

The Eternal 'Being' and 'Nothingness' as its Accompaniment: An Essay on the Narrative Philosophy of *Peppermint Candy*

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Abstract

This paper is an attempt to understand the philosophical moorings in the narrative of *Peppermint Candy* directed by Lee Chang-dong. Through the concepts of 'being', 'non-being', and 'nothingness', the paper delves into the life of the protagonist to reimagine the nature of human existence. A South Korean drama film, *Peppermint Candy's* narrative trajectory takes a route towards Kyoto School of philosophy. This paper examines its connectivity with the broad dimension of existential philosophy through a correlative study of the protagonist's attempt at finding reality and seminal philosophical thoughts.

Keywords: Film as Philosophy, Narrative Philosophy in *Peppermint Candy*, Questioning Existence, Phenomenon of 'Being' in *Peppermint Candy*.

Introduction

Peppermint Candy directed by Lee Chang-dong, is a film that focuses on the life of a young man. The film follows the tragic trajectory of its protagonist, Kim Yong-ho, as he reflects on the choices and events that led to his eventual demise. Backtracking from his suicide, the film depicts Yong-ho's life in reverse order, from his tragic demise to his innocent youth. Throughout his life, he is a student, a soldier, a cop, and finally an investor who loses a little fortune on the stock market. The segments in the film showcase his interpersonal relationships, aspirations, his experience in the military and his struggles with his ideals all in a broader socio-political background of high political tension and pro-democracy movements. The narrative structure which starts with Yong-ho's suicide, moves backward in time. This backward movement of the narrative serves as a powerful lens to examine the complexities of human existence. The film displays the weight of social expectations, personal problems, and the consequences of individual choices. *Peppermint Candy* presents Yong-ho, as a figure who lives and personifies

authority at various stages in his life. Yong-ho's experiences in the military and the police force play an important role in the story, uncovering the nuances of his character and giving a lens through which to explore larger societal issues. Yong-ho's journey begins with his return to the rural countryside where he grew up, and we see his transition from a damaged man to a hopeful youth as the narrative moves backward in time. In the military segment, we see the idealistic and patriotic Yong-ho, whose admission into the military coincides with South Korea's political turmoil in the 1980s. The film highlights the contrast between Yong-ho's teenage ideals and the subsequent disillusionment, echoing a larger cultural narrative of lost innocence and shattered dreams. The military functions as an example of authority and power, subjecting individuals to discipline and conformity. Yong-ho's military experiences highlight themes of conformity, personal identity disintegration, and the sacrifice of individual agency in the face of authoritarian organizations. The military element serves as a testing ground for Yong-ho's changing view of power, laying the groundwork for his subsequent challenges in the police force. As the story moves backward, we see Yong-ho's life as a humiliated ex-police officer. The police, like the military, are institutions of authority and control. Yong-ho's police experiences highlight the corrosive effect of power relations, corruption, and moral compromises on the individual psyche. His transformation from a promising young recruit to a disillusioned and shattered man exemplifies the toll that exposure to the darker sides of power can have on an individual's sense of self.

Yong-ho's End as an Eternal Phenomenon of 'Being'

Peppermint Candy is a deep exploration of the protagonist's troubled life and his slow spiral into despair. Set with the background of South Korea's modern society the film explores how the protagonist searches for the meaning of life and redemption. The film's reverse chronological sequence showcases the choices of the protagonist, Yong-ho, from his moments of rock bottom to when he had happiness in life. Jean Paul Satre's elucidation on the concept of 'Being' as a phenomenon that is conceived by human minds in relation to a proof becomes crucial here. The article explores the philosophical outline represented through the narration of the film by connecting Yong-ho's end as an epistemological quest towards 'being.' "The phenomenon of being, like every primary phenomenon, is immediately disclosed to consciousness" (Satre 5). In the phenomenon of 'being,' Yong-ho's responsibilities and choices become a vantage point towards his end. He questions his 'being' to find meaning in life and "participates in the transcendence of being" (Satre 4). Through his questions on his choices, Yong-ho negates his realities and enter into 'nothingness.'

The South Korean Film *Peppermint Candy*, directed by Lee Chang-dong, unfolds in reverse chronological sequence, charting the life of its protagonist, Yong-ho, from his sad finish back to his innocent beginnings. The film explores existential despair, guilt, and the cyclical life. Through these overpowering sentiments, Yong-ho keeps negating the reality and ushers in self-expression. The existentialist philosophy of the Kyoto School, notably the concept of 'nothingness,' is obvious in the film's investigation of the futility and disappointment that beset its major character.

To call reality itself absolute nothingness, then, is to say that all of reality is subject to the dialectic of being and not-being, that the identity of each thing is bound to an absolute contradictoriness. In other words, nothingness not only relativizes the “ground of being,” it relativizes any model of co-existence or harmony that sublates, transcends, debilitates, or otherwise obscures that contrariness. At the same time, it is to say that the ascent of nothingness to self-awareness in human consciousness, “to see being itself directly as nothingness,” is both the place at which the self can directly intuit itself and the place at which the absolute becomes most fully real (Kitaro 63).

Yong-ho’s death directs attention to the phenomenon of ‘nothingness.’ His questions targeted at his ‘being’ contradicts his realities of existence and carries him forward to a transcendental state of ‘being’ which never ends, and thus determines the other possibility of ‘non-being.’

Yong-ho’s Existence as a Panopticon

The police force episode in Yong-ho’s life highlights themes of ethical ambiguity, internal conflict, and the effort to preserve one’s moral compass within a system that may jeopardize individual values. It becomes clear that the authority Yong-ho once had is riddled with paradoxes and moral ambiguities. From his painful experiences as a disgraced ex-police officer to his idealistic childhood, Yong-ho’s defiance of cultural expectations, as well as his struggle against authoritarian systems in his life, parallel Camus’ investigation of rebellion as a response to absurdity. The narration emphasizes devastating repercussions of a person confronting and defying authority. The concept of authority extends into panopticism and the panoptic gaze. In this context, the gaze functions as a tool to discipline the military men. This gaze becomes an essential factor in creation of the panoptic space. “The Panopticon is a privileged place for experiments on men, and for analyzing with complete certainty the transformations that may be obtained from them. The Panopticon may even provide an apparatus for supervising its own mechanisms [...]. An inspector arriving unexpectedly at the centre of the Panopticon will be able to judge at a glance, without anything being concealed from him, how the entire establishment is functioning” (Foucault 204). The camp’s panoptic structure mirror’s greater themes of authority and control during warfare. *Peppermint Candy’s* examination of panopticism is fascinating. The concept is explored in the film through Yong-ho’s experiences as a disgraced ex-police officer. The police force, being an institution of authority, constantly monitors and controls Yong-ho. Internalized police discipline becomes a force that affects Yong-ho’s psyche and actions. His spiral into despair depicts the impact of panopticism on a person's sense of self, highlighting the repressive nature of surveillance and its long-term consequences. Yong-ho, on the other hand, goes through a period of retrospective self-discovery, but his path is defined by a sense of impending doom and despair. Yong-ho’s broken memories and shattered identity reflect the Kyoto School's emphasis on self-awareness as a dynamic process. His tragic life develops as a never-ending battle to reconcile previous experiences with present comprehension, mirroring the Kyoto School’s concept of an ever-evolving person.

Sartre contends that emancipation entails accepting radical freedom, accepting the agony that comes with it, and accepting responsibility for one's choices. The concept of "bad faith" is important to Sartre's philosophy, reflecting the self-deception that people participate in when

they reject the genuine recognition of their freedom. His most famous example for this concept is the example of a waiter.

Let us consider this waiter in the cafe. His movement is quick and forward, a little too precise, a little too rapid. He comes toward the patrons with a step a little too quick. He bends forward a little too eagerly; his voice, his eyes express an interest a little too solicitous for the order of the customer. Finally there he returns, trying to imitate in his walk the inflexible stiffness of some kind of automaton while carrying his tray with a recklessness of a tight-rope walker by putting it in a perpetually unstable, perpetually broken equilibrium which he perpetually re-establishes by a light movement of the arm and hand. All his behaviour seems to us a game. He applies himself to chaining his movements as if they were mechanisms, the one regulating the other; his gestures and even his voice seem to be mechanisms; he gives himself the quickness and pitiless rapidity of things. He is playing, he is amusing himself. But what is he playing? We need not watch long before we can explain it: he is playing at being a waiter in a cafe. There is nothing there to surprise us. (Sarte 59)

According to Sartre, the waiter serves as a metaphorical representation of the human condition and the implications of existentialist philosophy on individual existence. The waiter in Sartre's example is not merely performing his job; he is embodying a role, adopting a set of behaviours and gestures that are stereotypically associated with being a waiter. He meticulously follows the conventions and norms expected of him in his profession. Sartre argues that the waiter is not acting authentically; instead, he is playing a role, acting in a way that conforms to societal expectations. The waiter's existence is characterized by inauthenticity, as he loses himself in the role he plays, denying his freedom to make genuine choices. The waiter, in his pursuit of playing the role of a waiter perfectly, denies his freedom to choose a different path. He becomes a mere object, a tool in the service of his job, rather than an authentic individual exercising his freedom. The example of the waiter serves as a microcosm of the human condition.

Sartre contends that individuals often succumb to societal pressures, adopting predefined roles and identities that society imposes on them. This conformity, according to Sartre, is a way for individuals to escape the anxiety and responsibility that accompany true freedom. By embracing societal roles, people can evade the burden of making authentic choices and defining their existence. Sartre's philosophy emphasizes the idea that human beings are condemned to be free. This means that individuals are inherently free to choose their actions, but this freedom comes with the responsibility of creating their own meaning and values in a seemingly indifferent and absurd world. The waiter, through his conformity and inauthenticity, illustrates the evasion of this responsibility. He embodies the concept of bad faith, illustrating how individuals often succumb to societal expectations and adopt predefined roles to escape the anxiety and responsibility that accompany true freedom. Through this example, Sartre challenges individuals to confront their existential freedom, embrace authenticity, and take responsibility for shaping their own existence in a world devoid of inherent meaning. Liberty and self-identity are concepts that are intertwined, and the constant interplay forms the human experience. Liberty allows individuals to autonomously navigate the nuanced pathways of their lives by creating space for self-identity to emerge. In contrast, self-identity creation contributes to the richness and diversity of the human experience. The concept of self in the Kyoto school of thought exists in relation to

the world around an individual. Nishida suggests that the true identity of the individual only emerges through a co-existence of opposites. The device of establishing identity through contradiction is more than a means of criticizing the way we identify items in the world with the language or ideas we have fashioned to take them out of their native environments and make a home for them in thinking. Influenced by Buddhist thought, particularly the concept of ‘emptiness’ (sunyata), the Kyoto School explores the idea that the self is not a rigid, self-contained entity. Emptiness involves a self-negation, a letting go of fixed notions of self, allowing for a more profound engagement with reality. *Peppermint Candy* uses reverse chronology to tell the story of Yong-ho, and his path from despair to tragedy. Yong-ho’s death is a poignant illustration of the Buddhist notion of karma—the effect of one’s conduct in previous lives on the present. The film depicts the cyclical nature of existence and the unavoidable consequences of one’s actions as Yong-ho revisits critical times in his life. The story implies that breaking free from the cycle of birth and death necessitates acknowledging and transcending the karmic patterns that connect people together. As a result, Yong-ho’s death serves as a metaphor for the endless cycle of *samsara* and the possibility of release through enlightenment.

Yong-ho’s End Begins a Contemplative ‘Being’

Arendt’s *vita contemplativa* encapsulates the life of contemplation and introspection. It involves intellectual endeavours, philosophical reflection, and the pursuit of deeper understanding. On the other hand, *vita activa* encompasses the life of action and engagement with the external world. It involves labour, work, and political participation – activities that manifest in the public sphere. Zaluski differentiates *Vita Activa* and *Vita Contemplativa* as “VC being a way of life detached from the affairs of everyday existence, focused on the contemplation/pursuit of truth, while VA being a way of life engaged in worldly affairs, focused on realising various non-contemplative goals” (Zaluski 16). Arendt’s study of labour, work, and action sheds light on the intricacies of human existence and calls into question traditional concepts of individual and social identity. Labour and work and action. Her three-part distinction between labour, action, and work gives a complete framework for comprehending the many facets of human activity. Labour is the activity associated with the human condition of existence, work with the condition of worldliness, and action with the condition of multiplicity. Labour is judged by its ability to sustain human life, to meet our biological needs of consumption and reproduction. In this framework, labour is not an option, but rather a necessity that individuals must engage in in order to survive. Labour is distinguished by its cyclical and private nature, as opposed to work, which involves the creation of long-lasting goods, and action, which takes place in the public sphere. Labor’s repetitive nature sets it apart from more precise and purposeful elements in work and action. Work is judged by its ability to build and maintain a world fit for human use. For Arendt, work is more than just labour; it entails building of long-lasting objects that add to the objectivity of the human experience. Work, whether via creative expression or technical invention, becomes a manifestation of human freedom, allowing people to rise above the demands of life and actively participate in the creation of a meaningful and lasting common world. Action is judged by its ability to reveal the identity of the agent, to affirm the reality of the world, and to actualize our capacity for freedom. The concept of action as a different and higher form of human activity in comparison to labour. For Arendt, action is the area of freedom. She defines freedom as the

ability to begin, to start something new, to do the unexpected, which all human beings possess by virtue of their birth. Action as the achievement of freedom is thus anchored in natality, in the fact that each birth marks a fresh beginning and introduces novelty into the universe. It entails people gathering in public to engage in discourse, deliberation, and the production of shared meaning. Arendt emphasizes the importance of action in the building of political communities, claiming that people express their unique identities and contribute to the development of a shared world through public debate and interaction.

Similarly, the pursuit of the *vita activa* characterizes Yong-ho's early life. He navigates adulthood's challenges, engages in relationships, and performs a tough job. His acts are motivated by a desire for personal fulfilment, society recognition, and achievement. Yong-ho embodies Arendt's concept of engaging with the external world through labour, activity, and action at this point in his life. However, as the story progresses backwards, we come across critical events that reveal Yong-ho's character has a reflective side. Under the surface of his seemingly bustling existence, the video reveals depths of reflection and thought. The suicide of Yong-ho, depicted at the beginning of the film, raises questions about the internal battles and reflections that led to his untimely end. Arendt's concept of *vita contemplativa* and *vita activa* shows Yong-ho's life through the lens of these concepts. Yong-ho is not immune to the inner world of ideas, emotions, and introspection while engaged in the vigorous pursuits of life. The film's reverse chronological structure emphasizes this dynamic, emphasizing how the repercussions of his actions alter his reflective inner life. Yong-ho's character questions the apparent duality of activity and introspection. The film implies that the two are connected, with acts affecting contemplation and contemplation influencing actions. Arendt's focus on the interconnection of multiple forms of existence resonates in Yong-ho's context, as the ramifications of his busy life compel greater introspection. *Peppermint Candy* provides a captivating canvas for delving into Hannah Arendt's theories.

Conclusion

Peppermint Candy invites contemplation on the interconnectedness of personal lives and historical events, blurring the boundaries between the public and private realms. The film eloquently illustrates Arendt's contention that private actions have public consequences. Yong-ho's individual decisions, regrets, and traumas mirror South Korea's larger historical and societal framework. His experiences demonstrate the close connection between people's lives and the unfolding picture of the nation's history, reflecting the changes and upheavals in the nation. The movie emphasizes that the private sphere is an essential component of the greater social fabric rather than an isolated haven, much like Hannah Arendt's philosophy does. Yong-ho's life becomes a microcosm that reflects the macrocosm of societal changes, highlighting the notion that individual deeds are part of the public sphere's collective fabric. These cinematic narratives illustrate the intricate relationship between individual lives and the broader socio-political landscape. As we witness the characters' struggles and triumphs, we are prompted to reflect on the relevance of Arendt's ideas in understanding the complexities of human existence, both on and off the screen.

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