



In Ulrike Ottinger's 2008 feature *The Korean Wedding Chest*,

the fairy tale, which the director wrote for this film, offers a supernatural frame to the document of marriage ceremonies. The Ginseng Man and the Ginseng Woman,¹ followed by their friends among flora and fauna, make contact with the human realm, which is defined as a coupling of self and other guaranteed or consummated by becoming, assuming, and doubling one's images. As Ottinger's fable underscores, it is the not-yet-seen world that engages us to make contact via our rituals and media of rapport and remembrance. Indeed one of the Korean myths attached to the Ginseng views the root, named after its resemblance to human legs, as the initiator of contact. The root cried out, shouted, to attract the attention of the humans, who were thus prompted to discover it and its special properties as cure-all and aphrodisiac. If the Ginseng root represents the legs of man, then it represents man, in the first place, as standing upright. According to Freud, it was assumption of the upright stance that pulled us up from the sense of smell and toward the all-importance of the visual sense, which in turn stimulated humankind to seek the regular contact that living in social groups like the family harbors and to which marriage applies the stamp of approval.

In the world's canon of nuptial ceremonies, the Korean ritual of the wedding chest recalls, in its reversal, that standard of exchange of vows known in English as the bride's dowry and in German, more suggestively perhaps, as her *Mitgift*.² The Korean ritual of the chest pays a debt to the parents of the bride and, in one ceremony attending the transfer of the chest, pays its tribute in the context or contest of a bet. On the night in question a

1. It was German botanist Christian Gottfried Daniel Nees von Eisenbeck who first classified Korean ginseng (in 1833). Before it was replaced by another classification, it held the place of von Eisenbeck's mourning over his friend Johann Wolfgang von Goethe.

2. The German word for dowry gives etymological evidence that at one point the presenting English word "gift" and the identical word shape in German, *Gift*, which means "poison," were one and the same primal word.

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ULRIKE OTTINGER'S *THE KOREAN WEDDING CHEST*

leader and a pack representing the groom stop short before the bride's home and pitch the sale of the chest to anybody who can offer a good price. The bet that is made, therefore, is whether the special someone will in fact receive the gift. It is up to the family of the bride to intervene in the sale of the chest to anybody else and secure it as gift. All's fair and bets are placed as lures. Envelopes of money dropped just a few steps away seduce the groom's party to approach the front door. When they still hesitate, food and alcohol are offered. Then the so-called "beauties," the friends of the bride, arrive to offer the pack further distractions. The bride's family can now grab the isolated leader and bring the chest inside.

The diversity of marriage rites and their histories around the world can be organized under the economy of three overlapping terms: exchange, revenge, and deception. Marriage introduced a standard of exchange in what was otherwise a free-for-all, but with women as the prizes. Nietzsche reflects in his *Genealogy of Morals* (1887) that the marriage tie was, in the beginning, seen to transgress against the rights of the community. For each marital exchange there are the excluded parties who, at a loss, seek to get even. That's why, in certain cultures, bridesmaids wear the same dress, which was originally the same as the bride's, so marauding rival suitors could not as readily find the bride and carry her off. But at the same time we know that such deceptions were put on to disorient evil spirits so that they, too, would lose the track of their pursuit.

In his 1981 study *The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage*, Stanley Cavell cites Nietzsche's Eternal Return as "the call ... he puts by saying it is high time, a heightening or ascension of time; this is literally *Hochzeit*, German for marriage, with time itself as the ring."³ This is the time of the pledge and the vow. Upon ultimate heightening, as superlative, as *höchste Zeit*, it is the other high time, the time that is running late, the time of nearly no time left, the time that often attends or dictates the placement of a bet. Etymologically, the English "wedding" is related to the German *Wette* or bet. The *Hochzeit* could be seen, then, as guided by the *höchste Zeit* of the wager. For Goethe the pact basic to Faustian striving was such a bet. Mephistopheles can seize his client's soul only if Faust should find beyond the momentum of the wager a moment of fulfillment beyond striving. But *Hochzeit* as *höchste Zeit* must remain on the cusp of passage. When Mephistopheles misinterprets Faust's highest moment or *Augenblick*

3. Stanley Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* (Cambridge, MA & London: Harvard UP, 1981), 241.



opposite. There were rituals for which it was more to the point that knots be untied prior to the consummation of marriage. Another tying or untying ritual, the couple's clasping of left to left and right to right hands, does not describe a knot, but follows rather an interweaving or interlacing of strands preliminary to tying the knot or not. The not knot is basic to the Korean rituals attending the binding of bride and groom as recorded in Ottinger's film. The bindings that enable the groom to carry the chest to the bride's family must not, we are instructed, be knotted. The interwoven strands that comprise these bindings can always be unraveled and rewoven: they convey the harmonious flow to be desired between husband and wife. Although Freud's concession that weaving was woman's one contribution to prosthetic technicity continues to cause consternation, the connection he made goes to the very art of his own textual production. In relationship to the theory of castration, moreover, weaving would also be the one prosthetic invention that does not cut loss with aggrandizement of function. When you tour the Freud Museum in Hampstead, London, you will witness alongside the mementos of Freud's two-year stay the large loom in the study that documents Anna Freud's co-presence, survival, and far longer stay. The explanatory card cites father Freud analogizing between weaving and the dream work. To complete the tour of his frame of references to weaving one should recall Penelope's legendary loom on which it proved possible to sustain a relationship to the missing as work of mourning or unmourning by interweaving weaving, unraveling, and reweaving.

During the modeling of wedding gowns, Ottinger shows her edits with the kind of showmanship we associate with the very first films: the model exits on the right and enters again on the left and so on. What is not seen could also be a looping or weaving of the movement of the circling models. Then the scene admits the invisibility by letting a model disappear mid-screen and reappear as suddenly or magically. This magic of editing was pressed into the service of representation of the supernatural in earliest cinema. Given the overall composition of the sequence, is it not possible, in contrast perhaps to the magic shows of Georges Méliès, for example, that in Ottinger's film presence and absence are not juxtaposed as cuts or knots but are woven together as strands? And yet the prospect



of a new opposition between interweaving and the cut or knot is itself the knot that I propose untying (where the “un” would mark the word as primal). In *The Korean Wedding Chest*, the looping and interweaving processes bind visible and invisible realms and forces—and admit spirits.

Another interweaving with the invisible realm allows the participants in the ceremony not to be alienated or cut by the incessant corrections they undergo in preparation for their photo ops. As Ottinger has pointed out in interview, these incessant interventions are otherwise part of East Asian theater traditions, whether involving actors or puppets. During a theatrical performance, however, the work of assistance can be kept hidden from view. But in the face of the photographic medium, the wedding celebration participants find themselves immersed in the interweaving of presence and absence leading up to the printed pictures. At the end, with the closing titles, we witness a series of wedding photographs dating back to the start of the twentieth century. Was it the novelty of the photographic portrait that summoned the ongoing assistance from behind the proscenium arches of theater, but now as threads of invisibility or haunting interwoven with the threads of participation and posing, thereby binding together reality and the ceremony within the production of these pictures?

In her second digital feature Ottinger shows us what’s old in the new. Less a new and improved medium that opposes itself to what came before, the digital medium offers instead as supplemental synthesis access to all prior media and genres at the same time sublating earlier points of conflict, like the cut or knot of editing that distinguished film from video. The digital film interweaves, then, not only among all the possible futures that editing contemplates but also between media. Is it accidental that Ottinger inserted photographs into her first digital feature *Southeast Passage* (2002)? No. In *The Korean Wedding Chest* she addresses, also via the digital return to the old themes and techniques of looping and weaving, the spirit realm of photography and film in her signature mode of affirmation in mourning. This mode was, perhaps, more pressingly juxtaposed in the sequence from *Exile Shanghai* (1997) in which the memories and souvenirs of the interviewed couple’s wedding in WWII exile in Shanghai are matched or made by the contemporary Shanghai business of marriage ceremonies. This jubilant externalization of the couple’s own affirmation against all odds back then legibly de- and re-contextualizes a traumatic history within and as the work of montage. Ottinger doesn’t discount the effects of traumatic separation and exclusion, but she also doesn’t get stuck on the cutting of losses. Instead, room is made both for the absence and for affirmation.

In *The Korean Wedding Chest* we face a jolly modernity, which as Nietzsche counseled in regard to an ancient Greek setting, is but a mask of the impasse of trauma or, in Kleinian terms, a manic defense against repressed depression. But there is in Ottinger’s film something older than this now. Ottinger joins in the untying of knots and the joining together of no longer opposed stands as strands for the interweaving. We entered, together with the nonhuman figures of the fairy tale, the human world of representation and attended the wedding document as witnesses to the quintessentially human marriage to images. At the film’s open ending it’s once again high time: together with the Ginseng Man and Woman we reenter the largely invisible loop binding the film to the world of transfer of the old in the new and the new in the old. As Eva Meyer writes in her 1999 study *Glückliche Hochzeiten* (Happy Marriage Ceremonies): “To begin means to make a difference. An old conception is to be presented anew and it is the task of the production to make of this a *Hochzeit*.”⁶ ㉞



Theorist/therapist LAURENCE A. RICKELS's new book, *I Think I Am: Phillip K. Dick*, is available at a bookstore near you.