* from LA (while his cast and crew were in Seoul), the film that details the production of the promo film and the chaos ensuing behind the scenes from his absence, while at the same time remotely directing the short promo film, which is about a film director who decides to direct a romantic comedy remotely!<sup>10</sup> Just to add to the confusion, there is an angry walk out of an actor, which turns out to be a prank, and various parts of the short film are inserted into *Behind the Camera*. On top of all this, as Derek Elley (2013) puts it, 'E builds another layer of artifice, with himself playing himself directing the promo'. The result is part making-of documentary, part film within a film, but the film never makes it clear whether the director is actually in LA or if it is a feature film that pretends to be a making-of documentary. In fact, some of the actors and crew members are convinced that E is in Seoul and will turn up at any moment. E later, however, reveals in various interviews that he did locate himself away from the set. For choosing LA when he could have 'hidden' anywhere, E explains that: 'Hollywood is an icon of the whole film industry, which is why I chose it and also to make fun of myself and make fun of other directors, also who want to go to Hollywood' (Vélez 2013).

Taking it further into much more complicated terrain than *Actresses*, much of

---

<sup>9</sup> The other two directors involved in the project are: Kang Hyōng-ch'öl and Chang Hun.

<sup>10</sup> According to the director, it took three days to shoot two films (one short and one feature-length), but took over eight months to edit (Special Features, *Behind the Camera* DVD).

*Behind the Camera* is apparently improvised by the ‘cast’ members who only know the basic premises of the project (that the director would not show up on the set) but need to play themselves (or versions of themselves) and the roles assigned to them at the same time. The film, however, never makes it clear how much of it is scripted or improvised. Sliding between the ‘documentary’ (featuring E as the director) and the scenes from the promo short, all the while offering off-the-cuff exposés of the Korean film entertainment scene (e.g. the conversation regarding actress Yun, bathing suit and director Hong Sang-soo), the film continuously mirrors itself and pokes fun at the very art form and industry it belongs to, providing a striking and intriguing example of *mise-en-abîme*. The film ends with unravelling some of its layers by first showing the wrapping up of shooting of the short promo; then by pulling out the camera to show the bigger crew involved in the making of the ‘documentary’. In the meantime, the film makes known that this process is done according to E’s exact direction, which is given before the actual shots are shown. As such, brimming with playful irreverence and self-reflection that is unorthodox and cleverly subversive (e.g. E is now a Hollywood director as he made a film in Hollywood), the film questions the role of the director and collides with our perceived ideas of what a film is.

### **Conclusion: A Hymn to Somewhere Else**

None of E’s films are road movies in the strictest sense, but many of his characters, particularly of his early films, have been, or are sent off to, somewhere else. At the end of *An Affair*, both Sō-hyōn and U-in are on their way to Rio de Janeiro, presumably heading to the lake U-in talked about earlier in the film – the place where he was happiest; and the place where Sō-hyōn imagines the time would pass more slowly. In *Asako in Ruby Shoes*, U-in and Aya arrive in Alaska together, escaping from the constraints of their lives in Seoul and

Tokyo. *Untold Scandal* ends with Lady Cho en route to China, while the lovers – Jo-wŏn and Lady Suk – dreamt of going to Yŏn-kyŏng (Beijing, China) where they thought they could take new identities.

Frequently appearing in his films too are nomadic or diasporic characters. In *An Affair*, U-in is a Korean-American who also lived a few years in Brazil before his family settled down in the US. In *Asako*, U-in's old classmate Kuk-jŏng, whom U-in bumps into in a bank, is an ethnic Chinese who grew up in Korea, lived in Alaska, studied in Los Angeles and returned to Seoul to work as a hotel manager. Invited by Kuk-jŏng, U-in attends a banquet to raise funds for establishing a new Chinatown in Korea, and when he realises that he's the only ethnic Korean in the hall, he says he 'feels kinda shitty'. His friend responds: 'Feeling strange and out of place? I probably feel the same way in Korea'. In Tokyo, Rie's boyfriend is Iranian, mistaken by her as being Egyptian. Anthony in *Dasepo* is from Switzerland, and his song-and-dance number, accompanied by accordions, lederhosen, yodelling and giant bars of Toblerone, playfully exposes the romanticised view of Switzerland (particularly in Korea). Even in *Actresses*, a young man called Emile briefly appears, accompanying actress Ko. While ethnically Korean, Emile was born in Germany and had an acting career in the US and now in Korea. His comments on beauty – for instance, he picks the oldest actress Yun as the most beautiful among the actresses – is interestingly unconventional and different to mainstream perceptions. In *Behind the Camera*, director E locates himself in Los Angeles, only appearing on a computer monitor within the film screen.

As discussed above, characters, who are or aspire to be on the move, are one of the most notable traits of E's films. Asked about the endings of *An Affair* and *Asako*, E commented that 'my personal preference that when somebody leaves and goes into this new world, they go through some kind of personal growth and development and change, undergoing a transformation. So I think that's why I like endings where the characters go off

somewhere' (Hangul Celluloid, London Korean Links 2012). Indeed, E's preferences fit in with cultural cosmopolitanism that emphasises the fluidity of individual identity and people's capacity to adapt to and flourish in diverse cultural environments. Although quite conventional in terms of narrative format, E's latest film *My Brilliant Life* too reaches out to embrace the difference, telling the story of A-rŭm, a teenager with the body of an eighty-year-old man, who wants to know and feel what it is like to be young. Celebrating these characters who reject being confined to their immediate cultural (or 'biological') border, E's films manifest cosmopolitan principles that aspire to encompass all human conditions and activities. If I can quote back Brown and Held's succinct and poignant pitch for cosmopolitanism, 'the idea that we have universal duties to all human beings' (2010: 3) permeates E's eclectic body of works that reject any simplistic or rigid labels or grouping.

## Bibliography

- Brown, Garrett Wallace, and David Held, eds, *The Cosmopolitanism Reader* (Cambridge & Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2010).
- Choi, Jinhee, *The South Korean Film Renaissance: Local Hitmakers, Global Provocateurs* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2010).
- Chung, Hye Seung, and David Scott Diffrient, 'Interethnic Romance and Political Reconciliation in *Asako in Ruby Shoes*', in Chi-Yun Shin and Julian Stringer, eds, *New Korean Cinema* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005): 193–209.
- Elley, Derek, 'Behind the Camera: Why Mr E Went to Hollywood', *Film Business Asia* (14 January 2013), <[www.filmbiz.asia/reviews/behind-the-camera-why-mr-e-went-to-hollywood](http://www.filmbiz.asia/reviews/behind-the-camera-why-mr-e-went-to-hollywood)> accessed 22 August 2014.
- Hangul Celluloid, London Korean Links, Miniminimovies and Eastern Kicks, 'E J-Yong Interview' (23 February, 2012) <<http://hangulcelluloid.com/ejyonginterview.html>> accessed 15 July 2014.
- Paquet, Darcy, 'An Interview with E J-yong' (8 October 2003), <[koreanfilm.org/ejyong.html](http://koreanfilm.org/ejyong.html)> accessed 22 August 2014.

Scheffler, Samuel, 'Conceptions of Cosmopolitanism', *Utilitas* 11/3 (1999), 255–76.

Vélez, Diva, 'NYAFF 2013 Interview: E J-yong Talks Directing *Behind the Camera* Over Skype' *Twitch* (6 July 2013) <<http://twitchfilm.com/2013/07/nyaff-2013-interview-e-j-yong-talks-directing-behind-the-camera-over-skype.html>> accessed 15 July 2014.