

Kim Ki-duk: The Silent Cases of *The Isle*, *Bad Guy*, and *The Bow*

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Abstract

Many of South Korean director Kim Ki-duk's films revolve around a protagonist who uses little to no words, as is the case with *The Isle* (*Söm*, 2000), *Bad Guy* (*Nappün namja*, 2001), and *The Bow* (*Hwal*, 2005). In each of these films, characters exist in a marginalized world, cut off from traditional society in the purest sense. Whether on a small fishing hut in the middle of a lake, at sea, or in a tauntingly cruel brothel, each of these three films establish a place of isolation within which the characters subsist. Though this silence manifests in different ways, each film individually explores peculiar relationships between those who remain mute (or nearly so) and those around them. Another common theme spanning across Kim's filmography is that of brutal violence. *The Isle* and *Bad Guy* both utilize prostitution as a form of violence against females, but individually create worlds in which the characters are unforgivingly brutal. *The Isle's* uncomfortable sexual violence and homicide interplay with the sexual taunting in *Bad Guy* as well as the strange and seeming sexual violation of the young girl in *The Bow*; all three forcing a certain ferocity upon the protagonists. The construction of such interpersonal relationships, while almost entirely taciturn, showcases the true cruelty of humans while interconnecting ideas of a peripheral existence and raw emotion. The overarching theme of violence, as is connected with each character's muteness, leads each protagonist their near isolation from society and into a marginalized, singular existence. Through a close examination of *The Isle*, *Bad Guy* and *The Bow*, along with a brief look at the Kim's inaugural film *Crocodile* (*Ak ö*, 1996), the violence of humanity and displays of ultimate aggression are agreeably common through the director's work. *Crocodile* presents a clear picture of how Kim's vision of vicious gore has adapted throughout his various films, establishing a core for the human aggression visible throughout many of the director's work. The limited social interaction of his characters and the relationship between this

silence and their ultimate aggression leads to a lonesome sense of isolation in *The Isle*, *Bad Guy* and *The Bow*. Each of the films suggests brutality in reaction to society's impingement on the protagonist's life. The classification of these protagonists as outsiders also helps relate each of them as so-called underdogs who are rarely given a chance to succeed in the traditional sense, instead forced to face their overwhelming emotional pain. The establishment of these recurring themes adds to other developed motifs including animal cruelty and prostitution. These overlapping themes create a sense of consistency throughout Kim's work while also establishing a newfound sense of the relationship between silence and human brutality, reestablishing the lengths at which humankind is willing to go for love.

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Introduction

Ever since his first feature film, director Kim Ki-duk has shown an affinity for revealing the gritty side of humanity. Using brutal situations and bloody violence, Kim's first film *Crocodile* (*Ak ō*, 1996) explores the life of homeless individuals living in the margins of society next to the Han River in Seoul, South Korea. With its anti-hero protagonist nicknamed "Crocodile" and a handful of other misfit characters, the film explores the depths of human violence and interpersonal relationships setting the tone for Kim's succeeding films. Interested in exploring, in his own words, "the existential questions of what is life and what is a human being and what is the meaning of all this?", Kim constructs filmic worlds akin to mythic tales of sex, love and death ("Kim Ki-duk on *3-Iron*"). Three of his works, *The Isle* (*Sŏm*, 2000), *Bad Guy* (*Nappŭn namja*, 2001), and *The Bow* (*Hwal*, 2005), explore the relationship between a silent protagonist who remains mute (or nearly mute) for the entirety of the film and the foundations of human violence and marginality.

Each of these three films expands upon Kim's themes and motifs established in *Crocodile*. Whether it's the anti-hero Han-gi in *Bad Guy*, the suicidal and co-dependent "couple" Hyun-shik and Hee-jin in *The Isle*, or the completely isolated old man and young girl in *The Bow*, each film takes motifs established early in Kim's career and builds them to "[explore] the use of characters who do not talk in order to discover new ways of 'speaking' in the cinema" (Choe, "Kim Ki-duk's Aporia"). Often referred to as a cinema of the senses by critics, these films use poetic imagery and luscious water settings to create mystical worlds that further isolate the characters from conventional society. Exploring complex human existence through the use of silence is common throughout *The Isle*, *Bad Guy*, and *The Bow*, helping Kim's cinema become an intense portrait of human emotion. The silent protagonist often plays the role of both hero and

victim, thus establishing further the character's isolation. Through delving into the different creations of silence in these three films, each reveals an intimate look at self-worth and heartbreak, extending into notions of isolation and fantasy. Although the plots differ in each film, the recurring themes and motifs that Kim returns to help connect *The Isle*, *Bad Guy*, and *The Bow*.

The Isle is a poetically beautiful film that takes place lakeside. The female protagonist Hee-jin operates vacation fishing huts for visiting men (and occasionally women). Hee-jin is also a prostitute for the visiting men; delivering coffee and fishing bait to the colorful huts, Hee-jin offers her body at the same time. The main plot of the film revolves around the visiting Hyun-shik who comes to stay on the yellow fishing hut that floats upon the lake. It is shown through a dark, shadowy flashback that Hyun-shik has murdered his wife and her lover, thus inferring that he has come to the lake to hide out and later attempt suicide. Throughout the film, Hee-jin develops a strange fascination with Hyun-shik and stops him from committing suicide twice. Hyun-shik and Hee-jin both perform sadomasochistic acts through their self-mutilation with ever-convenient fishhooks. As the film progresses, the two become co-dependent and take turns nursing each other back to health from their individual bouts of self-mutilation. By film's end, both Hyun-shik and Hee-jin (who has also become a murderer) float away across the lake as *The Isle* dissolves to a philosophical ending that relies on the sexual relationship established within the film.

In *Bad Guy*, outcast and brothel owner Han-gi comes across a pristine and innocent college girl, Sun-hwa, whom he assaults with an aggressive kiss in the film's opening sequence. Immediately differentiating Han-gi in the opening through his complete lack of social decorum in the urban city, the film establishes him as a resolute "bad guy" and continues to use this trope

throughout the plot. After his first encounter with the young girl, Han-gi becomes enthralled with the beautiful Sun-hwa and plots a complicated pick pocketing scam to force Sun-hwa into his brothel. After being caught with a man's wallet (which was planted by Han-gi's brothel workers) at a bookstore, Sun-hwa is relegated to giving up all rights to her body until her debt is paid. The upside-down makeover plot that follows, tracks Sun-hwa's journey from innocence to dishonor; she loses her virtue to a stranger and is constantly tormented by thoughts of her chaste past life. Although never completely innocent, Sun-hwa eventually discovers Han-gi's scheme and the two become forever connected. The plot weaves their two lives together through violent fights and Han-gi's voyeuristic tendencies, ending with the two "riding into the sunset" in their makeshift caravan which doubles as a moving brothel.

The Bow explores the silent relationship between an old man and a much younger girl who is apparently about sixteen. The two live on a remote fishing boat in the middle of the ocean. The only social interaction they have with the outside world is fishermen who come from the mainland each day. The plot reveals early on through a shot of a wall calendar that the old man is to marry the girl in about a month, though as the film progresses and the girl becomes more promiscuous and less loyal to the old man's wishes, he begins to skip days bringing their wedding day closer. During the film, the young girl becomes infatuated with a teenage boy who visits the boat, and consequently the relationship between old man and girl becomes strained. Eventually it is revealed that the old man kidnapped the girl ten years prior. The boy attempts to "free" the girl from the old man's clutches. However, the strain between the two protagonists is ultimately repaired and they wed. In *The Bow's* final sequence, the old man shoots an arrow into the sky and jumps into the ocean, committing suicide seemingly because he has reached his ultimate happiness. The girl has a mystical de-flowering sequence following the old man's death

and the man's arrow falls perfectly between the girl's legs causing a bloodstain on her white slip. The very end of *The Bow* shows the young girl leaving for the mainland with the boy and the fishing boat sinking into the ocean, following the path of the old man.

The director himself can be considered an outsider of the Korean film industry, often lending his films a sense of self-reflection and exploration. Kim was never film-school-educated, growing up in the village of Bonghwa in North Gyeongsang Province. A high-school-dropout, Kim spent much of his youth in the marines before traveling to Paris for a brief period to pursue a career in painting (Paquet 89). The influence of his military service can be seen in *Address Unknown* (*Such'wiin pulmyŏng*, 2001) and his two-year streak in Paris is reflected in the setting and narrative of his second feature film *Wild Animals* (*Yasaeng tongmul pohogyŏg*, 1997). The reflections of his own experiences in his films offer a critical view of Korean society, explored through *The Isle*, *Bad Guy*, and *The Bow* through indications of class conflict. Kim explains the inclusion of these themes in an interview with Kim So-hee by admitting, "Cruel class distinctions and a lack of compassion permeate the reality I have experienced throughout my entire life" (Chung 130). This admission reflects his exploration of the source of human cruelty, which is dealt with in several of his films. This also helps explain the obvious political leanings in films like *Address Unknown* and its dealings with Korean colonialism, or the military presence in *Coast Guard* (*Haeansŏn*, 2002).

Kim's films flourish mostly through the film festival circuit, earning the director many accolades including four Golden Lion nominations at the Venice International Film Festival (the festival's highest honor) and one Golden Lion win for his latest feature *Pieta* (*P'iet'a*, 2012). Various other international festivals have recognized the director for his auteur style and visceral cinema with special director awards throughout his career ("The Kim Ki-duk Page"). Although

The Isle, *Bad Guy*, and *The Bow* are not Kim's most celebrated works, they offer a unique cross-section of the director's films which explore themes common to much of his work as a director and help establish a basis for the use of silence and violence within his cinema. Known for his low budgets, quick production schedules and sweeping style, the critiques of Korean society Kim offers have not been popular with domestic audiences in South Korea (Kim, "Race, Gender, and Postcolonial Identity" 244).¹ His two "big budget" films, *Bad Guy* and *3 Iron (Bin-jip, 2004)* cost only six hundred thousand dollars a piece (Chung 9). The low production costs of his films do not take away from the brilliant imagery the director produces. His films consistently showcase what Kim refers to as "semi-abstract" images because of the relationship between fantasy and reality spanning across his filmography.

Through understanding the background of the director, many of his recurring themes are brought to the forefront, as is the case with *The Isle*, *Bad Guy*, and *The Bow*. These films identify with the ideas of class conflict and further other themes established in *Crocodile*, like human violence and brutality through sexual situations and marginalization. As used in *The Isle*, *Bad Guy*, and *The Bow*, silence creates an immediate space of isolation for the main protagonists and directly reveals their marginalization. The repeated use of silence in his films reflects Kim's desire for an exploration of human emotion. The "frightening nature of the human relationship itself" is established in *The Isle*, *Bad Guy*, and *The Bow* through the construction of silence (Chung 133). The emotional pain of trying desperately to understand the world and the complexity of interpersonal relationships is pushed to the forefront in each of these films. In *The Isle*, Hee-jin and Hyun-shik struggle for control through their sexuality and violent self-mutilation. *Bad Guy* shows the repression of emotion leading to violence and destruction through the marginalized Han-gi and his relationship with youthful Sun-hwa. The old man and the young

girl in *The Bow* are placed in a struggle for understanding of human emotion through their co-dependency and acts of ritualism. These three films develop the muteness of the main characters to further establish silence as a concrete way of realizing and beginning to understand humanity's faults.

In exploring silence and its manifestations within *The Isle*, *Bad Guy*, and *The Bow*, the construction of individual characters as “abject heroes” is understood. Often times these protagonists are both victims and heroes, establishing what Michael Bernstein refers to as the “abject hero...[who] feels himself constantly on the verge of exhaustion or collapse” (26). Each of the male protagonists in these three films embodies these attributes. *Bad Guy*'s Han-gi is perhaps the most heavy-hearted of the three men in his exterior appearance insisted upon, in the opening sequence, through his black clothing. His large neck scar reveals the apparent presence of his violent past, presumably the reason for his taciturn existence, making him a more empathetic character. The old man in *The Bow* is engaged in a constant struggle between the serenity of the music from his bow and the dissent of the young girl he has raised from her youth. Hyun-shik is full of despair in *The Isle* because of his slaying of his wife and her lover and his escape from capture, as revealed in his repeated attempts to commit suicide. The three men relate to the idea of mainstream society “stigmatizing those regarded as inferior and different from the established norms”, reinforcing their connection to the idea of the abject hero (Kim, “Race, Gender, and Postcolonial Identity” 244). The silence of Han-gi and the old man, and the murderous outlaw Hyun-shik, causes these men to be pushed into the margins because of their eccentricities and abjectness. The creation of these men as almost self-contemptuous is contrasted with the female characters and the female sexuality present in each film.

The Isle, *Bad Guy*, and *The Bow* each construct different representations of female

sexuality and perversions of the body. The female identity within South Korea is often one of subservience to males. South Korea is a “patriarchal culture that strictly controls women’s sexuality under an ideology of chastity and allows women’s position and existence only within a space related to men” (Kim, “Race, Gender, and Postcolonial Identity” 249). The chastity issue of women is explored in both *The Bow* and *Bad Guy*. *Bad Guy*’s unsympathetic treatment of the chastity issue is haunting at best, but undercuts the recurring class conflicts Kim uses readily within his films. The use of prostitution in a number of Kim’s films points back to his exploration of the harsh class distinctions within Korean society. *The Isle* and *Bad Guy* both exploit prostitution as a tool for showing male domination of the female body. *Bad Guy* establishes the Red Light District as a place where people should be dignified in earning a living, but also Sun-hwa’s own suffering becomes the true “embodiment...of fear and pain” (Williams 4). In contrast, *The Isle* subverts the idea of fear of corrupting female virtue and instead insists upon the power of the female body over a male. Linda Williams suggests in her essay “Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess” that “even [in] the most extreme displays of feminine masochistic suffering, there is always a component of either power or pleasure for the woman victim” (8). Hee-jin uses her sexuality to her advantage, especially in her budding relationship with Hyun-shik. The female body is represented in multiple ways, used to create distinctions between classes as well as explore the male domination inherent in Korean patriarchal culture.

Violence is one of Kim’s most repeated themes throughout his films. Known for his stunning use of human violence along with animal brutality, Kim’s films often tackle difficult subjects of suicide, sadomasochism, and voyeurism. *The Isle* uses extreme violence in the relationship between Hee-jin and Hyun-shik as a mechanism for revealing “that behind the contempt and destructiveness of it lies something so alluring, the most beautiful love of them all”

(Chung 133). Kim is insistent that the most powerful image in *The Isle* is the shot of two fishhooks forming a heart, thus representing the creation of these inanimate objects, used for sadomasochistic self-mutilation, as the force for something more existential in the power of human relationships (Chung 132). *The Isle* also brutalizes animals, something that when combined with the self-mutilation of Hee-jin and Hyun-shik, tests audience sensibilities and falls within the realm of sensationalizing violence. *Bad Guy* is inherently violent in its reliance on prostitution, but also features bloody stabbings and man-to-man street fights. The tamest of the three films is *The Bow*, which uses little violence except the torturous methods of the old man to drive potential suitors of the young girl away from the fishing boat. By shooting arrows towards the advancing fishermen, the old man drives away all threats to his relationship with the girl. These three films combine uses of sexual violence and bloody sequences to present the image of human brutality. Following the idea of an exploration of what human beings are, this allows for the understanding of violence as inherent part of life, especially for these outsiders. The understanding of violence as an inherent part of life for the outsiders follows Kim's intent of exploring what human beings are. The films incorporate setting as an important factor in showcasing the protagonist's marginalization and liminal existence. Water plays an important role in the creation of marginalized spaces, especially in *The Isle* and *The Bow*. Thus the settings create exterior spaces that exist on the margins in which these characters are allowed their violent acts, suggesting marginalization, silence, and violence as strongly interconnected ideas.

In the exploration of these three films in particular, Kim's use of silence as a recurring premise in his career is illuminated through the taciturn character's relationship with violence and exteriors of society. *The Isle*, *Bad Guy*, and *The Bow* offer examples of how Kim's characters have adapted through the use of silence, peaking to a point of awkwardness with *The*

Bow in 2005. The use of these silent protagonists also makes Kim's films often more available to Western audiences because of the lack of verbose Korean dialogue. However, the use of silence as a tool for the exploration of human emotion is powerful in creating interpersonal relationships in marginalized spaces. The underlying message of many of Kim's films, felt through his consistent use of ambiguous and often fantastical endings, is, as he puts simply, "The world will not change... We can find happiness only if we accept this and do not fear falling to the bottom" (Chung 139). The consistency of silence and its relationship with human brutality and violence offers such a perspective of the world in which redemption is hard to attain and marginalization is perhaps inevitable. *The Isle*, *Bad Guy*, and *The Bow* together help identify these relationships and establish worlds that can be likened to a pessimistic view of the world.

By showcasing the interactions between a man and a woman, each film utilizes themes of silence and violence to reveal dichotomies of human brutality. Through the exploration of such themes, along with presentations of prostitution and animal cruelty, *The Isle*, *Bad Guy*, and *The Bow* are archetypes of Kim's filmography. The persistence of his themes, those in which "criminal activities proliferate and corruption or vice is a fact of life", reveal the director's own interest in understanding the human identity and inherent societal problems (Chung 2). Through this criminality, common to all the protagonists in some way, the inherent nature of violence is shown. The establishment of silent characters in Kim's films, especially these three, shows the development of silence as a tool for character relationships, but can also reveal some problems with the obsessive nature of Kim's silent protagonists (such as the immense tension in the silence of *The Bow*'s main characters, explored further in the conclusion). These on-screen relationships, as constructed by Kim, further the idea that silence is partly responsible for social marginalization but also serve to enhance the violent nature of humanity.

Chapter One: Silence and Its Manifestations

Silence on a film screen can be difficult to negotiate, but through his protagonists Kim utilizes these taciturn characters to create worlds beyond the normative; these filmic worlds explore the dichotomies of human emotion and vulnerability, especially through his depictions of the so-called underdog. Throughout *The Isle*, *Bad Guy*, and *The Bow*, Kim establishes his protagonists outside the urban social core. These characters exist in their own type of prison, pushed aside from a normal social existence creating a “visceral feel for cruelty and class conflict” (Paquet 89). However, although the use of silence may seem to suggest a type of retardation or a mental lack which some may be quick to suggest, these characters simply communicate in a different manner. Speech does not help them further their interpersonal relationships nor transcend their marginalized social reality. Instead Kim seems to continually return to silence “employed as an external projection of internal pain” to create these intimate filmic worlds (Totaro 210).

Silence offers a sense of vulnerability that is not permitted the other characters in the films. These characters “find silence in the calm that life has denied them” (Gombeaud 25). In *The Isle*, the silent Hee-jin reigns supreme in her relationship with the suicidal Hyun-shik. Her mobility through the fishing boat and her unmirrored slithering through the lake’s dark waters allows her a sense of dominance even in light of her apparent muteness. The brothel in *Bad Guy* allows Han-gi an overwhelming sense of control over college girl Sun-hwa whom he essentially forces into prostitution. However his silence is at times crushing in Han-gi’s inability to relate fully to those around him especially in his interactions with Sun-hwa. The old man bringing fishermen aboard the boat in *The Bow* is seemingly the only connection the young girl has to the real world, as they are isolated on a fishing boat in the middle of the ocean. Their peculiar communication

by shooting arrows and fortune-telling showcases the sense of doom that overcomes the fishing boat when strangers come from the mainland, always bringing some problem for the couple.

Each film presents these silent characters as “object heroes”.² The most relatable character to this idea of submission to the world is Han-gi in *Bad Guy*. His inability to communicate in a so-called “normal” manner with the outside world causes him problems. Bernstein describes the so-called object hero as one with “a common moral blindness...[the] abjection always contains a strong mixture of the monstrous, the rejection of conventional ethical and social codes” (26). The opening of *Bad Guy* showcases this dilemma of morality directly through a six-minute sequence in which the urban population that surrounds Han-gi shuns his inability to speak through the clear insistence upon class conflict. Han-gi struggles against the authority of the soldiers who attempt to force him into compliance—they make Han-gi apologize—after his lurid sexual advances upon the obviously high-class college girl Sun-hwa. Han-gi is drawn to the girl in the opening sequence. He inches closer to her as they sit side-by-side on a bench. The distinction between social strata is clear in Sun-hwa’s obvious distaste for the somewhat dirty and disheveled Han-gi who stares unabashedly at the girl beside him. This clash of cultures, Han-gi’s subaltern existence as juxtaposed with Sun-hwa’s urbanity, reveals not only the clear class distinctions which are referenced throughout the film, but also portrays the insistence upon silence as a less understood form of emotional communication.

Han-gi’s inability to convey his own reasons for his aggressive advances on Sun-hwa with the urban elitists is understood as a disconnect between these social classes that continue to become prevalent in the film’s ongoing struggle between chastity and prostitution. Hye Seung Chung refers to Han-gi as a “socially branded outlaw” in accordance with the character’s facial profile emerging at the end of the sequence with the film’s title *Bad Guy* appearing next to this

close-up (49). The insistence upon marking Han-gi as the outcast only furthers the innate doom of this labeled character that attempts to subvert his dissimilarity of being indecent and “dirty” and help those around him. According to the definition of an abject hero, they subsume “logically incompatible qualities” and self-contempt (Bernstein 22). Han-gi shows these characteristics: whether it is by sacrificing himself as a murderer and going to jail for a friend, or seemingly “saving” Sun-hwa from a continued life in the brothel by whisking her away in the van at film’s close only to presumably remain in this marginal class. The abject hero is often placed in relation to Friedrich Nietzsche’s idea of “*ressentiment*”. Bernstein defines Nietzsche’s term in accordance with the abject hero: *ressentiment* “can be best understood as a malignant modern outgrowth of abjection...[the hero’s] hatred with which he feeds his sense of having been treated unfairly, and his hope of someday forcing others to suffer in his place” (28). *Ressentiment*, then, can be equated with Han-gi’s desire to turn Sun-hwa into a prostitute.³ He desires to put others in his place of suffering: the Red Light District. This creation of Han-gi as an “abject hero” suggests his true contrast to the stigmas associated with not only his silence but also his life as a pimp.

Connecting this idea of an underdog or destitute protagonist, both *The Isle* and *The Bow* continue this theme in using their main characters to connect with the outside world in selfish ways. Throughout *The Isle*, Hee-jin utilizes her isolation on the lakefront to establish her dominance over the men who come to fish in the floating huts. She not only becomes a mermaid-like entity by swimming underwater in the dark of night to mess with the fishermen by dropping their possessions into the lake, but she creates a barrier between herself and the customers by choosing to remain silent. Her choice of remaining mute is insisted upon after a brief sexual encounter with one fisherman who teases her for not speaking and relates, “I know you can talk.

You moaned while doing it.” This leads to the sexual humiliation of Hee-jin who remains silent throughout the film in lieu of a few desperate screams. Gender relations become extremely important in *The Isle* as the relationship between Hee-jin and Hyun-shik progresses from initial attraction and pure lust to a sort of mutually beneficial relationship by film’s close. This carries over into *The Bow* and *Bad Guy* creating a "visceral feel for cruelty and class conflict" which pervades each of the three films (Paquet 89).

The Bow uses silence as a way to further isolate the two main characters, the old man and the young girl. Their existence remains on the open sea where the old man essentially holds this young girl hostage—though she does not resist until later in the film. The strange relationship between the two is enhanced through their use of fortune-telling. When the old man brings fishermen from the mainland onto their boat, he tells their fortunes. The young girl sits upon a swing that dangles harrowingly from the edge while the old man stands on their adjacent boat and shoots arrows towards the girl. Never hitting her, the arrows land upon a painted Buddha image that adorns their large houseboat. Once three arrows have stuck soundly in the image, they are plucked out of the wood by the swinging girl who then climbs aboard and whispers in the old man’s ear, each time with a slight smirk. The old man then relays the message by whispering into the deserving fisherman’s ear—the fortunes are never revealed to the viewer. This is the only verbal communication seen between the old man and the girl in the film. This peculiar ritual is replayed three times, the last time leading nearly to the old man’s undoing because of his strained relationship with the girl. The ritualism of this action plays upon the isolation of the two characters in the sense that they relate to outsiders only through this type of spirituality. It seems their spirituality is the only real communication with the outside world they share until the visiting teenage boy gives the young girl a cassette player. After first setting eyes on the boy, he

becomes the girl's new object of affection much to the dislike of her keeper (and future husband), the old man. Both of these films represent the female protagonist in a way that isolates her from society through her silence and the oppression of male characters.

Establishing the silence of his protagonists early in each film allows Kim to create these worlds of emotional interpretation rather than verbal communication. Not only do these taciturn characters exude vulnerability in their failure to communicate with those deemed normal, but also the relationship between silence and aggression is introduced. All of Kim's characters that remain mute, or almost entirely mute, as is the case with Han-gi, showcase a vivid aggression in their respective films and it can be suggested that Kim himself "sees violence as a direct outgrowth, if not reflection, of emotional pain" (Totaro 209). Han-gi is the most outwardly violent, his acts stemming from sexually assaulting Sun-hwa at the beginning of the film to vicious street fights in front of the brothel. *The Isle* contains perhaps the most disturbing violence in the infamous fishhook sequences in which both Hyun-shik and Hee-jin self-mutilate using the harrowing objects as weapons against their own body. *The Isle* also introduces Kim's recurring idea of violence against animals through the tormenting of innocent fish, explained further in chapter three. This animal motif is carried throughout *The Isle* in various ways and also relates to the insistence upon the animalistic brutality of humans themselves. *The Bow* maintains a subdued violence in the relationship between the object of the bow itself and the musings of the old man and the girl. It is notable here that the only actual violence that results in injury is of the young girl's doing (she shoots two men in the leg) and not the old man—who consistently uses the bow to portray his masculinity. These films exemplify the notion that "People don't talk to each other in Kim's films, people hit each other. Relationships are always frontal, direct, decoded, never mediated through language which would neutralize the violence and allow individualities to meet

in the neutrality of a shared space” (Gombeaud 60-61). The complex nature of the silent protagonist as related to their internal and outward aggression is insisted upon in each film and establishes further the innate isolation each character experiences, again relying clearly on distinctions between classes and the conflicts of non-traditional communication.

As referenced, Kim’s consistent use of taciturn protagonists perhaps expresses the reliance upon an emotional rather than a verbal language. This extends into each film through the use of close-ups, especially in intense scenes of emotion in which the main character is trying to maintain some strong affecting connection within a relationship with another verbally constructed character. As Béla Balázs identifies in his theory of the close-up, “The film has brought us the silent soliloquy, in which a face can speak with the subtlest shades of meaning...it is the manifestation of mental, not physical, loneliness” (62-63). All three of Kim’s films represent this conceptual nature of silence through the use of the close-up. *The Bow* and *The Isle* rely heavily on close-up shots and extreme close-ups, especially in scenes that contain extreme tension. *The Isle* uses extreme close-ups to directly juxtapose both of the self-mutilation sequences. In the first of the two, the camera begins with a medium shot of Hyun-shik contemplating the fishing rod as the imminent danger of police capture lies just outside the confines of the yellow fishing hut. The sequence then moves quickly through a series of four extreme close-ups: the four fish hooks dangling from the rod, Hyun-shik’s open mouth and the hooks being lowered inside, his watery, pained eyes as he swallows, and finally his hand wrapped tightly with the fishing line, pulling the hooks back up his esophagus. These are then connected to Hee-jin’s sexual violence later in the film as the mutilation of her vagina is shown through a less explicit, more implied construction of images using mostly long shots and one extreme close-up. Though not as overt, this scene directly references Hyun-shik’s violence

through an extreme close-up of Hee-jin's teary eyes just before she lets out a blood-curdling scream—nearly the only sound she makes throughout the film. The strong juxtaposition of the two shots of Hyun-shik and Hee-jin's eyes creates a new realization as well, of Hee-jin's silence. She uses sound only to her advantage and shuns verbal communication for the most part. Her relationship with others is based almost solely on her ability to manipulate—as she does by mutilating herself right after Hyun-shik tries to leave her behind.

The Bow also creates dominance through the interdependence of the relationship between the old man and the girl. The old man's masculine desires and his perverse relationship with violence are shown in his aggressive use of the bow. Instead of verbally communicating with the fishermen who threaten his bond with the girl, he shoots arrows instead to assert his own dominance over the girl and her sexuality. The fishermen who visit the boat are constantly taunting and advancing on the girl, touching her and putting fish down her blouse. The girl's impish smile and lack of verbal interjection leads on the hyper-sexualized men. The old man's jealousy and rage interferes each time a fisherman gets too close. Arrows are shot towards the fishermen, often startling them, showcasing the old man's strength, power, and possessiveness over the girl, forcing the fishermen to back off. This brutal form of communication between the urban fishermen and the isolated man symbolizes the strength of the relationship between the old man and girl. The two communicate primarily through daily rituals; one of consequence is their nightly hand-holding. This connection is established each night, with him assuming the dominant position. Not only does the couple sleep in a hierarchal bed—a bunk bed—but the man always remains on top symbolically asserting his dominance over the young girl. Each night the man reaches down and grasps the young girl's hand. This symbolic connection is shown in close-up several times, as are the silent faces of the characters. *The Bow* remains in close-up for much of

the film, especially in the opening sequence of the man fashioning his bow and the girl getting her face painted with colored dots next to her left eye. This sequence is somewhat disorienting and no words are spoken, truly setting the tone for the rest of *The Bow*. The opening emphasizes “The bow here is a symbol of male power. It is an object the old man brandishes proudly in his beloved’s direction...stretching his bow to prove his virility and vigor” (Gombeaud 53). The dominance of the elder in terms of his maleness and his age is continually asserted on screen through his demeanor, forceful aggression towards other male threats and seeming mythical power over the girl’s actions. The young girl’s innocence is the man’s greatest hinderance in the film.

Silence, too, is used as a way to establish the ineffable. It has been somewhat readily suggested that many of Kim’s protagonists are a direct reflection of the writer-director himself in their inability to completely express their emotional pain and accept their apparent marginalization. Again Chung suggests, “Silence is a manifestation of Kim’s own mistrust of language-based discourse and the signifying systems that are controlled and manipulated by members of the intelligentsia” (55). It is important to note that Kim’s first film *Crocodile* does not include a silent protagonist. Instead *Crocodile* explores the actions of a notorious homeless man, in effect creating Kim’s first representation of an abject hero. This early presentation of the abject hero also opened the door for many of Kim’s other recurring themes throughout his work including sexual perversions, a suicide motif, and the presentation of female agency. *Crocodile* however lacks the visual and narrative flair found in Kim’s subsequent work. The film contains many harsh cuts, which tend to jar the narrative flow compared to later films in which film sequences flow gracefully between shots and plot elements. The addition of muteness as a recurring character trait in Kim’s succeeding post-*Crocodile* films—arguably reaching a peak

with the release of *3-Iron* in 2004—is undeniably a suggestion of the turn inward for Kim sparked after harsh criticism by the press, following the release of his second film *Wild Animals* in 1997.⁴ This creation of something greater, something that cannot be said, leans back upon the structure created through the silence that pervades *The Isle*, *Bad Guy*, and *The Bow*.

The Bow relies upon the precarious relationship of an old man and a young girl who are to be married and allows the silence to take on a new significance in the way it shapes the complex interaction of the two. The girl holds an absolute trust in the old man until the young boy she lusts after reveals to her that she was kidnapped at a young age. But the girl is unable to leave the old man behind. When she first attempts to leave for the mainland with the young boy, the old man attempts suicide by fashioning the boat's towrope around his neck. Although he tries to back out by cutting the rope from his neck, the girl has already realized what the old man has done, returning to the boat in tears, thinking him dead. The strength of their dependence is shown here in the girl's clear connection to the man who raised her. The emotional content of this scene shows both the old man and the girl at a low point that leads them back on the path to marriage. Again, the silence creates a type of monotony aboard the boat, showing how the creation of emotion through mise-en-scène is key in Kim's films. Kim uses the boat to establish a type of claustrophobic maze of doors and tiny living quarters aboard. This feeling of closeness is enhanced through the continuous use of close-up shots that occasionally disorient the spectator from the setting. However the boat also relegates itself to solitude through long shots, which contain only the fishing boat and the vast blue ocean. This creates a new type of silence, that of pure loneliness which seems not to plague the characters within the film but is felt through the screen, invading the spectatorial space. This "progressive sliding into silence in the course of his career... first, a forced mutism, the irreversible symptom of a sustained violence, it slowly

becomes a *chosen* silence and place of purity... as in *The Bow*” (Gombeaud 88). *The Bow* creates this purity through the continual rituals, including nightly bathing, fortune-telling and the music that stems from the bow as an instrument.

Music is used to enhance the creation of emotional depth within these close-mouthed sequences. *The Bow* relies heavily on the use on instrumentation to create a spiritual type of existence for the old man. The old man is time and again seen using his bow as a musical instrument, strumming the cord similarly to a violin or a Korean fiddle.⁵ Interestingly, this same bow is the object that symbolizes the old man’s aggression: “The bow in the film is at the same time a death device, a tool to predict the future and a very delicate musical instrument” (Gombeaud 53). This connection between musical language and aggression points back to the larger theme of silence and violence in accordance with one another. The manifestation of aggression with something that creates a beauty of sound points to the close relationship between communication and brutality, and the fact that the two are interwoven “thus producing harmony and violence at the same time” (Gombeaud 105). The connection can be seen less explicitly in *The Isle* and *Bad Guy*. However other modes of suggestion relate silence and violence together in these respective films like the creation of dualities in *The Isle* through Hyun-shik and Hee-jin’s sadomasochism and the employment of costumes in *Bad Guy*, explored in chapters two and three, respectively. Music in essence tears the young girl away from everything she knows and understands after she is given an audio cassette player from the teenage boy who comes aboard the fishing boat. Music and the man’s playing of the bow help create a transcendent feeling, reverberated throughout the diegesis. Instead of the spectator focusing directly on a film’s dialogue, the strength of the other cinematic features is more fully realized in light of little to no verbal communication of the protagonists.

The reliance upon these types of emotional characters and the abjectness of their place within each respective film leads back to Nietzsche's concept of *ressentiment*. Bernstein suggests that "abjection could lead directly to a *ressentiment* embittered enough to erupt into murder" and it is idealized in terms of its relation to the character's anger, aggression, guilt, and frustration (9). This concept also identifies the reasons for which Chung determines, "Kim's corpus can be described as a *necessarily* brutal cinema...[Because] themes and characters that derive from the writer-director's lived experiences make Kim's cinema of *ressentiment* so potent" (24). The portrayal of such characters that so closely resemble the highlighted and idealized notions of Kim's own experience rests subtly in their silences as well. *The Isle*, *Bad Guy*, and *The Bow* use the camera to show character emotion through the consistent use of close-ups. Along with guiding these films as a type of social critique, the director also utilizes his desire for the exploration of humanity to showcase significant class distinctions. The use of silence in these three works attempts to transfer emotion to a more acceptable form of communication in its endeavors to overcome the limitations of verbal communication through this non-typical form of interaction.

Chapter Two: Constructions and Perversions of the Sexual Female

The Isle, *Bad Guy*, and *The Bow* each revolve almost solely around the relationship between one male and one female. The sexual violence and prostitution presented in these films shows an outward aggression relating to the male-female dynamic of each film's protagonists. Female isolation is also readily applicable to each film especially in the lack of agency granted to females, a recurring concern through the broader context of Korean society, which widely considers "female chastity as a national virtue and women as second-class citizens" (Totaro 211). *The Bow* and *Bad Guy* bring into question the role of female chastity, and its presence in these films creates sexual tension and leads to violence in both cases. The multifarious relationships between love and lust also pervade these three films as Kim explores the consequences of desire as it relates to human relationships and sexuality. From the twisted downgrading of a college girl into a prostitute in *Bad Guy* to a kidnapped teenage girl marrying a man more than twice her age in *The Bow*, Kim's films establish interpersonal relationships that defy the norm and broaden traditional ideas of love and desire beyond what is customarily acceptable—extending occasionally to ideas of sadomasochism in *The Isle*. Williams broadly suggests, "The categories of fetishism, voyeurism, sadism, and masochism frequently invoked to describe the pleasures of film spectatorship are by definition perversions" (6). These complexities and perversions bring out questions of sexual violence and female identity as related to the idealizations of the female body within each film and question the role of the female within these male-constructed domains.

In each of these three films, the female identity is placed in relation to the males that surround her. *The Bow* presents the most glaring example of this fascination with male-female relationships, as only one female is present throughout the entirety of the film. The young girl is

always placed in relation to a man, the old man, the young boy or random fishermen that come aboard each day. Hee-jin in *The Isle* is presented in terms of the men she encounters at the fishing huts and, further into the film, purely in terms of her developing intimacy with Hyun-shik. *Bad Guy* exhibits the most chilling representation of female identity, as the setting is primarily a brothel where all the women are objectified and utilize men to promote a sound living for themselves. Basically, “these ‘parasitical’ women are in need of male protection, and their bodies are offered as rewards for such protection” (Chung 73). These conflicts and complex identities, although different in each film, interconnect the sexual violence through aggressive presentations of the female body. Female identity is constructed on the basis of the Korean tradition of an overwhelming patriarchy, which pervades Kim’s films. The female is always placed in relation to a male, underlining the sometimes-severe treatment of females in Kim’s work. Films containing these constructions of female sexuality and violence, like *The Isle*, then, are often labeled “Asia Extreme”⁶ and tend to “rely on the Western audiences' perception of the East as weird and wonderful, sublime and grotesque” (Choi, *Horror to the Extreme* 87). This phenomenon extends to each film a new spectator who may be more forgiving to the abjectness of the protagonists and therefore are offered more sympathy.

The Isle explores sexuality perhaps through the most explicit lens, even though *Bad Guy* deals with the more pressing issue of chastity. *The Isle* establishes early on the relationship between Hee-jin and the fishermen to be one of prostitution; the floating fishing huts place human cruelty alongside sexual exploits. It can be perceived that *The Isle* is primarily exploring “Man and Woman reverting to their primitive, primal origins”, but ideally the film explores more than just this man-versus-woman model, instead turning inward to explore the depths of emotional pain, mistrust and perhaps love (Totaro 211). Far from being a typical slasher film,

although containing similar elements of female victimology, shocking gore and mild pornography, *The Isle* identifies with Hee-jin as an object of desire almost immediately. She is seen pleasuring fishermen in the dead of night and being humiliated when asked to speak as referenced in chapter one. Her identification in the film leads the spectator to feel sorry for her, as throughout the beginning it seems she is afflicted with some sense of isolation and loneliness from her destitute setting. *The Isle* also uses this gore to establish the connection between the male and female body. Instead of mutilating her mouth as Hyun-shik did, Hee-jin goes straight for what identifies her as a female: her vagina. Her sadomasochistic mutilation is clearly a struggle against defining herself in terms of sexuality and a ploy to enhance her relationship with Hyun-shik. Hee-jin is already contrasted to the other prostitutes in the film who always wear skimpy clothing and visible makeup. Her brutal attack on her own vagina furthers her contrast to the perceived “innocence” of the younger, more conventionally beautiful prostitutes. This attack on her female identity is common through the film as Hee-jin attempts to come to terms with the evolving relationship she has established with Hyun-shik. At one point sexual violence erupts when Hyun-shik kisses Hee-jin and gropes her in the rain. Through a long shot, Hee-jin is shown vehemently pushing Hyun-shik off of her as he cruelly rips her shirt right off of her now-bare body. The scene exemplifies the visceral quality of the film, in that it depicts violence from a distance but still has the same haunting effect as it would if it was seen up-close and personal. The long shot does serve, however, to de-sexualize the moment, giving it a less graphic quality as well as distancing the spectator from the action. The moment prefaces the rest of the film by showing the masochism of Hyun-shik and the insistence on a relationship greater than what Hee-jin shares with the other fishermen. This scene also furthers the “humiliating subordination of women by supermacho Korean men [that is] abundant” (Choe, “Kim Ki-duk’s Cinema of

Cruelty” 65-66). Female humiliation extends to the opening sequence of *Bad Guy* where Han-gi forcibly kisses Sun-hwa. The tension of this scene in *The Isle* is reconciled later when Hee-jin saves Hyun-shik from being arrested by the police and nurses him back to health after his attempted suicide. The reversal of roles in the film is also quite apparent, and connects with the same type of male-female switch in *The Bow*, as Hee-jin needs Hyun-shik’s help later—essentially forcing him into helping her after she repeats Hyun-shik’s mutilation of body and self to goad him into returning to the yellow fishing shack.

The Bow maintains a similar type of male-female dynamic which rests upon the intimate desires and masculine identity of the old man as related to the timid and emerging sexual desires of the young girl. The old man, as mentioned in chapter one, asserts his dominance throughout the film in his use of the bow. Acting as a type of phallic symbol, the bow is immediately associated with the man’s power as the entire opening sequence focuses on the man fashioning his bow into a music instrument as if to lull the girl into submission, which it seems at times he does indeed do. The old man is also seen sharpening the arrows on occasion, relating to his desires toward the girl—although his desire pertains to a traditional sense of marriage than a purely sexual need. The girl’s adaptation throughout the film seems to be about finding her sexuality and realizing what love is. Her sexual desire comes to rest with the young boy who intrudes upon her relationship with the old man, but at the film’s end she realizes her true love for the old man, which makes her marry him. Even the strong oppression she feels from the old man’s patriarchal values do not stop the girl from obtaining a perverse pleasure in the anger of her captor. Thus, “even [in] the most extreme displays of feminine masochistic suffering, there is always a component of either power or pleasure for the woman victim” (Williams 8). The reversal of roles in the film comes when the young girl picks up the bow. This action symbolizes

her taking over the man's role in the relationship—she also is the only true violent aggressor in the film to an extent. The girl even shoots an arrow toward the old man, as if warding off his love and telling him to stay away and the “changing gender dynamic in which the aggressor becomes the victim of aggression” comes full circle (Choi, “Riding the New Wave” 179-180).

Bad Guy deals again with the issues of chastity and prostitution. The film's perverse degradation of a seemingly upper class college girl into a somewhat trashy prostitute is wholeheartedly disturbing if only for the fact that the girl was forced upon false pretenses into the life of sexual gratification for males. It is “indeed problematic that male focalized class warfare is waged over the bodies of middle class women” perhaps justly because of the chastity issue which hangs over the beginning of Sun-hwa's misfortune (Chung 24). Sun-hwa is forced into her prostitution “debt” as a virgin. This creates a whole new stigma surrounding her ordeal because she begs for her boyfriend, although he seemingly does not comprehend the reasons behind her sexual desires and is unable to give Sun-hwa what she wants. The reality leaves her with one option: give up her virtue to a complete stranger. After this step is overcome, Sun-hwa transforms. Her innocent schoolgirl attire is exchanged for gaudy, colored wigs and scanty bikini tops covered in fringe and sequins in similarly obnoxious shades of neon blue and pink. The deflowering sequence also relies on a sense of voyeurism, not only in relation to the film's spectators but within the film too. Han-gi watches Sun-hwa's every move through a two-way mirror of which only he is privy to its secrets. This intimacy as created through Han-gi's omniscient perspective into Sun-hwa's most private moments creates a tender awareness as Han-gi is able to “[identify] with female pain and [transform] his initial social *ressentiment* into interclass, cross-gender empathy” (Chung 88). Han-gi's own pain over what is in essence a “rape” sequence is mirrored in his shadowy figure hiding behind the mirror and the pained

expressions given in close-up. These voyeuristic arrangements which occur frequently also act as a cinematic allegory of the spectator watching this type of lifestyle from behind the glass, purposefully removed from the action by the pane of see-through glass which is only broken when Han-gi eventually reveals himself by lighting a match.

The Bow also deals with the issue of chastity and purity of the female body through the young girl who is presumably a virgin because of her young age and isolation. The insinuation throughout the film, after it is revealed by a shot of a calendar hanging in the sleeping quarters, is that the old man and girl will marry. Marriage implies the deflowering of the female on the wedding night, which is only enhanced in that the old man becomes threatened when other males touch or fondle the young girl, at one point even dropping a fish down her blouse. She is essentially treated as his property. It is only when she begins to push back against his overwhelming authority that their relationship is strained. Throughout *The Isle*, *Bad Guy*, and *The Bow*, it seems as if “female characters are burdened with the responsibility of having to convert and redeem morally reprehensible or unstable men by sleeping with them” (Chung 69). This is certainly insisted upon at the end of *The Bow*, which contains a strange deflowering sequence that follows the supposed suicide of the old man—he jumps headlong into the ocean and is never seen again. After the traditional wedding ceremony of the couple, the man plays his bow for the last time while the young girl sleeps in her white undergarment. After the old man finishes his song, the old man shoots his last arrow straight into the sky and proceeds to jump into the ocean. The girl suddenly wakes and experiences the feelings of an orgasm, moaning and writhing, as the boy watches in awe. The film suggests the arrow that the old man shot into the sky returns to earth and “penetrates” the young girl’s virginity, so that “[she] bleeds between her legs in her virginal child bride’s dress” (Gombeaud 39). The scene is bathed in light and the girl

is shrouded in heavenly brightness. This coloring along with the perverse imagery of the young boy essentially taking the place of the old man—the shot makes it seem as though the boy and girl are having sex—becomes evident as he leans over to help her and the young girl grasps him tighter and reaches her orgasm. The scene creates spirituality through the symbolism of the falling arrow and the replacement of the old man and the boy. This foreshadows the last scene of the film in which the boat the old man and girl lived on sinks into the ocean when the girl leaves with the boy, echoing the old man's earlier drowning. This too relates back to the distinction of classes (or in this case ages and traditions) in that the girl is “freed from the lecherous clutches of an oppressive older man only to be guided by a comparatively more youthful, gentler form of patriarchy” (Chung 71). The strange intricacies of this scene and the assumption that the young girl has been deflowered by the spirit and memory of the old man is somewhat troubling but also reminds of the reversal of roles in terms of sexuality and violent behavior which were introduced earlier in the film.

The presentation of sexual objectification and exploitation of females in Kim's films, though inciting larger themes and issues, has become a source of much debate among critics and academics, especially those concerned with a feminist perspective. Some suggest, like Myung Ja Kim, that “the prostituted women in Kim Ki-duk's films can be read as mocking the ideology of chastity and the respectability Korean culture has cherished and imposed on women for so long” (255). However, this point although occasionally valid is a surface-level interpretation of the themes which Kim constantly refers back to. The prostitution of women in his films, although admittedly sometimes hard to watch, is also dealt with in a realistic manner. The treatment of these women is more a comment on the social stigmas associated with prostitution and lower class Korean society than a comment on the actual treatment of the female. In a 2002 post-*Bad*

Guy interview, Kim himself was quick to explain that he “used characters from this world for [his] film, because people living and working here seem to be more vulnerable...Life happens regardless of a person’s conscious efforts. Therefore, someone’s everyday work becomes his/her life even if other people do not accept it or respect it” (Yecies). This again points to the theme of class conflict within the writer-director’s works and the complexities of relationships set in these marginalized worlds.

One of Kim’s most vocal critics has gone so far to suggest his films as representations of “sexual terrorism.” Tony Rayns’ snarky comments tend to bash the writer-director, using menacing statements like: “To the best of my knowledge, Kim himself doesn't beat up women or force them into prostitution, but these protagonists are all in some sense surrogates for the director” (50). These bleak depictions of Kim do nothing to satisfy the more supportive critics of his work and tend to casually suggest the director has no merit whatsoever. Although this negative criticism may make some viewers move away from Kim’s films, the poetic beauties of his masterful character relationships—and the creation of such thrilling premises as in *The Isle*, *Bad Guy*, and *The Bow*—make Kim’s films a delight to watch. These films provide an expansion of national Korean film “by rendering...narratives set against scene portrayals of the troubled psyches of doomed protagonists” (Choi, *Horror to the Extreme* 5). Although the provocative nature of some scenes, themes and relationships may seem a type of “sexual terrorism”, the interplay between female identity and the true desire felt throughout his films overcomes this sensationalized reading of many of Kim’s works. Often times the subtleties of Kim’s filmmaking push the boundaries of sensitive subject matter, shown, too, in the lack of large domestic audiences as referenced in the introduction.

In dealing with Kim's use of sexuality juxtaposed with violence, it can be argued that these films do take on extreme forms of sexuality in order to alleviate some tension between the character's human bestial and sexual desires. Prostitution is one example of such an extreme. Not only does prostitution carry a stigma within western society, but also it seems to be similarly downgraded in non-western societies as well, including South Korea. Speaking of the Red Light District specifically, Kim clarifies how "people see this kind of place as a junkyard...many Koreans judge others by their educational and social backgrounds" (Yecies). This dichotomy of classes is foregrounded in Kim's work and repeatedly in *Bad Guy*. The film delves into the isolation of those who reside outside what is commonplace or acceptable. Essentially the Red Light District would be considered outside the traditional and not a place for any young college girl to be in and rightly so. The film is fraught with violence, sexual scenarios, and oddities of behavior. Han-gi constantly switches from his assigned "bad guy" role to a master of charity, giving himself up to the authorities for the sake of his henchman who brutally attacks a man in the street. Again this points to the dualities of male-female relationships and the interest each film has in exploring how sexuality creates these differences.

The Bow utilizes the dualities of men and women as well as young and old in the creation of the relationship between the old man and the young girl. This is notable especially through the switching of positions in terms of their rituals. The beginning of the film showcases the unique and oftentimes mundane daily routines of the "couple" including the bringing of new fishermen and groceries, playing the bow for music and ritual baths of the girl by the old man. The baths are of note because the ritual switches in the end revealing the true, and perhaps non-sexual love the old man and girl share with one another. The second-to-last bath is full of mistrust and hurt for both parties. The girl refuses to cooperate with the man. As Williams remarks, "She plays the

part of passive sufferer in order to obtain pleasure” from the old man’s inability to satisfy her (8). In the final bathing scene, once the relationship turns sour and the old man attempts suicide, the bathing is switched. The camera now shows the girl taking great care to wash the old man (instead of vice versa) who seems to be at the end of his wits. This tender scene recalls the first bathing scene in which the old man tenderly washes the girl as opposed to the bathing scene in which she pushes him away.

The establishment of sexual violence within Kim’s cinema is of interest to the interrelatedness of themes carried throughout *The Isle*, *Bad Guy*, and *The Bow*. Each delves into the construction of female identity in a different sense, whether through prostitution, chastity or the basic representation of the female body. Again these three films seem to share narrative and thematic references from *Crocodile*, which presents a dominant male and seemingly repressed female. The homeless thug aptly named “Crocodile” repeatedly rapes a woman he fished out of the river (after she attempted suicide) and resuscitated. This perversion of sexuality and the violence associated can be seen manifested throughout Kim’s body of work, not just in the four films primarily mentioned here but also in other works like *Samaritan Girl* (*Samaria*, 2004), *Wild Animals* and *Address Unknown*. The three films utilize tactics interwoven with other techniques such as close-ups and creations of social conflict to portray these females in relation to the patriarchy under which each woman finds herself struggling. Hee-jin, Sun-hwa and the young girl all find themselves trapped within this social stratification of men-versus-women dichotomy and are restrained under the weight of such men teeming with desire and lust. Each film’s insistence upon sexual violence in different forms creates an even more undeniable relationship between the protagonists’ isolation and marginality and the silence under which they seem to exist.

Chapter Three: Violence and the Periphery

Perhaps one of Kim's most recognizable film traits is his ardent portrayal of violent imagery. Whether violence against humans or animals, Kim's films almost never fail to deliver a type of brutality that resonates with the spectator. *The Isle*, *Bad Guy*, and *The Bow* are no exception. *The Isle* portrays self-mutilation, gruesomely filleted fish, and sexual violence. *Bad Guy* follows suit with its representation of the Red Light District and vicious man-to-man street fights and knifings. *The Bow* utilizes violence in a much more subtle manner through the arrows that are constantly shot around the fishing boat and several slapping bouts between characters. This outright violence portrayed by each of the protagonists seemingly forces them into a position of marginalization within their respective societies. Hee-jin lives alone by a lake and lives a life of laboring routine as she satisfies the needs of hypersexual fisherman. Han-gi is marginalized in his inability to fit in with urban society; instead he's resigned to a life of crime and sexual exploitation within the Red Light District. The old man and the girl are entirely separate from the world, as they reside on a fishing boat in the middle of the ocean. This marginalization also relates back to each film's setting as "alternative spaces of invisibility, exile, and alienation" (Chung 61). These isolated characters exist outside the socially acceptable norms and with that survive in a peripheral space framed in part by their own evocations of human brutality. This creation of characters that exists on the outskirts creates an innate connection between marginalization and violence. According to Gombeaud, "[Kim] is not so much fascinated by violence as by our desperate efforts to escape it", and each film is representative of different aspects of violent action (27). Setting becomes a vital aspect of all these films and this need for escape, especially in light of Kim's preference for the exteriors of society and class confrontation as established through his first feature *Crocodile*.

Water is an important location in many of Kim's films. *Crocodile* is set right next to the Han River in Seoul, where the character Crocodile finds himself homeless. *Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter...and Spring* (*Pom yŏrum kaül kyöul kŭrigo pom*, 2003) takes place on a lake in which a floating monastery roams freely on the water. Following this notion, *The Isle* takes place on a fog-covered lake, *The Bow* is set amidst the vast ocean, and in *Bad Guy* Han-gi and Sun-hwa repeatedly visit the beach. Water is used in each film to symbolize different aspects of humanity and create intimate settings. Each film utilizes water to create a sense of "spatial isolation" (Choi, "Riding the New Wave" 179). The setting further segregates not only the characters within the film, but the spectator as well. The films generally do not offer much exposition outside of the main settings, the lake, the ocean, and the Red Light District. This connection between isolationism and violence becomes notable as the characters present the innate desires of human violence and a visceral brutality within their respective marginalized spaces.

The Isle uses water in perhaps the most mythical way. The opening shot of the film establishes the setting through a high angle long shot of this misty, mythical lake setting, presenting it as "a fluid word, magical and everlasting" (Gombeaud 54). The fog covers the water's surface and emits an almost tranquil feeling, but unlike the use of water as vast and open such as in *The Bow*, *The Isle*'s lake is ominous; gunshots, rapists, and displeasing torture will soon mar the seemingly tranquil waters. Jinhee Choi suggests that *The Isle* tends to "render space abstractly" thus removing any real sense of location ("Riding the New Wave" 179). The water is perhaps the only thing in the film that can be determined as innocent—the brutality of humanity more than anything else in the film invades the water. The lake occupants dump maimed fish, mutilated bodies and remnants of the past, like Hyun-shik's gun, into the water. This setting in

The Isle serves to further marginalize the characters as well as create a mythical place, which further displays the brutality of humanity as juxtaposed with the serenity and calmness of the misty water. As Chung insists, “Sometimes serene evocations of the natural world contrast sharply with the agitated mental state of his films’ anguished characters” as with Hyun-shik’s extreme emotional state and repeated suicide attempts (2). This idea is also present in *The Bow* as the calmness of the ocean sharply contrasts with the harshness of life aboard the boat for the young girl.

Similar to the way water is used in *The Isle* is the way the ocean is utilized in *The Bow*. The ocean is immediately recognized as a vast body of water that is mysteriously unfamiliar, reaches to monstrous depths and can also be treacherous. *The Bow* utilizes all the aspects of the ocean to create an intimate setting aboard the fishing boat. The unfamiliarity of the ocean is echoed in the relationship the girl has with the visiting fishermen. She fails to understand the reasoning for the men’s groping actions and often misleads the fishermen with her impish smile. This mystery extends to the girl herself; the spectator is partially unknowing of why the girl resides on this isolated boat with a man so much older. One strong scene, which connects the character’s relationship with the ocean setting, comes directly after the two have fought over the rising affections the visiting boy showed to the girl. A riling storm rages outside the boat and even in all their recent turmoil, somehow this dangerous environment, the rocking boat and harsh howling wind, brings the couple back together. The young girl clings to the old man in fright of the peril raging outside. This scene shows the ability of setting to act in cohesion with the characters. The two were fighting and the sheer force of nature attempts to bring harmony back to their lives. This is directly referenced in the film through the sequence that immediately follows the nighttime storm—all peace has been restored to the ocean. There are few clouds and

the water is as calm as ever, stretching off into the horizon in long shot. In the water, “human beings continually find some comfort...water unifies, regenerates, pacifies” (Gombeaud 54). Just as in this scene, the relationship between the characters is essentially regenerated through the force of the water’s wrath. *The Bow* utilizes the immensity of space through the setting of the sea to make the isolation aboard the boat feel all the more powerful. The consistent use of close-ups with regard to the protagonists’ faces also invites this sense of isolated doom.

In *Bad Guy*, water seems to suggest a renewal. Han-gi takes Sun-hwa to the beach as an escape from the brutality of her new life within the brothel. This marks one of the first times the spectator gets to see the two together in a different setting, not surrounded by the filth of the Red Light District where most of the film is set. This beach scene is suggestive of the restoration of Sun-hwa’s own humanity and dignity. It is also one section of the film “in which it is unclear where reality ends and fantasy begins” (Chung 67). As Han-gi and Sun-hwa crouch side-by-side in the sand, Sun-hwa sees a woman walk into the ocean, never to return. This moment, shot in medium long shot as the water laps and the foggy horizon wanes, becomes a realization for Sun-hwa that there is something worse. She comes to understand the intrinsic bleakness of the new world that she inhabits and this understanding leads her to an ultimate acceptance of her current situation. Sun-hwa’s anguish is readily apparent throughout the film and in this moment her sadness is overcome by the understanding that this other woman has found nothing to live for. The relationship between Han-gi and Sun-hwa reaches a pivotal moment in that they both need something to live for and for now at least they have each other. Here on the beach, Sun-hwa also finds the ripped up remnants of two photographs buried beneath the sand. These pictures, which Sun-hwa tapes back together, are still missing the faces, thus the identities of the man and woman remain unknown. In the end, Sun-hwa finally discovers the missing photograph pieces of

the man and the woman in the sandy beach when she returns after escaping from the brothel. The picture is of herself and Han-gi, as “the features of the face appear as the couple reveal themselves and each of the protagonists lets their feelings for the other show” (Gombeaud 43). This strange twist of events in the film is a type of premonition that leads into the ending, which can be read as a false happy ending (and perhaps just a dream of Han-gi’s).⁷ This seashore sequence ends with the couple “[reuniting] just like the couple in the [photographs]—wearing the same clothing and leaning toward each other in the same way—and their image is momentarily frozen before fading out in overexposure” (Chung 67). Yes, Sun-hwa is no longer cooped up in the brothel, but she is still leading a life of prostitution.

The term peripheral existence describes most of Kim’s protagonists. From Han-gi and Hyun-shik to Sun-hwa and Hee-jin, the characters in Kim’s films are somehow alienated from the realms of traditional society. For many of these characters, violence plays a large role in their separation. *Bad Guy*’s Han-gi runs a brothel in the Red Light District, the setting itself already placing him outside the confines of a bustling urban center. In *The Isle* Hyun-shik is relegated to a small yellow fishing hut amidst a foggy lake because of his criminal acts: killing his wife and her lover. Similarly both females in these films are abandoned by society and are essentially the property of their own sexuality and their bodies. This insistence upon peripheral settings and characters that exist in a marginalized space enhances the silence used throughout Kim’s films and helps insist upon a portrayal of violent human behaviors as a natural, intuitive reaction to the character’s inhabited space. Violence in these three films is suggestive of inherent and intuitive human behaviors. Each character commits brutal acts upon instinct, reacting to the harsh realities of the world around them. The insistence upon the use of violence is closely related to the peripheral existence as well as Kim’s use of space. He often frames his characters in long shot

(especially in *The Isle*) which allows not only for distance from the on-screen brutality, but also for the use of negative space. Often, these long shots reveal a sense of negative space surrounding the characters, adding to the sense of isolation and marginalization felt within each film. In Kim's cinema, "any sense of temporal spatiality is undermined as day, night, dusk and dawn blend into each other" (Totaro 209). This blending of time and space is used to connect the characters to their environment.

The violence displayed in *Bad Guy* is connected to the setting through the insistence upon themes of prostitution and class conflict. Han-gi is violent towards his minions when they disobey him; he showcases his strength and bestiality to assert dominance over the girls in his brothel and the men he employs. This violence is also suggested in his silence. Kim's characters use silence partially as a way to withdraw into themselves. Han-gi's own voiceless existence seems to stem from some violent act, for when he does speak the sounds are high-pitched and pained as if "his vocal cords have been the victim of a blade" (Gombeaud 25). This insistence on past and present violence in *Bad Guy* permeates the film. Even Han-gi's voyeurism through the two-way mirror is a type of violence in its invasion of Sun-hwa's extremely private moments. Gombeaud suggests, "violence in Kim Ki-duk's films only exists to let out a moment of gentleness...and vice versa" (24). This is all too true in *Bad Guy*. Each moment of violence, whether it's Sun-hwa slapping Han-gi or Han-gi's attack on one of the brothel's customers, is juxtaposed with a moment of extreme anguish where the camera focuses singularly on a tender moment of crying or reflection versus a scattered multi-shot view of brutality. The relationships Han-gi holds within the film are almost all based around an intimidation factor. "Physical violence [is employed] as a form of intimidation and a vessel for authoritarianism", where Han-gi is basically the dictator of his brothel (Totaro 211). His associates cower in his presence,

jumping immediately out of their chairs to stand at attention like soldiers whenever Han-gi enters the room. His mere presence is intimidating for most minor characters in the film. These displays of authority help foster Han-gi's aggressive tendencies. But despite his aggression, tenderness is also present. He seems to care for Sun-hwa in a more generous manner than others he encounters. Although his actions with Sun-hwa in the film's opening scene, when Han-gi forcefully kisses her, are initially brutal, his actions throughout the film subvert his initial force. He even gives Sun-hwa the book of sexual-themed paintings she coveted early on in *Bad Guy*. These discrepancies in Han-gi's near-constant violent attitude are created to reveal moments of gentle reflection within the film and portray two sides to the abject hero: both aggressor and victim of human desire.

Often times in *The Isle*, *Bad Guy*, and *The Bow*, the limits of spectator sensitivity are tested. In *The Isle*, haunting displays of self-mutilation and animal cruelty are especially shocking and entirely visceral. The "surreal renderings of hyperviolent imagery and gore" depicted in *The Isle* are surely formidable, but primarily serve to further greater themes within the film (Choi, "Riding the New Wave" 174). Although some readings of *The Isle* may identify clichéd metaphors such as "hooked on love", the film delves into the greater relationship between desire and dependency. Hee-jin becomes dependent on the affections of Hyun-shik and the film can be seen as an in-depth exploration of male perversion and fantasy. With all his flaws, murdering his wife and her lover and his numerous suicide attempts, Hyun-shik seems to exert a power over Hee-jin. But Hee-jin's own sphinx-like nature allows her to negotiate her own motives with Hyun-shik and their relationship turns into one of dependence. They are both complicit in the killing of the young prostitute and her pimp and, by the end of the film, they

escape to a transcendent watery isle. This dependence is felt especially through their self-mutilation.

The first of the self-mutilation sequences, as mentioned in chapter one, is shot through a series of extreme close-ups. This attention to detail when Hyun-shik forces fishhooks down his throat is a direct insistence upon this gruesome violence against the body. The scene doesn't show anything outright however. The violence is more implied with the insistence on red blood and the extreme close-up of his bulging eyeballs. The following sequence in which Hee-jin copies the fish hook act by forcing the sharp objects up her vagina is in long shot, thus distancing the audience from a second visceral sequence. This technique allows for a "shock-and-awe" feeling because of the extreme close-up, an intimate view of bodily harm. However, at the same time, the viewer is detached by the long shot of Hee-jin's vehement act. This juxtaposition is seen throughout the film in violent sequences. After Hee-jin ties up the prostitute who has a crush on Hyun-shik and leaves her alone in a floating hut, the girl attempts to escape and ends up falling into the lake, dead in minutes. This sequence of the prostitute falling into the water is also shown in medium long shot to distance the spectator from the death. The insistence on depicting intimate violence and then forcing a distance creates a tension in the film, leading back to the idea of sensitivity. *The Isle's* use of close-ups and long shots helps reveal the primitive nature of violence and allows the visceral aspect of each scene to ripple through the spectator.

The suggestion of audience sensitivity, though not at all new, has helped classify *The Isle* as "extreme horror". However, *Bad Guy* and *The Bow* do not necessarily fall under this category. Instead, these two films utilize formidable subject matter instead of grotesque self-mutilation to make use of audience sensitivities. Both films revolve around girls who are virgins and have deflowering scenes. In *Bad Guy*, the said sequence of Sun-hwa being forced (and/or tricked) into

becoming a prostitute is surely a challenge for sensitive spectators. The scene is bathed in soft shadows and the encounter is staged from behind Han-gi's two-way mirror, thus invoking the audience as voyeurs too. The insistence here upon the spectator as voyeur is important in recognizing the perversity of the situation Sun-hwa is in as well as the connection between violence and emotional pain. The use of brutality to showcase vast depths of human emotions in each of these films is insisted upon through the character's violent actions and the peculiar situations of each plot. *Bad Guy* utilizes this pain to connect two individuals, as does *The Isle*. *The Bow* uses jealousy and a certain spirituality to bring two people together and free the old man from his frustrations.

The violence set against intense emotion is similar to the insistence on violence against a backdrop of serenity. The films' settings, as juxtaposed with human brutality, sometimes "[provoke] a much more bizarre sense of grotesqueness since they are placed in settings full of sublime beauty and lyricism" (Kim, "Race, Gender, and Postcolonial Identity" 254). *The Bow* is set against the serenity (or danger) of the ocean and poses questions of desire and love in a hostile relationship between the man and young girl. *Bad Guy* attempts to represent the life of the Red Light District with some sense of respect for the setting, but contrasts this supposed respectability with uncomfortable sexual violence and vicious scenes of intimidation. *The Isle* is the most indicative of a sublime setting intertwined with poetic cinema and has the most potential in showcasing the relationship between beauty and destruction in human beings and in nature itself. It can be argued that "Kim Ki-duk never hesitates playing with the level of pain tolerance of the spectator" because of these juxtapositions present in so many of his films (Gombeaud 48).

Animal cruelty is often thought of as a gateway crime for the killing of humans and *The Isle* is a prime example of such a case. Hee-jin electrifies fish using a car battery and jumper cables. This is only one instance of many where fish are brutalized in *The Isle*. As Gombeaud remarks, “Electrocuted, asphyxiated, tortured, reduced to a sashimi state... fish reflect the fate reserved for omen, in the proper as well as the figurative sense. In spite of that, they have a survival instinct” (49). Fish are a direct parallel to Hyun-shik and Hee-jin. They each represent the need for survival but also the co-dependency of nature and humans. Thus, fish present these ideas in symbolic format. The images of fish and the aggressive acts humans commit against them throughout the film portray the innate connection humans have with their surroundings. This connection shown through nature is present also in the intimation of Hee-jin as a mystical creature of the water. She slithers around unseen under the dark lake in several different sequences, equated directly with the mutilated fish that recur through *The Isle*. It can be seen, then, that there is a strong relationship between the water, the animals, and the human beings, showcasing Gombeaud’s idea “the aquatic world [contains] creatures with no compassion for one another” (51). Although *The Isle* is the only film that directly presents animal cruelty as a motif, the connection between the helpless fish and the female bodies is similar in all three films: “All are weak, defenseless, incapable of rebelling against horror. All are dominated. All have suffered or suffer cruelties” (Gombeaud 101). As presented, this idea relates most directly it seems to Sun-hwa who is almost entirely helpless throughout *Bad Guy*. It is only when she realizes the strength of her connection with Han-gi that she nearly redeems herself, now that she’s physically removed from the brothel. However she is still dominated by a life of roadside prostitution as the ending suggests. The girl in *The Bow* suffers a similar fate. Her mere isolation from society paints her as a victim of cruelty. She has nothing to compare her experiences to

until the boy brings her a tape player, which is the first symbol of some modernity within the film. In *The Isle*, although she is somewhat able to stand up to men in the film, Hee-jin still becomes the victim of Hyun-shik's manipulations as the two become further entangled together.

Stemming from each character's isolation is a sense of "the other" in each film. All of the protagonists exist outside of conventional society and whenever they breach that line, or encounter people who are more traditional, they are still labeled as outsiders. The opening sequence of *Bad Guy* is a prime example of the "othering" that occurs in each film. From the opening moments of the film the urban population walks hurriedly down a street and Han-gi is immediately "othered" through his outfit. He is dressed in black from head-to-toe, a sharp contrast from Sun-hwa who is clothed in pastel shades of white and blue already pointing to the extreme difference between an innocent victim and a formidable opponent. The girl in *The Bow* is similarly "othered". Even though the film already points to the extreme isolation and marginalization of the old man, and especially the young girl, the girl is further pointed to as an outsider through clothing. Often times, the young girl wears little protection against what is assumed to be extreme cold weather. It even snows slightly at one point. The fishermen who visit the boat mostly come swathed in huge winter coats and boots. In contrast, the girl wears floaty skirts and light cardigans. Not only is the girl "othered" in her refusal to speak, but she is pointed to as a type of mystical creature almost in her costume choice and her sense of power exerted over all men. *The Isle* clothes the female protagonist similarly in long skirts and flowing blouses. Here, Hee-jin's clothing is also reminiscent of a mythical creature as she has some animal-like qualities in her ability to slither under the dark lake unnoticed by men. The men are "othered" in more conventional ways, through their behavior. Hyun-shik and Han-gi are both violent and, therefore, this others them from conventional society.

In the films the protagonists also take on a liminal existence; they exist outside the confines of traditional or urban society, pushed away by their silence and in turn, their violence. Kim “attempts to translate the suppressed outrage and explosive tension of marginalized people into images charged with grotesqueness and cruelty” (Kim, “Race, Gender, and Postcolonial Identity” 244). Each film enhances this tension placing the protagonists outside the normative. The conflict between the outside and the urban is seen directly in *Bad Guy* when Han-gi crosses into the urban space in the beginning of the film and in the middle when he tries to let Sun-hwa leave the brothel and returns her to the bench where they first encountered one another. The only sense of urban existence seen in *The Isle* is through the other young prostitutes that visit the fishermen, mentioned previously in chapter two. The girls come dressed in skimpy clothing, all dolled-up with makeup in direct contrast to the natural, wind-swept appearance of Hee-jin. The visiting fishermen in *The Bow*, again, also represent the conflict between urban and liminal existence. This insistence upon contrasting the protagonists with other urban characters showcases the othering of the protagonists in each film. These set-ups which continually reveal the protagonists as outsiders is only furthered through Kim’s use of setting which adds another element to the peripheral existence of the characters.

Settings that further distance the characters from the rest of society help form the strong bonds between male and female characters in *The Isle*, *Bad Guy*, and *The Bow*. The violence within each plot reveals the realities of human brutality. *Bad Guy* establishes the connection between violence and emotional pain through its abject hero Han-gi and also tests audiences through the use of disturbing plot devices like the transformation of Sun-hwa into a prostitute. *The Isle* conducts beautifully the relationship between a poetic and mystical setting and the relationship between characters. Hyun-shik and Hee-jin are intertwined through dependency and

also related through the use of visceral imagery, constantly reminding the spectator of the sharp differences between the mystical lake and the human brutality amidst the beauty. *The Bow* utilizes the setting primarily to isolate its main protagonists and insist upon the differences between conventional society and the relationship between the old man and the girl. The three films create settings within which violence has a place and shows the silent protagonists to be strangely connected to violence. This connection between silence and violence only furthers the notion of “the other” which has already been indicated through their muteness. Language in each film “remains caught in the monoliths of nastiness, violence and despair” (Gombeaud 61). The presence of formidable violence showcases the connections between the emotionality of each protagonist and the periphery in which they find themselves nearly stranded. These connections point to the underlying idea in almost all of Kim’s films that “nobody is innocent and there is no pure and simple victim” (Gombeaud 74).

Conclusion

Kim Ki-duk's cinema, in essence, often focuses on silent protagonists and their relationships with others and the world around them. The use of silence for protagonists in modern film is somewhat rare, as audiences are more likely to see the point of a film if characters routinely talk, discuss and verbalize their thoughts and emotions. Instead of relying on simple dialogue to "do all the talking" in his films, Kim focuses instead on the camera, the setting and violence to create characters whose interactions are morbidly fascinating to behold. Silence as a film technique allows for the emotional content of Kim's films to be pushed to the forefront, "the silence comes to speak louder than words, taking advantage of cinema's monstrative capacities to show rather than simply tell" (Choe, "Kim Ki-duk's Aporia"). This allows the audience's gaze, especially a Western gaze, to focus strictly on the film, the imagery, and the poetics of Kim's films.

Possibly employed purely as a tool for making his films more accessible, silence then poses some problems within *The Isle*, *Bad Guy*, and *The Bow*. Although it is clear that silence itself is almost another protagonist in each of the films and creates vulnerability on screen, occasionally it seems forced, almost too present to ignore. *The Bow* is problematic in that it begs for the main characters to speak at many points. The silence here is almost too overwhelming. The gaps in understanding this film's unique ending—the old man throwing himself into the ocean after his marriage to the young girl—stems from the lack of language between the spectator and the characters. *Bad Guy* and *The Isle* have fewer struggles with prolonged silences between the characters. Kim insists that both protagonists, *Bad Guy*'s Han-gi and *The Isle*'s Hee-jin did have lines in the original scripts, but he "got rid of most of their lines after [he] realized how powerful their silence would be" (Yecies). Han-gi is more obviously the victim of some

traumatic moment, which caused him to nearly lose his ability to speak which allows him a direct reason for not using verbal language. Hee-jin is known to have the ability to use language, but chooses not to. Unlike these two films, *The Bow* gives no concrete references to why the protagonists do not verbalize anything throughout the film and thus their silence remains problematic. However, even with the problems in *The Bow*, Kim's use of silence in many of his characters directly points to emotional struggles and the mystical quality of the three film endings.

Perhaps that is what makes Kim's films so fascinating to behold, the endings of each film are ambiguous, often lyrical and gorgeously photographed. *The Isle* ends with a naked Hyun-shik wading through chest-high water towards an isle completely isolated and surrounded by blue water as the camera tracks out to a long shot. Then it dissolves directly to Hee-jin's pubic hair, covered with seaweed, as she floats naked on her back, entrenched in water in a sinking boat surrounded by tall plant fronds. Unclear as to whether or not Hee-jin is dead or alive, the ending is hard to decipher. However the insistence on Hyun-shik entering the small planted space insists not only on the sexuality of the film but also the dependence of the two characters and their complete isolation (seen through the shot of the isle surrounded entirely by water). *Bad Guy* ends in a similarly strange manner, and the viewer is unsure if the events are real or perhaps occurring in Han-gi's imagination. Sun-hwa and Han-gi are driving in an acquired van and stop by the side of the road to make some money via prostitution. The two then drive away in the red van and a red square remains on screen as the rest of the shot fades to black. The ambiguity of this ending offers no sense of resolution to Sun-hwa's makeover and is a false happy ending in that she is no longer in the brothel but assumedly still continues her life as a prostitute with Han-gi by her side. *The Bow* seems to suggest spirituality at the end with the old man finding his completeness in

committing suicide by jumping into the ocean. The young girl then mysteriously loses her virginity and the old man's last arrow, which he shot straight into the sky before jumping into the water, falls directly between her legs. The film ends with the fishing boat sinking into the ocean's depths much like the old man's drowning, as the girl leaves with her boyfriend and "savior" from the mainland. Each of the three film endings "meet a fantastico-mystical outcome" where it becomes nearly impossible to decipher the true meaning of Kim's intentions (Gombeaud 53). The director himself has stated, "People can choose whatever they want to see in my films. I leave the choice up to the audience" (Yecies). This ambiguity, too lends Kim's films an appeal through the open endings and mystical qualities.

With the harsh realities depicted in Kim's films, the relationship between silence of language and violence truly stands out. The marginalization of Kim's protagonists furthers the connection between the two overarching themes within *The Isle*, *Bad Guy*, and *The Bow*, showcasing the tensions that arise between what Kim calls "between lightness and darkness, sorrow and hope" ("Kim Ki-duk on *3-Iron*"). The employment of silence as a technique to demonstrate character emotionality helps reveal Kim's focus on the relationship between spectator and screen as well. This connection refers back to the issue of "sensationalism" of human brutality and animal violence that often comes across in grotesque fashion (Choi, "Riding the New Wave" 175). Such cruelty reveals an exploitative aesthetic within Kim's films and indeed helps pose questions about society and humanity in general. In viewing Kim's work it is often important to look beyond the limits of sensation and understand the complexity of the metaphors being presented to truly realize the poetics of Kim's films and uncover the sources of human instinct. These characters suffer, "overwhelmed by their passions, their anger, their desire; they become the *very face* of passion, anger, and desire" (Gombeaud 60). Kim is directing

his audiences through his juxtapositions of violence and silent protagonists to realize the underlying “incongruous relationships between people and feelings of displacement” which are present in many of his works (Yecies).

With a complex look at the films of Kim, there is no denying that the director has pervaded spectator sensibilities with his harsh realities and thought-provoking cinema. The insistence upon revealing the brutality of mankind within many of his films allows for the true exploration of human relationships and dependency. Kim represents a new stream of cinema that is both poetic and yet shocking in its stark realities mixed with mythical elements. The settings of his films, while beautifully filmed, help reveal the direct contrasts between the sublime of the natural world and the harshness of the human material world. His strong critiques of today’s Korean society as well as human nature and instinct provide an in-depth exploration of the cruelty inherent in a world of comparison. Kim’s ambiguous endings often do nothing to quell this lack of order in society and instead provoke a relationship with the fantastic, which in the director’s own words “helps make life more bearable” (Yecies). Thus, cinema in itself can help make the realities of life more bearable.

Notes

1. Domestic admissions for Kim's first three films, *Crocodile*, *Wild Animals* and *Birdcage Inn*, were less than 6,000 Korean audience members. His worldwide success grew, the international success of *Bad Guy*, which reigned in over 750,000 spectators worldwide. Although after this his domestic audiences still fell short of spectacular. See Chung pages 8 and 21.

2. This term, as established in Bernstein's *Bitter Carnival: Ressentiment and the Abject Hero*, explores the hero as both murderer and victim. The term was first applied to works of literature such as Diderot's *Le Neveu de Rameau*, Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, and the works of Dostoyevsky. Though Bernstein's book explores primarily mythological and classical character types, the creation of the term "abject hero" is entirely applicable to many of Kim's characters as noted by Chung. See Chung, *Kim Ki-duk*, pages 22 and 124.

3. Suggested by Chung, *Bad Guy* can be likened to a reverse social allegory from George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion*. Instead of the pretentious and wealthy Professor Higgins taking a lower class Eliza Doolittle and turning her into a "lady," in *Bad Guy*, lower-class outsider Han-gi procures an upper class college girl and essentially makes her over as a prostitute. See Chung, page 17.

4. Kim's first two films were plagued with poor reviews from Korean critics and those abroad. After the release of his second film *Wild Animals*, Kim sent a letter to Korean press which "[declared] his outright 'hatred' toward in different, dismissive, or hostile journalists who, in his opinion, were responsible for keeping audiences away from his films" (Chung 15). Kim has never had complete commercial success with his films (see Note 1) and Korean audiences are less interested in his films than foreign audiences of the United States, France, and Germany. After the release of *Bad Guy* in 2001, Kim went "silent" refusing to give any interviews for a

period of time. See Chung, pages 11 and 14-15 and Yecies, “Korean Post New Wave Film Director Series: Kim Ki-Duk”.

5. Kim himself references the Korean fiddle (or Haegeum) in the DVD extra “The Making of *The Bow*”.

6. Though not to suggest that all of Kim’s films can be branded as “Asia Extreme” horror flicks, the term has been often applied to *The Isle*. Hamish McAlpine who has since branded his entire production company—Tartan Asia Extreme—after the phrase, primarily established the term “Asia Extreme” after realizing the trend of hyper-violent Asian films. The labeling of this mini-genre has since made films in this category popular in the West. See Choi, *Horror to the Extreme*, pages 85-86.

7. It has been readily suggested by critics that the ending sequence, post Han-gi’s (perhaps fatal) stabbing when Sun-hwa and Han-gi meet at the beach only to later “ride into the sunset” in their newly acquired van, is merely the man’s fantasy occurring after his death. Some critics see the lack of narrative causality as a sign of a fantasy sequence beginning. If this notion is true, everything that follows Han-gi’s stabbing, including finding Sun-hwa on the beach and the two driving away in the red van is only but a dream. However, Chung suggests this ending is merely another representation of Kim’s paradoxical cinema, another reality of the quote at the end of *3-Iron*: “Its hard to tell whether the world we live in is either a reality or a dream” (68). See Chung, pages 17 and 67-68.

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