



## **THE DECEPTIVE DESIGN OF HONG SANG-SOO'S *VIRGIN STRIPPED BARE BY HER BACHELORS***

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### **Abstract**

In discussions of cinema, "design" can refer specifically to the built sets where a film's action takes place, as well as, metaphorically, to the organization or structuring of the narrative that occurs in those places. The purposeful interplay of both meanings of "design" can be seen in *Virgin Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors* (2001), an apparently nonlinear Korean film written and directed by Hong Sang-soo.

The film's narrative shows how a young woman decides which of two men to have a relationship with. Because she cannot be entirely certain about the truth of what the men say to her, she has to look for nonverbal evidence to help her decide which man to commit herself to. The film is divided into five parts. The first, third, and fifth parts take place during the present. The second and fourth parts show the past actions and events which led her to her decision. The second and fourth parts each present the events of seven numbered days. Because there appear to be contradictions between the two parts, critics have assumed that these retellings of past actions are from different points of view: the film's second part from the point of view of the young man she chooses; the fourth part from the young woman's point of view.

In fact, there are no contradictions between the two parts. The events and actions of the two parts fit together in chronological order. The critics' confusion comes from several things. To begin with, even though there are seven numbered days in each retelling of the past, only six of the days are the same in both retellings. The second part and fourth part each show one day not seen in the other part. All together, then, the past events occur over a total of eight days, six of which exist in each retelling and two, each of which exists only in one retelling.

Because the camera position, the setting, and the positions of the characters are the same at these moments in both apparent retellings, critics assume from a single obvious difference between the two scenes that they are different versions of the same moment. In effect critics misread the cinematic cues in these scenes as though they functioned in their normal way. However, careful scrutiny reveals temporal cues which would signal an observant viewer that even though these actions do occur in the same location, they occur sequentially, not at the same time.

Like the young woman in the story who cannot be sure of the meaning of what either man says, correctly discerning the events in *Virgin Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors* requires of viewers a skeptical perception that searches for evidence rather than simply drawing apparently obvious, though mistaken, conclusions based upon appearances. In other words, by its deceptive form and its deceptive use of settings, *The Virgin Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors* encourages critics and viewers to free themselves from their habitual

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modes of perceiving narrative logic and set design in order to see with freshened sight the film's actual structure.

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