Situations 19.1 (2026): 113–38
doi: 10.22958/situcs.2026.19.1.006 ISSN: 2288–7822

Mirror Surfaces: Duplicity in Park Chan-wook's *Decision to Leave*

Sara Son (University of California, Irvine)

Abstract

This paper examines Park Chan-wook's *Decision to Leave* as a self-reflexive interrogation of the mediated production of the Korean female marriage migrant. Drawing on the concept of "duplicity"—understood as both duplication and deception—I argue that the film mobilizes mise en abyme, character foils, and recursive visual framing to stage "mirror surfaces" that simultaneously reproduce and fracture the migrant image. Situated within South Korea's neoliberal multicultural framework, which casts marriage migrants as economic solutions to demographic decline and labor shortages, the paper reads Seo-rae's performance through Lacanian misrecognition and Bhabha's mimicry. By staging Seo-rae's "not-quite-ness," the film unsettles the dutiful migrant wife archetype and exposes its construction through circuits of media production. In doing so, the film implicates itself, prompting an interrogation not only of how such archetypes are produced but also of the media apparatus that distributes and enforces them.

Keywords: *Decision to Leave*, duplicity, marriage migration, mise en abyme, diegetic media, multiculturalism, gendered surveillance

Introduction

In Park Chan-wook's *Decision to Leave* (2022), Seo-rae—a Chinese migrant wife and the lead suspect in her husband's murder—often appears framed and contained. She appears on phone screens, in surveillance footage, and through binoculars. These thresholds are themselves embedded within the film's frame, producing a recursive configuration: one boundary separates the viewer's world from that of the film, while another divides the film's diegesis from its own internal screens, inviting a parallel act of spectatorship that traverses narrative planes. Through this formal recursion, Seo-rae is doubled; she becomes both subject and image, performer and performance. This repeated visual containment evokes the paradoxical position of the South Korean (hereafter, Korean) female marriage migrant: desired for her reproductive and affective labor yet governed by heavy-handed policy designed to preserve a form of traditional gendered labor perceived to be at risk.[1] Thus, the "foreign wife" is read as a migrant subject conscripted to perform "nation-building" femininity and domesticity to quell the anxieties of a post-IMF, neoliberal state whose plummeting birth rates portend a crippling contraction of its labor market.[2]

And yet, the film's narrative unfolds through the perspective of Hae-jun, the lead detective in Seo-rae's investigation, whose growing obsession with her complicates his professional judgment and prevents him from recognizing her culpability. Where Seo-rae is continually contained in a screen, made accessible and viewable, Hae-jun struggles with his vision. He repeatedly administers eye drops and often navigates scenes shrouded in thick fog, literalizing his inability to see Seo-rae clearly. Together, her hypervisibility and his clouded vision underscore the dissonance inherent to surveillance and perception, and self-reflexively speak to the very mechanisms of performance and media enforcement that construct the social reality of the Korean marriage migrant.

Scholars have long noted how media and cultural imagery reinforce this performative labor, reflecting societal expectations onto

the migrant subject in a recursive loop of image and behavior.[3] The performance goes both ways: as the migrant performs for the state, the state performs for the migrant. Held against such context, *Decision to Leave* signals a departure from earlier media portrayals of Korean marriage migrants that emphasized gendered conformity and rapid cultural assimilation. A wealth of scholarly discourse indexes the ways media circuits and state-sponsored surveillance have reified this ideal of the "migrant mother" as a reproductive nation-builder.[4] Yet substantially less scholarship examines media that envisions what resistance might look like. A recent wave of post-COVID films, though, has started to engage in this effort. Alongside Park's *Decision to Leave*, films like Han Shuai's *Green Night* (2023) center Chinese female marriage migrant characters who radically invert the script of "dutiful wife and mother" through the genres of film noir and thriller. Notably, both films engage heavily with diegetic media (television shows, tragi-romances, news footage) that perform exaggerated tropes of female victimhood, loyalty, and self-sacrifice, forcing their migrant characters to confront reflective surfaces upon which their prescribed roles are projected. This paper examines that critical moment of encounter: when the migrant subject confronts her duplicate image.

Using *duplicity* as a guiding concept, I examine how Park deploys two interrelated devices of mimesis, character foils, and diegetic performance (specifically *mise en abyme*), to generate what I read as "mirror surfaces" in *Decision to Leave*. The word *duplicity* itself enacts its own semantic duality: it can mean duplication or deception. Interestingly, both definitions implicate a form of labor: in duplication, the labor of reproduction, and in deception, the labor of performance. Analytically, *duplicity* allows us to trace how the female marriage migrant symbolizes both reproductive and performative labor, filling what scholars have called "the mother deficit, baby deficit, and care deficit" of Korea.[5] Her labor is literally reproductive, as a biological surrogate, and figuratively performative, as an affective replacement for the role of mother, wife, and caregiver vacated by the "modernized"

native woman. In the film, mirror surfaces function as screens upon which Seo-rae engages, challenges, and exploits this reflected image. These surfaces initially set up a relation of seemingly mimetic duplication, or reproduction, but eventually fracture to reveal the artifice of their own construction—that is, their deception. By revealing and fracturing these mirrors, the film interrogates not only the performance of this labor but also the very instrumentation of media that police and circulate it.

Production of the Migrant Image

To understand *Decision to Leave*'s marked departure from earlier media representations of marriage migrants, we must situate our discussion with the sociological and economic conditions that brought these women into national attention. Following government-led industrialization and postwar economic planning, South Korea experienced radically disruptive changes in its family paradigm: declining fertility, fewer and later marriages, and a skyrocketing divorce rate.[6] Concurrently, from the 1980s through the 1990s, the country experienced an unprecedented influx of international marriage migrants.[7] Recognizing marriage migration as a stopgap for declining fertility and a contracting labor force, the Korean government became a central actor in the recruitment and integration of these migrants.[8] With Roh Moo-hyun's 2006 declaration of the "irresistibility" of a multicultural society, the state began to position itself as host to migrant wives under the banner of tolerant multiculturalism (*damunhwa*), drawing from the old Western playbook in which the tolerating subject is equated with the liberal West and the tolerated object with the nonliberal Orient.[9]

The state's attention to marriage migrants, framed as a solution to a low-fertility, low-marriage economy, inherently coded these women as economic laborers and commodities. Jinhee Kim and Haeeun Jeon note that the government's interest "started from the necessity of importing

a labor force for economic growth, not a fundamental question of how to make a multicultural society."[10] More critical analyses go as far to suggest migrants were enlisted to "restore the manhood of Korean men who can't find a wife."[11]

The state and society communicated this demand through a range of mechanisms. Multicultural Family Support Centers (MFSCs)—government-subsidized "welcome centers" that promise fast-tracked citizenship with the completion of courses on language, cuisine, and traditional customs—imposed traditional gender roles and caregiving responsibilities under the guise of cultural education, while media representations further reinforced this idealized image. Popular television programs such as *Asia Asia* (MBC 2003), *Chit-Chat of Beautiful Ladies* (KBS 2006–2010), and *Nice to Meet You, My In-Laws* (SBS 2007–2008) promoted the foreign wife's successful assimilation into Korean norms, constructing her as an exotic other whose role was to fulfill the responsibilities of an obedient wife.[12] Films like *Failan* (2001) and *Wedding Campaign* (2005) similarly essentialized the female marriage migrant as the embodiment of traditional feminine values, deliberately contrasting her with the more "liberated" native woman.[13] The theater of film serves as a productive space for exploring societal questions, yet its significance is especially pronounced in Korea, given the centrality of cultural production to South Korea's economic model and global identity. Korea's investment in its entertainment industry has paid dividends: entertainment consistently ranks among the country's largest export industries, solidifying its position as a global player in cultural influence.[14] To analyze Korea media, then, becomes an interrogation of how the nation imagines and exports its own perceived identity.

Despite this vast output, representations of foreign wives in Korean entertainment are few and far between. Much of what exists presented a whitewashed vision of ethnic harmony while disregarding the grimmer realities of their precarious condition.[15] According to a 2017 survey conducted by the National Human Rights Commission

of Korea, 42% of foreign-born wives reported domestic violence, and 28% reported sexual abuse.[16] Consequently, representations of female marriage migrants are "caught in a binary narrative that casts them simultaneously as potential sources of social disruption and as powerless subjects dependent on Korean families for survival."[17] Oscillation between such distinct binary poles of threatening outsider and helpless victim fractures a sense of coherent selfhood. This fracturing is compounded for the female marriage migrant who is doubly marginalized for her gender and perceived foreignness.

Consequently, exposing and critiquing such oppression through the very vehicle of representational media is a resistance not only to its enactment but also to its instrumentation of the power to shape social perception. Film can operate as a dual mirror of consciousness, exposing the lived realities of foreign wives while simultaneously interrogating how representations of those narratives have been manufactured and promoted.

The *Not-Quite*

For Lacan, the ego is constituted in the mirror: a child forms self-identification by witnessing the duplication of his gestures in a reflective surface.[18] This understanding is reinforced by others (for example, a mother who repeatedly exclaims, "That is you!"). But this recognition is unstable. The unified, coherent image in the mirror belies the child's turbulent experience of his inchoate motor movements. The moment is therefore marked by recognition (That *is* me!) and *mis*recognition, or *méconnaissance* (*That* is me?). It is this slight, barely conscious gap, the liminal space between identification and self-alienation, that haunts the child throughout life—a hologram of a stable self that is always within reach yet never fully attainable.

Postcolonial and feminist scholars, building on intermediary figures such as Fanon, extend Lacan's specular image to read postcolonial and gendered subjects, emphasizing how mimetic performance,

imagistic duplication, and phantom-like reflection render subjects vulnerable to the coercive power of images that loom over them.[19] And yet, this vulnerability possesses the potential to destabilize these coercive powers. Homi K. Bhabha writes: "The effect of mimicry on the authority of colonial discourse is profound and disturbing."[20] For Bhabha, colonial mimicry is ambivalent; it desires "for a reformed, recognizable Other, as *a subject of difference that is almost the same, but not quite*" and thus produces a "partial presence" of the colonized subject.[21] He continues:

> . . . in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its own slippage, its excess, its difference. The authority of that mode of colonial discourse that I have called mimicry is therefore stricken by an indeterminacy: mimicry emerges as the representation of difference that is itself a process of disavowal.[22]

It is specifically this liminal space of the "not quite" that has the potential to enact this resistance. This mimetic mode Bhabha proffers can be used as a subversive strategy. By performing the script placed upon the foreign subject, while maintaining that slight *not-quite-ness*, Seo-rae is able to reveal and destabilize the very artifice of power. In *Decision to Leave*, I suggest Park exploits and exaggerates this space of incompleteness, this slight gap carved out by Lacanian misrecognition (this *not quite*) through extreme violence and brutality within the crime-thriller genre to displace Seo-rae from the role of victimized caretaker. If what Lacan and Bhabha propose is a slippage, Park rends it into a hyper-visible rupture that reveals the instability of her performance.

At first, Seo-rae is presented in near likeness to a faithful citizen and wife, what Bhabha might term a "disciplinary double." Yet as the film progresses, it seizes upon this "not-quite-ness" and exaggerates it into compulsions of vengeance and murder. It is revealed that Seo-rae did in fact kill her husband and intentionally subverted Hae-jun's

investigation, leveraging her role as a home nurse to trick her senior patient into corroborating her false alibi. Moreover, Seo-rae continues to kill—she murders her second husband to protect Hae-jun's career. More striking than her violence is the way she leverages the very performance that initially rendered her harmless into the opposite effect. After all, what is more "not quite" than the imperative to care and to give birth, if not to maim and kill? Bhabha, though, is clear: what he identifies as mimicry is not analogous to a Fanonian reading of the subjugated person as being defined only by his ruler (that is, the black man ceases to be a person because only the white man can define him).[23] For Bhabha, "mimicry conceals no presence or identity behind its mask—its very menace is in its *double* vision which in disclosing [its ambivalence] also disrupts its authority.[24]

Taken together, Lacan and Bhabha illuminate Seo-rae's condition through duplicity: a state in which she is compelled to replicate an image, yet in the very act of failing to adequately do so, in her "not-quite-ness" she exposes the artifice of her own performance. *Decision to Leave* teems with visual symbols—binoculars, police surveillance footage, haptic phones, television screens—all mediating perception and desire. Hae-jun also struggles with his vision, which underscores the film's preoccupation with seeing and not-seeing. The narrative lingers in these near misses, moments suspended at the liminal borders of perception.

Inverse Mirror: The Other Woman

Simone de Beauvoir wrote that man is the Subject, "he is the Absolute—[woman] is the Other."[25] If this is true, then the migrant woman is an object doubly othered: she is both *not-man* and *not-native*. Her identity is wrought through opposition to two positive Subjects, bifurcated along the axis of sex and nationality, through which she derives her negative definition. And yet, "the other woman" still carries another more colloquial inflection: a woman with whom a man

engages outside the bounds of his marriage—in other words, the *not-wife*. Seo-rae inhabits all three negative definitions as a migrant wife, who finds herself in an affair with Hae-jun. At the start of the film, Park positions Seo-rae in opposition to Jung-an, Hae-jun's long-distance wife, who lives in Ipo and enjoys a successful career at a nuclear power plant. In a somewhat classic foil setup of the married woman and the other woman, Park arranges subtle comparisons that etch the identities of Seo-rae and Jung-an through Hae-jun's differential treatment.

In their first scene together, Hae-jun prepares a homemade meal for his wife Jung-an after driving a long way from the city to see her. She suggests they simply buy sushi, implying he need not go through the trouble of cooking for her. He replies, "I don't want any old sushi. At least while I'm home, I should feed you real food." The significance of this moment emerges only later, during an interrogation of Seo-rae, when Hae-jun orders for her a premium sushi set from an upscale restaurant—a gesture so unusual that it surprises his team. In the wordless sequence that follows, the two move through a quiet choreography of cleaning; at one point, as Hae-jun wipes the table, Seo-rae reaches out to take over. That Park chooses to arrange these women in parallel scenes signals key differences in each couple's approach to the economy of care.

With his wife, Hae-jun occupies the role of caretaker. He cooks for her—meals she receives with pleasure, asking him to move to Ipo so she can enjoy them every day. But with Seo-rae, even though he provides her with food just as he does for his wife, he relinquishes the role of caretaker. His earlier comment about "real food" functions as both taunt and point of comparison, suggesting that, though the sushi set is luxurious, it lacks the supposed intimacy of the meals he prepares for his spouse. Like a Lacanian mirror image, the side-by-side comparison appears close enough to invite recognition yet remains slightly askew, not quite the same. The parallel meal scenes position the two women in diametric relation to one another through the performance of care, reflecting their capacity to impose or relieve

Figure 1. Side-by-side first meal shots for Jung-an and Seo-rae.[26]

traditionally gendered domestic labor on the male figure. The effect is one of lateral inversion—the phenomenon in which a mirrored reflection reverses our image, so that left appears as right and right as left. At a cursory glance, the specular image looks familiar, yet this recognition belies an intrinsic reversal of orientation.

Whatever affection Jung-an maintains for her husband is filtered through her fixation on health. She insists on weekly sex to sharpen cognition and prescribes Hae-jun turtle essence to boost his "male hormones." Her love, couched in clinical terms, feels sterile and stripped of affection; she is ineffective even at her uninspired attempts at caretaking. She comments on her husband's health, noting his lackluster appearance, and says, "56% of middle-aged men are at risk of depression." True to form, she frames her concern through diagnosis rather than emotion, a mode of uninspired care that feels perfunctory and detached. Later she is seen peeling a mound of pomegranates, a fruit long associated with fertility in Korea, while remarking that "they can delay menopause." It is implied Jung-an may suffer from amenorrhea, the absence of menstruation, further marking her as estranged from the biological signs of fertility and, by extension, from conventional womanhood.

Seo-rae, by contrast, materializes the fantasy of traditional femininity: receptive, nurturing, and palliative. Formerly a nurse in China, she works as a home caregiver in Korea, tending to her elderly patients and various animals, such as her patient's pets and the neighborhood stray cat. Her caregiving extends beyond the domestic, suggesting an intimacy that flows instinctively toward the vulnerable. If Jung-an's form of care is diagnostic and intellectualized, Seo-rae's is affective and embodied. Hae-jun's chronic insomnia cements this opposition. With Jung-an, his body resists rest; with Seo-rae, he is lulled to sleep by her breath. The contrast suggests competing economies of care: the procedural rationality of the modern wife versus the instinctual presence of the foreign caregiver. Hae-jun's sleep, then, becomes the symbolic end, or resting place, of this dichotomy—a full

yielding of will and vigilance that only Seo-rae can induce. In the scene after, Hae-jun takes Seo-rae on a date to a traditional Korean temple, staging their intimate encounter in a visual setting that harkens back to an older, more rigidly codified gender hierarchy. Of this moment, Park says:

> because Seo-rae is a foreigner, I felt like Hae-jun would take her to a nice tourist spot he knew. . . . And remember, with Hae-jun, his characteristics are very old-fashioned, his taste is old-fashioned. He wouldn't be someone who takes Seo-rae to, say, a very fancy cafe by the ocean.[27]

Though the film initially positions the women as tidy foils, this binary is destabilized the moment Hae-jun realizes Seo-rae's culpability—that she did kill her husband and performed the role of a victimized foreign wife to thwart Hae-jun's investigation. Performance, by its nature, necessitates a doubling—the character and the actor; the role and the self—and suggests a reproduction or appropriation of an identity. It is here that the framework of *duplicity* shifts from its first sense, duplication, into its second: deception. By inhabiting this familiar trope as the victimized "foreign woman" (unable to communicate fluently in Korean, caring for animals and the elderly), Seo-rae leverages Hae-jun's traditional imaginings of her to blind him to the reality of her guilt. That is, Seo-rae engages in a duplicitous fantasy of herself as a duplicated image.

Recursive Mirror: Frame Within the Frame

From the start, Park constructs a world mediated by visual enclosures—literal frames that flatten bodies into images. Our first impressions of Jung-an and Seo-rae are captured within such boundaries. In the film's cold open, Jung-an is introduced indirectly: the camera focuses tightly on her face in a newspaper article praising

her work at a nuclear plant, then slowly pulls back to reveal a wall of plaques and academic degrees surrounding it. Her image appears before her body; her presence is mediated by symbols of professional achievement and authority. She is enshrined as the exemplar of the modern professional woman.

Seo-rae, too, is introduced to us by way of a framed image. Hae-jun first encounters her face in a photograph on her late husband Do-Soo's phone, collected as evidence; his partner, mistaking her for her husband's daughter, remarks: "His daughter is a beauty." Shortly thereafter, but still before he meets her in person, Hae-jun is shown evidence of her husband's abuse on a computer screen: photographs of Seo-rae's battered body, marked by domestic violence. Disturbingly, it is revealed that the husband has branded his initials over Seo-rae's pelvic bone with the same monogram he uses on his backpack and flask.

If Jung-an's image circulates in print, stabilized by the permanence of ink and accolades, Seo-rae's image flickers on a glowing phone and computer screen, fragile and haptic, defined through vulnerability and trauma. In both cases, the women are seen before they are present. Notably, their faces are contained within a visual perimeter: the frame of a picture and the screen. Their images arrive first, flattening their bodies into surfaces of prestige or evidence, long before their subjectivities can emerge. Park designates these visual reproductions as the portals through which we first meet both female figures: each woman is a representation before she is flesh, an icon before she is self. Consequently, their opposition is framed less as a private, domestic entanglement and more as an allegorical staging of broader societal distinctions—the "native" and the "foreign," the professional and the sensual. Notably, Jung-an appears alone in her photograph, whereas Seo-rae appears beside her husband, defined relationally.

This logic of framing extends to the men in Seo-rae's life beyond Hae-jun. Her late, abusive husband Do-soo created hiking videos for YouTube: videos that carefully portrayed him as a nature-lover

Figure 2. Side-by-side opening shots for Jung-an and Seo-rae.[28]

while conveniently concealing his violence. Later, in the second half of the film after Hae-jun and Seo-rae split following the revelation of her crime, Seo-rae remarries another Korean man whom Jung-an recognizes from television; he is eventually exposed as a conman. The men surrounding Seo-rae, too, are trapped within framed performances, each framed by his own self-fashioning before a camera or screen.

Such moments bring us to what André Gide first coined in 1893 and what Lucien Dällenbach later expanded on as *mise en abyme* (which translates to "placed into the abyss"), understood as a nested or hypodiegetic narrative.[29] Dällenbach, who aptly called the device "the mirror in the text," writes: "reflexivity operates on at least two levels: that of the narrative, … and that of the reflexion, where it intervenes as an element of metasignification, enabling the narrative to take itself as its theme."[30] Put differently, these diegetic performances function as a recursive mirror: by creating duplications, they draw attention not to the replicated image but to the very act of seeing—"a kind of internal dialogue and a means whereby the work can interpret itself."[31]

Indeed, much of the film's narrative tension is propelled by Hae-jun's troubled vision (he repeatedly applies eye drops and is often found in settings where dense fog obstructs his view). Still, he is undeterred; he continues to strain to see. He watches Seo-rae in interrogation footage, spies on her at work through binoculars, observes her as she cries at home, and records her as she feeds a stray cat. She is constantly framed through instruments of surveillance. At several points, it becomes clear that Seo-rae is aware of being watched. In one such moment, seen from Hae-jun's perspective, she appears to be crying; yet as the camera moves closer, revealing her face behind her downturned hair, we see that she is in fact smiling. In retrospect, given her role in her husband's murder, these moments read as diegetic performances—carefully staged for Hae-jun's gaze.

Beyond mechanisms of imagistic containment and surveillance, the film folds upon itself through actual performances on television

Figure 3. Hae-jun surveils Seo-rae through multiple devices: binoculars, a camera, and his smart watch to record and translate her voice.[32]

screens. Frames from shows that Seo-rae watches repeatedly interrupt the film's diegesis at critical moments. The first instance occurs while Hae-jun has sex with his wife: though Jung-an appears to enjoy herself, Hae-jun looks visibly distracted. He turns away from her. In the next shot, we see a woman dressed in a traditional hanbok, eyes closed, gasping. Primed by the preceding frame, we are misled to think this female character is also sexually engaged. For a moment, we cannot place her in the film's diegesis: Who is this woman? And why is Hae-jun watching her while having sex with his wife? Then the camera pulls back. She is an actress in a historical drama playing on Seo-rae's television. The woman is not in pleasure but in pain, bleeding from a chest wound.

Alone in her home, Seo-rae mimics the woman's dying words, "I've nowhere to go. Leave me to die." The sound of Seo-rae's voice bleeds into the subsequent shot of Hae-jun lying in bed with his wife, post-sex. The sound bleeds across scenes, confusing narrative boundaries. This interlacing technique becomes a recurring stylistic motif: characters slip into one another's frames, often through quick match cuts or audio bleed-overs. In one fluid movement, as Hae-jun spies on Seo-rae through binoculars, he is suddenly transported from his car to her living room, close enough to catch the ash falling from her cigarette. His visual surveillance becomes indistinguishable from physical trespass. The effect is disorienting. The viewer is unable to easily parse where one scene ends and another begins, or where to place characters within the diegetic levels of the story—they are melded spatially, temporally, visually, and audibly. Neat frames for each scene rupture, making room for the interruption of another. Such a technique feels characteristic of Park who is known for being meticulous about his frames. Even so, in *Decision to Leave*, it signals a deeper and more pointed obfuscation, rendering the audience, like Hae-jun, unable to see clearly.

As Bhabha argues, mimicry can reinforce authority by producing a recognizable copy, yet it simultaneously undermines that authority by

Figure 4. The female character first appears unframed within the film, then within Seo-rae's television set, bleeding.[33]

revealing its constructed nature through distortion or exaggeration. In *Decision to Leave*, Seo-rae's repeated imitation of the television character is one instance of a broader *mise en abyme* effect: by generating multiple duplications—images within images, performances within performances—the film makes viewers hyper-aware of the artifice behind her behavior, revealing how her actions are shaped in response to mediated portrayals. Taken together, these screens represent a film that, as Dällenbach says, takes its own construction as its theme.

Coincidentally, while viewing the film, my laptop's battery died, and my screen turned black. Upon this literal reflective surface, I saw my own face looking back at me. In this reflective surface, I, too, confronted the meta-significance of my own consumption. Disruption of a sense of immersive story-time has this effect—we, as viewers, by viewing our own gaze in a mirror screen, expose ourselves in the act of viewing, of consuming an image. Put differently, the act of surveillance becomes the object of our attention.

In the case of Korean female marriage migrants, awareness of the diegetic frames laden in Park's film implicates the very method by which their story is reproduced and performed through media imagery. Ultimately, the film resists neat categorization of Seo-rae as helpless victim or dangerous femme fatale. Racked with guilt over her sabotage of Hae-jun's case and, consequently, his career, she commits another murder to protect Hae-jun from the potential leak of an incriminating voice memo. At the end of the film, Seo-rae climbs into a hole at the beach and waits for the tide to wash in. The film never shows her actual drowning—just a mound of sand consumed by the oncoming wave. We are meant to deduce that she has been buried alive by the time Hae-jun arrives at the shore in frantic search of her. The tide has already flooded the beach. Park refuses us her presence, but also her obliterated body. Behind the mask, as Bhabha argued, there is nothing.

Hae-jun calls for help but knows there is limited time left before the sun sets and all visibility is gone. The following sequence of shots

catalogues the dimming light of a setting sun. The camera pans wide to show the neighboring cliffs, the swelling tide—all growing more and more indecipherable as dusk descends. This final act of obfuscation seems to epitomize the lack of visibility that permeates the film: Hae-jun constantly uses eye drops and the city he moves to is known for its characteristic fog and mist. In an interview, Park says: "Throughout the movie, we see a lot of mist. . . . There's a lot of uncertainty visually. . . . It represents how the characters don't know their own emotions. They aren't sure whether Seo-rae is supposed to be a femme fatale who is trying to take advantage of people."[34] Indeed, by the end, Hae-jun is unable to neatly categorize Seo-rae—she has resisted his initial rendering of her as a traditional, helpless figure through her capacity to kill and lie, but has also proved her earnest loyalty and love for him through this very enactment of her criminality. It is hard to place her into either end of the victim-transgressor binary. When she appears vulnerable, she is performing; when she acts violent, she is earnest.

The film closes with Hae-jun using a small handheld flashlight trying in vain to illuminate his surroundings. By emphasizing Seo-rae's final act—her *decision to leave*, as it were—the film refuses us, in the last moment, access to her image one final time. The film denies our desire to see and therefore, to contain. Seo-rae's suicide is about disappearance, and as the title suggests, departure; she leaves no body to be found, and therefore indelibly cements herself as an unsolvable case in the mind of Hae-jun, a man we learn is obsessed with cold cases and murder. The end of Seo-rae is this: she refuses to be clearly seen, to be finalized into a concretized ending. In omitting herself from the final scene, she punctures through the enclosing frame's perimeter toward possibility. Of the ending, Park says:

> I don't want the audience to think that Seo-rae sacrificed herself to prevent a man from ruining his career or his marriage, that she disappeared for the man. Instead, she has chosen a personal way for herself, and this is her method of liberation and to attain

> freedom for herself. That's how I want the audience to think of the ending.[35]

Still, it is worth noting that for Park, such agency is enacted through the erasure of the female marriage migrant character. Whatever imagined resistance the film proposes necessitates Seo-rae's final erasure—and ultimately this limits the capaciousness the film might have been set up to offer us. In the end, Seo-rae is freed from the entrapment of duplicity, though ironically, she does so by becoming permanently unseen. Ultimately, the ending disappoints: rather than resolving the dialectical tensions it meticulously cultivated, the film evades them through erasure.[36]

Conclusion

In *Decision to Leave*, Seo-rae's trajectory illustrates how a subject can inhabit and manipulate the very frameworks designed to confine her. From her introduction through mediated images to her final disappearance, she negotiates a space between duplication and deception, performing the roles imposed upon her while simultaneously destabilizing them. Lacanian misrecognition and Bhabha's mimicry converge in her duplicity: she engages with the mirror of societal expectation, yet the exaggeration of her "not-quite-ness" exposes the artifice of that very expectation.

At this point, it is worth noting what is absent from the film: children. Though Seo-rae fulfills the role of caretaker in many ways, she is never defined as a mother. She exhibits many of the qualities associated with a good wife and mother, yet she ultimately dies a childless widow who has killed both of her husbands. She becomes not only "not quite" but simply "not."

Park's cinematic techniques—character foils and *mise en abyme*—render visible the mechanisms through which media and societal discourses shape, monitor, and constrain female marriage migrants.

Yet the film also stages the potential for resistance, however disappointingly limited, within those mechanisms. Seo-rae's ultimate disappearance, her refusal to be fully seen or contained, signals the possibility of autonomy precisely through absence. That is, a refusal to be contained within the frames of the film. By the end, she decides to leave the film's diegesis entirely. In doing so, she escapes categorization, defies interpretive authority, and literally punctures an enclosing perimeter toward possibility.

More broadly, the film prompts viewers to confront the recursive power of representation itself. Just as Seo-rae must navigate, inhabit, and manipulate the duplicative images projected onto her, audiences are compelled to recognize their own participation in consuming, interpreting, and policing these images. In doing so, *Decision to Leave* marks the emergence of works of artists and thinkers who signal their hyper-awareness not only of the plight of Korean marriage migrants but also of the modes by which their predicament is enacted. Self-reflexive films, by constructing an internal mirror, are able, as Dällenbach says, to take themselves as their own theme, to reveal the edifice of their own construction. By initially positioning neatly doubled duplicates, and then fracturing the mirror surfaces that manufacture them, *Decision to Leave* exemplifies what Bhabha calls "the menace of mimicry." The film offers a meditation on visibility and the ethical stakes of spectatorship in a capitalist society that leverages media reinforcement as one of the primary levers of its duplicitous "multiculturalism" campaign waged against its marriage migrants. Ultimately, her *decision to leave* is not just an exit from Hae-jun or the film's diegetic frame. In the end, we as viewers are denied the final consumption of her image, exposing the fragility of our desire to fully possess narrative and identity. If the film begins with Seo-rae's face enclosed and replicated on a phone's touchscreen, by the end she becomes impossible to see or contain, impossible to grasp.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to the Center for Critical Korean Studies at the University of California, Irvine, to Joseph Jeon, and to my co-participants at the 2024 *Situations* Conference for their generous support. This work was supported by the Core University Program for Korean Studies of the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Korea and the Korean Studies Promotion Service at the Academy of Korean Studies (AKS-2021-OLU-225006).

Notes

[1] Eunjung Lee, "Migrants' (m)Othering Under a Neoliberal Gaze: An Ethnographic Inquiry on Multicultural Family Services in South Korea," *Affilia* 40, no. 4 (2025): 606, https://doi.org/10.1177/08861099251340628.

[2] Lee, 606.

[3] Keumjae Park, "Foreigners or Multicultural Citizens? Press Media's Construction of Immigrants in South Korea," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 37, no. 9 (2014): 1565–86; Myoung-Sun Song, "Cooking Love in Asia: Food, Belonging and the Making of a Multicultural Family on Korean Film and Television," *International Journal of Media and Cultural Politics* 15, no. 2 (2019): 197–213.

[4] For further discussion of marriage migrants in South Korea, see Hae Yeon Choo, "Gendered Modernity and Ethnicized Citizenship: North Korean Settlers in Contemporary South Korea," *Gender & Society* 20, no. 5 (2006): 576-604; Hae Yeon Choo, *Decentering Citizenship*: *Gender, Labor, and Migrant Rights in South Korea* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016); and Soojin Yu and Feinian Chen, "Life Satisfaction of Cross-Border Marriage Migrants in South Korea: Exploring the Social Network Effects," *International Migration Review* 52, no. 2 (2018): 597-634.

[5] Hee-Kang Kim, "Marriage Migration between South Korea and Vietnam: A Gender Perspective," *Asian Perspective* 36, no. 3 (2012): 531–63.

[6] Gavin Jones and Hsiu-hua Shen, "International Marriage in East and Southeast Asia: Trends and Research Emphases," *Citizenship Studies* 12, no. 1 (2008): 9–25, https://doi.org/10.1080/13621020701794091.

[7] KOSIS, "Marriages of between Korean Bridegroom (by Marital Status) and Foreign Bride (by Nationality)," *KOSIS* (*Korean Statistical Information Service*), March 16, 2023, https://kosis.kr/statHtml/statHtml.do?sso=ok&returnurl=https%3A%2F%2Fkosis.kr%3A443%2FstatHtml%2FstatHtml.do%3Flist_id%3DA23%26obj_var_id%3D%26seqNo%3D%26tblId%3DDT_1B83A31%26vw_cd%3DMT_ETITLE%26language%3Den%26orgId%3D101%26path%3D%252Feng%252Fsearch%252FsearchList.do%26conn_path%3DA6%26itm_id%3D%26scrId%3D%26.

[8] Stella Jang, "Multiculturalism in South Korea: Putting Migrant Wives in Their Place," *Social Identities* 5, no. 5 (2022): 1–15.

[9] Nora Hui-Jung Kim, "The Retreat of Multiculturalism? Explaining the South Korean Exception," *American Behavioral Scientist* 59, no. 6 (2015): 739, cited in Wendy Brown, *Regulating Aversion: Tolerance in the Age of Identity and Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), and David Theo Goldberg, *Racist Culture: Philosophy and the Politics of Meaning* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993).

[10] Jinhee Kim and Haeeun Jeon, "Anti-Multiculturalism and the Future Direction of Multicultural Education in South Korea," *Curriculum Perspectives* 37, no. 2 (2017): 181–89.

[11] Jang.

[12] Na Young Cha, Claire Shinhea Lee, and Ji Hoon Park, "Construction of Obedient Foreign Brides as Exotic Others: How Production Practices Construct the Images of Marriage Migrant Women on Korean Television," *International Journal of Communication* 10 (2016): 1470–88.

[13] Sumi Kim, "Politics of Representation in the Era of Globalization: Discourse about Marriage Migrant Women in Two South Korean Films," *Asian Journal of Communication* 19, no. 2 (2009): 210–26, https://doi.org/10.1080/01292980902827086.

[14] International Trade Administration, "South Korea - Entertainment and Media," *International Trade Administration,* December 5, 2023, https://www.trade.gov/country-commercial-guides/south-korea-entertainment-and-media.

[15] Sumi Kim.

[16] Julia Hollingsworth, Yoonjung Seo, and Gawon Bae, "South Korean Authorities Encourage Men to Marry Foreign Women. But Their Brides Often Become Victims of Abuse," *CNN*, August 3, 2020, https://www.cnn.com/2020/08/02/asia/foreign-wives-south-korea-intl-hnk-dst/index.html.

[17] Sangjoon Lee and John Lie, "Multiculturalism in Korea: Discourse, Policy and Practice," in *Multicultural Korea? Multiculturalism, Migration, and Peoplehood Diversity in Contemporary Korea*, ed. John Lie (Seoul: Seoul National University Press, 2010).

[18] Jacques Lacan, "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the I Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience," in *Écrits*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W. W. Norton, 2006), 75–81.

[19] See Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989); and Kaja Silverman, *The Threshold of the Visible World* (New York: Routledge, 1996).

[20] Homi K. Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse," *October* 28 (1984): 127, https://doi.org/10.2307/778467.

[21] Bhabha, 126.

[22] Bhabha, 126.

[23] Bhabha, 129.

[24] Bhabha, 129.

[25] Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. Constance Borde, intro. Judith Thurman (New York: Vintage Books, 2011), 26.

[26] *Decision to Leave*. Directed by Chan-wook Park. Seoul: CJ ENM, 2022. 00:02:54; 00:06:31.

[27] David Canfield, "The Images of *Decision to Leave*: Inside Park Chan-wook's Noir Masterwork," *Vanity Fair*, October 31, 2022, https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2022/10/awards-insider-decision-to-leave-shot-list-park-chan-wook.

[28] Park, 00:02:54; 00:06:31.

[29] Lucien Dällenbach, *The Mirror in the Text*, trans. Jeremy Whiteley with Emma Hughes (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 7, quoting André Gide, *Journal 1889–1939* (Paris: Gallimard, 1948), 41.

[30] Dällenbach, 44.

[31] Dällenbach, 55.

[32] Park, 00:14:24; 00:33:07; 00:33:34.

[33] Park, 00:10:20; 00:10:33.

[34] Tasha Robinson, "Park Chan-Wook Says Decision to Leave's Ending Is 'Sacred,'" *Polygon,* November 8, 2022, https://www.polygon.com/23445882/decision-to-leave-ending-explained-park-chan-wook-interview.

[35] Jessica Wang, "Park Chan-Wook Invented the Ending of His Latest Thriller Several Decades Ago," *EW.com*, October 14, 2022, https://ew.com/movies/park-chan-wook-decision-to-leave-ending/.

[36] See Han Shuai's *Green Night* for an alternative ending enacted through a queer relationship (the total omission of a male figure). In Han's film, the female marriage migrant character refuses to disappear—a distinction that perhaps most palpably reflects the sensibilities of a Chinese female director.

Submitted: January 1, 2025
Reviews Completed: January 28, 2026
Accepted: January 28, 2026