NEW KOREAN CINEMA:
MOURNING TO REGENERATION

by

Seung-hwan Shin

B. A. in English Literature, Yonsei University, Seoul, 1999

M. A. in Comparative Literature, Yonsei University, Seoul, 2003

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This dissertation was presented

by

Seung-hwan Shin

It was defended on

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and approved by

Colin MacCabe, Distinguished Professor, English/Film Studies

Adam Lowenstein, Associate Professor, Film Studies

Kyung Hyun Kim, Associate Professor, Film & Media Studies, UC Irvine

Dissertation Advisor: Marcia Landy, Distinguished Professor, Film Studies

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Seung-hwan Shin, PhD

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The past two decades saw Korean cinema establishing itself as one of the most vibrant national cinemas in the world. Scholars have often sought clues in democratization in the early 1990s. Yet, the overall condition of Korean cinema had remained hardly promising until the late 1990s, which urges us to rethink the euphoria over democratization. In an effort to find a better account for its stunning and provocative revival, this dissertation challenges the custom of associating the resurgence of Korean cinema with democratization and contends that Korean cinema has gained its novelty and vitality, above all, by confronting the abortive nature of democratic transitions. The overarching concern of this study is thus elucidating the piquant tastes of the thematics and the styles Korean cinema has developed to articulate public discontents with recent historical changes.

Chapter one revisits the New Wave era (the late 1980s to the early 1990s) and employs the notion of *ssitkim* (mourning) to probe how New Wave filmmakers maneuvered between legacies of the democracy movement and public/industrial demands and between historical trauma and rapid changes in the wake of democratization. Chapter two discusses Korean cinema's reorientations in the second half of the 1990s through films by Lee Chang-dong and Hong Sang-soo. Lee's investment in the non-linear time narrative offers a notable instance of renegotiations over national history at a time of troubled historical transition. Hong's rediscovery of everyday life without good sense and depth presents an eloquent commentary on the post-epic milieu. Chapter three adopts Deleuze's notion of the originary to explain how the

revenge narrative and the theme of violence in Park Chan-wook's films provide a significant critique of the democratized and neo-liberalizing milieu where the faculty of action becomes further frustrated. Chapter four looks to the Manchurian Western, a vernacular hybrid film genre, to investigate how the Western has been integral part of sociocultural formations in South Korea and thereby to demonstrate the need to step beyond restrictive frameworks such as historical and cultural authenticity for a greater understanding of the complex dynamic in transnational uses of popular genres.

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PREFACE

This dissertation could not have been brought to life without the guidance and support I have received from a number of people over many years. I owe an inestimable debt of gratitude to them. Foremost, I was very fortunate to have the opportunity to work with truly extraordinary scholars for this project. They have each played a decisive role in the development of this study. Marcia Landy, my dissertation chair, has been an invaluable and enduring source of inspiration. Many of the core ideas that inform this study grew out of dialogue I had with her through her written work, seminars, comments on my drafts, and one-on-one conferences. Her ability to orchestrate many complex issues into an original perspective has been truly fascinating and essential to enriching my understanding of cinema. I am deeply grateful to Colin MacCabe for motivating me to write on Korean cinema, without which I would not have embarked on this project. I also cannot thank him enough for stimulating discussions, which carried me through many moments of blockage in my thinking, and for opening doors to Asian cinema scholars beyond the University of Pittsburgh, which was instrumental to broadening my vision. I would like to thank Adam Lowenstein whose instruction has been vital to my film education. He has taught me, through challenging questions and constructive criticism, what it means to be a film scholar. His careful reading of my chapters was extremely helpful in refining my thoughts. Kyung Hyun Kim, my outside reader, has always been somewhere inside my mind as I have navigated Korean cinema. He has shown me the way through his pioneering work, detailed

forget the hospitality of the Good family (Kazuyo, Hiro, and Dublin), which made Pittsburgh feel like another home. Finally, words fail to express the gratitude I owe to my parents, family, and my fiancée Jihyun. I am sorry I could not be around for such a long time, and I thank you for having been so patient with me.

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To avoid diacritical marks and special coding, Korean Romanization in this dissertation follows the Revised Romanization adopted by the South Korean government in 2000, with the exception of proper names—especially movies, directors, public figures, companies, etc.—that have gained wide currency outside South Korea (e.g., Im Kwon-taek instead of Im Kown-t'aek, Park Chan-wook instead of Pak Ch'an-uk, and Jang Sun-woo instead of Jang Sŏn-u). Asian names maintain their traditional order of family name followed by given name: the exceptions are those in the references (footnote and bibliography) and those who have Western given names. I use "Korea" and "Korean cinema" to refer to "South Korea" and "South Korean cinema" simply for convenience's sake; it is not my intention to dismiss any legitimacy North Korea and its cinema may have as part of Korean history and culture. Lastly, unless otherwise noted, the English translations of the Korean-language texts in this study are all mine.

1.0   INTRODUCTION: IMPOSSIBLE MOURNING AND PROVOCATIVE REGENERATION

The turn of the millennium witnessed South Korean cinema establish itself as one of the most vibrant and robust national film industries in the world, consistently outperforming Hollywood cinema at home and making its name more regularly heard on the international circuits.[1] For an answer to the stunning rise of Korean cinema, scholars have often turned their attention to the transition from military to civilian rule in the early 1990s. In brief, the advance of democracy offered Korean society the liberty to explore more freely its traumatic past including Japanese colonization (1910-1945), the Korean War (1950-1953), the national partition, and decades of authoritarian rule (until the early 1990s)—the historical wounds Korean society could not have an opportunity to treat properly under suppressive regimes. This justifies an attempt to regard democratization as "the" turning point around which to structure the perception of Korean cinema's "regeneration." Exemplary in this regard is *New Korean Cinema*, a collection of essays that attempt to put in perspective fresh developments in Korean cinema roughly from the mid-1990s onward through such issues as the impact of democratization, generational shifts in

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[1] In the early 2000s, the domestic market share of Korean cinema rose to 45 to 50 percent and by 2005, Korea became the world's fifth largest film market with ticket sales rising from 42 million in 1996 to 148 million and the box-office revenue reaching $890 million. In this period, Hollywood's market share in Korea was cut in half: 77 to 36-38 percent. Darcy Paquet, "The Korean Film Industry: 1992 to the Present," in *New Korean Cinema*, eds. Chi-Yun Shin and Julian Stringer (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 33; Jinhee Choi, *The South Korean Film Renaissance: Local Hitmakers/Global Provocateurs* (Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2010), 1-2. A point to be noted here is that the main driving force behind these changes in the 2000s was domestically produced films.

filmmaking and spectatorship, the formation of a dynamic film culture (film festivals and journals), innovative investments in popular cinema, the successful rise of local blockbusters, and so on.[2]

The matter becomes more complicated, however, if we consider that the overall condition of the Korean film industry after democratization was hardly promising, but rather quite ominous. In the wake of democratization (the early 1990s), Korean cinema saw many local film companies going out of business and the market share of domestically produced films dropping to all-time lows—18.5 percent in 1992 and 15.9 percent in 1993.[3] Thus, Korean cinema seemed to many to be potentially on the brink of collapse, and this fear continued to haunt local film communities up to the late 1990s.[4] It is then clear that the newfound freedom of expression in the democratized milieu did not directly lead to a revival of the local film industry. We are thus faced with why Korean cinema, for all the much-awaited freedom in hand after democratization, continued to fail to impress even its own constituents.[5] More importantly, how could it bounce back from a near-death state within less than a decade to become one of the most animated national cinemas in the world? The regeneration of Korean cinema around the turn of the new millennium was certainly much more than a political matter. Over the past two decades or so, many other countries experienced democratic transitions, as South Korea did.[6] However, few of them now have a local film industry comparable to that of South Korea in size and vitality. Notably, even in a country like Taiwan, which bears much similarity to South Korea in both

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[2] Chi-Yun Shin and Julian Stringer, eds. *New Korean Cinema* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 6-7.
[3] Darcy Paquet, "The Korean Film Industry," 32.
[4] Broadly, this condition continued until 1999 when the market share of Korean cinema soared to 39.7 from 25.1 percent the previous year. Korean Film Council (KOFIC), *Korean Cinema 2007* (Seoul: KOFIC, 2007), 495.
[5] For many senior filmmakers who had led Korean cinema through dark ages (military regimes), the 1990s was not the dawn of a new era, but rather the twilight of their careers. Broadly put, their films kept failing to attract the attention of local audiences, with only a few exceptions such as *Sopyonje* (Im Kwon-taek, 1993) and as the decade was drawing to a close, many of them found themselves at the end or in the downhill of their careers.
[6] I am thinking of a series of democratizations often referred to as the Third Wave Democracy, which transpired in Eastern Europe, South America, Asia, Africa, and more recently the Middle East over the past two decades or so.

politics and economy, a revival of the local film industry did not take place. Neither government subsidies nor the global attention such auteurs as Hou Hsiao-hsien, Edward Yang, and Tsai Ming-liang brought to Taiwanese cinema could rescue its film industry from a long and deep slump.[7]

Film critics like Darcy Paquet, thus, draw attention to the structural shifts in the Korean film industry in the 1990s. Especially notable, according to him, was its drive toward "profitability" and "self-sufficiency" (less reliance on public funding and more proficiency in the market) as an alternative to futile protectionism. A consequence was the condition where even renowned directors could not be exempted from the "intensified pressure not only to make good films, but to make films that would not lose money."[8] As he himself acknowledges, however, this explanation is somewhat limited, "when we note that Korean audiences have turned such challenging and complex works as *Oasis* (2002), *Memories of Murder* (2003), *A Good Lawyer's Wife* (2003), and *Old Boy* (2003) into number-one box-office hits."[9] This observation reaffirms the disparity between commercial prospects and public reception. That is, an industrial approach often loses its validity when faced with questions like the broad appeal those "challenging" films generated among the Korean public. What becomes urgent, then, is to understand the "unprecedented enthusiasms" the Korean public has shown to such thematically and stylistically provocative films, or to put it the other way around, what fresh perspectives and vocabularies Korean cinema developed to speak successfully to the new concerns and shifting tastes of the public after democratic transitions and in the increasingly globalizing milieu, as well.

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[7] In 2001, the ticket sales of local films in Taiwan plunged to 0.1 percent. Paquet, "The Korean Film Industry," 40.
[8] Ibid., 33. For more about structural shifts in the Korean film industry over the past two decades, see also Jeeyoung Shin, "Globalisation and New Korean Cinema," in *New Korean Cinema*; Seung Hyun Park, "Korean Cinema after Liberation: Production, Industry and Regulatory Trends," in *Seoul Searching: Culture and Identity in Contemporary Korean Cinema*, ed. Frances Gateward (New York: SUNY Press, 2007).
[9] Paquet, "The Korean Film Industry," 33.

No doubt, the renewal of Korean cinema owes much to political and economic changes in the wake of democratization. After all, had it not been for those changes, the creative energies of Korean cinema would have remained without viable outlets. Then again, it is equally undeniable that examining how Korean cinema could realize its creative potential involves a host of different questions. My sense here is that it is quite difficult to gain a meaningful understanding of the vitality of Korean cinema today without close attention, above all, to the nature of the appeal it has generated across a broad range of audiences; in other words, how it gives expression to the public's perceptions of the post-democratized milieu. It may help clarify my point to invoke a remark Michel Foucault gave at the beginning of his 1976 lecture at the Collège de France:

> [F]or the last ten or fifteen years, [we saw] the immense and proliferating *criticizability* of things, institutions, practices, and discourses… But alongside [that]…[was] the inhibiting effect specific to totalitarian theories… Marxism and psychoanalysis…can be used at the local level only when, and this is the real point, the theoretical unity of their discourse is, so to speak, suspended.[10]

Foucault's comment on the post-1968 era has a resonance for democratized Korea. Briefly put, democratization in the early 1990s brought "a time of increased criticizability" to Korean society. Yet, the 1990s in South Korea was also "a decade of disorientation and frustration." When authoritarianism was finally replaced by civilian rule and the oppressors were no longer easily discernable, oppositional discourses began to lose their authority rapidly—even though democratization was far from complete and Korean society was still suffering from the same problems that had plagued it for decades. As it became increasingly difficult to identify the foes of democracy, Manichean views such as the democracy/anti-democracy binary also began losing analytic efficacy for an inquiry into historical changes. Korean society in the post-authoritarian era thus frequently saw the revived will to critique compounded or restrained by the confusion or

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[10] Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended*, trans. David Macey (New York: Picador, 2003), 6: my emphasis.

the frustration over what and how to express. To my eye, it is above all through confrontations with this abortiveness of the increased criticizability in the post-democratization era that Korean cinema today has found its distinctive positions. At the core of my discussion is thus an effort to rethink the euphoria over democratic progress and the success of cinema. In other words, this study challenges the celebratory views on the renaissance of Korean cinema to bring to light its provocative nature, namely, the piquant qualities of the thematics and the styles contemporary Korean cinema developed to articulate the public's deepening confusion over or discontent with its recently democratized milieu.

In general, New Korean Cinema is considered to have emerged sometime in the second half of the 1990s. Yet a closer look would reveal that its roots stretch to the Korean New Wave; namely, the efforts to unfetter Korean cinema from dictatorship especially from the late 1980s to the early 1990s. The differences between the two periods are unmistakable, as demonstrated in studies like *New Korean Cinema*. Still, a study of New Korean Cinema could not be thorough without paying due attention to the Korean New Wave, which I take to mark initial stages of Korean cinema's enquiries into the increased but abortive criticizability in the democratized milieu. It has been customary to discuss the New Wave cinema in association with the *minjung* (people's) movement (the grassroots democracy movement mainly during the 1980s).[11] Yet, it was indeed a multifaceted phenomenon; it took various paths that were not always consistent with, or often divergent from, the *minjung* discourse. More specifically, the New Wave cinema provides early patterns of the efforts in Korean cinema to maneuver its way between the legacies of the *minjung* movement and the rapid changes in both the social climate and the film industry during and after democratization. Indeed, as will be shown in more detail in the first chapter, my contention is that the Korean New Wave heralded the tendency in Korean cinema today to bring

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[11] I examine the *minjung* movement and its impact on the Korean New Wave in more detail in the first chapter.

sociopolitical concerns and popular cinema into tense interplay. Thus, as a way of laying the groundwork for the discussion of New Korean Cinema, this study begins by revisiting a few defining moments of the New Wave era: *Sopyonje* (Im Kwon-taek, 1993), *Chilsu and Mansu* (Park Kwang-su, 1988), and *A Petal* (Jang Sun-woo, 1996).

My reading of these works is structured around two main orientations in the New Wave era: the making of "national cinema" and the search for "alternative cinema." More specifically, my concern rests with shedding light on the ways the New Wave cinema negotiated between the two imperatives and public/industrial demands, which I consider to be crucial to clarifying major challenges for the newcomers in the following years to confront in one way or another. To that end, I draw upon the notion of "*ssitkim*." I have found it instrumental to explicating the shared aspiration in both Korean society and cinema after democratization to bridge the ruptures between the traumatic past and the rapidly altering present. *Ssitkim* literally means "cleansing," but in Korea's historical and cultural context, it conveys spiritual meanings such as "mourning" or "consoling," as in the "*ssitkim-gut*," a shamanist ritual for relieving burdened souls. Involved in both mourning the dead and consoling the living, the *ssitkim-gut* served as a powerful trope for the wishes and the struggles of Korean society in the post-authoritarian era to grapple with historical wounds and at the same time confront new challenges in the present.

Ssitkim, however, is not just another local term for the memory narrative. It is certainly redolent of such popularized concepts as "mourning" and "melancholia." As with mourning or melancholia, the work of *ssitkim* engages with the loss of a loved object, the desire to remember it, the sense of guilt about survival, the search for consolation, and so on. But the psychoanalytic perspective proves limited, when we consider, for instance, the oft-observed tendency in Korean cinema to defy such notions as "inner psyche" or "psychological realism." Consider *Sopyonje*,

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for example. A portrayal of the struggles of a makeshift family to preserve *pansori* as a dying

form of traditional folk music, the film epitomizes the urge to rediscover national culture beyond

colonial modernity and West-oriented developmentalism in the wake of democratization. The

profound rupture between tradition and modernity in Korean history finds an eloquent figuration

in the separation of the brother (who, fed up with the deprived and itinerant life of a *pansori*

singer, runs away to Seoul) and the sister (who ultimately reaches a mastery of *pansori*, but loses

both youth and sight and wanders remote rural areas). The storyline thus reaches the climax at

the reunion between the brother and the sister. At the end, however, the scene does not offer any

resolution. Allegedly, they communicate through *pansori*. Yet after the brief reunion through

music, they part from each other again even without acknowledging their mutual recognition.

This cryptic and indecisive ending presents a glimpse of the challenge the cinema of

ssitkim poses to the theory of mourning or melancholy. It conforms neither to the work of

mourning where the ego works through the loss and eventually lets go of the lost, nor to the state

of melancholia where the loss turns inward, causing the ego to become impoverished and

hollowed.[12] In other words, the film provides no definite solution to the separation between the

sister and the brother and between tradition and modernity; nor does it entirely deny the

possibility of reconnection or reconciliation between past and present (e.g., the reunion through

music), however elusive or brief it may be. Is the sister found? Is *pansori* rediscovered? Or are

they all lost again in the end? Are the ruptures between past and present bridged? No definite

answer seems to be possible for these questions. This inconclusive conclusion, in other words,

urges us to rethink the mourning/melancholia theory; it makes evident the dangers in a schematic

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[12] In an effort to draw clear distinctions between mourning and melancholia, Sigmund Freud wrote, "In mourning it is the world which has become poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself." Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 14, ed. and trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth, 1957), 246.

understanding of mourning and melancholia, such as oversimplifying the various complex ways the present conjures up the past in a specific historical and cultural context.

Indeed, basic psychological categories such as the ego already become problematic in the reunion scene. A peculiar mixture of various distinct strains such as historical experiences, religious accents (Buddhism), and ritualistic perspectives, the stoicism of the scene resists any easy rationalizing interpretation anchored in assumptions like personal motivation. At the level of the individual psyche, one may feel hard-pressed to entertain a satisfying account for why they should go their separate ways again after all the struggles to find each other. For local viewers like novelist Park Wan-seo, however, the irresolute ending was an eloquent choice, so much so that she characterized it as "an 'advance' and a 'transcendence' that is superior to an 'immature' meeting."[13] Here, on this "advanced" or "mature" way of understanding historical ruptures or on this historically and culturally distinct sense of verisimilitude, concepts like the ego or the self seem to have little bearing. Scholars have often alerted us to problems in psychologizing criticism, particularly its tendency to displace primarily historical and social matters into the dimensions of the personal psyche.[14] In line with the cautionary advice, this study employs the notion of *ssitkim* to shy away from an uncritical use of the psychological discourse, or to historicize it to reactivate properly political impulses in it, namely, to open it up to more productive (less reductive or prescriptive) debates over the various distinct and often competing manners in which the past returns and the present looks back in a specific historical conjuncture.

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[13] Quoted in Hae Joang Cho, "*Sopyonje*: Its Cultural and Historical Meaning," in *Im Kown-taek: The Making of A Korean National Cinema*, eds. David James and Kyung Hyun Kim (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2002), 146.

[14] A notable example is Fredric Jameson's comment on what he calls "ethical criticism," which often relies on psychologization to "recontain itself by assigning hostile and properly political impulses to the ultimate negative category of *ressentiment*." Frederic Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative As a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), 60.

More specifically, the opening chapter uses the *ssitkim* motif to probe the paths the New Wave cinema explored between the imperative to redress the wrongs in the past and the rapid changes in the present, namely, the ways it responded to the early 1990s as an interregnum when the ethos of the *minjung* movement was quickly fading into history, but a new direction had yet to be found. Thus, this study is, strictly speaking, less concerned with "what" was *ssitkimed* than with "how" *ssitkim* was performed. *A Petal*, for instance, revisits the Kwangju Massacre, the brutal suppression of the military regime on pro-democracy protests in 1980. Yet what intrigues me about the film is not its will to remember Kwangju, but rather the complex way it brings Kwangju back to the minds of the public in the 1990s. This question also serves as a springboard for two larger issues: first, how New Wave directors offered the public meaningful opportunities to loosen the grip on the horrors of the past, at least to some extent (social regeneration); second, how, in so doing, they also carried out a *ssitkim-gut* for Korean cinema itself (the renewal of cinema), namely, how the rebirth of Korean cinema was bound up with the quest for an effective form of *ssitkim* in the post-authoritarian era. Central to rereading the New Wave cinema through the prism of *ssitkim* is, thus, articulating the new thematic and stylistic perspectives New Wave filmmakers cultivated to grapple with the return of traumatic pasts and at the same time the shifts in both public sentiments and the film industry.

It is not my intention, however, to extend the motif of *ssitkim* to New Korean Cinema. I am not simply suggesting that *ssitkim* ended with the New Wave cinema or that the notion is no longer quite germane to Korean cinema today. In brief, my sense is rather that New Korean Cinema need be seen as the late stage of *ssitkim*. The new developments in Korean cinema since the mid-1990s were certainly substantial, which justifies an attempt to distinguish the new stage from the previous eras. As the title "mourning to regeneration" already indicates, this study is

also largely in line with the efforts to valorize the novelty of Korean cinema since the mid-1990s; as my discussion moves on to New Korean Cinema, the focus also shifts to the resurgence of Korean cinema—its revival on multiple fronts such as the rise of politically informed and/or aesthetically challenging films, the growth of film culture, and the industrial boom. However, a challenge arises when we note that it was not so much triumphant or hopeful feelings as the senses of failure, disorientation, and disillusionment that were endemic to Korean society in the post-democratization era. If we understand mourning in its traditional sense as "remembering the lost and letting it go," *ssitkim* is an unfinishable kind of mourning. To return to *Sopyonje*, its irresolute ending (or its approach to historical ruptures through irresolution rather than success) suggests that the search for *pansori* does not end with glorifying the lost tradition and that the quest for people's *sori* (voice) rather than *pansori* itself as a traditional art form is unfinished. Likewise, the pursuit of a national cinema requires continuous renegotiations. More specifically, the queries New Wave films like *Sopyonje* raised on historical ruptures and national cinema are still very much with us. Markedly, the concern with historical traumas such as colonization and national division persists in Korean cinema today, albeit often in a less politically overt and more mass-mediated form. We are thus entitled to say that New Korean Cinema is not so much "a cinema after *ssitkim*" as "a meta-*ssitkim*," namely, "a *ssitkim* of *ssitkim*" that hinges upon the need to rethink and restructure the entrenched perceptions of "national cinema" and "alternative cinema" in the face of the historical milieu where increased criticizability repeatedly proves to be ineffective and *ssitkim* continues to appear impossible to complete.

What this makes clear is that the new developments of Korean cinema on the threshold of the new millennium cannot be charted through a linear form of evolutionary narrative; they were less a break than a series of reorientations. Thus, rather than simply draw distinctions between

the Korean New Wave and New Korean Cinema, I recast them into the dynamic of convergence and divergence. Put another way, this study aspires to show that the piquant tastes ("provocative regeneration") of Korean cinema today originate above all from its endeavors to inquire into the historical milieu that makes it impossible to complete *ssitkim* ("unfinishable mourning"). This view is fleshed out via the efforts I make throughout this study to locate New Korean Cinema at a few important theoretical conjunctures, where different strains intersect and compete: *minjung* (the oppressed) vs. *daejung* (the mass), national cinema vs. transnational perspective, and alternative cinema vs. genre cinema. A quick way to clarify this is to note that the films examined in this study (the works by Lee Chang-dong, Hong Sang-soo, Park Chan-wook, and Kim Jee-woon) do not sit well with either side, or appear to straddle both sides. My main concern thus rests with elucidating the distinct choices new generation filmmakers made on the crossroads between the political and the popular, between the local and the global, and between independent and mainstream cinema.

To that end, my reflection on New Korean Cinema opens with films of Lee and Hong (Chapter two). Along with other filmmakers of the same generation such as Kim Ki-duk, and Im Sang-soo, they took the lead in new developments of Korean cinema in the second half of the 1990s. Their films are largely thought of as far less ethnographically and/or politically angled than New Wave films. At the same time, however, they also appear to maintain some distance from commercial cinema. Put another way, from the industrial perspective, they opened new terrains of filmmaking by carving niches between political and mainstream cinema and thereby expanded the spectrum of Korean cinema. Still more noteworthy, however, are new positions with which they experimented in the niches. Indeed, it is above all the thematic and aesthetic innovations that make the niches sustainable. What I have found particularly intriguing about

their works is their efforts to dislodge history from the reign of the determinable: in Lee's case, the disruption of established history through non-linear temporality; in Hong's films, the critique of historicism hostile to life by discovering depthless everyday life and its paradoxes.

I consider Lee's works to make a compelling case for discussing how allegory is used to inquire into Korean society in the wake of democratic transition and globalization in the 1990s and onward. In particular, I focus my attention on the way his films unfetter allegory from the linear narrative through, for instance, the use of reverse chronology in *Peppermint Candy* (1999). I suggest that Lee's meditation on non-linear time can be regarded as a response to the difficulty of representing history at an interregnum. My discussion, however, does not intend to read the proliferation of non-linear narrative simply as a symptom of historical or social crisis; rather, Lee's reverse chronology brushes determined history against the grain or peels off the layers of actual present and thereby brings us to the realm of the virtual. In so doing, it liberates allegory from the hegemony of determinate and territorializing movement, simply chronological history. In this respect, this study reads Lee's films (especially, *Peppermint Candy*) as a notable example of renegotiations over national history at a time of troubled transition (in the case of South Korea in the 1990s, incomplete democratization and the 1997 Asian financial crisis).

Hong also questions history, but in a drastically different manner. Confronted with the 1990s as a post-monumental era (an era after epic changes such as democratization), he strove to rediscover everyday life, more specifically, its contingency, disjointedness, and ambiguity through a minimalist approach. Yet, it is misleading to associate his films with such notions as postmodernism or deconstruction, as has often been the case. At the core of his cinema is rather the impetus to examine or embrace life without good sense. Notably, characteristic of everyday life he discovers is the absence of center and depth to build our perception on. His works

thereby suggest that the everyday is governed above all by "paradoxes" (the coexistence of multiple senses or directions) instead of "good sense" (the determinable sense or direction that forces us to pick one over the other). Events and characters in his films do not have one determinable direction, but always travel or drift in distinct and often conflicting directions at the same time. We thus repeatedly come across the motif of surface in his films. For instance, the disparities between different memories of the same events in *Virgin Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors* (2000) continue to incite us to look for motivations behind actions, but the film ultimately denies us access to the inner or psychic dimension of the characters. Rather, it shows its characters waiting, hesitating, wavering, wondering, doubting, or forgetting on the surface, accidentally or intentionally, instead of entering or heading in one direction. Also notable in this regard is humor as a key ingredient in Hong's inquiry into everyday social encounters that somehow continue without an ultimate solution to their paradoxical nature. Thus, this study contends that Hong's meditation on everyday life without depth and good sense constitutes a unique way of grappling with the post-epic milieu. I also argue that his minimalism bears witness to new possibilities of filmmaking in between maximalism (e.g., big-budget films) and protectionism (e.g., publicly funded films).

Around the turn of the new millennium, however, Korean cinema saw another series of fresh developments: the emergence of the local blockbusters (led by Kang Je-kyu's 1999 *Shiri* and Park Chan-wook's 2000 *Joint Security Area*); the successes of international film festivals such as the Pusan International Film Festival (launched in 1996), the Bucheon International Fantastic Film Festival (launched in 1997), and the Jeonju International Film Festival (launched in 2000); the expansion of film culture (the proliferation of film journals and art movie theaters); the transformation of the film industry (such as the rise of venture capitalists as a major player);

the increase of institutional support (for instance, the revamp of governmental agencies such as the substitution of the Korean Film Council [KOFIC] for the Korean Motion Picture Corp. in 1999), and so on. And this new phase of regeneration also coincided with the rise of a group of younger generation filmmakers such as Bong Joon-ho, Kim Jee-woon, Ryu Seung-wan, Kim Sung-su, and Hur Jon-ho as well as the two directors mentioned above. Their films are noted for being youth-oriented, genre-savvy, stylistically rich, and unabashed about drawing upon popular film traditions. As ardent cinephiles, they had "encompassed a broad range of cinema from European auteurs to Hong Kong action films, Taiwanese art cinema and Hollywood B-movies." As directors, they were keen on "incorporate[ing] these influences into local films." On the other hand, local audiences, for their part, were "highly receptive to such an approach."[15] If we can thus say that the success of New Korean Cinema offers telling evidence that inventiveness is not always at odds with popular reception, Park Chan-wook's revenge films are among the most compelling and challenging cases. For instance, the public sensation a film like *Old Boy* engendered despite provocative elements such as incestuous affairs and a heavy dose of violence[16] puts us at an intriguing intersection where various distinct strains such as art, genre, local history, and transnational interaction intersect. In the third chapter, thus, I look to Park's revenge films as a key venue to examine the piquant taste of New Korean Cinema, that is, the provocative regeneration of Korean cinema over the past decade or so.

My analysis centers above all on his obsession with the revenge narrative and more broadly the theme of violence. In an effort to put the issues in perspective, I take my cue from

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[15] Darcy Paquet, *New Korean Cinema: Breaking the Waves* (London: Wallflower, 2009), 65.

[16] Kim Young-jin, a leading voice in Korean film criticism, portrayed the film as "one of the most interesting commercial events in Korean cinema in the mid-2000s." Young-jin Kim, ed. *Korean Film Directors: Park Chan-wook* (Seoul: KOFIC, 2007), 7-8, 45.

Gilles Deleuze's comments on naturalism in his cinema study.[17] Central to the naturalist cinema is, according to Deleuze, the discovery of the "originary" world or the world of "primordial impulses," which arises between the deterritorialized and the territorialized, the virtual and the actual, and idealism and realism and that idealism cannot make felt and realism remains unable to represent. Not transitional or derivative, but autonomous and consistent, the originary impulse tends to exceed historical limitation rather than remain subdued within the determinate milieu. Characteristic of the originary world is, thus, violence beyond historical and moral constraints. I take the notion of the originary to be congenial to clarifying the implications of Park's avengers, both aesthetically and historically.

First, employing the notion of the originary weans us off a schematic demarcation between realism (history and the real) and idealism (fiction and the imaginary), which has often been the ground for a dismissal of Park's films. The figuration of originary impulses through the trope of avenger is not opposed to realism; an act of scrutinizing the actual milieu, it accentuates the realist ethos to the point where it cannot help admitting that there is something that it is powerless to represent. It also enables us to reach a more meaningful understanding of the rise of avenger as a key icon in Korean cinema today and the issue of violence, as well, rather than remain caught with the customary view that has disqualified it simply as a false action taken in the absence of a historically viable form of action. My sense is rather that the rise of avengers between the amplified will to action (the call for justice) and the actual milieu of action (historical limits) offers a powerful critique of the historical condition where the faculty of action is repeatedly and severely frustrated.

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[17] Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema I: The Movement-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 123-124.

Then, my invocation of Deleuze in reading Park's films should not be read as aiming to put forth them as another instance of naturalist cinema, or Deleuze's version of naturalist cinema. Instead, the overarching question for this chapter is, "What is originary about his originary world?" That is, my discussion is structured around questions like why and how he invented an originary world in his own right, what triggered him into the terrain of originary impulses, and why Korean cinema had to discover an originary world at the moment of its rejuvenation. In so doing, I aspire to explicate how Park's cinema draws upon the theme of revenge and violence as a central problematic to question recent historical changes such as democratization, the financial crisis, and *segewha* (globalization)—more precisely, their futile nature, as verified in the salience of the captivity motif as the flipside of the revenge impulse.

In this regard, Park's investment in issues like style cannot be reduced to superficial aestheticization. My stance is rather that the question of stylization should be read in association with the primacy of originary impulses over historical limitation. In other words, the stylization of violence in Park's films is a sign of the uncontainable originary impulses (e.g., the demand of justice). Likewise, humor as a key ingredient of his cinema is not simply a cheap ploy to make intense violence more digestible. It instead marks a moment when an originary impulse emerges disrupting or overpowering the determinate milieu. An exemplary case is Keum-ja's untimely return to society in *Sympathy for Lady Vengeance* (2005). On a snowy winter day, she emerges from the prison gate in a summer dress. Yet the natural condition has no impact on her; her calm posture rather overrides the temporal reality. If Hong's humor stems from or testifies to the paradoxes of depthless life, I interpret Park's humor as indicative of an abrupt manifestation of the ordinary in the depth of the actual historical milieu. To my mind, thus, Park's cinema forms a unique way of Korean cinema's regeneration: rejuvenation through violence.

In the final chapter, I turn my attention to another notable moment in recent history of Korean cinema: the rediscovery of the Manchurian Western or the Manchurian *hwalguk* (or *hwalkuk*) not only on the scholarly and institutional level, but also by filmmakers. A vernacular genre that drew upon the Western and was mainly set in colonized Manchuria, the Manchurian *hwalguk* enjoyed great popularity in the 1960s. Yet, from the early 1970s, the genre gave way to other action genres that preferred different locations or urban settings. It had since remained forgotten until recently when a filmmaker like Kim Jee-woon brought the lost genre back to the public's mind through *The Good, the Bad, the Weird* (2008), a tribute to both the Manchurian *hwalguk* and Sergio Leone's Dollars Trilogy, and local scholars, too, began reassessing the forgotten genre. Its rediscovery coincided with the renewed interest in local popular cinemas. More importantly, however, the birth of the indigenous hybrid genre and its return at the moment of Korean cinema's regeneration raise a series of challenging questions: above all, if the Western is an American genre *par excellence*, what makes the American genre relevant to Asia?; or what use or appeal does the American genre have for Korean society today?

Pivoting around this question, this chapter aims to examine, first, the emergence of the Manchurian *hwalguk* and then its recent return through *The Good, the Bad, the Weird*. In so doing, I seek to present a meaningful perspective on the complex dynamic at work in the transnational dissemination of the Western (and popular genre traditions, as well) and more importantly the ways the tropes of the Western has been integral to the regeneration of Korean cinema, both then (in the 1960s)[18] and now (in the era of New Korean Cinema). To that end, my discussion begins by reconsidering established perceptions around the transnational permutations

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[18] In the 1960s, Korean cinema produced a number of commercially successful films and also witnessed the rise of new generation filmmakers such as Yu Hyun-mok, Shin Sang-ok, Lee Man-hui, Kim Ki-duk, and Jeong Chang-hwa. In Korean film history, the decade is called the golden age of Korean cinema. For more about this period, see Kathleen McHugh and Nancy Abelmann, ed. *South Korean Golden Age Melodrama: Gender, Genre and National Cinema* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2005).

of the Western. The analysis of the Western's dissemination across borders has often been hamstrung by the idea of historical and cultural authenticity and thus by such notions as imitation, parody, pastiche, and so on. My sense, however, is that investments in the Western tropes outside the American context have involved deliberate transformations, which require us to step beyond restrictive frameworks such as historical-cultural authenticity and the simplistic binary between Hollywood and other national cinemas. More specifically, my discussion strives to demonstrate that the reinvention of the Western can offer new thematic and visual lexicons to a society where the faculty of action is severely frustrated and then fantasizing about a time for action through the Western tropes often serves as a vernacular form of reaction to a time of troubles and disorientations.

My reflection on the Manchurian *hwalguk*, thus, centers on the efforts to elucidate the distinct uses Korean cinema made of the Western in reaction to claustrophobic historical conditions in South Korea. *Hwal* means both physical and spiritual vitality. Given the traumatic modern history in the Korean peninsula, it would be fair to say that *hwal* has been foreign to Korean society. Then again, it is the lack of *hwal* that has made the impetus of *hwal* endemic to Korean society. What becomes urgent, then, is examining the way in which the endogenous impulse of *hawl* interlocks such exogenous elements as the Western and Manchuria. More specifically, my discussion is geared toward examining how Korean cinema has put the Western and Manchuria into critical use to question the historical condition where *hwal* could not find a realist form, or it could not actualize itself without disrupting historical authenticity and narrative coherence to a greater or lesser degree. Indeed, I hold that the distinctiveness of the Manchurian *hwalguk* stems above all from its struggles to maneuver through the difficulties of creating the image of *hwal* in the milieu where history repeatedly proves to be hostile to it. Conversely, the

search for a *hwal* image beyond those difficulties bespeaks a mounting desire to find a way out of suppressive history. In this sense, the recent return of the Manchurian *hwalguk* can be read as signaling a growing demand of renegotiation over national history and culture. That is, registered in its return is a sense that it becomes increasingly problematic to map the world in terms of nationally defined differences.

2.0 *SSITKIM* AND AFTER:

THE KOREAN NEW WAVE AND ITS LEGACIES

> The *ssitkim-gut* [the ritual of relieving the departed sister's soul] went well. I am really relieved now…but sad. Life turns empty…like this.
> A shaman in *Mudang: Reconciliation between the Living and the Dead* (Park Ki-bok, 2003)

It has now become customary to date the arrival of New Korean Cinema sometime in the second half of the 1990s. However, a closer look proves that its roots can be found in the Korean New Wave (the late 1980s to the mid-1990s), which briefly put, hinged on the impetus to unfetter Korean cinema from the residual effects of military rule and breathe new life into it. If we can consider New Korean Cinema to be "the story of [filmmakers finally freed] not only to realize a politically- and socially-informed cinema, but to look beyond this to an era when films were no longer obligated to speak for their nation or people [or they could no longer afford to stay complacent with the increased freedom to speak openly of political, social issues],"[1] New Wave filmmakers certainly deserve to be studied as precursors in the quest of solutions to this dual task. Although frequently associated with the democratic transitions especially from the late 1980s, the Korean New Wave was actually a multifaceted phenomenon where various paths were taken. Such celebrated directors from the period as Park Kwang-su, Jang Sun-woo, and Im Kwon-taek attest to its wide spectrum; their films offer rich illustrations of the complex interplay between the amplified freedom of expression and popular or industrial demands. Intended as the groundwork for reflections on New Korean Cinema in the rest of this study, this chapter seeks to

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[1] Darcy Paquet, *New Korean Cinema: Breaking the Waves* (London: Wallflower, 2009), 3.

elucidate both the triumphs and the limitations of the Korean New Wave, which set the stage for a bigger drama of regeneration in the coming years—the regeneration in the 2000s, which involved both aesthetic innovations and the industrial boom.

To that end, my discussion focuses on two major strains in the Korean New Wave rather than attempt to delineate it in a comprehensive way: the search for "alternative cinema" and the making of "national cinema."[2] The term "*minjung* cinema," which has been widely used to refer to the Korean New Wave primarily due to its close association with the *minjung* movement, may be a good starting point. "*Minjung*" indeed captures the tenets of the democracy movement. Derived from Chinese characters (民衆), it literally means people. In the Korean context, however, it carries strong political connotations; it has often been employed to denote the oppressed or the unprivileged such as the peasantry and the working class. At the core of *minjung* discourses is the belief that people are the true subjects or protagonists of history and history should be understood from their point of view.[3] *Minjung* discourses thus pivoted around two questions: how to represent or establish solidarity with the *minjung* and how to resurrect the distinctive and subversive cultural traditions of the *minjung* that have been disqualified or subjugated under colonialism, cultural imperialism, and authoritarianism. As the *minjung* movement culminated in the late 1980s, the cinema also began to show some notable signs of change. Perhaps most remarkable was the rise of new directors: Park and Jang among others,

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[2] There are, of course, other noted directors during the period who do not easily fall under such banners: e.g., Lee Myung-se who was known as a stylist (*Gagman*, 1989; *My Love, My Bride*, 1990), Kang Woo-suk who was seen as a guaranteed hit-maker (*Mister Mama*, 1992; *Two Cops*, 1993), and Kim Ui-seok whose debut film *Marriage Story* (1992) set up a model for the foray of *chaebols* (big corporations) into film business (the first feature film financed by Samsung) by becoming the top-grossing film of the year and starting a sex-war comedy cycle. Still, it is fair to say that creative energies in Korean cinema during the late 1980s and early 1990s owed much to "alternative cinema" and "national cinema."

[3] Namhee Lee, *The Making of Minjung: Democracy and the Politics of Representation in South Korea* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007), 2-5, 33. See also Darcy Paquet, *New Korean Cinema*, 16; Isolde Standish, "Korean Cinema and the New Realism: Text and Context," in *Colonialism and Nationalism in Asian Cinema*, ed. Wimal Dissanayake (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 86.

who had developed their visions for a new cinema under the constellation of the student movement (a major force in the *minjung* movement) and counter-cinema practices (e.g., the foundation of the Seoul Film Group).[4] With the political atmosphere mellowing in the late 1980s, they could make inroads into mainstream cinema and bring critical energies to it, not without conflicts with the established customs of the film industry. Besides, for many senior directors as well, the gains of democracy meant an opportunity for rebirth.[5] In Im's case, for instance, the political change offered him more liberty to address politically sensitive subjects such as national partition that had continued to trouble his life due to his family's ties to leftist groups before and during the Korean War. The newfound freedom of expression allowed Im to breathe more political tones into his ethnographic or heritage films. History or traditional culture no longer needed to be a refuge from government censorship, as had often been the case under military rule. His search for cultural roots could gain political justification by serving the imperative of offering an outlet to marginalized voices.[6]

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[4] During their college years, Park and Jang joined Yallasheong, a college film club formed in 1980 by Hong Ki-Seon and Kim Dong-Bin among others. After graduation, Park launched the Seoul Film Group (or Seoul Film Collective) whose members included Hwang Gyu-dok, Hong Ki-seon, Jang Sun-woo, Yeo Kyun-dong, and Song Neung-han. In close connection to the *minjung* movement and inspired by the 1960s Third Cinema of South America, they made 8mm short films (*Pan-nori Arirang*, 1983; *Suri-se*, 1984) and also published books such as *Towards A New Cinema* (Seoul: Hakminsa, 1983). Tony Rayns, *Seoul Stirring: 5 Korean Directors* (London: Institute of Contemporary Arts, 1994), 46; Jinhee Choi, *The South Korean Film Renaissance: Local Hitmakers, Global Provocateurs* (Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2010), 27, 167; Paquet, *New Korean Cinema*, 16-17. More details about the alternative cinema campaign in the early 1980s can be found in Soyeon Kim, *The Death of the Real: On the Transitional Reflexivity of the Korean New Wave* (Seoul: bBooks, 2008), 36-38.

[5] Notable instances include Jeong Ji-young (*North Korean Partisan in South Korea*, 1990; *White Badge*, 1992), Jang Gil-su (*Silver Stallion*, 1991; *Susan Brink's Arirang*, 1991), Park Jong-won (*Kuro Arirang*, 1989; *Our Twisted Hero*, 1992), and Park Cheol-su (*301, 302*, 1995; *Farewell My Darling*, 1996).

[6] Indeed, Im's relationship with military regimes was not always negative. If the 1970s was the worst time for many Korean filmmakers, it was not so hostile to Im. The government's generous support for so-called quality films led to a new trend that allowed box-office failures to be offset by subsidies and thus put less pressure on directors. Im thus took advantage of the policy to develop his own vision of realism and turned history into his major source of themes and settings. Even the turbulent 1980s worked in Im's favor. As the new military regime encouraged filmmakers to seek international recognition, he could continue his search for cultural roots without much conflict with the regime. David James, preface to *Im Kwon-taek: The Making of A Korean National Cinema*, eds. David James and Kyung Hyun Kim (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2002), 28-31. Equally undeniable, however, is the fact that he still could not speak about the trauma history left in his mind until the early 1990s when democratic rule was finally established.

Yet it would be a mistake to believe that the Korean New Wave always remained consistent with *minjung* discourses. Rather, New Wave directors cultivated their distinctive voices through tense interplays with the legacies of the *minjung* movement. I employ the motif of "*ssitkim-gut*" (a shamanist ritual for relieving burdened souls)[7] as a key word to explore the "tense interplays," namely, both continuities and discontinuities between New Wave films and the revolutionary 1980s. Given the decades of authoritarianism as well as unhealed wounds from the colonial period and the Korean War, Korean society certainly needed a *ssitkim-gut* and the rise of the Korean New Wave coincided with the swelling desire for a collective *ssitkim* in the wake of democratization.[8] Notable in this regard is the comment Jang made in his 1995 documentary *Cinema on the Road*, the Korean episode for the British Film Institute's *The Century of Cinema* series: "I hear many objections to using the shamanist *ssikim-gut*… [But] there have been many evil things in Korean film history…[and] too many times when film's influence on the Korean public has been malign… [That is why] I opened and closed…[it] with the *ssitkim-gut*: it gave the documentary a ceremonial feeling."[9] One year later, he provided another *ssitkim-gut* through *A Petal* (1996), a film that revisits the Kwangju Massacre, the military regime's brutal suppression of pro-democracy protesters in a local city Kwangju in 1980, which is believed to have claimed thousands of civilian lives. This film was a memorable

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[7] For more about this notion, see "Introduction."

[8] "The *ssitkim* cinema" bears affinity to the "post-traumatic cinema" Kim laid out in his study of the Korean New Wave. Above all, both underscore the effort of Korean cinema during/after democratization to confront the return of historical traumas. Yet my reading of the New Wave cinema takes a slightly different approach; while his analysis gravitates toward "the imagery of emasculated males (often, both socio-politically and sexually)" as a primary trope New Wave directors drew on to address the paralyzing effects that historical traumas have left on Korean society, I employ the notion of *ssitkim* to thematize "the repeated frustration of the faculty of action" as a major challenge to an attempt to represent modern Korean history or as a central factor for the complexity of historical narrative in the Korean context. The trope, I suggest, invites us to both the urge and the difficulty to bridge the ruptures between traumatic pasts and the present, which recurrently drove New Wave filmmakers into complicated narrativization. Thus, my study, at the cost of the opportunity to note gender issues, focuses on probing convoluted and multivalent forms of storytelling that New Wave filmmakers invented to deal with memories of failures. Kyung Hyun Kim, *The Remasculization of Korean Cinema* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

[9] Tony Rayns, *Korean Film Director: Jang Sun-woo* (Seoul: KOFIC, 2007), 45-46.

event for Jang and Korean society alike. In the beginning of Jang's cinema, there was Kwangju.

It was when he was arrested and put in jail for engagement in anti-government protests that he

became seized with the desire to make a film about Kwangju in 1980,[10] and fifteen years later,

he could finally return to the origin of both his pain and cinema. Yet the *ssitkim* was not just for

him. As the film replayed the Kwangju incident, the Korean public also had "a chance of

loosening [their] grip slightly on the horrors of the past," although no easy resolution could be

expected.[11]

The desire for *ssitkim* was not exclusive to young and politically conscious directors like

Park and Jang. It was also important to veteran directors such as Im, particularly in the early

1990s. Born in the colonial era, he had to undergo all the major national ordeals over the course

of Korea's modernization in the last century. After entering into film business in the postwar era,

he also experienced all the ups and downs of Korean cinema throughout the latter half of the last

century. He is thus a living witness of modern Korean history and Korean film history.[12] Yet,

having a family accused of being communist sympathizers, Im had to carry on his back a big

steel block of history without being able to talk about it through decades of anti-communist

regimes.[13] It was only in the early 1990s when democratic rule finally came within sight that he

could begin taking down the historical burdens from his back. As the decade of the 1990s was

dawning, his films began to wander through the Honam areas (Jeolla Province) he had fled after

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[10] Tony Rayns, *Korean Film Director: Jang Sun-woo*, 38.

[11] Darcy Paquet, "A Petal," Koreanfilm.org, last modified October 29, 2006, http://koreanfilm.org/kfilm96.html#petal.

[12] In Kim's words, "The inconsistencies, the transformations, and the contradictions…[in] four decades of [his] work …[over 100 feature films] illustrate what it was and continues to be like working in a nation that historically features even more tumultuous contours than Im's career… [They show] a spirit of endurance and tolerance, if not resistance, that far outweighs the complicity and compromises involved in the shaping of his career… [Negotiating] between expectations of his domestic audience, the demands of producers, and the standards of the art film marketplace, … [his films also reveal] dilemmas and the history of Korean national cinema." Kyung Hyun Kim, "Korean Cinema and Im Kown-taek" in James and Kim, eds., *Im Kown-taek: The Making of A Korean National Cinema*, 39-40.

[13] Sung-il Chung, *Korean Film Director: Im Kwon-taek* (Seoul: KOFIC, 2006), 87; James and Kim, eds., *Im Kwon-taek: The Making of Korean National Cinema*, 249, 253-255; and Paquet, *New Korean Cinema*, 11-12.

all the terrors he had seen in his youth.[14] Above all, in *The Taebaek Mountains* (1994), he

returned to his hometown to depict the period around the Liberation (1945) and the Korea War

(1950) and confronted the agonizing memories of the left-right conflict that deeply divided and

ruined families, towns, and the entire nation.[15] If this film thus offered Im an opportunity to

revisit the origin of his pain and finally reconcile himself to it, the vehicle he chose for the

overdue odyssey was *ssitkim-gut*; the film closes with the shamanist ritual, which carries his

hope that the film would relieve the viewer of historical wounds, at least to some extent.[16]

Reading the Korean New Wave through the prism of *ssitkim*, however, is not iterating the

same memory narrative in a different language. A vernacular way of reconnecting or reconciling

past and present, *ssitkim* rather requires us to be alert to the distinctive manner in which New

Wave films grapple with historical traumas. A good way to clarify this would be noting the

limitations of the custom of putting the New Wave cinema under such an umbrella term as

realism. Paquet, for instance, contends that for all their stylistic differences, New Wave directors

adopted realism as a core aesthetic principle. They shared "a commitment to using the medium

of film to push for social change" or "a pent-up urge to a realist, politically informed cinema."[17]

This comment tallies with the established view, which generally deemed the New Wave cinema

as an inheritor of the *minjung* movement or more broadly as a restoration of the realist tradition

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[14] Sung-il Chung, *Im Kwon-taek on Im Kwon-taek II* (Seoul: Hyeonsil-munhwa-yeongu, 2003), 261. I am thinking of *Fly High, Run Far* (*Gaebyeok*, 1991), *Sopyonje* (1993), and *The Taebaek Mountains* (1994), among others, which all use the Honam area as the major backdrop and draw upon its geopsychic imports.

[15] As Im embarked on *The Taebaek Mountains* in 1991 shortly after *Fly High, Run Far* (a historical drama about the Donghak Peasant Uprising in the late nineteenth century), the government warned him against making a film about leftist movements in the post-Liberation era (1945-1950), and he had to wait to resume the project until the arrival of civilian rule. Chung, *Im Kwon-taek on Im Kwon-taek II*, 311-313; James and Kim, eds., *Im Kwon-taek: The Making of Korean National Cinema*, 249; Kim, *The Remasculization of Korean Cinema*, 290 (note 24).

[16] Chung, *Im Kwon-taek on Im Kwon-taek II*, 345-347.

[17] Paquet, *New Korean Cinema*, 21-22. In Korean film criticism, the term "realism" did not work in the same way as Western film studies assumed. Developed in close relation to leftist discourses, it would refer to filmmaking practices defiant of continuity editing and invisible style. Perhaps it was much closer to what Bertolt Brecht meant when he said, "Realism is…not only for literature; it is a major political, philosophical and practical issue and must be handled…as such." Bertolt Brecht, "Against George Lukacs," *New Left Review*, 84 (March-April 1974), 45.

that had remained stifled during military rule.[18] But this approach seems too prescriptive to deal with the multivalent and polyglossic nature of the New Wave cinema. I am not simply suggesting that realism discourses failed to account for many notable films that did not deal explicitly with political and social issues; adding more examples would not be of much help to elucidate the subtleties of the dialogues the New Wave cinema had with its time. Indeed, the main reason why I prefer the notion of "*ssitkim*" is that it urges us to note the tensions that New Wave films, including overtly political ones, had with the *minjung* movement, and the different strains in them which cannot be reduced to realism in the traditional sense. As film critics like Kim Soyeon underscore, the New Wave cinema emerged in a transitional era where the ethos of the *minjung* movement was fading away, but new orientations were yet to be found,[19] which is affirmed by the New Wave cinema's preoccupation with such feelings as loss, failure, confusion, and frustration. To my mind, it was this transitional situation that gave special historical validity to *ssitkim* in the post-dictatorial era. *Ssitkim* as a ritual of both mourning the dead and consoling the living served as a vital source of inspiration on which New Wave directors could draw for the dual task of dealing with traumatic pasts and rapid changes in the present; or more precisely, *ssitkim* provided New Wave filmmakers with a useful framework to confront and narrativize the profound ruptures in historical transition or the difficulties of achieving a reconciliation between past and present as an outcome of the repeated failures to redress past injustices and the growing disillusionment with democratization.

This is indeed why I am concerned less with what *ssitkim* was about than with how it was performed, that is, diverse ways in which New Wave directors, consciously or not, carried it out. What is realist in *A Petal* is Kwangju. But what is new is how it remembers or mourns Kwangju,

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[18] For conventional views on the Korean New Wave, see Kim, *The Death of the Real*, 9-13.
[19] Ibid., 15, 20.

which involves a host of different storytelling forms that do not work in the same way traditional views assume realism to work. The realist impetus (the desire for historical truth) is evident, but it often appears riddled with non-realist aspects such as supernatural elements, folkloric qualities, religious accents, theatrical styles, surreal tones, decentered narrative, and deliberate irresolution. My discussion thus centers on the efforts of New Wave directors to grapple with deeply ruptured historical transitions (modernization and democratization) and the consequences such as the intricate ways they blended distinct narrative and visual strains into their films. If Korean society and art alike, as Paul Willemen observed, were caught in an "impossible modernization" (where the way back to tradition and the way forward to modernity are both blocked),[20] this chapter seeks to probe the ways the New Wave cinema responded to this blockage in the wake of democratic transitions by rereading such films as *Chilsu and Mansu* (Park Kwang-su, 1988), *Sopyonje* (Im Kwon-taek, 1993), and *A Petal*, which, to my mind, mark defining moments of the period.

2.1 *SOPYONJE*: NATIONAL HISTORY AND TECHNICAL REPRODUCTION

Few would deny the historical significance of Im's *Sopyonje* in Korean cinema. It was the first Korean movie to draw more than two million viewers nationwide, when Korean cinema was still in a deep slump. But the film proves even more noteworthy when we consider the story behind its success. Until the theatrical release, the film was hardly expected to be a commercial hit, still less the highest grossing Korean film up to that moment. Im himself was not an exception; "In preparing the film, I made sure that the producer understood that this film would never make a

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[20] Paul Willemen, "Detouring through Korean Cinema," *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 3, no. 2 (2002), 175-76. I will return to the notion of "impossible modernization" later.

cent."[21] That *Sopyonje* struck an unmistakable chord with Korean audiences in the early 1990s

reveals that the film somehow spoke to the needs of the moment—the needs that others could not

articulate effectively. Michael Robinson claims that the film "represented a culmination (an

ending?) of…resentments, grief, and tragedy borne by Koreans through decades of…social and

political turmoil," and "tapped into a strong desire of Koreans…to remember their sufferings but

to move on." He goes on to say that the film "marks a lifting away of the ponderous weight of

social and political activism within the culture industry of Korea, a liberation…from the

imperatives of the master narratives of nation."[22] This comment is resonant with the notion of

ssitkim as defined above; the film allowed the Korean public to remember their sufferings and

loosen their grip on the heavy historical weight. However, it proves to be a challenging task to

answer how the film could serve as an effective *ssitkim* for the Korean public if we remember

that few anticipated it to be a popular sensation and also that Im's other films from the same

period such as *Fly High, Run Far* and *The Taebaek Mountains* failed to attract much attention

from the public, even when they were much more ambitious projects than *Sopyonje* in terms of

both production and the director's personal motivations.[23] What was the *Sopyonje* phenomenon

about? What was it in the film that made the Korean public so enthusiastic about it?

In a nutshell, the film revolves around Yubong's struggles to rescue *pansori*, a vanishing

traditional folk art form of storytelling. Migrating from one place to another as many *pansori*

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[21] James and Kim, eds., *Im Kown-taek: The Making of Korean National Cinema*, 252.

[22] Michael Robinson, "Contemporary Cultural Production in South Korea: Vanishing Meta-Narratives of Nation," in *New Korean Cinema*, eds. Chi-Yun Shin and Julian Stringer (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 26-27.

[23] In *Fly High, Run Far*, Im refurbishes his humanitarian stance by drawing upon the Donghak Peasant Uprising—Donghak (literally, "Eastern thinking") as the philosophical ground of the uprising and the epic battles of peasants against corrupt rulers and foreign powers. In *The Taebaek Mountains*, he revisits the origin of national division, the very site of traumas not only for Koreans but for him, as well. *The Taebaek Mountains* was planned to follow *Fly High, Run Far*, but suspended due to the warnings from the military government. When it was resumed in 1994, it became the most expensive movie ever made up to that time in South Korea. Kim, *The Remasculization of Korean Cinema*, 95, 290 (note 26). In a sense, thus, *Sopyonje* was an *entr'acte* wedged in between the two epic films, but it was the *entr'acte* that drew far more attentions from critics and the public alike than the other two.

singers did to make a living, he meets a homeless girl (Song-hwa) and boy (Dong-ho) along the way. He adopts them, and as they grow up, attempts to initiate them into *pansori*. As he is reaching adulthood, however, Dong-ho becomes increasingly exasperated by their poverty and Yubong's mulishness, and eventually runs away. His rebellion makes Yubong fearful of losing Song-hwa as well, which leads him to blind Song-hwa. Now entirely dependent on Yubong, she devotes herself to *pansori* and the stoicism in her training blooms, as Yubong wishes, with maturity born of all the agonies and sorrows piled up in her mind. Yubong's death, however, leaves her no choice but to wander the remote rural areas. Meanwhile, Dong-ho finds work in a herbal pharmacy in Seoul and starts a family of his own. Yet he cannot forget his sister and his trips to collect herbs repeatedly turn into a journey in search of her.

Many observers saw this film as an allegory of Korean cinema's struggles to find its own voice under the hegemony of Hollywood and European art cinemas.[24] Yet its resonance was not restricted to questions of cinema alone. It also triggered an outpouring of discussions across various social platforms over the issue of national culture and the possibility of stepping beyond cultural colonialism and imperialism. One of the most notable responses can be found in the remarks from anthropologist Cho Hae Joang:

> Competition with a "center" possessed of accumulated capabilities and overpowering capital can never be a fair game. No matter how South Koreans strive, it is still difficult within this global structure for them to produce work…of the highest quality according to "universal" (Western) standards… [More importantly,] there is no reason South Koreans should want to produce such a work… An excellent movie emerges when its creator has an honest conversation with one viewer. Then the audience is not the anonymous masses or the "universal human" spread across the world but a group of individuals who share concrete historicity. In this sense, *Sopyonje* symbolizes *the triumph of a local movie within a locality*.[25]

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[24] Kim, *The Remasculization of Korean Cinema*, 60-61.
[25] Hae Joang Cho, "*Sopyonje*: Its Cultural and Historical Meaning," in James and Kim, eds. *Im Kown-taek: The Making of A Korean National Cinema* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2002), 151; italics are mine.

In brief, Cho witnessed in *Sopyonje* a promise that a local cinema can triumph within its regional constituency bypassing the center (Hollywood and European cinemas), or without seeking a visa from the center (imitating Hollywood or going to cherished overseas film festivals). That is, the film came as a reminder of the need to decenter (provincialize) the center and as a testimonial of the possibility to break with the centripetal viewpoint (internalized colonialism). In her view, the film provided Korean viewers (who had long awaited a storyteller who could tell their own lives) with "words that speak to their own hearts" and "resonate deep within their own lives." Yet, she also adds that the search for national culture should not be confused with neocolonialist practices rooted in, for instance, particularism and the victim mindset and that instead, it is to be put in the service of a postcolonial self-awakening that tries to shed that mentality.

Cho's words confirm that the *Sopyonje* phenomenon was not about *sopyonje* (a form of *pansori*) in itself, or more broadly *pansori* as a whole. What made the film sensational was not some beauty inherent to the vanishing cultural tradition. Its appeal resided rather in the ability to inspire its audiences to rethink the sociocultural edifice that had recurrently pressed them to position themselves in comparison with, or in opposition to, the center, always-already existing beyond, which includes not only cultural inferiority complex but also overstrained localism at the other end of the spectrum of the colonial mentality. It is in this regard that the film, albeit set in the past and drawing upon outdated cultural traditions, deserves to be regarded as "modern."[26] If, as David James points out, Korean society and art alike "have been caught between an extraordinarily rich array of the preconditions of a national culture and the ruinous negation of them," and if, as a result, "a national cinema has been simultaneously an imperative and an impossibility,"[27] *Sopyonje* definitely constitutes a compelling example of how Korean cinema

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[26] Cho, "*Sopyonje*: Its Cultural and Historical Meaning," 150.
[27] James, preface to James and Kim, eds. *Im Kown-taek: The Making of Korean National Cinema*, 11.

responded to the imperative of a national cinema at the dawn of democratic rule; it provided a meaningful *ssitkim* for the Korean public and triggered them into postcolonial self-awakening. How did the film, then, perform a successful *ssitkim-gut*? How does it address or grapple with complex questions involved in national culture, instead of simply essentializing or romanticizing it? How does it conjure up the past for concerns and struggles in the 1990s?

What intrigues me first in this respect are the ways the film handles the tensions between *pansori* (a dying folk music tradition) and the will to preserve it (or the desire to transfer it to the screen)—indeed, a major hurdle to the effort to narrativize the quest for cultural roots into a story of the search for *pansori*. In this context, the *jindo arirang* sequence is perhaps the most notable instance. It opens with Yubong's family emerging from the background of a rural landscape. As they walk along a road that meanders through small patches of farmland, singing *jindo arirang*, a traditional folk ballad, the camera yields its mobility to the song and becomes theatrical. Filmed in one unusually extended take (over 5 minutes), it allows or obliges us to dwell on the ensemble that the song creates with *pansori* singers, the road, and the rural scenery. Particularly striking is the way they blend with each other. As the characters gradually advance toward the foreground along the road, the song also alters in both tone and tempo: sorrow to gaiety and *jinyang* (adagio) to *huimori* (vivace). This makes the long duration of the shot correspond to *jindo arirang*'s elastic and improvisational character, namely, its unique aptitude of adapting to a broad range of affective conditions and bodily movements. On the other hand, the continuance of the folk song through a variety of distinct themes and emotions resonates with the long tortuous road, and also with the endless peripatetic life of the *pansori* artists through all the joys and woes in life. If the road serves as the *pan* (stage) for the *sori* (voice), and if the song responds by giving the road rhythms, the long take provides time for them to interact with each other.

Yet an irony to be addressed here is that after all, the traditional folk music *pansori* as an art of time remains defiant of the camera as a modern medium of technical reproducibility and its desire to preserve time. Notably, the long take ends with a melancholic gaze; after the characters leave the frame, the camera lingers for a while as if to entreat the viewer to mediate on the empty road. Indeed, the sense of transience is dominant in the sequence. Above all, *pansori* is fugitive. I am not simply making an ontological claim that filming music is necessarily limited. My sense is rather that if *pansori* remains resistant to museumification, it has always historically been so. A remainder of oral and artisanal culture, it is closely tied to historical experiences that due to their scientifically unverifiable qualities, have been un-/disqualified in the modern system of knowledge production. It is worth remembering that one of the key motifs in *Sopyonje* is "training," which does not just mean gaining techniques but rather pickling *pansori* in the life of the singer so that it can acquire the deep flavors of life.[28] What is to be added, however, is that the main space for *pansori* training is the road. *Pansori* is born and reborn on the road. *Sopyonje* is a road movie *per se*. It begins and ends on the road.[29] The quest for *pansori* in the film thus becomes synonymous with wandering on the road. Then again, the road of *pansori* is not an open highway or a city street. *Pansori* has been marginalized, or subalternized during the course of modernization, which explains the film's preoccupation with remote and desolate regions as the spatial backdrop of the search for *pansori*. *Pansori* means wandering geographical and historical peripheries. Put another way, Seoul as the epicenter of modernization in South Korea, as critics like Kim have observed, "becomes prominent in

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[28] Here, I am drawing on Walter Benjamin's notes on the storyteller: "The storytelling that thrives for a long time in the milieu of work…is itself an artisan form of communication, as it were. It does not aim to convey the pure essence of the thing, like information or a report. It sinks the thing into the life of the storyteller, in order to bring it out of him again." Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, ed. Hanna Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968) 91-2.

[29] Kim, *The Remasculization of Korean Cinema*, 53-54, 64; Chung, *Im Kwon-taek on Im Kwon-taek II*, 274, 277-278.

Sopyonje only *through its absence*."[30] Its gravitational force is repeatedly evoked, but continues to prove antithetical to *pansori*. Yubong's friends recommend that he come to Seoul to join their modernized theater. But he rebuffs the offer (and the road of modernization) over the traditional way of *pansori*. Dong-ho, fed up with the drifting life of *pansori* artists, runs away to Seoul, but his longing for the lost sister takes him back on the roads to distant hinterlands.

In the tense interplay between *pansori* and cinema, we thus see an analogy to the conflict between official and counter history. *Pansori*'s roads are suffused with rhythms and experiences that are tangential to the sanctioned memories of modernity. Faced with those counter memories, Im's camera turns humble. It does not strive to clasp or freeze its objects. It is rather the camera that becomes frozen. It stands still and allows its objects to slip out of the fixed frame. Here, the camera's asceticism is perhaps how Im pays his homage to the *pansori* form that is fading into history. At the same time, however, it also feels like an acknowledgment of the difficulties in grappling with the deeply fractured nature of Korean cultural history, that is, the profound ruptures between past and present as a major challenge for an endeavor to invent a national culture. In other words, the static camera tallies with the tendency (a consequence of the fragmented modernization) that the quest for *pansori* in *Sopyonje* continues to involve the tension between contrary orientations such as forgetting-remembering, negation-nostalgia, and retraction-attraction rather than evolve into a linear storyline.

No less notable in this respect is the reunion sequence at the end. It provides another rich illustration of "fragmented modernity" particularly through the form of family romance. Yet it is also interesting to note its contrast to the *jindo arirang* sequence in terms of the conflict between *pansori* and cinema. The family romance runs parallel to the quest of *pansori*. The overall

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[30] Kyung Hyun Kim, *Virtual Hallyu: Korean Cinema of the Global Era* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 25; italics are mine.

storyline of the film is built upon Dong-ho's search for his lost sister. But a complication becomes inevitable in the family narrative when it has to begin and end on the road, which is not a result of personal taste, but evocative of the historical condition that made the drifter sentiment endemic to Korean society, as demonstrated in Im's own remarks on drifting: "It is not limited to *pansori* singers. To my mind, our entire people has been drifting and I myself have always been drifting."[31] Then again, it is this domination of drifting that poses a dilemma to the need to close the family narrative. What ending would be right for Dong-ho's search for his lost family? Can he reconcile with the past he had to forsake? More broadly, can the ruptures in national cultural history be bridged? Im opts to leave the questions open for further reflection.

Dong-ho finally finds Song-hwa in a dilapidated tavern in a desolate rural town. Without unveiling his identity to the blind sister, however, Dong-ho simply asks for her *pansori* and grabs the drum. She nonetheless recognizes soon by the way he drums that the guest is the brother she has been awaiting. But she does not openly acknowledge it either. Rather, they continue to sing and drum through the night. Then, as the day breaks, they go their separate ways; Dong-ho takes a bus to Seoul and Song-hwa leaves the tavern without any determined destination. Yet, asked why they parted again as if they were strangers, Song-hwa explains that they communicated with each other and eased their grief through *sori*. Quite irresolute or cryptic, this ending raises a host of questions. What would the reunion through *sori* mean? What relationship does *sori* establish between past and present? Why should they be separated again after their reunion through *sori*? How can we make sense of the indecisive nature of this ending after all the journeys in search of *sori* and the lost family?

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[31] Chung, *Im Kwon-taek on Im Kwon-taek II*, 277.

This ending is evocative of the notion of "impossible modernization,"[32] which Willemen uses to denote a bewildering condition where neither tradition nor modernity is fully accepted or rejected. Dong-ho and Song-hwa are entrapped in a limbo between past and present. Tradition may be dear, but it is inextricably tangled with patriarchy, dogmatism, and isolation. Modernity may be desirable or inevitable, yet it only comes after a radical negation of tradition. Song-hwa acquires *sori* at the cost of youth and sight. Dong-ho chooses the path for modernity, but his life becomes backward-looking: he travels to rural towns for herbs (traditional remedies) rather than work for a Western drugstore (modern medicines); and within the film's context, his ties to Seoul are confirmed only through the phone (the calls to his boss). Still, it would be too hasty to write off *Sopyonje* simply as another example of impossible modernization. Indisputably, the disjuncture between tradition and modernity remains defiant of any ultimate solution, as with the separation of Dong-ho and Song-hwa. No less significant, however, is Im's effort to maneuver through the historical dilemma. The brother-sister reunion is certainly not a *deus ex machina*, an abrupt way out of the narrative impasse. Rather, their brief reunion through *sori* is telling of the complexity of impossible modernization in Korea and Im's careful approach to the issue: "careful" in that it involves various strains of thought. First, his stoic treatment of the reunion scene bespeaks his mindfulness that there can be no easy answer to impossible modernization. Yet it also hinges on his historical experiences; in Cho's observation, "his personal familiarity with the drifter's life had taught him that there were times when it was better for separated relatives not to meet."[33] On the other hand, his attitude to agonies in life also has its roots in the Buddhist notion of salvation that underlines transcending secular desires including human ties.[34] In short, the reunion scene presents a peculiar mixture of historical sensibility, humanist

[32] Willemen, "Detouring through Korean Cinema," 173-177.
[33] Cho, "*Sopyonje*: Its Cultural and Historical Meaning," 147.
[34] Ibid., 147.

perspective, and Buddhist thinking. Here, it is interesting to note that despite its esoteric or indecisive nature, the scene did not cause much trouble to the Korean viewer; rather, many seem to have found it not only acceptable, but intellectually pleasurable as well. A good example is the reaction of Park Wan-seo, a renowned novelist. In Cho's words,

> She writes that during the final scene, 'I wanted to leave as I became edgy.' She didn't want the emotions built up during the movie to be suddenly lost by an ending in which the characters hugged, cried, and…[said,] 'Sister! It's Dong-ho'… '[Their] meeting through music, hugging each other in their minds only, and stoutheartedly parting' is an 'advance' and a 'transcendence' that is superior to an 'immature' meeting, she writes.[35]

What intrigues me here is the language Park uses to explain her perspective on the reunion scene, such as "advance." That is, she saw in *Sopyonje* some kind of innovation rather than an iteration of the cliché of "parted family," or another Korean film stuck in impossible modernization. The "advance," however, has little to do with providing any clear solution to the dilemma, which can hardly be more than an illusive way of narrative closure; instead, it has more to do with finding a mature way of articulating historical ruptures and thus relieving the pain ensuing from them, that is, discovering the *sori*, which does not necessarily mean *pansori* as an art form, but "voice" that makes it possible to identify or establish a certain continuity through separations and differences. Here is where *Sopyonje*'s historical validity becomes tangible; it seems timely to the early 1990s when in the wake of democratization, Koreans were gripped with the desire to find their own *sori* (not *pansori* in itself) beyond persistent legacies of colonialism and authoritarianism.

From this perspective, the change in Im's attitude toward *pansori* in this reunion scene is also noteworthy. In brief, unlike the *jindo arirang* sequence where the camera remains stagnant on behalf of *pansori*, this reunion scene relies heavily on editing: high-angle shots are employed to establish the setting; the frequent use of shot-reverse shots captures the interactions between

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[35] Ibid., 146.

the two characters; camera distance often alters from long/medium shot to close-ups to highlight their emotions. Furthermore, halfway through the scene, diegetic *pansori* is replaced by non-diegetic music ("Cheon-nyeon-hak" by Kim Su-cheol). As Julian Stringer observed, at the very moment the two characters become most united, *sori* as the very medium of their reunion is taken away and a piece of mood music takes its place.[36] In other words, at the climactic moment of reunion through *sori*, *sori* cannot be heard, but only seen; watching *sori* replaces hearing *sori*. Does this change mean that Im betrayed his initial promise to preserve *sori*? Then again, isn't it also true that this kind of wariness often proves to be anchored in the desire to romanticize or fetishize it? "Can *sori* be filmed?" becomes a tricky question unless we are attentive to when it is raised and who raises it.

Indeed, Im's stance to the tension between *pansori* and cinema remains indeterminable. To my mind, however, it is this indeterminacy that makes the *pansori*-film nexus in *Sopyonje* all the more engaging. It invites us to look into the complex interplay between *pansori* and film rather than remain caught in an essentialist or positivist approach to whether *pansori* can be filmed. For instance, the long take in the *jindo arirang* sequence is certainly one of the most remarkable moments in the film. Yet, it is the only scene where a long take is used. Of the choice, Im had to say, "I continued to feel anxious [about the long take], even during the shooting [of the sequence], because unless the viewer is absorbed by *sori*, everything becomes useless… That's why shot could not help getting shorter and shorter."[37] As for his decision to make a film about *pansori*, he stated, "When I saw *pansori* on TV, I would change the channel to see something more entertaining. I myself had become that much apart from *pansori*. But I somehow had this recurrent urge to make a film about it and bring back and tell about things that

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[36] Julian Stringer, "*Sopyonje* and Inner Domain of National Culture," in James and Kim, eds., *Im Kown-taek: The Making of A Korean National Cinema*, 164.

[37] Chung, *Im Kwon-taek on Im Kwon-taek II*, 279.

were vanishing."[38] These remarks prove that Im was not an ardent advocate for long take or *pansori* itself and his concern rather rested with "the desire to bring back things that were vanishing," which is indeed a modern and urban tendency. To push a little further in this direction, what mattered for Im was less "*pansori*" itself than "the gaze" at *pansori*. It was also this modern way of looking at things in danger of irrevocable loss that appealed to the minds of his contemporary viewers, who had become as apathetic to *pansori* as, or far more so than, him. That is, registered in the gaze is a manifestation of the *sori* (not necessarily *pansori* to be heard, but rather voice conveyed in image) that stemmed from the public's intensifying desire to move beyond colonialism and dictatorship. In this respect, the switch from audible *sori* to visible *sori* in the reunion sequence was not necessarily a betrayal of the promise to salvage *sori*. Instead, it is now possible to read in the interaction between *sori* and vision a challenge to the romanticist assumption of "authentic" *pansori*.

Invoking Benjamin here may help clarify the point. "The technique of reproduction," he noted, "detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition" and "substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique existence." On the other hand, it also allows "the reproduction to meet the beholder or listener in his own particular situations" that are out of reach for the original itself.[39] In the dual process of technical reproduction, thus, notions like unique existence and authenticity recede into the background and transmissibility instead comes to the fore. A point to be added is that in terms of spectatorship, technical reproduction puts the masses in the position of the critic, more precisely, an examiner who unlike a professional one such as connoisseur, does not need to concentrate or contemplate, but assesses an object in a distracted manner, that is, without serious

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[38] Ibid., 266.
[39] Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 220-221.

attention to its historical uniqueness.[40] Benjamin's remarks divert us from authenticity (*pansori*)

to transmissibility (*sori*)—how the reproduced *pansori* meets its viewers or listeners in their own

specific historical conditions that have become so different from those responsible for the unique

existence of *pansori* or how it can be reconnected to the public that has become detached from it.

In this respect, *Sopyonje* illustrates the complex ways technical reproduction is implicated in the

formation of a national culture and cinema in the postcolonial or post-authoritarian context. The

new way of perception involved in the technical reproduction of *pansori* coincides with the urge

to bridge the rifts between past (colonial, dictatorial) and present (postcolonial, democratic). Yet

technical reproduction also attests to the challenges in grappling with such historical ruptures. It

involves the endless interplay of contrary practices such as detaching-reattaching, decomposing-

recomposing, deactivating-reactivating across temporal and spatial boundaries.

    I am, however, also mindful of pitfalls in the path of a cinematic quest of national culture,

or simply put of the misuses of history in technical reproduction and distracted reception. After

all, it is indisputable that the technique of reproduction is inextricable from the power to use it,

namely, the power to determine what counts, what to include or exclude, and how to represent.

As with many other historical films, *Sopyonje* is not entirely exempt from the charge of

complicity in the state's mistreatment of national culture to legitimize itself or the maneuvers of

culture industry to commercialize it.[41] Nationalism often claims to preserve cultural traditions

while in fact it forges a high culture or helps commodify them. In the process, they are detached

from original historical contexts and manipulated into the needs of the state or culture industry.

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[40] Ibid., 240-241.

[41] It is worth remembering that in South Korea's case, it was military regimes that started promoting national culture
through such policies as the National Cultural Properties Preservation Act. Stringer, "*Sopyonje* and Inner Domain of
National Culture," 174; Kim, "Korean Cinema and Im Kwon-taek," 35; Choi Chungmoo, "The Politics of Gender,
Aestheticism, and Cultural Nationalism in *Sopyonje* and *The Genealogy*," in James and Kim, eds., *Im Kown-taek:
The Making of A Korean National Cinema*, 112.

For instance, as the film follows the *pansori* family traveling through rural areas and natural landscapes, it offers a visual tour of the nation's recent past. But the geocultural spectacles in the visual journey often appear stripped of political and historical contexts. Put another way, the melancholic gaze of the camera turns into a tourist gaze. It thus becomes vulnerable to an accusation of nostalgia as a key source of tourism.[42] An overaestheticization of folk art is also an issue that continues to demand critical vigilance. Above all, it is hard to go on without questioning the notion of transcending historical injustices through art at the heart of the film's narrative. In brief, it is congenial to state or ruling ideologies. Consider, for example, Yanagi Soetsu, a Japanese art critic who was a leading figure in the traditional craft preservation movement and an ardent supporter of Korean folk arts during the colonial era. He lamented the destruction of Korean culture and arts under Japanese colonial rule and strove to help Koreans recognize the unique greatness of their own cultural traditions by theorizing the "beauty of sadness" in Korean folk art. As Karatani Kojin cautions, however, Yanagi's sympathy for the colonized, despite its humanitarian intention, is another and more sophisticated form of colonial perspective in that his overaestheticization of sorrow and sadness in Korean folk art obscures the history of the Korean people's life-and-death struggles for political, economical, and cultural autonomy.[43] It is thus understandable to notice a colonial legacy in the overstrained emphasis on *pansori* as a means to sublimate historical wounds into the level of art.

As the final point of my reflection on *Sopyonje*, however, I would propose that the film does not lend itself to easy political labeling as regressive or progressive. In particular, the ending is illustrative of its open-ended approach to history. As noted above, the visualized

[42] For more about this issue, see Choi, "The Politics of Gender, Aestheticism, and Cultural Nationalism, 113-116.

[43] Karatani Kojin, "Uses of Aesthetics: After Orientalism," in *Edward Said and the Work of the Critic: Speaking Truth to Power*, ed. Paul A. Bové (Durham: Duke UP, 2000), 149-51. For more about this issue, see also Choi, "The Politics of Gender, Aestheticism, and Cultural Nationalism," 124-129.

pansori does not abolish the disparities between *pansori* and cinema and between tradition and modernity. Melancholic (backward-looking), but distracted (forward-looking) at the same time, it rather opens up the ruptures between the diverging orientations and suggests that they are the prerequisite of discovering *sori*. It looks back upon traditional culture, but does not strive to monumentalize it. The sense of indeterminacy is further accentuated in the direction of narrative. Dong-ho eventually finds Song-hwa. Yet their long-awaited reunion lasts only for one night, and they part from each other again. Dong-ho heads for Seoul and Song-hwa resumes her drifting around geographical and historical hinterlands. Here, Im's choice to portray history through failure or irresolution rather than success poses challenges to dominant modes of historiography. From my perspective, thus, *Sopyonje* makes it clear that the quest for *sori* does not end with glorifying *pansori*, but rather remains an unfinished task, and likewise the search for Korean cinema requires continuous reorientations and reconfigurations.

2.2   *CHILSU AND MANSU*: INSIDE/OUTSIDE *MINJUNG* DISCOURSE

If Im was at the center of national cinema discourses in the 1990s, it was Park Kwang-su and Jang Sun-woo that were on the front lines of the campaign for an alternative cinema, another main strain in the Korean New Wave. To begin with Park, he became a leading figure in counter cinema movements in the 1980s through such channels as Yallasung and the Seoul Film Group. He recalls those years as the "Black Age" when no politically- and socially-informed artwork was tolerated and dissident voices had to remain underground.[44] His stay in Paris for study, however, permitted him to see Third World films that were not made underground but screened

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[44] Rayns, *Seoul Stirring*, 46.

quite openly.[45] This experience planted in his mind the seeds of the hope that the same could happen in Korea.[46] And it became his task to find a way of making the seeds germinate in the soil of Korean cinema.

Fortunately, by the time he returned to Korea, the general condition of filmmaking began to change in his favor in terms of both film legislation and political climate. Put in place in 1984 and 1986, the fifth and the sixth revision to the Motion Picture Law caused notable shifts in the local film industry: the licensing system for production companies was replaced by a simpler one (the fifth revision); foreign companies were permitted to operate directly on Korean soil; and import quotas for foreign films were superseded by a screen quota, which required theaters to screen domestic films for a minimum number of days per year. These changes led above all to a massive influx of overseas films and companies, which pushed Korean cinema into a "crude and cruel game of 'fair competition.'"[47] But they were not destructive altogether. Most notably, they loosened the state's hold on the film industry and a result was the proliferation of new production companies, which in turn would bring in 'new wave' directors.[48] Besides, faced with escalating political unrests on the eve of the Seoul Olympics (1988), the military government became rather desperate to show a more liberal face to the world. It was under these conditions that a new generation of filmmakers such as Park and Jang could move from the underground to a public area.[49]

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[45] Ibid., 47.

[46] Ibid., 13.

[47] Kim Kyung Hyun, "Korean Cinema and Im Kown-taek," 33. For a more detailed discussion about this issue, see Darcy Paquet, *New Korean Cinema*, 47-53.

[48] Drawing attention to the interaction between new producers and directors in the late 1980s, Paquet notes, "It may be instructive to compare and distinguish between [them]… Both were, in a sense, trying to overcome the legacies of authoritarian rule: the New Wave directors were aiming to break free of old ideologies…while the producers had inherited a broken industry that had been misshaped by decades of harmful film policies." Paquet, *New Korean Cinema*, 50. See also Paquet, "The Korean Film Industry: 1992 to the Present," 35 and Rayns, *Seoul Stirring*, 5.

[49] Rayns, *Seoul Stirring*, 13.

On the road to the mainstream film culture, however, Park had to face a Sphinxian question. It was not authoritarian rule anymore. This time, it was the mass audience, which was no longer an integrated body that rallied against the military dictatorship, but began rapidly diverging with distinct concerns and struggles. "In the film," he noted of his debut film *Chilsu and Mansu*, "I set out to make something that would appeal to…the mass audience." His effort to connect with the mass, however, ended up only drawing lukewarm responses, which led him to rethink his approach: "I had made quite a lot of compromises in the hope of reaching the mass audience… [But after the film's rather disappointing result at the box office,] I thought that I should forget about trying to please people and make a more personal film." This is unmistakable in his later films, which are far more geared toward politically charged independent cinema. To name just a few, the second film *Black Republic* (1990), albeit funded by a production company (Dong-A Exports), daringly thematized the labor movement, a then political taboo, through a blacklisted intellectual hiding in a remote mining town. Then he became the first Korean director to launch his own independent production company and as its inaugural work, made a film about the Korean War, *To the Starry Land* (1993), a story of a film director who wants to honor his father's death wish to be buried in his hometown, but should learn first of the unhealed wounds his father inflicted on his neighbors during the war. Also partly funded through such noncommercial platforms as public fundraising campaigns,[50] *A Single Spark* (1996) portrays the life and death of Jeon Tae-il, a sacred symbol of the labor union movement in South Korea, through the eyes of a dissident intellectual writing his biography on the run. It is thus fair to take him to be a pioneer of independent Korean cinema, which had been a desert land until then as virtually no public funding opportunity was available until the late 1990s.[51]

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[50] Kim, *The Remasculinization of Korean Cinema*, 109.
[51] Ibid., 28.

This is not to say, however, that he ultimately steered away from the question of the mass audience. Rayns was right when he wrote about Park's later films, "His stance is still essentially what it was when he made in *Chilsu and Mansu*" in that it "remains committed to raising serious political and historical issues in his work but wants to meet the needs and tastes of the film-going audience at least half-way."[52] For instance, *Black Republic*, albeit fraught with weighty political issues, centers on the protagonist's disillusionment with dogmatized leftist or *minjung* discourses and his rebirth by rediscovering subaltern classes in social and cultural fringes (e.g., a call girl).[53] Illustrative of his distrust of emotional identification (even with *minjung* practitioners), the film also shows that his analytic rigor has as a counterweight an assiduous attention to the history and culture of the oppressed masses. From the formal perspective as well, his films do not denounce resources from everyday life and mass culture, but explore them or often employ them to lay bare the limits of high or intellectual culture including oppositional discourses.

If we can thus say that Park is exemplary of how New Wave directors found their way into the public film scene not only industrially, but also aesthetically, my discussion here concentrates on his debut film *Chilsu and Mansu*, which is, to my mind, prototypical of his endeavors to strike a balance between historical consciousness and popular concerns or tastes and between criticism and empathy. This film, as Kim points out, "signaled a new wave in the mainstream film culture, bringing back 'social critique' in movies after its long hiatus [under military rule]." And through the struggles to find its place in a public area, it evolved into a "symbiotic mixture of the popular genre codes of comedy and melodrama with psychological

[52] Rayns, *Seoul Stirring*, 13.
[53] Kwak Han Ju saw the reluctance to be more attentive to class antagonism as implicitly contradictory to the film's initial premise; in brief, the film is subversive in addressing class conflict, but turns problematic as it fails to explore the possibility of social transformation and instead ends by suggesting a vague hope through a romance. To my eye, however, her reading is too prescriptive and dismissive of Park's critical stance to ethical leftism without analytical rigor. Still it reminds us where the major tension resides in the film. Kwak Han Ju, "Discourse on Modernization in 1990s Korean Cinema," in *Multiple Modernities: Cinemas and Popular Media in Transcultural East Asia*, ed. Jenny Kwok Wah Lau (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003), 95.

and political themes, vying to reach for the potential of cinema that can enmesh entertainment, art, and politics."[54] My concern in the rest of this section rests with examining the ways (nascent, but provocative) the film orchestrates political questions and genre idioms and thereby providing a useful account for how New Wave filmmakers maneuvered through challenges involved in the ascendency from the underground to the public sphere, and more broadly, in the transition from *minjung* to *daejung* (the mass).

The film articulates these issues brilliantly from the outset. It opens with a civil defense drill. As the sirens wail, Mansu appears behind the window and gazes out on the streets. Then, through a series of establishing shots, the scene sketches the scenery of Seoul under siege by the sirens: an aerial shot that exhibits the spectacle of the Gangnam area (the nouveau riche section of Seoul) packed with high-rise buildings; the street shots where policemen clear the streets of vehicles and pedestrians; and a 360-degree pan that with its axis in the middle of Sejong Boulevard (located in front of Gyeongbok Palace), offers a panoramic view of the empty street. Having defined the atmosphere of Seoul gripped with the Cold War paranoia, the scene now cuts to a bus driver evacuating a bus and prodding a young man awake. We are introduced to Mansu, who looks sullenly out the bus window. A revolving POV pan ensues that stops as an attractive woman (Jina), who is caught in the middle of the defense drill and standing in a dented doorway, comes into the frame. It is only after spotting her that Mansu springs to his feet and quickly gets off the bus. He then follows her into a video game arcade where she opts to pass the time until the defense drill ends.

As Frances Gateward summarizes, this scene makes evident that "[t]he authorities control the pulse and movement of the city." This is highlighted through the contrast the establishing shots create between Seoul's two contrary facets: economic development-vibrancy-mobility

[54] Kim, *The Remasculinization of Korean Cinema*, 140-141

(high-rise buildings and the streets bustling with vehicles and people) and state control-paralysis-immobility (the regular defense drill). This contrast gains further political implications through the two protagonists, Chilsu and Mansu, who are stuck in the gap between the two contrary aspects, that is, "permitted to witness the economic growth," but "remain trapped behind barriers of glass and metal." [55] No less noteworthy in this opening, however, are the uses of the conventions of popular filmmaking: star power (Ahn Sung-ki as Mansu and Park Joong-hoon as Chilsu) and established genre forms such as the buddy film and romantic comedy. From the start, thus, the film leads us to a challenging question; if we cannot simply say that the film adopted mainstream conventions to pander to the producers or the mass audience, or only to trash them as delusional and reactionary (as was often the case in naïve left or *minjung* criticisms), how does it juggle them with political perspectives? This question indeed continues to resurface throughout the film as it keeps juxtaposing popular historical conceptions and political discourses.

Consider, for instance, the cut from the street to the inside of the video game arcade. The transition is signaled by the screen of a video game, and in the game, a military aircraft continues to drop bombs on the ground. Here, as the state of war is refigured on the video game, a parallel is drawn between the streets and the game arcade. The inside of the game arcade, however, also stands in notable contrast to the outside. An interstice between public areas, it constitutes a zone where state power wilts. As the outside loses its movement and becomes lifeless under the spell of the state, the game arcade gains its vigor and turns vibrant. This is, to be sure, not a venue for political resistance. Yet it is not just a space for escapism, either. People in the interstitial space instead remain riveted to the world of video games without paying much attention to the defense

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[55] Frances Gateward, "Youth in Crisis: National and Cultural Identity in New South Korean Cinema," in Lau, ed., *Multiple Modernities: Cinemas and Popular Media in Transcultural East Asia*, 122.

drill. They are not politically conscious. But they are not always conforming to state ideologies, either; frequently, they remain distracted from or apathetic to the state's discipline. Chilsu epitomizes the erratic nature of the masses. When the entire nation loses its pulse and movement under the order of the despotic state, he begins moving. More intriguingly, what rules his action from the very moment he wakes up on the bus is his romantic impulse; he hurries off the bus not because of the defense drill but rather to pursue Jina. This motif of emotional mobility is further accentuated in the video arcade. As Jina plays a car race game, he sidles over and commandeers the wheel. Then he shortly slips into a fantasy in which he drives a convertible along the coastal highway with Jina in his arm. It is in the game arcade that his e-motion (motion without motion or a mobility distinct from both administered mobility and enforced immobility in the public sphere) culminates as it is projected onto the racing game. Certainly, this can be taken as an indicator of his naïve personality (his loss of proper sense of time and place). At the same time, however, his involuntarily tangential attitude toward political subjects also calls our attention to the aspects of mass culture that cannot be easily reduced to categories like "progressive" or "regressive." That is, the move from the defense drill to the game arcade (and that from the political to genre imagination) invites us to the pulses and movements of popular cultural formation that the authoritarian state could not fully contain and oppositional discourses have remained unable to address adequately.

Indeed, the oblique subaltern positions Chilsu and Mansu illustrate do not allow any easy verdict on the film's political unconscious. For that matter, the issue of identity crisis is notable. Chilsu recurrently assumes other identities than his own. In other words, disguising is a key part of his social life. He tells Jina that he studies at an art college, when he is, in fact, an uneducated billboard painter stuck in the mire of unsteady and low-paying jobs. He also spins fantasies in an

attempt to impress others. For instance, he talks continually of his always-imminent departure to America at the invitation of his imaginary brother in Miami—imaginary because it later turns out that he only has an older sister who moved to the United States long ago as a GI bride against her father's wish, but since then has never contacted the family back in Korea. Also unmistakable is the influence of American culture in his life: his room is decorated with posters of movie stars such as James Dean and Marlon Brando; he watches *Rocky IV* on a date with Jina; he peppers his speech with English, frequents a Burger King, and recurrently appears in denims and a Stars and Stripes shirt. This makes it quite easy to view Chilsu through the lens of postcolonial theory. When the perspective stays restricted to the demarcation between nation-states, however, it loses its analytic efficacy for the complex dynamic of mass-mediated cultural formation. More specifically, when it is in the service of nationalism that, as discussed above, often turns national cultural traditions into a high culture or commodity, there is little it can tell us about issues such as what use the masses (particularly, the oppressed and minoritized) make of cultural lexicons borrowed across national borders and what relevance they have to the struggles and concerns of the masses at a specific historical juncture. Indeed, to my mind, it is not quite convincing to equate Chilsu's "America" with America as a geographical place or read it simply in view of America's political and economical expansion around the world. In his case, "America" rather stands for things that are not here. It is, in other words, an antithesis to a social condition that would only bring to him more disadvantages once his true identity is exposed.[56] It may be useful to recall here a question Frederic Jameson raises as he draws attention to the complex interplay between the Utopian and the ideological rather than the old habit of setting one against the other: "[H]ow is it possible for a cultural text which fulfills a demonstrably ideological function…to embody a properly Utopian impulse, or to resonate a universal value inconsistent with the

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[56] Kim, *The Remasculinization of Korean Cinema*, 145.

narrower limits of class privilege …?"[57] This is quite true of Chilsu's Americanism. Inscribed in it is a utopian impulse, which is manifested in a colonial manner (e.g., cultural envy and imitation), but at the same time carries a criticism of the milieu that keeps pushing him to the edge of society or leaves him with few other options than camouflaging to survive within it.

In Mansu's case, I have found his cynicism to be worth close attention. His reserved and reticent disposition renders him contrasting to the playful and loquacious Chilsu. Yet he is analogous to Chilsu in his tendency to hide his identity. He also keeps his personal history unknown, if not by lying as with Chilsu, then through silence. Behind the silent surface, however, he has painful memories. A flashback reveals that he was barred access to the lucrative economic opportunities in the Middle East due to his father, a long-term political prisoner. The state excluded, but at the same time included him.[58] It negated his rights as its member, but also defined him to be guilty. Thus prohibited from the normal path of integration into society, he remains trapped somewhere between home and society. It is no accident that language becomes a central issue in his portrayal. His silence is suggestive of his failure to acquire the language of Father (not only that of society, but also that of his father devoted to political ideals). When he speaks, he either becomes distrustful and vitriolic or has to imitate the languages of others. When his sister tells him that the issue of political prisoners is gaining more public attention and they should try a petition for an amnesty for their father, he rebukes her for her naïveté through a sarcastic comment: "I've heard you joined the labor union in your factory. Well, how smart you are now!" He has not seen any real change in society. Moreover, he has not yet found a way of

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[57] Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative As a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), 288.

[58] My view here draws on Giorgio Agamben's reflection on the inclusive exclusion as the foundational way in which the relationship is established between the nation-state and bare life: "At once excluding bare life from and capturing it within the political order, the state of exception actually constituted, in its very separateness, the hidden foundation on which the entire political system rested." Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1998), 9.

embracing his father who left his family in an unbearable condition on behalf of his political beliefs. On the other hand, he also has to disguise his identity to survive within hostile social environments. Unable to find a company that would hire him, he remains a self-employed billboard painter who continues to worry about the lack of work. In making phone calls to find new jobs, he thus often makes his accent identical with that of the other person to navigate through the deep-rooted regionalism in Korean society. For him, political ideals (which his father treasures even at the price of his family's safety) are a luxury he cannot afford.

Given that the film was made in 1988, one year after the fervor for democracy swept the entire nation and compelled the military regime to eventually consent to a few major democratic reforms including popular presidential election, it is certainly intriguing to notice that Park opted to position his protagonists outside the waves of political changes. Chilsu's life, mainly orbiting around personal interests such as romance, seldom crisscrosses political scenes. Although often conflated with political references, Mansu remains detached or isolated from them; he grumbles about labor strikes, passes by a political rally, or causes a brawl with strangers in a bar by turning off the election campaign TV coverage they are watching. The film, in other words, redirects us to sociocultural domains that have been obfuscated by political spectacles. Thereby, it allows or urges us to probe the surreptitious but pervasive senses of failure and disillusionment manifested in the tangential attitudes of the two protagonists to grand history: apathy (Chilsu) and antipathy (Mansu). Noteworthy in this respect is the way Park closes the film—particularly the ironic strokes he employs to articulate the subalternized lives of the two characters.

One lucky day, they are hired to paint a huge billboard for a liquor advertisement. Their task is to produce a colossal image of a scantily clad buxom blonde woman holding up a glass of whiskey on the top of a building located in one of the busiest districts in Seoul. Thus set up, this

scene offers a series of juxtapositions of contrasting aspects: the hypervisibility of the glamorous white female model (a colonial-capitalist-male fantasy) and the invisibility of Chilsu and Mansu (obliterated history of colonized labor); references to economic growth (soaring buildings, broad streets, and unending streams of cars) and allusions to poor working conditions (the supervisor's continued pressures to complete the billboard quickly); and whiskey as an emblem of high-class consumerism and *soju* (a cheap local liquor Chilsu and Mansu drink) as a trope of working-class culture. Then again, the billboard is not simply a symbolization of repression; it also serves as a site for emancipation and regeneration. Drinking *soju* atop the billboard they have just finished, Chilsu and Mansu begin speaking their suppressed minds to each other for the first time. Mansu accepts Chilsu's apology for having stolen a look at his letter about his righteous father's refusal of a three-day parole to celebrate his sixtieth birthday with family. Chilsu tells Mansu about his family and also confesses that the invitation to the United States is a lie and the relationship with Jina is over. Then Mansu abruptly stands up and begins shouting at the city below his feet, "All the bastards with power, education, talent, and money! You, listen up!… Let me speak out loud when I am up here… I've nothing to say, and many things to say." And Chilsu stands and joins Mansu's speech by applauding and contributing his own words. Put another way, the billboard turns into a place where they finally find a way of breaking out of isolation and communicating with each other, and furthermore, acquire their languages to voice their frustrated minds—if not yet in a lucid manner as evidenced in such an oxymoronic sentence as "I've nothing to say, and many things to say."

This moment of optimism, however, does not last long. What started as a rather playful act takes a tragic turn when the spectacle they create begins drawing the attention of pedestrians on the ground and the state authorities quickly step in. And as the streets are swarming with the

police, reporters, and spectators, the two billboard painters, who were previously invisible, find themselves at the center of public attention. Yet the situation turns in the wrong direction when they are incapable of communicating with the police, initially due to the distance between them and the noise of the busy city that smothers their voices, but more notably because of historical, social, and cultural conditions that make them vulnerable to misconception. Not only the police, but also the media and spectators assume or believe them to be militant labor protestors. Unable to hear their words or not quite concerned to find out who they are and what they desire, the entire society construes their gestures as an attempt at a public suicide protest and their *soju* bottle as a Molotov cocktail. Such a reaction is quite understandable if we consider that South Korea the 1980s often saw college students and workers stage public suicides (such as self-immolations and jumping off buildings) in protest against military dictatorship. Yet an irony to be noted here is that neither Chilsu nor Mansu is a political activist, but society readily identifies them as such. That is, the moment they begin to speak, the minute they become visible, they are labeled through established frames of perception such as the binary between dictatorship and dissident or *minjung* protesters.

Indeed, through the prolonged confrontation between the police and the two protagonists and continued alternations between the two different points of view, this scene strongly suggests that what matters here is less the state-*minjung* antagonism than misconception. Far from driven by political intents as the police assume them to be, Chilsu and Mansu remain unable to tell that they are mistaken for militant activists; they rather become caught between panic (caused by the sudden arrival of armed troops) and frustration or resignation (ensuing from a sense that society again allows them little room to express their discontents). Meanwhile, the police try to persuade the "intransigent activists" to surrender. After finding records about Mansu's father,

the chief of police tells him that he should not follow in his father's footsteps, but become different from his father who has been malicious to society. The police chief equates Mansu with his father, while he could not, and still cannot, embrace his father and indeed his grievance about his egoistically righteous father was a key factor that triggered his action on the top of the billboard. That is, his position, although oblique to both the right (the state) and the left (his father), is quickly reduced to the old model of narrative. Thus underscored, the disparity between the two protagonists and the left-right binary challenges not only state ideologies, but *minjung* or oppositional discourses, as well. In other words, Chilsu and Mansu point to the blind spots of *minjung* theory.

In her study of the *minjung* movement, Lee notes that it hinged above all upon the efforts to identify the *minjung* as the true subject of history and rewrite history from their points of view. Yet, while the *minjung* movement was certainly effective for battles against military dictatorship and became the major factor in the renewal of Korea's civil society particularly in the 1980s, the notion of "*minjung*" was, as she observes, quite "elastic and abstract"; it was constructed mainly as the antithesis to fascistic regimes, economic elites, and foreign powers rather than materially and historically grounded. A consequence was that the *minjung* was often assumed as a coherent and unified body in opposition to ruling groups. [59] Moreover, largely led by progressive intellectuals, *minjung* theory also continued to be haunted by a dilemma between the need for them to revolutionize the *minjung* and the need to erase their presence to establish the *minjung* as the true protagonists of history. [60] *Chilsu and Mansu* evokes these problems with an interesting twist. In the film, the role of the intellectual (or the advanced intellectual) is notably missing. Perhaps, the best candidate for that role would be Mansu's father. Yet he is spectral, as he is

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[59] Lee, *The Making of Minjung*, 2-5, 33.
[60] Ibid., 12.

present only through a photo and remains confined to the prison of political ideals, leaving all the burdens of real life on the back of his family. If, as Kim observes, emasculated intellectuals formed a main trope in the Korean New Wave[61] and if Park's works frequently reflect on the realistic difficulty of coupling intellectuals and subalterns (the inability of the intellectual to merge with the rest of society and represent him-/herself or the subaltern as historical agencies),[62] *Chilsu and Mansu* is perhaps to be viewed, for all the ingredients of romantic comedy in it, as one of the most cynical films, not only in Park's oeuvre, but also in the Korean New Wave. Chilsu and Mansu definitely belong to the most unprivileged social groups, but they have no intellectuals to speak with. They rather indicate that advanced intellectuals like Mansu's father are caught in idealism and severed from historical reality. More broadly, the *minjung* movement seems to have failed to incorporate their frustrations and resentments and help them develop into historical agencies. And ironically, it is the state authorities that associate them with the *minjung* movement and label them dissident *minjung* activists.

Park's films continue to move sociopolitical thematics toward the private realm and interweave personal history into a larger historical context. More importantly, however, he remains resistant to offering an easy solution to the tension between the two strains. Rather, personal problems remain unsolved or become more complicated as they are reconnected to a larger historical context. Notably, on hearing the police chief's promise to help him live differently from his father, Mansu bursts into a hysterical or contemptuous laughter. He then jumps off the billboard, which, presented in video footage, again evokes a sense of distance between Mansu who scoffs at the chief's inability to tell his difference from his father and media spectatorship where he is just another suicidal protester. Meanwhile, Chilsu is arrested and taken

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[61] Kim, *The Remasculinization of Korean Cinema*, 20.
[62] Ibid., 139-140.

to a police car. Then the final shot, rendered in the freeze frame, shows him looking out the rear window of the police car, presumably to see Jina among the crowd. Thus rejecting the reintegration of its protagonists into society, *Chilsu and Mansu* underlines the need to develop a new perspective that will allow us to recognize the latent discontents in subaltern life and culture. On the formal level, the film brings political subjects and popular cinema into tense interplay; they contest and refract each other in the film. It is thus fair to say that the film in a sense anticipated the trend of conflating sociopolitical commentary and genre experimentation as a central tendency of Korean cinema in the succeeding era:[63] for instance, works by Lee Chang-dong, Bong Joon-ho, and Park Chan-wook (particularly in his early films) among others.

2.3   *A PETAL*: *SSITKIM* AND COUNTER HISTORY

As discussed above, Jang's career path often converged with Park's, but their approaches to filmmaking were quite different. As Tony Rayns notes, examining Jang's films often gives a feeling of "engaging with a series of paradoxes and contradictions." In his films, he has always "embraced contradiction" by "reacting against his own previous works" and "using 'sensational' material to attract audiences and then treating it in a way that will challenge or even repel them." Thus each of his works is "radically different from the others in tone, style and film language."[64]

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[63] Chris Berry, "'What's Big About the Big Film?': 'De-Westernizing' the Blockbuster in Korea and China," in *Movie Blockbuster*, ed. Julian Stringer (London: Routledge, 2003), 226.

[64] Rayns, *Korean Film Director: Jang Sun-woo*, x, 3. A quick look at his filmography would suffice to confirm this: an allegorization of social ills through a self-proclaimed Jesus in *Seoul Jesus* (or *Seoul Emperor*, 1986; co-directed with Sunwoo Wan), a comic satirization of the logic of marketing and consumerism in *The Age of Success*, a realist treatment of an extramarital affair between two wretched tailors in *Lovers of Woomuk-baemi* (1990), a sarcastic jab at the narcissism and hypocrisy of the intellectual world in *Road to the Racetrack* (1991), a meditation on historical wounds from the Buddhist perspective in *Hwa-om-kyeong* (1993), an Oshimaesque mélange of eroticism and social criticism in *To You, From Me* (1994), a semi-*cinéma-vérité* style documentation of delinquent teens and their violent lives in *Timeless Bottomless Bad Movie* (1998), and so on.

Yet this is not just about personal taste. His versatility owes much to his hyper-responsiveness to the world: "[Directors like Jang, Oshima Nagisa, and Garin Nugroho] look for stimuli wherever they find them (in newspapers, in novels, in history…) and their films are their direct responses. The structure and style of each film is determined, intellectually or instinctively, as part of that response."[65] This remark holds true of *A Petal*, too. Revisiting the Kwangju Massacre that had been a political taboo under military rule, it coincided with the ethos of the *minjung* movement, or the public's mounting desire to redress past wrongs. Yet Jang did not remain complacent with the newfound freedom of expression in the post-dictatorship era. He rather turned the film into a venue for reconsidering the proliferation of *criticizability* in the democratized milieu. His *ssitkim*, in other words, was not simply about telling past injustices, but more about challenging the present that was democratized but still unable to find a meaningful way of facing the horrors of yesterday. If Jang questions grand history by testing it with the traumas of the subalternized, his criticism went "not only against the official historiography of South Korea that consistently invoked nationalist agencies, but also against the new *minjung* (people's) history that claimed to be the 'collective will of the people' while countering the government's version."[66]

1980 Kwangju has a special meaning for Jang, as explained at the outset. It is where his trauma began. At the same time, it is where his cinema started. Yet he had to wait fifteen years to revisit the origin of both his trauma and cinema, and over the years Korean society underwent a series of rapid and drastic changes. His journey back to 1980 Kwangju, thus, could not simply be a recounting of what had happened then. It was to be remembered "along with" the layers of historical changes between then and now, which is reflected in the complex strategies Jang uses to represent Kwangju. More specifically, when he finally had the chance to address Kwangju in

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[65] Ibid., 7-8.
[66] Kim, *The Remasculinization of Korean Cinema*, 19-20.

a film, it was in a sense already too late. In the mid-1990s, Korean society witnessed two former

presidents Chun Doo-hwan and Roh Tae-woo arrested and charged with mutiny for the military

coup in 1979 and for the violence in Kwangju in 1980.[67] The media could enjoy unprecedented

freedoms to divulge crimes of military regimes including Kwangju. On the other hand, however,

the public also frequently had to learn evil aspects of the new civilian government (continuation

of labor suppression and collusions between political and economic elites). The mid-1990s was,

thus, a time when the increased freedom to reflect on the ills of the past attested to a significant

advance of democracy, yet public discontent did not decline but rather deepened.[68] Moreover, it

should be added that the mid-1990s also witnessed South Korea rapidly transforming into a

consumer society. Ultimately, these changes created a condition in which older generations

grew more and more weary of talking about the 'dark days' of military oppression including

Kwangju, whereas younger generations turned less and less motivated to learn about them,

which made it a much more complicated task to bring the question of Kwangju back to the

public's mind. Faced with the challenge, Jang responded by questioning the illusion of triumph

and progress through a tale of a girl who loses her sanity after witnessing the terrors of Kwangju

and drifts endlessly without any hope of being recuperated.

  The marketplace scene at the end is a good point of departure, which is, to my mind, one

of the most symbolic moments in the film. The scene opens with the girl squatting at a corner of

the marketplace crowded with people. People's heavy clothes indicate that it is winter, but she is

wearing a light spring dress that exposes her legs to the cold weather. Lipstick is applied to her

lips, but smudged all around her lips. She occasionally raises her head with disheveled hair and

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[67] Paquet, *New Korean Cinema*, 41. In August 1996, Chun and Roh were sentenced to death and twenty and a half years in prison respectively. The sentences were mitigated later in the Court of Appeals to life in jail and seventeen years. But the two were pardoned in December 1997 at the request of president-elect Kim Dae-jung.

[68] Nancy Abelmann, *The Melodrama of Mobility: Women, Talk and Class in Contemporary South Korea* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2003), 7.

smiles at passersby, but they pay little attention to her. In short, she is in one of the most bustling places, but remains almost invisible. Then, the national flag retreat ceremony begins along with the national anthem (a daily routine under the military regime), which makes everybody stop and turn toward the national flag. However, as everybody pauses and stands still looking in the same direction as if spellbound with the national anthem, the girl begins walking, like a ghost, through the frozen bodies of people in the marketplace.

Composed in a theatrical fashion, this scene underscores the barrier between the girl and the rest in the marketplace, and by doing so, urges the viewer to realize that military dictatorship is not the only thing to be interrogated, but entire society was and is still involved in the violence in one way or another. This issue is further accentuated as the scene proceeds. Shortly after the national flag retreat ceremony begins and the girl starts walking in the direction from which the national anthem is coming from, a black-and-white flashback is interjected, as if to indicate that the national anthem somehow triggers the girl into a fragment of memory, and it shows civilian protesters waving national flags beyond the wall of armed soldiers during the Kwangju uprising. This creates a juxtaposition of two contrasting images: the vitality and power of people at the center of history and their ignorant, submissive, and even vicious nature. Likewise, the national anthem takes on a double meaning: a catalyst of grassroots uprising and a sign of state power, which is indeed already suggested through the use of atonal variations on the national anthem in earlier flashbacks to signal the girl's relapse into the memory of past horrors. No less notable is the position of the camera at the end of the scene. As the girl walks away and eventually slips out of sight, it remains riveted to the spot like others who stand paralyzed by the everyday ritual of the military regime. And with the camera trapped in the midst of frozen bodies, the viewer is also put in the position of people in the marketplace who can do nothing but watch the girl fade

away. By doing so, the scene urges viewers, against their expectations to see the state indicted for its wrongs in the past, to reflect on why "we" failed to save her rather than what "they" (e.g., the state and the military) did to her.

Indeed Jang's efforts to veer away from the naïve opposition between the state-aggressor and the people-victim, which fails to address the intricate interconnections between fascistic rule and social strata, continue to form a central strain in the evolution of the film's narrative. First of all, the peculiar nexus between the girl and Mr. Chang, a socially isolated construction worker, is worth scrutiny. In an interview, Jang acknowledged, "I didn't want only to question the violence of the military regime [in the film]… [W]e should also question the violence in ourselves… I tried to express that through the relationship between the working-class man and the girl."[69] The film begins with the girl following Mr. Chang on his way home. Physically handicapped and sexually repressed, he rapes and then stones her to drive her away. However, the girl keeps following him calling him *oppa* (older brother), which hints that she takes him for her brother who was forcibly drafted into the military and soon died mysteriously. In his shanty placed in an isolated area, Mr. Chang continues to brutalize her by raping and beating her. The film thereby diverts our attention from the easy binary between the ruler and the ruled to the fascist culture displaced into/entrenched in nonpolitical domains of everyday life (e.g., that of sexuality).

More intriguingly, however, we witness further complications arising, as the relationship between the two develops. Mr. Chang's manner begins to change gradually, particularly after he hears the rumors about Kwangju circulating among workers. Instead of abusing her, he begins taking pity on her and taking care of her by feeding her, bathing her, and buying her clothes,

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[69] Rayns, *Korean Film Director: Jang Sun-woo*, 42. Of the news footage of Chun Doo-hwan's inauguration, Jang also mentioned, "[T]he broadcast announcement [shows] that Congress had approved the new 'emergency powers' (seeking to legitimate the Chun Doo-hwan dictatorship which was inaugurated three months after the massacre) by a majority of 90%. It's important to stress that we, the Korean people, accepted the new regime. Unless I question myself and others about that, I don't see that any of our fundamental problems can be solved." Ibid. 43.

which is perhaps because the rumors, albeit all contrary and incoherent, could implant in his mind a hunch about possible connections between the horrific stories and her mumbling such as "Mommy, hole, here [in the belly]." The progress in Mr. Chang's attitude, however, leads to more problems rather than a resolution. Halfway through the film, for instance, he stops by a clothing store. When he browses through women's dresses, the salesperson asks, "Who's it for? For your wife…or your daughter?" As Mr. Chang nods awkwardly, the salesperson asks how old she is, which makes him embarrassed, for he does not know what he is supposed to know, that is, his daughter's age. As he runs away, the salesperson scoffs at his back, "Moron, he doesn't even know his own daughter's age." This episode accentuates the vague nature of the relationship between Mr. Chang and the girl. Is he a surrogate brother, a substitute father, or her spouse? To put it the other way around, is the girl a daughter, a sister, or a lover? No definite answer seems to be possible for the question, as long as her recovery from traumas continues to be denied and her relationship to society thus remains indeterminable. This obscure position of the girl within society epitomizes challenges inherent in an effort to reconnect to Kwangju.

Indeed, the difficulties of narrativizing the memories of Kwangju continue to form the major tension in the film. A little later, Mr. Chang arranges a special dinner for the girl. The table is decorated with a clean sheet of tablecloth and a vase of flowers. She appears in a formal adult suit with a new pair of girl's shoes, which is once again suggestive of her ambiguous identity. Mr. Chang offers her a portion of a side dish, which she shyly takes with her mouth. She then begins eating her meal eagerly. Taking it as a sign of improvement, Mr. Chang chokes up partly due to a sense of relief and partly out of remorse for the violence he inflicted on her. The rare moment of hope, however, does not last long. Shortly after, the girl abruptly bursts into a hysterical laughter. She relapses again into her own impenetrable and unintelligible world of

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trauma and insanity, which frustrates Mr. Chang and the audience as well. More importantly, she starts leaving Mr. Chang's shanty and wandering the town, which signals that she has somehow realized that Mr. Chang is not her real brother and resumed the search for him. Then one day she visits a gravesite, where she places flowers before an unidentified grave and starts talking as if it were her brother. Finally having her brother to speak with, she becomes capable of gathering all the disjointed memories and tells the whole story of the fateful day in Kwangju: how the suspicious death of her brother in the military spurred her mother to join the anti-government rally, how she followed her mother to Kwangju against her mother's wish, how her mother was shot to death as she was trying to fetch her after she tripped on the street, how she had to frantically break her mother's grip on her wrist to run away from the soldiers rushing toward the protesters, and so on. Remembering the origin of trauma, however, does not lead to any resolution. As her talk or soliloquy ends, she passes out and slides back into insanity. A break with the mother's hand may signify the transition from childhood to adulthood and from home to society. In the girl's case, however, it is the beginning of her drifting between home and society. The traumatic memory leaves her trapped in a limbo between childhood (lost) and adulthood (unreachable).[70] Moreover, her limbo has no room for a savior, which is affirmed above all by the inability of Mr. Chang (the one with whom she stays at least for a while) to be of any help to her, even after he hears her story at the gravesite.

Mr. Chang is not the only one that fails to help her. Jang's concern rather rests with the social and cultural structure that renders everybody implicated in the violence on the girl in one way or another. In a sense, thus, the girl serves as a prism that makes visible dark sides of society, but in the pictures the prism offers, there are no images of heroic workers as one can find

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[70] Notable in this respect is Jang's frequent use of non-realist elements such as childhood *manhwa* (the Korean term for *manga*) and the trope of ghost to unveil her psychic state, which I see as indicative of her inability to gain the language of society or adulthood.

in films like *A Single Spark*. Workers in *A Petal* appear largely ill-educated about, indifferent to, or even reactionary to pro-democracy protests including the Kwangju uprising and their daily lives are strewn with loose talk, drinking, and gambling. It is also shocking to learn that the girl has already been sexually assaulted numerous times before she meets Mr. Chang. What is even more unsettling is that women and children are not an exception in Jang's gruesome portrayal of Korean society. A group of women in a local town holds a protest in a hospital where the girl is treated, accusing her of soliciting adulterous sex rather than feeling ashamed of the crimes the town committed on her. Children appear no less brutal, when they take pleasure in ridiculing, stoning, and pushing her into a reservoir. Not all characters are hostile to her, though. Mr. Kim in the town, for instance, shows warmth to her. He brings her to hospital when she is in a critical condition. Yet he does so because she reminds him of his teenaged girlfriend who died young. His hospitality, in other words, is not reciprocal, but rather unilateral and repressive. He remains enclosed in his own romantic fantasy and projects it onto her. He indeed appears hardly concerned to learn about her and is barely conscious of the sociopolitical situation, as suggested in his inability to understand why her brother was forcibly enlisted in the military. Her brother's friends are also worth noting. As college students, they are certainly more informed of Kwangju than any other character in the film. Their search for the girl is the central motif of the film's narrative. However, they are always "too late." Moreover, when they finally meet Mr. Chang, another victim of Kwangju in that just like the girl he loses sanity and his command of language too after the girl leaves him, they remain less attentive to him than they should be. In brief, they are a painful reminder of the failure of the intellectual to address varying sociocultural factors that were responsible, if not directly, then indirectly, for Kwangju and still allow it to haunt the present.

If *A Petal* can be called a *ssikim-gut*, it is certainly a peculiar one. It does provide a kind

of catharsis. Yet the catharsis has little to do with solace or relief. It rather brings us to a critical

enlightenment, or urges us to dwell on why Kwangju matters in the present. The opening credit

sequence begins with fragments from the media footage of the Kwangju incident (allegedly, the

only remaining news footage shot by a German journalist). After unveiling the horrors of the

incident, it closes with the images of soldiers who are cleaning the streets and sanitizing the city.

The white fumigation gas spreads over the entire screen, as if to obliterate all the dirty memories

of Kwangju from the public mind, that is, sanitize public memories. Then the film's title

"Kkotnip" (a petal) emerges on the bleached screen as if to designate a return of the repressed

through the screen of sanitized memories. Thus starts the story of the search for the girl. At the

end, however, she still remains missing. Friends of her brother finally abandon the hope of

finding her and take a bus for Seoul. Mr. Chang roams at the gravesite where she spoke of the

horrors of Kwangju to an unknown grave, which is accompanied by the final line delivered in the

voice-over of one of her brother's friends: "Beside a cemetery, on a riverbank, or at a street

corner, you may run across this girl. If you see her bare skin through her torn and dirty skirt,

please pretend you saw nothing. She may come up to you one day. Don't be afraid of her; don't

frighten her, either. Just show her a bit of concern." Disheartening and indecisive, this coda

confirms that the lost girl remains an unsettling lacuna in the sanctioned historiography of

democratization. In other words, *A Petal* carries out the task of *ssitkim* by prompting us to

confront the girl as an unsanitizable and forgotten segment of history, simply put, "counter

history," however disconcerting it may be. Here *ssitkim* serves as a means to rescue history from

amnesia not by sanitizing it, but by challenging the reign of sanitized memories, including those

of leftist discourses where the *minjung* was often assumed to be a coherent and unified body in opposition to ruling groups.

3.0   REORIENTATIONS IN THE POST-*SSITKIM* ERA

In the preceding chapter, I employed the notion of *ssitkim* to scrutinize the ways Korean

filmmakers endeavored to develop a new cinema in tandem and tense interplay with the

democracy movement. However, it is mistaken to regard *ssitkim* as an umbrella term for the

entire 1990s. After all, the 1990s were a time of rapid and drastic change, which challenges any

overarching, descriptive term to define it. Cinema is not an exception. Noteworthy in this

respect is 1993, when Im's *Sopyonje* set a milestone in Korean film history by becoming the first

Korean film to attract over a million viewers in Seoul alone, while the market share of Korean

films had dropped to all-time low, 15.9 percent.[1] The contrast between the success of *Sopyonje*

and the general decline in film attendance is indicative of the wide disparity between the film

circle and public spectatorship in the early 1990s.

Public reaction to New Wave films (or Korean cinema as a whole) remained generally

lukewarm, except for a few instances such as *Sopyonje*.[2] Yet, it is not that Korean viewers could

not recognize the values of New Wave films. Indeed, one of the most noteworthy changes in

1990s Korean society was the migration of critical energies from politics to culture, and cinema

held a central place in the shift, as evidenced in the outburst of film festivals, art cinema theaters,

film clubs, and publications (magazines, journals, online blogs). Kim Soyoung describes the

cultural landscape of the 1990s as follows:

> [T]he quasi-religious energy of the 1980s…student movement…is hardly detectable on
> 1990s streets and campuses. Unexpectedly, and unlike the 1980s, quasi-religious energy

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[1] Darcy Paquet, "The Korean Film Industry: 1992 to the Present," in *New Korean Cinema*, eds. Chi-Yun Shin and Julian Stringer (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 32.
[2] Kyung Hyun Kim, *The Remasculization of Korean Cinema* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), x.

is found in film spectatorship. The fascination for cult movies, … American B-movies, European art-house cinema, Hong Kong action movies and Wong Kar-wai, in particular, [is] phenomenal in Korean youth culture.[3]

This outburst of cinephilia in the 1990s was, according to Kim, illustrative of substantial changes in the pattern of collectivity formation in the era. Kim observes that cinephilia "function[ed] to unify different groups with different positions under the rubric of the desire for cinema," and cinephilia often engages in "looking for something they [people] desire to see but which is not actually there to be seen."[4] Accordingly, the rapid growth of cinephile culture in 1990s South Korea indicated: first, the dissolution of old unificatory categories of collectivity such as "national" and "*minjung*" (which coincided with the divergence of social groups and positions); and second, the failure of Korean cinema to meet the public's expectations. Having just emerged from a period of tumultuous change, Korean society in the early 1990s was in need of a collective *ssitkim* to confront historical traumas. No less urgent was finding a new mode of cognitive mapping in the face of rapid political, economic, and cultural shifts for which Korean society, including the film community, was yet prepared. Thus, directors like Kim Hong-jun (*Ma vie en rose*, 1994) commented of the general atmosphere in the post-*minjung* era, "The '80s provided answers, but the '90s have not."[5]

Notable in this respect is the emergence of a new group of directors in the mid-1990s: to name just a few, Lee Chang-dong, Hong Sang-soo, Im Sang-soo, and Kim Ki-duk. Their work

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[3] Soyoung Kim, "'Cine-Mania' or Cinephilia: Film Festivals and the Identity Question," in Shin and Stringer, eds. *New Korean Cinema*, 82; Tony Rayns, *Korean Film Director: Jang Sun-woo* (Seoul: KOFIC, 2007), 5-7. For the importance of the cinephilia-youth nexus in the recent upsurge of Korean cinema, see David Desser, "Timeless, Bottomless Bad Movies: Or, Consuming Youth in the New Korean Cinema," in *Seoul Searching: Culture and Identity in Contemporary Korean Cinema*, ed. Frances Gateward (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2007), 77-90. For details about the proliferation of film festivals, see Soojeong Ahn, *The Pusan International Film Festival, South Korean Cinema and Globalization* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2012).

[4] This echoes Rayns' observation: "[M]any Koreans in the 1990s used film cultures as a source of information about the wider world: not just about other film cultures but also about foreign fashions, preoccupations and ways of thinking." Rayns, *Korean Film Director: Jang Sun-woo*, 7.

[5] Hyo-in Yi and Cheong-ha Yi, eds. *Korean New Wave: Retrospectives from 1980 to 1995* (Seoul: The Pusan International Film Festival, 1996), 52.

was far less ethnographic or political than early New Wave films, but it also maintained distance from commercial films. They played a vital role in broadening the spectrum of filmmaking in South Korea by exploring various fresh routes between political and commercial cinema and by drawing attention to the terrains that had been un- or disqualified by grand narratives, including leftist or *minjung* theory.[6] In general, their films were indexical of the transition from the political to the cinematic. However, they also retained certain continuities with the New Wave cinema despite thematic and formal differences. These continuities include the lasting concerns with historical trauma, minoritized life, and anti-elite or anti-intellectual sentiments. Thus centering on this new stage, this chapter aspires to clarify new routes Korean cinema took roughly from the mid-1990s. My concern rests with Lee and Hong among others, particularly their early films. Their works may appear geared toward quite contrasting orientations. Above all, while Lee's characters are repeatedly found in search of certain ideals, Hong's films strive to probe everyday life stripped of such ideals. Still, it is worth bringing them into juxtaposition in that they present two most exemplary cases of Korean cinema's reorientations in the post-*ssitkim* era.

In exploring Lee's works, my concern rests with how he maneuvered his way through the disparities between the 1980s and the 1990s; how he developed new perspectives on both history and cinema during his conversion from novelist to filmmaker; and how he, in doing so, found the niche between independent and mainstream cinema. What I consider intriguing about his films is the use of allegory as a powerful means to inquire into Korean society in the wake of the period of democratic transition and globalization from the 1990s onward. More specifically, his

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[6] Film scholars like Choi Jinhee classify the films of these directors as the second New Wave in distinction not just from senior New Wave directors, such as Im, Park, and Jang, but also from those of the same generation who were leaning toward commercial viability such as Kang Je-gyu, Kim Sung-su, and Kwak Kyeong-taek. Jinhee Choi, *The South Korean Film Renaissance: Local Hitmakers/Global Provocateurs* (Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2010), 165.

allegory is not limited to drawing some parallel between national and personal history; rather, he liberates allegory from a linear way of understanding by employing an unusual mode of temporality, as in the reverse chronology of *Peppermint Candy* (1999). My discussion thus seeks to elucidate the historical and cultural significance of the reverse narrative in the film through such themes as the action in crisis, the sensory-motor breakage, and the proliferation of recollection-images.

In Hong's case, his arrival in 1996 marked a rise of a unique direction in Korean cinema. Perhaps no other debut film in Korean film history could enjoy more passionate reactions from cineastes than his, *The Day a Pig Fell Into the Well* (*The Day* hereafter). Critics hailed it with unreserved acclaim: "a gunshot that shook Korean film history" (*Cine 21*), "a true rarity in Korean cinema" (Kim Soyoung); and a "cinematic language…unprecedented in Korean film history" (Huh Moonyung).[7] Such applause proves to be not just hyperbole, if we compare the unorthodox aspects of his films with the general tendencies of Korean cinema in earlier periods. In his radical minimalism[8] geared toward everyday life instead of grand history, social relations become stripped of clear reasons or motives. Yet, his meditation on the everyday has little room for notions like "psychological depth." In Hong's films, depth yields to episodic and temporary social encounters on surface and the everyday proves to be impregnated with "paradoxes" (the contemporaneity of multiple divergent senses or directions) instead of "good sense" (the determinable sense or direction that always compels us to pick one over the other. His discovery

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[7] Moonyung Huh, ed. *Korean Film Directors: Hong Sang-soo* (Seoul: KOFIC, 2007), 3; Moonyung Huh, *Secular Film, Secular Criticism* (Seoul: Kang, 2010), 88, 96.

[8] Here, I draw upon David Bordwell, who compares Hong to the Asian minimalist school (Hou Hasio-hsien, Tasi Ming-liang, Kore-eda Hirokazu, etc.), but maintains that he recast the regional trend often in unpredictable ways. David Bordwell, "Beyond Asian Minimalism: Hong Sangsoo's Geometry Lesson," in Hun, ed., *Korean Film Directors: Hong Sang-soo*, 19. I will return to this issue later when discussing Hong's works.

of paradoxes in depthless everyday life, to my mind, forms a unique phase in the evolution of Korean cinema in the post-*ssitkim* era, i.e., from the mid-1990s onward.

3.1   LEE CHANG-DONG: NARRATIVE IN/OF A TIME OUT OF JOINT

If the stimulus for the renewal of Korean cinema in the first half of the 1990s was the impetus to provide a *ssitkim* (an opportunity to address and relieve historical traumas) for a society emerging from colonialism and dictatorship, the second half of the decade witnessed much of inventive energy migrating from the work of *ssitkim* (often embroiled with heavy historical and political issues) to the need to interrogate a new milieu where even *ssitkim* appeared to have become a cliché (not because it was completed, but rather because it remained unfinished). In many ways, Lee's rise in Korean cinema is illustrative of this historical development. First, his conversion from novel to cinema coincided with the transition from the 1980s as an era of literature to the 1990s as a time of cinema.[9] The early 1990s was a time when authoritarianism was finally replaced by civilian rule and oppressors were no longer evident. Resulting from the change was a rapid erosion of the authority of oppositional discourses, such as *minjung* theory, even when democratization was far from complete and Korean society was still facing the same problems that had troubled it for decades. The *minjung* was, as explained above, invented in opposition to the foes of democracy such as suppressive rulers, economic elite, and colonial powers. But when the adversaries of the *minjung* became no longer obvious, the concept of *minjung* also began losing its validity and the *minjung*/anti-*minjung* binary could no longer work as "the" framework to account for society. It was at this historical conjuncture that Lee

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[9] My idea is indebted to Paik Mun-im's notes on Lee. Mun-im Paik, *Zoom Out: The Politics of Korean Cinema* (Seoul: Younsei University Press, 2001), 158.

converted to cinema. A novelist who had been drawn deep into chasing democratic ideals in the 1980s, Lee experienced, like many other intellectuals, a time of confusion at the dawn of the 1990s. As sociopolitical ideals to fight for became less apparent, Lee could not find the inspiration to continue to write.[10] Luckily, when he needed a flight from his crumbling world of literature, help came from Park Kwang-su, who invited him to join the production of *To the Starry Land*, first as scriptwriter and later as assistant director. Afterwards, he quickly established himself as one of the most promising directors in South Korea with his 1997 debut film *Green Fish*. His sophomore feature, *Peppermint Candy*, cemented his reputation in film communities at home and abroad as well. For many local observers, his successful conversion from novel to cinema was suggestive of the transition from the 1980s when literature had served as the epicenter of advanced thought to the 1990s when cinema rose as a new major arena for sociocultural formation. Lee bridged the gulf between the two eras, but he did so by discovering cinema as the new medium to interrogate the ruptures between the two eras. Korean film critics thus would depict him as a director who "did what the 1990s literature could not do about the 1980s," and declare, "Director Lee achieved what novelist Lee could not achieve."[11]

From another angle, however, we can also say that he was on the cusp of the two periods and the two mediums. My sense is that his liminal position indeed makes his films idiosyncratic. No doubt, his films retain certain continuities with the 1980s (e.g., the lasting realist impetus and allusions to social and historical issues). But their subtle flavors, to my mind, stem largely from the efforts Lee made to come to terms with the discrepancies between the 1980s and the 1990s. For that matter, it would also be fair to say that his films diverge even from those of senior New Wave directors such as Im, Park, and Jang; after all, he generally was detached from overt

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[10] Young-jin Kim, *Korean Film Directors: Lee Chang-dong* (Seoul: KOFIC, 2007), 91.
[11] Paik, *Zoom Out*, 144-45, 158.

political orientations or ethnographic topics. On the other hand, he continues to position himself on the borders of both literature and film. For him, filmmaking means rediscovering cinema: "I came to film after writing novels. I am not used to looking at the world through film… [Thus] I constantly ask myself what film is."[12] Yet, it is misleading to regard his outsider mentality merely as attesting to his disapproval of mainstream cinema. To be sure, he is not a filmmaker who would readily yield creative and critical spirits to commercial viability. Still this does not mean that he rejects popular cinema altogether. Indeed, his works have continued to draw upon popular cinema, or mass culture in general, as a major source for experimentation. Notably, he acknowledged in an interview on *Oasis* that the most pleasing reaction to it was, "[T]his is really melodramatic," and he went on to say, "I wasn't trying to make a mainstream film, but I wanted to communicate with a mainstream audience."[13] This may sound rather paradoxical, but for me, it is this urge to engage with mainstream audiences through nonmainstream ways of storytelling that tells much of Lee's unconventional uses of conventions borrowed from popular culture and cinema.

From an industrial perspective as well, Lee's works stand in the middle ground between alternative and mainstream cinema. Lee's films mark a reorientation of the New Wave cinema in the latter half of the 1990s. If, as discussed above, the loosening of state control over the film industry after changes in the Motion Picture Law led to a surge of new production companies in the late 1980s, Korean cinema saw a group of fresh producers emerging with an ambition to revamp the condition of filmmaking in the mid-1990s. For Lee, there was East Film, which was founded in 1996 by such prominent figures of the New Wave cinema as Myung Gae-nam, Yeo Kyun-dong, and Moon Sung-keun to enrich the quality of Korean cinema. In alliance with

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[12] Kim, *Korean Film Directors: Lee Chang-dong*, 64.
[13] Ibid., 68.

investment companies such as Cinema Service and UniKorea (which were often supportive of films that attempted to exist outside mainstream cinema), East Film produced Lee's first three films, *Green Fish*, *Peppermint Candy*, and *Oasis* (2002). Lee's films were, in other words, the products of fresh developments in the Korean film industry in the latter half of the 1990s. His appearance illustrated the emergence of a new space within the mainstream film industry that allowed niche products like Lee's films to burgeon—a space that offered him substantial latitude to experiment with distinctive style and thereby show new possibilities of Korean cinema to the public that had become weary of political clichés and insipid genre films.

Notably, his liminal position has induced diverging critical responses. Some critics have tried to align him with the tradition of alternative cinema. Kim Kyung Hyun, for example, tends to regard Lee's films as marking the final stage of the evolution of Korean cinema in the 1980s and the 1990s, or simply, the Korean New Wave. In particular, *Peppermint Candy* "drew the curtain on the period," in that traveling back to the last two decades of Korea's twentieth century through a male protagonist's traumatized life, it epitomizes the main tendency of Korean cinema to hinge upon the repressed and traumatized masculinity to allegorize the Korean people's lack of agency under authoritarian rule.[14] On the other hand, critics like Moon Jae-cheol draw attention to Lee's bent on mixing genre codes and social concerns. *Green Fish*, for example, references issues like the fever of city redevelopments in the post-dictatorship era, but relies on the tropes of noir films. Likewise, *Peppermint Candy* invokes memories of defining moments in recent national history, yet its narrative as a whole is structured around the motif of

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[14] Kim, *The Remasculinization of Korean Cinema*, 22. Also notable is the local media's portrayal of Lee as an inheritor of the realist tradition in Korean cinema. Yeong-seop Shim, "Lee Chang-dong, the True Descendent of the Realism Family," *Donga Daily News*, Jannuary 6, 2000, http://www.donga.com/fbin/moeum?n=dstory$l_52&a=v&l=3&id=200001060204.

melodrama.[15] Understandably, Kim Young-jin suggests that Lee shares "commonalities with the next generation of filmmakers [such as Bong Joon-ho, Park Chan-wook, and Kim Jee-woon]" in that his works, even when anchored in the realist ethos and defiant of linear or goal-oriented narrative, do not disprove genre cinema altogether.[16] Similarly, foreign critics like David Martin-Jones also found in *Peppermint Candy* "certain similarities with many of its contemporaries that do aim at mainstream audiences." For him, the film resonates strongly with the tendency of Korean cinema today to "place the relative merits and limitations of Western categories of film genres and types in perspective, by mixing a discourse on politics…[or] 'serious' cinema with popular genres."[17] What all this makes clear is that it is not viable to reduce Lee's films to one group or direction, whether it is the New Wave cinema (the 1980s to the early 1990s) that defied commercialism and vied to raise social critical consciousness, or the post-New Wave era (since the mid-1990s) that does not eschew mainstream sources. My discussion thus centers on the way he navigated through the times of historical transition and interregnum, that is, the idiosyncratic perspectives he developed on history and cinema in the face of the gulf between the 1980s and the 1990s, in the liminal space between literature and film, and in the niche between alternative and mainstream cinema.

What I have found particularly intriguing about his films is his allegorical exploration of the post-democratization era—allegory not as a failed symbol or an abstract personification, but as a figuration that serves as a powerful means to interrogate historical changes in the 1990s and onward. Take, for instance, his words on female protagonist Gong-ju in *Oasis*, who suffers from cerebral palsy: "[Viewers] are not comfortable looking at her because she looks ugly. But that's

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[15] Jae-cheol Moon, "The Meaning of Newness in Korean Cinema: Korean New Wave and After," *Korea Journal* 46, no.1 (Spring 2006), 46.

[16] Kim, *Korean Film Directors: Lee Chang-dong*, 22-23.

[17] David Martin-Jones, *Deleuze, Cinema and National Identity: Narrative Time in National Contexts* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), 208-209.

hard to convey in writing. In words, readers feel sympathy for her. But if they are confronted with an image of her, they *experience* discomfort. It is only then that the audience can...find her inner beauty or embrace her as a human being."[18] These words suggest that Lee saw in cinema its power of making tactile the antinomy between ideals and history, a common denominator of his works, as proven in his obsession with the ruined bodies of his naïve characters—their decaying bodies as a figuration of the way ideals (encoded in tropes like green fish, peppermint candy, oasis, secret sunshine, and so on) subsist in the historical world.

No less notable in this light is his interest in temporality: "While a movie is playing, the time frame functioning in the film collides against…[or] distorts real time… Cinema…allows us to *experience* different forms of time, even reversal of time. In the case of literature, one can conceptually think about different forms of time, but can't experience them."[19] Experiencing different temporalities is, of course, not just a technical matter. The reverse chronological order in *Peppermint Candy* (perhaps the most intriguing case) was, in his words, "a form of searching for identity."[20] Namely, his attention to cinematic time was a reaction to the historical milieu of the 1990s as a period of disintegration and disorientation. Here his discovery of cinematic time resonates with Gilles Deleuze's commentary on the proliferation of time-image in European and American cinemas in the aftermath of World War II as an effect of the sensory-motor breakage. Deleuze attributes the crisis of movement-image in postwar cinemas to the broken connection between perception and reaction. Analogously, Lee's preoccupation with the issue of time coincides with the degeneration of the faculty of action in the post-democratized era—not an era of oppression, such as the 1980s when harsh oppression would fuel intense political activism, but an era where action is "lost" rather than "suppressed," simply, an era of inaction, stasis, and

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[18] Kim, *Korean Film Directors: Lee Chang-dong*, 63; my italics.
[19] Ibid., 64; my italics.
[20] Ibid., 61.

atrophy. In brief, my sense is that Lee's films provide a compelling case for probing the surge of allegorical gaze and cinematic time during historical transitions and also scrutinizing the way they problematize historical changes (in South Korea's context, democratization and globalization). Under the rubric, my analysis concentrates on *Peppermint Candy*, although it will often expand to other films as well.

As for the issue of allegory, a good starting point may be his main characters. Typical of them is their naïve, innocent, or childlike nature, which makes them isolated from the milieu into which they are thrown. *Green Fish*, for example, begins with the return of Mak-dong (a term for the youngest son) from military duty, which coupled with an encounter with an attractive woman Mi-ae on the homecoming train, resonates with the hopeful climate after the end of military rule. Yet the buoyant mood is soon replaced by a sense of disorientation. The urban development has changed his hometown so much that he becomes confused over direction. Additionally, nobody is at home to welcome him, which shortly proves to be a luxury his family cannot afford due to their daily struggles for survival: his mother is now a maid; his brother in the police has fallen prey to alcoholism; another older brother has become an egg truck vendor; and his younger sister works as a hostess in a local café.[21] There is at least one family member to whom Mak-dong's return is an important event: the oldest brother. But he cannot expect Mak-dong to come by train, which was recently built for new towns, and waits for his brother at the bus stop, as he would do in the past. He is, in other words, the only family member that remains unaffected by all the changes. However, it does not come without a cost to remain unchanged by time, that is, to keep values like love untouched by the passage of time; his body is afflicted with cerebral

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[21] Mak-dong's isolation from the rest of the world is further accentuated in the dialogue between him and his mother. When he asks about other family members, she does not respond to his questions, but rather stays riveted to the TV, as if she did not hear him. Thus, although they are within the same frame, it feels like a split screen that juxtaposes two separate worlds.

palsy. Faced with this frustrating reality, Mak-dong hopes to rebuild his broken family. He even tells his mother to quit working, asserting that he will make a fortune. Neither educated nor having specific professional skills, however, he ends up in gangland. With the help of Mi-ae, who turns out to be the mistress of the leader of a crime organization Tae-gon, he becomes Tae-gon's chauffeur. Then he quickly climbs the ladder of Tae-gon's family and becomes his adopted brother, only to fall victim to Tae-gon's trickery.[22]

The milieu Lee as a filmmaker studies here certainly differs from the society novelist Lee strove to examine. In a short story *Nok-cheon Has Lots of Shit*, for instance, the youngest son as a student activist defies his older brother, who has chosen the family's welfare over social justice. In *Green Fish*, however, Mak-dong's older brother or the policeman is no longer an authoritarian figure; he is instead powerless, impoverished, and alcoholic. Besides, Mak-dong is also far from political passion. Briefly put, the conflict between activism and conformism loses its cogency in the society filmmaker Lee tries to diagnose. It is rather a world where those who fail to adjust to rapid changes are helplessly left behind. To put it the other way around, the world is ruled above all by schemers like Tae-gon, who readily exploits all resources within his reach to secure the right to renovation of run-down business areas and ascend from the underground to the surface as a successful businessman. He forces his mistress Mi-ae to sleep with the district attorney and scapegoats his sworn brother Mak-dong (namely, kills him) for the murdering of the leader of a rival gang (a wicked plot to at once remove the nemesis and avoid a retaliation). Mak-dong is thrust into a milieu where "green fish" cannot exist and his naïve

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[22] The failure to reintegrate into family or society serves as a key motif in Lee's other films. In *Oasis*, for example, Jong-du returns from prison, but it turns out that his family has moved to a different place without notifying him. In *Secret Sunshine*, Shin-ae moves to her late husband's hometown presumably to find a way of forgiving his infidelity. But she finds the local town quite hostile to a stranger and even has her son kidnapped and murdered.

search for such an ideal (for instance, in the relationship with his surrogate brother Tae-gon) ultimately costs him his life.

Nonetheless, Lee is not a cynic at his core and does not leave ideals lost altogether. In fact, ideals return to the present tearing open its hardened surface, which constitutes a central moment in his films. A compelling example is the ending of *Green Fish*—perhaps the most memorable and bitter scene in the film. Mak-dong's family now runs a restaurant at their house, which may have been possible through the reward for his death. Tae-gon and Mi-ae, now a married couple living in a nearby new town, chance upon the restaurant. They order chicken soup, watch their chicken being slaughtered, and even have a chat over a frame of old family photos hung on the wall. However, looking around the place on the way out, Mi-ae becomes gripped by an ominous feeling ensuing from the place's familiarity and soon recognizes the willow tree she saw in the picture Mak-dong gave her. Horrified by the fact that it is Mak-dong's home, she cries and writhes in piercing but suppressed agony. This marks a moment when memories of Mak-dong and his lost dreams blast open the coagulated surface of present everyday life, or the present is sucked into the maelstrom of memories. However, the outburst of repressed memories, or Mi-ae's sensory-motor breakage, does not last long. The film closes with an extended long shot of the restaurant, which shows the continuation of the everyday life of Mak-dong's family in a nonchalant manner, as if nothing has happened and as if to suggest that Mak-dong's family will continue their lives as an appendage to new towns.

In a sense, then, Lee's next film *Peppermint Candy* seems to stand at the other end of the spectrum, or it begins where *Green Fish* ends. If actual time in *Green Fish* becomes disrupted at the end, *Peppermint Candy* reverses the irreversible flow of time from the start. The film opens with a suicidal middle-aged man standing on the railroad shouting at the oncoming train, "I want

to go back." Then, as if to fulfill his wish, or as if to satisfy the audience's curiosity about what

drove him to suicide, the train starts to run backward and unveils defining moments in the two

decades of his disturbed life (1979-1999) in reverse time order. In other words, as the film opens

with the protagonist's death, the rest consists of a series of flashbacks. More interestingly, it

ends without returning to the present. Indeed it has no diegetic device that takes us back to the

present such as a detective or a journalist, as is the case in, for example, *Citizen Kane* (Orson

Welles, 1941). We do not see past memories summoned to the present in *Peppermint Candy*.

Rather, the present or the viewer is summoned to the past. When everything is flashback,

flashback no longer exists or flashback itself is the present. Thus film critics like Chung Hye

Seung and David Scott Diffrient dubbed *Peppermint Candy* "a flashback film without

flashbacks."[23]

Reverse chronology here, however, is not simply a technical matter. It urges or allows us

to reassess accepted views on the film's thematic and formal properties. For instance, obviously,

the film's narrative is configured in an allegorical manner. The protagonist's private history runs

parallel to South Korea's national history over the final two decades of the last century. Yet with

reverse chronology employed, the allegorical structure gains new dimensions and becomes more

than a simple parallel between personal and national history. Certainly the reverse time narrative

is not a prerequisite of the allegorical mode of storytelling; an allegorization of collective history

does not always require the backpedaling narrative, as in *Green Fish*. We are thus entitled to say

that the notion of allegory alone would not offer us a satisfying account for the effects of reverse

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[23] Chung Hye Seung and David Scott Diffrient, "Forgetting to Remember, Remembering to Forget: The Politics of Memory and Modernity in the Fractured Films of Lee Chang-dong and Hong Sang-soo" in Gateward, ed. *Seoul Searching: Culture and Identity in Contemporary Korean Cinema*, 118. On the other hand, Kim Kyung Hyun notes, "The time [in the film] progresses backward without the use of flashback." Kim, *The Remasculinization of Korean Cinema*, 22. Here my concern is not to determine whose view is right. Rather I suggest that the confusion is integral to the spectatorial experience of the film.

chronology in the film. What becomes crucial, then, is to recognize and examine new strains the film adds to its allegorical structure by reversing temporal order. To my mind, it is indeed such new strata that are of greater help for an effort to elucidate the historical and cultural imports of the film.

Before going further, however, a brief plot synopsis is necessary. The first chapter, titled "Picnic: Spring 1999," starts with protagonist Young-ho's arrival at a twenty-year reunion picnic of the Bongwoo Club (a factory worker's group formed in 1979) at a riverbank. The group soon recognizes their old friend. Yet he disrupts the party by hysterical and obnoxious actions. Then he climbs atop a railway bridge across the river and soon faces an oncoming train. His suicide is followed by the episode, titled "The Camera: Three Days Ago Spring 1999," where he purchases a gun and attempts to shoot his ex-business partner. He also meets a man, who says that his wife Sun-im (Young-ho's first love) is severely ill and wants to see Young-ho before she dies. Young-ho visits her in hospital to find that she has relapsed into a coma. As he leaves, Sun-im's husband hands him an old camera, which, according to Sun-im's testament, belongs to him. But he sells it off for food. In the next fragment, "Life Is Beautiful: Summer 1994," Young-ho is a successful small business owner. Yet his marriage is in crisis. He spies on his wife as she has an affair, but he has an affair of his own. He bumps into Myong-sik as well and asks, "Life is beautiful, isn't it?" The story behind the cryptic query is unveiled in the ensuing chapter, titled "Confession: Spring 1987," where Young-ho is now a police officer who tortures student activists, including Myong-sik who wrote in diary, "Life is beautiful." The next section, "Prayer: Fall 1984," presents Young-ho as a fresh recruit in the police. The day he has his first torture victim, Sun-im visits him. He deliberately breaks her heart by groping the thigh of the waitress, Hong-ja, who later becomes his wife. Sun-im still gives him a camera as a gift, but he refuses to

take it. His rejection of Sun-im is explained in the succeeding chapter "Military Visit: 1980."

Young-ho is a soldier and dispatched with his division to Kwangju to quell anti-government

protests. He is shot in the foot, and while waiting for his fellows to return, he accidentally kills

an innocent high school girl (whom he initially mistakes for Sun-im). As his crying over the

dead girl cuts to the closing chapter, we see a picnic of young and idealistic factory workers at

the same riverside that opened the film. A shy and sensitive man, Young-ho tells Sun-im that he

wishes to become a photographer who can capture the beauty of nameless wildflowers. She

gives him peppermint candies. Next, breaking off from the group, he walks to the railroad

bridge on which twenty years later he will commit suicide. Then the scene ends with a freeze

frame of his teary face rendered in close-up. The title of the final chapter is "Picnic: 1979,"

which is analogous to that of the first chapter with the only exception of the twenty-year time

difference.

Obviously, one of the effects the backpedaling form of storytelling engenders in this film

is making the viewer gradually realize that initially unlikeable Young-ho was indeed an innocent

and sensitive man. One can also say that as the reverse narrative brings us farther back into his

past, we can see the film changing from what would otherwise be another story of degeneration

into an odyssey to an age of youthful innocence. Before delving further into the implications of

reverse chronology, however, we need to consider Young-ho's death (a total loss of action) at the

beginning of the journey. This flashback movie without flashbacks, in other words, starts with a

complete breakdown of the sensory-motor linkage, an irrecoverable fracture between perception

and reaction. We are thus impelled to examine, first of all, the crisis of action at the final phase

of his life specifically in the late 1990s.

Indeed, Young-ho's suicide is a rather explicit reference to the situation the entire country had to undergo in the aftermath of the so-called IMF crisis in 1997 (the Asian financial crisis); in the post-IMF era, it was routine to hear new stories of austerity actions, failed companies, massive layoffs, drastic pay cuts, and collapses of middle- and working-class families. Yet what makes Young-ho particularly noteworthy is his status, which stands in notable contrast to those of characters such as Mak-dong and his family members in *Green Fish*. In the third segment set in 1994, he appears to have changed from a policeman of the military regime to a successful businessman, which indicates the economic boom since democratization in the early 1990s. He is thus comparable to figures like Tae-gon, who successfully transforms from an underworld boss into a triumphant entrepreneur, in contrast to Mak-dong who fails to readjust to the post-military era or his police brother who becomes impoverished and falls prey to alcoholism in the new situation. Considering this historical context, we can take Young-ho's depravity to be a way of maintaining the sensory-motor continuity within military rule and then in the neo-liberalizing milieu, if not a progressive form of reaction to the world.

However, the IMF crisis transformed South Korea into a society where even a conformism like Young-ho's was not enough for survival. Ensuing from the crisis was a milieu where the old ways of understanding and reacting to the world, revolutionary or reactionary, repeatedly proved to be no longer working—a situation affecting not only naïve idealists such as Mak-dong and Myung-sik but also obedient reactionaries such as Tae-gon and Young-ho. A result of the crisis of action, embodied through Young-ho's death, is the rise of a time out of joint, or more specifically, a time detached from the world of determinate movement (linear and irreversible)—in the case of *Peppermint Candy*, the emergence of a pure recollection situation. Notably, at the moment of suicide, Young-ho's face is arrested in close-up, which turns to a

freeze frame. In the still image, his face is abstracted from its determined spatiality and temporality. The facial close-up gradually strips the frame of other sources and thereby nullifies the viewer's sense of time and space.[24] In the frozen facial close-up, all the determinate spatiotemporal references are cut away. Then begins the journey into the terrain of recollections.

In fact, this is not the only moment when Young-ho experiences difficulty in his reactions to the world. Most notably, his limp suggests, as Martin-Jones points out, a "moment of sensory-motor discontinuity, a point at which, his body slowed, the past attempts to appear in the interval between perception…and action."[25] It originates from Kwangju, not simply because he has his leg shot, but far more importantly because he loses his ideals to the territorializing force of the totalitarian milieu. The day Sun-im visits the military base to see him, he is dispatched to Kwangju. Chasing civilian protesters at night, he has his foot hit by a bullet presumably from another soldier. He finally collapses in a rail yard and waits for fellow soldiers to return, during which he finds a girl hiding in the shadows. Initially, she appears to be Sun-im, though he could not see due to the military order. However, when the girl emerges from the shadows, she turns out to be a different girl. As Martin-Jones notes, Sun-im's spectral appearance here indicates an "interval created by his sensory-motor stillness."[26] However, the interval cannot last long. Worse still, in an effort to readapt to the determined situation, he comes to shut the door to what Sun-im stands for. Although he tries to help the girl escape from returning soldiers, he ends up accidentally discharging his rifle at her. Although unintentionally, he fails to save or kills what

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[24] My view here draws upon Gilles Deleuze's notes on close-up as an abstraction from spatiotemporal co-ordinates. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema I: The Movement-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 95-101.

[25] Martin-Jones, *Deleuze, Cinema and National Identity*, 215. Here I owe a good deal to Martin-Jones' analysis of the reverse chronology in *Peppermint Candy* via Deleuze's notion of sensory-motor breakage. Still my focuses are slightly different: first, I consider the post-IMF era to be worth closer attention as the moment of profound ruptures between perception and reaction; second, to my mind, the circular nature of the film's reverse narrative also deserves to be noted, as I will shortly discuss in more detail.

[26] Ibid., 216.

he desires to save, namely, the innocent girl who is Sun-im's double. His reterritorialization within the military state is preceded by a violent break with the youthful desire to pursue innocent ideals.

After his injury, Young-ho's limp recurs throughout the film. After deliberately disillusioning Sun-im by flirting with Hong-ja, he sees her to the train station, where he returns the camera to her and then limps away. When he and his colleagues travel to Kunsan to capture a fugitive activist, he meets a bar girl who offers to be Sun-im's double. Unable to believe her, but unable to curb the longing for Sun-im either, he spends the night with her and also plans to have breakfast together next day. Yet he returns to duty, when his partners are running after the suspect. In attempting to escape, the suspect knocks him down and then his limp returns. He also breaks his promise to meet the bar girl again due to the need to return to Seoul with the suspect. He thus loses again a chance to reconnect with Sun-im, albeit indirectly in this case. After visiting Sun-im in hospital in the chapter after the suicide episode, his leg bothers him. Sun-im's husband hands the camera over to him, but he sells it and then starts limping again.

While the sensory-motor breakage recurs, the opportunity of deterritorialization is quickly contained due to the need to be reterritorialized within the surrounding condition such as the military regime and the neo-liberalizing condition. At each turning point or at each major crossroad in his life, Young-ho keeps losing a chance of deterritorialization from the determined milieu—a possibility of a different route, which is offered by Sun-im and her traces (such as the student in Kwangju, the girl in Kunsan, political activists, the camera, the train, and peppermint candy) that return to disrupt his sensory-motor connection. Put another way, he remains largely successful in suppressing the sensory-motor fracture and submissive to the reign of determinate and territorial movement. After all, he does not limp, but acts and moves without any trouble for

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the most part of the film. In the IMF's wake, however, Korean society experienced a profound crisis of action, which caused the rupture between perception and action to be no longer episodic or temporary but endemic to society in its entirety. Herein lies the historical and cultural significance of Young-ho's suicide and the ensuing recollection situation: they reveal a crisis of action in Korean society in the post-IMF era.

Yet my emphasis on Young-ho's suicide and the sensory-motor breakage is not meant to imply that he is another figuration of South Korea's troubled modern history or that *Peppermint Candy* marks the final phase of the tendency in Korean cinema to narrativize national sufferings through a tragic figure. Such allegorical approaches are still based on the primacy of territorial movement. My perspective is that deterritorialization is not a failed territorialization; rather, it is a manifestation of the potential that is different from the determinate or the virtual that is not yet actual but substantial and existing as the seed of a different future. The reverse narrative in the film peels off the layers of the "actualized present" in the past and thus questions territorialized movement (determinate and practical action). To be sure, Young-ho's repeated failure to realize different possibilities on the historical plane reminds us of the power of territorialization. On the other hand, the reverse narrative also "evokes the deterritorializing power of the time-image and its potential to stutter this linear pathway [that of territorialized movement] through time."[27] As the reverse chronology strips away the layer of each determined present, it reveals a fork of time where we witness paths leading to unfulfilled actions. That is, as the reverse chronology brushes history against the grain, it takes us to the points where time forks—the moments where we find virtual potentials coexistent with actual movements and witness the possibilities that Young-ho, and national history as well, "could have been" different.

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[27] Ibid., 217.

It is, then, not so farfetched to suggest that the reverse chronology in *Peppermint Candy* dislodges allegory from the domination of territorial movement at the core of chronological history. It may help clarify this point to look into the way the film establishes a connection between the opening and the ending. As the narrative plays backward without returning again to the present, it ultimately leaves us in 1979, where we see the image of an entirely different Young-ho as a tender, innocent, and idealistic youth. But this ending is not a regress to an age of romantic ideals. Indeed, what is intriguing about the ending is that it renders the reverse chronology circular. The last episode coils back to the same picnic location and the same song that opened the film and thereby it offers us a feeling that the ending converges with the beginning. It is not that the ending is reintegrated into the beginning, which would mean reterritorializing the past into the present. As discussed above, this film has no diegetic device that sends the past back to the present. This brings us to the freeze frame of Young-ho's facial close-up, with which the last chapter closes. Just like the close-up in the beginning, the ending close-up cuts off spatiotemporal references from the frame and thus abstracts Young-ho's face from its actual historical context. In other words, the film reconnects the ending to the opening, not by reterritorializing the past into the present, but by Young-ho's facial close-ups, which are detached from the determinate milieu. Through the deterritorialized facial images, the film also urges us to recognize that 1979 (or a time charged with virtual potentials) is not lost, but instead immanent in 1999 (or a time ordained by territorial movement or on the brink of collapse).

It is also interesting to notice the way the negotiation between the virtual and the actual is implicated in romance, an attribute that is certainly hard to dismiss in Lee's films. Lee is not shy about using romance conventions, though he would not render them conventionally either. To be brief, his romantic narratives are ambiguous, fragmented, and indecisive. In Young-ho's case,

his accidental killing of an innocent girl in Kwangju causes him to fall prey to self-contempt and cynicism, which leads him to reject Sun-im. His intense antiheroic actions are thus, in a sense, revealing of his strong desire for innocence or his inability to forget Sun-im. He is, in other words, trapped in between the longing for innocent love and the historical milieu hostile to such ideals, which makes it impossible to construct the romance plot in a conventional way or renders it deeply convoluted and multivalent rather than linear and straightforward. The film illustrates this situation eloquently through Young-ho's reactions to Sun-im's recollection-images (rather than the real Sun-im): above all, the bar girl in Kunsan.

During a break from his duty of surveillance, he meets her. When she asks what brought him to Kunsan, he says that he came to look for a person, which makes her anxious to hear more about his story. He then says he heard that his first love lives in Kunsan and he just came, even though he does not know exactly where she lives and cannot meet her. He then delivers the romantic lines: "I didn't come to meet her… I just had to come because it is where she lives. I would like to walk the same street she walks and see the same ocean she sees…She is in the same rain I am in now." As she teases, "You're good at fooling people," he retorts, "Do you think I am making this up?" As he alters his position from a policeman who came to capture an activist suspect to a romantic figure in search of his first love, it remains uncertain whether he is simply deceptive or genuine to some extent. Even he seems confused about whether he tells the truth or not, as suggested by the alternation of his facial expressions between that of a candid man and that of an imposter. Sitting with his back toward her, he never turns around to talk face-to-face to her. He sometimes seems to sink in a romantic fantasy, but he occasionally shoots a stealthy and sneering side-glance at her behind his back. What is clear, however, is that temporarily removed from his duty, he now stands between deterritorialization and

reterritorialization.   The indistinctness of his romantic gestures here are, in other words, symptomatic of his continued bifurcation between the virtual and the actual.

This struggle is further accentuated in the ensuing post-coitus sequence. He is seen lying, again with his back to her. She asks him to call her Sun-im and tell her anything he wants to say to Sun-im. Initially hesitant, however, he soon starts calling the name "Sun-im." He then breaks down and weeps. In this way, this sequence marks a moment when Young-ho reconnects to Sun-im, if not via a real reunion, through the nameless bar girl, who deterritorializes herself from her own identity to become Sun-im's surrogate or recollection-image. As noted above, however, this opportunity of deterritorialization from the despotic milieu is temporary; it is quickly revoked by the need to reintegrate into the suppressive state, the need to capture and take the pro-democracy activist to Seoul. The film's romantic narrative thus remains caught in between the rich feelings of virtual potentials and the difficulty of realizing them on the plane of actual history.

Then again, this is not meant to imply that in Korea's historical context, a love story is to remain broken in order to be called "truthful." To be sure, heedful of the power of determinate history to subjugate virtual potentials to its authority, however, *Peppermint Candy* also offers us chances to find the seeds of different futures that dismantle linear narratives constructed on territorialized movements. In so doing, the film also tells us that popular genre tropes can be powerful tools to come to terms with complex historical and social issues. In Lee's films, melodrama becomes an eloquent allegory of South Korea's recent history, not by success, but by failure.

3.2   HONG SANG-SOO: PARADOX OF DEPTHLESS EVERYDAY LIFE

After a Storm-and-Stress adolescence in his own right,[28] Hong entered college in 1980, the year

the Kwangju incident broke out and campuses were dominated by despair, wrath, and the

growing hunger for democracy. He believed in what student protestors were fighting for and

also joined mass demonstrations himself on several occasions. Yet he could not find a place for

himself in the college culture, which was dictated largely by the urgency of democracy struggles

and had fostered a strained and suppressive atmosphere of collectivism. His urge to find a way

out led him to America, where he studied cinema at the California College of Arts and Crafts in

1983. It was there he eventually found a cultural haven congenial to his unorthodox spirit;

according to Huh, the "individualistic atmosphere [in the new world] started to bring light to his

shadowed character."[29]

It is interesting to note Hong's coming-of-age story. His initiation into cinema forms a

sharp contrast to those of senior New Wave directors such as Park Kwang-su and Jang Sun-woo,

and it serves as a telling sign of the changes both Korean society and cinema was undergoing in

the mid-1990s. In hindsight, it is perhaps fair to say that if he had debuted in the 1980s or in the

early 1990s his films would not have drawn much attention from critics, let alone the public.

The 1980s were certainly a time for political activism, a time that required the effort to direct all

subtle thoughts toward action, however coarse the action may appear. Yet in the 1990s when

minjung discourses were increasingly degenerating into clichés, political activism was no longer

necessarily a synthetic expression of critical subtleties. The 1990s were a time when the will to

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[28] His deviant adolescence reached its peak in a suicidal attempt in 1978 after refusing to take the college entrance test, perhaps the most important rites of passage in the transition to adulthood in South Korea. Huh, ed., *Korean Film Directors: Hong Sang-soo*, 113.
[29] Ibid., 116.

epic action began giving way to the need for analytic rigor. During the decade, activists faced

several challenges, including: the need to probe democratized society without an illusion of

victory; the need to face the void left by the fading of all the fervor for political ideals; and the

need to rethink traditional frames of criticism such as the binary opposition between the *minjung*

and ruling groups, which now would often be found to serve the deceptive rhetoric of progress.

In brief, the 1990s were a post-monumental era that had to rediscover the ordinary world after

waves of monumental change. Activists, artists, filmmakers, and intellectuals found it necessary

to create a new narrative mode capable of breaking with grand history and grappling with the

contingent, ambiguous, and disjointed nature of everyday life. In this respect, the arrival of

Hong's cinema halfway through the decade was timely. In the post-epic era, the critical value of

his anti-monumental sensibility became more legible.

Yet, it does not feel right to subsume his rediscovery of everyday life under the banners

of postmodernism or deconstruction. Nor, does it seem to sit well with concepts like cynicism or

nihilism. In an interview, he commented on the futile efforts of his youth to come to terms with

the gulf between ideals and reality and the marks the experiences left in his films:

> I went through puberty clinging onto the ideals…I failed to comprehend things in life that
> couldn't be incorporated into [them]… So, my life became fraught with schizophrenia…
> [Yet in my twenties]… I could fortunately begin to see the falsehood behind those ideals
> and…better appreciate life… Characters in my movies reflect such experiences. Specific
> characters chase after clichéd ideals, or even get chased by them, but I want my gaze of
> characters to be…free from these clichés. [For them]…the conflict between ideals and
> life…is very painful…[yet] the ideals…are the essence of the problem, not life itself.[30]

Hong's remarks are reminiscent, especially when situated within the broader historical context of

Korean society in the 1990s, of Nietzsche's critique of historical knowledge hostile to life.[31] For

Hong, life without ideals is not something to deplore; to my mind, his works rather owe much of

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[30] Ibid., 51-2.
[31] Friedrich Nietzsche, "On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life," *Untimely Meditations*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 60-67.

their appeal to the impetus to free life from the paralyzing gravity of ideals. To be more precise, they become critically engaging in the audacity and tactics to affirm life without romanticizing it, that is, in the ways they maneuver through the difficulties of embracing it with all its tedious and disintegrated nature. For that matter, it is certainly worth noting that his main characters, mostly intellectuals and artists, continue to appear quite flawed, morally or perceptually; they repeatedly appear impulsive, mercurial, narcissistic, careless, forgetful, incoherent, or superficial, which are signs of life without ideals. Lacking in virtues like prudence and faithfulness, however, they are by no means evil. A more thoughtful answer would be that they are not so afraid of being all too human or risking the ideals in favor of life, however disorienting or unsettling it may be. Hong's cinema, thus, marked the emergence of a new character type, the man of paradox. As will be discussed later in more detail, they may not be entirely free from the lingering gravity of weighty sociopolitical issues in the post-*minjung* era, but they never remain trammeled by them, either.[32]

How does Hong then embrace life without ideals? How does he navigate the challenges involved in it? Perhaps, "minimalism" is a good place to begin. As David Bordwell points out, Hong shares with other Asian filmmakers such as Hou Hsiao-hsien, Tasi Ming-liang, Jia Zhang-ke, and Kore-eda Hirokazu the penchant for mundane situations and activities (rather than grand history), the elliptical narrative structure built with loosely connected episodes (instead of a goal-oriented plot), the austerity in camera movement (that prefers long and sedate takes to short and mobile shots), and the distant camera position (as confirmed in the disinterest of close-up, which evokes a sense of detachedness or plainness). In brief, Hong's films are an eloquent instance of

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[32] Notably, Hyo-seop in *The Day* is surrounded by fellow writers, critics, and publishers, but shows little interest in their grand languages about politics and society. Seon-yeong in *Turning Gate*, engaged in pillow talk with another man in a hotel room, shows great respect for his husband (who had hard times due to his engagement in the student movement but as the time changed, became a professor honored for the past and who according to her always truly helps others), but has to say at the same time, "He is not like us. He does have what we don't have; he helps others with sincerity all the time." Hong's characters remain tangential to the world of ideals, political or ethical.

the irony of minimalism that limited means can produce more room for creative initiatives, or as Bordwell puts it, "By taking away too much, the filmmaker reveals nuances in what remains."[33] Yet these criteria are still too broad to deal with the distinctive qualities of Hong's works, which give him a unique place in the minimalist tradition. For instance, if Hou's prolonged and static takes are meditative, Hong's simplified shots tend to accentuate events that are slow-paced, but impregnated with tense emotional exchanges (e.g., confusion, misconception, distrust, ridicule) between characters. If Tsai's films are renowned for minimal dialogue, Hong offers loquacious, if not eloquent, characters. Their speeches feel banal, idle, and even nonsensical, yet they often prove to be in the service of catalyzing tensions in social encounters. Hong's shots thus require us to remain attentive to events, characters, and dialogues (that is, narrative sources) rather than contemplate or probe images at length.[34] In a nutshell, Hong adopted formal premises of Asian minimalism, but he also recast the tradition in a unique way, which proves evident, above all, in the question of narrative. Unlike many other minimalist films where the role of storytelling has become significantly eroded, Hong's cinema has developed, in Bordwell's words, "a strikingly original approach to overall narrative structure."[35]

Then, what new path has Hong found in terms of storytelling? Perhaps, we can rephrase this question and ask, "How does he minimalize narrative?"—which is different from an antipathy to narrative. Typical of Hong's works is, as Bordwell points out, a radical reduction of space, time, and action[36]; they usually have a small number of main characters (less than five or

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[33] David Bordwell, "Beyond Asian Minimalism," 21.
[34] Similarly, Choi notes, "Despite his use of long takes and a fixed camera, Hong's preoccupation with characters and language often will not allow for the kind of lassitude or languor found in films by Hou or Tsai." Choi, *The South Korean Film Renaissance*, 184.
[35] Bordwell, "Beyond Asian Minimalism," 22.
[36] My discussion of this issue is indebted to Bordwell's observation. Ibid., 22-24. His perspective echoes with Hong's own remarks: "I want fragments first to be picked up and then for them to form a movie. I want to make one body that can hold all pieces even though they seem contradictory or unrelated to each other." Huh, ed., *Korean*

so); they are also noted for a short spatial and temporal trajectory (several days or so within a narrow orbit of mundane sites); and events (characters' actions and interactions), usually set in a banal situation, remain casual, arbitrary, and fragmented, which renders them lacking in any deeper meanings or motivations. This microscopic gaze has, broadly put, two notable effects. A minimal repertoire of situations makes events iterative, which invites or compels us to concentrate on details, more specifically, minute differences in the repetitive situations and events. Yet as the narrow band of settings creates echoes and variations among episodes, a broader configuration or a "pattern," as Hong calls it, becomes palpable. Consequently, on one level, his films appear preoccupied with mundane everyday life, which is governed by both random and banal events to the extent that the boundary between "contingency" and "necessity" becomes blurred. However, a closer attention would reveal an intricate architecture of connections and differences. The relationships between events may still appear tenuous and fragile, yet because of that, they are all the more striking.

The "pattern," however, is not to be taken to imply something like an order hidden under the disjointed surface of everyday life. Indeed, the notion of depth has little role in Hong's films. The issue of the details may be helpful, again. Hong's minimalism, as noted above, obliges us to the details and slight alterations in his films. However, they are not traces or clues linked to a secret. An exemplary case is *Virgin Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors* (2000, *Virgin* hereafter), which tells of a tug-of-war romance between an affluent gallerist, Jae-hun, and a deprived screenwriter, Su-jeong twice. The first part relies mostly on Jae-hun's memory, while the second half pivots around Su-jeong's. The two memory blocks remain the same in the basic storyline. But minute changes in their details are unmistakable, which makes them never fully symmetrical

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Film Directors: Hong Sang-soo, 51. See also Adam Hartzell and Darcy Paquet, "Hong Sang-soo," Koreanfilm.org, last modified February 28, 2007, http://koreanfilm.org/hongsangsoo.html.

and leaves the viewer wondering what actually happened or whether the differences are important or simply accidental. Still, one thing is clear: the differences are not to be reduced to individual perspectives, e.g., the incongruities between Jae-hun's and Su-jeong's memory. As Bordwell points out, "It is not that Jae-hun remembers a moment in their affair in one way, while Su-jeong remembers it differently. Indeed, we have no reason to believe that the flashbacks represent the characters' memories at all." That is, the film "does not supply any subjective motivation for the disparities."[37] To take the birthday party episode in the first section, for instance, it begins with Jae-hun bantering with others. Su-jeong soon appears with TV director Kwon, her boss, who is also Jae-hun's alumnus. In the following sequence, director Kwon, who is now drunk, starts making indiscreetly intimate gestures toward Su-jeong, which disturbs Jae-hun. As this anecdote is restaged in the latter half, it begins, once again, inside the apartment (Jae-hun's point of view). He opens the door and director Kwon enters with Su-jeong. As the replay continues, however, its differences from the first one become clear. Especially noteworthy is its ending; now located in an adjacent room, the camera captures Jae-hun engaged in a passionate kiss with another woman behind the half-closed door, while the left half of the frame, split by the door, stays allocated to Su-jeong and director Kwon who are trading caustic words with each other in the living room set in the background, without knowing what is happening behind the half-closed door. We as the viewers are, thus, placed in a position different from both Su-jeong's and Jae-hun's.[38] But this does not mean that we are in a superior position. The new piece of story has little to do with "omniscience" or "objectivity"; it does not

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[37] David Bordwell, "Beyond Asian Minimalism," 26-27. Hong himself noted in an interview, "I remember I decided not to be stubborn about showing only the things from the man's perspective, although each chapter seems to lean on the main character's memory. I think it was better to give rich content by not being strict on formalizing the content based on each subject's vision." Huh, ed., *Korean Film Directors: Hong Sang-soo*, 60.

[38] Another example is Su-jeong's visit to Jae-hun's home in the first half. Early in the scene when Jae-hun takes a shower, Su-jeong, alone in his room, takes off her bra and put it in her purse, which Jae-hun can never see.

add to our understanding of what really happened but rather our confusion. Still only with limited and disjointed pieces of memory, we have little more privilege or authority than the characters in determining who is more truthful or justifiable. Indeed, it seems pointless to raise such questions for Hong's films. They continue to deny us access to the psychic dimensions of the characters, and notions like "psychological realism" have little bearing on Hong's films.

This leads us to a host of motifs repeatedly accentuated in Hong's films: surface, drifting, and paradox. Hong's storytelling is defiant of an epistemological or ethical center; it sprawls out as events are loosely stitched or piled up. It is not even or rectilinear, but rather it is bumpy and curvy. As already noted, it grows through echoes and variations among the events. *Virgin* is exemplary again. It is structured in the form of a fold or a diptych. If its main narrative sources are the two prolonged series of flashbacks (respectively titled "Perhaps Accident" and "Perhaps Intention"), they are framed by three episodes set in one day in the present: "Day's Wait," a prologue which introduces Jae-hun, who is anxiously waiting for Su-jeong in a hotel room on the day they chose to consummate their love; "Suspended Cable Car," an interlude which serves as the hinge of the two story panels and shifts the focus to Su-jeong, who is quite reluctantly on the way to the hotel and becomes accidently caught in a cable car suspended in midair due to power failure; and "Naught Shall Go Ill When You Find Your Mate," an epilogue where as the cable car is fixed and moving again, Su-jeong ultimately arrives at the hotel room. What intrigues me about this diptych form is the peculiar way the two story blocks are paired and the strange sense of humor inscribed in it. The "all's well that ends well" kind of conclusion after all the uncertainties roused by the disparities between the two panels of flashbacks is especially notable. "Contradiction" does not seem quite right for the tense interplays between "accident" and "intention." Rather, they are paradoxical; namely, they are both "adjacent to and divergent from"

each other without any center on which to build our perception.[39] Of course, the mismatches between the two memory panels coax us into looking for motivations behind actions or determining whom to trust. Yet, the digging leads nowhere but to a lateral sliding between the two series of memories or between "accident" and "intention." They are "beside" each other, but without having any priority over the other, which makes us continue to wonder which way to look. Social interaction goes on without any ultimate solution to the dissonances between the two directions. It always appears and disappears somewhere between the two panels of "Perhaps," but never entirely on one or the other. This gives us more sense of the humor embedded in the inconclusive conclusion, "all's well that ends well." The indecisive coda bears witness to Hong's efforts to encompass the simultaneity of the two distinct directions (the two diverging kinds of "perhaps"), or to challenges he raises to the reign of "good sense" in that if "good sense," as Deleuze notes, "affirms that in all things there is a determinable sense or direction" and "forces us to choose one direction over the other," "paradox is the affirmation of both senses or directions at the same time."[40]

Understandably, scholars like Chung Hye Seung and David Scott Diffrient notice Cubist legacies in Hong's films. Hong's cinema, in their analysis, bears affinity to films like *Rashomon* (Kurosawa Akira, 1950) in that it adopts multiple points of view, which complicates the narrative to the extent that no ultimate solution seems to be possible.[41] Hong's narrative Cubism, however, cannot be reduced to pluralist thought. It is distinctive not because it embraces multiple voices instead of one master perspective, but rather because it questions the notion of

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[39] My view here draws on Deluze's notes on paradox in *The Logic of Sense*. Early in the study of "becoming" and its paradoxical nature, he writes, "Paradox appears as a dismissal of depth, a display of events at the surface, and a deployment of language along this limit. Humor is the art of the surface, which is opposed to the old irony, the art of depths and heights." Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, trans. Mark Lester and Charles Stivale (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 9.

[40] Ibid., 1, 76-77.

[41] Chung Hye Seung and David Scott Diffrient, "Forgetting to Remember, Remembering to Forget: The Politics of Memory and Modernity in the Fractured Films of Lee Chang-dong and Hong Sang-soo," 129-30.

perspective itself and its presuppositions, as well, such as depth and the subject as *the* autonomous, self-conscious, and consistent center.[42] It not only abandons old principles of representation, such as a fixed perspective and harmonious proportion, but as it breaks an object into fragments and displays them on the two-dimensional plane the signs of depth, such as shade, turn into that of width. Depth is just another name for slopes between the surfaces of distinct levels. What is inside is on the outside; the inside is continuous with the outside. Watching Hong's films thus involve such feelings as falling, climbing, turning, reversing, and circling— not digging, entering, or heading to one point (one character or goal). No accident, his figures are marked with, as noted above, impulsiveness, obliviousness, indecisiveness, opportunism, superficiality, in short, effects of the refusal of good sense or the primacy of width over depth.[43] They are not hypocrites or schemers *per se*, architects of the inside. For them, the most deep is the surface. They are illustrations of "life without good sense," which does not have one determinable direction but always travels in conflicting directions at the same time. Then again, Hong is not an advocate for something like "subversive bad sense." "Bad" may seem opposing to "good" or "right," but once romanticized, it turns hardly different from good sense, for it is now "the" orientation to pursue over the other. Hong's characters are by no means heroes of "good" bad sense; they are instead symptomatic of life without good sense. Understandably, "drifting" becomes a dominant strain in Hong's cubist model of narrative. Home is not where

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[42] Kim offers a similar view when he reads the accident-intention nexus in *Virgin* via the term, "interchangeability." In *Rashomon*, characters are self-conscious individuals with different interests. The core question is, thus, whether they are truthful and if not, why they lie. For Hong, however, neither the integrity of the individual subject nor the distinction between true and false is central. Truth and lie or accident and intention are never clearly separable, but rather inextricably twined with each other: "In every intention, a trace of chance can be found." Kim, *The Remasculinization of Korean Cinema*, 211-13.

[43] Hong's characters are reminiscent of Michel Tournier's Friday, who finds it strange to set a higher value on depth than on breadth; the prejudice "accepts 'superficial' as meaning not 'of wide extent' but 'of little depth,' [but] 'deep' … [as meaning] 'of great depth' and not 'of small surface.'" But for him, "a feeling such as love is better measured, if it can be measured at all, by the extent of its surface than by its degree of depth." Quoted in Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, 315, 336 (note 7). For the original source, see Michel Tournier, *Friday*, trans. Norman Denny (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985), 67.

the story is. His protagonists are either leaving home or straying from home. They are always migrating from one place to another or from one person to another. And as the paths of the wanderers crisscross with one another, the fabric of the narrative becomes complex.

His debut film *The Day*, for instance, is organized into four sections[44] that portray failed romantic relationships intertwined with each other. The first episode revolves around Hyo-seop, an unsuccessful novelist who is having an affair with Bo-gyeong, but who also appears to be engaged in another romantic relationship with Min-je. In the second section, we are introduced to Dong-wu, a salesperson who is on a business trip to a local city, Jeon-ju. As the meeting is abruptly put off until next morning, Dong-wu comes to spend the night in a cheap motel and ends up having a call girl. Here, he is also revealed to be Bo-kyeong's husband, first through a phone conversation he has with her in a restaurant and then through a family photo he sees prior to having sex with the prostitute. Then the focus shifts to Min-je who sells tickets at a third-run theater. She is anxious to have love from Hyo-seop, who unfortunately would not requite her love but rather often abuse it. She buys him meals, gives him an allowance, and copyedits his novel voluntarily. Yet, she also turns out to be breaking the heart of another man, Min-su, who helps his uncle run a theater; however, Min-su seeks her attention to no avail. Returning to Bo-kyeong, who is now at a bus station with a large suitcase, the final segment tracks her futile attempt to leave home. She waits for Hyo-seop at the bus station, but he does not turn up. She goes to his place only to find it locked. Thus starts her wandering around the city, during which she accidentally witnesses her husband entering a clinic, and she later finds that it was for a

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[44] Allegedly, they were written separately by four writers—each of whom was in charge of developing one character apiece—and Hong combined them later into one story. Choi, *The South Korean Film Renaissance*, 185; David Scott Diffrient, "Drift and Duration in Hong Sang-soo's *The Day a Pig Fell into the Well*," *Post Script* 27, no. 3 (Summer 2008): 90.

venereal disease test. At night, she revisits Hyo-seop's place, but it is still locked, which leaves her no other option than returning home.

The multi-panel narrative is hardly new in itself. At stake is the way they are connected, which invites us, first, to "chance encounter" as a key constitutive motif in the film's intertextual edifice. In Hyo-seop's segment, for instance, his path crisscrosses with Dong-wu's and Min-su's paths briefly. Halfway through the segment, he is on his way to a publisher and takes the same elevator as Dong-wu. When he is taken to the court for the fracas he caused at a restaurant over an alumni dinner, we can see Min-su bailing himself out of detention. Of course, at this point, they are unknown to each other. Their relationships are not yet set up for the viewer, either. One can recognize these fortuitous encounters only retrospectively. This tactic sometimes creates a shock effect, as is the case when we realize in hindsight that Hyo-seop was in the same elevator as his lover's husband without knowing it. It may also evoke an uncanny sense that strangers who brush past everyday may not totally be strangers to us and vice versa—an experience endemic to a densely populated urban milieu like Seoul, where individuals develop similar patterns and coinciding trajectories of daily life and where anonymity often becomes a screen that separates or shields private lives.[45]

However, what intrigues me more about the polyptych structure is its potential for infinite expansion (and the way it is brought to a halt), which indicates Hong's efforts on the structural level to come to terms with life without good sense. Simply put, his characters are all in a double-bind situation. They oscillate between two incompatible paths, namely, two separate love affairs and each set of relationships overlaps another: Dong-wu--Bo-kyeong--Hyo-seop/Bo-kyeong--Hyo-seop--Min-je/Hyo-seop--Min-je--Min-su…and so on. The film's plotline thus can

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[45] Kim also points out, "Because of its discursive web of people populating the modern city… [*The Day*] suggests that it is common to find two people who do not recognize one another, yet whose lives are profoundly affected by each other's existence." Kim, *The Remasculinization of Korean Cinema*, 224.

be summarized into a pattern: A-B-C/B-C-D/C-D-E…[46] Dong-wu and Min-su may seem a little

tricky, but they are not an exception. Mysophobic Dong-wu has no actual extramarital affair, but

strays from his sterile world when he has a call girl in a mucky motel room. Besides, he also has

women whose tender postures toward him, albeit presented in furtive ways, cannot go unnoticed:

his friend's wife in Jeon-ju, who shows regret at his early departure and continues to look out the

apartment window to watch him walk away down on the street until her husband finally calls her

from the bedroom, and Bo-kyeong's pharmacist friend, who attends to his needs in Bo-kyeong's

dream of her own funeral she has over a nap in the friend's house.[47] In Dong-wu's case, we thus

have a set, X-A-B, with "X" denoting a latent factor. Min-su is no less inconsistent than others.

He preaches teenagers not to waste their youth loitering around third-run theaters to sneak into a

sexploitation movie, but he runs one of the third-run theaters. He is unreserved in honoring his

love for Min-je; "What should I do if innocence fails to get through?" On another level,

however, his innocence turns out to be not so innocent. When another box-office girl, who cares

for him, but has presumably been sexually assaulted by the theater's president (his uncle), asks

him, "Can't you stop the boss from doing it?" he responds callously, "It's up to you. What can I

do?" Still he is not simply an imposter. His life, as with other characters, forks into two

diverging directions. Yet, in his case, his morality forces him to stay committed to one direction,

which leaves the other end of his set abolished: hence, D-E-( ). However, his heightened

morality is not the sign of his strength, but rather his weakness. If Dong-wu, albeit no less

obsessed with ideals, endures life without them, Min-su is too frail to do so. It is no accident that

he eventually becomes a martyr of good sense, who breaks the chain of love affairs by killing

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[46] In a similar vein, Diffrient compares it to a relay race: "each character in this film passes the narrative 'baton' to another." Diffrient, "Drift and Duration," 95.

[47] Dong-wu's past relationships with the two women remain unspecified. Given the importance of details in Hong's films, however, it is hard to dismiss their markedly affectionate gestures to Dong-wu.

Hyo-seop and Min-je; he stops the continuum of paradoxes in the name of good sense. Yet he is an atypical case in Hong's cinema or maybe the least Hong-esque character. After all, his protagonists never die in other films, even when they often appear seized by a suicidal urge[48]; rather, their lives keep bifurcating without any ultimate answer to which way to go. The polyptych form of narrative, in other words, urges us to rethink the habit of favoring 'small surface' with 'great depth' over 'wide extent' with 'little depth.'

In this regard, Bo-kyeong's dream merits a little more attention. It begins with an abrupt transition from the pharmacy scene to her funeral picture. Dong-wu is busy receiving mourners and Bo-kyeong's friend entreats him to have a meal first. Shortly after, Hyo-seop shows up with Min-je and unabashedly says to Dong-wu, "At last, we meet like this." Next, Dong-wu cleanses his ears in the bathroom, while Hyo-seop makes a furtive visit to the bedroom where Bo-kyeong lies and caresses her, which causes her to open eyes and have a peek at him. This is followed by another bizarre scene where all main characters are sitting around a table and sharing cake, as if to celebrate something, when Bo-kyeong emerges out of the bedroom and says with a stony face, "Everybody's here." "Got up already?" Dong-wu responds, as if nothing special happened, and quickly returns to his cake. Then, it cuts back to Bo-kyeong, who is now waking up from a nap, which allows us to realize, again retrospectively, that it was all her dream.

Thus structured, the shift between reality and dream feels like a sliding on a Mobius strip. The reality (the outside) is continuous with the dream (the inside). Technically, it occurs without any transitional cue. Moreover, it tells little of her inner mind; it barely makes us better informed of her internal struggles—e.g., the causes for her troubled marriage or her affection for Hyo-seop that never wilts even after she learns of Hyo-seop's affair with Min-je. Instead, in her

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[48] For instance, the policeman in *The Power of Kangwon Province* (1998), Kyeong-su in *The Turning Gate* (2002), Sang-won in *Tale of Cinema* (2005).

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dream, the reality is reconfigured into a collage, where spatiotemporal distances are abolished and things set apart in reality are put side by side: "Everybody's here," says Bo-kyeong. As characters who are supposed to remain separated from each other are summoned to one place, this narrative collage makes their conflicts more tangible. Yet a further complication arises from the concomitance of distinct temporalities. Most strikingly, Bo-kyeong is dead, but also alive. This is not an "either-or" question; it is not that if one is true, the other is false. She is being mourned, and at the same time she is napping. She is moving both to the past (death or disappearance) and to the future (awaking or reappearance). Likewise, other characters also pull in both directions simultaneously: the time before her death and the time after her death. Hyo-seop slips into the bedroom where Bo-kyeong is sleeping and also gives a flirtatious smile to Min-je in the funeral room. Dong-wu is adjusting to a new life in which the substantive presence of her pharmacist friend is unmistakable, but he also remains Bo-kyeong's husband when she emerges from the bedroom. In brief, good sense has no power here. Unlike Min-su, who restlessly looks for one destination, characters in this caricature of social interactions remain quite tolerant of the situation where opposing directions coexist and the separation of before and after is negated. And, as their nonchalant attitudes to the paradoxical condition persist, deadpan humor prevails over good sense.[49]

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[49] Another compelling instance of Hong's paradoxical humor is the opening of *Woman Is the Future of Man* (2004), where Mun-ho tells Heon-jun to walk on the unspoiled carpet of snow in the yard of his home, saying that he saved the first snow of the year as a gift for Heon-jun. Interestingly, Heon-jun walks backward a few steps on it and then, without turning around, moves forward, using his own footprints so that it may appear as if someone began walking in the middle of the snow carpet and heading in one way to get out. This play with directions (backward vs. forward and in vs. out) continues to resonate across the entire film. Mun-ho helps Heon-jun find his first love Seon-hwa, or in his own words, "offers them a day to return to their past." But, it turns out that it is also Mun-ho's trip to his past. Indeed, Mun-ho is, in a sense, Heon-jun's mirror image. In the restaurant scene, while Heon-jun is absent, Mun-ho does what Heon-jun did when he was alone: they ask the same waitress if she would like to work with them (acting and modeling); both are also propelled into memories of Seon-hwa by the same woman outside the window (as she returns their gazes briefly); and finally, their flashbacks show that Seon-hwa became Mun-ho's first love after Heon-jun abandoned her during his study abroad. Thus, by helping Heon-jun visit Seon-hwa, Mun-ho has the opportunity to meet his first love again. Yet what is to be added is that even when Mun-ho knows what Heon-jun does not know, there is no reason to believe that he is superior to Heon-jun, perceptually or ethically; he still repeats what

Hong's interests in the surface of the everyday and its paradoxes also frequently develop into spatial questions. Especially noteworthy is the ubiquity of interstitial spaces. As discussed above, his characters are mostly drifters. We can seldom see them at work or home, but instead wandering the streets, vacationing, waiting, encountering friends, befriending strangers, chatting, drinking, and the like, which tends to end with an unsatisfying or passing affair. His films, thus, often trigger us into a geopsychic reading of everyday spaces, especially those for slack periods, which are both adjacent to and deviational from the normative trajectory of life. Prototypical is the cut from the publisher scene to the gallery in Hyo-seop's segment. He visits a publisher to show his manuscript, but the editor soon strays into his own idea for a novel that blends Marx and Chuang-Tze into a tale of a former student activist who converts to Taoism after undergoing a collapse of political beliefs. Hyo-seop has no interest in the editor's rather clichéd idea and not enough patience to hear it to the end. His concern is elsewhere: "Can I get my paycheck today?" he asks. But the editor only repeats that an advance payment violates company policies and he should wait until the end of the month. Then it cuts to Hyo-seop and Bo-kyeong, who are having coffee from a vending machine in a secluded area in the back of the gallery. "Why do we always come to a place like this?" Bo-kyeong asks. Hyo-seop replies, "Isn't it nice here? Coffee shop is too stuffy." Bo-kyeong returns with tender words, "I've never seen a man like you," and Hyo-seop begins fantasizing their marriage life. His reverie, however, is quickly shattered by an unexpected appearance of a friend of his, who turns out to be tending to his fiancé's exhibition in the gallery.

Set side by side, these two scenes present an intriguing contrast. The publisher is a public area, which is, after all, ordained by such values as bureaucratic order, social decorum, and grand

Heon-jun does rather than drive him from behind. Watching this film, thus, gives a series of paradoxical feelings: "backward" turns into "forward"; "before" is indiscernible from "after"; progress circles back to regress; the past is in the future and vice versa.

language. In such a public sphere in which good sense dictates, a man of paradox like Hyo-seop cannot help remaining a problematic figure. His appearance in a public space repeatedly ends up reaffirming the irresoluble disparities between them. In contrast, the recessed coffee place in the gallery is quite paradoxical itself. It is set in between inside and outside; it is both an entrance to the gallery and an exit to the street. It is a public place as a part of the gallery, but also a private space as a rendezvous for Hyo-seop and Bo-kyeong. It is secluded (partitioned off from both the gallery and the street) and open, simultaneously (linked to them). It is also where the hegemonic tempos of life come to a pause; it forms a temporary hiatus or interval in the stream of normative movements. To further clarify the intermediate-indeterminate nature of the interstice, it is worth noting two differing reactions to the space.

"What are you doing here?" Hyo-seop's friend asks. He is unable to answer the question. Unlike his friend who has good reason to be there (his fiancé's exhibition), Hyo-seop is there for no good reason or for a false reason that does not tally with the space's accepted value. Still, we cannot say that he is at a wrong place. The interstitial space is a blind spot of "good reason." Its indeterminacy makes it open to personal uses, which often become creative or divergent from its determined value. Notable in this sense is Bo-kyeong's reaction, which forms a good contrast to that of Hyo-seop's friend. She draws our attention to the peculiar quality of the interstice, when she asks, "Why do we always come to a place like this?" For her, Hyo-seop's unorthodox use of space is telling of his bohemian spirit, a reason for her admiration, as suggested when she admits, "I've never seen a man like you." His penchant for an interstitial space may simply be a result of his financial problem (e.g., his failure to get a paycheck before meeting Bo-kyeong), or necessity may have allowed him to acquire a good eye for interstitial spaces. In addition, we are given too little information about her to decide whether she is aware of his troubled condition and trying to

enliven him or just projecting her own desire onto him. All the unsolved questions bring us to a sense that ambiguity and misconception are endemic to an interstitial space. What is intriguing about Hong's characters, however, is that they repeatedly show that vagueness, or more precisely indeterminacy, is not always detrimental to social connection. Bo-kyeong may be misconstruing Hyo-seop, and vice versa. Nevertheless, the odds of their internal differences (which the distrust of appearance spurs us on to find) hardly hamper their interaction on surface. Their persevering relationship rather proves that misconception can often become constitutive of social interaction. Hyo-seop's taste for interstitial spaces remains unexplained. Still the nebulous situation does not stop Bo-kyeong from discerning his distinctive charm in it and her words from reassuring him of her love for him. Miscommunication is not necessarily a failed communication; more often than not, it is another mode of interaction, which is true particularly of an interstice, an indeterminate contact zone that turns congenial to a cohabitation of heterogeneous elements as "good sense" or "good reason" begins losing its power.

Hong's interest in the interstitial remains a mainstay in his later films; the motif continues to return through diverse geocultural forms like vacation sites, motels, pubs, cafés, street corners, and alleys. Meanwhile, overall narrative structure becomes further minimalized; from his second film *The Power of Kangwon Province* (1998), his storytelling tends to use one set of story blocks or romantic relationships instead of multiple ones. Now his films in general show A-B or A-B-C patterns reconfigured into varied diptych structures such as A-B/a-b, A-B/B-C, and A-B-C/a-b-c. In *The Power of Kangwon Province*, we can detect a variation of the A-B pattern. It follows two ex-lovers, Sang-gwon and Ji-suk, whose paths overlap, unbeknown to each other, as they go on a trip separately to the same popular tourist area, Kangwon Province, over the same period of time. Set mainly in the same area, but tracking the two characters' distinct trajectories, the film is split

into two parts. Yet, as in Hong's other films, the two story panels are linked through thin threads of coincidences. For example, Sang-gwon's friend brushes past Ji-suk on the train for Kangwon. Ji-suk sees a dying goldfish on a mountain trail and Sang-gwon finds later at his office one of his two goldfishes missing. If, as noted above, *Virgin* is built on the A-B/a-b formula with two parallel but asymmetrical memory panels, *Turning Gate* (2002) is coordinated into the A-B/B-C structure. On his way back to the hometown after his debut film flopped, actor Gyeong-su meets two women in two different cities noted for tourism: Myeong-suk in Chuncheon and Seon-yeong in Gyeongju. Myeong-suk quickly grows desperate for his affection to no avail, but in the latter episode, it is he that becomes desperate to win Seon-yeong's mind. Here again, the two stories form a fold as they involve both differences (e.g., chasing-being chased and hurting-being hurt) and repetitions (e.g., the identical words from the two different women, "You in me, me in you," and the similarity between the folktale of the Turning Gate in the first episode and Gyeong-su's inability to pass through the door of Seon-yeong's home).[50] *Tale of Cinema* (2005) relies on the same format, but this time, the story folds on an actress, who engages in short-lived affairs with two men, one in "reel" life and the other in "real" life. To name one more example, *Woman Is the Future of Man* (2004) employs the A-B-C/a-b-c frame. Here time is used as the hinge for the two story boards; the reunion of three protagonists in the present (A-B-C) turns into a replay of their love triangle in the past (a-b-c).

If, on the thematic and stylistic level, Hong's rediscovery of the everyday is worth noting as a distinctive effort to confront the post-epic, or post-*minjung*, milieu without illusion (with the

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[50] The folktale is about a man who dies from a prohibited love with a Chinese princess, but returns to life as a snake and follows her to a temple in Korea. Yet after entering the temple to solicit food, she does not return, and the snake waits for her before the Turning Gate until death. Gyeong-su pays little attention to this tale, when his friend tells it. But it returns to his mind later when he waits for Seon-yeong before her home. We can thus suggest that this film is not about what is behind the door, but more about what happens before it, or the history 'before' the gate (rejections, hesitations, delays, waiting, peeping, stalking, excuses, frustrations, resentments, regrets, and so on).

paradoxes of life without depth and good sense), his cinema also offers a remarkable case of how filmmaking practice in South Korea has evolved since the mid-1990s. It is perhaps the case that his perseverance and prolificacy owes much to his minimalism. Indeed, many senior directors could not survive or had difficulties adapting to the rapid changes of the local film industry in the 1990s. In spite of some signs of improvement especially at the end of the decade, the general condition of filmmaking still remained quite uncongenial to venturous initiatives and heavily biased toward lucrative projects. Moreover, funding resources from public sectors were also scanty or underdeveloped. In brief, filmmakers in the 1990s were left with few alternatives to high production value and paltry public subsidies. Nonetheless, Hong could find a viable path of independent filmmaking between local blockbusters and publicly funded small cinemas. With his minimalist approach, he became an exemplary case of niche filmmaking between inflated maximalism and futile protectionism.

4.0   THE CINEMA OF VIOLENCE: PARK CHAN-WOOK AND NATURALISM

What were *you* before Bull Weed…found you?

Rolls Royce to Feathers, *Underworld* (Josef von Sternberg, 1927).

[H]ow often the figure of the 'great' criminal, however repellent his ends may have been, has aroused the secret admiration of the public.

Walter Benjamin, "Critique of Violence."[1]

Beneath the omissions, the illusions, the lies of those who would have us believe in the necessities of nature or the functional requirements of order, we have to discover war: war is the cipher of peace … it is not enough to rediscover this war as an explanatory principle; it has to be reactivated. We have to force it out of the silent, larval forms in which it goes on without anyone realizing it.

Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended*.[2]

"It should be pretty," Keum-ja in *Sympathy for Lady Vengeance* (Park Chan-wook, 2005; *SLV* hereafter) responds composedly to a former fellow inmate, who crafted a gun at Keum-ja's request. Unable to hold back her curiosity over the graceful bas-relief decorations on the grips, the inmate asks while handing it over to her, "What are these for? Isn't a solid shot all that matters?" This rather peculiar demand of Keum-ja's exemplifies the thematics essential to Park's films. Where does the urge to revenge originate? What makes it inexorable even to the point where it becomes remorseless? Besides, why does it have to be pretty? What justifies her insistence on beautiful revenge? Is it simply another superficial aestheticization of violence?

These issues are not limited to Park's films. His obsession with the revenge narrative, in my view, offers a key venue for discussing provocative aspects of Korean cinema today and thus enriching our understanding of the contentious nature of its recent rejuvenation. His fixation on

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[1] Walter Benjamin, "Critique of Violence," in *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Schocken Books, 1978), 281.
[2] Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended*, trans. David Macey (New York: Picador, 2003), 268.

the captivity/release motif is quite understandable, if we note Korea's turbulent modern history: colonization, the civil war, the national partition, decades of dictatorship, and the IMF crisis. Darcy Paquet thus found in Dae-su's unmerited captivity in *Old Boy* (Park Chan-wook, 2003) a parallel to the frustrations pent up in the minds of Koreans during pre-democratic eras, and in his hunger for justice a sense of the urgency to vent suppressed energies.[3] In a similar vein, Choi Jinhee also notes that the Dae-su character incarnates a shared desire that has revitalized Korean cinema in recent years; his strong urge to tell the story of his stolen past is "emblematic of the current status of the South Korean film industry."[4]

Noteworthy though they are, these views leave some compelling issues untouched. Few would believe that the urge to confront troubled pasts is unique to Park. For that matter, it would suffice to recall the Korean New Wave, which, as discussed in the opening chapter, pivoted around the efforts to rewrite national history from subaltern perspectives or to redefine the *minjung* as the true protagonist of history.[5] Nor does the revenge motif itself entitle Park's films to special attention. One may find, without much difficulty, a good number of vendetta dramas in other national cinemas. We are thus prompted to ask what makes his vengeance films distinctive and what the public's sympathy for his avengers tells us about the sociocultural dynamic of South Korea today.

At the beginning of this study, I demonstrated that employing sociopolitical perspectives (e.g., associating it with democratic transitions) or industrial viewpoints (e.g., emphasizing the structural shifts in the local film industry) could not present a satisfying account for New Korean Cinema. I then suggested that in order to reach a meaningful perspective on Korean cinema's

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[3] Darcy Paquet, *New Korean Cinema: Breaking the Waves* (London: Wallflower, 2009), 1-3.

[4] Jinhee Choi, *The South Korean Film Renaissance: Local Hitmakers, Global Provocateurs* (Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2010), 1.

[5] Namhee Lee, *The Making of Minjung: Democracy and the Politics of Representation in South Korea* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007), 2-5, 33.

stunning rejuvenation, it would be crucial to elucidate the enthusiasms the Korean public has

shown, often unexpectedly, for narratively and stylistically audacious films and that we are thus

impelled to examine the new thematics and vocabularies Korean cinema developed to commune

with its audiences or give voice to their changing concerns and tastes in the post-authoritarian

era. Here, Park's works constitute one of the most compelling cases. As with other fellow

filmmakers, he also had to wrestle with the tough environments of the Korean film industry (e.g.,

the intense demand of commercial viability).[6] Yet, with such films as *Old Boy*, he became

remarkable evidence that inventiveness is not always at odds with popular reception. Infused

with pungent elements such as incestuous affairs and intense violence, the film had kept its

producers on edge before its theatrical release. In the end, however, the film proved their qualms

to be precarious by becoming "one of the most interesting commercial events in Korean cinema

in the mid-2000s."[7]

Indeed, the rise of the avenger as an iconic character through Park's inventive use of the

revenge narrative poses serious challenges to established views on the evolution of Korean

society and cinema in the wake of democratic transitions. Toward the end of *Old Boy*, for

instance, the film shifts focus from "why Dae-su was imprisoned" to "why he is freed"—on

broader terms, "why *we* were imprisoned" to "why *we* are freed." The abrupt shift of narrative

focus is not simply a rhetorical gesture. Embedded in it is the irony that today's freedom is no

less painful than yesterday's confinement; or you may say, it dramatizes a Foucauldian turn—

"why we are incited to believe that we were locked and now are free."[8] The irony, I would add,

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[6] In the mid-2000s when Park became a globally recognized filmmaker, film critic Kim Young-jin wrote that "Park is standing at the peak of success," but the volatile conditions of the local film industry have made him vulnerable to the anxiety that even an acclaimed director like him could "crumble like a sand castle at any moment." Young-jin Kim, *Korean Film Directors: Park Chan-wook* (Seoul: KOFIC, 2007), 11.

[7] Ibid., 7-8, 45.

[8] The narrative shift is, in my view, reminiscent of Foucault's turn to genealogy: "The question I would like to pose is not, Why are we repressed? but rather, Why do we say with so much passion and so much resentment against our

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also resonates with public disillusionments with the course of historical changes after democratization. The 1990s in South Korea was, as Nancy Abelmann aptly depicts it, a decade of "collapses": those of the Seongsu Bridge over the Han River (1994), the Sampung Department Store in downtown Seoul (1995), the Daegu Subway (1995), and even national economy (1997). Such disasters would stir up broad public oppositions to the developmentalism from old military regimes. No less marked in the social scenery of the 1990s, however, were a series of financial scandals, which indicated the deep ties of new civilian leaders to the old residues from military regimes such as the state-corporate collusion.[9] Korean society in the decade was thus suffused with the sense that democracy was betrayed and the distaste for political society "grew stronger in the era of civilian democracy than in the era of military dictatorship."[10] On that account, it may not be an overstatement to say that the reversal of the narrative flow in *Old Boy* echoes the social climate of South Korea in the 1990s. Quite analogous to the case of Dae-su, Korean society awoke to find itself in darkness or a larger prison.[11]

This is not to say that democratization had little to do with the revival of Korean cinema; to be sure, its innovatory spirits could not have been reawakened without the freedom to explore politically and socially sensitive issues. Still, it was another challenge to confront a new darkness, i.e., the democratic milieu that is supposedly more open, but in effect more confusing and disorienting, perceptually and ethically alike. Korean society in the post-democratization era

most recent past, against our present, and against ourselves, that we are repressed?" Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Vol. 1, An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1978), 8-9.

[9] Nancy Abelmann, *The Melodrama of Mobility: Women, Talk, and Class in Contemporary South Korea* (Honolulu: U of Hawai'i P, 2003), 6-7.

[10] Kyung-Sup Chang, "Compressed Modernity and Its Discontents: South Korean Society in Transition," *Economy and Society* 28, no. 1 (1999), 35; quoted in Abelmann, *The Melodrama of Mobility*, 7.

[11] This echoes what Kim notes in discussing *Lady Vengeance*: "In…Korean society where procedural democracy is generally complete, the dualism of absolute good and absolute evil has collapsed. Some voices of opposition may exist, but a clear angle of opposition as in the past cannot be attained. In the process, only disillusionment with reality, the feeling that the world is not changing the right way, is amplified." Young-jin Kim, *Korean Film Directors: Park Chan-wook*, 31.

thus continued to witness the liberty of expression, as noted above, compounded or restrained by the confusion or the frustration over what and how to express. My sense here is that this ironic situation forms the constellation of the birth of Park's vengeful characters; to my eye, it becomes tangible in the realms to which his cinema recurrently take us, that is, somewhere in between the heightened will to action (the idea of liberty) and the actual condition of action (historical limitation). Indeed, his films harken back to what Gilles Deleuze calls the "originary world," which arises between the indeterminate and the determinate, the non-territorial and the territorial, abstraction and actualization, and the idealism of affection and the realism of action—the world of "primordial impulses" idealism cannot make felt and realism remains unable to represent.[12] It is no accident that Park describes his avengers as follows: "[They] have goals, but those goals aren't realized properly. In that situation, [they] are faced with a dilemma. The conclusion of my movie is the depiction of that dilemma [not its resolution]."[13] In a similar vein, he also noted in an interview, "[R]evenge is an endless circle of evil, going around and around until the chain breaks. We tend to justify vengeance, but it's not my idea to justify it or explain it. My idea in this film is to take this vengeance, right or wrong, unjust or foolish, and to get the audience to feel it, to taste it."[14]

Yet this is not just about personal taste; a better explanation resides in the originary world itself. As already implied in the term "originary," the world is not transitional or derivative, but autonomous and consistent. Besides, its impulses exceed the restrictive conditions of historical milieux. A salient attribute of the originary world is thus violence beyond the established social

[12] Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema I: The Movement-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 123. This view also finds echoes in Jonathan Romney when he calls Park's vengeance trilogy "parodic naturalism" in that they tend to address social issues through excessive aestheticization "as if to mock the notion that fictions must be rooted in a recognizable world to be believable." Jonathan Romney, "Sympathy for the Devil," *Artforum International* 44, no. 9 (May 2006), 277.

[13] Kim, *Korean Film Directors: Park Chan-wook*, 14, 34.

[14] Logan Hill, "The Avenger: Korean Director Park Chan-wook on the End of His Vengeance Trilogy," *Nerve*, last modified April 27, 2006, http://www.nerve.com/screeningroom/film/interview_parkchanwook/.

and moral constraints.[15] The originary world is, in brief, not simply an anomaly or a regression, however perverse or gruesome it may appear; a naturalist gaze rediscovers it to be rather primary or immanent to determined milieux, although obliterated in the civic-minded world. To return to Park, his remark above bespeaks that his films are not so concerned to offer a historically viable solution to the thirst for justice, but rather to scrutinize the "thirst" itself, more precisely, the way it originates in the depth of a determined milieu. Certainly "stylization" or "fetishization" is not so convincing a concept for the poised air Keum-ja takes on as she insists that her gun be pretty; it is rather a reassertion of the primacy of her impulse over the constraints of the historically and geographically determined world, which has some smack of, for instance, Josef von Sternberg's unabashed temptresses such as Lola-Lola (*The Blue Angel*, 1930) or Marie (*Dishonored*, 1931). The piquant taste of the Keum-ja character, in other words, has little to do with how her urge of revenge finds a socially valid form of action; it rather stems from how she becomes instrumental to exploring the "urge" that erupts in the absence of a viable way of realizing it. For that matter, she surely makes an apt medium: she is neither a heroic figure that eventually represses primal impulses in favor of a new social order, nor a tragic one whose passion ultimately fails to extend itself to the plane of history; rather, Keum-ja acts as a vehicle that helps us contour the originary world via its rapid and continued alternations between contrasting values: high-low, human-animal, light-darkness, pleasure-pain, regeneration-degeneration, sanguinity-morbidity, intimacy-animosity, and so on. It is no coincidence that his films almost compulsively stage the clash or conflation of contrary affective and ethical forces.

However, unless we can remain complacent with a simple analogy between his films and some predecessors in Deleuze's pedigree of naturalist cinema such as Luis Buñuel, Erich von Stroheim, or Joseph Losey, a question to be raised is why and how Park invented an originary

[15] Deleuze, *Cinema 1*, 123-124.

world in his own right. In brief, what is originary about his originary world? What triggered him into the terrain of originary impulses? Where does his obsession with the originary world originate? Why does Korean cinema have to discover originary worlds at the moment of its rejuvenation? This chapter seeks to present a meaningful perspective on these queries. My attention is geared toward vengeance in particular and violence in general. To my mind, the motifs are quite congenial to the naturalist sensibility Park cultivated in the Korean context— particularly in dialogue with recent historical shifts such as democratization, the IMF crisis, and globalization (*segewha*). In other words, they are where Park's originary world proves to be originary. Yet instead of moving directly on to the issues, my discussion will detour through *Joint Security Area* (2000; *JSA* hereafter), which, unlike his later works that are far more abstracted from the historical frame, is more closely linked to historical references (national division and democratization). It is, however, already impregnated with thematic and formal concerns that continue to rule his later works. It thus provides valuable clues to the convoluted relationships Park's cinema has developed with Korea's recent history.

4.1   *JSA*: RECONFIGURING POST-DIVISION IMAGINATION

In 1993 when civilian rule was finally put in motion and Korean society was brimming with optimism, Paik Nak-chung noted that a key measure of democratic progress in South Korea was "its opening *towards* the North, and vice versa." As long as the South-North conflict dictates state formation on the Korean peninsula—vertical aggression (paired with internal suppressions) and lateral dependency (in uneven relationship with global powers)—and unless any real change occurs in "the division system (*bundan cheje*)," the democratic turn would remain partial or even

abortive.[16] Twenty years have passed since he delivered this verdict, and yet it still remains valid today. That is, the two decades of civilian rule has brought no major change to the condition of division, holding democratic initiatives hostage. The Cold War ended long ago and many new nation-states have since been born through the secession from former political blocs or the reunification of nations that had fallen into partition under the Cold War order. However, Korea still stays divided and the tension between two Koreas shows little sign of abating.

This calls our attention to the specificity of the Korean case. In Germany, the end of the Cold War led to, in Jürgen Habermas' words, "an inevitable implosion for endogenous reasons." What collapsed with the Communist bloc was "the alternative model of society that had been the only possible *raison d'être* for a second German state."[17] In the Korean peninsula, on the other hand, no such "inevitable implosion" ensued from the historical change. To be sure, the Cold War was a key factor for Korea's division and its maintenance. At a deeper level, however, it had little to do with "endogenous reasons." It is not that Korea had no inner conflict; as in many other countries on the path of modern nation building, Korea at the moment of its rebirth had to face deep divisions among social groups over major issues such as land reform. What made the Korean case special, however, was that endogenous differences were superseded by exogenous causes such as the rivalry between superpowers. That is, national division was not quite a self-made decision. For the South, it was "much more a unilateral affair of US world hegemony."[18] And when Korea's division was to remain thus determined, the end of the Cold War order could entail no inevitable implosion in it. Paik thus suggests that no recipe for a South-North détente can hope for lasting success without any meaningful change in the peninsular configuration.

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[16] Nak-chung Paik, "South Korea: Unification and the Democratic Challenge," *New Left Review*, 197 (Jan-Feb 1993), 71.
[17] Jürgen Habermas, "National Unification and Popular Sovereignty," *New Left Review* 219 (Sept-Oct 1996), 6.
[18] Nak-chung Paik, "South Korea: Unification and the Democratic Challenge," 78.

A notable event in this regard was the Sunshine Policy introduced on the threshold of the new millennium, not merely because it was an internally derived initiative to defuse the division situation, but more importantly in that its failure was a sign of the persistence of the condition in which the exogenous overrides the endogenous. To be brief, unlike prior cases mainly grounded on the denial of the other Korea, the new *Nordpolitik* sought open dialogue and cooperation over denunciation and confrontation. Under the new policy, a series of reconciliatory measures such as humanitarian aid were put in place to build mutual trust, which ultimately developed into the historic summit meeting between the two Korean leaders in 2000. The ripple effects of the dramatic change in the South-North relationship also became increasingly tangible in the entire society. The sharp growth of inter-Korean contacts on various fronts (e.g., the reunion of separated families, economic cooperation, and cultural exchange) encouraged South Koreans to rethink the hostile views they had developed of the other Korea for decades. The new historical development, in other words, demonstrated the inevitability of revising the stern binary opposition between South (the self) and North (the other), which had long been the central premise for the formation of the national psyche in divided Korea.[19] Regrettably, however, the thaw was to be short-lived. The Sunshine Policy could not pull through power shifts on the other side of the Pacific; it failed to gain consent from the Bush administration. But a real fatal blow had yet to come: the Bush cabinet's rather precipitous declaration of North Korea as an axis of evil in the aftermath of 9/11, which put a halt to virtually all further inter-Korean initiatives.[20] South Koreans had to witness once again endogenous causes constrained or superseded by

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[19] For more about the Sunshine Policy and its ramifications, see Suk-Young Kim, "Crossing the Border to the 'Other' Side: Dynamics of Interaction between North and South Korean in *Spy Li Cheol-jin* and *Joint Security Area*," in *Seoul Searching: Culture and Identity in Contemporary Korean Cinema*, ed. Frances Gateward (New York: SUNY Press, 2007), 224-226.

[20] For details, see Bruce Cumings, Ervand Abrahamian, and Moshe Maoz, *Inventing the Axis of Evil: The Truth about North Korea, Iran, and Syria* (New York: The New Press, 2004), 52-62.

exogenous factors, and the Sunshine Policy became a replay of the failure to realize democratic sovereignty to a significant degree. It was an all-too-familiar story to South Koreans. Yet the agony it caused was fresh and acute; the higher the hope for an inter-Korean rapport soared, the more painful its downfall felt.

Notably, it was the intensified clashes of rising hopes and lasting doubts about national division that served as a major backdrop, or a key catalyst, for the revival of Korean cinema in the late 1990s. If 1999 was a turning point for Korean cinema with its unprecedented successes at the box office, its triumph was indebted to a great extent to films such as *Shiri* (Kang Je-kyu, 1999) and *Spy Li Cheol Jin* (*The Spy*, Jang Jin, 1999). Especially, *Shiri* drew an estimated 6.2 million admissions nationwide, breaking the local box-office record set by *Titanic* in 1997 (4.8 million), and heralded the renaissance of Korean cinema.[21] The following year as well, Korean cinema delivered another string of acclaimed works, as if to prove its surge not to be fortuitous. And the biggest sensation in the year was another film about division, *JSA*, which far surpassed the other films in both public and critical reception.[22]

Of course, "the division film" (*bundan yeonghwa*; films on the Korean War and national partition)[23] is by no means new. If cinema plays a key role in the shaping of collective psyche, the most explicit case in the Korean context might be the division film. In brief, bridled by strict state control, the division films of the past would stand at the front of the psychological warfare

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[21] Darcy Paquet, "1999," Koreanfilm.org, last modified September 30, 2006, http://www.koreanfilm.org/kfilm99. html.

[22] KOFIC, *Korean Cinema 2007* (Seoul: KOFIC, 2007), 495; *Korean Cinema 2008* (Seoul: KOFIC, 2008), 461. *JSA* won "more or less unanimous praise from every sector of Korean society" and also outperformed *Shiri* at the box office record. Darcy Paquet, "2000," Koreanfilm.org, last modified September 18, 2004, http://www. koreanfilm.org/kfilm 00.html.

[23] Despite their shared thematics, the Korean War and national division, it is misleading to consider "division films" a genre; in formal aspects, they have had recourse to various genres such as war film, intelligence film, action film, family melodrama, romance, comedy, and so on. I will thus refer to them as a "film tradition" for clarity's sake. For more about the classification and the film tradition as well, see Byun Jae-ran's brief overview, "A Dangerous Play in the Field of Land Mines: *Shiri*, *Spy Li Cheol Jin*, and *JSA*" in *Joint Security Area: JSA*, ed. Yonsei Media Art Center (Seoul: Samin, 2002), 133-140, 179 (note 7).

against the North; they took the lead in forging the division morality by projecting the good-evil binary onto the division between South (the self) and North (the other).[24] Yet by the end of the 1980s, with military rule nearing its end and political censorship loosening, the film sector, too, began to show some signs of change. And the change became tangible above all in the surge of "post-division films (*tal-bundan yeonghwa*)," that is, films disposed to rethink the edifice of division: to name just a few, *North Korean Partisan in South Korea* (Jeong Ji-young, 1990), *To the Starry Island* (Park Kwang-su, 1993), and *The Taebaek Mountains* (Im Kwon-taek, 1994). Certainly, the rise of post-division films at the nascent stage of democratic rule was in tune with Paik's notes on the correlation between division and democracy. Still it remains to be further clarified why the post-division films in the early 1990s, despite their supposedly timely arrival, failed in practice to inspire much public reaction.[25]

It is a dubious move to look to such notions as the decline of public interest in collective imperatives or the waning of grand narrative for an explanation;[26] the broad attention a series of new post-division films drew at the end of the decade (e.g., *Shiri*, *The Spy*, and *JSA*) testified that national division had been an issue of sustained concern in Korean society. Nor is the difference between the new post-division films and their predecessors in the early 1990s simply a question

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[24] It is not that there was no exception: to name just a few notable cases, Lee Kang-cheon's *Piagol* (1955), which centers on the inner struggles of Northern partisans left in the South; Yi Man-hui's *The Seven Female POWs* (1965), which features a Northern officer who saves Southern female POWs from Chinese soldiers' sexual assaults and then defects to the South; Im Kown-taek's *Gilsotteum* (1985), which examines the festering wounds of the Korean War through a disconsolate reunion of a separated family decades after the war. In *Piagol*'s case, its realist approach to the psychological depth of Northern partisans made it the first film banned for breaching the National Security Law (NSL). For Yi's film, its positive portrayal of Northern soldiers led to his arrest and the charge was again a violation of NSL. Still, division films had largely stayed hamstrung by state control until the end of the 1980s. Korean Film Archive, "The Truth of Korean Movies," KOFA, last accessed April 3, 2014, http://www.koreafilm.org/feature/kmknow.asp.

[25] In terms of ticket sales, the films were far below imported ones such as *Ghost*, *Jurassic Park,* and *Dances with Wolves*: 324,169 for *North Korean Partisan in South Korea* (Seoul); 133,282 for *To the Starry Land* (nationwide); and less for *The Taebaek Mountains*. Darcy Paquet, "1990-1995," Koreanfilm.org, last modified June 11, 2006, http://koreanfilm.org/kfilm90-95.html.

[26] For instance, Michael Robinson, "Contemporary Cultural Production in South Korea; Vanishing Meta-Narratives of Nation," in *New Korean Cinema*, ed. Chi-Yun Shin and Julian Stringer (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 24-28.

of production value. Technical proficiency is evident in the new post-division films and certainly responsible to some degree for their public appeal. Yet we also have seen many lavishly crafted films prove with their debacles at the box office that enhanced technique is not the final answer, if any, to public resonance. In short, the binary or the gear shifting between history and popular cinema[27] does not offer much insight into subtle shifts (not the waning of) in public conceptions of division under civilian rule and in the interaction between cinema and altering social climates. The public enthusiasm for the new post-division films is not to be written off just as an effect of the advance in film techniques or commercialization of division.[28] To my eye, they are rather a telling testimonial to the lasting validity of the division-democracy linkage. Put another way, they mark a new development of the nexus of post-division imagination and social regeneration; as stated above, the new post-division films took the lead in the revival of the film community on the eve of the new millennium.

I am not suggesting, however, a simple parallel between social changes and the evolution of cinema. The convoluted nature of their interplay is evident in the lasting discrepancy between the post-division imagination and actual historical conditions. A prominent attribute of the new post-division films is the free-spirited and bold strokes in countering the division order. In contrast to their precursors, which would gravitate toward retrospective or reflexive gazes at the traumas of division history, they tend toward personal and chance encounters (not politically motivated, but private and unintended) between South and North through such narrative forms as romance and friendship. That is, the new post-division films often draw their critical energy[29]

[27] For instance, Moon Jae-cheol, "The Meaning of Newness in Korean Cinema: Korean New Wave and After," *Korea Journal* 46, no. 1 (Spring 2006), 40.

[28] Ibid., 11.

[29] My use of "critical" here draws upon Nietzsche; in his essay on history, he proposes the critical use of history as an antidote to the tendency in monumental and antiquarian historiography to let the dead (the past) bury the living (the present). Friedrich Nietzsche, "On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life," *Untimely Meditations*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 67-76.

from a mixture of unworldliness (naiveté) and audacity (youthfulness), more specifically the vitality unburdened with historical traumas and thus apt to venture into an unforeseen horizon of action. Yet, on the other side of the narrative spectrum, they remain quite vulnerable to the preponderant gravity of the division order. Their audacity in border-crossing imagination becomes very costly; they find themselves helplessly trapped between the two deeply divided states or between the reawakened passion for action or change and the hostile force of the determinate reality. Besides, seldom do they find other exits in the situation than exile or death. We are thus entitled to claim that if the new post-division films touched a chord with the Korean public and thus triggered the revival of Korean cinema, their broad appeals are not quite a sign of social progress, but have more to do with a shared sense of the failure to achieve a genuine social regeneration. An irony to be noted here is that the defeat of the post-division ethos in reality serves as a precondition for its success on the screen.

Indeed it is this irony that provides valuable insights into the way Park reconfigures post-division imagination in *JSA*, and more importantly, the thematic and stylistic motifs that continue to govern his later works. In this respect, attention should be paid, first of all, to the paradoxical nature of the JSA or the DMZ (De-militarized Zone) as the central backdrop of the film and the positions the protagonists develop in the milieu. The detective motif, or more specifically, Major Jean as the driving force of the narrative, presents a good place to start. The film opens with a shootout in a North Korean outpost in the JSA on a rainy night. The South claims that the North has abducted a soldier, while the North accuses the South of having crossed the border to murder its soldiers. But surviving witnesses on both sides say nothing beyond conflicting official testimonies, which are quite likely fabricated by authorities on both sides. With no solution within sight, the Neutral Nations Supervisory Commission (NNSC) weighs in and has a third

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neutral party lead the investigation: hence, the appearance of Maj. Jean, a inspector from Switzerland. This setting is hardly new in itself, especially for South Korean viewers with many comparable experiences since national partition. Yet Maj. Jean is certainly an interesting choice. First, at the core of the film is the tension between her (the will to truth) and the survivors of the incident (their silences), which marks a break with old division films largely anchored in the left-right opposition or the binary between the division ideology and its victims. Moreover, the narrative structure becomes more convoluted as her personal history comes into play. She is, as unveiled later in the film, a half Korean; her father was a prisoner of the Korean War who chose a third neutral country over divided Korea. She is, in other words, both an outsider and an insider, which adds further layers to the frame of the detective narrative. Notable in this respect are the multiple or trans-territorial perspectives she represents as her journey unfolds.

Her initial position is the third party investigator at the center and her stance is governed by the ambition to find the truth. Upon her arrival at the JSA, the NNSC deputy director Bruno Botta admonishes her that her job is solving the incident without provoking both sides. A South Korean General Pyo also warns her with a sneer that there is no room for "neutrality" in divided Korea, but only the choice between "us" and "enemy." Yet she pays little heed to them; they just toughen the will of the young and eager officer to step over such cynical conformism (Botta) or bigoted particularism (Pyo). Her passion, however, only makes her more insulated. Not only do both sides stay defiant; her inquiry also pushes a suspect into a suicide attempt, which angers both sides and exacerbates the situation. Thus underlined is the paradoxical role the center plays in divided Korea. The neutral center is where two sides are brought together. Yet in the case of divided Korea, as Adrien Gombeaud points out, it only "play[s] the part of divider." It is not a

solution to separated Korea, but an integral part of the birth and persistence of division,[30] which the film continues to remind us, particularly in Botta's later remarks, "I really question myself just how humanitarian these permanently neutral states [Sweden and Switzerland] really are, [when they authored the armistice to oversee divided Korea, but refused to offer asylum to Korean POWs who were anxiously looking for a neutral country]."

Maj. Jean, however, does not stay one-dimensional; nor does the center. As her position alters, new layers under its surface begin to be visible. On the rigidly territorialized surface, the neutral center stays integral (internal) to divided Korea only by being indifferent (external) to it. When the center tries to be a true middle ground at once integral and mediatory to both sides, it loses its official validity; by principle, the division system cannot tolerate any undivided contact zone, as illustrated in Pyo's words. From another perspective, however, this paradox also serves as a Carrollian rabbit hole, a gate to the undivided terrain under the firmly divided surface. Take, for instance, Maj. Jean's unforeseen encounter with her father. She knows little about him. Nor is she much concerned to learn about him. Even in a family photo she carries, his side is folded back. He is little more than a distant memory to her. The repressed past, however, returns in an unexpected way. Perturbed by her intrepid moves, Pyo hatches a cunning plot; he digs into her family history for any weakness of her and finds out that her father was a North Korean officer, which renders her disqualified for the investigation. The moment her father's specter reemerges from the past, that is, the moment she reclaims her forgotten ties to Korea, she is expelled from divided Korea, which knows or acknowledges no other social relations than "we" and "enemy." Yet this also indicates the moment she slips into the terrain of histories un- or disqualified in the division system. When she is relinked to Korea via her father, but because of that, rejected from

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[30] Adrien Gombeaud, "Joint Security Area," in *The Cinema of Japan & Korea*, ed. Justin Bowyer (London: Wallflower Press, 2004), 235-237.

divided Korea, she becomes akin to an exile and gains more insight into the silences of both her father (who had kept his past secret) and the surviving soldiers (who defy her will to knowledge).

This takes us to her chosen failure to tell the truth. A day before her departure, she wants to see Sergeant Lee Soo-hyeok, the South Korean survivor of the incident. Her investigation has already led her to the conclusion that, in contrast to official testimonies, the soldiers concerned have been in a close relationship. Still, unclear of whether she should tell what she believes to be true, or what consequences her report would entail, she seeks a clearer sense of the motivation behind his silence, perhaps hoping that it helps her decision. She thus shows Lee two opposing files of report, truthful and faked, and says, "Which one I submit is up to you. If you tell me the truth, I won't leave any of this information for my successor… It's a deal [not a threat]." "What can you then do for me in return?" asks Lee, who having already heard of her father, now feels empathy for her. She replies, "The one you try to protect until the end, Sgt. Oh Kyeong-pil. His safety." Lee then begins unraveling the details of the night, which along with other previous flashbacks, completes a tale of a secret friendship across the border and its tragic end.

These flashbacks show how Lee's squad of Southern soldiers on a night patrol in the DMZ mistakenly crosses the border, and scrambling to return to the South, forget that Lee has isolated himself to urinate in private. Worse still, when he tries to rejoin his troop, he accidently steps on a landmine. Thus trapped in the middle of nowhere, he calls out for help, only to be discovered by North Korean guards, Sgt. Oh and Private Jung. At the sight of enemies, they instantly draw their guns at each other. After realizing Lee's misery, however, Oh deactivates the landmine and saves his life. They then start exchanging letters and presents in secret, which eventually emboldens Lee to cross the border to meet the new friends on the other side of the border and later invite his associate Private Nam as well to the secret society of borderless

friends. Yet as tensions in the Korean peninsular escalate over nuclear issues and Lee's military duty is also soon to end, they decide to stop seeing each other and gather for the last time on Jung's birthday. Unfortunately, however, the farewell party quickly turns into a fratricide, when a North Korean commanding officer makes an unexpected visit to the outpost and thrusts everybody into an uncontrolled state of shock and fright.

Lee's revelation, however, is a double bind. Maj. Jean reaches hidden veins of division history (its subterranean strata impregnated with deterritorialized memories), only to realize that she should leave them shrouded so as not to destroy them. She now knows unspoken stories of divided Korea, but cannot speak about them. In other words, her growing insights into division history leave her confined in the rupture between perception (knowledge) and reaction (praxis). In terms of the narrative, the film hinges upon the detective motif (which is, to me, evocative of the amplified desire in the post-authoritarian milieu to recall repressed and unspoken pasts), but the storytelling mode proves futile in the face of counter-memories. The failure is, nonetheless, not just a weakness[31]; it rather embodies a break with other mainstream detective stories. Maj. Jean's decision to relinquish her position as a neutral investigator at the center—or her endeavor to decenter herself—is a telling reminder of the difficulties in representing counter histories; it raises a radical challenge to linear discourses of progress by exposing their limits in addressing other histories.

The issue of failure indeed constitutes a key problematic in the historiography of divided Korea. Consider, for instance, Kim Dong-choon's rediscovery of the Korean War from the

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[31] Park noted in an interview, "The mystery is just an excuse to start the story, a kind of McGuffin. A conclusion where the mystery is solved is not important"; Maj. Jean remains a stranger and the film is not built around the inspector's eyes. Kim, *Korean Film Directors: Park Chan-wook*, 80; see also Chan-wook Park, "Interview," in *Joint Security Area: JSA*, ed. Yonsei Media Art Center (Seoul: Samin, 2002),165-166. She certainly stays unable to fully understand the wounds of division until the end, as proven in her unwary revelation that Lee, instead of Nam, first shot Jung to death, which puts him under an unbearable moral burden and eventually leads him to suicide. Yet it is misleading to dismiss her role. She becomes noteworthy because she fails; it is her failure that makes more legible the challenges in narrating division.

social perspective.[32] Taking its cue above all from Foucault's theory of society as the extension

of war by other means,[33] the study strives to answer how the forgotten Korean War is not yet

over, but has continued to be a primary base of social formation in South Korea. However, the

dearth of research sources about the war beyond military or state-centered ones brings him to a

realization of the special importance of "memory struggles (*gi-ok tujaeng*)"[34]—the efforts to

resurrect denied, marginalized, or repressed memories, in Foucault's words, "subjugated

knowledges"[35]—for any serious attempt to reassess the Korean War. Particularly intriguing in

this respect is his notion of "refuge society."

If the course of nation rebuilding in Korea over the war and beyond, as discussed above,

was largely contingent upon exogenous causes rather than endogenous forces, this configuration

rendered the overall political conditions in Korea congenial to the rise of a despotic state which

is deeply vulnerable to outside powers, but far less concerned to represent the people than they

could or should have been—in brief, an externally weak and internally authoritarian state.[36] In

addition, as the situation continued to prevail over the rest of the century, it became routine for

the state to reproduce its power mainly via outward networks instead of an organic relationship

with its people. That is, state power in Korea has been structurally lacking in the responsibility

to embrace demands from below, and civil society has suffered from a severe deficit of popular

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[32] Dong-choon Kim, *The Unending Korean War: A Social History*, trans. Sung-ok Kim (Larkspur, CA: Tamal Vista Publications, 2008). The first Korean edition was published in 2000 as *War and Society* (*Jeonjaeng kwa sahoi*) and revised in 2006, *War and Society* (Seoul: Dolbaegae, 2006). For references to the Korean text, the revised edition is used; its page numbers, rendered in parenthesis, will follow those of the English translation.

[33] Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended*, 15-16. For Kim's views on Foucault, see *The Unending Korean War*, xii and 23-24 (57 and 93-94).

[34] Kim, *The Unending Korean War*, 214 (387). For more about his emphasis on "memory struggle," see pp. xii, 9-17, 23-24, 36-37, and 214-215 (57, 73-83, 93-94, 114-115, and 386-388).

[35] See especially Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended*, 7-12.

[36] Perhaps nowhere else was it more palpable than during the war: "What mattered to [Rhee Syngman who heavily relied on the U.S. to become the first president of South Korea]…was diplomacy rather than public support…[i.e.,] getting military aid from the United States, and thus he had little consideration for the people. When he did, it was limited to encouraging people to demonstrate for American assistance. As in the colonial period, 'the people' simply did not exist in his mind." Kim, *The Unending Korean War*, 88 (195).

sovereignty.[37] Understandably, endemic in Korean society has been the "refugee sentiment."

Taking refuge, according to Kim, was not just an experience restricted to the war period. As its

legacies continued to prescribe the condition of social life in following decades, seeking asylum

became "a chronic sociopolitical phenomenon."[38] As the state kept proving unable or unwilling

to take responsibility for the safety of its people, Korean society became gripped with a sense of

insecurity, which would drive it into a survival mode. The persistence of the war (the Korean

War as a forgotten, yet unending war) turned Korea into a society of quasi- or potential refugees

seized with the unsettling sense of being exiled at home[39] or the desire to outwit the uncertain

reality.[40]

Here, however, the fragmented and furtive nature of refugee sentiments requires closer

attention, which is where we can come across major complications in narrating them. How can

we, in brief, reactivate un- or disqualified histories that have not simply been politically coerced

into silence, but also socially dismissed as naïve, inferior, erratic, and thus unfitting for a serious

discussion? Given their tendency to stray from public discourses, counter-memories need more

than scientific rigor. Foucault asked in an attempt to elucidate genealogy, "[O]nce we have

excavated our genealogical fragments, once we begin to exploit them…, isn't there a danger that

they will be recoded, recolonized by these unitary discourses which, having first disqualified

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[37] Indeed scholars have often identified the Korean War and national division as a key factor for the deep disjuncture between the state and society in South Korea. For instance, Jang Jip Choi, "Political Cleavages in South Korea," in *State and Society in Contemporary Korea*, ed. Hagen Koo (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 13-50.

[38] Kim, *The Unending Korean War*, 40 and 92 (121 and 202).

[39] "Exile at home" has been a recurrent motif in cultural imagination in South Korea, for which Park made a notable remark in the interview mentioned above: "Our whole generation is to some extent fascinated with Choi In-hoon's *Gwangjang* [*The Square*]," a novel that centers on a disillusioned POW who chooses exile over divided Korea, just like Maj. Jean's father, and has been deemed to be a classic of "division literature (*bundan munhak*)." Kim, *Korean Film Directors: Park Chan-wook*, 81; see also Park, "Interview," 166.

[40] Kim sees an affinity between refugees desperate to catch the last train or ship during the Korean War and today's Koreans rushing to get on a bus first or honking loud to get ahead of other cars. Kim, *The Unending Korean War*, 40-41 (121). Indeed, the obsession with mobility and outclassing has been a key characteristic of Korean society, whether in politics (e.g., so-called "migratory bird politicians"), economy (e.g., developmentalism), social life (e.g., the culture of envy and rapid changes of trends), or education (e.g., the English fever).

them…, may now be ready to reannex them…[to] their own power-knowledge effects?"[41] The same can be asked for quasi-refugees, *les damnés* of divided Korea. Can we de-subjugate their subjugated memories without re-subjugating them to the center? How can we do so, especially at a time when the center becomes more lenient about old taboos than before, yet the increased criticizability is not so much a sign of real progress but rather an effect of administered changes without a radical change, changes that can hardly be more than effects of coalitions between old and new regimes—in Korea's case, the democratic transitions without any significant change in division or a radical break with old despotic regimes as the primary beneficiaries of the division system?[42]

Quasi-refugees are a scandal to the *raisons d'être* of divided Korea, but they are also a lacuna in anti- or post-state discourses; they are both outside and inside the state, that is, stateless within the state or excluded (rejected as outside) from the state by being included (determined to be so) within the state system. In more specific terms, the border-crossing friendship in *JSA* is neither tolerable to the division paradigm, nor reducible to a romanticization of exile or an uncritical or premature celebration of the mobility freed from the gravity of the state; the rise of such a deterritorialized zone in the depth of a rigidly territorialized milieu calls for a new cartographic sensibility. At issue here is not gathering more facts or being accurate; little does Maj. Jean's rigorous inquiry help her to reach the truth, it only drives her further apart from it.

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[41] Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended*, 11.

[42] My discussion here owes much to Antonio Gramsci's concept of "passive revolution," which, simply put, refers to historical change without a real change, that is, reforms or transitions imposed from above (the state, above all) and led by ruling groups (deeply tied to state power). To me, democratization in South Korea can be taken as a passive revolution, which becomes clear above all in the persistence of division. Concluding his essay on the state-society cleavage in South Korea, Choi wrote, "[T]he most critical variable [in democracy] is the balance of power… If the counterhegemonic forces weaken or are outmaneuvered…the most we can hope for is Gramsci's passive revolution, that is, limited gains within the existing power structure." Choi, "Political Cleavages," 50. The persistent division system testifies that democratic transitions were "limited gains within the existing structure." And this approach, I would add, prompts us to be attentive to the limits of the critical freedom seemingly expanded after democratization. For Gramsci's elaboration on the concept, see Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971), 54-55, 59.

Nor am I proposing something like the intuition for immediate experiences beyond reasoning; Maj. Jean's investigative keenness, albeit encumbered with naïveté, is to be sure a valid critique of fatalism or defeatism that has become endemic to Korean society—as evidenced not only in Botta's and Pyo's attitudes but also in the silences of surviving soldiers (literally subalterns) on both sides—after generations of frustrations over the unending division order. What all this brings home is the urgency of finding a new way of coupling critical rigor and local memories, or as Foucault would put it, an anti-scientific form of "erudition" which no longer strives to obtain a visa from the center for its validity, but instead helps subjugated memories insurrect against the unifying and centralizing effects of knowledge production.[43]

To be sure, the feasibility of "anti-scientific erudition" remains open to further debate, but it goes beyond the outlook of this study. Still, an invocation of Foucault helps us gain more sense of the challenges involved in narrating quasi-refugees, which is, to me, essential to parsing some recurrent thematic and formal motifs in *JSA*. That is, there is something genealogical (something reminiscent of Foucault's endeavors for the insurrection of counter-memories) in Park's struggles to trace covert histories of quasi-refugees, more accurately, those who are caught in between the increased criticizability and the lasting division system in the democratized milieu. *JSA* is not so concerned to present a practicable way out of the dilemma or suggest its inexplicability; its focus rather rests on probing the situation itself in detail—more specifically, the confusions, struggles, and defeats of the stateless in the state. The film is thus marked by a tendency to underline opposing strains conflated or alternating with each other: for instance, the JSA, which is at once integral to division (as its product) and exceptional to it (as a contact zone) and the rapid reversals between intimacy (fraternity) and enmity (fratricide) as the

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[43] Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended*, 6, 8-9.

refrain of the film. Still, the truly distinctive flavors of the film derive from the elaborate ways the conflicting forces are interlaced with each other.

The first to be noted is the de-/re-contextualization of division references. The DMZ, or the JSA, is not simply a frontline of the division system, but also a contact zone or a sanctuary of trans-Korean relations. This paradox is further accentuated when the DMZ is de-/recoded into a de-militarized zone—when references to division and military confrontation are torn apart from their original contexts and put to different uses; bullets turn into the tools of childhood play, guns into nutcrackers, the division line into a stage for the spit game, military uniforms into props for a photo, and so on. Unbridled from the gravity of division ideologies, political mantras also serve different purposes. When Lee crosses the border for the first time in reply to the invitation Jung made in jest, his unforeseen visit renders Oh and Jung dumbfounded. Jung then tries to make up for the bewildering result of his ill-fated joke with old propaganda phrases: "Welcome, Comrade Lee Soo-hyeok! You've leapt over half a century of division, the history of agony and disgrace, and come to open the waterway for reunification." Taking notice of the censures on the Oh's and Lee's frozen faces, however, he realizes his hyperbolic gesture (a retreat to the division rhetoric) to be a ill-judged move and calls it off with "Sorry." The laughter his awkward apology evokes forms a moment when the authority of the division ideology is eroded and its idioms succumb to ridicule. Humor is indeed integral to the disintegration of the division ideology; as the tropes of the division ideology are unmoored from their determined contexts and thereby become more quotable (transmissible and exchangeable across spatial-temporal boundaries), they often entail confusion or misconception and thus serve as useful sources for gags. When Lee recycles Jung's phrases later to encourage Nam to cross the borderline, they become further

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decontextualized. They are no longer specific to the North or simply evocative of the division propaganda, but in the service of witticisms on the arbitrariness of division.

On the other hand, the repetition-difference nexus is also underscored through the motif of masquerade. The histrionic quality of Oh's demeanor in the cross-examination scene comes to mind. During the interrogation, a guilty conscience, piled up over the course of the investigation, leads Lee to break down in tears. Noticing him on the verge of unveiling the truth, Oh overthrows the table and pours out a barrage of incendiary remarks. Oh's extravaganza of pugnacious anti-South and anti-capitalist rhetoric is not a relapse into the division ideology but a deft ruse to maneuver out of the trouble. He converts division idioms into a trick to save not only himself but also his South Korean friends from further ordeals. Oh's masquerade reminds us that there is something deeply hypocritical about the division system and thus the national history predicated on it, as well; but it also suggests that there is often something more than division ideologies in division idioms.

Then again, *JSA* is not simply a reiteration of anti-division or anti-war discourses through comic or satiric strokes. The question of virtual refugees is certainly more complicated than that. It goes beyond the criticizability expanded in the wake of democratization; it is not just Pyo (the state) or Botta (the arbitrator from without), but also Maj. Jean (the reawakened will to truth) that comes into conflict with the subaltern soldiers—the stateless in the state, the de-contextualized in the rigidified context, the deterritorialized in the firmly territorialized. In brief, a genealogy, or a critique, of the increased criticizability itself (its historicity) is a prerequisite for investigating (or defending) the society of virtual refugees. The issue of violence gains in significance here. Take Nam, for instance. He plays a minor role, but presents central clues to the vulnerability of virtual refugees. He is, in other words, a weak ring in the narrative chain in which the collision between

the persistent division order and post-division imagination often takes on an extreme form. After an autopsy of the North Korean soldiers, Maj. Jean asks Lee, "If you just wanted to escape, why did you shoot a man [Jung] eight times?" Yet the question is left without a clear answer; the viewer hears no explanation, from Lee or Nam who actually shot Jung multiple times. Of course, Maj. Jean's diagnosis on the eccentric ways the shots were fired tells us that Nam acted "impulsively" and the impulsiveness has to do with "revenge."

Still her assessment remains a conjecture and does not account fully for the extreme nature of Nam's violence and its necessity, that is, why he had to shoot his friend over and again even after he was already down. But the ambiguity is not an effect of negligence. In fact, Park is conscious of this issue. In an interview, he commented on the hysteric violence in the shootout sequence, "The North Korean soldiers should be killed extremely violently. Their heads are blown into pieces, and their fingers are cut off… Ironically violence always emerges out of fear for the other."[44] To expand a bit further on his commentary, the hysteric quality of the violence in the scene forms a symptom of the fierce collision between affection (fraternity) and fear (enmity). Gory details here are not just rhetorical ornaments; they redirect our attention from the "whodunit" perspective (the plot-driven and teleological narrative structure) to the schizophrenic nature of the division system. On this account, Nam surely forms an instance of remarkable peculiarity. Tender and caring but faint-hearted and hesitant, and thus in sharp contrast to experienced and quick-witted figures such as Oh, he serves as a soft spot in the topology of characters, where the conflict between post-division sensibilities and the division reality erupts in an unexpected or grotesque form. In this respect, Nam's case poses challenges to the post-division discourses (the increased criticizability of division) thriving after democratic

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[44] Kyeong-uk Kim, "Overcoming Division: The Task of Korean Cinema," *Korean Culture and Arts Journal* (November, 2000), 69.

transitions, not to mention the division system itself. His impulsive violence, in other words, makes a key problematic for an interrogation of the post-authoritarian milieu, which is certainly more open to deterritorialized imaginations, but still would not allow them to insurrect against the old law of territorialization.

Laden with memories of confusions, battles and defeats, the history of potential refugees demands special strategies to trace, which in my view, justifies some recurrent technical choices in *JSA*. To return to the scene where Lee crosses the border for the first time, Park uses a panning shot instead of, for instance, a tracking shot to suggest his border-crossing act. The camera starts at the Southern outpost and pans clockwise to show Lee looking north. When the panning resumes after a brief black screen, the camera reveals Lee again. Yet as it continues to turn into the same direction, it now shows the Southern outpost in the background across the border, which denotes that Lee is now on the side of the North. This ostensibly unbroken movement is unrealistic.[45] It is an odd mixture of two incompatible movements, the linear (the act of border crossing) and the circular (the panning of the camera); or you may say, the linear movement (the tracking shot) is already implicated (or implanted) into the circular movement (the panning). Thus composed, this sequence causes the audience to lose territorial sensibilities, but in doing so, offers a secret pleasure of the liberation from the symbolic order of division.

Editing also often serves to evoke a sense of disorientation. Halfway through the film, Lee and Nam are shown having shooting practice with wooden targets in shape of North Korean soldiers. At the end of the sequence, Lee blows off their faces, which is followed by an image of him pointing the gun at the camera. It then cuts to another shooting target, but this time, figures on it are South Koreans, which signals the change of location from the South to the North. More

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[45] A good contrast is Orson Welles' *Touch of Evil* (1958). The long sequence shot in the opening of the film follows real movements across the US-Mexican border without being cut: first, a car with a bomb planted in it and then, the newly wed Vargases strolling across the border until the car explodes.

importantly, as the camera zooms out and the target retreats into the dark background, Lee's face starts to fill in the frame, superseding the target. Thus coordinated, the scene blurs the distinction between Lee and the targets, which is a powerful visualization of the psychic landscape of quasi-refugees where fraternity borders, or overlaps with, fratricide. In other words, the continuity set up through the shooting targets between the two sequences corresponds to the striking contiguity or contemporaneity of affection and animosity in the division psychology. Intercutting is also of special help in articulating the battles of quasi-refugees. After learning about her father and her dismissal from the investigation, Maj. Jean is shown standing right on the division line in a high-angle shot. Then as she slowly walks along the division line, lost in thought, the camera captures her first from the south and then from the north. In the fusion of the POV shots from both sides, the unilateral logic of the division system succumbs to a reflection on the inner conflicts of Maj. Jean trapped between two Koreas, which has an effect of weaning the viewer further off division ideologies.

Photographic images, as well, deserve close attention. To return to Maj. Jean's old family photo, when she takes it out during unpacking her baggage early in the film, the viewer can only see her and her mother. As the camera zooms in on little Jean, however, it reveals an arm that is hung around her shoulder and disappears out of the frame. It proves later to be her father's when she unfolds the photo after hearing about his past. This episode marks a turning point where the investigation begins to overlap with her own personal odyssey, which brings her to a realization of her ties to un-/disqualified histories of Korean diaspora. A photo, by nature, is a trace of what is not here and now (the presence of absence or the absence of presence) and thus often becomes a central trope for the search for the lost or the mourning over its loss. Maj.

Jean's family photo confirms this, as it registers the return of her forgotten and invisible father, or more broadly that of denied and erased histories of Korean diaspora.

The notion of the absent presence is re-emphasized in the freeze frame at the end, which indeed constitutes an eloquent coda to the tale of a secret friendship across the border. It revisits a prior scene where a wind gust blows a tourist's hat away into the North side, and as Oh picks it up and returns it across the division line, another tourist pops in to take his snapshot. The ending starts with Oh holding out the hat, which with a sound of the camera shutter, freezes into a still image. And then, the camera detaches itself from the frozen frame to scrutinize its details; it zooms in to show Jung marching in the background and pulls back to reveal Nam looking at the tourist in the middle distance and finally Lee stopping the tourist in the foreground. Meanwhile, the photo is decolorized and turns into a black-and-white one, which infuses a sense of temporal distance and a melancholic or mournful tone into it.

The pairing of the motif of tourism and the secret friendship is an interesting choice. A famous tourist site, the JSA is, in theory, open to public eyes. Yet what is visible here, or what division tourism guides us to see, is the approved reality, e.g., the reality that makes it impossible to pick up a hat just a few steps away due to one thin demarcation line. Thus re-established in/by division tourism is the administered visibility, namely, the amplified visibility designed to stress the inaccessibility and invisibility of the other Korea. The approved visibility is, in other words, complicit with the division system that has to make the undivided invisible or voiceless. That is, in division tourism, things are made visible so as not to be really visible; the four border guards are at once visible (as enemies—the identity defined by/for the state) and invisible (as friends—personal histories at odds with the state). More precisely, "visibility" and "invisibility" are not

separable but compossible; the guards are visible for they are invisible, i.e., for their individual histories are effaced.

No less intriguing, or perhaps more so, is the way "visibility" and "invisibility" become compossible—how they are intertwined with each other in the photographic image. As the film revisits the snapshot at the end, the viewer now can see what they could not see before, just like the tourist who took the photo of guards unaware of their private histories. As the indiscernible becomes discernable, however, the picture arouses mixed feelings. When watching it again, the viewer is now aware that three soldiers are dead. Echoing the notion of the absent presence, the still image becomes a strong reminder that they are lost. In other words, their personal histories become perceptible too late—only after their deaths, or as something lost. Then again, a photo also involves the mummification of its object, which enables it to travel through time and space; it freezes an object at a specific moment and transmits it to another time and space. This double movement (freezing-unfreezing) indeed gives the freeze frame special cogency for illuminating the complex ways in which the memories of quasi-refugees return. In the freeze frame, the denied friendship of the four soldiers is at once vanishing (mourned) and returning (remembered). We should bear in mind, however, that its return is untimely. It comes too early (far ahead of time) or too late (only as an afterimage), but never at the right time, which is why it remains virtual, namely, deterritorialized and indeterminate.

It is, then, not so mistaken to say that in Park's post-division sensibilities, the society of quasi-refugees comes close to the originary world. His portrayal of the stateless within the state continues to swing between the deterritorialized and the territorialized, between the idealism of fraternity and the realism of division, and between abstraction and actualization.[46] In brief, *JSA*

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[46] Exemplary of this is the scene where Nam tries to take a picture of the others. Disturbed by the portraits of Kim Il-sung, the founding father of North Korea, and Kim Jong-il, his son and successor, he asks them to cling together

is a study of post-division impulses (impulses that predate division) and their returns and defeats, especially in the democratized milieu (an era of increased criticizability). The society of virtual refugees in *JSA* is, nevertheless, not yet an originary world. It is not yet sovereign (autonomous, robust, and consistent) enough to overpower the division reality; it rather remains overwhelmed and overridden by the constraints of division and thus derivative, episodic, and spasmodic. It is in the question of violence (more specifically, the motif of vengeance) that Park's cinema, to my eye, begins to be originary more consciously, that is, to refuse to surrender primordial impetuses to the reality principle.

4.2   "VENGEANCE IS MINE": ACTION IN CRISIS AND SYMPATHY FOR VIOLENCE

Before taking his revenge at the end of *Sympathy For Mr. Vengeance* (2002; *SMV* hereafter), Dong-jin has to tell Ryu who is responsible for the death of his daughter, "I know you are a good guy. So you understand why I have to kill you, don't you?" Hesitatingly delivered, this line raises a host of questions.[47] Pronounced in the disparity between the two claims ("You are a good guy" and "I have to kill you") is, first, Dong-jin's moral confusion. More interestingly, however, it asserts that his impulse of revenge is far greater than all the legal and ethical constraints. Still another complication arises when we note the absurd way the two claims are combined. Sutured by "So," they suggest that Ryu is not evil, but harmed others, inadvertently

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more tightly so that they block the portraits. References to division are ubiquitous, and Nam tries to erase them, in other words, deterritorialize the friendship from the reality of division, but often to no avail.

[47] Steve Choe also calls attention to the ironic nature of this sequence. Steve Choe, "Lover Your Enemies: Revenge and Forgiveness in Films by Park Chan-wook," *Korean Studies*, 33 (2009), 35-40. Yet, if Choe reads Park's films as a critique of revenge and violence in the cinema, I consider the thematics to be a springboard for a discovery and exploration of the dimension of originary impulses emerging in the depth of Korea's disrupted history.

or not, and that likewise, Dong-jin is not evil either, but cannot help taking revenge into his own hands. Dong-jin's reasoning, in other words, derives from the condition both he and Ryu share—the situation where innocent people are thrust into a vicious circle of revenge on each other, where no clear distinction exists between good and evil, but only ill-fated encounters between wretched ones, where the demand of justice often exceeds legal and ethical parameters, in short, the milieu imbued with the sense that vengeance (or the right to use forces for individual needs) no longer belongs to God or to the law, but to "me" as an individual who has nothing but "my own faculty of action" to rely on to realize justice.[48]

What is it, then, that triggered Park into the world of godless and lawless avengers, that is, the world of immediate (or non-mediate) individual forces[49] in confrontation with each other? Is this just another example of replacing social with personal motives, as has often been the case in the revenge narrative? In other words, is this simply an instance of psychologizing the social into the question of troubled individuals?[50] If not, how else can we understand Park's obsession with the theme of individual violence? *SMV* has little interest in offering an empirically correct picture of society. Equally evident, however, is its bent on using references to broader historical and cultural contexts. It is then essential to look into the way the film draws upon the post-IMF

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[48] It is certainly worth noting that the original Korean title of the film is *Vengeance Is Mine* (*Boksuneun na-ui geot*).

[49] By this, I refer to individual forces that are unmediated by, for instance, the state, the law, or religions.

[50] The notion "psychologization" here owes much to Fredric Jameson's critique of "ethical thinking." "Ethics," he claims, "lives by exclusion"; it involves "creating certain types of Otherness or evil." Simply put, "I" as the center of knowledge and action is right and good, according to which the other is bad, inferior, useless, impure, deceptive, confusing, or dangerous. Yet ethics does not just mean moralization. In modern society, psychology has frequently served as a privileged habitat of ethical thinking; psychologization has been quite conducive to the efforts of ethics to re-contain itself by assigning properly political impulses to the negative category of personal resentment. Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative As a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982), 59-68, 115, 117, and 234. In *Cape Fear* (Martin Scorsese, 1991), for instance, a convicted rapist Max seeks revenge on a public attorney Sam who deliberately blundered in defending Max (by hiding a potentially exculpatory report from both the court and illiterate Max) and left his client behind bars for fourteen years. Yet the film remains mostly faithful to the codes of the crime thriller and does not provide much room to take the two characters otherwise than as stereotypical figures (a corrupt lawyer and a disturbed psychopath), whereas the foundation of the law itself is left untested. This film thus seems to reaffirm the notion that the problem is not the law itself, but flawed individuals.

milieu as its general backdrop (which is where it indeed becomes truly intricate), or to be more specific, the way it derives the theme of individual violence (which is, to my mind, much more than a genre trope) from the social landscape of post-IMF South Korea. A brief look at the two protagonists may help clarify my point.

Ryu is a deaf-mute laborer living with a sister in urgent need of a kidney transplant. To his dismay, however, his disabilities make him a prime target of mass layoff as a part of drastic austerity policies in the aftermath of the financial collapse. In desperation, he turns to the black market to get his sister a kidney on time, only to be swindled by organ dealers, who vanish with his savings and one of his own kidneys as well. More agonizingly, his doctor soon notifies him that a donor has been found, but he cannot afford the operation now. Then, his radical anarchist girlfriend Young-mi convinces him to abduct Dong-jin's daughter by claiming that it is not wrong to take good care of his daughter for a while and return her safely in exchange for a small sum of ransom from her wealthy father. Yet their plan goes awry as Ryu's sister discovers it and takes her own life to unburden him. Worse still, as he entombs his sister on the bank of a river in their hometown, Dong-jin's daughter slips into the river and drowns to death; due to his deafness and also absorbed in the burial, he cannot hear her crying out for help behind him. On the other hand, Dong-jin is a self-made businessman—a high-school graduate who started as an electrical mechanic and built up his own factory from nothing, which is surely indexical of South Korea's economic miracle. Yet as the national economy crumbles, so does his entire life. He loses not only his factory (bankruptcy), but also his wife (divorce) and daughter (kidnapping), which dismantles the myth of South Korea's tiger economy. Furthermore, with no one else available to help him out of the mire, he becomes engulfed with utter despair, and metamorphoses into a avenger single-minded about hunting down the kidnapper.

What intrigues me first about the two characters is the strange nature of their opposition, which, to my eye, forms an eloquent critique of the neoliberal configuration in the post-IMF era. It is mistaken, however, to try to locate direct political or social commentaries in the film; its genuine critical value rather resides in the way it draws upon the issue of violence as a valid problematic for a study of the recent course of history. To be sure, there is an echo of the class struggles in their antagonism. Still it is not the central factor of their blood feud. In my view, it is rather in their similarities that they prove to deserve serious attention: despite their difference in social status, they are both victims of the collapse of national economy; they are not flawless, but not entirely evil, either; they are in urgent need of justice, but without any other resources to rely on to seek it than their own capacities of action. In brief, both are trapped in the deepening gap between personal needs and the public order. This invites us to another issue, the absence of the state and the law, which indeed forms a common denominator of Park's cinema in general.[51] They are erased, remain a minor accessory, or become a proxy for personal revenge. The needy detective in *SMV* helps Dong-jin to hunt down the kidnaper in exchange for the costs of his own daughter's organ transplant, which ironically makes him parallel to Ryu the kidnapper in that they both need Dong-jin's money badly to save the lives of their beloveds. *Sympathy for Lady Vengeance* (*SLV*) goes a little further; an old disillusioned detective willingly enlists in Keum-ja's private revenge, conceivably in the hope of making up for his flaw from the past, that is, his chosen failure to prove her innocence. In *Old Boy*'s case, the police remain out of sight (e.g., the opening which set in a police station, leaves officers off the frame), or the void left by their absence changes into a business (e.g., the private prison as a satire of reckless privatization of public sectors including law enforcement). The growing disparity between individual and public

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[51] In analyzing *Old Boy*, for instance, Kim Kyung Hyun highlights "the erasure of authority," which, in his words, "emphasizes the fact that the heroes and villains operate outside the domain of the law." Kyung Hyun Kim, *Virtual Hallyu: Korean Cinema of the Global Era* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 181.

justice is, in other words, an effect of the condition in which the public sphere has lost much of its mediatory and balancing functions and people are left on their own. It is worth noting that Park's avengers have no meaningful ties to any social group or movement. In other words, they defy any easy classification in that they do not fall readily under traditional categories such as bourgeois, working class, minority, antihero, gangster, and so on. In essence, they are isolated forces without any sanctioned means to fulfill their personal needs and helplessly thrust into immediate clash with each other. What we see in Park's avengers is, simply put, a primordial form of individuality.[52]

It is misled, however, to take Park's investment in individual violence simply as a retreat from social issues such as class. The class conflict in South Korea is far from declining; instead, it has deepened, as evidenced in the increasing gap between rich and poor, especially during the course of economic recovery in the wake of the IMF crisis.[53] The real conundrum is rather that despite the persistence or exacerbation of social and economic ills, progressive camps have been futile to provide viable alternatives to neoliberal ideologies that have dictated South Korea since the financial crisis. Caught off guard by the sudden collapse of national economy, the entire society simmered with fears and furies. But, as the sense of urgency to salvage national economy increased, the same old nationalistic mantras such as "unity over division" and "growth before distribution" were reinstated to curb the public unrest and mobilize the entire nation into

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[52] Kim Kyu Hyun also calls attention to the issue of social isolation in *SMV*, but for him, it results from a refusal or an inability to transcend subjective levels and enter into communication with one another. To my eye, however, this line of approach is too prescriptive, albeit not entirely mistaken, to touch on diverse historical imports deposited in the question of non-mediate individuality—for instance, challenges it poses to democracy under a specific historical juncture (e.g., the post-IMF era). Kyu Hyun Kim, "Horror as Critique in *Tell Me Something* and *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance*," in Shin and Stringer, eds. *New Korean Cinema*, 115.

[53] From 1998 to 2000, about 130,000 workers (more than 18 percent of all public workers) had been laid off, which led to "further indiscriminate class divisions and the rise of a neoliberal elite." Keith Wagner, "Fragments of Labor: Neoliberal Attitudes and Architectures in Contemporary South Korean Cinema," in *Neoliberalism and Global Cinema: Capital, Culture, and Marxist Critique*, eds. Jyotsna Kapur and Keith Wagner (London: Routledge, 2011), 219. The statistical data are originally from Hochul Sonn, "The Post-Cold War World Order and Domestic Conflict in South Korea: Neoliberalism and Armed Globalization," in *Empire and Neoliberalism in Asia*, ed. Vedia Hadiz (London: Routledge, 2007), 209-210.

economic recovery. People were thus spurred into austerity measures with no clear answer

offered about who should be held accountable for all the burdens cast on their backs. Ruling

groups and *chaebols* (simply, big corporations), although most blamable for the national ordeal,

were promptly exculpated under the too-big-to-fail policy. Meanwhile, a barrage of crisis

discourses pressed oppositional groups to give up much of what they had earned through long

battles for democracy in previous decades, and dissident voices were easily branded unpatriotic

and irresponsible. In this setting, the state and capital, according to Sonn Hochul, a renowned

name in Korean politics, "executed a series of unprecedented attacks against labor in the form of

massive layoffs, legalization of unilateral dismissal by employers and the privatization of major

public corporations such as Korea Heavy Industries, Korea Electric Power Corporation, and

Korean telecom."[54] And thus, ironically, those most culpable for the financial crisis, instead of

those most vulnerable and innocent, benefited the most from the crisis and ensuing recovery

measures. Consequently, Korean society, which was already seized with growing

disillusionments with democratization, saw the public's frustrations deepening at the turn of the

new millennium.

We thus have reached the issue of action in crisis, and more importantly, that of violence

as a reaction to the absence of viable modes of action, which is worth discussing at some length,

given the deep-seated, uncritical antipathy to violence in our society. The rise of avengers as

iconic characters of post-IMF Korean cinema is reminiscent of Hannah Arendt's study of

violence, which defines violence to be symptomatic of the milieu in which the faculty of action

is severely frustrated.[55] Of course, the crisis of action is not a novel issue in South Korea. As

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[54] Sonn, "The Post-Cold War World Order and Domestic Conflict in South Korea," 209.
[55] Hannah Arendt, *On Violence* (New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1970), 83. My view has some resonance with Kim Kyung Hyun's efforts to read Korean New Wave films through "the crisis of masculinity" resulting from decades of authoritarian rule in *Remasculinization of Korean Cinema*. Yet if his discussion is largely geared toward

noted above, the deep rift or imbalance between state and society, especially in the pre-democratic periods, had left civil sectors severely stultified; this had frequently triggered them into contentious forms of action to articulate their concerns, such as anti-government protest and labor strikes.

However, the IMF crisis became a crucial turning point in South Korea's social formation. Korean society in the post-authoritarian era was no longer brutally coerced into silence. Yet the financial crisis, more specifically, the urgency of reviving the national economy, pushed the majority of people into acquiescing to austere recovery actions and made it much harder to counter *chaebols*, allegedly the main engine of the national economy, and neoliberal doctrines such as deregulation and market liberalization to stimulate investments. The authority of leftist discourses eroded quickly, leaving the vulnerable in a more vulnerable condition and the social atmosphere infused with a sense of anomie. This sense of frustration can easily be found in cultural productions in the IMF era and beyond, including Park's films; the moral ambiguities of his avengers, for instance, are indexical of "the misfortune of this age where none of us can rashly condemn… those whom we regard as evil," or the befuddling condition of Korean society today where "procedural democracy is generally complete, [yet] the dualism of absolute good and absolute evil has collapsed" and where "some voices of opposition may exist, but a clear angle of opposition as in the past [e.g., dictatorship-democracy, *chaebol*-labor] cannot be attained" and "only disillusionment with the reality, the feeling that the world is not changing the right way, is amplified."[56] From this perspective, the notion of the degenerated faculty of action has special critical validity for Korean society in the IMF crisis and in its wake. If, in pre-

the interrelations between sexual and socioeconomic incompetence in male figures, my analysis strives to present a broader perspective through the frustrated faculty of action and regenerative violence or violent regeneration, which I hope can enable us to deal more effectively with diverse filmmaking practices including vibrant genre experiments in more recent years.

[56] Kim, *Korean Film Directors: Park Chan-wook*, 31.

democratic eras, it had managed to wage vigorous battles against despotic regimes, and if democratization had brought in more freedom of expression at least at the formal level, the IMF crisis induced a perceptually and ethically disorienting milieu where the fervors for democratic ideals were supplanted by the concerns about economic safety and growth and people were left with few other choices than following the lead of the state and *chaebols*, however unfair or bitter its results were. And this situation entailed an escalation of social problems such as personal bankruptcy, suicide, crime, divorce, and child abandonment, in other words, a sharp growth of unprotected individuals who were helplessly left out of shrinking social safety nets.[57]

Arendt's position, however, becomes dubious when she views violence as a false action taken in the absence of a socially viable form of action. To be more specific, her thought is not so different from the old distrust of violence. She holds onto the belief that violence can never be the end in itself, but a temporary means at best. To her eye, thus, thinkers like Frantz Fanon and Jean-Paul Sartre betrayed their mentor Marx on the issue of violence; they turned oblivious to Marx's vision of putting an end to all the violence in explaining the need of violence for the battle against colonialism (*The Wretched of the Earth*). And she even goes as far as to suggest, "[T]he Third World is not a reality but an ideology,"[58] a world invented through the Manichean perspective. However, when she relies on the means-end binary to renounce violence as a false form of power, she herself becomes oblivious to one of her mentors, Benjamin, because he sees it as vital for a meaningful critique of violence to establish a criterion for violence itself, namely,

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[57] This echoes what Wagner has to say about Park's portrayal of South Korea in the aftermath of the IMF crisis. For him, the disintegration of social movements and workers' consciousness is central to Park's neoliberal Seoul; in the neoliberal milieu, the labor "lacks the clarity and stamina to counter…the IMF's restructuring." A good example of this is the scene where the manager of Ryu's factory bypasses him who is just fired and rushes out to lunch without even noticing his presence, which is evocative of the condition where workers increasingly become disposable, but public safety nets are crumbling. Wagner, "Fragments of Labor," 227, 230. It would then be fair to say that Park's treatment of labor has good reason to be, in Wagner's terms, "less trenchant…than one would expect." Ibid. 225. Not a retreat from class, it rather brings home the absence of a counterweight to neoliberalism.

[58] Arendt, *On Violence*, 21.

a standpoint outside the framework of the means-end opposition. "Natural law," in his words, "attempts, by the justness of the ends, to 'justify' the means, [while] positive law to 'guarantee' the justness of the ends through the justification of the means." Yet this antinomy would remain unsolvable, "if justified means on the one hand and just ends on the other were in irreconcilable conflict." He thus contends that we could gain no insight into this problem unless we break the circular logic and set up "mutually independent criteria for both just ends and justified means."[59] The task of a critique of violence, put another way, begins with freeing violence from the reign of teleological, moralizing, or utilitarian views (which have displaced violence into the question of whether it is a just means for a just end), or with discovering its origin that predates legal and moral questions.

Yet this does not mean that one can think of violence separately from the law and ethics. If Benjamin's critique of violence aims to elucidate the true values and functions of violence, it would be impossible without understanding *its relations to them*; he thus makes it clear from the outset that his concern rests with "expounding its relation to law and justice," for an action is held to be "violent, in the precise sense of the word, only when it bears on moral issues" and the area of moral issues is "defined by the concepts of law and justice."[60] He thus takes it to be central to a study of violence to examine the ambiguous distinction between sanctioned and unsanctioned violence, to be more precise, the antinomial relationship between legitimate and illegitimate use of force. In a nutshell, unsanctioned (lawmaking) violence is both "immanent" and "antithetical" to sanctioned (law-preserving) violence. To follow Benjamin's perspective a little further, this is the case above all in the right to strike. Apart from the state, organized labor

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[59] Benjamin, "Critique of Violence," 278.
[60] Ibid. 277. This is why I prefer "violence" for the German word "*Gewalt*," with all the possible misunderstandings it may induce, to such euphemized or neutralized terms as "power" and "force," which is deprived of vestiges of the antinomy immanent to the use of force, that is, the antinomial relationship that action for natural ends has to the law as the system of lawful ends.

is "probably today the only legal subject entitled to exercise violence"; the state or the law grants workers the right to escape from the violence of their employers. Yet they want to keep the right to strike restricted to passive or defensive use, while workers often need to exercise it "actively" to attain certain ends and sometimes to the extent that it overthrows the law that has conferred it.[61] Underlying in the clash between the two contrary positions on the right to strike is an antinomy inherent to the law. At its birth, the modern law also began as lawmaking violence (it toppled the feudal system with revolutionary actions) and still maintains some of its native lawmaking characters, as verified in the right to strike. Yet, it is the lawmaking function of violence that the established law fears now and strives to eliminate; the established law should continue to defend its universal validity (its *raison d'être*) against all the emergent innovatory forces, and even against its own past. And the law realizes the goal by monopolizing violence, namely, making all individuals deprived of the right to use their force for personal needs.[62] Violence thus becomes a serious threat to the law, "when [it is] not in the hands of the law," not just because of the ends that violence pursues, but more importantly "by its mere existence outside the law."[63]

However, the law's monopoly of violence, as already indicated in its position on the right to strike, goes parallel with amnesia, or the oblivion to its own origin. The law's existence is not simply preservative; no less vital to its evolution is lawmaking violence, as noted above.[64] At

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[61] Ibid. 282.

[62] Ibid. 283. Max Weber also noted that the use of force today is "legitimate only so far as it is either permitted by the state or prescribed by it... The claim of the modern state to monopolize the use of force is as essential to it as its character of compulsory jurisdiction and of continuous organization." Max Weber, *Max Weber: The Theory of Social and Economic Organization,* trans. A.M. Henderson and Talcott Parsons (London: Oxford University Press, 1947), 156.

[63] Benjamin, "Critique of Violence," 281.

[64] Benjamin further specifies the convoluted nature of lawmaking violence as follows; it "pursues as its end, with violence as the means, *what* is to be established as law, but at the moment of instatement does not dismiss violence," for what is set up as law is "not an end unalloyed by violence, but one necessarily and intimately bound to it, under the title of power…Lawmaking is power making, and, to that extent, an immediate manifestation of violence." Ibid.

the moment of instatement, however, it starts denying all the ties it has to the lawmaking character of violence. Put another way, it strives to cleanse itself of its ignoble origin as illegitimate violence by displacing it into a remote past, or replacing it with a nobler story of genesis. [65] For Benjamin, however, it is this forgetting of the antinomy between the two functions of violence that leads the modern state and the law into stasis or decrepitude, which is often misunderstood as equilibrium and maturation: "When the consciousness of the latent presence of violence in a legal institution disappears, the institution falls into decay." This is true above all of parliaments, for they "have not remained conscious of the revolutionary forces to which they owe their existence" and due to the "lack [of] the sense that they represent a lawmaking violence," they "cannot achieve decrees worthy of this violence, but cultivate in compromise a supposedly nonviolent manner of dealing with political affairs."[66]

The degeneration of violence in democracy is also reaffirmed in such issues as the police in monarchy and the prince. The spirit of the police is "less devastating…in absolute monarchy, [where the police represent]…the power of a ruler in which legislative and executive supremacy are united, than in democracies where their existence, elevated by no such relation, bears witness to the greatest conceivable degeneration of violence."[67] Yet this is not simply a fortuitous remark; indeed an integral part of Benjamin's efforts to brush history against the grain, it forms a central motif in his *Trauerspiel* study. In theorizing the clash between "the over-strained transcendental impulse" and "all the provocatively worldly accents " as a recurring theme in the

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295. Here, Benjamin's critique of violence comes close to Foucault's genealogy. For both, the law is never immune to politics; it is rather a major front of power struggles. At work beneath the law's peace-making gestures, from the genealogical perspective or from the viewpoint of violence, is its power-making function.

[65] Drawing upon Benjamin, Slavoj Žižek also notes that modern states obliterate their "illegitimate origins," "repress them into a timeless past," and "offer 'noble lies' to people in the guise of heroic narratives of origin." Slavoj Žižek, *Violence: Six Sideways of Reflections* (New York: Picador, 2008), 116-17.

[66] Benjamin, "Critique of Violence," 288. From this perspective, "individual freedom" proves to be a tricky notion. It is judicially valid only when it remains devoid of lawmaking violence. In Žižek's words, it often "functions as a mere formal gesture of consent to our own oppression and exploitation." Žižek, *Violence*, 129.

[67] Benjamin, "Critique of Violence," 287.

baroque mourning play, he contends that the philosophy of princely power (the theory of sovereignty) in its early stages was "more intelligent and more profound than its modern version."[68] The modern prince was an emblematic manifestation of the antinomy between two strains, the one hinging upon still fresh memories of historical shifts and the other geared toward "the ideal of a complete stabilization, an ecclesiastical and political restoration."[69] If the modern prince was a result of the breakdown of the ecclesiastical order, he also had to "replace the unpredictability of historical accident with the iron constitution of the laws of nature."[70] He was, in other words, the prime example of how the lawmaking function of violence was entwined with its law-preserving aspect, which presents a striking contrast to democracies where legislative and executive supremacy are estranged from each other and violence loses much of its innovatory power and becomes conservative.

We now have more sense of why Benjamin regards legendary outlaws as a good occasion for a critique of violence. In brief, he sees in them some traces of the modern prince. Examining the law's monopoly of violence *vis-à-vis* individuals, he urges us to recall "the secret admiration" great criminals have often aroused among the public, however repellent their ends or actions may have been. To be more precise, their public appeals do not originate from their deeds *per se*, but rather from the violence to which their deeds bear witness or their exceptional faculties of action that surpass historical constraints. Yet because of that, they have continued to be repressed in modern society.[71] Underlying the public's obsession with legendary outlaws is, above all, the sympathy for the violence that "confronts the law with the threat of declaring a new law, a threat that even today, despite its impotence, in important instances, horrifies the

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[68] Benjamin, *The Origin of The German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osbourne (London: Verson, 2003), 65-66.
[69] Ibid., 65.
[70] Ibid., 74.
[71] Benjamin, "Critique of Violence," 281.

public as it did in primeval times."[72] The return of princely virtues in the form of a monumental

outlaw, despite its untimely and unrealistic nature, makes a powerful reminder of the antinomy

between lawmaking and law-preserving violence, which is vital to social renewal, but remains

erased in contemporary society. In other words, the public's surreptitious sympathy for the great

criminal indicates a degenerated social condition where the faculty of action is deeply frustrated

and has few options left to attain its ends except a violent outburst, however shocking it may

appear.

Thus understood, Benjamin's notes on violence present a useful framework for an inquiry

into social and cultural developments in South Korea in the recent past including the provocative

renaissance of its film culture. If Benjamin saw in the scepter of the prince an antinomy essential

to the modern world (the antinomy between lawmaking and law-preserving violence or historical

and transcendental impulse), if he detected its secret return in a marginalized form of storytelling

such as great outlaws in folkloric traditions, Korean cinema today constitutes a good occasion for

re-invoking his critique of violence, for it rediscovered the antinomy in/through the images of the

avenger. When democratization ended with a degeneration of violence, when the consolidation

of neoliberal forces during/after the IMF crisis (the increasing subordination of democratic ideals

to the free market) made the action faculty still further stifled at the turn of the new millennium,

as is verified in the decline of labor strikes, Korean cinema found an antidote to the suppressive

condition in the secret charms of lawless and remorseless avengers. They are to Korean cinema

today as the prince was to the baroque *Trauerspiel*, or as the great outlaw has been to the popular

or folkloric imagination.

However, a further complication becomes inevitable when we note the elusive nature of

lawmaking violence, as has been repeatedly implied in such modifiers as "latent," "secret," and

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[72] Ibid., 283.

"impotent." In brief, enough attention should go to the challenges in the task of elucidating the furtive modes in which lawmaking violence subsists in modern civilization, or the difficulties in articulating innovatory initiatives deposited in marginalized forms of storytelling. Besides, this issue becomes more complex in Park's case. His avengers do not fit in well with the category of the legendary outlaw in Benjamin's sense; they are certainly not a Robin Hood, but often prove at odds with the trope of the virtuous outlaw. How does Park regenerate violence or rediscover the antinomy between lawmaking and law-preserving violence, if not in the prince or the figure of the great criminal, but in the figure of the avenger?

For Benjamin, lawmaking violence is mythical. It is "not a means to a preconceived end but a manifestation," which is true above all of myth, where violence is "a mere manifestation of the gods, more precisely, not a means of their will, but a manifestation of their existence."[73] The notion of mythical violence works well for Park's avengers; they are, as noted above, immediate forces existing outside social relations. As in myth, in the world of Park's avengers, there is no ultimate distinction between good and evil or rich and poor, but only the clashes between forces. Dong-jin is hardly an emblem of the bourgeoisie, nor is Ryu a truthful portrayal of the oppressed. They are, above all, an immediate expression of primal impulses, the forces predating the ethical or the judicial judgment that defines them to be violent. Then again, their action has little to do with monumental history such as an establishment of a new social order. What incites them into heightened actions are not some epic spirits intrinsic to them, but the intensity of their impulses. That is, what makes them capable of magnified action is not their innate heroic aptitude (which they do not have), but rather the irrepressible thirst for justice (which is potent enough to propel even the most frail or passive into an extreme or unforeseen horizon of action). Notably, Park's revenge dramas pivot around the alternation between the ordinary (routine, intimate, or realistic)

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[73] Ibid., 294.

and the extraordinary (eccentric, uncanny, or un/surreal); typical of his works is the byzantine narrative edifice with multiple peripeties. His films tend to unveil the shocking contiguity between the two opposing strains at a critical stage of narrative development via, for instance, a moment where the aggressor turns pitiful and the victim atrocious[74] or an eruption of savagery at the core of the civilized (the peaceful, the beautiful, the innocent, or even children, as well). To piece it together, it is this blend of mythical thought and anti-epic sensibility that is responsible to a great extent for the idiosyncrasy and convolutedness of Park' revenge narratives.[75] Dong-jin and Ryu declare the return of mythical violence, yet not through an epoch-making action that completes the cycle of chaos to order, but by morphing into forces disjointed, or unleashed, from the world of the empirically verifiable.

Further attention, then, should go to Park's formal experimentations to stage the return of mythical violence through the imagery of the avenger. Notable in this respect are, for instance, Young-mi and her anarchist group. Quite a quixotic figure, Young-mi offers an odd collage of an enhanced will to action (a youthful, free-spirited, political activist) and the absence of an organic relationship to the surrounding milieu (a naïve, imprudent, isolated idealist). In other words, she is a caricature of the intellectual lost somewhere in between political passion (reminiscent of the democratization movement up to the early 1990s) and the post-political condition (ensuing from frustrations over democratization and the IMF crisis). She shouts for the dissolution of *chaebol* and the expulsion of the U.S. military, all alone on the street. However, delivered in an impassive manner and with no passersby paying serious attention to her, the slogans she chants cannot help but sound hollow. At another point, she triggers Ryu into

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[74] Kim, *Korean Film Directors: Park Chan-wook*, 92.

[75] Similarly, Kim also contends in an essay on *Oldboy* that the film "suggests a mythical, ahistorical world—beyond the mundane realities of a legal system." Yet given its unknowable nature, the mythical world is also reminiscent of the modernist narrative, which tends to refuse any claim of "objective knowing or mastery." Park's avengers are at once mythical and Kafkaesque. Kim, *Virtual Hallyu*, 181.

kidnapping through a flimsy theory that it is not necessarily wrong to take a small sum of money

from a wealthy family, for it would maximize the value of capital to return their child safely and

make good use of the money for the those in urgent need. In this case, it is fair to sense in her

gravity-free political radicalism Park's skeptical stance toward the trope of the virtuous outlaw.

However, she is not a mere satirization of oppositional discourses that are losing analytic

efficacy in accounting for recent historical shifts. Nor is she simply locked up in her own world

of fantasy. The realm to which her quixotism alludes proves to have some kind of substantiality,

albeit empirically unverifiable; indeed, its extension onto the plane of the actual forms one of the

most memorable moments in Park's works. When Dong-jin tortures her by electrocution to find

Ryu's hideout, she warns that her anarchist group will avenge her unless he spares her life. Yet

the audience shortly learns from a dialogue between detectives that the anarchist group does not

exist and that its only member is Young-mi herself. Interestingly, however, her warning proves

to be true at the end. When Dong-jin is about to bury Ryu's body, a group of strangers emerges

from the distant background,[76] and surrounding and stabbing him repeatedly, they fatally wound

him. Then, one of them pins a note to Dong-jin's chest with a knife, which informs the viewer

that they belong to Young-mi's anarchist organization. The abruptness of their arrival is further

accentuated by the scene composition. Given their mystical nature, it is quite a peculiar choice

to stage their emergence at a real location (a barely stylized or embellished backdrop) instead of

employing, for instance, a dream sequence or an expressionistic setting. No less unorthodox is

their acting. Far from trained assassins, they murder Dong-jin hesitatingly and awkwardly, as if

they were fearful of their deeds. And then, they retreat to a vanishing point in the background, as

if they were hurrying back into the small door to their own spectral world. They escape from the

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[76] Kim Kyu Hyun writes on this ending, "Instead of effecting closure in the narrative… [it] heightens the sense of absurdity." Kim, "Horror as Critique," 112-113.

spectator by dissipating, dissolving, or defusing into the landscape. However, it is a mistake to regard their unexpected appearance just as a superficial stunt. They return beyond oblivion to disrupt or stop narrative closure and remind us of Young-mi's justice, however bizarre it may seem.

Like Park's other characters, Young-mi is also a flawed figure in many ways, which makes the viewer unable to have a clear position on her as an individual. In the matter of justice, however, she evokes our sympathy, which justifies the abrupt arrival of her anarchist group in the real world; they serve as messengers sent from another world to bring her ignored call for justice back to our attention. In so doing, they also prove her individual justice to be transpersonal rather than just personal. Still they can only arrive in an unintelligible manner, as is suggested in Dong-jin's futile effort to read the note pinned to his chest to know who they really are. They are an expression of shared passions without realization—"expression without realization" in that they are not yet historically, geographically coordinated. It is this latent presence or diffusion of unmediated, mythical forces in determined and demythologized society that Park tries to explain when he likens the enigmatic emergence of Young-mi's anarchist group to the "destiny that transcends the individual's will."[77] Destiny is certainly a useful term for a moment when a mythical force proves to have the power to overwhelm the established world. When they appear with a radically different kind of justice, they come as fate, without reason or telos.

Here, it may help further elaborate my point to recall Deleuze's notes on the compossible. An event may or may not take place, but it cannot be true that it takes place and at the same time does not take place. It is not that one is possible and the other not; both can be possible, but they cannot be compossible with each other. It is then not the impossible, but only the incompossible

[77] Kim, *Korean Film Directors: Park Chan-wook*, 90.

that proceeds from the possible.[78] Young-mi's anarchist group may, or may not exist. Both are possible. But are they incompossible? Park seems to suggest that they are compossible. The avenging of Young-mi's death is both existent and non-existent. But this is not a logical flaw. It rather urges us to be heedful of the polyvalent nature of Park's films. Young-mi's avengers are found fictitious at one level, yet at another, they prove real and substantial. More importantly, however, the two levels cannot be separated. Young-mi's avengers emerge out of the actual milieu; or conversely, the actual milieu serves as the matrix of their existence. In fact, their appearance is not opposed to realism, but rather accentuates it to the point where it realizes that there is something that it is powerless to represent. Yet this is not a matter of which one has primacy over the other. Park's major concerns are rather with the compossibility, or contemporaneity, of heterogeneous strains (e.g., the actual and the mythical). If narrative closure in Park's films is continuously interrupted by turns and twists, it is not because he tries to prove that the world is fragmented to the core, but because he wants to examine the rise of mythical (originary, lawmaking, regenerative) forces and their antinomial interactions with the determined world as closely as possible. Now is, then, time to look further into how Park discovers the terrain of originary impulses in the depths of the real, determined world.

4.3   IMAGING THE ORIGINARY: SPACE, TIME, AND BECOMING

Thus viewed, Park's avengers are reminiscent of Deleuze's war machine, which, in his words, "brings a *furor* to bear against sovereignty, a celerity against gravity, secrecy against the public…a machine against the apparatus." A classical model is the Amazons, a band of nomadic

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[78] Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema II: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 130.

woman warriors organized in a war mode between two states, the Greek and the Trojan—simply put, an archetype of a stateless people. "In every respect," Deleuze notes, "the war machine is of another species, another nature, another origin than the State apparatus."[79] This is, of course, not about a primitive past. At issue is a world of war that has been continued by other means, but forgotten in civilized societies, that is, the war Foucault inspires us to resume to save our society from the beautiful illusion of peace and progress: "Beneath…the lies of those who would have us believe in the necessities of nature or the functional requirements of order, we have to rediscover war… [More precisely,] it is not enough to rediscover this war as an explanatory principle; it has to be reactivated… We have to force it out of the silent, larval forms in which it goes on without any realizing it."[80] Likewise, Park's avengers arise in a world where the state and the law cease to be visible, as demonstrated above. By no means purely imaginary, however, they reside somewhere in between the determined and the indeterminable, the territorialized and the deterritorialized, and the actual and the virtual, namely, in a domain that idealism thinks to be too profane and tainted (e.g., morally ambiguous protagonists), but that realism finds to be too unearthly and inarticulate (e.g., unintelligible destiny). Yet they do not remain silent or larval between the two; they refuse to transcend or succumb to the determinate world. To be sure, they are not a refugee or a tragic figure, still less a hero. Perhaps animal may be a better word for them. They are human animals prior to the differentiation between human and animal. And they owe their heightened faculty of action, above all, to their irrepressible impulses that compel them to be a warrior in war with the determinate world.

No wonder, when asked where he found the point of contact with society in an interview on *Old Boy*, Park had to reply, "I don't know, it's kind of an irrelevant answer, but… I'd like it if

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[79] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 352 and 355.
[80] Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended*, 268.

people saw it as something close to a prototype containing mythology, ancient stories or old fairy tales."[81] For me, his irrelevant response provides some useful clues to how he and his avengers reach society; sub-/countercultural forms of storytelling such as myth, folklore, fairytale, fantasy, and *manga* seem to have served as the major source of inspiration for his figuration of avengers. They surely have been a notable reservoir of un-/disqualified experiences and counter-memories. But it is mistaken to say that Park's cinema simply recycles the marginalized modes of narrative. His films prove idiosyncratic especially when those traditions (mythical motifs, folkloric idioms, fairytale qualities, *mangaish* tastes, etc.) are thrust into an encounter with the actual world. And in the encounter, they continue to be reconfigured. Meanwhile, when they arise as war machines with another justice (destiny) in the real world, they also cause the real world to undergo radical changes and render it no longer historically and geographically determinate. To piece it together, the metamorphosis of characters into avengers in Park's films runs parallel to the emergence of a new kind of space-time, a spatio-temporality resulting from the tense interplay between affect (something like passions, desires, impulses) and the actual historical condition.

Typical of Park's spatial composition is, thus, the mixture of authenticity and artificiality. It becomes obvious above all in his great taste for half-done/half-undone architectural sources— those in the process of becoming (emerging or vanishing), those without firm shapes (embryonic or decadent), those of unformed/deformed matter, in short, buildings and sites that are stripped of historical referential values. Consider, for example, the offices of the organ traffickers in deserted or dilapidated buildings where Ryu is robbed of his savings, his kidney, and his hopes to save his sister's life, as well. In the case of Dong-jin's home, it reveals few signs of life, but begins to be haunted by the specter of his daughter. Ryu's void hideout in a rundown area turns analogous to a beast's lair when he chews the kidneys of the organ robbers. As for the small

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[81] Kim, *Korean Film Directors: Park Chan-wook*, 107.

river in a remote rural area, the viewer is informed that it is located in Ryu's hometown, but the place itself has no discernible historical or geographical markers; primarily, it is rather the stage for the avengers' final battles against destiny and their deathbeds. They are quite indeterminable and unmappable, even when they are real locations. It is certainly fair to say that they are evocative of Deleuze's notion of "any-space-whatever," a space without historical and geographical reference points.

As Park's imagination grows further abstracted from history or further geared toward the terrain of originary forces in later films, his spaces also appear more deterritorialized. Dae-su's release from the private prison in *Old Boy*, for instance, is set on a rooftop of a lofty apartment building. The scene opens with a big suitcase left on the grass. Shortly, Dae-su emerges from it, just like a bird breaking out of its own eggshell. Meanwhile, the camera pulls away from him to reveal that Dae-su is, indeed, not on the meadow, but on top of an unknown apartment building. Then the shot begins showing the scenery of surrounding areas, as if to indicate that Dae-su is looking around to figure out where he is now, and the panoramic view exhibits a series of unfinished and homogenous apartment buildings. Thus composed, the backdrop for Dae-su's discharge into the outside world evokes a sense of confusion and disorientation. And the unmappable nature of the site gives it some mythological or fairytale qualities; if Dae-su is like a monster just freed from a long period of unexplained captivity, the apartment rooftop is comparable to a mountain peak in the midst of unchartable urban forests. It is certainly a new kind of space that stands in contrast to determinate or realist milieus, such as the police station in the opening credit sequence, which is furnished with clear historical references, such as the poster of the Seoul Olympics (1988).

Yet a more compelling case would be the prison, the womb of Park's avengers, which is marked with the tense interplay between inaction (destruction, discipline, forgetting) and action (regeneration, resurgence, remembering). In *Old Boy*, it carries out two opposite but correlated functions: "remembering" (fueled by fury) and "forgetting" (ensuing from detention). First, it is a space where Dae-su is forgotten and forgetting. His complete isolation from the outside leaves him forgotten by the world. The only medium that connects him to the outside world is a TV set. He learns through it that his wife is murdered, he has become the prime suspect and his daughter is sent to a foreign couple. He only perceives the outside through the TV. He even falls in love with a female singer through the TV. Locked up in the prison for no apparent reason, however, he starts asking why he is confined, which spurs him on to a rigorous search through his past for an answer. The unexplained pain inflicted on him consumes him with unremitting furies, which transform into a strong desire for knowledge and justice. In a sense, therefore, the prison is didactical; it is a school where Dae-su learns fury against injustice and the urge for justice and thereby gradually transforms from an obnoxious alcoholic man to a man with the will to action.[82]

The emergence of Park's avengers also comes with a different kind of temporality. One of the most notable instances is Keum-ja's release from prison in *SLV*. When she emerges from the prison gate on a cold and snowy day, she appears in the short sleeve polka-dot dress she wore as she went to jail in summer fourteen years ago. The natural condition is certainly inhospitable to her, yet it has no impact on her behavior. Her posture remains composed and her face looks stony. That is, her poised bearing annihilates the temporal reality: both the reality of the present milieu (she is indifferent to the present natural condition) and the passage of time (she sticks to

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[82] In Keum-ja's case in *SLV*, her prison is more like a laboratory. If Dea-su as a figuration of the pure will to action remains in need of a viable mode of actualizing the will to action in the real milieu, Keum-ja embodies originary impulses in a more advanced stage of actualization and her prison serves as a space where she prepares to actualize her originary impulses.

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her old summer dress). She thus forms a stark contrast to characters like Jong-du in Lee Chang-dong's *Oasis* (2002). The film opens with Jong-du's release from prison. Like Keum-ja, he also appears in summer clothes on a cold winter day. Unlike Keum-ja whose posture never gives in to the hostile natural condition, Jong-du's acts remain consistent with the outside milieu, accentuating his isolation from the rest of the world. His deeds are largely ruled by the cold weather, and his anomalous presence induces discomfort from pedestrians. In short, if *Oasis* foregrounds the harsh reality Jong-du has to face through a contrast between his action and the milieu, Keum-ja's return intensifies the disparity between her action and the milieu and eventually overrules the limitations of the real milieu. Her action is not subject to or in organic relationship with the milieu, as in traditional realist cinema. She rather brings radical changes to the milieu. With her arrival, the real temporal order loses its power of regulating movement and turns derivative. Thus composed, her untimely return suggests that she lives in a heterogeneous time zone, even when she is in the actual milieu.

As one final point in relation to the spatiality in Park's revenge films, it is worth probing the place Keum-ja chooses for revenge, the abandoned school building in the middle of mountains. It offers a telling instance of the tension between originary impulses and the actual milieu. What I have found especially intriguing about the scene is the way in which revenge is delayed, that is, the process in which Keum-ja gains the "sympathy" for her primordial impulses from others and organizes their furtive and fragmented discontents into a collective will of action. However, the sympathy for violence is not yet fully actualized or territorialized. After all, the deserted school as Keum-ja's court is unmappable; it is not yet an actual place. Still it is essential because it is where her violence enables us to experience the presence of inexhaustible justice. Keum-ja's unchartable court is not reducible to whether it is justifiable in the real

milieu; it rather takes us to a deeper level of violence where it proves deeply involved in the unrepresentable presence of infinite justice. It is not accidental that Jacques Derrida had to draw attention to the ghostliness of justice in his reflection on the mystical foundation of the law: "The undecidable [the ultimate justice] remains caught, lodged, at least as a ghost—but an essential ghost—in every decision, in every event of decision."[83]

4.4 VIOLENCE AS A PROBLEMATIC

"There is no document of civilization," Benjamin wrote, "which is not at the same time a document of barbarism."[84] This dictum has often been taken as an urge to identify the barbarism continued behind the peaceful façade of our civilization. However, if we consider his reflections on violence (the necessary antinomy between lawmaking and law-preserving violence), it is also a profound warning against a modern democratic society that has the tendency to forget its origin and oppress its potential of regeneration. What this makes clear is the need to recognize beneath the promise of peace and progress the law's innate tendency to monopolize violence and repress action faculties of other agencies, including that of labor (the right to strike). In this respect, if a critique of democracy hopes to be effective, it should be able to reactivate the antinomy between lawmaking and law-preserving violence.

Benjamin's critique of violence, to my mind, resonates with Park's obsessive investment in avengers. They proclaim, outside the law, that the right to use force does not belong to God or the law, but to them. At a crucial historical conjuncture, their desire to be sovereign expands

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[83] Jacques Derrida, "Force of Law: The 'Mystical Foundation of Authority,'" in *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice*, eds. Drucilla Cornell, Michel Rosenfeld, and David G. Carlson. (New York: Routledge, 1992), 24.
[84] Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hanna Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 256.

beyond judicial and ethical limitations. Their actions, thus, pose a grave threat to the established

order where the modern law monopolizes violence by depriving all individuals of the right to use

force. Their arrivals are indexical of the return of lawmaking violence. In this sense, the cinema

of violence becomes a compelling critique of the abortive democratic order in our times.

5.0   THEY WENT NORTH BY WEST:

THE MANCHURIAN WESTERN AND GENRE IN TRANSNATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

> What can possibly follow that dream of America lost?... Death… America, to my eyes, appears like a long and cruel Arabian Night… I must try to tell the story of Scheherazade, and capture the attention of the public—or the death sentence will be carried out at dawn.
>
> Sergio Leone[1]

> Dusk falling in a plain in Manchuria…was so mammoth it gave the impression of immersing the whole world in a resplendent sea of fire. Myong-jun...put down his fountain-pen with a cry of admiration and went over close to the window… The vast fields of corn and sorghum, stretched out in front of him as far as the eye could see, were a sea of fire. Even the air was on fire. A feast of fire…
>
> *The Square* (*Kwang-jang*)[2]

> Riding horses across the steppes felt very, very good; I even had a *deja-vu* that this was somewhere I had played before, somewhere I belonged. Maybe I was a Hun tribesman in a former life, a nomad!
>
> Jang Sun-woo on his trip to Mongolia[3]

Speculating on the development of the Western in the post-WWII era, André Bazin made a puzzling note on the genre's fate. Having reached its classic perfection by the eve of the war, it had to justify its survival, in the years after the brief wartime hiatus, by adopting new extrinsic elements such as social issues, psychological depth, aesthetic embellishment, eroticism, and the like. His diagnosis, however, becomes more nuanced shortly after when he adds, "Its ups and downs do not affect its existence very much. Its roots continue to spread under the Hollywood humus and…green and robust suckers spring up in the midst of the seductive but sterile

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[1] Christopher Frayling, *Sergio Leone: Something to Do with Death* (London: Faber & Faber, 2000), 476.

[2] In-hoon Choi, *The Square*, trans. Kevin O'Rourke (Devon, UK: Spindlewood, 1985), 81. The novel was published serially in *The Dawn* (*Saebyeok*) in 1960.

[3] Tony Rayns, *Korean Film Director: Jang Sun-woo* (Seoul: KOFIC, 2007), 51.

hybrids."[4]   Although written over half a century ago, and obfuscated by his doubts on the directions of the Western in the postwar era, his botanic metaphor remains quite cogent for the genre's continuous dispersion into various regions across borders.   Many verdicts have been written on the genre's demise.   On the other hand, we also have witnessed its new shoots continue to sprout in remote lands, including Asian societies.   We are thus entitled to say that its rhizomes, unlike the decrepit trunk at home, have remained healthy and kept sprawling out under rigidified territorial boundaries.   And this was reaffirmed in the rediscovery of Asian Westerns over the last decade or so.

One of the most notable moments in recent Korean film history might be *The Good, the Bad, the Weird* (2008), Kim Jee-woon's tribute to both Sergio Leone's Dollars Trilogy and the Manchurian *hwalguk* (or *hwalkuk*).[5]   Nationally, it was the biggest box-office hit of the year and played a key role in bringing the forgotten *hwalguk* genre back to public attention.   Making news at international film festival circuits, it also popularized such terms as "the Kimchi Western" and "the Manchurian Western" among international audiences.   Not an isolated event, it forms, along

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[4] André Bazin, "The Evolution of the Western," in *What Is Cinema?*, Vol. II, trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), 153.   Much has been said of Bazin's qualms about superwesterns such as *Shane* and *High Noon*: Jim Kitses, *Horizons West: Directing the Western from John Ford to Clint Eastwood* (London: BFI Publishing, 2004), 4; Edward Buscomb, *The BFI Companion to the Western* (New York: Atheneum, 1988), 45.   To my mind, however, his take on postwar westerns goes beyond a matter of "for or against."   A classicist taste is unmistakable in his penchant for John Ford.   His definition of superwesterns as a sign of decadence is also unequivocal.   Yet a closer reading would prove that his view is more complicated than it appears, as evidenced when he notes that the "B" western (or the genre's subterranean evolution) "does not attempt to find refuge in intellectual or aesthetic alibis."   Bazin, "The Evolution of the Western," 152-53.

[5] The Manchurian *hwalguk* (or the Manchurian western) refers to a vernacular South Korean film genre from the 1960s, which drew upon the western and was set in colonized Manchuria.   It was a major form of the so-called *daeryuk hwalguk* ("continent action drama") whose locations would include the Chinese mainland and Russian borders.   Beginning with Cheong Chang-hwa's *The Horizon* (*Chipyeongseon*, 1961), the genre soon gained popularity in the 1960s.   Among renowned titles are: Im Kwon-taek's debut feature, *Farewell to the Duman River* (*Dumankang-a jal ikkeora*, 1962), whose success secured his standing in the highly volatile film industry in postwar Korea; Kwon Yeong-sun's *The Conqueror* (*Jeongbokja*, 1963), which attracted about 200,000 admissions at the box office.   See Kyung Hyun Kim, "Korean Cinema and Im Kown-taek: An Overview" in *Im Kwon-taek: The Making of a Korean National Cinema*, eds. David E. James and Kyung Hyun Kim (Detroit: Wayne State UP, 2002), 16; and Yeong-il Yi, *History of Korean Cinema* (*Hanguk yeonghwa jeonsa*), rev. ed. (Seoul: Sodo, 2004), 373.   Yet, from the early 1970s, the *daeryuk hwalguk* began to give way to other action genres and locations shifted from Manchuria to urban settings such as Hong Kong.

with other cases, what I call the second wave of Asian Westerns in distinction from the first wave that emerged in the late 1950s and continued up to the 1970s. In 2007, Miike Takashi's *Sukiyaki Western Django*, a rich patchwork of diverse intertextual and cross-cultural references, rekindled the interest in the tradition of Japanese Westerns such as the Nikkatsu Studio's *Wataridori* series (1959-1962)[6] and Terence Young's *Red Sun* (UK, 1971).[7] China, too, has been a rich soil for the Western's subterranean dissemination. First of all, He Ping is responsible for the rise of the hybrid genre of Western-*wuxia* movies with films such as *Swordsmen in Double Flag Town* (1991), *Sun Valley* (1995), and *Warriors of Heaven and Earth* (2004). More recently, Jiang Wen blended tropes of the Western and the martial arts film into a political satire in *Let the Bullets Fly* (2010).[8] At the level of international coproduction, Tom Dey collaborated with Jackie Chan to refurbish the Kung Fu Western in *Shanghai Noon* (US/Hong Kong, 2000).[9] The legacies of the Western are also unmistakable in Wei Te-Sheng's *Warriors of the Rainbow: Seediq Bale* (2011), a recount of the legendary 1930 insurgence of Taiwanese aboriginals against Japanese occupiers, which harkens back to Indian westerns such as *Little Big Man* (Arthur Penn, 1970), *Dances with Wolves* (Kevin Costner, 1990) and *The Last of the Mohicans* (Michael Mann, 1992). In South Asia, two titles come to mind: *The Last Thakur* (Sadik Ahmed, UK/Bangladesh, 2008), an allegory of the nation's traumatic birth through a lone gunman's return to his mother's hometown to revenge her who was raped by one of two rival leaders during the Liberation War and Shashank Ghosh's *Quick Gun Murugun: Misadventures of an Indian Cowboy* (India, 2009),

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[6] Allegedly, its success popularized such terms as "the *miso* western" and "*mukokuseki* (nationless) action." Mark Schilling, "Spaghetti Westerns Served Up in Japan," *The Japan Times*, September 14, 2007, http://www.japantimes. co.jp/text/ff20070914a1.html.

[7] A prototype of Eastern warriors wandering in the West, it features Kurosawa icon Toshiro Mifune as a samurai out west in quest of a lost golden sword, a gift from the Japanese emperor to the US president.

[8] A tale of an intricate power game in a local town between a bandit leader guised as the new governor and an autocratic tycoon, which shows Jiang's bent for political satire, as marked in his debut feature *Devils on the Doorstep* (2000).

[9] Among the foundational works in this subgenre are the ABC TV series *Kung Fu* (US, 1972-1975) and Antonio Margheriti's *The Stranger and the Gunfighter* (*Blood Money*, Italy/Hong Kong, 1974).

a comedy of a vegetarian cowboy in battle with a bandit-turned tycoon who covets an ultimate

beef menu for his fast-food chains. Among the examples from South East Asia are *Tears of the*

Black Tiger (Wisit Sasanatieng, Thailand, 2000), a nostalgic bricolage of Western idioms, tearful

romance, deliberate cheapness, cartoonish style, and Warholian coloration,[10] and *Tatlong Baraha*

(Toto Natividad, Philippines, 2006),[11] which features three heroes confronting ruthless Spanish

militaries in the 19th century Philippines.[12]

In tandem with growing interests in local popular cinemas, scholars also have been keen

to reassess the legacies of the Western in Asian societies beyond established views on popular

national cinemas. Notable in this regard is the rereading of the Curry Western such as *Sholay*

(Ramesh Sippy, 1975) in Wimal Dissanayake and Malti Sahai's *Sholay: A Cultural Reading*,

Anupama Chopra's *Sholay: The Making of a Classic*, and Zakir H. Raju's "A Reading of *Dost-*

Dushman: Popular Cinema, Cultural Translation, and Remakes of the Western in Bangladesh."[13]

As for South East Asia, the traditions of the Thai Western and the Tagalog (or Filipino) Western

have recently become a subject of critical attention thanks to the success of such films as *Tears*

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[10] It is also known as the first Thai film invited to the Cannes Film Festival (2001).

[11] A remake of a 1961 Tagalog Western with the same title, which itself was an adaptation of a popular comic strip series run under the same title in *Espesyal Komiks* in 1961.

[12] To broaden our purview, one may also include: Ömer Sorak's *Yahsi Bati* (Turkey, 2010), a comedy of two Ottoman officials on a journey to deliver the Sultan's gift to the US President, but left lost in the middle of the West after their stagecoach is robbed; Patrick Hughes' *Red Hill* (UK/Australia, 2010), a revisionist Western that portrays the return of an aboriginal prison breaker to rectify the history of racial injustice through the eyes of a new neophyte sheriff. Among multinational productions are: Lee Sngmoo's *The Warrior's Way* (2010), a variation of the martial arts Western, which centers on an Eastern swordsman coming to the West in search of peace but unable to leave his sword buried when a gang of gunslingers ravage his town; Marco Sparmberg's *Squattertown* (2011), an online Dim-sum Western series, which offers a fusion of Spaghetti flavors and the idioms of the Hong Kong noir in its heydays (roughly the 1980s to the early 1990s).

[13] Wimal Dissanayake and Malti Sahai, *Sholay: A Cultural Reading* (New Delhi: Wiley Eastern Ltd., 1992); Anupama Chopra, *Sholay: The Making of a Classic* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2000); Zakir Hossain Raju, "A Reading of *Dost-Dushman*: Popular Cinema, Cultural Translation, and Remakes of the Western in Bangladesh" in Soyoung Kim, et al. eds., *Modernity and Geopolitical Aesthetics of Asian Cinema* (Seoul: Hyunsil Munhwa, 2009), 213-33.

of the Black Tiger.[14] In East Asia, this revisiting has happened through the recent attention paid to Japanese Westerns (Japan) and the Manchurian *hwalguk* (South Korea).[15]

Of course, it is presumptuous to claim the Asian Western as a major strain, within Asian contexts or in world cinema; its productions have been sporadic and have seldom become the subject of wide or serious attention. Nor has the return of the Western been unique to Asia. Films such as Robert Rodriguez's Mexico Trilogy[16] and Jan Kounen's psychedelic Western *Renegade* (France, 2004)[17] prove that the roots of the genre have continued to spread in various directions and regions around the world. In Hollywood as well, where few would expect now to rediscover the Western, its new shoots have not ceased to rise: Coen Brothers' *True Grit* (2010), a remake of Henry Hathaway's 1969 film with the same title, and more recently, Quentin Tarantino's *Django Unchained* (2012), a homage to Spaghetti Westerns. Nevertheless, the marginal standings of Asian Westerns do not denude their special historical significances. Rather, they invite us to consider the complex ways the Western has interacted with cultural formations in Asian societies. Indeed, my employment of modifiers such as "rhizomatic" and

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[14] Rachel Harrison, "'Somewhere over the Rainbow': Global Projections/Local Allusions in *Tears of the Black Tiger/Fa thalai jone*," *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 8, no. 2 (2007): 194-210; Nick Deocampo, "Icon and Bastard: The Western, Mimicry and Adaptation" in Soyoung Kim, et al. eds. *Modernity and Geopolitical Aesthetics of Asian Cinema*, 235-55.

[15] In the wake of the release of *Sukiyaki Western Django*, *Kinema Junpo* published a special issue dedicated to the Western's legacies in Japanese cinema. See *Kinema Junpo* 1492 (October 2007): 23-73. The film also revived the study of Japanese Westerns: Aaron Gerow, "The Homelessness of Style and the Problems of Studying Miike Takashi," *Canadian Journal of Film Studies* 18, no. 1 (Spring 2009): 24-43; Jane Stadler, "Cultural Value and Viscerality in *Sukiyaki Western Django*: Towards a Phenomenology of Bad Film," *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies* 24, no. 5 (October 2010): 679-691. As for the Manchurian *hwalguk*, studies available in English include: Soyoung Kim, "Genre as Contact Zone: Hong Kong Action and Korean *Hwalkuk*" in Meaghan Morris, Siu Leung Li, and Stephen Chan Ching-kui, eds. *Hong Kong Connections: Transnational Imagination in Action Cinema* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006): 97-110; Hye Seung Chung, "*The Man with No Home/Musukja* (1961): Shane Comes Back in a Korean 'Manchurian Western,'" *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 39, no. 2 (2001): 71-83. Also notable are the efforts at the institutional level to rediscover the forgotten genre: for instance, "Get the Ticket to the Continent: Manchurian Western Special Screenings (an event organized by the Korean Film Archive in 2008)," KOFA, last accessed April 3, 2014, http://www.koreafilm.or.kr/cinema/program_view.asp?g_seq=52&p_seq=315.

[16] *El Mariachi* (1992), *Desperado* (1995), and *Once upon a Time in Mexico* (2003). A mix of the Western and the motif of drifting *mariachi* (Mexican folk musician), they are also labeled the Mariachi Trilogy.

[17] An adaptation of *Blueberry*, a French-Belgian comic series by Jean Giraud, the psychedelic Western portrays a marshal's spiritual journey to suppressed segments of his past through Indian shamanic rituals.

"subterranean" already indicates the affinity between the Western and the sub- or counter-cultures in transnational contexts. Especially, in spaces geographically and culturally distant from the western's homeland America, the genre's dissemination involves more frictions and more tortuous processes of reconfiguration, which are worth investigating. The rise and the return of Asian Westerns, on the other hand, are indexical of significant changes in the cinematic, and cultural as well, geography of Asian societies.

The overarching questions for this chapter are thus, "If one still can find some validity in Bazin's claim that the Western is an American genre *par excellence*,[18] what makes the primarily American genre relevant to Asia?" and "What does its recent return have to do with the social and cultural imagination in Asia today?" Unless the revival of Asian Westerns is simply another thrust of revisionism or baroque embellishment with new dialects and costumes, unless it is just a passing vogue of retro cinema feeding on old glories of the Western, or unless it is merely an opportunism to exploit the global genre to make local contents more marketable around the world, then what use or appeal does the archaic American genre have for social and cultural life in Asian societies today? Given the liberties Asian filmmakers now take with direct citation of Western tropes,[19] today is a time when we cannot feel as much authority as before in, for instance, Akira Kurosawa's assertion that a Western by an Asian director can hardly be more than a pastiche and can never be a good film.[20] The genre, which would be taken to be un-Asian

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[18] André Bazin, "The Western: Or the American Film *Par Excellence*," *What Is Cinema?*, Vol. II, trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971): 140-48.

[19] Above all, films like Miike's *Sukiyaki Western Django* and Sasanatieng's *Tears of the Black Tiger*.

[20] For instance, his remarks on foreign adaptations of his films in an interview: "I've got nothing against adaptations. But I do not think that they can succeed. The basic context is so very different. And whatever my views, pastiche films, of a premeditated kind, can never be good films. It is for example ridiculous to imagine me directing a Hollywood Western. For I am Japanese." Quoted in Christopher Frayling, *Spaghetti Westerns: Cowboys and Europeans from Karl May to Sergio Leone*, rev. ed. (London: I.B. Tauris, 2006), 150 and 152. Interestingly, however, for many of his contemporary natives, he was considered the most Westernized director. David Desser, *The Samurai Films of Akira Kurosawa* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1983), 2-4; *Eros Plus Massacre: An Introduction to the Japanese New Wave Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 21.

in essence, now seems to have become an important source for sociocultural imagination in Asia today. We are thus prompted to ask how Western tropes have been integral to Asian societies.

With these queries in mind, this chapter focuses on the Manchurian Western and its recent return, although my discussion will extend beyond Korean cinema, if it becomes essential to put it in broader perspectives. I chose it not simply because the main concern of this dissertation is Korean cinema. What animates this study is the oblique position of the Manchurian Western in Korean film history, which, in my sense, makes a notable venue for discussing the issues posed above. Indeed, the genre often appears neither quite Korean nor entirely foreign, neither factually precise nor fully imaginary, and neither simply mass-oriented nor too avant-garde. In other words, it stands at the middle ground where a baffling variety of narrative and formal options compete and intersect: the national vs. the post-national, the territorial vs. the nomadic, the historical vs. the generic, the real vs. the imaginary, and the artistic vs. the folkloric. The Manchurian Western thus urges us to rethink conventional views on the western genre; they lose much of their analytic efficacy in the face of the Western's versatility, namely, its ability to spread out under rigidly territorialized surfaces. At the same time, quite illustrative of the polyvalency the Western gains through its rhizomatic evolution in transnational terrains, the vernacular genre also brings home the need to think beyond linear and monolithic takes on Korean cinema. Clearly, the broad attention that *The Good, the Bad, the Weird* garnered at home despite its deeply hybrid, multilayered, and thus puzzling nature makes it inevitable to redress established ways of delineating Korean cinema.

Before turning my attention to the Manchurian Western, however, I will examine some issues in genre criticism, particularly those associated with the Western. I do not intend to recapitulate genre theories. What follows rather seeks to articulate challenges the Western's

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vibrant and continuous dissemination across borders poses to customary views on the genre, and to traditional categories of national cinema, as well. In so doing, I will clarify major questions to be addressed for an inquiry into the Manchurian Western and its historical imports.

5.1   HISTORY OF/IN GENRE CRITICISM

In *The Political Unconscious*, Fredric Jameson distinguishes two main tendencies in genre criticism: the phenomenological (semantic) and the structural (syntactic).[21] In a nutshell, the phenomenological approach gravitates to "what it means," i.e., the endeavor to determine thematic and formal properties intrinsic to a genre and their historical and cultural implications. For philosophers like Henri Bergson, thus, the core of comedy is to preserve social norms by castigating deviancy with ridicule, while for others the comedic makes the inevitable absurdity of human existence more tolerable. On the other hand, a structural analysis is not so much concerned with the meaning itself as with the structure through which the meaning is produced, that is, the system of signification. In this type of criticism, a genre is defined less by what it intrinsically has than by what it is not, that is, in terms of structural differences.

Although largely based on literary genres, Jameson's distinction retains analytic efficacy for navigating through debates over genre cinema, as well. His approach is of course not without parallels in film criticism: for instance, Rick Altman's "A Semantic/Syntactic Approach to Film Genre."[22] Jameson's position, however, marks a distinct dimension that extends beyond the

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[21] Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative As a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982), 107-110. His position, it seems, owes much to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's rereading of Freud in *The Anti-Oedipus*. Ibid., 21-22.

[22] Rick Altman, "A Semantic/Syntactic Approach to Film Genre," *Cinema Journal* 23, no. 3 (Spring 1984): 6-18; reprinted in *Film Genre Reader III*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003), 31-40.

taxonomical semblance, which indeed entitles his genre study to our close attention. In brief, Altman's formulation, it seems to me, remains schematic and enclosed within the parameter of textual-structural analysis. His distinction between the semantic (generic components such as themes, characters, locations, settings, shots, and the like) and the syntactic (the structure into which the traits are organized), as he himself acknowledges, is analogous to that of "the linguistic" (e.g., a horse as a means of transport) and "the textual" (e.g., a horse as something soon to be outmoded).[23] On the other hand, what governs Jameson's concern with the generic is not an impetus to rewrite the history of genres and genre theories through master codes—here, the semantic and the syntactic—but rather the necessity of redressing or de-positivizing, if not repudiating altogether, them from historical perspectives. His genre study intends, in other words, to be a metacommentary on the traditions that have privileged one model over the other or turned them into the dual nature of genre in a positivistic way.[24] Herein lies a reason why I have found Jameson's view to be worth drawing upon; a metacritique of positivistic and schematic assumptions in traditional genre criticism is, in my view, a prerequisite for an effective analysis of the Western's dissemination across borders, that is, its evolutionary versatility in international environments—for the present context, in Asian societies.

5.1.1 Genre in phenomenological perspective

Few would deny that the rise of genre criticism in film studies owes much to the phenomenological tradition of thinking. Among pioneering works are Robert Warshow's

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[23] In his *Film/Genre* published over two decades later, Altman tries to revise his early semantic-syntactic binary (a text-centered approach) by adding a new term, the "pragmatic" (a use-oriented perspective): hence, "A Semantic/Syntactic/Pragmatic Approach to Genre." Rick Altman, *Film/Genre* (London: BFI Publishing, 1999): 216-26. Yet the new term remains supplementary to the original semantic-syntactic schema rather than bring it to a substantial change.

[24] Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, 109.

"Movie Chronicle: the Westerner" (1954) and André Bazin's essays, "The Western: Or the American Film *Par Excellence*" (1953) and "The Evolution of the Western" (1955). No doubt, they contain many insights for later critics to revisit. Nonetheless, given the preponderance of the desire to determine the Western's fundamentals in their writings, it is quite understandable that they are now considered hamstrung by essentialist and reductionist views—in Barry Grant's words, "impressionism and prescriptiveness."[25] Bazin's notion of "classic perfection" in "The Evolution of the Western," for instance, surely has a smack of Hegelian art history; in Bazin's classicist stance hinging on an assumption of essential values to be fully realized at a certain historical conjuncture, the evolution of the Western can be translated into the linear narrative of "birth-maturation-decadence."

Another instance to be noted is auteur theory, which rose to prominence through such channels as *Cahiers du cinéma* (France), *Movie* (U.K.) and the works of Andrew Sarris (U.S.) in the 1950s and 1960s, celebrating singular artistic visions of auteurs in reaction to the global hegemony of Fordized Hollywood studios. When it comes to the Western, the impact of auteurism left a clear mark in such a publication as Jim Kitses' *Horizons West* (1969), an attempt to apply the notion of authorship to the Westerns of Anthony Mann, Budd Boetticher and Sam Peckinpah.[26] Roughly from the mid-1960s, however, doubts over auteur theory began to surface, as evidenced in, for instance, Alan Lovell's 1967 remarks on the dissonance among auteur critics: "For Anglo-Saxon critics, the western is typical of most of the vices of the mass

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[25] Barry Keith Grant, "Introduction," in Grant, ed., *Film Genre Reader III*, xvi.
[26] For more about the imports of Kitses' auteur study in film genre criticism, see John G. Cawelti, *The Six-Gun Mystique Sequel* (Bowling Green OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1999), 135-36. It is to be noted, however, that although written under the heavy influence of auteurism, Kitses' discussion was impregnated with concerns with the Western's conventionality, which, in Thomas Schatz's assessment, brought it close to structural analyses of coming years. Thomas Schatz, "The Structural Influence: New Directions in Film Genre Theory," in Grant, ed. *Film Genre Reader III*, 96. His work thus can be taken to be an early example of the transition from auteurism to structuralism or a predecessor to later efforts to negotiate between genericity and auteur, convention and innovation, repetition and difference, and structure and history. Schatz's essay was originally published in in *Quarterly Review of Film Studies* 2, no. 3 (August 1977): 302-312.

media. It is endlessly repetitive, utterly simple in form and expresses naive attitudes. For French critics, the western contains nearly all the things they most admire in the American cinema, its direct-ness, its intelligence, its energy, its formal concerns."[27] Among the frontrunners in the new development was Buscombe: "Why bother to talk about genre at all [if 'auteur' explains basics of a film]?" he questioned in his 1970 essay on genre—a resonant rejoinder to auteurism's failure to recognize genre's own functions. For him, reading genre through the lens of authorship provided little help to our understanding of genre itself. Instead it often fell prey to the desire to overcompensate for "the critical Dark Age when American cinema was dismissed as repetitive rubbish, mass-produced to a formula…in the factories of Hollywood" by glorifying American auteurs' singular visions in genre films[28] at the cost of their conventionalities and popular connections— in Jean-Loup Bourget's words, "the very paradoxical reasons for their creativity."[29] Auteur criticism, in other words, would catapult genre films to the status of art by cleansing them of their folkloric and mass-mediated origins—an old tactic to institutionalize popular productions.

5.1.2   The structural/post-structural turn

Understandably, genre criticism on the threshold of the 1970s saw a proliferation of the efforts to find an alternative to the phenomenological approach and its assumptions such as thematic/formal attributes intrinsic to the text and the hierarchy between high and low and between art and popular. Central to the reorientation was, above all, the shift of focus to genre

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[27] Alan Lovell, "The Western," *Screen Education* 41 (September/October, 1967), 93.
[28] Edward Buscombe, "The Idea of Genre in the American Cinema," in Grant, ed. *Film Genre Reader III*, 20; originally published in *Screen* 11, no. 2 (March/April 1970): 33-45.
[29] Jean-Loup Bourget, "Social Implications in the Hollywood Genres," in Grant, ed. *Film Genre Reader III*, 51; first appeared in *Journal of Modern Literature* 3, no. 2 (April 1973): 191-200.

itself or the question of genericity. Genre, in Buscombe's view, predates a great director and has a substantial extent of autonomy; it is "not a mere collection of dead images waiting for a director to animate it, but a tradition with a life of its own."[30] Thus what genre criticism needed was "a way of looking at a genre that can make clear what is distinctive about it."[31] Besides, the interest in genericity was further legitimatized by observations on the disparity between auteur analysis and the ways ordinary viewers react to a film: "For [the average viewer] it is not a new Hawks or Ford or Peckinpah; it is a new western."[32] In a similar vein, Andrew Tudor also defined genre as "sets of cultural conventions" or "what we collectively believe it to be," and went as far as to claim that "art movies," too, should be seen as a genre in that we can discuss an auteur breaking genre conventions "only if we know what these rules are."[33] Genre auteur was no longer a cactus rose blooming amid the desert of formula films; auteur rather began to be understood as one code among many others at work in the genre system.[34]

As the 1960s drew to a close, thus, genre criticism began seeking new theoretical inspiration in structuralist studies. Particularly, the notion of conventionality served as a common denominator between the linguistic and the cinematic (especially, that of genre cinema)

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[30] Buscombe, "The Idea of Genre," 25.

[31] Ibid., 22.

[32] Ibid., 22.

[33] Andrew Tudor, "Genre," in Grant, ed. *Film Genre Reader III*, 7-9; originally published in *Theories of Film* (New York: Viking Press, 1973), 131-150.

[34] I am not suggesting that in the changing climate, the notion of auteur lost its critical values altogether. In fact, structural genre criticism did not cease to be inflected by auteurist considerations: auteurism continued to justify its existence, sometimes by merging with the concerns with genericity, other times by serving as a conduit for discontents with the closed nature of genre system. For instance, in "Ideology, Genre, Auteur" (1977), Robin Wood held the auteur to be a key factor for tensions within genre structures. An exemplary case is Hitchcock; lurking behind the ideological-generic façades is his profound skepticism. At the end, however, Wood's take on the auteur-genre dynamic become more nuanced with another twist: "Its roots in the Hollywood genres, and in the very ideological structure it so disturbingly subverts, make *Shadow of a Doubt* so much more suggestive and significant a work than Hitchcock the bourgeois entertainer could ever have guessed." Robin Wood, "Ideology, Genre, Auteur," in Grant, ed. *Film Genre Reader III*, 64, 70, 73; first appeared in *Film Comment* 13, no. 1 (January/February 1977): 46-51. Notable among earlier attempts to incorporate auteurism and structuralism is Peter Wollen, *Signs and Meanings in the Cinema* (first published in 1969 and revised in 1972), where he de-privileges the directorial code by taking it as one element among many others such as production, reception, economic conditions, and historical contexts.

despite their variances. Besides, findings in anthropology (e.g., Claude Lévi-Strauss and Vladimir Propp) and seminal works from literary genre criticism (above all, Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism*), along with legacies of leftist critics (e.g., Louis Althusser), expedited the structuralist turn in film genre studies by offering already tested analytic frames: myth-ritual in particular and ideology in general. "The conventional nature of genre films," Barry Grant noted, "has been cited most frequently to support the argument that genres have become the contemporary equivalent of tribal ritual and myth for mass-mediated society." [35] And the conflation of myth (and ritual) and genre seems to have been beneficial particularly to the structural analysis of the Western, which is quite understandable given the status of the Wild West as a primary myth in American cultural formation not only in the popular imagination but also at the level of scholarly debates such as Richard Slotkin's trilogy on the Frontier myth: *Regeneration through Violence* (1973), *The Fatal Environment* (1985), and *Gunfighter Nation* (1992). Exemplary here are John G. Cawelti's *The Six-Gun Mystique* (1970) and Will Wright's *Sixguns and Society* (1975),[36] which, despite their marked differences in methodology,[37] have in common the emphasis on the mythic and ritualistic aspects as central to genre cinema, especially to the western. For Cawelti, the western, as myth or ritual does, serves as "a means of affirming certain basic cultural values, resolving tension and establishing a sense of continuity between

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[35] Barry Keith Grant, "Experience and Meaning in Genre Films," in Grant, ed. *Film Genre Reader III*, 118. For more about growing concerns with the mythic-ritualistic dimension in genre films during the peak of structuralism, see also Schatz, "The Structural Influence," 94-100 and Altman, "A Semantic/Syntactic Approach," 30.

[36] Will Wright, *Sixguns and Society: A Structural Study of the Western* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975).

[37] In brief, the original edition of Cawelti's study was governed by the urge to determine the internal laws of the Western, and as he himself acknowledges later in a revised edition, "failed to recognize the Western as a time and culture bound historical production." See, *The Six-Gun Mystique Sequel*, 4-7. On the other hand, the main focus of Wright's study lied in how to introduce historical aspects into structural analysis. While structural approaches often ended producing a static, synchronic typology, Wright's combinational model (based on four basic variants, the classical, the revenge, the transition, and the professional plot), in Jameson's assessment, could embrace history and analytically overcome the old incompatibility between internal structure and extrinsic context. In the permutation scheme, deviation from a sequence of variants is not an aberration but an advent of something new and meaningful, which calls for a further interpretive activity. Fredric Jameson, "Ideology, Narrative Analysis and Popular Culture," *Theory and Society* 4, no. 4 (Winter 1977), 551.

present and past."[38] In a more radicalized definition from Wright, myth is considered a key dimension of social life where one can find practical ways of understanding and interacting with the world. For him, myth is not antithetical to reason: the real basis for knowledge is not scientific but political, and the frontier myth is as fundamental a conception of America as others, including scientific discourses.[39]

Yet, strictly speaking, that is, when measured by the adherence to Saussurean principles, the turn to structuralism did not last long. At the crude level of understanding (e.g., reflectionism), or in alliance with skeptical views (e.g., those akin to the Frankfurt School's culture industry thesis), the notion of systemic genericity would still reaffirm, and be reaffirmed by, the customary view of popular genres as essentially conservative in content and form alike—genre films as an ideological edifice at the service of the existing order and ruling groups. With more critical energies invested in mass cultural formation, however, the failure of structuralist analyses to account for historical aspects of cultural production could not go unquestioned. Especially, cultural politics became an epicenter of new challenges. As the interest in reappropriating popular culture for an oppositional politics was growing, scholars found the notion of structure both critically and politically suffocating above all due to its closed nature, and began to look to subversive forces and erratic rhythms within the structure through concepts like heterogeneity, excess, fracture, and lacuna. Evolving out of the changing ambience was poststructuralism, which, simply put, turned structuralism against itself by radicalizing the

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[38] Cawelti, *The Six-Gun Mystique Sequel*, 49. For more about his view on the mythic-ritual function of the Western, see pp. 14-18, 87, 97, 118, and 144-146.
[39] Wright, *Sixguns and Society*, 199-200.

operation of difference within the structure. The structure was thus no longer considered a fixed and closed system, but rather a deeply fractured construct.[40]

Accordingly, the theory of ideology—and myth as an ideological form as well—underwent significant revisions. A telling instance is the notion of "progressive genre," an outcome of the efforts to reframe film criticism through Althusserian perspectives,[41] where Ideology (ideology in general) is not simply false consciousness, as in traditional Marxism, but represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to the real world, and Ideological apparatuses, in contrast to the State apparatus working primarily by coercion and repression, have as their core characteristics constant struggles among heterogeneous narrative options for consent and hegemony. From the perspective, the articulation of Ideology in a genre text is not simply a realization of ruling ideologies; a genre text is rather a site where distinct and often conflicting conceptions of the world continue to compete and negotiate with each other. Particularly, a progressive text "hampers the straightforward expression of [ruling ideologies] through the production of a formally impelled rupture with the veneer of its own promises." A progressive text is, in other words, punctuated with ideological tensions (or contradictions) and thus moments of "reflexivity" or "auto-critique," which disrupt the genre system from within.[42]

Certainly, this turn to textual politics (the text-ideology relation) helped genre studies to a great extent to wean itself off both the inertia of relapsing to authorship in search of an account for innovation within convention and the reductive assumption of fundamental properties in

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[40] For the rise of poststructuralist initiatives in film studies, a useful overview can be found in Philip Rosen's introductions to *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology*, ed. Philip Rosen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986).

[41] Among the forerunners in the issue were Jean-Louis Comolli and Jean Narboni. See their 1969 *Cahiers du cinéma* editorial, "Cinema/Ideology/Criticism," *Cahiers du cinéma* 216 (October-November 1969); reprinted as "Cinema/Ideology/Criticism (1)" in *Screen Reader 1: Cinema/Ideology/Politics* (London: SEFT, 1977), 2-11. As for further elaborations on the issue, I have found noteworthy Barbara Klinger's "'Cinema/Ideology/Criticism' Revisited: The Progressive Genre" in Grant, ed., *Film Genre Reader III*, 75-91; originally appeared in *Screen* 25, no. 1 (January-February 1984): 30-44.

[42] Klinger, "'Cinema/Ideology/Criticism' Revisited," 78. See also Rosen, *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology*, 376.

genre structures (a phenomenological inflection in structural analysis). In so doing, the ideology critique also could dismantle the hierarchized distinction between "high" and "low" or "art" and "popular": from this perspective of ideology, there could be no fundamental difference between an artwork and a popular film. However, it did not come without costs. First of all, the old distinction between art and popular cinema was often superseded by another dualism between the progressive (subversive, open) and the reactionary (normative, closed) text—or a replacement of old phenomenological assumptions (auteur-centered) with a new one (text-centered). The overemphasis on progressiveness also led critics to underplay the ability of the system to absorb or manage even the most aberrant or rebellious elements. As Steve Neale cautioned, it would be naïve to regard difference simply as antithetical to the genre system, for it is in fact not the repetition of the same, but the possibility of variation that enables a genre system to persevere over time. In other words, difference is integral to the economy of genre cinema.[43] Yet, the thesis of "progressive genre" tended to "selectively overstate the radical valency of intentional signifiers and underestimate the means through which supervising systems negotiated a normative function for even the most excessive, foregrounded, deformative textual tendencies."[44]

A consequence from such discontent with the leftist ethics of resistance was an ambiguous position—e.g., an ideological criticism without, or wary of, a clear political commitment. Illustrative here is Robert Ray's stance toward how to infuse Althusserian legacies into genre studies in *A Certain Tendency of the Hollywood Cinema, 1930-1980*. On the one hand, he took the concepts of "overdetermination" and "transformation" as a vehicle to traverse major critical theories like Marxism, myth study, and psychoanalysis; the notion of multiple

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[43] Steve Neale, *Genre* (London: British Film Institute, 1980), 48-50.
[44] Klinger, "'Cinema/Ideology/Criticism' Revisited," 87-90.

layers at work in sociocultural formation involves the issues of structural mutation in myth and condensation/displacement in psychoanalysis.[45] For his critical taste, however, it was too easy a nonconformism to celebrate dissident variations arising in the crevices of conventional modes. Accordingly, eschewing the subversive-reactionary binary, he opted to explore the popular as a "scientifically more sustainable framework" in that the mass audience has proved relatively, if not completely, uniform and stable and thus more apt for an analytic study of, for example, how American cinema has assimilated deviant practices into the system of "regulated variety"— which harkens back to such notions as "administered resistance" (Theodor W. Adorno) and "licensed carnival" (Terry Eagleton).[46]

Besides, the poststructuralist emphasis on the text-ideology nexus left genre criticism susceptible to the accusation of textual isolationism. In Klinger's observation, the text-ideology critique was "strongly situated within the province of textual reading," and this was true "even in those genre studies [attentive] to the external social/ideological environments," where certain textual traits would be abruptly declared to be crystalizing or disturbing historical conditions.[47] The problematic nature of the text-ideology analysis became more visible in the face of challenges from spectatorship studies. Of course, the issue of reception was not new to (post)structuralism; it had been central to structuralist criticism from its early days. If, as discussed above, structural analysis was spurred by the recognition of the importance of genre

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[45] Robert Ray, *A Certain Tendency of the Hollywood Cinema, 1930-1980* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 11-12.

[46] Ibid., 17-18 and 20-21. I am thinking of the Frankfurt School's skepticism on the culture industry in the totally administered society. See especially, Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972). For Eagleton's "licensed carnival" (a caution about Bahktinians' overvalorization of the carnivalesque), see *Walter Benjamin, or Towards a Revolutionary Criticism* (London: Verso, 1981), 148.

[47] Klinger, "'Cinema/Ideology/Criticism' Revisited," 86-87. She thus argued in another article for the need to "seek to structure reception beyond textual boundaries" and take "social and intertextual agencies" not as secondary, trivial elements but as intrinsic, systematic factors. Barbara Klinger, "Digression at the Cinema: Commodification and Reception in Mass Culture," in *Modernity and Mass Culture*, eds. James Naremore and Patrick Brantlinger (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 118.

conventions (Buscombe and Tudor), the shift was deep-rooted in the concern with the audience. Embedded in the widely shared view of genre as a social contract between author and audience was the sense that one could not reach a meaningful understanding of genres without considering the viewer's role in their evolutions. As Altman also noted, the mythic-ritualistic approach saw "Hollywood as responding to societal pressure and thus expressing audience desires" or "attribut[ed] ultimate authorship to the audience."[48]

Still, even when it became customary to address spectatorial aspects, the issue received less analytic attention in actual critical practices than it could or should have. The audience was often called upon to testify the existence of genre structure—"Genre is what the audience collectively believes it to be." Yet, when the task was done, the issue of the spectator would be quickly shoved aside for the sake of genre itself as the primary object of serious analysis. If the viewer was increasingly considered more than a product of textual-structural operation, it was still barely discernible from the obscure backdrop of popular cultural production. A few factors were responsible for the trend: the mistrust of empirical approach and its limits (e.g., surveys on the impacts of popular genre films on the viewing public, particularly lowbrow or young audiences)[49]; the persistent appeal of leftist investments in alternative practices in and outside mainstream cinemas (or as its reverse side, the deep-seated suspicion of popular genres as an apparatus to reproduce ruling ideologies); lastly, and perhaps most importantly, the emphasis on

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[48] Altman, "A Semantic/Syntactic Approach," 30.

[49] For that matter, Wright's commentary is worth noting. For him, "meaning does not exist in the world, it exists in a relationship between things in the world and a person or group of people." Yet viewing should not be confused with understanding. The falling apple cannot be analyzed as it is experienced; nor can one understand the Western simply from watching it. Locating meaning in a film, or in any cultural artifact, is not an empirical matter: "For understanding to take place, the experience must be interpreted from within an analytic framework that neither contradicts the experience nor exhausts it"—an interpretive framework not as something our mind can impose on the experience, but something "inherent in the experience itself" and "conceptually revealed by the scholarly mind." *Sixguns and Society*, 195-197. Still the disproportion between structural and anthropological analysis—the preponderance of textual analysis and the insufficient account for the text-reader communication—remains a major shortcoming in his study, which led critics like Frayling to note that although useful in categorizing major developments of Italian Westerns, Wright's method failed to answer questions such as "How could a genre of American origins be so successful in other countries in the 1960s and 1970s?" Frayling, *Spaghetti Westerns*, 53.

"structure" or "system," which drove genre criticism to text-centered analysis and left little room for serious attention to viewing experiences.[50]

This is not to say, however, that the issue of reception remained simply dismissed in structural genre analyses. On the contrary, it constituted a central agenda to structural genre studies, particularly, in the late stage of their developments. As is well known, one of the key questions upon which the text-ideology critique hinged was, "How does the cinematic apparatus involve subjectivity formation?" It is to be noted, however, that the structure-ideology critique tended to see the viewer as an element "already implicated" in the textual structure. For instance, a key agenda for studies like Roland Barthes' *S/Z* (a scrutiny of the textual Ideology at work in Balzac's novella *Sarrasine*; 1970) and Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (a study of psychological operations of ruling ideologies in film texts; 1975) was how the textual structure of representation constructs the reader's positions and collective identities in a specific direction. In brief, the endeavor of the (post)structuralist critique to incorporate spectatorial aspects (subject formation) into the text-ideology framework led to the notion of the textually constructed spectator, which often proved to be at variance, to a greater or lesser degree, with historical viewers.

5.1.3   The historical-cultural approach and transnational Westerns

Roughly from the early 1980s, genre scholarship began migrating to what I would call the "historical-cultural approach," namely, the attempts to valorize the real audience in distinction from its theoretical counterpart and their historically variable and culturally specific viewing

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[50] Melvin Stokes, "Introduction: Historical Hollywood Spectatorship," in *Hollywood Spectatorship: Changing Perceptions of Cinema Audiences*, eds. Melvin Stokes and Richard Maltby (London: BFI Publishing, 2001), 2-5.

experiences. The foremost source of inspirations for the new direction was, no doubt, cultural studies drawing and expanding upon Marxist thinkers (Raymond Williams, Antonio Gramsci), Weimar theorists (Siegfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin), and more recently, consumer culture critics (Michel de Certeau).[51] To take John Fiske for example, feeding off of de Certeau and Pierre Bourdieu, he argued in *Understanding Popular Culture* (1989) that the complex nature of popular texts "lies as much in their uses as in their internal structure" and that meaning is not something already determined, self-sufficient, and inherent to a text, but created anew at each moment of its contact with the historically and socially situated reader.[52] He thus developed the notion of "popular discrimination" as opposed to "aesthetic discrimination"; if the "aesthetic judgment" as the primarily bourgeois mode of perception is anchored in the idea of universal values and entrenched in the theory industry, the "popular discrimination" is concerned with the "relevance" to everyday experience and the "productivity" of popular consumption.[53] For Miriam Hansen, too, whose perspectives have ripened in the footsteps of Kracauer and Benjamin among others, the gulf between theoretical and historical audiences forms a main agenda. In *Babel and Babylon* (1991), a study of American spectatorship in the silent era, she observes that for all its tendency to integrate heterogeneous viewers into a somehow unifiable body of consumers, American cinema in its silent era also allowed for the emergence of an alternative

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[51] Particularly influential were: Gramsci's notes on common sense ("Everybody is philosopher, if not by profession"); Kracauer's and Benjamin's elaborations on "distraction" as a key aspect in mass perceptions (e.g., Benjamin's Artwork essay and Kracauer's *The Mass Ornaments*); and Michel de Certeau's theses on productive uses (e.g., *The Practice of Everyday Life*).

[52] John Fiske, *Understanding Popular Culture* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 122.

[53] See "Popular Discrimination" in *Understanding Popular Culture*; "Popular Discrimination" in *Modernity and Mass Culture*, ed. James Naremore and Patrick Brantlinger (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 104-107. Central to Fiske's "popular discrimination" were Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984) and Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984).

social sphere where viewers could negotiate between what was given on the screen and their own experiences in life.[54]

Theoretically, the historical-cultural approach to spectatorship was a reaction to genre criticism caught in the impasse of a gear shifting between phenomenological and structuralist analysis. It did not only attempt to steer away from genre phenomenology (the tendency to define essential semantic values, as in auteurism) and its legacies that were felt even in the structural analysis (schematic assumptions on structural attributes). The historical-cultural perspective was also animated by the increasing discontent with the text-centered analysis including those in leftist cultural politics and the text-ideology criticism: if, in the ideology critique, it was "textual readership" that constituted an arena of distinct world views in competition, what was foregrounded in studies like Fiske's and Hansen's was a shift to the *parole* aspect of popular film texts or the uses to which they are put by individual or group viewers, namely, the ways in which historical spectatorship (historically, socially variable modes of popular reception) becomes a site where economic, social, and political conflicts are registered in distinct manners. Now the question to be posed was less how Ideology in the text "always-already" intepellates the viewer as a subject or where it structurally fails to do so than what mass audiences "make" of films—the ways they consume the texts differently from their supposedly immanent meanings—and how polyvalent public receptions create an alternative sphere, if not necessarily a consciously progressive one, for digressive sociocultural imaginations.

At the practical level, the shift to historical spectatorship had as a consequence a multiplication of ethnographic studies of historically and culturally specific groups of

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[54] Stokes, "Introduction: Historical Hollywood Spectatorship," 5-6; Miriam Hansen, *Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 5, 8, 61-2, 70-6, 83, 99, 114-20.

moviegoers—e.g., female and subaltern viewers—and their distinct modes of reception.[55] As for the Western, the new ethos animated the varied efforts to rediscover and reassess the genre's centrifugal variations both at home and abroad. Notably, its disseminations across national and cultural borders made it inevitable to redress orthodox views on the genre. For instance, striving to defend Spaghetti Westerns—particularly, Leone's—against hostile critical judgments, critics like Christopher Frayling found traditional frames of analysis to be limited to explain the historical-cultural imports of international Westerns. Structural studies might be of good use in identifying and categorizing some thematic and formal attributes in the Spaghetti Western. Yet they could not, or did not have to, deal with many questions that were to be posed at some point of any meaningful study of the genre's historical and cultural specificities: for instance, How could a genre of American origins be so successful in other countries in the 1960s and 1970s?[56] No less problematic is the text-ideology critique. Predicated on static understandings of the text and its relation to the audience, it could not embrace the *act* of reception as well as filmmaking into its analysis.[57] Besides, whether from inside, neighboring societies, or the other side of the Atlantic Ocean, critical reactions to Spaghetti Westerns would remain confined to the authenticity issue or the cultural roots discourse, and thereby such notions as imitation, parody, and pastiche.[58] Accordingly, little attention was paid to the complex ways popular conceptions of the world were materialized in/through thematic and formal characteristics of the Spaghetti Western—e.g., anti-epic cynicism, excessive stylization, intertextual-transcultural hybridization, heavy dose of violence, and a fairytale quality.

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[55] Stokes, "Introduction: Historical Hollywood Spectatorship," 7-8. Although in a different context, D. N. Rodowick also presented a similar observation recently: "No doubt [a retreat from theory since the early 1980s] had a number of salutary effects: a reinvigoration of historical research, more sociologically rigorous reconceptual-izations of spectatorship and the film audience, and the placement of film in the broader context of visual culture and electronic media." See D. N. Rodowick, "An Elegy for Theory," *October* 122 (Fall 2007), 91.

[56] Frayling, *Spaghetti Westerns*, 53; the original edition was published in 1981.

[57] Ibid., xxii-xxiii.

[58] For more about the "authenticity" controversy, see Ibid., 121-37.

Understandably, in an effort to move beyond the established critical frameworks, Frayling attempted a cartography of Italian film culture (an account for the geographical manifestation of sociocultural stratification) to put in perspective the rise of the Spaghetti Western and its receptions among specific social groups. Many Spaghetti directors were affiliated in one way or another with the underdeveloped South, and made their inroads to Cinecittà Studios at Rome—as staff members or assistant directors mostly for 'pulp' films—in the mid-1950s when the American influx took place.[59] The overall condition within Italian cinema in the era, however, was quite hostile to the Southern newcomers. Above all, in an atmosphere where the sociocultural hierarchy would easily translate into the geographical division between the advanced North and the backward South, Italian cinema, as with other terrains, could not remain intact from the deep-rooted regionalism. Indeed, most of Italian auteurs in the 1950s and 1960s were from the North: Antonioni (Ferrara), Fellini (the Romagna coast), Pasolini (Emilia-Romagna), Bertolucci (Parma). On the other hand, new directors from the South were frequently accused of not only their training under Hollywood influences, but also low standings of their works ('pulp' films usually intended for Southern markets).[60] Given the general sociocultural climate where Spaghetti Westerns were born, their acute disaffections for the order from above—which often proves too intense to be subdued beneath the narrative façade of equilibrium—take on new critical significance. Popular obsessions with their anti-epic cynicism, stylistic embellishments, and fairytale flavors were an indirect expression of the public discontent (especially, that of subaltern groups in the South) with the uneven cultural geography.

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[59] Sergio Leone, for instance, was from a Neapolitan family (Naples), and was studying at the Lycée in Rome when the postwar boom of the Italian cinema began. Sergio Corbucci and Carlo Lizzani were from Rome and Domenico Paolella from Foggia. Sergio Sollima and Duccio Tessari also fit this pattern. For the young cinéastes, the growth of Cinecittà Studios in the wake of the Hollywood influx was an opportunity to make their marks in the Italian film world. Frayling, *Spaghetti Westerns*, 58-59.
[60] Ibid., 66-67.

Similarly, Wimal Dissanayake and Malti Sahai underscored in a study of *Sholay* that the privileging of the text failed to address the difference between the subject formed by the text and the historical viewer situated along with such variables as class, race, gender, age, and nation. For them, the sensations *Sholay* generated among the public audience are a testimonial that the practice of decoding often carries far more weight in meaning production than the views of encoders such as producer, director and critic.[61] Particularly intriguing in that regard is the unanticipated popularity the film brought to the Gabbar character, the archvillain who destroys the family of a police officer, cuts his arms, terrorizes villagers, and thus should arouse repulsion from viewers. Besides, unlike other main characters all played by big stars, Gabbar went to an unknown actor Amjad Khan, "the only new face in a sea of superstars."[62] Far from possessing the rich baritone of villain characters, his voice was also so unpromising that crews implored the director to find someone else to dub for the character. Yet, when the film was released, it was the Gabbar character that loomed larger than any others; his dialogue tapes enjoyed more popularity than others' and the character transformed into a successful icon in the world of commercials.[63] Quite new to Indian cinema up to that point, and a complete surprise even to film crews, the rise of the villain as the most popular character became a memorable event in the history of Indian cinema: not a sign of the Indian moviegoers' lack of moral sense, it was a manifestation of a peculiar moral sense in that if the narrative gave way to the element of spectacle in the viewer's reception, it was indicative of some changes in their conceptions of the world.[64]

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[61] Dissanayake and Sahai, *Sholay: A Cultural Reading*, 71-74.
[62] Chopra, *Sholay: The Making of a Classic*, 87.
[63] Ibid., 138-39.
[64] Dissanayake and Sahai, *Sholay: A Cultural Reading*, 59.

5.1.4 Transpositional thinking: Historicizing "other histories"

The historical-cultural approach is not without its problems, of course. First of all, unless, by historical spectatorship, we mean an outright dismissal of the textual level, where can we place it in the discussion of historical spectatorship? It is an unpromising move to propose something like "audience sovereignty" in reaction to the old conception of the text as something determined. Popular discrimination, or public discretion, is no more a self-sufficient entity than is the text.[65] In other words, the question of historical readership cannot be separated from the text. What we need is, then, a perspective on how to integrate the text into its historical uses and *vice versa*.

To begin with the textual, if a Western has more appeal for the viewer than others, it certainly testifies that the film has certain features that make the viewer find it more gratifying and enjoyable than others. In other words, some elements in the text serve as a catalyst of popular discrimination. More specifically, it is a set of certain thematic and formal traits in the text that animate the faculty of popular discretion and drive it into certain directions at each particular historical conjuncture. Herein lies a question that is left unexplored in Dissanayake and Sahai's study: How could the Western genre among others become a primary formal source for capturing "the *Zeitgeist* of the seventies [in India], when the idealism of the freedom struggle and the optimism of newly independent India were things of the past"?[66] The notion of an archvillain persona's popularity as a sign of a peculiar moral sense is truly noteworthy. Yet the

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[65] Paul Smith, for instance, has found it problematic to overemphasize audience aspects (use, pleasure, and interpretation)—an overreaction to the static views of spectators as helpless victims of textual ideologies. For him, it is the text that initiates the act of interpretation, however different the decoding might be from the encoding. Besides, the text itself is as much a complex battleground for negotiations as the terrain of reception. He thus calls attention to the "intendment" or the "semiotic pressure" of the text that incites the reader to interpret the text in a particular and circumscribed way. Paul Smith, *Clint Eastwood: A Cultural Production* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), xv-xvi, 23.

[66] Dissanayake and Sahai, *Sholay: A Cultural Reading*, 7-8, 19.

observation is applicable to other genres, too, such as film noir and the gangster film, and does not tell us much about the specific historical and cultural relevance that the Indian public in the seventies found in the western, a genre of foreign origin.

It might help further our discussion to recall Kracauer's notes on "distraction" as a major mode of popular perception. Indeed the Gabbar phenomenon already shows that popular discretion involves quite distinct reading practices. The public obsession with the archvillain character had little to do with, or indeed undermined, the textual reason. More specifically, the Indian public viewer could take pleasure in certain aspects in the film without striving to find necessary connections between them and the text as a whole or its intended messages. Popular discretion is, in other words, little concerned with the text's integrity and more geared toward its relevance to everyday life, and consumes the text in a fragmented way, namely, by tearing certain elements from the entire body of the text. In popular readership, the text becomes akin to a picture puzzle in which, although part of a larger picture, small hidden figures still retain their distinctive values with little relevance to the entire picture. The discretion of the distracted mass viewer thus brings home the need to develop a view that neither subordinates spectatorship to the text, nor privileges it over the text, but can shed light on the dynamic interdependency between the text and diverse reading practices.

No less complicated, however, is the notion of the historical spectator. Notably, historical-cultural studies have often been empirically oriented and subject to skepticism. To return to the *Sholay* study, its "unstructured interviews" with average spectators were mean to, according to the authors, "attain a clearer picture of the complex ways in which audiences negotiate meaning with filmic texts and produce pleasure."[67] The interviews, however, appear to have failed to detect meaningful clues to distinct characteristics of popular spectatorship such as

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[67] Ibid., 71.

the public fascination with the Gabbar character. Even when the interviewees remembered the Gabbar phenomenon, their comments on the issue would easily fall back on customary views already outlined by major discourse-makers such as producers, directors, and critics.[68] In other words, the audience interviews, although designed to probe their active role in meaning production, failed to reach the issue of their obsession with the villain character, let alone the popular discretion registered in the phenomenon.

Certainly, something like de Certeau's analogy between the text and the rented apartment is insightful. A tenant can make considerable changes—"insinuate countless differences," in his words—to his or her rented apartment to make it more inhabitable. Likewise, to a substantial degree, it is the reader that makes the text "dwell-able" (meaningful and enjoyable). Put another way, de Certeau flips over the Foucauldian critique of biopolitics and steers our attention from various disciplinary techniques in everyday microphysics to infinitesimal antidisciplinary transformations that ordinary users effect to the given sociocultural economy.[69] Still the notion of "productive use" leaves us with a challenging question. As already indicated in terms like "infinitesimal," the productive readership remains necessarily fugitive and clandestine. An overt change made to a rented property, unless authorized by its owner, would be perceived as damage in reality. Thus, creative as the everyday use of a rented apartment or a text may be, it often fails to extend beyond the level of surreptitious imagination or virtual transgression.

We are then faced with the question of how a historical-cultural (anthropological, ethnographic, materialist) inquiry into popular reception can deal with the elliptical and erratic ways in which popular discretion operates—a Gramscian question to be posed in the face of the

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[68] Ibid., 78-130.
[69] de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, xx-xxi.

necessarily fragmented and episodic nature of subaltern histories.[70] In addition, a further complication is inevitable when we consider the complex dynamic of power relations. Gramsci's concept of hegemony does not refer to a unified, exclusive province of the ruling or the ruled; it rather urges us to be mindful of the nonlinear and multilayered nature of sociocultural formation—e.g., a dual perspective on histories of subalterns who are at once determined (conservative) and determining (digressive).[71] In a similar vein, Foucault also taught us that power is not static and proprietary, but rather operational and relational. Power is, as Deleuze aptly underscores, "practiced before it is possessed…it passes through the hands of the mastered no less than through the hands of the masters (it passes through every related force)."[72]

What becomes clear then is that an inquiry into popular discretion requires a different perspective than an empiricizing/positivising approach whose prerequisite is turning its object into a fixed entity, namely, divesting the object of its historical vitality. Given the operational nature of power relations, we also should be mindful of the pitfalls in conventional ways of representing the power structure: e.g., the master/slave narrative. In this respect, a feasible perspective on historical uses of genre is to be the one that can embrace into its analytic framework both the episodicity and the polyvalency of popular sociocultural formations without romanticizing or moralizing them.

On the other hand, the microscopic sensitivity to historical differentials should not be confused with the total rejection of "collectivity" or the uncritical use of "multiplicity" that flattens all the historical, cultural unevenness and turns "difference" into a schematic and static notion. It is customary now to be cautious of "massive unification," a logical leap from a set of

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[70] Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971), 54-55, 59.
[71] Marcia Landy, *Film, Politics and Gramsci* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 76-77.
[72] Gilles Deleuze, *Foucault*, trans. Seán Hand (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 71.

thematic/formal leitmotifs identified in a cluster of texts to a certain collective body of cultural and psychic coherence, as is often the case with discussions of national cinemas.[73] However, it would be as much misleading to turn a blind eye to the "historical forces" behind a claim of collectivity. There are surely historical junctures in which a coordination of varied social forces becomes more substantial and noticeable than other periods, even if its overdetermined and contingent nature remains defiant of any monolithic narrative. Critics like Rosen, thus, define national cinema as something that can be "more or less realized precisely as a readable discursive coherence which is unstable and whose terms and/or intensity may very well shift to the point where …a historian…[may] argue that the cinematic output of a given nation during a given period does not embody that particular kind of intertextual address one would call a national cinema."[74] Thus viewed, the question of collectivity cannot be exhausted by the sterile logic of "true or false." Nor does this mean that the dichotomy itself is an error; it is not something to be dispelled by scientific rigor, but a historical construct that could not be properly assessed without due attention to its power-knowledge dynamic. At stake here is rather the transpositional understanding of the historical gravity, where a collectivity claim can be an effect of ruling ideologies at one level, but at another, a starting point of opposing strategies.[75]

To return to genre criticism, transpositional thought relates to what Jameson calls the historical, or dialectical, use of genre. What I have found especially intriguing for the present

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[73] For instance, Kracauer's reading of the Weimar cinema in terms of a "shared inner life" governed by middle-class cultural dispositions and Nöel Burch's delineation of the formal distinctiveness of Japanese cinema in comparison with conventions of Western cinemas. Philip Rosen, "History, Textuality, Nation: Kracauer, Burch and Some Problems in the Study of National Cinemas," in *Theorizing National Cinema*, eds. Valentina Vitali and Paul Willemen (London: BFI Publishing, 2006), 18-20.

[74] Ibid., 26.

[75] I use the "transpositional thinking" as an alternative to the positional thinking that, as Jameson notes, involves the good-evil binary as a key mechanism of subjectivity formation. Simply put, the good-evil distinction (high-low, hero-villain, and civilization-wilderness) as the central ideologeme in romance turns "positional," when engaged in subjectivity formation; what belongs to "I" as the center of perception and action is good and righteous, in terms of which the other is evil, lower, uncultured, impure, confusing, or threatening. Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, 115, 117, 234.

discussion in his genre study is that the evolution of romance in modern and postmodern milieux has been something like a return of the repressed. When realism was reified to the point where it lost much of its versatility to accommodate fundamental heterogeneities of history as its raw material, or as the modernist discontent with limited senses of verisimilitude in realism became institutionalized to the point where historical heterogeneity turned into an abstract or strategic principle for an advanced aesthetic and critical practice, romance began to serve as a site in which counter-memories foreclosed in dominant modes of representation could reclaim their historical rights. In other words, exiled in marginalized forms of storytelling (fairy tale, Gothic, mystery, detective story, melodrama, science fiction, comic book, and the like), romance has formed a reservoir of alternative historical conceptions disqualified and suppressed under the reign of reified realism and institutionalized modernism.[76] What proves crucial for a genre study is, then, to cultivate a critical and interpretive versatility corresponding to historical and cultural differentials in the use of genre, that is, uncanny infinitesimal differences emerging in the lacunas of the established vocabulary in genre criticism—differing tactics and positions responsive to multilayered and relational historical formations.

The task, I would add, becomes more urgent in the face of the globalizing milieu where the transnationalization of filmmaking practices goes beyond simply imitating or assembling cinematic traditions across national boundaries, and traditional frameworks of classification increasingly prove futile in accounting for the new dynamic of transnational cultural developments—e.g., the burgeoning of various interlocal communities between national borders or enclaves/exclaves within territorial boundaries to a substantial extent, which brings home the need to rethink established models of cognitive mapping such as the global-local opposition. In the case of the Western, perceptions around its border-crossing permutations have often appeared

[76] Ibid., 103-107, 193.

hamstrung by the question of historical and cultural authenticity, and thus by such conceptual frames as imitation (opportunistic), emulation (sterile), parody/self-parody (derivative), or pastiche (hollow). Furthermore, the line of thinking has not only been the case with American perspectives; for many critics and viewers outside the U.S. as well, the transnational Western could hardly be more than an imitation, a parody, or a pastiche—e.g., Kurosawa as mentioned at the beginning.[77] The approach, however, does not provide much help in examining what critical values Asian Westerns have in accounting for historical and cultural changes in Asian societies or how they are symptomatic of the complexity of cultural interactions in the age of globality. Transnational Westerns may involve some elements of parody or pastiche. Still, as critics like Paul Smith note, they are not simply derivative, but need be considered as "deliberate transformations" of Hollywood Westerns,[78] which prompts us to look beyond such restrictive frameworks as historical-cultural authenticity and the binary between Hollywood and national cinema.

5.2   VIRTUAL WESTS AND VERNACULAR MODERNITIES

Indeed, transnational Westerns owe much of their historical significance to the ways the Western as a primarily American genre becomes relevant to other societies and their vernacular modernities. Gramsci provides a good starting point here. For him, 'Americanism' was much more than just the political, economic and cultural expansion of America; during the processes of nation-building across Europe around the turn of the century, it would serve as "an advance criticism" of old social strata resistant to a new way of life. The question to be posed was thus,

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[77] As for the case of the Spaghetti Westerns, see Frayling, *Spaghetti Westerns*, 121-125.
[78] Paul Smith, *Clint Eastwood*, 4.

Could the influx of the new civilization compel old Europe to overturn its antiquated economic and social basis? Or would it end becoming another instance of passive revolution, change without a change? That is, would it fail to be more than a reconsolidation of the same old Europe in a new coat?[79] Whatever the answer, Gramsci's question urges us to view "Americanism" as an integral part of modern nation-building histories in Europe; it was "a force to be reckoned with in accounting for changes in European culture."[80]

Similarly, Hansen also has found Americanism central to the formation of modern mass culture in Germany.[81] In Weimar Germany, "Amerika" would be a key metaphor for the modern world engaged with standardization, rationalization, mechanization, the increase of mobility, the urban masses, and so on. Particularly, cinema emerged as one of the most vibrant domains where diverse values including Americanism continued to contest each other.[82] For Kracauer, thus, separating "German" from "American" could not be a viable way of inquiring into the mass culture in Weimar Germany. Unlike in the minds of elite social groups, the German-American distinction was not so self-evident in the mass-mediated evolution of modern life[83]; for the Weimar masses, "Amerika" was a practical part in negotiations over competing visions of life. Drawing upon a variety of heterogeneous conceptions of the world to their own ends, they would create distinct forms and rhythms of life from that of ruling classes. In this respect, the

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[79] Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, 317-318.

[80] Landy, *Cinematic Uses of the Past*, 78.

[81] For Hansen, decentering (or provincializing) Hollywood cannot simply mean taking it to be on a par with other national cinemas; at stake is rather how to account for the success of Hollywood as "an international modernist idiom on a mass basis," which occurred "not because of its presumably universal narrative form but because it meant different things to different people and publics, both at home and abroad." "The Mass Production of the Senses: Classical Cinema as Vernacular Modernism," 340-41.

[82] Miriam Hansen, "America, Paris, the Alps: Kracauer (and Benjamin) on Cinema and Modernity," in *Cinema and the Invention of Modern Life*, eds. Leo Charney and Vanessa R. Schwartz (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 367, 371.

[83] When ruling groups treated the mass culture with reproach, Kracauer's response was: "the more people perceive themselves as a mass, the sooner the masses will also develop productive powers in the spiritual and cultural domain which are worth financing," which is, in his view, how ruling classes lost their cultural monopoly and how their isolated status became real. Siegfried Kracauer, *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, trans. Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 325.

American Age was not something to be dismissed as un-German, but rather a force to be explained to understand the modernity in Germany and its multi-stranded nature.

5.2.1 Westerns of Scheherazades

Likewise, the West has been a key word in film traditions outside Hollywood, not so much as a geographical reference as in terms of their own struggles to search for new and original—not necessarily Americanized—orientations of life. Spaghetti directors and viewers in the 1960s and the 1970s, for instance, found the themes and styles of the Western quite relevant or congenial to a portrayal of Italian life in their own times; the emphasis on landscape and on demographic mobility is deeply tied to the conditions that inhere in Italian folklore and can be grafted onto Western tropes, no matter how distant they are from actual Italian history and culture.[84] Besides, the rise of Italian Westerns marks a distinct way in which "the West" served as an integral idiom to other societies. This becomes clear, above all, in the pessimism endemic to Italian Westerns. As often noted, its emergence corresponded to the ideological and moral confusion of the period; more often than not, the 1960s saw historical courses reversed and yesterday's allies turning into today's enemies and *vice versa*, while laments on unfinished reforms were quickly superseded by the rhetoric of social harmony and economic growth and the range of individual choices became increasingly restricted.   It was in this climate that the public feelings of failure and disempowerment found a powerful form of compensation in a Westerner, more specifically, the one that was no longer a hero as in the epics of the American Frontier, but rather a disaffected cynic with the gun as the last and only resort.[85] If the West still retained critical values for

[84] Landy, *Cinematic Uses of the Past*, 79, 82.
[85] Frayling, *Spaghetti Westerns*, 55.

European societies, it did so not as a metaphor of an advanced horizon but rather as a problematic on a popular basis to come to terms with historical changes on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean.

Noteworthy in this respect is the ambivalent stance of Leone, a "disillusioned socialist" in his own words,[86] toward America, which is vital to understand his unique way of responding to the social climate in Italy. Of his first encounter with real Americans, he recalls:

> In my childhood, America was like a religion. Throughout my childhood and adolescence… I dreamed of the wide open spaces of America. The great expanses of desert… the first nation made up of people from all over the world… Then real-life Americans abruptly entered my life—in jeeps—and upset all my dreams… They were no longer the Americans of the West…[but just] soldiers like others… In the GIs who chased after our women, and sold their cigarettes on the black market, I could see nothing that I had seen in Hemingway… Nothing…of the great prairies, or of the demi-gods of my childhood.[87]

Leone's disillusionment with Americanism, however, did not turn him away from the West. The West, more accurately, the West of his childhood romance, continued to be the privileged site for his cinematic imagination well beyond his disillusioned adulthood; indeed, the rich flavor of his Spaghetti Westerns springs from the ways in which he incorporates into the childlike way of looking at the world a sarcasm toward both his contemporary world and American Westerns where the wine of myth and imagination would eventually be made insipid by the water of realism and optimism. He thus wanted to, as Frayling aptly says, "reenchant the cinema, while expressing his own disenchantment with the contemporary world." Understandably, he often characterized his own works as "fairy tales for grownups" and likened himself to Scheherazade, a storyteller striving to survive long and cruel Arabian Nights of his contemporary world by re-

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[86] Leone once said: "I am a disillusioned socialist. To the point of becoming an anarchist…With John Ford, people look out of the window with hope. Me, I show people who are scared even to open the door. And if they do, they tend to get a bullet right between the eyes." Frayling, *Sergio Leone*, 306.
[87] Frayling, *Spaghetti Westerns*, 65; Frayling, *Sergio Leone*, 23-4.

invoking the charm of the frontier romance.[88] To put it metaphorically, he dreamed of reopening

the door to the Monument Valley—the door John Ford had to close with Ethan (John Wayne)

left outside alone in *The Searchers* (1956)—and it was his way of enduring or coming to terms

with the claustrophobic life of 1960s Europe.

Similarly, *Sholay* also answered widespread disillusionment in its time not through direct

comments on the political but by transcoding the political into Western tropes. Genre codes in

the film, Dissanayake and Sahai note, served to "construct a metaphoric view of Indian society

and its manifold problems" by "displac[ing] accuracy and specificity with ideality."[89] This does

not simply mean that *Sholay* utilized a genre of foreign origin as a means for an implicit delivery

of political messages. The distinct nature of *Sholay* rather lies in the way in which Western

tropes became a new vocabulary in popular Indian cinema of the 1970s. Above all, the portrayal

of the main characters—in particular, two outlaw protagonists, Jai and Veeru—needs to be

addressed. Quite typical of popular Indian cinema prior to *Sholay* had been the idea of the

family as "the" narrative closure—often with the mother at the center. Interestingly, however, it

was the lack of this very nucleus that made *Sholay* distinguishable from other films. The Thakur,

a retired police officer, has lost his family to Gabbar, which renders him consumed with the thirst

of revenge. Jai and Veeru too appear to have no family ties. As mercenaries hired mainly for

money, they also remain detached from accepted social values. However, the public fascination

with the film testifies that the representation of the denim-clad mercenaries (culturally and

morally ambiguous characters) was not a premature transplantation of the Western onto the

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[88] Frayling, *Sergio Leone*, 487. For more about the fairytale quality of Leone's Westerns, see also *Sergio Leone*, 127, 141-2; *Spaghetti Westerns*, 126.
[89] Dissanayake and Sahai, *Sholay: A Cultural Reading*, 25-6, 66-7.

Indian cultural soil, as many critics reproachfully commented;[90] it rather marks an emergence of new thematic and visual lexicons to fill lacunas in the established vocabulary of Indian cinema—voids that, along with social shifts, became increasingly substantial and visible.

The notion of the frontier myth as integral part of sociocultural formations across borders bears affinity to Jameson's view of romance as a return of the repressed. More specifically, in contrast to its fate at home, the Western outside America has often attained new life at a time of troubles and confusions, i.e., an interregnum where old views of the world are losing their validities and new orientations are yet to be found. To paraphrase Jameson, the West has often resurfaced as a privileged backdrop of romance through marginalized forms of storytelling in times where given modes of representation, whether realist (including nationalist inflections) or modernist (including avant-garde practices), proved no longer quite effective in accounting for changes in social relations. Neither Leone's remythicization of the West nor the Indian public's infatuation with the Western tropes in *Sholay* was necessarily a sign of cultural imperialism; they rather bespeak that the return to the frontier myth against the grain of demythologization in both Hollywood and national cinemas—fantasizing about a time for action through popular modes of imagination such as mythical and fairytale narrative—has often served as a vernacular way of enduring long Arabian Nights without much hope, or as a critical reaction to the world where dissident discourses had already become clichés bereft of their original subversive energies and the faculty of action became frustrated.

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[90] Critical reactions to *Sholay* for the first couple weeks after its release were mostly castigatory: "There was no mother figure…what kind of friendship did the two men share?"; "The major problem…is the unsuccessful transplantation it attempts–grafting a Western on the Indian milieu."; "*Sholay* will teach the producer and other moviemakers what to do and what not to do when making exceptionally ambitious films." See Chopra, *Sholay: The Making of a Classic*, 160-161, 168.

5.2.2   An epic cinema without epic history?

We are then led to another challenging agenda.   Vernacular histories deposited in creolized frontier romances are not yet actual ones, but remain quite defiant of empirical verification, however rigorous it may be.   What kind of West is created in transnational Westerns?   The Western's historicity is hardly a new issue; it has been a major question in critical history of the Western from its early stages.   In "The Western: or the American Film *Par Excellence*," for instance, Bazin notes that although one should not dismiss historical references in Westerns, many of honorable standing are primarily imaginary rather than faithful to history.   His discussion thus centers on the genre's peculiar historicity geared toward a mythical-phenomenological approach.   In this view, the genre's epic historical imagination (vast open space, grand landscape, monumental action, all-encompassing shot, the pan, traveling shot, and so on) owes much of its persistent appeal to its link to the myth-reality, i.e., the foundational moment of a nation-civilization—the moment of transition from the nomadic (nomos) to the written law (logos), where individual justice comes into conflict with the law which is not necessarily superior to those that it prosecutes, but a new equilibrium is eventually established between individuals and their environments.[91]

Certainly, Bazin's myth-reality thesis deserves due attention in that it opens our eyes to the Western's distinct historicity that extends beyond the empiricist or positivistic perspective and thereby the simplistic repudiation of universality as well. Perhaps one of the most insightful expansions on Bazin's view can be found in Deleuze. For him, the primary ground for the global triumph of the American cinema in its classical stage was realism predicated on the organic-

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[91] For Bazin, Western tropes are "signs or symbols of its profound reality, namely the myth"; as a myth–reality, the West in cinema is "our Odyssey." Bazin, "The Western: Or the American Film *Par Excellence*," 142, 148.

cosmic relation between milieux and modes of action. A rich instance of epic cinema (the large form, in Deleuze's words) is the Western where the constant presence of the vast open space and the immense sky forms the Encompasser that embraces individuals capable of monumental action. This does not mean that there is no closed space in the Western as an epic cinema. The outside encompasses the inside; or both communicate through some organic rhythms. In Ford's *Stagecoach* (1939), thus, "the diligence inside alternates with the diligence seen from the outside." The milieu of the epic Western, in other words, awakens the revolutionary spirit of human agency and great individuals respond to the epic milieu through grandiose actions. And what makes the Western more pertinent to this definition than other genres is the West, which is at once an archetypal setting of epic romance and a real site: hence, the Western genre as a prototype of epic realism in film history.[92]

It is disputable, however, how sustainable Bazin's view, and Deleuze's as well, can be outside the American context, especially that of the classical American Western. Their absence of attention to transnational Westerns does not invalidate their perspectives; their classification of classical Westerns as an exemplary case of epic cinema is certainly useful. Yet we should be mindful, as well, that the evolutions of the Western in transnational contexts extend beyond their formulations. Bazin, for instance, identified epic style as the core aesthetic principle of the Western, but it loses much of its validity in the face of the genre's permutations across borders. In transnational Westerns, too, the hegemony of epic style has continued, as evidenced in their penchant for open spaces, panoramic views, traversing movements, dynamic shots (the pan and the traveling shot), and the like. As for transnational Westerns, however, the epic impulse could not have such an "epic-realist" milieu as the West upon which the American Western drew to

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[92] Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema I: The Movement-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 141-146.

evoke shared expectations and hypotheses among its constituencies. In contexts outside America, another real West could not exist, or it was to be invented largely as a cultural phantasm—an outcome of the lack/desire of such a realist-epic space. In a society laden with heavy residues from the past (e.g., Europe) or tenacious legacies of colonialism and despotism (e.g., Third-World countries), history hardly offers an analogy for the West. One can thus say that if the American Western could form a great tradition of realism in its classical era thanks largely to the organic relationship it created between the West and epic odysseys, the transnational Western had to build its own traditions without an epic-realist milieu such as the West, or by contemplating on the impossibility of the West.

It is not accidental, for instance, that the question of "Which way is America?" serves as a tongue-in-cheek refrain in Leone's *Duck, You Sucker* (*A Fistful of Dynamite*, 1971). Set in the Mexican Revolution, the film interweaves various competing views on history into a tragicomic seesaw relationship between two contrasting characters: John (Sean), an IRA revolutionary who, on the run from the British, seeks another chance to put his political ideals into practice in Mexico, and Juan, a bandit leader who desires to take advantage of John's expertise in explosives to rob banks but unexpectedly becomes a hero of the revolution when tricked into breaking into a bank packed with political prisoners instead of gold. As their relationship develops through a series of divergences (conflicts) and convergences (friendship), the quest for "America" (Juan) runs parallel to that for revolution (John). More importantly, however, Juan's America repeatedly proves to be beyond reach, just as John's revolution appears to be. Just like the revolution, the West is always present "not by being here and now" but "by being over there"; it exists because its arrival continues to be delayed. The peculiar juxtaposition of the two distinct strains thus becomes revelatory of a challenge fundamental to transnational Westerns.

At the core of the genre is the profound dissonance between the desire for the West (or what it signifies) and its impossibility, between the charm the western evokes in international contexts and the passive-revolutionary historical reality, and simply put, between form and content.

The disparity between form and content is by no means unique to transnational Westerns; it already began to haunt the American Western in its postwar years. As the organic relation between the West and westerners often proved no longer self-evident, the Western became increasingly ethical or self-reflective rather than epic.[93] Emblematic of the change is, once again, Ford. In the postwar era, he tended to experiment with new directions in which Westerners grew increasingly decrepit, solitary, nostalgic, pensive, disoriented, or even morally ambiguous. For instance, the transition from the outside to the inside at the end of *The Searchers* is bewildering; Ethan, a Civil War veteran, fails to come inside the house. Moreover, in the case of *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962) which foregrounds the Westerner's split subjectivity, the birth of America appears enmeshed with deliberate misconceptions; Stoddard is freed from his moral flaw when he comes to know that it was Doniphon, not him, that shot Valence to death, but becomes a senator thanks to the public belief that he vanquished the villain. Accentuated in both examples is a sense that the West is no longer an epic-reality. Even when the same West is in use, it cannot awaken epic action anymore. Accordingly, the action also ceases to be monumental; the man of deeds begins to appear anachronistic or irresponsibly violent, for he has lost the milieu that would accommodate his ambition for epic history. To go back to Bazin, in order to justify its survival in the postclassical era, the Western had to lend itself to extrinsic elements such as moral struggles, social issues, psychological depth, stylistic embellishments, and even eroticism—"extrinsic elements" in that they were not unique to the Western, but applicable to or better suited to other genres.

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[93] Deleuze, *Cinema I: The Movement-Image*, 147.

The closing of the West had as an inevitable consequence a qualitative change in the realism of the Western. "When the legend becomes fact," the journalists in *Liberty Valence* insist, "print the legend." Yet, after becoming fact, the West could no longer remain the same as before. Robert Warshow thus wrote, "Once it has been discovered that the true theme of the Western movie is not the freedom and expansiveness of frontier life, but its limitations, its material barrenness, the pressure of obligation, then even the landscape itself ceases to be quite the arena of free movement it once was, but becomes instead a great empty waste." And it was the "mature sense of limitation" that led the Westerner closer to the field of serious art, and "the deeper seriousness" of the adult Western involved "the introduction of a realism, both physical and psychological"[94]—more accurately, a new realism to be distinguished from epic realism.[95] Of course, the West could still be a realist milieu, but only as the one deprived of epic energies. The Western, in other words, succumbed to rational narrativization where the West, with all the same physical grandiosity, turned far smaller in its capacity of fermenting an epoch-making action. No longer in cosmic relation with human action, the West could hardly be other than a functional backdrop—functional, or rationally reconfigured, because it ceased to exist for itself, but rather to explain or supplement others.[96] It was this new realism (the post-epic realism geared toward critical/ethical conceptions of history) that constituted a main base for diverse new directions in the postclassical Western: to name just a few, Howard Hawks, Anthony Mann, Budd Boetticher, and Sam Peckinpah.

[94] Robert Warshow, "Movie Chronicle: The Westerner," *The Immediate Experience: Movies, Comics, Theatre and Other Aspects of Popular Culture* (New York: Doubleday, 1962), 112-14.

[95] By this, I do not mean that postclassical Westerns have more historical accuracy. Warshow was already well aware that the feel of "more real" they could evoke was a result of the genre's formal evolution, i.e., the advance of the pattern where the gunfighter can do nothing but play the game of gunfight until the time comes when it is he who gets killed. That is, "being mature and real" was inevitable in the Western, as the genre became an art for connoisseurs who expected their Westerners to learn and grow. Ibid., 113-17.

[96] My argument here owes much to Deleuze's notes on the functionalism of the milieu in neo-Westerns, in particular, Howard Hawks' films. Deleuze, *Cinema I: The Movement-Image*, 164-68.

Still, the realism of post-Westerns does not tell us much about the developments of the Western across borders. Transnational Westerns are often found to be geared toward contrasting directions. In brief, if the post-Western repeatedly confirms the demise of the West, the transnational Western frequently appears to be preoccupied with the will to reinvent the West. Indeed, the impossibility of the West has been a central factor for the rises of transnational Westerns. To broaden our purview a little further, the transnational uses of the Western provide an important venue for discussing complex processes of modern social formations outside and in relation to "America"—more specific, the dynamic of transcultural constructions that are adumbrated by such notions as the "nostalgia without memory" (Arjun Appadurai)[97] and the deterritorialized West (Cawelti).[98] If we thus cannot expect a realist cinema—more accurately, the same kind that one can witness in American Westerns—from transnational Westerns, it is certainly misguided to read them through such frameworks as the intrinsic-extrinsic binary and the classical-postclassical distinction. Neither an epic-realist cinema nor variations of the post-epic Western, the transnational Western rather involves radically distinct patterns of the genre's evolution. When Leone aspired to rejuvenate the Western in reaction to its degeneration at home, he was well aware that he had to do so without a realist milieu, and without succumbing to the wave of the post-epic realism, either. His response was, thus, to reenchant the genre against the trend of demythologization and through fairytale imagination and stylization. That is, he

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[97] In other words, the imagined nostalgia for things that have never existed. Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 30, 77.

[98] Cawelti saw in transnational Westerns a rise of "a new 'deterritorialized' genre on the boundary between cultures." Cawelti, *The Six-Gun Mystique Sequel*, 164, 112, 124-25. Indeed, deterritorialization has been vital to the Western's transnational disseminations. If post-Westerns and Italian Westerns tended to veer away from historical, cultural authenticity, the delocalization seems to have provided the genre with much more room for international audiences to relate to it, as evidenced in enormous popularities they garnered around the world. In the case of South Korea, the 1950s saw films like *High Noon* (Fred Zinnemann, 1952) and *Shane* (George Stevens, 1953) becoming a public sensation; in the following decade, much of the public attention migrated to Spaghetti Westerns such as Leone's Dollars Trilogy and Corbucci's Django series. Yi, *History of Korean Cinema*, 340-41. See also Chung, "The Man with No Home," 72-74.

aspired to recreate an epic cinema in a post-epic time, the result of which was a cinema which, inevitably steeped with a sense of loss and failure, was critical of both the historical condition where a cinema of epic realism was impossible (e.g., Europe in passive revolution) and the world where a cinema of myth-reality already belonged to history (e.g., America in post-revolution).

5.2.3   A Korean case: The West as the transcendental outside

Noteworthy in this regard are the ways international viewers have redefined the spatiality of the West. For Korean film critic Huh Moonyung, for instance, the West is above all transcendental. Beyond the reach of the secular camera, the landscape of the West is the sublime Other that transcends the narrative of historical actions and events. This does not mean that the West has nothing to do with historical action. It is rather the inner force that animates the Western's narrative. It is, in other words, something like an absent cause that, although unrepresentable, or because of that, leads humans to desire to know or achieve it. In his phenomenological approach (which is reminiscent of negative theology), thus, the real charm of the Western lies in the absolute distance the West has from the world of historical events. In the foreword to *Secular Film, Secular Criticism*, a collection of his film reviews, he writes,

> The Western is a genre that transcends itself internally and it is this paradox that makes the Western great… The landscape of the West is not an image of a real place, but a transcendental space that enables the generic form of the western… [More accurately] the transcendental nature of the landscape in the Western resides not in its image but its distance. It is its absolute distance [from secular eyes] that makes the Western profoundly melancholic.[99]

> Understandably, he finds the loss of the West more fundamental to *Liberty Valance* than

the death of Doniphon; or the demise of the Westerner is an inevitable outcome of the West's

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[99] Moonyung Huh, *Secular Film, Secular Criticism* (Seoul: Kang, 2010), 16-21.

disappearance. He even holds that the loss of the West became a principal trauma for post-Ford or postclassical cinemas, namely, modern cinemas. The Monument Valley may reappear in another Western, but no longer as the transcendental outside that gave rise to a new civilization or could urge/help it to regenerate itself over and again. Unable to arouse a sublime feeling of magnificence, the West is now a cultivated wilderness (as in tourist perspectives), a site of original sin (as in countercultural Westerns [100]), or a barren wasteland (as in modernist cinemas [101]). Accordingly, the search for a familiar stranger from the absolute outside—the desire both Jean Renoir and Ford shared to keep alive the hope for a social regeneration at the sight of decaying society—is no longer possible, either. [102]

It is not my concern, however, to calibrate the validity of Huh's claims. My focus is rather on how the West gains new historical and cultural values beyond its home, how the West is de-/re-contextualized under the gaze of a Korean spectator like Huh. First of all, when he reads the West as a transcendental outside, there is little room for something like the "classic perfection," that is, the moment of the organic unity between epic-realist space and monumental action that Bazin and Deleuze could witness in *Stagecoach*. For him, *Stagecoach* becomes meaningful not because of the epic journey through all the internal conflicts and external obstacles, but as a last snapshot of the West. Accordingly, Bazin's distinction between "classical" and "postclassical" has little significance in his view. For him, the West could only exist as an afterimage from the outset, which is why the Western is melancholic in essence, and it is its melancholic nature that makes the Western profoundly cinematic.

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[100] Among notable subgenres in this direction are Indian Westerns (e.g., Arthur Penn's *Little Big Man*, 1970) and feminist Westerns (e.g., Maggie Greenwald's *The Ballad of Little Jo*, 1993).

[101] To name just a few renowned instances for the sake of clarification, Dennis Hopper's *Easy Rider* (1969), Wim Wenders' *Paris, Texas* (1984), and Ridley Scott's *Thelma & Louise* (1991).

[102] Huh, *Secular Film, Secular Criticism*, 26.

Understandably, his attention gravitates to, for instance, what Doc Boone has to say at the backs of Kid (John Wayne) and Dallas (Claire Trevor) coaching to the west of the West: "Well, they're saved from the blessings of civilization."[103] The paradox in this claim approves Huh's position that the West lies beyond the boundary of civilization and knowledge. Or to put it the other way around, his view seems quite helpful to make sense of the ways the scene is structured. Why is it set at dark night? Why would the camera not show the new couple, when the eyes and the dialogue of Doc Boone and Marshal Wilcox are all directed to them? The West is talked about all the time, but not available for a direct representation. It is not here and now, but always exists over there as a terrain yet to be discovered. In other words, it remains excessive or scandalous to narrative closure. The West, however, is not the end of history. It is rather an important aspect of history. When the camera holds onto the alcoholic doctor and the aged marshal rather than follow the new couple, when the West thus remains buried in darkness and can only be implied through small gestures such as Doc Boone's witty remarks instead of being fulfilled by a larger form of action, its historical negativity or virtuality becomes a powerful comment on the impoverished and morbid condition of the "here and now." To rephrase it, its distance from the history of the "here and now" becomes absolute and the absolute distance conveys critical messages when society turns oblivious or hostile to its evolutionary energies.

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[103] Ibid., 22.

5.3   NORTH BY WEST: MANCHURIA AND THE *HWALGUK*

Huh's comments on the Western are mostly devoted to American cases, yet it is hard to ignore Korean perspectives at work in his approach. Choi In-hoon's novel, *The Square* (1960),[104] a milestone in modern South Korean literature, might help clarify my point. It provides useful clues to how the Western was received in South Korea. Besides, and more importantly, it makes a good occasion for discussing how Manchuria became a privileged site in translating the Western into South Korean cinema.

5.3.1   The West (the frontier) to Manchuria (an exclave)

What I have found first noteworthy in the novel is a rather peculiar choice Choi made to capture the deep frustrations of his protagonist Myong-jun, a POW who, after repeated failures to find the "square" (the political sphere) to fulfill his passion for nation rebuilding, ends up choosing exile over the homeland plagued and divided by the Cold War ideologies.

> America has already been discovered. Western stagecoaches are only in movies… Where…is one to produce an action scene?... At no other time has the heroic life been more impossible for man… When all the conditions [for heroic action] have been plucked away, the grain that remains is beautiful superstition… All he knew was that the seeds [of heroic action] could not flower in a dark square lit by a black sun.[105]

Here such tropes as "the West" and "stagecoaches" are not restricted to America in its geographical sense. Nor do their disappearances belong exclusively to American history. For Myong-jun, the West is an archetypal space for epic action. Likewise, its loss also has world-historical meanings; the impossibility of heroic life as an effect of its closing is indexical of the

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[104] An outcome of the short-lived springtime between the despotic Syngman Rhee regime (1948-60) and the onset of military rule (1961), *The Square* has been considered a staple of the "division literature" in South Korea and also one of the most widely and steadily read novels since its publication.
[105] Choi, *The Square*, 53.

decay of modern nation-civilizations. Korea could not be an exception; "Where can one produce an action scene?" became an urgent question for Korea, as well, especially in the wake of its liberation from Japanese colonial rule. At the moment of its rebirth, Korea found itself left in a dark square where heavy clouds of colonial legacies, along with the torrent of external powers, kept innate initiatives for real change from sprouting.

At the personal level, however, what gives him a right to his cynicism is his acute desire for an open square, or another West, that can accommodate his passion for national rebuilding. In other words, his craving for an epic milieu forms the other side of his split subjectivity. Indeed, it is this impetus of action that drives him to Manchuria, which is made evident in the way Manchuria is portrayed in his memories. When his POW ship draws near to Hong Kong on the way to exile, he comes to catch the city's night view embroidered with numerous burning lights. Enthralled by the splendid spectacle, his mind slips back to a scene of similar kind in his memory: immense Manchurian plains blazing under the dusking sky.

> Myong-jun … with a cry of admiration … went over close to the window. Sky and earth were a sea of fire. The clouds gathered in the west were a huge, golden lump of glass … It seemed as if at any moment sparks would leap in all directions … The vast fields of corn and sorghum, stretched out … as far as the eye could see, were a sea of fire.[106]

Charged with revolutionary energies, Manchuria in Myong-jun's memory is redolent of the West. In other words, he sees the possibility of another West, a stage for epic action, in Manchuria. However, the analogy between them would remain superficial if their historical differences are not explained. If the West provided the western an epic-realist space, that is, if the genre could build its tradition upon the West as it had been or as what people believed it to have been, Myong-jun discovers Manchuria not as what it was or what people believed it to have been, but as a counter-image of the Korean peninsula and its claustrophobic conditions.

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[106] Ibid., 81. For his recollection of Manchuria, see also Ibid., 94-95.

The way Myong-jun discovers Manchuria is indexical of sociocultural conditions in South Korea. Manchuria had remained hardly accessible throughout the Cold War era due mainly to the communist bloc in the north (North Korea, China, and the USSR), and northbound initiatives had been continuously frustrated. And as the Cold War mentality took roots deeper in South Korean society, it "paralyzed both the capacity and desire to move beyond the border."[107] Accordingly, Manchurian memories too had to be sanitized, if not entirely erased, under the division order. Given the heavy restraints on vertical imagination, the subversive undertone of Myong-jun's travel to a location like Manchuria could not go unnoticed among the South Korean public. Yet it is also to be noted that Manchuria could be relevant to Korean history—that is, it could stir up liberating feelings among the Korean public—not as it was or as people believed it be, but as an antithesis to Korea as a dark square.

Still this line of approach is limited, for it fails to address other factors at work in Myong-jun's discovery of Manchuria. The trajectory of his journey is not straight. The South-North axis is not the only factor for his journey. No less important in his search for an open square is the idea of the West as an antithesis to the enclosed condition of the Korean peninsula. His northbound imagination is, in other words, not only vertically determined but laterally, as well. His mind thus meanders through various points in the Cold War coordinates, which makes his journey to Manchuria defiant of an easy linear interpretation, whether horizontally coordinated anti-North positions or vertically aligned nationalist (or anti-imperialist) discourses. In brief, he goes north by west. He discovers Manchuria by the way of the West.

Besides, a further complication arises when we consider that his Manchuria is not yet a real place. Like the West in *Stagecoach* that is still buried in darkness, Myong-jun's Manchuria is also yet to be realized. It is a place without any actual historical reference. No coincidence, it

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[107] Kim, "Genre as Contact Zone," 99, 105-106.

only exists in his memory. Its virtuality is also confirmed by Myong-jun's immobility. In the past, he could see Manchuria only through the train window; now confined to a ship of POWs on the way to exile, he can experience it only in his recollection. Here his condition is redolent of the film viewer sitting in the dark theater. His discovery of Manchuria, in other words, bears an affinity to cinematic experience. To go little further, his Manchuria is demonstrative of vernacular cinematic sensibilities developed in the claustrophobic conditions of South Korea under postcolonial military rule. Manchuria in his recollections is not yet a real place like the West that allowed the western to become a prototype of epic realism. It is rather an intended reality, an image of something that has never been actually experienced, but fantasied about or willed in the dark, closed theater of Korean society.

5.3.2 Manchuria in the *hwalguk* imagination

Published at the dawn of the 1960s, *The Square* heralded the burgeoning of the "*daeryuk hwalguk*" ("continental action drama" set mainly in Manchuria) in the decade. By this, I also mean that it prognosticated the challenges the genre had to face *en route to* Manchuria as well. Why Manchuria? When history lacks a realist space for epic action, what would it mean to invent a space for *hwal* out of Manchuria?[108] What kind of milieu is it if it is historically and culturally undefined? In addition, what kind of *hwal* can be created in such a non-realist space? Manchuria was far from a space for trailblazers; it was rather like a dead end for Korean émigrés (e.g., poor peasants, bandits, outlaws and independence fighters), who had to endure antagonistic

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[108] Literally, *hwal* (活; 활) means physical mobility. Yet its use often extends to refer to spiritual vitality. Cho Jeonghwan, for instance, employs it to denote movements or forces truly antithetical to the repressive power. For him, it is "not the opposing power but the anti-power," or "the centrifugal power" in distinction from the centralizing one. Quoted in Kim, "Genre as Contact Zone," 110. As for the term *hwalguk*, it had been widely used in South Korea until the mid-1970s. But at the end of the decade, it began to give way to other terms like "action movie." For the South Korean public today, thus, it carries some nostalgic sense. Ibid., 100-101.

conditions, social or natural, in exchange for a bit of freedom from Japanese colonizers and no-less-abusive collaborators (native bureaucrats and landlords).[109] From the realist perspective thus, a drama of *hwal* in Manchuria could hardly be a candid historical representation. Besides, given the tight curbs on northern imaginations under the Cold War order, Manchuria could scarcely be remembered without sanitization, as discussed above. Faced with the double bind, the Manchurian *hwalguk* developed the tendency to imbue Manchuria with the heroism of independence fighters[110] and on the other, cleanse it of heterogeneous diasporic histories such as leftist movements and dissident groups. The genre, in other words, could make its way through the postcolonial authoritarian climate by offering mythopoeic romances compensatory for the collective sense of failure and emasculation anchored in colonial experiences and the civil war. And the tendency continued roughly up to the mid-1960s.

Still, it is simplistic to assert that the Manchurian *hwalguk* was simply an edifice of state-centered ideologies or an escapist fantasy. Particularly, as the decade drew to a close, the genre grew increasingly digressive from state-centered formulas. Perhaps, the Italian Western—known as the Macaroni Western in South Korea—deserves good credit for the shift. Beginning with *A Fistful of Dollars* released in 1966 in South Korea, the Spaghetti Westerns generated such a sensation that the military regime had to toughen restrictions on their import for fear of the adverse impacts their intense pessimism and violence could have on the South Korean public.[111] While it is certainly possible to read in the public obsession with Spaghetti Westerns some discontents the public had with the courses of national history in the postcolonial Cold War era, I would add that the genre also served as a major catalyst for the *hwal* impulse growing beyond

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[109] Chung, "The Man with No Home," 75-76. For more about the living conditions of Korean immigrants in occupied Manchuria, see Bruce Cumings, *Korea's Place in the Sun*, rev. ed. (New York: W.W. Norton, 2005), 162.
[110] Chung, "The Man with No Home," 72-73.
[111] Yi, *History of Korean Cinema*, 335, 339-41.

the parameter of nationalist discourses and rational narrativization. To be more specific, it was Spaghetti Westerns along with a few other globally renowned post-Westerns such as *Shane* (George Stevens, 1953) that would help the Manchurian *hwalguk* to radicalize itself around the turn of the decade by offering new lexicons such as the ronin mentality and the mercenary motif.

5.3.3   Disenchanted Manchuria

In *The Man With No Home* (*Musukja*, 1968),[112] for instance, Shin Sang-ok calls into question the convention of assimilating Manchuria to national history. First, the film problematizes entrenched frames of ethnic and ideological demarcation. When bandits are called "*yugyeokdae*" (commando) and have some ties to the Independence Army, and furthermore when their extortions of military taxes prove to be the major burden to poor peasants, Manchuria is no longer a unified front against common enemies such as Japanese colonizers; it is rather a world of confusion and distrust where action can hardly help reestablish the threatened order, but only disclose or deepen the fractures within Korean diasporic communities. In other words, Shin's film presents a new kind of Manchuria. Digressing from the customs established by its predecessors, the film portrays Manchuria to be at odds with state-centered discourses. The new Manchuria is also quite in contrast to Myong-jun's. Having lost its epic quality, it can no longer invoke a sublime vision such as the one we saw in Moyng-jun's recollection. It is now a land of the *musukja* (the man with no home to return to) above all else.

The degeneration of Manchuria entails that of characters, that is, the decline of their ability to form an organic relationship with milieux. The protagonist, Chang, belongs to the

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[112] The film was promoted as an "Oriental Western" for the first time in South Korea. Yi, *History of Korean Cinema*, 373.

pedigree of Shane and Yojimbo, ronins who have lost their masters or noble causes to serve and are thus fated to drift around. Unlike those whose aptitudes for grand action eventually bring fresh life to a society in decay, however, Chang cannot survive the hostile environments of Manchuria without mutating into a cynic. He is, in other words, a debased ronin who repeatedly fails to enter into any meaningful relationship with others or society, except for a contractual one. When taken captive by the bandits, he survives by accepting an offer they make in the hope of exploiting his gun draw skills to eliminate Sam-man, the center of peasant rebellions. Not so depraved as to carry out the order, however, he rushes to Sam-man to warn him of the impending threat. Still, his good-natured mind finds little good in a greater form of action such as an epic battle for poor farmers. He thus argues in an attempt to persuade Sam-man to flee Manchuria, "When your enemies are watching for you around every corner and farmers are hiding even without a breath sound, would you like to die alone like a dog? It's silly to believe in farmers in a situation like this."

Chang's anti-epic nature is further accentuated in his inability to save Sam-man; when he fails to escape the bandits, Chang comes to his rescue too late. Shin's cynicism is certainly stronger than the lure of heroism, which is reaffirmed in another unsettling twist at the end. On return after a prolonged flight from the chase of the bandits (or the Independence Army), Chang finds Sam-man's wife and son leading a prosperous life in the house of a benevolent Chinese landlord, which leaves him with no other options than going back to the life of *musukja* in the wilderness. Unlike *Shane* which concludes with the viewpoint of little Joey (who might have invented the myth of a mysterious hero from outside), Shin's film closes with the dejected gaze of Chang who can do nothing but just watch Sam-man's son running into the arms of the Chinese landlord (the new surrogate father) from a distance. Certainly incongruous with official

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discourses, whether of nation-rebuilding or social justice, Chang's ronin mentality marks a break with the old customs of the Manchurian *hwalguk*. Still, the new Manchuria remains permeated with a tragic sense of historical limitation.

5.3.4 Reenchanting Manchuria

Produced at the twilight of the genre, Yi Man-hui's *Break the Chain* (*Soisaseureul kkeuneora*, 1971) ventures into a contrasting direction; it confers much more authority on the impetus of *hwal*. Notable in that regard is Yi's treatment of the mercenary motif. Of course, we have already seen it in use in Shin's film. In his disenchanted Manchuria, however, it had to give in to the realist ethos, namely, the feelings of loss and disorientation. In Yi's film, on the other hand, the motif turns Manchuria into a very different space. Before going further, however, we should take a brief look at his other works, which would help us gain a better sense of what drove him to Manchuria.

His filmography is steeped, above all, with the theme of entrapped life: a female prisoner who has a brief romance with a fugitive counterfeiter on a three-day temporary release in *Late Autumn* (*Manchu*, 1966); a woman locked in a marriage with a novelist and war veteran bedridden due to war-caused paraplegia in *Homebound* (*Kuiro*, 1967); an unemployed youth who steals his friend's money to get his ailing fiancé medical care, but loses both her and their unborn baby during a surgery on a long winter Sunday in *Holiday* (*Hyuil*, 1968); miners trapped not only in a collapsed shaft, but also in yellow journalism in *Life* (*Saengmyeong*, 1969); and three wayfarers (an ex-convict, a jobless coolie and a young barmaid) unable to find their way back to home in *The Road to Sampo* (*Sampo kaneun kil*, 1975). Besides, Yi's expertise was not in action genres; his action scenes are poorly crafted compared not only to the standard today but

also to his contemporaries such as Cheong Chang-hwa, a pioneer in Korean action films. That being the case, it was certainly a peculiar move for him to venture into such unfamiliar territory as the Manchurian *hwalguk*. Then again, his filmography strongly suggests that Yi was as much a claustrophobic as Myong-jun in *The Square*, which makes it quite conceivable to draw an analogy between his journey to Manchuria and Myong-jun's quest for an open square. No wonder, critics like Huh saw in the film the pathos of a claustrophobic gripped with a compulsion to see a wide-open space. [113] We can then regard his abrupt excursion to the Manchurian *hwalguk* as an effort to give vent to the swelling urge for *hwal* under postcolonial military dictatorship.

Yi's Manchurian *hwalguk* thus presents an odd collage of historical sensibility and genre imagination. At the center of its narrative is a Tibetan Buddha statue in the hands of some bandits in Manchuria. Yet the statue does not have much gravitational power in itself. Yi thus justifies his protagonists' journey to Manchuria by engraving a list of independence fighters into the statue—an adoption of the convention of encoding nationalist messages into the Manchurian *hwalguk*. At the practical level, however, it is the statue's exchange value that governs the film; Yi's protagonists flock to Manchuria due primarily to the price tags that both the Independence and the Japanese Army put on the statue. The statue thus crystallizes the film's double-track narrative: treasure hunt (genre dimension) and independence movement (national history). This strategy is by no means new given that genre has been a key domain in the formation of popular conceptions around national history. What I have found rather intriguing about Yi's film is the way the two strata intertwine with each other. Yi's mercenaries, for instance, have to throw their fists first at each other even when Korean soldiers are under the siege of the Japanese Army— apparently, a sarcastic jab at the custom of subjecting the *hwalguk* to patriotic codes. The

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[113] Huh, *Secular Cinema, Secular Criticism*, 218.

ending, too, presents another intriguing reversal. After bringing triumph to the Independence Army, they proclaim that they have found their nationality again. In the following scene, however, Yi does not bother to verify their words by, for instance, making them join the Independence Army. He instead lets them ride off into the sunset. That is, he approves of their wish to, in their own words, "keep chasing the sun to flee from dark and lonely nights," whereby he breaks the chain that would harness the Manchurian *hwalguk* back to official national history and culture.

Saved from national blessings thus, Manchuria now becomes a new kind of space. No doubt, Yi's Manchuria has an affinity with Shin's. Both are dominated by fluidity as an effect of their unhingedness and indeterminacy. Yet, the same attribute reflects quite contrasting values in their two Manchurias. In Shin's Manchuria, fluidity is indexical of the *hwal* impulse in crisis; his Manchuria is permeated by the deep-seated doubt that an epic action could be little more than a naïve quixotism, as evidenced in Chang's cynicism. It thus comes close to the sea Myong-jun eventually reaches after all the aborted attempts to find an open square, and whose fluidity corresponds to his immobility, i.e., the atrophy of his *hwal* impulse. Yi's Manchuria is, in contrast, oceanic. A space amicable to *hwal*, it is antithetical to the enclosed condition at home. Accordingly, its fluidity is less a sign of inactivity than an antidote to static, territorially determined conceptions of national history and culture.

Understandably, polyglossia becomes a central aspect in Yi's Manchuria. In it, things become drawn to mobility and malleability, which keep bringing their values into renegotiation. Notable in this respect are the way Yi orchestrates various idioms taken from overseas film traditions. Take the jarring relationship, for instance, into which Yi interweaves the mercenary motif and national history. It harkens back to *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly* (Sergio Leone,

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1966), where the paths of treasure hunters continue to crisscross with the American Civil War in an iconoclastic fashion: the Confederate gold (the military pay stolen and buried in the Sad Hill cemetery) as the holy grail for treasure hunters; their encounters repeatedly set against the apocalyptic backdrops of war-stricken towns and refugees; gags drawing upon confusions over military uniforms (stolen Grey and dusted Blue); the Langstone Bridge (the cause of endless wasteful combats and deaths, in the words of an alcoholic Union captain) to be blown up to clear the way to the cemetery; and the final showdown on the *corrida* built at the center of the cemetery and surrounded by countless graves in concentric circles.

In Yi's film, too, the mercenary motif works as a key strategy to brush national history against the grain, which becomes unmistakable when his protagonists turn atonal to national imperatives such as independence. It is the mercenary nomadism that allows his protagonists to remain defiant of romanticism, i.e., the tendency to make the remote periphery a romantic site of rebirth where society regenerates itself through battles with primitive forces, while a variety of heretical characters are presented only to be rejected or rendered socially more palatable. Yi's use of such an exogenous trope as the mercenary is not just a cheap ploy to circumvent the historical reality and escape into fantasy. Absurd or unpromising as it may seem, it is a way of being true to another dimension of reality, or the terrain of what Giuliana Bruno called "(e)motion,"[114] namely, the endogenous impulse of *hwal*. We are thus entitled to say that Yi did not simply imitate the Western genre, but rather put it into critical use to interrogate Korea's distinct historical condition where the impetus of *hwal* could not find a realist form, or could not

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[114] The term "emotion" is historically associated with both mobility and immobility. Its Latin root *emovere* consists of *movere*, (to move) and *e* (out). Emotion is thus not the lack of motion, but a new kind of motion, that is, a "moving out" or a migration from one place to another (or from one state to another), which needs a special cartographic sense. Guiliana Bruno, *The Atlas of Emotion: Journeys in Art, Architecture and Film* (London: Verso, 2002), 6-7. Inscribed in the *hwalguk* is, in my view, the motion of emotion; the genre is, in short, a drama or a journey of the *hwal* impulse.

realize itself without unsettling historical authenticity and narrative rationality. As an exclave that was neither outside nor inside, Manchuria provided him with a privileged space for the interplay between the innate *hwal* impulse and borrowed idioms. To put it in the perspective of South Korean film history, the Manchurian *hwalguk* constituted an enclave where the impetus of *hwal* could find a possibility to realize its mobility—in Bruno's terms, a geopsychic terrain, in which the motion of an emotion (*hwal*) enters into a haptic relationship with space[115]—often with the help of languages and costumes taken from outside.

5.4   BACK TO MANCHURIA: REDISCOVERING THE *HWALGUK*

The *hwalguk*'s radicalization did not come without costs. Indeed, Yi's chain breakers anticipated the genre's demise in following years. Having set themselves free from national blessings and narrative unity, *hwalguk* heroes could rarely make their way back to the screen. The dawn of the 1970s saw the genre going downhill fast and Manchuria too giving way to other locations, especially modern cities like Hong Kong.[116] Since then, the genre remained by and large forgotten in South Korean cinema for more than a generation. Its recent rediscovery, however, proved that it had not lost its *hwal*—its germinative power—altogether. By this, I am not suggesting something universal and intrinsic in the genre. The notion of "germination" involves alteration as much as endurance and the present as much as the past. What is rediscovered is not the genre as it was. If it is to re-burgeon after decades of dormancy, it is above all because of something like "*jetztzeit*" to be blasted out of the empty historical

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[115] Ibid., 9-11.
[116] Kim, "Genre as Contact Zone," 103, 106.

continuum for today's struggles, the way old costumes are quoted for new fashion,[117] something to be brought into dialogue with the present. A study of its regeneration should thus be as mindful of discontinuities as continuities between then and now.

5.4.1   The *hwalguk* in camp perspective

Clearly, the issue of how to image *hwal* when history renounces it has continued to haunt heirs of the *hwalguk* such as "Action Kid," Ryoo Seung-wan.[118] Indeed Ryoo's creativity has much to do with his efforts to maneuver through the dilemma between the historical experience hostile to *hwal* and his affection for the *hwalguk* that has carried over to his adulthood.[119] Notably, he titled his debut film *Dead or Bad* (known as *Die Bad* for English spectatorship), which exemplifies the core of his world: "The man of *hwal* can hardly survive otherwise than being bad." His preoccupation with the discord between *hwal* and history, however, also has restrictive effects. Above all, it keeps him from exploring other directions into which the *hwal* impulse can evolve by, for instance, pushing it beyond the empirical horizon to an unforeseeable

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[117] Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Shocken Books, 1968), 261.

[118] A noteworthy case of new developments in South Korean cinema at the end of the century, Ryoo's fervor for action films is deep-rooted in his first-person experiences of the popular film culture in South Korea. From his childhood, mishaps such as the loss of both parents and ensuing financial difficulties made him derailed from the normal course of life; in his adolescence, he became the bread earner with no other options than working during day and studying at night. Throughout those years, however, he could find opportunities of self-education in movie theaters, particularly action films, which charmed him into eventually embarking on the road to filmmaking. And as evidenced in such remarks, "Jackie Chan films are as precious to me as *Citizen Kane* might be to someone else," the memories of his childhood lowbrow spectatorship have been a major diet for his cinematic vision. Youn-hui Lim ed. *Ryoo Seung-wan: The Action Kid* (Seoul: KOFIC/Cine 21, 2005), 13. Such terms as "sub-/counter-culture" and "good bad taste," however, are too restrictive to capture his subaltern cinephile sensibility; its implications become more legible against traditional views such as nationalist/anti-imperialist and realist perspectives which have defined the 1970s and the 1980s as the winter of South Korean cinema. Indeed, *Dachimawa Lee* (2000), his short parody of old homespun action films, deserves much credit for its pioneering efforts to reassess indigenous popular film traditions largely dismissed in South Korean film history. The title is a pun on a Japanese theatrical term "*tachimawari* (立ち回り)" that means "fight choreography," but in South Korean film history, it refers to action films from the 1960s and the 1970s. Ibid.,17.

[119] Huh, *Secular Cinema, Secular Criticism*, 332-333.

dimension. *Hwal* is like a wine that is deep and rich in flavor but also quite intoxicating. His

protagonists are repeatedly animated by the will to *hwal*, only to learn that the more they wiggle,

the further they get entangled into the cobweb of ruthless reality. Or when he tries to look

beyond the constraints of the realist sensibility, he prefers to have some distance rather than

venture into the new terrain, as seen for instance in the *Dachimawa Lee* series, a camp-style

tribute to the *hwalguk*.[120] If the series treats the *hwalguk* with a self-referential sense of humor,

the strategy relies to a great extent on the temporal distance that sets the low (cheap, frivolous,

excessive, derivative, etc.) free from the reign of the high (upscale, serious, decent, original,

etc.). [121]   Meanwhile, however, the cinema-on-cinema approach leaves the issue of *hwal*

untouched or repressed.

This is by no means to say that the question of *hwal* leads to nowhere in his camp

sensibility. On the one hand, the *Dachimawa Lee* series bears witness to the difficulty of

reaching an *hwal* image in a historical context like Korea's. On the other hand, however, the

difficulty—or more precisely, the way Ryoo grapples with the difficulty—is what makes his

position unique in Korean cinema. His camp approach to the *hwalguk* poses significant

challenges to customary views on the genre, and on popular cinema in general, as well. To begin

with, he seems to be well aware that being serious about the low is not the same as turning it into

a serious matter—an old tactic to institutionalize popular cultural products, which would turn the

Rabelaisian reversal into an empty rhetoric. When the lost genre comes back alive as a campy

object under his gaze, it remains defiant of any solemn take on it. In brief, he holds dear the

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[120] *Dachimawa Lee* (2000) and its feature-length sequel *Dachimawa Lee: Devil, Take The Train to Hell* (2008). The latter's subtitle is borrowed directly from Park No-sik's *Devil, Take The Train to Hell* (*Aginiyo jiokang keupang-yeolchareul tara*, 1976).

[121] My view on the camp sensibility is, by and large, in line with Susan Sontag. For the temporality of camp works, see especially, Susan Sontag, "Notes on 'Camp,'" *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York: Picador 1966), 285.

hwalguk, yet not in a serious way, but in a detached and jocular manner. Notable here is his emphatic use of sources from the genre such as hyperbolic acting styles, tawdry costumes, and even fake locations.[122] This deliberate cheapness and outdatedness make it clear that his concern does not rest with hallowing the vernacular genre as an honorable tradition of national cinema. Nor does he intend to ridicule it in order to, for instance, make its shoddiness more tolerable. Instead, he fondly pokes fun at the genre—a way of embracing it without romanticizing it or cleansing it of its folkloric origins. His case thus makes evident the need to think beyond the habitual alternation between downplaying the genre as an escapist entertainment or a pointless attempt to imitate overseas products (e.g., nationalist/anti-imperialist and realist stances) and overvalorizing it against such elitist views (e.g., auteurism inflected by popular and ethnographic discourses). Still, his camp approach is not yet a *hwalguk*.

5.4.2   Regenerating the *hwalguk*

On the other hand, Kim's *The Good, the Bad, the Weird* gives the *hwal* impulse a more ambitious treatment: "more ambitious" because the film confronts the difficulty of creating an image of *hwal*—the difficulty proven in Ryoo's restrained take on the *hwal* impulse, the base of his passion for cinema. That is, it aspires to regenerate the *hwalguk* rather than reflect on it at a distance. Understandably, *The Good, the Bad, the Weird* is as anomalous to Kim's oeuvre as *Break the Chain* was to Yi's. He has been renowned for deep concerns with genre traditions, yet what is no less worth noting about his bent for genre imagination is an obsession with closed spaces; they catalyze "the claustrophobic psychology of characters" trapped in them, or events

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[122] Due to both political and financial restraints, the *daeryuk hwalguk* would use domestic sites instead of actual *daeryuk* (continent) locations such as China, Russia, and Manchuria.

take place mainly to disclose the confined nature of the milieu.[123] Particularly problematic is the space of the home. Labeled as "a comic drama of cruelty," his debut feature, *The Quiet Family* (1998), opens with a long traveling shot that scans the dark vintage interiors of Mist Villa, a motel and home at the base of mountains. The film then never leaves the location as if to scrutinize its interstitial quality—a space in between nature and culture, leisure and business, Eros and Thanatos, conception and misconception, and sanity and insanity[124]—until the end where, now watching TV in hospital, the son of the quiet family bursts into a fit of laughter to the news that the police identified a corpse found near the villa as a Northern spy's, while it actually belongs to a hitman accidentally killed on a mission to assassinate a guest in the motel.[125] *Memories* (2002), a short horror film, centers around an amnesic woman who wakes up on an unknown street with fragmented memories only and struggles to find her way back home. However, when she eventually steps into her apartment in a new unfinished town girdled by dreary excavated lands, she finds her mutilated body packed in a bag. In *A Tale of Two Sisters* (2003), a liberal adaptation of an old Korean folklore into a horror film, the home holds a girl captive in the delusion that her evil stepmother cunningly turns her father away from her and maltreats her little sister to death. In the 2005 film noir *A Bittersweet Life*, the hotel sky lounge "La Dolce Vita" becomes a disguised home for the protagonist, but at the end, it turns into the stage for the final Oedipal confrontation with his fatherly boss who expelled him from it.

To be sure, the motif of an enclosed space does not exhaust all the intricate flavors of Kim's films. Over the course of his career, his genre imagination has continued to experiment

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[123] Hyung-seok Kim, ed. *Korean Film Directors: Kim Jee-woon*, trans. Colin A Mouat (Seoul: KOFIC, 2008), 32.

[124] The villa sits on the border of society and nature. It is also at once the home and the workplace for the family. For customers, it is a space for leisure, but their leisure is business for the family. Besides, sited at the fringe of society, it often turns into a space for suicides and crimes, whereas the family keeps them in secret for their business. As the situation continues and the family grows blasé about it, mayhem becomes part of normalcy.

[125] It carries a sarcastic view on the military regimes that would employ the national security paranoia to avert concerns over social ills.

with new spatial aspects. In his 2000 comedy *The Foul King*, for instance, the wrestling ring as a central spatial motif serves, first, as a microcosm of the life of a wimpy bank clerk who keeps being belittled and ridiculed by his boss who has an odd habit of disciplining him through the headlock hold. Even to the eyes of his friends and father, he can hardly be other than a headache. Yet the motif of the wrestling ring is not one-dimensional. Propelled by an ad he accidentally sees on the street and also by the desire to learn how to escape the boss's headlock, he embarks on learning wrestling. Of course, he has no talent to be a real wrestler. Nevertheless, in the ring life, he gains the tricks to break free from headlock, and begins to cultivate a new stratum within his constrained life. In short, the wrestling ring is not simply metaphoric of his encircled world, but also metamorphic in the sense that it is where new ways of life continue to develop. Indeed, the comedy takes much of its humor from absurd clashes between the two distinct levels. Still the film does not go as far as to allow the ring life to extend to the plane of real life. The real life continues to far outweigh the ring life. For instance, with his wrestling mask on, he can muster the courage to confess his secret affection to a female colleague. His bravery, however, is only greeted with her cold and chastising response, which throws him into a swirl of shame and regret. His ring life, albeit not without substance, still remains surreptitious and lacking in the power of making itself meaningful in the real milieu.

Given the salience of claustrophobic settings in Kim's other films, *The Good, the Bad, the Weird* certainly marks a notable deviation in his filmography. Its mainstay, he acknowledged in an interview, is "the image of men racing through the vast plains," so much so that he had to add that the rest of the film was "pulled in as a device for those racing scenes."[126] Yet the shift is not simply an aesthetic matter. When asked what the Western meant to him, he answered, "When I chose the genre…and thought about what theme of this genre I was going to talk about,

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[126] Kim, ed. *Korean Film Directors: Kim Jee-woon*, 135-36.

what came to mind was 'life'… I had the sense that, although desire brings a man down and destroys him, it is only when he has that desire that he is really living and breathing."[127] In other words, at the heart of his concern with the Western is the urge for life or *hwal*. His interest in *hwal*, however, is not limited to the genre. It has its roots in the pleasures he gained from various action films in his childhood: "At that time, I didn't know what genre that was. I just liked the action… [Besides] a lot of Korean films that came out in the 1960s and the 1970s…were basically a lot more hybrid genre films than now," which made it "difficult to tell the nationality and time period."[128] It becomes clear then that what Kim as a child spectator relished was not Westerns, Leone's films, or Korean action movies, but the cinema of *hwal*. His Manchurian Western was a homage to the cinema of *hwal* that reclaimed his attention after a decade—his first decade as filmmaker—of captivity in enclosed milieux.

If we thus take Kim to follow in the footsteps of his claustrophobic precursors, he also shares challenges they had to face *en route to* Manchuria. Intended to revive the *hwalguk*, his journey to Manchuria cannot go around an irony made legible above all by Yi: the *hwalguk* realizes its charm when it de-realizes itself, namely, when the impetus of *hwal* ceases to succumb to a history hostile to it. And he seems to be well aware of the paradox; he adopts it as a core principle for reconfiguring Manchuria for *hwal*. It is then no accident that in his recollection of his childhood *hwalguk* spectatorship above, he underscores the deeply hybrid nature of the genre. This is not simply a formal issue. If the pleasure he found in his childhood *hwalguk* was little mitigated by the genre's spatial and temporal obscurity, this proves that its charm predates the knowledge of historical and cultural distinctions. To put it another way, the cinema of *hwal* as such would not be rediscovered without brushing established frames of cognitive mapping

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[127] Ibid., 139.
[128] Ibid., 135.

against their grains. No doubt, he did not go to Manchuria to reconnect the chain Yi broke, but to rejuvenate the faculty of *hwal* that Yi strove to rescue by letting his protagonists dismiss national interpellation and ride off to the more distant Manchuria. In other words, his journey begins where Yi's ended, for which it becomes vital to render Manchuria once again sympathetic for *hwal*, that is, to free it from traditional modes of territoriality. Of course, it is costly to confer such authority on the faculty of *hwal*. Whatever the price, however, Kim is eager to pay it. More often than not, thus, we can witness his Manchuria turning against the gravity of historical authenticity and narrative coherence.

5.4.3 The optics of *hwal*: Style, details, game, and the childlike

From the beginning, *The Good, the Bad, the Weird* makes clear its predilection for *hwal*. The opening credit sequence starts with a bird's-eye view of vast stretches of the Manchurian desert and a locomotive charging toward the faraway horizon. As the epic imagery gives way to the scene of the train's interior, the camera follows a snack vendor who pushes his way through a teeming crowd of passengers. Shortly, a man emerges out of nowhere to cry out, "Independence for Korea." But Japanese soldiers lose no time in subduing the revolt and the vendor resumes his briefly interrupted march, as if nothing happened. And on reaching the freight carriage, he promptly drops his vending tray, pulls out guns, and storms into the adjoining first-class cabin. Thus introduced, the Weird (Tae-goo) raises a host of questions. Who is this train robber, for whom the independence protester seems to be of little concern, while his eyes do not miss a lavishly dressed woman even amid bustling passengers? What sense can we make of the inconsistency between the epic scenography (Manchuria) and the anti-epic figure (the Weird)? What can we read from the peculiar combination of the intimacy aroused by Song Kang-ho, one

of the most lauded actors in South Korea today, and the oblique postures his screen persona takes? Answering all the questions might be unnecessary if we can reach their common ground. A descendant of Yi's mercenaries, the Weird has no nobler cause than survival and money, and it is this mercenary nomadism that is largely responsible for the vigor and liberty of his action.

Similarly, the Good (Do-won) owes much of his mobility to his unhinged life. A bounty hunter, he is less interested in the map itself—what it means to the Independence Army or Japanese colonizers—than in the rewards put on the map and the two outlaws, as well. As with the Weird, he is also a man of means without end, a masterless warrior who has extraordinary skills of action, but no noble goal to uphold, including national liberation.[129] Unlike the Weird's case, however, in the Good, the mercenary nomadism often translates into sarcasm. "You ain't got no country, but you gotta have money," he says, when asked what brought him to Manchuria; on hearing the Weird's wish to return to Korea and buy some land to raise livestock, he also bluntly rejoins, "What good would it do when you got your country stolen?" Yet the film shows little concern to explain his cynicism. Indeed, we are hardly informed of his personal life. He has a shack, but sitting in the middle of nowhere, its location is unchartable. In the shack, there is also a girl, but her relationship with him is left nebulous. He himself remains tight-lipped, consciously or not. Even when he appears to have the cue for unveiling his mind in a conversation with the Weird on a night out in the desert, it is instantly revoked when his ill-mannered listener starts snoring. This taciturnity renders him lacking in internality. His lack of psychological depth, however, is not a drawback. His apparent simplicity is part of his personality as a man of deed; if he cannot, or will not speak of himself, it is above all because

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[129] The domestic version, which is about ten minutes longer than international ones, offers more details on how the Good joins the map hunt; the Independence Army asks for his help to secure the map. His tie to the Independence Army makes little difference in his mercenary position. Their coalition never develops beyond the contractual level, but remains quite frictional, as underlined in the tension between his cynicism and independence fighters' derisive attitude toward him.

something like brooding does not suit him. There is thus good reason why he sticks to a cowboy hat, a duster, and a Winchester, or why Kim is little concerned with indigenizing the character. Clearly, the visual idioms are foreign to historical, cultural experiences in Korea. However, the foreignness is what makes them especially congenial to portraying the Good's unanchored life, and more importantly, to accounting for his *hwal* impulse that exceeds the limitations of traditional territoriality. Kim's answer to his nomadic impetus was a cinematic nomadism, i.e., a rhetorical use of distinct cinematic dialects borrowed across borders.

No less noteworthy is the way the Bad (Chang-yi) serves as another key outlet of Kim's will to the *hwal* image. At the request of a double-crossing collaborator who tries to steal a treasure map he sold to the Japanese Army, the Bad's bandits swoop on the train. Yet he soon learns that the map is already taken by the Weird and his chase after the thief begins. As the story unravels, however, it turns out that what he really seeks is not the map itself, but the one who has it, namely, the Weird. The flashback at the end reveals that they have a score to settle. Years back in Korea, they had a legendary fight, where the Weird inflicted an indelible stigma on the Bad (or castrated him) by thrashing him and cutting off his finger. This episode makes it clear that what mobilizes him is neither professional commitment nor material desire, but rather values like "honor" and "grace," which is reaffirmed in, for instance, his fixation to the rivalry and his imperious air. In other words, he lives in an archaic world, or an age of legends, where there can be no two suns and only the victor writes history; nothing is more agonizing for him than losing face. And this gives us more sense of his eccentric taste for a black tuxedo, leather gloves, a mangaish hairdo and the like. Apparently a mismatch with the dusty and bleak landscape of the 1930s Manchurian deserts, his rather dandyish appearance conveys an antipathy to the world where the principle of utility drives codes like honor out of culture. Style here is

more than personality. His insistence on the stylized and poised look bears witness to some aristocratic quality, which gives him a tendency to choose dignity even at the risk of life, and which must be verified in his entire being and through action. With all his villainies, he thus carries a semblance to a matador who has to dress lavishly to face a raging bull. It is not so far-fetched, then, to read in the Bad's self-indulgent archaism Kim's resolve to create the image of *hwal*, regardless of the costs it incurs in terms of historical and cultural credibility.

These treasure hunters may offer little that an adult can take seriously. Even so, it is equally undeniable that their defiance of adulthood (what it suggests) is imperative for keeping their *hwal* alive. In other words, rediscovering a childlike way of looking at the world is a prerequisite for rediscovering the *hwalguk*. This does not simply mean a relapse into childhood. At stake here is rather how (and why) to reproduce the childlike vision on a higher plane, which encourages us to examine the ways Kim absorbs it into his narrative and aesthetic choices. First, style has a special validity in the childlike understanding of the world. "Watch a child with his toy guns," Warshow wrote, "and you will see: what most interests him is not (as we much fear) the fantasy of hurting others, but to work out how a man might look when he shoots or is shot." In the child's imagination, the gun is appealing not as a means to kill, but as an emblem of values like superiority and valor. Hence, his dictum goes, "A hero is one who looks like a hero."[130] While such an idea has limitations in reality, we cannot dismiss the insights it provides on some aspects of cultural formation. What I have found particularly intriguing about Warshow's remarks is the notion of abstraction he underlines in drawing a connection between the childlike vision and stylization. Typical of the childlike imagination is its ability to detach a thing from its original and utilitarian context and stitch it into a new one. Likewise, stylization tends to decontextualize its materials and turn them into the subjects of new distinct concerns, which

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[130] Warshow, "Movie Chronicle: The Westerner," 123.

extends their usability across diverse historical and geographical boundaries. Here lies an answer to Kim's unabashed stylization of his characters. It gives him more liberty to put into rhetorical use various tropes borrowed across borders, which certainly helps him save the cinema of *hwal* from the restrictive frame of national history and culture. The Westerner costumes have little to do with the history, culture, and geography of Manchuria. Still they gain special semiotic values in Kim's search for *hwal* images. They play a significant part in his efforts to rediscover his childhood *hwalguk* that would lie beyond the knowledge of historical and cultural distinctions and thus appear deeply hybrid and polyglossic.

Details are also central to Kim's film. Yet they are not for getting things right. Nor are they just an instance of superficial intricacy. Their imports become more legible in relation to issues like the game aspect of the film. As discussed above, nothing is more important for Kim's protagonists than their own game. Even the treasure map, albeit indisputably at the center of the narrative, proves to be a decoy to lure them into the climatic showdown staged at its destination; when the boarded-over crater set as the backdrop of the duel eventually unveils its secret by spewing a column of oil up in the sky, the gunslingers lying wounded on the ground still have no clues to what it is and a wind gust snatches the map away from the Weird's enervated hands. Moreover, the following ending offers no further comments on what happens to the oil well; it instead shows the two survivors, the Good and the Weird, resume their game of chasing and being chased, as if to reaffirm that what matters after all is not the treasure *per se* but the hunting game itself. Here, the link between the treasure and its hunters may seem arbitrary. Yet the contingency does not invalidate the game. It rather invites us to the unique way the game works: e.g., the non-practical uses into which the game put details. As Frayling notes, a childhood game relies much on the players' concerted efforts to suspend their disbelief in it. Once they start

feeling silly or self-conscious, the game will soon lose its magic of claiming their attentions. It thus demands many details to be as convincing and engaging as possible on its own terms.[131]

5.4.4   Myth against itself

By the childlike vision, however, I do not simply mean one way among many of viewing the world. In the Manchurian *hwalguk* that references early moments of Korea's nation-building in one way or another, it has special historical implications. Of course, revisiting the national birth is hardly a fresh issue; it has been central to various revisionist or deconstructive practices around the world. Nor is the childlike imagination by any means the only or best way to do so. What is intriguing about the genre rather lies in the way it uses the childlike imagination to recount the foundational moments of the nation differently. More specifically, the genre at once demythologizes Manchuria (as a privileged site for foundational narratives) and remythicizes Manchuria (to make it conducive to *hwal*). In other words, the cinema of *hwal* regains its *hwal* by countering the accepted mythopoeia through another mode of mythical imagination. This tendency became evident particularly at the last stages of the genre's development (in the late 1960s and the early 1970s).

To return to *The Man With No Home*, its pessimistic overtone challenges official history anchored in the notion of unity and progress. Its anti-epic stance is reaffirmed in Chang's failure to save Sam-man and build a new home for his widow and son. He is an allegorical reminder that the question of failure is a core problematic in narrating Korea's modern history, as with many other Third-World countries troubled by haunting histories of colonialism and

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[131] Frayling, *Sergio Leone*, 15-6. For the game dimension of the Western genre, see also Cawelti, *The Six-Gun Mystique Sequel*, 18, 49.

despotism—how to articulate elusive and fragmented histories of the defeated that have been effaced in the official historiography of nation (re)building. On the other hand, Yi took a more radical step in *Break the Chain*; the film also questions the nationalist ethos, yet not by introducing adult perspectives (mature senses of limited reality) but by reinvigorating the base of the genre (by restoring *hwal* to the *hwalguk*). The film dehistoricizes the *hwalguk* to return to history (to be true to the *hwal* impulse that is real to modern history in the Korean peninsula).

Decades later, the seeds of the *hwalguk* find another opportunity to germinate in Kim's genre imagination. Taking his cue from Yi (and Leone, as well), Kim portrays Korea in its rebuilding stage through peripheral figures like the thief, bandit, outlaw and bounty hunter, which might have been taken from folklore, fables, "B" movies, pulp magazines, comic books, and the like. His iconoclasm, however, is suggestive of more than just fashionably subversive badness. Underlying it is, above all, the will to revive the charm he witnessed in his childhood *hwalguk*. Then again, the childlike vision he wishes to retrieve is not the same as, say, that of little Joey, who invents an unworldly hero like Shane that emerges mysteriously from the plains and on fulfilling the task to save the troubled town, fades away again into a remoter land or that of mythical heroes. Kim's Manchuria is a mythical space, but one without epic saviors. In a way, it is a world of myth turning against itself. It has no epistemological or moral center. It is not monolithic, but marked by a variety of immediate forces in endless flux and contest— immediate because they predate the mediation of ethical judgment. His mercenaries are neither good nor evil; they are images of *hwal* beyond good and evil.

Herein lies an account for Kim's interest in such a motif as the opium den, which might otherwise feel like a deviation. To be sure, the opium den is at variance with the rest of the film. It is a grotto in the middle of vast open spaces, or an abrupt pause in the midst of rhapsodic

movements. It is, in other words, a cave of sirens. But their songs are not so idyllic, and attuned

rather to national imperatives. To coax the treasure map from the Weird, the proprietor claims

that he funds independence fighters and the map would be a great contribution to national

liberation. In response, the Weird throws a sarcastic jab: "Every bum's calling themselves

independence fighters, and now even an opium dealer's saying he's also in the independence

movement!" He has no appetite for being a national hero; he just wants to be entertained. But

the doubling of the two conflicting directions has an interesting effect. His preference for

pleasure (or the primacy of body over head) proves to be not so amoral or frivolous when the

opium dealer attests to the vulnerability of the nationalist ethos to hypocrisy. Indeed, his crude

but profound distrust of grand language is a reminder of the incongruity between official

discourses and subaltern lives, or the failure of nationalism to address the issue of diverse

historical subjectivities.   At the level of narrative, his recalcitrant and anti-intellectual

temperament serves as an antidote to the old custom of assimilating entertainment factors (e.g.,

genre tropes) to national history.

Yet the grotto is not just a space for atrophy. The second half of the sequence is devoted

to a dialectical turn to the regeneration of *hwal*. Sobering up from a narcotic intoxication, the

Weird finds himself locked in a prison. But the prison has a peculiar quality. It has other

inmates, children, and a giant doorkeeper as well, which might be taken from Arabian

mythology. Thus composed, the setting conveys a sense of fairytale. Moreover, in the fairytale

prison, the Weird comes to develop a companionship with the child inmates. Between them,

there is no such distance as the one that divides little Joey (the inventor-viewer) and Shane (the

invented-viewed); as captives, they share the same fate. Their affinity is further accentuated in

the peculiar "magic" they adopt to escape the prison: butt poking. It is a common harmless

childhood prank in South Korea. In Kim's treatment, however, it refuses to remain confined within the terrain of innocent childhood entertainment. The strain of the childlike, just like the mole, burrows and breaches the barriers between childhood and adulthood, between imagination and reality, and between the serious and the comic. And its covert migration across borders entails confusions and misconceptions, and thus serves as a Rabelaisian joke. When Japanese commanders find the opium dealer and the prison guard lanced in the behind to death, they conclude that the Weird must be an extreme pervert to commit such a heinous deed. Delivered in a somber tone and scientific language, their misdiagnosis adds the final dose of humor to the scene. We are thus reminded again of the crevice between official narratives and popular cultural practices—the interstice where the urge of *hwal* manifests itself in the guise of Rabelaisian laughter or the like.

5.5 A CRITICAL USE OF MONUMENTAL (OR MYTHICAL) HISTORY

Mythical thought, however, is not something like an intrinsic component of the structure of human mind or collective psyche. It does not have the same significance and strength in all societies and at all historical junctures, which calls for our caution against an abuse or misuse (a schematic, positivistic, and static understanding) of the notion. A question to be posed is, then, when and why a society demands *La pensée sauvage*. It is perhaps fair to say that major genres of mythical thought like romance or adventure story have been foreign to modern South Korea due to the paralyzing effects that its turbulent history (colonization, the civil war, military dictatorship, and so on) has had on social and cultural formations. If so, what use would the mythical mode of thinking have for South Korea? One can also find concepts like "analogical

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history" (Lévi-Strauss and Wright) to be useful for accounting for the temporality of the Manchurian *hwalguk*; as with mythical thought where history is analogical (circular or cyclical) rather than analytical (causal and linear) and thus the past is coexistent with the present,[132] the genre creates an analogical correspondence between the past (Manchuria in the colonial period) and the present (its conditions and concerns). Then again, what drives South Korean cinema to an analogical sense of history?

In more concrete terms, given its ties to the issue of Korea's nation-building, the Manchurian *hwalguk* may remind us of the concept of monumental history (Nietzsche). In brief, it sees a chain in great historical moments, i.e., a continuity that connects them like a range of mountain peaks. It thus favors analogy, more exactly the one that inspires the present with a sense that the greatness that was once possible may be possible again. But Nietzsche already knew the dangers in it: e.g., a masquerade where the hatred of, or the inability to recognize the great emerging in the present is disguised as the admiration for great pasts. When society keeps piling historical treasures on the back of the present, but never teaches how to take them in hand, it needs a critical history that will stop the past from burying the present.[133] South Korea, of course, has a distinct historical condition and the Manchurian *hwalguk* can be taken to be illustrative of the particular way the dialectic between monumental and critical history comes into play in the South Korean context. The genre invites us to monumental moments in the past, but they have no real reference points. Manchuria is an imagined West, a space of the nostalgia for what has never been really experienced. The Manchurian *hwalguk*, in other words, cannot be a cinema of epic realism. Rather vital to the genre is the paradox that anti-epic cynicism is

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[132] Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), 262-64; Wright, *Sixguns & Society*, 205-12.
[133] Friedrich Nietzsche, "On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life," *Untimely Meditations*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 67-76.

integral to its passion for epic imagination; its critical monumentalism is rooted in the discontents with historical conditions hostile to *hwal*. Yet the formal (structural or typological) approach needs to be considered alongside history, which urges us to ask what makes South Korean cinema once again gravitate toward the paradox today, in the era of globalization.

A consensus seems to have been reached on recent changes around the world: no matter how we define or measure it, globalization is real. Yet dispute continues over its nature and significance and shows few signs of abating. Indeed, an irony of globalization is that it is deeply enmeshed with, or mediated by, the local. The global is not something that transcends local differences; it rather relies on localities in order to function. That is, it presupposes or creates borders rather than abolishes them, as many would assume: e.g., the international division of labor and localism as a key tactic in multinational production and marketing. It is naïve, thus, to take the global as simply antithetical to the local. But it is not synonymous with the international, either. Globalization is not just an extension of the networks between nation-states. Localities reconfigured by or for the global do not coincide with nationalities. Local mediations of the global rather erode the authority and function of the nation-state. The transnationalization of production, as Arif Dirlik notes, does not simply homogenize the world, but fragments and reorganizes spaces, as well. The domestication of the global into the local "cut[s] across national boundaries" and "undermines national sovereignty from within by fragmenting the national economy." It is thus no longer adequate to map the world in terms of nationally defined differences. Parts of the so-called Third World are now on the pathways of global capital, whereas many sectors in the First World are marginalized from new economic developments and become close to the Third World.[134] A consequence of the global-local

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[134] Arif Dirlik, "The Global in the Local," in *Global/Local: Cultural Production and the Transnational Imaginary*, eds. Rob Wilson and Wimal Dissanayake (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 31-32.

conjunctions is the proliferation of politically, economically, culturally, and temporally mixed zones—e.g., a variety of en- and exclaves. What is to be added is, however, that the transnational spaces are quite virtual, namely, restricted by the reality that no matter how transnational our life can be, we have to live within the territory of a nation-state and deal with national differentials. The growing concerns with such notions as "transnational governance" and "global citizenship" are clearly a testimonial that a new way of sociocultural life is in the making. Yet the juridico-political efforts to recognize the transnational remain quite prognostic, when our real life is still, by and large, territorially bound and nationally defined. Appadurai closes the prelude to *Modernity at Large*, a celebrated study of cultural globalization, by picturing, "In the short run, it is likely to be a world of increased incivility and violence. In the longer run…we may find that cultural freedom and sustainable justice in the world do not presuppose the uniform and general existence of the nation-state."[135] Perhaps he is not so mistaken in general terms. But he leaves us with a wide gap between the world of "increase incivility and violence" and that of the "freedom and justice unimpeded by the national mode of belonging (more accurately, its suppressive nature)."

The issue here is not simply what steps to take to resolve the "increased incivility and violence." What is rather problematic, in my view, is the prevailing custom of taking them to be just a hurdle in the way to a new order. Modern society has cultivated an ethical tendency where incivility or violence itself is taken to be already a sufficient ground for condemnation. However, a problem of the moralizing view is that it is unlikely to offer a convincing argument for the pleasure the viewer often takes in great outcast figures such as criminals, bandits, and mercenaries. Their unique charm does not stem from the violent acts they commit, but what is intimated in their deeds: their exceptional aptitude of action or *hwal*, the undemocratic force,

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[135] Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*, 23.

which is a grave threat to the state or the law (which in theory has the sole right to the use of force), but for that reason, renders them redolent of the monarch as personified sovereignty. They are modern (secularized and popularized) forms of "the prince expelled from society."

The motif of the banished prince, however, is not just an anachronistic fantasy. His return brings to the fore the clash between individual justice and civil order, which indeed gives a special validity to genres like the Manchurian Western in the age of globalization. That is, the genre offers a useful frame for articulating challenges immanent in the new historical condition. Drawing upon such tropes as the borderlands, vast open spaces, mercenary figures, and duels, it re-dramatizes the antinomy between the nomadic and the territorial. In so doing, it turns Manchuria as an emblematic setting for national childhood into a rich analogy of post- or transnational environments impregnated with the deepening conflict between sociocultural formations and national governance. Manchuria is, in brief, an old future. A terrain of *hwal* saved from national blessings or untrammeled by national interpellations, the mythic space serves as an outlet for the growing desire in the present for the "freedom and justice that do not presuppose the uniform existence of the nation-state" and more importantly, to the frictions between the longing for *hwal* (vitality and mobility) and the order of belonging.

Of course, we cannot be overcautious of pitfalls in analogical thought. Without proper attention to the variances between historical reality and genre economy, it would produce little more than an empty semblance. When social issues are projected to the setting of the Manchurian Western, when they are displaced onto the private (duels and revenges), the scope of narrative options is often shaped by the rules and expectations that inform the contours of the genre and subversive energies in analogical thought fail to develop beyond the parameter of genre imagination. What we can find in the superficial analogy would be little more than a false

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promise that resolves new struggles with old methods. However, it is equally undeniable that the rediscovery of the Manchurian Western is a powerful reminder of the need to create a new sustainable mode of collectivity. Today, we cannot anticipate another Ford (or a cinema of epic realism). Still it would not be a vain hope to expect another Scheherazade to emerge somewhere in the world and tell us new tales of the West over another cold and cruel Arabian night.

6.0   CONCLUSION: THE PRINCIPLE OF HOPE

In this study, I have tried to offer a useful perspective on the regeneration of Korean cinema over the past two decades or so. To that end, I opened my discussion by challenging the entrenched tendency to associate the revival of Korean cinema with democratic transitions and/or structural shifts in the film industry. My contention was that it would be difficult to reach a meaningful understanding of the newness and liveliness of Korean cinema today in that its piquant flavors have much to do with its efforts to interrogate the limitations of the increased criticizability in the post-democratized milieu. In other words, what animated this study was the concern to elucidate the deeply provocative quality of the thematics and styles contemporary Korean cinema has cultivated in the face of unsettling historical transitions—curtailed democratization and costly integration into the global network (e.g., through the IMF crisis)—or the audacious and intricate ways it recasts and re-enchants film traditions to speak to growing public discontents with those changes. I also underscored that Korean cinema today repeatedly brings us to several crucial theoretical intersections where distinct strains intersect and compete: the political vs. the popular, national cinema vs. transnational exchange, and alternative vs. genre cinema. As a way of putting the finishing touches to my reflection on the historical imports of Korean cinema's resurgence, I want to briefly discuss how to situate its contentious newness and vitality within the larger picture of world cinema history. A good place to begin is Dudley Andrew's critical

notes on contemporary Korean cinema in his recent essay, "Time Zones and Jetlag: The Flows and Phases of World Cinema."[1]

He begins the essay by structuring his position around two competing notions, cinema's propensity for internationalism (its congenitally national and potentially international character) and the *décalage* indispensable to cinematic experience (its built-in time-lag). He then maps out the developments of world cinema (globally mediated, but locally differentiated) by periodizing them into five phases: cosmopolitan (the silent era); national (the prewar era, the talkies, the surge of nationalism); federated (the postwar era, reflections on reckless nationalism, the rise of the cinematic modernism); world (the 1970s and 1980s, the decline of the modernist cinema, the expanding purview of film festivals, discoveries of far-flung cinemas); and global (from the 1990s onward, the shrinkage of the world, the proliferation of post-territorial networks, the decline of *décalage*, the entropy of cinema). His attempt to recast our perceptions of cinema through the perspective of world cinema (or such notions as cinema's mobility and *décalage*) certainly deserves due attention, above all, as another notable contribution to the ongoing efforts to rectify conventional views anchored to a greater or lesser degree in the old binary between Hollywood as the trunk and alternatives as branches.

Even so, it is also hard to pass over a questionable move he makes as he reaches the latest phase of world cinema. The 1970s witnessed the waning of cinematic modernism (both in Europe and Japan). Still, the void left by the retreat of the modernist cinema could be filled, thanks largely to film festivals, with "alternative possibilities" from the "elsewhere" such as Taiwan, China, Senegal, Mali, Iran, Yugoslavia, Ireland, and so on, especially in the 1980s. However, the 1990s marked the beginning of a new era, "global cinema." Central to the new

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[1] Dudley Andrew, "Time Zones and Jetlag: The Flows and Phases of World Cinema," in *World Cinemas, Transnational Perspectives*, eds. Nataša Ďurovičová and Kathleen Newman (New York: Routledge, 2010).

phase is, in his judgment, the loss of *décalage*, which he attributes to the accelerated flows of images, ideas, and capital across borders in an undifferentiated manner (unlike their transnational circulations across a vast yet differentiated cultural geography in previous eras) and the spread of new trends in film festivals such as proactively programming what to be made (through, say, seed money and DVD deals) instead of discovering what was made. What we experience is not real *décalage*, but an illusion of *décalage* (or an illusory sense of "elsewhere" and "elsewise"): "How can you expect the unexpected, when the warming of the cultural atmosphere since 1990 has reduced differences within and among nations, such that new waves will no longer form, at least not with the power and frequency they once did."[2] And exemplary of this entropic condition is, to his eye, Korean cinema (and its vaunted triumph since the late 1990s), which was "jump-started by a festival [the Pusan International Film Festival or PIFF] that itself was born of an alliance between government and industry (Samsung, and so on)."[3]

Although not mistaken altogether, his diagnosis appears dismissive of a few important issues. First, while PIFF deserves due attention for its role in the regeneration of Korean cinema, it seems rather presumptuous to assert that Korean cinema was jump-started by the film festival. A simple way to clarify this is to consider that many other countries have launched film festivals, but could not see their national cinemas reanimated to a degree comparable to the Korean case. It is also worth noting the disparity between film festivals and public tastes; more often than not, festival award winners fail to draw much public attention at home, and Korean cinema has not been an exception. Scholars like Choi Jinhee, thus, point out that while terms like "opposition," "resistance," or "postcolonialism" have been widely used in academia and on the critical circuit to emphasize the distinct aspects of third-word cinemas, they often prove futile to explain the

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[2] Ibid., 82.
[3] Ibid.

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heterogeneity of "alternative entertainment cinemas" (e.g., popular cinemas in Korea, Hong Kong, or India), which "cannot be measured with the same yardstick applied to festival-oriented cinema."[4] This makes it clear that the festival perspective fall short of providing us with a convincing picture as to how the renaissance of Korean cinema took place.

Besides, even when it is true that the government and corporations have been actively involved in the growth of Korea's film industry, we still have no clear reason to believe that state subsidies and corporate investments, through film festivals or other channels, were the major catalyst for the reinvigoration of Korea's film culture. In fact, we have seen many films prove with their failures to attract public and/or critical attention that public funding or industrial support cannot be a reliable answer to public resonance. Then again, equally questionable is the assumption that the state is simply detrimental to the liberty of cinema. Isn't it rather the case that many alternative national cinemas have been indebted in one way or another to government support? Consider French cinema, for instance, which became, in Stephen Crofts' words, "the most successfully nationalist of national cinemas" in the postwar era "by virtue of its cinema workers' vigorous campaign against the post-Vichy influx of Hollywood films which obliged the government to impose a quota on Hollywood imports as well as box-office taxes to subsidize indigenous feature film production." That is, a variety of legislative and financial measures put in place by the state were crucial to the establishment of what Thomas Elsaesser calls the cultural mode of production—as distinct from the industrial mode (e.g., Hollywood)—in French cinema.[5]

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[4] Jinhee Choi, *The South Korean Film Renaissance: Local Hitmakers/Global Provocateurs* (Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2010), 35.

[5] Stephen Crofts, "Reconceptualizing National Cinema/s," in *Theorizing National Cinema*, eds. Valentina Vitali and Paul Willemen (London: BFI Publishing, 2006), 45-46.

Still, this is not to say that public and/or industrial investment is the primary factor for the rise or fall of a national cinema. The success of the cultural mode of production in France, according to Crofts, was closely tied to the esteemed status of cinema in its national culture. That is, without such a favorable cultural condition, the legislative and financial support system would not have led French cinema to become the most successful national cinema in the postwar era.[6] In Korea's case as well, although the investment of the state and corporations in such platforms as film festivals certainly deserves some credit for having provided more space for the local film culture to expand, it is still mistaken to believe that they were the driving force behind the consolidation of the cultural mode of production. In that regard, it is interesting to consider some alarming reports on the still-fragile infrastructure of Korean cinema: "Whereas US films received a majority of their revenues from DVD, cable television, merchandising and other sources, … [in Korea,] theatrical admissions accounted for 70-80% of overall revenues … [And the result] was that films that failed at the box office had little or no second chance to recover profits on DVD" (Darcy Paquet)[7]; "Certainly, the Korean government's and institutional support for the industry boom—deregulations for crossfertilization within the regional market—must also be in order" (Choi Jinhee).[8] Although intended to alert us to the vulnerability of the Korean film industry, these words can be read conversely as attesting to the limits of state and industrial perspectives in explicating the revival of film culture in Korea. That is, for all its structural weaknesses, Korean films could still continue to galvanize public enthusiasm for cinema.

We are then entitled to say that what is imperative for a richer perspective on the resurgence of Korean cinema is to look into the complex ways Korean cinema has interacted

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[6] Ibid., 46.

[7] Darcy Paquet, *New Korean Cinema: Breaking the Waves* (London: Wallflower, 2009), 110-111. In 2006, DVD sales in Korea (excluding rentals) were about $72 million and theatrical revenues $954 million, while DVD sales in the U.S. market were $16.6 billion and theatrical revenues $9.94 billion. Ibid., 111.

[8] Choi, *The South Korean Film Renaissance*, 196.

with the public at a time of rapid historical transformation. And this was why this study strove to elucidate above all the new thematics and styles contemporary Korean cinema developed to commune with its viewers—namely the various ways the narrativization in Korean films today becomes compounded and nuanced as they are conflated with historical failures at the collective level. A film like *Sopyonje* was important in this study not because it was a commercial success or a festival-bound movie, but because it presents a rich illustration of how aesthetic experiments in Korean cinema coincided with the irresolvable confusions and changing perspectives of the public in the wake of democratic transitions and in the face of the globalizing environment. This is also where, at the moment of wrapping up my reflection on Korean cinema today, I locate a glimmer of hope for the perseverance of its vitality and creativity.

In the beginning of this study, I invoked Foucault's comment on the post-1968 era in an attempt to offer a snapshot of the sociocultural climate in Korea in the post-democratization era. It may help clarify my thought to briefly return to the post-1968 era, this time, through Andrew's memory. He opens the section of "world cinema" by recalling, "European intellectual arrogance fell hard in 1968, helping precipitate the decline of cinematic modernism and of art theaters." The 1970s became "utterly unremarkable" as "the blood drained from the European art cinema …[and] criticism squandered its authority in…academic debates about Hollywood and Europe."[9] This picture echoes the social scenery of Korea in the 1990s, an era when increased criticizability repeatedly prove to be of little efficacy to account for changing society. It was under this constellation that New Korean Cinema was born. More precisely, contemporary Korean cinema has emerged and acquired its distinctively piquant flavors, as this dissertation strove to demonstrate, through the struggles to confront and work through the futility of the increased criticizability in the post-democratized and neo-liberalizing condition. Now, I would like to add

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[9] Andrew, "Time Zones and Jetlag," 75-77.

that as long as Korean cinema's critical responsiveness to historical changes remains fresh and vibrant, it would not be a vain hope to expect it to provide us with more "remarkable" films.

Is contemporary Korean cinema a symptom of the loss of *décalage*? The answer may vary, depending on who defines *décalage* and how it is defined. To rephrase the question à la Benjamin, is the loss of aura something to be lamented or welcomed? Isn't the nostalgia for authentic difference characteristic of the connoisseur's mode of perception? Isn't it typical of the popular perception to abolish spatiotemporal distance? Then again, isn't it also fair to say, in line with de Certeau, that increased transmissibility always involves popular discretion and that the everyday transnational use of images continues to create their new meanings even in a highly interconnected and shrunken milieu? Perhaps, then, it is not so mistaken to say that the public enthusiasm for Korean cinema today deserves enough analytic attention as a new kind of *décalage* emerging against the illusion of authentic *décalage*.

A SELECT FILMOGRAPHY OF THE MANCHURIAN *HWALGUK*

Cheong Chang-hwa
The Horizon (*Jipyeongseon*, 1961)
The Ruler of the Earth (*Daeji-ui jibaeja*, 1963)
The Great Plain (*Daepyeongwon*, 1963)
Fighters in the Wilderness (*Gwang-ya-ui kyeolsadae*, 1966)

Im Kwon-taek
Farewell to the Duman River (*Dumankang-a jal ikkeora*, 1962)
Eagle in the Wilderness (*Hwang-ya-ei doksuri*, 1969)
One-Eyed Park (*Aekkunun Bak*, 1970)

Kwon Yeong-sun
The Conqueror (*Jeongbokja*, 1963)

Kang Beom-gu
The Border Between Russia and Manchuria (*Soman kugkyeong*, 1964)

Kim Muk
The Secret Emissary on the Continent (*Daeryuk-ui milsa*, 1964)
The Wild Tiger (*Gwang-ya-ui horangi*, 1965)
Three Villains in the Songhwa River (*Songhwagang-ui 3-akdang*, 1965)

Yi Yong-ho
The Burning Continent (*Bulbutneun daeryuk*, 1965)

Shin Sang-ok
The Man with No Home (*Musukja*, 1968)

Choi Kyeong-ok
Female Bandits (*Yeomajeok*, 1968)

Yim Won-sik
Yeong (*Yeong*, 1968)

Ahn Il-nam
The Outlaw on a Donkey (*Dangnagui mubeobja*, 1970)

Kim Hyo-cheon
An Unwanted Guest in the Sunset (*Seokyang-ui bulcheong-gaek*, 1970)

Kim Yeong-hyo
One-Armed Fighter in the Wilderness (*Hwangya-ui oipari*, 1970)

Yi Man-hui
Break the Chain (*Soisaseureul kkeuneora*, 1971)

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