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The Intimacy of Distance:
South Korean Cinema and the Conditions of Capitalist Individuation

By

Jisung Catherine Kim

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Film and Media

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Graduate Division

of the

University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:

Professor Kristen Whissel, Chair
Professor Mark Sandberg
Professor Elaine Kim

Fall 2013

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Abstract

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Doctor of Philosophy in Film and Media

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Professor Kristen Whissel, Chair

In *The Intimacy of Distance*, I reconceive the historical experience of capitalism's globalization through the vantage point of South Korean cinema. According to world leaders' discursive construction of South Korea, South Korea is a site of "progress" that proves the superiority of the free market capitalist system for "developing" the so-called "Third World." Challenging this contention, my dissertation demonstrates how recent South Korean cinema made between 1998 and the first decade of the twenty-first century rearticulates South Korea as a site of economic disaster, ongoing historical trauma and what I call impassible "transmodernity" (compulsory capitalist restructuring alongside, and in conflict with, deep-seated tradition).

Made during the first years after the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis and the 2008 Global Financial Crisis, the films under consideration here visualize the various dystopian social and economic changes attendant upon epidemic capitalist restructuring: social alienation, familial fragmentation, and widening economic division. The revamped film industry and liberalization of censorship laws that accompanied this historical moment also enabled South Korean filmmakers to explore unresolved and long repressed sociopolitical tensions with North Korea and the United States. Through readings of feature-length films across the genres of melodrama, romance, blockbuster, horror and youth-oriented art films, accompanied by sociological and historical research that situates South Korean films within the broader transnational history of the Cold War and the regional history of South Korean nation-building, I reveal how this film culture's portrayals of "intimacy" and "distance" provide a method for visualizing the ongoing aftereffects of geopolitical historical change that may be invisible to the naked eye. My project explains how modes of nonlinear temporality, narrative patterning, and imagery of violence, competition, individualism and diaspora in stories of everyday life covertly represent historical experiences of U.S. militarism, heartrending national division, and volatile boom-and-bust economic cycles. By connecting impossibilities in personal life to larger crisis in national and transnational life, my project reexamines taken-for-granted perspectives and helps us see anew the ongoing intersection of American imperialism, South Korea and the globalization of capitalism since the mid-century era.

This dissertation is dedicated to

Karina Miyoung Chun

&

Fiona Sunyoung Chun

The Intimacy of Distance:
South Korean Cinema and the Conditions of Capitalist Individuation

by Jisung Catherine Kim

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Writing this dissertation is one of the most important things that I will ever do. And it has been a project I have dreamed of since I was a girl growing up in Koreatown (Los Angeles) and taking the school bus to Cleveland Humanities High School in Reseda (known by students as “core”). There I read Marx, Freud, and innumerable others who opened up new possibilities of imagining and challenging the world. We don’t need a PhD to “prove” our worth as intellectuals. But for me, it has been an urgent life-long dream.

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A Note on Names and Film Titles

In keeping with Jinsoo An's point that the term "Korean cinema" conservatively naturalizes and privileges "South Korea's discursive hegemony" over North Korean assertions, I also employ the term "South Korean cinema" to demarcate South Korea's specificity.¹

For the names of South Korean filmmakers inside the main text, I follow Korean convention, presenting surname first, given name second except in cases where surname last has been established as the norm or the individual's preference. However, for names of scholars in the main text and in the footnotes, I place surnames last in keeping with American academic convention. Because there are multiple transliterations of Korean names, I apologize for misspellings. This applies to myself. While my "U.C." name is "Jisung Catherine Kim," the official name I have registered with the state is "Ji Sung Kim" (with "Sung" wrongly written as my middle name).

For film titles, I have deferred to IMDb (the International Movie Database at www.imdb.com). In certain cases, I have noted popular variations. I have left out diacritical marks to facilitate reading.

¹ Jinsoo An, *Popular Reasoning of South Korean Melodrama Films* (PhD diss., University of California at Los Angeles, 2005), 4.

Introduction: The Intimacy of Distance

The Intimacy of Distance attempts to grapple with the enormous aftereffects of capitalism's globalization through the lens of South Korean cinema. Arguing that the "national" is premised on the "transnational," and vice versa, the dissertation examines recent films as emblems of national history and global history. By obliquely exploring the Korean War and South Korea's ensuing capitalization—both unresolved processes, I argue the films considered here recognize events such as the Korean War, national division and the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis ("the Crisis" hereafter) are unusually significant cultural events that motivate reworkings in fictional form. In the films discussed here—such as *A Tale of Two Sisters* (Kim Jee-woon, 2003), *The Host* (Bong Joon-ho, 2006), *Oasis* (Lee Chang-dong, 2002), *Marriage is a Crazy Thing* (Yoo Ha, 2002) and *Take Care of My Cat* (Jae-Eun Jeong, 2001)—family histories narrate and make meaningful recent traumatic national and global history.

These films create narrative formations that bear out the vantage of civilians whose experience of war and modernization were horrific. As Adam Lowenstein writes, "To speak of history's horrors, or historical trauma, is to recognize events as wounds."² The Korean War (1950-53) killed three million civilians in three years.³ The Vietnam War, by comparison, killed 2 million civilians in twenty years (1955-75).⁴ Both wars were America's wars; millions of real people of flesh and bones—not just news images—witnessed their villages go up in flames; rural homes made of wood and paper, or frond and bamboo, were not built to withstand tanks and bombers. While the Korean War is the "Forgotten War" in the United States, for Koreans, this war and its effects are ongoing. By tearing apart the fabric of a people's identity, culture, history and geography, the Korean War's cumulative and unresolved effects have a tenacious afterlife. As a manifestation of the Cold War, the Korean War was the condition of possibility for the imposition of capitalism onto South Korea as the paradigm for individuated nation building. Whereas the trauma of Japanese colonialism has more or less come to closure, the traumas of national division and internalizing capitalism are unfinished. Although the battles of the Korean War ended in 1953, the war itself is technically still in place, resulting in a suspension of the peninsula's future. Likewise, the future of South Korea's capitalist economy appears insecure, given the damning recurrence of global financial crises and the widening economic division between the haves and the have-nots. While South Korea's affluent class is suggestive of developmental progress, the downward spiral of South Korea's middle class into the debt-ridden underclass suggests that development has also produced pure misery. Moreover, the indeterminacy of South Korea's separation from North Korea and the unsettled question of South Korea's capitalist autonomy from the shadows of the U.S.'s superpower are entwined concerns.

² Adam Lowenstein, *Shocking Representation: Historical Trauma, National Cinema, and the Modern Horror Film* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 1.

³ John Tirman, *The Deaths of Others: The Fate of Civilians in America's Wars* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 92.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 167.

Film scholars have used the notion of “historical trauma” to explore South Korean cinematic representation. In their exploration of South Korean Golden Age cinema, melodramatic films made after the Korean War (1955-1972), Kathleen McHugh and Nancy Ablemann write, “melodramatic narration conveys the force of a specific historical trauma.”⁵ Kyung Hyun Kim’s investigation into South Korean film culture of the late 1980s and early 1990s as a “post-traumatic cinema” has shown how depictions of (post-)trauma, anxiety, violence and masculinity correlate to South Korea’s historical struggle to overcome authoritarian rule.⁶ Kim argues that that this cinema “engineered a master narrative that engages with trauma—a narrative trajectory where the protagonist is left with a wound so ineradicable that even the spectator and animated endings of melodrama cannot fully recuperate him from his emotional wreckage.”⁷ Whereas Kim attends to emasculation under military dictatorship as the site of trauma, my objective is to look at the sites of daily life that make up the home front.

The Intimacy of Distance is about the ongoing and unresolved social, cultural, and economic fallout from the Korean War and the ensuing imposition of capitalism onto South Korea as its paradigm for nation building and modernization. Other scholars have discussed the war’s fallout through figures whose social formation surfaces after the war: spies, soldiers, military sex workers (yang gong-ju), war brides, multiracial children, war orphans, transnational adoptees and the Korean-American diaspora (after 1965).⁸ These

⁵ Kathleen McHugh and Nancy Ablemann, ed., *South Korean Golden Age Melodrama: Gender, Genre, And National Cinema* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2005), 2.

⁶ Kyung Hyun Kim, *The Remasculinization of Korean Cinema* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

⁷ Ibid., 28.

⁸⁸ On South Korean war figures, see David Scott Diffrient, “Han’gul Heroism: Cinematic Spectacle and the Postwar Cultural Politics of *Red Muffler*,” in *South Korean Golden Age Melodrama: Gender, Genre, And National Cinema*, eds. Kathleen McHugh and Nancy Ablemann (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2005), 151-184. For a discussion of North and South Korean spy films, see Suk-Young Kim, “Crossing the Border to the Other Side: Dynamics of Interaction between North and South Koreans in *Spy Li Cheol-jin* and *Joint Security Area*,” in *Seoul Searching: Contemporary Korean Cinema and Society*, ed. Frances Gateward (Albany: SUNY Press, 2007), 219-242. For analysis of the yang gong-ju (also spelled yanggongju), see: Grace M. Cho, *Haunting the Korean Diaspora: Shame, Secrecy, and the Forgotten War* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008); Hyun Sook Kim, “Yanggongju as an Allegory of the Nation: The Representation of Working-Class Women in Popular and Radical Texts,” in *Dangerous Women, Gender and Korean Nationalism*, eds. Elaine H. Kim and Chungmoo Choi (London & NY: Routledge, 1998), 175-202; and Katharine H. S. Moon, “Prostitute Bodies and Gendered States in U.S.-Korea Relations,” in *Dangerous Women*, eds. Kim and Choi, 141-74. For a discussion of the yang gong-ju in cinema, see Kyung Hyun Kim, “Is This How the War is Remembered?: Violent Sex and the Korean War in *Silver Stallion*, *Spring in My Hometown*, and *The Taebaek Mountains*,” in *The Remasculinization of Korean Cinema* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 93-106 and Hye, Seung Chung, “Towards a Strategic Korean Cinephilia: A Transnational Detournement of Hollywood Melodrama,” in *South Korean Golden Age Melodrama: Gender, Genre, And National Cinema*, eds. Kathleen McHugh and Nancy Ablemann (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2005), 117-150. On analysis of war brides, see Ji-Yeon Yuh, *Beyond the Shadow of Camp Town: Korean Military Brides in America* (New York: NYU Press, 2002). On orphans and transnational adoption, see Eleana J. Kim, *Adopted Territory: Transnational Korean Adoptees and the Politics of Belonging* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010) and Tobias Hübinette, *Comforting an Orphaned Nation: Representations of International Adoption and Adopted Koreans in Korean Popular Culture*, Korean Studies Series No. 32, (Seoul: Jimoondang Publishing Company, 2006). On Korean Americans and the Korean War, see Jodi Kim, “The Forgotten War: Korean America’s Conditions of Possibility” in *Ends of Empire: Asian American Critique and the Cold War* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 143-191.

figures suggest the war's direct effects of exile, dislocation, new sexual configurations and starting over elsewhere. I consider how these same effects are re-signified in a number of crises, desires and traumas that on the surface appear unrelated to the war or the new economic system: friendships lost under forced separation, failed relationships that cannot reconcile the conflicting demands of tradition and capitalist modernity, monsters characterized by consumption, disdain towards native Korean cosmology and corporeality, and new forms of mobility, both geographic and economic, that have transformed and even confounded notions of home and the individual. These effects are small, isolated and hardly visible, yet they are also the manufactured consequences of radical socio-historical change imposed from without. By bringing to the fore the disassociation between expectations and effects, this film culture makes visible the conflict between capitalism's ideals and its consequences.

In doing so, the films I have chosen to analyze along with my particular mode of investigation allows us to "see" South Korea, capitalism, and South Korean cinema differently. While my project is in line with scholarship that defines capitalism as the manifestation of consumerism, commodity fetishism, and class conflicts between the ruling class and the working class, I attend to capitalism in a more interior manner.⁹ I am interested in how cinema helps us visualize internalized capitalism and its operations *as* everyday life: calculation of self-interested individualism; "managerial" parenting; alienation from friends and family; commodification of relationships—particularly heterosexuality; "development" of children (e.g., to learn English) to increase their later market value; seduction by promises of freedom, meritocracy, individualism and cosmopolitanism; and stigma and abandonment of people displaced from the shrinking middle-class. This form of economic sociality is becoming more common worldwide under the supposition that free market capitalism is utopia—with South Korea commonly cited as a case study. My intervention, in such light, raises the question of capitalism's hidden dystopia by citing South Korean cinema. While multinational capitalism has produced unprecedented conveniences and technological advancements, such capitalism has come at an unsustainable cost—not only in terms of biospheric degradation, but in terms of its human toll: permanent war (e.g., "the War on Terror" and the Korean War), familial fragmentation and economic instability.

With the exception of *Madame Freedom* (Han Hyeong-mo, 1956), the films I consider were made between 1998 and the first decade of the new millennium when a new film system and a new generation of filmmakers emerged.¹⁰ As Darcy Paquet remarks, films made during this time have a sense "of decades of pent-up creative energies suddenly let loose."¹¹ Historically, censorship had constrained South Korean cinema for ninety years; thus film scholars such as Hyangjin Lee have noted, "South Korean films have always been ideologically controlled by its government."¹² For

⁹ See, for example, Hyangjin Lee' *Contemporary Korean Cinema: Identity, Culture and Politics* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000).

¹⁰ For analysis on South Korean cinema's industrial transformation in the 1990s, see Darcy Paquet, "The Korean Film Industry: 1992 to the Present" in *New Korean Cinema*, ed. Chi-Yun Shin and Julian Stringer (New York: NYU Press, 2005), 32-50 and Doobo Shim: "South Korean Media Industry in the 1990s and the Economic Crisis," *Prometheus* 20.4 (2002): 337–50.

¹¹ Darcy Paquet, *New Korean Cinema: Breaking the Waves*, (London: Wallflower, 2009), 5.

¹² Hyangjin Lee, *Contemporary Korean Cinema*, 45-52.

Japanese colonizers and military autocrats, films were objects of information control to broadcast propaganda. For most of South Korea's existence, the Motion Picture Law (1962-1996) controlled filmmaking by legislating the terms of licensing, registration and evaluation prior to film production.¹³ While the government subsidized heavy industries like steel, shipping and auto-making, the state never financed the film industry. To become a filmmaker, individuals apprenticed through an "old boys" network in Chungmuro (this term is the South Korean equivalent to "Hollywood," referring to an arts district in Seoul where the first theaters and film companies were launched).¹⁴ Even as recently as the early 1990s, South Korean cinema was struggling to survive. As Paquet points out, "The percentage of ticket sales accounted for by local films was reaching all-time lows."¹⁵ After the 1986 Korea-U.S. Film Agreement, policies on foreign films were deregulated.¹⁶ Hollywood films went from 53% of market share in 1987 to 80% in 1994.¹⁷

In 1994, a "single episode" in Doobo's Shim's words, changed the nation's perception of films. A government inquiry on the prospects of digital technology reported the computer-generated *Jurassic Park* (Steven Spielberg, 1993) and its ancillary products made the equivalent revenue of 1.5 million foreign sales of Hyundai cars.¹⁸ In response, the Kim Young-sam government (1993-1998) reclassified cinema as a manufacturing industry. The Motion Picture Promotion Law replaced the censoring Motion Picture Law, giving tax breaks to chaebols (family-owned conglomerate businesses that exceed \$20 billion in annual revenues) for investing in the local film scene. The new promotion law also founded the School of Film, Television and Multimedia at the public Korean National University of Arts.¹⁹ Chaebols' entry into the film business changed, in Doobo Shim's words, "the mom-and-pop" styled local film scene into a corporate industry.²⁰ Chaebols increased budgets, promoted the star-system, used marketing and audience research, hired trained film directors with international degrees, stressed efficiency, and vertically integrated film production, distribution, exhibition, video sales and cable television broadcasting.²¹ While many chaebols (e.g., Daewoo, Hyundai and LG) departed from filmmaking after the Crisis to focus on their "core" businesses, the remaining conglomerates such as CJ Entertainment, Lotte Entertainment and Showbox Mediaplex (these dominant film companies are subsidiaries of multinational corporations engaged in dozens of other industries from processed foods to electronics and biotechnology) have continued to use this model.

¹³ Hyae-joon Kim, "A History of Korean Film Policies," in *Korean Cinema: From Origins to Renaissance*, ed. Mee-hyun Kim (Seoul: Com-munication Books, 2007), 353.

¹⁴ As In-young Nam explains, "In the mid 1990s... It became possible to debut as a feature film director without having first served as an apprentice for a long time in the male-dominated networks where deep-rooted gender discrimination existed." "Korean Women Directors" in *Korean Cinema: From Origins to Renaissance*, ed. Mee-hyun Kim (Seoul: Com-munication Books, 2007), 166, <http://www.koreanfilm.or.kr/jsp/publications/history.jsp> (accessed August 6, 2013).

¹⁵ Paquet, "The Korean Film Industry," 32.

¹⁶ Ibid., 35. The screen quota system remained initially but was deregulated in 2006.

¹⁷ Shim, "South Korean Media Industry," 339.

¹⁸ Ibid., 340.

¹⁹ Jeong Jae-eun, the director of *Take Care of My Cat*, is a graduate of this school.

²⁰ Shim, "South Korean Media Industry," 347.

²¹ See Paquet, "The Korean Film Industry," 39-40 and Shim, "South Korean Media Industry," 347.

In 2001, President Kim Dae-Jung (1998-2003) abolished film censorship and re-launched the Korean Film Council (KOFIC) with members of the film industry (e.g., actors, directors and critics) rather than government agents.²² The new KOFIC—after a generational power struggle won by the emerging cadre—marked a new system of film financing and marketing, expanding film investment funds by working with venture capital companies and introducing sophisticated new elements such as global public relations.²³ The idea of venture capitalism extended to a trend called the “netizen funds” which allowed everyday people to invest in film projects over the internet. Industry-wide changes increased women’s participation, but the industry remains male-dominated, a fact shared with Hollywood (according to Martha Lauzen, just 7% of Hollywood directors in 2010 were women and “women accounted for just 16 percent of powerful behind-the-scenes individuals”).²⁴ With KOFIC arguing that “free expression” made films more “appealing” and “competitive,” art, politics and commerce appeared to find coexistence.²⁵

Significantly, the filmmakers who made the films under consideration here were born in the 1960s and 1970s, growing up when authoritarian dictators (Park Chung-hee, 1961-1979 and Chun Doo-hwan, 1980-1987) ruled everyday life through militarized policies: curfews, emergency drills, censorship and criminalization of cultural expression deemed anti-government or communist-sympathetic, military presence on the streets, brutal suppression of civilian protests often led by young college kids, and persistent fear-mongering through government-controlled textbooks, television stations, family planning and consumerism.²⁶ Government repression took place as the growing middle-class—a consequence of autocrats’ state-led, centrally planned capitalism called the Yushin modernization project—sought out new “personal and political freedoms,” in the words of Nancy Abelmann and John Lie.²⁷ As dictatorships received financial support from the U.S. government, America was also held culpable for the authoritarian nature of daily life. This atmosphere produced a dynamic anti-government movement conceptualized by the intellectual class around notions of the “minjung” (everyday poor people), labor, gender, democracy and reunification. Henry Em notes that to take part in the movement, the works of “Marx, Lenin, and Mao, along with intellectuals of the Frankfurt School and the New Left, as well as Third World theorists (e.g., Paolo Freire, Samir Amin, etc.) were required reading throughout the 1970s.”²⁸ When filmmakers came of age, the Minjung movement and its Film Movement offshoot (perhaps less vehemently than in the 1970s) still characterized university life. According to Hyangjin Lee, the Minjung Film

²² Hyae-joon Kim, “A History of Korean,” 352.

²³ Paquet, *New Korean Cinema*, 76-77; For more on KOFIC, see its website: About KOFIC, “Introduction of Kofic,” <http://www.koreanfilm.or.kr/jsp/kofic/intro.jsp> (accessed August 6, 2013).

²⁴ Martha Lauzen, “Getting Real About Reel Employment,” Women’s Media Center, February 25, 2011, <http://www.womensmediacenter.com/feature/entry/getting-real-about-reel-employment> (accessed August 6, 2013).

²⁵ Hyae-Joon Kim, “A History of Korean,” 352.

²⁶ Nancy Abelmann and John Lie, *Blue Dreams: Korean Americans and the Los Angeles Riots* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2009), 68.

²⁷ Ibid., 68.

²⁸ Henry Em, “Overcoming Korea’s Division: Narrative Strategies in Recent South Korean Historiography,” *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* 1.2 (Fall 1993): 484, note 29.

Movement's "favorite subject-matter included the struggle of the working class and the contradictions of the political and economic structures of contemporary Korean society."²⁹ In the mainstream, Lee points to melodrama (a method known for unmasking the irresolution between personal life and political structures) and "films of social commentary" as the two major genres which "the majority of Korean films [from 1950s to the 1980s] seem to cluster around."³⁰

While these filmmakers' youth was immersed in developmental nationalism centered on growing the state itself, their adulthood was staged at the precipice of a different turn: globalization-driven nationalism. This new turn believes that, as Hyun Ok Park notes, "the expansion of South Korean capitalism is predicated on transcending its territorial borders."³¹ Film reflected this shift: they went from objects of authoritarian rule to global commodities signifying South Korea's growing worldliness. Amid this turn, the new generation of filmmakers experienced what Soyoung Kim calls the "cinephilia" of the 1990s, a culture powered by "the proliferation of film festivals, art-house cinema theatres, cinematheques, videotheques, film magazines, journals and cinema groups housed in cyberspace and in real space."³² Notably, cinephilia was not limited to esoteric sectors of the intelligentsia; the government's new enthusiasm for South Korean cinema meant cinema became a regular topic of discussion and film viewing became an indicator of a person's cultural capital. In 2007, film critic Tony Rayns pointed out, "What [South] Korea has become in the last ten years or so, is, I would say, the most cinephilic country in the world. People are really crazy about film. Everybody is interested."³³ This ascendancy of film in South Korea stands out even more given the decline of film-going culture among the young in the U.S. In this milieu in South Korea, the boundaries of art and commerce blurred. For example, films like Lee Chang-dong's 2002 *Oasis*, considered a marginal art film in the U.S., spent three weeks as a number one box office hit in South Korea³⁴—a film market that emerged as the world's seventh largest box office in 2012 with 1.3 billion dollars spent on movie-going.³⁵

But in the last decade, however, economic forces have imperiled this most alluring aspect of "new" South Korean film culture—the cinephilic love of cinematic heterogeneity. Despite South Korean cinema's domestic and international rise, its establishment has been unstable. In late 2006, the Korean film industry entered a recession with three consecutive years of losses, making it difficult for filmmakers (especially art-house oriented ones) to find reliable investors.³⁶ The industry appears to

²⁹ Hyangjin Lee, *Contemporary Korean Cinema*, 54.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 57.

³¹ Hyun Ok Park, "Segyehwa: Globalization and Nationalism in Korea," *Journal of the International Institute* 4:1 (Fall 1996) <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.4750978.0004.105> (accessed August 13, 2013).

³² Soyoung Kim, "'Cine-Mania' or Cinephilia: Film Festivals and the Identity Question" in *New Korean Cinema*, ed. Chi-Yun Shin and Julian Stringer (New York: NYU Press, 2005), 82.

³³ Mike Archibald, "Treading on East Asian Cinema: An Interview with Tony Rayns," *Offscreen* 11.1 (January 31, 2007), http://www.offscreen.com/index.php/phile/essays/tony_rayns/P1/ (accessed August 13, 2013).

³⁴ Paquet, *New Korean Cinema*, 83.

³⁵ Motion Picture Association of America, Industry Reports, "2012 Theatrical Market Statistics," 5. <http://www.mpa.org/Resources/3037b7a4-58a2-4109-8012-58fca3abdf1b.pdf> (accessed August 6, 2013).

³⁶ Lisa Han, "Korean Cinema Regains its Confidence in 2009," *Korean Cinema Today* 4 (November-December 2009): 4.

be on the rebound, having gone from 46% of domestic market share in 2007 to 59.6% in 2012.³⁷ But this surge was propelled by, as Park Eun-jee notes, “a market-driven approach bankrolled by corporate behemoths.”³⁸ While it is important that national cinemas grow local infrastructure to compete with ever-bigger Hollywood spectacles, growth driven by the economic logic of vertical-integration can suppress domestic cinemas of their idiosyncratic creativity, divest filmmakers of all film rights, and concentrate the vastness of film resources in the hands of a few remote executives. Because art-house theaters are rare, and large theater chains show their same conglomerate-backed films, independent films lack exhibition outlets. When chains do screen independent films, they often schedule films at inopportune times, such as before noon or after midnight.³⁹ In protest, Kim Ki-duk pulled his film *Pieta* (2012), winner of the Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival, from theatres to ostensibly make room for other independent films, but more to rebuke blockbusters for hogging theatres when independents had almost none.⁴⁰ Indeed, without policies to regulate conglomerate power, big business—rather than censorship—may kill South Korean cinema’s freedom of expression.

While the 1990s was an auspicious time for South Korean filmmakers, the films themselves were made amid the 1997 Crisis—a phenomenon I discuss at length in chapter 4. The Crisis resulted in bankruptcies for individuals, companies and, arguably, whole regions, requiring a \$55 billion bailout by the International Monetary Fund (IMF).⁴¹ Notably, the Crisis’s conditions of poverty, homelessness, family separation (many parents left the country to look for employment or elude bad business deals; children were sent to study abroad to learn English for their futures), requests for foreign aid (especially American), and the twinned senses of scarcity and competition that characterized the aftermath of the Crisis also characterized the aftermath of the Korean War. I claim that the ongoing irresolution of war, capitalism and South Korean history were resignified cinematically, and had immediate resonance throughout the Crisis while also tapping the earlier memory of catastrophic colonialism, neo-imperialism and authoritarianism. For example, the unhappy endings and the couple’s failure in the romance films examined in chapter 3 resound as North and South Korea’s unhappy and possibly permanent separation. Likewise, the critique of U.S. militarism in the *Host* can be broadly tied to the rising sense of foreign economic takeover; during the Crisis, there were mass demonstrations against foreign companies that were seen as gobbling up South Korean companies at bargain rates, thanks to Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) deregulation ordered by the IMF. The infatuation with the U.S.A. and Hollywood that prevailed after the Korean War arose again after the Crisis. Hyangjin Lee claims that after the U.S. Army came to South Korea in 1945, Korean audiences’ exposure to American films led to attempts “to make Hollywood-style films” and “the

³⁷ The percentages are respectively taken from *Korean Cinema 2007* (Seoul: Korean Film Council KOFIC, 2007), 493 and *Korean Cinema 2012* (Seoul: Korean Film Council KOFIC, 2012), 28.

³⁸ Eun-jee Park, “Conglomerates Direct Korea’s Film Industry,” *Korea JoongAng Daily*, December 6, 2012, <http://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/news/article/article.aspx?aid=2963465>. (accessed August 13, 2013).

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ The accounting for the bailout is inconsistent, ranging from 55 to 58 billion dollars.

Americanization of the viewers' taste..."⁴² In a similar manner, in her critique of blockbusters such as *Shiri* (Kang Je-gyu, 2002) as imitations of Hollywood cinema, Kim Gyeong-Wook notes, that after the Crisis, "Under the U.S.-led globalization dynamics, Korea obsessively learned how to completely mimic America and how the whole Korean society could be Americanized."⁴³ This includes the mimicry of U.S. culture, socio-economics, and lifestyles. These repetitions suggest South Korea's unfinished and ongoing modernization.

Throughout the dissertation, I highlight the contradiction between South Korean film culture's visualization of South Korea as a site of "historical trauma" on the cinematic level and world leaders' citation of South Korea as a model of "historical progress" on the geopolitical level. The idea of "history as progress" has been *the* compelling argument for the Third World's "development": to increase wealth through maximum economic production and efficiency—enabled by science, technology, individualism, a "competitive" marketplace, and other tools of modernization. This rhetoric presumes that economic growth will produce a better world with greater freedom, justice, gender equality and human rights, improving quality of life for all. Progress has been achieved when indigenous local economies have "grown" into transnational modern ones on par with those of the First World. Recent U.S. presidents such as George W. Bush and Barack Obama have pointed to South Korea to demonstrate the ideal of "progress" and defend the superiority of the free market amid the 2008 Global Financial Crisis. In a 2008 speech on the world economy, Bush said, "Ultimately, the best evidence for free market capitalism is its performance compared to other economic systems...Free markets allowed South Korea to make itself one of the most technologically advanced societies in the world."⁴⁴ A year later, in a speech at the 2009 G8 (Group of Eight) Summit, Obama said, "When my father traveled to the United States from Kenya to study, at that time the per capita income and Gross Domestic Product of Kenya was higher than South Korea's. Today obviously South Korea is a highly developed and relatively wealthy country, and Kenya is still struggling with deep poverty in much of the country."⁴⁵ Much of this inference results from the success of family-owned corporate conglomerates (like Hyundai, Samsung and Daewoo). However, such a conflation between family-owned companies and a nation is like saying that the Walton family—the richest family in America that controls the multinational retailer Walmart—is representative of the United States' economic health.

Through the rhetoric of South Korean "development" (and other Asian nations), a conclusion has been made: Third World development has been, and can be, a success. It has been impossible to know in advance what the outcome of capitalism's expansion in

⁴² Hyangjin Lee, *Contemporary Korean Cinema*, 45.

⁴³ Gyeong-Wook Kim, as quoted in Sun Jung, *Korean Masculinities and Transcultural Consumption: Yonsama, Rain, Oldboy, K-Pop Idols* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2011), 10.

⁴⁴ George Bush, "President Bush's Remarks on the World Economy" (speech at the Manhattan Institute, New York, November 13, 2008). http://www.realclearpolitics.com/articles/2008/11/president_bushs_remarks_on_the.html (accessed August 13, 2013). (accessed August 13, 2013).

⁴⁵ The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, "Press Conference by the President, U.S. Press Filing Center, L'Aquila, Italy" under "Speeches and Remarks, July 10 2009," <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/press-conference-president-laquila-italy-7-10-09> (accessed August 13, 2013).

the Third World would be. Growing the market economy on a planetary scale has been a huge experiment, but this has come to seem par for the course of human adaptation. The logical evolution of history as economic growth appears to be our present condition of “globalization.” The term “globalization” came to prominence in the 1990s to denote a new objective condition called the “world economy” resulting from the integration of financial relations, market activity and national economies on a planetary scale. In South Korea, the term is associated with President Kim Young-sam (1993-1998) who legislated “globalization” into domestic policies (*seggyehwa*)—policies encouraging FDI, South Korean companies’ internationalization, and the creation of a knowledge-based economy through information and communication technologies (ICT). For the purposes of the dissertation, I consider “globalization” to mean the globalization of post-Fordist capitalism within the context of Korean history. Hence I evoke the earlier historical transformations wrought by the Cold War that forced South Korea to become a capitalist showcase, and experiment, of U.S. economic and military expansion. In this context, recent South Korean cinema acts out (like other film sites) a kind of “vernacular modernism,” to use Miriam Hansen’s phrase, that makes legible and understandable the social and cultural experience of the capitalist economy’s overseas expansion in South Korea and elsewhere. Although we have yet to grasp the immense—and collective—implications of this worldwide paradigm shift, South Korea is a site where the enormity of this experiment is particularly legible because of the historical forces that brought it into existence.

South Korea was not self-made. As the U.S. was the driving force that bisected the peninsula and individuated South Korea into a nation-state, Joo-Hong Nam names the U.S. the “creator of a Korea.”⁴⁶ In a similar vein, Iain Pirie writes, “South Korea is essentially a U.S. creation, a creation the U.S. has protected from external threat and provided with both ideational and material support for over four decades.”⁴⁷ South Korea became a nation-state through U.S. military foreign policy (General Order No. 1), governance (the United States Army Military Government in Korea, USAMGIK, 1945 to 1948), proxy war (the Cold War known as the Korean War, 1950 to 1953) and postwar re-construction support (Armed Forces Assistance to Korea Program, AFAK, 1951 to 1971). Indeed, the U.S. has spent economic aid on South Korea equal to spending on entire continents. David Reynolds writes, “Because of South Korea’s importance as a front line of the cold war, the United States kept open its markets for Korean exports and pumped in economic aid to the tune of \$6 billion between 1946 and 1978 compared with \$6.87 billion for the whole of Africa and \$14.8 billion for all Latin America.”⁴⁸ In addition, South Korea also received \$6.8 billion in military assistance from 1946 to 1976.⁴⁹ It is disingenuous to call on South Korea as a paradigm of self-determined progress when other Third World nations received little comparable aid.

⁴⁶ Joo-Hong Nam, *America's Commitment to South Korea: The First Decade of the Nixon Doctrine* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 23.

⁴⁷ Iain Pirie, *The Korean Developmental State* (NY: Routledge, 2008), 7.

⁴⁸ David Reynolds, *One World Divisible: A Global History Since 1945* (New York: Norton, 2000), 422.

⁴⁹ Edward S. Mason et al., *The Economic and Social Modernization of the Republic of Korea* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1980), 182.

Significantly, this aid was conditional. Although the U.S. promoted the idea of South Korean sovereignty, it consistently undermined South Korean authority and sovereignty. When a 1961 accord on economic aid gave the United States the right to continuous observation and review,” the *New York Times* reported that “opponents of the agreement charge that since the United States funds make up more than 50 percent of the South Korean budget, the United States will be permitted to interfere in almost every aspect of government.”⁵⁰ Hence it is not by accident that the United States’ model of militarism and economics has come to dominate South Korea. Despite its utopian rhetoric of a national entrepreneurial individualism, South Korea could not have survived without U.S. financial aid and military resources that carried with it the experiment of American neo-imperial capitalism. Rather than resulting from Confucianism and so-called Asian values (as political and business leaders claim), it was South Korea’s proxy relationship to the U.S. that mobilized indispensable U.S. financial aid, technological ingenuity and military presence, regulating and disciplining the impoverished South Korea until it gained nation-state legibility and became a showcase of the U.S.’s international legitimacy.

Whereas the U.S. and proponents of capital tout South Korea as a model of teleological progress and globalization, the South Korean films under consideration here present a series of catastrophes that pile up in a heap: ghostly reminders of North Korea; monstrous subordination to U.S. militarism and capitalism; crises in housing and employment; authoritarian adults who divide and conquer the youth in their charge; abandoned children with no place to go; internationally split-up families who long to be together; and marriages that are based on finance over romance. This articulation echoes Walter Benjamin’s version of the “Angel of History.”⁵¹ In his interpretation of the Paul Klee painting *Angelus Novus*, Benjamin writes, the angel of history is “turned at the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe that keeps piling ruin upon ruin and hurls it in front of his feet.” The angel would like to rectify what has been “smashed,” but his wings are caught in a storm that “propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.” Likewise, the South Korean films examined here reject the idea of history as progress. By eliciting worsening living conditions, films depict “progress” and “development” as inventions that have allowed powerful entities from the outside to establish economic and political control over vulnerable peoples and regions. In the film genres *The Intimacy of Distance* explores—rooted in appropriation of horror, disaster, romance, coming-of-age films and melodrama—the borderless brew of global warming, stratified inequity, financial recession, romantic consumerism, divisive individualism, perpetual war, familial fragmentation and corporatized skylines overtake “progress.” By critically recasting the historical transformations wrought by the U.S. in South Korea as dystopian rather than utopian, this strategy redefines success in oppositional terms that are critical of U.S. neoliberalism and foreign policy.

⁵⁰ “U.S. Gets Right to Supervise,” *New York Times*, February 9, 1961, 8.

⁵¹ It is noteworthy that another scholar of South Korean cinema also uses Benjamin’s “angel” metaphor to “read” a recent film. See Aaron Han Joon Magnan-Park, “Peppermint Candy: The Will *Not* To Forget” in *New Korean Cinema*, ed. Chi-Yun Shin and Julian Stringer (New York: NYU Press, 2005).

Furthermore, by mobilizing cinema's plasticity to rearticulate South Korea's historicity as retrospective, rather than forward facing, the filmmakers considered here engender a cinema with a nonlinear approach to time. Several scholars have shown that one of South Korean cinema's defining features is its deviant cinematic temporality, where qualities of time—as organizer of narrative structure and as representation of lived or imagined history—are intentionally displaced, hybridized and disruptive. For example, writing on films made after the Crisis, David Martin Jones notes, “recent [South Korean] time travel melodramas are characterized by decompressed or unfolded narratives that experiment with recent national history to contemplate the effect of the past on the present.”⁵² In his reading of *Peppermint Candy*'s (Lee Chang-dong, 2000) “reverse chronological narrative structure,” Aaron Han Joon Magnan-Park remarks, “Re-visioning the past or the act of recognizing the past in the present and its ability to inflect the future, requires a willingness to avert one's gaze from its future orientation.”⁵³ Films across genres have been characterized as flashback-dependent, time-traveling, fractured, backwards, discontinuous or repetitive.⁵⁴ Time is likewise pending rather than forward driven in several of the films I examine: in Chapter 1, time is experienced as historical repetition while in Chapter 3, time becomes ephemera, where there is no future, only a present-oriented now.

In the following, the historical traumas characterized by the “chain of events” that make up the civil war, Cold War, national division and ensuing capitalisms (from state-led to neoliberal restructuring) are re-framed as a single, ongoing and unresolved historical unit. I use the term “transmodern” to identify South Korea's sense of blended, transverse and transitional modernity where an end is not in sight. Enrique Dussel has used the term “trans”-modernity (in his words the “‘beyond’ that transcends Western modernity”) to theorize an alternative worldview where indigenous cosmology (premodern tradition and spiritualism) can coexist with modern and postmodern logics.⁵⁵ South Korea's transmodernity suggests the optimistic possibility of indigenous tradition and global capitalism achieving mutual multicultural harmony. But it also portends the dystopian possibility of failing to cope with the conflicting demands made by both tradition and modernity. Bridging the bifurcated logic of pre-modernity (or non-modernity) and modernity is of practical necessity, given South Korea's accelerated rate of historical change. As Kyung-Sup Chang has pointed out, “South Koreans have

⁵² David Martin-Jones, *Deleuze and World Cinemas* (London: Continuum, 2011), 112.

⁵³ Aaron Han Joon Magnan-Park, 167.

⁵⁴ For additional examples of film scholarship that observes South Korean cinema's subversion of chronological temporality, see David Desser, “Timeless, Bottomless Bad Movies,” in *Seoul Searching: Contemporary Korean Cinema and Society*, ed. Frances Gateward (Albany: SUNY Press, 2007), 73-95; Hye Seung Chung 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 *Seoul Searching: Contemporary Korean Cinema and Society*, ed. Frances Gateward (Albany: SUNY Press, 2007), 115-139;; Kyung Hyun Kim, “The Awkward Traveller in Turning Gate” in *New Korean Cinema*, ed. Chi-Yun Shin and Julian Stringer (New York: NYU Press, 2005), 170-179; and David Martin-Jones, “Decompressing Modernity: South Korean Time Travel Narratives and the IMF Crisis,” *Cinema Journal* 46.4 (Summer 2007): 45-67.

⁵⁵ Enrique Dussel, “World-System and ‘Trans’-Modernity,” *Nepantla: Views from South* 3.2 (2002): 221.

experienced Westerners' historical development of two or three centuries over merely three or four decades."⁵⁶

This condensation situates South Korea's modernity in multiple modernities, intervals (between the non-modern and the modern), ideological systems (capitalism and communism) and plural places. As Jesook Song notes, "It is futile to make a clear-cut distinction between 'premodern,' 'modern,' and 'postmodern' for late-industrializing countries."⁵⁷ The jump from a shamanic agrarian system to a postindustrial knowledge-based economy has happened before non-modernity could die off and the new could settle in. At the same time, South Koreans have been internalizing a stream of overlapping (and some ongoing) modernities: Japanese (1910-1945), American Cold War (1945-1961, arguably ongoing), Yushin (meaning "restoration," 1961-1987, also arguably ongoing) and neo-liberal (1988-current, and arguably having started earlier) modernities. While the Cold War has ended for most of the world, it has not for the Koreans; the Cold War's continuing "afterlife" in South Korea is a striking reminder of South Korea's difference from the rest of the world. Indeed, recent scholarship on "transnational cinema" has pointed out that we live "in an era no longer marked by the sharp divisions between communist and capitalist nation states, or even 'first' and 'third' worlds."⁵⁸ Nevertheless, the persistence of communism on the Korean peninsula suggests the spectral relevance of the "dead" Cold War. Conversely, "South" and "North" Korean nation-states suggest a false border—a bisected nation already transgresses the normative understanding of a unified community. Moreover, the mid-century international conditions that engineered these Koreas suggest the limits of reading a "national cinema" through only one nation or community: South and North Koreas have always been enmeshed in other national histories, cultures and powers from afar and forcibly alienated from each other.

The Chapters

The *Intimacy of Distance* is comprised of four chapters. In the first half of the dissertation, the Korean War, national division and U.S. militarism is the formative historical trauma that is examined, while in the second half, it is South Korea's ensuing and ongoing transition to a U.S. style capitalist economy on the world stage. Each chapter considers the historical effects of displacement, competition, alienation, the pressure to succeed, the fear of poverty, and the trauma of losing loved ones. Alongside close analysis of individual films, each chapter offers a foray into history that is applicable to other chapters. Chapter one focuses on horror and the spectral presence of national division. Chapter two analyzes the monster as the embodiment of a host for U.S. neo-imperialism. The third chapter focuses on melodrama, the trauma of failed heterosexual romance, and the dual and incompatible socio-cultural forces imposed upon women by Confucian patriarchy, on one hand, and neo-liberal capitalism, on the other. Finally,

⁵⁶ Chang Kyung-Sup, "Compressed Modernity and Its Discontents: South Korean Society in Transition," *Economy and Society* 28.1 (1999): 48.

⁵⁷ Jesook Song, "Introduction: why Korea in the new millennium?" in *New Millennium South Korea: Neoliberal Capitalism and Transnational Movements*, ed. Jesook Song, (Oxford: Routledge, 2011), 3.

⁵⁸ Text is quoted from the back cover of *Transnational Cinema: The Film Reader*, ed. Elizabeth Ezra and Terry Rowden (New York: Routledge, 2006).

chapter four analyzes hollow promises of economic and geographic mobility for youth under neoliberalism.

In Chapter 1, I argue that the Korean War-and-Cold War is not dead but “undead”; it returns as the “Specter of National Division” to reconfigure notions of linear time and haunt cinematic representations beyond the confines of masculine battlefields in war films. Through close readings of *Whispering Corridors* (Park Ki-Hyung, 1998) and *A Tale of Two Sisters*, I argue that gothic horror—a genre that looks to be politically dismissible as female hysteria—deploys the alternative sensibility of horror to resignify the problem of North and South Korea’s tragic division and vexing reunification. By mobilizing historically resonant themes of closeness, homosociality, forced division and uneasy reunion, these films offer their spectators fantasies about geopolitical impossibilities: a loving yet terrifying reunification between North and South Korea; taking revenge against authoritative superpowers; and repeating time to rectify past mistakes and engineer a new future. Because both North and South Korea invented their national identities by deploying the creation myth of Tangun, the son of heaven born of a bear-mother five millennia ago whose rule extended from Korea to Manchuria, Korea becomes naturalized as having always been united. Accordingly, national division is seen as a tragedy not only against Koreans, but also against the idea of “natural” history itself by destroying this lineage. By imaging North Korea as a ghost of kinship and terror, recent cinema provides affective support for South Korean spectators who must contend with the contradictory forces of traditional ethnic-nationalism based on a yearning for solidarity, community and reunification, on one hand, and, on the other, the pressures of South Korea’s advanced capitalism which disavows the North as a precondition for moving forward, individuated, onto the global stage.

Chapter 2 explores the cumulative effect of the United State’s military and economic expansion on the rest of the world through a close reading of *The Host*. I argue *The Host* expresses its critique of the U.S. presence in South Korea and the capitalist economy it has imposed on the nation through the figure of the monster. The monster’s metaphorical configuration of divisive alienation, viral risk, unbridled consumption and stealth warmongering can only be destroyed by the re-invented family-cum-nation. *The Host* features a lovable family of South Koreans who are characterized by poverty, inertia and personal failures typical of those forced to survive at the margins of the capitalist world-system. The film appropriates and resignifies familiar incidents by filtering them through the conventions of the horror film; throughout the film, the fantastical merges with the historical, and the implausible is charged with the reality of current events. Likewise, by combining the conventions of a range of genres such as horror, science fiction and the paternal melodrama, the film defamiliarizes the familiar tropes of upward mobility and in turn, empathizes with the minjung, the people who have suffered abandonment under neoliberalization. Exemplifying how contemporary South Korean cinema joins high-tech filmmaking with narratives of the underprivileged, the film moves between extra-textual news events and fantastical horror, First World genre filmmaking and Third World Cinema movements to contend with South Korea’s transmodern, transnational and schizophrenic development.

Chapter 3 analyses the over-presence of failed relationships and the untenable situation of female protagonists in South Korean romantic dramas. In films such as

Madame Freedom, *Marriage is a Crazy Thing*, *Naked Kitchen* (Hong Ji-young, 2009) and *The Intimate* (Kim Tae-eun, 2005), heteronormative marriage is the site where tradition and emergent modern life collide in the form of marital infidelity. Whereas neoconservative tradition defines heterosexual relationships as a form of strategic matchmaking necessary for reproducing the family system, the new capitalist system defines heterosexual romance through desire expressed as individual freedom of choice. In contrast, in films such as *Love Me Not* (Cheol-ha Lee, 2006), *...ing* (Lee Eon-hee, 2003), *A Millionaire's first love* (Tae-gyun Kim, 2006) and *Oasis* (Lee Chang-dong, 2002) a health condition forces the woman to forego a normal life and the man to prioritize her needs, therefore removing the couple from the social realm that prizes status, advancement and normativity. Both paradigms remove the demands of the economy and the pressures of the Confucian family so that the couple in love can occupy the temporality of the present and experience uncompromised ephemeral intimacy. In these films, security and freedom are mutually exclusive, mirroring the logic of South Korea's national division where security competes with freedom. The broader suggestion is that the current historical context makes future-oriented intimacy impossible, as the preconditions for a love that is both free and secure is not yet in place.

Chapter 4 considers art film imagery of everyday girls coming-of-age amid financial disaster, economic hardship and urban desolation traceable to the Crisis. Films discussed in this chapter include *Take Care of My Cat*, *Paju* (Park Chan-ok, 2009), *In Between Days* (So Yong Kim, 2006), *Samaritan Girl* (Kim Ki-duk, 2004), *Treeless Mountain* (So Yong Kim, 2008), *A Light Sleep* (Im Seong-chan, 2008) and *A Brand New Life* (Ounie Lecomte, 2009). In particular, the chapter offers a close reading of *Take Care of My Cat* and *In Between Days*, two feature-length works that portray this generation of youth who are transitioning from childhood to adult responsibilities in a manner that signifies South Korea's transition from state-led capitalism to transnational neoliberalism. The new ideals of meritocratic upward economic mobility and geographic mobility, cosmopolitanism and self-development contradict the new effects of social stratification, internalized surveillance, and low-wage employment. In the process of imagining the prospects of imprisonment, homelessness, unemployment, domineering adults (bosses or parents), "English fever" and real or figurative orphan-hood, these films offer a sensitive glimpse into the invisible aftermath of economic restructuring, the ongoing crisis of capitalism in South Korea, and its unresolved future.

My title, "*The Intimacy of Distance*," evokes human connection that has been pulled apart by geography and ideology. It speaks to relations of solidarity and togetherness that have become forlorn. It echoes the challenge of making and maintaining community in today's de-territorial(izing) global economy. It conjures how imposed distance can provoke a yearning for reunion—as in nostalgia. But most pointedly, through the vantage of the dissertation, the "intimacy of distance" conjures the division of Korea into two halves and the intimacy that was and is still there; it invokes the perversion of heterosexual intimacy by the forces of commodification in Confucianism and capitalism; it bears the desire for cosmopolitan worldliness by going elsewhere, and the pang of exiles, refugees, immigrants—the Korean diaspora—who have lost their sense of home. Inversely, my title alludes to the contradictory bonds, and bondage, that have resulted between South Korea and the United States.

Chapter 1

Dying to Reunite: Ghostly Intimacy and The Specter of National Division in South Korean Horror

*Know what's really scary?
You want to forget something
Totally wipe it off of your mind
But you never can
It can't go away, you see
And... And it follows you around like a ghost*
—*A Tale of Two Sisters* (2003)

*People are trapped in history, and history is trapped in them.*⁵⁹

*The history of the horror film is essentially a history of anxiety in the twentieth century.*⁶⁰

In the dialogue quoted above, the scary stepmother in *A Tale of Two Sisters* (Kim Jee-woon, 2003) confesses that she finds most terrifying the inability to forget, to delete an event from memory despite a dire determination to “totally wipe it off.” Characterized by a historicity that exceeds all other acts, some events are so traumatic as to call forth a ghostly figuration that haunts the present. In modern Korean history, national division functions as the ghost that will not go away.

More than fifty years after the birth of two diametrically opposed Koreas, South Korea's horror genre intimates surprising ways in which the trauma and danger of national division continues to frequent South Korea's imagination. With the threat of nuclear weapons hovering over the peninsula, and ubiquitous 24-hour news channels visualizing the intimidating dance of synchronized North Korean soldiers, broadcasters provoke primal terror, reminding South Koreans and the world that Pyongyang lurks nearby.

In this chapter, I argue that North Korea functions in everyday life and in South Korean horror films as a specter, a force of terror that haunts the democratic, capitalist world. After all, North Korea should be dead, following the leads of the twentieth century's failed socialist experiments East Germany and the USSR. But North Korea persists as an anomaly capable of destroying the capitalist world. In a May 2009 press briefing, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton condemned North Korea for conducting nuclear tests:

North Korea has made a choice. It has chosen to violate the specific language of the UN Security Council Resolution 1718. It has ignored the international

⁵⁹ James Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955), 163.

⁶⁰ Paul Wells, *The Horror Genre: from Beelzebub to Blair Witch* (London: Wallflower Press), 3.

community. It has abrogated the obligations it entered into through the Six-Party Talks. And it continues to act in a provocative and belligerent manner toward its neighbors.⁶¹

Clearly, North Korea's possession of nuclear weapons and its blatant disregard for "the international community" make it a symbol of the apocalypse. Able to trigger worldwide warfare, North Korea represents the hazard of the unknowable, indeterminate future. Headlines about Pyongyang expose our worldwide vulnerability to all sorts of catastrophes.

In contrast, South Korea has come to represent expanding material growth and a model of capitalist success amongst developing countries. While class inequality continues, many South Koreans live middle-class lifestyles where the problem of one's 'daily rice' has lost its exigency. In sharp contrast, according to hunger relief agencies, North Korea has been menaced by a food shortage crisis since the 1990s.⁶² South Koreans are well informed about such famine and many feel pity and even guilt about the suffering of North Koreans. To illustrate this point, in the blockbuster *Shiri* (Kang Je-gyu, 1999), the North Korean spy derides South Korea's conspicuous consumption and material excesses: "Young drunk kids here yelling on the street while people in the north are starving to death. People here have wastes building up in their bellies. What an unfair world." Meanwhile, as its citizens starve and struggle to survive, North Korea threatens broadscale annihilation and justifies its nuclear tests as "self-defensive measures" designed "to defend its supreme interests."⁶³ In fact, North Korea's official newspaper, the *Korean Central News Agency of DPRK*, calls the U.S. the threat and North Korea the peacemaker:

The DPRK's accession to nuclear weapons is not aimed at threatening and pressurizing other countries and mounting preemptive attacks on them[,] unlike the U.S. The DPRK's nuclear deterrent is, to all intents and purposes, of self-defensive nature and has an aim and mission to champion peace. The Korean people are highly proud and honored to defend the peace and security of the Korean Peninsula and the rest of Northeast Asia as it has the full-fledged status of a nuclear weapons state[,] in view of the U.S. moves for a nuclear war.⁶⁴

Even if North Korea attacks South Korea, its nuclear effects would have catastrophic impact elsewhere, including within its own borders. Correspondingly, a U.S. nuclear attack will result in unforeseen destruction, likely against U.S. allies China, Japan and

⁶¹ U.S. Department of State, "Press Availability With Egyptian Foreign Minister Ahmed Ali Aboul Gheit," under "Remarks by Secretary Clinton: May 2009,"

<http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2009a/05/124009.htm> (accessed August 13, 2013).

⁶² For a report on North Korea's food crisis and international relief efforts, see the U.N. World Food Program's website, "Korea, Democratic People's Republic (DPRK)," under "Countries," <http://www.wfp.org/countries/korea-democratic-peoples-republic-dprk> (accessed August 13, 2013).

⁶³ Reuters, "TEXT: North Korea threatens nuclear test," *Reuters UK*, April 29, 2009, <http://uk.reuters.com/article/idUKTRE53S2A120090429?sp=true> (accessed August 13, 2013).

⁶⁴ Korean Central News Agency of DPRK (KCNA), "Rodong Sinmun Holds U.S. Wholly Responsible for Nuclear Crisis on Korean Peninsula" under "June 28. 2009 Juche 98," <http://www.kcna.co.jp/item/2009/200906/news28/20090628-11ee.html> (accessed August 13, 2013).

South Korea. In short, the mutual threat of annihilation is over-development's "dark side."⁶⁵

While the Japanese and the Americans have ample reasons to fear historical revenge, South Koreans arguably have the most to lose. Historically entwined and closely intimate as only a people of shared ethnicity, language and genealogy could be, South Koreans have not been able to dismiss North Koreans as *only* fringe lunatics. South Koreans still remember. The memory of the North's kinship survives, despite decades of the South's attempts to censor, repress and exorcise the cultural, historical, and familial ties that bind South and North. Given the association of North Korea with imminent violence, severed ties, longtime suffering, and a past that continues to haunt the present, it is not surprising that South Korean cultural productions give expression to North Korea's disturbing and oftentimes terrifying affect.

The problem of North Korea haunts the cinema screen through South Korea's vibrant horror genre in general, and the sub-genre of the teenage ghost film in particular. Although the genre connotes harmless and even mindless entertainment, this very connotation may cushion it from the scrutiny of laws that restrict and censor film production as well as freedom of speech at large. The criminalization of critical free speech by coercive forces of the state—the National Security Act (NSA, also known as the National Security Law, NSL) and the Korean Central Intelligence Agency (now known as the Agency for National Security Planning, ANSP)—has restricted South Korean cultural and political expression. Because "North Korea" has long served as the enemy of national security in everyday discourse, speech that challenges the state's rhetorical construction of North Korea has been long banned, as Kuk Cho asserts:

"The NSA is the centerpiece of the security regime that has dominated Korean history since the Korean War and partition of the country... Leftist, or radical, opposition organizations who espoused anti-capitalism, anti-Americanism, or pro-federation reunification were severely punished under the NSA... In sum, the NSA has served as a de facto Constitution that totally overwhelmed democratic and constitutionalist principles."⁶⁶

Given that the NSA has been effect since 1948, this foundational narrative of national security has coerced South Korean filmmakers from imaging direct criticism of capitalism, the government, ongoing U.S. military and economic intervention, as well as "sympathetic" representation of North Koreans. Nevertheless, the horror genre can indirectly depict the horrors of militarized daily life through oblique exploration of unresolved tensions. Associated with scenarios in which bloody teenage girls chase after each other, the genre bears the surface appearance of youthful female hysteria and political naiveté. Nonetheless, horror's rendering of adolescent girls' intense bonds uncovers a pattern of tragic division and troublesome reunification eerily reminiscent of modern Korean history, a pattern I call "the Specter of National Division."

The double meaning of the term 'specter' holds special significance as an emblematic locus of Korea's liminal and uncontained temporality. The term "specter" signifies a ghostly presence or apparition, on one hand; and, on the other, an unpleasant

⁶⁵ Beck, *Risk Society*, 20.

⁶⁶ Kuk Cho, "Korean Criminal Law and Democratization" in *Legal Reform in Korea*, ed. Tom Ginsburg (New York: Routledge 2004), 72.

prospect—much like the current theoretical understanding of “risk.” In the case of Korea, these dual meanings resonate with the problem of national division that has haunted the peninsula since the end of World War II. Because Washington’s intervention made possible the excision of Japanese control, the condition of possibility for Korean sovereignty was national division as spelled out in General Order No. 1.⁶⁷ For anti-colonial nationalists whose passion was the state itself, division was an unacceptable condition in need of immediate redress, even by means of war.⁶⁸ Yet neither North Korea nor South Korea emerged victorious after the Korean War. Consequently, each Korea’s other half has been resignified to function as a ghostly specter of both its traumatic past and a cautionary figuration of danger to come.

Through close readings of *Whispering Corridors* (Park Ki-Hyung, 1998) and *A Tale of Two Sisters*, this chapter argues that while characters are not overtly North Korean, a patterned resignification exists whereby personal stories of ghostly intimacy, usually queer and otherworldly, parallel the postcolonial relationship between North and South Korea. These films stage encounters between best friends and sisters who are torn apart only to endure vexing reunions that restage of historical trauma of national division. As Anton Kaes argues, “Films work through trauma by restaging it. Horror films in particular, with their shock effects and near-death encounters, might be seen as attempt to thicken the stimulus shield; they allow the viewer to take part in the experience of the traumatic event, but from a distance, vicariously and safely.”⁶⁹ I would add that the wishful and scary re-enactment of national division on a personal, familial scale gives indirect expression to the uncertainties and repressed psychic suffering associated with the specificity of Korea’s harrowing history. The contradictory intimacy girls feel for each other in these films, and the terror they inflict and experience are part of South Korea’s “larger postwar reckoning”⁷⁰ with the nation’s emergence from the rubble of civil war into the sphere of global capitalism.

Rather than hinder their treatment of a weighty subject, figures of youth and femininity function as strategic masquerades specific to imagining South Korea’s geopolitical rage, grief and repressed affection for its North Korean brethren. Images of youth aid in the deployment of a universal representation of colonial oppression, as such figures are able to evoke the external dependency and inner disquietude associated with enduring childhood under the tyranny of powerful adults. In turn, the range of historic symbolism attached to femininity facilitates the reflection of the semi-periphery’s paradoxes. Connoting family, anteriority, and vulnerability, as well as nation, emotion,

⁶⁷ James I. Matray calls division the “price of liberation” for Korea. See Matray, “Captive of the Cold War: The Decision to Divide Korea at the 38th Parallel,” *Pacific Historical Review* 50.2 (May 1981): 145.

⁶⁸ William Whitney Stueck points out that the leaders of both Koreas were willing to wage war for the sake of reunification: “Kim Il-sung and Syngman Rhee were fiercely nationalistic and determined to reunite their country under their own rule. That both understood this quality in the other augmented the sense of urgency... [Rhee] understood fully that this goal could be achieved only through the use of force, a method that he was perfectly willing to employ. Yet it was Kim’s North, not Rhee’s South, that launched the attack that set the peninsula aflame in a three-year orgy of violence.” See Stueck, *Rethinking The Korean War: A New Diplomatic and Strategic History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002): 69-70.

⁶⁹ Anton Kaes, *Shell Shock Cinema: Weimar Culture and the Wounds of War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), 51-52.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 48.

and change, the female figure is used to accommodate and resignify the aftermath of the Korean War, through scenarios of broken families, hidden secrets, and political victimization. Whereas warmongering in Korean cinema often evokes the masculinity of military violence, the common trope of women as the civilian victims of war makes them well suited to the task of representing postwar grief and Korea's legacy of oppression.⁷¹

But before analyzing how films restage historical trauma, I first examine how and why the problem of national division haunts the Korean peninsula and Korean individual consciousness, to make evident the urgent need for a true and lasting peace.

Nation and Imagination: The Idea of Korea

South Korean cinema bears the troubled history of dual nationalist formation under the two paradigms of modernity proffered by the West: capitalism and socialism. Rather than give an authoritative account of Korean modern history as a series of facts, I prefer to communicate the sensation of haunting that accompanies modern Korean history as an unresolved development in personal and political life. Importantly the use of hauntings and specters to represent national division is a representational strategy of displacement and resignification used by filmmakers to circumvent South Korean cinema's history of government censorship. South Korean cinema has experienced government enforced film censorship for ninety years.⁷² From 1962 to 1996, the Motion Picture Law restricted and censored film content (imports and domestic films) that

⁷¹ Here, it is worth noting that the international hit *Oldboy* (Park Chan-wook, 2003), 2004 Cannes Film Festival Palm d'Or nominee, also organizes its plot around the division and reunion of twosomes, that of the father-daughter and the brother-sister. However, by accentuating male homosociality, Park renders a brutal world of militaristic gangsters and female sex objects. Despite their similar plotting, their dissimilar gendering has important consequences. Feminist film theory has been long suspicious of male authorship as a projection of sexist insecurities onto female forms, suggesting masculinist filmmaking's characterization of women is driven by phallogocentric reasons, and that men's cinematization of femininity inevitably proves hostile, as in *Oldboy*. In contrast, *Whispering Corridors* and *A Tale of Two Sisters* remove the question of heterosexual normativity altogether. Instead, the cinematization of female spirits showcase restlessness against the conventional order to differentiate this grouping from other cinema that attach women's class mobility to heterosexual romance. Furthermore, these films exploit homosocial issues and environments, visibly engaging in female adolescence—the girls' school, female friendships, lesbian love, mother-daughter relationships, diaries, menstruation, and domesticity. While these films are clichéd at times, the point here is that these films nonetheless choose to take seriously women's specific struggles under modernity, reinforcing the idea of women's complex subjectivity. See B. Ruby Rich, "In the Name of Feminist Film Criticism" in *Issues in Feminist Film Criticism*, ed. Patricia Erens (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990) 268–287. See also Laura Mulvey's oft-cited article "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures* (London: Macmillan, 1989), 14–26.

⁷² During the Japanese occupation (1910-1945), imports and domestic films were subject to ideological scrutiny, with films banned in Japan also banned in Korea, like Sergei Eisenstein's 1925 *Battleship Potemkin*. After World War II, the American military government that ruled South Korea produced a system of film censorship that was bequeathed to the Syngman Rhee government (1948-1960). For approximately two years, censorship was lifted when the "April Revolution," a popular uprising led by students and labor, forced Rhee's resignation. This period produced a number of politically astute films such as the critically acclaimed *Stray Bullet* (also known as *Obaltan*, Yu Hyun-mok, 1960). Through a military coup, the conservative, authoritarian and state-corporatist Democratic Republic Party (DPR) controlled South Korea from 1963 to 1980 under the leadership of two military dictators (Park Chung-hee and Chun Doo-hwan). Park instituted the Motion Picture Law which broadly restricted and censored filmmaking from 1962 to 1996.

censorship review boards regarded as pornographic (genitals and pubic hair), violent, gay-friendly or pro-North Korean.⁷³

As such, it may indeed be invisible to those viewers who are less familiar with modern Korean history. Hence, I discuss the impact of the division of one Korea into two on questions of identity, consciousness and freedom of speech. My analysis defines North Korea's hold on the South Korean imagination in the current context of declining tradition and growing Westernization. We can trace the spectral presence of North Korea to three different discourses used to memorialize the idea of Korea itself: (1) descendants of Tangun, (2) Hermit Kingdom and (3) victims of the Cold War. These official discourses endeavor to inscribe a coherent ethnic nationalism—a state of racial cohesion aligned with national identity and shared cultural consciousness—to produce emotional responses of regret, injustice, resentment and trauma over the unnatural circumstances that have turned an ethnically same people into sworn enemies. The historical condition of coloniality has warranted such nativist construction—even today, some Chinese and Japanese people claim Koreans are not a separate ethnic race, but a continuing version of the Chinese or the Japanese—a stance that the Japanese used to justify Korea's colonization. In fact, a fair depiction of the diverse peoples who reside in North and South Korea would emphasize their heterogeneous interests and responses to social conditions. In discursive formation, however, these peoples have been gathered under the imagined identity of a single collective as a mode of regional resistance against warring invaders seeking to colonize the peninsula.

In the Image of Tangun

Writing on the Korean War, Ramsay Liem expresses a common understanding of why the division of Korea is especially tragic:

It left a people with 4,000 years of shared history permanently divided into north and south with nearly 10 million people separated from family and relatives and the entire peninsula engulfed in the most virulent of cold war animosities.⁷⁴

The concept of Koreans as a people sharing four thousand years of history is rooted in the myth of Tangun, which, importantly, also describes Koreans as sharing a common bloodline. The first reference to Tangun appears in *Samguk Yusa, Memorabilia of the Three Kingdoms* as a few paragraphs written by the monk Iryon (1206-1289) during the Mongol invasions. In this creation myth, Tangun Wanggeom, the grandson of heaven born to a bear-turned-woman, establishes the first Korean kingdom known as Kochoson around Manchuria and the Korean peninsula in 2333 B.C.⁷⁵ Significantly, despite their different governance of political and economic life, both North Korea and South Korea deploy Tangun as the timeline for dating Korean history.

Since the end of Japanese occupation, nationalist scholars on both sides of the divide have appropriated the Tangun myth to guard against further colonization. The

⁷³ Jonathon Green and Nicholas J. Karolides, *Encyclopedia of Censorship* (New York: Facts on File, 2005), 537.

⁷⁴ Ramsay Liem, "History, Trauma, and Identity: The Legacy of the Korean War for Korean Americans," *Amerasia Journal* 29, no. 3 (2003-2004): 114.

⁷⁵ For the passage regarding Tangun from *Samguk Yusa*, see Peter H. Lee, ed., *Sourcebook of Korean Civilization Vol. 1* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 6-7.

figure of a pure and individuated “Korea” defends against the threat of imperial discourses that might charge Koreans with ethnic impurity as a means for validating colonization under a pan-racial banner.⁷⁶ To construct “Tangun” as a factual figure, scholars trace an unbroken, coherent racial identity that differentiates Koreans from the Chinese and the Japanese.⁷⁷ Furthermore, by locating Korean authenticity in the ancestral myth of Tangun, scholars and governmental bodies wishfully cover over modern Korea’s tale of national failure by imposing a grandiose past onto a fragile present. As Hyung Il Pai notes, “By focusing on mythological racial origins, nationalist histories highlighted ancient Korea as a golden age of ‘gods and heroes’ when Korea’s political status and cultural achievements rivaled those of China and Japan (2).”

Moreover, by instituting Tangun as the nation’s progenitor, all Koreans—North and South—are understood to descend from his being. Consequently, this romantic fiction perpetuates the belief that Koreans have been ‘one people’ for eternity. Even though the notion of Korean racial purity seems insignificant in Korean scholarship produced prior to liberation, both Koreas have naturalized this rhetoric so that in the present, “Koreans believe that they have existed as one homogenous race, *tan’il minjok*, since prehistoric times.”⁷⁸ This belief presumes the two Koreas *should* be one, fostering emotional structures of guilt, longing and regret that Korea’s rightful unity has been broken. This divided state invites one Korea to claim greater authenticity in relation to the other, producing a binary opposition that provokes belligerent patterns of self-righteousness and othering. In place of such patterns, it seems that through mutual recognition of the two Koreas’ legitimacy as mutant, heterogeneous post-Cold War creations might lay the foundations for an alternative understanding of the Koreas as cosmopolitan subjects of the here and now.

Hermit Kingdom: the foothold to Asia

Due to its location between China and Japan, Korea has been a coveted site for Eastern expansionism and thus the target of foreign invasions throughout its history. In premodern times, the Mongols invaded in the 13th century, the Japanese in the 16th

⁷⁶ The Japanese empire used the rhetoric of Asian racial unity to justify their control over parts of modern-day China, Korea, Taiwan, Vietnam, Thailand, Burma, Malaysia, Indonesia, Philippines, and other regions. See Guy Faure and Laurent Schwab, *Japan-Vietnam: A Relation Under Influences* (Singapore: National University of Singapore Press, 2008), 15-16; Christopher S. Goto-Jones, *Modern Japan: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 83; Hui-yu Caroline Ts’ai, *Taiwan in Japan’s Empire Building: An Institutional Approach to Colonial Engineering* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 170-173; and Sven Saaler, “Pan-Asianism in Modern Japanese History: Overcoming the Nation, Creating a Region, Forging an Empire” in *Pan-Asianism in Modern Japanese History: Colonialism, Regionalism and Borders*, ed. Sven Saaler and J. Victor Koschmann (New York: Routledge, 2007), 1-18.

⁷⁷ As Hyung Il Pai explains, “The mythical origins of Korea were given credibility by archeologists who described clay fragments as female goddess figurines and bear totems in order to support a pre-Tan’gun Neolithic matriarchal society. When Bronze Age Korea became equated with Tan’gun’s state of Kochoson, Manchurian stone-cists, tombs, dolmens, and slim bronze daggers were seen as indicators of emerging class stratification and labor specialization under a hereditary kingship beginning with Tan’gun.” See Pai, *Constructing “Korean” Origins: A Critical Review of Archaeology, Historiography, and Racial Myth in Korean State-Formation Theories* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000), 88.

⁷⁸ Pai, 57. For analysis on the postwar racial construction of Koreans via the Tangun mythology, see Pai, 57-96.

century and the Manchu in the 17th century. In the 19th century, competing imperial powers—the United States, Japan, China, Great Britain and Russia—sought Korean ports and land to establish a foothold in the Pacific region. During this turmoil, the Chosun dynasty (1392-1910) legislated isolationism, causing English-language commentators to brand Korea a “Hermit Kingdom.” As the century closed, Korea signed treaties that gave foreign nations unchallenged access to its ports, markets, resources and peoples. Soon after, Japan defeated China and Russia for right to takeover Korea, enabling Japan’s military dictatorship over Korea for half a century.⁷⁹ With the end of World War II, Korea was liberated on the condition of national division to serve the Cold War interests of the Soviet Union and the United States.

Korea’s past status as a “Hermit Kingdom” has been reincarnated in a new era of North Korean isolationism marked by stridently anti-foreign and anti-colonial policies. After national division, South Korea adopted capitalism, while North Korea adopted socialism. Today, despite the fall of the U.S.S. R., amidst free trade agreements and the international division of labor, the North has outlawed global commerce as colonial, in favor of a policy of self-reliant governance. Such policies have led English-language authors to brand North Korea as the “hermit kingdom”⁸⁰ and sensationalize the North as a prehistoric oddity on a postmodern planet.

Yet part of the freakish appeal of North Korea is its possession by the past, much like the gothic imagination’s turn to the haunted house—an isolated and insular universe that conjures repressed memories and pre-industrial spirits. In the Korean example, the “Hermit Kingdom” speaks to the palimpsest of warmongering against foreign powers. The violent end of the Chosun Hermit Kingdom still figures as traumatic shock that exists outside of linear temporality and finds expression through belated and deferred resurfacing.⁸¹ Indeed, it is precisely in the economic climate of the late 1990s and early 2000s when the IMF’s (International Monetary Fund) powerful disciplinary forces restructured the Korean economy through transnational takeovers that the North Korean Hermit Kingdom—a figure of resistance against foreign control—may appeal to South Koreans. As the symbol of anti-capitalism, the North Korean Hermit Kingdom functions as an unreality free from the pressures of globalization and capitalism. In this fantastical

⁷⁹ For an early twentieth century American perspective on Korea as a site of international contestation and treaties, see Tyler Dennett, “Early American Policy in Korea, 1883-7,” *Political Science Quarterly* 38.1 (March 1923), 82-103 and American Society of International Law, “The International Status of Korea,” *The American Journal of International Law* 1.2 (April 1907), 444-449. For analysis on Japanese colonization of Korea, see Young-Iob Chung, *Korea Under Siege, 1876-1945: Capital Formation and Economic Transformation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), and Mark Driscoll, “Stubborn Farmers and Grotesqued Korea” in *Absolute Erotic, Absolute Grotesque: The Living, Dead, and Undead in Japan’s Imperialism, 1895-1945* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 101-118.

⁸⁰ For examples, see Eui-Gak Hwang, *The Search for a Unified Korea: Political and Economic Implications* (New York: Springer, 2010); and Eddie Burdick, *Three Days in the Hermit Kingdom: An American Visits North Korea*, (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2010). Helga Turku groups North Korea with Albania and Burma as paradigmatic cases of isolationism in today’s capitalist world-system of interdependence. See Helga Turku, *Isolationist States in an Interdependent World* (Surrey, England and Burlington VT: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2009).

⁸¹ Cathy Caruth notes, “The impact of the traumatic event lies precisely in its belatedness, in its refusal to be simply located, in its insistent appearance outside the boundaries of any single place or time.” See Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 8-9.

formulation, the Hermit Kingdom is Korea's haunted house, an isolated and sometimes terrifying space where the prohibited romance and censored longing between North and South fuse with pent-up wrath against foreign interlopers. The South Korean government/state? has come into increasing contradiction with the populace requiring protection from capitalist globalization and the state's need to expand itself in the capitalist mode. Under this contradiction, North Korea paradoxically signifies nationalist resistance against transnational economic colonization, and the return of repressed past trauma obstructing South Korea's differentiated future.

General Order No. 1 and the Forlorn Division of Korea

*The Korean people are of one race, with one language and one homogenous culture. It was clear that division, though temporary, would violate this fundamental unity.*⁸²

*What must we call each other if we meet there
 Brother sister neighbor lover go unsaid what we are
 ...For long, forlorn, have I desired*⁸³

The 19th century power play for the Chosun dynasty resulted in Japan's colonization of Korea in the early twentieth century (1910-1945), which in turn produced another ghastly result: the unjust division of the Korean people. If the twentieth continues to inscribe Korea as an object, rather than a subject, of history, this real or imagined historiography is tinged with profound regret. After regaining its independence at the end of WWII, Korea became entangled in the Cold War's border control. In August of 1945, days after the U.S. dropped the second atomic bomb on Nagasaki, the U.S. military's State-War-Navy-Coordinating Committee (SWNCC) split East Asia into "Northern" and "Southern" halves along the thirty-eighth parallel to disarm Japanese forces in a manner that would appease the Soviet Union and the U.S: an ephemeral border for two footholds.⁸⁴ Bruce Cumings writes, "It is Americans who bear the lion's share of the responsibility for the thirty-eight parallel."⁸⁵ The order for the division, General Order No. 1, states:

The senior Japanese commanders and all ground, sea, air and auxiliary forces within Manchuria, Korea, north of 38 degrees north latitude, and Karafuto shall surrender to the Commander-in-Chief of Soviet forces in Far East. The Imperial General Headquarters, its senior commanders, and all...forces in the main islands of Japan, minor islands adjacent thereto, Korea south of 38 degrees north latitude,

⁸² Cho's statement well exemplifies the common belief taught to persons of Korean descent that national division is an injurious violation of a "fundamental unity." Soo-Sung Cho, *Korea in World Politics: an evaluation of American responsibility, 1940-1950* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1967), 92.

⁸³ Please note I have cut together evocative lines from Myung Mi Kim's masterful poetry collection *Under Flag*. Myung Mi Kim, *Under Flag* (Berkeley: Kelsey Street Press, 1991), 19 and 45.

⁸⁴ See Cumings, "The Passions, 1945-1948" in *Korea's Place in the Sun: A Modern History* (New York: Norton, 1997), 185-236.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 186.

and Philippines shall surrender to the Commander-in-Chief, U.S. Army Forces of the Pacific.⁸⁶

The order divvied up the fallen Japanese empire, but it did not split Japan like Germany. Rather, without the input of Koreans, U.S. President Harry S. Truman approved of Korea's partition in light of the region's geopolitics.⁸⁷ Hence, as Chae-Jin Lee notes, "As a result of the de facto division of the Korean peninsula into two zones of foreign military occupation, the prospects for Korean unification and independence became inevitably conjoined with the subsequent unfolding of U.S.-Soviet relations."⁸⁸

During the period of Japanese colonialism, Korean nationalists were politically split, but neither Marxists nor moderates had anticipated the nation's division. In the Southern region, independence leader Lyuh Woon-Hyung had formed the Korean People's Republic with plans for immediate reunification.⁸⁹ However, General Order No. 1 stipulated the American Military government as the only legitimate government south of the 38th parallel, thereby discrediting Korean leadership.⁹⁰ During its three-year occupation, the American Military government re-enacted Japanese repressive tactics and "intervened on behalf of" Korea's tiniest minority of landowners, rather than carrying out democratizing alternatives for Korea's peasant majority.⁹¹ Constrained by dueling hegemonies and an unforeseen division, the newly 'decolonized' Koreans disagreed on how to pursue national liberation. As superpowers quarreled over Korea's future,⁹² conflict amongst Korean rivals escalated to civil warfare with the arrival of tanks, planes and other militia funded by foreign powers.⁹³

Like all wars, the Korean War (1950-1953) brought immeasurable destruction and heartache. Assessing the war's damage, Grace Yoo reflects, "four million lives were lost; over nine million people were displaced; 11 million families were separated; 300,000 women were widowed; and many children were orphaned."⁹⁴ For Yoo, the war's human toll is especially felt in the issue of family separation: "Family separation and

⁸⁶ Marc. S. Gallicchio, *The Cold War Begins in Asia: American East Asian Policy and The Fall of The Japanese Empire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 75-76.

⁸⁷ Matray notes that Washington supported the 38th parallel from afar: "Truman and his advisors believed that if Stalin controlled the Korean peninsula, the Soviet Union could undermine Chiang's position in China and place the security of Japan in jeopardy." See Matray, 165.

⁸⁸ Chae-Jin Lee, *A Troubled Peace: U.S. Policy and the Two Koreas*. (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), 20.

⁸⁹ See Chae-Jin Lee, *A Troubled Peace*, 21 and Cumings, 191.

⁹⁰ General John R. Hodge—commanding general of the U.S. Forces in Korea—discredited competing Korean leadership, especially left-leaning People's Committees. See Chae-Jin Lee, *A Troubled Peace*, 21 and Cumings, 190-191.

⁹¹ Cumings, 194.

⁹² The U.S. backed out of a 1945 joint communiqué in Moscow to create a 5-year trusteeship over Korea amongst the U.S., the U.S.S.R., Britain and China. Instead, the U.S. proposed holding free elections under U.N. observation, to establish "a national provisional legislature in accordance with the two-to-one ratio populations in South and North Korea" which the U.S.S.R. rejected. See Lee, *A Troubled Peace*, 23.

⁹³ Bruce Cumings notes both Koreas were strategizing to wage war: "The 1950 logic for both sides was to see who would be stupid enough to move first, with Kim itching to invade and hoping for a clear southern provocation, and hotheads in the South hoping to provoke an 'unprovoked' assault, in order to get American help—for that was the only way the South could hope to win." See Cumings, 251.

⁹⁴ Grace Yoo, "A Not So Forgotten War," *Peace Review* 16.2 (June 2004): 169.

displacement was the ultimate tragedy of the Korean War. Eleven million families were unable to communicate, unaware whether loved ones had lived through the war. The divisive politics of the Korean peninsula meant that families were now divided.”⁹⁵

At the end of the Korean War, the factions signed an armistice (Korean Armistice Agreement), though they never made true peace. The division is still in place and the two Koreas technically remain at war. North Korea formed the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) under Kim Il Sung. Kim developed Pyongyang’s form of communism known as *juche*, an economic, political and militaristic system that promotes self-reliance and opposes foreign dependence. The South formed the Republic of Korea (ROK). Under various military dictators,⁹⁶ South Korea pursued rapid economic development where capitalism was divorced from democracy. This changed when Kim Young-sam became South Korea’s first civilian president in 1993.

Beyond Korea, 1945 reconfigured borders in Europe, South Asia and the Middle East. The partitions that made the Koreas, Israel, Palestine, India and Pakistan are at once domestic and foreign. While each is unique, these groupings share the struggle to forget the pre-divided past and establish a discrete future. For these countries in the periphery, postwar ‘development’ has meant westernization to achieve “history as progress”: modeling new nations after socialism or capitalism to transform poor traditional societies into powerful political economies. Sharing conditions of division, foreign domination and dispossession of “homeland” and “countrymen,” these spaces have become riddled with discontent in the 21st century. The emergence of two Koreas at the end of WWII and the advent of the Cold War exhibits three lessons: (1) the national is simultaneously transnational; (2) warfare—not liberal enlightenment—engineered South Korea’s so-called miraculous modernity; and (3) North Korea’s contempt for the U.S. stems from a sense of historical violation from which there has been no relief.

National division structures Korea’s historical unconscious; this collective and relatively recent event is “the memory of a traumatic experience”⁹⁷ that time has not healed. In Koreans’ understanding of national division as the cleavage of kinship, the geopolitical and the personal combine: individuals tend to imagine collective trauma as a personal trauma because of the dominant founding discourses. In *Korea and Its Futures: Unification and the Unfinished War*, Roy Richard Grinker observes, “Koreans often construe division not only as the separation of the nation but also as the separation of families, and as a result unification is construed as the reunion of separated family members. The nation is the family writ large.”⁹⁸ With millions of families divided, South Korea’s growth has neither alleviated the suffering, nor the longing, to reunite with one’s lost parent, sibling, friend or lover. These separations haunt the ongoing and inescapable experience of national division in everyday life and in Korean cinema. While constantly cited as a source of danger, but never materially real, North Korea has become a specter

⁹⁵ Ibid., 177.

⁹⁶ Three military officers-turned-presidents are Major General Park Chung-hee (1963-1979), Lieutenant General Chun Doo Hwan (1980-1988) and General Roh Tae-woo (1988-1993).

⁹⁷ Kaes, 54.

⁹⁸ Roy Richard Grinker, *Korea and Its Futures: Unification and the Unfinished War* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1998), 102.

that crosses paranoia with nostalgia, history with new risk and yokes the impulse to ‘get close’ with the prohibitions to ‘stay back.’

Resignifying War as Gendered Gothic Horror

Given the constant yet taboo presence of North Korea in the South Korean imagination, it is not surprising that some of the most spectacular blockbusters identified with New Korean Cinema—*Shiri*, *JSA/Joint Security Area* (Park Chan-wook, 2000), *Taegukgi* (Kang, Je-gyu, 2004) and *The Front Line* (Jang Hun, 2011)—thematize national division. Whereas these films’ warm critical reception implies national division might constitute a considerable force in Korean film history, the case is not so. From 1962 to 1996, South Korea’s “Motion Picture Law” barred thoughtful depiction of North Koreans by censoring films deemed sympathetic to Pyongyang and punishing filmmakers with jail or career annihilation. Seung Hyun Park notes, “Censorship has been the greatest barrier to the development of Korean cinema ... Censorship was part of the government’s efforts to prevent antigovernment action by dissidents, otherwise known as communists or people ‘affiliated with North Korea.’”⁹⁹ Similarly, Kyung Hyun Kim acknowledges the dearth of depictions of the Korean War in 1980s cinema due to “vigilant censorship” but points out in the 1990s, a new proliferation of realistic films set during the Korean War has shifted the previous discourse: the paradigm of anticommunism encouraged by censorship boards—North Korea’s villain to South Korea’s victor—has “long since become unfashionable.”¹⁰⁰ Whereas Kim discusses how the masculine in war films express the trauma of national division, this chapter argues that the feminine has surreptitiously also represented the Korean War via the alternative language of horror.

While President Kim Dae Jung’s 1998 “Sunshine Policy” has lifted the ban against the depiction of communist Northerners, the longstanding censorship against North-South intimacy has produced consequences for film production and reception. Consequently, filmmakers have found ways to represent national division without directly representing North Korea through processes of displacement and resignification. Such strategies have strong historical precedents in the history of the cinema and censorship. For example, in her book *The World According to Hollywood*, Ruth Vasey argues that early Hollywood of the 1920s dealt with the problem of impending censorship by adopting textual ambiguity. The advent of sound produced greater realism that made sex, crime and the characterization of foreigners more transparent to consumers who might find such depiction objectionable on moral or political grounds. In response, Vasey writes, “Levels of ambiguity were deliberately introduced into motion pictures to allow multiple interpretations by multiple audiences. Treatments of ‘adult’ themes were characterized by innuendo and ellipsis, so that movies could not be accused of educating innocent viewers in methods of sexual or criminal behavior.”¹⁰¹ Elsewhere, as “censorship action encouraged ambiguous treatment” (113) in early Hollywood, the threat of censorship spurred filmmakers of other film cultures to find ways to represent

⁹⁹ Seung Hyun Park, “Film Censorship and Political Legitimation in South Korea, 1987-1992,” *Cinema Journal* 42.1 (Fall 2002): 120.

¹⁰⁰ Kyung Hyun Kim, *Remasculinization*, 78-79.

¹⁰¹ Ruth Vasey, *The World According to Hollywood: 1918-1939* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1997), 101.

censorable material that would resonate with audiences while evading close scrutiny by the state.

German Expressionist Cinema provides another case in point. In *Shell Shock Cinema*, Kaes argues that the repercussions of World War I demanded new strategies for filmmaking that would accommodate the war's traumatic aftermath, its "invisible though lasting psychological wounds."¹⁰² Kaes remarks, "A realism that implied a familiarity with and affirmation of one's surroundings could not capture the eerie and alienating desolation of the battlefield...The war demanded a new aesthetics."¹⁰³ Hence, Weimar Germany's films of the 1920s—e.g., *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (Robert Wiene, 1920) and *Nosferatu, a Symphony of Horror* (Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau, 1922)—"found a way to restage the shock of war and defeat without ever showing military combat. They were post-traumatic films, reenacting the trauma in their very narratives and images."¹⁰⁴ By employing strategies of resignification and displacement that shifted the war's trauma onto the plane of the fantastic, Weimar filmmakers invented a new modernist film language of horror and science fiction that could relay the "unspoken and concealed, implied and latent, repressed and disavowed."¹⁰⁵

As in the case of German Expressionist Cinema—where "the painful reality of defeat remained taboo for everyone except left-wing intellectuals and pacifists" in Kaes' words—the reality of the Korean War has also remained taboo until very recently.¹⁰⁶ For most of South Korea's history, the NSA's "anti-communism" was *the* law of the land. Because military dictatorships suppressed the painful reality of national division, films could not approach the subjects of war, communism, capitalism and the oppressive interplay of governments directly. Even though film censorship has eased in terms of direct representation of North Korea since the 1990s, the NSA is still in place. A direct diatribe against America for imperialist intervention or against South Korean governments for collusion would appear discursively too similar to a communist, North Korean rhetorical position—the Koreans are still at war. Thus the continuing trauma of war demands a departure from conventional realism if it is to be susceptible to cinematic representation. Weimar's articulation of the war experience through liminal horror resonates with the emotional structures of fear, loss and suffering found in South Korean horror and South Korea's traumatic condition of unresolved war against the North. As Robert Wilson writes, "Alien 'hauntology' and threatening otherness might have a peculiar pungency and attraction in a divided country like South Korea...haunted by a Marxist alter-reality and Confucian simulacrum to the North."¹⁰⁷ With constant footage on South Korean media showing North Korean nuclear warheads, South Korea has good reason to dread its deadly kin. Horror films tap into this anxiety by resignifying the political as the personal and by displacing historical fear onto uncanny horror and shock. Hence, horror films infuse its dreamscapes with psychic terrors linked to late modernity and Korea's strange division. Horror films find a way to re-present the trauma of modern

¹⁰² Kaes, *Shell Shock Cinema*, 3.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 81.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹⁰⁷ Robert Wilson, "Globalization, spectral aesthetics and the global soul: Tracking some 'uncanny' paths to trans-Pacific globalization," *Comparative American Studies: An International Journal* 1.1 (2003): 38.

Korea's history by taking on the form of the female gothic, a subgenre of both Horror and the Woman's Film that problematizes representation through the technologies of gender.

In the Korean language women are conflated with the idea of home, tradition and the primordial. In Korean, the denotation for "woman" is *Yuhja* (여자), taken from the Chinese characters for "home" plus "person" (女子). Similarly, as Mary Ann Doane has argued, the narrative formulation for gothic representation in Hollywood film is "the image of woman-plus-habitation."¹⁰⁸ *Whispering Corridors* and *A Tale of Two Sisters* uses this convergence via the private sphere of the gothic school and gothic house, respectively. These settings evoke a closed, isolated world, not unlike Korea's historic seclusion as a "hermetic kingdom." Thus, while these characters occupy modern South Korea, the films' settings' register an unchanging, pre-rational, 'native' space off-limits to the general population. Absent are urban landscapes and the pressures of modern life so common to New Korean cinema.

In the woman's gothic cinema, the insistence on the feminine gaze casts the feminine as the pathfinder of the haunted domain. Hence, films restage the known through the unknown by way of the feminine as its discursive system. In this inquiry, it is vital to understand how the female figure is used to connote premodernity and late modernity. In her analysis of 1960s and 1970s horror Kim So-Young has argued that that because Japanese colonization and U.S. modernization had enabled women's emergent mobility, women came to connote anxiety about modernity through films' reconfiguration of the ghost into the femme fatale "more threatening and complex than a purely traditional one."¹⁰⁹ In contrast, the horror I examine expresses anxiety about modernization through the figure of the unhinged adult authority and raises questions about identity, memory and human connection through the intimacy of girlhood. By placating ghosts with tearful endings that combine confessions of love and requests to be left alone, films such as *Whispering Corridors* and *A Tale of Two Sisters* give audiences a sense of safety that delivers them from geopolitical fear. Thus, such films produce a specter of national division that expresses the wish for reunification, while ultimately reassuring audiences that separation and a continued movement away from the terrorizing North, is far more comforting.

Whispering Corridors

South Korea's third-highest grossing domestic film in 1998,¹¹⁰ *Whispering Corridors*' success suggests that the horror film, with a particular emphasis on youth and femininity, has the power to deliver a temporary cathartic release from South Korea's postcolonial trauma. The film's financial success helped proliferate a wave of horror films featuring young women and spawned four sequels known as the *Yeogo goedam* series (i.e. "female high school ghost story"): *Memento Mori* (Kim Tae-yong, Min Kyu-dong, 1999), *Wishing Stairs* (Yun Jae-yeon, 2003), *Voice* (Choe Ik-hwan, 2005) and *A*

¹⁰⁸ Mary Ann Doane bases this formula on her citation of Norman Holland and Leona Sherman. See Doane, *The Desire to Desire: The Woman's Film of the 1940s* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987), 124.

¹⁰⁹ So-young Kim and Chris Berry, "'Suri Suri Masuri': The Magic of The Korean Horror," *Postcolonial Studies* 3.1 (2000): 57.

¹¹⁰ *Korean Cinema Annuals* (Seoul: KOFIC, 1998), 99.

Blood Pledge (Jong-yong Lee, 2009). While most of these films feature a pattern of living-woman-and-dead-woman couples that similarly emplot *Whispering Corridors*'s specter of national division, each film is self-contained, featuring unrelated storylines and characters. In *Memento Mori*, the ghost of Hyo-Shin, a student rejected by her lesbian lover and made pregnant by a pitiable teacher, seeks to expose the sexual politics of her death. In *Wishing Stairs*, best friends with Sapphic undertones vie for a scholarship to a Russian ballet school, leading one friend to make a selfish wish that results in the other's death and subsequent drive for revenge. In *Voice*, a talented singer practicing after school ends up a ghost who can't leave the school premises, thus requiring her best friend to solve the mystery of her murder. In *A Blood Pledge*, a friend returns from the dead to make sure her four living friends keep their promise to remain together forever.

While *Whispering Corridors*' successors have their own merit, none of them, as of yet, display the authoritarianism and abuse of power that incited educational groups to ban *Whispering Corridors*.¹¹¹ *Variety* accurately reviewed the film as "a thoughtful horror item that succeeds more as a commentary on regimented life than as a stylish bit of bloodletting," accounting for the film's breakout popularity to its "harsh critique of Korea's militaristic education system."¹¹² Furthermore, *Whispering Corridors* appears to have catalyzed the Korean film industry's foray into horror. Kyu Hyun Kim writes, "The contemporary Korean horror cinema as a steadily produced genre seems to originate with the surprising financial success of *Whispering Corridors*."¹¹³ Jinhee Choi argues that the *Yeogo goedam* series started by *Whispering Corridors* "appeal to adolescents and portray their social circumstances not only bring to the fore the consequences of the Korean education system but also seemingly authorize a culture of adolescent sensibility."¹¹⁴ For these reasons, *Whispering Corridors* helps adumbrate late modernity's systems of power and Korean horror's industrial rise. However, little attention has been paid to how these texts operate as post Cold-War national and transnational allegories. Such analysis offers a new way of understanding the rise of Korean horror cinema.

Set in an all-girls' high school, *Whispering Corridors* chronicles a string of mysterious deaths that haunts Jookran High School For Girls. On the first day of their senior year, the bright Ji-oh, the shy Jae-yi and the spooky Jung-sook discover a disliked female teacher hanging from the school's overpass (Figure 1). The teacher's body is displayed for all to witness, looking as if she had been executed during wartime. Disturbed by the sight, Ji-oh seeks catharsis by painting a portrait of the dead woman and bonding with Jae-yi over their shared trauma and interest in art. Meanwhile, the school administrators mandate silence to preclude any investigation of wrongdoing. Amongst the students, however, word circulates that Jin-ju, a girl who died years before on school grounds, has returned to exact vengeance by possessing current students and forcing them to do her bidding. Jin-ju's former close friend, Huh Eun-young, who now teaches at the

¹¹¹ John Scott Marchant, "Schoolyard horror in 'Whispering Corridors,'" *The Korea Herald*, November 26, 2004.

¹¹² Ken Eisner, "Whispering Corridors (Yeogo Goedan)" *Variety*, December 21, 1998 - January 3, 1999, 78.

¹¹³ Kyu Hyun Kim, "Horror as Criticism in Tell Me Something and Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance," in *New Korean Cinema*, ed. Julian Stringer and Chi-Yun Shin (New York: NY University Press, 2005), 116.

¹¹⁴ Jinhee Choi, *The South Korean Film Renaissance: Local Hitmakers, Global Provocateurs* (Middletown CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2010), 124.

school, narrates through flashbacks. She tells the story of how Mrs. Park, the teacher who was found dead, blackmailed Ms. Huh's younger self by threatening to expel Jin-ju if they continued their friendship.¹¹⁵ As the film develops, Ji-oh's painting of Mrs. Park is found by the authorities, marking Ji-oh as an outlaw against their injunction of silence. Subsequently, Ji-oh is beaten by the cruel Mr. Oh, a compulsive supporter of corporal punishment and competitive individualism. Hence, when Mr. Oh is subsequently shown being tortured and killed by the ghost-student, the ghost appears to have exacted a noble vengeance against the teacher's many wrongdoings. Eventually, armed with information from Mrs. Park's planner, Ms. Huh discovers a pattern to the killings that leads to a face-to-face confrontation with the ghost.



Figure 1.1: An image evoking war: to witness the execution of Mrs. Park

The film's opening scene establishes several important considerations: 1) a ghost is attending the school by passing herself off as a living, corporeal student; 2) only a woman can investigate the mystery of the ghost and 3) the student ghost is killing teachers. The establishing shots show a rainy, thunderous night on a schoolyard where a girl's shoeless feet jump into a muddy puddle, with cutaways to the school's edifice. Working late, the middle-aged teacher Mrs. Park looks at yearbook pictures. On the phone with her younger colleague, Ms. Huh, Mrs. Park says, "She's definitely dead... but she's here. She's been here all along." As the dial clicks, the frame shows Mrs. Park's back, privileging the ghost's gaze through an unclaimed POV shot, one that implies a character's perspective without a reverse shot that reveals the looker's identity. The eerie dial tone suggests Mrs. Park's connection to the human world has been severed. As Mrs. Park turns around, an abrupt close-up blurs her face, but brings into relief a reflection in her eyeglasses, which show a girl in uniform to introduce the figure of the uncanny student. Without warning, the next sequence shows Mrs. Park strangling herself with her

¹¹⁵ Kaes calls the flashback the "ideal narrative trope for conveying the recovery and enactment of traumatic memory." Kaes, 53.

own hands. The phone drops, the yearbooks tumble and Mrs. Park's feet soon dangle above the ground. The noose around her neck and the sway of her body midair confirms her death. Although a man on security duty checks classrooms with his flashlight, he misses the incident, oblivious to the blood dripping from the ceiling. Here, the film suggests that patriarchal surveillance is ineffective in this all-girl domain.

Accordingly, as in other gothic horror, the woman is situated as the agent of the gaze.¹¹⁶ But to uncover the identity of the ghost, the agent of the gaze must also share the ghost's temporal promiscuity, its nonlinear sequencing. The ghost, as Anne Whitehead has remarked, is "the disjunction of temporality, the surfacing of the past in the present."¹¹⁷ Bliss Cua Lim further points out the return of the ghost subverts temporality at large: "The ghostly return of traumatic events precisely troubles the boundaries of past, present, and future, and cannot be written back to the complacency of a homogeneous, empty time."¹¹⁸ In *Whispering Corridors*, the flashback becomes the human counterpoint to the ghost's temporal deviance: both reactivate the past as a force that possesses and problematizes the present. As undead consciousness, memory acts as a ghostly haunting.

If ordinary investigative looking cannot "see" the ghost (because it perceives only the present's immediate surface information) a gaze equipped with knowledge of the school's history is necessary in order to identify the student who has returned from the past. Moreover, since Mrs. Park died after learning the truth of the past grievance, the detective must elicit the ghost's compassion if she is to survive the investigation. Only Ms. Eun-young Huh—the nice teacher, former student and the ghost's ex-best friend—fulfills these criteria. As a new teacher alienated from her older colleagues, Ms. Huh bridges the gap between the traditional order and the new generation. The flashbacks that chronicle Ms. Huh's student days show how her teachers manipulated her. Ms. Huh's in-between status helps her identify with and be identified by the audience as both student and teacher. The film thus privileges her location, which represents an interstitial point of identification situated across multiple sites and detachments, not unlike South Korea's semi-peripheral location as a developing nation straddling the world's core and its periphery. Hence, *Whispering Corridors* enlists Ms. Huh to embody an emergent subject—she is a new teacher who was a former student at the school—that is not yet part of the dominant First World or fully of the residual Third World much like South Korea. Ms. Huh occupies the semi-periphery's non-linear historicity—its complex possession by a shameful past that remains as censored taboos in the present, even as it moves along an ambitious trajectory toward a new future. Flashbacks present various versions of her developing identity across time. The figure the film ultimately constructs is saturated with ongoing grief, confusion and longing—a figure whose personal history, marked by division and violence, resonates within South Korea's ongoing haunting by a violent past that refuses to remain buried.

As Ms. Huh's flashbacks help her come to terms with the death of her friend Jin-ju, four students in the diegetic present mimic Jin-ju in some fashion to assume the role

¹¹⁶ Mary Anne Doane points out in gothic horror, "the narrative structure produces an insistence on situating the woman as agent of the gaze, as investigator in charge of the epistemological trajectory of the text, as the one for whom the 'secret beyond the door' is really at stake." Doane, 134.

¹¹⁷ Anne Whitehead, *Trauma Fiction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), 6.

¹¹⁸ Bliss Cua Lim, "Spectral Times: The Ghost Film As Historical Allegory," *Positions* 9.2 (2001): 287.

of the ghostly suspect. Remarkably, the manner in which students are configured as deadly correlates to the young women's shared invocation of shamanism (muism), a popular yet belittled spiritual practice in South Korea.¹¹⁹ Like Jin-ju, Ji-oh is an artist and suffers from rumors that her mother is a shaman. So-young, the school's highest-ranked student, secretly likes séances and smokes cigarettes in the art room where Jin-ju died. The brusque Jung-sook clashes with teachers to fuel rumors that she is possessed. Finally, Jae-yi gives silver bells—used by shamans as spirit-invoking—to Ji-oh, the same present Jin-ju gave to Ms. Huh years ago.

Given the historical context to which the film gives expression, it is noteworthy that instead of consolidating these suspects into a single group, the film tells its story through coupled twosomes. Three pairs of friends duplicate and oppose one other: (1) So-young and Jung-sook, (2) Eun-young (Ms. Huh) and Jin-ju, and (3) Ji-oh and Jae-yi. In all three couples, one girl is deemed smarter, prettier and richer, while the other is considered “backward” due to her shamanic bent. For teachers, this union between the modern and the primitive must be divided. Consequently, their meddling results in breakups and divisions that result in one friend's death. By making each friendship suffer a breakup due to external pressure, the film produces a narrative strategy that gives form to the concept of division that is not unlike the formation of the two modern Koreas. After all, the world's most powerful authorities did meddle in Korea's sovereignty. The idea that division is necessary for the “development” of some students' potential echoes the Cold War argument that partition will bring progress and that South Korea had to break from the North for the sake of modernization.

Specifically, the pattern of inscription is similar: previously intimate friends are divided by exogenous, rather than endogenous, forces, supposedly to benefit the surviving friend. Yet, separation creates a dreadful sense of loss and deep remorse. In the first case, after Jung-sook hangs herself, So-young sobs, “We used to be close, very close. The teachers started comparing us and we drifted apart. She became distant. I never reached out to her, but I never thought it would come to this. It's all my fault.” In the second case, flashbacks dramatize why the young Ms. Huh (Eun-young) broke away from Jin-ju. Ms. Huh recalls, “If I continued to meet you, she [Mrs. Park] threatened to expel you for my sake. I was afraid. I'm so sorry, Jin-ju.” Mrs. Park's godly acousmetric voice meanly insists, “Do as I say, Eun-young. You'll thank me one day. You won't regret it...You have to hang around the right friends. She's no good for you.” In these two scenarios, where So-young and Eun-young respectively express guilt over their friends' deaths, the film evokes the affect of historical guilt that South Koreans have experienced following national division, particularly due to the modernization achieved through reluctant collaboration with the powerful U.S. As in *Whispering Corridors*, such acquiescent collaboration has killed their formerly beloved friend North Korea.

In these romantic friendships, the girls love each other intensely and best. Because boys do not exist in the *Whispering Corridors* universe, heterosexual romance means coupling with the out-of-control Mr. Oh, a relationship the film in no way endorses.

¹¹⁹ For analysis on the role of shamanism in Korean historical-social formation, see Roger L. Janelli, Dawnhee Yim Janelli, “Shamans and Ancestors” in *Ancestor Worship and Korean Society* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1982), 148-176 and Laurel Kendall, *Shamans, Housewives, and Other Restless Spirits: Women in Korean Ritual Life* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1985).

Rather, the film assumes that for teen girls, lesbian-ish intimacy is the norm. Thus, *Whispering Corridors* (and its sequels) do not experience the “heterosexualization of lesbianism” that Tricia Jenkins observes in recent American teen films.¹²⁰ On the contrary, the problem of intimacy here is that the beloved turns out to be dead. The feelings of regret and longing for the dead make these relationships queer; these excessive feelings keep alive an attachment that should not exist, for such attachment can bring back the dead (and, with it, the past). Thus, the friendships in *Whispering Corridors* take on the quality of lesbian sexuality through their shared apparitional transmission. According to Patricia White, the longing to be with a dead woman “produces scary effects that are unmistakably part of the appeal of the [horror] genre to its female audiences.”¹²¹ In this franchise, the intense love shared by teen girls supports the euro-American tradition of representing the lesbian through ghostly figuration.¹²² Moreover, *Whispering Corridors* combines this American tradition with the Korean tradition of using female ghosts and female fantastical creatures to represent modernization.¹²³

Furthermore, *Whispering Corridors*’ reflexive use of the specter in the hermitic all-girls’ school places the film in the iconographic tradition of European and American Gothic horror. Here, the subtext of lesbianism provided by the all-girls’ school—the setting Patricia White gleans as “the female institution most prone to ‘environmental lesbianism’”—also renders the intuitive intimacy of sameness. The film deploys homosociality, with its homosexual undertone, to elicit a different sense of ‘homo’ love: homo-nationalism between two nations rooted in sameness, but irrevocably changed. Accordingly, the film articulates South Korea’s anxiety around division and modernization through the vehicle of paranormal lesbianism. It entangles the terrifying anomaly of female-female relationships with the frightening prospect of reunification with the spectral other Korea.

Yet in this horror film, a figure even more disturbing than the ghost exists. The source of students’ phobia is not the dead per se; rather, they dread their teachers and the educational system itself. The figure of the teacher brings to mind two dreadful traumas in South Korean history: the belligerence of foreign powers that caused the reckless division of the nation and the violence lurking in South Korea’s history of military dictatorships that abused its people behind an affectation of industrial progress and capitalist modernity. Hence, the suffering and repression at the hands of the power structure within the South Korean state gives expression to a broader loathing. As Chris Berry remarks, “*Whispering Corridors* invokes a deep historical disquiet about Korea’s modernity” and “suggests the price that Koreans paid for modern progress.”¹²⁴ The film symbolizes modernity’s negative risk via Mr. Oh (or “Mad Dog”), a figure not unlike the military dictators who ruled Korea. In one scene, the psychopathic Mr. Oh forces his

¹²⁰ See Tricia Jenkins, “Potential Lesbians at Two O’Clock: The Heterosexualization of Lesbianism in the Recent Teen Film,” *The Journal of Popular Culture* 38.3 (2005): 491-504.

¹²¹ Patricia White, *Uninvited: Classical Hollywood Cinema and Lesbian Representability* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1999), xxi.

¹²² See *ibid.* for Patricia White’s analysis of the relationship between lesbianism and classical Hollywood’s ghostly horror.

¹²³ For an analysis on postcoloniality and the ghost film, see the special issue on Global and postcolonial horror in *Postcolonial Studies* 3.1 (2000), which includes Kim and Berry’s article, “Suri Suri Masuri.”

¹²⁴ Kim and Berry, 54.

students to kneel on their desks with their arms up. Pacing the aisles with a stick, Mr. Oh advises students forget friendship and focus on hostility:

You're each other's rival, but frankly speaking, you're each other's enemy.

The worst enemy in war is yourself.

When you can defeat your inner enemy, then you can be a true winner.

For Mr. Oh, progress demands sacrificing emotion, pleasure and the body to privilege the *ego cogito*. In the context of Korea's continuing civil war, the reference to the "war with the self" suggests excising North Korea to enable South Korea's capitalist individuation. The film shows students studying Algebra and English, the keys to western progress. Yet even though teachers shame students by calling their mothers shamans, with shamanism understood to mean lower class, superstitious and uneducated, students still resist and engage in shamanic rituals.

Overall, with no recourse, students obey teachers' authority, just as citizens obey dictatorships. However, when Mr. Oh goes on security duty one night, the student-ghost chokes him with curtains, crashing his body through the classroom's windows. The scene ends with a female hand stabbing the man with a sculptor's knife. When the representatives of justice are unjust, a subversive hero is needed. Given no human can punish the ghost, audiences can indulge patricidal fantasy without worrying for the avenger's life.

The avenging ghost seems a timely fantasy given the turn of events that preceded the film's release. *Whispering Corridors* was released in 1998, a year after the 1997 IMF Financial Crisis in which an economic meltdown caused upheaval throughout Asia. According to a *New York Times* article written in December 1997, South Koreans bemoaned the IMF bailout as another example of a hostile foreign takeover:

Demonstrators... denounced "U.S. imperialism," Japan, and Western powers in general for imposing harsh conditions on Korea under the aegis of the International Monetary Fund... "Western countries are conspiring to rule Korea," was one of the cries heard at Pagoda Park, where President Bill Clinton was called "an enemy of the people"... "The Japanese want to colonize Korea again through the IMF," another slogan said.¹²⁵

In this context of renewed fear over foreign control, the mandate to 'modernize' is another example of western values marginalizing Korea's indigenous belief system in South Korea's ongoing capitalist transformation. The IMF takeover of Korea has an authoritarian ring in its unilateral restructuring of the Korean economy where ordinary Koreans are reduced to helpless bystanders who must submit to totalitarian power structures. It appears authoritarianism itself is the precondition for South Korea's transformation into a capitalist power in the image of the U.S.

Because *Whispering Corridors* justifies Mr. Oh's death as the end of unbearable authoritarianism, the film supports students' wrath against institutional oppression, criticizing modernity as an ideology that suppresses one's humanity. Simultaneously, the film elicits empathy for the ghost's marginality and pleasure in the ghost's invincible

¹²⁵ Don Kirk, "Seoul Tries to Calm Feelings; Brokerage Goes Under: Increasing Anger With West," *New York Times*, December 13, 1997.

power, mockery of respectability and toppling of the dominant order. The film dramatizes a scenario of wish fulfillment in which a young woman—coded as shaman-spiritual, lesbian and North Korean—kills an intolerable patriarch and in the process undermines the power of her oppressors. By killing bad teachers, the ghost annihilates symbols of censorship, repression and injustice.

Throughout the film, the ghost has been present but invisible and unidentifiable as a ghost: appearing human, the ghost wears the school uniform and stays quiet. Any student could be possessed by the ghost. Neither othered by physical anomalies, nor non-Korean ethnicity, the specter conforms to and even embodies its socio-cultural surroundings and the disciplinary context of the girls' school. At the film's end, the ghost states, "For the past nine years, no one suspected my identity. No one noticed I was here, or whether I was human or not. I just had to fill the empty seats, and be there during head counts." With this revelation, the prosaic Jae-yi becomes undead, scary and deviant.

The appearance of the ghost sheds light on South Korea's postwar consciousness in which the Other is/was essentially the Self—the bad guy is/was one of us—serving to invoke the specter of the unresolved past and the specter of the individuated future. As Avery Gordon has argued, "The ghost is not simply a dead or a missing person, but a social figure, and investigating it can lead to that dense site where history and subjectivity make social life."¹²⁶ If the ghost is a trans-historical figure who represents a collective *and* subjective conundrum that transgresses episodic time, the appearance of the cinematic ghost as simultaneously normal yet categorically different conjures the contradictory relationship between the two Koreas: sameness in ethnic physiognomy, traditional culture and prewar history and oppositional differentiation in most other postwar matters.

In *Whispering Corridors* and *A Tale of Two Sisters*, the ghosts manifest their appearance in the guise of familiarity—normal girls who do not float but walk—to embody the sensation of the known and the normal. In channeling relations of intimacy through an appearance of normality, the films expose the characters' intimate connection to the ghost. Yet, having been constituted as a specter, the beloved intimate arouses dread as a figure of violence who has not peacefully crossed to the other side, and stubbornly remains amongst the living in search of relief that usually takes the form of human death. While having the outer appearance of lifelikeness, the ghost is defined by pastness and death that provokes both longing for reunion and return to the past era prior to fragmentation and dreadful fear of the beloved's present, deadly incarnation.

In an analogous twist, in Korean spiritual tradition, emotional attachment can also act as a problematic reason for ghosts' appearance on earth. As Laurel Kendall writes, "emotional attachments draw the dead to the living. Although these ancestors have no malevolent intent, their presence has negative consequences... The *mansin* [shaman] say that 'the hand of the dead is a hand of thorns'... it cannot touch living flesh without inflicting injury."¹²⁷ Although the living may sympathize with the specter, the specter

¹²⁶ Avery F. Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 8.

¹²⁷ Laurel Kendall, *Shamans, Housewives, and Other Restless Spirits*, 100. Roger L. Janelli and Dawnhee Yim Janelli point out in Korea, ghosts are figures of tragedy: "Many of the dead who are hungry for ritual offerings died prematurely, have no descendants of their own, or perished in tragic circumstances. Feeling

always arouses dread as an otherworldly being unable to recognize that it does not belong with the living. Ghosts' very presence is an omen in need of undoing.



Figure 1.2: Emotions of grief, longing and horror on consorting with the dead

As ghosts cannot be killed, ghosts themselves must be willing to disappear after achieving emotional resolution. The ending of *Whispering Corridors* delivers a poignant rapprochement that suggests trauma can be rectified through the pacifying effect of mutual empathy. At first, the ghost reacts with violence when she learns Ms. Huh has discovered her identity, and warns, “You’ll become just like Mrs. Park (an old fox)... I don’t want to hurt you but I don’t have a choice.” In this fear that Ms. Huh will develop into Mrs. Park, a larger apprehension is expressed: modern development begets authoritarianism. However, Ms. Huh’s concern over the ghost’s emotional interiority suggests Ms. Huh’s difference; whereas the exploitation of power for personal profit girds authoritarian violence, compassion for the collective good cultivates true peace. For example, Ms. Huh wants to understand the ghost’s motive for lingering at school. The ghost answers, “I needed a friend who really understood and cared about me.” With the arrival of the ghost’s present best friend Ji-oh, and Ji-oh’s assurance of true love, the ghost acknowledges the effect of her deadliness and disappears. Ji-oh cries out, “I love you with all my heart, too. It’s true, but not this way. Please! Leave the rest to us. Rest in peace, Jae-yi.” The ghost agrees, “I never meant to hurt anyone. All I ever wanted was a friend, and to leave with good memories, that’s all. You’re right, I can’t stay like this, because I’m not human.” Here, the ghost is a figure of the past who haunts the present to create a new past and with it, new happy memories of friendship and love. But the ghost’s haunting of the present restrains the living’s capacity to create a happy future.

unfairly deprived of their allotted life span and the rewards of human existence (ogurhada), such persons afflict their closest kin out of resentment and must be propitiated with shamanistic rituals. In general, those who die with a pressing desire cannot find peace in the afterlife until that desire is satisfied.” See Roger L. Janelli and Dawnhee Yim Janelli, *Ancestor Worship*, 161.

Despite their shared past and shared love, the living cannot consort with the dead. On that account, the film suggests that reunification is unthinkable. For the sake of peace, each party must return to their rightful, separate sphere and discontinue their risky intimacy.

A Tale of Two Sisters

Like *Whispering Corridors* and its sequels, the horror film *A Tale of Two Sisters* features teenage pairs comprised of a living lover and her dead beloved. While both films share the specter of division's pattern of deadly breakup and ghostly reunification, and a concern for late modern life, their approaches differ. In *Whispering Corridors*, twosomes exist in the insular safety of the female high school where friends love each other best, to render their intense devotion and invite a lesbian reading of the film. When one student dies due to a meddlesome and authoritarian teacher, the dead girl returns to haunt the school and systematically kill teachers who moralized inhumane treatment of others as a means to an end, and fostered competitive alienation over communal cooperation. *A Tale of Two Sisters*, in contrast, features two sisters in a gothic house who must stick together to protect themselves from their suspicious stepmother. When the fairy-tale-like horror movie reveals that one sister has been dead all along, their bond becomes problematized as untenable and doomed.

The seventh highest-grossing domestic South Korean film of 2003,¹²⁸ *A Tale of Two Sisters* made news when American studio DreamWorks acquired the rights to its remake, following DreamWorks' success with *The Ring* (Gore Verbinski, 2002), a remake of the Japanese horror movie *Ringu* (Hideo Nakata, 1998). In reviews of Hollywood's version of *A Tale of Two Sisters*, newly titled *The Uninvited* (Charles Guard, Thomas Guard, 2009) with no relation to earlier films of the same title, critics lament over their disappointment. *Variety* called *The Uninvited* "a flat, obvious effort that doesn't begin to approach the creepiness of the 2003 South Korean original *A Tale of Two Sisters*."¹²⁹ *NY Times* film critic A.O. Scott wrote, "It certainly doesn't have much in common with *A Tale of Two Sisters*, the creepy Korean horror film of which it is supposedly a remake."¹³⁰

In an overview of horror films with young women published one week before *The Uninvited's* release, film critic Terrence Rafferty wrote the remake would be "hard pressed to match the spookiness of their counterparts in the South Korean original, *A Tale of Two Sisters* (2002), which is one of the best, and most heartbreaking, weird-girl horror movies ever made." This last appraisal captures the gusto the Korean original inspires amongst fans and critics alike. For many, *A Tale of Two Sisters* epitomizes recent Korean horror. In 2004, Dana Stevens annointed the film as such when she wrote in the *NY Times*, "*A Tale of Two Sisters* is the first major South Korean example of a now well-established genre: the new Asian psychological horror film."¹³¹ Thus, like *Whispering Corridors*, *A Tale of Two Sisters* signals a galvanizing turning point in the history of the

¹²⁸ Koreanfilm.org, Korean Movie Reviews for 2003, "2003," <http://koreanfilm.org/kfilm03.html>. (Accessed September 7, 2011).

¹²⁹ Dennis Harvey, "The Uninvited," *Variety*, Jan. 30, 2009.

¹³⁰ A. O. Scott, "Two Bickering Sisters, a Stepmom and an Ominous Garbage Can," *New York Times*, January 30, 2009, Movies section.

¹³¹ Dana Stevens, "Evil Stepmother Is the First Cue: Be Very Afraid," *New York Times*, December 17, 2004. Movies section.

genre. If *Whispering Corridors* legitimized horror for the Korean box office, *A Tale of Two Sisters* legitimized Korean horror as an art form for film connoisseurs everywhere. While critics have examined *A Tale of Two Sisters* in the context of the dysfunctional nuclear family as an affirmation of the phallogentric symbolic order, by way of Barbara Creed's theory of the "monstrous feminine" and Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection, I hope to examine it anew in the context of South Korea's recent history of modernization.¹³²

The film takes as its starting point the folk tale "Rose Flower and Pink Lotus" (Changhwa Hongnyon chon), a "popular traditional narrative story about an evil stepmother and two stepdaughters" according to Korean literature scholar Peter Lee.¹³³ Whereas both versions figure the conflict between stepmother and stepdaughters, key differences exist. In the folk tale, the "pock-marked" (201) stepmother, with three sons of her own, accuses the virtuous Rose of giving herself an abortion using a skinned rat, inciting the circumstances that lead Rose and Lotus to commit suicide. Rose and Lotus return as ghosts to haunt the magistrates who govern their village, until an upright official hears their pleas and exposes the stepmother's sins. The sinless father remarries a seventeen-year old, and Rose and Lotus are reincarnated as his daughters to reunite the family once more. Lee contends this morality tale depicts "the contradictions and circumstances of the collapsing authoritarian society" that marked 18th and 19th century Korea (283).

By sanctioning polygamy and concubinage, Confucianism also inadvertently produced undesirable family strife, such as infighting over estate inheritance. The tale's patriarchal logic suggests that family harmony hinges on women's moral, sexual and filial compliance. First, the tale faults the stepmother for the family's discord, and judges her behavior instead of questioning Korea's patriarchal family system. Second, the tale endorses the girls' suicide, presenting their situation as one without alternatives. Certainly, the tale sympathizes with Rose for being the butt of the stepmother's unjust accusation and murder plot. Yet rather than depict the girls as impudent, the tale narrates their self-injury and glosses over the contradictions that define the father. The system needs women to forsake their self-interest to maintain the status quo. For such compliance, the girls are rewarded posthumously.

In contrast, the film is notable for what it does not adapt from this tale. The film avoids depicting the rat, the stepbrothers, and the magistrates and also steers clear of abortion, incest, and deliverance from a righteous authority. Consequently, like *Whispering Corridors*, the film excises the discourse of heterosexuality and male rescue. Along with cutting out minor figures, the film's other changes alter the story's unfolding. First, while in the tale, both become ghosts to spook village leaders, in the film, only Su-yeon (Lotus) is a ghost and she haunts Su-mi (Rose), not an outside party. Next, while in the tale, Rose and Lotus live in a village-type community, in the film, they live in an isolated house away from other people. Finally, while in the tale the stepmother's

¹³² K.K. Seet, "Mothers and Daughters: Abjection and the Monstrous-Feminine in Japan's Dark Water and South Korea's A Tale of Two Sisters" *Camera Obscura* 71, 24.2 (2009): 138-59.

¹³³ Peter Lee, *A History of Korean Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) xxiii. To read the original story, see Zong, In-sob, *Folk Tales of Korea* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1952. 4th Revised edition, Elizabeth, N.J.: Hollym International Corporation, 2005).

execution and the girls' reincarnation compensate for the hardships they endure, in the film, no human or supernatural act can compensate for Su-mi's loss. Su-mi's loss is complicated because she feels responsible for her sister's death; in her mind, her arrogant behavior towards her stepmother leads Su-mi to miss the moment that could have saved Su-yeon's life. Furthermore, it is helpful to consider that in the tale, the dead girls want to reunite with their good father through a second chance at life, while in the film, the girls want to be with each other and their mother, and less so their father.

The film's narrative opens in a sanitarium with a male doctor nudging a pale adolescent to "tell me what happened." He asks the seminal questions: "Who do you think you are?" "Can you tell me about that day?" His query implies the girl has survived a momentous event—a trauma—that she appears to have repressed and that has altered her understanding of herself. The film cuts to a car pulling up to a large, dark-wooded, foreboding house, accented by *hyangali* clay kimchi pots and Korean pine trees in the background. Sisters Su-mi and Su-yeon exit the car. In a rare carefree moment outside the house, the older Su-mi and the younger Su-yeon hold hands, joyfully frolicking in the countryside and loafing at lakefront. For a minute, the film feels idyllic; then the girls enter the shadowy house through a low angle shot. Whereas *Whispering Corridors*' opening scene establishes a murder whodunit with a ghost culprit, *A Tale of Two Sisters* sets up a mystery about the end of innocence and the inception of madness. If *Whispering Corridors* seeks the ghost-killer's identity, *A Tale of Two Sisters* seeks the scenario that caused Su-mi to unravel.

Greeted by their overly chatty stepmother Eun-joo, the girls ignore the woman, dismissing her motherly concern as illegitimate. Although Eun-joo feigns motherhood by ostensibly being there for the girls, the stepmother is an unnatural, foreign substitute who has usurped the true mother's position under false pretenses: the stepmother's satiny surface camouflages the underlying trauma of the loss of the good biological mother. Thus the stepmother must appear beautiful, for she functions to produce the anxiety of the visible that veils over the invisible: her glittery allure hides the unsightly violence of past trauma and its lingering aftereffects, an allegorical figure for South Korea's history of modernization. Accordingly, the film uses the stepmother as the entry point for arranging the epistemological dissonance to come between surface knowledge and repressed truth.

Hence it is fitting that more so than any other character, the film represents the stepmother as monstrous to create suspenseful epistemological uncertainty and ambiguity over what and whom to trust. In particular, sequences of the stepmother in solitude situate the woman as harbinger of the uncanny, the familiar made strange. After the family's first dinner, the stepmother is preparing for bed. Taking off her lipstick before an ornate mirror, the camera evokes both an Asian version of Disney's Snow White—black-bob, white skin and red lips, and Snow White's evil stepmother. That night, when the stepmother awakens from her sleep, a cut to the woman's face shows a menacing glint in her eyes. To show her getting out of bed, the camera dollies out from a close-up of her feet to her entire body. With her head down, so that her hair covers her face, the shot parallels Su-mi's mad appearance in the opening hospital scene. Later that night, the stepmother evidences more ghoulishness when she stares at television static and turns her neck slowly at the sound of a crash.

Withstanding her chilling body language, she displays inappropriate behavior with others. During dinner with her brother and his wife, the stepmother tells a story she thinks is funny, but no one else laughs. Her brother cannot recall the event she describes and she reveals herself to be crazy when she asks too harshly, “Why don’t you remember? Are you crazy?” In an earlier dinner scene, the father placed two pills before the stepmother. Given the stepmother exudes psychiatric anxiety as an observant yet dissatisfied woman pretending to be happy, her medical problem seems psychological. Like the housewives with “the problem that has no name” discussed by Betty Friedan in *The Feminine Mystique*, the stepmother suffers from isolation and pines for more than her homemaker duties. Physically, she seems normal enough. However, everyone notices her ‘strangeness.’ For instance, Su-mi tells Su-yeon, “That woman,” their term for the stepmother, “is strange. And so is this house.” Hence, the film links the gothic house with the mad modern woman-outsider, combining spectral haunting and female psychological instability. The crazy woman aligns with the crazy house in terms of their uncanny enclosure of unspeakable secrets that must eventually be disclosed. As Patricia White remarks on her discussion of the 1963 Hollywood horror film *The Haunting* (Robert Wise), the gothic mansion “is a projection not only of the female body, but also of the female mind, a mind that, like the heavy oak doors, may or may not be unhinged.” (78) In *A Tale of Two Sisters*, the big home invokes the residents’ psychic alienation and detachment as an uncomfortable and un-homey house to produce the film’s affect of horror.¹³⁴

But what truly makes the stepmother monstrous is her treatment of Su-yeon. Like Mr. Oh’s pedagogy in *Whispering Corridors*, the stepmother’s parenting operates from the same paradigm of tyrannical authority that justifies adults’ brutal treatment of children. The sequence that leads to Su-yeon getting locked in the wardrobe well illustrates the stepmother’s cruelty. After freeing herself from her bedroom, under the belief that the girls had maliciously locked her in, the stepmother rushes into Su-yeon’s bedroom where Su-yeon is asleep. The stepmother finds old family pictures showing the girls’ dead mother with their father. Much like the painting of Mrs. Park in *Whispering Corridors*, these photographs of the dead are problematic and should be censored. When the stepmother finds the pile of torn pictures with her face scratched out in black ink, she wakes Su-yeon, only to discover her pet bird dead under the covers. Raging uncontrollably, she demands, “Tell me the truth. Who did it?” The stepmother drags and pushes the screaming Su-yeon into the wardrobe, flinging the photographs in as well. Once the stepmother locks the child, she says, “Say that you’re sorry. Until you do, don’t even think about coming out. It’s no use crying. Say that you’re sorry and beg for forgiveness!” The stepmother paces in classical chiaroscuro lighting that blacks out her eyes, giving visual expression to her internal monstrosity. This sequence is notable for its narration of the stepmother’s paranoid subjectivity. Her need to uncover the truth structures the woman simultaneously as the subject and object of persecution—like an investigator, she demands her stepdaughters reveal the truth, yet the girls’ refusal negates her gaze and subjects her instead to the dread of epistemological insecurity.

Their father (Kim Kap-su), unlike the stepmother, is much too reticent. With lines like, “Sorry, I have things to tend to,” the father is absent even when present.

¹³⁴ Doane, 136.

A doctor, the father represents scientific reason. Dubious of emotion and superstition, the father dismisses any mention of strangeness. He denies his family's mystical problem, saying, "Don't say stupid things" and "You're just having a hard time adjusting. You'll get better if you rest." Whereas the girls and the stepmother are associated with "strange" happenings, the father lacks such association. Rather, he is portrayed in 'real' time and space, from talking on the phone to sleeping, or dealing with 'real-world' matters such as burying the pet bird. Clearly, he is not the ghost that haunts the house. As in *Whispering Corridors*' depiction of the masculine gaze, the father's attempt to "look around" cannot uncover the truth, as only female characters can glimpse the terrifying creature with the long hair and burnt arms under the kitchen sink. Like the father, Sun-kyu, the stepmother's brother, cannot "see" the specter, even though his female partner can.

Why can only the female characters see the phantom and the looming menace it relays? In the tradition of the gothic, Mary Ann Doane notes, "the house is uncanny to the woman, not the man."¹³⁵ According to Doane, "the horror film intensifies and structures its affect of fear by positioning a female character as the one who looks and who ultimately unveils the terror-inciting monster... the positioning of the woman as the recipient of visual terror is determined by the psychic construction of sexually differentiated processes of seeing."¹³⁶ The male gaze seeks out the female ornamented with beauty and pleasure to appease his anxiety over women's castration, and in turn, the possibility of his own castration and impending ruination. Hence, the ghost is not visible for the male gaze as an object of heterosexual consumption. Rather, the ghost haunts the woman because the ghost is woman herself. As Doane remarks, "when the woman in filmic narrative confronts the nonobject of her own fear ... what the woman actually sees, after a sustained and fearful process of looking, is a sign or representation of herself displaced to the level of the nonhuman."¹³⁷ In *A Tale of Two Sisters*, this realization is actually dramatized in the film's cryptic ending when the film reveals that one of the sisters suffers from a rupture in identity; she is not a unified self with the capacity to perceive the real. The specter produces a representation of woman's castrated status of trauma, a status with allegorical implications for a postcolonial nation.

Cut off from both adults, the sisters turn to each other for support. The film figures their relationship as therapeutic and intimate in the sequence that presents Su-yeon going into Su-mi's bed. In the middle of the night, while Su-yeon sleeps in her room, someone comes in. Scared, Su-yeon goes to Su-mi's room and hides in her bed. Unable to explain what's wrong, the fearful Su-yeon says, "I keep hearing strange noises outside" and "Somebody came into my room." Su-mi suggests it was "that woman" being "strange." With concern, Su-mi says to Su-yeon, "Are you scared? Everything's all right. I'm here. Come here, let's sleep. I'll always be with you." As the older sister strokes the younger sister's hair and hugs the younger sister's body with both arms, this embrace poignantly communicates the older sister's need to protect her fragile baby sister; moreover, it establishes their power differential. In a later scene, Su-mi unlocks Su-yeon from the wardrobe and hugs her tightly. Su-mi consoles her sobbing sister by saying, "Su-yeon, I'm sorry. I didn't hear you. I'm sorry, Su-yeon. I'm sorry. This will never

¹³⁵ Ibid., 140.

¹³⁶ Ibid., 141.

¹³⁷ Ibid., 142.

happen again.” While the film visualizes the girls so that they appear the same in age, *A Tale of Two Sisters* emotionally figures the older Su-mi as strong and independent, and, in contrast, the younger Su-yeon as dependent and in need of protections.



Figure 1.3: Intimacy and regret between ghost and human halves

Here, it is worth noting that the above sequence can be understood through another context once the viewer learns that Su-yeon is not who she seems. Unlike *Whispering Corridors*, the ending of which exposes the apparition, *A Tale of Two Sisters* makes its startling revelation halfway through: Su-yeon is not alive. This model of narrativity invokes a demystification that suggests the first half of the film was merely a dream, a well-plotted figment of Su-mi’s imagination. The film explains away, without didactic explanation, the earlier unreliability of the diegesis. If the camera has been lying all along in its representation of Su-yeon and the stepmother as “normal” characters with their respect of gravity and other laws of nature, unlike the abnormally levitating ghost Su-mi encountered in her lucid nightmare, the film forces us to abandon our viewing habits and assumptions. Whereas this storytelling method is unacceptable for normative dramas, the horror film valorizes the fantastic over realism.

The fantastic of horror cinema gives expression to the hidden repressions in Su-mi’s consciousness, but paranormal activity retains aspects of dramatic realism so that until the film’s very end, the line between the real and the imagined is blurred. Su-mi’s struggle against her evil stepmother, for example, manifests itself through household objects and as a climactic fight between an abusive adult and a recalcitrant child. The scene begins with a low shot of the stepmother dragging a large, bloodied burlap bag. Meanwhile, Su-mi wakes up panting in her bed, as if from a nightmare, to beg the question: what is a dream and what is real? In this scene, flashes that show Su-mi taking pills and shaking her head evokes the sense that she prefers the escape of her paranoid frights over her pill-popping social reality. Looking for her sister, Su-mi finds a trail of blood in a low-lit room and a bloodied burlap bag. That Su-mi’s bare feet take deliberate steps across a trail of blood is noteworthy, as walking across blood is suggestive of the Korean War when civilian families throughout the peninsula packed their possessions and sought refuge by foot through bloodshed. The homemade look of the burlap bag

further invokes the bags refugees carried during the war. Marred by blood and the knowledge that it holds a half-dead human body, the bag bears the look of atrocity, secrecy and something in need of release. As Su-mi tries to free up the bag, the stepmother accosts the girl not with a gun or supernatural powers, but a kettle of boiling water and Su-mi fights back with scissors. Shoving ensues and Su-mi is knocked unconscious. Through simple suspense and everyday objects, the film props up make-believe with the real to suggest domestic affairs have led to Su-mi's haunting. The next sequence meaningfully represents the residual haunting that pervades post Cold-War Korean consciousness after national division and capitalist individuation. Su-mi is lying on the ground looking up at her sitting stepmother. The out-of-breath stepmother wonders, "What in the hell's name made us get to this point? ... Know what's really scary? You want to forget something, totally wipe it off of your mind but you never can. It can't go away, you see. And it follows you around like a ghost." This vocalization conceives a notion of haunting as a past that cannot be consciously released and so produces an ongoing present-day condition of anxiety and possession (or colonization) by a spectral, external will. Soon after, the film reveals the stepmother who has been onscreen all this time has been a projection of Su-mi's paranoia. All along, Su-mi has been alone with her father in the house while the real stepmother has been elsewhere.

But why is Su-mi insane? The film cuts to the sanitarium where Su-mi is coming to terms with her memories. Back at the big house, however, the real stepmother appears terrified as she is beset by ghostly figures and inexplicable power outages. The house is haunted because people died there; it appears the forces that acted on Su-mi's mind were not operating from her unreason alone but were partly aroused by its resident ghost(s). A final flashback of Su-mi's memory shows a series of tragedies. First, Su-yeon discovers inside the wardrobe the mother's hanging dead body with a bottle of pills. Then in her attempt to remove the body and save her mother, Su-yeon accidentally forces the wardrobe to topple over on herself. As Su-yeon lay dying, Su-mi has the chance to rescue her sister but unknowingly sabotages it by making spiteful remarks to her stepmother, the only person who can help. In the flashback, the stepmother is the first to appear at the scene of Su-yeon's accident. Although the stepmother does not directly aid Su-yeon, she tries to tell Su-mi about Su-yeon's mishap. However, instead of listening to the stepmother, Su-mi uses the encounter to lambaste the stepmother and smugly walk away, thus losing out on the moment when Su-mi could have saved her sister.

Haunted by illusion, repression and condemnation of self and other, Su-mi's chaotic psychic climate prevents Su-mi from having access to her own self. Separated from the awful truth of what happened, she manifests her ineffable trauma as hallucinatory horror. As long as the misgivings of her past torment her in the present, she cannot live out her own life but must instead relive past heartbreak, thereby continuously undermining her peace of mind. For her psychological survival, Su-mi must distance herself from the memory of her dead kin and acquire new resources for relations that will support a new, independent identity. Although compounded by isolation, and her father's inability to decipher emotional, as opposed to rational, consciousness, Su-mi must nonetheless learn to adjust to the 'real,' post-specter world.

Like *Whispering Corridors*, *A Tale of Two Sisters* signifies an impressive undertaking in recent Korean horror's serpentine confrontation with the traumatic

aftereffects of the Korean War. By conjuring notions of dependence, the need for protection from a despotic authority, and images of horrifying corporeal punishment, alongside fantasies of the past and the dead living on in the present in the figure of the specter, *A Tale of Two Sisters* invokes both the traumas of national division and South Korea's capitalist development and individuation under autocratic forces. Without resorting to images of postwar familial separation or the problem of North Korea, the film uses the figure of the specter to depict how the experience of being haunted threatens to pull the present into the past and imagines a dreadful future that can only repeat the past should this inappropriate, overly-close relationship between the living and the (un)dead endure.

The Specter of National Division

Through the unreal imagination of recent South Korean horror, I speculate that films allow indirect exploration of the anxiety of being restlessly haunted by an undead beloved and participate in the fantasy of returning to a past world to reunite with a spectral loved one. Presenting a range of paradoxical perspectives on the problem of geopolitical intimacy, these texts also raise misgivings about the inhumane individualism late modernity requires. The motifs of *Whispering Corridors* and *A Tale of Two Sisters*—the themes of oppression, cruel brutality, repression of feelings, censorship of dissent, traumatization of childhood by adults, grave need for protection, and the return of the undead beloved whose vengeful reappearance both helps and hurts the living— suggests the deepening contradictions amongst the Korean people's critical vulnerability under militarized capitalist development, South Korea's conviction in deregulated global capitalism as the panacea to its future economic security and the shadowy presence of North Korea as its national doppelganger.

From a general point of view, the teenage ghost film offers spectators the chance to relive the unspeakable cruelty adults dole out on children, presumably for children's proper development, and cathartically punish those adults who abused their authority to traumatize us with their injustices. But from a political point of view, the teenage ghost film has a historical dimension that emblemizes the most profound horrors that have haunted the consciousness of post-Cold War Korean identity. Recalling the palimpsest of the domestic-regional-global past, the onscreen division of familiar intimacy in South Korean cinema resonates as the nation's unresolved breakup, its specter of national division. On the diegetic level, the problem is the prospect of communion between human and ghost, where a ghost used to have the same social identity as the human and continues that pretense. In turn, on the allegorical level, the problem is the North-South dilemma, that is, the prospect of reunification between a thriving capitalist economy and an incapacitated communist one. While Northerners and Southerners share the same ancestry, these groups no longer share the same social and political identities. North Korea is not only clearly anti-capitalist, but moreover a rogue, terrorist state in much of the world's opinion, and therefore "dead" and "deadly" in the capitalist world-system.

This specter of national division offers a different model for understanding horror. Built on South Korea's experience of postwar modernization, the divided relationships in *Whispering Corridors* and *A Tale of Two Sisters* are not created along the lines popularized by New Hollywood horror. In American horror films exemplified by the

likes of *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (Wes Craven, 1984), and *Friday the 13th* (Sean S. Cunningham, 1980), a group of teenagers are killed off, one at a time, until a lone individual (the “Final Girl”) must fight off the dreaded, disfigured Other, a stranger who has intruded on the group. This division appears to speak to the U.S.’s troubled history of xenophobic immigrant and race relations where the bitter monster in the American horror film evokes the divisiveness, alienation and injustice historically experienced via ethnic and class stratification. In contrast, South Korean films figure the “monster” as an intimate, rather than a stranger. Although the world media relates to North Korea as an aberrant “Axis of Evil,” the ghost in South Korea’s new cinema is closer to a lost twin.

In the post-Cold War period, the prevailing discourse has been an alarmist construction of North Korea as an aberrant “Other” at large. Historian Henry H. Em points out, “it has become commonsensical for historians in the United States and South Korea to treat North Korea as an entirely separate and distinct unit. Trained under the grip of the Cold War, most professional historians were unable or unwilling to write about North Korea without constituting it as the Other.”¹³⁸ Likewise, cultural critic Chungmoo Choi notes, “For more than two decades after the national partition, South Korean schoolchildren visually depicted North Koreans literally to be red-bodied demons with horns and long fingernails on their hairy, grabbing hands, as represented in anti-Communist posters and widely distributed propaganda materials.”¹³⁹

The Cold War’s othering of North Korea was designed emotionally and intellectually to dismember pre-established understandings of Koreanness to produce the detachment necessary for South Korea’s capitalist individualization. However, the South Korean state’s propagandist othering of North Korea was also an act of psychological violence that dispossessed Koreans of their own identity and history. The resignification of northerners as others forced Koreans—including the Korean diaspora whose identity has been mainly interpolated through the presumption of South Koreanness—to repress their personal connection, continuation and sameness with the North. Given that the Korean War directly or inadvertently caused millions to disperse and leave behind loved ones on the northern side of the 38th parallel, modern Korean consciousness carries the power of familial, transgenerational memory. Consequently, lingering longing, residual emotional attachment and memories of closeness have not been eradicated. Rather, by denying and disassociating such taboo emotions and memories, the contradictions of modern Korean history have been repressed, and the effects of this denial and deception have materialized as haunting—something in need of true pacification.

But with North Korea’s ascendancy into a nuclear power, desire for closeness also produces a sense of terror: emotional attachment between the two Koreas risks fueling a nuclear war under the banner of re-attachment. To deter such disaster, it appears South Koreans must repudiate their kin to secure their survival on the world stage. In the imagery offered by the teenage ghost film, this predicament—the most pressing quandary on the Korean peninsula—comes to life, bringing to the fore the need for curative closure and lasting true peace where intimacy and distance can mutually co-exist.

¹³⁸ Henry Em, ““Overcoming” Korea’s Division: Narrative Strategies in Recent South Korean Historiography,” *Positions* 1.2 (1993): 450.

¹³⁹ Chungmoo Choi, “The Discourse of Decolonization and Popular Memory: South Korea,” *Positions* 1.1 (1993): 81.

Chapter 2

Monster as Metaphor, Family as Movement: South Korea-U.S. Relations in *The Host*

*What else remains as 'politics' except resistance to this inhuman?*¹⁴⁰

*A return to emotion is politically essential for cultural movement, for, in feminist terms, politics closely affects the fabric of our intimate space.*¹⁴¹

The film's original title in Korean *Gwoemul* translates to "Monster," but its English title *The Host* (Bong Joon-ho, 2006) references a range of historical processes that reinforces a number of the film's concerns. The film mobilizes various notions of 'host' as metaphors for predatory relations in vestigial U.S.-Korea geopolitics and in the general mayhem of emergency that lurks in militarized everyday life. Having appropriated the conventions of science fiction in which the viral epidemic is an old standby, the title, *The Host*, appears to overtly refer to the creature's status as a biological conveyer of disease: in the film, the American soldier, Donald White, is said to have died after coming in contact with the creature and the Park family is hunted down as they are considered hosts of the creature's contagion. Yet the notion of 'the host' possesses another meaning that can be applied to the film: that of providing accommodations, much as South Korea has been hosting U.S. expansion in Asia since the end of World War II.

Although the original Korean title did not intend for such interpretation, the translated title offers, by accident, connotations that coincide with the film's concern with militarism. The archaic sense of the term implies war, as "host" denotes "army" and "multitude." In this respect, who has been the host? Who bears the arms of mass destruction? Controls the hosts of war on the southern half of the peninsula? These are salient questions given that Korea is one of the most militarized regions in the world. Facing off on both sides of the armistice line—a 155 miles long, 2.5 miles wide wildlife haven that is commonly referred to as the DMZ or Demilitarized Zone—are almost 1.8 million heavily armed South and North Korean troops. Arguably, South Korea has never experienced a "calm" period of history; rather, it has always existed in crisis, ever speculating the next tit-for-tat with axis of evil North Korea. After the end of World War II, the U.S. military occupied the southern half as the official governing body.¹⁴² In 1954, after the Korean War, U.S. Forces Korea was established; as of 2011, about 30,000 U.S. troops are stationed in South Korea.¹⁴³ By attaching itself onto the host South Korea, the

¹⁴⁰ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), 7.

¹⁴¹ Giuliana Bruno, *Atlas of Emotion: Journeys in Art, Architecture, and Film* (New York: Verso, 2002), 224.

¹⁴² See Chapter 1 of this dissertation, especially the section on General Order No. 1.

¹⁴³ The South Korean military does not have troops stationed in the U.S.; I point this out to underscore the power differentials between these two nations. Some critics appear weary of the term "Americanization" as too totalizing, but the term, in my opinion, is suggestive of a process at large that is planetary in scope and

U.S., has been able to secure military control over the region while fostering dependency. Given the economic and military hegemony of the U.S.—its “unipolar global order”—over the entire planet, South Korea is just one host amongst many.

Hosting America was supposed to bring freedom, happiness and relief from Japanese tyranny and Confucian inequality, but the film suggests servile Americanization has produced excesses of both materialism and militarism. In turn, the American scientist’s disregard of his Korean assistant (who warns against dumping those chemicals into the Han River that spawn the monster) dramatizes the U.S. disregard of Korea as an inferior. In the new millennium, America’s unipolar order has been tarnished and exposed as vulnerable after the September 11th attacks. The U.S. economic downturn preoccupies much of the news to devalue U.S. symbolic capital and create the sense that something is amiss with the American way of life. But having already been exposed to Americanization, the networked world cannot limit the influence of the U.S. Whatever has been ailing the U.S. has been “spreading” everywhere, not unlike a virus. In the example of South Korea, many critics have pointed to Americanized Korean economists as the driving force behind the Crisis as they “*spread* U.S. neo-liberalism in Korean society... Consequently, the Korean government was unable to prevent the financial crisis in 1997.”¹⁴⁴

But the film’s title *The Host* also resonates with another phenomenon: the spread of risk at large. The planet is now wired through the world of computers. Accordingly, dissemination of American-style financial “risk” happens in a mobile and synchronous manner. The convenience, standardization and automatism of new digital technologies has decentralized, deterritorialized, and dematerialized international transactions so that risks are both networked and untraceable. South Korea’s president Lee Myung-Bak calls these risks “new challenges:”

Tackling climate change, attaining energy and food security, maintaining healthiness in our financial system, eradicating terrorism, preventing cyber attacks, stopping the illicit trafficking of drugs as well as humans are all new types of threats and challenges. These challenges are not stand-alone challenges but rather, they are often complex and interconnected.¹⁴⁵

These mobile, sprawled and viral new enemies listed by Lee give government the pretext to incite a panic mentality and induce mass mobilization of whatever means necessary—from militarism to surveillance—to eradicate so-called evil. In this respect, the exaggerated scenarios of viral pandemic and radical containment in *The Host* are

interactive; it engages local cultures to produce strategic hybridization that will benefit the reproduction of militarized U.S. capital.

¹⁴⁴ My italics. Seong Won Park, “The Present and Future of Americanization in South Korea,” *Journal of Futures Studies* 14.1 (August 2009): 56-57. In the 1990s, Koreans (not Korean-Americans) made up 10% of U.S. Economics Ph.D.’s, earning the acronym ATKEs (American-trained Korean Economics). On returning to South Korea, the ATKEs were hosts of Americanized economic and disseminated deregulatory policies in the 1990s. For analysis, see Jang-Sup Sin and Ha-Joon Chang, *Restructuring Korea Inc.: Financial Crisis, Corporate Reform, and Institutional Transition* (London: Routledge, 2002).

¹⁴⁵ “President’s Keynote Address at Shangri-la Dialogue,” The 9th IISS (International Institute for Strategic Studies) Asia Security Summit, The Shangri-La Dialogue, Singapore, Friday June 4 2010, Lee Myung-Bak, President, Republic of Korea, <http://www.korea.net/Government/Briefing-Room/Presidential-Speeches/view?articleId=91054> (accessed August 6, 2013).

metaphors for the planetary state of emergency that has led to new structures of inflated security after the 9/11 attacks. *The Host* bears witness to the cumulative effect of America's foreign policy on the rest of the world and attempts to bring a measure of relief by concentrating the forces of viral panic, capitalist gluttony and veiled militarism into a monster who can be targeted and destroyed, not by official channels but by the strengthening of social bonds, the magic of cell phone connectivity, and a redefinition of family as collectivity.

As in chapter 1, this chapter considers how the past does not disappear once repressed, but instead returns in the present in dangerous ways to inform and reform onscreen relationships in a manner that echoes modern Korean history. Here, I look at how *The Host*, like other recent South Korean cinema, appropriates, mobilizes and transforms the conventions of a range of genres—science fiction/monster, family melodrama, action-adventure, nationalist cinema—to construct a narrative about 21st century historical processes that resonates with local and transnational audiences. The film exploits the logic of each genre in the service of producing a blockbuster that focuses on marginal figures to make recent, traumatic (trans)national history meaningful. Curiously, for a feature that embraces so many of cinema's genres, the film lacks its most steadfast component: heterosexual romance. In lieu of basing its resolution on the formation of the couple, *The Host* substitutes the resolution of the family conflict. Indeed, the film infuses familial re-connectivity with a sense of mission and urgency when the child—swallowed up and taken by the horrible monster—turns out to be alive in a dank and dark mass grave somewhere in Seoul. By eliciting the reunion of atomized family members and requiring that they change their prefixed identities to ensure the monster's defeat, the film suggests that a reinvention of collective social action may be the only outlet available for challenging the monstrous byproducts of development's inhumanity and the free market's duplicitous rhetoric in South Korea.

South Korea in Global Discourse: The World's Model Minority

In the official vernacular spoken by titled experts, South Korea—once poor and primitive, now rich and victorious—provides as a model for a Third World country's teleological ascent. Speaking at the G8 Conference in 2009, U.S. President Barack Obama painted such a picture of South Korea:

...when my father traveled to the United States from Kenya to study, at that time the per capita income and Gross Domestic Product of Kenya was higher than South Korea's. Today obviously *South Korea is a highly developed and relatively wealthy country*, and Kenya is still struggling with deep poverty in much of the country. ...why is that? There had been some talk about the legacies of colonialism and other policies by wealthier nations, and without in any way diminishing that history, the point I made was that *the South Korean government, working with the private sector and civil society, was able to create a set of institutions that provided transparency and accountability and efficiency that*

allowed for extraordinary economic progress, and that there was no reason why African countries could not do the same.¹⁴⁶ (my italics)

Likewise, in his book *In Defense of Global Capitalism*, Swedish scholar Johan Norberg contrasts South Korea with another African country, Zambia. Although on equal economic footing in 1960, South Korea has surpassed Zambia's wealth by twenty-fold in 2000, writes Norberg. These comparisons say, in effect, that South Korea has "made it" in the global capitalist arena, and other third-world countries *could* follow suit if they took individual responsibility for their performance in a global marketplace, instead of blaming the system's inherent inequalities. While these accounts extol South Korea's development as a "miracle" and take African countries to task for their "disastrous track record" (99), they cover over the fact of South Korea's continued poverty.

In tandem, the Korean corporate media has promoted the image of South Korea's winning capitalist modernity. Korean television dramas, in particular, refashioned themselves in the 1990s to cater to emergent middle-class identities founded on trendy consumerism. According to Hyun Mee Kim, new television dramas such as *Sparks* (2000, SBS) and *Endless Love: An Autumn's Tale* (2000, KBS) began to present a pattern of love stories featuring sophisticated "plastic" beauties and their monogamous male admirers.¹⁴⁷ Prior to this shift, foreign audiences perceived South Korean dramas to be chiefly concerned with "primitive" matters. For example, Kim notes that before 1999, the Taiwanese linked Korean dramas with poverty, political violence, patriarchal masculinity and a "lack of material and cultural refinement."¹⁴⁸ However, Kim notes "the Taiwanese's fixed perceptions of Korea as an 'impoverished country' have been transformed by the recent trendy dramas, furnishing the satisfaction of 'material brilliance' and 'simultaneity of desires' to match the capitalist economic development of both countries."¹⁴⁹ Korean dramas circulate capitalist glamour dominated by "breathtaking scenery, luxurious houses, chic outfits, and fabulous professions... to homogenize all class differences and social relationships in Korean society and create an unreal entity of urban spectacle."¹⁵⁰

While South Korea's new growth has raised living standards and brought about emergent freedoms of mobility, technology and individual rights, the historical process of being stripped of tradition for accelerated capitalist modernization remains controversial. For along with new luxuries have arisen new risks. The new international and domestic discourses on South Korea's rising development ignore South Korea's growing class polarization. They turn a blind eye to the unprecedented social suffering—the difficulties of unemployment, alienation, uprootedness, inferiority complexes, and feelings of lack and loss—that urbanization has caused under successive authoritarian regimes. For at the same time that Korean television dramas and official discourses romanticize South Korea

¹⁴⁶ The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, "Press Conference by the President, U.S. Press Filing Center, L'Aquila, Italy" under "Speeches and Remarks, July 10 2009," <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/press-conference-president-laquila-italy-7-10-09> (accessed August 6, 2013).

¹⁴⁷ Hyun Mee Kim, "Korean TV Dramas in Taiwan: With an Emphasis on the Localization," *Korea Journal* 45.4 (2005): 190 -191.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 189.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 193.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 194.

as an emerging capitalist nation defined by “upscale hyper-modern lifestyles,”¹⁵¹ there exists a more critical voice marked by an interest in class struggle. South Korean auteur cinema has emerged, in part, as a form of (sometimes veiled) political expression against authoritarianism and often stages dramatic confrontations within economic and historical modernity to criticize historiographical narratives that justify global capitalism.

Indeed, the “South Korean Film Renaissance” that has bloomed in the new millennium is genealogically tied to cultural activist practices of the 1970s and ’80s that were conceived around a new populist identity called “*minjung*”—those who have been “oppressed politically, exploited economically, alienated sociologically, and kept under-educated in culture and intellectual matters.”¹⁵² If conceived within a global unit, *minjung* rings of various third world movements’ conceptions of “New People’s” activism founded on postcolonial nationalist sentiment. South Korea’s proletariat-centered, avant-garde nationalism propelled the emergence of the National Cinema Movement that has begun to treat film as a “political weapon.”¹⁵³ Auteurs working in the new millennium such as Bong Joon-ho, Jang Sun-woo, and Lee Chang-dong have been painting a picture that challenges their nation’s new identity—and ideological function—as a showcase of U.S. style modernization.

Dissenting from official and pop-cultural discourses, these filmmakers problematize Asia’s globalization with militant urgency, showing that although capitalism has led to greater wealth, it has also spawned new dystopian disparities and insecurities. Such representation emphasizes and empathizes with the marginalized—the landless urban poor in lower-paid and insecure sectors of labor. This cinema’s rejection of normative ideology regarding development may bring relief, pleasure, and points of identification to spectators who have felt victimized by the capitalist world-system, yet have had to hide their opposition in order to conform to their social environment. Along these lines, to understand South Korean cinema’s rising global popularity, it is important to recognize this film culture’s enormous sensitivity to the workings of power from the perspective of the downtrodden. Much of current South Korean cinema appreciates the cultivation of sensitivity to power relations because its intelligentsia was in, or has been influenced by, the National Cinema Movement.¹⁵⁴ This radical film movement was established during military dictatorships that ruthlessly restricted dissidence. Amidst the serious censure of people’s rights, filmmakers and cinephiles reveled in taboo Marxism and critical art films, and called for using the cinema as a political vehicle. Later, these agitators formed their own production companies to produce highly politicized features.

However, though a recognition of South Korea’s local history of cultural activism is vital for understanding the significance of decolonial resistance within this film culture, it alone cannot explain recent South Korean cinema’s rising popularity. The best of

¹⁵¹ Hae-Joang Cho, “Reading the ‘Korean Wave’ as a Sign of Global Shift,” *Korea Journal* 45.4 (2005): 176.

¹⁵² Eungjun Min, Jinsook Joo and Han Ju Kwak, *Korean Film: History, Resistance and Democratic Imagination* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2003), 6.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, 87.

¹⁵⁴ I call this film movement the National Cinema Movement following Min, Joo, and Kwak. David E. James has referred to this movement as the “small-film movement.” See James, “Im Kwon-Taek, Korean National Cinema and Buddhism,” in *Im Kwon-Taek: The Making of a Korean National Cinema*, ed. David E. James and Kyung Hyun Kim (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2002), 49.

current South Korean cinema uses rhapsodic film styles and modernist whimsy to present audiences with narratives of harrowing social realism. To do so, these highly ciné-literate filmmakers appropriate from the world's film traditions to refrain from dull didacticism, and instead aspire toward the technical professionalism the world associates with entertaining Hollywood-style movies. South Korea's modernity provides access to resources unavailable to the periphery. Filmmakers—usually formally trained—have easier means to raise the large funds necessary for elaborate crowd scenes, expensive camera and lighting equipment and seamless special effects in postproduction that contribute to a believable diegesis. And access pertains not only to the machinery, but the insider knowledge vital to executing authentic storytelling about capitalist culture.

One key to South Korea's global reception has been this film body's invocation of semi-peripheral duality in content and form: tales of social suffering balanced by entertaining packaging within popular genres and narrative structures. Perhaps most emblematic of this trend is the socially conscientious blockbuster *The Host*, outstanding for its critical accolades and box office performance. In his book *New Korean Cinema: Breaking the Waves*, Darcy Paquet calls *The Host* “the final maturation of Korean cinema in terms of its growth from a weak, highly regulated industry that operated under the government's hand to a competitive, globalized business that could turn out almost any kind of film.”¹⁵⁵ If officials on the global stage reduce recent Korean history to peaceful capitalist development, *The Host* doubly subverts this figuration by rendering history as (1) South Korean kowtow to the United States via a monstrous mutation and (2) working people's struggle against indifferent and even brutal authorities.

In what follows, I examine how the film appropriates the generic conventions and tropes of the monster film to re-signify real-life horrors that include unpunished crimes against South Koreans by U.S. military personnel, the monetization of security that leads to increasing homelessness, and the brutality of government functionaries that harm rather than help citizens in need of assistance through no fault of their own. Rather than a story of capitalist triumph, late modernity's dissipation of economic and social foundations here engenders a dystopian world in need of human connection and alternative heroes. In the film, the new economy tramples on people's bodies and rights, strains basic human connection and displaces the traditional family. In order for the monster to be defeated, traditional bonds of communal intimacy must be renewed in the face of global inhumanity, and the mobilizing power of new technology must be harnessed so that the people may survive, even in the belly of the beast.

The Host

Besides its narrative, *The Host* is notable for having been released less than a month after the government halved the screen quota system from 146 days to 73 days. The screen quota system is a governmental policy that requires movie theaters to show domestic films for at least a minimum designated percentage of screening days. In South Korea, the quota system was initiated in 1967 to create a local market that could nurture the nation's domestic film industry. When the Ministry of Finance and Economy announced that the quota would be halved as part of the U.S.-South Korea Free Trade Agreement of 2007, the Korean Screen Quota Action Alliance—a group made up of

¹⁵⁵ Paquet, *New Korean Cinema*, 108.

actors, filmmakers, and producers—vocally protested that Hollywood would invariably saturate the domestic market. For years, the MPAA (Motion Picture Association of America) and USTR's (Office of the United States Trade Representative) had fought to reduce the protectionist policy; with the rise of South Korean cinema's international profile, the American organizations asserted South Korea's film industry could now compete with foreign products in an open marketplace.¹⁵⁶ *The Host*'s jaw-dropping success, indeed, suggested a turning point in film history, as it eventually became South Korea's top box office record holder. Bong made news himself when “fresh from acclaim at the Cannes Film Festival for creating a South Korean *Jaws*, director Bong Joon Ho, 36, staged a lone protest outside the Culture Ministry in Seoul, shouting slogans and raising a red placard.”¹⁵⁷ The change in the screen quota system also prompted the International Network for Cultural Diversity (INCD) a “global network of artists, painters, musicians, policy-makers and cultural groups” from 70 countries with 500 members¹⁵⁸ to write a letter to the USTR stating their objections: “We believe the agreement to reduce the screen quota arrived at between the United States and Korea interferes with the democratic will of the Korean people to have their political representatives protect and promote Korean culture...We have no doubt that the Korean film industry will be severely damaged by the decision to slash the screen quota.”¹⁵⁹

Situated within the twinned context of vexed industrial conflict and unprecedented box-office success, *The Host* found critical acclaim from international film communities for its subversive tale and adventurous ride. The Japanese academic film journal *Kinema Junpo* and the French film journal *Cahiers du cinéma* each named the film as amongst the best of 2006.¹⁶⁰ In the United States, *Variety* waxed ecstatic:

“On almost every level, there's never quite been a monster movie like *The Host*. Egregiously subverting its own genre while still delivering shocks at a pure genre level...much-hyped big-budgeter...is a bold gamble that looks headed to instant cult status.”

For the *New York Times* reviewer Manohla Dargis, the film is “a snapshot of a modern South Korea bordering on social anarchy” that addresses “the demons that haunt us from without and within.”¹⁶¹ What are these demons that circulate outside and inside? And more importantly, what can defeat them?

¹⁵⁶ For analysis on Hollywood and international trade relations including South Korea, see Kevin Lee, “‘The Little State Department’: Hollywood and the MPAA’s Influence on U.S. Trade Relations” *Northwestern Journal of International Law & Business* 28 (2008): 390-92. See also B. M. Yecies, “Parleying Culture against Trade: Hollywood’s Affairs with Korea’s Screen Quotas,” *Korea Observer*, 38.1 (2007): 1-32.

¹⁵⁷ Heejin Koo, “Korean Filmmakers, Upstaged by Hollywood, Fight Back (Update3),” *Bloomberg*, September 7, 2006, http://www.bloomberg.com/apps/news?pid=newsarchive&sid=afJd_LrX563U&refer=news (accessed August 6, 2013).

¹⁵⁸ Thomas L. McPhail, “Differing Views of World Culture,” in *Development Communication: Reframing the Role of the Media*, ed. Thomas L. McPhail (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009) 86.

¹⁵⁹ McPhail, 97-98. The letter is dated March 24, 2006.

¹⁶⁰ *Cahiers du cinéma*, Meilleurs films de l’année 2006. Palmares 2006, La liste de la rédaction des Cahiers, <http://www.cahiersducinema.com/article959.html> (accessed August 6, 2013).

¹⁶¹ Manohla Dargis, “It Came From the River, Hungry for Humans (Burp),” *The New York Times*, March 9,

The film opens in 2000 with an exchange between two scientists—one a middle-aged American, the other a younger Korean—inside an autopsy laboratory at a U.S. military base. Inexplicably, the American scientist objects to the dust collecting on hundreds of bottles of formaldehyde sitting on the laboratory's shelves and commands the younger scientist to empty them down the drain and into the Han River—an act of willful contamination that spawns a horrible amphibious monster. The film flashes forward to 2002, to two fishermen startled by the alarming sight of a small, mutant creature. In 2006, a man in a business suit is about to jump off the Han River Bridge, when he looks down and sees “something dark in the water.” At the end of his wits, the suicidal businessman warns that the amorphous shape lurking beneath the water is a harbinger of a scary truth about to be revealed, but the men who have gathered around him refuse to pay attention. Before jumping, he mutters to himself, “Morons, to the very end.” The sequence ends with the camera pulling out into an extra-long shot—reversing the establishing shot's usual order—to show the man's tiny silhouette plunge into the liquid vortex below against a cityscape draped by clouds.

After these title vignettes fade, the film cuts to a bright, day shot of a Korean man with dyed, dirty blonde hair asleep inside a kiosk, his ruddy face surrounded by colorful packaged foods. From here on, *The Host* tells the story of the family who operates a hole-in-the-wall snack stand along the river, catering to the residents of Seoul and international tourists who frequent the Han River as a recreational hub for cycling, walking or picnicking on the grass.

From the outset, the film characterizes this family as a band of losers. Heavy-eyed Gang-du, although ostensibly helping his father run the snack stand, mostly sleeps and collects small coins in a styrofoam ramen bowl to buy his daughter a new cell phone. Gang-du evokes *The Fool*, a type Andrew Spicer calls “a bumbling Everyman [who] exposes the arbitrariness of social regulations and masculine norms...becoming either irrelevant or unattainable.”¹⁶² Yet because Gang-du is unfettered by social mores, he operates from his heart and lacks modern neuroses to embody selfless courage and uncalculated directness. Gang-du's father, the old-timer, laments over his grown idling children, but feels helpless to change anything.¹⁶³ The old man helps take care of Hyun-seo, Gang-du's spirited preteen daughter. Unfettered from tradition's chain of respect, the seventh-grader freely chastises her dad for missing the school's parents' day and loudly frets she feels “too embarrassed” by her passé cellphone. She even complains about her uncle Nam-il, who showed up at her school with alcohol on his breath. Nam-il, an unemployed college graduate, wastes his life drinking and griping against the system. At one point, he says, “I sacrificed my youth for the democratization of our country, and those fuckers won't even give me a job.” Lastly, Nam-joo, the girl's aunt, is a competitive archer plagued by indecisiveness. In a televised contest watched by Hyun-seo and grandpa, Nam-joo first hits a perfect target, but loses her frontrunner status because the allotted shooting time expires before her next shot. Each family member is

2007, <http://movies.nytimes.com/2007/03/09/movies/09host.html> (accessed August 6, 2013).

¹⁶² Andrew Spicer, *Typical Men: The Representation of Masculinity in Popular British Cinema*, (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2001), 102.

¹⁶³ The old-timer's defeatism especially comes across when he says, “If the government says so, we have to accept it. What can we do?” in the scene inside the van.

suggestive of defeat and lack of success and, at the same time, authentic Koreanness whose construction of nationality is emblematic and unquestionable. Alienated, poor, earnest and barely coping with Seoul's techno utopia, the family dramatizes the dystopian, unfulfilled and irrational effects of capitalist modernization on the Korean working class. In all, the family delineates South Korea's peripheral status.

The narrative gains momentum when this idle family crosses the extraordinary amphibian in a horror-filled occasion. While Gang-du is delivering a snack of squid tentacles—a common Korean treat—to customers picnicking along the river, the carnivorous monster makes its debut on land to a blistering drumbeat. The creature—smaller scaled than most movie monsters at about the size of a truck—looks like a biped fish with an exaggerated tail to suggest the mutated traits of multiple animals: the monster can run on land with its rubbery two feet like a mammal, use its lizard-like tail to swing on the bridge like an acrobatic monkey, and has a face dominated by its massive mouth. The camera never gives us access to its shark-like eyes, to give the impression that it has no soul or personality other than a physical prowess and an appetite that lacks any sense of tenderness. The creature tramples the area, knocking people over with its relentless forward motion, not unlike a tank. Running for their lives, Gang-du grabs Hyun-seo's hand, but falls and mistakenly grabs another girl's hand and continues to run away. In silent slow motion—a technique that slows down time to accelerate anticipation—the camera reveals a profile shot of Gang-du pointing, cuts to a fallen Hyun-seo getting up as the creature accelerates behind her, and cuts back to an open-mouthed Gang-du. The monster breaks the scene's surreal silence when it splashes loudly into the river's depths, its gigantic tail wrapped around the 13-year old. The monster's appearance and capture of Hyun-seo begins a struggle that will pit the family against the monster and the state's unhelpful authorities.

The Monstrous Creature

How can we understand *The Host*? Kevin B. Lee situates the film in a genealogy of politicized American horror:

The Host takes its place in the tradition of sociopolitical allegory disguised as sci-fi and horror, from *The Day the Earth Stood Still* and *Them!* to *Dawn of the Dead* and (if you believe Robin Wood) *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*. If Bong has drawn from these or other Hollywood films in creating an unprecedented smash for his domestic film industry, his timing couldn't be better.¹⁶⁴

The Host's portrayal of military paranoia, bureaucratic tyranny, and an unnatural mutant that hosts a deadly global virus resonates with the tradition of post Cold-War American horror as political satire. In *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (Robert Wise, 1951), authorities capture a friendly being (the alien Klaatu) using the full might of the U.S. military, but the alien's escape triggers a manhunt. Similarly, in *The Host*, authorities hold Gang-du hostage and later authorize a manhunt to capture the family. In *Them!* (Gordon Douglas, 1954), exposure to man-made substances (the atomic bomb blast of 1945) causes nature (ants) to mutate into horrific creatures (gigantic ants), triggering the

¹⁶⁴ Kevin B. Lee, "The Han River Horror Show: An Interview with Bong Joon-ho," *Cineaste* 32.2 (Spring 2007), <http://www.cineaste.com/articles/an-interview-with-bong-joon-ho.htm> (accessed August 6, 2013).

state apparatus to establish Martial Law by unleashing military personnel onto the streets and into the river bed's sewer tunnels where soldiers destroy the Queen ants' nest. Likewise, in *The Host*, the U.S. military's chemical waste creates a gigantic mutant fish that lives in sewer tunnels leading to the Han River. Notably, *The Host* is also resonant of the zombie genre, exemplified by cult films such as *Night of the Living Dead* (George A. Romero, 1968) where the unleashing of manmade objects (radioactivity from a space probe) produces unforeseen mutations (the dead are reanimated) that cause a pandemic outbreak of infectious death. These latter works point to science's consequential effects on the natural order. As Tony Magistrale notes, such techno-horror "reflects the particular anxieties of the developed world transformed through technological advances that have occurred—and continue to occur—with such speed that the implications of each new advance cannot be comprehended, much less assimilated, fully."¹⁶⁵ Accordingly, *The Host* is a work of "techno-horror" in which technology changes nature into horror.

At its essence, *The Host* follows a basic Hollywood formula that constructs horror as a confrontation where "normality is threatened by the monster."¹⁶⁶ As a monster film, *The Host* recalls the Japanese monster genre *daikaiju eiga* (Japanese Giant Monster Films), given its similarity to *Gojira* (Honda Ishiro, 1954), which in turn was preceded by *King Kong* (Merian C. Cooper and Ernest B. Schoedsack, 1933).¹⁶⁷ As Nikki J. Y. Lee points out, *Gojira* and *The Host* attribute the monster—Gojira's awakening and the creature's mutation—to U.S. scientific militarism.¹⁶⁸ In addition to these American and Japanese strains, *The Host* is suggestive of the first South Korean monster film *Yongary Monster From The Deep* (Kim Ki-duk, 1967) when the creature gulps gasoline during the climactic ending, as *Yongary* features a biped reptilian from outer space that attacks Seoul to guzzle its gasoline. As a South Korean monster film, *The Host* also draws comparisons to *D-War* (Shim Hyung-rae, 2007), a fantasy film set in premodern Korea and modern-day Los Angeles in which ancient Koreans reincarnated as white Americans battle a dragon that has attacked Los Angeles.

In these films, the monster figures "constellate around the dread of mass destruction, biological mutation, and the environmental impact of pollution resulting from rapid industrialization" as Jay McRoy writes in his study of Japanese horror.¹⁶⁹ Furthermore, these transnational monsters beckon a reading of national identity as one insurmountably caught in dystopian change. By considering how *The Host* uses the available conventions of the monster film to give form to the invisible risks of American militarism, environmental toxification and viral contamination, we can interrogate the vexing conditions surrounding the monster and its nativity to probe South Korea's troubled attachment to (and subordination by) the U.S. How can we read this monstrous

¹⁶⁵ Tony Magistrale, *Abject Terrors: Surveying the Modern and Postmodern Horror Film* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2005), 82.

¹⁶⁶ Robin Wood, *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan and Beyond* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986, 2003), 71.

¹⁶⁷ See Roy Kinnard, *Beasts and Behemoths: Prehistoric Creatures in the Movies* (Metuchen, NJ: The Scarecrow Press, 1988) and David Kalat, *A Critical History and Filmography of Toho's Godzilla Series*. (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 1997).

¹⁶⁸ Nikki J Lee, "The Host," *Science Fiction Film and Television* 1.2 (2008): 349-352.

¹⁶⁹ Jay McRoy, *Nightmare Japan: Contemporary Japanese Horror Cinema* (Amsterdam, NY: Rodopi, 2008), 138.

creature? Is it a doppelganger Other that has returned despite repression? If so, what kind of repression? Is it an effect of the surplus sexual repression of the nuclear family, as widely suggested by American film theorists? Or is it an alternative repression stemming from geopolitics? How does the creature's cinematization resonate with audiences as a digital attraction and a narrative subject?

Indeed, *The Host's* opening scene clarifies a relationship of casual servitude that is suggestive of the historical past and the immediate present; the encounter between a native South Korean and an imperial American is redolent with banality and domination. Borrowing from the Frankenstein horror tradition, the screen title announces "Morgue, U.S. Army base, Yongsan, Korea" to stage the setting of the mad scientist in blue scrubs: an isolated laboratory "filled with elaborate pseudo-scientific apparatus."¹⁷⁰ In a wide shot, an older white American commands a younger Korean man to do something unethical and illegal: pour formaldehyde down the drain (Fig 1). When the Korean cites regulations and the Han River, the American quips, "The Han River is very broad. Let's try to be broadminded about this. Anyway, that's an order, so start pouring." As in the Frankenstein tradition, *The Host's* mad scientist is "the primary disordering impulse" due to his moral failing.¹⁷¹ The camera tracks to show hundreds of brown glass bottles dissolve and melt into a shot of the actual Han River.

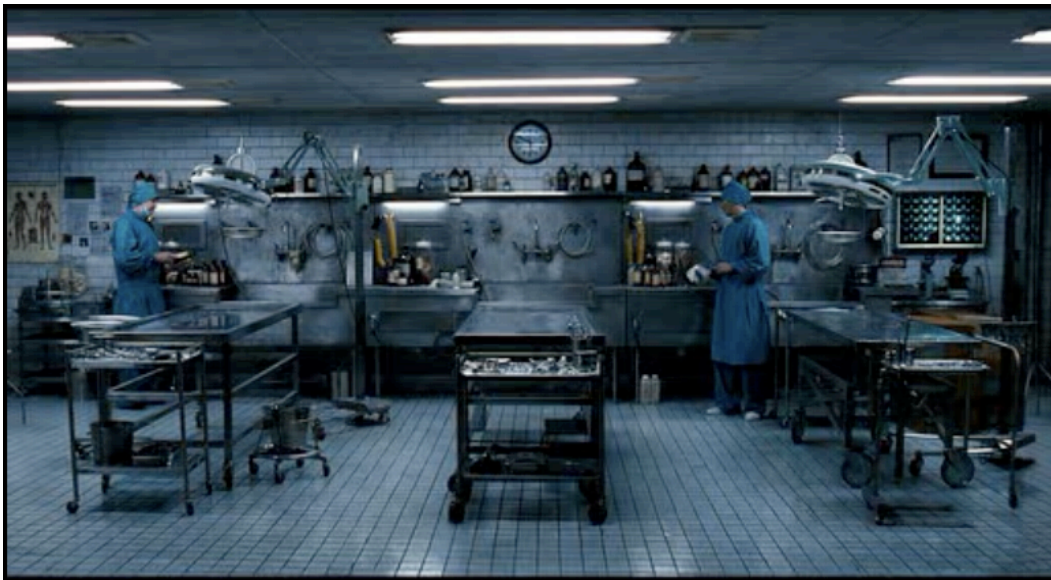


Figure 2.1: The American Mad Scientist and his Korean assistant at the Lab

While outrageous, the scene also feels prosaic and unremarkable. That this scene reanimates an actual historical episode further emphasizes the paradoxical interplay between the normal and the strange, the just and the incredible re-inflected between the diegesis and lived social relations. On February 9, 2000, Albert L. McFarland, the sub-director of the U.S. Eighth Army Mortuary Building, ordered a Korean soldier to dump twenty boxes of formaldehyde and methanol down the drain. Despite the subordinate's

¹⁷⁰ Andrew Tudor, *Monsters and Mad Scientists: A Cultural History of the Horror Movie* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), 29.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 154.

initial refusal since the chemicals would wind up in the Han River, the soldier heeded the order but reported the incident later to army headquarters. The newspaper *Chosun Ilbo* reported in 2006 that the U.S. military knew about *The Host*'s use of the McFarland incident: "The U.S. military newspaper *Stars & Stripes* on Friday ran a story titled, 'USFK morgue incident inspired S. Korean horror movie' that outlines the way that the movie *The Host* is based on a real-life pollution case whose convicted perpetrator remains in his old job here."¹⁷²

Because the scene cites two unrelated yet familiar orders of knowledge, it is eerily plausible. First, it conjures U.S. power over the rest of the world; even if audiences did not know Bong had adapted an actual incident, audiences uninformed of U.S.-Korea relations could find the dynamic between a senior white man and a young Korean man believable given the global sprawl of America's military-imperial complex since 9/11. A reversed scenario of a Korean man bullying a white American man would alternatively achieve a dream effect because South Korea does not possess the U.S.'s prowess. Second, the opening elicits the familiar antics of the mad scientist whose arrogant experiments disturb the natural order and lead to unnatural ramifications. Consequently, the simultaneity of the real and the unreal incites and concentrates the genre's conventional horror and the horror of South Korea's continued powerlessness, even in its own country.

Along with the conjuring of geopolitical injustice, this sequence raises doubts about South Korean sovereignty and democracy in lieu of unrestrained U.S. authority. Due to the constraints placed by U.S. military extraterritoriality, American personnel are immune to Korean law and cannot be prosecuted accordingly. Although Koreans demanded the U.S. military fire McFarland, newspapers in 2006 noted McFarland "still works at the morgue despite receiving a two-year suspended sentence."¹⁷³ In 2002, another U.S. military incident outraged South Korea. On June 13, Sergeant Mark Walker and Sergeant Fernando Nino, uniformed U.S. Forces Korea soldiers, drove a Mi-60 tank that crushed to death two female junior high school students, Shim Mi-son and Shin Hyo-sun.¹⁷⁴ Despite "tens of thousands of South Koreans spilling onto the streets to light candles in the dark to demand accountability,"¹⁷⁵ the soldiers never faced a Korean court and were acquitted of negligent homicide by a U.S. military court.

Such incidents of military criminality and misrule spawned anti-America protests throughout South Korea. Writing in 2004, Katharine Moon notes, "They were protesting perceived American injustice and arrogance toward the Korean nation. Denunciations of the U.S. war on Iraq, anger over the Pentagon's *fait accompli* to reduce and restructure troops stationed in Korea, and disillusionment with U.S. policy toward the peninsula in general and North Korea in particular continued through the months."¹⁷⁶ The problem,

¹⁷² "U.S. Army Keeping Close Tabs on Han River Monster," *Chosun Ilbo* newspaper, English edition, August 11, 2006, http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2006/08/11/2006081161014.html. (accessed August 6, 2013).

¹⁷³ Ibid.

¹⁷⁴ For information on the two 14-year-old Korean girls killed, see: "US soldiers charged for Korean deaths," BBC News World Edition, Asia-Pacific, July 5, 2002, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/2097137.stm>. (accessed August 6, 2013).

¹⁷⁵ Katharine Moon, "South Korea-U.S. Relations," *Asian Perspective* 28.4 (2004): 43-44.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 44, italics in original.

she notes, is “U.S. unilateralism, in policy and process, which is resented by all Koreans, center, left, and right. Koreans who are exploring the relatively new terrain of democracy know first-hand the negative consequences of unilateralism; they endured it during Japanese colonialism and later under military authoritarianism” (59). *The Host* elicits and recognizes South Koreans’ historical experience of confronting an overwhelming force that exercises its horrific power with impunity.

However, while the film figures the scientist’s paternalistic persona in a critical light, *The Host* presents another White-American figure who seemingly embodies a different fantasy of U.S. military identity. During the monster’s rampage in the park, an unnamed, younger white American voluntarily works side-by-side with Gang-du to save people’s lives. The white man turns out to be U.S. Army Sergeant Donald White. Unlike the menacing scientist who commits fraud and abuses his power to endanger the Korean people, White fulfills the claims of courage and goodness attached to fictions like G.I. Joe, All-American hero. After sacrificing his own safety to help others, White dies from the virus he contracts from the creature (the film later reveals White died during surgery and had no virus). These dual nationalized-racialized figures represent the ambivalent mix of love-hate felt by Koreans, and much of the world, regarding U.S. intervention. Rather than pure anti-Americanism, the transition from peripheral to modern westernization simultaneously provokes gratitude and resentment. The trope of American military heroism is not unusual in South Korean cinema. For example, an early sequence in *Tidal Wave* (Je-gyun Yun, 2009) shows white American men in uniform use their military helicopter to rescue Korean citizens during a tsunami. *The Host* mediates the characterization of Donald White from a developing nation’s perspective to signify the wishful desire for egalitarian social relations with America. By killing off White, the film emplots a nativist overtaking of even foreign benevolence to regain sovereignty. Ultimately, White’s death signals a rejection of U.S. military presence. The sequence suggests Koreans cannot return to a past that predictably deferred to the U.S. military as South Korea’s “savior.”¹⁷⁷ The incompatibility of South Korea’s democratic autonomy with U.S. extraterritoriality reveals the internal contradictions of U.S. presence in the developing world.

Unwittingly but inevitably, the formaldehyde changes the Han River’s ecology to birth a mutant creature. Created not by sexual reproduction, but military pollution, the accidental creature portends new transnational problems. In *Monstrous Imagination*, Marie H  lene-Huet points out the term “monster” hails from the Latin roots *monstare* (to show) and *monere* (to warn),¹⁷⁸ and “belongs to the etymological family that spawned the word *demonstrate* as well” (6, italics in original). If in *Gojira*, “Honda saw his monster as a narrative device to discuss the terror of the nuclear age,”¹⁷⁹ the creature in *The Host* demonstrates the risks of the globalization era, described by Mark Berger in *The Rise of*

¹⁷⁷ The idea that the U.S. “saved” South Korea has been widely disseminated. For instance, after the Battle of Incheon in 1950, President Syngman Rhee famously said to General Douglas MacArthur, “We love you as the savior of our race.” See Douglas MacArthur, *Reminiscences* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1964), 356.

¹⁷⁸ Marie H  lene-Huet, *Monstrous Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 6.

¹⁷⁹ Kalat, 15.

East Asia as “an era of post-Cold War capitalist dystopia” (283) characterized by Western domination, uneven development and social polarization.

Rather than a gargantuan-like *Gojira*, the creature is sized to a more “human” scale, which defamiliarizes the usual context for reading the monster film. By reducing its size, the film disrupts the Asian monster film’s founding premise of otherworldly artificiality and makes the monster more vulnerable to social reality. According to Bong, the monster design came from a “strange discovery” he read in the newspapers about “a deformed fish with an S-shaped spine caught in the Han River.”¹⁸⁰ By situating the creature in our growing sensitivity to mutated wildlife under Global Warming, the film flirts with the outlandish yet credible notion that such a mutant could exist undiscovered, in transit between scientific possibility and horror’s implausibility.

Indeed, the film consciously constructs and incorporates reactions of incredulity between onlookers and the creature during its initial sightings to incite and identify with the viewer’s suspension of disbelief. In the sequence before the creature makes its debut at the park, a diverse crowd gathers by the river’s edge and show collective curiosity at a veiled underwater form. In the ambient noise, the soundtrack highlights the voices of the Pakistani onlookers who are speaking Urdu to mark the space and the suspense as global and public. When the grey, fish-like creature finally presents itself, it is defined by an uncanny physical prowess. The manner in which the creature mows down the crowd at the park harks back to the incident of the girls killed by the U.S. military tank (Figure 2.2).



Figure 2.2: The tank-like creature attacks Hyun-seo

Because the camera avoids its eyes, the creature appears inscrutable and without personality. With its enormous mouth that opens vertically and horizontally like a hexagon, the creature appears driven entirely by its voracious appetite. During its

¹⁸⁰ Giuseppe Sedia, “An Interview with Bong Joon-ho,” Koreanfilm.org, February 14, 2008, Translated by Kim Oen Joung, <http://www.koreanfilm.org/bongjh.html> (accessed August 6, 2013).

rampage, the creature swallows people whole, including an unsuspecting woman in headphones, a fat man, and Donald White. The backdrop of the crowd-creature chase sequence moves from scenes of grassy “nature” to cars and skyscrapers to shift the creature into the larger narrative framework of South Korean city life.

While its corporeal mutation bears the earth’s ecological crisis, the creature, in turn, hosts a virus capable of destroying humankind. Given the film presents the creature’s genesis as traceable to the Morgue at the U.S. Army base in Yongsan, rather than an untraceable risk of industrialization at large, *The Host* points to the hierarchical relationship between the white American and the Korean as the culprit behind the potential epidemic. The U.S.’s enforcement of its world order and South Korea’s collusion in upholding an unethical regime is thus underscored. Such knowledge, however, is not made public in the depicted news coverage of the virus. Though the news coverage appeals to the American scientific knowledge of the U.S. Center for Disease Control to confirm that, “the creature from the Han River, as with the Chinese civet wild cat and SARS is THE HOST of this deadly new virus,” the Center for Disease Control cannot unravel the mystery of the creature’s origins. As viruses are uncontrollable in their deterritorialized formlessness, globalization’s worldwide and highly networked interdependence accelerates the spread of epidemics. This suggests that the relationship of imperial servitude responsible for the virus has outlived its usefulness, as it has now become the harbinger of humanity’s self-destruction.

Thus, the social context of this horror film is not the psychoanalytic dynamic of repression played out in the nuclear family, but the longstanding allegorical dynamic of historical domination. If, as Paul Wells has argued, “the fundamental theme of the horror film” is the desire for “the presence of an ‘order’ which seeks to evidence and maintain the idea that there is someone or something to believe in which justifies material existence,”¹⁸¹ then *The Host* calls into question the fantasy of U.S. militarist order. Representative of today’s global risk culture from the vantage of a developed Third-world country, the creature shows the consequence of South Korea’s historical servitude and the shortsightedness of U.S. ambition. Given the U.S. notion of order has monstrous consequences, *The Host* suggests non-American heroes must reintroduce the primordial order of humanity to balance American militarist and capitalist’s inhumanity.

While the film pertinently problematizes U.S.-Korea relations from its semi-peripheral vantage of an emergent autonomous democracy still riddled by the remnants of foreign domination, *The Host* is also notable for its mediation of historical events into a cinematic form. Visual instances of “the historical”—the girls killed by the tank, the bad polluting mortician McFarland, the mutant fish found in the Han River—dissolve specks of realism into a genre notable as fantasy, a fictional dreamscape existing beyond the realm of reason. Instead of a documentarian-styled rendering that might contain the anxiety of lived trauma by its realistic affect, *The Host* amplifies the threat of the real by placing a fantastical or outrageous charge onto these historical events. In *S/Z*, Roland Barthes considers how the textual and the extra-textual form connotations to suggestively open narrative meaning:

Analytically, connotation is determined by two spaces: a sequential space, a series of orders, a space subject to the successivity of sentences, in which meaning

¹⁸¹ Wells, 6.

proliferates by layering; and an agglomerative space, certain areas of the text correlating other meanings outside the material text, and with them, forming a ‘nebulae’ of signifieds (8).¹⁸²

In *The Host*, the overlapping of the textual screenplay and the extra-textual news events produces connotations that obscure the opposition between fact and fiction and renders reality more susceptible to horror. The film’s emplotment of a beginning event that explains the story’s “natural” course of events seems highly indicative of traditionalist, humanistic story-making, if it were not for the film’s use of parody to elicit contradictory and heterogeneous film readings. The film renders self-aware moments in the text that satirize and derealize narrative expectations of the diegetic filmic “event” to recapitulate the so-called “evolutionary reality” of history and story as objective, teleological closure. What is comprehensible is not the film’s imitation of, or lack of, historical objectivity, but history’s illogical resonance as something that stays in the psyche, long after the passage of an event. The U.S. military conjures not only immediacy, but the deep-rooted ambivalence around South Korea’s foundational nativity because South Korea’s modern identity and nationhood has been interpolated via the American Cold War. The long-term uncertainty signified by the U.S. military presence portends the peril of future warmongering, as the U.S. military’s presence is an outcome of the local Korean War and the international Cold War. While the Cold War is over, the Korean War is not over. The U.S. military presence in South Korea is a reminder that U.S. interference caused national division, and that to resolve that mistake, the most frightening prospect of all might visit Koreans: nuclear war to settle the two Koreas’ differences.¹⁸³

Chungmuro Pastiche

The appropriation and resignification of familiar historical incidents blurs *The Host*’s formal boundaries because of the psychic and cinematic interplay amongst fact and fiction, memory and imagination. Likewise, problems of categorization arise around *The Host* because the film, while using the tropes of horror, troubles genre with its paternal melodrama and its heist subtext. American film critics have compared *The Host* to several American films to better proffer its intelligibility. Derek Elley posits, “In its mix of genre-bending, political asides and character emphasis, there are strong parallels with Larry Cohen’s 1982 cult classic, *Q: The Winged Serpent*.”¹⁸⁴ Manohla Dargis likens *The Host* to the documentary *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006, Davis Guggenheim) and the independent feature *Little Miss Sunshine* (2006, Jonathan Dayton and Valerie Faris).¹⁸⁵ The difficulty of pinning down *The Host* to a specific genre arises out of the film’s pastiche turn. As Dargis notes, “*The Host* is a loose, almost borderline messy film, one that sometimes feels like a mash-up of contrasting, at times warring movies, methods and moods.”¹⁸⁶ The film pulls from many genres, including the monster horror, broken

¹⁸² Roland Barthes, *S/Z* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1974), 8.

¹⁸³ See Chapter 1 of this dissertation for more analysis on the U.S.’s role in Korea’s national division.

¹⁸⁴ Derek Elley, “The Host,” *Variety*, May, 22, 2006, <http://variety.com/2006/film/reviews/the-host-1200516065/> (accessed August 6, 2013).

¹⁸⁵ Dargis, “It Came From the River.”

¹⁸⁶ Ibid.

family, paternal melodrama, ride blockbuster, group heist, and underdog-against-the-system films.

Speaking on the composite character of recent South Korean cinema, the article “Korean Films in 2006 and 2007: Analysis and Outlook” published by the *Korean Film Council 2006* observes, “For some time now, Chungmuro [the South Korean film industry] has favored the interbreeding of different genres in eccentric and creative auteur films such as *Save the Green Planet*.”¹⁸⁷ The article categorizes *The Host* with the South Korean historical drama *The King and The Clown* (Jun-ik Lee, 2005) because both films are “compounded and multi-layered stories full of B-movie sentiments, with a nod toward social minorities.”¹⁸⁸ In *The King and The Clown*, two male street performers of the early 16th century—one masculine and the other feminine—get arrested after performing skits that mock the King. To stay alive, the homoerotic performers make a bargain that entangles them into the corrupt royal circle and the King’s spiraling madness. While one film is a historical drama and the other is a monster movie, both *The King and The Clown* and *The Host* subvert and satirize Korean Confucian hierarchy and allegorize the plight of class struggle through poor characters on the margins. Similarly, *Tidal Wave* plots the class struggle between small business people and corporate developers seeking to build malls in Busan. These films also share in common superior box office success: they are amongst the five South Korean films that have each sold over 10 million tickets.¹⁸⁹

Given these films’ configuration as novel-seeming pastiche and narration of disenfranchisement, these films appear to exceed precise genre classification, even though they are symbolically attached to popular genres to ease discursive circulation. These films’ “compounded, mixed and multi-layered tendencies”¹⁹⁰ points to their “genre” as the genre-full frenzy of postmodern pastiche, predicated on “the frantic economic urgency of producing fresh waves of ever more novel-seeming goods” via “aesthetic innovation and experimentation.”¹⁹¹ By appropriating popular Hollywood styles and tropes and, and by embracing different genres with disregard for provenance, recent South Korean cinema bears in part the tag of postmodernist invention. But what is interesting is how this cinema exploits the “neutral practice”¹⁹² of pastiche mimicry. Films like *The Host* resignify genres such as the monster film by joining pastiche with South Korean political motivation to produce parody.

In the case of *The Host*, the monster receives the most attention, but Bong suggests in an interview that the monster film is a convenient ruse:

In monster films you typically have a scientific reason for why the monster came to be and what their weaknesses are. Most of the story focuses on the monster. But in this film the monster comes out right at the beginning and then it's mainly

¹⁸⁷ Jong-do Lee, “Korean Films in 2006 and 2007: Analysis and Outlook” in *Korean Cinema 2006* (Seoul: Korean Film Council KOFIC, 2006), 9.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., 4.

¹⁸⁹ See “List of highest-grossing domestic films in South Korea,” Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cinema_of_Korea#All-time_box_office_records (accessed August 6, 2013).

¹⁹⁰ Jong-do Lee, 4.

¹⁹¹ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 4-5.

¹⁹² See Jameson’s description of pastiche as neutral practice: Ibid., 17.

about the family, what each character is about, the details of their stories. I think that's why the film retains a human aspect. If you want to be really picky about it, I don't think you can say *The Host* is a monster movie. It's more of a kidnapping movie. The kidnapper just happens to be a creature. It's all about the family coming together and what they overcome.¹⁹³

Unlike other monster movies, the threat of the monster disappears almost completely during many sequences, even when characters are walking along the river and other monster movies would clearly convey that they are in danger at every moment. Instead, the film suggests the true dangers are the wild humans who make up the jungle of capitalism: the police state, the indifferent bureaucracy, the exploitative media, and friends who betray friends for money.

A Cinema that Centralizes the Margins: *Minjung's* National Cinema Movement

Hence, while English-speaking audiences who have consumed a steady diet of Hollywood fare can understand and analyze this film through the allegorical Hollywood horror film tradition, attention to South Korean cinema's counter-hegemonic local history is key to understanding the family's plotline. As the monster allegorizes South Korea's shadowy experience of modernity under U.S. militarism, the family allegorizes South Korea's common people, the *minjung*, who are marginalized from the dominant power structure. Given *The Host* is fraught with allusions to activism, a discussion of South Korean cinema's activist history is in order.

The Park Chung Hee and Chun Do Hwan military dictatorships of the 1960s, '70s and '80s incited a milieu of overt and covert resistance comprised of labor, student, and women's groups that sought political democracy, reunification with North Korea and the ousting of U.S. capitalism and militarism.¹⁹⁴ During this time, the government used film to promote its own agenda: anti-communist ideology, an obedient populace, the government as just and constructive, and the image of nation building as a smooth transition fusing tradition and modernity for everyone's benefit.¹⁹⁵ As such, this period is called the "Dark Age" of South Korean cinema. Dal Young Jin notes:

The Korean film industries – both film producers and importers – were severely regulated by the government between the early 1960s and the late 1980s. Korea's authoritarian regime tightly controlled the media through both ownership and regulation. The two autocrats – Park Chung Hee (1961–79) and Chun Doo Hwan (1980–8) – used their legal resources to put the film business under government control, as they did with other media industries such as the newspaper and broadcasting industries.¹⁹⁶

¹⁹³ Kevin B. Lee, *Cineaste* interview

¹⁹⁴ For a discussion of military rule in a film studies context, see Kyung Hyun Kim, *Remasculinization*, 15–19.

¹⁹⁵ Min, Joo and Kwak, *Korean Film: History*, 69.

¹⁹⁶ Dal Yong Jin, "Cultural Politics in Korea's Contemporary Films Under Neoliberal Globalization," *Media, Culture & Society* 28.1 (2006): 8.

For activists, South Korea's conventional cinema produced dreadful effects: it sided with the oppressors via ideological distortions, distracted the masses from social crisis, promoted disposable consumerism, placed profit over art, and made dead, vertical, and unilateral films closed to viewers' critical participation.

In this context, filmmakers and cinephiles mobilized the underground National Cinema Movement (*Minjok Youngwha Woondong*; NCM).¹⁹⁷ While filmmakers experimented with taboo topics and contested industry orthodoxy, film enthusiasts circulated underground publications and formed "cinema clubs" that screened foreign film cultures. The NCM modeled its film production after Italian Neorealism and Latin American Third Cinema, emphasizing realism over fantasy to raise consciousness. Correspondingly, filmmakers represented Korean history as a narrative of struggle forged through foreign oppression and people's resistance—not a storied example of capitalism. The 1983 publication *For New Cinema* published by the Seoul Cinema Group (*Seoul Youngwha Jipdhan*) defines this cinema as "a marginal and politicized cinematic practice that resists the imitated version of Hollywood's dominant modes of production and creates new forms and contents. Its main goal is to liberate *Minjung* (popular) and to fight for its progressive agendas. It must be placed in the center of *Minjung Woondong* (movement) and closely interrelated with the national labor struggle."¹⁹⁸ Over time, this film culture infiltrated commercial cinema, shifting the NCM from a "subversive movement" to a "new standard" for rethinking cinema's role in society.¹⁹⁹ Likewise, Jinhee Choi notes "the Korean film renaissance [of the 2000s] may be viewed as a reorientation and/or an expansion of the cultural movement of the 1980s, with its focus changing from *minjung* to *daejung* (the mass)."²⁰⁰

One way to discern the NCM's impact is to examine two sub-stories in *The Host* that are relatively discontinuous from the film's "family-versus-monster" high concept. In these extra enfigurations, Bong's political intention comes into relief because the ex-activist corporate worker and the homeless brothers do not greatly impact the overall plot, in effect producing an exhibition in the guise of narrative. *The Host* deploys these figures to cinematize money's correlation with security under capitalism, making the presence of class critique known and transparent. The sequence with Nam-il's college friend, for example, shows economics has eclipsed human relations. When Nam-il asks the ex-activist (now employed at a telecommunications firm), "You must make 60, 70 grand a year?" the friend answers, "My credit card bill is 60, 70 grand." With the pretense of using his firm's cutting-edge computers to locate Hyun-seo's cell phone, the friend stages a trap, betraying their friendship for the reward money offered for Nam-il's capture. In addition to this display of greed and ethical compromise, the film deploys the figure of homeless children to anchor the problem of economic insecurity. The older brother voices this problem: "Gosh, it's hard to make a living." Like the creature, the two brothers—a younger teenager and a little boy—live a nomadic existence in Seoul's sewer

¹⁹⁷ Here, "national cinema" is more akin to mean nationalist cinema, with "nationalist" carrying the postcolonial sentiment of liberation from colonial and imperial forces.

¹⁹⁸ Min, Joo and Kwak, *Korean Film: History*, 72.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 111.

²⁰⁰ Jinhee Choi, 27. For other accounts on the minjung movement's influence on Korean cinema, see 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), 66-69.

system. The film underscores its political empathy for the poor when the boys break into the Park family's snack shop. The child finds money and wants to take it, but the older brother explains how taking cash is theft, but taking food is *seo-ri*, a traditional Korean practice to mean "a right of the hungry" that says the poor are justly entitled to food. The word "*seo-ri*" reappears when the old-timer explains Gang-du raised himself through *seo-ri*. This connection of *seo-ri* produces an intimacy between Gang-du and the homeless children to elicit empathy for the poor. Moreover, the hunger and deprivation experienced by the children grossly contrasts against the monster's voracious consumption, to visualize the human cost of capital; this contrast is suggestive of the rising polarity between the penniless and the newly middle-class whose infection by affluenza causes bloodthirsty consumerism and uncaring opportunism at the cost of humanity itself.

These scenarios of class critique suggest the impact of South Korea's modern history of cultural activism, yet *The Host* does not provide an easy set of expectations on how audiences should behave after encountering the film. After the triumphant defeat of the monster in a street-protest styled showdown, *The Host* could end on a happy note. However, the film's very last scene suggests that monsters are still out there. Months later, Gang-du and the little boy are back in the room adjoined to the snack shack, preparing to eat dinner. As Gang-du looks out the window, he watches the river and grabs his shotgun, as if threatened. The scene's use of contrasts between the inside and the outside—the cold snow versus the hot rice, the barren city versus the abundant dinner, and the vast river versus the vulnerable folk—invokes a danger that cannot be contained, an epidemic that lurks in the shadows to transmit its unforeseeable plague. However, as the television in the background comments that the virus was never real, the film suggests the problem has been resolved on the plane of the bureaucratic and that the host was a government hoax. However, regardless of the news, Gang-du is not at peace. With its ambivalent ending, *The Host* is reminiscent of the cinema that began to question the NCM's didacticism: "instead of offering closure to historical questions, the New Korean Cinema opted for an indeterminate open-endedness; rather than firmly shoring up a historical subjectivity, the[se] films denied easy accessibility to its coherence and salience."²⁰¹ Consequently, in the new millennium when political liberalization and active government support has helped South Korean cinema flourish as a competitive industry, the NCM's legacy of activism continues, albeit with distance. Rob Wilson similarly points out this trend in his discussion of Park Chan Wook's oeuvre: "...the activism of the eighties has not died out. Such social motivation has gone underground and become more subliminal and psychic in uncanny, minor, or more consciously innovative ways that... demand global/local interpretation."²⁰²

The Park family

Although free of most censorship, and working under different conditions, the question of negotiating political idealism with industrial commercialism remains prominent for South Korean cinema. How does a film honor the NCM—its opposition to the "ideology of the ruling class" in favor of "the historical importance and necessity of

²⁰¹ Kyung Hyun Kim, *Remasculinization*, 20.

²⁰² Rob Wilson, "Killer Capitalism on the Pacific Rim: Theorizing Major and Minor Modes of the Korean Global," *boundary 2* 34:1 (2007): 132.

class struggles,” and the use of film as a forum for “Korean self-expression and cultural liberation from the West”—while still making money?²⁰³ How does one make a politically alternative film that fiscally competes with mainstream films?

The film’s emphasis on family meets the imperative to politicize in manifold ways. First, the film characterizes each family member through dysfunction and foibles, including Nam-joo’s hesitance and Nam-il’s alcoholism. This imperfection goes hand-in-hand with their peripheral class status. As operators of an unpretentious snack stand, the Park family diverges from the clean-cut professional held up as the model of urban success in dominant popular entertainment. They are neither chic nor rich; the old-timer points out he sold ramen so Nam-il could go to college. In their accessibility as “losers” oppressed and struggling in a capitalist schema, the family meets the NCM standard of everyday *minjung* protagonists. As such, the Parks’ social standing of capitalist failure marks their proletarian identity, which in turn comprises their normativity rather than their Otherness. Despite their individual failings and their dysfunction as a family, they are still loveable in a bumbling sort of way and provide a dose of comic normalcy against which their outlandish predicament becomes more believable. Likewise, the family’s foibles suggest genuine humanity in contrast to the creature’s perfect inhumanity. Moreover, the film creates a distinction between Nam-il and Nam-joo—who struggle to succeed yet remain on the periphery as they fall just short of the mark (he has his education, she is a highly trained athlete)—and the father and brother who operate the snack stand. The latter are more on the social and economic periphery, and seem doomed to remain there as long as they live.

The Snack Stand as Home Front

In *The Host*, the locus of the snack stand functions as the film’s version of the family home. The film draws attention to the snack stand from its inception: after the title sequence fades, we are introduced to Gang-du through the shop window with a close-up of his face pressed sideways against packs of colorful gum and candy. As Gang-du sleeps behind the concession stand, a little boy tries to grab some candy until an older boy ushers him away. The small stand—analogue to the corner neighborhood store—appears as a relic of a time before free-market restructuring. It embodies the post-war period when poverty and periphery defined South Korea. The stand emblemizes the coexistence of the third world within this advanced industrialized economy.

As Gang-du and his father have lived there all their lives, in an adjacent back room with Gang-du’s daughter, the storefront is the home front of the new economy’s class warfare. Representing the low-paid, insecure, and low-skilled segment of the service-based economy, the location of the family home within this work place is symptomatic of the family’s position at the bottom of the socio-economic hierarchy. The shack is located along the river to be accessible to leisure-seekers and tourists. This location evokes the precariousness of a transitory life based on consumer demand, fleeting encounters, and a “service industry” that caters to a global “tourist”

²⁰³ Min, Joo and Kwak, *Korean Film: History*, 108-9.

community.²⁰⁴ Without any barriers between the river and the snack shack, the home appears especially vulnerable to the monster's whims. Gobbling everything in sight, driven by the sheer desire not only to consume, but also to accumulate the "products" (that is, people) it consumes, the monster conjures the cold-blooded forces of global consumerism gone awry. The working class constitutes the snack stand and is most vulnerable to the appetite of the militarized global economy.

By narrating the film from the perspective of protagonists who work and live in the snack stand from start to finish, *The Host* commits to the margins as normative. This characterization of the working class as normative (and eventually heroic) is in contrast with 1970s Hollywood horror's treatment of class. Robin Wood writes that Hollywood horror projects onto the proletariat the condition of Otherness: "the bourgeois obsession with cleanliness, which psychoanalysis shows to be an outward symptom closely associated with sexual repression, and bourgeois sexual repression itself, find their inverse reflections in the myths of working-class squalor and sexuality."²⁰⁵ Similarly, Carol Clover writes about the city/country split in American horror films where country dwellers make up the "threatening rural Other" characterized by poverty, under-education, unemployment and squalid living to establish rape-revenge confrontations between city and rural dwellers that are further complicated by gender differences.²⁰⁶ Writing on 19th century Europe and the Gothic literary tradition, José B. Monleon notes, "the 'lower' classes formed a monstrous category (comprising beggars, murderers and workers) intrinsically attached to the bourgeois society and indispensable to its subsistence."²⁰⁷

Whereas lack of money can cinematically connote sexual primitivism and loss of control to appease middle-class guilt and justify class stratification, *The Host* instead uses impoverishment to connote the film's authenticity as a work of art for "the people." Alongside this tactic, *The Host* dispenses with problems of classed heterosexuality as perversion by excluding relevant scenarios, from rape to romantic love. In tandem, the film's minimization of normative femininities—i.e., the mother, wife or girlfriend film phenotypes—seems a conscientious thwarting of cultural critics who consider the return of repressed sexual energy a primary paradigm for understanding horror conventions.²⁰⁸ Poverty instead serves as a throwback that re-appropriates South Korea's premodern condition to assert its native "us-ness" rather than otherness. Perhaps because poverty symbolizes shame and disavowal for a semi-peripheral nation just recently emerged from the disarray of war and paucity, it seems the film employs another kind of characterization designed to elicit national pride, in effect recasting the poor Parks in a sympathetic and normative light. For example, as a former student activist, Nam-il

²⁰⁴ The growth of the service sector and a cheap labor force is a key feature of neoliberal new capitalism in Korea and elsewhere such as the U.S. See Jennifer Jihye Chun, *Organizing at the Margins: The Symbolic Politics of Labor in South Korea and the United States* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009), 44-67.

²⁰⁵ Wood, 67.

²⁰⁶ Carol Clover, *Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 124.

²⁰⁷ José B. Monleon, "1848: The Assault on Unreason," in *The Horror Reader*, ed. Ken Gelder (New York: Routledge, 2009), 27.

²⁰⁸ Robin Wood explains, "in a society built on monogamy and family there will be an enormous surplus of repressed sexual energy, and that what is repressed must always strive to return." See Wood, 72.

signifies the nation's protest movements of the 1980s and '90s. Likewise, as a woman archer on the national team, Nam-joo draws out national pride, as the women's South Korean team has captured the gold medal in archery in every Olympic competition since 1984. In effect, the projection of nationalist characterization disables essentialist reduction of working class people. Moreover, the film is constructed as a vehicle for and about working class solidarity: it is the family who eventually elicits cheers as heroes, turning from fragmented fools to a collective of cool in their attempts to rescue Hyun-seo.

Questions of Gender

Despite the film's erasure of heterosexual relations that might draw negative attention to questions of female sexual objectification and other problems attached to the male gaze, it is noteworthy that the film has been critiqued as sexist. Sunny Yoon notes female characters follow pre-established patterns of female victimization and inactivity:

The Host presented greater complexity in its portrayal of women ... Yet the girl is portrayed stereotypically as the ultimate bait of the monster and the aunt's defensive attack is shown to be humorously weak and outdated. In contrast to the male characters in the film who act, discuss and even cause trouble, these women remain largely silent props. Moreover, the other images of women in the film are as victims of the monster's brutal attacks with no means to act in their self-defense. Men are also attacked, but women's fatalities are rendered in far greater dramatic detail.²⁰⁹

While it is important to be vigilant about the portrayal of female characters and be mindful of the allure attached to the gorging of female bodies, we must also acknowledge conscientious deployment of gender. As no specific sequences are cited to support her claims, Yoon's confident declaration is suspect. In terms of fatalities, the creature memorably kills defenseless men, such as the sanitation worker and the two brothers. In addition, the sequence in which the creature kills the old-timer stresses the folly of patriarchal bravado by exposing the old-timer's absolute weakness when up against the creature. Moreover, as a figure of the paternal melodrama, the old man suggests a problematic patriarchy that instantiates lack, ineptitude, neglect and pessimism. This figuration of the Father is not unlike the film's definition of bureaucratic authority—the police, the medical establishment—as failing the family and the South Korean people by neglecting Gang-du's experiential intelligence. As David Rodowick notes of masculinity in the melodrama, “Either pathetically castrated, or monstrosly castrating, the figuration of patriarchal authority completely fail[s] the social and sexual economies of the melodramatic narrative.”²¹⁰

Along with the rendering of brutality against male bodies—a recurrent trope in South Korean cinema—we may want to keep in mind *The Host* could have subjugated

²⁰⁹ Sunny Yoon, “The Neoliberal World Order and Patriarchal Power: A Discursive Study of Korean Cinema and International Co-production,” *Visual Anthropology* 22.2 (2009): p. 204.

²¹⁰ David N. Rodowick, “Madness, Authority and Ideology: The Domestic Melodrama of the 1950s” in *Home is Where the Heart is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film*, ed. Christine Gledhill (London: BFI Publishing, 2002), 278.

femininity to the trauma of sexual violence, given how the monster film and Korean national cinema have used rape scenes to demonstrate such ideological motivations as women's need for protection and the injustice of raped woman as a corollary of the raped nation. In the text's discursive production of Hyun-seo, the film challenges the audience's preconception about femininity by refashioning the victim-story of the schoolgirl killed by an American tank into one of audacity. Under the constraints the diegesis places on Hyun-seo, the girl is brave and resourceful: she inspects dead bodies for cell phones, she ties up clothes to create a ladder and she faces the monster unarmed. Moreover, in the film's climactic ending—connoted via a mode of invisibility over femininity's usual context of sexual hypervisibility—Hyun-seo's small body shelters the even smaller boy and hangs on to him so that he would not be chewed up by the monster, to transform her from damsel in distress to hero. While her death may be disappointing and conventional, dying sanctifies her as an activist martyr—a symbol of self-sacrifice than a casualty of patriarchal submission. Significantly, rather than being the object or terrain of struggle for competing adult agents to save, she herself abjures that role to manifest a subjective maturity.

But moreover, it is illusive to read cinematic femininity, the object of mediated image, as having the capacity to align mimetically with the complicated and differentiated psyche and subjectivity of “actual women.” In her essay on U.S. film culture's cinematic projection of Asian/American women, Laura Hyun Yi Kang emphasizes, “image, identity, and subjectivity do not and cannot line up with each other.”²¹¹ The cinematic projection of gender manifested in *The Host* shifts away from traditional agendas of women's patriarchal submission towards a look at men's past failure as parents and patriarchs and their need for redemption. In this regard, rather than focus on the non-equivalence of male and female characterization in *The Host*, I wish to consider how the film resignifies family and masculinity to destabilize Confucian patriarchal understanding of familial duty and hierarchy.

Paternal Melodrama

Without the presence of a mother or a grandmother, the glue that holds together ostensibly “natural” domesticity, the film's decentered household combines the fragments of extended kinship and the single-parent families. Devoid of the regional, seasonal and ritualistic framework of agrarian living where communal division of labor and shared code of conduct ensure the village's survival, urban capitalist modernity has engendered previously unimaginable atomization for organizing personal life. In Korea's prior historical system, the norm was for many nuclear family units and generations to co-exist under one roof in a patriarchal extension. Today, with increasing acceptance of the diversification of personal life, the modern is continually mediating the traditional to produce mobile, interstitial and individualized domiciles. The effect has been to break down traditional family structures and organizing institutions to cause the family's “reinvention.” In particular, the absence of both Gang-du's mother and his wife is evocative of new definitions of womanhood premised not on Confucian motherhood, but on her socio-economic individuation as a modern subject under the twentieth and twenty-

²¹¹ Laura Hyun Yi Kang, *Compositional Subjects: Enfiguring Asian/American Women* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 75. See Ch.2, “Cinematic Projections: Marking the Desirous Body,” p. 71-113.

first century's capitalist forces. Fatherhood as the primary caretaker becomes the marker of radical social change brought about by the new economy.

Specifically, by removing mothers—the old-timer and Gang-du are wifeless—the film explores the problem of male paternity to construct a “paternal melodrama” based on the father's lamentation over the loss of his child, his past inability to nurture and the greater impact of this inadequacy when coupled with the mother's absence. In her reading of maternal melodramas, Mary Anne Doane notes, “the true mother is defined in terms of pure presence: she is the one who is there” while “paternal power... often manifests itself more strongly through absence.”²¹² Premised on motherhood's naturalization as immediacy, obviousness, and there-ness, the conflict that arises in the maternal melodrama is that of discrepancy, when mother is not there. In *The Host*, this scenario is the unspoken starting point. With mother gone, the children are especially tragic. In such a scenario, when modern conditions give mothers the new option of absence, a new nurturing presence must replace her because a child's need for loving connection is primordial and unchanging. The need for paternal presence in the absence of mothers and the dissolution of community is likewise raised in the films *The Chaser* (Na Hong-jin, 2008) *Speed Scandal* (Kang Hyeong-cheol, 2008), *Baby and Me* (also known as *Baby and I*, Jin-yeong Kim, 2008), *The Man from Nowhere* (Lee Jeong-beom, 2010), and *Miracle in Cell No. 7* (Lee Hwan-kyung, 2013).

In *The Host*, the old-timer and Gang-du doubly figure paternal melodrama. With the transformation of gender relations under modernity, the paternal must now account for its former absence. Absence and distance are the chief failures of the father: premised on the regret that *he should have been there*, paternal absence is not harmless as formerly believed, but rather induces lifelong personal trauma in children. Accordingly, the paternal melodrama dramatizes the conflicts and failures linked to the father's inability to live up to an ideal form of paternity. The maternal melodrama also engages with questions of failure, but the mother's failure is linked to excess and over-presence and over-closeness in the child's life. Whereas in the maternal melodrama, the mother can only redeem herself by giving up her child, by contrast, in the paternal melodrama, the father can only redeem himself by sacrificing his own life for his child.²¹³ In feeling the heartbreak, enduring the humiliations and suffering the losses of separation, *The Host* mediates masculinity and patriarchy via regret and remorse over a failure to act and a neglectful absence.

The film takes recourse to patrilineage so that the father's sins become those of his son. As David N. Rodowick points out in his study of melodrama, “men assume the place of their fathers in the network of authority.”²¹⁴ Gang-du fails in part because his father failed him. This cyclical, intergenerational cycle of suffering and failure is a staple of the paternal melodrama. The failure of Gang-du's father is signaled by the old man's

²¹² Doane, 84.

²¹³ On maternal sacrifice and melodrama, see Linda Williams, “‘Something Else besides a Mother’: *Stella Dallas* and the Maternal Melodrama,” in *Home is Where the Heart is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film*, ed. Christine Gledhill (London: BFI Publishing, 2002), 299-325. For analysis of paternal death, see Richard De Cordova, “A Case of Mistaken Legitimacy: Class and Generational Difference in Three Family Melodramas,” in *Home is Where the Heart is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film*, ed. Christine Gledhill (London: BFI Publishing, 2002), 255-267.

²¹⁴ Rodowick, 271.

alcoholism, a disorder that is normalized in Korean society, in contrast to drug addiction, which is pathologized as deviant. This predictable disorder was determined by the death of his wife. To cope, the old man indulged too much in anesthetizing his own pain. His son, who falls asleep, seems like a displacement of the anesthetic effect of alcohol. In effect, the father's failures are writ upon the son's body and behavior. The son's body is a melodramatic body that "speaks" its suffering.

Halfway into the film, the old-timer repents aloud his earlier parental desertion and alcoholism that he believes has scarred Gang-du. The scene begins with Nam-il and Nam-joo preparing their shotguns, wondering if they should wake their older brother. Nam-il asks, "Should we leave him here? He's no help anyway." The old-timer says, "Kids, wait a minute; sit down." The camera shows the two children sit on the floor across from their father in a conventional arrangement of respect. Gang-du also sits on the floor, his head slumped forward, apart from the others. The father stages his paternal melodrama by saying, "As you know, when he was young, I was out of my mind, hardly ever coming home, staying out all night. And this poor boy with no mother, he must have been so hungry." The sequence inter-cuts to reaction shots of Nam-il and Nam-joo sitting side-by-side and giving each other knowing looks, their eyes on the ground and their bodies impatient. Dark lighting enshrouds close-ups of the old-timer's coppery face, smoke coiling off his cigarette, to stylize weighty import. But the old-timer's adamant seriousness—"So, I really need to say this to you"—is rendered comical when a wide shot shows his children are all asleep.



Figure 2.3: The old-timer and his paternal melodrama

Although the object of his father's lament, Gang-du has been absent in this scene. In a twist, however, when the old-timer mentions Hyun-seo's name, the camera pans left to show Gang-du staring ahead, alert. Instead of reacting with gratitude that the old man cares so much, Gang-du interrupts to announce the creature's presence, a fact missed by everyone else. Embroiled in his own paternal melodrama, Gang-du comes into consciousness only when his daughter is evoked. In this way, through recourse to the monster and its action-genre, the film resignifies the paternal melodrama by replacing

Gang-du's sleepiness with a new pattern of alert presence that redefines fathering as visible, evident devotion—Hyun-seo is always on his mind. This paternal “awakening” is repeated in the later hospital scene when we assume he is drowsy with anesthetic, but he stages his escape with a burst of activity instead. The sequence ends when the old-timer's sentimental journey is subverted not by his children's apathy, but by the unsentimental creature. When the creature squeezes down on and topples over the snack stand/family home, the space of family changes from a state of shelter to crisis. The creature, as a manifestation of the return of political-capitalist repressed energy, cannot be contained to an outside, but continually encroaches upon the family.

Soon after, the old-timer's neglectful absence is converted into unselfish presence when he reforms himself through self-sacrifice. The scene starts by building up the expectation the old-timer will triumph as the family's leader. The old man's first shot brings down the monster, but the creature rouses and runs away. A chase sequence ensues in which the gun-wielding family has the upper hand. The film positions the old-timer squarely before the monster to anticipate the old man's patriarchal heroism. But when he clicks, no bullets come out; the creature stampedes over him then flings his body aside. By giving his father a bullet-less shotgun, Gang-du inadvertently causes the old man's death; in effect, Gang-du thwarts the expectation of patriarchy, bringing an end to their viral, genetic and hierarchical relationship and enabling the siblings to redefine the family laterally as collectivity. In turn, however, the old man succeeds in living up to the ideal of paternity. His repentance now rings true: rather than imposing on his children to sacrifice their lives to shield the patriarch's, the old-timer redeems himself by relinquishing his own life for his progeny.

With his own father dead and his child at stake, the impotent son/father of the paternal melodrama becomes the active hero of the Action genre. While his other flaws are forgivable, Gang-du's failure to protect his daughter is not. Accordingly, the redemption of this failure is Gang-du's driving force. In this transformation, *The Host* partially collapses the opposition between activity and passivity commonplace in cinematic projection. Geoffrey Nowell-Smith writes, “the active hero becomes protagonist of the Western, the passive or impotent hero or heroine becomes protagonist of what has come to be known as melodrama.”²¹⁵ Against this precedent of constructing and reading protagonists as either impaired or invincible, the film encodes Gang-du and the rest of the Park family to encompass both spheres. The Park family retains their sense of loss and inadequacy, despite their “heroic” manner, to enmesh activity and passivity. Even with momentary triumphs, they must still deal with the barriers of state bureaucracy, unemployment and other forces beyond their control.²¹⁶

The Oppressed versus Networks of Authority

²¹⁵ Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, “Minnelli and Melodrama” in *Movies and Methods: An Anthology* ed. Bill Nichols (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 192.

²¹⁶ Rodowick notes, “although the family tries to substitute itself, *pars pro toto*, for the global network of authority in which it is implication, it also imagines itself as a world divested of significant social power... The domestic melodrama is attentive only to problems which concern the family's internal security and economy.” See Rodowick, 270. However, power tied to the U.S. military and Seoul's bureaucracy infuses *The Host* as a work of multiple subgenres that breaks and refashions film conventions to suit its needs.

*Because they claim to be concerned with the welfare of societies, governments arrogate to themselves the right to pass off as profit or loss the human unhappiness that their decisions provoke or their negligence permits. It is a duty...to always bring the testimony of people's suffering to the eyes and ears of governments, sufferings for which it's untrue that they are not responsible...It grounds an absolute right to stand up and speak to those who hold power.*²¹⁷

Almost continuously, *The Host* cites networks of anonymous power. A scattering of public figures in extraterrestrial-like gas masks connote villainy, injustice and the ideological reproduction of elitist systems. Rather than doling assistance, these antagonists criminalize the family, isolate them and foil their time-sensitive mission to rescue Hyun-seo. Though they have suffered the loss of Hyun-seo and faced down the beast, Gang-du and his family face bureaucrats who, time and again, victimize them by dismissing their accounts and framing them as insane. The bureaucracy is indifferent to the actual suffering caused by the monster and instead more concerned with media representations of their response. While this may be leftover from Confucianism's *yangban*²¹⁸ control over state bureaucracies and the Confucian value of hierarchical peace and order, the fraying of traditional lifestyles has transformed people's relationship to the state. Individuation frees subjects from ancestral demands, but it also means loss of communal security and mandates for self-reliance over "burdening" others. As unforeseeable risks of unaccountable origins increasingly affect everyday life, individuals lose greater control over their own welfare; hence people need help to cope with uncertainties, through no fault of their own. Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim notes, "The need for security is translated into demands on the state or various public institutions, in the expectation that they should protect the individual through a network of services and provisions, rules and regulations."²¹⁹

In *The Host*, a chance encounter has rocked the family's already weak foundation, and no one—neither the state nor other individuals—seems willing to help. In the past, the Chosun Dynasty's Chungchong reign (1506-1544) enacted the Lu-Zhu community compact with four basic tenets: "neighbors should help each other in time[s] of need, in promoting virtuous deeds, in correcting misdeeds, and observing proper rites."²²⁰ Although some argue Korea's "communal ethic of mutual help has survived urbanization"²²¹ into a system of personal networks that enhance individuals' material self-interest, *The Host* suggests communalism's felt absence, at least in regard to strangers outside one's network. In the place of communal ethic, an ethos of self-interest prevails over Seoul such that even friends betray the family.

²¹⁷ Noam Chomsky and Michel Foucault, *The Chomsky - Foucault Debate on Human Nature* (New York: The New Press, 2006), 212.

²¹⁸ *Yangban* refers to the aristocratic class who got appointed to government posts after passing state exams.

²¹⁹ Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim, *Reinventing the Family: In Search of New Lifestyles* (Oxford: Polity Press, 2002), 42.

²²⁰ Yun-Shik Chang, "Introduction: Korea in the process of globalization," in *Korea Confronts Globalization*, ed. Chang Yun-Shik, Hyun-Ho Seok and Donald L. Baker (New York: Routledge, 2009), 30.

²²¹ Yun-Shik Chang, "Introduction: Korea in the process of globalization," 30.

In the film, officials who bear the expectation of service treat Gang-du and his family as undeserving of help, as in the sequence when Gang-du talks to a policeman. Instead of an over-the-shoulder shot to suggest a matched pair, the camera isolates each actor. Gang-du, covered in transparent plastic, looks into the camera and says, “She’s deceased, but she’s not dead.” The subjective close-up suggests Gang-du is speaking to us. In the rest of the scene, the film cuts to a wide shot of the family. When Nam-il wants to trace Hyun-seo’s cellphone, the policeman says, “That’s not something we do for just anyone,” and adds, “Your daughter never called you in the first place, okay?” Although the camera shows Nam-il, the old-timer and Nam-joo in a traveling wide shot, with Gang-du, the camera deploys the empathetic subjective close-up. Breathing through plastic, Gang-du pantomimes as he cannot access authorized forms of legitimate communication that favor neoliberal positions (Figure 4). Bewildered, the policeman asks the doctor if Gang-du has “received psychological treatment” and walks away. Following this failed encounter, the pack escapes; in the getaway van, Gang-du playfully pushes back the policeman’s face, comically undermining the policeman’s hierarchical authority.



Figure 2.4: Gang-du tries to illuminate the truth

Similarly, in a later sequence, Gang-du has been captured by authorities and is about to undergo surgery when his sister calls with his daughter’s exact location. Gang-du informs the medics, but they again dismiss him; the nurses want to anesthetize him, not save his daughter. The white American surgeon asks, with naïve concern, “Why didn’t you contact the police?” The surgeon’s comical cross-eyed look and his ignorance of Korean suggest he lacks the clinical and ethnic-nationalist gaze necessary to infiltrate the invisible social relations that afflict Gang-du. The translator answers for Gang-du, “Because nobody fuckin listens to me.” To this, Gang-du tells the translator, “Please don’t cut me off. My words are words too. Why don’t you listen to my words?” This plea to be heard contrasts with Gang-du’s notorious fame; the news media’s unrelenting attention to the Park family has made Gang-du recognizable as a virus carrier and thus a host. Yet he is figured in the film as voiceless and powerless within the system because of his illegitimate subject position in the milieu of rational, educated and upwardly mobile modernity.

In contrast to this devaluation of the *minjung* subject who bears the brunt of legitimizing their problems and concerns through sanctioned modes of grievance, the film gives expression to Gang-du's profound sorrow through a shocking scene of hysteria that empathizes with the Park family's ordeal. After the creature's violent diurnal rampage, hundreds of survivors have gathered at a basketball gymnasium-turned-memorial to pay tribute to the dead and learn what to expect next from government representatives. This sequence conveys the family's poignant heartache and mutual attachment not through dialogue, but bodily displays that exceed bourgeois propriety. The sequence opens with the camera intimately following Nam-joo over-the-shoulder, as she winds around sitting figures. She takes out her bronze metal from her pocket and walks pass her father and older brother. The camera cuts to a frontal close up showing the actress Bae Doona's raw face: her eyes teary, her nose red, her hair matted (Figure 2.5). With the background in soft focus, the audience connects with her. The actress affects a controlled sadness in the tightness of her closed lips.



Figure 2.5: A display of familial intimacy: *Jeong*

The camera cuts to the focus of Nam-joo's sightline, a photograph of Hyun-seo smiling broadly in her crisp school uniform, incense smoke drafting by. On seeing Hyun-seo's face, Nam-joo cries. A wide shot shows countless picture frames lined with flower arrangements, candles and incense. Nam-joo stumbles over to Hyun-seo's picture, followed by Gang-du and the old-timer, to form a tearful physical chain. If the audience now feels the family's suffering and loss as a legitimate condition in need of reparation, the text has mediated tears to act as "cultural problem-solving" as Linda Williams deems.²²² In addition, the deployment of wailing sound, makeup-less faces, zigzagging camera action and fluorescent lighting insinuate a photographic realism interested in not just capturing, but empathizing with the family's trauma.

²²² Linda Williams, "Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess," *Film Quarterly* 44.4 (1991): 12.

This display of sorrow becomes increasingly frenzied and turns into a parody of overwrought grief. A red-faced Nam-il, in a black suit with an untucked shirt, enters the wide shot; he pulls off Gang-du, and places his soju bottle before Hyun-seo's picture. A medium frontal shot of a cluster-hug shows the actors emote grief. The old-timer says, "Thanks to you, we're all together," to mark their reunion. Nam-il screams, "Hyun-seo!" Gang-du and the old-timer force a group hug, even as Nam-il shouts, "Let go of me." The four adults fall onto the floor. The aerial framing shows the length of their bodies. The family writhe their limbs and contort their faces with such excess to evoke slapstick physical comedy. Although this climax simultaneously validates and pokes fun of the family's crude, communal exaggeration, the film will not allow the family to sustain any illusion of a communalist heterotopia; in each case, a force of domination inserts itself to exploit and commodify their grief. First, faceless paparazzi flash their cameras to capture the family's trauma into spectacle, shattering the family's chance to grieve honorably undisturbed. Next, an overhead announcement for the owner of a Hyundai shows a woman skidding off and an official voice decries, "Hey lady, how could you park your car there?" Thirdly, a line of official-looking men with neatly combed hair shove the family aside to the family's bafflement. This cycle of irreverent violation finally ends with clownish men in yellow haz-mat suits breaking up the mourners into an awaiting bus with tear gas, like riot police breaking up protesters.

This line of absurdist attacks—the paparazzi, the overhead voice, the official beaters, the hazmat clowns—foreshadows the increasing incompetence of the bureaucracies "managing" the crisis and, inversely, the dire need for self-determined heroism. The scenarios of radical containment to come—as in the hospital scenes—produce confinement and therefore submission. As Hannah Arendt famously wrote in 1951, "By pressing men against each other, total terror destroys the space between them... [Totalitarian government] destroys the one essential prerequisite of all freedom which is simply the capacity of motion which cannot exist without space."²²³ In militarized environments, motion is minimized under martial law: containment is the absence of freedom. As Paul Gilroy notes, writing in 2005, "The states of permanent emergency enacted through the declaration of 'war against terror' allow minimal scope for active dissent."²²⁴ In the film, official bodies use the virus as a ruse for its militarized violations. Similarly, government agencies can secure total control and institute inhuman policies by deploying pretexts. For instance, the Cold War in earlier decades and the War against Terrorism today has served as pretexts to infringe on civil liberties for so-called national security. In South Korea, both wars are one and the same—the regional and the global are not in opposition, but co-existent as the specter of national division.²²⁵

Given that officials ignore or endanger the protagonists, rather than serve and protect them, the film suggests that the kinds of "crises" that erupt in the 21st century require the family to re-form itself given the indifference of a bureaucracy more interested in controlling citizens' behavior, shaping its mass-mediated image and yielding to U.S. foreign policy. In the unfolding of the family's relationship with networks of authority, a pattern develops to bolster the resulting drama: the Park family turns to law-

²²³ Hannah Arendt, *The origins of totalitarianism, Part I* (Orlando, FL.: Harcourt, Inc., 1994), 164.

²²⁴ Paul Gilroy, *Postcolonial Melancholia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 58.

²²⁵ South Korea's National Security Law exemplifies infringing on civil liberties for reasons of security.

abiding channels (with the father's encouragement), but they fail to get anywhere through "legitimate" means. As a result, the family is forced into criminal acts of transgression, which in turn bring them closer to Hyun-seo.

In order to fulfill their mission, the family must reinvent what it means to be a father or an aunt, and they must learn to function alone, in isolation, without any expectation of help. This is the dystopian version of "individuation"-as-alienation, in contrast to the utopian version of entrepreneurial individualism. The film, however, does not oppose technology as another example of development's inhumanity; rather, the film deploys technology to aid the family's do-it-yourself mission. For instance, after the old-timer's death and Gang-du's capture, Nam-il finds Hyun-seo's location using powerful computers at his college buddy's telecom firm, while Nam-joo receives word of Hyun-seo's location through a text message from Nam-il. Indeed, the film valorizes the power of cell phone connectivity as a mobilizing vehicle for individual acts of solidarity. In the film, cell phones route through the movements of Hyun-seo, Nam-il, Nam-Joo and Gang-du so that they inhabit a united mapping of nonphysical terrain across material markers. Ultimately, the survivors travel to the same destination: confrontation with the creature.

Confronting the Creature and Reinventing the Family

What is mobilized in *The Host* is the re-invented family. The film literally re-invents each member of the family and mobilizes this collective to defeat the all-devouring monster. For this family, triumph is conditioned upon reforming itself into a collectivity that is non-hierarchical, less critical, and that orients its efforts toward a single goal. Indeed, in an exemplary manner, each family member eventually finds a "talent" and overcomes a personal lack that allows them to contribute to the monster's death: Nam-il focuses his rebellion on a tangible enemy, shifting his selfish whining into self-sacrificing activity; Nam-joo stops hesitating and finally hits the bulls-eye when it counts; Gang-du stays awake, despite being heavily sedated, in his determination to rescue his daughter, ultimately translating his true, deep love for her into something that can actually have a real positive outcome. In this respect, they step out of their assigned identities, finally, and in a flexible, ad-hoc manner, defeat the monster. The family's saving grace, in this horror context, is their utopian commitment to come together and renew their connection toward the good of human beings (rather than the good of patriarchy as in the past). They have adapted to modernity's mobility and technology, yet they retain their primordial humanness: a return to bonding, concern, tenderness, justice and self-sacrifice that empowers resistance to new chartings of inhumanity.

The way the family reforms itself and takes direct action is most heroic in the climactic and largely silent standoff between the family and the creature at the riverbank described as the "Agent Yellow release point." Hundreds of activists have gathered to protest Agent Yellow—a toxic chemical weapon developed to destroy the creature and its nonexistent virus—and demand Gang-du's release. When the creature arrives, the crowd quickly scatters. A yellow cloud is released that maims the creature long enough for Gang-du to pull out his daughter and the little boy from the creature's mouth. In a slow-moving montage orchestrated to a melancholic film score, the film displays the three crying siblings clasp and caress Hyun-seo's limp body and face. The score becomes upbeat as each sibling takes a stab at the creature. Gang-du aims at the creature with a

signpost, Nam-il throws Molotov cocktails that miss, and Nam-joo uses her bow and arrow to shoot a piece of lit cloth that hits the creature's eye, causing it to burst into flames. Looking at the river, the creature attempts to escape, but Gang-du rams the signpost's metal rod into the creature's mouth and kills it.²²⁶ Gang-du walks over and picks up the boy who opens his eyes; Hyun-seo's remain closed, indicating she is dead. This scene of violent struggle and anti-government protest draws from the highly recognizable visual codes of 1980s and '90s student-labor-women's movements. Christina Klein points out, "The image of a young man with a backpack throwing Molotov cocktails is deeply resonant for Koreans. It gestures to the twenty-year history of violent street protests that young Koreans have engaged in, from the pro-democracy protests in the 1980s through the anti-globalization and anti-free-trade protests of the early 2000s. The image also contains an undercurrent of anti-Americanism, as many of these protests also took aim at the United States, either for supporting the repressive military regimes or for pushing a neoliberal economic agenda."²²⁷ The climactic clash between the monster and the family is a thrilling confrontation with the problems the monster evokes, but has been repressed—development's insidious consumption and mercenary carnage that kills and stockpiles others' misfortune for personal gluttony.

At the same, it is significant that the family's victory is only a partial victory. In the end, the family loses their child Hyun-seo, the original reason behind the family's adventurous contestation. While the partial-victory ending is not a device of the Hollywood blockbuster, it is common to both South Korean blockbusters and the American family melodrama. On the former, Jinhee Choi notes, "Unlike most Hollywood blockbusters, protagonists in Korean blockbusters only partially achieve their goals."²²⁸ The conventional explanation for this phenomenon is South Korean film culture's greater use of melodrama—with melodrama often reduced to comforting emotionalism.²²⁹ Here,

²²⁶ Nikki J. Y. Lee draws from Barbara Creed's conception of the monstrous-feminine to argue the creature connotes the moralizing absent mother: "The monster represents a projection of this horror [of immaturity] and hatred on to a mother who may force family members to grow up and who may blame them for being social failures if she returns." Although I disagree that the monster stands for the maternal's domain over social respectability, the idea the monster is gendered feminine is provocative, especially considering Gang-du pierces the creature's mouth, a "mouth [that] resembles female genitalia" See Nikki J Lee, 351-2.

²²⁷ Christina Klein, "Why American Studies Needs to Think about Korean Cinema, or, Transnational Genres in the Films of Bong Joon-ho," *American Quarterly* 60.4 (2008): 887.

²²⁸ Jinhee Choi, 48-49.

²²⁹ In his discussion of *Shiri*, David Scott Diffrient explains South Korean blockbusters' hybridization of special effects with "the melodramatic sentiments of traditional Korean storytelling" is what sets apart South Korean films from Hollywood blockbusters. See David Scott Diffrient, "Shiri," *Film Quarterly* 54.3 (Spring 2001): 42. In their discussion of *Attack the Gas Station* (Kim Sang-jin, 1999), Nancy Abelman and Jung-ah Choi likewise claim the combination of "melodramatic narration of personal lives with new-generation film aesthetics" (what they call a "new youth style" with "MTV-like aesthetics") is responsible for the film's appeal. See Nancy Abelman and Jung-ah Choi, "'Just Because': Comedy, Melodrama and Youth Violence in Attack the Gas Station" in *New Korean Cinema*, ed. Chi-Yun Shin and Julian Stringer (New York: NYU Press, 2005), 133. For Choi, it is essentialist to explain South Korean cinema's differences by suggesting that melodrama is somehow inherent to Korean "tradition." She notes Hollywood blockbusters also incorporate melodramatic elements. For Choi, "Korean blockbusters are more character driven and attempt to expand 'narrative depth,' which is often lacking in contemporary Hollywood blockbusters." See Jinhee Choi, 49. For a discussion of shinpa's origins, see Min, Joo and Kwak, *Korean*

I would suggest that melodrama is a powerful storytelling device that exceeds emotional manipulation of audiences for profit. Melodrama is, as Ben Singer points out, “a product of modernity.”²³⁰ Melodrama is a form of cultural expression that addresses everyday people’s concerns over capitalism’s excessive rationality, crazed competition, shocking newness and atomizing individualism.

In the South Korean version, melodrama also signifies ongoing colonial apprehension toward capitalism’s link to American empire building. Through the imaginary discursive plane of cinema, South Korean films such as *The Host* harness this genre’s capacity to contradict capitalism’s utopian claims about life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. In her discussion of melodrama’s timing of “too late,” Linda Williams identifies how “In these [melodramatic] fantasies, the quest for connection is always tinged with the melancholy of loss.”²³¹ In the South Korean interpretation, the loss of human connection is tinged by the melancholy of loss exerted by powerful outside forces: the monster here, and the teacher in chapter 1’s analysis of *Whispering Corridors*—both “outsider” figures appear to originate from the postwar imposition of U.S. capitalism. *The Host*’s partial victory reflects the family’s vulnerability to global capitalism’s voracious appetites. On one hand, the film cites the inability of Hyun-seo’s individual effort to conquer adversity; on the other, it suggests the power of the siblings’ collective effort to render change. Like in American family melodramas made in the classical era, the prevailing socio-economic and political formation only allows for a partial victory marked deeply by profound loss. As Thomas Elsaesser notes, “The external world is more and more riddled with obstacles which oppose themselves to personal ambition and are not simply overcome by the hero’s assertion of a brawny or brainy libido.”²³² But Hyun-seo’s death is not in vain; she challenges the monster as a subject in her own right, and though she does not defeat the monster nor get saved in time, Hyun-seo’s gesture of love and solidarity saves the young boy, and in a sense, rescuing the boy her father once was.²³³

The Host is a kind of “Utopian wish fulfillment wrapped in dystopian wolf’s clothing,” to cite Fredric Jameson comment in another context.²³⁴ The re-imagined family articulates the deep yearning for a simpler, less selfish, less commodified time and space in which marginalized subjects have reappropriated the discourse on “South Korea” to mean contestation of the American neoliberal order, not economic miracle. Here, it is the family’s human connection that gives meaning to their struggle, motivates their political contestation and suggests their superiority in the film’s mediation of beings. Already

Film: History, 33-38. Shinpa, or shimpa, is a Japanese term meaning “new wave,” and was a style of Japanese melodramatic theater and cinema. It was introduced to Korea in the 1920s.

²³⁰ Ben Singer, *Melodrama and Modernity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 131.

²³¹ Linda Williams, “Film Bodies,” 11.

²³² Elsaesser, “Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on the Family Melodrama” in *Home is Where the Heart is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman’s Film*, ed. Christine Gledhill (London: BFI Publishing, 2002), 58.

²³³ Hyun-seo’s self-sacrifice resonates with Chicano labor leader Cesar Chavez’s words in another context of power struggle against U.S. injustice: “I am convinced that the truest act of courage, the strongest act of humanity is to sacrifice ourselves for others in a totally nonviolent struggle for justice.” See Richard Griswold Del Castillo and Richard A. Garcia, *César Chávez: A Triumph of Spirit* (Norman OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1997), 178.

²³⁴ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 384.

implicated inside capitalism, the family exists in a matrix of economic insecurity, dystopian indifference, and alienated anonymity. Against this uncertainty, their one meaningful truth is their love of Hyun-seo and their uncompromised need to save her, a feat made possible only by their ability to come together. The film does not oblige the viewer to love all human beings, but recognizes the import of human connection.

In place of socially sanctioned traditional patriarchy or commodified romance, the film valorizes renewing native understandings of communal love as a liberatory measure of resistance. The re-invented family is bonded by *jeong* (정), an indigenous sense of love that bonds family, friends, and acquaintances through personal histories of close contact that forces mutual recognition of each other's "need, suffering, hunger, or thirst."²³⁵ Unlike romantic love, which idealizes intense pair relationships forged through sexual energy, *jeong* is collective in nature, and bonds people "even when there are power imbalances among people."²³⁶ Michael Gibb and Andrew Jackson suggest *jeong* can serve as a therapeutic: "In the face of the alienating and impersonal forces of the city, one's *chong* [*jeong*] provides the essential link with the past and tradition. Modernity is acceptable as long as Koreanness (and here we mean *chong*) is not lost."²³⁷ In *The Host*, *jeong* is politicized as flights of protest to function as a viable form of political hope. As Chela Sandoval has argued, "It is love that can access and guide our theoretical and political 'movidas'—revolutionary maneuvers toward decolonized being."²³⁸

A hyper-industrial film that meets global demands for the blockbuster-commodity while delivering a message of anti-imperial resistance, *The Host* taps into local frustration with the remnants of Korea-U.S. relations and planetary anxiety over the 21st century's various crises vis-à-vis the rise and decline of U.S. hegemony. As in recent American blockbusters *Avatar* (James Cameron, 2009) and *The Bourne Identity* (Doug Liman, 2002), *The Host* likewise codes the villain as the all-powerful, self-righteous and deceptive global U.S. machine. Namely, in the aftermath of the global standardization of U.S. capitalist and militarist technologies (e.g., biological weapon yellow agent and credit card debt in *The Host*) that have increasingly dehumanized nonmodernity and regional aura, the ideological message of the current crop of anti-U.S. films appear to bear witness to the post-traumatic struggle to re-humanize contemporary life.

The Host's last sequence ends with a picture of innocence disrupted by the whiff of violence. While the surrogate son ceremoniously enjoys dinner, Gang-du looks out the window, takes in the river and grabs his shotgun. The room's palpable warmth contrasts against the snow falling outside. At any moment, the monster could come back. After all, who can say no more creatures are lurking out there? South Korea, built on Westernization and American militarism, carries a surplus of repressed, censured and negligent political energy that will strive to return.

²³⁵ Yohan Ka "Jeong-han as a Korean Culture-Bound Narcissism: Dealing with Jeong-han Through Jeong-Dynamics," *Pastoral Psychology* 59 (2010): 231.

²³⁶ *Ibid.*, 230.

²³⁷ Michael Gibb, and Andrew Jackson, "Neither Here nor There: Positive Responses to Modernity in South Korean Film" in *How East Asian Films are Reshaping National Identities: Essays on the Cinemas of China, Japan, South Korea, and Hong Kong*, ed. Andrew David Jackson, Michael Gibb, and Dave White (NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2006), 104.

²³⁸ Chela Sandoval, *Methodology of the Oppressed* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 141.

Chapter 3

Finance and Romance, Capital and Melodrama: Ephemeral Intimacy in South Korean Cinema

*Why is south Korean society such a difficult place
for unmarried women to live confidently?*²³⁹

In films about love, the locking of eyes between a man and a woman often incites the insight that these two figures could make a perfect couple under auspicious circumstances, no matter their differences. But rather than being thwarted by numerous obstacles that eventually begets the couple's happy reunion as in some Hollywood films, South Korean filmic couples generally follow a different path. Instead of experiencing mishaps that bring delayed happiness, South Korean relationships invert this structure: explosive happiness is followed by insurmountable problems which thwart the ideal of long-term togetherness as the film comes to its conclusion. While men and women both suffer from the loss of love, it is the fate of the female protagonist that is especially notable: she is condemned to endure a sensible marriage to the man she does not love; suffers divorce and/or a breakup and is forced to live adrift and alone in an existential crisis; or, she experiences outright death. Because the genre is predominantly constructed for and consumed by heterosexual women, love films appeal to women's fantasies, but they also address women's anxieties about survival. This chapter argues such anxieties—and the films that (melo)dramatize them—have their origins in the overly close connection between romance and finance in South Korean culture and society.

The tremendous changes that have occurred to the South Korean economy since the Crisis have pushed the country toward high-tech industries, sequestering good-paying jobs for those who meet the specialized requirements of conglomerates. While giants like Samsung and Hyundai are major drivers of the GDP, in 2011, South Korea's top 30 firms employed less than 7 percent of the nation's workforce.²⁴⁰ While South Korea's high-tech explosion is suggestive of new opportunities for all, this has not been the case, especially for women. Some of the worst gender inequity in the world prevails in South Korea. The O.E.C.D. (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development) routinely demonstrates that South Korea has one of the lowest women's employment rates and the widest salary gaps by gender, despite high rates of female baccalaureate completion.²⁴¹ In

²³⁹ Haejoang Cho, "Living with Conflicting Subjectivities: Mother, Motherly Wife, and Sexy Woman in the Transition from Colonial-Modern to Postmodern Korea," in *Under Construction: The Gendering of Modernity, Class, and Consumption in the Republic of Korea*, ed. Laurel Kendall (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2002), 189.

²⁴⁰ Jun Yang and Sangwon Yoon, "South Korean Youth Eschew Samsung Jobs For Facebook Dreams: Tech," *Bloomberg*, July 30, 2012, <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2012-07-31/south-korean-youth-eschew-samsung-jobs-for-facebook-dreams-tech.html> (accessed August 7, 2013).

²⁴¹ Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (O.E.C.D.) *Gender Initiative, Gender Equality in Education, Employment and Entrepreneurship*, May 2011. <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/171239.pdf>

O.E.C.D. tests of teenagers from across the globe, Koreans not only rank highly, but Korean girls outscore Korean boys in reading and science, and score just below boys in mathematics.²⁴² Girls dedicate their childhoods to getting into college and parents pay for ever-increasing tuition costs on the premise that meritocracy exists and girls can now become career women. But after graduation, women face a sobering job market. Structurally, the economy hires and promotes women differently, presumes that women in their late twenties and early thirties will quit working once they get married and lack childcare support for working mothers.²⁴³ Because of their weak employment and earnings outcome, women are at a higher risk for extreme poverty as they age.

A number of related South Korean trends also bear out women's vulnerability to poverty. First, underemployment has increased due to labor market dualism (temporary employment) jumping to half the job market in 2009, with temporary jobs paying 40% less than regular work and much of it filled by women. Second, poverty has increased across all types of households from 9% of the population in the 1990s to 25% in 2009. Third, senior poverty has rocketed to 50% of seniors aged 65 and older, the highest such rate in the world.²⁴⁴ The current of economic life is alarming, and even more so because the nation lacks a social safety net: government spending to relieve poverty is paltry and temporary workers cannot receive state welfare.²⁴⁵

Hence women confront a brave new world of makeshift jobs that pay meager wages, despite having achieved educational parity. Condoning and enabling economic discrimination of this magnitude is a criminal failure on the part of South Korea and of global capitalism. The national and transnational modernization push has been pressuring women to surrender to the cause of capitalist modernity for sixty years with the promise of significant social change: the end of patriarchy and the beginning of women's liberation. Education has been touted as the path to female independence, yet thus far it has functioned as a ruse to create a skilled and cheap labor force. The need to mobilize for women's equality remains. Given women's harrowing status, pro-globalization agencies can no longer call on South Korea as the model minority of the developing world. In South Korea, film scholars like Hyangjin Lee have noted, "films frequently use

²⁴² See "Mathematics proficiency: PISA 2009," O.E.C.D., Statistics from A to Z, <http://www.O.E.C.D..org/statistics/#d.en.199456>. (accessed August 8, 2013).

²⁴³ See Roger L. Janelli and Dawnhee Yim, "Gender Construction in the Offices of a South Korean Conglomerate" in *Under Construction: The Gendering of Modernity, Class, and Consumption in the Republic of Korea*, ed. Laurel Kendall (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2002); and Haejoang Cho, "Living with Conflicting Subjectivities."

²⁴⁴ See O.E.C.D. Economic Surveys: Korea, April 2012 Overview, <http://www.O.E.C.D..org/eco/50191444.pdf> (accessed August 8, 2013); Karon Snowdon, "One quarter of South Koreans touched by poverty," interview with Kang Shin-wook, *ABC Radio Australia*, February 13, 2012, <http://www.radioaustralia.net.au/international/radio/onairhighlights/one-quarter-of-south-koreans-touched-by-poverty> (accessed August 8, 2013); and Korea Highest in Elderly Poverty: O.E.C.D., *The Korea Times*, November 8, 2008, http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/nation/2011/04/113_34066.html (accessed August 8, 2013).

²⁴⁵ Jiyeun Chang, "Labor Market Dualism and Social Insurance Coverage in Korea," *Korean Labor Institute Working Papers* 209, March 19, 2012, http://www.kli.re.kr/kli_ehome/work/vew.ehome-200004?pageNo=&condition=&keyword=&rowNum=&year=&firstClass=&seq=342&listNum=209#none (accessed August 8, 2013).

women's predicament as a metaphor for the troubled nation."²⁴⁶ But it is not only the state of the troubled nation that can be gleaned from South Korean women's predicament; South Korean women's dystopian economic condition is a metaphor for the troubled state of global capitalism.

The ominous condition of women's underemployment has meant that women must forsake personal ambitions and yield to the marriage market and find new methods for brokering control of their lives. Cho Haejoang perceives that "in such a gloomy situation, young women attempt to secure their own space and new resources for power. They are back in the domestic realm but they have discovered the power of their female bodies. Women of the new generation no longer identify themselves as mothers and wives but as individuals. They try to make the family home a site of self-realization through consumption."²⁴⁷ Having lost control over their careers and intimate lives, women can claim "me"—be it their bodies or homes—through consumer capitalism, a trend that has co-opted the discourse of feminist self-reliance and consciousness-raising. As Cho notes, women are "making themselves into attractive objects to be gazed at and purchased by desirable men."²⁴⁸ There is power in sexual self-objectification to exert influence, envy and even desperation. As a result, the cultivation of sexuality has become the chief means by which to procure agency and security where few other means of accomplishing upward social mobility and financial stability exist.

Global capitalism demands that *all* women, regardless of age, occupation and uniqueness, participate in consumption in order to transform themselves into "glamorous, slender, liberated sex objects" as Harriet Fraad asserts.²⁴⁹ While this pressure has been present since the nation's earliest years as *Madame Freedom* (Han Hyung-mo, 1956) shows, this pressure has intensified after 1997's restructuring efforts. Like the U.S. and Japan, South Korea has become a nation of borrowers and spenders through an entwined consumer credit-and-real estate boom in the early 2000s.²⁵⁰ Between 1999 and 2002, credit card use in South Korea increased by 75%.²⁵¹ Credit cards have democratized shopping as an *inclusive* activity. The logic of marketing and advertising sells a sense of power, success, and popularity—desirable sensations lacking in many lives. Advertising has promoted the ambition to identify as a modern subject and to distance oneself from the (individual and national) past, which is seen as poor, backwards and oppressed. However, if elders have spent their life earnings on their children's education and weddings so that they are unprepared for retirement, younger generations seem to have

²⁴⁶ Hyangjin Lee, *Contemporary Korean Cinema*, 138.

²⁴⁷ Haejoang Cho, "Living with Conflicting Subjectivities," 187.

²⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 181.

²⁴⁹ Harriet Fraad, "Starving and Hungry: Anorexia Nervosa and the Female Body Politic," in *Class Struggle on the Home Front* ed. Graham Cassano (New York: Palgrave, 2009), 117.

²⁵⁰ See Andrew Gordon, "From Singer to Shipan: Consumer Credit in Modern Japan," in *The Ambivalent Consumer: Questioning Consumption in East Asia and the West*, ed. Sheldon M. Garon and Patricia L. MacLachlan (New York: Cornell University, 2006), 137; Chang-Gyun Park, "Consumer Credit Market in Korea since the Economic Crisis," in *Financial Sector Development in the Pacific Rim*, ed. Takatoshi Ito and Andrew K. Rose (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 161.

²⁵¹ Richard Westra, "State, Market, and Stages of Capitalism in South Korean Development," *Marxist Perspectives on South Korea in the Global Economy*, ed. Martin Hart-Landsberg, Seongjin Jeong, and Richard Westra (Hampshire, UK: Ashgate Publishing, Ltd., 2007), 103.

likewise squandered their paychecks on ephemeral commodities to the point of “ruining their lives.”²⁵²

In this economic landscape, the arrival of hypermodern global capitalism has not liberated women from traditional sexism. Rather, modernity and conservatism persist together, and the new system has brought with it its own updated version of patriarchy. Faced with an untenable historical situation, women are stuck between the lingering pressures imposed by longstanding “Eastern traditions,” and the additional pressures imposed by global capital.²⁵³

This chapter reiterates the themes discussed in chapters 1 and 2: the problematic effect of modernization on a range of social relations (familial, romantic, work) and the way such problems are addressed by South Korean cinema. Earlier chapters respectively examined the historical traumas of the Korean War and U.S. imperialism reconfigured as modern horror. This chapter brings together a number of South Korean films to give an account of historical and social change through the figure of heterosexual intimacy. Whether conceived as a biological act or a social construction, cultural theorists such as Herbert Marcuse and Anthony Giddens have contended that love holds the radical possibility for freedom from the pressures of civilization, while modern neuroscientists have claimed that the euphoria of attachment can inure personal life from unpleasant social, economic, and political forces.²⁵⁴ Yet at the same time, the convergence of capitalist and traditional forces in South Korea has commercialized love as a matter of status and consumption. For women who bear the burdens of retaining tradition as the structural support subtending marriage and family, and of actualizing the new expectation of economic and sexual independence, intimacy has become make-believe, an ideal fulfilled through ephemeral encounters rather than “everlasting love.”

The discourse of women’s new individualism after the Crisis claims women are autonomous subjects who derive their social power from making self-interested and self-inventive choices in the marketplace.²⁵⁵ It urges women to cultivate an “autobiographical

²⁵² Youngseok Kim, “The Social Foundation of Luxury Good Obsession in South Korea,” (Master’s thesis, Brandeis University, 2011), 1.

²⁵³ I use the term “traditions” throughout this chapter. Here, “tradition” should stand not as authentic and literal continuity from the past, but “pseudo-tradition.” Japanese colonialism and the Korean War effectively destroyed traditional lifestyles and the class system as discussed in the introduction. In its stead, tradition has come to mean the elitist conventions of the patriarchal yangban ruling class (yangbanization). As Denise Potrzeba Lett writes, “Whether or not one can trace actual lineal descent from the yangban, members of the new middle class seek high status. The ‘game of distinction’ played by the yangban of yesterday has become the ‘game’ of contemporary middle-class Koreans.” See Denise Potrzeba Lett, *In Pursuit of Status: The Making of South Korea’s “New” Urban Middle Class* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 227.

²⁵⁴ See Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955); and Anthony Giddens, *The Transformation of Intimacy: Sexuality, Love & Eroticism in Modern Societies* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992). On neuroscience and attachment, see Louis Cozolino, *The Neurobiology of Human Relationships: Attachment and the Developing Social Brain* (New York: Norton & Co., 2006); Daniel J. Siegel, *The Developing Mind: How Relationships and the Brain Interact to Shape Who We Are* (New York: Guilford Press, 2012).

²⁵⁵ For a discussion of “new individualism” see Anthony Elliott and Charles C. Lemert, *The New Individualism: The Emotional Costs of Globalization*, (London: Routledge, 2006). See also Joo-hyun Cho’s discussion of “neoliberal women” in “Neoliberal Governmentality at Work: Post-IMF Korean Society and the Construction of Neoliberal Women,” *Korea Journal* 49.3 (Autumn 2009): 15-43.

self” that is separate from one’s birth and socioeconomic identifications. For women, neoliberal expectations that individuals must take personal responsibility over their lives have converged with feminist expectations that women should pursue self-determination. As one of the most important decisions in a woman’s life, it would seem that modern women who choose to marry would do so as a matter of personal choice. In the aftermath of the Crisis, Joo-hyun Cho notes, “Rampant individualism and the logic of unlimited competition dominating the post-IMF society led to a deepening desire for intimacy and individual appropriation of sexuality.”²⁵⁶ But the reality may be that women marry as a means of negotiating the various demands placed upon them by, on one hand, enduring religious and familial traditions and, on the other, the new social and economic conditions created by US-style capitalism and forces of globalization.

The problem of love, economics and marriage find expression in South Korean love films that use the conventions of romantic melodrama. Like 1950s American melodramas, South Korean love films made after the Crisis (between 1998 and the early 2000s) re-enact socio-historical contradictions its mostly female audiences can “identify with and recognize,” as Thomas Elsaesser wrote of American melodrama.²⁵⁷ For Elsaesser, melodramas “concentrate on the point of view of the victim... The critique—the questions of ‘evil,’ of responsibility—is firmly placed on a social and existential level, away from the arbitrary and finally obtuse logic of private motives and individualized psychology.”²⁵⁸ The films discussed here recognize women’s urge for autonomy and the contradictory sites of power dynamics that delimit women’s agency and confound their desire for upward mobility. As Elsaesser claims, “the melodrama, at its most accomplished, seems capable of reproducing more directly than other genres the pattern of domination and exploitation in a given society... by emphasizing so clearly an emotional dynamic whose social correlative is a network of external forces directed oppressingly inward, and with which the characters themselves unwittingly collide to become their agents.”²⁵⁹ The forces that press onto melodrama’s protagonists are emphatically historical and disruptively manifold.

In South Korean women’s film history, the “feminine melodrama” popularized in Golden Age films (1950s to 1960s) has been critiqued as a genre that appealed to women but “were incapable of raising consciousness among female viewers about the sociopolitical conditions in which they were situated.”²⁶⁰ In contrast, the emergence of the “*Yeoseong Yeonghwa*” (Women’s Film, 1960s to 1990s) has been seen as the “shift from [the] melodramatic to the more “serious” realities of contemporary women.”²⁶¹ In many critical film circles, the term “melodrama” equals weepies. To thwart the dismissal of films out of hand, I propose using the more neutral “love film” over the charged “romantic melodrama.” The love films discussed here are melodramatic not in the pejorative sense of being saccharine (therefore anti-modern and non-political), but in

²⁵⁶ Joo-hyun Cho, “Neoliberal Governmentality,” 25.

²⁵⁷ Elsaesser, “Tales of Sound,” 54.

²⁵⁸ Ibid., 64.

²⁵⁹ Ibid., 64.

²⁶⁰ Nohchool Park, “Undomesticated Visions: A History of South Korean Independent Women’s Films, 1974-2004,” *Korea Journal* 49.4 (2009): 138.

²⁶¹ Ibid., 137.

their refusal to portray romance, friendship, family and the self as an easily reconcilable source of utopia where individual determination overcomes structural oppression.

Recent love films have been shaped by the historical moment of the Crisis and the globalization (*seggyehwa*) policies put into place by President Kim Young-sam (1993-1998). In the late 1990s and early 2000s, the Crisis caused abrupt impoverishment triggering emotional and even physical displacement.²⁶² At the same time, the new influx of foreign capital and the liberalization of trade policies suggested a new “postnational” era where gentle cosmopolitanism had vanquished fearful (and phallogocentric) nationalism. With the Crisis’s mass layoffs pushing some fathers to suicide, some critics advanced neoconservative patriarchy as the solution to economic devastation.²⁶³ To avert one’s vulnerability to crisis (e.g., unemployment), media discourse prescribed the ideological expectation of perfectionism—at home, school, and the workplace. Notably, the historical moment of the Crisis evokes the conditions of trauma after the Korean War. Both periods have been characterized by wide impoverishment and dislocation on one hand, and American intervention bringing potentially liberating or colonizing globalization on the other. South Korean society exists in the unresolved “historical system” set off by national division, the Korean War and ensuing modernization. In the love film, narrative denouements that stress the impossibility of couple’s romantic future resonate as the nation’s impossibility: two hearts cannot beat as one.

Consequently, the female subject of this historical system has been overwhelmed with multiple and contradictory demands. Such demands cross a wide spectrum: financial, emotional, global, feminist, neoconservative, traditional, societal and individual. Like a seesaw, autonomy here may cause subordination there: self-sacrifice and self-interest are intertwined. As in Elsaesser’s observation of Sirkian melodramas made in 1950s Hollywood, the characters of South Korean love stories “are never up to the demands which their lives make on them...”²⁶⁴ The films under consideration here refuse to reconcile the contradictions that provoke their protagonists’ inevitable suffering and disillusionment.

The patterns of love stories mapped out in this chapter revolve around two imaginary femininities I have constructed: (1) the upwardly mobile woman—the marriageable or married woman with socioeconomic mobility in the mainstream and (2) the marginal woman—the physically incapacitated or terminally ill woman running out of time who leads a peripheral social existence. These films vary in terms of their box office performance, the generational appeal of their actors, and their “artistic” merit. Some films were local award winners that excelled at the box office like *Marriage is a Crazy Thing* (Yoo Ha, 2002) and both male and female leads were lauded for their performances. *Kitchen* (also known as *The Naked Kitchen*, Hong Ji-yeong, 2009), on the other hand, did poorly at the box office and was critically panned despite its well-known young cast. I have grouped these particular films together because they facilitate seeing

²⁶² I discuss in detail the impoverishment caused by the Crisis in chapter 4.

²⁶³ Cho Han Hae-joang writes, “The current movements to ‘encourage men’ and to ‘support and cheer up our fathers’ who are depressed by the IMF crisis were actively led by the mass media.” See Cho Han Hae-joang, ‘You are entrapped in an imaginary well’: the Formation of Subjectivity within Compressed Development—a Feminist Critique of Modernity and Korean Culture, *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 1.1 (2000): 62.

²⁶⁴ Elsaesser, “Tales of Sound,” 67.

general patterns that may not be visible otherwise. While I treat them in a generic manner to underscore what I perceive as historical touchstones, each film is stylistically distinct with its particular mix of genres and interests. Here, my focus is to call attention to how different films treat the ongoing problem of capitalism through critical and uncritical presentations of fictional heterosexual romance.

Films that feature a character I call “the upwardly mobile woman,” I claim, articulate the contradictory demands imposed upon female protagonists by conservative Confucianism’s alleged long-standing traditions and the new challenges of consumerism and commodification posed by rapid historical change. Representative of this grouping for this chapter’s purposes are films such as *Marriage is a Crazy Thing*, *Kitchen*, *The Intimate* (also known as *Lover*, Kim Tae-eun, 2005), *Changing Partners* (Jeon Yun-su, 2007), *An Affair* (E J-yong, 1998), *Happy End* (Jung Ji-woo, 1999), *The Good Lawyer’s Wife* (Im Sang-soo, 2003), and *A Good Day for an Affair* (Jang Mun-il, 2007). In these films, hetero-normative marriage is increasingly defined as the point where longstanding tradition and emergent aspects of modern life collide. In contrast, films that feature the character I call “the marginal woman” articulate illness, disability and trauma as artificial and arbitrary narrative solutions that remove the couple from the untenable pressures they bear in this transitional moment of history: a fatal condition forces the woman to forego marriage, family, a consumer lifestyle and work, and forces the man to accommodate her needs. Films evocative of this cluster are *Oasis* (Lee Chang-dong, 2002), *Love Me Not* (Lee Cheol-ha, 2006), *You Are My Sunshine* (Park Jin-pyo, 2005), *...ing* (Lee Eon-hee, 2003), *A Millionaire’s first love* (Kim Tae-gyun, 2006), *Happiness* (Hur Jin-ho, 2007), *Failan* (Song Hae-sung, 2001), *Fly High* (Kwak Ji-kyoon, 2006), *The Beast and the Beauty* (Lee Gye-byeok, 2005), and *Our Happy Time* ((also known as *Maundy Thursday*, Song Hae-sung, 2006). In these films, illness allows escape from the otherwise unconquerable conflicting demands of tradition and modernity.

Rather than being representative of actual women’s experiences, these feminine archetypes portray the impossibility of unconditional lasting love in the face of modernization. While the upwardly mobile woman and the disabled woman differ in their characterizations, films featuring these dichotomous figures unexpectedly valorize a similar kind of love. For the upwardly mobile woman and the marginal woman, real love is fleeting and temporary, an ephemeral ideal that disappears soon after it is found. This sensation of ephemerality is exemplary of capitalism’s pervasive impact. Referring to the way that capitalism dissolves all that was previously knowable and foundational, Marx and Engels wrote, “All that is solid melts into air.”²⁶⁵ The once-enduring romance is now utterly fleeting and has likewise dissolved into ephemerality. Here, late capitalism and the process of neoliberal globalization dissolve both the older traditional forms of marriage based on principles of Confucianism and filial piety, in turn dissolving the heterosexual romance and patriarchal nuclear family that emerged after Japanese colonization ended.

Given women in real life are encouraged to pursue heterosexual relations that meet their need for financial security—not love—contemporary South Korean cinema provides an alternative fantasy that addresses women’s yearning for a form of heterosexuality that is diametrically opposed to oppressive forms of patriarchal

²⁶⁵ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, “Manifesto of the Communist Party,” in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 2nd ed., ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1978), 476.

heteronormativity and is instead aligned with notions of “intimacy.” “Ephemeral Intimacy” is that alternative: a fantasy in which men and women meet as their “authentic” selves and not as emblems or the embodiment of a financial future—in short, as something other than commodities. In the films under consideration in this chapter, intimacy acts as a kind of “feminine-heterosexuality” based on emotion and affect that supports the ideals of a gender equality and prioritizes compatibility (regardless of class, family pressures, or financial security), figures as romantic mania or *amour fou*, and leads to non-commodified happiness. As such, “ephemeral intimacy” is part of the national imaginary this dissertation identifies and analyzes.

Beyond friendship and desire, “ephemeral intimacy” is characterized by present-oriented temporality, vulnerable subjectivity, and purposelessness. By joining romantic idealization with impulsive *amour fou* and eliminating outward pursuits, ephemeral love allows lovers to temporarily escape the confinements of modern life. Lovers are focused on the present moment rather than the unknown future, to loosen the binds of tradition and trouble dominant gender roles. Idiosyncrasies that are usually concealed are recognized as a site of exploration rather than control. Arousing desires that momentarily negate the pressures of the real world, ephemeral intimacy relieves subjects from filial, social and financial demands. Rather than being productive or reproductive of the biological, social or national order, ephemeral love is deliberately escapist, impractical and “unnatural”—it refuses the utilitarian coding of love.

A product of historical change, ephemeral intimacy is a response to general and local transformations and recurring social, political, and economic conditions. The twentieth century’s feminist struggles for reproductive and economic rights, and women’s new emphasis on emotional health in ordering personal life has constructed intimacy as an ideal worth pursuing.²⁶⁶ Likewise, the disappearance of agricultural life for urban lifestyles has shaped and redefined present-day heterosexuality.²⁶⁷ In tandem, local modernization has shaped intimacy. Under Japanese occupation, Koreans seeking independence from tyranny sought liberatory heterosexuality inspired by European socialists and hoped Western modernity would relieve families of the burdens of Confucian patriarchy. U.S. influenced processes of modernization, however, ultimately blended capitalist consciousness with Confucian consciousness, reinforcing pre-existing class conflicts by exaggerating capital’s importance for personal survival and making personal wealth the new measure of upper-class status (the Japanese had eradicated the old royal classifications of class). In this development, an erotics of power—the sexism of patriarchy and the sexism of global capitalism—has prefigured heterosexuality as pecuniary heteronormativity. Accordingly, the pursuit of ephemeral intimacy arises from the wish to escape and challenge a system that defines the individual in terms of class status and, in the process, perpetuates gender imbalances in power.

In the ephemeral love film, the couple gets together quickly—little emphasis is placed on the gradual development of a romance. In the upwardly mobile woman’s film,

²⁶⁶ See Anthony Giddens, *The Transformation of Intimacy: Sexuality, Love & Eroticism in Modern Societies*.

²⁶⁷ See Niklas Luhmann, *Love as Passion: The Codification of Intimacy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998); and Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim, *The Normal Chaos of Love* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995).

amour fou inflames unstoppable sexual desire, provoking adulterous sex. In the marginal woman's film, illness forces the couple to skip the distractions and spend time together before time runs out. Together, the ephemeral couple negates connections to the past, overruling obligations to parents, authority figures and other inherited burdens of tradition. The negation of history un-tethers the couple from the family and the past to allow them to occupy the present and focus on the presence of each other. However, the lack of historical anchors rules out any certain future for the couple—hence the ephemerality of their relationship. Despite their differences in plot and structure, films featuring the mobile woman and the disabled woman share a sense of doubt and indeterminacy about the future.

Instead of basing its resolution on the formation of the couple (paradigmatic of some classical Hollywood movies), Korean romance cinema often (but not always) bases its resolution on the couple's separation. Endings depict dystopian fragmentation through the beloved's death (*Failan, A Millionaire's First Love*), emigration (*Singles*), imprisonment (*Oasis*), marriage to someone else (*The Intimate*) or an existential crisis (*Kitchen* and *Changing Partners*). Thus, individuals must learn to deal with sudden break-ups and go their separate ways, not unlike South Korea's historical division from North Korea. This powerful tendency contrasts with the utopian understanding of onscreen heterosexuality where the lover *wins* over his (usually) beloved by overcoming obstacles through individual determination (as in the folklore of entrepreneurial individualism). As David Bordwell, Kristin Thompson, and Janet Staiger have noted, "To win the love of a man or woman becomes the goal of many characters in [Hollywood] classical films."²⁶⁸

Whereas in much of classical Hollywood cinema, the couple is presumed to persist in a later future, in South Korean cinema, couples routinely exist ephemerally. In the Hollywood tradition, Mary Anne Doane points out that, "Some form of heterosexual pact constitutes its privileged mode of closure."²⁶⁹ This pact is the "happy ending" with its undertones of *winning* success and the American Dream. Within this logic, separation would suggest failure and futility. There have been recent South Korean films that suggest the continued existence of a future-oriented romantic couple: In *Castaway on the Moon* (Lee Hey-jun, 2009) and *Penny Pinchers* (Kim Jung-hwan, 2011)—stylistically very dissimilar films—the formation of unlikely couples form is these films' mode of closure. Notably, in both films, what draws the couple together is their mutual need for intimacy (to know and be recognized unconditionally for their interiority) and therapeutic relief from the harrowing conditions of the Crisis, rather than *amour fou* or desire for romance: *Castaway on the Moon* shows a business man in deep debt who attempts suicide connecting with a an extreme social recluse (the woman is a hikikomori, the Japanese term for so-called "normal" people who refuse to leave their rooms); and *Penny Pinchers* shows an unemployed recent college graduate who turns homeless coming into contact with a frugal young woman who loses her substantial savings through investment fraud.

²⁶⁸ David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), 16.

²⁶⁹ Doane, 97.

In this chapter, however, I am interested in films that show heterosexual romance without the means to reproduce a lasting, physical and corporeal, face-to-face connection in the future. Why do so many South Korean films time and again produce narratives of detachment that contradict the understanding of love as attachment and resolution? What kind of “heterosexual love genre” articulates romantic love as impossibility? Gayatri Gopinath has aligned queer desire with impossibility and has noted the term has a more general application as in the “impossibility” of “oppositional practices, subjectivities and alternative visions of collectivity that fall outside the developmental narratives...”²⁷⁰ Here, in the context of South Korean love films, the impossibility of intimacy suggests the larger failure of the South Korean modernization project and the U.S. Cold War to bring about “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” By lingering on the desirability of ephemeral love and identifying these unions as the most fulfilling matches possible, these films flirt with an oppositional alterity while protecting the viewer from the (all too real) disappointment of unrealized dreams and promises experienced in everyday life. In the films examined here, lovers find contentment in deflated expectations and acceptance of separation as the inevitable fate of a kind of happiness too ideal for the real world. At the same time, these films refuse to project their couples into the future. Such stoic leveling of the need for intimacy in personal life seems to reflect the experience everyday life in South Korea, in which lost intimacy and unchanging separation from North Korea informs the peninsula’s schism, and suffering through authoritarianism, U.S. militarism and merciless urbanization has enabled South Korea’s miraculous, but unhappy, development.

Korea’s Sex-Gender System: Premodern Polygamy

South Korea is transmodern: premodernity’s prioritization of collectivism and modernity’s privileging of individualism structure society contiguously thanks to the nation’s accelerated rate of historical change. As Jesook Song notes, “It is futile to make a clear-cut distinction between ‘premodern,’ ‘modern,’ and ‘postmodern’ for late-industrializing countries.”²⁷¹ This transmodernity creates overlaps and differences that make semi-peripheral sites compelling—an untenable yet promising historical situation of lingering tradition and global capitalism.

Korea’s premodern sex-gender system still exerts considerable pressure on modern women’s lives: as in the past, heterosexual relationships are supposed to result in marriages that increase wealth and status for the bride and her birth family. This Confucian-*yangban* framing of marriage as a means for achieving upward financial mobility overlaps with the logic of capitalism. The “*yangbanization*” of South Korea has meant the redefinition of indigenous “tradition” according to the ideological conventions of the ruling class.²⁷² Problematically, such approaches rely on women’s sacrifice of their

²⁷⁰ Gayatri Gopinath, *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 20.

²⁷¹ Jesook Song, “Introduction,” 3.

²⁷² Kwang Kyu Lee writes, “Even though it was the state doctrine for all during the Yi dynasty, Confucianism was monopolized by the upper-class land-owning *yangban*. But in modern Korean society, it has become the ethic of all people. In this way, Korean society is undergoing a ‘*yangbanization*.’ Whether it was lowly or high in the past, every family and lineage now tries to achieve a higher status.” See Kwang

subjectivity and agency (i.e., individualization) as the precondition for family/collective prosperity. By blurring the notion of collectivity with dynastic patriarchy, Korea's sex-gender system justified women's subordination as benefiting the collective good, validating inequity as natural and protectionist.

At the heart of this system was the ruling class's authorization of men's polygamy and its punishment of female infidelity. Under the Goryeo (918-1392) practice of plural wives and the Joseon (1392-1897) custom of a principal wife and a secondary wife or concubine, Korean law allowed men of the aristocratic *yangban* class access to multiple partners.²⁷³ However, Korean law criminalized women with multiple partners because dynastic patriarchy argued that only women's chastity could guarantee male progeny and patrilineal inheritance, and thus guarantee order.²⁷⁴ During the Joseon Dynasty, "all sexual relationships out of marriage were seen as adultery subject to punishment," including instances of rape.²⁷⁵ In contrast, the state's law of celibacy for widows rewarded women who remained faithful to their dead husbands with grain, an honorable red spike, and her family's exemption from coolie labor.²⁷⁶ This system recruited women—mothers, mothers-in-law and first wives—to coerce girls into confining marriages that favored kinship, not individual choice. For girls and women, marriage was an act of filial duty and female virginity and chastity was a commodity for others to barter. The larger suggestion was that the nation's welfare required state jurisdiction over female sexuality and reproduction.

If the traditional system aligned women's sexual subordination with collective order, a number of contemporary South Korean films consider men's sexual corruption as the real threat to sovereignty. In historical films such as *Untold Scandal* (E J-Yong, 2003), *Hwang Jin-Yi* (Chang Yoon-hyun, 2007), *Shadows in the Palace* (Kim Mee-jeung, 2007), and *Portrait of a Beauty* (Jeon Yoon-soo, 2008), male bureaucrats waste resources chasing after or disciplining women instead of governing the nation. In these films, female heroines "overcome the oppressive socio-cultural structure of the pre-modern era and determine their own fate as women in spite of male-dominated social conventions."²⁷⁷ Notably, the backdrop of such films is not national growth but decline. In *Untold Scandal* (E J-Yong, 2003), the regulation of female sexuality is staged against the ruling class's hedonism and the working class's rebellion. The film takes on the hypocrisy of the upper class that demands women's purity, yet permitted men's sexual vice by justifying concubines as the elders' directive to carry on the family line. In the film, Lady Cho arranges for her husband's wedding to a sixteen year-old while secretly plotting her revenge. In effect, the film suggests men absorbed in polygamy could not

Kyu Lee, "Confucian Tradition in the Contemporary Korean Family" in *Confucianism and the family*, ed. Walter H. Slote and George A. De Vos (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), 263.

²⁷³ Martina Deuchler, "Propagating Female Virtues in Chosŏn Korea" in *Women and Confucian Cultures in Premodern China, Korea, and Japan*, ed. Dorothy Ko, JaHyun Kim Haboush and Joan R. Piggott (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 143.

²⁷⁴ Bae-yong Lee, *Women in Korean History*, ed. Ted Chan and trans. Kyong-Hee Lee (Seoul: Ewha Womans University Press, 2008), 35.

²⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 44.

²⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 34.

²⁷⁷ Lee, Jong-do, "Korean Films in 2006 and 2007: Analysis and Outlook" in *Korean Cinema 2006* (Seoul: Korean Film Council KOFIC, 2006), 10.

provide dependable leadership just when Korea faced its biggest crisis: insurgency and colonization.

Alongside the polygamy of the upper class (yangban), Koreans across village and class stratum practiced similar polygamous customs, including child-bride (*minmyonuri*), and adopted son-in-law (*terilsawi*) traditions.²⁷⁸ As aberrant as these arrangements may seem, they were also practical means for distributing labor in ways that enabled families to reproduce themselves. With many women to one man, polygamy's collectivist living conditions shaped a homosocial culture in which women who lacked structural power could build personal power through immediate family relationships.²⁷⁹

Modernity: New Freedoms, New Pressures

In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, Korea's palimpsestic transmodernity—shaped by Japanese colonial occupation, U.S. postwar restructuring, military dictatorial modernization and neoliberal globalization—has reconfigured the traditional sex-gender system. Dynastic polygamy has been outlawed while behavior considered highly improbable by premodern terms (the ideal of free love) has become normalized—to a degree. The notion of heterosexual love is a recent construct that registers South Korea's historical change. The legitimization of the concept of individual agency created the condition of possibility for the understanding of heterosexuality as personal rather than collective relation. Traditional belief systems regarded people as collective beings to sustain the communitarian needs of Korea's agrarian economy. As a force of disorder, love based on individual desire and sexual passion was discouraged during the Joseon dynasty. However, during Japanese colonization, love became a force for personal and national independence.

According to Boduerae Kwon, the concept of romantic, sexual love—*yeonae*—came to East Asia through Western missionaries in China in the mid-nineteenth century, later to Japan in the 1880s and then to Korea through Japanese colonization in the 1910s.²⁸⁰ Noting the conceptual absence of heterosexual love, Kwon points out “*yeonae* was formed as the translation of foreign word[s] whose equivalent was non-existent in Korean.”²⁸¹ Kwon argues Japanese colonialism shifted the discourse of heterosexuality: “the authority of the state and nation weakened and the influence of political discourse waned noticeably. In this vacuum, expressions related to individuality, which had been negatively affected by the totalizing power of state and nation, came into bloom.”²⁸² The Japanese legislated monogamy in 1922, despite Koreans' persistence with polygamy.²⁸³ But moreover, colonialism incited Korean nationalist love. The Christian construct of

²⁷⁸ For an analysis of traditional marriage practices, see Chu-su Kim, “The Marriage System in Korea,” *Korea Journal* 16.7 (July 1976).

²⁷⁹ Eun-shil Kim, “Women and the Culture Surrounding Childbirth,” *Korea Journal* 37.4 (Winter 1997): 17-18.

²⁸⁰ Kwon Boduerae, “The Paradoxical Structure of Modern ‘Love’ in Korea: Yeonae and Its Possibilities,” *Journal* 45.3 (Autumn 2005): 186.

²⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 200.

²⁸² *Ibid.*, 204.

²⁸³ The Committee for the Compilation of The History of Korean Women, *Women of Korea: A History From Ancient Times to 1945*, trans. Yung-Chung Kim (Seoul: Ewha Womans University Press, 1977), 269.

“love” as missionary passion translated to patriotic zeal for a free nation. In turn, love for a free nation enabled love between men and women as a new ideal.

A free nation required an autonomous, decolonized people capable of building a new society better than the old Joseon hierarchy and the false Japanese aggression. In this utopian world, men and women would marry and divorce freely based on *yeonae* rather than forced arrangements. Writing in the 1910s, Korean intelligentsia—who were influenced by the socialist writings of Bertrand Russell, Edward Carpenter and especially Ellen Key’s *Love and Marriage*—argued personal happiness and national prosperity were inextricably entwined as only happy individuals could create a flourishing nation. Personal happiness was conditional on *yeonae*, a social relation that took into account people as individuals with their own sexual and social will (individualist love), rather than only filial sons and daughters subject to unhappy unions preordained by dictatorial elders and the family system. Hence revolutionizing male-female relations also demanded changes in the “despotic” family system.²⁸⁴ Given that the state of the world depended on human relations of individual love, the rhetoric of individual agency gained new legitimacy and helped legitimate heterosexual relations based on individual will and desire rather than the collective order. If the concept of *yeonae* helped mitigate forced marriages, state-sponsored family planning programs helped detach sex from procreation to increase women’s sexual autonomy. The dislocation of sexuality from biological reproduction began in the 1960s when the government implemented population control programs that emphasized the family planning ideal of two children. As of 2008, South Korea has one of the lowest fertility rates in the world.²⁸⁵ The current force for falling fertility is attributable to college-educated women’s decision to delay marriage, or to refrain from childbirth even after marriage. For middle-class women workers, marriage and children have emerged as a liability to the pursuit of a successful career, as married and pregnant women are the first to be fired during economic recessions.²⁸⁶

In conjunction with changes in reproduction, feminism has politicized women’s sexuality as a site of social relations. For decades, South Korea’s women’s movement has been calling for a radical re-evaluation of heterosexuality in support of female autonomy. Something akin to the West’s second-wave feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s took hold of South Korea in the 1980s as part of the Minjung National movement, instituting feminism on college campuses through the establishment of Women’s Studies departments and women’s organizations. Writing on women’s rising consciousness in the 1980s, Haejoang Cho notes, “The image of independent and self-sufficient women was propagated widely. Women began to talk about ‘self-realization,’ asserting that they wanted to be defined not by familial relations but as individuals.”²⁸⁷ Correspondingly, increases in non-normative households caused by rising divorce rates, single mothers, multiculturalism and a growing population of aging single individuals have challenged the patriarchal family system.

²⁸⁴ Kwon Bodurae, “The Paradoxical Structure of Modern ‘Love’ in Korea,” 203.

²⁸⁵ Joo-hyun Cho, “Neoliberal Governmentality,” 24.

²⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 24.

²⁸⁷ Haejoang Cho, “Living with Conflicting Subjectivities: Mother, Motherly Wife, and Sexy Woman in the Transition from Colonial-Modern to Postmodern Korea,” 179.

Yet some long-standing traditions have not changed, despite attempts to mobilize social change. For instance, the criminalization of adultery (Article 241 of the Penal Code) continues to infringe on personal life by authorizing the state's criminal courts with the right to punish individuals with up to a two-year prison sentence over decisions that should be dealt in divorce courts; in effect, the state is disregarding individuals' right to privacy and sexuality and instead compelling people toward "traditional" monogamy and heteronormativity through extreme measures.²⁸⁸ Another vestige is young women's tendency remain in the parental home until marriage, compromising women's effort to assert individual identity outside the family.²⁸⁹ Although many South Korean women desire separate housing, the economic demands of self-subsistence—especially the expense of food and shelter—force women to frame their autonomy in terms of marriage, whether or not marriage is desirable. For instance, Eun-shil Kim stresses the oppressive coercion felt by women to marry, despite women's own misgivings:

At *honki* [a woman's marriageable age], women get tremendous pressure to get married directly and indirectly, and at the same time, many women are afraid of being left out as a single person. Women in their twenties usually get married. Others study in graduate schools and work in companies and experience unequal treatment with their male colleagues and frustration in discriminating working environments. Gradually, these women are forced to accept marriage as a proper and safe place.²⁹⁰

In addition to this frame of reference, another position has emerged as the competing narrative of women's careers has gained considerable ground. Joo-hyun Cho writes:

"After the IMF crisis, there was a sudden realization of the unsustainability of relying solely on men as bread-winners... This accentuated the importance of economic contributions of women in this turbulent social upheaval. Among unmarried women, there was a widespread consensus that in life, getting a job is essential but marriage is optional."²⁹¹

The predicament of being an unmarried woman in her mid-thirties who has prioritized her dream career over marriage is the subject of the South Korean television drama series *The Woman Who Wants to Marry* (MBC Network, 2004) and its sequel *The Woman Who Still Wants To Marry* (MBC Network, 2010). In these dramas, much like the American television program *Sex and the City*, successful single women deliberate over their life choices while fending off prejudice against "old-maids" and struggling to date eligible men. In *The Woman Who Still Wants To Marry*, Da-jung (a character defined in the series as desperate to marry) finally weds a doctor but then disparages her husband's family and longs for her single life, preferring her past loneliness to her present imprisonment. However, pregnancy makes a return to single life impossible. While dramas empathize with modern Korean women, they lack the availability of another option: that of the single woman and man who live alone and self-sufficiently in one's own housing, with social relationships and a happy life, minus a romantic partner.

²⁸⁸ Kuk Cho, "Korean Criminal Law," 78.

²⁸⁹ Lett, 82.

²⁹⁰ See Note 6 in Eun-Shil Kim, "Female Gender Subjectivity Constructed by 'Son-Birth': Need for Feminisms?" *Asian Journal of Women's Studies* 1, (January 31, 1995): 33. <http://www.proquest.com/>

²⁹¹ Joo-hyun Cho, "Neoliberal Governmentality," 24.

Rather, the entwined logics of capitalism and Confucianism drive personal life so that only marriage seems realistic and imperative. According to Eva Illouz, the search for partners is not about finding true love, but about maximizing profit in the spirit of entrepreneurial capitalism. Prospective mates are ranked for potential benefits bound to the “self-interested rationality of the market.”²⁹² Having succumbed to the ideology of economic rationality and free choice, the “merit” sought in a partner harmonizes with the mate who “happens” to offer the best financial speculation. The rules of capital pre-shape the selection of partners; love is not a democracy when a “biologic-sexual” self, innocent of economic structures, chooses his or her mate. Under capitalism, young women in South Korea seem unconsciously to strive to cultivate relationships that provide upward mobility and its material securities—similarly to Confucian matchmaking. After the 1997 recession, a mate selection’s speculative ties to economic self-interest seem to have intensified. Amidst rising of debt, pyramid schemes, bankruptcy and homelessness (the usual subplots of Korean film and television), and the absence of career-worthy jobs, marriage has become the linchpin of women’s upward mobility. In Nam In-sook’s 2004 self-help book *Everything in a Woman’s Whole Life Is Determined in Her 20s*, the author advises it is “an absolute necessity to marry men with higher social or economic status to make ends meet, for women are severely disadvantaged in the marriage market in Korea.”²⁹³

Significantly, the belief that economic rationality should govern all behavior has become commonsense, even in childhood. While desiring the best opportunity for their children has been an ideal for generations of parents, the situation in South Korea has become unhealthy and may prove disadvantageous in the long run. To compete in the arena of global capital, the nation prescribes science and overachievement, shaping boys and girls into economic commodities at the cost of personal curiosity. The government has joined the national ministry of education and the ministry of science and technology; of the 80% of youth who pursue college, 25% of undergrads major in engineering.²⁹⁴ As junior high begins, children focus on admission into a top college for later admission into the upper classes by attending school, *hagwons* (costly cram-schools) and tutoring.²⁹⁵ Indeed, the O.E.C.D. reports South Korean parents as spending the most money on their children’s education—contributing to parents’ insolvency in later life.²⁹⁶ For children, the never-ending preparation for tomorrow leads to depression, and even suicide: South Korean youth rank as the unhappiest in the world and the suicides of the young and the

²⁹² Eva Illouz, *Consuming the Romantic Utopia: Love and The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 242.

²⁹³ The book’s title is transliterated as *Yeoja-ui modeun insaeng-eun isip dae-e gyeoljeong doenda*. Reprinted in Joo-hyun Cho, “Neoliberal Governmentality,” 26. For an analysis on the predominance of matchmaking versus ‘love marriages’ in South Korea, see Denise Potrzeba Lett’s chapter 6 on “Marriage Strategies” in *In Pursuit of Status*, 182-199.

²⁹⁴ Michael Alison Chandler, “How does South Korea outpace the U.S. in engineering degrees?” *The Hechinger Report*, July 17, 2012. http://hechingerreport.org/content/how-does-south-korea-outpace-the-u-s-in-engineering-degrees_9032/.

²⁹⁵ See Amanda Ripley, “Teacher, Leave Those Kids Alone,” *Time Magazine*, World, September 25, 2011. <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,2094427,00.html>

²⁹⁶ Mark McDonald, “Elite South Korean University Rattled by Suicides,” *The New York Times*, Asia Pacific section, May 22, 2011. http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/23/world/asia/23southkorea.html?_r=1&ref=asia

brilliant has become newsworthy.²⁹⁷ When a string of suicides hit a premier college, a student lamented, “Day after day we are cornered into an unrelenting competition that smothers and suffocates us... We no longer have the ability to laugh freely.”²⁹⁸

The extreme pressure to succeed, drawn from the transmodern belief systems of well-established tradition and newly established capitalism, interpellates individuals into a matrix that disguises economic rationality as self-interested freedom of choice. Having survived a series of horrifying historical nightmares, and now dealing with the pressures of global capitalism on one hand, and potential war with North Korea on the other, the 19th century problem of basic survival—how to remain independently alive—continues to haunt the nation. While other nations point to South Korea as an example of capitalism’s utopian effects, the tales of love told in South Korean cinema are profoundly dystopian. In the following, I discuss the seminal postwar film *Madame Freedom* in which female adultery is at the nexus of South Korea’s transition into the new economy. As a text that delves into historical change through personal life, the film presents a model occasion for analyzing how the forces of Confucianism and capitalism disciplines and constructs heterosexuality and modern femininity.

Madame Freedom

Under traditional patriarchy, lack of freedom defines the married woman’s life: she must exhibit chastity and servitude to her husband; she endures supervision by her mother-in-law; and she must sacrifice everything for her children. However, the postwar reconfiguration of Korean life under emergent modernity challenged the married woman’s so-called fate with predictions of women’s economic and sexual independence. The 1956 melodrama *Madame Freedom* inquires into this dialectic through a housewife’s search for modern female identity.

The film opens with a “before” image of traditional family life: a graceful middle-aged housewife in a satiny *hanbok* irons clothes and helps her elementary-school aged son with homework while her husband pens his opus with a Confucian brush. Disrupting the husband’s concentration are the neighbor’s American big-band music and his wife’s pestering for permission to work at a department store. Although her husband protests that such work is unbecoming of a professor’s wife, Madame Oh retorts, “it’s not for fun,” hinting that an academic’s income cannot sustain their lifestyle. This clash foreshadows the conflict to come between the husband who scorns money and the wife who lacks the luxury of such contempt. While the husband of the old Confucian order cannot grasp the transformations brought on by postwar capitalization, the wife who partakes in the vogue of new womanhood cannot understand the risks attached to the western temptations of consumer culture.

The film’s title, *Madame Freedom* (*Jayu Buin* “free wife”), conveys the powerful fantasy of becoming untethered from the confines and subordinate roles of traditional domestic life and taking on the persona of a heroine. Westernization allegedly qualified wives to act autonomously, rather than in the self-effacing manner demanded by custom. While Korea’s marriage system demanded that the wife renounce her personal freedom for economic protection, postwar reality often meant women had to work for wages in the

²⁹⁷ Chandler, “How does South Korea.”

²⁹⁸ McDonald, “Elite South Korean University.”

public sphere for the family's survival. With such changes, the freedoms reserved for husbands—work, mobility, money and sex—became prospects for wives. Wives who had dutifully entered arranged marriages could finally taste romance—*yeonae*. In *Madame Freedom*, however, *yeonae* has been resignified so that *yeonae*'s socialist conceptual roots from Britain and Sweden have been re-inscribed with capitalist repercussions reflecting South Korea's postwar Americanization.

American capitalism's new importance as the central catalyst in Koreans' lives drives the film. In 1956—the year of the film's release—South Korea was clichéd as a “war-torn third world country” just three years removed from the Korean War. Whereas parentage determined one's social status under the Confucian economic order—making social standing unchangeable—capitalism claimed individual effort could determine one's status under its fluid meritocracy. In the film, Madame Oh's occupation is initially registered as an opportunity that transforms the housewife to a manager. The sequences depicting her behind the counter at *P'ari* (Paris) Boutique, the most upper crust department store in Seoul, show Madame Oh as an authoritative expert in European and American brand names. She effortlessly sells expensive products and handles large sums of cash. Her work facilitating the high-end consumption of others causes Madame Oh to develop an inflated and misguided sense of self-importance and economic mobility.

In tandem to wage work, her friend Yoon-joo prevails on Madame Oh the need for women to start a business, provoking in her feelings of insecurity, rivalry, urgency and greed. In the film, the new economy is a democratic system of free enterprise in which anyone can become private owners for profit—including women. Over dinner at a Chinese restaurant, Yoon-joo urges Madame Oh to join a “savings club” to make extra cash. After ridiculing Madame Oh for not knowing how to dance and calling women of their age (thirties to forties) “withering roses,” Yoon-joo counsels, “The important thing is money. Nothing is impossible without money. Especially for us women. We need to be economically independent to avoid the tyranny of our husbands...All that's left is to enjoy this short life. And in order to enjoy it, we must make money.” Notably, the word “enjoy” is spoken in English. Through Yoon-joo, the film voices the new expectation that women have an economic life that is outside the family system.

Along with economic independence, sexual autonomy signifies women's new enfranchisement. As the film progresses, Madame Oh perceives adultery as the upper-class, middle-aged woman's right. First, Madame Oh joins an elite wives' club that obliges its members to bring “boyfriends” (spoken in English) to its opulent dances. Meanwhile, Madame Oh comes in contact with male customers at the department store, transgressing the taboo against hetero-social space. In one sequence, Madame Oh lights the cigarette of a male customer after he buys the costliest cosmetic in the store, an unchaste gesture that brings her married woman's hand close to a male mouth that is not her husband's. But her rival suitors—her neighbor Choon-ho and the store-owner's husband—best embody the forces of Western romance and desire that reveal the new economy's corruption of married women's chaste sexuality. On one hand, hipster Choon-ho challenges Madame Oh to stop calling herself “an old person,” telling her, “You're young and beautiful and if you wear a Western style dress, it would be very good.” In a later sequence, he declares, “I love you. [In English.] Madame, please use me as you like this evening.” With their cheeks pressed (kissing was censored), the film implies a sexual

affair (although her son interrupts the moment). On the other hand, the older store-owner's husband takes her out to exotic restaurants (Mexican food) and buys her posh tokens. By linking Madame Oh's sexual seduction with her seduction by the new consumer culture, the film represents the commodification of love. When the wives' club throws a party, Madame Oh strategically invites the rich gentleman to be her date. He agrees on the condition that he becomes her "boyfriend."

The trappings of Western capitalism—rendered in *Madame Freedom's* lavish sets, props and costumes—exercise modernity's power to provoke desire for the new, to reorganize the world according to commercial value. As the yangban class's alienation from folk practices converges with the West's disparagement of non-industrial cultures, the new economy disparages native habits as primitive and lower class. Accordingly, ignorance of Western goods and customs incites an insecurity complex as older habits get replaced. Early in the film, Madame Oh feels threatened by her ignorance of the American dances. To make up for these doubts, the new economy encourages women to identify themselves with how they appear to others through the international brands they buy (*Hermès, Chanel, Max Factor*), their trophy boyfriends and the sites of consumption where they are seen. The new market elicits women's consumer dependency through alienation from their indigenous identity, disapproval of their corporeality and promises of betterment. For these women, the modern self is created by giving in to the irresistible lure of the commodity fetish and to sexual desire outside of the family, both of which entail rejecting the past and authorizing the new.



Figure 3.1: The housewife tastes beer for the first time with her neighbor in *Madame Freedom*

If modern femininity is represented as a break from the past and an acceptance of capitalism as the immanent, differentiated future, this symbolic gender system forces Korean women to perceive their heritage and corporeality as lacking. Conscious of one's Koreanness from the gaze of the new economy that "others" and dismisses Korean traditions (such as shamanism) as backward, peasant or superstitious, the modern woman seeks to rid herself the internal disquiet of not being modern enough. Postwar modernization through U.S. intervention brought America and the world to South Korea

in excess. The modern spans many transnational sites (for example, Kathleen McHugh points out that the nightclub scene features a cabaret act that feels familiarly American yet is “more strikingly reminiscent of the Mexican *cabaretera* film than of the Hollywood variant.”²⁹⁹). The film mixes global referents (French brands, Cuban-sounding music) with self-referential use of English (Korean dialogue cut by jarring English words like “madam,” “enjoy,” “I love you,” singing in English in the cabaret scene, and a minor character—Madame Oh’s niece—learning English by dating an American). The modern subject consumes the world and speaks English. In this film, consumption produces a sense of future-oriented utopian progress and upward mobility—Western-ness—to birth a nation of consumers. Constituted by the Cold War, the influence of the U.S.—hailed as South Koreans’ savior from Japan and North Korea—distances “South Korea” from prewar Korea and corporeal, ethnic Koreanness (as this is shared with the North). As modernity dislocates native knowledge, Koreans become aware of themselves anew: to be capitalist “South” Korea, to inhabit a new identity and a sense of historical surveillance.

The film suggests that becoming modern entails a process of (self)commodification in order to construct its own a critique of capitalist notions of “development.” It appears that everything outside of the traditional sphere—that is everything within the new sphere of the Americanized economy—is horribly commodifiable, including love. As Kathleen McHugh notes, “All the romances in *Madame Freedom*... [are] overtly mediated by economic exchange or professional improvement.”³⁰⁰ Over time, Madame Oh learns to detach sexuality from emotion and re-attach it to financial opportunism. After the neighbor-turned-dance instructor seduces her with the English words “I love you,” Choon-ho is eventually exposed as a freeloader on the prowl for a benefactress. Comparatively, when Madame Oh finds herself in a financial predicament, she sees no other recourse than to take the store owner’s husband as her lover for an economic bailout. Anyone can be purchased, and all “worth” has a monetary value or an exchange value, but nothing else.

If the one exception to the commodification of relationships is the love between mother and child, then the new economy endangers this bond by tempting mothers to detach from their children to “enjoy life.” As the film ends, Madame Oh returns home in the snow-falling darkness, having just left a hotel room with the store-owner’s husband—and having been resoundingly slapped by his furious wife. Once home, the professor spurns the dejected Madame Oh: “Driven by vanity, you abandoned your family. You gladly exchanged your duties as a mother... If you have at least a scrap of conscience left, leave this home. That is your duty as Kyungsoo’s mother.” The son, however, wails, “It’s mom.” Moved, the professor opens the gate, allowing the boy to embrace his mother. Repentantly, Madame Oh sobs, “It’s all my fault.” The film ends with a wide shot of the father looking on at his wife and son. For this family, the future is ambivalent.

Madame Freedom rejects the premise that American capitalism will liberate Korean women from the oppressive traditional sphere as an economic and sexual agent.

²⁹⁹ Kathleen McHugh, “State, Nation, Woman, and the Transnational Familiar,” in *South Korean Golden Age Melodrama: Gender, Genre, And National Cinema*, ed. by Kathleen McHugh and Nancy Abelmann (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2005), 32.

³⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 30.

Under the new economy's oppressive indifference to protecting women from predatory capitalism, Madame Oh ends up alone, humiliated and in terrible debt. While the film critiques Madame Oh, it also faults the husband. By ignoring all the social, economic and cultural changes capitalist restructuring entails, the husband stands in the way of progress and drives his wife to deal with the practical demands of life under capitalism, forcing her to enter the economic sphere alone and unprepared, where she can resist neither the desire nor the fear that capitalism provokes.

But, while both wife and husband struggle to adapt to capitalist restructuring, it is really the woman that is caught between these two overwhelming forces: the forces of tradition to which she is supposed to subordinate herself, and the forces of capitalist modernization and the radical social change it demands. Tradition requires she submit to her husband and remain his dependent, while modernity requires the married woman to support her dependent boyfriend or become a kept woman supported by a rich lover. Either way, heterosexual relationships are premised on some form of commodification or economic exchange that threatens intimacy. The new economy seems to destroy the relationships that make traditional intimacy possible: marriage (the husband's inability to make money forces the wife to become the breadwinner), homosocial friendship (Madame Oh becomes a pawn of Yoon-joo's get-rich-quick scheme), and maternal attachment (Madame Oh neglects her son to "liberate herself" through the market's temptations). Moreover, *Madame Freedom's* linking of illicit sexuality with excess consumption is itself a sign of its ambivalent alignment with traditional views of women and modern capitalism's commodification of femininity and sexuality (its tendency to construct women as desirable objects of consumption and as consumers).

Marriage and Adultery: Ideologies of Reproduction and Rebellion

Decades after *Madame Freedom*, South Korean cinema continues to interrogate processes of historical change through its impact upon and transformation of heterosexual intimacy. Romantic dramas that imagine married or engaged women in adulterous affairs comment on events that transpired after 1953 that would curtail men and women's ability to achieve happiness despite the nation's so-called success. In *Kitchen* and *The Intimate*, a wife and a bride-to-be have sex with strangers. In *Marriage is a Crazy Thing*, a woman sets up a home with two different men. These films are based on the premise that a financially secure marriage does not generate feelings of closeness, belonging and mutual understanding. In these films, only radical intimacy—corporeal, irrational intimacy characterized by free will detached from social, financial or familial considerations—can allow for a heterosexual relation free of oppressive conditions. As a result, a pattern emerges: women eligible for an upward trajectory through marriage have a transgressive affair with a man who defies the predictable role of the upwardly mobile ideal. In this way, a form of resistance emerges from the actions taken by these women in their pursuit of intimacy; while naïve and ultimately flawed, these are nonetheless acts of dissidence against the twinned but contradictory pressures of capitalism and tradition.

The "upwardly mobile woman" is a fantasy-character who upholds the mainstream's idealized expectations of Korean femininity. By embodying Confucian and capitalist ideals—superlative looks, education, and appropriately feminine careers—these

“plastic beauties” (women who have invested in plastic surgery to increase their sexual capital) epitomize heterosexual desirability in the marriage market.³⁰¹ On the surface, this good girl has lived by the rules to have a happy life with a desirable—i.e., rich—marital partner. Her narrative purpose, however, is not to embody the ideals of the mainstream, but to trouble and contradict them. Whether married or at *honki*, the upwardly mobile woman performs the requirements of Korean femininity in order to lead a financially secure life, all while secretly resenting constraints placed on her pursuit of romance and desire. While her fiancé or husband has money and a white-collar job, he lacks time and empathy. When the upwardly mobile woman brings up a problem, he tells her to ignore it (*The Intimate*) or forget about it (*Kitchen*), leaving the woman feeling unheard and misunderstood. As a result, marriages appear dutiful, alienating, and patriarchal, lacking the therapeutic give-and-take desired by modern women.

Dissatisfied, the upwardly mobile woman in these films opts for a preposterous sexual affair that ultimately results in affective fulfillment. Adulterous sex emerges as a social practice bearing non-verbal bodily intensity, gendered relations of power, and the possibility of human experience untethered from the capitalist-Confucian economy. The vertical orientation of upright sex in all three films herald feminist relations. Along with sex, mimetic and anti-mimetic play sets adultery apart from normativity. Play resolves the tension between compulsory marriage and individualism by enacting an alternative life where women are rewarded with immediacy and authenticity: the happiness of reuniting with the (childhood) self that she had repressed and creating memories of love that she will carry into the future.

The man who is the object of adulterous desire is, from the outset, presented as an impossible fantasy figure, a clear indication that the protagonist’s intimate liaison with him will be fleeting: he combines the “bad boy” and the “sensitive man” figures while meeting impossible standards of male commercial beauty. As a fantasy figure for personal freedom, the lover attends to the woman’s hidden psychosexual and emotional needs. Along these lines, he also rejects capitalism due to his conscience (*The Intimate*), critical mind (*Marriage is a Crazy Thing*) or expatriate identity (*Kitchen*); hence he is socially and economically marginal. His marginality also extends to his emotional vulnerability: often, he is recovering from a broken heart (*The Intimate*) or the trauma of surviving cancer (*Kitchen*). While ethnically Korean, he is characterized by global difference and mobility: he is a transnational adoptee from France in *Kitchen*, a man headed to Zanzibar in *The Intimate*, and an English literature scholar in *Marriage is a Crazy Thing*. Lacking ambition or desire for upward mobility, he leads a life that allows for geographical mobility and ideological nonconformity. Often portrayed by tall commercial models (e.g., Ju Ji-hoon who registers as 180cm/5’11” tall, when the national average is 174cm/5’7”), the actor’s sexual capital obfuscates the character’s lack of

³⁰¹ South Korea leads the world in plastic surgery procedures after accounting for the population and over 50% of Korean women in their 20’s are reported to have had plastic surgery. See Charles Scanlon, “The price of beauty in South Korea,” *BBC News*, February 3, 2005. http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/programmes/from_our_own_correspondent/4229995.stm (accessed August 13, 2013). See also “Who has the most plastic surgery?” *The Economist*, Daily Chart. April 23, 2012, <http://www.economist.com/blogs/graphicdetail/2012/04/daily-chart-13> (accessed August 13, 2013)

economic capital, making plausible his desirability. Moreover, male beauty clarifies first sexual encounters as unambiguously consensual sex, rather than rape by a stranger.

If, in these films, the fantasy figure is economically disadvantaged, then the fiancé/husband counterpart is predictably characterized as successful and unavailable resulting from overwork. As marriage to a rich man enables the standard of living portrayed in the media, consumer culture idealizes affluent men as the object of marital desire. Smart and goal-oriented, the husband is a dependable provider. But, his overly responsible and perfectionist tendencies keep him from being carefree, patient and empathetic. In striving to excel and conquer the business world, he develops adversarial and narcissistic traits. As a result, he makes a poor partner: lacking self-doubt, the husband ignores his wife's views and acknowledges only his own version of reality. Because the husband values idealized public images, his female partner is expected to conceal aspects of the self that might disturb the couple's semblance of success. Lastly, accustomed to having power, the husband's controlling manner connotes the arrogance of unequal social relations.

This opposition between the lover and the husband resembles the "making a choice" grouping in the Hollywood classical love film in which women choose between two suitors who struggle for her.³⁰² In the South Korean version, the upwardly mobile woman is caught between two forces of desire, one backed by the power of centuries-long tradition, and the other so fleeting and ephemeral that it cannot offer anything so secure as a "way of life." On one hand, the current heterosexual and economic paradigm is built so that women have few quality job prospects and must instead find upward mobility through marriage at the expense of their own individuality. Women must assume docile mannerisms, negate their own ambition and repress desires that deviate from the rigid limits of expected behavior. Amidst this denial and mystification, the only relationship is a non-relationship: there is no intimacy, only financial considerations.

In contrast, while the lover-stranger can offer liberating real intimacy, these men cannot hold down a job, and would require women to enter the harsh workforce with its unfair compensation, long hours and few prospects for advancement. The lover cannot provide for a future that includes unforeseen crisis and material sustenance like childcare. Indeed, transience—freedom from place, permanence and responsibility—are the province of these romanticized men leading highly mobile, even globally mobile, lives. The liberal idea of "freedom of choice" is discredited because neither man can bring about a happy ending. By identifying security and intimacy with two separate characters, films suggest that a marriage able to combine the two remains a mere fantasy.

The Intimate

The Intimate thematizes the problem of marriage, adultery and historical change by narrating the story of a betrothed woman who has the opportunity to leave her overbearing fiancé for a stranger who promises her unconditional intimacy. In contrast to the other films discussed here, *The Intimate* unfolds through a prolonged flashback. This tampering with temporality causes *The Intimate*'s narrative structure to subvert the romance genre's happy ending. This film defines true love by separation and distance, rather than merged oneness and thereby challenges notions of the "couple."

³⁰² Doane, 105.

In *The Intimate*, the wedding is a fabrication created for others' consumption; happiness is in the memory of an ephemeral day that represents a romantic ideal unattainable in practical reality. As of 2012, getting married in South Korea cost an unbelievable average of over \$200,000 (including start-up housing costs), although household income hovered slightly above \$40,000.³⁰³ The American-styled wedding (also glimpsed in *Kitchen*, *Marriage is a Crazy Thing*, *An Affair*, *Oasis*) symbolizes the promise of love, happiness and prosperity and contrasts with married characters' lived experience of hidden despair. The main protagonist appears in a bridal gown in the opening and ending sequences to show the irony of her situation. In the opening, the woman (Seong Hyeon-ah) is at the salon getting styled for her wedding pictures when she gazes into the mirror and triggers the narrative's flashback. Organized much like the American film *Before Sunrise* (Richard Linklater, 1995), the flashback traces a twenty-four hour period during which time the woman falls in love with a man who is not her groom, but a model-handsome stranger (Jo Dong-hyuk) she meets in an elevator. The two leave in separate cars, yet miles away they meet again, as if by fate. Having just declared bankruptcy on his company rather than engage in corrupt business practices, the stranger is about to depart for Zanzibar the next day. The woman, an artisan who makes traditional knotwork, is engaged to marry a man she has been dating for seven years. Each time the woman reaches out to her fiancé, he is unavailable, triggering feelings of anger, alienation and melancholy that incite and justify the woman's infidelity. On this day, they insist on anonymity as in *Last Tango in Paris* (1972, Bernardo Bertolucci), and go by "man" (*namja*) and "woman" (*yuhja*). While she tries to limit her playtime with the stranger, the fiancé's ongoing unavailability drives the woman toward the stranger time and again in the 24 hours they end up spending together. She wants a man who has the freedom of both time (life) and financial security, but the impossibility of that desire reflects her nation's historical dilemma.

At the outset, the woman and the stranger's time together represents the ultimate romance—a day of adolescent freedom organized around play, sex and leisurely consumption, in which duties and pressures are forgotten. Ersatz Parisian music scores their happiness as the couple shuffles from bookstore to *videobang* (privatized rooms that screen films) and then the postmodern gallery where they have upright sex (as in *Kitchen*). Although they part as planned, the woman spies her fiancé at a fancy restaurant with his white clients, occasioning the woman to play with the stranger at a children's park. Afterwards, they dine at a restaurant where the stranger's credit cards are rejected, forcing the woman to pay for dinner. Here, the film points out their relationship is not free, and is also overlaid with connotations of consumption and globalization. By making the man the woman's dependent, the film sets their romance in the market economy and marks her as a "new woman" (as in *Madame Freedom*).

If the stranger is the woman's dependent, the woman is the dependent of her fiancé. A third of the way through *The Intimate*, the film explains that marriage is not about real love, but the pressures of intractable tradition and a market economy so

³⁰³ This sum includes the wedding, the pre-wedding and housing. Housing takes up 70% of the cost. See Eunhye Shin, "Getting married in South Korea? Bring a lot of cash!" *Reuters*, April 27, 2012. <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/04/27/us-korea-weddings-idUSBRE83Q07Q20120427> (accessed August 13, 2013).

powerful that even knowledge of its limitations and horrors cannot prevent one's absorption into it. The protagonists of these films get married precisely because no alternative exists. In the car, the woman asks to postpone their wedding, raising the fiancé's ire. Soon after, the fiancé describes their upcoming marriage in a way that foreshadows her inevitable misery: "Marriage is nothing. Don't be too serious," he comments, continuing "Every girl becomes the same after seven years. What's the matter?" When she looks at him questionably, the fiancé says, "Let it go. I'll live with you. And you will too. What's love? This is love too. Got it?" When the woman replies, "I don't know," the man explains, "Everybody lives in his own hell." When she responds, "Why should I be your hell? You can dump me," he responds, "I would do that if I could get out of hell by dumping you... For seven years, hell has expanded as much as our love has. Everybody knows it's hell, but he can't get out of it. That's hell." This enactment articulates their lack of choice; they must fulfill the traditions imposed by the past and the demands of the modern present and, in doing so, knowingly succumb to a future defined by unavoidable misery. Whereas the romantic couple in Hollywood cinema often transcends the most devastating historical circumstance through their union, the romantic couple in South Korean cinema is entirely subordinate to the alienation and lack of autonomy wrought by both tradition and historical change.

Ephemeral romance intervenes as a fantasy figure of escape from this historical condition. Realizing she cannot influence her fiancé or change the system at large, the woman gives up on challenging the marital partner. Nonetheless, the patriarchal marriage through which she has emerged as an "upwardly mobile woman" incites rage in the protagonist as she realizes her powerlessness, preparing the way for emotional intimacy to develop between the woman and the stranger. This shift begins after the stranger has followed her into the restaurant without her consent, just as the fiancé has delivered his tirade. Hurt and angered by the awful truth, the woman lashes out at the stranger. She throws a drink at the stranger's face. When he says she's out of line, she says, "Make me happy. I feel like shit now." As the woman cannot communicate with her fiancé, the woman projects the anger she feels onto the stranger, which in turn implicitly changes into understanding during the course of the night.

If the stranger represents escape, the husband is the dogged system that remains in place and challenges the new couple's chance at utopian happiness. The power struggle at stake in their love triangle is best conveyed in the scene set in the nightclub that starts with the new lovers gaily dancing. The stranger lampoons moves from *Saturday Night Fever* (John Badham, 1977). Dripping with sweat and out of breath, the lovers enter a private room. When her cellphone rings, the man asks her to ignore the call, which the woman takes. On the other line, her fiancé says, "No matter what, you're coming back to me. Nothing will change. Have fun." The camera shows the fiancé is inside the nightclub. When the stranger confronts the fiancé at the bar, the fiancé quips, "To her, you're nothing but a disposable dildo." Feeling shamed and insecure, the stranger returns to the room. The woman takes off her panties and throws it at him, saying, "I like you being aggressive. It turns me on." He dives into her and performs cunnilingus. She calls her fiancé and taunts, "I'm having fun as you told me. You think you're something. You like to have sex with me? Not for me. I hate it. I hate everything!" She throws her phone. The stranger pauses and asks, "You've been thinking about him the whole time we've been

together?” Irked, she answers, “You’re no different from him. Who do you think you are?” She stands as if to leave, declaring, “It’s my body, not yours! Who are you to tell me what to do!” In this scene, the fiancé’s intrusion divides the new couple and incites their mutual mistrust.

Although she could have foreseen that answering the fiancé’s call would harm her new relationship, the woman’s desire for both men and her urge to push the limits of both bonds leads to confusion. Caught in the feud between the woman and her fiancé, the stranger overreacts to his feeling of being doubly castrated and loses sight of his love for the woman. The result is a violent rupture: while it was the fiancé who insulted the stranger and the woman, and the stranger and the woman both lost control in their quarrel, it is the woman who is punished. The stranger shakes the woman, places her over the table and rapes her from behind. She initially screams, “Let me go,” and then stops. Her face shuts down except for one eye that sheds a resigned tear. He stops with a look of remorse. At last, she stands up, looks at him, and slaps him. She grabs her bag and leaves.

This rape sequence punishes the woman for daring to be the sovereign of her mind and body, and desiring two men, and embodying a form of autonomous femininity that is too modern by South Korean standards. Sexualized violence becomes an expression of the powerlessness experienced by each in modern South Korea. The man and the woman are out of control—upwardly mobile or downwardly mobile, they are trapped in history.

After the horrible rape, the couple parts ways, but neither has a home to go to. Unwittingly, they find each other again at the park. They enter a new level of closeness based on the fact that they need not calculate their “love” on long-term conditions. The park repudiates the disciplining pressures of domesticity and the alienating commercialism of hotels. The park is a fantasy space of play, nature and childhood. By resolving their problems in a park, the ephemeral couple embraces the fantasy of unconditional free love: the ideal of heterosexual love unfettered from ownership, self-interest or past ill will. At the park, she is initially angry to see him, but when he embraces her lovingly, she chooses to hug him back and they start to kiss. He takes her hand and draws its outline on the park bench. By appealing to play, the film severs from normative images of romance that code heterosexual love as status, affluence and perfection (as in wedding imagery). Instead, spontaneous play figures as a past way of life that is now unobtainable. Thus, these love films acknowledge that such freedom is a fantasy that is impossible under current historical conditions.

As the film closes, *The Intimate* converts mimetic play into a form of resistance against harrowing pressures imposed by the marriage system. The most telling sequence shows the two mocking wedding vows before a statue of the Virgin Mary where the man and the woman yell, “No, I don’t.” This game of theatre empowers the woman in her fantasy to refuse her pretend husband and reject the inevitability of marriage. The woman plays this defiant game to reach a compromise with her impending marriage. In saying no, she refuses marriage as a “necessary” constriction. After more whimsical play that mocks the trappings of adult, domestic life—the couple gets free champagne and trespasses into a condo for sale—the lovers separate. The sun has come up. The woman gets into a cab, alone. As the outlet for the woman’s repressed needs, the stranger has exorcised her desires for *amour fou* and autonomy.

In the film's ending, she "returns" to the future. In her wedding gown, she is taking pictures with the fiancé at the park she had shared with the stranger. By adhering to powerful cultural pressure, she gains a measure of economic security but has also paid a real price: the potential of finding true love. Consequently, the stranger's query, "What if you met your destined man right before the wedding?" resonates as an impractical yet haunting question. Like other South Korean films such as *Il Mare* (Hyun-seung Lee, 2000) and *Finding Mr. Destiny* (2010, Yu-jung Jang), star-crossed love figures as a temporary outlet against compulsory tradition. In *The Intimate*, characters meet that utopian "someone" who enables happiness. As the man says, "You know what my wish is? To be happy." In a different sequence, the woman says, "I'm so happy with you, as if we were on the moon." But in the end, she refuses him, as love will fade: "If we go out, we'll start finding faults with each other. We'll be disappointed and regret it. Isn't that how it works?" For her, memory is eternal: "I'd like to have good memories about a man... One that I can recall as the man who brought me happiness." While the stranger is unreliable for reality, he is steadfast as fantasy. In the last sequence, the woman passes the bench and touches the handprints that the stranger had carved into the wood. The sequence suggests she has experienced all-consuming love without being consumed by it, allowing her to let go and accept marital hell, protected by her memory.

In both *Madame Freedom* and *The Intimate*, the female protagonist is used to register disenchantment with traditional marriage and the changes wrought by modern life; in this respect she is a figure for resistance. At the same time, she is violently punished or humiliated for such resistance, and bears a double burden for registering ambivalence towards change.

Kitchen

Kitchen, a film notably written and directed by a woman, chronicles the story of a young wife in a safe marriage who has an affair with a stranger that turns out to be her husband's visiting friend. *Kitchen* opens on the morning of wife Mo-rae's (Shin Min-ah) first wedding anniversary to Sang-in (Kim Tae-woo). Set to a cheerful faux-French melody, the scene establishes the married couple's winsome lightheartedness and material security. Mo-rae cooks a scrumptious meal, the couple has a fully-clothed water fight in the bathtub, Hermès wedding china graces the dining table and ardent kissing is initiated by the wife. Curiously, Mo-rae calls her husband not by his name but "Hyung," a term meaning 'older brother' in Korean. The scene ends with a sweeping tour of their chic showcase home, cataloging the bedroom, hallway, kitchen and living room filled with mid-century modern furniture and handmade Korean embellishments to arouse a sense of bourgeois contentment built on affluence.

The film speaks to a historically specific dichotomy of capitalist globalization: the competing expectations for a cosmopolitan identity that leads to happiness against a prestigious profession that, despite appearances of success, brings unhappiness and disconnects individual characters from their real interests. *Kitchen* constructs Mo-rae's identity through idyllic signs that feign Frenchness. With her cheerful disposition, the film targets South Korean female audiences seeking happiness as a citizen of the world

through what Dina Smith calls the “postcard fantasy” of France.³⁰⁴ Mo-rae evokes faux-Parisian fantasy by wearing the quirky haircut made famous by *Amelie* (Jean-Pierre Jeunet, 2001), the film Sebastian Budgen called “the worst piece of disneyfied kitsch the French cinema has ever produced.”³⁰⁵ Mo-rae is a designer who runs a boutique that sells charming but nonessential parasols (reminiscent of Jacques Demy’s 1964 *The Umbrellas of Cherbourg*). Accordingly, Mo-rae’s *joie de vivre* portends the romance to come—the newcomer’s French upbringing fulfills her Francophile fetish. As she rarely has customers, her perfect lifestyle—which includes French labels (Hermès)—appears paid for by her husband. Thus while she has a transnational identity, her work—based on her authentic self—is not financially viable. Meanwhile, her husband quits his stockbroker position to become a chef, explaining to his younger, confused colleague, “I’m tired of talking about money all the time... Life’s too short. Let me live my passion.” By quitting his job, Sang-In invokes a transgressive masculinity that rejects the market for a life less determined by the market. As such, he conveys the crisis of being tugged between two competing pressures: the high paying but tedious corporate job or the rewarding but insecure career. Although achieving economic eminence has been South Korea’s priority since the war, development has not produced the fulfillment it was supposed to bring.

The narrative quickly leads to the affair. In the scene, Mo-rae is looking for the ideal anniversary present at a gallery-like shop that sells artful ceramic kitchenware. While technically not open for business, the store’s door is open. Mo-rae sneaks in and browses, bumping into another trespasser. Hearing others approach, the two strangers hide in a back area. Sandwiched inches apart by two walls, the man starts to kiss Mo-rae, and soon she kisses him back. Thus through unplanned turn-of-events, the two spontaneously have sex. Hence the scene indirectly refers to the commodification of heterosexual relations by conjoining consumer desire with sexual desire: the pleasure of shopping for high-end, rarefied commodities in a swanky boutique is combined with the pleasure of having taboo, impulsive, and nonsensical sex (*amour fou*) with an imposingly beautiful man. To boot, this sex scene is hauntingly triangulated as both Mo-rae and the stranger are at the shop ostensibly for the husband. That evening, Mo-rae tells her husband “he came out of nowhere and it just happened.” Later that night, the stranger is revealed as Du-re (Ju Ji-hoon), Sang-in’s friend from Paris, who will stay with the couple to help launch Sang-in’s culinary career. When Mo-rae tries to divulge the truth about her dalliance, Sang-in implores his wife to never discuss the matter again. In effect, the husband’s request for repression is understood as forgiveness (later it connotes controlling behavior), but with Du-re now living with them, the repressed constantly returns to excite illicit desires.

³⁰⁴ Dina M. Smith, “Global Cinderella: *Sabrina* (1954), Hollywood, and Postwar Internationalism,” *Cinema Journal* 41.4 (2002): 32.

³⁰⁵ Sebastian Budgen, “The French Fiasco,” *New Left Review* 17 (2002): 48.



Figure 3.2: An accidental affair in *Kitchen*

Remarkably, *Kitchen* elicits empathy for Du-re by assigning him a back-story of trauma, vulnerability and tragic separation from South Korea: he is a cancer survivor whose adoption by a French family enabled the surgery—impossible in Korea—that saved his life. This diasporic nomad has no ties to Korea other than to Sang-in, admitting he has, “No one to greet me, and no place to be” in Korea. Distanced from South Korean daily life, Du-re possesses a kind of worldly authority fashioned by his knowledge of French culture and detachment from South Korean ideological systems. Hence, Du-re has the ability to help orient Mo-rae’s desire beyond her own native experiences and her unconscious adherence to tradition.

While Mo-rae shares an easygoing, buddy-like companionship with Sang-in, Mo-rae shares a sense of romantic intimacy with Du-re. Although they refrain from sex, they start a flirtatious friendship attuned to romance and eroticism. For instance, in a non-threatening manner, Du-re exposes to Mo-rae her own erotic nature, as when he looks at her drawing of a bird atop a two-hump mound inspired by the *Little Prince*. He points out, “This is kind of erotic” and sketches atop a nude woman, stating in French: “It’s invisible to the eyes. Anything essential is seen only by the heart.” Likewise, Du-re senses her marriage is sexless: “Sang-in has been the only man, always been there for you, getting married to him, him taking care of you forever. That’s not love. He just got lucky.” In a later scene, Mo-rae admits she followed Sang-in everywhere as a child because he ensured she “never felt lonely.” To this, Du-re asks, “Is that love?” With the music swelling, Mo-rae dismisses the notion of romance: “To me, love doesn’t mean much. It’s Han Sang-in. Not because I don’t love someone, or love someone else more. I’m just trying to be me.” Yet Mo-rae has already revealed she feels excited by Du-re, having confessed, “the way he sees me, takes interest in me is mysterious... I even get aroused when I don’t see him.” Consequently, the film posits the problem of love as the binary between a companionate marriage and a revelatory romance. Because it develops communicative intimacy, the latter becomes more threatening than simply a physical affair, as Du-re dares the woman to cultivate her identity. As traditional marriage makes neither passionate love nor an autonomous female identity possible, an untenable

situation emerges in which the self called forth by modernization and capitalism must define itself against the traditional.

Confronted with this choice, Mo-rae asks, “What am I supposed to do?... Can you love two men at the same time?” When Sang-in discovers Mo-rae and Du-re’s early indiscretion and developing intimacy, Sang-in and Du-re come to a brawl in the basement, ending their home’s peace. Mo-rae then confesses, “I wanted to possess both of you, I know. I didn’t want to lose both of you. I didn’t want to lie to my heart.” Mo-rae, however, chooses to not choose. She simply abandons them both, leaving behind a wall-sized projection of an ultrasound that channels attention to her fetus. In the diegesis, characters presume the baby’s father is the husband, but paternity is never confirmed by Mo-rae or a test even though she was unfaithful. The uncertainty of the baby’s paternity suggests a coming generation that may not find itself torn between the historical past and the modern present. If neither man can lay claim to paternity, then the child must be viewed as an amalgamation of both the past and the modern.

In *Kitchen*’s final sequences, the woman refuses to make a choice, with the suggestion that being a single mother is a new transgressive lifestyle. Her Francophile crush was just a girlish fancy, and her husband was a companion who provided financial security. Her unborn baby, however, provides her with a new intimate relationship. While Du-re takes a plane back to Paris, the divorced Mo-rae and Sang-in ironically reunite at their friends’ wedding reception. Showing no anger, Sang-in says he plans to find Du-re. Moreover, he gets down on his knees and jokes not many men would propose to a pregnant woman. Mo-rae responds, “Let me think about it.” She smiles and asks him to sit beside her. Here, *Kitchen* suggests divorce can be friendly and marriage is not compulsory, even with children involved. Mo-rae’s calm attitude about single parenthood suggests that life goes on, but the audience is left wondering what she will do. The film refuses to decide simply because it seeks to foreground the fraught decision women must make between returning to the old way of life or diverging toward the entirely new. It seems the film wants to evoke a new combination of old and new that has yet to be defined by a future generation.

Marriage is a Crazy Thing

Like *The Intimate* and *Kitchen*, *Marriage is a Crazy Thing* is an erotic spectacle that presents fantasies of escape, and yet also critiques the marriage system, voicing how capitalist-Confucian power coerces individuals to forego deeply felt love and regard it simply as an impossibility associated with a time and place far away. In *Marriage in a Crazy Thing*, two strangers begin an unorthodox relationship of friendship and casual sex that leads to love—but not marriage. They continue their relationship even after the woman marries someone else, with the man becoming her “kept” paramour. Narrated by the dependent lover, poet-turned-filmmaker Yoo Ha deploys the love story to bear out the film’s title: *Marriage is a Crazy Thing* (결혼은 미친 짓이다).

The dependent lover who narrates the film is also a critic who observes Korea’s mating rituals like an ethnographer. By highlighting the absurdities associated with hetero-normativity, he represents marriage as a contrived and irrational institution arising from the amalgamation of ongoing tradition and processes of globalization. The film opens on Joon-yeong’s (Kam Wu-seong) younger brother’s wedding day. As by custom

the eldest son should wed first, guests question Joon-yeong's mother on his bachelorhood, making her feel pressured to conform to social norms. The scene ends with Joon-yeong missing from the family wedding picture—Joon-yeong resents marriage and is all too aware of its purely economic function. Even so, the graduate student/ lecturer of English Literature goes on a marriage-oriented blind date later that day. The "*matseon*" or "*seon-bo-gi*" is a blind date with the aim of interviewing each other as a prospective spouse and is the customary means for meeting prospective partners in South Korea. In the *matseon*, the film represents the mainstream heterosexual's dilemma: characters must subordinate themselves to the demand that their relationship should end in weddings that cultivate social relations and enhance economic status, rather than satisfy individual desire. To expose the system's oppressive hypocrisy, the film shows the respective lovers of Gwy-jin and Yeon-hee in attendance at their weddings. Hours before his wedding, Gwy-jin laments, "If I could escape, I would escape." The film then cuts to his nuptials.

As escape is futile, even the time spent waiting for the blind date to begin is a farcical figure for the commodification homogenization of mating practices. In *Marriage is a Crazy Thing*, Joon-yeong stands waiting for his date outside of the fast food restaurant KFC. Exasperated, he enters the fast food joint to inquire if another KFC exists, and learns from the cashier that another man has just made the same inquiry. When Joon-yeong steps outside, he smokes a cigarette and is approached by a man for a light. The camera zooms out to draw a parallel between the two men who are side by side, holding a rolled up newspaper and smoking a cigarette. That the sequence takes place in front of KFC is significant: this setting suggests that mating has been reduced to globalization's fast-food paradigm of efficiency, routinization, predictability and substitution of chance for automation.³⁰⁶ Furthermore, the film dramatizes a real condition known as the "007-ting," or the "James Bond-ting," where the male waits for the female in a predetermined location. While the female remains unidentifiable by the male, he sports some visible agreed-upon sign—in this case, the rolled up newspaper—that allows the woman to identify him and assess his appearance anonymously. She then approaches him or walks away.³⁰⁷ By joining the fast food restaurant with the 007-ting, the film suggests nowadays, women can select men like food off a menu. After having waited too long, the other man leaves. Shortly thereafter, a beautiful woman (Uhm Jung-hwa, a.k.a. the Madonna of Korea) approaches Joon-yeong.

Their *matseon* exemplifies how matchmaking eliminates all opportunity for chance or fortuitous encounters by reducing dating to a series of tedious financial calculations. During their first date, sitting across from each other, the woman asks about the man's livelihood that makes the academic uncomfortable, as he is admittedly scraping by and still living with his parents. Though he argues such concerns—age, occupation, family, college—are unimportant, the woman, Yeon-hee, interjects that the trivial matters should be traded first to savor the meaningful exchanges last. In voiceover, the man describes their date as an impersonal interview, emphasizing how dating in one's early thirties is rote and officious. Finding a mate has become systemized to maximize efficiency and profit, resulting in procedural and passionless coupling. But after coffee, a movie, dinner, and drinking at a traditional tea-house/bar, the woman starts to speak

³⁰⁶ George Ritzer, *McDonaldization: The Reader* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press, 2002).

³⁰⁷ Lett, 186.

frankly. She admits she already saw the movie they just watched and says, “I’ve been on more than ten blind dates this month alone. I don’t know if marriage is worth all this trouble?” It turns out she shares his criticism of the premarital process.



Figure 3.3: *Seonbogi*: interviewing each other for sex not marriage in *Marriage is a Crazy Thing*

As in other films, extra-marital sex allows characters to act out an embodied connection that contrasts with late modernity’s distanced and calculating relations. Feral sex returns the couple to a plane beyond material concerns and a focus on the future. In *Marriage is a Crazy Thing*, drunkenness affords a temporary loosening of traditional moral codes and social propriety and leads to sex. With public transportation discontinued because of the late hour, the strangers check into a motel. Though she appeared prim during their date, her sexual confidence belies her mask of chaste femininity. Sharing a matched sense of humor and intelligence, the two start a relationship with little expectations of monogamy or marriage. As the film develops, sex scenes show the connection between physical attachment and a look of happiness—their mutual excitement suggests they have fallen in love.

Whereas other films show romantic freedom as consumer leisure without self-reflection, *Marriage is a Crazy Thing* suggests that the reckoning of commodities as “love” mystifies heterosexuality and paralyzes authentic connection. When Joon-yeong says he needs to go to the department store, Yeon-hee leaps onto his back with delight, but he plans to buy his nephew a birthday present. At the store, they amuse themselves so that a sales associate assumes they are newlyweds and Yeon-hee falsely concurs. The date ends with a western meal of steak and red wine at a “sky lounge” restaurant with a panoramic view of the city. He feeds her from his fork and calls her “extraordinarily beautiful.” She smiles, gazes out the window, and says, “It’s a lie but I like to hear it. I wish I could live like this forever, going on dates and listening to sweet talk.” The western meal is important, for this food connotes romance and the fantasy of the American Dream promoted by Hollywood. Here, the Korean film appropriates the

cultural form of American romance to critique it. While the viewer saw a couple at the restaurant, they did not see the romantic couple so much as its transnational mediation: a performance of normative heterosexuality that reveals its artificiality where identity is not fixed but performative.³⁰⁸ In a follow-up scene at the same store, Joon-yeong appears shut down as Yeon-hee buys things for her marriage to another man.

Marriage is a Crazy Thing likewise self-consciously represents the polarization of heterosexual relationships into models based on false comforts of economic stability versus those less secure relationships based on desire and love. While both Joon-yeong and Yeon-hee discuss the marriage system, Yeon-hee spurs Joon-yeong on to get in the game, while Joon-yeong protects his pride by critically analyzing her actions. For example, when Yeon-hee tells Joon-yeong that she has a blind date planned, Joon-yeong accuses her of being motivated by provision and prestige: "You're not looking for love on your blind dates anyway. You're looking for certain conditions. Not the person, but who they are and what they can offer you." In a later sequence, Yeon-hee audits each of her five suitors: "Marrying the doctor will provide me with life's amenities, but it will be a dull, fixed life with his stuck-up family to deal with. Not to mention having to get used to his ugly face. Then there's the life of a salary man's wife." When she says the choice is between Joon-yeong and the doctor, Joon-yeong insists she could never give up on marital upward mobility, while he could never abide by monogamy. After his avowal, Yeon-hee gets engaged to the doctor. The narrative supports the claim that marriage leads to riches, as her new house is large with wooden floors and bright light and has a tree-filled vista.

Yet despite such luxuries, her marriage is a sham because it is based on faked sentiment. In contrast to the deadening effects of married life, Yeon-hee appears truly alive when she plays out her fantasy with Joon-yeong. The montage set to Latin American music at the beach evokes the fullness of mutual love. In her make-believe world, downward mobility is non-threatening because she has, in fact, ascended into the upper-class. In her pretend play with Joon-yeong, she chooses poverty, as when they go on their pseudo honeymoon and insists on staying at a dilapidated inn, even asking for a discounted rate. They pretend to be newlyweds to the innkeeper and to each other, to authorize a fantasy life that permits the woman's downward mobility into marital poverty. As the film progresses, the distinction between the real and fake marriage becomes muddled. Two months after her "real" wedding, Yeon-hee contacts Joon-yeong and suggests he get his own place with her money, saying, "It's not charity. I'm lending it to you." Though he declines, the next sequence shows him moving into an out-of-the-way apartment.

By circumventing the norm, the couple rejects convention to make possible their otherwise untenable love. For Yeon-hee, this fake domestic life allows her to indulge in her deferred childhood desires and her authentic notion of romantic freedom. When Yeon-hee looks out the window, she says that as a child, she believed marriage meant waiting for the husband to come home. The view shows a freeway and a cityscape in disrepair. When he asks, "Why are you doing this?" she answers, "It's fresh here." When the camera cuts to them discount shopping, the film suggests this alternative domesticity is the married woman's new and true project. Joon-yeong insists he does not want clutter,

³⁰⁸ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

but the furniture and home goods she buys conjures her childhood fantasy to play “house.” While becoming a doctor’s wife has provided her with economic security, it requires that she sacrifice her individual preference for Joon-yeong. Playing newlyweds in a house fulfills her subjective desires and elevates their game by producing greater intimacy, and hence greater risk of loss. When she visits, she dotes on him. She shaves his face and does laundry by foot, explaining, “When I was little, it looked so fun.”

But their relationship comes undone as jealousies surface and the fun of pretend itself becomes tedious. Their “free marriage” cannot be thought outside conditional heteronormativity and its demands for monogamy, routine and oneness. Calls from the woman’s husband and computer messages from an infatuated student invade their world. But they cannot demand fidelity. Joon-yeong starts resenting Yeon-hee’s divided attention, and airs his frustration in inconsiderate ways (like insisting on ramen instead of the soup she cooked). Consequently, their fantasy space, while free of status-driven demands, nonetheless suffers from their merger. The film ends with a picture of ambivalence: narratively they are broken up, but the last image shows the woman back at his place, opening the door with her key. But the film does not show whether he is there, waiting for her as always.

In the new millennium’s erotic dramas, ephemeral intimacy is celebrated, but also doomed. By invoking play, these films acknowledge that such freedom is a fantasy—historical conditions (i.e. the arrival of certain types of modernity and change) have presented individualism as a potential option but nevertheless hold it just out of reach. This frustration creates a condition of longing for a future that will not arrive in time for young marriage-aged women. Accordingly, these relationships can only be premised on some form of commodification in which the woman supports the man. While tradition creates feminine dependency on the patriarchal authority, emergent modernity creates single male dependency on the married woman. The lover-husband opposition takes place on a historical axis that respectively divides temporality between the past and present. As history is not fully resolved, the clash between historical forces with contradictory expectations gives rise to the impossibility of either unfettered individualism or unfree economic security. Neither man presents a viable or desirable option. In effect, these films reject the conventional association of utopian conclusions with heterosexual coupling. Instead, films end with a state of separation that imparts a sense of ambivalence about historical change.

Illness and non-reproductive love: Marginal Heterosexuality

While films centered on the extramarital love affair suggest an uncertainty about lasting, true love with either husband or lover, it is notable that another group of films conveys unequivocal faith in genuine human connection able to transcend the historical conditions that seem to make such connections impossible. In contrast to the upwardly mobile woman whose self-reflexive search for sexual autonomy and economic security leads to the mutual invalidation of boyfriend and husband, this latter grouping constructs a marginal femininity that is characterized by otherness: a combination of physical disability, ongoing health conditions, ethnic-national difference and/or sex work that

underscores the absence of their commodity value in the marriage system. The men who love these women are marked by loss, inability, failure, or artistic sensitivity. Unsurprisingly, marginal couples do not result from matchmaking.

Although this latter genre features women who personify a kind of immobility and inability to fulfill the demands of modern hypergamy, these “marginal” romances have much in common with “extramarital” love affairs. The type of love idealized in marginal romances, much like in marriage-and-adultery films, privileges ephemeral love. In both cases, transcendent intimacy between vulnerable selves is temporary and terminal rather than permanent. In this sense, filmmakers refuse endings that connote fairy-tale closure—making happiness impossible under the current historical context.

The most prevalent version mediates social marginality through a medical problem. Women are afflicted by cerebral palsy (*Oasis*), blindness (*Love Me Not* and *The Beast and the Beauty*), deformity (...ing) and fatal health conditions (*Failan*, ...ing, *Love Me Not*, *A Millionaire's First Love*, *Happiness*, *You Are My Sunshine* and *Fly High* - 2006). This characterization suggests that despite women's desire for self-sufficiency, their ailments prove they require care and are dependent upon patriarchal figures, despite the modern women's drive for independence. Hence, while these female protagonists' compromised health suggests their lack of control over their own destinies and their non-modernity, they also tap into a different set of feminine fantasies. By compromising from the beginning a female protagonist's ability to maintain an autonomous identity for herself, such films permit the woman to be “needy.” Consequently, films condone feminine desire to drop out of capitalism's rat race: sickness and death become a potential outlet for female viewers' fantasy to escape life's overwhelming pressures, as the demand to make a profitable living might cause exhaustion and even death, as in *Failan*. Consequently, strategic female “disability” allows the male characters—also outcasts but for different reasons—to take up the mantle of courageous and dependable masculinity. In other words, if a woman is healthy and capable, his display of steadfastness can be reinterpreted as conservative patriarchy's suppression of female independence, whereas if a woman is “helpless,” the man can appear heroic instead. In *A Millionaire's First Love*, *Love Me Not* and ...ing, the man desperately takes his woman to the hospital for emergency care—often carrying the woman in his arms—as the woman with fatal conditions have passed out due to over-exhaustion.

Whereas modern mainstream men have contradictory expectations that women should display both traditional submissiveness and work outside the home to help carry the economic burdens, these caregiver men do not expect the heroine to be economically productive or reproductive, releasing their wives from the Confucian expectations of producing male heirs. Her health condition makes sex a non-issue, not for the sake of her chastity, but because it might upset her health. The general absence of intercourse keeps the love companionate and virginal and romanticizes their connection as one determined by emotional and ideational intimacy over raw physical possession that might elicit discomfort for chaste viewers. In *A Millionaire's First Love*, *Love Me Not* and ...ing, the women are played by teenagers; as such, the problem of underage sex would further discourage the representation of overt sexuality. Likewise, the fantasy figure of the “sensitive” man learns to help around the house following the onset of the protagonist's sickness, amazing his female partner with surprising domestic talents such as cooking. In

making the loving male a caretaker, this grouping feminizes men's masculinity to domesticate the male into an "equal" in the home, thus fulfilling the fantasy of the patriarch-feminist: a man who has patriarchy's desirable ability to protect and provide for his partner as an independent agent while also having the feminist ability to recognize his female partner's legitimacy; thus he can take direction from her rather than insist on the superiority of his authority based on his manliness. In *A Millionaire's First Love*, the boyfriend prepares an elaborate surprise birthday meal for his girlfriend. In *You Are My Sunshine* (Jin-pyo Park, 2005), an ex-prostitute who has contracted HIV is unconditionally cared for by a farmer. Such characters have their origins in nostalgia for simpler gender relations, bolstering masculinity with heroism for the sake of the film's female audiences whose trust in traditional masculinity has been undermined by historical change and economic crisis.

The marginal couple mediates the world differently than the mainstream couple. Whereas the mainstream couple experiences going out as romantic freedom inured in consumer spaces that allow them to buy, eat or exhibit objects suggestive of class status and achievements, the marginal couple is free from such demands. In *Oasis* and *Love Me Not*, women's health problems explain why they have been homebound for most of their lives, literally hidden away from outside human connection. Hence when men take them out, the men make up for a lifetime of deprivation and also quell women's phobias about the world at large. As naïve women can get lost, hurt or humiliated in public spaces filled with unsympathetic crowds, men must protect and navigate them through the bustle of public life.

If women fear the world, it is because their health conditions make them vulnerable to villainous forces. In *Love Me Not*, the male character rescues his blind beloved from thuggish would-be rapists. Lastly, masculine heroism comes not only from caring and rescuing activity, but also from personal transformation for the social good. In *...ing* and *A Millionaire's First Love*, male protagonists are changed to become more responsible for the welfare of others. In the last scene of *...ing*, the photographer displays in his solo exhibit a wall-sized picture showing his dead beloved's hand of three webbed fingers—at the besmirch and discomfort of attendees. In *A Millionaire's First Love*, the once-spoiled brat uses his inheritance to build the orphanage his dead girlfriend wanted. Illness becomes a *deus ex machina* for removing the couple from the untenable and unbearable pressures they bear in a transitional moment of history in which they must accommodate the conflicting demands of tradition and modernity.

A variant of the sickly object of desire is the suicidal woman seen in *Our Happy Time*, *I Love You*, *Love Me Not* and *Asako in Ruby Shoes* (E J-yong, 2000). Although in *Love Me Not*, the female protagonist wants to die when she loses her sight, in many other films, women do not suffer from a chronic disability, but an invisible trauma. In these films, the marginal woman overlaps with the upwardly mobile woman. In *Our Happy Time*, a beautiful professor of Art with a lively past as a pop star attempts suicide on multiple occasions. Although everyone "normal" in her life cannot understand what is troubling her, a prisoner on death row helps her come to terms with the traumatic rape she experienced as a teenager by revealing his own harrowing tale of survival. Likewise, in *Breath* (Kim Ki-duk, 2007), a middle-class woman married to an unfaithful man

develops a nonverbal bond with a non-Korean death row inmate by decorating the prison meeting room with photographic murals that evoke the seasons and outdoor freedom.

In *Our Happy Time* and *Breath*, the upwardly mobile woman “breaks the law” of Korea’s sex-gender system by meeting the convict who lacks all commodity value. Like the woman with the mysterious illness, the man with ties to prison similarly removes the couple from fulfilling conflicting historical demands. In films as diverse as *Oasis*, *Failan*, *Love Me Not*, *Breath* and *Our Happy Time*, the romantic male lead is an inmate or an ex-con. In concert with their felon backgrounds, men such as *Oasis*’s Jong-du and *Failan*’s Kang-jae are defined by their crude manners, class immobility and vulgar appearances that repulse mainstream women. Consequently, these men are pathetically alone. But because films idealize the unconditional love of the hurt and helpless helping each other, their vulgarity and poverty is not a problem. For the upwardly mobile suicidal women, visiting dismal prisons is an awakening that forces women to re-evaluate the moral duty of being modern and pursuing autonomy. That is, “slumming it” frees the woman from her gilded cage, allowing her to find compassion both for a criminally flawed man as he is, and for her troubled self, making possible a heterosexual relationship untethered from the demands of family or the marketplace. Notably, the person able to intervene in her depression is not the man of wealth prized in entrepreneurial matchmaking, but the man who also has known great duress in his life, in the form of childhood trauma, extreme alienation or time in prison. By presenting cases of childhood/adolescent traumas, these films suggest the trauma of historical change—a major event that causes violent upheaval and forever scars the individuals who survive it. To resolve historical trauma, films call for intimacy over money.

Because her life is on the line, the woman suffering from mental or physical trauma savors life’s nonmaterial affects like happiness. Hence in *A Millionaire’s First Love*, when the boyfriend apologizes for having done little for his dying girlfriend in a late sequence, the girl responds, “Fool, you brought me happiness.” As such, films suggest genuine human connection preempts the usual prerequisites of materialist status in favor of non-reproductive, non-pragmatic, and non-calculating love. The only condition on unconditional love is time. Whereas capitalist modernity usually rewards delayed gratification, the couple in love must not delay anything. The man does not have time for emotional distance; he must learn the discourse of intimacy now. If separation is immanent, the man must give himself over to an almost maternal intimacy based on devotion, emotional attachment, sacrifice and care giving. The woman’s failing health produces transparency and urgency that eliminate conflicting expectations. Their disparate self-interests combine in mutual interest to make most of the present time left. Indeed, in these films, there is no future, only a “now.” By eliminating the future and all it implies (producing a family, accumulating wealth, advancing one’s career, fulfilling Confucian principles) the couples can occupy the temporality of intimacy, which is decidedly oriented to the present tense.

In the paradigm of the marginal love story, the non-South Korean woman is another figuration for transcendent love. The non-native woman conveys the idea of an elsewhere and an escape from the unbearable here and now to address South Korean men’s anxiety over their homelessness and their rejection by local Korean women. These films identify with surges in detachment from people and attachment to screen

technologies as a result of atomization. In *Failan* and *Asako in Ruby Shoes*, lonely, inept men fantasize about being loved by a non-Korean woman who they get to “know” through their screens. Accordingly, films represent technology’s ability to provide for a distanced, highly mediated simulation of closeness, an intimacy that does not entail sharing space face-to-face. In *Failan*, the Chinese “paper bride” (Cecilia Cheung) dies but leaves behind love letters and videos to her aging gangster “husband” Kang-jae (Min-sik Choi) who has never experienced a woman’s love and finally finds it through her sincerity. In *Asako in Ruby Shoes*, alienated government employee U-in (Jung-jae Lee) visits a Japanese porno site to create his online “dream girl” Asako (Misato Tachibana), a look-alike of his lesbian Korean crush played by a suicidal Japanese girl from a dysfunctional family. Throughout both films’ duration, the “couple”—the paper bride and the gangster in *Failan* and the government employee and his internet dream girl in *Asako in Ruby Shoes*—do not physically meet each other face to face. However, although these couples meet in person and share screen space only once, these films show these couples “meeting” multiple times vicariously through the video or computer screen.

Unlike most films in the romance genre, these films “speak” to men by representing male heterosexual and homosocial culture, particularly the ideals of brotherhood and pornography. In both films, familial male figures seek to exploit male protagonists for personal gain: in *Failan*, the brotherly boss wants Kang-jae to confess to a murder he did not commit, while in *Asako in Ruby Shoes*, the brother-in-law wants U-in’s nice house. Other real people, including brother figures, are untrustworthy. What is trustworthy is the make-believe of pornography which satisfies male sexuality: in *Failan*, Kang-jae’s roommate loves his pornographic videos, while in *Asako in Ruby Shoes*, U-in and Aya’s brother appear addicted to internet pornography. While narratives lack sex acts, films do appeal to the logic of pornography: much as in the wishful thinking of modern pornography, the dislocated male miraculously transcends the barriers of his enclosed life and experiences substitute attachment by watching images of a woman through a television or computer screen. Accordingly, men’s fantasies dominate the women. These films cannot provide credible explanations for why young pretty women would reciprocate the sexual desire of these older strange men. Indeed, the pornographic extends to the age difference in which the young women are characterized by child-likeness in need of protection while the men are older voyeuristic consumers who see themselves as victims and cannot implicate themselves in the global sex trafficking of girls and women.

As the figure of departure, the non-native fantasy woman enables the South Korean male failure to imagine escaping from his closed world defined by estrangement, atomization, and lack of change. Although she is not Korean, the Korean male can identify with her because she is also a product of economic development. Thus she faces similar problems of alienation, abandonment, a dead-end job and the loosening of familial ties. *Failan* leaves China to find her aunt in Korea, only to learn the aunt is in Canada. Poor, alone and morally pure, the lovely young orphan would rather wash laundry by hand as an old woman’s assistant for room and board than resort to “easy money” by working as a prostitute at a hostess bar. In contrast, Aya (Asako is her porn name) is an eighteen year-old girl living in Japan (the film switches back and forth between the male and female protagonist’s stories) who wants to hold her breath and die

during her flight to Alaska across the international dateline. Aya suffers from an existential crisis brought on by her sense of non-belonging. Her cheating, greedy parents have destroyed her home life while economically depressed but hyper-expensive Japan cannot offer Aya a worthwhile career path. As Japan's legitimate and illegitimate marketplaces exploit young people's labor and young people cannot find decent jobs, the film shows middle-class boys and girls are turning to the lucrative but repulsive sex industry rather than continue working in the menial service sector (Aya works as janitor at the gym, is fired for staying after hours and then answers an ad to work as an "internet model").

Both these non-native figures function as mirrors for South Korea's economic insecurity and historical identification. If, as Chua Beng Huat notes, "Japan's present is the future of the rest of Asia,"³⁰⁹ rural, underdeveloped China is Korea's past. But both Failan and Aya is suggestive of South Korea's historical placement: innocents at the mercy of global systems which lack regulatory safety nets and have thus forced young people to commodify themselves in order to access any semblance of life, or die to keep their dignity. No one can be rescued in the current historical system. As the women of these films are scheduled to die due to illness or volition, their fantasy love is doomed. In *Failan*, Kang-jae dies a noble death like Failan; after he takes the stand that he will not confess to the murder, gangsters kill him in his home as a video of Failan plays on the television screen, singing in Korean on the beach. In *Asako in Ruby Shoes*, Aya leaves her depressing situation by leaving for verdant Alaska where she meets U-in. Happiness is the afterlife or in a nature where economic pressures cannot bother the couple.

The marginal love story addresses the fate of those outside the heteronormative marriage system. Social outcasts in love need not calculate the cost of love as they have the least (indeed, almost nothing) to lose. The lovers in these films need not worry about losing an inheritance for marrying the wrong person—a favorite theme in South Korea television drama series such as *Secret Garden* (SBS Network, 2010), and *Boys Before Flowers* (KBS2 Network, 2009). In South Korean cinema, the film that seems to best exemplify this condition of unconditional, intimate love between two social outcasts is, to me, *Oasis*, Lee Chang Dong's 2002 story about isolated misfits ecstatically in love.

Oasis

Spun through marginalized figures unwanted by their own respective kin, *Oasis* represents loneliness and isolation, the loss of tradition, and the thrills of physical and emotional closeness in order to problematize the need for human connection in a world where one's family abandons and illegally exploits its own members for personal gain. By starring a child-like simpleton released from prison and a clever woman with cerebral palsy, *Oasis* demands that audiences attend to the hypocrisy between South Korea's face of success and its invisible, impoverished underbelly. Poor, unsuccessful and without prospects, this unlikely couple embodies the antithesis of the glamorous, modern life of financial and social success. Yet the intimacy they experience provides greater reward than anything money can buy. What is being resolved in the intimate attachment between these two highly unusual individuals? What kind of fantasy does Chang stage in her

³⁰⁹ Chua Beng Huat, "East Asian Pop Culture: Layers of Communities," in *Media Consumption and Everyday Life in Asia*, ed. Youna Kim (New York: Routledge 2008), 108.

representation of protagonists marked overtly by lack and doomed to remain at the bottom of the socio-economic ladder by neoliberal standards? What is their appeal to audiences thoroughly interpellated by ideologies of upward mobility, whether via capitalism or Confucian yangbanism?

The first clue lies in the repeated appearance of the film's eponymous signifier, "Oasis." The film's prequel lingers on a worn tapestry depicting an elephant, a child and a woman amidst sandy dunes and Palm trees with the word "Oasis" stitched in all caps. Initially, the protagonist, Gong-ju (Moon So-ri) fears the shadow of tree branches that are projected atop this tapestry at night, and so it symbolizes the terror she experiences sleeping alone in her apartment. At the film's opening, then, there is an ironic disjuncture between the idea of an oasis as a calm sanctuary and Gong-ju's experience of her home as a space of peril to suggest that for a marginalized figure like Gong-ju, there is no such thing as an oasis—only fear. The terror linked to oasis is transformed when Jong-du (Sol Kyung-gu) first tells his beloved that he dreamt the tapestry came alive. Subsequently, a dreamscape filled with flute music shows a boy in a turban, a small elephant and an Indian woman in a pink sari dance around Gong-ju's living room as the boy throws flower petals on the couple who spin, dance (Gong-ju's disability has disappeared in the dream) and kiss passionately as the lights go dim. This dream is repeated throughout the film to constitute the idea of an "oasis" as the trope for their love.



Figure 3.4: Unconditional, non-hierarchical love in *Oasis*

Like an oasis—a lush watering hole in a desert—the restorative love that blossoms between these outcasts is akin to a haven for intimate connection outside of the troubling commodification of both modern and traditional romantic relationships. The attachment between these two figures cannot be quantified in capitalist terms girded by the narcissistic desire for socio-economic status. Jong-du and Gong-ju are nonconformists not because they ascribe to eccentric individualism, but because their marginalized existence frees them from the financial trappings of “for-profit” modern matchmaking. For audiences who face the pressures of marital tradition, *Oasis* depicts an

escapist fantasy where love is represented in its most uncalculated form—lustful, savage, unconditional, innocent, and devotional. Class difference is leveled and never even a question. As their intimacy is removed from the strategic conformity and the conspicuous consumption that have made heterosexual relations into a series of enterprises (e.g., the wedding industry, the baby industry) *Oasis* aspires instead to present the purest kind of human attachment available, an attachment that is nonexistent in the market-driven world. As a communal-based attachment, their love is reminiscent of socialism, and is thus impossibly fantastic in their South Korean setting.

Hence, “high” love is imagined through “lowly rejects.” The radical alterity of these characters serves as the precondition of *Oasis*’s love story and, moreover, of this second grouping’s non-normative love; identities of abjection disrupt the dominant model of commodified heterosexual relations. Early scenes establish each character’s otherness and concomitant isolation until their parallel alienation builds to a crisis that demands textual resolution. The film stages this crisis through the severing of family ties. Jong-du, just released from prison after serving two-and-a-half years for committing a hit-and-run, goes home to learn that his family has moved without telling him its new address or phone number. Eventually, Jong-du finds his way to a basement occupied by his mother, eldest brother, his wife and their son. The family is not welcoming. His mother wonders, “Where are we going to put him?” Later, his sister-in-law disavows him: “I’m sorry to tell you this, but I really don’t like you... Without you, we had no worries. It’s not only me, but your brother and your ma feel the same way.” Likewise, Gong-ju is a figure of burden and abandonment. When Jong-du visits the apartment of the man he killed two years ago, he finds Gong-ju, the dead sanitation worker’s daughter, seated on the floor, her legs and arms twisted inward, her face turned into a grimace by cerebral palsy. Outside, Jong-du learns the woman’s brother is moving away with his pregnant wife, and is leaving behind his sister, Gong-ju. Subsequently, the film shows the effect of this abandonment: we see Gong-ju at nighttime, afraid and huddled under a blanket, her eyes open in the dark, and her fingers grasping at the radio knob.

Later, the film makes clear the treachery of the protagonists’ respective families: while Jong-du’s the eldest brother actually caused the sanitation’s worker’s death and let Jong-du take the blame, Gong-ju’s brother used her disability to secure a new apartment reserved for disabled individuals, inviting her over only to fool the inspectors. *Oasis* unveils the hypocrisy of the “normal” brothers who preach propriety and civility but exploit their siblings for personal gain. Despite sharing the same bloodline, the “normal” brothers neither love their disabled siblings unconditionally nor do they feel any need to protect them. Indeed, Jong-du and Gong-ju’s abject strangeness causes their families discomfort, as dramatized in the party scene celebrating Jong-du’s mother’s birthday. When Jong-du brings Gong-ju to the party, all the guests stare and the eldest brother causes a scene. Social conventions fall apart as the shame and unease aroused by the lovers demands the lovers’ removal from the party and, hence, from “normal” social and family relations. By connoting social disorder and non-modern inefficiency, their dual freakishness is too much for the “normal” guests to bear.

This inscription of radical difference, however, allows Jong-du and Gong-ju to experience a disjunctive love that produces the therapeutic and political ideal of relieving each misfit from his/her profound alienation. The film represents their mutual attachment

through signs of *amour fou*. Their *amour fou* provokes the transgressive and surrealist elements the film uses to undermine conventional understandings of Jong-du and Gong-ju's respective categorization as people with mental and physical difference. As Dominique Mainon and James Ursini note, "Derangement of the senses is one of the key symptoms of those suffering from *amour fou* (mad love). Love and madness intertwine, leaving victims crippled by their own overpowering emotions."³¹⁰

The film represents this mad love through out its narrative unfolding. The most disturbing representation of *amour fou* takes place in an early sequence that begins with Jong-du visiting Gong-ju's apartment with a bouquet of red roses, flowers that are intercepted by Gong-ju's caretaker. After waiting a while, he comes back and uses the keys hidden in the flower-pot to sneak into her apartment. Her bedroom is disheveled and cluttered. He tells her of his intention to have a relationship with her, confessing that he thought she was pretty from the moment he saw her. He gives her his brother's business card and says she can call him anytime. All this time, the woman is flailing. He says, "Don't be scared, I'm not here to hurt you," but his romantic intention is cut short by impulse. He touches her feet and joins her bare feet with his bare feet. He touches her face and says, "You're pretty." Gong-ju grunts louder and flails her arms harder, implying, "stop." However, in an instant, he puts his hand under her shirt, pulls down his jeans and appears to penetrate her from behind while the woman struggles and then becomes unconscious. The sequence is shot in a wide shot like a nature documentary. Afterwards, Jong-du berates himself, rinses the woman's face, pulls up her pants, and quickly departs. The camera never confirms whether he ejaculated from humping her sweater or actually penetrating her. As the woman's panties appeared off, the audience can surmise penetration, but the audience is forced to bear the onus of interpretation.

It appears the woman has been raped, yet it is remarkable that the *mise-en-scène* of this sequence is reminiscent of the first sexual encounter in *Last Tango in Paris*, where the man overtakes the woman in the vacant apartment in a display of sexuality stripped of romance and civilization. If the intercourse in *Last Tango in Paris*, as well as in *Kitchen* and *The Intimate*, is clearly thinkable as *amour fou* sex-with-strangers-fantasy rather than rape, it appears Chang is goading the audience into rethinking its own prejudices. Chang suggests the sex shocked her, but as a grown woman, she likes it, perhaps not the act itself, but the idea that she has been sexualized. In the film's next sequence, Gong-ju watches and hears her caretaker take advantage of Gong-ju's living room as a space to privately have sex with the security guard because Gong-ju's sentience can be dismissed. The film shows Gong-ju listening to the activity in private, with a red lipstick in her twisted hand. Her resigned facial expression of curiosity and longing suggests Gong-ju's physicality conceals her subjectivity and intelligence. By this acknowledgment that she—a person predefined as sexless by her pre-existing conditions—can desire sexuality, Chang attempts to give her self will and sovereignty over her body.

But this is unintelligible to audiences because Chang renders the circumstance of the couple's sex in a manner that evokes both stranger-danger rape and sex-with-a-stranger fantasy. The simpleton's unsightliness and uncouth advances muddles this latter consideration. Because sexual desire is often fulfilled through the taboo, this "rape"

³¹⁰ Dominique Mainon and James Ursini, *Cinema of Obsession: Erotic Fixation and Love Gone Wrong in the Movies* (New York: Limelight Editions, 2007), 69.

sequence can also be read as a “rape fantasy” sequence where a woman might imagine reducing a man to sexual desperation and being overtaken like an animal. But because the main characters are outside of normal modern intelligibility—they are neither fetching nor capable of reproducing an upwardly mobile family—their sexuality is illegible and goes unrecognized by the matrix of capitalist/Confucian heteronormativity. By automatically presuming that what the screen is showing is rape, the film suggests the audience is also culpable of rendering these two characters as sexless and without sexual agency. But as the film unfolds, *Oasis* registers how these two people are not only sexual, they can fall in sublime love. Later, the film unambiguously shows the couple trying to have sex and the act being misinterpreted as rape by well-meaning but ignorant “normal” people who presume her physicality prohibits sexual agency. The film suggests the truer rape is both the man’s and the woman’s exploitation by their families, and the normative assumption that places a prohibition on their sexuality and insists upon defining her as a passive victim and him as an oversexed beast (he has a police record of rape). In contrast, Chang contends with rape in another film, *Poetry* (2010), where it is plainly an atrocious crime committed by a group of boys who have lost their humanity.

But because rape is so problematic, rape as a cinematic metaphor deserves special attention. In Korean cinema, the “rape-as-national-trauma” metaphor has served as a form of cultural critique to express political anger without depicting censorable images like North Koreans or leftist Marxism. As Hyangjin Lee notes, “aside from poverty and insanity, prostitution and rape serve as particularly acute metaphors for the country’s traumatic experiences of humiliation and helplessness.”³¹¹ In *Arirang* (Ungyu Na, 1926) and *Stray Bullet* (Hyun-mok Yu, 1960), women are victims of circumstance, much like South Korea was a victim of foreign control. Raped women suggest the indigenous order’s failure to protect women and nation.

In the new millennium, the “rape-as-national trauma” idea has evolved from the colonial/imperial state, to the domestic modernization project. The ambiguous nature of rape—*The Intimate* and *Love, In Between* show forced sex between people who have already had onscreen sex—suggests that it is a metaphor of South Korea’s ambiguous relationship to capitalist modernity. Disturbingly, the protagonists seem ambiguous on whether the act is a rape. Is the modernization project utopian or dystopian? Is South Korea’s globalization self-interested or exploitation by foreign interests? The woman, as the figure of excessive ambition, is punished with rape to suggest that the nation has moved too quickly into modernity. The man, as the figure of neoconservative power, is delegitimized as a brute that cannot embrace the liberal social agenda needed to complete modernization as democratization. Hence rape expresses films’ critical ambivalence about this historical change.³¹² This ambiguity suggests how the negative consequences of modernity such as violence, atomization, and alienation are all-encompassing yet hopeless to trace. The true locus of power is impossible to specify: it is no longer top-

³¹¹ Hyangjin Lee, *Contemporary Korean Cinema*, 138.

³¹² Noting the shift toward the spectator’s identification with the rape-victim in rape-revenge horror films made after the 1970s, Carol Clover writes “Even when the rapes are shown, they are shown in ways that align us with the victim.” Rape sequences delegitimize macho or neoconservative Korean masculinity—it is hard to cheer for the ephemeral couple in *The Intimate* after having witnessed the man’s aggression. See Clover, 152.

down, but woven into the social fabric through a web of power that mediates the logic of capitalism as scientific principles. Capitalist modernity is inextricable from South Korea's past and future individuation.

Contemporaneously, South Korean horror has figured rape through the rape-revenge formula. In *Tell Me Something* (Chang Yoon-hyun, 1999) and *Arang* (Ahn Sang-ho, 2006), the abused woman (sometimes returning as a ghost as in *Arang*) avenges herself by punishing her tormentors or other male substitutes. In *Bedevilled* (Jang Cheol-soo, 2010), a marital-horror drama, a woman married to an abuser gets her just revenge by using crude farm tools—e.g., a sickle and a hoe—to pummel to death her husband, the men who subjected her to gang-rape, and the female seniors who protected her husband/patriarchy. Notably, in horror, the abuse of power is clear rather than ambiguous, while in romantic dramas, the abuse of power is unclear because films “speak” to women's sense of guilt of having profited from hasty transformation as willing conspirators.

I have detoured into the problem of rape because the “rape” sequence in *Oasis*, and in other South Korean films, has baffled me a great deal. In contrast to this early sequence, *Oasis* provides an alternative representation of *amour fou* that is clearly transcendent. This second sequence takes place on the highway at night. After spending the day together outside, Jong-du is driving Gong-ju home when they face bumper-to-bumper traffic. Amidst lanes of unmoving cars, Jong-du gets out of the vehicle and cradles the invalid in his arms. Based on their insider joke—Gong-ju (*gongju* means princess in Korean) is “the princess” to Jong-du's “general”—Jong-du calls Gong-ju “Your highness” and spins her around. Oblivious to the honking cars and the flaring red lights, Jong-du turns on the radio and “dances” with Gong-ju who is making jerking motions. As the film cuts to the surreal scene of the animated Oasis tapestry described earlier, the cinematic structure suggests that the spontaneous happiness of their *amour fou* transports the couple into this fantasy, leaving behind all worldly cares. The sequence suggests that when two isolated individuals find genuine intimacy, they feel free and happy enough to transcend the misery of their circumstances. As in other films I discuss in this chapter, such intimacy (and the happiness it produces) is, in the end, fleeting and ephemeral—much like the fantastical dream of the Oasis tapestry come to life.

After the film establishes their deep love, the couple is separated because they cannot exist within normative intelligibility. Toward the end of the film, after a day of failed attempts at “romantic freedom,” he takes her back to her dark apartment. When he tries to leave, she tells him “I want to sleep with you. You said I was quite pretty.” They get naked and he climbs on top of her. He keeps asking if she is okay while she grunts and grimaces her face, even shedding a tear to suggest pain and pleasure. The brother and his wife interrupt the couple and react with panic. The wife cries, “Poor Gong-ju, save her.” The police are called. Because Jong-du has three previous convictions, (a hit-and-run, physical assault and rape), the cops surmise he is a “pervert.” At the police station, all the brothers come together. The policeman notes the case is open-and-shut because Jong-du was caught in the act. When the police want to hear Gong-ju's testimony, her sister-in-law speaks for her. What befuddles the police is to think of Gong-ju as sexed: the cop asks, “But how could he assault a poor girl like her?” Jong-du's older brother reacts by screaming, “You call yourself a human being?” and beats the simpleton.

Meanwhile, Gong-ju's brother wants money (20 million won, or about \$17,000) from Jong-du's brother, who then disowns Jong-du as an aberration. The people at the police station try to comfort Gong-ju by saying, "There's nothing to fear any more." The camera pans to the right, moving from showing a fight break out between the opposing brothers to Gong-ju pushing her wheelchair back and forth, repeatedly banging her flailing and twisted body against a metal storage cabinet to make a disturbance. The audience knows she is furious at her family, the police and the injustice of the system, but her actions are again misinterpreted as fury at her so-called rapist. In the film's final climax, Jong-du has escaped from the police station and has climbed onto the top of the towering tree next to Gong-ju's apartment. Jong-du uses a saw to cut down branches that have been casting the scary shadow, fulfilling his promise to make the tree disappear. Cops congregate underneath the tree and Gong-ju can see what is going on through her bedroom window. When Gong-ju turns on the radio very loudly, Jong-du responds with an amusing dance as a love song comes on. A high-angle shot shows the puzzled the cops; after Jong-du cuts off the last branch, he falls off the tree and is handcuffed again. The camera shows Gong-ju looking into the camera to suggest her subjectivity. Hence, he returns to jail and she returns to her apartment. In the final sequence, her apartment is filled by his voice reading aloud a love letter from prison: "Your highness, this is your general... You must be so bored all alone in your apartment. I play soccer and table tennis [...] so don't worry about me..." The non-normative couple manages to overcome their isolation via a transcendent intimacy that does not require physical proximity. Touched by love, they have a reason to live, even in their mutual states of solitary confinement. As in other films, *Oasis* suggests the sustaining power of memory and the feeling of having experienced true intimacy, however fleetingly.

What is most impressive about *Oasis* is the film's feat in portraying unconditional intimacy through non-commodified means. *Oasis* seduces the viewer not through materialistic glamour, but through the couple's mutual silliness and his blindingly loyal devotion and consideration. While the simpleton does try to buy Gong-ju meals and roses, other people thwart these attempts because they find the couple unintelligible and grotesque. Left without such devices, Jong-du seduces her, and us, through primitive methods. He takes care of her, listens to her, does her laundry, sings to her goofy ditties. He sees her as an individual, while the rest of the world sees her as a human lump. That is why again and again she references back to him calling her pretty: whereas the world defines her as an undesirable paraplegic, the simpleton sees her as a person with possibility. In this manner, the film evokes the socialist Koreanized concept of *yeonae* that premised modern utopian heterosexuality on the mutual recognition of two liberties. In her essay "The Woman in Love," Simone de Beauvoir notes:

Genuine love ought to be founded on the mutual recognition of two liberties; the lovers would then experience themselves both as self and as other; neither would give up transcendence, neither would be mutilated; together they would manifest values and aims in the world. For one and the other, love would be revelation of self by the gift of self and enrichment of the world.³¹³

Oasis is able to produce this understanding of revelatory, transcendent and unconditional intimacy through its life-like fantastical sequences where miraculously, Gong-ju can use

³¹³ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. H.M. Parshley (New York: Vintage Books, 1989) 667.

her voice and body, even though the world around her has not changed. In these fantasy sequences, Gong-ju is changed but notably, Jong-du remains his same idiot-like self. For instance, in the sequence at the subway station after the woman's failure to sing at the *noraebang*, Gong-ju is shown singing a sweet love song standing up, gazing into Jong-du's eyes and gently pushing him into the wheelchair as she sings about her happiness in just being together. In her fantasy, he has his tics as he is sticking his tongue out, sniffing and touching his nose uncontrollably. The sequence suggests she accepts and loves him unconditionally. In the fantasy, she is "normal" so that she can clearly communicate her love for him, but he does not have to qualify as "normal."

Conclusion

More than sixty years after the Cold War razed the singular Korea, South Korean cinema appears to honor this passing with unromantic endings that uniquely inscribe the nation's division and fears. Anxiety about the potential for a non-commodified, lasting relation of human(e) intimacy enmesh with alarm about South Korea's commodified future as an emergent force in global capitalism. The South Korean mythology in the global imaginary advertises capitalist Cold War America's triumphant validity through claims of this recently invented nation's miraculous economic development, and thereby uses South Korea as a disciplinary force to promote the logic of the global model-minority. But the affirmation of distance—separation, loss, memory—in the multitude of millennial romantic films examined here suggests that even the "light fare" of South Korean romance is not convinced of the nation's miraculous trajectory towards a capitalized, globalized future. Whereas happy endings would suggest South Korea has a secure and optimistic future, the unhappy ending dominates the romance genre to obliquely implicate a dystopian future under modernity, countering the optimistic rhetoric of development.

By idealizing ephemeral, non-commodified relationships, South Korean cinema is searching for an alternative life outside of the pressures exercised by the Confucian-capitalist matrix. By releasing men and women from their obligations to the future and instead allowing them to lead uncompromised lives of authentic lived experience, romance films allow viewers a tentative escape from the hyper-rationalized understanding of heterosexual connection as strategic matchmaking for socioeconomic mobility. These films insist that human connection severed from concerns about family and finance can offer life-affirming happiness. Yet films eventually evaluate this connection as undependable, impoverished, and doomed to disappear; such connections only survive through the tenuous longing of nostalgia. True love lives posthumously as haunting memory, allowing the remembering lover to eke out another day without the disruption of an anarchic intimacy that dares to transcend the "not-now-hurry-up" temporality of everyday life under late capitalism. In these formulas, security and freedom are mutually exclusive, paralleling the logic of South Korea's postwar, nuclear-age modernity where security competes with freedom. The broader suggestion is that the current historical context makes future-oriented intimacy impossible, as the preconditions for this kind of love's existence are not yet in place. Intimacy and distance once again become metaphors for Korea's historical condition.

Chapter 4

Coming of Age After the Crisis: Girls, (Im)Mobility and Neoliberal Globalization in the Twenty First Century

Hae-joo, one of the girls coming-of-age in Jae-Eun Jeong's 2001 feature film *Take Care of My Cat*, emerges from a drab condominium onto icy streets and trudges forward with her head down, pausing before a car with its windows violently smashed in. She moves on to catch the train for Seoul. The camera cuts to a shot of the Incheon subway station, then dissolves into a succession of lines: the tracks, the widening highway, the subway map, to a page in an English-language manual for Korean speakers with the heading "Are you sure, or are you just saying it?" In the opening sequence of So Yong Kim's feature debut *In Between Days* (2006), a teenaged girl is similarly shown. Through rickety hand-held camera work and backlighting, Aimie, the main protagonist, is shown walking toward the audience, her face and figure almost blacked out in silhouette. The camera suddenly cuts to a still long shot of a snow-blanketed North American field deplete of people but lined with telephone poles and tall buildings. The image of isolation contrasts against the girl's illusionary description of community in her Korean voiceover of a letter to her estranged father: "Now, I'm going to school here. I've made a lot of friends, Dad. My friends are white, black, Chinese, and Japanese, too. Isn't that amazing? And mom's working hard too. So don't worry about us." In Park Chan-ok's (2009) *Paju*, urban alienation is rendered through a taxi ride on a dark and rainy night. Eun-mo sits in silence next to a talkative cab driver who invokes, then denies, the scary scenario of a taxi driver and his male passenger working together to kidnap and rape female passengers. The cab driver laughs as he navigates the traffic and the film cuts to an extra-wide shot of the dark blue freeway and its line-like lanes. The cab makes its first stop at a gaudily lit, multi-storied nightclub and drops off an older gentleman who has been sitting in the back. The woman stares out the window as the cab driver remarks, "Development's all about bribery and backdoor dealings. Are you from here? First time in a long time? This place has long changed this way."

In each film, a girl is on guard as she moves forward through the cold wilderness. In each film, vertical and horizontal lines elicit urban isolation and modern rationality. This image of resolve and isolation engages with notions of prospects, belonging and development: everyday girls on the brink of adulthood must grapple with an unfriendly terrain, much of it alone. These opening sequences reveal the conditions faced by the generation of youth—both young men and women—coming of age after the Crisis: alienation, poverty and the need to learn English and cope with female sexuality. These films focus on plain young women who exist on the economic and social margins; their struggle to survive is an effect of the new economy. Visually, they signify their outsider status by their lack of conformity with the new synthetic ideals of femininity grounded in consumption and neoliberal notions of "self-development." Their isolation is symptomatic of the destruction of traditional social relationships. These films convey young women's anxieties about surviving the atomization and impoverishment that have become mundane due to the changes wrought by the Crisis.

In this chapter, I focus on a specific generation of young women—those who are coming of age just after the economic and political shift of the Crisis. This generation occupies a historically liminal position: they must contend with past socio-cultural and familial conventions and traditions, and they must negotiate the new changes coming from the shift towards an information economy based on multinational capitalism. Accordingly, this generation's transition from one state of their lives to another mirrors South Korea's transition from an older economy to a new one. In both cases, the girl and the nation are cut off from the past and must fit into a new and scary world order. At the same time, the past still imposes itself on the present in ways that are both comforting and oppressive.

Much of the sociological material I will be citing does not differentiate between the situation of boys and girls in this economic climate; the Crisis has been disastrous for boys as well. A number of recent films explore the fate of young boys post-Crisis: *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance* (Park Chan-wook, 2002), *The Aggressives* (Jeong Jae-eun, 2005), *No Regret* (Leesong, Hee-il, 2006), *Baby and Me*, *Beastie Boys* (also known as *The Moonlight of Seoul*, Yoon Jong-bin, 2008), *Bleak Night* (Yoon Sung-Hyun, 2010) and *Punch* (Lee Han, 2011). These films visualize familial fragmentation in exaggerated ways to problematize the new distancing and gathering effects of the Crisis. Films such as *Baby and Me* and *The Aggressives* show parents who unexpectedly leave behind their teenaged sons, forcing young men to deal with harsh economic realities while also finding new forms of “family” (respectively, an abandoned baby and a group of inline skating street kids). In other related representation, young men are orphans (*No Regret*), growing up with a single parent (*Punch* and *Bleak Night*), or experiencing the loss of loved ones (*Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance*). These films also narrativize economic restructuring by casting main protagonists as homeless (*Penny Pinchers*, *The Host*), laid off factory workers (*No Regret* and *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance*), and sex workers (respectively for lonely gay businessmen in *No Regret* and business women in *Beastie Boys*).

Hence while recent films can be found treating both girls and boys in narrative terms, I am most interested in the girl narratives as a special case. Since male subjects have been at the center of English-language South Korean film criticism (in my purview) vis-à-vis modernization, it is worth giving special scrutiny to the emergence of female subjects in relation to ongoing shifts within capitalist modernization. In addition, girls and young women are central to a number of highly visible, bigger budgeted thrillers that usually feature male cops, pimps, gangsters, kidnappers, serial killers, and organ traffickers buying, selling and killing young female objects (although female cops and murderers also exist).³¹⁴ Yet these films reduce the problems facing young women to “bad men,” rather than considering the cumulative pressures and experiences attendant to the Crisis and South Korea's transmodernity. Moreover, throughout the dissertation, I have claimed that the discursive formation of South Korean femininity has been charged with expressing historical transition, multiple simultaneity, intimacy and separation—in

³¹⁴ See, for example, *Memories of Murder* (Bong Joon-ho, 2003), *The Man From Nowhere* (Lee Jeong-beom, 2010), *The Chaser* (Hong-jin Na, 2008), *The Unjust* (Ryoo Seung-wan, 2010), and *I Saw the Devil* (Kim Jee-woon, 2010). For films with female suspects, see *Tell Me Something* (Chang Youn-hyun, 1999) and *Princess Aurora* (Pang Eun-jin, 2005).

short South Korea's transmodernity. This is because femininity is narrativized as the site of the past (domesticity) and the future (the newly unfettered public sphere): it is femininity that must uphold and reproduce native Korean "tradition" and it is femininity that must evolve into the "new" through economic development to take advantage of the opportunities promised by capitalism. Because colonialism and neo-imperialism, as well as deep-rooted native patriarchy have victimized femininity, women's figurative redemption—by becoming men's equal in the economic public sphere—symbolizes the fulfillment of "history-as-progress" promised by global capitalism. Thus, throughout the chapters, I have argued that fantasies of South Korea's capitalist individuation are often rendered through the female form to suggest that South Korea's future-orientated separation (from North Korea and the U.S.) must not be in the service of a patriarchal or neo-imperial nation-state but a "feminine" new beginning that can balance South Korea's transmodernity.

Thus I focus on the fate of girls amid the Crisis. Rather than emphasize the epic scale of the Crisis, these coming-of-age stories show the impact it has had on a subtler scale. They focus on young female characters whose lives have spiraled out of control just following the crash. Feature-length independent dramas such as *Take Care of My Cat*, *Paju*, *In Between Days*, *Samaritan Girl* (Kim Ki-duk, 2004), *Treeless Mountain* (So Yong Kim, 2008), *A Light Sleep* (Im Seong-chan, 2008) and *A Brand New Life* (Ounie Lecomte, 2009) represent every day life as a material site of struggle. In these films, the fates of protagonists are bound to uncontrollable circumstances that constrain protagonists' agency, despite their attempts to comply with the new expectations of "personal responsibility," the free market, and ideologies of self-management.

Notably, these films did not excel at the box office; their cachet comes from their international profile and their female auteur bylines (all but *Samaritan Girl* and *A Light Sleep*).³¹⁵ *Paju*, for example, was the first South Korean film to open the 39th International Film Festival Rotterdam (Park, former assistant director to established auteur Hong Sangsoo, had won a Tiger award at the same festival in 2003 for her 2002 film *Jealousy is My Middle Name*). *Samaritan Girl* won the Silver Bear at the 2004 Berlin International Film Festival. *Treeless Mountain* won Best Film in the Asia-Africa section of the 5th Dubai International Film Festival. *In Between Days* won a Special Jury Prize for Independent Vision at the 2006 Sundance Film Festival. *A Brand New Life* won the Best Asian Film Award at the 22nd Tokyo International Film Festival. These films are, I believe, less popular because they do not sensationalize femininity (or masculinity in similar male-centered youth films)—these films are slow-paced, rather than action-packed. These films exist, in my opinion, in the intellectual demand for liberated, empowered femininity—that is, "women filmmakers making artistic films about the plight of real girls"—but they also exist in a sexist and patriarchal marketplace that is based on proffering fantasies of femininity as spectacles of sexual excitation.

Although I treat these films as a cluster, each film has its own aesthetic sensibility and individual point of view. The qualities that yoke together this "new generation" of

³¹⁵ But it is notable that in South Korea, "artistic films" do occasionally excel at the box office. The distinction between "artistic" and "commercial" cinema is, in Darcy Paquet's words, "shown to be problematic" because artistic films have been "number-one box office hits." Paquet, "The Korean Film Industry," 33.

filmmakers may be their interest in calling traditional representations of the nation into question. While in some ways evocative of *minjung* cinema (an interest in class and everyday people's social concerns) and feminist filmmaking (a focus on "real" women), these films do not promote identification with a knowable collective. Likewise, these films do not reassert lost traditional "aura" as in the film *Sopyonje* (Im Kwon-taek, 1993). By receding from overtly populist and nationalist sentiment that speaks to South Korean specificity, these films critically re-evaluate the promise of developmental globalization at large.

Drawing from these films, I begin by identifying the struggles young women contend with in the post-Crisis world: the fragmentation of family, economic turbulence such as unemployment, and the new demanding idea(l) of "self-development" through education, appearance, cosmopolitanism and entrepreneurialism. I then offer a close reading of *Take Care of My Cat* and *In Between Days*, two films that depict the new pressures of coming-of-age after the newly restructured economy. Both films are made by first-time female directors who themselves exemplify the new shifting ideal—young women becoming creative makers of mercantile cultural products with transnational appeal. Together, these films offer cogent insights into notions of (self and national) development, from becoming a self-starter to starting over elsewhere. Moreover, these films are historical expressions of the Crisis that record the clash between the traditional and the neoliberal through the cinematic vehicle of youthful femininity. Much like the films discussed in the other chapters of this dissertation, the Crisis creates new everyday conditions that cause the rift in the social fabric.

A critical focus on this generation of youthful femininity is important because, as Yeran Kim argues, "Girl bodies are at the core of the neoliberal regime of knowledge, power and pleasure."³¹⁶ Upon the advent of Crisis, the government advocated for immediate globalization (removing regulations against foreign investors and multinational corporations) of the economy. One consequence was the emergence of a spectacle-based market system.³¹⁷ Soon after, images of "liberated" young women charged with "girl power" proliferated on digital screens of cell phones, televisions, computers and electronic billboards.³¹⁸ Kim points out, "For Koreans, the 'emergent culture' of freely producing and consuming girls' self-images is identified with the realization of libertarian democratization...the 'ontology' of girl bodies itself 'becomes'

³¹⁶ Yeran Kim, "Idol Republic: the Global Emergence of Girl Industries and the Commercialization of Girl Bodies," *Journal of Gender Studies* 20.4 (2011): 334.

³¹⁷ For analysis on the socioeconomic factors that created the rise of South Korea's market-based media industry, see the following articles by Doobo Shim: "South Korean Media Industry," 337–50; "Hybridity and the Rise of Korean Popular Culture in Asia," *Media, Culture and Society* 28.1, (2006): 25–44; and "Globalization and Cinema Regionalization in East Asia," *Korea Journal* 45.4 (Winter 2005): 233–60.

³¹⁸ Yeran Kim points out, "Girls are present in every part of society, from music shows and music videos to dramas and films; from advertisements and reality programs to international sports events and governmental campaigns." Yeran Kim, "Idol Republic," 333. In his discussion of K-pop, John Seabrook notes "In Seoul, you can feel K-pop all around you. There is the constant presence of the idols on billboards and in display ads. Life-size cutouts of idols greet you at the entrances of the big department stores. On the streets and in the subways you see echoes of the idols' faces." See John Seabrook, "Factory Girls: Cultural technology and the making of K-pop" *The New Yorker*, 8 Oct. 2012, http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2012/10/08/121008fa_fact_seabrook#ixzz2IkUDLlrv (accessed August 13, 2013).

the idealized fantasy of the present times, that is, to be free, independent and hedonistic.”³¹⁹ In this historical context, the illusion of utopian individual entrepreneurialism is projected onto girl bodies: the young woman’s link to patriarchy and her new representation as individuals unfettered from powerful historical forces is an ideal mythmaking vehicle.

In particular, the cultural form of glossy and colorful music videos featuring K-pop (Korean popular music) girl groups illustrates this make-believe fantasy. Groupings of provocative girls sing and dance in virtual social solidarity to tunes like “I Don’t Care” and “I am the Best” (2NE1), “Female President” (Girl’s Day), “Girls on Top” (BoA, a soloist), and “Wonder Woman” and “Women’s Generation” (T-ara, SeeYa, Davichi collaboration).³²⁰ The lyrics to “Women’s Generation” typifies how consumerism has joined feminism in popular discourse, targeting the new generation:

Put on make up, Get a new haircut, I’ll be born again into a cool woman
Bolder and more confident, I’ll never cry again
Wear pretty heels, wear trendy clothes, I step outside onto the streets
Everyone looks at me, I don’t mind, I’m beautiful (etc.)³²¹

Later, the song goes, “Even though I fall in front of the world...I’ll just get back up again.” The song links female resilience to a visual appearance of consumerism. This cultural form’s worldwide popularity is proven by their YouTube hits: The Girls Generation’s “Gee” music video (where, in another instance of consumer feminism, girl singers are mannequins who come to life after hours in a department store) has received over a hundred million hits.³²² Consequently, the new figure of the “girl-powered” “young woman” has come to narrate new iterations of postcolonial-neoimperial concepts: notions such as “progress,” “freedom” and “development” that were defined and legitimized during U.S. intervention via World War II and the Korean War. The new symbolic representation of femininity suggests that despite past unfair suffering, girls are now free to come into their own power in and through the global free market.

At the same time, K-pop girl bodies act out the disintegration and fragmentation of life through their transparent artificiality and their function as distraction. Writing in the late 1920s amidst Germany’s economic crisis on the emergence of Berlin’s new

³¹⁹ Yeran Kim, “Idol Republic,” 337.

³²⁰ 2NE1, “I Don’t Care,” YouTube video, 4:55, September 5, 2010, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zdZya6yATn0> (accessed August 13, 2013); and “I am the Best,” YouTube video, 3:35, June 27, 2011, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j7_ISP8Vc3o&feature=c4-overview&playnext=1&list=TLnkXZHdapK4o (accessed August 13, 2013). Girl’s Day, “Female President,” YouTube video, 3:38, June 23, 2013, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xF3MC8PWgJE> (accessed August 13, 2013). BoA, “Girls on Top,” YouTube video, 4:57, June 2, 2011, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MJxaWZk8Vs8> (accessed August 13, 2013). T-ara, SeeYa, and Davichi, “Wonder Woman,” YouTube video, 3:44, January 15, 2010, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=auSAITfuBBc> (accessed August 13, 2013) and “Women’s Generation,” YouTube video, 3:32, May 7, 2009, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k20RVR2Xb2Y> (accessed August 13, 2013).

³²¹ T-ara, SeeYa, and Davichi, “Women Generation,” Core Contents Media, Single, 2009 (3:32); my translation.

³²² Girl’s Generation, “Gee,” YouTube video, 3:54, June 8, 2009, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U7mPqycQ0tQ>. (accessed August 7, 2013).

“picture palaces,” Siegfried Kracauer wrote of the mass ornament, “Here, in pure externality, the audience encounters itself; its own reality is revealed in the fragmented sequence of splendid sense impressions.”³²³ In the surface level expressions of low-art K-pop, the need for distraction and girl power are satisfied—the campy simulation of “girl power” is a throwback to children’s pretend-play; it is merely an entertaining image. Its function as disposable entertainment is itself an admission that it is fantasy. Like “the mass ornament” of the Tiller Girls Kracauer wrote of—the “indissoluble girl clusters whose movements are demonstrations of mathematics”—the coordinated choreography of K-pop’s Korean girl clusters “is the aesthetic reflex of the rationality to which the prevailing economic system aspires.”³²⁴ Similarly, K-pop girl clusters (Wonder Girls, Girls Generation, T-ara, etc.) whose highly manufactured faces look so similar to be interchangeable and expendable are a demonstration of the new consumer economy based on services, the manufacture of disposable goods and the drive for the always new. In this manner, K-pop reflects the breakdown of society put into place by the new economic and social order.

In contrast to K-pop’s glitzy imagery of young women in “consumption euphoria,” the films under consideration here offer a jarring counter figure (who is also imaginary in character): a plain female whose life is unraveling in a downward spiral. Often realized through a grainy aesthetics of flat tones (*In Between Days* and *Paju*), these films also focus on externality. Here, externality amounts to the ruins, the refuse and the marginalized young people that are disavowed and hidden from sight as upwardly mobile South Korea distances itself from reminders of its own decay and disintegration. These films visualize the vernacular of everyday existence under globalization: the grind of daily life, the monotony of low wage, expendable labor, the unpredictability of the future, and the unreliability of familial and social relationships. The generation of young women in these films represents the future that is at stake.

The Crisis: Restructuring the Economy, the Family and the Self

What comes to the fore in the films under consideration here is personal crisis unfolding in slow motion. In *Take Care of My Cat*, a group of friends who have just graduated from a vocational school in Incheon learns to contend with the adult world’s economic and social pressures that place pressure on their friendship and their futures. In *Paju*, Eun-mo returns from living abroad to face her brother-in-law, an activist, who is her only living family and the man she wrongly suspects to have killed her sister. In *In Between Days*, Aimie is a new immigrant teenager who has befriended only one other teenager since moving to Canada, a misfit Korean-Canadian boy who is also deeply but differently displaced from home. In *Samaritan Girl*, the death of her friend causes devastated and isolated Yeo-jin, who was her friend’s unofficial pimp and scout, to contact her friends’ older male clients, have sex with them and return their money, not knowing that her police father has discovered her afterschool job. In *Treeless Mountain*, two young children, who have been left behind by their mother as she goes on a journey

³²³ Siegfried Kracauer, *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, trans. Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 326.

³²⁴ *Ibid.*, 79.

to search for their father in the U.S., adjust to life with their alcoholic aunt and wait for their mother to return. In *A Light Sleep*, a high school student pretends everything is okay when in fact, her parents died two years ago and she has been caring for her little sister alone, paying for living expenses through prostitution.³²⁵ In *A Brand New Life*, a girl abandoned by her parents at a Catholic orphanage resists the idea that she has been forsaken but later comes to accept the prospect of getting adopted and moving to a new country.

Although girl characters try valiantly to deal with crisis—e.g., the disappearance of guardians in *A Light Sleep*, *Take Care of My Cat*, *In Between Days*, *Treeless Mountain*, and *Paju*—alone and without help, they cannot survive on their own. Still children, they need adults to love and take care of their material needs. Moreover, they need refuge from both the old rules and the new expectations. Indirectly, these films recall the “disaster film,” but instead of the disaster being enormous in scale (e.g., the fire that overtakes a high-rise building in John Guillermin’s 1974 *The Towering Inferno*) or “natural” (as in fires, floods, avalanches, tsunamis or volcanic eruptions), disaster results from abandonment: by the nation-state that lacks a welfare safety net, by landlords and developers who prioritize profit over safe and affordable housing, by men who use their bodies for sex but cannot help in times of emergency, and by the new economic system that floods the nation with minimum-wage or unfairly waged temp jobs. These films suggest that displacement, isolation and an illegitimate system that insidiously reproduces wider inequality are the actual effects of globalization.

The personal crises in these films respond and correspond to the historical moment when financial disaster shocked South Korea (and the world) at the turn of the century. In 1997, property speculation collapsed in Thailand resulting in a financial crisis that led to unemployment, GDP nosedive, bank closures and urban poverty—all of which spread to nearby Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, and South Korea, and far off Estonia, Russia, Brazil, and Argentina.³²⁶ In the aftermath of the Crisis—the “greatest economic crisis since the Great Depression,” according to Joseph Stiglitz³²⁷—the all-but-bankrupt South Korea entered into a \$55 billion dollar bailout agreement with the IMF (International Monetary Fund).³²⁸ To borrow the sum, creditors forced structural changes that ordered “neoliberal economic reforms in finance, trade and FDI (Foreign Direct Investment) policy, labour markets, and corporate governance.”³²⁹ The Crisis marked new economic priorities: the South Korean economy restructured from state-owned capitalism to venture capitalism dominated by

³²⁵ For analysis on teenage women’s and sex work, see Eun-Shil Kim, “A culture that cultivates the prostitution of teenage women I: based on the experiences of prostitution among teenage women,” *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, 4.2 (2003): 337-52 and Mee-Hae Kong, “Material Girls: Sexual Perceptions of Korean Teenage Girls who have experienced ‘Compensated Dates,’” *Asian Journal of Women’s Studies* 9.2 (June 2003): 67-114.

³²⁶ David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 96.

³²⁷ Joseph E. Stiglitz, *Globalization and its Discontents* (New York: Norton, 2002), 89.

³²⁸ David Harvey, *A Brief History*, 111.

³²⁹ Christopher M. Dent, “The state and transnational capital in adaptive partnership: Singapore, South Korea and Taiwan” in *Handbook of Research on Asian Business*, ed. Henry Wai-Chung Yeung. (Northampton: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2007), 236.

multinational corporations.³³⁰ The period of “compressed industrialization” (1961 to 1996) had restricted FDI and foreign licensing, while supporting South Korean “reverse engineering” of foreign technology to nurture South Korean corporate brands.³³¹ This model—a system that seemed bound to authoritarian Confucian tradition—was abandoned. But critics point out that although this period was characterized by military dictatorships and enormous U.S. foreign aid, the period saw growth based on policies that resisted American pressure to “free trade.”³³²

Since the Crisis, South Korean leadership has insisted on policies that expand free trade, FDI and multinational corporations (of South Korean and other origin), mirroring the logic of the IMF and the World Bank.³³³ This advocacy position is associated with Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher’s (Reagan-Thatcher) “free-market ideology” and has come to be critically known as “neoliberalism.”³³⁴ This belief system claims that government exists to promote free trade (over people and the environment) and safeguard free markets through military intervention so that unfettered markets can spread “progress” and “market civilization.”³³⁵ It urges the formation of a self-managing population that can take “personal responsibility” over their lives and finances to limit the welfare state. As a phenomenon, neoliberalism has been defined through a number of interplaying factors: the deregulation of industry; the erosion and even elimination of labor protections (including living wages, benefits, job security); the “commodification of everything;” the erosion of government protections and safety nets; the exacerbation of income inequality; the escalation of consumer debt; and the shift to a service economy. Highly mobile and deterritorialized from nationalism, the neoliberal approaches use post-Fordist forms of so-called “flexible” production that includes outsourcing production to sites around the world in order to find the cheapest most expendable labor.

The Crisis, as its name implies, was calamitous. For South Koreans, it has been widely considered the most harrowing event since the Korean War. The Crisis increased unemployment by four-fold between 1996 and 1998; women were laid off first.³³⁶ Media

³³⁰ Pirie, 1.

³³¹ Yong Ahn Choong writes, “At the onset of industrialization, Korea emphasized the promotion of absorptive capacity as well as indigenization of foreign technology through reverse engineering, while restricting both FDI and foreign licensing. As a result, Korean firms were able to assimilate imported embodied technology so rapidly that they managed to undertake subsequent expansion, and to upgrade industrial structure.” See “A Search for Robust East Asian Development Models after the Financial Crisis: Mutual Learning from East Asian Experiences,” *Journal of Asian Economics* 12.3 (2001): 427.

³³² As James Crotty and Kang-Kook Lee point out, “Over the 35 years ending in 1996, Korea had an annual average annual real GDP growth rate of about 8%, while real wages grew by more than 7% a year.” See James R. Crotty and Kang-Kook Lee, “Economic Performance in Post-Crisis Korea: A Critical Perspective on Neo-Liberal Restructuring” PERI Working Paper No. 23 (2001): 4. <http://ssrn.com/abstract=333744> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.333744> (accessed August 7, 2013).

³³³ While Joseph Stiglitz does not use the term “neoliberalism,” he critically connects the relationship between “free market ideology” and global economic institutions. See in particular “The Promise of Global Institutions” in *Globalization and its Discontents*, 3-22. See also Luigi Manzetti, *Neoliberalism, Accountability, and Reform Failures in Emerging Markets: Eastern Europe, Russia, Argentina, and Chile in Comparative Perspective* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2009), 1-37.

³³⁴ David Harvey, *A Brief History*, 2.

³³⁵ See Stephen Gill, “Globalization, Market Civilization, and Disciplinary Neoliberalism,” *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 24.3 (1995): 399-423.

³³⁶ George DeMartino, *Global Economy, Global Justice* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 8.

outlets reported horrific stories: at one point, 4000 “IMF homeless” South Koreans were reportedly holed up in the Seoul Train Station,³³⁷ welfare centers meant to provide shelter from the financial fallout instead subjected the needy to physical violence, rape, slave labor, and solitary confinement;³³⁸ there were even reports of parents killing their own children for insurance payments.³³⁹ These reports are the hyperbole of tabloid news culture—but its resonance lies in their evocation of the Crisis’s imagination of disaster. These reports suggest South Koreans’ re-evaluation of capitalism (and the national self) as the so-called deliverer of utopia: the unthinkable inhuman is taking place not in inferior North Korea where freakish nightmares are presumably routine, but here in the center of capitalism’s normativity.

The independent films under consideration here depict the economic turbulence wrought by the Crisis. Audiences can recognize the historical forces that push down on young protagonists: unemployment and underemployment, abandonment by adults, impending homelessness, the high cost of daily life and the absence of governmental assistance. In *Take Care of My Cat*, Ji-young confronts structural, chronic unemployment, homelessness, and even jail while Hae-joo contends with workplace exploitation. In *Paju*, Eun-mo protests against the violent eviction of poor tenants by gentrification-minded developers. In *A Light Sleep*, Yul-lin pays for the high-cost of living (e.g., the van that picks up her sister for school) through prostitution (with no images of sex work, only the buzzing of a second cell phone). These “real-life” scenarios visualize the uncertainty and insecurity brought on by the Crisis.

Moreover, the Crisis appears as images of urban landscapes undergoing change. These films often show underdeveloped regions on the cusp of development (*Paju*, a city near the DMZ that has been undergoing gentrification to become “artist-friendly”) or industrialized regions facing economic downturn due to the transition from an industrial to an information-based economy (Incheon). Urban landscapes bereft of people but occupied by cars, shops, and buildings with English lettering (or Korean lettering in Canada) suggest atomization, privatization and globalization. Images of linearity—utility poles, staircases, highways, street traffic, high-rises and rows of desks—evoke rationality and capitalist, not natural, space. External shots of young women walking down the street or entering dilapidated businesses particularly suggest an alienating urban environment (in *Paju*, *In Between Days* and *Take Care of My Cat*). Films further visualize the liminal environment by capturing the world through glass panes that divide an insider-outsider wall: the passing-by streets caught through a moving bus or subway (*Take Care of My Cat*), a taxi cab (*Paju*) or the ghostly layering of characters and street life through a bus stop’s glass panel that softens the image’s compressed focus. The wide sky—a smoggy gray (*Take Care of My Cat*), washed-out white (*Paju*), or twilight dark blue (*In Between Days*) but rarely sky blue—is another site of urbanization. The sky frames girls, as in a tilted shot showing a girl’s upper body walking down the street and an airplane zooming past overhead (*Take Care of My Cat*).

³³⁷ Jesook Song, “Historicization of Homeless Spaces: The Seoul Train Station Square and the House of Freedom,” *Anthropological Quarterly*, 79.2 (2006): 196.

³³⁸ Kyung-Sup Chang, “Social Ramifications of South Korea’s Economic Fall: Neo-liberal Antidote to Compressed Capitalist Industrialization?” *Development and Society*, 28.1 (June 1999): 74, footnote 27.

³³⁹ Jesook Song, “Historicization of Homeless Spaces,” 200.

Urban landscapes come into modern understanding through consumerism and technology. Commercial districts—particularly set in Seoul—suggest the arrival of endless consumerism and in turn, the system’s untold accumulation of capital. As Dudley Andrews notes, in *Take Care of My Cat* the city of Seoul is “the continuously illuminated present of office buildings, shopping malls, and the clubs that make up the environment and lives of most Koreans, oblivious to the past.”³⁴⁰ In contrast, scenes set in domiciles elicit questions about the nation’s welfare state and the growing division between the rich and the poor. Girls such as Ji-young in *Take Care of My Cat*, Yul-lin in *A Light Sleep*, and Aimie in *In Between Days* live in cramped homes in peripheral neighborhoods (including slums) suggestive of poverty. Films often show cell phones and text messages as the means through which protagonists negotiate personal and economic relationships, and reconcile their own isolation. In these films, texting, cell phone ringing, and listening to voice mail are ways of showcasing communication and isolation. The arcade and its video games is visualized in both *Take Care of My Cat* and *In Between Days* as the necessary distraction to take young protagonists’ minds off disappointing personal encounters (Hae-joo with her boss in *Take Care of My Cat* and Aimie with her mom in *In Between Days*).

While the Crisis is visualized by images of urbanization or unemployment, it is perhaps most tragically felt by the loss of human relationships. In each of these films, the fragmentation of friends and family constitutes both an important plot device and a central index of capitalist restructuring. The new model of capitalism exacerbates physical separation and emotional disconnection. Protagonists suffer fragmentation in many ways: parents, grandparents, sisters and best friends die, abandon girls or move overseas. In most films, this rupture results from an adult’s decision (the parent renounces the child in *Treeless Mountain* and *A Brand New Life*) or an accident (the friend falls to her death in *Samaritan Girl*). In some cases, girls who have been lashing out to cope with their marginalization indirectly trigger death (Eun-mo causes the gas leak that results in the deadly explosion in *Paju* and Ji-young spends money on a new phone rather than fixing her grandparents’ roof in *Take Care of My Cat*).

The loss of parental figures leads to physical exile and economic displacement. Often, loss arrives like a surprise attack, a sudden tragedy out of nowhere. In *Take Care of My Cat*, the roof collapses on a girl’s house, killing her grandparents and leaving the homeless, jobless and family-less girl to seek shelter in jail. In *Treeless Mountain*, an overburdened mother abruptly leaves for the United States, leaving behind her two young girls aged two and five with their aunt in a rural town. In *A Light Sleep*, the death of her parents forces a high school student to take up sex work to support her younger sister and make sure they stay together. And in *A Brand New Life*, a much beloved and newly remarried father pretends to take his nine-year-old daughter on a trip but abandons her in an orphanage (this film is set in the 1970s, but its plot resonates with the other films listed here). If it is not friends or family members who have disappeared, it is the protagonist herself who has gone away. In *In Between Days*, a teenaged girl has left South Korea for Canada with her mother, dislocating her from her father, her friends and her homeland.

³⁴⁰ Dudley Andrew, “Ghost Towns” in *Cinema at the City’s Edge: Film and Urban Networks in East Asia*, ed. Yomi Braester and James Tweedie (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010), 43.

Even when adults are present, emotional and ideological disconnection fragments families: children keep secrets that deviate from parental expectations; in turn, parents pressure children to follow normative dogma that corrodes children's sense of self. In these films, parents' dysfunction keeps families apart. Parents are depressed (the lethargic mothers in *In Between Days* and *Take Care of My Cat*), self-involved (the deserting mother and alcoholic aunt in *Treeless Mountain*, the mother's new lover in *In Between Days*), or too confounded (the cop father who cannot cope with his daughter's illicit acts in *Samaritan Girl*). These ascriptions suggest that parents must contend with their own contexts of struggle, history and individualism beyond their traditional parental duties. This diversion of attention can lead to an atmosphere of abandonment. At other times, parents pressure children "for their own good"—a taken-for-granted belief that hides the authoritarian exercise of power over children.³⁴¹ These films show the little intrusions that parents exercise on a daily basis not for the children's benefit, but to meet the parent's need for security and conformity. For instance, such parenting is figured in the father who expects his children to follow his example in *Take Care of My Cat* and the mother who mechanically tells her daughter to study in *In Between Days*. Children, in turn, grapple with parental pressure by doing and hiding things they know their parents will consider shameful and disappointing (quietly leaving for another country in *Take Care of My Cat*, engaging in prostitution in *Samaritan Girl*, and dropping out of school and having a close male friend in *In Between Days*). For the new generation, such acts are not sins or errors but part of their effort to experience the new ideals of sexual agency, cosmopolitanism and self-fashioning. Consequently, the generational conflict and lack of familial closeness charges the home with a sense of displacement and alienation.

Nevertheless, despite the imperfection of family relations, these films invoke the persistent need for adult guardianship. Without the physical presence of adults, tragedy ensues: girls must cope with financial existence (*A Light Sleep*, *Take Care of My Cat*); the responsibility of rearing a younger sibling (*A Light Sleep*, *Treeless Mountain*, *Paju*); or betrayals and disillusionments, like abandonment and ensuing isolation, for which there are few if any coping mechanisms (*Treeless Mountain* and *A Brand New Life*). The loss of elders signifies the erosion of tradition and anchors to the past—controls still necessary for youth's survival.

In these coming-of-age films, the cumulative result of familial fragmentation and economic turbulence is the proliferation of girls who must raise themselves, alone and without any expectation of help from state agencies or traditional community networks. This narrative patterning bears out a number of changes that have produced a new social reality: women across all ages are living life alone more than ever before. Cho Joo-hyun observes that after the Crisis, four significant shifts took place: women delaying marriage; women thus also delaying having children; a rise in divorce rates; and an ensuing rise in single female headed households.³⁴² Cho writes, "Single householders appear in increasing number across all stages of life, from unmarried young women and men to the never married and divorced middle-aged and older men and women, a

³⁴¹ For analysis on the relationship between the totalitarian state and authoritarian childrearing, see Alice Miller, *For Your Own Good: Hidden Cruelty in Child-rearing and the Roots of Violence* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1983).

³⁴² Joo-hyun Cho, "Neoliberal Governmentality," 24-25.

phenomenon already appearing in developed countries and the rest of the world.”³⁴³ In the last chapter, I discussed how ongoing sexism in the workplace and women’s underemployment as “flexible” labor in the “nonregular” labor market increased women’s chances of poverty in later life, forcing many marriage-aged (*honki*, 30 is considered the age for women to marry) women to perceive marriage to a man with income prospects as a more reliable means of economic security and upward mobility.³⁴⁴ In the films examined in this chapter, girls are maybe barely twenty: marriage is not an option. Here, the convenient ruse and fantasy of the eligible rich bachelor is removed, leaving girls to contend with the new forces of displacement and fragmentation alone.

At the historical moment when the Crisis increased women’s chances of isolation, a new powerful discourse of “self-development” also took hold.³⁴⁵ The remedy to women’s displacement was not structural or institutional change, but a new logic which prescribed maximizing one’s “human capital” to produce a more competitive and profitable self.³⁴⁶ Young women were taught they were unfettered from larger circumstances: the deregulation of capitalism from the authoritarian state had likewise deregulated young women from confining patriarchy and collectivist mentality. In their description of “neoliberal subjectivity” and college-aged young women, Nancy Abelmann, So Jin Park and Hyunhee Kim write, “today’s successful student must necessarily be more than simply a hard-working social conformist: He or she must be a self-starter...”³⁴⁷ The new identity model has been called the “self-entrepreneur” by Cho Joo-hyun and the “entrepreneur of themselves” by Valerie Walkerdine.³⁴⁸ The rhetoric of “self-development” emerges in the shifting sites of education, appearance, cosmopolitanism and “venture” entrepreneurialism (starting a self-fashioned career).

For girls, the older stress on university admission lingered, but instead of an authoritarian parent hounding the child to study, the child was expected to self-manage. Discussing why she got accepted into Koryo University while her friends from the same college preparatory institution did not, a young woman interviewed by Abelmann et. al. credits her superior self-management: “We all used to hang out together, but when we parted at 1 a.m. I would go home and study until 3 a.m. before I went to bed. They just went to bed because they were tired. *So it was all about self-management* [italics in original].”³⁴⁹

For poorer women, superficial appearance has become more urgent than a college education. In the documentary *Good for Her* (Elizabeth Lee, 2004), an interviewee observes, “The economic situation has gotten even worse [since the Economic Crisis of 1997]. There are so many people that need employment but only a handful get jobs. So naturally, the competition has become fierce. People try to have better English abilities

³⁴³ Ibid., 25.

³⁴⁴ It is worth noting that women’s employment is expected to end around the time she turned thirty.

³⁴⁵ The rhetoric of “self-development” encompasses other similar terminology: “self-help,” “self-empowerment,” “the new intellectual,” “raising one’s human capital” “self-entrepreneur.”

³⁴⁶ Joo-hyun Cho, “Neoliberal Governmentality,” 16.

³⁴⁷ Nancy Abelmann, So Jin Park and Hyunhee Kim, “College rank and neo-liberal subjectivity in South Korea: the burden of self-development,” *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 10:2 (2009): 230.

³⁴⁸ Valerie Walkerdine, “Reclassifying Upward Mobility: Femininity and the Neo-liberal Subject,” *Gender and Education* 15.3 (2003): 239.

³⁴⁹ Emphasis in original, Abelmann, Park and Kim, “College rank,” 234.

than others. For women, a better face and height, which is also important.”³⁵⁰ In the post-Crisis era, appearance has come to measure a woman’s “human capital.” As Cho writes, “For women, especially young women, their gender and class statuses are estimated no longer primarily by their individual characters and resources, but rather by their appearance.”³⁵¹ Regionally, Zhen Zhang has observed a trend in China where “youth and beauty are the foremost, if not the only, prerequisites to obtaining lucrative positions, in which the new ‘professionals’ often function as advertising fixtures with sex appeal.”³⁵² Coming-of-age films recognize this trend by tying appearance to pecuniary benefits and anxieties: the body is a source of income (*Samaritan Girl* and *A Light Sleep*) privileges (*Take Care of My Cat*), or unprepared-for attention (*Paju* and *In Between Days*). In South Korea (and in much of Europe and Asia), job applications require photographs, suggesting that a new generation of South Koreans must market themselves according to the post-Crisis’s new facial aesthetic. Although appearance and age based discrimination by employers is outlawed, a government survey revealed nine out of ten adults believed “pretty women” receive preferential hiring treatment.³⁵³ While the privileged who already have clout and capital can spurn social norms, as Bonnie Berry points out, “For the not-privileged, appearance can be everything.” Given, as Jiyeun Chang notes, South “Korea has a high poverty rate, and a particularly high proportion of working poor,”³⁵⁴ it is poor young women who have the most to lose by appearance discrimination.

However, because the rhetoric of “self-development” aligns itself with “self-interest,” the new expectations do not appear forced but natural and rationally chosen to reflect human desire. Nevertheless, this new discourse was not organically developed but imposed onto South Korea after the Crisis. Since the Crisis, successive presidencies—President Kim Dae-Jung (1998-2003), President Roh Moo-hyun (2003-2008) and President Lee Myung-bak (2008-2013)—have actively sought out FDI from multinational corporations “in possession of the capital, technology and know-how needed to enhance the competitiveness of local corporations and financial institutions and ensure sustainable growth.”³⁵⁵ Notably, whereas American foreign policy, military aid and direct investment shaped, or some say “created,” South Korea’s first forty years of existence, European companies dominated post-Crisis FDI between 1998 to 2006.³⁵⁶ European foreign investors critiqued South Korea as a “difficult place to do business”³⁵⁷ for several reasons. In terms of the labor market, South Korea was unattractive due to the

³⁵⁰ Reprinted in Sharon Heijin Lee, *The (Geo)Politics of Beauty: Race, Transnationalism and Neoliberalism in South Korean Beauty Culture* (PhD diss., The University of Michigan, 2012), 71-72.

³⁵¹ Joo-hyun Cho, “Neoliberal Governmentality,” 31.

³⁵² Zhen Zhang, “Mediating Time: The ‘Rice Bowl of Youth’ in Fin de Siecle Urban China,” *Public Culture* 12.1 (2000): 94.

³⁵³ “S. Korea issues employer guidelines on job discrimination against women,” *The Hankyoreh*, December 28, 2006, http://www.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_national/180989.html (accessed August 13, 2013).

³⁵⁴ Jiyeun Chang, “Labor Market Dualism and Social Insurance Coverage in Korea,” *Korean Labor Institute Working Papers* 209, March 19, 2012, http://www.kli.re.kr/kli_ehome/work/vew.ehome-200004?pageNo=&condition=&keyword=&rowNum=&year=&firstClass=&seq=342&listNum=209#none (accessed August 13, 2013).

³⁵⁵ Judith Cherry, *Foreign Direct Investment in Post-crisis Korea: European Investors and Mismatched Globalization* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 139.

³⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 140.

³⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 139.

presence of militant unions,³⁵⁸ lack of initiative, creativity, productivity and responsibility,³⁵⁹ a “low level of English speaking,”³⁶⁰ and anti-foreign sentiment (not toward individuals but a broad suspicion of foreigners “taking over” South Korean companies).³⁶¹ In this light, the new discourse on development, and a number of related new ideals and practices, appear produced to placate the concerns of multinational corporations. For example, the new ideal of the self-starter capable of self-development and self-management appears to build a labor force that is not driven by mandates from above—as would befit a state-run capitalist system based on formal, long-term social relations—but driven by self-surveillance as would befit a fast-paced, mobile, and efficient transnational business. This labor force would not fault corporations for perceived injustices but instead internalize inequities as their own shortcomings.

Of the self-development techniques, learning English is widely viewed as the condition of possibility for future advancement. Inferring from interviews with South Korean college students, Abelman, Park and Kim note, “In differentiating themselves from the past, contemporary students articulate a discourse of individuality, style and self-fashioning... At the heart of this personal development project is English mastery and many students described English as a necessary base (*beisu*).”³⁶² *A Light Sleep* depicts a classroom with a European instructor teaching English. South Koreans reportedly spent fifteen billion dollars on learning English in 2005 alone.³⁶³ In 2008, newly elected President Lee’s “Presidential Transition Committee” proposed to enforce English immersion education in non-English subjects so that “all high school graduates would be able to speak English as a result of their public education.”³⁶⁴ Indeed, as Jae Jung Song points out, “South Korea has recently witnessed a most remarkable or even bizarre phenomenon...— whether or not English should be adopted as South Korea’s official language.”³⁶⁵ This so-called “embrace” of English is suggestive of the history of U.S. imperialism through which South Korea emerged and recalls the history of Japanese colonialism when Koreans were forced to give up the Korean language. Historically, the Minjung movement sought to centralize the “common people’s” subjectivity through Korean language: to remove residual Japanese parlance from the everyday vernacular (e.g., to use the Korean term “yangpa instead of the Japanese term “tamanegi”), to incorporate class-conscious, communalist Korean lexicon and to delimit the use of English—a language that was regarded as not only imperialist, but supportive of military autocrats and thus anti-democratic in the 1970s and 1980s. But with the rise of a democratic civil society and the turn toward “globalization” in the 1990s, for many, knowing English serves as a nationalist sign of South Korea’s increasing competitiveness

³⁵⁸ Ibid., 150-151.

³⁵⁹ Ibid., 152.

³⁶⁰ Ibid., 153.

³⁶¹ Ibid., 155.

³⁶² Abelman, Park and Kim, “College rank,” 230.

³⁶³ Jin-Kyu Park, “‘English fever’ in South Korea: its history and symptoms,” *English Today* 25.1 (March 2009): 51.

³⁶⁴ This proposal was rejected. See Joseph Sung-Yul Park, *The Local Construction of a Global Language: Ideologies of English in South Korea* (New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 2009), 40.

³⁶⁵ Jae Jung Song, “English as an official language in South Korea: Global English or social malady?” *Language Problems & Language Planning* 35.1 (2011): 35.

given the English language's undeniable cache and mobile power.³⁶⁶ At the same time, it should be noted that Korean has become a popular language overseas, not only with the Korean diaspora, but with non-Korean fans of South Korean popular culture (Hallyu).³⁶⁷ Knowing English is not at the expense of Korean; rather, young South Koreans are encouraged to be multilingual. But English's centrality is its function as the language of capitalist economics. English has been deracinated from the U.S. and England; instead, English is representative of penetrating global markets worldwide.

Concomitant with learning English, the narrative of self-development prescribes, in Abelman, Park and Kim's words, "the pursuit of active, vital and cosmopolitan lives."³⁶⁸ Cosmopolitanism conveys the ethos of being a citizen of the world in a global community. Cosmopolitans embrace and feel at ease in physical and digital spaces beyond South Korea. Cosmopolitanism (for my purposes) encompasses actual or wishful English-language fluency, internet and telecommunication skills, and the desire to temporarily study, travel and/or live abroad. The term also suggests valuing discovery, appreciating heterogeneity, and having transcended, in a broadminded way, the constraints of borders. Cosmopolitanism is conjured as the motivation behind teenage prostitution in *Samaritan Girl*: a summer trip to Europe. Cosmopolitanism is a noble neoliberalized term that, notably, downplays ignoble sensations. Whereas mobility, heterogeneity and hybridity characterize both new cosmopolitan subjectivity based on market individualism and older diasporic subjectivity resultant from war, colonialism, famine and other exigency, the former underscores utopian free choice whereas the latter expresses the dystopian condition of forced exile and marginalization.

Films that focus on diasporic subjects highlight the displacement, alienation, racism, illegitimacy, and discrimination that afflict exiles, undocumented immigrants, diasporic subjects and even naturalized citizens. In the South Korean blockbuster *Yellow Sea* (Na Hong-Jin, 2010), for example, racism (in the film, Korean characters in China are called "*Gaoli Bangzi*," a derogatory epithet that communicates anti-Korean sentiment in China), menial work, poverty, societal barriers and unhappiness define life in Manchuria for diasporic Koreans (called the "Chinese Korean Minority"). When the main protagonist is illegally trafficked to South Korea—a fantasyland of easy money and pleasure for Chinese Koreans in the film—he is shocked by the South Koreans' coldness and discrimination toward Chinese Koreans; as Mengyan Yu notes, "he has not escaped from the feelings of loneliness and insecurity."³⁶⁹ Likewise, while *In Between Days* does not show overt racism, it similarly highlights the protagonist's disconnection from any concrete sense of belonging, community and security.

A number of South Korean films featuring Korean immigrants in Los Angeles similarly bear out a pattern of cynicism about geographical mobility and specifically, the American dream. In *Western Avenue* (Kil-soo Chang, 1993) racist lovers, the Los Angeles Riots and overbearing parents limit Jisue's pursuit of individual authenticity. In

³⁶⁶ So Jin Park and Nancy Abelman, "Class and Cosmopolitan Striving: Mother's Management of English Education in South Korea," *Anthropological Quarterly* 77.4 (2004): 646.

³⁶⁷ Jiyoung Shin, Jieun Kiaer, and Jaeun Cha, *The Sounds of Korean* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 3.

³⁶⁸ Abelman, Park and Kim, "College rank," 230.

³⁶⁹ Mengyan Yu, "Yellow Sea: A Floating Home of Chinese Korean Minority," in *Diasporic Choices*, ed. Renata Seredyńska-Abou Eid (Oxford: Inter-Disciplinary Press, 2013), 41.

Deep Blue Night (Chang-ho Bae, 1985), the highest domestic grosser of the 1980s by the “Spielberg of Korea,” life is defined by lies, alienation, human commoditization, and survivalist selfishness; when Jane (a naturalized Korean immigrant) falls in love with the undocumented immigrant she married for money who also turns out to be greedy, cunning and homicidal, the film ends with Jane killing herself and her supposed “paper” husband. In *Love Talk*, protagonists are so unfettered from emotion and authentic experience, they passively keep the world at a distance, despite their alienation and craving for human connection. In these films, the new utopian ideal of life abroad is not idealized; rather, social, economic and historical relations obstruct “cosmopolitanism.” In contrast to this “diasporic subjectivity” beholden to historical forces, the new ideology of cosmopolitanism looks to the future, rather than the past. The rhetoric of cosmopolitanism appears designed to lessen South Koreans’ sense of historical trauma and hence reactivity to perceived foreign control. While multinational companies do not wish to be perceived as “taking over” South Korea, their purpose is to produce binding demand for ongoing consumption. To combat South Korea’s ethnocentric “consumer nationalism,” multinational companies promote “consumer cosmopolitanism”: the purchase of “cosmopolitan” (not foreign) brands is advertised as an act of border transcendence, open-mindedness, discovery and global consumer citizenship.³⁷⁰

By reinforcing the people’s faith in the new system’s meritocracy, the discourse of self-development reduces doubts about the system. But the new emergence of self-help methods of self-control in themselves suggest the restlessness that South Koreans have been experiencing since neoliberal restructuring widely increased underemployment and economic insecurity. As James Crotty and Kang-kook Lee point out, “One of the IMF’s key demands was that the government repeal labor laws protecting workers from being fired and replaced.”³⁷¹ Consequently, management could lay off workers without court action, hence phasing out the ideal of long-term salaried work. Short-term contractual agreements were normalized, thereby producing an intermittently employed and disposable labor market. Coming of age with images of the “IMF *nosukcha*” (people who became homeless after the Crisis), fear of financial disaster pressured younger generations to submit their futures to the new neoliberal rule(s). Yet even though youth abided by the new rules of costly college, English education and study-abroad stints, youth still grappled with joblessness. Writing a decade later in the late 2000s, economist Woo Suk-hoon noted youth’s continuing impoverishment. Woo coined this generation (those born in the 1980s) the “880,000 won generation” from estimating that among college graduates in their 20s, five percent would find career-minded jobs while ninety-five percent would work as part-time contract workers whose earning would equal 880,000 won a month.³⁷² For youth, the global restructuring of capitalism to meet its

³⁷⁰ For research that reflects this trend, see Petra Riefler, Adamantios Diamantopoulos and Judy A. Siguaw, “Cosmopolitan Consumers as a Target Group for Segmentation,” *Journal of International Business Studies* 43 (April 2012): 285-305.

³⁷¹ James R. Crotty and Kang-Kook Lee, “Korea’s Neoliberal Restructuring: Miracle or Disaster?” *Political Economy Research Institute, University of Massachusetts Amherst*, (2001): 3. <http://people.umass.edu/crotty/PS9.pdf> (accessed August 13, 2013).

³⁷² Jack Linchuan Qiu and Yeran Kim, “Recession and Progression? Notes on Media, Labor, and Youth from East Asia,” *International Journal of Communication* 4 (2010): 634.

need for “flexible” labor has made survival much more precarious.³⁷³ In *Take Care of My Cat*, the character of Ji-young seeks inclusion in the new economy, but her position at the intersection of tradition and globalization negates her chances at employment. In films that depict teenage prostitution (*A Light Sleep* and *Samaritan Girl*), unemployment is implicated. These films suggest that economic restructuring must prioritize viable employment first in defining what constitutes “advanced” modernity and prosperity. Otherwise, long-term unemployment, experienced as abandonment by the forces of neoliberalism, is restructuring’s true outcome rather than espoused growth.

Though the Crisis’s economic reforms held out the promise of providing South Koreans with new opportunities for social mobility that included the emancipation of women from oppression, its benefits have been illusory. Even for diligent girls whose intelligence and work ethic are supposed to carry them to success, life according to the new rules has brought with it new forms of inequality, economic and social stagnation, and even desperation. Although narratives of self-development provide the ideological underpinnings of family life, education, and work in South Korea thanks to the new economy, individuals face serious obstacles to obtaining even a modicum of economic security. In turn, those who do have some security must sacrifice their independence, freedom, and sense of individuality to the demands of marriage and the market place. The films under discussion here narrativize the same experiences in a more dystopian way. Notably, both official and cinematic discursive constructions are fundamentally and contingently narrative.

In the following, I consider two films in depth: *Take Care of My Cat* and *In Between Days*. At the crossroads of the rhetoric of self-development (education, appearance, English, cosmopolitanism) and the fragmentation of family that exacerbates everyday crisis, these astute films chronicle new moral, economic, and familial disasters in tandem with new social solidarities and powers of mobility. Questions of mobility—both economic mobility (upward and downward) and geographical mobility—help map the costs of new social fragmentations versus the benefits of new social freedoms. By probing the figures of the female boss, un/employment, learning English, and plastic surgery, the chapter calls into question the ideal of upward economic mobility as the endgame of women’s agency. Alongside new claims of women’s agency, youth culture registers as the site of mobility. The emergence of mobile technology, multilingual fluency, all-ages consumerism (access to arcades, restaurants and nightclubs) and the fragmentation of family have untethered youth from the territorial limits of the physical home and the motherland. Whereas geographical mobility offers some semblance of upward economic mobility in *Take Care of My Cat*, geographical mobility seems to bode only a static or even downward economic mobility in *In Between Days*. In the latter, life abroad is mired in estrangement, disenchantment with the new home, and forced international family separation.

Take Care of My Cat:

³⁷³ See Melinda Mills, Hans-Peter Blossfeld, and Erik Klijzing, “Becoming an Adult in Uncertain Times: A 14-Country Comparison of the Losers of Globalization” in *Globalization, Uncertainty and Youth in Society*, ed. Hans-Peter Blossfeld, Erik Klijzing, Melinda Mills and Karin Kurz (New York and Oxford: Routledge, 2005), 438-59.

Take Care of My Cat was not a box office success at the time of its release: it bombed at the box office with just 35,000 admissions and was withdrawn from South Korean theatres two weeks into its release.³⁷⁴ Nonetheless, through international festival exhibitions and accolades for actress Bae Doona (Tae-hee), Jae-eun Jeong's freshman effort has surfaced as an important representative of New South Korean cinema.³⁷⁵ Over the last decade, scholars have identified *Take Care of My Cat* as a key film that epitomizes the trends of capitalism's globalization: transnational youth culture, increased digital technologies, changes in discourses on gender, the global spread of English, and East Asia/South Korea's new prominence in the global economy.

For instance, David Desser links the film to the rise of technology and the breakdown of face-to-face intimacy.³⁷⁶ For Dudley Andrew, *Take Care of My Cat*'s empty urban geography suggests the film can "figuratively... be called a ghost film."³⁷⁷ Jinhee Choi, in contrast, cites the film to observe the continuing problem of women's unequal employment in South Korea.³⁷⁸ And for Rob Wilson, the film exemplifies "global cinema wrought in minor mode."³⁷⁹ While these scholars leave *Take Care of My Cat* itself mostly unanalyzed, Chi Yun Shin champions the film as an example of feminist New Korean Cinema.³⁸⁰ For Shin, the film "registers the feminist theme of identity quest" (127) and "revises generic constraints by developing the progressive 'new' subject matter of female friendship while shifting the woman's film out of its melodramatic mode" (130). Shin concludes the film is "one of the most prominent examples of a female- and feminist-addressed film that creates a new space for women's film in the mainstream, blending explicitly feminist themes and alternative cinematic directions with popular, mainstream interests." (130).

In lieu of reading the film through the lens of feminist film history, this chapter analyses the film as a historical refraction of the Crisis and its material conditions. This chapter argues that the film engages with the experience of globalized neoliberalism on the ground, and demonstrates how *Take Care of My Cat* problematizes the various social and economic changes attendant upon neoliberal global capitalism's transformation of gender identity, class positions and patriarchy in South Korea. Hence, I focus on how the forces of neoliberal capitalism *produce* social conditions that cause the rift in the social fabric, much like the films discussed in the other chapters of this dissertation.

I suggest that buried beneath its female "buddy" plot, *Take Care of My Cat* bears traces of the disaster film, with disaster played by the invisible hand of capital. Significantly, *Take Care of My Cat* is organized around what Nick Roddick describes as the disaster film's three-part structure: "the world before the disaster," "the disaster

³⁷⁴ See Derek Elley, "Take Care of My Cat," *Variety* 385.2 (November 26, 2001): 27.

³⁷⁵ For instance, the *Los Angeles Times* reviews it as "another key contribution to the flowering of the South Korean cinema." Kevin Thomas, "S. Korean director impresses with debut; Jae-eun Jeong shows a gift for storytelling with the coming-of-age film 'Take Care of My Cat,'" *Los Angeles Times*, 13 Dec. 2002, E.14.

³⁷⁶ Desser, 76.

³⁷⁷ Andrew, 43.

³⁷⁸ Jinhee Choi, 123.

³⁷⁹ Rob Wilson, "Killer Capitalism," 119.

³⁸⁰ Chi-Yun Shin, "Two of a Kind: Gender and Friendship in *Friend and Take Care of My Cat*," in *New Korean Cinema*, ed. Chi-Yun Shin and Julian Stringer (New York: NYU Press, 2005), 117-131.

itself” and “the world after the disaster.”³⁸¹ In *Take Care of My Cat*, the focus is on the effects of economic disaster. For Roddick, a disaster film is not “disaster-ridden,” therefore “not requiring a specific conjunction of political and economic forces to bring it about” (13). Likewise, *Take Care of My Cat* represents not a natural disaster, but the man-made destruction caused by the risk culture of neoliberal capitalism, an amorphous assortment of effects experienced as disastrous (such as the ongoing unraveling of one life with unemployment) that are not linked to a single cause.³⁸² According to Michael Ryan and Douglas Kellner, disaster films can “warn about the dangers of unrestrained corporate capitalism and show how the unchecked pursuit of profit leads to catastrophe.”³⁸³ In this matter, *Take Care of My Cat* reflects on the pervasive social and financial insecurities of its era and warns about the lack of governmental safety nets that might have saved economically shell-shocked South Koreans from poverty.

Take Care of My Cat’s opening sets up the world before the disaster on a bright day at the pier where five friends in their school uniforms are happy and together. Notably, the sequence shows Ji-young and Hae-joo with their arms linked. The rest of the film, however, chronicles the end of such carefree days.



Figure 4.1: Friends celebrating the end of school

With school over, friendships begin to fall apart as economic responsibilities—that is the disaster itself—start to take priority over relationships and emotional intimacy. The narrative centers on the contentious breakup between former best friends Ji-young and Hae-joo, and the deepening intimacy between Ji-young and Tae-hee. The story comes to a crisis when a tragedy kills Ji-young’s grandparents and destroys their home, leaving Ji-

³⁸¹ Nick Roddick, “Only the Stars Survive: Disaster Movies in the Seventies,” in *Performance and Politics in Popular Drama: Aspects of Popular Entertainment in Theatre, Film, and television 1800-1976*, ed. D. Brady (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 243-269.

³⁸² See Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity* (London: Sage, 1992).

³⁸³ Michael Ryan and Douglas Kellner, *Camera Politica: The Politics and Ideology of Contemporary Hollywood Film* (Indiana University Press, 1988), 52.

young in a dire predicament. Identical, part Chinese twins Bi-ryu and Ohn-jo round out the group and offer comic relief.³⁸⁴

The following reading presents three iterations of girls: (1) Ji-young, the orphan suffering from long-term unemployment, (2) Hae-joo, the worker hoping to become a career woman in the corporate world and (3) Tae-hee, the middle-class cosmopolitan desiring distance from the constraints of mainstream life. These individual characters embody and live out the fates of different classes, none of whom benefit from recent historical changes. Rather than outcomes of unfettered upward economic mobility and free geographical mobility, the real outcome of the Crisis is the fracturing of the social group. The new emphasis on personal responsibility, consumerism, image and self-management alongside new labor laws that expand short-term, low-wage and insecure service-sector jobs has dire consequences. The Crisis destroys girls' sense of community and diminishes their ability to feel intimacy, empathy and solidarity with and for one another. Each protagonist must contend with feeling alone, trapped and powerless with no one to turn to for help. Hence, while the effect of disaster is not visually epic in scale, *Take Care of My Cat's* hardly visible effects of subjective isolation, human disconnection and landscapes of alienation are nevertheless immense. The far-reaching consequence is the arrival of a cold and cruel world, one that is economically impoverished and without love.

Ji-young: the crisis of unemployment and homelessness

In *Take Care of My Cat*, the representation of Ji-young's chronic unemployment and homelessness work through the experience of the Crisis. Although characterized as a talented girl with ambition, she cannot realize her desires for upward and geographical mobility because she lacks the traditional standing and the educational credentials necessary to access a respectable job in the new economy. Living with her grandparents in a rented hovel, she must work to cover the family's expenses. Stuck between inflexible tradition and insecure capitalism, she evokes the dystopian fate of working-class youth whose lives are increasingly bound to the low-wage service sector.

The film introduces Ji-young through her depressed environment and her anxious thoughts: a traveling long shot pictures her walking alone against an industrial background of older trucks and edifices covered with faded tarp. By establishing Incheon's semi-abandoned streets, the film invokes South Korea's post-industrial shift from manufacturing to a high-tech economy. By layering her internal diegetic conversation over the street noise, the film immerses the audience in the girl's thoughts:

--"Did you find a new job?" asks a sympathetic-sounding man.

--"Not yet," answers Ji-young.

--"As soon as we sell off the equipment, I'll send you the rest of the money.

Thanks for everything," says the male voice.

The memory of her boss's parting words invisibly expresses her sense of panic. Unsure of how she will make her living in the future as she has been abruptly laid off, Ji-young

³⁸⁴ The twins elicit the new idea(l) of entrepreneurship through their "jewelry business"—handmade trinkets they sell to the neighborhood kids.

embodies jobless anxiety and the subjective isolation of having to deal with this overwhelming trauma alone. What brings relief to her distress is emotional connection. Immediately after this sequence, the film shows Ji-young pulling a kitten out of a secret opening and lovingly petting the animal, enabling the viewer to identify with her.

With cat in tow, the film jump cuts to Ji-young calling “Grandma!” During this brief yet important moment, Jeong represents the way to Ji-young’s home as a windy labyrinth through South Korea’s invisible slums—an undesirable ruin from the industrial past that now exists on the margins of the new economy. The two figures walk on a dirt road following a dilapidated train track that runs parallel to and under a highway bridge, passing old buildings, plastic covered stalls, and few people. They live in what Mike Davis calls a state of “absolute poverty” where “urban slum-dwellers are truly and radically homeless in the contemporary international economy.”³⁸⁵ Though the home looks uninhabitable, it allows Ji-young to retreat to her art making because the space is hers. While wistful music plays on the soundtrack, Ji-young nuzzles her face into the kitten’s and colors by hand an intricate design of diamonds that registers Ji-young’s commitment to honing her talent. Thus, the film introduces Ji-young as a deserving character full of potential, despite her impoverished circumstances. By contrasting Ji-young’s unemployment against her abilities as an artist, the film questions the principle of neoliberal meritocracy, asserting poverty results not from personal weakness, but systemic contingencies and inequalities.



Figure 4.2: Ji-young’s house in the slums

Although Ji-young believes in the new culture’s principles of self- discipline and prides herself on her personal ability, her yearning to be unfettered from poverty is not a matter of choice. Despite her attempts to repudiate her circumstances and perform the “positive thinking” and proactivity demanded of her by neoliberal culture, her structural conditions delimit her options.

³⁸⁵ Mike Davis, *Planet of Slums* (London: Verso, 2006), 26.

An early sequence staged in a nightclub articulates the contradiction between Ji-young's unfettered aspiration and her fettered circumstances. Inside the nightclub's stainless steel bathroom, the camera shows Ji-young and her reflection washing her hands by the sink; through the mirror, we see Hae-joo dabbing powder on her face, staring into her own mirrored compact. The image suggests distance, but Ji-young is upbeat as she reveals she is "thinking... about maybe studying abroad," continuing, "everyone in textiles goes abroad these days." Hae-joo, through the mirror image that looks at Ji-young's back, replies, "You don't have money, so you can't go, anyway." The cutting remark brings out Ji-young's sense of shame, weakness and contradiction as Ji-young stares at Hae-joo who has entered a bathroom stall and promises to find Ji-young a part-time job. While Ji-young subscribes to the new ideal that her generation can aspire to creative and individualized careers, her class marginality is at odds with her career choice. During the Crisis, "self-cosmopolitization" was a strategy to avoid long-term unemployment.³⁸⁶ Jobless youth could evade the custom of age hierarchy (employers' preference for younger entry level workers who are easier to control) by studying abroad to learn new skills and languages, especially English.³⁸⁷ Geographical mobility would help youth become more flexible, making them better cope with the unpredictability of the new economy. Although Ji-young would like this too, this neoliberal plan is a privilege reserved only for the moneyed classes.

In a follow-up scene, Ji-young seems resigned from her dreams as she waits for Hae-joo at a café in Seoul to discuss the job Hae-joo promised. The café is inside the shopping mall, a site that seems to satisfy (however temporarily) the desire for upward mobility and a service economy organized around commodities and consumption.³⁸⁸ In this sequence, a medium shot shows Ji-young is sitting at a table with a glass wall to her side, showing in soft focus the mall's stainless backdrop and visitors on two floors. A closer shot blurs the background. Almost painterly dissolves show Ji-young's alienation and her standstill temporality: a shot of a full glass of water and a piece of paper with some design dissolves into a withdrawn Ji-young staring out into the mall. This image of waiting in a state of isolation and deprivation (she buys nothing and drinks water instead of coffee), subverts the mall's usual significance. For consumers, the mall connotes manufactured needs and the redefinition of self through the purchase of "lifestyle" objects. Without money, however, Ji-young has no place and no function in this economy. As Robert Walker and Claire Collins note, "People with low income are not only denied access to the purchases, possessions, and involvement that serve to define those who belong to the socially acceptable mainstream, they frequently live with shame or embarrassment."³⁸⁹ After waiting for an hour, Ji-young leaves for the subway station.

³⁸⁶ Jesook Song, "'Venture Companies,' 'Flexible Labor,' and the 'New Intellectual': Neoliberal Construction of Underemployed Youth in South Korea," *Journal of Youth Studies* 10.3 (July 2007): 333.

³⁸⁷ Ki-Soo Eun, "Lowest-low Fertility in the Republic of Korea: Causes, Consequences and Policy Responses," *Asia-Pacific Population Journal* 22.2 (August 2007): 56.

³⁸⁸ See Margaret Crawford, "The World in a Shopping Mall," in *Variations on a Theme Park: The New American City and the End of Public Space*, ed. Michael Sorkin (New York: Hill and Wang, 1992), 3-30.

³⁸⁹ Robert Walker and Claire Collins, "Families of The Poor" in *The Blackwell Companion to the Sociology of Families*, eds. Jacqueline L. Scott, Judith Treas, Martin Richards (Malden, MA, and Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 208-209.

Hae-joo calls and apologizes, asking, “But what brought you here?” Ji-young replies, “nothing.” Asking for help suggests shameful “personal failure” and exposes her poverty.

In the film’s depiction of Ji-young’s search for employment, the marginalization of poor youth emerges. Just as Ji-young has no place in the mall, she has little use value for the employment agency she seeks out. The scene is framed inside a classroom that emphasizes the linear lines of gray tables and rows of black chairs. The medium shot shows Ji-young further away, across from two men who look over Ji-young’s transcript. The younger man notes, “Your high school grades were quite good,” but asks, “Are these all the licenses you have? Are you good with computers? Can you drive?” With her unpromising answers, Ji-young looks away, her hope fading. So far, the interview has been framed through objective medium shots, but once the man remarks, “both your parents have passed away,” the camera cuts to a close-up of Ji-young’s face. His off-screen voice declares, “...we need an immediate family member to vouch for you.” This contrast in camera distance and sightline elicits refrains from arousing pity by minimizing Ji-young’s emotional response and rejecting the subjective identification that a direct look into the camera would elicit. While Ji-young’s lack of licenses makes her less marketable, the tradition of family-as-reference makes her unemployable for office work. Despite Ji-young’s efforts—such as pursuing high grades in school to gain an advantage in the job-market, the film suggests lay people cannot find jobs due to situations beyond their control. For Ji-young, the intersection of the traditional (custom of kin reference) and the neo-liberal (demand for licenses) confounds her efforts to achieve a modicum of economic stability, let alone upward mobility.

Instead, Ji-young is situated in global capitalism’s new demand for low-wage service sector workers. In South Korea, there was a net increase of 148.59% (4,422,000) in service sector jobs between 1990 and 2000.³⁹⁰ The endpoint of her employment search suggests the dual promise of upward economic mobility and geographic mobility for young workers is the illusory ideal that neoliberal culture promotes to maintain its veneer of meritocracy and create global consent of economic polarization. What capital hides is its urgent need for new supplies of cheap, docile, and expendable labor to carry out low-wage, precarious drudgework. Having exhausted her options, the film eventually shows Ji-young seeking out housecleaning jobs. A middle-aged woman familiar with Ji-young’s home life helps Ji-young procure a job cleaning the Incheon International Airport, a luxury airport that opened in 2001 that has since become South Korea’s main airport, often considered the world’s best.³⁹¹ The airport is an icon of international mobility for those who enjoy upward economic mobility. By contrast, a young woman’s job as a cleaner is the perfect representation of a static economic position at the margins of the neoliberal economy. She will never go anywhere outside the transitional space of the airport, which for her is a confining space that does not function as a threshold to other places. While the film does not show her actually working at the airport—perhaps because that scene would be too close to the depressing reality lived by young people or

³⁹⁰ Jennifer Jihye Chun, 51.

³⁹¹ Jayne Clark, “What Makes the World’s Greatest Airport So Great,” *USA Today*, December 11, 2012, <http://www.usatoday.com/story/dispatches/2012/12/11/worlds-best-airport-seoul-incheon/1756725/> (accessed August 13, 2013).

that scene might inversely suggest that Ji-young can circumvent disastrous homelessness through menial work—it suggests that this is the only certain job Ji-young can get.

Throughout the film, hopelessness around her employability threatens her future survival, but an immediate danger puts her life at risk every day: Ji-young's home is in dire disrepair. The corroded metal sheets that make up the roof are sinking. A sequence of the family at home shows the newspaper-lined ceiling descending downward as the grandfather watches television and the grandmother repairs socks on her sewing machine. While her grandparents turn to Ji-young to fix the problem, and Ji-young in turn calls the landlord for help, she is told to repair the roof herself or move out. When Tae-hee lends her the money to make the repairs, Ji-young replaces her old cell phone for the new flip model that Tae-hee and Hae-joo own. In this desperate effort, she attempts to secure the outward signs of a less tenuous position in upwardly mobile South Korea. Her boxy and outdated cell phone emblemizes her feelings of shame and acts as a "material analogue" of her position outside the consumer economy.³⁹² The new omnipotent cell phone helps her anneal her growing sense of alienation by offering entertainment, mobility, and a sense of belonging in, and a connection to, a pseudo-community forged through shared consumption.

Subsequently, the roof crashes down on her grandparents while Ji-young is away at a sleepover. Ji-young is walking home when an ambulance rushes past her. As she comes in proximity to her home, onlookers call her by name and ask, "Where have you been? What are you going to do?" Ji-young bypasses the crowd and steps up into the elevated surface of the home's rubble. The camera catches her feet and broken debris: a table cracked in two, picture frames and cement rubble. The camera tilts up and isolates her image with a high-angle shot that hides the crowd and frames her on both sides with cracked and bent metal sheets. As Ji-young looks on, the scene fades to black. The radical image of the broken roof that wipes out the family supports the film's function as a disaster movie in which the historical conflict between the old and the new results in personal tragedy.

The horrible and preventable accident that destroys her home and kills her family also pushes Ji-young into the worst scenario possible: homelessness in utter isolation. When the police question her, Ji-young stops speaking. Exasperated by her silence, the police place her into juvenile hall, which, for Ji-young, serves as shelter. When Tae-hee questions why she stays in jail, Ji-young confides, "Even if I get out, I have no place to go." The figure of the criminalized homeless youth in South Korean cinema raises the problem of provision after the Crisis that has become an important theme in contemporary film. *The Host* shows two young homeless brothers who drift nomadically and survive on *seo-ri*, while *Tears* (In Sang-soo, 2000) shows homeless runaway teens, and *Treeless Mountain* (So Yong Kim, 2008) focuses on two small children deserted by their mother who are passed around from their alcoholic aunt to their elderly grandparents. In *Paju* (Park Chan-ok, 2009), developers bulldoze buildings, leaving residents-turned-squatters homeless.

In *Take Care of My Cat*, Ji-young's story, the clashing of economic forces (need vs. desire, home vs. communication/status, tenant vs. landlord) culminates with the

³⁹² Kristen Whissel, *Picturing American Modernity: Traffic, Technology, and the Silent Cinema* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 188.

bigger disaster of her grandparents' deaths—an event that has dire consequences for Ji-young. Ji-young's fate is treated as a personal failure, though the forces of tradition and neoliberalism conspire to condemn her to poverty. Although the new capitalist economy has fostered the ideal of equal self-advancement regardless of one's social status, the experiences associated with "individual success" is reserved for the privileged classes that already have the access to opportunity. The economic gap widens under the free market because the rich can risk investing in the self for delayed and potentially bigger returns—cultivating a professional and social self through privileges such as travel and family connections—but the poor, who must struggle for daily survival, cannot. They must accept the new spheres of menial, insecure, irregular work or risk destitution and homelessness. Emerging into adulthood during South Korea's transition from an old economy into the neo-liberal economy, Ji-young still needs the traditional ties of collective responsibility where family and neighbors take care of each other in order to enter into the new economy. Thus the disaster concerns the failings of the transition: the older system dies off while it is still needed in order to gain entry into the new, and the new has no interest in supplying the old protections. Without family or money, Ji-young's life is headed for disaster: Ji-young becomes quite literally a nobody.

Hae-joo: self-interested femininity and wishful upward economic mobility

In contrast to Ji-young, who represents the experiential disasters that the Crisis imposed on the poor, Hae-joo represents the working class's subjection to ideological pressures to meet the new economy's need for a docile workforce capable of critical self-management. The restructured economy imposed a new standard of perfectionist individualism through the discourse of self-development; South Koreans were subjected to redefining the self through artificial appearance, self-surveillance, and the single-minded pursuit of economic goals, at the cost of losing one's community. As Ji-young's worsening situation increases the audience's sympathies for her, Hae-joo's lack of compassion for her friend registers the demand for emotional detachment and the loss of social solidarity required by market competition. Through Hae-joo's twinned desires to climb the corporate ladder and obtain material goods, the film problematizes gendered neoliberal promises. Hae-joo's work as an entry-level assistant at a brokerage firm allows the film to interrogate common premises about the positive impact of neoliberal corporate culture on gender equity, while Hae-joo's investment in consumer culture thematizes "neoliberal feminism" and its promise of empowerment through the production and resolution of personal insecurities.

In *Take Care of My Cat*, Hae-joo embodies the nation's new image-driven, hyperreality: throughout she is associated with digital simulacra, geographical mobility, telecommunications, globalized financial markets, alienation and consumerism. In an early sequence, Hae-joo takes the subway train from Incheon to Seoul. Bored by her English textbook, Hae-joo takes off her headphones and looks out the window with glazed eyes. Her sightline awakes when she reaches for her cell phone and punches in a text message that comes to life as a digital effect: in the screen's upper right hand corner, a chirping, animated message directs the viewer to a new hyperreality based on simulated, technological connection forged through the screen's interface. As a smile forms on Hae-joo's face, the film suggests that in lieu of physical bonds, the cell phone's

networked communication can substitute for lost social connections in the context of urban alienation, thus enabling the individual to cope with the experience of modern life.

The title sequence shows the image of corporate globalization. In an empty office setting, Hae-joo moves from right-to-left to open up the blinds. The camera pulls out to reveal a large conference room with glossy tables, boxy office equipment, large windows with steel railing and a city view of Seoul—an image of corporate success. Layered over this image, Jeong digitally renders the film’s title bilingually: the alphabetical “Take Care of My Cat” staggers above the Korean script in blue and red hues, South Korea’s national colors. These words emerge from a background of pixel-like black squares that picture a map of the world—specifically, the African and Asian continents. As the squares echo the rectangular design of the office and Seoul’s skyscrapers, this title sequence announces the film’s concern with South Korea’s entry into the free market system of rationalized global capitalism.

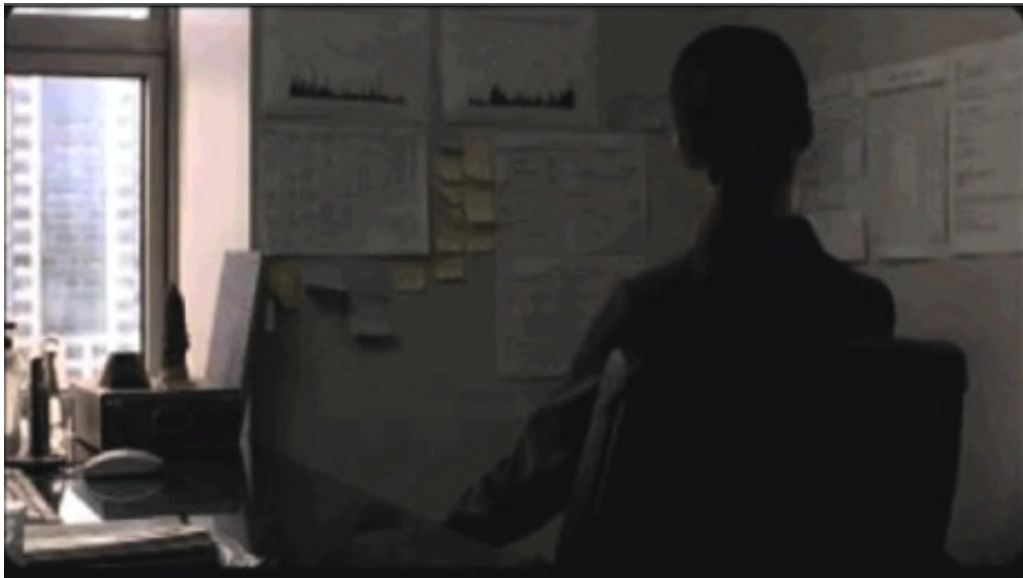


Figure 4.3: Hae-joo in the female boss’s chair

The ensuing sequence establishes Hae-joo’s desire for upward economic mobility as a middle-class professional. As the title fades, the film follows Hae-joo into a small, neat office with black furniture and clear ceiling-to-floor glass doors. After tidying up, Hae-joo takes a seat in the reclining office chair as if she were the boss and scrutinizes the charts covering the wall. Meanwhile, the camera cuts to the corridor to show a woman with a briefcase and a paper coffee cup walking down the hall, pausing before entering the office with a look of annoyance. Swiftly, Hae-joo jumps out and greets the woman with deference. The female boss provides a paradigm of “deregulated” and “borderless” capitalism’s new ideal and promise—the opportunity to become a self-reliant professional woman who transcends the confines of patriarchal domesticity, has earned her financial security, and thus her personal freedom and social power. The female boss reflects changes in South Korea’s labor market that took place after the Crisis. According to Cho Joo-hyun, the labor policies adopted by the Korean government

since the Crisis has led to the “polarization of the female labor market.”³⁹³ Since the Crisis, greater numbers of women have entered the job market. While the majority are “non-regular” (part-time, contract-based, temporary) workers, “the percentage of professional female workers increased, furthering division of the job market into the one for professional and managerial workers, and the one for service and sales workers.”³⁹⁴ Hence a pattern of stratification divides women into two classed camps with unequal access to economic mobility, upward and downward.

The female boss suggests a major historical shift. In earlier decades, South Korea’s state-led and male-dominated capitalism segregated men and women so that men were the business leaders and women were the manual and menial “dutiful daughters.”³⁹⁵ Women’s fast, cheap, and disposable labor was foundational in attracting foreign capital to build Korea’s manufacturing plants between the 1960s and 1980s and hence, its industrial economy.³⁹⁶ While women were mobilized as a united front in collective nation building, complaints over labor practices were seen as traitorous. Because women’s labor was assumed to be a temporary means of supporting oneself in the interval between school and marriage, women’s professionalization for long term, permanent careers was discouraged. This introduction set up Jeong’s sustained inquiry into the widely held premise that globalization has democratized the workforce through transnational affirmative action that creates promising new opportunities for women workers.

In contrast to Hae-joo’s belief that working at the firm offers her the opportunity to one day become a female boss herself, the boss does not acknowledge this possibility. Rather, without eye contact, the boss says, “You’re here early. Where do you live again, Hae-joo?” Hae-joo sheepishly answers, “Incheon,” a city considered inferior to Seoul, confirming a distinction between the two women that intensifies Hae-joo’s insecurities. Their costumes also visualize an economic stratification: Hae-joo’s jacket and miniskirt are merely pretty while the boss’s black pantsuit points to her authority. Moreover, the boss has worked in New York, confirming her status as an elite cosmopolitan professional hailing from a privileged background. And, as David Desser points out, Hae-joo’s class subordination also stems from her educational background: “that [Hae-joo] has attended only a two-year institution and not a prestigious university is what separates her, and always will, from her even more pretentious and snobbish coworkers.”³⁹⁷ Unable to register the social relations between labor and capital, Hae-joo does not understand how her class identity defines her current and future position in the work place; i.e., the firm’s power is not her power because she is nothing more than cheap, expendable labor. Whereas the boss inhabits the professional sector, Hae-joo is an “office girl” who occupies the service sector. As the film develops, however, it becomes clear Hae-joo’s investment in the illusory promise of professional and economic upward mobility requires a denial of real-world politics. Hae-joo seems unable to distinguish between

³⁹³ Joo-hyun Cho, “Neoliberal Governmentality,” 24.

³⁹⁴ Ibid., 24.

³⁹⁵ Eun-shil Kim, “The Cultural Logic of the Korean Modernization Project and its Gender Politics,” *Asian Journal of Women's Studies*, 6.2 (June, 2000): 50-77. Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com/docview/197717043?accountid=14496>

³⁹⁶ Ibid.

³⁹⁷ Desser, 85.

social reality and image-manufactured illusion. Although Hae-joo tells Ji-young to forget about studying abroad, her own desire for upward mobility seems equally delusional.

The office appears newly rationalized, but still male dominated. The sequence representing Hae-joo cheerfully distributing the dailies through the office creates the image of a kind of corporate Panopticon: a mid-shot shows several middle-aged men in middle management seated hovering over computers in a post-Fordist, “alone together” open arrangement (the work version of atomized consumption at the mall), which allow the bosses in nearby private offices to see and control them. The image of only male workers implies that although state-led capitalism is dead, patriarchy lives on. If in business hierarchy, it is tacitly agreed that certain positions are “reserved” for women while the rest are for men, women must compete, not cooperate, for those solitary slots, not out of disdain or wish to harm, but to secure the prize.

To survive in the workplace, workers learn the art of self-surveillance to perform properly for the managerial gaze. The sequence of Hae-joo in the firm’s bathroom looking into a mirror dramatizes how the emergence of professionalism has made women subject to new forms of demanding surveillance. As she puts on her contact lenses and talks with Tae-hee on her cell phone, Hae-joo says, “You haven’t tasted the work force yet. It’s nowhere near as easy as you think...You make the tiniest mistake and people look down on you; Always have to be on your toes. Lose it for a second and you’re doomed!” The mirror suggests the unbearable scrutiny Hae-joo feels as a low-level worker and the self-surveillance she must impose on herself to avoid making even the tiniest mistake. If the worker does not obey unquestioningly, she can find herself victimized by unemployment and financial crisis.

In the work world, Hae-joo’s motivation is her belief in meritocracy—the idea that with hard work, she too will become a successful professional able to enjoy upward economic mobility. But the conditions of social stratification limit the quality and quantity of advancement available to the working class: Hae-joo’s line of work will never lead to managerial promotion. The loss of this ideal disastrously injures Hae-joo’s sense of security. In a sequence where the female boss gives Hae-joo life advice, the female boss asks, “Hae-joo, all the other girls are taking night classes. What about you?” Hae-joo answers, “I think I learn more by working. I’ll learn from you. You’ve always made me feel like part of a team, so I’m always glad to help,” revealing she sees her job as a mobile apprenticeship. However, the boss counters, “Still, you need a degree.” The camera cuts to Hae-joo for her reaction. As the boss’s offscreen voice says, “You can’t be a low-wage earner all your life,” Hae-joo forces a smile. Later, a wide shot shows Hae-joo in silhouette as she cries alone while looking out a window to the city, to secretly express her despair. Here, unlike the dramatic roof collapse that begets homelessness for Ji-young, the film elicits a small and individual disaster that is nevertheless devastating: the economic forces that shape Hae-joo’s life and condemn her to a low-wage existence without dignity are overwhelming. Despite her good looks and Louis Vuitton purse, Hae-joo exists at the margins of the new economy as a disposable go-fer.

The notion that the forces of neoliberalism define Hae-joo as expendable labor is expressed in the scene that features the firm’s other frustrated low-wage female workers out at a bar. One woman complains, “The branch manager made me get coffee eleven times today.” Another says, “At least these days, the market’s good,” referring to the

Crisis. A third quips, “When the market’s bad, one of us is a coffee vending machine.” Amidst their social solidarity, Hae-joo, who has been sleeping, gets up to say, “Shut up...So what if we get coffee? Being so sensitive is sort of a complex. That’s why we’re called low-wage earners.” When faced with the fact of non-mobility and her job’s menial status, Hae-joo responds with hostility, as if she has been threatened. Hae-joo refuses to recognize the structural polarization that separates the office workers from the managers. Instead, she readily internalizes the blame, faulting office workers’ “sensitivity” as the disadvantage that keeps them immobile. Thus, she reflects the larger neoliberal logic that individuals are self-determining, with sole responsibility over negative consequences which are the result of poor self-management (sensitivity complex). By over-valuing her freedom of choice, Hae-joo alienates herself from the group and disenfranchises her power to critically evaluate the economic forces that shape their lives. She cannot protect herself from the constraints, inequities, restrictions and discriminations that result from historical conditions. As a result, Hae-joo is more vulnerable to self-destructive (and community-destructive) tendencies; she is liable to condemn herself alone as the cause of life’s hardships to maintain the illusion of meritocracy. The scene ends with Hae-joo leaving the group.

If the corporate workspace presents the allure of upward mobility for women untethered from the success of a father or husband, then shopping for objects and services promises social status and self-improvement through the satisfaction of consumer desire. The film’s most telling instance occurs after a male associate tells Hae-joo, “I almost didn’t recognize you. Your eyes look like two slants” because she is wearing glasses. Notably, an executive makes the insult, charging the comment with professional authority. The next sequence shows Hae-joo undergoing lasik surgery; afterwards Hae-joo says, “Next time, I’ll do my nose and widen my eyes a bit. I wanna change as much as I can.” Here Hae-joo succumbs to the demand for plastic surgery that will transform her into an ethnic-less, nationally ambiguous ideal of beauty demanded by the new transnational economy. This deracinated form of synthetic femininity appeals to the desire for upward social and economic mobility by promising a financial return. As Lee Young-ja points out, the discourse of plastic surgery promises an illusion of profit through mastery of the body: to own a plastic “ideal-body” is to gain “self-actualization” and become a “highly desirable commodity...on the marriage market, the job market and the workplace.”³⁹⁸ Living up to this market-generated new female ideal becomes a “survival strategy” for obtaining social and economic security and, moreover, acts as an ongoing distraction from the actual relations of power. In the new consumer society, consumer goods (including artificial beauty) are not desired for their use value but their “pretense value.” Desser points out that Hae-joo’s “growing dissociation” and “increasing alienation from her friends” is tied to her increasing preference for the superficial pretensions offered by shopping/consumerism over the troublesome tensions of friendships.³⁹⁹

The film’s last image of Hae-joo in relation to her friends takes place shortly after the female boss calls Hae-joo a low-wage worker. The ensuing sequence shows a

³⁹⁸ Young-ja Lee, “Consumer Culture and Gender Identity in South Korea,” *Asian Journal of Women's Studies* 6.4 (2000): 11.

³⁹⁹ Desser, 88.

tracking shot of Hae-joo at the office. The camera moves in on her to elicit her alienation: male workers are busily moving about, but she is standing with her arms crossed by the fax machine with a catatonic look. Behind her, the map of the world from the title sequence reappears across the conference room's off-limits glass doors. The scene ends with an external evening shot which cuts the screen in thirds: the right hand shows Seoul's black and colorfully lit cityscape, the left hand shows a tiny figure of Hae-joo in the brightly lit office and running up the middle is a text message: "Sorry, I can't go with you. Have a good visit. Say hi to Ji-young for me. Hae-joo." In the similar way in which Hae-joo rejected Ji-young's birthday gift—the film's titular cat, Hae-joo cannot take care of Ji-young. The next scene cuts to Tae-hee showing the message to Ji-young who is wearing an orange jumpsuit, behind a glass barrier in jail. Here, the phone cannot replace corporeal intimacy. This is when Ji-young needs Hae-joo the most, but for Hae-joo's own survival, Hae-joo has no choice but to stay at work. Through the image of the glass partition and the tenuous connection provided by the cell phone, this scene effectively represents the growing social and economic isolation of its protagonists as they succumb to overwhelming historical forces over which they have no control.

Tae-hee: searching for her place in the world

Unlike Hae-joo, Tae-hee is uninterested in becoming a white-collar professional, but rather takes interest in the world-at-large. Her desire to escape from nationalism, bigoted homogeneity, predictable standardization, and discover new freedoms by crossing state boundaries is suggestive of cosmopolitanism. At the same time, her disinterest in consumerism, her willingness to "slum it" and her discomfiture with her middle-class cocoon suggests an alternative subject-in-formation: the economically privileged young woman who desires a place in the world that is outside of both tradition and commodification. In Tae-hee's narrative, the film assesses the drawbacks of capitalism's middle-class trappings and advocates the need to maintain social and family relationships. Her characterization as a force of freedom is depicted by her preference of leisure, personal vagaries, freedom over productivity, efficiency and security. Thus, she mediates her generation's desire to resist the constraints of tradition and corporate capitalism, and instead find fulfillment through non-normative adventures—in the lives of the marginalized, in a "seamen's" ship meant for undocumented sailors, in boarding a plane for an elsewhere far away. As a result, Tae-hee emerges as the film's ideal of a new 21st century identity touched by global financial recession that straddles critic, rebel, caretaker and ultimately nomad: by leaving South Korea, Tae-hee rejects the untenable position available to her within emerging socio-economic order.

Whereas the other girls are introduced on the streets, the film places Tae-hee inside domestic settings in her earliest scenes to establish a sense of confinement. Tae-hee's discomfort in her own home is shown in an early sequence. When Tae-hee enters her house, she bypasses her family members who have gathered for a collective meal, passes through the large living room and its hardwood floors, ignores the housekeeper, and withdraws into her room upstairs under lock and key. Her father says, "Always locking that room, no wonder it's all moldy," to suggest Tae-hee is at odds with the family's conventions. Her life is the opposite of Ji-young's: while Ji-young suffers due to

the lack of family ties and financial security, Tae-hee suffers from the suffocating trappings of middle-class domesticity.

Having established a stifling status quo in Tae-hee's home life, the film suggests Tae-hee is struggling for a way of encountering the world beyond the family. Her interaction with a poet who has cerebral palsy represents her search for meaning beyond the slick surface appearances offered by mass culture. Recorded in a stationary master shot, the scene places the characters in opposite corners of the frame to impart a distance that estranges the bedroom's eroticism. As the poet speaks, Tae-hee types up his words on a typewriter, and simultaneously, the Korean text appears onscreen. The poem titled "My Best" has two lines: "I want to do my best for you/ So I hope you'll do the same." The poem concerns reciprocation—the idea of mutual accountability per the Golden Rule, and offers a way to read the title's parallel concept of "taking care." Disrobed of social expectations, the two figures can meet each other without the clock of economic growth hurrying their poetry making, an activity that is neither leisure nor business and thus outside the capitalist model. The film posits Tae-hee's relationship with other people as an alternative to human relations founded on market forces.

In contrast to her friends who struggle to enter the middle-class mainstream, Tae-hee's dissatisfaction with her middle-class existence leads her to fixate on people and experiences that signify alterity from the mundane, the domestic, and the known. The film particularly conveys this when Tae-hee and Ji-young come across a homeless woman.⁴⁰⁰ As Tae-hee and Ji-young take a walk on an overpass framed by Incheon's gritty refineries and gray steel fencing, a disheveled woman clutching a bundle jumps in front of them and then turns around to watch them leave. Over her shoulder, the camera shows the two women look back and then trail away. Back on the ground, the two young women walk side-by-side in a close-up shot that suggests both of their individual subjectivities and the different pressures that compress them: they do not look at each other but straight ahead from the shoulders up, framed by the sky and two tubular steel walls on each side that narrow into the background. Ji-young says, "That beggar back there. I'm afraid I'll turn out that way." Living in the shantytown, Ji-young can relate to the woman's socioeconomic abjection. In contrast, Tae-hee says, "I never thought of it like that. Sometimes, I wanna follow them out of curiosity. To see how they pass the days. Wouldn't it be nice to wander around with no regrets?" Ji-young, chuckles, "You think that's freedom? I don't think so. What if something happens to you while you're wandering around?" Tae-hee is blinded by both her privileged position and the oppressiveness of being an upper-middle class woman whose path is already predetermined: she is to be married to a businessman and invest her desires in a claustrophobic domestic space defined by consumer culture. For Tae-hee, this seemingly inevitable future would devastate her sense of self. Her desire to escape this fate blinds her to the fact that homelessness is the hellish inverse of her own situation—constant forced mobility, insecurity, isolation and vulnerability to disaster.

⁴⁰⁰ For an analysis on post-IMF homelessness, see Jesook Song, "Historicization of Homeless Spaces."



Figure 4.4: Ji-young (L) and Tae-hee looking back at the homeless woman

This exchange suggests the emergence of a localized, late-capitalist version of the flâneur. Tae-hee's persona—an observer who wishes to follow a 'street person' out of curiosity—resonates with the flâneur attested much earlier elsewhere. In the emergence of European and American modernity, the flâneur heralded the future's eclecticism and grieved the loss of the past. In his narrative, "The Man of the Crowd," Edgar Allan Poe portrays the flâneur as a man moved to follow a fascinating stranger. The narrator is at a coffee-house "peering" into the street describing various groups the entire day, when the narrator spots an old man with a "countenance which at once arrested and absorbed my whole attention, on account of the absolute idiosyncrasy of its expression...I felt singularly around, startled, fascinated... Then came a craving desire to keep the man in view—to know more of him."⁴⁰¹ The narrator follows the stranger night and day. As both narrator and stranger lead mobile lifestyles unbound from time and place, these men thwart urban alienation by becoming anonymously one with the city and all its dispersed attractions as observers of the new.

Along with Poe's description of the man of the crowd, Baudelaire's essay "The Painter of Modern Life" associates the flâneur with ephemera, curiosity, mobility and worldliness.⁴⁰² For Baudelaire, the flâneur is the painter-observer-philosopher of "the passing moment," (5) of "the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent" which comprise 'modernity.' He underscores that the flâneur's "genius is *curiosity*" (italics in original) because the flâneur retains a child-like interest such that "no aspect of life has become stale" (16-17). Baudelaire calls the flâneur "the spiritual citizen of the universe" (18): "To be away from home and yet to feel oneself everywhere at home; to see the world, to be at the centre of the world, and yet to remain hidden from the world" (9). The flâneur's

⁴⁰¹ Edgar Allan Poe, "The Man of the Crowd" in *Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. Philip Van Doren Stern (NY: Viking Press, 1945), 113.

⁴⁰² Charles Baudelaire, "The Painter of Modern Life" in *The Painter on Modern Life and Other Essays*, ed. and trans. Jonathan Mayne (London: Phaidon Press, 1964).

worldliness suggests a transnational subject detached from the clan and the nation, much like the new cosmopolitan ideal. What distinguishes flânerie from similar neoliberalist regard for ephemera, mobility and worldliness is flânerie's opposition to the standardization of consumerism.⁴⁰³ Premised on curiosity, the flâneur is anti-bourgeois and anti-commodification as an aristocratic aesthete who appreciates the unique and the rare. Likewise, Tae-hee seeks a new way of being that transcends the conformity demanded of her. But although she seeks autonomy from tradition, without access to quality employment, Tae-hee lives off her father's graces and is expected to obey him, even though she finds him oppressive.

The family's visit to Tony Rama, an American franchise restaurant specializing in barbeque, reveals the family's tendency to conform to standardized tastes suggestive of closed-minded group thinking. At Tony Rama, the English menu befuddles the family: the brother, for instance, asks, "What the hell? What is all this?" Abruptly, the father asks for the bestseller and advises his family, "When in doubt, always order the most popular dish. It's a safe bet." Tae-hee says, "Dad, beating isn't the only violence. Ignoring someone's freedom counts too." Ignoring his daughter, the father says to his son: "No big man would stare at a dinky menu for so long...A man who graciously eats what he gets will make it big, huh?" The father is overly invested in the standardized tastes prescribed by franchise capitalism; he seeks to tailor his tastes and desires to the demands and "authority" of a marketplace that standardizes and homogenizes all experience. Existing outside the father-son patriarchal relationship, and uncomfortable with her father's demand that she conform to a predetermined path, Tae-hee is twice out of place as a girl and a drifter. For Tae-hee, the middle-class home and family life stifles her sense of curiosity, individuality and free will, and serve as a site of oppression from which she must escape.

To resist the coming middle class disaster championed by her father, Tae-hee seeks out relationships and encounters that will take her out of the claustrophobic, oppressive sphere of middle class domesticity. Ironically, at the same time that globalization homogenizes consumption and tastes, it also opens up new worlds. As such, in her jaunts as a middle-class Korean female wanderer—a new historical subject herself—Tae-hee encounters people who pique her curiosity because they come from a different place, even though their relocation to South Korea is a byproduct of global capitalism. For example, Tae-hee encounters young men in American-styled blue jeans from Myanmar at the pier while hanging out with her girlfriends. In Korean, one man says, "I like Koreans. I love Korean women." Tae-hee responds, "Wow, your Korean's good. Where are you from?" When the men reply together, "Myanmar," Tae-hee responds as if she has never heard of Myanmar. The film appears to emphasize how sheltered she is from the outside world, thus recognizing her naiveté. When Tae-hee suggests to her friends they join these boys, Hae-joo retorts, "What's there to do with factory boys?" This question makes Hae-joo a foil for Tae-hee: whereas Hae-joo thinks there is no point to socializing with factory boys who offer no chance of upward economic mobility, Tae-hee is interested in them precisely because they exist at the social and economic margins.

⁴⁰³ See Esther Leslie, "Ruin and Rubble in the arcades," in *Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project*, ed. Beatrice Hanssen (London and New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2006), 95-95.

In this interaction, *Take Care of My Cat* layers the logic of late capital and hypergamous Confucian heterosexuality in South Korea. Both systems encourage individuals to perceive one another other as a means for establishing economic relations, with emotional needs and desire suppressed for material security. For these men, who are even more marginalized than Korean women and have come to South Korea for economic opportunity, the girls represent potential upward economic mobility fostered through greater socio-cultural belonging. For the women, however, these “factory boys” represent an ephemeral good time or permanent downward mobility. Given that a woman’s future-security appears hinged to her marriage prospects in South Korea, a relationship with a factory boy could result in enduring impoverishment and marginalization, even if such a boy could relieve her of traditional demands and fulfill certain modern ideals (e.g., egalitarianism and individualism). Though Tae-hee is curious about the men’s nationality, they remain generic outsiders marked by undesirability—a reflection of the women’s own class dependence and lack of real sexual choice. Hence, these boys cannot be reduced to exotic othering or reductive deracination. To the degree that the film stresses, rather than suppresses, the nation’s new heterogeneity, it suggests South Korea’s history is unfinished and that it now includes the history of its new immigrants.

As the narrative develops, the film connects Tae-hee’s interests—her curiosity in others and the value she places on reciprocation—with the problem of urban poverty, charging her *flânerie* with class consciousness. When Ji-young stops accepting her text messages, Tae-hee visits her home in “Buksung, the old town.” The hand-held camera follows Tae-hee, and the scene echoes the walk taken earlier by Ji-young and her grandmother, but with some differences. Tae-hee makes her way through a windier course to a melancholic soundtrack: she walks over old stairs made out of rocks, through claustrophobic dark paths and more alleyways until she stops before a rundown shack. *Take Care of My Cat*’s spectacle of the slums connects to other examples from the “cinema of globalization” that also melodramatize the class polarization resulting from global capitalism, as in *City of God* (Fernando Meirelles and Kátia Lund, 2002), *Slumdog Millionaire* (Danny Boyle and Loveleen Tandan, 2008), and *District 9* (Neill Blomkamp, 2009).

Once inside Ji-Young’s dwelling, Tae-hee is rewarded with homemade dumplings from Ji-young’s grandmother. When Ji-young comes home, the friends take a moonlight stroll that renders the neighborhood familiar. Whereas by day the neighborhood was deserted, by night women are out handling tubs of seafood, calling Ji-young by name. The presence of people—tempered by gentle music—produces the sensation of human connection. The walk ends with the friends sharing a cigarette and exchanging gifts: toothbrushes Tae-hee bought on the bus and a sheet of Ji-young’s designs. Tae-hee mentions the prospect of taking a “working holiday,” having seen an ad in the papers promoting overseas opportunities in which, “They find you a job in Australia, and teach you English for free.” “Working holiday” is an oxymoronic ploy of neoliberalism that ostensibly promises study and travel in exchange for work (often in exploitative conditions operating outside of any oversight or regulation).

But disaster soon strikes. Later, out on an errand for dim sum, Tae-hee recalls Ji-young’s grandmother’s dumplings and visits Ji-young’s place only to discover the house

has been razed into rubble. Tae-hee follows up by going to the police station and learns Ji-young has been detained at juvenile hall. The realization that Ji-young is in jail is a shocking moment that reveals the harrowing impact of the Crisis on a small human scale. The two friends are separated by the plexi-glass partition while another communicates with them only through text messaging. This sequence clarifies the Crisis's multiple changes: remote, networked forms of socialization have replaced face-to-face communication; poverty and homelessness has been criminalized; and the partition materializes the separation of classes and their relative freedom and mobility.

It seems as if Ji-young will end up experiencing the negative extremes of homelessness and incarceration. While homelessness is the dystopian flipside of an uprooted existence unbound from the fetters of family and tradition, jail and detention imposes a static, confining existence that sharply curtails any kind of mobility—economic, geographic, and bodily. Tae-hee “rescues” her from this fate by offering the utopian dream of life lived as a transnational.

Take Care of My Cat ends with Tae-hee leaving her family and its confining comforts. For Tae-hee, the constrictions of bourgeois existence and the logic of standardized homogeneity is a kind of disaster from which she needs to escape. From her parents, she takes the salary she should have received from working at her father's business for the past year. She cuts out her picture from a large family portrait quietly before absconding in the night. Tae-hee meets Ji-young as she is released from juvenile hall to Ji-young's pleasant surprise. Upon saying, “Let's shake” the girls meet physically in a double entendre soliciting platonic and lesbian readings. Ji-young asks, “Where are you going?” Tae-hee smiles and responds with an invitation: “We'll think about it on the way. Rather than going alone, I thought it would be better going with you.”



Figure 4.5: Ji-young (L) and Tae-hee looking androgynous-but at the airport

In this moment of resolution, the film evokes the allure of lesbian love and its hope of utopian social equity outside of the patriarchal family and resistance against conformist normativity. In discussing the Taiwanese film *Vive L'Amour* (Ming-liang

Tsai, 1994), Xiao-Hung Chang and Chih-Hung Wang assert that the film refuses to regret the loss of the traditional family, and instead “rhapsodizes over new modes of erotic interaction.”⁴⁰⁴ Guo-Juin Hong paraphrases this insight as “‘heterotopic’ eroticism,” pointing out that, “If the traditional, or normative heterosexual love has indeed failed, the homosexual or alternative love is still yet to be consummated.”⁴⁰⁵ Similarly, based on their masculine clothing, lack of cosmetics, Ji-young’s low-voice and Tae-hee’s short hair, it is clear that their narratives will find resolution through lesbian sexuality. In the next cut, visibly androgynous-but in the colors of South Korea, the women examine the terminal screens, their backs to the camera, and then turn around to walk side-by-side towards the viewer in slow motion. This conjuring of lesbian romance is likewise evoked in the ending of *Paju* when Eun-mo and her female friend (a minor character) run off on a motorcycle together. In *Samaritan Girl*, an early sequence shows the two main female characters at the sauna, naked and sitting across each other; when one friend cries at the thought of her best friend engaging in prostitution, the best friend promises to not “like” the men and leans in for a kiss on the mouth.

While lesbianism offers these women autonomy from Confucian patriarchy, these characters’ class differences negate the ideal of “equality” in *Take Care of My Cat* as Ji-young’s mobility is entirely dependent upon Tae-hee’s generosity. Though these transnational nomads’ destination is unmentioned (and this is part of the conclusion’s utopian and ambivalent appeal), the English words “GOOD BYE” in all capital letters are superimposed over a plane departing into the sunrise to suggest a better life in the mythic elsewhere promised by utopian cosmopolitanism. In this final image offered through the airplane, the film indulges in the fantasy of Ji-young finding economic relief and geographical mobility by her movement from being a cleaner in the airport—which connotes a static economic existence, which in turn can only result in geographic immobility as well—to jet-setter, a figure who emblemizes the airplane’s potential for radical mobility.

With its transnational identity freed of territorial limitations, the airplane is the signifier of neoliberal capitalism in the twenty-first century, in the way the train was the emblem of technological modernity in the early twentieth century. Transnational corporations own airports and air travel as a constitutive condition of global capitalism’s international reproduction. Significantly, the airplane serves as an agent of upward mobility by literally uplifting the new couple from the nation’s gendered and classed stasis, to effectively “rescue” the girls from the disasters on the ground. As Rob Wilson points out, “the only maker of hope seems to be the jet planes that lead out of South Korea to Australia or America.”⁴⁰⁶ In the film, the image of the airplane’s lift-off replaces

⁴⁰⁴ Xiao-Hung Chang and Chih-Hung Wang, “Mapping Taipei’s Landscape of Desire: Deterritorialization and Reterritorialization of the Family/Park” in *Focus on Taipei through Cinema, 1950-1990*, ed. Ru-shou Robert Chun and Gene-Fon Liao (Taipei: Wangxiang, 1995), 124-125. (This quote is reprinted in Guo-Juin Hong’s dissertation, 181, note 51).

⁴⁰⁵ Guo-Juin Hong, *Cinematograph of History: Post/Colonial Modernity in 1930s Shanghai and New Taiwanese Cinema since 1982* (PhD diss., University of California at Berkeley, 2004), 181.

⁴⁰⁶ Wilson, “Killer Capitalism,” 130. For Wilson, the problem lies with Seoul, not all of South Korea: “The only maker of hope seems to be the jet planes that lead out of South Korea to Australia or America, or back to Incheon, rather than subways that can lead only into the transient mazes and bonds of corporatized Seoul.”

the image of the girls, to establish narratively that these young women have emerged from nationalism toward an undefined transnational identity. The finale thematizes an identity of indeterminate status, freedom and mobility through the metaphor of the airplane. The film constructs a future that is literally up-in-the-air, an undefined and fluctuating non-world entwined with the precariousness of the airplane and of neoliberalism.

Following the tendency of the disaster genre, the ending of *Take Care of My Cat* closes with the friends who have been separated by the disaster finding their way back to each other again (with a few folks lost along the way). The film ends with a vague suggestion that this new unorthodox couple will “start over,” offering a mythical means of survival, but leaving out, like the disaster film, the difficulties they will encounter in doing so. Tae-hee and Ji-young’s place in the world remains unspecified and unresolved.

In Between Days

Like *Take Care of My Cat*, So-young Kim’s tender feature-length video *In Between Days* poetically portrays a young working class girl of South Korean descent in a postindustrial urban environment. Both texts focus on the marginalization of unskilled working class women and the horror of social failure specific to the experience of everyday life in the early 21st century. Yet whereas *Take Care of My Cat*’s finale shows Tae-hee and Ji-young at the airport, just beginning their longed-for adventure away from the social and economic problems in South Korea, *In Between Days*’ central protagonist Aimie has already moved to a Western elsewhere. And whereas in *Take Care of My Cat*, Tae-hee and Ji-young go abroad to find autonomy and pursue upward economic mobility, Aimie’s exile to Canada sharply curtails her autonomy because she is a dependent in a foreign land. Moving was not Aimie’s choice; rather, she is a casualty of her parents’ desire for a better life outside South Korea and their belief in the false promises of developmental migration.

In an anonymous city of tall buildings, multiracial inhabitants, and English-speaking citizens, Aimie lives with her mother and ostensibly attends school to learn English. If a common aspiration amongst Korean youth is to live abroad, Aimie is living out this desire. When, in *Take Care of My Cat*, Tae-hee cuts herself out of the family portrait and goes to the airport, she appears to take control of her life. The film suggests the decision to live abroad reflects a kind of daring rebellion against the traditional and emerging Korean social order. Nonetheless, the film projects a fantasy of life abroad that uncritically upholds the foundational supposition of Occidentalism and Orientalism—the Western world is freer, more innovative and more modern than the non-Western world.

In contrast to this common yearning to move to the “modern world”—namely the United States, Western Europe, Canada or Australia— *In Between Days* demystifies the migratory romance of cosmopolitanism and the utopian First World in important ways. First, the digital movie uses familiar images to critique the exoticism and romanticism of images of the white, English-speaking world that have been exported to the world’s markets for over a century. Non-western audiences have internalized Hollywood’s dominant projections of the English-speaking First world as glamorous white people in middle class, monoracial systems. To represent the recent immigrant’s experience in North American, Kim presents us with a gritty urban landscape that is reminiscent of

South Korea's cities. Indeed, even in Canada, South Korea seems inescapable: Aimie's best friend Tran speaks Korean to her, her acquaintances are of Asian descent, and everyone has a cellphone. Aimie sings Korean songs at *noraebangs* (private karaoke rooms) and storefronts have Korean signage that advertise native comfort foods like *hodduk*, rice flour pancakes filled with brown sugar.

In this respect, *In Between Days* keenly contends that the migratory and homogenizing effects of global capitalism have brought South Korea's youth-oriented markets to Canada, making certain kinds of consumer culture in North America nearly identical to South Korea's. For example, the first sequence at the *noraebang* is shot through a medium-close up that blackens out the background and only shows Tran and Aimie sitting still, staring at the screen while Tran clutches a microphone close to his mouth and sings an American pop song. Rather than the colorful and kinetic dynamism of K-pop music videos, the energy here is dark and subdued: small bobbing of the head and moving of the lips. In a later sequence, Aimie is alone, singing a Korean song as colorful light is cast over a close-up of her face. She calls Tran. When he does not accept her invitation; she sinks into the chair and appears emotionless. Rather than offer a real source of connection to her life back in South Korea, the proliferation of Korean culture in Canada are empty, painful reminders for a lost culture, sense of self, and community; for this diasporic subject, these substitutes can never provide the connection to home and family she desires. Other sequences show Aimie on the street, crossing buildings with hand-painted signs that are suggestive of industrial Seoul in the early 1980s. Moreover, the film shows teenage isolation and everyday life. Midway through the film, a sequence shows Tran and Aimie waiting for the bus—a bus stop that could exist in South Korea. The film shoots the duo through the bus stop's glass screen. Images of cars and lit up buildings gleam on top of Tran and Aimie. In turn, the duo looks ghost-like and disembodied, as if they are floating in the night. Notably, the soundtrack plays street noise and no pedestrians are seen. The wait is long. Contrary to expectations, this first world disappointingly appears less modernized: in Canada, there is less broadband and less efficient public transportation than Aimie had access to in her Korean homeland. The depressing appearance of these urban spaces further suggests that rather than bringing about upward mobility, Westward emigration may ultimately foster downward mobility.

In addition to the film's mobilization of distinctly South Korean (mass) cultural markers that adulterate fantasies of rich, exotic and pure (white) Western spaces, *In Between Days* represents the haunting alienation of immigrant life by evoking dystopian absences characteristic of life abroad. The most troubling is the absence of her parents, a condition that connotes the fragmentation of family depicted in other coming-of-age films. Although Aimie is close to adulthood, and her mother lives with her, the video nonetheless presents Aimie as a child abandoned by the adults in her life before she has reached maturity. Her father, we learn, left the family and remains in South Korea. Aimie evokes the father's absence consistently through her non-diegetic voiceover.

From the opening sequence and in fragments throughout, Aimee vocalizes a letter to her father back in Korea in her native Korean language. These sequences layer and contrast with Aimie's internal subjective voice-over exterior still shots of urban backdrops, immersing the audience in the adolescent's subjective isolation and the environment's alienation. For instance, a frontal shot of a motionless bridge in linear

perspective and symmetry juxtaposes against Aimie's voice telling her father, "Mom lost weight... You like skinny women, right?" In a different instance, a low-angle shot tilts up to the sky, showing the blue-gray clouds, telephone polls and the tops of apartment high-rises (suggestive of public housing), as Aimie's voiceover says, "Send my regards to Grandma and Aunt. Are they doing well? I really want to see them." These cinematographic pauses are postcards that convey Aimie's subjective isolation in the world and her desire for human connection. In another still image of power lines and utility poles cutting into the dark blue sky, Aimie says, "You have to come, a promise is a promise." Later, the film shows an image of a still dark blue parking lot as Aimie's voice says, "Dad, I wish you would come here soon because there's so much here that I want to show you. I think you'll really like it here [like me]." This particular moment especially articulates the profound disconnection between the non-diegetic fantasy world described by the voiceover and the depressing diegetic world presented onscreen. The last vocalization shows a wide image of a blue and purple skyline, with buildings and utility polls in silhouette. Aimie's voice says, "I miss you so much, dad, but don't you miss me? Just wondering." These disparate fragments reflect Aimie's own unraveling as a result of her fragmented relationships.

Her mother, the video shows, is neither physically nor emotionally present. Whereas motherhood is traditionally premised on domestic presence as caretaker in a child's life, Aimie's mother rarely supervises her daughter. The mother walks Aimie to the bus once on a rainy day, but the film shows Aimie walking alone multiple times. The mother does not ride the bus with Aimie, meet her afterschool or greet Aimie when she comes home. Rather, Aimie does it all alone. The video strategically figures the mother's absenteeism through elision as when Aimie says on the phone, "Late again. Okay, fine mom." To further emphasize her absence, the video disembodies the mother in Aimie's day-to-day living: we hear the mother's offscreen voice remind Aimie to wake up and get ready for school, unaware that her daughter has dropped out and harbors a boy in her bedroom. Indeed, one of the main ways the mother demonstrates her presence in the daughter's life is through this daily wake up call where the mother functions as a "disciplinary device that...attaches standardized time to the body" as Kristen Whissel puts it in her study of American industrial modernity.⁴⁰⁷ This mother's custodianship rests on the daughter's future economic welfare and her ability to prepare her daughter for entry into a corporate workforce. However, while the mother acts as a timekeeper who regulates the schedule of the workday and school day, she herself cannot give her daughter the time she needs to be able to deal with the vast emotional loss of forced migration. Without such time 'spent' on each other, mother and daughter lack the familial intimacy that might help overcome the alienation of exile.

In rare moments when the two are together, the film presents superficial, terse questions-and-answers. Mother and daughter rarely take up the screen together. The film shoots each character individually, with their sightlines often directed toward the ground or a distanced horizon to suggest a lack of connection. A number of sequences reveal the degree to which the mother has over-invested in her daughter's education as the means to achieve future happiness and success. In one sequence, Aimie asks, "Mom, Can I have some money?" to which the mother answers, "You know I don't have any. Why don't

⁴⁰⁷ Whissel, 204.

you go study?” In another sequence, the mother asks, “Where are you going?” When Aimie answers, “To study,” the mother says, “Good, you have to study hard,” without further inquiry. In a revealing sequence, mother and daughter have walked to the bus stop in the rain. The mother, in blissful ignorance, says, “I know you are studying hard. So, I’m not worried about you.” The mother’s face is off-screen; the camera stays on Aimie’s face as she looks off to the side and to the ground.



Figure 4.6: Aimie’s mother says she has no extra money

Hence while in *Take Care of My Cat*, Tae-hee’s father channels neoliberalism’s spirit of competition, here, the mother disseminates neoliberal ideology into the household through an over-emphasis on education. In such context, the duties of motherhood entail “loving” a child by vigilantly preparing him or her to meet the material demands of global capitalism, rather than by providing emotional and experiential security. The mother is the embodiment of the “educational manager mother,” (*maenijeo eomma*) a new South Korean paradigm in which the discourse of maternal care has been refashioned as managing children’s education. As So Jin Park notes, the image of the “educational manager,” converges with neoliberal citizenship. While the “educational manager” label refers to mothers of young children who strategically place their children in numerous private after-school programs (upwards of twenty-three), Park notes

...the neoliberal formation of maternal subjects as manager mothers constantly invites diverse women (including working-class mothers or middle-class working mothers) to join these maternal educational projects. These projects are also social mobility projects for the whole family to climb the social ladder.⁴⁰⁸

In accordance with this new paradigm shift, Aimie’s mother focuses her energy on Aimie’s schooling, without providing the bonds of familial love.

⁴⁰⁸ So Jin Park, “Educational Manager Mothers: South Korea’s Neoliberal Transformation,” *Korea Journal* 47.3 (Autumn 2007): 207.

As such, the mother does not know her child. Whereas the mother imagines that Aimie is on a path towards professional and financial success, she is in fact engaging in petty crimes and experimenting sexually with her friend, Tran. When the mother emphasizes studying (the future), she pushes for Aimie's independence, forcing a separation between mother and daughter that heightens Aimie's alienation and exacerbates the sense of disconnection from a cohesive community made up of the extended traditional family. Compounding the family's fragmentation is the mother's desire to lead a life of her own—to experience the modern female narrative of romance and personal fulfillment. In a sequence that takes place in the family's bathroom, the mother is looking into the mirror as she puts on mascara. Aimie is at the doorway, behind the mother and looking in at her through the mirror. When Aimie asks where she is going, the mother says she is going out. When Aimie asks "With who?" the mother answers, "A friend." In response, Aimie says, "You look like a cheap whore with your make-up and clothes." In a rare medium shot that shows both characters in the same frame, the mother turns around and slaps the daughter; for a brief second, Aimie looks into her mother's face. Later, towards the end of the film, Aimie finds her mother crying in the fetal position in a high-angle shot. When Aimie calls out to her mother, the mother responds, "It's nothing." While only the mother can bridge Aimie's old life in Korea and her new life in Canada, their terse relationship signals their personal estrangement and the alienation that pervades the economic-political system at large.

As with the young women from *Take Care of My Cat*, the lack of adult protection results in isolation. In these films the family is either fractured or oppressive rather than comforting and cohesive. Whether the family is figured as fracture or oppressive, it is an economic domain. That is, to prepare for the future—and global economic disasters like that of 1997—investment in financial success overrides traditional maternal/familial responsibility. The mother's new role is to help the child become a professional with a high exchange value in the transnational market economy.

It is not surprising that the mother equates studying with learning English, since learning English is the "base" in terms of preparing for the future and has become the mainstay of the private after-school programs imposed on South Korean youth. As Doobo Shim and Joseph Sung-Yul Park point out, "the need to outdo others [has]... produced a huge private education market which caters to a large number of curricular and extracurricular subjects in various modes, and English is the single most important area within this market."⁴⁰⁹ Furthermore, youth often leave South Korea at a heavy emotional and financial cost to learn the English language elsewhere.⁴¹⁰ This demand for English proficiency has been dubbed "English fever" (*yeongeo yeolpung*).

⁴⁰⁹ Doobo Shim and Joseph Sung-Yul Park, "The Language Politics of "English Fever" in South Korea," *Korea Journal* 48.2 (Summer 2008): 149-150.

⁴¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 150. Shim and Park describe English Fever as an effect of U.S. hegemony—an imposition from the center that has been reproduced and reinforced by those at the semi-periphery: "In the Korean case, English is inextricably tied with the hegemony of the United States and the global economy which is imagined to operate through English... While the privileged few are able to justify their positions by aligning themselves with these global sources of hegemony, the majority of Koreans without such privilege (and Korea as a whole) can only be subordinated within a hierarchy of power—not only locally but globally as well... global structures of power come to be reproduced...not through active imposition by the "center," but through local practices of dealing with English." Shim and Park, 153-4.

In *Please Teach Me English* (Sung-su Kim, 2003), a comedic film that is dedicated to the problem of globalized English, the stressful demand thrust upon diverse sectors of South Korean society to know English becomes fodder for humor. Yet whereas in *Please Teach Me English* various students bond over the pressure to learn English from a sexy yet sympathetic blonde Australian teacher, in *In Between Days*, there is a profound disconnection between the lecturer, who scribbles on the whiteboard with his back to the class and Aimie, an émigré who has failed to “catch” English fever. In sequences that take place at school, the camera crops in on Aimie’s head and shoulders; she appears stationary while others—whose faces are cut off—are moving about and talking to each other. She eats alone; she doodles alone; she looks backward when others look forward. A classroom sequence shows the lecturer differentiating between “I make a great deal of money” versus “a great amount of” (an indirect yet self-conscious reference to the economic system). He asks Aimie, who has been tilting her head and falling asleep, “Can you make a sentence with a great amount of?” She stares at him blankly and the film cuts to the next scene.



Figure 4.7: Aimie in the classroom

In Between Days never clarifies exactly why the mother-and-daughter duo left their homeland and whether the move is permanent. For the purposes of this chapter, we can read this video from the vantage of a recent South Korean film. Like *In Between Days*, *The Show Must Go On* (Jae Rim Han, 2007) shows a mother with her children living in Canada. However, unlike *In Between Days*, which demystifies life abroad from a Korean-North American perspective, in *The Show Must Go On*, the film’s finale projects the West as a quaint haven for Korean migration. The film chronicles a cruel-yet-sweet gangster’s struggle to give his children the best education possible—studying abroad. By the film’s end, what he gets in return for enduring extreme violence is the privilege of slurping ramen in an empty Korean house before his big screen television while watching videos of his wife and children in Canada, looking idyllic amidst people-less yet tree-filled suburbia. Yet the video image of the family is likewise alienating in

their mutual aloneness. Here, the fact that the gangster only connects to his family via video is important: they look like the image of western, middle-class happiness, yet the family is fragmented geographically and culturally and has suffered violence to achieve this state (i.e. it might look like a pretty picture, but in terms of affect, it is fairly empty and even alienating).

Whereas *The Show Must Go On* imparts the hope that this family will reunite itself in the future, in *In Between Days*, no such hope exists. The fragmentation of family is final, as the father has left the duo. As no reunion is possible, there is no reason to return to South Korea, echoing the traditional family's demise, as presented in *Take Care of My Cat*. Yet whereas the characters in *Take Care of My Cat* seek out new queer communal attachment between one another, in *In Between Days*, Aimie seeks and finds a new connection in her friend Tran, a sensitive boy with a nontraditional masculinity. The video lingers mostly on how these two almost-orphans take care of each other yet cannot sustain a lasting connection: while Aimie's 'girlish' infatuation leads her to desire romance, Tran's 'boyish' infatuation with her is chiefly sexual. In the film's finale, Aimie has casual sex with someone she does not care about, someone she has no romantic expectations of, unburdening herself from these juvenile longings and resigning herself to a mode of heterosexual material relations premised not on emotion, but on the body, simultaneously losing her innocence and entering a future that is certain to be grounded in disillusionment.

In the historical consciousness of the Crisis, in which the adversities of joblessness, homelessness and anxiety about future economic security produce a sense of entrapment and oppression, the escapist ideal of cosmopolitan geographic mobility becomes entangled with desires for personal freedom and upward economic mobility. But life as a stateless transnational is also fraught with new risks and dangers.

The "imagination of disaster" in these films is not in the thrill of destruction on a colossal scale described by Susan Sontag, but addresses the smaller, more individual scale of the experience of devastating economic disaster.⁴¹¹ While the falling roof of Ji-young's shantytown home in *Take Care of My Cat* materializes the disaster of the Crisis, the effects of economic collapse in these films is mostly subjective, hardly noticeable and newly normalized. The intersection between the loss of the old and the advent of the new produces conditions of disaster in slow motion as each protagonist enters into a slowly-turning downward spiral that delivers them to lives defined by thwarted desires, poverty, isolation, and alienation.

If in decades past, South Korea (and other parts of the developing world) defined girls as docile workers with dexterous fingers attracting foreign capital on the assembly line, this generation emblemizes South Korea's (and East Asia's) newfound arrival as a site and sight of multinational development. On one hand, girls are positioned through their youth and gender to take advantage of South Korea's economic development, a so-called auspicious liberation that allows women to pursue independence through work. On the other hand, they must cope with the contrast between the promises of popular culture and the insurmountable economic stratifications that constitute their social reality.

⁴¹¹ Susan Sontag, "The Imagination of Disaster," in *Against Interpretation* (New York: Farrar, 1966), 209-225.

Wrought by neoliberal capitalism's risky financial speculation, "development" and "progress" carry the potential for devastating, uncontrollable crisis. Those who lack the traditional protections of the family or the new protections of money are most vulnerable to the maelstrom of economic crisis.

The financial, social and emotional burdens of modern neoliberal life cannot be met alone. However, the protections of the family and the government are no longer available. The transformation of the family and the state has led to separation, isolation and alienation. In both films, the dissipation of community (friends and family) and face-to-face intimacy is a new normative condition. In the face of isolation and disconnection, the protagonists of these films desperately seek relationships that will anneal the effects of the Crisis on their everyday lives. *Take Care of My Cat* draws on unclearly queer bonding (Ji-young and Tae-hee) as an alternative expression of community, while *In Between Days* draws on a shared sense of exile to imagine the couple as a pair of teenage delinquents whose heterosexual friction makes wishful intimacy/community impossible.

The youth in these films represent the future, and this future is defined by sharply curtailed social and economic mobility and the lack of any real social freedom beyond what the matrix of neoliberal capitalism provides.

Conclusion:

The common thread that runs from this dissertation's first chapter's unthinkable ghostly friendships through to the last chapter's transnationally severed families is the dissolution of love, kinship and family. Such dissolution reveals to spectators this national cinema's repressed yearning: the impossible demand for restoration and reunification. In its depiction of separation beyond personal control, this film culture represents and resignifies the historical traumas of Korea's mid-century national division and the ensuing imposition of American-style capitalism, the effects of which continue to haunt South Korea. While world leaders present South Korea's economic development as evidence of the market system's superiority, growing numbers of South Korean films made after the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis are telling an entirely different story. As filmmakers visualize a dystopian and polarized world using genres and film language that was established by Hollywood, a new critical and entertaining cinema has emerged: ghost stories reminiscent of the relationship between North and South Korea, blockbusters with CGI monsters that connote American imperialism, ephemeral intimacies that challenge the commodification of love, and coming-of-age disasters that challenge capitalism's supposed "benefits." In effect, the South Korean films I have examined reappropriate the common understanding of South Korea and global capitalism, resignifying these so-called sites of utopian miracle into sites of horror, failed humanity and the wreckage of war. As a result, this film culture helps us grapple with the unprecedented experiment of capitalism's global implementation.

South Korean cinema is particularly well positioned to picture and evaluate capitalism because it emerged from the belly of the beast: South Korea is a nation-state that was created by the U.S. to propagate capitalist markets overseas through a history of military and government violence that shut out ordinary Koreans from significant political decisions that have had ceaseless ramifications in every day life. The peninsula's schism by U.S. policy fragmented geographical identity to produce cultural and affective schizophrenia. In the 1950s, the Korean War appeared like an act of futility, what the Hollywood film *The Bridges of Toko-Ri* (Mark Robson, 1953) referred to as "the wrong war at the wrong place." From the vantage of the twenty-first century, we can identify the Korean War as one of America's many wars that was designed to seed capitalism around the globe and destroy economic diversification that could impede market "progress." In *The Steel Helmet* (Sam Fuller, 1951), another American war film about Korea, an American soldier describes how the Korean allies and enemies appear the same: "He's a South Korean when he's running with you and he's a North Korean when he's running after you." In just decades, tectonic historical shifts have "made" different kinds of Koreas and Koreans to naturalize processes of national division and segregation.

As capitalism was a foreign economic structure that was put into place by the American Cold War, it produced Korea as a site of historical trauma: U.S. military and economic intervention created war between kin; it bisected the peninsula—an outcome that was never intended by Korean leaders on either side; it created military dictatorships that held South Korean civilians at gunpoint as they instilled "pro-capitalism" policies; and created an unresolved war that could, at any moment, escalate to nuclear proportions. But because North Korea has long served as the scapegoat for causing the Korean War,

the Korean War's traumatic legacy has been disconnected from the experience of modernization through capitalism. Through relentless conditioning and frantic development, South Korean governments have naturalized capitalism as a perfectly normal way of life in mere decades. Although South Korea has experienced economic growth, it has also experienced economic downturn. The nation's merger with Wall Street and multinational corporations has brought, and continues to bring, waves of devastating financial crisis. Cinema's important role has been to represent the consequences of this accelerated process and express the populace's ambivalence toward the need to meet the unjust demands of U.S.-style capitalism while upholding so-called native traditions.

Though they address Korea's unique historicity, the displacements visualized by Korean filmmakers, and the emergence of nation and capitalism from genocidal war, are far from unprecedented. Rather, the wreckage of global capital—the sense of isolation and alienation, the insecurity resulting from dependence on fluctuating markets (e.g., job, marriage, food, housing), the pressure to prove one's worth through outward signs of “success”—may constitute the shared experiences that connects us as modern human beings. By converting their critique of global capitalism into unrealistic, pleasurable, and corporeal fantasies—that is, fusing (geo)politics with entertainment—recent South Korean films create affective resonance with domestic and overseas audiences.

The Intimacy of Distance has explored how feature-length narratives covertly represent historical experiences of U.S. militarism, heartrending national division, and volatile boom-and-bust economic cycles through stories of everyday life. Inherent in this effort is the articulation of historical trauma through the use of nonlinear time. Temporally promiscuous, the films I have analyzed take their spectators into the past, the present and the future to represent historical consciousness that is not teleological. Beyond techniques such as flashbacks, I have contended that South Korean filmmaking conceives characters and narratives that signify the impasse between tradition and modernity, new risks versus new opportunities, and devise storylines around conflicts that evoke the past and the present. Films from genres as diverse as horror, romance, melodrama and the teenage art film help piece together a picture of a historical environment that is both rapidly changing and trapped in an unchanging limbo. They address the peninsula's schizophrenic history and geography by visualizing the psychological states of dread, grief, and paranoia, feelings of insecurity and anonymity, as well as unresolved trauma, emotional shutdown and sensations of homelessness that are vague and amorphous in daily life.

Throughout the dissertation, I have attempted to capture the often repressed or hidden consequences of South Korea's apparently successful turn to capitalism, focusing particularly on the loss of social relations. My focus has been on the growing problem of social detachment, alienation and fragmentation that often goes unrecognized in scholarship on South Korean cinema and media. This easily overlooked yet nonetheless profound change is especially striking considering that prior to the war, Korea's socio-economic system was organized around kinship, a fact rooted in the Korean language. In Korean, even strangers are called by kinship terms (e.g., grandmother, uncle, aunt, older

sister, older brother).⁴¹² The dominant pronoun in the Korean language has been traditionally “we” (uri or woori).⁴¹³ For example, “my mother” is expressed as “our mother” (“uri uhmuhi”). Implicit in the term “uri” is the self’s connection to the plurality of human sociality. But this understanding of the individual’s connection to the collective is being destroyed. By showing how notions of economic scarcity, survival and self-interest change and charge personal relationships (with friends, family, lovers) with mistrust, aversion, and competition, the films that I have analyzed here suggest that capitalism normalizes alienation and isolation; it frames estrangement from other people as a desirable form of “freedom.”

Thus it has been my argument in the dissertation’s four chapters that portrayals of “intimacy” and “distance” provide a method for visualizing the ongoing aftereffects of geopolitical historical change that may be invisible to the naked eye. Historical conditions compel isolation, mobile connection, and ephemeral and interchangeable relations. Throughout, the impossibility of closeness among friends, lovers and family echoes the nation’s difficulty. In Chapter 1, I demonstrated how the rapport between friends and sisters in gothic ghost tales *Whispering Corridors* and *A Tale of Two Sisters*, respectively, (re)present the historical trauma of national division and the way lost loved ones ripped away by war haunt the present. The homo-social connection set in the insular settings of the haunted house and school suggests primordial Korea’s Hermit Kingdom, while adults who meddle into young people’s business and silence the truth suggest authoritarian rule amid ongoing U.S. intervention. Like the doomed liaison between ghost and human, the relationship between North and South Korea is queerly paranormal. To survive, the living must individuate and go their separate ways, despite the yearning to undo what has been wrongly done. The sensible recourse is to remember from afar and hope the past will rest in peace.

In Chapter 2, *The Host* fuses Hollywood form (blockbuster, monster, digital effects, disaster) with local opposition. The film uses a voracious monster resulting from South Korean kowtow to U.S. extraterritorial power to represent consumption gone awry and, through its paternal melodrama provides a reconfigured family of outsiders able to work alone and together to contest and even defeat (however momentarily) the horrors wrought by the new economy. The monster’s belligerent surprise attack, which rips through a peaceful gathering, characterizes recent financial crisis, the Korean War and the transformations of compulsory capitalism that caught the nation unprepared.

Chapter 3 shows how the formation of romantic couples is subtended by market calculations, making temporary moments of *amour fou* the only means of achieving (fleeting) happiness. Characters such as Madame Oh (*Madame Freedom*), “Woman” (*The Intimate*), and Mo-rae (*Kitchen*), exemplify the transmodern pressure to bear both the New Woman idea(l) which calls for feminine individualism and the traditional duty to reproduce the patriarchal home. Entry into the capitalist sphere—as career women,

⁴¹² Ho-min Sohn, “Introduction” in *Korean Language in Culture and Society*, ed. Ho-min Sohn (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i, 2006), 10.

⁴¹³ Ho-min Sohn points out, “The extensive and obligatory use of ‘I’ in English and the extensive omission of ‘I’ in Korean suggests that I exists independently of others in American culture but is not outstanding in Korean communication. Koreans usually use a plural possessive form (neutral uri or a humble chōhūi ‘our’).” Ibid., 10. However, the younger generation appears to be using the term “na” and “nae” (meaning I) much more extensively from my own observation of South Korean youth culture.

entrepreneurs, and consumers—has been promised as the means to women’s progress and independence since the 1948 South Korean constitution vowed to “promote the welfare and rights of women.”⁴¹⁴ Some anticipated the Crisis’s restructuring of state-centralized industries would produce greater gender equity. While some professional women have seen greater gains, the Crisis’s polarization of the economy into the service sector and the managerial sector, its normalization of “flexible” underemployment and the lingering male dominated jobs landscape, have increased women’s vulnerability to poverty. The need to broker economic control through sexuality is visualized in cinematic fantasies that address women’s anxieties about survival and the neoconservative traffic of femininity. In this context where heterosexual connection becomes an economic strategy, films envisage “free” connection by showing adult lovers playing at silly pretend, to mimic children’s unplanned playfulness and imagine a form of heterosexuality that is outside of commodification. Yet the refusal to accept the normative conditions of heterosexuality and ideology results in punishment: rape (*The Intimate*), state enforced separation (*Oasis*), and humiliation (*Madame Freedom*). In these romantic dramas, authentic connection beyond the confines of the market lives on as a fond memory, not real possibility.

Lastly, in chapter four, *Take Care of My Cat* shows the dystopian fallout of the Asian Financial Crisis through the disintegration of familial intimacy and articulates the fantasy of starting over abroad. By looking at small, youth-oriented art films, I showed films work through the problem of “neoliberalism.” Economic reconfigurations demand that South Korean youth pursue “self development” and cosmopolitanism on the level of the personal and the national. I argued youth’s coming of age invokes the nation’s coming of age and its encounter with a catastrophic future. *Take of My Cat*, I claimed, is a disaster film that substitutes invisible economic disasters dealt in subjective isolation for highly visible natural disasters. To escape the displacements and alienation of South Korean transmodernity, *Take Care of My Cat* shows characters departing the family and the nation and finding new connections suggestive of the new liberatory ideal of classless lesbianism. In contrast, *In Between Days* visualized a forlorn Canadian landscape to articulate a transnational young woman’s crisis of disconnection amid international familial fragmentation through diaspora.

Thus the dissertation’s four chapters analyzed the loss of family and friendship to analyze the historical fallout of war and violent modernization: ongoing historical trauma, impassable transmodernity, and distant intimacy. These sites of horror, failure and impossibility are likewise conjured in other kinds of films that did not fit into the dissertation’s emphases on contemporary family (and friendship) dramas. For instance, thrillers characterized by cops and gangsters (*Failan*, *The Show Must go On*), organ-traffickers (*Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance* and *The Man From Nowhere*, Lee Jeong-beom, 2010) and serial killers resignify the ongoing historical traumas of atomization, deregulation and commodification. Hong-jin Na’s *The Chaser* (2008) dramatizes these notions through the figures of the single-mother/prostitute, the cop-turned-pimp, the inept police, the abandoned child and the geographically mobile serial killer who experiences

⁴¹⁴ “The Constitution of the Republic of Korea,” July 17, 1948, http://www.ccourt.go.kr/home/att_file/download/Constitution_of_the_Republic_of_Korea.pdf (accessed August 12, 2013).

killing as an individual freedom and a religious calling. *The Unjust* (2010) visualizes a dirty justice system that is rigged with unethical policemen who use money and torture to forge confessions and prosecutors who can be bought by criminal elements with gifts and money. In *Memories of Murder* (Bong Joon-ho, 2003), country cop Park Doo-man (“shaman’s eyes”) is pitted against city cop Tae-yoon’s mantra “documents never lie” to render the transmodern conflict between nonmodern and modern knowledge systems that arise from the opposition between Korean-style intuition and American-style investigation. The serial killer genre evokes average people’s vulnerability to being kidnapped, tortured and then killed thanks to capitalism’s social relations of alienation. The genre also brings out the fantasy of killing others with impunity as recompense for injuries that have no legitimate outlet. By getting away with murder, serial killers are the ultimate symbols of freedom and deregulation in a new world that is both crowded and scattered.

In addition to films set in modern time, South Korean historical period films set in fictionalized pre-modern eras also re-present the concerns outlined by the dissertation: the fallout of war, displacing division, and the problem of transmodernity (compulsory capitalist restructuring alongside, and in conflict with, deep-seated tradition). Called *Sageuk* (historical dramatic text in film and television), these films are set in a “Middle Ages” specific to Korea (some time between ancient Gojoseon, 2300 BC and Joseon dynasty, 1392-1897). Chapter 1’s configuration of a living-woman-and-dead-woman couple is found in the sageuk ghost films *Shadows in the Palace* (Kim Mee-jeung, 2007) and *The Evil Twin* (Kim Ji-hwan, 2007). In *Shadows in the Palace*, a royal concubine and her trusted court maid submit to the scheme of superiors, resulting in the maid’s death and her return as an avenging ghost. Through an autopsy and concerted investigation, a female royal medic uncovers the truth: the Queen Mother coerced the maid to have sex with the king to bear the crown prince, and then killed her. In *The Evil Twin*, identical twins So-yeon and Hyo-jin suffer a drowning accident that causes one twin to die and the other to become comatose. When the surviving twin regains consciousness after ten years of being in a coma, a female ghost also “awakens,” turning the peaceful village into a bloodbath. Later, it is revealed that the mother lied about sacrificing one twin for the sake of the other. These films encrypt patterns that need to be explained; the “Specter of National Division” discussed in Chapter 1 can help explain how films fuse horror conventions (lighting, mise-en-scene and gothic themes) with resonant narratives to resignify the Korean War, ongoing violent partition and competition for survival.

As I conclude this dissertation, I wish to turn to this cinema’s affirmation of human connection amid the crisis of ongoing historical trauma. In the films I have considered, what is openly utopian and wildly desirable is useless, senseless, anarchic, warmhearted, primordial love removed from Confucian and capitalist expectations of success, self-interest and delayed gratification: in *The Host*, the family is willing to die to rescue the daughter who authorities have deemed dead; in *Oasis*, the simpleton and the paraplegic share an idle romance that manages to appear idyllic; the relationship is not based on commodities and class identity but instead on the preposterousness of their unwavering devotion to one another. In *Take Care of My Cat*, a girl takes personal responsibility for a friend who has lost everything to produce a nonsensical family founded on queer homo-sociality and the renunciation of class privilege. In the gothic

horror films *Whispering Corridors* and *A Tale of Two Sisters*, girls' affectionate camaraderie with undead beings offers relief from the ordeals of reality. Rather than scientific reason, it is anarchic love—often grounded in notions of justice, the common good and taking on personal risk—that can proactively resist historical traumas and affirm characters' deep yearning for connection.

This phenomenon, however limited and fantastical, pictures a collective refusal of the rationalizing normativities that foreground economic self-interest over human suffering. The implicit justification for capitalism's globalization has been the presumption that markets will bring about happiness and freedom, progress and security. But has establishing free markets really helped so-called "developing" nations and their peoples? When we look at capitalism's global reach through the screen of twenty-first century South Korean cinema, we see unexpected growth: economic polarization aligned with structural inequality and social marginalization. We see human costs like childhoods burdened by the demands of the marketplace, the transnational division of families as parents leave behind children to find work overseas, and ongoing war trauma passed down through families and news cycles. The material benefits of capital's conveniences do not balance against the costs of social and familial alienation and fragmentation. These findings have enormous implications for "emerging markets" and "developing nations" that have been encouraged to see South Korea as a "model minority" of Third World Development. For the vast experiment that has been "South Korea," the sad legacies proffered by the free market have been permanent war, financial dependence, and vulnerability to market risks inseparable from capitalism's boom-and-bust cycles. These discoveries are almost impossible to "see" from too far or too close; but through the vantage of South Korean cinema, we can see capitalism and South Korea anew with a sober eye.

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