

**Goldsmiths College
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**Locating Contemporary South Korean Cinema: Between
the Universal and the Particular**

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to the department of Media and Communications**

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DECLARATION

I, Seung Woo Ha confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

Signed..........

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ABSTRACT

The thesis analyses contemporary South Korean films from the late 1980s up to the present day. It asks whether Korean films have produced a new cinema, by critically examining the criteria by which Korean films are said to be new. Have Korean films really changed aesthetically? What are the limitations, and even pitfalls in contemporary Korean film aesthetics? If there appears to be a true radicalism in Korean films, under which conditions does it emerge? Which films convey its core features? To answer these questions, the study attempts to posit a universalising theory rather than making particular claims about Korean films. Where many other scholars have focused on the historical context of the film texts' production and their reception, this thesis privileges the film texts themselves, by suggesting that whether those films are new or not will depend on a film text's individual mode of address.

To explore this problem further, this study draws on the concept of 'concrete universality' from a Lacanian/Žižekian standpoint. For my purpose, it refers to examining how a kind of disruptive element in a film text's formal structure obtrudes into the diegetic reality, thus revealing a cinematic 'distortion' in the smooth running of reality. The thesis will demonstrate that Im Kwon-taek's *Beyond the Years*, Bong Joon-Ho's *The Host*, and Zhang Lu's *Grain in Ear* and *Hyazgar* show how an excessive element in the formal aspect of the film text explodes an explicit narrative line, thus allowing us to redefine the whole narrative line.

In my chapter on how Korean films screen the past, I find that *Beyond the Years* provides a dialectical way of moving out of the alleged Koreanness, by posing a third party between official historiography and popular memory. In the chapter on how Korean

blockbusters invent the Other and how the subjects respond to the encounter with the Other through an ethical framework, I suggest that *The Host* reveals the fundamental antagonism at the heart of contemporary South Korean society, thus confronting viewers with truly ethical concerns. In the chapter on how cinematic strategies are used in depicting the shadowy underside of the law, I demonstrate through a close reading of Zhang Lu's films that the radicalism of Korean cinema does not stem from the empirical description of a wretched reality but from disclosing an ontological shift in filmic images.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Contemporary South Korean cinema has seen changes since the late 1980s, especially in terms of the financial and distribution sectors of the local film industry, accompanied by innovations in the whole process of film production, distribution, and exhibition. The shift in the local film industry has provoked a multiplicity of postmodern consumption spaces, such as multiplex theatres. These changes were then further enhanced by *Saegae-hwa*, the Korean version of globalisation launched by the former president Kim Young-sam in 1994. Since then, the South Korean government has continued to support the local film industry as a highly value-added sector of the information economy. This emphasis on information technology led to the institutionalisation of the local film industry through the establishment of the Korean Film Council (KOFIC) in 1999. KOFIC is a government-promoted administrative organisation, but consists of professionals from civil society who work in the local film industry.

Even though an industrial sector shapes the filmic text, the domain of the filmic text, however, remains autonomous of industrial forces. What characteristics have appeared in recent film screen culture in terms of filmic aesthetics? In general, contemporary South Korean films seem to have developed their own survival strategies both in domestic and foreign markets – for example, the ‘Korean New Wave’ and the Korean blockbuster – using imported cinematic formats to wrestle with conflicting aspects of history, in their efforts to distinguish themselves both from previous environments of film production, and from other national cinemas. Apart from that, some films have paid more attention to a violently excessive corporeality of bodily pain increasingly erasing their recourse to a given historical

material.

Whereas many scholars have tended to consider contemporary South Korean films as achieving a new vision of cinema, a series of questions can be posed regarding the transformation of the recent South Korean films. Have South Korean films truly generated a new mode of national cinema? Which theoretical considerations have been mobilised for exploring the concept of newness in terms of filmic aesthetics? If it is true that a new cinema has appeared, under which terms does it appear? Which films carry its key features? In an effort to explore these questions further, this introductory chapter briefly sketches the aims of the thesis, the necessary theoretical frameworks, and methodology. In doing so, this chapter will explicate the central research questions. To this end, by presenting a summary of subsequent chapters, this introduction aims to lay the foundation for understanding the whole direction of my thesis.

The Aim of the Thesis

This research seeks to analyse contemporary South Korean films from the late 1980s up to the present day. So, why do I choose contemporary cinematic texts? What is the significance of studying them? Which theoretical considerations can guide us in developing the study of South Korean film? In order to answer these research questions, it is important first to note that there has been an increasing amount of English-language publications under the umbrella term of ‘New Korean Cinema’ (Stringer, 2005; Paquet, 2009). Julian Stringer, one of the co-editors of *New Korean Cinema* points out that ‘the cultural phenomenon which critics now routinely refer to as “New Korean Cinema” is qualitatively different from the pre-1990s cultural cinema’ (Stringer, 2005: 2). Darcy Paquet uses the term ‘New Korean Cinema’

because '[f]ilmmakers finally escaped their confinement, and became free not only to realise a politically and socially informed cinema, but to look beyond this to an era when films were no longer obligated to speak for their nation or people' (Paquet, 2009: 3). Whatever differences there may be, most of the recent writings on 'New Korean Cinema' believe that contemporary South Korean cinema provides a good example of a national cinema that has fought against the dominance of Hollywood in its own right, both with remarkable commercial success in its domestic market and with increasingly wide recognition at international film festivals.

My immediate response to this situation is to ask whether Korean cinema has really produced newness in terms of the aesthetic dimension of film. In my view, film is marked by its distinct ability to make evident what would otherwise remain concealed, allowing viewers to witness what they normally do not see in social reality. However, it is not a matter of rendering visible the inner depth of reality itself, but of revealing an excessive element emerging out of the prevailing diegetic foci, which does not fit into the narrative structure of a film. Arguing against film as a mere delivery apparatus for representations of reality, what I keep in mind is a cinematic distortion and/or excess of the field of the visible that shatters the untroubled operation of social reality. It is here that cinema imperils the completeness of social reality preferred by the dominant narrative structure in certain filmic texts. Cinematic distortion, thus, refers to the point of failure at which filmic narrative becomes full wholeness. It ultimately refers to the dialectical tension between cinematic form and the narrative dimension.

Bringing into question whether South Korea has invoked a new cinema in this light, this thesis seeks to interrogate how Korean films are said to be new. This is not to say that Korean cinema has nothing to do with the production of newness. Rather, my point is: if there

appears to be a real change in Korean film aesthetics, we need to redefine the evaluative criteria, because the predominant criteria in current film scholarship do not seem to be effective in exploring the terms on which a new national cinema emerges.

In order to explore this problem further, let us describe in brief how contemporary South Korean cinema has developed. First, I would argue that contemporary South Korean films have engaged with local historical issues to a great extent in an attempt to distinguish themselves from the dominant norms of Hollywood. This tendency is manifested in the case of the Korean New Wave and the Korean blockbuster. Regarding the former, *Black Republic* (1990), *A Single Spark* (1995), *Memories of Murder* (2003), *Peppermint Candy* (1999) are analysed in chapter 5. Regarding the latter, *Silmido* (2003), *Joint Security Area* (2000), and *The Host* (2006) are analysed in chapter 6. Second, I propose that some Korean films have differentiated themselves from the prevailing cinematic strategies of the Korean New Wave and the Korean blockbuster by increasingly excluding the question of history and relying on a more global trope such as visual violence (see the analysis of *TaeGukGi* [2004] in chapter 6 and *Oldboy* [2003] in chapter 7).

Where many other scholars consider the emerging filmic phenomena as grounds for assessing newness, I would like to interrogate the political valence of the evaluative criteria. First, the question of history comes into scrutiny. As mentioned earlier, some Korean films have attempted to hold their own by producing a difference from Hollywood on the basis of their engagement with Korean history. Although this effort can be seen as localising and pluralising Hollywood genre conventions, this type of strategy in the contemporary South Korean film scene, however, does not seem to produce radical alterity. Why does it fail to rethink radical difference and otherness in the study of national cinema?

The overall method in the thesis is to maintain a constitutive gap between ‘the empirical

material of history' and 'the concept of history' (the fundamental limit of history) (Homer, 2006: 74). The failure to maintain the gap between the two runs the risk of historicism. As Joan Copjec (1994a) points out, historicism is 'the reduction of society to its indwelling network of relations of power and knowledge' without any reliance on a principle which 'transcends' the power/knowledge matrix (Copjec, 1994a: 6-7). In an effort to avoid the trap of a teleological description of history, contemporary historicism tends to see history as a series of displaced fragments and replacements: the opposition between a single coherent unity versus multiple differences remains crucial in mobilising a historicist approach. To put it another way, in order to escape from an objective law of progress in the sense of a totalising national history, historicism 'tends to foreground the radical *discontinuity* of history, conceptualising history, not in the Hegelian/Lukácsian sense of a "progressive longitudinal totality" but rather as a series of displacements, ruptures, and breaks' (Homer, 2006: 82, emphasis original). However, the relinquishment of historical necessity – the ultimate limit of history – is trapped into what Copjec calls 'contemporaneity'. 'Its solid denial of any "transcendence", of any notion that there is a beyond internal to historical reality, or that there is something that will forever remain inarticulable in any historical text', Copjec contends, 'is what leads new historicism to isolate each historical moment from the one preceding and following it, and to reduce it to its contemporaneity with itself' (Copjec, 1994b: viii-ix). It is not difficult to see that paradigms based on historicism have been widely used in the work of postmodern politics and film scholarship. For example, in their famous book, *Unthinking Eurocentricism*, Ella Shohat and Robert Stam (1994) argue that '[their] goal is not only to look at Hollywood through multicultural eyes but also to decenter the discussion by calling attention to other traditions, other cinemas, other audio-visual forms' (Shohat and Stam, 1994: 7). In a similar but slightly different manner, Laura U. Marks (2000) points out the

danger of postulating dominant culture as ‘the invisible ground against which cultural minorities appear in relief’ (Marks, 2000: 7). In an effort to escape the pitfall inhering to the discourse of resistance, she underscores ‘diachrony and the possibility of transformation’ (ibid.: 6) between one culture and another. More or less, these discourses belong to historicism, because these fail to pose something that fundamentally eludes the representation of history – the concept of history or what Slavoj Žižek defines as the Real. What is at issue at this point is not a matter of rendering visible a minority culture’s fuller account of history and/or of stressing the mutual interconnectedness between one culture and another, but of maintaining the non-contextualisable within the historical context itself. When the concept of history is reduced to the representation of historical reality, what results is empiricism. It is, thus, not enough merely to focus on different temporalities or histories posed against a single coherent unity. This is not to say that I ignore the significance of the discourse of resistance against homogenising dominant power. My point here is that in order to attack it genuinely, we need to take a step further. The emphasis on pluralisation and diversification can be understood as an initial move against official historiography. Yet what is more crucial here is the moment where a series of historical contingencies based on displacement and fragmentation are barred from within, thus staging the non-historical moment within a given historical context. For this reason, ‘[a] differential conception of temporality and the historicity of specific levels of the social totality’ does not forestall ‘a conception of the singularity of history itself’ (Homer, 2006: 85). Historical time is deeply rooted in a multiplicity of temporalities while at the same time involving the singular conception of history: ‘[t]here are the multiple temporalities associated with the historical and geographical diversity of social practices, and there is the single overarching temporality – the time of History with a capital H – through which these multiple temporalities are unified...into a

single complex system' (Osborne, 1994: 3-9). For my purpose, this kind of singularity of history or the overarching concept of History refers to the fundamentally unrepresentable on the level of the transcendental which radically hinders the empirical account of history.

In contrast to films with greater focus on historical representation, some other films have tended to rely on a more universal filmic language based on visual brutality. Those films have resulted in heightened awareness of South Korean cinema in the field of world cinema (for example, Park Chan-wook's Vengeance Trilogy). This type of film is considered by some to have been productive of more newness than the previous filmic strategies of the Korean New Wave and the Korean blockbuster. Moon Jae-cheol (2006) raises the questions 'why are today's directors extreme in their use of the visual sensation of the image? Why are they attached to negative, deviant, and violent images that give rise to visual shocks, excitement, and disgust?' (Moon, 2006: 53). In answering these questions, he highlights the centrality of the idea that 'violence has sometimes been a means of aesthetic experiment. Examples can be found in the emphasis on sex and violence in European art films or in New American Cinema' (ibid.). Direct exposure of visual violence, for him, reveals 'the basic essence of a film and is one way of seeking innovation' (ibid.). In a similar vein, Patric Galloway (2006) notes that 'directors like Kim Ki-duk and Park Chan-wook re-envisioned Korean cinema as a vibrant and visceral medium for exploring themes ranging from the political to the universal. In films of explosive visual style and emotional impact, these filmmakers and their contemporaries express the pent-up energy and rage of a century of repression' (Galloway, 2006: 18).

In contrast to the ideas just discussed, this study will stress that the simple focus on graphic violence fails to present the notion of radical difference and otherness in terms of filmic ontology. Even in order to stage the non-historical moment within a certain historical

context, one must presuppose the description of historical realities. The non-historical emerges from particular time-space coordinates. Consequently, the relationship between the non-historical and the historical context are precisely co-relative and immanent. By eradicating the referential anchoring to historical context, what results is an increasingly depoliticised trend in film studies, often associated with postmodern filmic representations. It is necessary to follow a line of Fredric Jameson's here. For him, 'History – [Louis] Althusser's "absent cause", Jacques Lacan's "Real" – is not a text, for it is fundamentally non-narrative and nonrepresentational' (Jameson, 1981: 82). At the same time it must be added here that 'History is inaccessible to us except in textual form, or in other words, that it can be approached only by way of prior (re) textualisation' (ibid.). In other words, history presents itself as a form of contradiction – in other words, the antagonism of social conflict. It is not a story or narrative. History can be seen as something that disintegrates the smooth functioning of historical reality. No one can directly access history because it belongs to something that fundamentally eludes our everyday experience. However, it is important to note that it is 'not graspable in itself, but something we know through its effects or textualisation' (Homer, 2006: 75). In order to minimally grasp the unsymbolisable abyss of History on the level of the transcendental, historical realities must be given some basic expression. With an increasing absence of historical material within a given filmic text, it is no longer possible for us to apprehend the core of history, the non-historical moment from a concrete historical situation.

Furthermore, an increasing focus on the detailed depiction of filmed objects is entirely irrelevant to the filmic excess or distortion which I situate as a key tool for rethinking the notion of radical cinema. If a film tries to make the excess directly visible, the film loses the source of fascination. Cinematic fascination does not arise from the reality depicted, but from

an excessive piece of reality that unbalances reality itself. The type of film that tries to show filmic objects in their total exposure can be seen as substantialising the inaccessible aspect of filmic excess or distortion. If cinema is able to present a radically transformed ontological quality, it is ‘not because of its ability to penetrate into the essence of reality’, but because of ‘its very failure to do so – its capacity for distortion’ (McGowan, 2007a: 29).

Theoretical Framework: ‘Concrete Universality’

In order to provide the appropriate theoretical framework by which film is assessed to be innovative and radically different, this study aims to present a universalising theory rather than a particular claim. This is why the thesis aims to analyse some films within a larger framework of ‘concrete universality’. In order to make my claim clear, it is essential first to examine what ‘concrete universality’ means and what this notion has got to do with cinema. It is important first to note here that this conception does not refer to the classical notion of universality, one which encompasses all the parts of the universe. Instead, Žižek takes up a Hegelian concept of ‘concrete universality’ to illustrate the final stage of the dialectics in which the universal encounters itself within its own particular (Being) in the form of its opposite (Nothing). For him, ‘concrete universality’ appears as one of the particulars and, at the same time, as a supplementary particular which is never reducible to the previous particular, desubstantialising its specific space-time coordinates (Žižek, 2004a: 101-2). This precisely refers to the non-contextualisable within the context itself or the radical non-coincidence of the context itself. This radical particular – the Real – moves beyond empiricism, belonging to an ontologically different register. In terms of ontology, ‘concrete universality’ does not lie in any of the particular’s multiple descriptions, but in the very gap

that they designate from within. For this reason, this conception is fully identified with a Lacanian/Žižekian notion of the Real, if the Real designates a point of failure, loss, and a fundamental gap which prohibits the normal running of social reality. The explanation of notions such as the Real will be discussed in more details in chapter 3.

What, then, has this notion got to do with cinema? It is with the concept of suture that Žižek presents one example for developing a better understanding of ‘concrete universality’ with respect to its relevance to film studies. The standard notion of suture in the field of film studies has usually involved the process through which ‘the exterior is inscribed in the interior, thus...producing the effect of self-enclosure with no need for an exterior’ (Žižek, 2001: 55). However, Žižek’s reformulation of suture does not lie in ‘the illusory, self-enclosed totality’ but in the fact that ‘the excluded externality always leaves its trace’ into an internal one, because ‘such self-enclosure is *a priori* impossible’ (Žižek, 2001: 58, emphasis original). Thus, for Žižek, it is not sufficient simply to distinguish different levels of the cinematic production process – for example, to distinguish a narrative line from the formal aspect of a film text – and then to establish affinity between them, examining the way in which a certain formal procedure ‘expresses’ the narrative structure. The true concept of suture appears ‘when...we conceive of a certain formal procedure not as expressing a certain aspect of the (narrative) content, but as marking/signalling the part of the content that is excluded from the explicit narrative line’ (ibid.). So, ‘*if we want to reconstruct ‘all’ the narrative content*’, Žižek writes, ‘*we must reach beyond the explicit narrative line as such, and include some formal features which act as the stand-in for the ‘repressed’ aspect of the content*’ (ibid., emphasis original). The point here is that the external limitation of historical material on the narrative level is overlapped with the formal aspect of a filmic text, leaving its traces within the formal procedures. What is at issue here, thus, is to examine whether a

certain filmic text maintains a constitutive gap between empirical knowledge of history (narrative line) and the concept of historicity (the formal features of a filmic text) or whether it serves to conceal this gap by integrating two overlapped but sharply distinguished levels. Žižek claims that Alfred Hitchcock, Krzysztof Kieslowski, David Keith Lynch, and others produce a fragmentary effect in diegetic reality, thus offering us a 'subversive' notion of suture. The exemplary case of 'subversive' suture can be found in a famous bird's-eye shot of Bodega Bay in *The Birds* (1963). Just after the birds attack the gas station, we have what initially appears to be a 'God's-view' shot. Then we see the birds enter the frame one by one. Initially one bird, then many birds, until huge numbers of birds have flocked together before us. The viewer soon realises that the objective 'God's-view' shot of burning Bodega Bay has been 'subjectivised' into the point of view of the birds. Tension exists in the transition from objective 'God-view' shot to subjective shot. Yet this tension is much more heightened, as the ultimate standpoint is not 'that of birds' but 'that of off-screen space itself for which the birds are only substitutes' (Butler, 2005: 39). The truly traumatic situation arises from the fact that viewers are directly confronted with the traumatic Thing itself which is not allocated to a specific personalised character (in this case, a bird). If this scene gives a fully conflictual tension, it is because 'there is no possible subject within the space of diegetic reality who can occupy the point of view of this shot' (Žižek, 2001: 36). In an opposition to the standard procedure of suture, a new concept of suture here concerns how the fragmentary aspect of reality emerges out of an ordinary reality. This is where a magic moment happens, accompanying the shifted ontology of the filmic image. This thesis will demonstrate that Im Kwon-taek's *Beyond the Years* (chapter 5), Bong Joon-Ho's *The Host* (chapter 6), and Zhang Lu's *Grain in Ear* and *Hyazgar* (chapter 7) present this kind of excessive element in a film text's formal structure, thus hindering the forward-moving structure of diegetic reality. In so

doing, these films will make us better understand the notion of ‘concrete universality’.

Why do I use the notion of ‘concrete universality’? In what ways is this notion useful in the study of contemporary South Korean films? The impulse motivating the notion of ‘concrete universality’ is to redefine the notion of difference. In order to explain this problem, it is necessary to note that comparative techniques such as ‘cultural translation’ have been predominantly used in the study of South Korean cinema. According to this, South Korean cinema can be situated as the site of local translation in terms of a national cinema’s relationship with Hollywood (see, for example, Klein, 2004; Ok, 2009; Berry, 2003; Kim Byung-chul, 2005). Borrowing imported Hollywood genre conventions and engaging with local issues at the same time may expand the scope of national cinema studies by locating a national cinema as translation, citation, and hybridity. Such a process of local, cultural translation does allow for a wide range of re-signification. Here, a particular national cinema becomes what it is by what it is not – South Korean cinema can be defined in terms of the fact that it is not Chinese cinema or Japanese cinema, and so on, in an endless game of re-signification.

For example, Christina Klein (2004) points out that the ‘South Korean film industry shows it can hold its own by combining local themes with Hollywood style’. By focusing on how contemporary South Korean cinema, especially Korean blockbusters, utilise the Hollywood blockbuster format to tell a distinctly Korean narrative, she argues that ‘South Korean blockbusters of the past six years offer a profound exploration of the country’s history, often voicing sentiments that have been suppressed for decades’ (ibid.). She continues to say that ‘[t]hey express what it has felt like to be South Korean over the past fifty years. A number of them, including *Shiri*, *Joint Security Area*, *Silmido*, and *TaeGukgi*, explore the tragedy of the Korean War and the subsequent ideological fanaticism, exploitation, and desire

for reconciliation with the North' (ibid.). In a similar vein, Kathleen McHugh (2005) highlights the centrality of idea that the construction of South Korean national cinema proceeds from its comparison with what it is not. 'We understand our national identity and who we are as a nation through historically contingent and variable interactions,' writes McHugh, 'wherein we encounter, identify, and name what we are not' (McHugh, 2005: 17). She goes on to 'consider South Korean cinema as an instance of a national cinema from this perspective: as a complex and contradictory entity usually only identified and affirmed in encounters with and negations of that which it is not' (ibid.). South Korean cinema's intersection with other national cinemas is not confined to the case of Hollywood. Lee Hyung-sook (2006) emphasises how Hong Kong cinema had a great impact on the transformation of recent Korean cinema: 'When Korean film culture was confronting such a keen crisis opposing the global cultural hegemony of Hollywood', she argues, 'Hong Kong cinema came in as a significant and alternative cultural force that could counterbalance Hollywood's influence in the Korean market' (Lee, 2006: 108).

However, this formulation does not seem to touch on the dimension of radical alterity, precisely because a multiplicity of temporalities and histories needs to be articulated with the non-historical. This will be discussed in more detail in chapter 3 with special respect to Judith Butler's notion of 'spectral' universality and Ernesto Laclau's notion of universality as 'empty signifier'. Insofar as the notion of difference is mobilised to recognise the simple combination of established differences, it struggles to provide a radical difference in terms of filmic ontology. It is also important to note that a new logic and structure of contemporary 'communicative capitalism' – 'capitalism that travels through communicative networks and catches on like a virus so that nothing can remain outside of it and indeed even communication about its problems winds up extending and deepening its hold' (Passavant,

2004: 8) – is immune to this kind of difference and turns this into its own intrinsic component. This is not to say that this thesis abandons the significance of this kind of a given difference altogether. Indeed, the Hollywood blockbuster format can be re-signified in a differing historical context. However, it is much more important to note that each of a series of displacements and fragments is barred by a traumatic blank from within. The name for this kind of a traumatic moment is precisely the Real in the Lacanian/Žižekian line. Again, what matters is the non-coincidence between empirical description of history and the concept of history.

Insofar as ‘concrete universality’ refers to the inherent point of failure of a certain filmic text, where the Real (void) that is concealed by ideology manifests itself, it does not refer to the largest categories, such as Hollywood, world cinema, transnational cinema, and global cinema. Instead, this study sticks to the notion of national cinema rather than insisting on the increasing transnational dimension of screen culture even in the age of globalisation. In my view, it is not sufficient to claim that a national cinema is influenced by the transnational flow of globalisation. Of course, a particular national cinema is shaped within the processes of globalisation. For example, each national cinema does not accommodate the same relationship with Hollywood, but different things in different cultures. However, this type of differential system belongs to the realm of the taken-for-granted. It overlooks the fact that cinema has its own heterogeneous autonomy, which is irreducible to the material context. When one attempts to understand a national cinema’s radical difference, it is, thus, vital to consider its radical difference not in terms of externality but in terms of its non-coincidence with itself. The crucial concern is to explore how a certain moment in a filmic text encounters its non-identity which is irreducible to the previous ontological register – even though it temporarily thwarts diegetic reality and soon returns to reality. The analysis of Zhang Lu’s

films in the chapter 7 will clarify my point.

The special emphasis on radical difference will be also found in regard to ethics. I will examine the Korean blockbuster in terms of ethical issues in chapter 6. It is, thus, necessary very briefly to explain the role of key thinkers such Alain Badiou and Emmanuel Levinas concerning ethics. Levinas's ideas on ethics have been one of key references in film studies and cultural studies. He conceives of ethics as a 'calling into question of my spontaneity by the presence of the Other' (Levinas, 1969: 43). The basic matrix for the Levinasian account is an encounter with Otherness which threatens to undo our self-confidence. He highlights 'the strangeness of the Other, his irreducibility to the I, to my thoughts and possessions' (ibid.). However, many scholars seem to misunderstand Levinas's ideas, bowdlerising Levinas's own ethical thoughts. This is manifested in the prevailing ethical view of 'the respect for the Other'. One, thus, needs to argue against the dominant ethical view to "'tam[e]...Levinas's exorbitance", in other words, to bowdlerize and transform Levinas's complex and sometimes unpalatable insights into a "bland and empty injunction to respect otherness"' (Davis, 2006: 98, 97, cited in Downing and Saxton, 2010: 4). Today's prevailing ethical ideology is problematic, because it is that 'of [prohibiting] any idea, any coherent project of thought, settling instead for overlaying unthought and anonymous situations with mere humanitarian prattle' (Badiou, 2001: 32-3).

Badiou argues that 'the respect for the Other' is not a true point of Levinas. Instead, Levinas's problem lies in another aspect. For Badiou, Levinas seems to be inclined to what he calls 'ethics in general' (ibid.: 16). The Levinasian notion of ethics, Badiou writes, 'requires that the Other be in some sense *carried by a principle of alterity* which transcends mere finite experience. Levinas calls this principle the "Altogether-Other", and it is quite obviously the ethical name for God. There can be no Other if he is not the immediate phenomenon of the

Altogether-Other' (ibid.: 22, emphasis original). In sum, the problem intrinsic to Levinas's account is that 'there can be no ethical *situation* as such', writes Peter Hallward, 'since ethics bears witness to a properly meta- or preontological responsibility (roughly, the responsibility of a creature to its transcendent creator, a creator altogether beyond the ontological field of creation)' (Hallward, 2001: xxii, emphasis original). In contrast to Levinas, Badiou argues that we do not have 'ethics in general', but 'only – eventually – ethics of processes by which we treat the possibilities of a situation' (Badiou, 2001: 16). Instead of positing a transcendent matrix for ethics, Badiou's account posits that the truly ethical act should point towards how one can confront the event (void) which takes place out of a concrete situation and, in so doing, how one can give fidelity to that event. In other words, the subject only emerges by means of an event, and exists by continuing to give fidelity to this event. For Badiou, the ethical question proper is the subject's pursuit of this event which necessarily eludes everyday ordinary life. This point will be developed in a more detailed way in chapter 6, especially by examining how a female protagonist in *Shiri* exemplifies Badiou's account of an ethical act.

Methodological Questions

The thesis will initially separate the transformation of contemporary South Korean cinema into industrial and discursive forms. The changes in the local film industry are historically influenced in parallel not only with South Korea's socio-political formation but also with the contemporary capitalist mode of production. I situate the South Korean film industry in a broader range of communicative capitalism, because contemporary global capitalism is different from the old capitalist logic, positing communication as a significant factor in

restructuring itself. However, it is important to note here that, even though cinema is influenced by industrial forces, it cannot be reduced only to an industrial aspect. Even though filmic organisation in certain filmic texts emerges out of its historical context, it is not entirely determined by industrial, economic, and political forces. By paying great attention to the external condition of film production and reception, ‘we lose the possibility of being able to see the way in which an aesthetic object like a film might not fit within the context where it appears’ (McGowan, 2007a:ix). Instead, films can destabilise and subvert their context ‘through their individual mode of aestheticising it’ (ibid.). There are significant grounds for this. Cinema is not characterised by the portrayal of the material world with verisimilitude, but by its delineation of potentialities we cannot detect in our normal experience of reality. In other words, cinema is characterised by its capacity to register potentialities working on the transcendental level, thus presenting a cinematic distortion that escapes the social reality.

However, the thesis is not aiming to deny the importance of historical context. No film remains completely independent of context. But the context is not formed as external to the filmic text, but as immanent to the text. Each filmic text registers its context through its aesthetic refinement. One of the central themes in this thesis is that ‘though one cannot ignore the context of a film’s production and reception, one must find them inhering within the film itself, not outside of it’ (McGowan, 2007a: x). Thus, the chapter on methodology notes a shift from description of particular historical fact to interpretive textual analysis.

Central to this shift is to look at filmic images and objects’ inherent conditions of emergence apart from their social context. For my purpose, instead of categorising films by genre, historical period, or some other measure, this study attempts to categorise films in terms of how they stage the Real (void). It can be seen as exploring cinematic tensions in a given filmic text, by examining how a disruptive piece of diegetic reality distorts the banal

running of diegetic reality, thus staging a radically different register of filmic images. This focus is an effort to reveal the potentiality of cinema through the dialectical articulation of the formal aspect of a film and its narrative dimension. Although the special focus is on the dialectics between form and content, that is, the non-historical within a historical situation, it does not mean that my methodology has less to do with the issue of history. On the contrary, it can be best understood as ‘the dialectics between text and history in a manner that both respects the formal aspects of a text and the complexities of specific historical constellations’ (Willemen, 2002: 177). As mentioned above, if history manifests itself as a specific form of contradiction within a given text, what is crucial here is not the question of how a certain filmic text represents the concrete historical context, but of how a given text inscribes the tensions at work in the complex historical conjuncture, by enabling viewers to apprehend the core of the current historical condition. There is a direct jump from the tension in a given filmic text to tension in a given social reality, not vice versa. It is only through the staging of tensions inherent to textual mechanism that we can glimpse the conflictual tension of a historical situation.

In addition, I should describe how I situate myself between South Korean and Western scholarship. In so doing, I will explore further the contributions that the thesis can make to each. My basic position can be understood through the pole of a neither/nor which I borrow from Paul Willemen’s reformulation of a new mode of national cinema. For Willemen, innovative non-Western film-makers ‘exemplify a way of inhabiting one’s culture which is neither myopically nationalist nor evasively cosmopolitan’ (Willemen, 1994: 177). Willemen’s focus on the moment of a neither/nor is not confined to non-Western film-making practices. It can be related to the discursive mode of national cinema studies as well. As Willemen criticises both nationalism and cosmopolitanism, so I rely on the pole of a

neither/nor proposition to present the ground for innovating both South Korean and Western film scholarship. This attempt cannot be understood as synthesizing the weaknesses of both South Korean and Western scholarship. I do not locate my position as ‘neutral’ to bridge the gap between the two. Rather, my position may be seen as an empty space of negativity formulated in the proposition of a neither/nor to change the terms and conditions on which the scholarship on Korean cinema has been created.

First, as a native Korean, I can be said to know the Korean language and culture better than Western scholars. For the same reason, I can collect historical material on Korean cinema much more easily than Western scholars. By being familiar with Korean history and, furthermore, Korean film history, I can more readily study the historical complexities from which contemporary Korean cinema has emerged. However, I do not claim to be able to verify the authenticity of Korean cinema simply because I am a native cultural expert. What I especially aim to avoid is a particularist claim on Korean cinema: the notion that only Koreans can truly understand the dynamics of contemporary Korean cinema and Korean film history. Such particularism based on the politics of identity cannot tackle a homogenising abstract universalism. Rather, it empowers universalism par excellence. This is why I try to elide the historical analysis of contemporary Korean cinema in which Korean film history is arranged chronologically. As repeatedly mentioned earlier, this does not mean that we should ignore the historical dimension of Korean cinema. To properly understand the condition of possibility for the emergence of a new national cinema, it is necessary to examine how contemporary Korean cinema emerges within the force field of concrete social-historical situations. Nonetheless, one should bear in mind that the sole emphasis on history needs to be mediated through the intervention of critical theory.

Mitsuhiro Yoshimoto (2006) presents a similar view by conveying deep scepticism about

the fashion for depoliticising in the field of Japanese film scholarship, in which much attention is being paid to mere historical description rather than to theory: ‘the attention to the cultural and political specificity of films was replaced by the historical study of film as texts. That is to say, the political radicalism of vanguard theory (Eurocentric universalism) gave way to the academic formalism of historicism (multicultural particularism). In this process, it was the culturalist discourse that gained currency in the field of Japanese cinema studies’ (Yoshimoto, 2006: 256). Yoshimoto’s critical diagnosis is not confined to Japanese film studies. It can also be applied to the analysis of contemporary South Korean cinema. However, Yoshimoto’s insight does not mean that we need to return to early Lacanian film theory, the so-called ‘Screen Theory’. In brief, by overlooking the role of the Real in early Lacanian film theory, and thus narrowly focusing on the relationship between the Imaginary and the Symbolic exemplified in the case of mirror stage, and finally applying an established set of norms on particular filmic texts, ‘Screen Theory’ has failed to reveal cinema’s radical potentiality to disrupt the functioning of ideology (McGowan and Kunkle, 2004: xiii-xix).

Nonetheless, it is even less helpful to discard all the possibilities of critical theory. The moment that we focus on mere historical description, we miss the force of theory as the critique of ideology. As Todd McGowan rightly puts it, the problem of early Lacanian theory does not reside in ‘its overreliance on purely psychoanalytic concepts’, but in ‘its deviation from these concepts’ (McGowan, 2007a: 5). One must therefore consider, he writes, that ‘the proper response to the demise of Lacanian film theory is not a defense of its previous claims but rather a return to Lacanian concepts themselves in the analysis of the cinema’ (ibid.). The focus, thus, should not be placed on totally ignoring the theoretical dimension, but on how one can posit the level of true theory, particularly against the increasing historicist approach predominant in the field of film studies. This problem becomes more complicated when we

deal with the question of national cinema studies. As Yoshimoto puts it, there must have been a dichotomy of Western theory/non-Western history in the academic field of national cinema studies (Yoshimoto, 1991: 248). To break the dichotomy, what this thesis should keep in mind is not a full withdrawal from theory, but ‘the precise location of theory in critical discourse on/of/by the non-West’ (ibid.: 250). This is why the thesis seeks to suggest a universalising claim rather than a particularist claim in order to analyse contemporary South Korean films: the increased emphasis on the particular – for instance, historicist research based on the mere description of cultural traffic – can serve to reproduce and even strengthen the discursive formation of the binary, Western theory/ non-Western history.

I have examined how I locate my position in terms of Korean film scholarship. I now need to explain my position in the field of Western national cinema scholarship. The study of Korean cinema has become an increasingly fashionable pursuit for Western film scholarship. There has been a growing number of English publications on Korean cinema which give rise to a new insight into the transformation of contemporary Korean film. In my view, this interest is likely to increase to a great extent, because Korean cinema is one of few sites that can successfully compete against Hollywood. In this respect, Korean cinema seems to present an alternative model for a future national cinema. However, to study Korean cinema in such a way may function as a fantasy fulfilling Western scholars’ supposedly lost dream. Yoshimoto suggests the danger and pitfall of the way in which Western scholars have discovered Japan in the field of film studies. ‘By the recent Japanese film scholarship, the Japanese cinema is construed as a new tribal art. At the same time, the emphasis on identity instead of affinity also makes it the avant-garde in the guise of a tribal art’ (Yoshimoto, 1991: 255-6).

Yoshimoto goes on to say that ‘the double identity of the cinema – tribal *and* avant-garde – requires [Western film scholars] to choose the cinema of a nation that is perceived to be

sufficiently different from, but have [sic] some common elements with, Western capitalist nations' (ibid., 256, emphasis original). In this regard, 'Japan' might function as a means of '[fulfilling] their utopian dream'(ibid.). Yoshimoto's insight can be extended throughout Korean film scholarship. Western scholars' enthusiastic reception for the contemporary Korean film scene may be seen as a fantasy in the way that it keeps its distance from the object of study by locating its position as that of the mere onlooker. This seemingly polite gesture produces an ideological effect as well, because the true power edifice is effective not from the moment when it oppresses the Other, but from the moment when it 'posits the difference of the Other against the identity of the self' (ibid.: 257). How can one move beyond the international division of labour in national cinema scholarship? One should not present oneself as 'a mere hollow vessel through which the voice of the oppressed, the voice of other people, resonates' (Willemen, 1994: 213). Instead, one should 'relate to his or her own situation as an [O]ther, refusing simple identifications with pre-given, essentialised socio-cultural categories' (ibid., 216-7). Willemen's point explains why I perform a critique of ideology throughout the thesis. If I focus on the limitations of contemporary South Korean cinema, in spite of the fact that recent Korean cinema has gained more recognition both within the region and around the world, it is because I need to situate myself as an Other, as opposed to acting as a mouthpiece for Korean cinema.

One might suggest that although contemporary Korean cinema has gained more recognition both home and abroad, it has not still been fully globalised. As a consequence, it may be necessary to introduce as much information on Korean cinema as possible and to let unheard voices on the contemporary Korean film scene be heard abroad. However, this does not mean that we should abandon viewing contemporary Korean film through the lens of critical theory, especially in terms of situating the critic's position as an 'Other'. The focus on

critical theory does not mean that I will merely apply Western theory in the case of Korean cinema. Moreover, it is not the case that Western theory should be adapted so that it can reconcile Korean film practices and the particular contexts surrounding them. In contrast, my use of theory is deeply dependent on context. So, the primary methodological question is not to apply a universal claim to an individual Korean film text. This might be called theory in general. Instead, the theory I keep in mind here is a conjunctive theory, because the theory simply refers to a stopping point in which historical context finds itself vulnerable.

Thesis Structure

This thesis is split into two major parts. Part One (chapters 2-4) primarily deals with the literature review on contemporary South Korean cinema, the theoretical framework, and the methodology. This will function as the groundwork for Part Two. Part Two (chapters 5-7) comprises the core chapters, analysing some selected films. I will analyse different types of Korean films, and classify how filmic objects are made, ordered, and redefined according to my critical perspective: the screening of the national past (chapter 5); the ethical question of the Korean blockbuster (chapter 6); and an examination of which cinematic strategies are used in the zone of indistinction between the lawful and the unlawful (chapter 7).

Part One: Literature Review, Theoretical Framework, and Methodology

Chapter 2 reviews the main debates on contemporary South Korean cinema. It splits the ongoing changes of the contemporary South Korean film scene into industrial and film textual aspects. Rather than seeing the changes in the local film industry as remarkable

growth, and arguing that these dramatic changes in the local film industry are the foundation of creative innovation of contemporary South Korean film texts, I will propose that the recent South Korean film industry is increasingly subsumed as an integral part of the global film system, and that a structure of domination and subordination has not necessarily evaporated. Hence, it would be more correct to say that unevenness in the local industry has in many aspects become even more entrenched, but in different forms. Keeping pace with changes in the local industry, South Korean film policy has also made a great shift from the previous 'control policy' to a 'promotion policy'. But this shift also contributes to producing norms in ways that have not only embodied the salient features of the contemporary capitalist form, such as the establishment of funding corporations, but have also absorbed non-governmental film-makers and non-commercial films into the domain of the organisation itself.

This chapter will also critically review the literature regarding terms such as Korean New Wave, Korean blockbuster, and Asia Extreme. In terms of Korean New Wave and Korean blockbuster, many authors contend that those films have tended to historicise the national past in their efforts to create a different filmic development that decentres Hollywood. However, as discussed briefly above, this study argues that the interpretive framework mobilised for assessing the newness of Korean cinema is not political enough. On the contrary, a truly provocative and radical engagement involves distinguishing the concept of history from the empirical knowledge of history, where the focus on the empirical knowledge of history falls into historicism, and the insistence on endless instances of differences rules out the question of the Real resisting any system of historicisation.

Different from both Korean New Wave and the Korean blockbuster, recent South Korean cinema has been crammed with visceral portrayals of the corporeal effects of injury, suffering and death. However, in its effort to render every aspect of human physicality seen,

visual brutality does not provide a new image – the Real qua ‘concrete universality’. Instead, it can be seen as the spectacularisation of the Real in its aim to force the viewer to experience the assumed effect of the Real. Contemporary South Korean cinema’s increasing preoccupation with graphic violence is not pertinent to the notion of radical difference in terms of filmic ontology, but only indicates that the global visual economy has integrated previously transgressive filmic images, and made them into its central elements.

By exploring which evaluative criteria are most appropriate for conceptualising the novelty of contemporary South Korean cinema, this study will suggest that perhaps the most striking vocabulary can be found in Willemsen (2002)’s definition of ‘blockage’: namely, the intense tensions within South Korean cinema in which both the way back to the pre-capitalist and the way forward to modernity are barred. However, this chapter insists on adding a twist to Willemsen’s notion of ‘blockage’ by arguing that the insecurity of modernity does not lie in the external poles such as the modern/the premodern, but in the gap within modernity itself.

Chapter 3 provides a theoretical framework for the whole thesis. It begins with a review of Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau, and Slavoj Žižek’s main debates in *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left* (2000). This chapter goes through the debate slowly and carefully, to demonstrate what justifies Žižek’s turn to ‘concrete universality’, to what extent Žižek’s understanding of ‘concrete universality’ is different from Butler’s and Laclau’s and why this study decides to side with Žižek’s conception, and finally how situating Korean cinema between the universal and the particular will be related to the study of contemporary South Korean cinema. In brief, both Butler and Laclau claim that the universal with special reference to the particular happens within the present historical situation, for instance in Butler’s focus on ‘spectral universality’ (cultural translation) against ‘official universality’ and Laclau’s focus on ‘equivalential chain’ against ‘logic of difference’.

However, it is only Žižek's engaging account that subverts the situation itself, by distinguishing between the historical situation and the non-historical moment within the situation.

Although fully admitting that Butler's insistence on the ongoing project of cultural translation ('spectral universality') against 'official universality' is important, this study argues that Butler's theory of the universal is not fully political, insofar as an identity which is different from another does not meet its radical non-identity from within. Consequently, Butler's theory might fall into empiricism. Thus, many views related to Butler's theory in exploring South Korean cinema's location between the universal and the particular struggle to present a critical criterion by which South Korean cinema can be said to gain novelty. Different from Butler, Laclau highlights the centrality of the limit-case of the particular political claim, one that serves as a condition to generate future possible political action. However, I will demonstrate that this type of limit-case cannot provide ways of thinking of radical difference, because power maintains itself by depending on its disavowed limit-case. On the contrary, I will argue that the role of the limit-case should be articulated with radical non-sense which fully forestalls a multiplicity of the signifying chains. To this end, I will give concrete examples of why Laclau's theory is not sufficient for explaining the newness of contemporary South Korean films.

Chapter 4 deals with the methodological approach. My methodology is centred around interpretive textual analysis, both examining the internal rule of contemporary South Korean cinema which allows for repeatability, and tracing the gap in particular films. It takes seriously two linked issues: first, the cinematic can be read as addressing the Real (void) as the purely cinematic event, with its own inherent logic dislocated from social reality; second, it is through the staging of the Real as an inherent tension in certain filmic texts that history

manifests itself, because history is presented as a certain form of contradiction. Furthermore, I will explain the selection of my corpus and the method of analysing the films in the corpus. The basic issue concerns the relationship to the Real that the films can approach. The films under discussion are chosen because they are all related to the Real in their various ways. However, it does not mean that they are an explicit manifestation of the Real, since the Real is revealed in such a way that story is delivered rather than story itself. The proper dialectical method privileges the analysis of form rather than insisting on manifest meaning, unsettling the positivity of its object. In this respect, most of the films analysed throughout this thesis seek to directly insert the Real into the diegetic reality without any of its obtrusive point which derails the development of filmic narrative. This constitutes how the power of ideology works, because ideology domesticates the point of disruption at which the Real manifests itself. So, why do I pay so much attention to the films which initially seem to approach the Real but in the end fail to address it? My first aim is to delineate a critique of ideology, thus examining the relevance of contemporary Korean cinema for the functioning of ideology. In so doing, I aim to redefine the criteria by which Korean films are said to gain novelty. The second is to demonstrate that it is only through the inherent incompleteness of ideology that the Real becomes more pronounced. To study how contemporary Korean films serve a primarily ideological function might, thus, inspire all other films in which the Real is made much clearer. This will allow us to develop a new way of conceptualising the notion of radical difference.

Part Two: The Analysis of the Filmic Texts

The central goal in chapter 5, *Screening the Past: Trauma, Memory, and the Question of*

Mediation, is to examine how contemporary South Korean cinema has dealt with the past – whether it just acknowledges the possibility of representing the past as it really was or whether it interrogates the impossibility of representation itself, thus exploring the invention of cinematic treatments of the past. This chapter focuses on the limitations of the social realist strategy through an analysis of *Black Republic* and *A Single Spark*, contending that these films domesticate the social antagonism with their basic direction geared towards the neutral look of the male intellectual. The chapter will also argue that *Peppermint Candy* is typical of historicism, by externalising the contradiction inherent in the contemporary South Korean social fabric into a binary opposition between suppressive state violence and an individual subject's private life. What is missing in this process is a third party, one that throws diegetic reality off balance.

This chapter will go on to argue that although *Memories of Murder* suspends the sequential direction of South Korean modernisation, in its efforts to foreground the non-historical inherent within the historical context, it does not offer a way beyond historicism. It initially offers a nonsensical point of the Real which obstructs the meaningfulness of social reality, but ends up with domesticating this point by rendering it meaningful. The final section of this chapter will analyse *Beyond the Years*. I will contend that *Beyond the Years* stages a radical way of historicising the national past, because the couple in the film is always mediated by a third element, and this third element can move us to encounter the non-historical par excellence.

Chapter 6, *The Invention of the Other and the Issue of Ethics in the Korean Blockbuster*, turns to how the Korean blockbuster has foregrounded the Other on the basis of the nation-state model of the geopolitical boundary: the North Korean soldiers in *Shiri* and *Joint Security Area*; the unwritten underside of nation-state in *Silmido* and *TaeGukGi*; and the

monster as the consequence of American imperialism in *The Host*. The representation of the Other necessarily leads us to raise the issue of ethics. The term ethics here refers precisely to ‘ethics of the Real’ (Zupančič, 2000) in which the subject redefines the mode of being in this encounter with the traumatic Real, thus becoming a true subject. Situating the question of ethics as a crucial analytical tool, this chapter discusses how each film works to respond to an encounter with the traumatic Other. One of the prevailing tropes of the Korean blockbuster is how the protagonist’s suicide keeps utopian impulses permanently parenthesised through the logic of sacrifice: *Joint Security Area*, *Silmido* and *TaeGukGi* demonstrate this. In contrast, *Shiri* opens up the inherent contradictions of all such ideas, by revealing that the female protagonist maintains fidelity towards her own ‘acts’ without being drawn into the logic of sacrifice. However, this analysis still continues to work largely within the narrative dimension of the film. To support this point, this chapter turns to *The Host* which also fails to show a narrative solution by revealing the rescue of the innocent victim to be in vain at the end of the film. However, by suggesting that the failure of this rescue – Hyun-seo’s death – had always already happened from the outset, because its focus was placed on cinematic devices rather than the narrative dimension, this chapter will demonstrate that *The Host* allows the viewer to encounter an initial failure of contemporary South Korean social reality in its purest form.

Chapter 7, *Suspension, the Spectral, and the Question of the Void in Marginal Space*, analyses Park Chan-wook’s Vengeance Trilogy, with particular focus on *Oldboy*, Kim Ki-duk’s films (*Bad Guy*, *Breath*, and *3-Iron*), and Zhang Lu’s films (*Grain in Ear* and *Hyazgar*). I have selected these films because they describe marginal lives on the shadowy underside of public law. However, each film’s portrayal of characters in the marginal space varies according to its cinematic strategies: suspension (Park), the spectral (Kim), and the void (Zhang). Instead of exploring how these films narrativise the theme of marginal lives in the

‘cramped’ space, this chapter seeks to consider whether each film’s central cinematic strategies correspond to the larger framework of ‘concrete universality’, namely the void.

The Vengeance Trilogy, especially *Oldboy*, directly portrays the space of indistinction between the lawful and the unlawful; the characters in this film work outside the rule of law. The role of public authority is shown as only an ancillary function. Where many scholars highlight the centrality of the ‘unknowable’, elusive, and suspensive point in the films, this thesis would like to propose that posing an outside from the law is not fully political, because law itself always depends on its exceptional, unlawful situation. Therefore, a true attack on the law is not produced by posing an outside from the law, but by a too literal over-identification with the law, thus revealing the radical discontinuity of the law from within. Park’s use of violence in *Oldboy* clarifies my argument. On the surface, this film seems to be filled with varieties of visual violence. However, by posing the suspension between action and reaction, it does not fully render everything visible. Although *Oldboy* does not display explicit visual violence, Park does not seem to be political enough, for the suspension at work here still remains in an action/reaction cycle.

Kim’s films are well known for visual cruelty. It would miss the point, however, to read Kim’s films as merely sensational provocation based on a representation of brutal violence. Instead, this thesis aims to construe the films from a different angle, by considering how Kim stages the spectral apparition. The main purpose is, thus, to examine the extent to which the ghostly being gains an ontological significance. In other words, do the films stage the spectral figure in terms of the purely formal aspect or do they substantialise the spectral apparition into a positive content, thus empowering the character? By situating what Žižek calls an ‘interface’ effect as a key tool for understanding the trope of haunting, where a shot includes its own reverse-shot within itself, and the excluded reverse-shot returns in the guise of a

spectral *objet petit a*, I attempt to trace how Kim's films give body to the spectral, by reducing it in its pure form to positive content. The films' orientation towards an empirical view on the spectral seems to be problematic, for it obfuscates cinematic distortion, thus perpetuating identity politics based on a particular identity.

Finally, this chapter examines the way in which Zhang Lu's films present a way of radically undermining spectacle in the marginal space. The characters in Zhang's films are marked by gestures exposing a disjointed human movement. Zhang takes the character's gesture, based on a disconnected sensory-motor system, further revealing the void which forestalls symbolisation. The closing sequences in both *Grain in Ear* and *Hyazgar* are exemplary in clarifying my argument. In both sequences, Zhang portrays marginal lives as a way of addressing a void itself fully dislocated from its bodily support in reality. By no longer integrating the viewer into the character's inner emotions, both closing sequences stage the rupture of the void from its anchoring reference to social reality, thus throwing diegetic reality into disarray. If Zhang's films can be understood as staging the question of the border, it is not because he narrativises issues such as emigration and refugees, but because he enables us to understand the tension in a given community only through the film text's aesthetic development.

Overall, I conclude in chapter 8 that what is novel in contemporary South Korean cinema is derived from the staging of the inherent tension between historical reality and the void within that historical context, and that this is the point at which contemporary South Korean cinema gains the concept of truly radical alterity in the field of national cinema. To this end, I go on to explore the further questions and possibilities that the dissertation opens up.

Note on Romanisation

All Korean names throughout this thesis do not follow the McCune-Reischauer system. Instead, they are romanised according to the Revised Romanisation of Korean issued by South Korea's Ministry of Culture and Tourism in 2000. However, where the preferred form of a name already has been widely recognised in English (e.g. *Pusan* not *Busan*), these particular conventions have been preserved. Finally, Korean names are written in Korean style, i.e. surname first, given name last, except in cases where authors have already written their names in Western form (i.e. surname last).

Chapter 2

The Transition in Contemporary South Korean Film Culture

The aim of this chapter is to critically review the main debates around contemporary South Korean cinema to demonstrate why it is useful to situate it in the framework of ‘concrete universality’. To achieve this goal, this chapter begins by reviewing the main debates on the South Korean film industry, especially in terms of the shifts in the distribution/investment structure. Beginning with a brief description of the changes in the film industry, this section will explore what really propels the shifts. By looking at the changes in the local film industry in terms of formal and real subsumption, it argues that the changes in the local industry need to be understood in terms of capital and labour relations in the current capitalist system.

The second section aims to explore whether there has been newness in the contemporary South Korean film scene and the terms under which this newness has emerged, if indeed it has, by examining some of the relevant critical discourses. To achieve this aim, it seeks to draw out key strands of contemporary South Korean film culture together with terms including the Korean New Wave, the Korean blockbuster, and Asia Extreme. The relevant critical discourses under these categories are examined, because they all are, to some extent, related to the relationship between historical context and the non-contextualisable (the Real): while the Korean New Wave and the Korean blockbuster refer to cinematic constructions of history, Asia Extreme concerns contemporary Korean film’s increasing attempt to move beyond the issue of history. Several relevant questions arise here. Which criteria have been used as tools for understanding the complex relationship between historical context and the non-contextualisable (the Real); and which have been used in furthermore developing the

study of contemporary South Korean cinema? If they fail to address this effective interpretive framework, why not? Towards the end of this section, I will examine the political implication of cultural exchange based on cross-cultural traffic in the era of transnational capitalism, arguing that a simple focus on cross-cultural exchange struggles to generate a radical discursive mode in the South Korean film scholarship.

The third section argues that Paul Willemen (2002)'s definition of 'blockage' is the most suitable term for understanding the real dynamics of South Korean cinema. However, it will also demonstrate how my conception of 'blockage' is different from Willemen's. In so doing, it will finally contend that the tension in question in South Korean cinema is not a matter of opposition between the modern and the premodern, but of the underlying One and its excess. This will clarify the concept of 'concrete universality' and why this concept is used for mapping out the location of contemporary South Korean cinema between the universal and the particular.

2.1 The 'Real Subsumption' Phase in the Global Visual Economy

In 1999 *Shiri* broke the box-office record which had been set by *Seopyonje* in 1993, and propelled the transformation of the South Korean cinema. Shortly after the success of *Shiri*, record-breaking success at the box-office continued with *The Host*, which saw the highest sales ever with 13 million tickets sold in 2006 (Choi, 2010: 1). By the end of 2006, the local market share of Korean films had risen to 61.2 percent (Korean Cinema, 2006: 495 cited in Yecies and Shim, 2007) Thus, the South Korean film industry became one of the few film markets where the domestic market share exceeded 50 percent, although the domestic market share began to slump in 2007-2008 (Paquet, 2009: 111).

It is undeniable that there have been some changes recently in the South Korean film industry, which have been accompanied by rationalisation of production processes, the sharply increased size of a film's budget, heavy reliance on advertisements, the introduction of a wide release method, and the increase in multiplex theatres. This section critically reviews how some commentators have discussed the change in the distribution and finance structure, which is central to understanding the transition of the South Korean film industry, while at the same time revealing the limitations of the literature and how my theoretical position differs from this research. Before moving to this question, it is necessary to present a brief portrait of the changes in the local industry.

A great many authors have pointed out that the remarkable change in the industry was driven by pressure from the United States, in the form of the South Korea-US film agreement of the mid- to late 1980s (Cho, 2006: 167-173; Paquet, 2005: 35-6; Park, 2000: 51-68; Park, 2007: 22-30; Kim, Mee hyun 2007: 414-5; Shim, 2006: 31). According to this logic, as the government approved a law opening up the film market to the US, the local film industry had to respond to the forces of globalisation and adjust itself to the demands of Hollywood. Subsequently, there was a sixth revision of the Motion Picture Law of 1986 under which Hollywood studios could establish branches in South Korea. After UIP, one of the major Hollywood studios, established its own distribution office in 1988, other Hollywood majors followed its lead, including Fox Korea (1988), Warner Brothers Korea (1989), Columbia Tristar Korea (1990), and Walt Disney (1993) (Cho, 2006: 174). However, these major Hollywood studios confronted some difficulties at the start, mainly because the barrier of the old system – the so-called *Chungmuro*¹ system – remained stronger than expected. It was in

¹According to the glossary in *New Korean Cinema*, *Chungmuro* refers to 'a street in Seoul, which formed the Korean film industry's traditional hub, and a byword for the industry' (Shin,

1992 or so that UIP started its own full-fledged nationwide direct distribution (Cho, *ibid.*: 175). Although there were some difficulties at the beginning, these Hollywood majors successfully settled down in South Korea, having a huge influence on the local industry.

The rapid transition in the investment and distribution structure of the film industry set the stage not only for Hollywood majors but also for local conglomerates (known as *chaebol*), such as Samsung to enter the film industry in the 1990s (Paquet, 2005: 36-40; Choi, 2010: 16-25). The entry of the *chaebols* into the film industry was triggered by the rapid increase in the video market beginning in the late 1980s. To cope with the increased hardware sales of VCRs, South Korea's leading conglomerates were determined to enter the film industry and obtain video copyrights to accompany their increased hardware sales into the video market. Just as Sony took over Columbia Pictures in 1989 to exploit synergy across the boundaries of software and hardware, to some extent they entered the film industry with similar business strategies. For instance, in 1992 Samsung entered the film industry by purchasing the video copyright to *The Marriage Story*, a film which had been produced by the independent film production house, *Shincine*, and which was regarded as the first 'planned film' (Paquet, 2005: 41-2) in the history of the South Korean film industry. A 'planned film' can be defined as a film which 'involve[s] pre-selecting a target audience and marketing strategy, and using a long period of script development to improve chances of success at the box-office' (*ibid.*: 41). *The Marriage Story* broke box-office records in 1992, and encouraged the other *chaebols* to take part in the film industry. Although the nature of the *chaebols*' investment was initially limited to purchasing the video copyrights to particular films, their investment method later extended into full engagement with the industry as a whole. The passage from small-scale to full-scale investment by the *chaebols* presents a very important clue to understanding the

2005a: 212).

changes in the industry. As Cho Joon-hyeong (2006) rightly points out, this passage implies that as the major South Korean corporations ‘have the ability to distribute the film on its own and secure profits through the rights it owns’, ‘these corporations assumed the role of investment & distribution companies like major film studios in Hollywood’ (Cho, 2006: 201). The major corporations’ entry into the film industry in the 1990s can be read as the beginning of a nationwide distribution pattern. However, it was not long before the first generation of *chaebols* retreated from the film industry in the late 1990s. As a result of the Asian financial crisis of 1997, these conglomerates had to focus on downsizing their business activity, such that they could no longer afford to maintain full-scale investment.

After the first generation of *chaebols* retreated from the industry, some mid-sized local majors including CJ Entertainment/Cinema Service and Showbox started to bridge the gap (Paquet, 2005: 43). What distinguishes these local majors from the former *chaebols* is that their investment/distribution activities are basically reliant on their own multiplex theatre chains: CJ Entertainment-CGV and Showbox-Megabox. The increasing number of multiplex theatres led to a rapid increase in attendance, whether for domestic or foreign films. At the heart of the significantly increased domestic market share – ten million admissions – ranging from 2003 to 2006 lay the vertical integration provided by the local majors. Together with the emergence of the local majors, the South Korean film industry experienced an influx of venture capital from the late 1990s. This venture capital was concentrated on the investment process only, rather than on any film-related business activities (ibid.: 43). Venture capital investment started to decrease to a great extent in 2002-2003, since there were a wide range of box-office failures in 2002 (Choi, 2010: 19). After the bubble burst around the latter half of 2006, the ‘venture capital investors, after suffering heavy losses, reduced their investment in Korean films or pulled out entirely’ (Paquet, 2010: 111).

Additionally, the range and scope of the local majors' investment has also grown beyond the national boundary. The creation of new distribution outlets and the pursuit of diversified film-financing methods in the film industry has globalised production in the pursuit of maximum revenue. An investment/distribution company, CJ, is exemplary in understanding this trend. It was established to forge a business partnership with Hollywood. Even though it operates on a small scale, it began its activities by investing \$300 million in DreamWorks in 1995 (Herman and McChesney, 2004: 103). CJ not only co-produces with The Kadokawa Group, a giant media conglomerate in Japan, but has also attempted to enter the business of building multiplexes in China as a way of undertaking a joint venture with the state-owned Shanghai Film Group (Davis and Yeh, 2008: 87).

The background outlined above provides a context for the shifts in the industry especially in terms of distribution and investment. While many authors have attempted to present a detailed description of the change in the local industry, something fundamental seems to be missing: what is the real cause of the transformation of the local film industry? What are the defining criteria for understanding the transformation? This section critically reviews the relevant literature concerning the interpretive framework for understanding the shift in the South Korean film industry.

Darcy Paquet's analysis needs to come into scrutiny first. While acknowledging that 'the unbalanced structure of the distribution system' leads to 'the further marginalisation of non-mainstream voices', nonetheless, Paquet stresses that 'the rapid development of its infrastructure remains a highly unusual case in world cinema', adding that 'the industry's commercial strength and the arrival of powerful local companies have also encouraged more people to pursue work in the industry, from crew members to cinematographers to sound technicians' (Paquet, 2005: 49). In my view, this perspective misses a crucial point by

overlooking the connection between the developments in the local and changes in the current capitalist system, that is, the shift towards finance capitalism, and the local majors' maintenance of their hegemony over independent production companies or small supplier firms, adjusting themselves to the new conditions of global media landscapes. By simply focusing on the historical change in the local film industry, this perspective misses the structural principles of how the local industry is intimately bound up with the real dynamics of the current capitalist system.

While exploring the main factors which have contributed to the advancement of South Korean cinema, some critics and scholars present a similar view to Paquet by identifying the freedom of expression or the liberation from censorship as responsible for its remarkable growth. For instance, this perspective sees 'the transition away from military rule *circa* 1992 as the "break" around which perceptions of contemporary Korean cinema's vitality and newness are structured' (Stringer, 2005: 6). This perspective is based on the fact that 'in 1992, the election of the nation's first civilian president, Kim Young-sam..., symbolically inaugurated the birth of a freer society' (ibid.: 4). In fact, the emergence of a civilian regime in 1992 has nothing to do with a freer society. With state monopoly capitalism still maintained, the structure of dominance and subjection continued. In this respect, I agree with Kim Kyung-hyun (2002) that during the Kim Young-sam regime, '[w]ith close alliances between big corporations and the Korean government maintained, the exploitation of the *minjung* [ordinary citizens] continued, making it extremely difficult for the masses to generate resistance against the newly formed hegemonic power, which, unlike previous regimes, was not visibly exploitative' (Kim, 2002: 99). Julian Stringer's argument is also problematic, because of how it situates the birth of New Korean Cinema in its historical context. By reducing the question of historicity into a visibly accessible official historical event, his

explanation remains bound up with the empirical description of history, only touching on the surface of social change.

Which critical category is more appropriate to understanding the changes in the current South Korean film industry? Given that the film production process is being controlled by a new form of global capitalism, it moves us to seek out new paradigms for understanding the dynamics of a national film industry through a more left-oriented framework. While it is not very difficult to see that 'Korean distribution remains profoundly different from that of Hollywood in that Korea has a small local market, and cannot rely on a vast international network to recoup costs' (Paquet, 2005: 46), this study nevertheless seeks to locate the local film industry in a broader range of global capitalism. In terms of size, the South Korean film industry can be seen as 'a small local market'. However, what matters here is that the local is part of the global media system not in terms of content but of form, and particularly the form of the network (Hardt and Negri, 2004: 142). As part of a global network, the local industry assimilates its mode of production and distribution from Hollywood. This tendency will be discussed in more detail later, but for the moment we need to examine the changes in the local film industry on the basis of class constitution at work between capital and labour. To examine this issue, it is necessary here to deploy Karl Marx's distinction between 'formal subsumption' and 'real subsumption'. Marx employs the notion to signal two different modes in the subordination of labour under capital. In formal subsumption, capital has an external impact on an '*existing labour process* developed by different and more archaic modes of production' (Marx, 1976: 1021), transforming them into processes producing surplus value from the point of view of capital. In the logic of formal subsumption, labour and capital remain independent of each other, maintaining a relatively fixed boundary between them. In contrast, 'real subsumption' can be defined as the process through which labour is absorbed

not as a foreign, but a constituent element in the process of producing surplus value. What is at stake during the course of ‘real subsumption’ is the introduction of technology, as an extensive form of capital’s endless remodeling of the means of production, so that it can be best understood in terms of ‘the *use of machinery*, and in general the transformation of production by the conscious use of the sciences, of mechanics, chemistry, etc’ (ibid.: 1024, emphasis original). As ‘real subsumption’ has come to gain dominance over ‘formal subsumption’ with the development of capitalism, capital directly participates in the labour process, thus fully changing the nature of production. With this in mind, the change in the *chaebols’* investment in the local film industry from purchasing video copyrights in the 1990s to full-fledged investment in film finance, production, circulation and consumption indicates a change from ‘formal’ to ‘real subsumption’. Under the logic of ‘real subsumption’, the local film industry has internally reorganised to gratify capital’s need in the form of technological development. Technology here does not simply refer to the technique development in the film-making process, but rather a wide-ranging shift in the film industry in its entirety, encompassing the introduction of diversified distribution channels, changes in the method of financing, and changes in the whole process of industrial organisation through production to exhibition. While the installation of new technologies accounts for the changes in the local film industry, one should also see the political-economic context of South Korea in which these innovations were installed. As a result, the change in the contemporary South Korean film industry might be seen as corresponding to the whole process of ‘real subsumption’ as capitalist restructuring in South Korea.

From this perspective, this study suggests that a primary factor in provoking the shift in the film industry was *No-dong-ja-dae-too-jaeng* (‘the great workers’ struggle of 1987’) as a direct expression of class antagonism which took place in 1987. According to Koo Hagen,

this struggle during the summer of 1987 can be summarised as follows:

As the regime's ability to exercise its repressive power diminished momentarily, a violent wave of labor conflicts erupted and spread swiftly across the country, halting production at almost all major industrial plants. Between July and September 1987 about 3,500 labor conflicts occurred, more than the total number of labor disputes during the entire Park and Chun regimes. In August more than a hundred new labor disputes arose daily, which was about the annual average occurrence of disputes in the past (Koo, 1993: 156).

This struggle was one of the strongest blows to the capitalist disciplinary system. However, it was capital that first responded to this class-based social movement. As capital relations have fully come to the fore, this antagonism has tended to be subsumed into capital's restructuring processes. As capital has extended throughout society and all social production has become controlled by capital relations, capital's restructuring has allowed for a change in the nature of labour. It is no coincidence that the South Korean government supported the film industry as a high value-added economic sphere of the information economy. This manifested itself in the '*Jurassic Park* syndrome' in 1994 during Kim Youngsam's regime. In 1994, the Presidential Advisory Council on Science and Technology reported to President Kim, highlighting the centrality of film and visual industry for future revenue: the profit of Steven Spielberg's *Jurassic Park* (1993) was equivalent to more than the export of one and a half million Hyundai cars. This report influenced the president's decision to advance film and media as a strategic future industry (Shin, 2005b: 53). Seen from this angle, at least in terms of an industrial perspective if not the film text, the emergence of the so-called New Korean Cinema can be read as corresponding to capital and state restructuring processes. The prevailing perspectives which conceive of contemporary

South Korean cinema in terms of development, innovation, and success unwittingly resonate with a capitalist logic deeply rooted in modernisation.

In contrast to my argument, some authors highlight the role of the state in the changes to the local industry in a positive way, noting that ‘the industrialization, liberalization, and deregulation of the film industry by the state as a targeted object of its cultural policy is one of the main factors that led to the national film industrial renaissance’ (Ryoo, 2008: 885). In line with this argument, Kim Hyae-joon (2007) stresses in his very brief article that official South Korean film policy since the Kim Dae-joong regime has shifted greatly from being a ‘control policy’ to being a ‘promotion policy’, with an attitude of ‘provide support, but do not interfere’ (Kim, 2007: 351-52). Examples of this new kind of policy in action include the foundation of the Korean Film Council (KOFIC) in 1999 which is a government-supported administrative organisation, but which comprises professionals from civil society. While admitting that KOFIC has helped to promote the local industry, a question from a different angle can be raised here. Namely, when a previously repressive government’s policy turns into a smooth and flexible policy, as is the case with South Korean film policy, does this really mean the abolition of all kinds of censorship and repression? To avoid any misunderstanding, this study does not intend to support the previous government’s ‘control policy’. Surely, the return to the environment of the *Chungmuro* system is neither possible nor desirable and the passage to a global film system is in a sense irreversible. However, in contrast to the argument which highlights the active role of the state, this study emphasises that the new forms of an ongoing process of global capitalism mark the state’s heavy reliance on market forces. As communication has become one of the most crucial components of the high-capitalist global system, government media policies tend to emphasise the importance of the creative industries: ‘The contemporary systems of communication are not subordinated to

sovereignty; on the contrary, sovereignty seems to be subordinated to communication – or actually, sovereignty is articulated through communications systems’ (Hardt and Negri, 2000; 346).

My contention can be also sustained by considering the following argument. Chris Howard (2008) challenges the widespread belief that sees the role of KOFIC as protecting against transnational globalisation. Given that low budget films struggle to maintain sufficient screening-time in competition with the local majors, KOFIC began to focus on ‘diversity policies’. For Howard, the Art Plus Cinema Network is exemplary of KOFIC’s turn to a new policy to protect low budget films. However, KOFIC’s changing emphasis, argues Howard, still functions as a means to ‘complement or expand particular *commercial* activities of the film industry’ (Howard, 2008: 89, emphasis original). This became clear when the Art Plus Cinema Network was designated to act as a preliminary phase in creating an increased demand for digital screening/distribution channels across Asia. Thus, the preference for digital technology in the Art Plus cinemas might ‘provide a more general boost to Korean IT companies working on aspects of a digital distribution/exhibition infrastructure’ (ibid.: 99). Not surprisingly, what we see here is that a film policy conducted at a national level has been influenced by a transnational media system, functioning as a threshold in constructing a global media system.

In contrast to a naive celebration of the state’s role in the course of the film industry’s change, Kim Hyun-sook (2000) suggests a useful tool for mapping the deployment of capital and labour in the local film industry from circa the late 1990s in terms of a world-system perspective (Kim, 2000: 176). For Kim, the ways in which capital is activated within the local industry can be classified in the following manner: (1) the South Korean brand offices of Hollywood majors based in the U.S.; (2) the subsidiaries of *chaebols* in the entertainment

industry as a form of transnational capital based in South Korea; (3) investment companies as a form of financial capital; and (4) small-scale production companies focused on domestic activities. She argues that a national film policy should place special attention on protecting the small-scale companies referred to in category (4) who cannot afford to practice transnational activities (ibid.). Kim Hyun-sook goes on to say that within the centre, periphery, and semi-periphery mapping of the world-system, the South Korean film industry has attempted to attain the status of being at the semi-periphery while being subordinate to the centre, but occupying a place of relative autonomy from the centre as well (2004: 302-319). In other words, it is certainly subordinate to Hollywood, but unlike those located purely at the periphery, it has been building up some production facilities to compete with Hollywood. This view leaves open the possibility of locating the South Korean film industry within a schematic power structure without lapsing into an uncritical call for the pure benefits of cultural exchange. A simple emphasis on media consumption without critical analysis would blur the real dynamics of the global visual economy composed of the 'new international division of cultural labour' (Miller et al., 2001).

Without underestimating the importance of these arguments, this study seeks to develop its theoretical framework from a slightly different angle. The fact that the South Korean film industry's adjustment to the global economy is most recognisable in relationship to Hollywood should not necessarily lead to an understanding of the contemporary global media situation in terms of stages of development such as the centre, periphery, and semi-periphery. To explore this problem further, it is instructive to follow the line of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri in *Empire* (2000). Hardt and Negri begin by conceiving of the ongoing capitalist system as opposed to that of imperialism. If imperialism expanded modern European sovereignty by continuously relocating the borders between the inside and outside,

imperial powers operate without barriers defining inside and outside. The notion of Empire is driven from Marx's idea that the process of capitalist reproduction and accumulation is characterised by a limit and the movement to overcome it. It is no coincidence that Hardt and Negri directly quote Marx in asserting that 'the tendency to create the world market is directly given in the concept of capital itself. Every limit appears as a barrier to be overcome' (Marx, 1993: 408, as cited in Hardt and Negri, 2000: 236). Empire pushes this process of accumulation to the extreme so that it is exercised in a way with 'no territorial center of power and fixed boundaries or barriers' (Hardt and Negri, 2000; xii). Empire is characterised by 'a decentered and deterritorializing apparatus of rule that progressively incorporates the entire global realm within its open, expanding frontiers' (ibid.). Hence, 'the geographical divisions among nation-states or even between central and peripheral, northern and southern clusters of nation-states', they argue, 'are no longer sufficient to grasp the global divisions and distribution of production, accumulation, and social forms' (ibid.: 334). However, it is at this point that many theorists, especially those who work from the perspective of dependency theory, underdevelopment, and world-systems analysis, criticise Hardt and Negri's account of geopolitical notions. For instance, unlike Hardt and Negri, Giovanni Arrighi (2003) focuses primarily on territorial boundaries between North and South and core and periphery. His main critique of the concept of Empire is thus concentrated on the subsequent points: (1) "the smoothness" of the space of Empire'; and (2) 'the role of the contemporary mobility of labour and capital in equalizing conditions of production and reproduction across that space' (Arrighi, 2003: 32). For Arrighi, what matters is that the North-South income gap between the former Third World and the former First World has not diminished but still remains persistent. Thus, he concludes that Hardt and Negri's notion of geographical division is not true with regards to the 'direction and extent of contemporary flows of capital and

labour' (ibid.: 33): in terms of extent, contemporary migration is in fact less than nineteenth-century flows; and, in terms of direction, capital tends towards wealthy countries, not flowing from First World to Third World. It may well be true that, in empirical terms, the raw numbers of immigration in the nineteenth century were much larger than in the present day and that capital's mobility still revolves around the central countries. However, Hardt and Negri's theses should be read in terms of 'historical tendency'. While for Hardt and Negri, focus is on emerging tendencies, many critics, including Arrighi, tend to highlight the importance of the empirical. Although the empirical evidence has significance, a single predominant direction has imposed a tendency on all other social forms, 'transforming them in accordance with its own characteristics, and in that sense it has adopted a hegemonic position' (Hardt and Negri, 2004: 141). As a result, what matters is not to present a detailed analysis of the present situation, but 'to grasp the direction of the present, to read which seeds will grow and which wither' (ibid.).²

With this in mind, the new forms of cultural traffic in the current global film industry are practised in every node of the full matrix where there is no central hub and all the nodes can cooperate and communicate with all the others. Yet, this is not to say that the current global order is immune to severe hierarchies, the international division of labour, and domination-

² Although this study advocates the validity of Empire, it does not mean that one should follow all of Hardt and Negri (2000)'s arguments. A problem arises from the fact that Hardt and Negri tend to focus too easily on a space relatively autonomous from the rule of capital, relying on collaboration and interactive communication. This is what distinguishes Hardt and Negri from Gilles Deleuze. When Negri asked Deleuze whether this Marxian conception of 'general intellect' in *Grundrisse* (1973) might open the way for communism, Deleuze's answer, in my view, precisely points to how communication works in today's situation: 'It would be nothing to do with minorities speaking out. Maybe speech and communication have been corrupted. They're thoroughly permeated by money – and not by accident but by their very nature. We've got to hijack speech. Creating has always been something different from communicating. The key thing may be to create vacuoles of non-communication, circuit breakers, so we can elude control' (Deleuze, 1995: 175).

subordination relations. On the contrary, global capitalism is first and foremost characterised by a new international division of labour and severe inequalities within this order. Even though it is still very much the case that the United States remains dominant in the global film industry, it is more useful to provide an analysis of the way that a global media system is now emerging and that this system has, as its primary elements: dominant nation-states, especially the U.S.; transnational corporations; and other powers.

It may be true that the South Korean film industry is currently in the phase of its development based on the semi-periphery in that it has not assumed a transnational dominance comparable to Hollywood. However, this urge to compare a particular nation-state's film industry with another in terms of size and scale might be secondary, since this perspective overlooks the historical tendency by heavily relying on an empirical description of the existing phenomenon. This is where my view of the South Korean film industry is different from that of Kim Hyun-sook, mentioned earlier. Where she focuses on the fact that the South Korean film industry is said to be on the semi-periphery, attaining a relative autonomy from Hollywood, I argue the global media system, not confined to U.S.-based Hollywood, has imposed exclusion on the South Korean film industry and nevertheless assumed domination over it. This is because the local film industry tends to incorporate distribution and investment techniques as it embodies the new *forms* of industrial organisation, not in terms of the local film industry's size or scale.

Overall, this section has studied the changes in the South Korean film industry by exploring how they are historically overdetermined by other social changes, particularly in terms of the phase of 'real subsumption'. At least in terms of its industrial form, cinema can be read as a form of social production, since it is almost impossible to separate out the terrain of cinema from other social relations. Given that communication has become an integral part

of contemporary global capitalism, this section has highlighted the South Korean film industry's roles as a threshold within the global media system.

2.2 From Korean New Wave to Asia Extreme

As mentioned towards the beginning of this chapter, contemporary South Korean cinema consists of three key components – Korean New Wave, the Korean blockbuster, and Asia Extreme. In what follows, I will deal with how other scholars have identified the ‘newness’ of Korean cinema in the films under these categories, while pointing out the limitations of these discourses.

Of course, the films under the same labels and the discussion of them in the field of Korean film studies do not offer complete coverage of contemporary South Korean cinema. Apart from them, there are a number of other topics which remain productive in other ways. For example, in their discussions on South Korean Golden Age melodrama – from 1955 to 1972 – following the Korean civil war, Nancy Abelmann and Kathleen McHugh (2005) argue that melodrama can be an important tool for the understanding the complexities of South Korea's constellation of modernity (Abelmann and McHugh, 2005: 4): ‘in the South Korean films of this period, the crises of the nation manifest themselves in persistent gender and genre trouble’ (ibid.: 3) They do not directly engage with the issue of contemporary Korean cinema. However, to the extent that they consider Golden Age films as ‘the antecedent of the current renaissance’ (ibid.), their view remains pertinent to this research project. In his analysis of *Calla* and *Donggam*, David Martin-Jones (2011) notes a certain similarity between both films and the Golden Age melodramas, by arguing that ‘both films contain the narrative conventions – including plot coincidence, suspense, and strange twists of fate – of

the golden age melodramas' (Martin-Jones, 2011: 111-12). He goes on to say that 'in both there are moments in which the formal elements come to the fore, demonstrating the often mute, visual excesses of the melodramatic mode' (ibid.). Similarly, Paquet argues that South Korean films have long invested in the use of melodramatic mode, especially discussing how *Christmas in August* in the late 1990s attempts to reinvent the genre of melodrama (Paquet, 2007: 52). On the other hand, David Desser (2007) notes that recent Korean films achieve a new style of cinema, by blending and twisting existing genre codes (Desser, 2007: 91). According to him, the impulse motivating a hybrid form of genre is youth culture. Choi Jinhee (2010) adds this topic with the emphasis focused on the "high-schooler" which includes delinquents inside and outside of high school, teen horror films, and high school romance' (Choi, 2010: 118). For her, high school does not serve as a simple background, but as 'the site of oppression and repression where narrative conflicts await various generic solutions' (ibid.).

These topics provide fresh insights to rethink the phenomena of contemporary Korean film from various angles. However, in my view, films under the label of Korean New Wave, the Korean blockbuster, and Asia Extreme might serve as a better indicator than other topics, because many of the films under these categories, more or less, are related to a dialectical tension between historical context and the non-historical.

In what follows, I will first examine the relevant critical discourses concerning Korean New Wave. Some of films under the umbrella of Korean New Wave suggest a way of going beyond official historiography, by staging the hidden reality covered by it. However, my argument would be that this type of strategy does not succeed in addressing the issue of radical historicity. In the next section, I will review some studies of the Korean blockbuster. The main purpose of this section is to point out the limitations of theoretical perspectives

based on local translation, hybridity, and pluralisation, thus clarifying how the issue of radical difference I keep in mind here is incompatible with these perspectives. In so doing, it will constitute an important effort at fulfilling the theoretical framework outlined in the preceding chapter. To this end, I will look at how some Korean films tend to fall short of displaying local specificity, depending on more universal filmic language such as visual violence. However, it could be argued that this type of cinematic strategy has nothing to do with the revealing of disparity between historical context and the non-historical. Following this reasoning, I will conclude this section by arguing that the mere emphasis on the cross-cultural traffic is not fully sufficient for rethinking subversive filmic practices, and that one, therefore, must redirect attention to the filmic text itself rather than its context.

2.2.1 Korean New Wave and Empiricist View on History

I will first review Yi Hyo-in's essay written in 1989, because he was, later, the one of scholars in inventing the term Korean New Wave. Although this essay lacks an elaborate, systematic theorisation, his argument might be understood as a first attempt to designate what the national means within the field of South Korean film scholarship. In this essay, Yi places the question of national cinema within the wider theoretical framework of social movements in the 1980s. As Yi notes, national cinema should serve to achieve '*chaju* (autonomy), *minju* (democracy), and *tong-il* (reunification)', in an attempt to combine a 'national liberation movement' with the 'working class movement' (1989: 14). Ten years or so on, Kim Kyung-hyun (1998) asks why the notion of the people or nation has declined in the 1990s as if nothing had happened during the 1980s (Kim, 1998: 144). He continues to ask the following questions: why do the questions of national cinema raised by Yi not apply to the current

discursive mode about South Korean cinema? (ibid.:146) Why do some filmmakers emerging from the 1980s 'become less politicised compared to the earlier generation such as Park Kwang-su or Jang Sun-woo'? (ibid.:145); examples would be, writes Kim (ibid.), the case of *Threesome* (Park Chan-wook, 1997) and *The Contact* (Chang Yoon-hyun, 1997). Whilst not completely casting off the definition of national cinema raised by Yi, Kim suggests that a new form of national cinema is needed to meet the changing film landscape of the 1990s.

According to him, a new national cinema should free itself from the narrow point-of-view of the 1980s. But this is not to say that a new form of national cinema should disdain the problem of local particularity. Kim argues that even in the postmodern era, 'the global universality cannot be constructed without the consideration of the local particularity' (ibid.: 146). As such, a new form of national cinema, writes Kim, should provide an instance of encompassing the question of both modernity and nationality at once.

Against this background, it is necessary to examine under which conditions the term Korean New Wave was created. The emergence of the term Korean New Wave was based on a certain theoretical direction developed at the First Pusan International Film Festival in 1996. At this festival, Yi Hyo-in, Lee Jung-ha, and Kim Kyung-hyun suggested that there had been a change between the 1970s and 1980s in terms of form, narrative, and theme. Even though positing some South Korean directors such as Im Kwon-taek, Lee Jang-ho, and Bae Chang-ho as the 'new beginning of Korean cinema', great attention was drawn to new directors such as Park Kwang-su and Jang Sun-woo. Even though not all the Korean New Wave films take up a common cinematic strategy, directors such as Park Kwang-su, Jang Sun-woo are categorised as 'New Wave' because they bring into more focus social issues in contrast to the directors who started their careers in the 1970s. Yi Hyo-in, one of the authors who invented the term 'Korean New Wave', explains why some South Korean films could be called 'New

Wave':

Of course, another convenient way to organize the 'new wave' would be to look for common elements related to specific film ideologies and methodologies, or a tendency to lead film movements. One cannot say for certain that the new directors who started their career in Korea in the mid 80's share such qualities. In a broad sense, however, it is a fact that such directors do keep a distance from the conventional filmic practices in terms of ideology and techniques that had been prevalent to that point in time, and they were seen as actually implementing their own beliefs regarding film. Therefore, they will be termed the *Korean New Wave* in this sense. The list of directors that are to be examined in further detail have been limited to those that represent this trend such as Chung Ji-young, Bae Yong-kyun, Jang Sun-woo, Park Kwang-su, Lee Myung-sae and Park Jong-won' (Yi, 1996 a: 35, emphasis original).

It is worth noting that the term Korean New Wave is not seen as a consequence of the manifesto of a film movement, but as a prescriptive category growing out of critical discourse. What specific cinematic strategies, then, did the film critics at the First Pusan International Festival advocate? Yi, Lee, and Kim suggest that *Minjung* (a Korean word for 'the people' or 'the masses') cinema in the 1980's can be a new national cinema's alternative path (Yi, Lee, and Kim, 1996: 110-117).

The term *Minjung* literally refers to the people or the masses. But the conception of *Minjung*, with the meaning and use of the term rooted in a specific historical constellation in the 1970s and 1980s, can be identified as 'more directly opposed to monopoly capital, precisely because monopoly capital represents the dominant mode of production in South Korea today' (Koo, 1993: 143). This distinguishes the South Korean *Minjung* movement from populism in Latin America in the 1930s. Whilst the latter was constituted by 'an alliance between the national bourgeoisie and the popular sectors against the oligarchic structure', the

South Korean *Minjung* movement ‘took shape in a rapidly industrializing society as a reaction to the consequences of capital accumulation led by monopoly capital’ (ibid.). The *Minjung* movement in the 1980s can be best understood as a ‘*class-based political movement*’ (ibid.: 145, emphasis original). Unfortunately, the critical discourse of Korean New Wave seems to narrow the scope and range of *Minjung* cinema based on populist perspective as a way of glossing over ‘nation liberation movement’ and ‘class movement’. This becomes evident when these authors highlight the shift of point of reference within the sphere of *Minjung* cinema in the way that ‘it was *Minjok* (nation or nation-ness) that later emerged as the chief cinematic trope within the political underground filmmaking arena’ (Yi, Lee, and Kim, 1996: 113).

Yi, Lee and Kim believe that to construct a new national cinema, South Korean cinema needs to respond to the changing boundaries of the local film industry. While acknowledging that *Minjung* cinema, especially in the 1980s, contributed to attacking the production values of the *Chungmuro* system, they contend that *Minjung* cinema has also exposed limitations in ‘[representing] a pure and coherent national subject through the conventionalized cinematic medium’ (ibid.: 115). Such a parochial attempt to imagine a coherent national subject, they argue, will lead to a ‘national anxiety towards *Otherness* or foreign-ness’ (ibid.) especially in the era of transnational capitalism (emphasis original). Nonetheless, these commentators do not disregard the significance of *Minjung* cinema, while even recognising that it is neither possible nor helpful for South Korean cinema to come back to the period of *Minjung* cinema in the 1980s. As a result, their main focus lies in the fact that ‘negotiations and arbitrations with the alternative aesthetics as well as with the radical thematics is a necessary step for the Korean cinema to look beyond its past’ (ibid.: 117). Park Kwang-su and Jang Sun-woo’s films are exemplary in conveying these ongoing negotiations, since these films ‘straddle

between the radical political past and the current financial responsibility of securing a new domestic audience, while critically engaging itself with the question of “nation” (ibid.: 116).

Albeit from different angle, Rob Wilson (1994) points out that the consideration of ‘national allegory’ suggested by Fredric Jameson is helpful in exploring films from the 1980s by directors including Lee Doo-yong, Im Kwon-taek, Bae Chang-ho, and Park Kwang-su. Isolde Standish (1994) also places the films of the Korean New Wave – especially these of Park Jong-won, Park Kwang-su and Jang Sun-woo – within the frame of the *Minjung* Movement in the sense that ‘the narrative content of these films grew out of ideas and ideologies of the underground *Minjung* Movement of the 1970s and early 1980s’ (Standish, 1994: 85). Tony Rayns also holds Korean New Wave films’ aesthetic value in high regard, by contrasting them with their ‘5th Generation’ contemporaries in China (Rayns, 1994a, 4; 1994b: 22-25).

Within this background, Kim Kyung-hyun (2002) in a more recent essay describes Park Kwang-su’s *A Single Spark* and Jang Sun-woo’s *A Petal* as ‘post-traumatic films’. It is worth citing at length.

Neither *A Single Spark* nor *A Petal* presents revolutionary agendas or – at its opposite end – nostalgic pastiche. Rather, like Alain Resnais’s *Hiroshima Mon Amour* (1959), they are *post-traumatic* films that explore a violent public history through personal memories that evoke trauma and pain. Without gentrifying the trauma or patently resolving it, these films refuse to be integrated into prevailing ideology. Yet, as any cynic knows, the mere representation of historical misery in a commercial enterprise immediately inscribes the work in an exploitative praxis. As Ken Loach – a director known for his sensitive treatment of working-class subjects – recently admitted, when making a ‘film about people who are victimized and exploited, there is always the charge that you are just wallowing in their poverty and hardship. Because the dominant convention of cinema is the melodramatic impulses that motivate a victim to triumph against the odds, Park and [Jang] must have been

sorely tempted to adopt sentimental plot lines, especially given the pressure to recover at least some of the production costs to make *A Single Spark* and *A Petal*. Yet both films self-consciously resist pat dramatic endings and only partially heal traumatic wounds (Kim, 2002: 99-100, emphasis original).

In fact, the Korean New Wave films paid much attention to the delivery of the historical trauma. But the representation of the traumatic past in their variable forms is problematic because these films merely stage the historical material, rather than invent a new mode of cinematic (re)presentation which attempts to bear witness to the traces of the past. This can be seen in *A Petal*. (*A Single Spark* will be analysed in chapter 5.) Pivoting the narrative appeal around a girl who is both a victim of and a witness to the state massacre of civilians in Kwangju in May 1980, this film attempts to raise the question of the representation of the traumatic past. However, where the film focuses on what really took place in Kwangju, and how this traumatic event caused the girl's suffering, *A Petal* casts away the significance of witnessing, which is crucial to the film's treatment of the trauma. As the impossibility of the representation of the traumatic past has been transferred into an acknowledgement of the possibility of the representation of the trauma itself, what remains in this film is not the gap between the event itself and its compulsive, pathological, and belated repetition, but the emotional identification with the traumatic past. If the effective way of historicising the trauma depends on whether a film stages the impossibility of representation, not through documenting what really happened there but through the revelation of the void that derails the symbolisation of trauma, the case of *A Petal* indicates that the Korean New Wave fails to decontextualise the historical description of the traumatic past. The radicalism to explode the mere representation of victimised human suffering can be

found in Zhang Lu's films, discussed in chapter 7.

Once again, as discussed in chapter 1, to the extent that 'History is an "absent cause"', something that we know, not as the thing-in-itself, but through its effects', it is all the more necessary and urgent to distinguish between the empirical knowledge of history and the concept of history (Homer, 2006: 74). Seen in this light, this study, suggests that, when contemporary South Korean cinema has attempted to distance itself from the dominant Hollywood film practices only by means of foregrounding the weight of history, without any reference to the non-historical moment (the concept of history) that cannot be incorporated into the processes of historical symbolisation on the level of the transcendental form, it simply falls into step with the very function of historicism. To render historical matters visible falls short of the revealing of radical historicity proper. Given that radical historicity is manifested within a given filmic text as a certain form of contradiction, what matters is to maintain the gap between historical content and the dimension of the unrepresentable that lies beyond the content of the story.

It is not the case, however, that one should apply the general paradigms of Euro-American film theories and aesthetics to contemporary South Korean film practices. Nor should one explore the styles and conventions of a given national cinema influenced by the economic condition alone. My point is that the historical mode of understanding involves as its primary element something which derails historical representation, that is, distortion: a cinema addressing historical knowledge should reveal the non-historical moment in an effort to explode historicism. Thus, my viewpoint is grounded on a basic assumption that each national cinema has its own many histories in accordance with the different levels of contemporary capitalist modes of production. However, the emphasis on differential

temporalities should be conceived as a starting point only, because this approach remains bound up with historicism. What is more crucial here is to explore whether a certain filmic text encompasses a conflictual tension between the different levels of contemporary capitalism and its non-historical moment qua the founding condition of the impossibility of representation. This is an attempt to stress the issue of historicity which involves the traumatic gap itself as its negative founding condition, whereas historicism can be defined as ‘historicity *minus* the unhistorical kernel of the Real’ (Žižek, 1991: 81, emphasis original). From the perspective presented here, Yi Hyo-in, Lee Jung-ha, and Kim Kyung-hyun fail to address the question of radical historicity, as they no longer distinguish the concept of history from the empirical knowledge of history. As a result, the critical discourses around Korean New Wave also fail to present a penetrating account of new national cinema. I take this question up more in chapter 5, by examining how *Black Republic*, *A Single Spark*, *Peppermint Candy*, and *Memories of Murder* conflate the empirical knowledge of history and the ultimate limit of history, thus failing to address the problem of radical historicity proper.

2.2.2 The Location of the Korean blockbuster between the Universal and the Particular

I will consider the literature on the phenomenon of the Korean blockbuster here. Before going into the main argument, this section begins by examining Kim Sun-ah (2006)’s essay on the Korean blockbuster. The critical review of her essay will offer a competent overview of the phenomena of the Korean blockbuster. The term ‘Korean blockbuster’ was initially designed as a marketing strategy to promote the release of *The Soul Guardians* (1998). As Kim Kyoung-wook (2007b) says, although ‘its total production budget of 2.4 billion won (US \$ 18.3 million) was exceptional for the times’ (Kim, 2007b: 383), it did not gain box office

success. After this film's failure, the film that has been widely recognised as the first true Korean blockbuster is *Shiri*, released in 1999 (ibid.). Kim Sun-ah focuses on the year, 1996, in which the first public manifestation of the Korean New Wave took place at the First Pusan International Film Festival (2006: v-ix). As the year 1997 saw the emergence of the term 'Korean blockbuster', Kim argues that 1996 is a year in which conflicting forces were contesting the possible identity of South Korean cinema. For Kim, there were two major conflicting pulls within the South Korean film scene at that time. On the one hand, there was a force-field, which was exemplified in the discourse of Korean New Wave, in which some critics attempted to restore the critical debate on realism – which had been the prevailing discursive mode in South Korean film scholarship – in regard to the changing boundaries of South Korean cinema. On the other hand, there was another force-field which highlighted the commercial viability of South Korean cinema that consequently led to the establishment of the Korean blockbuster (ibid.: ix). In this respect, 1996 refers to the 'internal fracture between the Korean New Wave and the Korean blockbuster' (ibid.: xi).

While fully agreeing with her critical diagnosis, I would like to develop my argument slightly differently. Where she separates the Korean New Wave and the Korean blockbuster by describing them as two distinct competing forces, I believe that there appears more continuity than discontinuity between them. Indeed, it is true that the general tendency of South Korean cinema between 1987 and 1997 developed in two major directions. On the one hand, there was an increasing effort to establish formulaic genre conventions along the lines of films such as *The Marriage Life* (1992) and *Two Cops* (1993) which laid a cornerstone for the Korean blockbuster towards the end of the 1990s. On the other hand, there emerged what some critics call the Korean New Wave led by a new generation of directors such as Park Kwang-su and Jang Sun-woo. However, to the extent that those films no longer separate the

concept of history and the empirical description of history, as mentioned earlier, I claim that the difference between the Korean New Wave and the Korean blockbuster is not fundamental. If the Korean New Wave can be understood as addressing historical issues in its distinct effort to present a stable foreground of the authentic local against Hollywood conventions, the Korean blockbuster can also be seen as portraying historical material. But instead of depending on representation of purely local content, it relies on formulaic genre film conventions. In this sense, what Choi (2010) calls a ‘second South Korean film *renaissance*’ (Choi, 2010: 6, emphasis original) would be a better term for apprehending the transformation of contemporary Korean cinema, because this term ‘encompass[es] both the resurgence of socially conscious, and/or aesthetically experimental films and the industrial boom’ (ibid.), instead of noting the difference between the Korean New Wave films of the late 1980s and the more commercially driven films of the 1990s and after.

Nonetheless, the analysis of the Korean blockbuster leads us to explore further the way in which the universal and the particular interact, because, unlike the Korean New Wave, it raises the question of what the political implication of local translation between national cinema and Hollywood is. In this regard, Chris Berry opens up the possibility that the localisation of the blockbuster in engaging with local issues in South Korea could bring about ‘the pluralization and de-Westernization of the blockbuster phenomenon’ (2003: 225) while emphasising ‘the impossibility of determining whether this participation constitutes challenge or capitulation, and the importance of grasping de-Westernization within globalization as a fundamentally ambivalent practice’ (ibid.: 218). In a similar vein, Ok HyeRyoung illustrates how the Korean blockbuster localises dominant Hollywood conventions in terms of the politics of local translation. For her, the Korean blockbuster’s translation of Hollywood conventions moves along two axes. On the one hand, the Korean blockbuster finds itself ‘as a

guardian of the national film industry against global Hollywood corporations' (2009: 44). On the other hand, 'it serves not only to universalize the cinematic conventions of Hollywood but more significantly to supersede Hollywood through this "intended mimicry", thereby extending its power across East Asia. In this attempt, the Korean blockbuster provides a new mode of national cinema' (ibid.). Whilst pointing out the danger that 'the Korean blockbuster actively tunes in and amplifies the nationalistic discourse by aspiring to be another regional super power, a new "homogenizing" agency in the Asian Market, beyond the goal of maintaining local resistance' (ibid.: 40), Ok writes that, 'there lies the possibility of resistance to actively appropriate hegemonic conventions and to transform them into [a] local yet globally appealing commodity, especially for non-western national cinema' (ibid.: 45). For a similar reason, Kim Kyung-hyun (2011) also highlights the process of localisation of Hollywood in the Korean blockbuster, stating that 'Bong Joon-ho, Park Chan-wook, and Kim Ji-woon attained stardom by fully exploiting their love-hate relationships with the genre films they grew up with from Hollywood, Japan, and Hong Kong' (Kim, 2011: 185-6). He goes on to say that 'by fully embracing Hollywood, rather than rejecting it, their works display hybridity that equally engages national identity and global aesthetics, art and commercialism, conformity and subversion, and narrative coherence and stylistic flair' (ibid.). In a similar vein, Joo Chang-kyu (2001) claims Korean cinema's localisation of Hollywood based on Homi K. Bhabha (1994)'s notion of hybridity, translation, and time-lag can provide an opportunity to shape a multiple and plural modernity. However, in contrast to Berry and Ok's idea, he is very critical of the recent Korean blockbusters, since those blockbusters have shown an inability to produce an alternative vision of historiography. Kim Byeong-cheol (2005) holds a similar but less critical view on the Korean blockbuster, especially in terms of Bhabha's theorisation.

These authors do provide an alternative to theories of ‘developmentalism’ for understanding the dynamics of the Korean blockbuster. They do not reduce the Korean blockbuster to a category of underdevelopment in comparison with the large-scale spectacular imagery of the Hollywood blockbuster. To reject the metanarrative imposed by Hollywood, they would like to look at the possibility of contextualising and pluralising the phenomenon of the Korean blockbuster, underlining the importance of diversity, plurality, and heterogeneity in the process of local translation. If this is so, the recent phenomenon of the Korean blockbuster can be seen as offering an instance of the diversification of the blockbuster phenomenon.

The concept of translation may be useful in discussing where the Korean blockbuster, and possibly furthermore contemporary South Korean cinema as a whole, is located between universality and particularity, because it asks what the real dynamic of a national cinema is in its close relation to global Hollywood without falling into a naïve affirmation of a national cinema’s particularist claim: an apparently endless play of displacements and fragmentations in the various forms of blockbuster questions the assumption that blockbuster is unique to Hollywood. The political valence of this theoretical framework will therefore be discussed in more detail in chapter 3 with special reference to Judith Butler’s notion of ‘spectral universality’.

While recognising that this process of translation serves as ‘performative agency’ to suspend a single unifiable conception of blockbuster, this study tries to explore the phenomenon of the Korean blockbuster from a quite different angle. In fact, as both successor and resistance to the Hollywood blockbuster, the Korean blockbuster indicates how, at the heart of the issue of national cinema, there resides the question of negotiation, compromise, and reappropriation of global Hollywood. However, the politics of local translation may not

be the best theoretical framework for exploring the concept of radical alterity. Alain Badiou may be more useful here. In his attempt to think about difference differently, he begins his account of difference by suggesting that being is characterised by ‘the multiple without-[O]ne’ in which there is not a single coherent unit, but only an infinite multiplicity of difference. All beings are not reduced to a closed totality, but constitute the realm of infinite differences. But for Badiou, ‘infinite alterity’ constitutes ‘quite simply *what there is*’. (Badiou, 2001: 25): ‘there are as many differences, say, between a Chinese peasant and a young Norwegian professional as between myself and anybody at all, including myself. As many, but also, then, *neither more nor less*’ (ibid.: 26, emphasis original). To the extent that otherness and difference is presented here as the acknowledgment of a given difference, it is not pertinent to the dimension of radical difference. In order to reveal the realm of radical difference, one should posit the void to break down infinite chains of differences. For Badiou, the void belongs to the dimension of truth, but for my purpose it refers to the issue of radical alterity. The void is based on Lacanian conceptions of the Real, which evaporates our everyday experience and refers to the point of non-sense resisting the process of signification, and in so doing, it is connected to the issue of ‘concrete universality’. In brief, the revealing of the void should make a universalising claim within a local situation, and this also should cut across the historical description that defines that situation. The universalising procedure does not entail the return to the traditional notion of all-encompassing, official, formal universality in which all the parts of the universe are reduced to a closed totality. But rather, it refers to the void erupting from a situation in which disparate cultural backgrounds are notably palpable.

From the perspective presented here, the Korean blockbuster is most definitely different from that of Hollywood. It becomes what it is by comparison to what it is not. There are,

indeed, many different individual cases of the notion of the blockbuster in the phenomenon of the Korean blockbuster. But it is not enough to say that there are various forms of blockbuster, because differences at work amounts only to 'what there is'. To avoid misunderstanding, this is not to say that the Korean blockbuster cannot be said to be new. It is true that a new mode of vision appeared in certain films. *The Host* is exemplary in this case, and this point will be examined in more detail in chapter 6. However, I aim to reconstitute the critical criteria by which it has gained newness, thus presenting a new possibility of looking at the Korean blockbuster from a radically different angle. In brief, if there appears a kind of radicalism in *The Host*, it is not because of the film's local engagement, but because of how it reveals the point at which the endless play of resignification and symbolisation fails, thus enabling us radically to redefine the whole narrative line. Thus, this endeavour can be seen as an attempt to examine how split, gap, and the void operate in an individual Korean blockbuster film; whether a certain type of film reveals the void from within a specific historical condition, or whether it pacifies the encounter with the void as a way of covering it up together with infinite chains of historical material based on the recognition of a given difference. What matters here is, thus, not to focus on the infinite chains of differences to fill up the void structured around social reality, but on how to stage the void for which these differences stand in. It is here that 'concrete universality' becomes a key point for understanding the dynamics of the Korean blockbuster.

Kim Soyoung (2003) initially proposes that it is useful to understand the phenomenon of the Korean blockbuster through the framework of performative agency, as do the authors mentioned earlier. But she takes a step further by suggesting that the Korean blockbuster needs to be understood in terms of global power and gender politics in the era of global finance capitalism: 'the Korean blockbuster, which could be seen both as a response to

Hollywood and a translation of universality into a spectral dimension, provides an instance where the fraught problems of the universal and the particular, as well as global dominance and local resistance and gender politics, can be examined in the age of global finance capitalism' (Kim, 2003: 15). With more emphasis placed on the issue of gender politics in the era of global finance capitalism, Kim Soyoung proposes that the Korean blockbuster's tendency of erasing South Korean women coupled with a newly constituted nationalism is problematic. As 'the identity of a fraternal collective is being re-constituted around notions of a global citizenship' (ibid.: 17), the Korean blockbuster embodies the process of exclusion inherent in the recognition of a global citizenship as a way of '[registering] the absence of local women and [mobilising] other Asian women for reasons of both economy and nostalgia' (ibid.: 18). What is appealing in this formulation is an effort to tie the Korean blockbuster's predominant cinematic trope to the regime of looking within global finance capitalism: the disappearance of South Korean women characters is propelled by a growing insistence on the male bonding community. This community including 'the army, the Korean Central Intelligence Agency, and organized gangsters' appears as opaque to women characters (ibid.: 17). This insight leads Kim to apprehend two related visual issues in the ongoing processes of finance capitalism: first, the increasing emphasis on transparency in which 'the IMF and the World Bank repeatedly used the trope of transparency ... when they tried to restructure the political economy of the state'; and second, 'the *opacity* of the world system' according to which 'the working of global capital becomes more opaque and impenetrable to local eyes' (ibid.: 16, emphasis original).

Kim's insight is important because it reveals how the local 'indexicality' of an individual national cinema, especially in terms of gender politics, is threatened by the dialectics between transparency and opacity, typical of the regime of looking under global finance capitalism. In

my view, this idea provides a more useful tool than local translation for exploring the location of contemporary South Korean cinema between the universal and the particular, because this conception leads us to cognitively map out the real dynamic of the current capitalist system through the close reading of what the filmic texts demand and address. While fully agreeing with this theoretical direction, the thesis seeks to add my own perspective.

In order to achieve this goal, this study initially suggests that vertical and hierarchical integration of the local majors in accordance with venture capital in the South Korean film industry has contributed to the oligopoly of the local majors, combined with a heightened increase in production costs. Within this situation, the local majors have mobilised nationalist sentiment in an attempt to attract not only young viewers, but also viewers in their sixties and seventies who had fallen out of the habit of visiting theatres. In this regard, it is true that ‘patriotic consumption’ is ‘less a “motor” for the record-breaker phenomenon and more a “tool” that helps the Korean majors generate these films’ enormous box office rewards’ (Howard, 2008: 90). From my more Marxist perspective, the local majors’ use of nationalist sentiment rooted in the male bonding community can also be seen as capital’s countertendencies against the ‘falling rate of profit’. The local majors’ arrangement of new technologies, with the aim of deploying the financial and distribution sector’s restructuring of the Korean film industry to adjust to the global media market in accordance with the institutionalisation of South Korean cinema, brings them into direct confrontation with the possibility of a decline in profitability. But they can also increase their efforts to combat the ‘falling rate of profit’ by utilising the trope of nationalism.

It is important to point out, however, that although industrial forces imprint themselves into cinema, the capital-intensive condition in the industry does not necessarily resonate with film’s own discursive form, precisely because cinema is characterised by its capacity to

reveal a disruptive point at which a linear unfolding of narrative space fails. In this regard, the thesis attempts to examine the inner rule of the Korean blockbuster by proposing that it has continuously sought to represent the external figure of the enemy as a way of separating friend and enemy. The invention of the Other has played an important role in the Korean blockbuster's narrative structure, for instance the North Korea of *Shiri* and *Joint Security Area* and the U.S. colonialism of *Welcome to Dongmakgol* and *The Host*. Here, I would like to take up a different angle from Kim's insightful account of the Korean blockbuster. Where she points out why South Korean female characters have disappeared from the blockbuster scene, I would like to suggest how the subject – especially male subjects – respond to the horrifying emergence of the Other, and why a wide range of films end up with the male subject's sacrificial suicide. The key issue here is the ethical scrutiny which examines what the subject decides to do in the confrontation with the terrifying Other. This point will be discussed in more detail in chapter 6. By examining the invention of the Other through the framework of ethics in the Korean blockbuster scene, I will consider whether the Korean blockbuster enables us to devise new maps of the current capitalist system.

Perhaps, my focus on the way in which the male subject responds to the loathsome, terrifying Other will be compared to Kim Kyung-hyun (2004)'s critical diagnosis of New Korean Cinema: threatened male subjectivity and its recuperation is key to understanding the phenomenon of 'New Korean Cinema'. His categorisation of 'New Korean Cinema' encompasses both the Korean New Wave and the Korean blockbuster, as his analysis ends with *Shiri* and *Joint Security Area*. In Kim's view, the film *Peppermint Candy* is a good example of how dominant narrative codes in 'New Korean cinema' from the late 1970s to the late 1990s have developed as a way of staging 'the desire for psychic wholeness and the putative recovery from the male lack' (Kim, 2004: 22). In the course of this process, Kim

argues that there has been an increasing marginalisation of female subjectivity. In this respect, 'New Korean Cinema' cannot be, argues Kim, seen as representing 'a self-centered woman who is freed from her duties as a mother or a wife, without framing her in the convention of a vamp' (ibid.: 9). As Kim argues, male subjectivity might therefore be a key reference point for understanding the transformation of New Korean Cinema. While basically agreeing with him on the importance of male subjectivity, I argue here that his analysis is problematic, because he remains bound up with a politically correct strategy of positive representation, that is, of how a filmic text depicts independent figures on the level of content alone, instead of considering the dialectics between story and cinematic techniques. In my view, the representation of 'a self-centered woman who is freed from her duties as a mother or a wife' (ibid.) is not enough. This is not to say that the depiction of independent female characters is not urgent and important. But positive content needs to be mediated through an emphatic absence of empirical explanation. In brief, the strategy of representation based on positive content fails to stage a new mode of vision in terms of cinematic devices, reducing the potentiality inherent to cinema to the level of signification. One should thus provide an instance of how the positive content on the basis of the particularity of identity is mediated through a lack of empirical description. I will advocate preserving the idea of this kind of subjectivity throughout the whole thesis, and demonstrate that Bong Joon-ho's *The Host* (chapter 6) and more specifically Zhang Lu's films – *Grain in Ear* and *Hyazgar* (chapter 7) are pertinent to this idea.

2.2.3 From Asia Extreme to Trans-Asia Cinema

Along with the emergence of the Korean blockbuster, there has existed another tendency in

the contemporary South Korean film scene: the increasing focus on a formulaic genre convention accompanying the shift from metanarrative in the Korean New Wave films to personal and individual stories. For Moon Jae-cheol, this trend moves along two axes. First is the insistence on the need to favour an individual memory deeply rooted in the depiction of everyday life (Moon, 2006: 41-4), found in films including *Peppermint Candy* (1999) *The Foul King* (2000), *Ditto* (2000), *Bungee Jumping of Their Own* (2000), *Spring in My Hometown* (1998), *No Manners* (2002), *Silmido* (2003), and *The President's Last Bang* (2005). Second is the growing emphasis on 'visual sensation and intensive violence or physicality' (ibid.: 53) ranging from Park Chan-wook and Kim Ki-duk's films to *Friend* (2001), *Blood Rain* (2005), *A Bitter Sweet Life* (2005), and more.

Mainly focusing on the second axis, he goes on to say that it is 'the form of auteur film' (ibid.: 47) that distinguishes itself from the cinematic trope of Korean New Wave in such a way that 'in the past, Korean cinema mainly garnered international interest by depicting local Korean customs. But today Korean film no longer portrays only the local, and when it does, the method is more universal' (ibid.: 48). As a result, Park Chan-wook, Bong Joon-ho, Jang Jun-hwan, Kim Ji-woon, and Yu Seung-wan's films are employed not only to demonstrate contemporary South Korean film's increasingly blurred distinction between art and popular film, but also to prove that 'non-mainstream language that is deviant and incoherent has also become familiar and popular' (ibid.: 47). This trend, Moon argues, manifests itself in an increasing insistence on visual violence, such that it can be seen as 'the product of a drive or an impulse toward innovation' (ibid.: 53). For him, such cinematic vocabularies as shock, transgression, and innovation have become central to the distinctiveness of contemporary South Korean cinema, thus constituting what newness and innovation implies in the contemporary South Korean film scene.

As noted by Moon (see above), the films are tending to describe the national past through the tropes of genre cinema rather than the mode of the Korean New Wave. Foregrounding personal and individual history through a more fictionalised form, these films have shown us that there can be another view of imagining the national past. But the mere insistence on the need to foreground personal memory without consideration of the cinematic distortion that we cannot uncover anywhere within our everyday experience does not yield a radical way of historicising. What is more problematic is Moon's insistence on visual violence. The emphasis on intensive violence does not necessarily bring about the novelty of a filmic text. The precise implication of newness has nothing to do with this kind of representation of violence, since the visual violence based on human suffering is, basically, in collusion with the spectacular display of a human being's body in its total exposure (this point will be discussed in more detail in chapters 6 and 7, with special reference to *Silmido*, *TaeGukGi*, and *Oldboy*). The display of extreme visual violence is not necessarily an example of the horrific Real. In so far as these visceral, sensual, and brutal filmic images fail to open the door for the void itself inherent to cinematic device in their aim at 'saying it all', they do not point towards the notion of the Real I advocate throughout the whole thesis – dialectical conflicts between the content of a story and its formal aspect – but towards covering up the void with the disintegrated effect of the Real domesticated. Overall, the emergence of radical difference in terms of the ontology of filmic images is not a question of adding something in an effort to render everything seen, but of subtracting something from within the images, thus showing the fragmentary dimension of reality.

The examination of 'visual sensation' brings us to the phenomenon of Asia Extreme. The UK film and video distributor Tartan launched the Asia Extreme brand in 2001, for the purpose of distributing and marketing East Asian horror and thriller films characterised by

excessive violence. Although the Asia Extreme brand was initially designed for a distribution and marketing purpose, it is important to consider ‘how this label is fed back into the production sector’ in the sense that “‘Asia Extreme’ seems to connote a closer tie, even mutual influences among such directors as Miike [Takashi], Park [Chan-wook], Fukasaku [Kinji], and Kim [Ki-duk]’ (Choi and Wada-Marciano, 2009: 5). Choi Jinhee and Wada-Marciano Mitsuyo recognise that there is undeniable danger of Asia Extreme ‘[e]ffacing local/national specificities and fostering aesthetic relativism’(ibid.: 6). Nevertheless, they render a more positive reading of Asia Extreme by insisting that ‘[i]t carries a set of cultural assumptions and implications’, such that ‘there might be a continuity between European art cinema of the 1960s (and even the contemporary) and the Extreme cinema of the 1990s onward in the sense that some of the attractions of foreign films in the U.S. lie in the depiction of subject matters that are not easily permissible within Hollywood, such as sex, gore, and violence’ (ibid.).

In contrast, a much more compelling critique is raised by Shin Chi-Yun who argues that the Asia Extreme brand can be read as the ‘gentrification of certain East Asian films’ (Shin, 2009: 99). Equating Tartan’s categorisation of the Asia Extreme label with the ‘discovery’ of the Japanese films of Kurosawa Akira, Mizuguchi Kenji, and Ozu Yasujiro in the 1950s (ibid.: 97), Shin argues that categorisation of certain East Asian films under the banner of Asia Extreme can be read as ‘an integral part of providing illusions of discovery, that is, a way of knowing and classifying East Asian cinema’ (ibid.: 99). In line with Shin’s argument, this study aims to note the danger of the Asia Extreme brand, pointing out that the process of naming never remains neutral. If Asia Extreme films were utilised for the transgression of Hollywood’s generic terms, this shows the way contemporary visual culture is set in motion, since the global visual economy begins to reveal its effect not when it represses the

transgression but the moment that it encourages the transgression. This point will be more sustained by Brian Massumi's question of exactly how contemporary global capitalism subsumes derivative resistance: 'the more varied, and even erratic, the better. Normalcy starts to lose its hold. The regularities start to loosen. This loosening of normalcy is part of capitalism's dynamic. It's not a simple liberation. It's capitalism's own form of power. It's no longer disciplinary institutional power that defines everything, it's capitalism's power to produce variety – because markets get saturated' (Massumi, 2002: 224 cited in Žižek, 2004b: 184-5). One of the key themes through the entire thesis is that the mere emphasis on the transgression or violation of the power edifice cannot provide a true threat against power itself. That is because the power edifice always operates by positing an exceptional place beyond its system. This point will be further examined in chapter 3 regarding my critique of Judith Butler and Ernesto Laclau's account of universality. This apparent transgression is not subversive but only indicative of the way in which the global visual economy as a dominating structure rests on its own shadowy obscene dimension.

From a slightly different angle, other recent studies also indicate the limitations and pitfalls of naming. As Bliss Cua Lim rightly points out, 'the recently conspicuous, spectacularly lucrative "Asian horror film" is not only a film cycle, but also a complex generative act of naming, a discursive formation, regionalist and globalist in character, that allows an array of movies to become coherent and marketable in particular ways' (Lim, 2009: 224). At this point, it is important to ask why Asia Extreme or Asia horror film is named regionally rather than nationally. The regionalist and globalist appellation, writes Lim, 'encourages spectators and critics to downplay the differences between Hideo Nakata and the Pang brothers, directing us instead to make sense of them as part of the same phenomenon' (ibid.). I agree that global Hollywood sets off an abstract, formal, homogenising universality

by making the cinematic specificity of an individual filmic text hazy. Where the films are classified as Asian, the naming serves to homogenise them in its effort to maximise revenues across various domestic and overseas markets.

The cross-cultural traffic is not confined to the phenomenon of Asia Extreme. One of the most salient features regarding cross-cultural exchange is that there has been an increasing phenomenon for Hollywood to purchase the rights to remake contemporary South Korean films. DreamWorks purchased the remake rights to *A Tale of Two Sisters* (2003) and *My Sassy Girl* (2001). Miramax bought the remake rights to *My Wife is a Gangster* (2001). And *Siwora* (2000) was remade in Hollywood under the title of *The Lake House* (2006) (Lim, 2009: 296, n. 15). While Hollywood has played a great role in the transnational flow of cultural products, there has been a reverse process, that is, the sending of non-U.S. cultural products to Hollywood. How should we conceive of this phenomenon? Christina Klein (2003) sees it as: ‘far from weakening the South Korean industry by extracting talent from it, the studios are strengthening it by providing it with a new source of revenue’. She goes on to say that ‘Hollywood’s interest may, however, be reshaping the South Korean industry, insofar as some producers there are now tailoring their films with an eye to the Hollywood resale market’ (ibid.). In contrast to this idea, Lim (2009) suggests that ‘this is true only in the short run; over the long haul, Hollywood appropriations of Asian filmmaking (whether in terms of talent, film markets, or the distribution or cofinancing of “local” producers) are poised to extract revenue from their internationalizing of Asian cinemas’ (Lim, 2009: 232). Siding with Lim again, I argue that mere emphasis on cross-cultural exchange blurs the structural relationship of domination and subordination within the global film system. One of the major concerns regarding this phenomenon is that contemporary South Korean cinema might respond to the globalisation of national film culture by fulfilling the familiar global standard.

The popularity of the term ‘well-made film’ on the contemporary South Korean film scene might be perhaps explained from this perspective of fulfilling the global standard. Even though the definition of this term still remains obscure – it is originally derived from journalistic usage – it might refer to a situation in which recent South Korean cinema has learnt to cope with the world capitalist market. Behind the emergence of this term is an underlying hypothesis that South Korean cinema cannot compete with Hollywood in terms of the scale and size of a film’s budget, and that the strategy of South Korean cinema should thus be oriented towards the consumer culture of global postmodernity rather than simply focusing on the spectacular variety of blockbuster. According to Kim Kyoung-wook, the term ‘well-made film’ refers to ‘a Korean combination of auteurism and high concept films of the New Hollywood Era’ (2007a:387). She explores the two dominant fashions in this term. On the one hand, certain films ‘engage the audience’, writes Kim, ‘by casting actors that fit the character rather than celebrity stars and emphasising narrative over spectacle within the limits of an average budget’ (for instance, *Marathon*) (ibid.). On the other hand, other films tend towards ‘high quality as a result of investment in Korean film production’s weak areas – art, sound, and post-production’ (for example, *A Tale of Two Sisters*) (ibid.). Encompassing films with lower budgets than Korean blockbusters, the vocabulary ‘well-made film’ has also come to refer to films which were once called blockbuster, as is the case with *Silmido* and *TaeGukGi: Brotherhood of War*. I conceive of the term ‘well-made film’ as a conservative response to the normalisation of Hollywood’s dominant filmic practices. The emergence of the term ‘well-made’ can thus be understood as tied to the ‘development narrative’ in which the heterogeneity of the opaque, local indexicality is regarded as out of date and, thus, needs to be refined according to the globally recognised standard. What results is national cinema’s integration into the smooth running of global film culture.

A similar critical angle can be applied to the growing body of literature on how the phenomenon of the *Hallyu* (Korean Wave) contributes to the transformation of Korean cinema. South Korean popular culture has extended its popularity through increased international consumption, especially in East Asia. *Hallyu* indicates where the South Korean popular culture is located in a regional formation of media culture. Kim Do-kyun and Kim Min-sun (2011) argue that ‘the influence of *Hallyu* has been unprecedented, affecting the domestic cultures and international relations of Asian countries and reducing the dominance of Hollywood in the Asia media market’ (Kim and Kim, 2011: 10). They go on to say that ‘it has been constructing a cross-national identity of ready consumers of Korean popular culture’ (ibid.). In contrast to the focus on the affirmative aspect of *Hallyu*, my argument would be that the mere emphasis on transnational film experience based on cross-cultural exchange fails to produce a radical discursive mode of South Korean film scholarship.

In this respect, Mitsuhiro Yoshimoto presents very useful criteria to break down the focus on the cultural traffic by highlighting that the mere emphasis on the transnational border crossing presupposes ‘the logic of transnational capital, which de-historicises and de-politicises difference and very real boundaries in the name of multiculturalism’ (Yoshimoto, 2006: 260). By pointing out pitfalls of cross-cultural exchange, he presents the idea of ‘trans-Asian cinema’ as a critical category, in the sense that it ‘[r]efuses any unproblematic assertion of the uniqueness of Asian cinema as such, and of the various national cinemas in Asia’ (ibid.). He goes on to say that ‘trans-Asian cinema ‘produces a multiplicity of cinematic practices and critical frameworks, which are not reducible either to the false universality of Hollywood as a transnational standard or to its mirror image, the particularity of identity embraced by multiculturalism and transnational capitalism’ (ibid.). While fully agreeing with this argument, this study seeks to extend the concept of ‘trans-Asian cinema’, because what

constitutes trans-Asian cinema remains obscure. Does it refer to an external, outside and exceptional place beyond a totalising Oneness of Asian cinema, or does it tend towards the incompleteness of a certain Asian cinema, thus providing the inherent gap of Asian cinema from within? For the concept of trans-Asian cinema to be made available for the direction of my thesis, it needs to invoke incompleteness.

The redefinition of ‘trans-Asian cinema’ needs to be oriented towards the critically dialectical reading. At stake in the dialectical analysis is the analysis of form. It attempts to take an in-depth look at the way in which the repressed narrative returns in the guise of the formal aspects of a filmic text, enabling the viewer to grasp the complex tension between the dimension of narrative and the formal aspect of film. The form at work here cannot be reduced to cinematic styles or technique alone. For my purpose, it refers to the nonsensical element at which a linear unfolding of narrative space fails. ‘The pure form of dialectical mediation maintains its distance from the positive content it mediates,’ writes Slavoj Žižek, ‘only by means of its coincidence with the most inert, “nonmediated”, remainder of this content’ (Žižek, 1991: 86). By advocating the dimension of non-meaning, dialectical analysis prevents the interpretation of film from falling into the trap of signification. With this premise given, Yoshimoto’s account of ‘trans-Asian cinema’ can be fully articulated with my own viewpoint. This issue of mediation will be situated as a key tool in exploring how some contemporary South Korean films have staged the national past in chapter 5.

2.3 ‘Blockage’: From the Opposition between the Premodern and the Modern to the Opposition between the Totalising One and its Excess

The many films under the brands Korean New Wave, Korean blockbuster, and Asia Extreme

and their discussion in the field of Korean film studies do not exhaust the phenomena of contemporary South Korean cinema. So, it is necessary briefly to argue how other literature impacts upon my research project. In so doing, I will clarify that the notion of ‘blockage’ can be best term for the study of Korean cinema.

Throughout this thesis, the examination of Korean cinema exclusively concerns feature films made in South Korea, not in North Korea. In opposition to my approach, Lee Hyangjin (2001) draws attention to different ways of defining nationhood in films from the North and the South by locating Confucianism as an important reference in which these differences are constituted (Lee, 2001: 135). However, as too much emphasis is placed on premodern tropes such as Confucianism, her book remains closely caught up with culturalism, ignoring the irreducible gap immanent to ongoing processes of modernity in Korea. The authors of *Korean Film: History, Resistance, and Democratic Imagination* (2003) illuminate how cinema not only reflects, but also constructs the idea of nationhood, focusing on the question of modernisation (2003: 113-148). Han Ju Kwak (2003), one of the authors of this book, advances the theme of modernisation and modernity in another essay, by arguing that certain South Korean films – Park Kwang-su’s *Black Republic*, *A Single Spark*, Im Kwon-taek’s *Sopyonje* and *Festival*, and Hong Sang-soo’s *The Day a Pig Fell into the Well* – ‘criticize modernization for its negative effects of alienation and degradation’ (Kwak, 2003: 109). However, he concludes that despite their critical perspective, they all fail to ‘provide any practical alternative’ (ibid.). However, what that alternative would be still remains ambiguous in his account. In my view, what is missing from his account is that the core of modernity is manifested as a traumatic kernel of contradiction and tension, such that the point is to reveal how this type of contradiction is played out in a certain filmic text. Accordingly, one must further consider how the dimension of contradiction in the formal aspect can refer to the

deadlock or blockage in the development of the narrative line, thus enabling us to grasp more readily a traumatic core of modernity.

In contrast to the authors mentioned above, Kim Soyoung suggests a new path for understanding the constellation of South Korea's compressed modernity. By suggesting that South Korean film critics have been preoccupied with realism, auteurism, and melodrama, in an interview with Chris Berry, she situates 'the fantastic mode of cinema' as opening a door for reframing South Korean cinema. 'The fantastic mode of cinema', she writes, offers 'a rich platform on which to think about non-synchronous synchronicity and the working of the premodern in modernity' (Berry and Kim, 2000: 53). She focuses on the horror film, science fiction genre, and more particularly Kim Ki-young's films generated during the era of Golden Age in her book, *Spectres of Modernity: Korean Fantastic Cinema* (2000). Although it is not about contemporary Korean films, her insight directs our attention to how trope of the ghostly can undermine the ground of modernity. However, my understanding of spectrality is different from her use of it, because it focuses on the distortion of reality itself involving an ontological change of the filmic image, not in terms of subject matter. I will further develop this idea in chapter 7 through my analysis of Kim Ki-duk's *3-Iron*. And this difference will also become clearer in the course of examining the notion of 'blockage' – in Paul Willemen and Kim Soyoung's uses of the notion– here, because I do not refer to the 'blockage' between two pre-existing modes such as the modern and the premodern, but to the fact that modernity is marked by its own excess, rather than one constituted in comparison to a counterpart such as the premodern. If the notion of 'blockage' can be understood as a certain excessive or distortive point at which the ongoing formation of modernity is fossilised, I believe that it will provide an occasion to rethink a subversive framework for the understanding of the dynamics of contemporary South Korean cinema.

To illustrate this point, it is necessary to examine the notion of ‘blockage’ carefully. The notion of ‘blockage’ is first related to the difficulties experienced by the Korean New Wave films in international film circulation. The term can also be found in Tony Rayns’s essay: ‘There must be a *blockage* of some kind. That’s the only possible explanation for the west’s failure to respond to recent developments in Korean cinema’ (Rayns, 1994b: 22, emphasis mine). However, Willemen’s concept of ‘blockage’ is independent of Rayns’s use of it. He refers to ‘a blockage *within* Korean cinema’ (Willemen, 2002: 173) in which ‘both the way back to tradition and the way forward to modernity are blocked as both directions appear to open out onto anti-modernism, absolutist, and corrupting social organisations’(ibid.: 175). The notion of ‘blockage’ will be discussed soon in a more detailed way, but at the moment I will offer an overview of Willemen’s theoretical trajectory, because the dialectical reading of South Korean cinema, together with the notion of ‘blockage’, are key to clarifying my argument.

Willemen focuses on the historically critical analysis of film. This is not to say that he relies on the mere description of the history of film. Although depositing the question of history as much more primary than any other factor in interpreting the quality of a certain cinema, he makes distinctions between the mere affirmation of difference as a given particularity and the ‘workings’ of history. In my own terms, this is the distinction between the empirical account of history and the concept of history. ‘If we accept that a film is a cultural product generated by a specific historical constellation of forces’, Willemen notes, ‘one of the key issues is *also* the way we understand history itself: the way we understand the “workings” of history is a constituent part of the way we read the presence of history, that is to say, the way we read social-cultural specificity in films’ (ibid.: 182, emphasis original).

It is important to note, however, that although he privileges historically analytical

reading, he never relinquishes the importance of cinematic practice in its formal aspect. This point is manifested when he suggests that ‘modes of address in cinema’ refers to ‘the question of exactly how, through which textual mechanisms, the social/cultural dimensions of a historical experience are “readable” in a text’ (ibid.: 177). As such, the crucial point in this formulation is to consider ‘the dialectics between text and history in a manner that both respects the formal aspects of a text and the complexities of specific historical constellations’ (ibid.). For my purpose, when Willemen’s focus is to read the ‘workings’ of history through a film’s own mechanism, I believe that he shows a penetrating dialectical analysis of how to present a true threat against the context-dependent historicist approach. His point does not reside in the determination of cinematic form by economic conditions, but in the fact that, in order to understand the ‘workings’ of history, one needs to look carefully at the way in which the filmic text moves the viewer.

This formulation enables us to understand the notion of the national. He most definitely demarcates the national from both nationalist discourse and national identity. For instance, ‘[c]ompared to the US black films, the black British films are strikingly British, and yet in no way can they be construed as nationalistic. They are part of a British specificity, but not of a British nationalism’ (1994: 209). Given that nationalist discourse and identity are distinguishable from national specificity, he goes on to say that ‘[t]he construction of national specificity in fact encompasses and governs the articulation of both national identity and nationalist discourses’ (ibid.: 210). According to this logic, another example would be that ‘the concern with notions of Australianness and with national identity was a temporary component of the dominant registers of Australian cultural specificity’ (ibid.). Owing to the national’s priority over nationalist discourse and identity, it ‘will determine which, if any, notions of identity are on the agenda’ (ibid.). For Willemen, a cinema addressing the

nationally specific formation not only serves as a condition to produce both nationalist discourses and national identity, but also what moves beyond the circuit of nationalist discourses. It is at this point that Willemen's notion of the national appears in resonance with a Lacanian/Žižekian conception of the Real. If the Real can be understood as the internal deadlock which interrupts the normal functioning of reality, any similarities appear. To paraphrase Willemen's formulation for my purposes, the national is the site where one encounters the very impossibility of a single unified system of nationalist discourse and identity, because it refers to what impedes from within the closed circuit of both of them.

As mentioned in chapter 1, Willemen's elaboration on the notion of the national can be further understood as a politics of negativity exemplified in 'neither/nor' propositions. This theoretical direction figures prominently in an attempt to redefine the concept of Third Cinema on his part: 'these three filmmakers [Nelson Pereira dos Santos, Ousmane Sembene, and Ritwik Ghatak] exemplify a way of inhabiting one's culture which is neither myopically nationalist nor evasively cosmopolitan' (ibid.: 177). The pole of a 'neither/nor' is said to indicate an interminable moment of negativity between a homogenising universalism and a mere particularist claim. This point gains urgency when we consider that the simple focus on particularism in effect empowers the concept of a totalising universalism. In this respect, Willemen's 'neither/nor' also refers to the way in which a homogenising universalism with particularism as its mirror image are overlapped into an inherent tension in a filmic text. For my purpose, this is where Willemen's formulation tends towards the concept of 'concrete universality', in that the empirical events of history are incomplete from within and this incompleteness is what renders it 'non-all', thus enabling us to 'read' the complexities of a specific historical condition. To the extent that one reads complexities of social formation through a filmic text's mechanism, and this specific historical condition is revealed through

negativity itself in the form of a neither/nor pair, my viewpoint definitely has some affinity with Willemen's.

With this in mind, let us return to the notion of 'blockage'. Blockage' is not a matter of forging the politics of identity out of non-identity, but of revealing non-identity as the question of the national in a given historical situation. It refers to the negative founding condition which has provoked a multiplicity of responses through the entire history of South Korean cinema. At the same time, it also refers to the primordial deadlock out of an infinite chain of historical narrative, thus allowing us to read how a filmic text inscribes tensions in a given conjuncture. Although in line with Willemen, Kim Soyoung presents a slightly different notion of 'blockage'. In Willemen's definition, the frequency of the freeze-frame in South Korean cinema – especially in the 1970s and 1980s – is summoned as a tool for understanding the complexities of specific historical conditions. However, Kim Soyoung (2001b) points out that it is only through Kim Ki-young's films that the 'allegorical possibilities presented in the freeze-frame are actualised' (Kim, 2001b: 309). By connecting the idea of 'blockage' to allegory in the Benjaminian sense, she goes on to argue that Kim's films make the pair such as the modern and the premodern 'couple and interpenetrate, only to cancel each other out' by foregrounding 'fetishism as a way to stage the blockage of linear progression and a breakthrough into an alternative modernity' (ibid.: 312-13). In so doing, she writes that 'the very ground of modernity surges to the surface' (ibid.: 313).

While in full agreement with the political implication of negativity through the notion of 'blockage', I propose a different theoretical perspective, especially in terms of pairs such as the modern and premodern, central to Willemen's conception of 'blockage' as mentioned earlier. The difficulty of posing this theoretical framework was already raised by Willemen himself, when he fully recognises that it is impossible to distinguish sharply between the

modern and the premodern, since “we” can only speak from within modernity, and that there is no pre or post outside of it, only, to adapt Jacques Derrida’s phraseology, spectres of possible pre- or post-modernities’ (Willemen, 2002: 183). Moreover, he fully acknowledges the danger of the post-modern in a sense that ‘the latter, incidentally, are beginning to look more and more like the former, making distinctions between the directionalities of vectorial change in contemporary societies increasingly difficult to discern, which, no doubt, is the reason why the post-modern spectre is so frequently trotted out nowadays in what passes for cultural analysis’ (ibid.). Nevertheless, he highlights the centrality of separating the modern/premodern pair, because this pairing helps us better to apprehend how a filmic text addresses “the archaicising or modernising” vectors that result from any particular orchestration of the many “voices” that are discernible in the “corridor of voices” (ibid.).

While Willemen’s formulation is striking, it needs to be revised for my purposes. It can be argued that the distinction between the modern and the premodern tends towards a neat binary such as a single total coherence and its exception which is external to it. As Willemen himself recognises this danger, it is important to note here that the dimension of the premodern (or exception) tends to incarnate the logic of the modern. Given that the shadowy existence of this premodern part secretly supports the reign of modernity, the mere emphasis on the premodern never goes far enough to impair the chronological continuum of modernity. The problem also arises of what constitutes the central part of the premodern, by whom it can be defined, and under which terms it emerges out of the modern.

As far as ‘concrete universality’ is concerned here, the tension of modernity does not reside in external poles such as the modern and the premodern, but in the split from within modernity itself. In other words, there are not tensions between the competing forces of the modern and the premodern, only the totalising modernity and its gap from within. A true

attack to break down the modernity does not lie outside of it, but precisely inside of it. The task here is how to make it incomplete, or ‘not-all’ by revealing the void as the cinematic event. For my purpose, the term ‘blockage’ can be understood as a purely negative gesture – not as a positive entity – capable of staging the inherent point of deadlock within a single coherent universalism. In fact, South Korean films have responded to this deadlock in their own way. Some films have staged this deadlock through the organisation of cinematic tension, while some have obfuscated it. It is in this sense that the idea of ‘blockage’ appears as an essential tool in illuminating the dynamics at work in South Korean cinema.

2.4 Conclusion

This chapter divides the ongoing transformation of contemporary South Korean cinema into literature on industrial and discursive aspects. It is true to a certain extent that South Korean cinema is located on the semi-periphery or in the process of becoming semi-peripheral in the sense that it has not assumed a transnational dominance comparable to a U.S.-based Hollywood film. However, following Marx’s logic of ‘real subsumption’ and Hardt and Negri’s concept of Empire, this chapter has argued that the South Korean film industry is tendentially incorporated as an integral part of the global film system, not in terms of size and scale, but as one of the new *forms* of industrial organisation. By situating the South Korean film industry in a broader range of global capitalism, this chapter has argued that the changes in the local film industry are historically over-determined in parallel with the contemporary capitalist mode of production.

Although the local film industry is governed by the current capitalist system, this is not to say that the filmic text is always determined by the film industry. In other words, although

the networks of institutions governed by global capitalism necessarily embed their traces in the filmic text, there always remain contradictory tensions between filmic texts and industrialised cinematic practices. Within this framework, this chapter has also examined critical discourses concerning terms such as Korean New Wave, the Korean blockbuster, and Asia Extreme, while critically exploring the evaluative criteria by which Korean films are designated as 'new'.

With this in mind, this chapter has argued that in the case of Korean New Wave and Korean blockbuster films, these films have questioned the dominant norm of Hollywood, by putting historical material centre stage. However, the mere focus on the empirical events of history is not fully radical, because the essential core of history is the point at which the vicious circle of empirical events of history fails. It is at this point, however, that there is more continuity, rather than discontinuity, between the Korean New Wave and the Korean blockbuster. Recent South Korean cinema has witnessed an increasing number of films with a focus on visual violence. However, the preoccupation with violence at the level of representation fails to deliver radical difference, unless this violence is disturbed by the cinematic event (the void). Rather than celebrating this tendency as innovation, this chapter has proposed that global capitalism at work is fully immune to transgression based on visual violence. Moreover, it has pointed out that the mere focus on cross-cultural traffic in the era of global capitalism fails to radicalise the South Korean film scholarship.

The final section has shown that Willemsen's definition of 'blockage' can be seen as a much more helpful theoretical tool than any other theoretical perspective in the field of South Korean film studies, because of its special focus on a penetrating analysis of dialectics which both considers the formal aspect of film text and the complexities of the historical condition in a given specific historical conjuncture. However, this chapter has also argued that while

Willemsen emphasises the 'blockage' between the modern and the premodern, I emphasise the necessity of the modern and its excess as cinematic event or the void. This is where the notion of 'blockage' can emerge as the key tool for critically diagnosing the location of contemporary South Korean cinema under the umbrella of 'concrete universality'.

Chapter 3

The Dialectic between Universality and Particularity

The main purpose of this chapter is to offer a detailed overview of the theoretical framework in an attempt to better understand the notion of ‘concrete universality’. In order to achieve this goal, I will critically discuss Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau, and Slavoj Žižek’s debate in *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left* (2000)³. Given that the classical notion of universality can be defined as some common features shared by all parts in the universe, all three theorists’ emphasis is nothing to do with an extrapolation of a general principle which regulates all parts of the universe. But rather, the universal at question here must be seen as a process which never allows for an assumption that there is such a thing as universal culture. Whilst all three authors suggest ways of moving beyond a mere affirmation of any given particular identities, in order to reconstitute an emancipatory political project, each arrives at a solution from quite different directions and those directions appear to be irreconcilable with one another.

In particular, Žižek’s taxonomy of universality shows a sustained discordance with Butler’s and Laclau’s accounts of universality. While both Butler and Laclau claim that political practice takes place within the parameters of the present horizon, only Žižek repeatedly challenges the horizon itself, precisely because he develops his notion of universality with specific reference to both capitalism and class antagonism. In line with

³ Hereafter, all references to this work will appear parenthetically in the text with the page number preceded by a letter representing the name of the contributor (JB=Judith Butler, EL=Ernesto Laclau, SŽ=Slavoj Žižek). Where no letter is presented, the quotation is from the section co-authored by all three.

Žižek, I will clarify the point of each different theoretical perspective, and demonstrate why Butler and Laclau's account of the universal fails to provide a new way of thinking of radical alterity. According to Žižek, the notion of 'concrete universality' concerns the 'uncanny point at which the universal genus *encounters itself* within its own particular species' (Žižek, 2002c: 34, emphasis original). As far as film is concerned, it can be best defined as the point at which an individual filmic text meets its non-identity in the form of its opposite, echoing precisely the concept of the Real in a Lacanian/Žižekian perspective. To put it more concretely, the repressed narrative content in a given filmic text manifests itself in a formal feature, because of its intrinsic impossibility to become itself completely. A certain formal procedure is not a matter of representing a certain aspect of the narrative line, but of indicating the fundamental self-contradiction in the explicit narrative line. 'Concrete universality' can, thus, refer to the dialectical tension between form and content within the force-field of a certain filmic text.

At the same time, in this chapter I will further argue that the concept of 'concrete universality' needs to be articulated with Gilles Deleuze's notion of cinema, because Deleuze's idea can push to the limit the revelation of the ontological question of film. By demonstrating that a Deleuzian notion of time-image and a Lacanian/ Žižekian notion of the Real can be articulated on the condition that both conceptions are clearly at odds with an empirical view of time under the umbrella of the transcendental, this section will provide a theoretical framework for developing the study of contemporary South Korean cinema.

This chapter will argue that the problem with Butler's theory of the universal derives from the lack of an inherent gap within identity. By focusing on the idea that a new identity is constituted by displacement of symbolic authority which bestows on the subject his or her identity, what Butler misses is that the difference which distinguishes one from another

identity bars one identity from within, hindering it from gaining full self-identity. What results from this is that Butler too easily falls into an empiricist approach. Some recent studies of South Korean national cinema based on cultural translation, in which South Korean cinema borrows genre convention from Hollywood but localises its content to pluralise the generic format, thus fail to provide a sustained consideration of how contemporary South Korean cinema gains radical newness.

In contrast to Butler, Laclau's account of the universal is based on the assumption that the difference which separates one identity from another 'reflects' itself within one identity, as the internal impossibility of gaining its full self-identity. Even though Laclau's theory of the universal provides a more fruitful tool than Butler's for introducing a limit-case to suspend infinite chains of (re)signification, I will show that this kind of limit-case does not reinvigorate the dialectical tension between the dimension of historical change and its traumatic, non-historical kernel at the core of historical change.

Overall, by delineating how a new conceptualisation of the universal such as 'concrete universality' is a much more fruitful concept than Butler and Laclau's theory, and in considering an evaluative criteria by which contemporary South Korean cinema is shown to be radically different, this chapter aims to demonstrate the applicability of the notion of 'concrete universality' into the field of South Korean film studies.

3.1 'Concrete Universality' as the Real and the Time-Image

This section will clarify the concept of 'concrete universality', thus presenting in what ways it is useful to adopt this concept in discussing a new vision of the film image. In a further move, I will argue that Deleuze's idea of the time-image can be understood through the

framework of a dialectical reading in a Lacanian/Žižekian mode. In so doing, I will present a theoretical framework for understanding the notion of a true radical otherness and difference in the study of contemporary South Korean cinema.

The notion of ‘concrete universality’ can be defined as initially appearing as one of the particulars, and at the same time as a supplementary particular that ‘encounters itself in the form of its opposite’ (Butler, 2005: 60). For Žižek, the notion of ‘concrete universality’ is not a matter of ‘the encompassing container of the particular content, the peaceful medium-background of the conflict of particularities’, but of ‘the site of an unbearable antagonism, self-contradiction’ (Žižek, 2009: 34) of a certain particular. In other words, ‘concrete universality’ refers to the point at which a certain particular meets its fundamental non-identity with itself. ‘Concrete universality’ precisely concerns the notion of the Real. As emphasized in previous chapters, to the extent that the Real refers to the fundamental limit of reality, ‘concrete universality’ can be defined as the ultimate gap of that reality. For this reason, while the particular is related to reality, ‘concrete universality’ entails a distorted piece of reality in the normal operation of reality.

In order to explore further the notion of the Real, it is necessary to understand the relationship between the Real and reality. Even though reality does not precisely signal any system of signification, it is deeply associated with it. As Sean Homer (2005) puts it, ‘for Jacques Lacan, our reality consists of symbols and the process of signification’. So, ‘what we call reality’, writes Homer, ‘is associated with the symbolic order or “social reality”’ (Homer, 2005: 81). This is not to say that one should ignore an external, material world. A tsunami, for example, exists independently of signification. However, whether tsunami can be seen as “natural phenomena” or “expressions of the wrath of God” relies on ‘the discursive articulation interpellating the social subject’ (Glynos and Stavrakakis, 2004: 204). This is

what Jacques Lacan (1998) implies when he argues that ‘there is no such thing as a prediscursive reality. Every reality is founded and defined by a discourse’ (Lacan, 1998: 32).

Within this context, the Real can be first defined as ‘*a grimace of reality*’ (Žižek, 2002c: xxvii, emphasis original). For Žižek, the Real is simply ‘a distorted perspective on reality – it is ‘something which only shines through such a distortion, since it is “in itself” completely without substance’ (ibid.). ‘The Devil’s face appearing amid tornado clouds in the *News of the World* cover photo’, argues Žižek, can be an example illustrating the notion of the Real. For this reason, the Real is ‘the obstacle (the proverbial “bone in the throat”)’ which perpetually destabilises ‘our perception of reality, producing anamorphic stains in it’ (ibid.).

However, this is not to say that the Real belongs to the level of pre-symbolic reality such as raw nature. The Real does not refer to an outside that is completely beyond the socio-historical dimension, but to the very gap from within the socio-historical dimension. It is always there and is covered up by the social construction. In this sense, the Real, paradoxically, works in two ways. First, it works as the condition of possibility needed to generate a multiplicity of socio-historical constructions. In other words, the Real is what comes before the socio-historical dimension. Therefore, all social constructions can be seen as answers or responses to it. Second, the Real serves as the ultimate gap resisting any system of social construction. In this sense, it is what comes after the construction (Myers, 2003: 27). To sum up, whilst the Real refers to the fundamental limit of symbolisation, any symbolisation can be seen as an attempt to reconcile the unbearable impact of the Real. For my purpose, much focus is on how the Real destabilises symbolisation.

Moreover, the Real is also not true reality but a distortion itself of reality, with a gap inserted in reality. It is a purely empty point of negativity (a void) with no positive-substantial status in the normal functioning of reality. Therefore, every substantial form of this void in its

attempt to fill up this void is not related to the Real. Žižek has several names for the concept of the Real: suture, antagonism, gaze, subject, and the non-historical in certain historical situations to name a few. Whatever differences there are, those conceptions are converged on a single conception: the Real. For the same reason, whatever terms I will use in the following chapters all refer to one conceptual point – the Real. All of them refer to an empty space of negativity where the normal operation of reality breaks down. To consider contemporary South Korean cinema through the lens of ‘concrete universality’, thus means to look at the relationship to the Real that the selected films take up.

To elaborate further on the idea of the Real, let us ground it through the example of Hans Holbein's *The Ambassadors* (1553). Holbein's portrait is one of the most often-cited examples for Jacques Lacan and Slavoj Žižek (Lacan, 1978: 85-90; Žižek, 1992: 90-1). Holbein's painting is simply a portrait of two foreign envoys at the court of Henry VIII. When we initially look at the painting, we may feel that a blot at the bottom of the painting is a strange but not quite eccentric element in its meaning structure. This part of the picture, viewed straight on, appears as an ordinary object. This is what we call reality in psychoanalytic terms. However, when we change our perspectives and positions, we can perceive that the blot at the bottom of the painting is a skull looking *back* at us. When we perceive that the ordinary, normal element is transformed into an uncanny element, the symbolic structure of the painting is completely destabilised. The shift indicates a sudden intrusion of the Real out of reality. It also concerns how reality is founded on the underlying abyss of the Real and the Real is a ‘stain’ that ultimately eludes our sense of reality. However, simply to interpret the distorted skull as the example of the Real would miss the point, because the Real is a certain distortion as such rather than any substantialised form of that distortion. The Real is not something material which gives body to that distortion. If the Real

can be defined in terms of topology, the Real is not a material element existing in space, but ‘a certain *curvature of the space itself* which causes us to make a bend precisely when we want to get directly at the object’ (Žižek, 1991: 48, emphasis original). It is simply ‘a topological twist’ (Žižek, 2004c: 78).

The Real also concerns trauma. Yet one needs to consider that the psychoanalytic conception of trauma is slightly different from the normal definition of trauma. In the media, we often hear about traumatic events such as car crashes, war, murder crime, and so on. In everyday language, a traumatic event is said to completely influence a person’s mind, causing him or her severe mental suffering. However, the notion of trauma in terms of Lacanian psychoanalysis is a bit different from that, because ‘a trauma is not necessarily something that happens to a person “in reality”’ (Homer, 2005: 83). But rather, trauma here concerns ‘a *psychical* event’ (ibid., emphasis original). ‘Psychic trauma’, writes Homer, ‘arises from the confrontation between an external stimulus and the subject’s inability to understand and master these excitations’ (ibid.). Given that trauma refers to the ultimate gap of symbolisation, it can be associated with a point of non-sense which derails any system of signification. In other words, trauma is ‘indifferent’ (Myers, 2003: 25) to the process of interpretations. The idea of trauma, thus, implies that there is a certain breaking point which forever prevents the process of signification. According to Tony Myers, perhaps AIDS would be a good example for understanding the idea of the Real in terms of non-sense.

Some people interpret it as a punishment for homosexuals, a divine retribution for carrying on a non-Christian way of life. Others see it as part of a plot by the CIA to stem population growth in Africa, while other people consider it the result of humankind’s interference in Nature (Myers, 2003: 26).

If AIDS can be seen as the eruption of the Real, it is not because it has a significant meaning, but because it is senseless in itself. It only refers to the simple fact of disease. On the contrary, all the interpretations mentioned above go around a point of non-meaning. They can be seen as attempts to obfuscate an eruption of the Real, by signifying it. While signification is said to interpret and give body to a point of non-sense in the structure of the meaning, the Real is ‘the excess that remains behind and resists Symbolization, appearing only as a failure or void in the Symbolic’ (ibid.: 27).

Žižek equates the Real with ‘the fundamental *antagonism* at the root of all societies’ in terms of social theory (Homer, 2005: 113, emphasis original). Hence, all social community is grounded on ‘a traumatic moment of social conflict’ (ibid.) and the ideological fantasy conceals the revealing of the traumatic moment, because when the traumatic moment is made visible, social reality is also broken down. In order to maintain its stable set of meanings, one of the pieces from that social reality should intervene here by means of filling in the void inherent in the social structure. Let us return to the case of AIDS. All the interpretations regarding the eruption of AIDS can be understood as the case of ideological fantasy, because AIDS simply concerns a void which forever eludes the process of signification. We do not know why it happened and who was responsible for it. In this sense, those interpretations mentioned above can be understood as avoiding the confrontation with the inherent void in society, by externalising the void into external figures. Moreover, these interpretations are predicated on the fact that if there were no AIDS, we would constitute a harmonious society: AIDS is posited as that which destroys the harmonious state of society. In contrast to the idea which presupposes a harmonious society, that is, an impossible fullness of society, the key focus should be on the fact that the social is always-already split from inside. Hence, what

matters in terms of the interpretation of AIDS is not to understand it as God's 'expressing divine omnipotence': instead, it should be read as '*a sign of God's (the big Other's) own impotence*' (Žižek, 2008: 170, emphasis original).

In order to develop the notion of the Real as a key tool for exploring the contemporary South Korean cinema, it is necessary to define it in terms of differential ontology. In my strict structural terminology, every single being belongs to the realm of the particular, regardless of differences. The rule of being is, thus, based on differences. For example, I am different from you and you are different from me, and every being is different from each other. But this is not to say that differences by themselves gain radical alterity. To borrow from Alain Badiou's provocative remarks about cultural and other forms of difference, 'differences are what there is, and since every truth is the coming-to-be of that which is not yet, so differences are then precisely what truths depose, or render insignificant' (Badiou, 2001: 27). Consider that for Badiou, truth is another name for the notion of the Real, that is, the void in the Lacanian perspective; in my conceptualisation, Badiou's concept of truth is therefore replaced with the question of radical alterity.

In the same vein, Žižek's ontology shares a similar structure with Badiou's: the void and its semblance in the elements that fill it up. Žižek's characterisation of 'concrete universality' in terms of ontology can be summarised in the following way: 'the definition of society is to be found neither in any of its various descriptions nor in their combination, but in the very split they indicate... It is in the sense that Žižek can say that each genus has only two species, the genus itself and that void for which it stands in' (Butler and Stephens, 2005b: 360). This brings us to Žižek's core ontological thesis, that is, how the externally opposed elements of the One can be transformed into a single inherent impossibility of the One – this is what Žižek calls 'minimal difference'. 'Minimal difference' is "pure" difference that differentiates

an element not from other particular elements but from *itself*, from its own place of inscription' (Žižek, 2004b: 64). In order for universality to be 'concrete universality', external, pre-existing differences between the Self and the Other are overlapped with the immanent fissure within the Self itself. 'Minimal difference' is not the gap between its two externally opposite elements, but the gap of the One with itself that grounds the traumatic encounter with the Real, never allowing for the gap itself to be filled with a wide range of metonymic chains of signifiers.

Let us return again to the case of Holbein's *The Ambassadors*. As mentioned earlier, it is the anamorphic effect of the painting exemplified in the skull-blot at the bottom of the painting that throws our control through the look into confusion. When viewed from the side, the skull-blot 'sticks out' from the surface and undermines our normal field of vision. How is this painting relevant for the understanding of 'minimal difference'? Given that 'minimal difference' entails the difference which differentiates itself from within, not the difference which separates an element from other elements, it enables us to explore what spectatorship is meant to be. The question of spectatorship is not confined to the relativism that considers spectatorship as a process separated from the text itself. This type of reception studies is much more problematic when it merely affirms the description of individual differences among the viewers. For my purpose, the key question on spectatorship is not so much outside the text as an insidious fissure within the text itself. The main contradiction is not placed on the relationship between the text and the viewer, but on the non-identity of the text itself. This does not mean that we pay no attention to the existence of the viewer. But instead, the process of spectatorship is not extrinsic, but intrinsic to the text itself. As is the case with Holbein's painting, it is only through the distortion of the painting that the painting is 'subjectivized', because it 'undermines our position as a "neutral", "objective" observer, pinning us to the

observed object itself': 'this is the point at which the observer is already included, inscribed in the observed scene' (Žižek, 1992: 91).

This is where Žižek is most definitely distinguishable from Butler and Laclau. In brief, if Butler and Laclau focus on the hegemonic struggle within a present horizon, only Žižek interrogates the horizon itself. For him, Both Butler and Laclau depend on 'an abstract a priori formal model (of hegemony, of gender performativity) which allows, within its frame, for the full contingency (no guarantee of what the outcome of the fight for hegemony will be, no last reference to the sexual constitution' (SŽ: 111). For him, however, Butler and Laclau fall into the trap of 'a logic of "spurious infinity": no final resolution, just the endless process of complex partial displacements' (ibid.). Žižek argues that Butler and Laclau's postmodern politics with more focus on a certain historical horizon is not fully radical, to the extent that they silently presuppose a 'non-thematised, "naturalised" framework of economic relations' (SŽ:108). For Žižek, Butler and Laclau belong to historicism because 'every version of historicism relies on a minimal 'ahistorical' formal framework defining the terrain within which the open and endless game of contingent inclusions/exclusions, substitutions, renegotiations, displacements, and so on, takes place'. In order to move beyond historicism, truly radical politics, writes Žižek, should involve 'the dialectical tension between the domain of historical change itself and its traumatic 'ahistorical' kernel qua its condition of (im) possibility' (SŽ: 112). This is why I side with Žižek. In my view, when there is no separation between a certain historical horizon and its traumatic non-historical moment as in the case of both Butler and Laclau, what results is an empirical account of history. The focus on empiricism prevents us from addressing the notion of radical difference and otherness. That is because radical alterity does not arise from the dispersed displacements within a particular historical horizon, but from the staging of the fundamental exclusion of the Real that

constitutes the horizon itself. Insofar as the question of otherness and difference is regarded as a given, based on established recognition of difference, it is not germane to the realm of radical otherness. This is where the concept of ‘concrete universality’, that is, the Real provides a useful tool for thinking about the question of difference differently, because it can be defined first and foremost as the radical non-identity of a particular being: where a particular being meets its inherent contradiction with itself.

I have explored the notion of ‘concrete universality’ with its special reference to the notion of the Real and explained why I agree with Žižek. Then, in what ways is Lacanian psychoanalysis applicable to the analysis of film? Just as social reality is structured around the traumatic situation, so film is structured around the void. Due to the void’s priority over the pieces which fill it, even the most ideological film is ‘a priori fragmentary’ (Žižek, 1997: 18-9). The success of an individual filmic text depends on the ‘artist’s capacity to turn this lack into an advantage – skilfully to manipulate the central void and its resonance in the elements that encircle it’ (ibid.:19). Seen in this light, to analyse contemporary South Korean films within the larger framework of ‘concrete universality’ (or the Real) entails looking at how an individual filmic object meets its non-identity. Although part of the numerous filmic objects, a certain filmic object is conveyed to stand out as an inherent non-identity of the filmic text, one that has no positive place in the development of narrative space. Radical difference is only possible to the extent that the determined identity of a certain filmic object meets its internal contradiction. It is not about ‘adding’, but about ‘subtracting’ something, or to put it another way ‘adding a certain “nothing”’, such that ‘what was originally given is incomplete’ (Butler, 2005: 38). Radical alterity initially emerges out of a concrete situation in narrative space, one amongst other filmic objects. But what is at stake here is that, emerging out of the situation, it cannot refer back to the previous ontological status out of which it

arises. It concerns something which is ontologically different as it cannot be reduced to its earlier model. It is in this sense that Adrian Johnston (2008) epitomises Žižek's ontology in terms of a transcendental materialist theory, which 'affirms both that this more-than-material negativity arises from materiality and that this negativity, once generated, subsequently remains, at least in part, separate from and irreducible to its material base/ground' (Johnston, 2008: 275). In order for 'concrete universality' or the Real to appear, the external limitations of the narrative line leave traces within the film, thus keeping it from gaining its full identity. Thus, the formal procedure of the film and the narrative line overlap with the immanent fissure within the filmic text itself. This fissure is not the gap between two externally opposite elements, but the gap within the film itself, never allowing the gap itself to be filled with a wide range of metonymic chains of signifiers. For my purpose, it refers to an examination of how a kind of disruptive element in a filmic text's formal structure disturbs the diegetic reality, thus revealing a certain curvature in the ordering of filmic images. This notion can also be tied to examining how a certain filmic text reveals the non-historical within the historical context, thus allowing us to cognitively map out a given historical context.

It is necessary to take a step further. Although Žižek notes the importance of tension between formal procedure and narrative space within a certain filmic text, less attention is placed on what cinema is and what cinema can be. Furthermore, he often tends to give concrete examples of films to illustrate psychoanalytic concepts. This tendency is, for instance, manifested when he directly identifies the monstrous 'alien' in the analysis of Ridley Scott's *Alien* (1979) with the Real (Žižek, 1989: 78-9). As Stephen Heath (1999) claims, 'Žižek's has, in fact, little to say about "institution", "apparatus", and so on, all the concerns of the immediately preceding attempts to think cinema and psychoanalysis' (Heath, 1999: 44). It is here that Žižek's use of 'concrete universality' can be articulated with a

Deleuzian notion of cinema, given that cinema can be understood in terms of time and movement (and furthermore thought): an articulation of the Real with the time-image deeply rooted in the virtual. If both conceptions move beyond the empirical description of reality (the Real versus reality and the virtual versus the actual), it does not seem to be at odds to bring together these two quite differential theoretical angles. To the extent that both conceptions highlight the centrality of events which have no material existence but are nonetheless the stuff of existence, and that they concern the subtraction from the representational logic of the world, they can be related to the staging of the ontological question of film: the question of how the filmic object is made, classified, and reordered.

Žižek contends in *Organs without Bodies* (2004b) that the Deleuzian idea of the virtual refers to the fundamental excess or surplus which always forestalls actualised experience of everyday life, identifying it with a Lacanian notion of the Real. Žižek's reinterpretation of Deleuze seems to be at odds with Deleuze's own viewpoint. Is it not Deleuze himself who strongly opposes the transformative process of the indefinite flow of becoming to the void of discursive structure favoured by psychoanalysis? This line manifests itself in *Anti-Oedipus* (1983) and *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987). Žižek, however, offers us a quite different interpretation of Deleuze, suggesting that there is another version of Deleuze which has some affinity with psychoanalysis, particularly late Lacanian thought in which much attention is paid to the Real. To make this case, Žižek starts by interrogating the ontological status of the virtual. For Žižek, Deleuze's notion of the virtual is disjunct from the ordinary usage of the term – for instance, virtual reality. The virtual, says Žižek, has to be considered not as the second-hand simulacra of reality (as in 'virtual reality') but as the transcendental dimension 'which is infinitely RICHER than reality' (Žižek, 2004b: 4).

Let us clarify the notion of the virtual and the actual in the Deleuzian sense and explain

how they are related to psychoanalytic notions of the Real and the Symbolic. For Deleuze, the virtual and the actual are ‘two mutually exclusive, yet jointly sufficient, characterisations of the real’ (Boundas, 2010: 300). While virtual/real lies on the side of an infinite field of potentialities of Events, actual/real refers to corporeal entities, present things, and state of affairs. To the extent that the virtual entails the Events, they are not ‘bodies’, but ‘the incorporeal effects which result from bodies’ (Deleuze, 2003: 4-5). To put it another way, while the actual refers to ‘real acts in the present, experienced reality, and persons as formed individuals’, the virtual concerns ‘the field of proto-reality, of multiple singularities, impersonal elements later synthesized into our experience of reality’ (Žižek, 2004b: 19). The virtual is, thus, the pure ‘effect’ of corporeal bodies. It does not exist by itself, but parasitizes its actualisation. It is a supplement and/or excess emanating from the surface of the corporeal entities. The virtual incompatibly coexists with the actual as experienced reality: sometimes it disappears into the actual, but sometimes it emerges out of the actual. However, the virtual and the actual never have the same ontological status. ‘Without being or resembling the actual’, Constantin V. Boundas explains, ‘the virtual nonetheless has the capacity to bring about actualisation and yet the virtual never coincides or can be identified with its actualisation’ (Boundas, 2010: 300).

Although there are deep theoretical differences between Lacan and Deleuze, the pair of the virtual and actual can be understood as tied to the pole of the Real and the Symbolic in a psychoanalytic sense. First, insofar as the Real concerns a point of disruption in the constitution of reality, which allows no room for substantial identity in the order of reality, the notion of the Real can be seen as tied to the virtual in the Deleuzian sense. To relate the virtual to the Lacanian notion of the Real is possible, because they all belong to something beyond the order of reality. They never entail obvious entities in the order of experienced

reality, only referring to an Event subtracted from within corporeal materiality. For the same reason, the Symbolic in psychoanalysis is related to the actual in the sense that both conceptions are related to the logic of reality/corporeality. As mentioned earlier, we should consider that the Symbolic is not reality itself, but constitutive of what we call reality.

For the same reason, the notion of the subject in psychoanalysis exactly corresponds to the level of the virtual, not its actualisation. Let us suppose that the subject is another name for the notion of the Real. Subject does not mean a person. Person is said to imply ‘the order of actualized reality, designating the wealth of positive features and properties that characterize an individual’ (Žižek, 2004b: 68). On the contrary, the notion of the subject – the Real – designates ‘the *reemergence of the virtual within the order of actuality*’ (ibid., emphasis original). It is ‘the unique space of the explosion of virtuality within constituted reality’ (ibid.). To sum up, the subject is the instance of purely *impersonal* potentialities or singularity coexisting with the actual space of individuated, personal, and self-claimed identity.

Insofar as the virtual and the Real are conceptions that refer to the void with no positive/material existence, we should focus on how the virtual emerges from the mutually intermixing corporeal entities rather than how the corporeal entities actualise themselves from this field of the virtual. Priority should be given to the former (immaterial effect of corporeal bodies) because, without the virtual, the mere emphasis on its actualisation points towards the politics of identity based on empiricism. As Žižek puts it, Deleuze’s whole point is that, although the virtual is the effect of material causality, ‘it does have an autonomy and efficiency [sic] of its own’ (2004b: 31). If an immaterial effect takes place from the material background, it never returns to the former ontological status. Although the virtual cannot be reduced to the former material background, it has its own relative autonomy. Žižek highlights

this point in the following: ‘One should return to Badiou and Deleuze, since they really and thoroughly reject reductionism. The assertion of the ‘autonomy’ of the level of Sense-Event is for them not a compromise with idealism, but a *necessary* thesis of a true materialism’ (Žižek, 2004b: 32, emphasis original).

Žižek, however, argues that Deleuze oscillates in his entire philosophical direction between the infinite flow of becoming as the ground which ‘produces’ the corporeal entities in terms of the ontological status of Being and interpreting the Sense-Event as the ‘effect’ of corporeal bodies, one that is extracted from material network of objects, but has its own ‘autonomous’ logic (ibid.: 26-32). Žižek’s overarching concern in *Organs without Bodies* (2004b) is to recover Deleuze’s latter aspect, stressing that the former stands in as the *productive* ground for corporeal materialisation. For Žižek, Deleuze’s early emphasis on corporeal materialisation is partly due to a ‘Guattarized’ Deleuze, precisely because this line of Deleuze’s thought is expressed in the books co-authored with Felix Guattari, particularly in *Anti-Oedipus* and *A Thousand Plateaus* (ibid: 21). In Žižek’s view, the dimension of ‘productive becoming’ is dangerous, precisely because it rests on a naïve dichotomies such as the molecular versus the molar, and by calling one practice a single coherent unity and another a multiplication of differences. This line of Deleuze’s thought obfuscates how the seemingly opposing poles indeed interpenetrate and complement each other. Too stark an opposition between the Nomadic and the State neglects that nomadic resistance can be fully consistent with the contemporary logic of capitalism in the sense that today’s capitalism never forestalls intensifying molar intensities as long as it can extract surplus-value from them.

In opposition to this direction, there is another theoretical line in Deleuze. This line emphasises the significance of the virtual as the Sense-Event which is irreducible to a certain

person or state of things, as is shown in the case of *The Logic of Sense* (2003) and *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image* (1986) and *Cinema 2: The Time-Image* (1989). In the course of distinguishing between corporeally existing bodies and incorporeal Events, what Deleuze gives priority in the *Logic of Sense* is incorporeal Events in which they are ‘effects’ of the interconnection of bodies. For Deleuze, whilst only bodies possess real existence, Events drift on the surface of bodies, such that they are far away from existence; they can be said to be a ‘nonexisting entity’ which ‘subsist[s] or inhere[s]’ in the mutual mixture between bodies (Deleuze, 2003: 5). Deleuze’s main interest in the *Logic of Sense* is how to conceive of the passage from corporeal existence to incorporeal surface, and how to recognise that this domain of the incorporeal surface of Events emerges without their recourse to material existence.

This leads us to further consider the status of non-sense. For, it is only through non-sense that Deleuze’s notion of Sense-Event appears. What makes Deleuze’s Sense compelling is that Sense emerges out of its internal obstacle – non-sense – without recourse to any external condition. In order to instantiate the nonsensical nature of Sense, Deleuze borrows structuralist terms such as ‘signifier’ and ‘signified’. He is stressing ‘a paradoxical element’ (ibid.: 50) in order to explain both convergence and divergence of the two series. This paradoxical element, says Deleuze,

belongs to no series: or rather it belongs to both series at once and never ceases to circulate throughout them. It has therefore the property of always being displaced in relation to itself, of ‘being absent from its own place’, its own identity, its own resemblance, and its own equilibrium. It appears in one of the series as an excess, but only on the condition that it would appear at the same time in the other as a lack... But above all, we can conclude that there is no structure without the empty square, which makes everything function (ibid.: 51).

In Deleuze's view, structure is constituted by the constantly mutual (dis) location between the two series; signifiers and signifieds. The 'paradoxical element' here refers to non-sense. The crucial point here is that the two series of signifiers and signifieds always involve a 'paradoxical element' that disturbs the balance of the structure, such that if one removes non-sense itself, one cannot arrive at the dimension of Sense. It is precisely in this manner that this 'paradoxical element' is equivalent to the Lacanian notion of the Real. Deleuze's emphasis on non-sense in *The Logic of Sense* is what constitutes 'sterile' becoming contrary to the constant flow of 'productive' becoming against the molar unification. In the opposition between 'productive' and 'sterile', 'sterile' becoming becomes important, says Žižek, since each of these conceptions brings about crucially different political consequences. Žižek recognises that the dimension of 'productive becoming' seems to be more clearly 'political' because it brings about 'the self-organization of the multitude of molecular groups that resist and undermine the molar, totalizing systems of power', while acknowledging that the 'sterility of the Sense-Event appears apolitical' (2004b: 32). However, Žižek responds to such a crucial question in the following way: 'what if there is another Deleuzian politics to be discovered here?'; 'what if the domain of politics is inherently "sterile", the domain of pseudo causes, a theatre of shadows, but nonetheless crucial in transforming reality?' (ibid). Deleuze's emphasis on the 'sterility' of the Sense-Event is political par excellence. That is because Deleuze's tendency for an anti-power critique based on 'productive becoming' misses a crucial point; that there is always a third party between power and resistance. Whether or not resistance is bound up in the systems of power rests above all on the way each resistance is articulated with the 'sterility' of the Sense-Event, that is, non-sense. For this reason, the radical non-identity of a particular filmic image based on the 'sterility' of the

Sense-Event, which both explodes the mere description of historical circumstances and any substantial positivity, in my view, presents a key site of the political struggle in the field of film studies and, furthermore, in national cinema studies, since screen form based on communication and information cannot appear to challenge the dominant visual regime. It is only through the seemingly ‘apolitical’ area that the ground of contemporary capitalism is challenged, since it presents ‘the site of an unbearable antagonism’, the point which is not reducible to the capital relation in our historically specific conjuncture of capitalism.

To clarify the affinity between Deleuze and a Lacanian/Žižekian viewpoint in the *Time-Image*, I will highlight the notion of ‘interstice’ and thought. To begin this, one needs to distinguish between interval and interstice. In the empirical succession of time in a movement-image, the interval separating any two spatial parts is functional to mark the end of the first part and the start of the second (Deleuze, 1989: 277). The interval here serves as a measure to enhance the representation of actions as a linear succession of spatial segmentation. Accordingly, time is subordinated to movement and is calculated only dynamically. However, with the advent of the time-image, what we can see is that ‘the interval is set free, the interstice becomes irreducible and stands on its own. The first consequence is that the images are no longer linked by rational cuts, but are relinked on to irrational cuts’ (ibid.). The interstice marks the lack of its own place within the association of filmic images, such that it does not name a given, empirical, and linear time which defines past and future as earlier or later elements in a rule of chronological succession. The interstice also concerns the revealing of cinematic event. As Tom Conley (2000) puts it, ‘the interstice becomes what *exhausts* – and thereby creates – whatever space remains of the image in the sensory-motor tradition. It supersedes the interval and, by doing so, multiples the happenings of events’ (Conley, 2000: 319-20, emphasis original).

In the course of the shift from interval to interstice, cinema confronts us with the question of thought. What distinguishes Deleuze from other film theory, writes D. N. Rodowick, arises from Deleuze's special focus on cinema's capacity to invoke thought (Rodowick, 1997: 174). The movement-image and the time-image have their own distinct regimes as ways of relating movement and time to thought. However, for Deleuze, it is only through the time-image that a direct presentation of time and thought appears. The time-image splits the present between the past and the future, leaving open the irrational gap between the movement-image and the time-image. In so doing, time as exemplified in the time-image reveals an 'impower' of thought. Cinema's founding task is to reveal 'this difficulty of being, this powerlessness at the heart of thought' (Deleuze, 1989: 166). This task is not to make this 'impower' of thought readable, but to unveil unthought itself, which is out of joint with its own place. If 'concrete universality' can be defined as a 'deadlock' and/or 'blockage' that happens to us by shattering our ordinary reality, this formulation can also be applied to Deleuze's idea, in that an 'impower' of thought concerns the way of confronting the crack, fissure, and gap between the image and thought. If there is such a thing as the essence of cinema, it would only be through the thinking of a powerlessness – 'a dispossession of thought in relation to the image' – that makes it possible (Rodowick, *ibid.*: 190). This gap itself concerns the way of radically decoupling images and sounds and images and thought, and so on. This is where 'concrete universality' takes place insofar as it concerns the way a certain filmic image is inherently inconsistent and internally asymmetrical with itself.

3.2 'Official Universality' versus 'Spectral Universality'

This section examines how Butler's notion of universality is deployed, with its specific reference to cultural translation. This leads us to examine the complex issue of what local translation means, and to consider whether the practice of translation in its relation to South Korean film scholarship is useful or not.

Butler suggests that a new reading of the role of translation as a concept in cultural theory can provide a fruitful analysis of the way in which, in the process of reiterating mimicry, the original meaning is contaminated, such that translation serves to question, subvert, and resignify the origin of the dominant power. By relating the issue of translation to the relationship between universality and particularity, she develops her own idea of the relationship between particularity and universality, drawing on Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's notion of universality. In Butler's reading of Hegel's critique of Kantian formal universality, universality is always divided between an 'official universality' and a 'spectral universality' (JB: 23). For Butler, 'official universality' based on the process of abstraction is set in motion by excluding a concrete, individual case of particularity. Thus, the definition of 'official universality' is dependent on its capacity to 'vanish' the very functioning of concretion. That is, it refers to a 'name' at first glance which reduces all the particularities to a single universal plane. However, it would be wrong to construe the formalism of 'official universality' as being only about the very functioning of abstraction. Butler stresses that, in the process of the abstraction of the particular into the universal, there always remains an 'unassimilable remainder, which renders universality ghostly to itself' (JB: 24). Where 'official universality' is replaced with 'spectral universality', Butler redefines the process as 'cultural translation'. When universality is always contaminated and haunted by the intrusion of particular things, the practice of 'cultural translation' can reveal where the dominant language loses control through mimetic strategy. It is also important to note here that Butler's

theoretical framework does not gesture towards mere emphasis on some particularity, but towards an articulation of particularities with respect to their close relations with universality: ‘the particular is excluded from the universal, and this exclusion becomes the condition for the relation of representation that the particular performs in relation to the universal’ (JB: 166).

Where is, then, the spectral dimension located between the universal and the particular? Even though the spectral existence clings to the universal in the first stage, it always occupies both the universal and the particular at the same time, such that it is never reducible to either of them. As the site of the failed attempts of abstract, homogenising universality, spectral existence manifests the impossibility of continuing to separate the particular from the universal. Depositing some of the particularity, which is contaminated by universality, back into universality itself, the opposition between the particular and the universal turns out to be ‘competing universalities’ within the field of a totalising ‘official universality’.

However, for Žižek, the weak point of Butler’s account, characterised by lack of the void in its purely formal dimension, is that she is drawn into too many empiricist problematics: as a result, spectral existence is said to be identified with a positive entity. To assimilate spectral existence with those excluded from the social field, Butler tends to point towards the identitarian mode of practice deeply anchored in the positivity of a particular ‘content’. The issue I am raising here can be clarified more sharply by looking at Butler’s following remark:

To claim that the universal has not yet been articulated is to insist that the ‘not yet’ is proper to an understanding of the universal itself: that which remains ‘unrealized’ by the universal constitutes it essentially. The universal announces, as it were, its ‘non-place,’ its fundamentally temporal modality, precisely when challenges to its *existing*

formulation emerge from those who are not covered by it, who have no entitlement to occupy the place of the 'who', but nevertheless demand that the universal as such ought to be inclusive of them (JB: 39, emphasis original).

Butler provides here a temporal understanding of spectral existence. Butler's temporalised approach, suggested by her use of the term 'not yet', serves as an a priori model to ground the proliferation of spectral existence. Moreover, 'not yet', as a temporal modality of universality, shifts our attention from a single coherent identity to the fully contingent process of resignification: there is no single fixed meaning, only an endless process of translation rooted in contingent displacements. The foregoing remark from Butler invokes a certain similarity between Judith Butler and Jacques Derrida in terms of a temporal modality. For instance, Samuel A. Chambers links Butler's 'not-yet' to the Derridian temporal understanding of 'the future-to-come', extending it throughout the concept of 'untimeliness' (Chambers, 2003: 160). Developing the spectral approach in relation to the universal/particular pair, Chambers emphasises that, once the universal is haunted by the particular, the particular can never be identical to 'its empirical facticity' (ibid.). The spectre that emerges out of concrete time-space coordinates, says Chambers, belongs to the particular. But insofar as the spectre appears to reiterate its past appearance, 'the spectre always transcends any particular time and place and can always reappear at other times and places' (ibid.: 161).

Although Chambers insists that hauntology goes beyond empiricism, it is not obvious under which terms the spectral belongs to an ontologically different register in comparison with the other particulars. According to the logic of 'not yet', in order for the spectral to be irreducible to either of the universal/particular pair, a minimum secret criterion, to distinguish the spectral from the other ontological registers, intervenes here. However, as there is no

stopping point in Chambers and Butler's theorisation, the evaluative criteria of the emergence of the spectral, thus, necessarily must be reduced to the question of degree or extent. As such, the theorisation is based on the sharp opposition between all the existences and spectral existence as a higher unit. There remains a problem in this formulation: how can one demonstrate that there is something fundamental in spectral existence? For instance, when the Korean blockbuster localises the Western blockbuster format in its effort to be clearly distinguishable from that of Hollywood, and it becomes a ghostly being, is it possible for us to really ever know if there is a true ontological shift in the sphere of the spectral? How can this ever be confirmed? This difficulty has a philosophical consequence, because the process of local translation – borrowing Hollywood genre conventions and localising their contents – is not necessarily radical in terms of differential ontology. As mentioned in the preceding section, the process of local translation can be seen as exposing 'what there is' as the rule of being. The rule of being consists of infinite multiplicity (see also chapter 2 regarding the review on the Korean blockbuster). It is at this point that I discard cultural difference and otherness. This does not mean, however, that my argument is opposed to the goal of the politics of difference. But rather, what is at stake here is that I regard difference as natural, and suggest that we need to go further if we want to be radically different.

Seen in this light, it is necessary to explore further in what ways Butler's theory of 'spectral universality' has direct connections to the discursive mode of national cinema writing. The idea of local translation, often connected with the politics of difference, has played a growing role in South Korean film scholarship. Kang Nae-hui (2001) highlights the importance of mimicry, arguing that it can provide a very useful theoretical tool to leave open the ways of thinking about a mode of resistance. As an 'imitation ... cannot be the same as the original', writes Kang, '[a]ll imitations are necessarily imperfect, supplementary, and thus,

always have the possibility of making a difference' (Kang, 2001: 150). Ok HyeRyoung (2009) emphasises the importance of translation, in that '[m]ost Korean scholars agree that the Korean blockbuster is a symptomatic response to Hollywood dominance and an attempt to translate universality into particularity in a spectral dimension' (Ok, 2009: 40). Huh Moonyung (2008) also presents a similar view in his analysis of Bong Joon-ho's two films, *Memories of Murder* and *The Host*, by holding that Bong 'actively appropriates techniques and technology from genres developed in Hollywood, but at the same time he adopts elements of local politics as major motifs, fundamentally changing the character of the genre in question' (Huh, 2008: 40).

According to the logic of local translation, the Korean blockbuster exists by comparison with other national cinemas, for the simple reason that it becomes what it is by the means of what it is not. For instance, the Korean blockbuster can be defined in terms of the fact that it is not just a Chinese blockbuster or a Japanese blockbuster, and so on. However, this notion of difference without any reflection on the non-historical in a concrete historical situation is exactly what constitutes historicism, as mentioned earlier. These perspectives are basically historicist approaches, because they pay scant attention to what the film itself addresses, by externalising it within a purely contingent domain, often associated with substitution, displacement, and an endless game of (re)signification. In this respect, my position is that 'spectral universality' based on the diversification of the blockbuster is unable to offer a moment of reinvigorating radical alterity in strictly ontological terms, because there is no point at which the endless game of local translation breaks down within the concept of 'spectral universality'.

Consequently, there is a relevant problem with Butler and the postmodern politics of 'spectral universality'. According to this logic, given that 'official universality' is working on

the basis of a mechanism of ‘non-place’, an alternative path, says Butler, is to cover up this place with the positive ‘content’ of shadowy existence. This is precisely in the sense that ‘spectral universality’ is constituted through the mechanism of colouring in the contours of the void inherent in the universalising structure. In terms of Butler’s assumption that ‘official universality’ is set in motion through the exclusion of specific contents, her solution is to make them participate in an endless process of cultural translation. Where cultural translation is often hailed as a mode of resistance, I would like to point out the danger of positivisation in Butler’s terms. This positivisation seems to be problematic, since this sort of spectral sphere might refer to ‘the very site of political universality’ in the sense that ‘*state power itself is split from within and relies on its own obscene spectral underside*’ (SŽ: 313, emphasis original). Žižek goes on to say,

Public state apparatuses are always supplemented by their shadowy double, by a network of publicly disavowed rituals, unwritten rules, institutions, practices, and so on. Today, we should not forget that the series of publicly ‘invisible’ agents leading a spectral half-existence includes, among others, the entire white supremacist underground (fundamentalist Christian survivalists in Montana, neo-Nazis, the remnants of the Ku Klux Klan, etc.). So the problem is not simply the marginals who lead the spectral half-existence of those excluded by the hegemonic symbolic regime; the problem is that this regime itself, in order to survive, has to rely on a whole gamut of mechanisms whose status is spectral, disavowed, excluded from the public domain (SŽ: 313-4).

Žižek’s statement indicates how spectral half-existence in the contemporary capitalist system empowers public ideology. Žižek is not alone in developing this kind of theory. Immanuel Wallerstein (1991) also points out the danger of cultural resistance in the following way: ‘when an antisystemic movement organizes to overthrow or replace existing authorities

in a state, it provides itself with a very strong political weapon designed to change the world in specific ways. But by so organizing, it simultaneously integrates itself and its militants into the very system it is opposing. It is utilizing the structures of the system to oppose the system which, however, partially legitimates these structures' (Wallerstein, 1991: 194). However, this is not to say that I relinquish all the radical implications of the spectral. In order for ghostly existence to be exposed in its most radical dimension, it should be understood through its lack of substantive-positive consistency. This means that the spectral in cinema needs to be conceived of as a purely formal aspect that indicates the part of the content which is foreclosed from the apparent narrative components. I will discuss this viewpoint more carefully in chapter 7 in an analysis of Kim Ki-duk's *3-Iron*.

Overall, while fully agreeing with Butler that the form of 'official universality' is constituted through the fundamental exclusion of traumatic content, I propose that Butler's notion of 'spectral universality' is insufficient to provide radical contributions to explode 'official universality', in that the derivative model of universality based on dispersed postmodern politics misses the decontextualising moment transcending the historical conditions out of which it grew. Hence, one needs to separate 'contingency/substitutability *within* a certain historical horizon' from the 'more fundamental exclusion/foreclosure that *grounds its very horizon*' (SŽ: 108, emphasis original). In other words, one needs to distinguish between historical change in a particular horizon and the ultimate limit of that change which constitutes the horizon itself. I will take this argument up more in chapter 5 and 6, by arguing that how films which directly engage local concerns fail to address the core of history.

3.3 Laclau's Theory of Universality: The 'Equivalential Chain'

Laclau is closer than Butler to Žižek in some theoretical frameworks. Both Laclau and Žižek share Lacanian psychoanalysis to explain their own accounts of the dynamic of universality. This is clearly evident when Laclau finds himself ‘allied with Žižek against Butler in the defence of Lacanian theory’ (EL: 281). From this background, Laclau’s formulation of the universal as a category should not be understood as a descriptive account of a phenomenon, but as a ‘*formal* analysis of the logics involved in the [hegemonic operations]’ (EL: 53, emphasis original). Deeply linking linguistic structure to the field of political theory, Laclau’s definition of the universal is oriented towards the notion of discursive formation. By identifying discourse with the structure of social logic, he defines social logic as a “‘grammar” or cluster of rules which make some combinations and substitutions possible and exclude others’ (EL: 76).

Even though his conception of discourse has an affinity with Michel Foucault’s conception of discourse to some extent, Laclau’s own elaboration on social logic is derived from the Lacanian concept of the Symbolic in which it is the anonymous network of society that regulates a human individual’s behaviour ranging from language to law. To the extent that the Symbolic is structured around the void in Lacanian psychoanalysis, it is not, thus, surprising to find Laclau’s claim that ‘*the universal is an empty place, a void which can be filled only by the particular, but which, through its very emptiness, produces a series of crucial effects in the structuration/destructuration of social relations*’ (EL: 58, emphasis original). The empty place, which eludes symbolisation, is to a great extent compatible with the Lacanian theory of the Real in his formulation of social logic and/or the universal. To posit the limit-case of the Symbolic, which Laclau calls the ‘empty signifier’, (re)articulates the various particularities under the umbrella of the ‘chain of equivalence’. ‘Equivalential

chains', says Laclau, work as both effect and ground that leads to enumeration of displacements on the basis of contingencies. The definition of 'equivalence', argues Laclau, cannot be identified with a simple affirmation of identity based on pure particularities. Articulating a particularistic claim with the common social aim denotes two related issues: 'first, that, no group or social actor can claim to represent the totality and, second, that there can be no fixing of the final meaning of universality' (Zerilli, 2004: 96). Laclau's notion of the hegemonic logic emerges through this transformative process of identification: 'for a certain demand, subject position, identity, and so on, to become political means that it is *something other* than itself, living its own particularity as a moment or link in a chain of equivalences that transcends and, in this way, universalizes it' (EL: 209-10, emphasis original).

It is necessary here to examine how Laclau distinguishes between pure difference and 'equivalence'. Laclau contends that 'the logic of difference' refers to a moment which is not contaminated by 'the logic of equivalence'. The former indicates an already established, determined, fixed identity such as race, ethnicity, sexual identity, etc. Instead, 'the logic of equivalence' requires an empty space which disrupts all positive identities, ['"universalizing"'] a certain particularity on the basis of its substitutability with an indefinite number of other particularities' (EL: 193-4). Although Laclau is clearly meticulous with the political implications of difference which plays a key role in the ongoing multiculturalist project, he redresses the balance by stressing that there is undeniably a danger that 'the assertion of pure particularism, independently of any content and of the appeal to a universality transcending it, is a self-defeating enterprise' (Laclau, 1996: 26). Particularism, says Laclau, does not consider the ways in which the universal is always involved in the constitution of all particular identities: no one can think of the particular without its relevance

to the universal; both of them are entangled in the complex dynamics of mutual interrelationship.

If the universal can be understood as being structured through an empty space, any attempt to fill in the space would confront the impossibility of representation with the failure of concretisation. For Laclau, this limit-case works as a founding condition for an infinite enumeration of particularities, insofar as certain particularistic demands under the condition of 'equivalential chains' are extended throughout a wide range of other demands.

Equivalential articulation is not an all-inclusive concept of classical universality that reduces particularistic demands to a single coherent principle, but an ongoing process of negotiation through which all the particularistic demands articulate their own political strategies with other political struggles.

At first glance, Laclau seems to be more similar to Žižek, at least to the extent that he draws his theoretical elaboration from the Lacanian notion of the Real by positing the limit-case to disrupt the fullness of community. However, Laclau's approach is, to a large extent, divergent from other Lacanian theorists such as Žižek. According to Laclau's formulation of 'equivalence', 'all elements which enter into hegemonic struggle are in principle equal' (SŽ: 320). There is no privileging element in the unfolding of the logic of 'equivalence'. At this point, this notion of 'equivalence' appears to be similar to Butler's notion of 'translation' in so far as both processes reject the introduction of an a priori privileging ground. The issue I am raising here can be focused on more sharply by considering the following remark: 'there is no universality,' Laclau says, 'except through an equivalence between particularities, and such equivalences are always contingent and context-dependent. Any step beyond this limit would necessarily fall into a historical teleology, with the result that universality, which should be considered as a horizon, would become a ground' (EL: 211). For this reason,

Laclau tends to take multiculturalism as the starting point for reformulating universality. Whilst arguing against the naïve affirmation of pure particularism exemplified in the ‘logic of difference’, he clarifies, however, that the demand for the recognition of differences might be an inevitable option against the classical notion of universalism. It is here that Laclau is clearly at odds with Žižek, who distinguishes the fundamentally traumatic point of the Real from the contingent displacements within the historical horizon. In contrast to Laclau, Žižek’s position is clear: in equivalential struggles, ‘there is always *one* which, while it is part of the chain, secretly overdetermines its very horizon’ (SŽ: 320, emphasis original). For Žižek, the privileging one is class struggle. In what follows, I will develop my argument by explaining why I side with Žižek.

Broadly speaking, I agree with Laclau’s conceptualisation of universality as constituted through an empty place and his argument that any attempt to fill in this empty place fails in terms of symbolisation, with every articulation remaining open to further articulations in a perpetual effort to hegemonise a larger universal task. This formulation can be understood as referring to the way in which hegemonic articulation of social conflict is organised. At least on this point, I believe that Laclau’s thought gains more immediacy than Butler’s.

There are, nevertheless, serious problems in the way that Laclau reads the political implications of class struggle. Žižek’s increasing emphasis on class struggle, says Laclau, is dangerous, in that Žižek privileges the dimension of class struggle more than any other form of political struggle. By advocating an endless game of displacements deeply anchored in political strategy such as negotiation rather than class struggle, Laclau’s suggestion is that ‘class struggle is just one species of identity politics, and one which is becoming less and less important in the world in which we live’ (EL: 203). To put it another way, although Laclau does not rule out the importance of class struggle, he considers it as one of any other

particular claims, and furthermore, one which does not gain currency in our contemporary era. However, the point is not that, as Laclau says, today's global capitalism is less and less important than in any other historical period. But rather, the crucial point is that capitalism still functions as a 'structuring principle' (SŽ: 96) in which class struggle emerges from among many other species, while at the same time 'overdetermin[ing]' (Žižek, 2004b: 185) the other political struggles. Reducing the role of capitalism and class struggle to one of any other particular claims can be read as an attempt to pacify an encounter with the fundamental social antagonism inherent within the capitalist system.

Another problem with Laclau's argument is that he too easily tends to identify class struggle with orthodox Marxism as a way of narrowing Marxist politics to the working class as an empirical group of people. Class struggle, says Laclau, 'tends to anchor the moment of struggle and antagonism in the sectorial identity of a group, while any meaningful struggle transcends any sectorial identity and becomes a complexly articulated "collective will"' (EL: 210). Laclau's basic assumption is that a formerly homogenous working class, in the ongoing transformation of modernity, has been subdivided into indefinitely fractured identities.

However, I would suggest that Laclau's empirical description of the working class is too parochial, precisely because Marxism has developed a wide range of responses to answer this question. The crucial point here depends on whether conceptualisation of class struggle means a positive entity such as the existing working class or whether it is a pure negativity which forever forestalls all efforts at positivisation. In contrast to orthodox Marxism, one needs to emphasise the purely formal structural feature of the proletariat deprived of its empirical description. For example, Nicholas Thoburn (2003), based in many aspects on Etienne Balibar's influential essay, 'In Search of the Proletariat' (1994), offers a penetrating analysis of where Karl Marx does not offer a vivid description of the proletariat in *Capital*:

‘we would be wrong, however, to interpret the apparent lack of positive description as a sign of the simplicity or weakness of the proletarian political figure’ (Thoburn, 2003: 60). By insisting on this evident lack of empirical description of the proletariat’s configuration in Marx’s *Capital*, Thoburn provides crucial contributions to conceptualise this ‘non-identity of the proletariat’ as ‘the proletarian “unnameable”’ (ibid.). The ‘proletarian unnamable’, says Thoburn, cannot be identified with a group of people such as workers, but refers to a ‘decided lack of empirical description and hardly any sense of its positive content’ (ibid.).

In *Tarrying with the Negative*, Žižek suggests that Marx’s elaboration of the proletariat offers a sustained analysis of the constant split between two conceptions of the proletariat: the proletarian refers to ‘the abstract subjectivity freed from all substantial-organic ties, yet at the same time he is dispossessed and thus obliged to sell on the market his own labor force in order to survive’ (Žižek, 1993: 25-6). The failure of classical Marxism, says Žižek, results from the fact that it has too easily considered the proletariat as an empirical group of people. This is partly due to Marx himself, in the sense that Marx often tends to orient towards a dialectical synthesis between non-identity of the proletariat and determined subjectivity. On the contrary, the notion of class struggle can be best understood as a founding negative gesture to resist becoming a positive-substantial identity.

The proof that class struggle is... a purely ‘formal’ transcendental gap is the fact that *translated into positive terms*, it always involves *three*, not merely two elements – why? Because class struggle as antagonism is, as it were, its own obstacle, that which forever prevents *its own* direct expression, its translation into clear symbolic or positive terms (Žižek, 2004a: 99-100).

In line with Žižek, Sean Homer (2001) also offers a critique of Laclau and Butler’s theoretical direction, insisting on the need to recall the importance of the critique of the

political economy in an era of global capitalism. However, slightly differently from Žižek, he suggests that Žižek's emphasis on a purely formal transcendental dimension in terms of class struggle might be problematic, in that Žižek abandons 'the possibility of giving his political project any positive content and thus reduces the political act to one of dissidence and opposition' (Homer, 2001: 14). However, in my view, it might be wrong to interpret Žižek's tendency to withdraw the personalised consistency in the class struggle as an inability to stage a radical political project. Rather, this pure negativity should be read more productively, precisely because it is only this transcendental level that keeps 'official' universality at work from its relevant particulars, by means of constituting a short circuit between the two.

Although Laclau conceives of the lack between the universal and the particular, this gap does not refer to the case of the singular on a purely transcendental field. The singular emerges out of a particular situation as an excess which prevents symbolisation, and it cannot be completely reducible to the former ontological register out of which it grew. Thus, if for Laclau the concept of the universal refers to the dimension of an individual particular's 'demanding' based on the strategic aim, the notion of 'concrete universality', contends Žižek, tends towards a traumatic situation itself which evaporates the normal functioning of reality: no-one can think of the encounter with the traumatic event, but it is forcibly imposed on the subject by shattering their own fantasmatic screen. Where Laclau's theorisation of the universal tends towards the limit-case to make it possible to move from one place to another place in its effort for a temporary suspension of closed totality, 'concrete universality' refers to the void (the Real) without any strategic aim, thwarting the balance of the social world. What Laclau neglects is, thus, precisely a dimension of the Real as a 'pathological', 'inert', and 'sterile' partial object which fundamentally freezes out a specific particular, not from other particulars but from itself. As Rex Butler (2005) puts it, the point is not a 'mere

extension of an existing concept tending toward emptiness’, but rather ‘is [emptiness itself] from the beginning, a pure “doubling” of what is’ (Butler, 2005: 37).

What has this got to do with cinema? The following diagram will help us better understand how Laclau’s theory is related to the analysis of film, and at the same time clarify why my argument is different from that of Laclau.

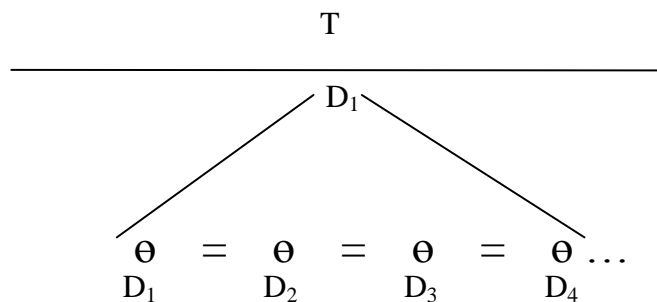


Figure 3-1 Laclau’s diagram

According to Laclau’s diagram , ‘T stands for [the oppressive regime]; the horizontal line for the frontier separating the oppressive regime from the rest of society; the circles D1...D4 for the particular demands, split between a bottom semi-circle representing the particularity of the demand and a top semi-circle representing its anti-system meaning, which is what makes their equivalential relation possible. Finally D1 above the equivalent circles stands for the general equivalent’ (EL: 303). This diagram can be used to illustrate South Korean cinema’s location between the universal and the particular. If we follow Laclau’s diagram, T refers to Hollywood; the horizontal line represents the frontier distinguishing it from South Korean cinema as a national cinema. The circles D1...D4 refer to the particular filmic texts, split between a bottom semi-circle representing the particular filmic text’s engagement with local issues and a top semi-circle representing its difference from Hollywood. Finally D1

above the equivalent circles represents the general equivalent; for my purpose, Korean New Wave, Korean blockbuster, and Asia Extreme can be understood as the general equivalent. A series of questions can be raised here: if we situate Laclau's theory in the study of national cinema, what is the principle according to which a certain filmic text becomes open? Does this sort of the limit-case, lack, and gap within a certain filmic text fully account for the emergence of a truly new national cinema? What sort of film does this formulation imply? Even though I do not underestimate the importance of this formulation – as mentioned earlier, Žižek's concept of 'concrete universality' has structural homology with Laclau's one – I make the point that it fails to present a way of inventing a new national cinema. Merely positing a limit-case within the linkage of associated filmic images is not fully sufficient for inventing a radically different filmic image.

For example, *Tidal Wave* (Yoon Je-kyoon, 2009) can be understood in this way. This film is a disaster film, telling the story of a mega tsunami hitting the coast of Busan, a major city well known for its beaches. This film begins with the 2004 tsunami catastrophe and flashes forward to the present. Even though large-scale spectacular imagery of the mega tsunami plays a great role in this film, the portrayal of spectacular on-screen events is not shown until the last half hour of the film. Instead, Yoon centres on the stories of the different characters and their situations before the mega tsunami strikes the city. Until the mega tsunami hits, the main collective characters were in growing conflicts with one another. The viewer is allowed to focus on these characters as their relationships develop and shift. What is worthy of note here is that when the mega tsunami befalls them, this film offers a much more harmonious rhythm and tone. The characters and their inter-relational stories are linked under a common denominator, that of facing a tsunami. A forward-moving structure of the different characters' plot lines across the different narrative nodes is suspended, and all the erstwhile

conflicts are immediately suspended. To paraphrase Laclau's term, it is only through the displaying of the spectacular image of a mega tsunami that the characters' equivalential relation is made possible. The tsunami here works as an empty container (that is, the general equivalential) to connect one character's individual experience and its equivalential relation with other characters' experiences. The tsunami has its own narrative function, as it obfuscates the characters' existing conflicts in the course of narrative development. However, the role of the tsunami functions as an ideology, because it serves to mask the social conflicts inherent in the different stories of the characters. Given that it is employed to neutralise and stabilise the characters' conflicts, this film disables us from cognitively mapping out the core of social antagonism inherent in the contemporary South Korean social fabric.

Overall, 'concrete universality' refers to something fundamentally nonsensical which allows us to redefine the whole line of meaning. Endless metonymic chains of signifying practices always involve non-meaning, and if one gets rid of the chains, the film fails to make sense. By focusing on 'the movements of the text and find[ing] the point of the traumatic Real around which these movements circulate', 'concrete universality' concerns the process according to which 'interpretation discovers meaning through the isolation and identification of the point at which meaning fails' (McGowan and Kunkle, 2004: xxii).

3.4 Conclusion

The notion of 'concrete universality' is not concerned with the traditional notion of universality as an all-encompassing universality which generalises all parts. It is not a transcultural generalisation which exists above the particulars, but rather the very process in which the particular encounters its self-contradiction in the form of its opposite. As far as film

is concerned, the concept of ‘concrete universality’ entails considering how a kind of disruptive element in a filmic text’s formal procedure disturbs narrative exposition, thus revealing a certain distortion in the linking of the associated filmic images. This notion can be also grasped as tied to examining how a certain filmic text discloses the non-contextualisable within a given historical context, thus enabling us to apprehend the core of history. With this in mind, the notion of ‘concrete universality’ needs to be articulated with Deleuze’s notion of cinema, because Deleuze explores further the ontology of film by linking it to the question of thought.

Therefore, even though I acknowledge Butler’s significance in positing a mode of resistance through a process of translation (‘spectral universality’) against ‘official universality’, I claim that she fails to provide a radically politicised account of universality, because her theorisation lacks the non-historical moment within the historical context. What results is Butler’s inclination towards an empiricist, positivist approach. Thus, many perspectives in line with Butler’s theory of ‘spectral universality’ in terms of South Korean film scholarship fail to present a critical criterion by which South Korean cinema is said to achieve newness.

In contrast to Butler, Laclau presents a way of moving beyond an endless game of differential relation by making the point that all concretisation to fill up the empty place in the social structure fails, and that this failure functions as a condition to provoke future possible political action. However, this type of limit-case does not provide ways of producing radical difference. Insofar as it refers to a mere lack which enables the subject to move from one object to another, it fails to reveal the dialectical tension between form and content as is shown in the case of ‘concrete universality’.

Chapter 4: Methodology

A Text-focused Approach against the Emphasis on Historical Context

The aim of this chapter is to explain which methodological approach is the most appropriate for the study of contemporary South Korean cinema. Interpretive textual analyses are selected as the most effective way to answer my research question. As previously discussed, I do not conceive the transformation of recent South Korean cinema as the consequences of globalisation, and therefore I do not seek a methodology that yields a historical description of that transformation or shows how the change in the distribution patterns and economic conditions in the contemporary South Korean film industry has led to a change of film styles. Instead, my approach concentrates on textual analysis by charting patterns, and at the same time examining under which conditions a filmic text opens up something radically new.

The methodology at work firmly focuses on the significance of the interpretation of the filmic text rather than on the experience of the viewer on an empirical level. This is not to say, however, that the thesis ignores the question of spectatorship: what it only refuses is an empiricist view on spectatorship, which emphasises how the experience of an individual text varies from viewer to viewer. The empiricist approach is limited, because it ‘[separates] the filmic text from its reception as if they existed independently of each other’ (McGowan and Kunkle, 2004: xx). But instead, what this thesis attempts to advocate is the fact that ‘the text in itself is already the text for us’ (ibid.), such that the procedure of spectatorship is intrinsic within the filmic text in itself. A basic assumption through the entire thesis is, thus, that ‘every film anticipates and calls for the mode of its reception. This reception does not occur “after” the text’s construction but is present in that very construction’ (ibid.). By situating the question of spectatorship as an internal aspect of the filmic text, this thesis seeks to favour the

centrality of interpretation, and furthermore theory. This is not to say that it tries to get beneath the surface meaning, and explore a deeper meaning below the surface. Nor is it the case that one applies theory's critical insights into individual filmic practices as a vehicle to interpret them. But rather, the crucial question throughout the entire thesis is to find a traumatic kernel of the Real as non-sense which ceaselessly hinders the vicious circle of signification. The Lacanian Real does not exist outside of the domain of signification. But instead, it denotes the point at which signification stops, and the point at which an inherent void within the film is revealed. By revealing this kind of nonsensical element (the Real) in the process of signification, this study tries to demonstrate that the apparent narrative line implies a nonsensical element which resists the signification: if one needs to reconstruct the whole narrative line, one should involve this kind of nonsensical element. This refers to the very definition of 'concrete universality' which underlies the whole research project.

In contrast to my methodological approach, the emphasis on cross-cultural analysis based on historical description has been becoming increasingly popular in contemporary film studies, and more specifically, in the field of national cinema writings. In my view, Andrew Higson (1989)'s formulation seems to have laid the ground for this tendency. Higson presents an organised approach to explaining national cinema, focusing on consumption than production. For Higson, many studies of national cinema have operated on the 'prescriptive' rather than the 'descriptive' level, 'citing what *ought* to be the national cinema, rather than describing the actual cinematic experience of popular audiences' (Higson, 1989: 37, emphasis original). By shifting the question from what national cinema ought to be to what national cinema is, his point is geared towards the fact that one should not consider Hollywood as a mere agent of cultural imperialism, but that, especially in the context of British cinema, 'Hollywood... has become a part of the popular imagination of British cinema

audiences' (ibid.: 42). Home-grown films, says Higson, are not the only ones to secure the production of cultural specificity within a given nation-state, stressing that viewers will not necessarily find domestic films more pertinent to cultural specificity. By insisting on the need to concentrate on a transnational experience exemplified in British audiences' reception of Hollywood films, he finally abandons the concept of national cinema in a more recent essay (Higson, 2006). He switches the concept of national cinema with the term 'transnational cinema' on the basis that the film industry has long been set in motion on a transnational level, especially in terms of co-production, distribution and the reception of films (Higson, 2006: 19). The labelling of national cinema, he argues, is not sufficient to describe cross-cultural exchanges beyond geographically-bounded borders. Concerning the reception of Hollywood films in particular, he suggests that 'as Hollywood films travel effortlessly across national borders, they may displace the sort of "indigenous" films that might promote and maintain specific national identities ... the entry of "foreign" films into a restricted national market may be a powerful means of celebrating cultural diversity, transnational experiences, and multinational identities' (ibid.: 18). He finally concludes that the imagined communities which take the geographical border for granted on the basis of Benedict Anderson (1991)'s view of the nation 'imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign' (Anderson, 1991: 6) need to be reconsidered in terms of either the local or the transnational.

I partly agree that the research on national cinema must consider how a national cinema has been influenced by global capitalism, at least in terms of its industrial dimension: defining national cinema through such conflicting forces in terms of its industrial aspect may expand national cinema as a category. However, although transnational flows are an important matter, these flows are too banal a set of phenomena in this era of global capitalism, such that it is no longer possible to celebrate this cultural traffic as a radical threat to a single

coherent unity of national identity. Moreover, insofar as the measure of the transnational is only premised on physical territorial boundaries, the naive affirmation of transnational cultural flow in this way, paradoxically, strengthens the central idea of geographical boundaries. Here, boundaries are fetishised only in terms of substantive geographical state-unity. Another problem arises when Higson stresses descriptive rather than prescriptive analysis to propose the notion of transnational cinema. He advocates the centrality of the description of some aspects of the transnational flows without any critical scrutiny; I think this might result in some dangerous consequences because it obscures the exploitative dynamics of contemporary global capitalism underneath this transnational flow by means of politically neutralising exchange between diverse communities. Accordingly, Higson's emphasis on cross-cultural analysis, best exemplified in the term 'transnational cinema', fails to identify how a national cinema can register the tensions and/or gap in terms of its split with itself.

Apart from Higson's analysis, there is also another version of the historicist approach. It is not very difficult to see that the discussion of national cinema favours contextual rather than textual analysis, by examining the way in which the economic, political, and historical contexts impact upon an individual film text's representations. For instance, Tom O'Regan (1996) highlights the significance of the connection between film text and historical context in the writing of national cinema: 'national cinema writers have no choice: they must deploy hybrid forms of analysis. The special local, critical, cultural, historical and industrial milieu of each cinema needs to be "translated" into a form available for various kinds of local and international circulation' (O'Regan, 1996: 4). In the study of German national cinema, Sabine Hake (2001) points out that 'the emphasis on cinema as a cultural practice shifts the focus from individual texts to the contexts that define films within changing systems of production,

distribution, and exhibition and that make them part of other aspects of public life and cultural consumption' (Hake, 2001: 3). In fact, this formulation is not confined to other national cinema studies such as Australian cinema or German cinema. A great many commentators have situated the transformation of contemporary South Korean cinema within contemporary South Korea's historical context (Moon, 2006; Stringer, 2005; Paquet, 2009). An underlying assumption here is that dramatic social change has led to the 'newness' of South Korean cinema. Whilst it is true that contemporary South Korean cinema has been influenced by social change to a great extent, there are, nevertheless, serious problems with the way these authors pursue the transformative dynamics of contemporary South Korean cinema. For instance, in order to develop the connection between filmic text and historical milieu, these authors have unwittingly rested on a brief summary of contemporary South Korean history, together with the description of a wide range of official historical events. Those historical descriptions include the withering of the revolutionary discourse rooted in Marxism after the 1980s, the overall social reform since the democratisation movement in the 1980s, and the IMF crisis in 1997, to name a few. The list could go on. Such a compressed introduction to South Korea's modern history, in my view, precisely indicates how historicism operates, since historicism defines itself as reducing the question of history to a sequential causality of historical events without any reliance on something which is always left behind the historicisation (see chapter 1 in regard to the definition of historicism).

To avoid falling into a trap with historicism, the crucial question here is to reveal how a filmic text implies a disruptive element which derails historical contextualisation (in the case of film, diegetic reality), thus constructing the whole narrative line entirely differently from the earlier narrative situation. From this perspective, my overarching task on a methodological level is to consider the way in which recent South Korean cinema has

unfolded its own rules and its split from within: through which film's organisation has recent South Korean cinema defined rules for repeatability? And more importantly, what propels a certain filmic text to reveal the dimension of the cinematic event on the transcendental level?

This is the very methodology Gilles Deleuze adopts in his books on cinema. For instance, for Deleuze neo-realism might come out of the Second World War but the emergence of neo-realism itself cannot be reduced to its historical background. In so doing, Deleuze no longer reduces the emergence of the time-image to the social milieu, but works to trace down cinema's intrinsic logic. Accordingly, he conceives of cinema's own potentialities or even dangers, not from outside but from within cinema's given force-field.⁴ Deleuze's attempt to distinguish Walter Benjamin from Siegfried Kracauer might give a useful insight in terms of the clarification of the methodology at work here:

What is interesting in Kracauer [1966]'s book *From Caligari to Hitler* is that it shows how expressionist cinema reflected the rise of the Hitlerian automaton in the German soul. But it still took an external viewpoint, whilst Walter Benjamin's article set itself inside cinema in order to show how the art of automatic movement (or, as he ambiguously said, the art of reproduction) was itself to coincide with the automatization of the masses, state direction, politics become art (Deleuze, 1989: 264).

Even though there is criticism that Deleuze deliberately avoids the issue of political economy in his cinema books (Beller, 1998), this study seeks to claim that Deleuze's escape

⁴ It is here that Moon mistakenly utilises Deleuze's methodology for examining the changes in recent South Korean film culture: 'Just as Gilles Deleuze understood the emergence of modern cinema not to be limited to simply a question of style but to react to specific geographic and historical circumstances, the changes in Korean film today also react to changes within the nation' (Moon, 2006: 41). Whilst Deleuze (1989) initially interprets the emergence of neo-realism as the result of the social context, however, this is only the first part of Deleuze's account of neo-realism. For Deleuze, the crucial point, however, is that the emergence of neo-realism has its own heterogeneity, and cannot be reduced to its material context.

from social context seems to be more provocative and radical, precisely because a context-dependent approach cannot touch on the inherent tension within a filmic text. For instance, this problem can be most noticeably found in the critical discourse around *Peppermint Candy*. Many critics see this film as relating to historical events in modern South Korea by means of opposing the bad state and good national/popular: an underlying assumption is that the state has ruined an innocent individual's life. The male protagonist, Yong-ho's life is shown as deeply embedded in a series of historical events in South Korea: the IMF crisis of 1997, the economic boom of the 1990s, the first democratic election in 1987, the military dictatorship of the 1980s, the Kwang-ju uprising in 1980, and the 'Seoul spring' in 1979. This type of interpretation, which tends to link an individual subject's life with the larger historical context, is, however, typical of historicism, because it overlooks the inherent tension within history and externalises this tension into the seemingly sharp contrast between the state and an innocent people. Accordingly, the question of history is reduced to something graspable phenomenologically. Moreover, such a dichotomy as the state versus innocent people by calling one practice a single coherent unity and another a multiplication of differences fails to theorise the phenomenon whereby the complex force-field of history always involves a certain nonsensical element mediating between seemingly opposing poles, and that if one removes this type of nonsensical element, one cannot arrive at the core of history.

What I have suggested so far is the centrality of the void in analysing certain filmic texts. It is important to note, however, that the focus on the non-historical out of the historical context does not abandon the question of history. It is necessary to follow Paul Willemen's line of argument here. For Willemen, methodology at work here must not be seen as expressing or reflecting the historical context, but as "[staging]" the historical conditions that constitute "the national" and, in the process, to "mediate" the socio-economic dynamics that

shape cinematic production, along with the other production sectors governed by national industrial regulation and legislation' (Willemen and Vitali, 2006: 8). Willemen's approach manifests itself in the analysis of Hou Hsiao-Hsien's films. Far from examining how a film text reflects the weight of history, he offers a penetrating account of the way in which Hou's films enable us to apprehend the current historical condition through a dialectical reading that considers together the formal dimension of a filmic text and the complexities of a historically specific conjuncture. At stake here is not that Hou's film is shaped by historical context in Taiwan, but the way in which Hou's film organises 'the hierarchically ordered interrelations between the forces evoked' along with 'the very rhythms of historical temporalities with their formative dynamics rather than merely registering the weight of history' (Willemen, 2008: 293).

Willemen's insight can be expanded to consider how a filmic text enables us to cognitively map the global indication of the current capitalist system in a Jamesonian sense (Jameson, 1992). Many similarities seem to appear between the two of them, despite their different crucial elaborations, in particular when they focus on how the 'workings' of history based on social antagonism can be graspable through a filmic text's own mechanisms. Indeed, the Korean blockbuster in chapter 6 will be studied following the Jamesonian ideas of 'cognitive mapping' and the 'geopolitical unconscious'. The focus on the non-historical cinematic event does not indicate that it is far from the historical apprehension of a given totality. On the contrary, I emphasise that it is only through the non-historical (the Real) within a given historical context that we are able to apprehend the fundamental core of a given society. In other words, the focus on the centrality of the cinematic event qua the void (the Real) means to consider the 'working' of history in a certain filmic text.

To sum up, my methodological approach moves along two axes. First, film can be seen

as addressing the void qua cinematic event. According to this point, what matters is to examine whether a certain type of filmic text reveals the void, thus exploding the historical situation, or whether it obfuscates the void by means of filling it with numerous positive contents. Second, the study has also pointed out how socio-political complexities in a historically-specific conjuncture can be comprehensible through the film text's organisation: there is a direct jump from the consideration of the dialectical tension between form and content in a certain filmic text to apprehend the social antagonism inherent in contemporary capitalism. Therefore, my methodological question is to consider how contemporary South Korean cinema provides a cognitively mapped understanding of the current capitalist system by means of looking at how a filmic text involves a conflictual tension which disrupts the seemingly apparent narrative situation.

In these circumstances, let us explain the principles on which I selected films for close analysis in the following core chapters. My thesis examines the characteristics of contemporary South Korean cinema from the late 1980s up to the present day. As mentioned in chapter 1, I characterise the main feature of a certain number of films produced in that period: the Korean Wave, the Korean blockbuster, and Asia Extreme. Of course, these terms and their relevant films do not fully include the whole of contemporary Korean cinema. Nonetheless, I believe that the films under these categories might be the core of contemporary Korean cinema. They refer to a complex relationship between historical context and the ultimate limit of the context. In other words, these films are all related to the question of the Real.

However, the films I analyse here exceed the categories mentioned above. For example, in chapter 5 which attempts to look at how a certain number of films screen the national past, I not only include Korean New Wave films such as Park Kwang-su's films (*Black Republic*

and *A Single Spark*), but also so-called post-Korean New Wave films such as *Memories of Murder*. Chapter 6 deals with the cinematic representations of the Korean blockbuster. Of course, this chapter cannot handle all the films under the category of the Korean blockbuster. The popularity of these films was, instead, taken into consideration for the selection of the films. The films chosen in this chapter are all successful in terms of box office. By discussing popular commercial films, I demonstrate that the Real is not restricted to the so-called art cinema.

In chapter 7, I deal with the films under the brand of Asia Extreme. Among numerous Asia Extreme films, I first chose Park Chan-wook's vengeance trilogy, especially *Oldboy*, because Park's films are most definitely representative Asia Extreme films. However, for the same reason mentioned earlier, the scope and range of films exceeds the categories of Asia Extreme. My focus is on how films chosen in this chapter deliver the zone of the indistinction between the lawful and the unlawful, thus demonstrating that the question of the Real has gained more urgency in the analysis of contemporary South Korean films.

For example, I include Kim Ki-duk's films in chapter 7, not because his corpus is part of the Asia Extreme film category. Special focus is not on how his films reveal visual brutality, but on another perspective to interpret them from a quite different angle. For my purpose, the role of the spectral is a key point for understanding Kim's corpus. To discuss the role of the ghostly being at the marginal space enables us to discuss the topic of subjectivity with reference to the Real. Zhang Lu's films address the depiction of the marginal lives at the cramped space par excellence. But I do not focus on how the Real is configured in terms of the narrative dimension, but on how the narrative component is addressed through the conflictual tension between form and content. In so doing, I stress that the Real is not in the content of a story, but in a dialectical tension between story and the fundamental limit of

story in terms of cinematic devices.

I have so far explained the principle according to which I selected the relevant films. That is, all the films throughout my thesis refer to the extent to which the films approach the Real. To put it another way, the most significant relationship with the Real prepares the grounds for the following chapters. But this is not to say that the only films I analyse here entail the emergence of the Real. We can see that other films are pertinent to the issue of the Real. However, I believe that they do not seem to have much greater impact than the films which will be examined in the following chapters regarding the staging of the Real, because in many cases, they merely serve to stage the Real in terms of narrative trajectory, not in terms of a complex relationship between form and content. The traumatic Real surely surfaces in contemporary Korean film scene. However, the true emergence of the Real is limited and can only be found in a few films that start to move towards engaging with the Real. That is because explicit content in terms of filmic narrative does not precisely concern the revealing of the Real, although it is the starting point for exploring the relevance of the Real for cinema. The crucial point is, thus, how the Real is staged through its way of address rather than manifest content. The Real occurs ‘in the filmic discourse...; that is, it occurs in the way that the story... is told, not in the story itself’ (McGowan, 2011: 8). The key feature of dialectical thought is to advance the analysis of form or the filmic discourse, rather than insisting on the analysis of manifest meaning. It involves the process of dismantling the positivity of its filmic object, with the identity of a particular filmic object contradicted with itself. This is where the concept of ‘concrete universality’ is manifested.

Moreover, the films of each chapter appear in the process of exploring both English and Korean academic writings on contemporary South Korean cinema. With a growing body of literature on contemporary Korean cinema, all the films except Zhang Lu’s films and Im

Kwon-taek's *Beyond the Years* have been discussed as representative examples of New Korean Cinema. Therefore, by analysing them, I aim to re-interrogate the conditions of the new.

Again, the films under analysis in the following chapters are chosen because they are all related to the Real through their ways of deployment rather than their obvious content. However, it is necessary to say that most of films except *Beyond the Years* (chapter 5), *Shiri* and *The Host* (chapter 6), and *Grain in Ear* and *Hyazgar* (chapter 7) retreat from the emergence of the Real towards their ends. They invite the Real only to pacify it, and in so doing, they serve to pacify the effect that the Real is supposed to have on the viewer. In these films, a turn away from the Real constitutes the functioning of ideology. As Paul A. Taylor puts it, 'contemporary ideology tends to achieve its effects *through* its mode of delivery rather than its explicit content' (Taylor, 2010: 91-2, emphasis original). Given that most films under analysis fail to stage the Real, it is necessary to explain why I give a good deal of space to the films which seemingly approach the Real but in the end fail to address it. The first purpose is to pose a critique of ideology, thus examining the relevance of contemporary Korean cinema for the working of ideology. By criticising its ideological implication, this study not only seeks to radically politicise South Korean film scholarship, but also aims to correct the criteria by which Korean films are said to gain novelty. The second purpose is to suggest that it is only through the internal incompleteness of ideology that the revealing of the Real can occur. The Real emerges out of a site where the edifice of ideology finds itself most stumbling. It entails ideology's fragility. If we want to explode the operation of ideology, this is only possible through the internal incompleteness of ideology, because the Real is precisely intrinsic to the operation of ideology. To study how contemporary Korean films serve the structure of ideology might, thus, offer a hint for examining the relevance of the Real for

cinema in a more text-focused way.

With this in mind, each chapter will begin with a brief account of the framework of thought that I have elaborated to advance the topics under discussion. Then, I will begin analysing a film which most definitely shows the involvement of ideology. I start with a film that arranges ideology in definitive ways, because the notion of the Real can be more readily understood by distinguishing it from the ideological aspect of film. I will highlight the extent to which the Real is manifested moving from more obscure to more straightforward. As a result, each chapter seeks to set up a logical development, rather than a chronological order. Perhaps, the films in chapter 5 seem to follow chronological order: *Black Republic* (1990), *A Single Spark* (1995), *Peppermint Candy* (1999), *Memories of Murder* (2003), *Seopyonje* (1993), and *Beyond the Years* (2006). But the main focus is still on the extent to which a film can evidence the Real. It is no longer a question of merely acclaiming or criticising films, but of opening up a new way of categorising films. In so doing, I will illuminate the conditions under which some of contemporary Korean films have presented a radical way of thinking about the status of the Real, while developing a new way of approaching the notion of radical difference.

Chapter 5

Screening the Past: Trauma, Memory, and the Question of Mediation

This chapter deals with *Black Republic* (Park Kwang-su, 1990), *A Single Spark* (Park Kwang-su, 1995), *Peppermint Candy* (Lee Chang-dong, 1999), *Memories of Murder* (Bong Joon-ho, 2003), *Seopyonje* (Im Kwon-taek, 1993) and *Beyond the Years* (Im Kwon-taek, 2006). As mentioned in chapter 4, those films are examined because they all present ways of screening the traumatic history of South Korea. They are all related to the Real, because the Real refers to a traumatic moment evaporating social reality. More importantly, the films selected for close analysis in this chapter convey the Real through their mode of address, rather than only their manifest content. However, most of the films ultimately fail to address the revealing of the Real, because they are glossing over intersected but sharply distinct spheres between historical context and a truly traumatic core of the Real within that context. Only Im Kwon-taek's *Beyond the Years* successfully conveys the staging of the Real in most definitive ways, because it delivers the contradiction between the depiction of historical resources and what refuses to be historicised. Although this is the most promising film, the other films are still worthy of being analysed. Because these films enable us to map out how ideology functions, we can get to redeploy a criterion for newness in contemporary South Korean cinema. The chapter begins by pointing out the most ideological dimension of film. Then, I will develop my logic, depending on the extent to which a film can come close to the staging of the Real.

This chapter analyses which cinematic forms the selected films utilise to provide a new way of historicising the past, rather than focusing on how these films narrativise the historical resource and situating them in a historical context. Central to this chapter's approach is a dialectical mediatory reading. The term mediation indicates that the main approach in this

chapter is not on the basis of the stark opposition between official historiography and counter and/or popular memory, but on the extent to which the mediatory role of a third party between two different poles disturbs the totalising Oneness.

What justifies this turn to a mediatory reading? In order to clarify the argument in what follows, it is necessary to introduce briefly the theoretical background that I am depending on. As mentioned in chapters 1 and 3, every social reality is founded on a traumatic kernel of the Real, that is, a void. When the void emerges, it collapses. In order to maintain minimally its consistency and coherence, one of the elements from the reality has to cover up the void. This kind of element works in at least two ways. On the one hand, it serves as an ideological fantasy by masking the void. On the other hand, it is necessary to keep in mind that there is another version of the element from the reality in the Lacanian formula: there is always an excessive remainder that disturbs the consistency of the reality – this constitutes the Lacanian *objet petit a*. It is only through the intervention of the excessive remainder that an ordinary, trivial, and everyday object in a given social field turns into its radical non-coincidence of itself. It is, thus, important here to note that the Real does not remain outside of social reality, but within reality itself, and that it emerges only through the mediation of a disruptive element from reality. Hence, staging historical materials can be productively mobilised only insofar as they are registered into the narrative space by means of a paradoxical, nonsensical, and excessive element whose presence leads to change of that narrative space. The question is, thus, to examine to what extent a kind of excessive element in a film text's formal structure obtrudes into the diegetic reality, thus rehistoricising the national past. Without this element, deeply rooted in a dialectical mediation, a film text's narrativisation of the past would end up as the mere empirical description of history.

From this angle, the first section of the chapter looks to *Black Republic* and *A Single*

Spark. Both films deal with, by turn, the issue of the labour movement, by showing how a male intellectual mediates between the people, and between two seemingly different locales and temporalities. *Black Republic* uses flashbacks as a way of linking the past of the 1980s to the male protagonist's present situation, alongside mediating between centre and periphery in terms of spatial inscription. *A Single Spark* foregrounds the legendary figure of the South Korean labour movement, Chon Tae-il, through the frequent mediation of the male intellectual's look. However, the mediatory role in those films works as an ideological fantasy by failing to reveal the fundamental question of social antagonism. For example, when Chon Tae-il is seen only through the mediation of the male intellectual's self-reflexive and nostalgic look, what this film overlooks is the revelation of a groundbreaking figure in the visible field, thus leading us to conclude that the role of civil society in South Korea, in which social antagonism was once deployed between the state and market, is completely integrated into the state in the postmodern era of transnational capitalism.

The second section will turn to *Peppermint Candy*. This film foregrounds the contemporary historical context of South Korea through the use of reverse narrative structure in its effort to challenge official historiography. First, I will argue that reverse narrative structure is not enough to throw it off balance, because it does not contain the non-historical within certain historical realities in terms of the formal aspect of the filmic text. Second, I will argue how the male protagonist Yong-ho's encounter with the traumatised past is presented in this film. For example, when Yong-ho shoots a young girl in Kwang-ju, this shot is shown from the perspective of his comrades-in-arms: the soldiers shine a flashlight on Yong-ho's face, so that the viewer's perception of Yong-ho being thrown into this traumatic situation is mediated. Third, I will discuss the idea that this film tends increasingly to oppose – especially towards the end of the film – state to nation as people, by disclosing how the

state has ruined a young innocent male protagonist. In so doing, it seeks to pacify the antagonism inherent in South Korea's modern social formation, through the uplifting of 'good' objects (innocent nation and people) intimidated by a 'bad' object such as the state. What it misses, however, is the role of a disturbing third piece of reality within the reality, which makes it possible for us to confront the core of antagonism. Given the lack of an excessive piece of the reality, the core of antagonism immanent within South Korea's contemporary modernity is reduced to understanding the male protagonist's inner emotional depth.

Turning to an analysis of *Memories of Murder* in the third section, this study considers whether this film presents a fundamental traumatic moment in displaying the historical past or whether it serves to reinforce the logic of the obscene underside of state power as a way of substantialising that traumatic moment. This film initially stages a moment to disrupt the sequentiality of the modern vision of time, by showing the manner in which the social is organised through an unsolved crime which resists symbolisation. A cinematic trope such as the train serves as a third element in this film. The viewer is allowed to witness South Korea's ultimate limit of history through the mediation of the train. However, this effect of uneasiness is lost towards the end of the film as the film begins to interpret the meaning of the traumatic event, by attributing the cause of murder to the abuse of state power. By contextualising the event into an historical situation, and subsequently domesticating the mediatory role between the social and its fundamental antagonism, this film fails to enable the viewer to encounter with the impossible, negative, and absent point of history.

Finally, the last section of this chapter briefly delineates Im Kwon-taek's trajectory. Im's films, especially *Seopyonje*, have increasingly tended towards a unified national identity based on Koreanness. This final section, will, however, argue that there is another version of

Im's film that can be seen as a way of refashioning the rules and contours of the alleged Koreanness, and this other version is exemplified in *Beyond the Years*. The stark contrast between *Seopyonje* and *Beyond the Years* will help us clarify this argument. Central to this argument is how *Seopyonje* and *Beyond the Years* deploy the main characters' reunions differently. I will argue that in *Seopyonje*, the central characters are closely bonded together in contrast to its explicit narrative appeal, thus domesticating the tensions at play in the South Korean formation of modernity. In contrast to *Seopyonje*, *Beyond the Years* presents a radical way of staging the past, by showing that a harmonious relationship between the main characters is always mediated by a third element which breaks down their relationship. This radical stage of the past will lead us to examine how the formation of South Korea's modernity is founded on an internal tension with itself. In this sense, *Beyond the Years* is the most promising film, from the point of view of my project.

Overall, many recent South Korean films have concentrated on its investments in the past, ranging from the traumatic past of Korean modern history to personal memory. Issues such as trauma and memory are important for mapping out the transformative dynamics of the contemporary South Korean film scene in the sense that the memory of the past plays a role in constructing national identity. Each film's cinematic uses of the past will be examined by the extent to which a mediatory role in each film serves to disturb and furthermore explode social reality by revealing the non-historical moment, that is, the void, within the historical situation. It is only through one of the elements of reality that a true traumatic moment of social conflict can appear. Without this kind of paradoxical element, historicising the past would end up as only historicism, by externalising the cause of the social problem into comparison between a good and bad object. For example, the core of antagonism is not the opposition between bad state and innocent nation/people within South Korea's social

formation as in the case of *Black Republic*, *A Single Spark*, *Peppermint Candy*, and *Memories of Murder*. Rather, it is precisely immanent in a given social formation, referring to a point at which the reality falls into disarray. The general opposition of a single coherent unity (official historiography) and particular identities (counter/popular memory) needs to be thus replaced by the method in which a certain film text reveals the internal fragmentation of South Korea's modernity.

5.1 The Male Intellectual's Narcissistic Illusion as Postmodern Ideology: *Black Republic* and *A Single Spark*

Black Republic deals with an issue of the 1980s for the first time in commercial film. As a commercial film, *Black Republic* seems to be a response to *The Night Before the Strike* (1990), an independent film. As a 16 mm feature film collectively produced by *Jangsankodmae*, *The Night Before the Strike* directly stages the contradiction between labour and capital. *Jangsankodmae* was a union of university film circles, aiming to create propaganda for the overall student activist movement (Kim Sunah, 2007b: 331). Unusually for an independent film, *The Night Before the Strike* drew audiences of nearly 300,000, producing a wide variety of social influences (ibid.: 332). *The Night Before the Strike* was not released in theatres but screened almost solely on university campuses, because of strong prohibition by the state (ibid.: 331). As the government strongly prohibited the exhibition of this film, showing it was regarded as a struggle against the government. Although this film played a critical role in staging the antagonism at work, there was undeniably a danger with the filmic technique, since the people are represented as a great teleological progression and/or the only true political subject of modern nation states. My basic argument in this

section would be that *Black Republic* and furthermore *A Single Spark* also expose the same problem as *The Night Before the Strike*. To illustrate this point, let us turn to the narrative of *Black Republic*.

A student dissident, Han Tae-hun using the false name, Kim Ki-young, comes to a declining coal-mining village to practise labour activism, leaving his mother alone in Seoul. Here, he meets up with Young-suk who works as a call-girl, and Sung-chul, the son of a factory owner, who abandons himself to pleasure. After his father renounces his mother, Sung-chul becomes brutally violent. While structured through the two male protagonists' melodramatic struggle over the female protagonist, Young-suk, *Black Republic* focuses particularly on the male intellectual's solidarity with the people, represented as a subaltern figure in Young-suk. Towards the end of this film, Ki-young is involved in a fight with Sung-chul when he finds that Sung-chul has beaten up Young-suk brutally. It leads him to go to the police, where his disguised identity could be exposed. He manages to escape from the police, and decides to leave the village. He then confesses to Young-suk that he is a student dissident, and she agrees to leave the village with him. They are supposed to meet at the train station, but she does not appear: caught by Sung-chul, she has stabbed him to death and been taken to the police station.

Black Republic is structured by an opening and ending sequence in the present, placing the main narrative into the past tense. It begins with darkness in a tunnel, and then cuts to a medium shot of Ki-young on a train with a voiceover by Ki-young's mother. This pattern appears again towards the end of the film, narrated by Ki-young's voiceover: 'no matter how we define the present day, change has already begun to take place. Those soon to fade away are bogged in despair at today's darkness, while those who behold dreams for tomorrow call this darkness hope'. *Black Republic* also performs the spatial division into 'us' as centre and

‘they’, the coal-mining village, as periphery. A spatial division between centre and periphery necessarily leads us to map cognitively a passage to the world system in the sense that two different spaces reflect an uneven global/local dynamic. However, this is not the main point. The point here is to explore how Ki-young mediates between two different spaces. As a prelude to arguing this point, this section will examine the way in which the people are configured in this film.

Black Republic describes the configuration of the people in terms of the social realist pattern. In accordance with the spatial figure of the mining village, the main characters presented in this film are absolutely alienated from their reality. Sung-chul’s violence stems from the fact that his father abandons his mother; Young-suk, as a sex worker, is continuously exploited by Sung-chul; Tae-shik, a colleague of Ki-young, has a father in jail because of his alignment with the labour movement. In a sense, it is understandable that Park Kwang-su presents a vivid sense of reality in an attempt to distinguish the film from the predominant tendency of representation in the 1980s stuffed with ‘quasi-pornographic films and melodramas featuring dysfunctional males’ (Kim Kyung-hyun, 2002: 98). There are problems, however, with the way that this film attempts to provide a representation of people as they really are, by focusing on Gilles Deleuze’s expression ‘people are there’ (Deleuze, 1989: 216). Deleuze illustrates how the model of the people has been shown in Soviet cinema (for example, Sergei Eisenstein) and American cinema (for example, the westerns of Frank Capra and John Ford). He argues that the models put forward in both these national cinemas are based on the founding condition that ‘the people are there, even though they are oppressed, tricked, subject, even though blind and unconscious’ (ibid.). Therefore, the task of contemporary political cinema, according to Deleuze, is not ‘addressing a people, which is presupposed already there’, but ‘contributing to the invention of a people’ (ibid.: 217).

From this reason, it is not sufficient to simply pose the repressed people against a dominant power structure. Representation of overflowing people, with its emphasis on the empirical level, is incapable of throwing the organic totality of the sensory-motor system off course. To further explore this question, it is necessary to begin my analysis by considering how the main characters are constituted through spatial configuration. The next sequence after the prologue consists of a series of images showing how Ki-young sneaks into the peripheral space following his trajectory. The first shot in this sequence frames the whole landscape of the dreary mining village, serving as an establishing shot. Then the film shows a bus entering this village to suggest continuity in space. This sequence ends up with the point-of-view shot of Tae-shik, a future colleague of Ki-young's, illuminating that Ki-young represents a character exterior to this peripheral space. In contrast to Ki-young, Sung-chul circulates around the village on his motorcycle. When the camera offers the framing of Sung-chul, Park tends to foreground him with rapid editing. Although there is a difference concerning the way that Ki-young and Sung-chul organise the events-in-spaces, many similarities appear between the two of them. While the male characters are presented as action and its extension as a way of continuity in space, Young-suk, in helpless despair, cannot move and leave space by herself. She appears as a kind of local space; she is offered not as a foreigner but as a direct embodiment of that local configuration. For instance, when the viewer first sees her in the film, the camera glimpses the whole landscape of the village through an extreme long shot, and then tilts down to her as she is stuck behind the window of a motel room.⁵ This film overemphasises the importance of this character, by paralleling the representation of people with the configuration of space: Young-suk is always represented as imprisoned, enclosed, and claustrophobic. She is not merely related to space, but is space as

⁵ For an analysis of this shot in terms of sexual politics see Kim Sun-ah (2006: 87).

such. This pattern culminates towards the end of the film where she is taken into custody for the tragic reason that she has stabbed Sung-chul to death. The viewer is shown the image of her stuck behind the window of a police car. Equating people with space prevents us from encountering a subject, because a subject in psychoanalysis defines itself as something which is out of its place. A subject has nothing to do with any spatial representation. For this reason, when the Deleuzian notion of minor cinema begins with a presupposition that ‘the people are missing’ (1989: 216) as opposed to people overflowing, the concept does not refer to identitarian minorities as a way of demarcating identity, but rather to something that ‘multiplies types and “characters”, and each time creates or re-creates only a small part of the image which no longer corresponds to a linkage of actions, but to shattered states of emotions or drives, expressible in pure images and sounds’ (ibid.: 220). From the view presented here, *Black Republic* seems to fail to stage an elusive figure of the people, by merely focusing on the present thing.

Along with the description mentioned above, it is also important to examine the way in which divergent spaces between centre and periphery are converged through the link of the male intellectual. In other words, an uneven relation between two spaces is exclusively mastered by Ki-young’s flashback of student activism taking place in Seoul. He is regularly influenced and affected by mediators including broadcast news, newspapers, and his own recollection-image of Seoul.



5-1 a

5-1 b



5-1 c

5-1 d

Figures 5-1 a – d: Ki-young recollects his past.

For instance, in the scene where Ki-young first meets up with Young-suk in a worn-out motel room, it is noteworthy that the inside space of the motel room is distinctively demarcated between a shower room and a bedroom. When she goes into the shower room, Ki-young watches the TV news which reports on a violent demonstration in Seoul (Fig. 5-1 a). Starting with two-shots of the couple, Park then zooms in on the face of Ki-young with the sound of the TV news coming from off-screen space (Fig. 5-1 b). The next cut returns us to a series of his flashbacks in which he was struggling as a dissident student, with the sound of the TV news still continuing into this shot (Fig. 5-1 c, 5-1 d). A similar pattern appears in the

later part of the film. When Ki-young is in custody in the police station, the camera frames a number of people moving through the station followed by a medium shot of Ki-young stuck in the police station. Alternating with Ki-young's various flashbacks, the film shows that the detective is interrogating him about his real identity. While he lies about his identity verbally on the soundtrack, the camera nonetheless continues to show, during his responses, a series of flashbacks.

The split between sound and image is offered as contradictory, but there still remains an organic succession mastered by what Deleuze calls 'mental images' such as 'recollection-images, dream or dreaming' (Deleuze, 1989: 79): mental images referring to the actual present or an indirect representation of time even though it is mediated through the leap into the past. This is not the disjunctive articulation of sound and image, but rather the synthesising of each sound and image in terms of an ever-expanding totalising One. As the flashback trope here serves to actualise the past, there is no moment for the virtual to be subtracted from this virtual/actual oscillation. In contrast to mental images, the pure past as 'the transcendental form of time' (Deleuze, 1989: 274) is not the particular, subsequent, and unifiable past of the actual present, but emerges at the interstices of the actual present where concurrent points in the present or layers of the past find themselves incompatible.

The degree to which Park privileges the mediatory role of an intellectual is much increased in *A Single Spark*. The film deals with a worker, Chon Tae-il, the immortal figure of the South Korean labour movement, who set himself on fire to protest against poor working conditions in 1970. Chon Tae-il is, however, shown through a male intellectual, Kim Young-soo, who is writing a critical biography on him. By representing Tae-il's life and death through an intellectual's point of view, this film leads the viewer to see working conditions in the 1970s. While Tae-il's time is shot in black and white, the present, led by Young-soo's

narration, is rendered in colour. The contrast between Tae-il and Young-soo's time through colour differences is fused into the present time as screen time in the 1990s. As a result, *A Single Spark* consists of a three-layered time period. It is mainly led by a working activist and writer, Young-soo, in the mid-1970s, while Chon Tae-il is shown in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Together with this time period, the film's opening and closing sequences are structured around the 1990s' situation. For instance, the film begins by showing newsreel-like images of tens of thousands of South Korean workers attending a rally in the mid-1990s. This sequence highlights that Tae-il's death has not lost its significance even in the contemporary era, and that his self-immolation has led to the reinforcement of the labour movement in the modern history of South Korea. However, for this very reason, this film fails to address 'the transcendental form of time', since time shown in this film remains caught up with the sequential line of time where past and present is linked on a continuum in ends-oriented chains. Moreover, by linking Tae-il's death with today's political struggles, this film represents a linear causality between distinct times based on the classical model of the people. That is because, as D.N. Rodowick rightly points out, 'classical cinema participate[s] in its own way in representing the teleological becoming of the people as identical with the ineluctable unfolding of history' (Rodowick, 1997: 152).



5-2 a



5-2 b



5-2 c



5-2 d



5-2 e



5-2 f

Figures 5-2 a – f : *A Single Spark* shows Tae-il's time through Young-soo's look.

This problem is sustained by the way in which Tae-il is mediated through Young-soo's look. For instance, in the sequence after the opening sequence, the film begins by framing the space of a whole factory in an extreme long shot, and tilts down to show that Young-soo is walking down the street to enter the factory (Fig. 5-2 a). In the next shot, Young-soo goes up the stairs (Fig. 5-2 b). The camera cuts to focus on him looking at something inside the factory (Fig. 5-2 c). The next shot shows that young girls are working in the factory in the present tense (Fig. 5-2 d). The camera cuts to capture a medium shot of Young-soo (Fig. 5-2 e). In the next, we can see that young girls are working in the factory in the 1970s (Fig. 5-2 f). As is shown in this sequence, the film sees Tae-il's time through the lens of Young-soo's look. This pattern appears at other points in the film. In some cases, Young-soo does not function as a mere onlooker, but even as a self-mirroring double of Tae-il. By foregrounding the blurring border between two of them, the film attempts to show that Tae-il must not be seen as an individual person, but as a ubiquitous figure: we are all Tae-il. However, I propose that that Young-soo's look can be seen as coexistent with an ideological fantasy, since it fails to gain 'something beyond the "normal" field of vision' that is, the 'elusive surplus of visibility [which] renders the whole vision non-transparent, ambiguous, and threatening' (Dolar, 1992: 144). For Mladen Dolar, Hitchcockian uses of the gaze can be defined as the Biblical motto 'they have eyes, yet they do not see' (ibid.). What is important is not the fact that the subject is watching, but that the subject is not seeing anything when s/he looks at. The inactivity in vision, Dolar argues, constitutes the necessary condition of the gaze (ibid.: 143). From the view presented here, Young-soo is not only watching, but also seeing Tae-il with complete certainty. As Tae-il is rendered as a transfixed bearer of Young-soo's look, what Young-soo misses is perhaps the zero-degree of vision.

This film's failure to stage the gaze manifests itself towards the end of the film. In a

scene where Tae-il sets fire to himself in black and white, the camera captures the back of Tae-il, leaving the viewers unable to recognise his face. In the next scene, the viewer comes to see Tae-il's face in colour through Young-soo's imaginary representation of Tae-il. The film then flashes forwards to the 1990s when Young-soo visits the factory once again. From his point-of-view shot, the camera captures the factory, then tilts down to focus on the young worker holding the book entitled *Chon Tae-il's Life and Death* that Young-soo himself has written.



5-3 a



5-3 b



5-3 c

Figures 5-3 a – c: Tae-il looks back to both Young-soo and the viewer.

Towards the end of this scene, Park frames the back of the young worker from Young-soo's point-of-view shot (Fig. 5-3 a, 5-3 b), and cuts to the worker looking back to both Young-soo and the viewer through the freeze frame (Fig. 5-3 c). When he turns his head back, the worker is switched to Tae-il in colour, smiling gently. In this shot, Tae-il is not confined to an existing person, but refers to an 'empty signifier' to invoke the flowering of the labour movement in the present. As is the case with the opening sequence, this shot is also employed to emphasise that Tae-il's struggle still has urgency even today. By focusing on the meaning which Tae-il delivers in the present tense, what this closing shot overlooks is the 'elusive surplus of visibility'. It is here that the figure of Tae-il serves as a transparent sublime object, by being transfixed within the normal field of Young-soo's vision.

Hyon Joo Yoo Murphree (2008) points out the centrality of the relation between the main narrator (Young-soo) and Tae-il: 'in the narrator's invocation, [Chon Tae-il] is locked into the shape of a lost young boy...who did not get to mature into a national genius, and [the] narrator himself must fill the ellipses and gaps of this lost boy's life' (Murphree, 2008: 679). She goes on to say that 'this refusal to turn a historical figure into a sublime object prevents the hypermasculine imagery from becoming a national myth' (ibid.). In contrast to this idea, I argue that this type of double image does not function as a haunting double to elude the existing order, but as a self-affirming and self-reflective double image. For the very reason that Young-soo can be seen as filling in the void of Tae-il, or that the young worker serves as the stand-in for the lost Tae-il, Young-soo's look in the closing shot is not the emergence of the gaze qua blot to disrupt our viewing process, but rather the nostalgic look of 'I see myself seeing myself' (Lacan, 1978: 80-1). Slavoj Žižek (1992) points out the importance of fascination in the nostalgic object: 'the real object of fascination is not the displayed scene but the gaze of the naïve "other" absorbed, enchanted by it' (Žižek, 1992:

114).

For the same reason, Kim Soh-youn (2008) presents a penetrating analysis, suggesting that this shot can be read as an attempt to domesticate the Real trauma of Chon Tae-il into the modern reflexive subject's narcissistic illusion (Kim, 2008: 195). Just as the relation between the representative and the people is domesticated through the male intellectual's flashback in *Black Republic*, so too Young-soo's nostalgic look in *A Single Spark* reveals the danger and limitation of self-reflexivity. For this reason, it might be accurate to say that the filmic strategy of the Korean New Wave might function as a precursor to anticipate the advent of the Korean blockbuster, insofar as both, based on postmodern retrospective nostalgia, tend to avoid screening the non-historical kernel of the Real which fundamentally eludes historicisation.

With Chon Tae-il seen only through the mediation of Young-soo's nostalgic look, how can contemporary South Korea's sociopolitical complexities be grasped through this type of mediation? Consider that the current transnational capitalism, deeply rooted in the real subsumption, is set in motion not when it represses civil society but the moment it posits the difference within the competing forces of civil society against a unified totality of the state. Perhaps these films lead us to understand that civil society, in which social antagonism was once orchestrated between the state and market, is really subsumed into the state in the postmodern era of transnational capitalism. To screen the antagonism of the historical past may correspond to the changing role of civil society in South Korea, which has become a threshold of the current capitalist system.

5.2 The Erasure of a Mediatory Role: *Peppermint Candy*

Peppermint Candy foregrounds Yong-ho's individual history which was repressed by the state, in a kind of reverse temporal structure that moves from spring 1999 to autumn 1979. As such, this film appeals to the sharp contrast between a single coherent unity (the state) and an individual subject's fragmented differences. However, such a resistance strategy misses the crucial point that there is always a third element between the two terms of a dichotomy. In what follows, I will examine the manner in which this film takes up the third element.

In the first episode (1999), the film begins with a scene where the male protagonist Yong-ho commits suicide by standing in front of an oncoming train, screaming 'I want to go back again', through a freeze frame. In the second episode, three days before he commits suicide, he becomes bankrupt and utterly isolated from his family. In the third episode (1994), he becomes a successful furniture store boss. He has an affair with a young member of staff whilst brutally beating his wife, who also gets involved in an affair with another man. In the fourth episode (1987), he works as a police officer taking an active role in torturing students associated with the anti-system movement. 1984, the fifth episode, is the year in which he starts becoming involved in torture. Episode 6, one of the key episodes, concerns the events in Kwang-ju in 1980. The final episode 7 suggests the only hopeful moment in this film in which Yong-ho, Sun-im and their friends participate in a picnic.



5-4 a

5-4 b

An emergency situation happens in the barracks.



5-4 c

5-4 d

Yong-ho gets on a military truck with his fellow soldiers.



5-4 e

5-4 f

Yong-ho looks out at Sun-im from the truck.



5-4 g

5-4 h

Yong-ho continues to look at Sun-im.

However, she does not notice that Yong-ho is looking at her.



5-4 i

5-4 j

Yong-ho is moving away from Sun-im.

Figures 5-4 a – j: Yong-ho looks at Sun-im from an army truck in *Peppermint Candy*.

Among them, episode 6 (1980) needs to be discussed first, because the events of Kwang-ju directly refer to the origin of Yong-ho's traumatised personal history, simultaneously working as a metaphor of national trauma at a collective level. In 1980, Sun-im visits the military base where Yong-ho is working but cannot meet him because he is to be sent to Kwang-ju. Then, the film cuts to a shot of an emergency in the barracks (Fig. 5-4 a), with rapid hand-held camera movement contrasting with the slowness of previous shots. The next shot shows Yong-ho stumbling to the ground because of his limp (Fig. 5-4 b). (This pattern always recurs just after he fails to meet up with Sun-im or encounters the traces of her double image, as discussed in detail below.) The following scene shifts our perspective, allowing us to see how they drift apart. Yong-ho looks out at her from a military truck but she does not recognise the fact that Yong-ho is looking at her (Figs. 5-4 c – i). The final shot of this scene, achieved with a long take and an extreme long shot, highlights that Yong-ho is moving away from Sun-im through the intervention of the state (Fig. 5-4 j).

During military manoeuvres in Kwang-ju, he gets shot in the leg and lies alongside the train. There, he sees a girl who, at first, looks like Sun-im but later turns out to be a local girl from Kwang-ju. While he attempts to defend the girl, he mistakenly shoots and kills her.

Peppermint Candy does not deal with the events of the Kwang-ju uprising directly, unlike *A Petal*, but the events of Kwang-ju present a clue for understanding this film: the events have caused physical and psychological destruction throughout his life. By opposing the national/people with the state in a melodramatic form, this film attempts to address how an individual subject in modern South Korean history has been intimately influenced by state violence: it is the state that destroys the people's solidarity exemplified in Yong-ho and Sun-im's innocent love.

However, *Peppermint Candy* is not fully free from the trap of historicism. For instance,

Lee Chang-dong relates the narrative reality in each episode to South Korea's important historical events or the national past: 1999 in episodes 1 and 2 is shortly after the IMF economic crisis that took place in 1997; in 1980 there was the Kwang-ju uprising; and in 1979 president Park Chung-hee was assassinated and there was a temporary anticipation of a return to civilian government. In the course of comparing individual history with official history, this film fails to refigure the complex relations between the empirical historical description and the concept of history (historicity) by glossing over two overlapping but nonetheless sharply distinguished spheres (this was discussed in the chapter 1). The simple equation of narrative event with the historical past cannot convey the non-historical moment which obtrudes into historical reality itself. The only way to move beyond this kind of dilemma is to extract the concept of history from historical context. Accordingly, the political *per se* here depends on how to reveal an initial empty point which eludes an engaging account of history.

Let me clarify my point by way of reviewing some relevant literature concerning this film's cinematic strategy of historicising. Aaron Han Joon Magnan-Park (2005) highlights the centrality of reverse temporal narrative structure since it 'directly challenges the progressive, linear and teleological construction of historicism and its incorporation within official history' (Magnan-Park, 2005: 167). However, reverse narrative structure does not necessarily bring about a radical way of historiography. Insofar as the narrative structure in reverse order is employed to trace down a series of events which triggers Yong-ho's suicide, this film still remains bound up with linear causality. Presented in this light, *Peppermint Candy* fails to present a radical historicity.

This point becomes prominent when this film carries a very obvious temporal trope exemplified in the shots of Yong-ho's limp, by contrasting a very rapid temporality rooted in

forcibly imposed modernisation to temporary discontinuity of the modern progress of time. Lee presents Yong-ho's recurring limp throughout the film. This limp takes place when Yong-ho is contingently connected to Sun-im or her double, such as an anonymous woman in Kunsan. David Martin-Jones (2006) argues that Yong-ho's limp designates that 'the possibility existed for the past (Yong-ho's youthful innocence) to reappear in the gap between perception and action, and thereby to break up the seemingly inevitable national narrative' (Martin-Jones, 2006: 214). He goes on to propose that this film offers 'the deterritorialising power of the time-image and its potential to stutter this linear pathway through time', whilst it rests on 'the power of the movement-image to reterritorialise the national narrative' (ibid.: 217). Yong-ho's sensory-motor discontinuity might seem to signal the temporary break of a linear chronology. However, this fleeting disruption in sensory-motor continuity does not seem to open up a new kind of cinematic image. Although his limp is presented as disjointed in sharp contrast with the development and progress which the state violently imposes, it still seems bound up with the empirical perspective of time.

The theoretical rift can be brought into focus more sharply by examining the following note from Martin-Jones. For him, if the events of Kwang-ju indicate the primary cause of the traumatic repetition for Yong-ho, this film also shows a hopeful moment in the last episode. In this episode, the film turns to autumn 1979 when Yong-ho, Sun-im and their friends befriend each other and sing together near the railroad track – it is noteworthy that the place in the final episode is the very same place where he commits suicide in episode 1. Martin-Jones emphasises the centrality of this scene in the sense that both national and individual identity could have unfolded in a very different manner: 'as the narrative plays backwards we are finally left with the image of the young idealistic Yong-ho. In this way *Peppermint Candy* attempts to show how the virtual potential offered by the crystal of time always coexists with

its actual manifestation. Thus, although it begins with Yong-ho's suicide, it also points out that if he had managed to act differently at any of the turning points in his life this did not necessarily have to be the ending of his story' (ibid.: 217). Perhaps, this episode may insinuate that the national history of South Korea during the 20 years could have unfurled differently, by positing an original innocent moment that Yong-ho lost afterwards. However, the introduction of original fullness is not an advantage, but a limitation of this film. That is because it is not a hope for the future but a deadlock of history, that is, the gap separating history from itself that renders the core of history visible.



5-5 a

5-5 b

Bongwoo Club members sit together near the railroad track.
Yong-ho and Sun-im exchange glances.



5-5 c

5-5 d

Yong-ho leaves quietly, and lies down on the ground.



5-5 e

5-5 f

Yong-ho looks out at something.
The camera reframes to a tight close-up of Yong-ho's face.

Figures 5-5 a – f: Yong-ho in the closing scene in *Peppermint Candy*

In contrast to Martin-Jones' idea, Todd McGowan (2007b) argues that this scene does not stress Yong-ho's bond with his friends or his relationship with Sun-im (McGowan, 2007b: 181). In order to explore this point further, it is necessary to analyse the closing scene in episode 7. The scene begins with an extreme long shot framing the future Bongwoo Club members sitting together near the railroad track (Fig. 5-5 a). In the next shot, the camera tracks left to reveal Yong-ho and Sun-im singing together, allowing only Sun-im's face to be in focus: they exchange glances, and smile timidly (Fig. 5-5 b). By allowing only Sun-im to be sharply in focus and leaving Yong-ho hazy in the background, Lee attracts the viewer's attention to Sun-im. With Yong-ho still lying outside the depth of field, he stands up, and leaves quietly (Fig. 5-5 c). Sun-im continues to look out at him walking away from the group, and turns her head towards the group in a circle. Lee then cuts back to a long shot of Yong-ho. As he slowly moves towards the camera, lies on the ground (Fig. 5-5 d), and looks out at something (Fig. 5-5 e), the camera reframes to a tight close-up of Yong-ho's face (Fig. 5-5 f) and ends with a freeze frame, with the train whistle on the soundtrack.

In his analysis of this scene, McGowan argues that this film does not focus on Yong-ho's connection with Sun-im or the group, since 'the film ends with Yong-ho drawn away from the group and from Sun-im, drawn to the power of the train that seems at once to fascinate and horrify him' (ibid.). By conceiving this closing shot as signalling a perpetual repetition of failure itself, and not as a kind of fullness, he argues that this film presents a way that 'the loss that occurs during this development is the loss of nothing substantial' (ibid.). He goes on

to conclude,

As the South Korean nation develops and as Yong-ho participates in that development, he does experience a series of traumatic ruptures, but in each case, he loses what he does not have. That is to say, the accumulation of traumas that scars Yong-ho's identity is his subjectivity; his subjectivity does not exist as a prior substance subjected to loss but emerges through the loss itself (ibid.).

Even though the theoretical framework starts from the same background, my argument would clearly be at odds with McGowan's. Before Yong-ho gets up, there are already tensions between Yong-ho and Sun-im as Lee frames their relationship through the use of selective focus. While the camera tracks, time lasts for Sun-im as the main character to establish herself in this shot. Even after the hierarchical relationship between the two of them is settled, there are tensions at play in this scene, since Lee raises the difficult question of who controls this scene. However, this tension is soon released by the close-up of Yong-ho's face in the next shot. In contrast to McGowan's idea, Yong-ho's detachment from the group and Sun-im and his attachment to the train do not work as indicating the loss itself, but as a defence screen to delay the intrusion of the Real, because there is an absence of a mediatory role in this closing shot. Given no functioning mediation of an excessive piece of reality, a traumatic moment inherent in the core of Yong-ho's subjectivity, and furthermore, national identity is reduced to a vulnerable human face. As a result, the viewer remains bound up with 'understanding' Yong-ho's inner emotional depth on the semantic level, thus reinforcing the dichotomy between an innocent space of the national and popular and the modern vision of the nation-state. This prevents us from seeing a fundamental core of history, that is, the non-historical inhering in the complexities of South Korea's contemporary modernity. By opposing Yong-ho's humanist face and a clearly predictable future (catastrophic trauma, that

is, the Real) without recourse to the operation of a mediatory role from the reality, episode 7 fails to demonstrate that the opposition of a single coherent unity (official historiography) and particular identities (counter or popular memory) can contain the dialectical tension between a given historical situation and its inherent traumatic core.



Yong-ho's fellow soldiers shine a flashlight on Yong-ho's face.

Figure 5-6: Yong-ho in panic after killing a local girl

My point is sustained by contrasting this scene with another one. In a scene in episode 6 where Yong-ho shoots a local girl in Kwang-ju, he screams, holding this girl, while the camera slowly moves from the shot of Yong-ho holding the girl surrounded by his fellow soldiers to a close-up on Yong-ho's face. The key point in this shot is that his comrades-in-arms shine a flashlight on Yong-ho's face, so that Yong-ho's traumatic encounter with the Real is presented through the form of this mediation. Lee invites the viewer – via the other soldiers (the Symbolic) – to witness the traumatic event not in terms of contents but of its purely formal procedure. As a result, this shot demonstrates that an unbearable trauma – the Real – appears through a split in reality (the Symbolic), and that the Real is precisely immanent to a concrete reality. This is what makes this scene striking in terms of representations of the traumatic events of Kwang-ju.

This kind of deployment of a traumatic past can be also found in episode 1, and is the key to the difference between episode 7 and episode 1. As is the case with episode 7, Lee moves Yong-ho away from the group towards the end of the scene. When it becomes clear that Yong-ho intends to commit suicide by standing in front of an oncoming train, the group pays no great attention to him, continuing to sing and dance. Episode 1 ends by confronting Yong-ho with the ongoing train, as it in episode 7. However, it is important to note here that before he kills himself, one friend among the group walks to the railroad and begs Yong-ho to get down. Once the anonymous friend appears in this scene, episode 1 is structured around one of the elements from reality which mediates between Yong-ho and the train. The viewer is invited to witness Yong-ho's confrontation with the Real through Yong-ho's friend's look. At this moment, it is necessary neither to exalt it as radical, nor dismiss it as the support for the normal functioning of reality, but to insist on the fact that it is only through a kind of 'umbilical cord' that reality falls into disarray. That is because the fracture in the reality itself becomes visible through the film's foregrounding of it. Although a third piece of reality does not always lead the Real to emerge out of reality – its other functioning is to mask the sudden intrusion of the Real mentioned earlier in this chapter – what we need to consider here is that only the paradoxical functioning of a third party provides the conditions for the emergence of the Real out of a given concrete historical reality. As the analysis of episode 7 demonstrates, the absence of a paradoxical, mediatory element from the reality does not allow the viewer to witness a traumatic moment of social friction. This is why Lee's deployment of a humanist approach, based on Yong-ho's close-up of his vulnerable face, ultimately serves as ideological fantasy, because 'fantasy has to remain "implicit", it has to maintain a distance towards the explicit symbolic texture sustained by it, and to function as its inherent transgression' (Žižek, 1997:18). For my purpose, the basic assumption of this film – that were

it not for the bad state, a traumatic kernel of the Real would not happen – constitutes an archetypal male fantasy.

Overall, *Peppermint Candy* seeks to combine collective history with personal history through its melodramatic uses of the past, thus reinforcing the concept that an individual's history in the form of micro-history is structured and affected by macro-history, especially the state. However, even if it is constituted as a reverse narrative, this film seems to fall into step with historicism, since it rests on the assumption that, were it not for the repressive state, there would be no monstrous male subjectivity. As a result, Yong-ho has not assumed full responsibility of his subsequent behaviour after killing a local girl in Kwang-ju. By concealing an initial failure of individual and national identity, especially through the hiding of a mediatory role towards the end of the film, this film seems to struggle to reveal the radicalism of the non-historical within the complexities of South Korean historical conditions.

5.3 Ideological Fantasy as Interpretive Framework: *Memories of Murder*

Memories of Murder will be discussed here. It is based on the true story of some serial killings which took place between 1986 and 1991 in a small village, Hwa-sung in Kyung-ki province. Serial murder continues throughout the small village in Kyung-ki province. Therefore the film's initial narrative impetus is to discover who has murdered those female victims in a brutal manner, making the male detectives the main drivers of the narrative. However, as the investigation proceeds, the viewer remains unable to get a clue to the truth of the serial killings. Soon after the first and the second suspects are released by the police, the detectives finally focus on the third vital suspect, Park Hyeon-gyu. That is because the female police officer, Ko Seo-hie, realises that a particular song is always requested on the radio

station during the nights when the murders are committed, and that it is Hyeon-gyu who requests that song. Investigating Hyeon-gyu, the detectives cannot, at first, find the crucial evidence. However, after another murder is committed, there remains vital evidence: the semen the murderer left at the crime scene. The investigation is narrowed to see if the semen corresponds to Hyeon-gyu's semen. But the DNA test has to be transferred to the U.S. because South Korea was unable to carry out the procedure in the 1980s. While the film almost invites us to identify Hyeon-gyu as the murderer, the document sent from the U.S. concludes that Hyeon-gyu is not guilty. He disappears into a railway tunnel, leaving the truth of the event forever unknown.

While many thrillers tend to focus on the killer's pathological character, in this film the murderer does not appear throughout the film. Hence, we might miss the point if we try to understand who the real killer is. Even though *Memories of Murder* is a genre thriller on the surface, its true attention is drawn to the past, that is, the representation of the 1980s, by describing how the 1980s in South Korea responded to a serial murder. The serial murder and its consequences represented in this film might indicate a fundamental antagonism at the heart of South Korean society. If all societies are based on a traumatic moment of social contradiction and ideological fantasy serves to hide this antagonism, any unsolved crimes in this film can be understood as a type of social antagonism, that is, the intrusion of the Real into the Symbolic. For this reason, it would be wrong to construe the serial killing as simply an individual crime. At any rate, it touches on the universal dimension, since in order for a society 'to claim legitimacy as a "natural", peaceful and democratically evolving state', 'the moment of barbarity, conflict, and antagonism...must be repressed' (Homer, 2005: 113).

The radicalism of this film is found in both the opening and closing sequences. The opening sequence begins with a master shot to display a quiet and peaceful ordinary rural

location. This sequence is organised around a beautiful landscape that parallels glowing golden fields of rice with a blue fall sky. But halfway through the sequence, the camera offers us an image of a woman raped and murdered in a ditch near a farm. When the inside of the drainage ditch is first depicted, every filmic object except a cricket is initially thrown out of focus. As the focus settles upon Doo-man's face a few seconds later in the same shot, the camera captures Doo-man's face peering inside the ditch. In the next shot, the camera shows the mutilated woman in the foreground with Doo-man located in the background. The following shot, from Doo-man's point-of-view, leads us to see that the body has already started to decay and ants are swarming over it. The film shows that Doo-man detects the victim in the ditch, but the focus is on the preceding shot that seems to show Doo-man himself confined in the ditch. It is here that the film forestalls any future narrative resolution organised by Doo-man. While the primary narrative drive is carried by the male detectives, this film provides moments that frustrate the predictable sequentiality of this drive, making the subject-who-is-supposed-to-know stumble.

In contrast to the previous shots, Bong Joon-ho then presents a long shot of Doo-man, a young boy, and an anonymous farmer. Doo-man is mocked by a little boy who simply imitates what Doo-man says. Doo-man appears impotent in the face of this mockery. The camera then pans to the right to show children playing in the rice field next to the crime scene. The farmer runs across to stop the group of children ruining the crime scene. Doo-man and the young boy remain off-screen. This shot is composed idly, so that it is clearly contrasted with the previous shots illustrating the drainage ditch. However, what draws our attention in this shot is the fact that the mutilated body of the woman has been abandoned next to the golden rice field. Bong posits the 'unknowable' dark ditch in off-screen space as something threatening a carefree rural life. This is the void I keep in mind throughout the thesis. This

space is seen not only as completely opaque in contrast to the golden rice field next to the ditch, but also as a disturbance to prevent any possible signification. This space produces a sense of unease, threatening to undo the normal functioning of everyday rural life.

This pattern reappears in the closing sequence of the film. A few decades later, Doo-man returns to the crime scene and peers again into the dark ditch. A young local girl then tells Doo-man about what she has heard from an anonymous man, who confessed about what he had done in the past. Doo-man asks the girl to describe whom the man resembled. The girl hesitates and says that his face was 'ordinary'. The camera initially cuts to a close-up of Doo-man's face from the side. But a few seconds later, in the same shot, Doo-man turns his face towards both the camera and the viewer. As Doo-man gazes back both at the viewer and at the camera, there emerges a cinematic tension. In other words, as Doo-man turns his face towards an imaginary viewer, this shot implies that what first seems to be a subjective shot is abruptly objectivised, thus not locating him within the space of diegetic reality. What is important is not a matter of the simple transformation of a subjective into an objective shot, but of the fact that the tension is left unresolved. As Doo-man turns his face towards the viewer, this moment allows us to confront cinematic tension in terms of a purely formal aspect, because the point-of-view of this shot is not designated as being that of a personal identity. What is important is, thus, not how Doo-man reveals his inner emotion through his facial gesture, but how Bong creates a cinematic tension by making him look at the viewer. This is where *Memories of Murder* successfully reveals the staging of cinematic distortion and/or tension.

The train in this film also plays a role in staging the disruption of the Real. To be more concrete, it is the third element I keep in mind in this chapter. Consider that Gwang-ho who is the first suspect and witnessed the crime scene cannot bear testimony to the fact, as he is

killed in a railway accident. It is noteworthy that the train in this film works as breaking modern progress and expansion, by strongly destroying the modern subject's will-to-knowledge. We would be lost, however, if we construe the train as bearing a part of the burden of meaning. The train can be best understood as signalling the lack of meaning, because the train refers to something which eludes and resists any kind of interpretive activities. It is through the mediation of this type of third element that this film opens up a dialectics between historical context and the non-historical point from the context which renders the context incomplete. At least in this sense, *Memories of Murder* seems to me more affirmative than *Peppermint Candy*. While *Peppermint Candy* directly links an individual history to contemporary South Korean history from 1979 to 1997, *Memories of Murder* provides an empty negative point to frustrate the sequentiality of the modern vision of time, by leaving the narrative solution unsolved.

Memories of Murder can be initially seen as displaying the tension between the modern and pre-modern. For example, while Doo-man and his violent colleague Cho Yong-gu are the detectives in the local area, Seo Tae-yoon and a new police chief Shin are sent to investigate the unsolved murder case. Doo-man's investigative methods do not coincide with Tae-yoon's. While the local detectives such as Doo-man and Yong-gu resort to brutal violence, torture, and manipulation of evidence and even rely on shamanism, Tae-yoon and Mr Shin try to keep their distance from the local cops, and, relatively speaking, are more dependent on forensic technology to solve the crime. The tension between the modern and pre-modern can be also found in the way that *Memories of Murder* stages a traumatic moment that depends on the stark contrast in spatial configuration. While an interrogation room in the police station is presented as an enclosed space in which state violence is secretly carried out, all the women victims are murdered in an open space, such as a field. If the enclosed space enables us to

grasp some aspects of the compressed modernity of South Korea, the field where murder recurs indicates, to some extent, the pre-modern that is left behind during modernisation. In this regard, the ditch where the first victim is found dead in the opening sequence and the deep railway tunnel in the later stages of the film can also be seen as referring to pre-modern figures who hinder the smooth functioning of modernity at work. In terms of staging an inherent tension, contradiction, and antagonism of South Korean modernity, this film might constitute what Paul Willemen calls ‘a blockage *within* Korean cinema’ (2002: 173, emphasis original) in which ‘both the way back to tradition and the way forward to modernity are blocked’(ibid.: 175): ‘blockage’ is revealed, argues Willemen, through the competing tension between the modern and pre-modern (this was fully discussed in chapter 2). However, while fully recognising the significance of Willemen’s conceptualisation, I seek to develop my idea from a different angle, as discussed in chapter 2. As far as ‘concrete universality’ is concerned, there are not external tensions, such as the tensions between the modern and pre-modern, only the inherent tensions – the encompassing modernity and its non-existence from within. The totalising process of modernisation is not corrected by posing an outside (the pre-modern), but by its inherent contradictions which are not located outside. In this light, the tensions at play shown in the film can be explained as indicating lack of any foundation within South Korea’s compressing modernity.

This film offers us the impossibility of the representation of the past, by positing that this impossibility refers to the ‘absent cause’, i.e., the void, gap, and lack inherent within modernity. However, the effect of uncanniness is faded out towards the end of the film, since the ‘absent cause’ that ideology hides is replaced by an empirical description of histories. In what ways does it fail to emerge? The sequence of the final crime, towards the end of this film, where the murder of a middle-school girl is crosscut with the blackout imposed by the

state is the key to understanding this film's particular mode of address.



5-7 a

5-7 b

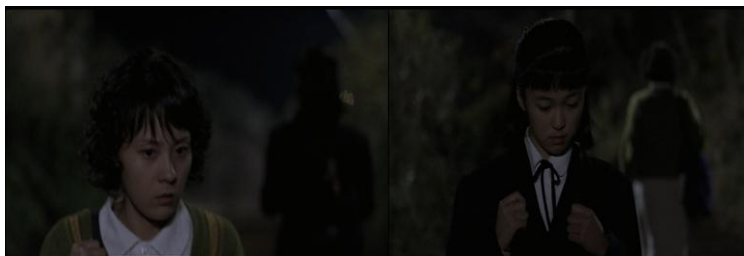
Kwok Seol-yung walks in the woods to visit a patient.
In the next shot, she looks out at something.



5-7 c

5-7 d

Bong cuts back to a shot of Seol-yung walking in the woods.
The viewer can see the killer from behind.



5-7 e

5-7 f

The camera alternates between Seol-yung and a young middle-school student.



5-7 g

5-7 h

The camera shows the viewer what the killer sees.
It pans right to reveal Seol-yung, then pans left to reveal the young student.
Finally it pans right again to show Seol-yung.



5-7 i

5-7 j

The next cut returns to the medium shot of the student walking in the woods. Bong, again, shows her through the killer's viewpoint.



5-7 k

5-7 l

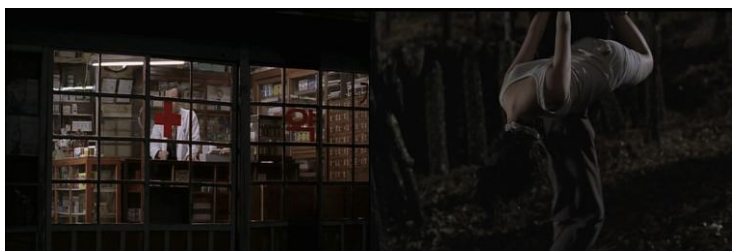
Bong continues to allow the viewer to see the student through the killer's viewpoint. The killer suddenly penetrates through the edge of the frame and attacks her.



5-7 m

5-7 n

Seol-yung looks out at something. An air-raid siren starts to sound.



5-7 o

5-7 p

The film then cuts back to the blackout scene, where each house puts out their lights in accordance with the drill, followed by a shot of the student hanging from ropes.

Figures 5-7 a – p: crime scene of the killer in *Memories of Murder*

This sequence begins with a shot showing Kwok Seol-yung, Doo-man's girlfriend, walking in the woods to visit a patient (Fig. 5-7 a); next it cuts to a shot from Seol-yung's viewpoint (Fig. 5-7 b); then back to a shot of Seol-yung walking in the woods (Fig. 5-7 c). The next shot is a long shot showing the killer from behind with Seol-yung in the background; the killer is watching her walk in the woods (Fig. 5-7 d). In the following shots, the camera alternates between a young female middle-school student and Seol-yung (Fig. 5-7 e, 5-7 f). Then, the camera invites the viewer to see what the killer sees, and to identify with the killer's point of view: it pans right to reveal Seol-yung, then pans left to reveal the young student, and finally pans right again to show Seol-yung (Fig. 5-7 g, 5-7 h). The next cut returns to the medium shot of the student walking in the woods (Fig. 5-7 i). Bong, again, shows her from the killer's viewpoint (Fig. 5-7 j). Finally, the camera offers a scene in which the killer suddenly penetrates the edge of the frame and attacks the student (Fig. 5-7 l), followed by Seol-yung's reaction shot (Fig. 5-7 m). In the following scene, the film crosscuts the blackout drill perpetrated by the state with the killer's brutal murder of the girl: when an air-raid siren sounds throughout the entire rural area with the whole village having fallen into darkness, the anonymous killer attempts to kill the student (Fig. 5-7 o, 5-7 p).

The first point to be made here is that as the scene of the murder in this sequence follows the standard version of the thriller genre for the purpose of heightening suspense, what it loses is a fundamental gap between the eye and the gaze. Briefly, by putting the viewer in a position identified with the killer's viewpoint, what this film overlooks is the sense of uncanniness resulting from a radical split between the eye and the gaze. What is worth noting here is that the gaze is not on the side of the subject viewing the object, but on the side of the object – that is, the filmic image. Although the gaze refers to an object, it is not just an ordinary object, but '*the objet a in the field of the visible*' (Lacan, 1978: 105, emphasis

original). The introduction of the psychoanalytic vocabulary of the *objet petit a* concerning the conception of the gaze signals that ‘this object is not a positive entity but a lacuna in the visual field’ (McGowan, 2007a: 6). The gaze can be, thus, defined as tied to the incompleteness of a filmic image that cannot be integrated into the visual field. In this sense, it is not very difficult to see that the gaze can be seen as another name for ‘concrete universality’, since both of them are always of the radical disturbance of the filmic image itself in terms of ontology.

How can we, then, conceive that the crime scene loses the effect of the gaze? What formal device justifies the domestication of the gaze? In order to explore it further, we can follow Slavoj Žižek’s analysis of Alfred Hitchcock’s use of montage in *Psycho* (1960). Towards the end of the film, Lillah climbs the hill to arrive at the old house where Norman resides. Žižek argues that Hitchcock’s montage technique alternates between the objective shot of Lillah climbing the hill and her subjective gaze at the house. He summarises the mechanism of Hitchcockian montage as follows.

In Hitchcockian montage, two kinds of shots are thus permitted and two forbidden. Permitted are the objective shot of the person approaching a Thing and the subjective shot presenting the Thing as the person sees it. Forbidden are the objective shot of the Thing, of the “uncanny” object, and – above all – the subjective shot of the approaching person from the perspective of the “uncanny” object itself (Žižek, 1992:117).

In this sequence from *Psycho*, the radicality of Hitchcock’s editing technique lies in that there is a fundamental gap between Lillah’s view of the house and the house, which returns the gaze at her. As the viewer sees the house from Lillah’s viewpoint, the house, argues Žižek, does not reside in a ‘neutral’ object shot of the house itself, but in the subjective shot of Lillah

stuffed with the sense of uneasiness. Why? The effect of uneasiness appears when an everyday, ordinary object turns into an uncanny object: ‘Hitchcockian montage elevates an everyday, trivial object into a sublime Thing. By purely formal manipulation, it succeeds in bestowing on an ordinary object the aura of anxiety and uneasiness’ (ibid.). In contrast to Hitchcock’s editing technique, the standard thriller genre relies on neutralising trauma by presenting subjective shots ‘from inside the house’ (ibid.: 118). As Žižek puts it,

Let us imagine that as Lilah approached the house, there had been a trembling shot showing Lilah through the curtains of the house window, accompanied by the sound of hollow breathing, thus indicating that somebody was watching her from inside the house. Such a procedure (used regularly in standard thrillers) would, of course, intensify the strain... But such a subjectification would again suspend the status of the gaze *qua object*, reducing it to the subjective point of view of another diegetic personality (ibid., emphasis original).

Žižek’s analysis can be applied to the crime scene of *Memories of Murder* mentioned earlier. From the perspective presented here, this film struggles to show a radical split between the eye and the gaze, by rendering subjective shots from the killer’s viewpoint. Or, to put it another way, the display of the victimised other identified through the viewpoint of the killer does not gaze back at the viewer. As the crime scene attempts to substantialise the catastrophic trauma by redirecting it back into the killer’s diegetic personality, this scene retreats from the impossible encounter with trauma in terms of the formal aspect. In so doing, this scene fails not only to stage the tension inherent within the film text, but also to disclose a fundamental antagonism immanent within South Korea’s formation of modernity. Without recourse to asymmetry between eye and gaze, a traumatic moment is presented in the form of a tamed, domesticated, and pacified figure. By failing to exhibit a disruptive mediator – in

this case, the gaze – to hinder the seamless operation of reality, the treatment of the past in this film is reduced to an empirical description of history.

My critical point will be more sustained by examining another cinematic practice in this sequence. Two separate spaces are dialectically synthesised to show how uncompetitive the state in the 1980s was, and that the state is the cause of the murder: in the blackout drill, the darkness is enforced by the state in the name of defence against a possible North Korean attack. Even though Bong's intention may have been to criticise the state's complicity in the murder of the young student, I think there are, nonetheless, some problems with the way the film tries to start interpreting the event and juxtaposes the abuse of state power with the crime scene. Until this kind of interpretation appears towards the end of the film, one cannot see in this film any consideration of the cause of the murder, since serial killing has been presented as a negative point where the 'absent cause' is manifested. Even though the cause of the event still remains obscure up to this point of the film, this scene can be seen as aiming at directly contextualising the meaning of the murder case by asking why it happened and who is responsible. By situating the event within its historical context, what this film misses is a traumatic encounter with the Real, that is, the non-historical which constantly prevents historicisation.

In order to clarify my argument, let us describe some theoretical background here. Consider that the constitution of social reality presupposes the fundamental exclusion of a traumatic moment, which Žižek identifies with 'social antagonism'. The encounter with the traumatic moment – the Real – reveals to the subject the total explosion of reality. It is, thus, precisely opposed to what subjects experience as reality. In order to maintain the coherence of reality, there is needed a role of ideology. The role of ideology, argues Žižek 'is not to offer us a point of escape from our reality, but to offer us social reality itself as an escape from

some traumatic, [R]eal kernel' (Žižek, 1989: 45). From a Lacanian/ Žižekian perspective, the critique of ideology, thus, does not lie in the fact that ideology is a deceptive illusion misrepresenting social reality, but that it endows subjects with interpretive framework which enables them to consider social reality as meaningful and coherent. The functioning of ideology with its special reference to reality can be summarised as follows:

The big Other [to paraphrase it on my own way, social reality] sustains its hold over the subject through the creation of a world of meaning: when one accepts the meaningfulness of this world, one subjects oneself to the big Other and its authority. This process of subjection allows the subject to exist in a world where things make sense. But retaining this world of sense depends on the continued capitulation of the subject to the big Other (McGowan, 2007a: 16).

From the standpoint presented here, Bong's cinematic practice in the scenes mentioned above can be seen as constituting ideological space in its effort to symbolise the traumatic event. His insistence on the ultimate horizon of meaning which symbolises the serial killing in the 1980s is increasingly irrelevant to a fundamental groundlessness in the social field. Rather, he colours, interprets, and gives some sense to that event, and in so doing falls into the trap of historicism. It is historicism because it serves to replace a fundamental exclusion of an antagonism that grounds the horizon of the social field with 'contingency/substitutability within a certain historical horizon' (SŽ: 108). In order for a true radicalism of the representation of trauma to appear, Bong should have left the viewers with no meaningful coordinates to contextualise it at all. Once he tries to give some sense to that traumatic event, what he misses is the staging of a traumatic kernel of the Real which prevents the final signification of the social field.

5.4 The Detour of South Korean Cinema through Im Kwon-taek

One of the key factors in exploring South Korean cinema's treatment of the past is to discuss Im Kwon-taek's films. Given that he was given the title 'all-Korean director' following the release of *Seopyonje* in 1993, which dramatises one of Korea's traditional folk cultures, *pansori*, his films have been, in my view, seen as a parameter for exploring the question of national identity. However, Im's insistence on an indigenous national culture remains limiting, because it mirrors the self-orientalising declarations of colonialist nostalgia. Of course, there are some of components in *Seopyonje* which defies what is frequently regarded to be the authenticity of Korean culture. The reunion scene in this film indicates that there is the possibility of redefining the alleged Koreanness. Song-hwa and Dong-ho finally meet each other towards the end of film, but they do not reveal their identities. When the emotion culminates, Im replaces *pansori* with background music (further synopsis will be given below). In so doing, Im seems to present the construction of national culture as always operating through a contradictory, ambivalent structure. South Korea's national identity does not exist independently, but through a dialectic between Western technologies and an indigenous national culture. However, while the sonic denial here serves as a complement to the repressed narrative content, it does not fully subvert the construction of the narrative line. Given that the reunion between the central characters is founded on a single unified wholeness which goes against the surface level of narrative, the reunion scene in *Seopyonje* fails to show that the formation of South Korea's modernity is based on insecure contradiction and failure – namely, antagonism. In contrast to this film, *Beyond the Years* foregrounds the reunion disturbed through the mediation of a nonsensical element – *objet petit a* – thus demonstrating that the modernity of South Korea is always split from within.

In order to develop my argument, let us first describe how the narrative is developed in *Seopyonje*. It dramatises a vagabond family over the course of a few decades, ranging from the period of Japanese occupation in the 1930s to South Korea's rapid pursuit of modernisation in the 1960s: a father, Yu-bong, his adopted daughter, Song-hwa, and his stepson, Dong-ho. Yu-bong is a *pansori* singer and has educated his children in *pansori*, Song-hwa as a singer and Dong-ho as a drummer. As Western culture gains popularity in Korea, *pansori* is ruined. The young Dong-ho, tired of poverty and hunger, flees from home. After a few decades, while he is searching for Song-hwa, he hears from a lady that Yu-bong blinded Song-hwa as a result of his belief that there must be *han* in order to become a good singer and she has been roaming around the southern parts of Korea. *Han* is defined as the condensed sentiment of various feelings such as “bitter feeling”, “hatred”, and “unsatisfied desire” (Standish, 1994: 86-7). At long last, Dong-ho visits Song-hwa and asks her to perform *pansori* together with him. Not revealing his identity in his effort not to disturb his sister's *han*, they perform *pansori* one night. The next morning, he is on his way again.

Seopyonje foregrounds a traditional Korean folk culture, *pansori*, through the use of flashbacks. At many points in this film, a flashback beginning with one person ends with another person's recollection. The memories of the past are not presented as monolithic, but as plural, multiple, and even contradictory, confronting the viewer with the question of what we have lost together during the process of South Korea's modernisation. However, an obsessive return to tradition in its effort to retrieve alleged Koreanness is dangerous, because the so-called 'something Korean' never exists solely independently, but only through a hybrid mixture with other cultural products. Cho Hae Joang (2002) points out first the pitfalls of the so-called 'search for our culture': 'Koreans have passed through several hundred years of modernization, and there is something terribly wrong in ignoring that historical accumulation

and defining the self as what the West lacks' (Cho, 2002: 142-43). She, nonetheless, stresses a necessity of 'strategical essentialism', suggesting that 'the realization that "our culture" isn't too bad is a satisfactory first step, for essentialism can be used strategically in the process of overcoming self-denigration' (ibid.).

However, *Seopyonje* fails to pave the way for foregrounding the entangled but contradictory tensions in South Korea's formation of modernity. In what ways does this film fail to stage the complexities of specific historical conjuncture? In brief, as this film is characterised by a decided lack of 'indexicality', the film's treatment of the landscape is filled with a nostalgic view of space. For example, in a famous long take where Dong-ho, Song-hwa, and Yu-bong perform *Jin-Do Arirang*, the film begins with an extreme long shot of the three characters, emphasising the centrality of a grand view of the landscape. We cannot initially identify the character's movement, since this shot is framed from an extremely distant position. The soundtrack volume gradually rises as the characters slowly move towards the camera, and continue to perform *Jin-do Arirang*. Finally, their performance is shown in the foreground plane, and ends when they start to exit the frame. In his essay on 'Korean New Wave', Yi Hyo-in defines this hill shot as one of the manifestations of the 'Korean' frame, by contending that '[Im] frequently arranges space to illustrate the psychological tension between the situation and the character, and divides the space vertically as do traditional Korean paintings to make use of empty marginal space' (Yi, 1996b:20). The magnificent landscape before the viewer is, however, presented as the mere backdrop to complement the character's movement, and as waiting to be stuffed with the characters. The use of landscape in this shot, thus, serves to support the character's continuous movement. As a result, the landscape is not related to 'what Raymond Williams, following [Bertolt] Brecht, calls "complex seeing": the reading of landscape within the diegesis as itself a layered set of

discourses, as a text in its own right' (Willemen, 1994: 141). The lesson one can learn from this scene is that there always lurks a danger that the mere emphasis on the particular, without reliance on a radically different content, that is, a specific historical condition, runs the risk of perpetuating the orientalisising look which it claims to resist.

A similar pattern of the representation of space appears at other points in the film. From the latter half the film, after Dong-ho leaves without any promise of return, Song-hwa waits helplessly for him. Yu-bong attempts to persuade her to sing again, but in vain. He blinds her by drugging her with a lethal dose of the medicinal plant *buja*, in order for her to have *han* to produce good singing. Entirely reliant on Yu-bong, she is fully occupied with *pansori*. Two-thirds into the film, Im presents an extreme long-shot framing of a shabby traditional Korean-style house while Song-hwa and Yu-bong perform *Shimcheong-jeon* together off-screen. The camera slowly pans left, and zooms down to focus on their *pansori* performance. Im then cuts to a shot of Yu-bong and Song-hwa sitting on the floor together to stress that they are stuck in enclosed space. This scene is immediately followed by a series of shots where Yu-bong and Song-hwa wander around the open roads of South Korea. During their solitary journey on the road, the viewer comes to realise that there has been a seasonal change: spring, summer, autumn, and winter.

In the analysis of scenes mentioned above, two suggestions can be raised. First, Im tries to weave space together by shifting the characters at marginal space to an entirely different open space. While a leap from claustrophobic to open space works as the temporal delay to suspend the continuity in the sensory-motor system, it does not fully present a new mode of vision by exploding the action/reaction schema. Im posits an interval dividing any discrete spaces. But the functioning of the interval remains in the circuit of the organic narration of totality. In other words, the use of the interval is not far-reaching enough to reveal the

interstice itself, an interstice deeply rooted in the emergence of the time-image (as discussed in chapter 3). The interval here serves as the link between the ending of the first shot and the beginning of the second shot, thus forming distinct segmentations of a linear causality.

Second, in a scene where Yu-bong and Song-hwa wander around the southern parts of Korea, their moving figures hold a stable position against a changing backdrop of different locations. The character's movement is, thus, more emphasised than space, as the camera follows their action. At this moment, Im appears to emphasise spatial and psychological consistency as is the same case with classical cinema, instead of revealing the indexical sign inherent in the very idea of space. Moreover, Im equates the character's movement with the chronological development of time: the seasonal changes of winter, spring, summer, and autumn. Time here serves as the measure depicting the 'calculated intervals of movement' (Rodowick, 1997: 81). By focusing on time's spatialisation in its full consistency, and subordinating time to the character's movement, this scene conveys 'the empirical or chronological view of time', one that 'measures past and future as self-similar moments that precede or follow the present in a line of succession' (ibid.). Privileging the character's movement demonstrates why 'humanism' or 'human value' constitutes Im's constant concern in making the films. However, what Im's insistence on 'humanism' is missing is a non-human excess which disturbs a congruous relationship between human beings.⁶

⁶ Yi Hyo-in argues that Im's insistence on humanism is 'somewhat different from the Western concept of humanism', because while according to the Western notion of humanism, 'everything is centered on the individual, Im's humanism is associated with 'the *Tonghak* ideas of Korea where man is heaven and considered a part of nature, justifying the indiscriminate respect to all individuals' (Yi, 1996b: 18). However, Yi's statement remains ambiguous, thus failing to present under which conditions Im's humanism is entirely different from the Western notion of humanism. In my view, Im's humanism shares a similar structure with the Western one. From the perspective presented here, it is useful to follow Willemsen (2002)'s argument here. In his critique of Im's humanism, he points out its limitation as follows, 'Im Kwon-taek's work is often described as humanist, even though his films are also

The constitution of narrative in *Beyond the Years* is based on Dong-ho's search for Song-hwa, as with *Seopyonje*. Nonetheless, it is important to note that *Beyond the Years* is clearly at odds with *Seopyonje*. Although based on the same source which brought about the making of *Seopyonje*, *Beyond the Years* can be seen as a separate film, presenting a radical way of screening the past. What makes a real difference between the two films lies in how Dong-ho and Song-hwa's reunion is organised aesthetically. To the extent that the main narrative appeal is structured around Dong-ho's search for Song-hwa in both films, the reunion scene gains a significant implication. In order to clarify the extent to which *Beyond the Years* distinguishes itself from *Seopyonje*, let us analyse the reunion scene in *Seopyonje* first. It will lead us to understand the true radicalism of *Beyond the Years*.

Towards the end of the film, Dong-ho has found blind Song-hwa in the small room of a liquor house. Hiding his identity, Dong-ho asks her to perform *pansori*. Song-hwa sings and Dong-ho beats a drum. The two perform *pansori* together all night, not speaking to each other. They go on their separate ways without any words the next day. In this scene, Im initially offers a long shot of Dong-ho and Song-hwa. But as a close bond between the main characters is formed through the practice of the *pansori*, and the emotion culminates in this reunion scene, Im renders it in a conventional shot/reverse shot pattern. What is of interest is that during the emotional peak, all diegetic sound is mute. At this point, Im inserts music as a nondiegetic sound here to disorient the viewer expecting to hear *pansori*. Julian Stringer (2002) emphasises the centrality of this manipulation of the soundtrack in the sense that Im's

associated with the *Minjung* culture movement and endowed with "green grass" connotations: *minjung* thus in its very name evokes a notion of eternal nature and recurrence. "Renewal" becomes associated with 'tradition' and is represented in terms of associations with "nature". However, this humanism is a very abstract, an allegedly universal norm liable to be incarnated by the state's self-presentation as benevolent patriarch, and it is an abstract humanism because it is notional and aspirational, to be equated with human nature, thus draining history out of its notion of the "human" (Willemsen, 2002: 176).

strategy here may refer to the ‘inner’ domain of national culture. Drawing on Partha Chatterjee (1993)’s theoretical framework, one that is rooted in the sharp demarcation between ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ spheres of anticolonial nationalism, Stringer highlights that the inner domain of national culture is fraught with ambivalence: it is only through the use of modern Western technology that national culture can be expressed. For this reason, Stringer suggests that the manipulation employed in this scene serves to ‘[construct] an “inner domain” of “essential” Korean culture’, because ‘as [*pansori*] is oral, acoustic form of cultural expression, there is the implication that it cannot properly be caught by technological means of reproduction’ (Stringer, 2002: 168). Insofar as [*pansori*] cannot be represented through the use of technology, the sound mixing in the climactic reunion scene, argues Stringer, may be designed not only to ‘avoid the cultural objectification of [*pansori*]’ (ibid.: 177), but also to show ‘the fragmentary nature of the nationalist project’ (ibid.: 178).

As Stringer rightly points out, it would be wrong to construe Im’s manipulation of the soundtrack as a mistake or as inclined to cheap sentiment. Instead, this sonic refusal can be seen as an excessive element for understanding the narrative dimension of the entire film. In other words, this kind of sound mixing serves as a stand-in clueing us into what the main narrative cannot tell us. This is not to say that a formal aspect such as the sonic denial in this scene ‘expresses’ the essence of the whole narrative line. The point is that the formal dimension designates the part of the content which is foreclosed from the explicit narrative appeal. As mentioned in chapter 1, this theoretical orientation constitutes what the concept of ‘suture’ refers to. A question can be raised here regarding what implication can be drawn from the substitute for the ‘repressed’ dimension of the entire narrative line. On the level of explicit narrative line, the two characters fail to reunite with each other, confronting the viewer with the permanent parting between the central characters. However, as *pansori* is

superseded with background music, this sound mixing acts as a stand-in for the repressed narrative content, suggesting that the reunion between the central characters never fails. In other words, *Seopyonje* can be seen as addressing the idea that the central characters are closely coupled together, not in the sense of the explicit narrative line, but in the sense of the purely formal aspect. By erasing the referentiality of the material condition of *pansori*, Im suggests another dimension of narrative reconstruction, a harmonious relationship of the couple, and furthermore the fullness of national identity. As the music here refers to a harmonious relationship between the two characters, and furthermore an undamaged origin at the base of South Korea's formation of national identity, it does not present a true threat to the fullness of national identity. This is where my perspective is entirely different from Stringer's. Where he identifies the sound-mixing as referring to 'the fragmentary nature of the nationalist project', I contend that the lack shown through the sound-mixing can be said to support the nationalist project, because it serves as a fetishist disavowal taming the tensions at work between the central characters and furthermore around South Korea's ongoing process of modernity.

In contrast to *Seopyonje*, *Beyond the Years* renders a radical way in which the origin of South Korea's formation of modernity lies at the fundamental antagonism through staging a disruptive element concerning the harmonious couple. When the main characters are connected to each other, this harmonious relationship is mediated by a third element which throws their relationship off balance. On the surface level, Song-hwa and Dong-ho's relationship is disturbed by Baek-sa and Dan-shim respectively: while still loving and searching for Song-hwa all around South Korea, Dong-ho begins an affair with Dan-shim; while Song-hwa temporarily becomes the mistress of a 70-year-old man, Baek-sa, who is reminiscent of her stepfather, Yu-bong. On the much deeper level, Im fuses a 'paradoxical

element' qua non-sense into ordinary diegetic reality, thus subtracting the Real from everyday reality.

In a scene where Dong-ho first meets Song-hwa at a grave in Gang-jin Town, the scene begins with a medium shot of Dong-ho. He comes to hear that an anonymous little girl is practicing a very familiar sound taught by Song-hwa, and then turns his head towards where the singing is coming from. In the next shot, the camera initially captures the girl through an extreme high angle, and tracks downwards to show only Dong-ho and Song-hwa, leaving the girl off-screen. As the camera continues to move, Im gives the framing of three people – the girl, Song-hwa, and Dong-ho– but soon narrows its focus to Dong-ho and Song-hwa again, placing more and more space off-screen. First, it is important to say that the relationship between Song-hwa and Dong-ho on-screen is mediated by a little girl off-screen. However, what is more important is that Dong-ho and Song-hwa's reunion is mediated through a decided presence of a third party such as the deceased father, Yu-bong, because the grave in Gang-jin Town is said to be the place in which their non-biological father, Yu-bong, is buried. Dong-ho claims that the deceased Yu-bong prohibits the imaginary relationship between himself and Song-hwa and steals away all possible enjoyment from them. However, in contrast, Song-hwa strongly denies Dong-ho's opinion, saying that '[Yu-bong] thought all his life how he could make me a better singer'. Dong-ho and Song-hwa's reunion is disturbed by the return of Yu-bong. How does Yu-bong function here? The mark of Yu-bong can be seen as a disturbing element of reality that one cannot discover anywhere within reality– namely, *objet petit a*. In other words, the deceased Yu-bong can be seen a meaningless paradoxical element disturbing the coupling into totalising One. What matters here is that *objet petit a*



5-8 e

5-8 f

Song-hwa continues to perform *Chunhyang*.
Dong-ho lowers his head.



5-8 g

Song-hwa continues to sing *Chunhyang*.

Figures 5-8 a – g: Baek-sa's seventieth birthday party

This point becomes more evident in a scene where Dong-ho encounters Song-hwa on Baek-sa's seventieth birthday. The scene begins with several shots showing Song-hwa performing *pansori* to celebrate Baek-sa's birthday. Soon after, the camera focuses on Dong-ho passing through the people for a better view of Song-hwa (Fig. 5-8 a). The next cut takes us to a medium shot of Song-hwa singing *Chunhyang* (Fig. 5-8 b). The close-up of Dong-ho looking at Song-hwa follows (Fig. 5-8 c). Then Im suddenly cuts to a medium close-up of Baek-sa looking at Song-hwa (Fig. 5-8 d). The next shot is a close-up of Song-hwa, who continues to sing *Chunhyang* (Fig. 5-8 e). The next cut returns to a long shot of Dong-ho framed as Fig. 5-8 a: in this shot, Dong-ho lowers his head (Fig. 5-8 f). Finally, this scene ends with a close-up of Song-hwa (Fig. 5-8 g). It is important to note that while constructing the narration primarily focused on the relationship between Dong-ho and Song-hwa, Im

unexpectedly presents a shot of Baek-sa (Fig. 5-8 d). By situating a third element within diegetic reality, Im temporarily interrupts the smooth operation of narrative development. As Chung Sung-il (2007) rightly points out, once Baek-sa's shot appears, the raised emotion between the two together with the *Chunhyang* song is sharply interrupted: he believes that Baek-sa's shot is the most decisive and influential shot throughout *Beyond the Years*. Given that the following shot of Song-hwa (Fig. 5-8 e) can be seen as Baek-sa's point-of-view shot and Dong-ho bends his head (Fig. 5-8 f), it seems to be Baek-sa who also looks at Song-hwa (Fig. 5-8 g). In some sense, Dong-ho seems to have hung his head in despair (Fig. 5-8 f). As a result, the viewers realise that the shot/reverse exchange between Dong-ho and Song-hwa in the early section of this scene is mediated via a paradoxical third element, Baek-sa, and the question of who controls the narration in this scene is also changed.

As far as screening the past is concerned here, Baek-sa first appears as an interval, one which merely serves to distinguish two spatial spheres between Dong-ho and Song-hwa. But as Im places a shot of Baek-sa to 'curve' the reunion between Song-hwa and Dong-ho, Baek-sa refers to the transformative passage from interval to interstice, one that is capable of exploding dynamically measured intervals of movement. In some respect, an 'uncanny' shot of Baek-sa can be seen as the spectral return of Yu-bong. Baek-sa and Yu-bong constitute a distinguishable but indistinguishable Möbius strip. This fossilised temporality and/or interstice itself via the spectral return of Yu-bong indicates that the fullness of national identity is founded on an unstable contradiction and immanent disruption, by assuring that South Korea's modernity in question is presented as split from within.

5.5 Conclusion

From a perspective which focuses on a dialectical mediatory reading, this chapter, then, investigates the limitations of the social realist strategy films through an analysis of *Black Republic*, and *A Single Spark*. These films tried to represent the question of social antagonism in the 1970s and 1980s in terms of a leftist-oriented perspective. However, as national pasts are mediated by the neutral look of the male intellectual, these films reduce the unfathomable abyss of the social antagonism into the domain of a male intellectual's narcissistic reflexivity.

In the case of *Peppermint Candy*, I propose that although it is in reverse chronological order, it serves to strengthen historicism as a way of directly opposing the suppressive state violence to an individual subject's life. This section considered further how it reified a third mediatory element by deeply depending on the male protagonist, Yong-ho's vulnerable face. *Memories of Murder* deals with how people in the 1980s respond to a serial murder case. This film initially stages a traumatic moment inherent in contemporary South Korea's modernity. However, towards the end of the film, it does not seem to provide the non-historical within the competing forces of history by means of giving sense to the traumatic event and contextualising its meaning on the semantic level.

The final section of this chapter analysed *Beyond the Years* in relation to Im's other film, *Seopyonje*. Im has been considered as pursuing the Korean image throughout his entire career. There is, however, a serious problem with the way in which he pursues the modern humanism that appeals to the essence of national identity. Nonetheless, it is worth noting that there is another aspect of Im's films which shows that an indigenous national culture is always mediated and disturbed by a paradoxical element whose presence leads to the redefinition of the entire narrative space.

Chapter 6

The Invention of the Other and the Issue of Ethics in the Korean Blockbuster

Chapter 6 examines the way in which the Korean blockbuster has displayed the Other and the subject's response to the encounter with the Other through an ethical framework, while at the same time considering whether these films allow us to cognitively map the geopolitical unconscious. Insofar as 'concrete universality' can be understood as tied to the Real in a Lacanian/ Žižekian perspective, the question of ethics in this chapter is first and foremost the 'ethics of the Real' (Zupančič, 2000). This concept is employed to look at how the subject should decide what to do in a traumatic moment of the disruption of the Real into reality.

With this in mind, this chapter begins with an introductory section which examines in more detail the theoretical framework to approach the relevant topic. Then, I will analyse *Silmido* (Kang Woo-suk, 2003) and *TaeGukGi* (Kang Je-gyu, 2004), *Joint Security Area* (Park Chan-wook, 2000), *Shiri* (Kang Jae-kyu, 1998), and finally *The Host* (Bong Joon-ho, 2006). The principle that I used to select the films among other Korean blockbuster films is the same as for the preceding chapters. Instead of following chronological order, the most prominent intersections with the Real lay the ground for selection in this chapter. All the films are candidates for the staging of the Real, because the Real refers to the way in which the subject encounters the horrifying Other, thus deciding what to do in the future. However, only *Shiri* and more importantly *The Host* successfully delivers the effect the Real is supposed to invoke. Why do the other films fail to reveal the Real? That is because their emphasis on the subject's suicide or death avoids the confrontation with the Real. In selecting the films for this chapter, I have also included the criterion of box office success. The films under discussion all won a mainstream local audience. My aim is not to secure highly-valued texts on the basis of

authorship, but to disclose how the radical dimension of film can become pronounced within the most commercially oriented film. As the films under discussion have become known as representative films triggering the South Korean film renaissance, they redirect us to draw attention to how contemporary South Korea's society and people try to respond to the traumatic situation of the Real.

The late 1990s saw the emergence of the Korean blockbuster film with *Shiri*. Immediately after the box-office success of *Shiri*, the term Korean blockbuster has become a fixture of the South Korean film industry. This film offers us a crucial starting point for exploring the change in the nature and quality of recent South Korean cinema. Drawing greatly on the large-scale spectacular imagery of the Hollywood blockbuster, a wide range of Korean blockbuster films have tended to borrow genre conventions from Hollywood. Contemporary South Korean cinema has tended to formulate itself in a similar manner to the Hollywood blockbuster, encompassing a massive change in the distribution structure. The great box-office success of films such as *Silmido*, *TaeGukGi*, and *The Host*, based on the large-scale spectacular patterns of Hollywood blockbusters, might not have been possible if these films had not been released widely through the use of a nationwide distribution structure.

It is important to note, however, that the box-office success of the Korean blockbuster has varied vastly according to the extent that they stage nationalist issues. Insofar as a film goes beyond the national question, it ends up as a box-office failure: *MUSA-The Warrior* (Kim Sung-su, 2001) is exemplary. Hence, the centrality of the nationalist strategy, deeply rooted in *Shiri*'s box-office success, has been a primary impetus in reproducing the similar patterns of Korean blockbusters. As Korean blockbuster films devoid of the localisation of content in the narrative dimension meet with failure at the box office, one of the key

strategies in Korean blockbusters is to combine the narrative structure of nationalism with visual spectacle. In its industrial perspective, posing historical questions in a blockbuster can be seen mostly as a marketing strategy to expand the scope of the audience.

Together with the cinematic uses of historical materials, Korean blockbusters have paid much attention to foregrounding the Other on the basis of a nation-state model of geopolitical borders, distinguishing between friend and enemy: the North Korean soldiers in *Shiri* and *Joint Security Area*; the unwritten underside figure of the nation-state in *Silmido* and *TaeGukGi*; and the monster, a consequence of U.S. based neo-colonialism in *The Host*. The main goal in what follows is, thus, to trace how these selected films organise the Other and how the film texts themselves respond to the emergence of the Other. What do they demand through the showing of the invention of the Other? How do the viewers answer the films' demands?

Before answering these questions, it is necessary to define briefly the Lacanian/Žižekian vocabulary regarding the definition of other, Other as the Thing or the Real, and the big Other. Slavoj Žižek draws on the Lacanian distinction between the 'little other' and the 'big Other'. The 'little other', the other written with a small letter 'o' designates our human fellows, colleagues, friends, and so on, projecting our ego, and having done so, constituting our imaginary relationship towards them (Myers, 2003: 23). The 'big Other', the Other written with a capital 'O' refers either to the functioning of the Symbolic, or another subject in so far as that subject refers to the Symbolic (ibid.). What, then, would be the Symbolic? It is an impersonally distributed network of society which regulates a human being's behaviour, ranging from language to the law (Evans, 1996: 201-3). Although the Symbolic does not precisely correspond to the social reality, it consists of a great deal of what we term 'reality'. Through the operation of the Symbolic, most people are given their own identity, and

participate as a member of a given community. In the meantime, the Other qua a horrifying Thing (the Real) is a point where the normal operation of the Symbolic disintegrates, leaving behind an excess or remainder after the symbolisation. As mentioned in previous chapters, what is crucial in psychoanalytic formulation is that the emergence of the Other/Thing can only be possible through a decisive break in the big Other: the Other (the Real) is intimately tied to the big Other (Žižek, 2006c: 44).

The invention of the Other in Korean blockbusters brings us first to an exploration of the ‘geopolitical unconscious’ of those films, since it enables us to map cognitively the ungraspable totality, that is, the current capitalist system. This does not, however, lead us to conclude that historical circumstances transform the formal configuration of the Korean blockbuster, nor that Korean blockbusters express the essence of socio-political conditions. But instead, it will be more accurate to say that this theoretical effort is to examine whether certain types of Korean blockbuster contain an allegorical apprehension of totality as a way of providing ‘representability’ – ‘the fundamental historical question of the conditions of possibility of such representation’ (Jameson, 1992: 4) – to what otherwise remains unrepresentable. The point is, thus, not about the matter of reflection, i.e. how certain narrative structures can reflect the social totality, but of how a partial element of narrative leads us to apprehend totality, i.e. the current capitalist system: how can one conceive of the global capitalist system through examining the form of narrative?

In order to explore this question further, it is necessary to introduce the relevant theories briefly. For Fredric Jameson, history cannot be identical with narrative, but with the Real in a Lacanian sense. Whilst history is not narrative, nonetheless, one cannot gain access to history except through ‘its prior textualization, its narrativization in the political unconscious’ (Jameson, 1981: 35). Mediating between an individual subject and history, narrative functions

in at least two ways. Its elementary role is ideological, because it always offers us a resolution that prevents us from cognitively mapping the fundamental antagonism of a given society. It is also here, paradoxically that narrative, for Jameson, produces a temporary apprehension of totality. As Jameson (1979) notes, ‘the works of mass culture cannot be ideological without at one and the same time being implicitly or explicitly Utopian as well: they cannot manipulate unless they offer some genuine shred of content as a fantasy bribe to the public about to be so manipulated’ (Jameson, 1979: 144). Even in order for the ideological functioning of a film to be effective, some bits of social contradictions and anxieties must be given initial staging. This approach shifts our attention from the mere inscription of the Other on the surface level to where a true invention of the Other points towards. This point manifests itself in both *Shiri* and *The Host*. This chapter will demonstrate that in the case of *Shiri*, real alterity does not derive from the North Korean soldier, but from the class antagonism inherent within the current South Korean capitalist system, while at the same time in the case of *The Host*, radical Otherness has less to do with its anti-colonial resistance against the imperialist U.S. than its implicit emphasis on what cannot be said in the explicit narrative line, that is, the inherent tension and insecurity of the family itself and furthermore the South Korean social fabric.

Second and more important, the invention of the Other leads us to explore the Korean blockbuster through an ethical framework. Regarding the ethical investigation into film, I would like to point out the way in which Korean blockbusters tend to confront the subjects – often male subjects – with a tremendously horrifying Other, and end with their sacrificial suicide. The sublime image of suicide has become a predominant narrative component in recent South Korean films. Even though Robert L. Cagle (2009) never mentions the phenomenon of the South Korean blockbuster, he provides a clue to help explore how Korean

blockbusters have differentiated themselves from the dominant Hollywood narrative forms. Citing Linda Williams (1998)' famous essay 'Melodrama Revised', he identifies the crucial aspect of popular American screen culture with the process of recovering damaged order. American popular culture is predicated on some sort of 'innocent' order. When this 'innocent' order is threatened, it sets the narrative line into action/reaction chains, propelling the spectatorial attention towards resolution on the level of narrative reality. Contrary to the dominant norms of Hollywood narrative codes such as the 'happy ending', he argues that 'South Korean films generally revisit instances of historical, political, and cultural trauma, examining these events from more contemporary perspectives and rarely providing any sort of resolution, but more often than not, offering important insights on these events and their significance to modern-day Korea' (Cagle, 2009: 126).

Surely, Korean blockbusters are characterised by the marginal male protagonist's suicidal ritual, as exemplified in *Joint Security Area*, *Phantom*, *The Submarine*, *Silmido*, *TaeGukGi*, *Welcome to Dongmakgol*, and *Typhoon*. Two issues might be suggested here. Firstly, does it really signal that those films differentiate themselves from the dominant Hollywood norms based on the recovery of 'innocent' order? I am not confident that those films have made their own radical difference against Hollywood. However, it does not mean that those films are a failed attempt to deliver a local issue, only drawing attention by displaying a Hollywood version of spectacle. A wide range of Korean blockbusters have persistently engaged in local issues in their own way regardless, even though large-scale spectacle-based films in the absence of articulation of local issues performed poorly at the box office and the combination of historical material into a blockbuster might be construed therefore as a marketing tool to attract a larger box office. However, I argue that this local difference is simply indicative of the very condition that Alain Badiou calls 'infinite alterity'

(2001: 25). As he suggests, ‘infinite alterity is quite simply *what there is*. Any experience at all is the infinite deployment of infinite differences’ (ibid., emphasis original). A deviation from the dominant norms of Hollywood cinema constitutes an element of ‘infinite alterity’ to be an element of abstract neutral universality.

Accordingly, I claim that the increased tendency towards the male protagonist’s self-annihilating gesture in the Korean blockbuster can be seen as ideological fantasy, in the sense that it fully forecloses upon the possibilities for staging social antagonism that would give us access to a utopian project in the complexities of a specific historical conjuncture. In this respect, *Silmido* and *TaeGukGi* are apparently more regressive than *Shiri* and even *Joint Security Area*. These films do not arrive at any kind of narrative resolution, thus leading to the consequence that social antagonism is parenthesised and kept at bay permanently. The male protagonist’s brooding over death towards the end of the film is intended to fill in the gap inherent in the big Other and/or to hide the inconsistency in the Other. Thus, what we see in those films is that collective male subjects have exhaustively appeared as full-scale actors for supporting the nation-state model of historiography, and that the possibility of a non-statist politics is totally foreclosed upon.

The hermeneutic problems found in most Korean blockbusters lead us to explore them through an ethical framework. As mentioned earlier, the question of ethics at play here is ‘the ethics of the Real’ (Zupančič, 2000). If the concept of the Real can be defined as a traumatic moment which intrudes into our everyday life, ‘ethics of the Real’ can be seen as something in which the subject redefines the mode of being in this encounter with the traumatic abyss of the Real, thus to become a true subject. It is only through the form of the encounter that one can confront the Real: no one dares to gain access to the sphere of the Real; to do so would result in what Alain Badiou and Alenka Zupančič call ‘simulacrum’ or ‘terror’ (Badiou, 2001:

73; Zupančič, 2000: 236) as an oppositional form of the ethics of the Real (this point will be explicated in the analysis of *TaeGukGi*). ‘The ethics of the Real’, thus, presupposes ‘something which appears only in the guise of the encounter, as something that “happens to us”, surprises us, throws us “out of joint” because it always inscribes itself in a given community as a rupture, a break, and an interruption’ (Zupančič, 2000: 235). It, then, concerns the way in which the subject decides what to do in the moment of encounter with the Real. The central questions are: ‘will I act in conformity to what threw me “out of joint”, will I be ready to reformulate what has hitherto been the foundation of my existence?’ (ibid.: 235). In sum, the question of ethics at work precisely concerns, when an unbearable, impenetrable trauma ‘happens to’ the subject, how one can choose what to do in the course of an encounter with it. In the moment of decision without recourse to any strategical, pragmatic intervention, the subject would have been reconstituted as a true subject. The ethical maxim here is not to escape from the original traumatic situation, as is the case in sacrificial suicide, but to endure, ‘persist’, and repeat what remains after the situation by ‘[acknowledging] one’s exposure/throwness, being overwhelmed by Other(ness)’ (Žižek, 2005b: 138), because the ethical question in psychoanalysis is not a matter of healing the individual subject’s psychic problem or assuring the subject’s well-being, but of putting him/her in a position of coming across the fundamental deadlock of his/her desire.

While film studies (and cultural studies) have been reluctant to take up an ethical concern, more recently certain scholars have examined filmic practice in explicit ethical terms. In this context, it is not very surprising to see that Emmanuel Levinas’s idea has been a pivotal point of reference (Aaron, 2007; Downing and Saxton, 2010; Zylinska, 2005).

Levinas (1969) suggests an essential contribution to how the concept of responsibility can be formulated with specific relevance to the vulnerable other on the basis of the face-to-face

encounter: the self's subjectivity is constituted through its response to the other's difference from the self. According to Michele Aaron's outstanding explanation of the Levinasian concept of responsibility, it refers to 'both... a kind of subjectivity-in-action (a reflexive state of self-constitution) and... our obligation to the other' (Aaron, 2007: 111). However, the Levinasian perspective on ethics and the Lacanian concern for ethics arrive at the problematic from sharply distinct angles, and these angles seem to be clearly at odds with each other. In short, while a Levinasian perspective derives from the absolute vulnerability of the other based on hospitality, respect, and more significantly face-to-face encounter, 'the ethics of the Real' would bring the subject into contact with a terrifying, monstrous Other-as-Thing in which the subject's ethical engagement designates how the subject gives 'fidelity' or 'consistency' to the encounter with it.

To take a Lacanian/ Žižekian line, what a Levinasian approach rules out is 'the monstrosity of the neighbor, monstrosity on account of which Lacan applies to the neighbor the term Thing (*das Ding*), used by Sigmund Freud to designate the ultimate object of our desires in its unbearable intensity and impenetrability' (Žižek, 2006c: 43). What is missing from a Levinasian perspective is that 'the neighbor is the (Evil) Thing which potentially lurks beneath every homely human face' (ibid.). Why does the Levinasian approach fail to address the horrifying abyss of the Other? Perhaps because there is no space for the dimension of the Third (the big Other as an impersonal network of symbolic order) to mediate here; as mentioned earlier in the chapter and throughout the whole thesis, I emphasise that the emergence of the Other as a horrifying Thing (or the Real) is only possible through the non-existence of the big Other. With a faceless Third 'translated' into the other's face, the Levinasian approach might run the risk of reducing the ethical dimension into 'understanding' (Žižek, 2005b: 184) of the other's suffering and vulnerability. In contrast to

Emmanuel Levinas's idea, what matters for a true 'ethics of the Real' is to subtract the faceless from an individual subject's face, thus redirecting it into the Third. In order to explore the role of the Third in its ethical terms, it is instructive to once again distinguish the conceptual triad other/Other/big Other (other as a human fellow colleague, Other as a traumatic Thing, big Other as the Third), by taking our cue from Žižek:

In order to render our coexistence with the Thing minimally bearable, the symbolic order qua Third, the pacifying mediator, has to intervene: the 'gentrification' of the Other-Thing into a 'normal human fellow' cannot occur through our direct interaction, but presupposes the third agency to which we both submit ourselves –there is no intersubjectivity (no symmetrical, shared, relation between humans) without the impersonal symbolic [order]. So, no axis between the two terms can subsist without the third one: if the functioning of the big Other is suspended, the friendly neighbor coincides with the monstrous Thing (Antigone); if there is no neighbor to whom I can relate as a human partner, the symbolic [o]rder itself turns into the monstrous Thing which directly parasitizes upon me (like Daniel Paul Schreber's God who directly controls me, penetrating me with the rays of jouissance). If there is no Thing to underpin our everyday symbolically regulated exchange with others, we find ourselves in a Habermasian 'flat', aseptic universe in which subjects are deprived of their hubris of excessive passion, reduced to lifeless pawns in the regulated game of communication (Žižek, 2005b: 143-44).

At the risk of simplification, this formulation can be applied to an analysis of the selected Korean blockbuster films in this chapter. *Silmido* and *TaeGukGi* pretend to present a situation that, when there is no neighbour whom I can rely on as a human partner, the big Other changes into the Other-as-Thing. However, those films fail to stage the emergence of radical Otherness by maintaining a 'human distance' in order to be able to prevent the male subjects being drawn into the deranged invocation of the big Other (Žižek, 2005d: 295). Moreover, the male subject's self-cancelling gesture towards the end of the film can be

understood as concealing the split in the big Other, such that those films do not belong to non-statist films, but to full-fledged statist films. *Joint Security Area* presents a way of rendering the radical alterity, by suggesting that when the big Other becomes inactive, the friendly human fellow turns into an unbearably traumatic Other-as-Thing. However, the film eventually fails to address the question of ethical engagement, in the sense that the male subjects eschew the encounter with the traumatic past which hinders their ordinary life. *Shiri* deals with how the friendly human fellow as an imaginary other turns into a monstrous Other- as-Thing. The whole narrative structure of this film is framed to re-symbolise the Other in its effort to ‘suture’ the terrifying experience of the close proximity to it. However, this film unwittingly exposes the figure of radical Otherness by rendering the female protagonist as literally over-identified with her own role in a given community.

In bringing the subject to confront the creature, the ‘hero’ figure in *The Host* seems to fail to solve the dilemma on the narrative level in the same way as *Joint Security Area*, *Silmido* and *TaeGukGi*. However, by focusing on the failure to rescue Hyun-seo through the formal aspect of the film text rather than the narrative appeal on the surface level, *The Host* enables the viewer not only to reconstitute the whole narrative direction, but also to witness the trauma itself without falling into ‘spectacularisation’ of the victimised image. This is where *The Host* appears more subversive than *Shiri*, since the inscription of radical Otherness in the latter film still operates within the narrative aspect of the film. *The Host* initially describes the historical background out of which the monstrous creature itself emerges. If this film remained caught up with the historical description, it would end up demonstrating a ‘flat’ network of social reality deprived of the traumatic Other-as-Thing. The crucial point in this film is, thus, that the truly traumatic Other-Thing ‘happens to’ the viewers by showing what remains unseen, that is, the non-historical in a given historical situation.

Analysing the representation of characters confronting ethical dilemmas might be one way of addressing an ethical enquiry in film. However, this chapter is not confined to this approach, because ethical concerns lie not only in a character's ethical dilemma on screen, but also on the spectatorial relationship between the filmed image and the viewer. This is why visualising spectacular imagery, particularly in the case of *Silmido* and *TaeGukGi*, also comes into scrutiny. In doing so, this chapter will analyse what the ethical charge of conveying the powerlessness of people and violent imagery of bodily pain implies. In contrast to those films, however, *The Host* presents a way of foregrounding the processes through which an ethicised engagement is brought about between viewers and filmed images in a genuinely radical way, by confronting the viewer with an encounter with the void within the filmic image.

6.1 The Ethical Question on the Self-Cancelling Gesture and the Spectacle of Visual Brutality: *Silmido* and *TaeGukGi: Brotherhood of War*

Korean blockbusters tend to make the figure of the male protagonist unseen at the end of the film. The big hits (with audiences of 10 million plus) such as *TaeGukGi: Brotherhood of War* (2004) and *Silmido* (2003) provide good examples of this tendency. What supports the male subjects' suicidal tendencies in the films is the logic of sacrifice, in which they situate themselves in the position of sacrificial victim to illustrate the unfair predicament of the powerless. By maintaining social peace through localising violence, they, thus, prevent the total disintegration of social reality. Moreover, those films attempt to complement the fascinating spectacle of the male subject's sacrifice with the spectacle of visual brutality. In what follows, I will explore the ethical/political valence of these films' increased tendencies towards sacrificial suicide, along with the spectacular display of bodily pain.

Silmido portrays Special Unit 684, and is based on a true story. It ends up showing how historical fact was suppressed by the government's official historiography. In the closing sequence, the deaths of the Special Unit 684 members were shown as merely another document in the government's official archive. As shown in the closing sequence, *Silmido* tries to unearth the historical facts covered up in the governmental official history by borrowing fictionalised genre conventions. In the film, the South Korean government organised Special Unit 684, which consisted of ex-criminals and prisoners excluded from the social world, to assassinate the North Korean president Kim Il-sung, promising to eliminate their criminal records and return their lives to normal. However, towards the end of the film, a new head of the Korean Central Intelligence Agency takes over. He cancels the mission, and even orders all the members of the Unit to be eliminated because a tense stand-off between the South and North Korean states has been replaced by more amicable relations. The Unit members have to be excluded once again as their existence might disturb peaceful relations with North Korea.

Within this background, I first turn to how *Silmido* portrays the figuration of the Other in the narrative dimension. *Silmido* blurs who the real enemy or actual Other of Special Unit 684 is. Is their enemy Kim Il-sung of North Korea or Park Jung-hee of South Korea? An unclear description of the Other prevents the male subjects from being given some initial expression of social antagonism. Given that the Other has not yet gained its positive ontological entity, *Silmido* posits collective male subjectivities as pure instruments of the state, by hiding the fact that the state edifice is intimately linked with its own shadowy existence, and this shadowy area precisely sets the founding condition for building up the South Korean nation-state. As a result, the possibility of foregrounding a non-statist politics is fundamentally excluded in the organisation of narrative.



Figure 6-1 Sergeant Jo leaves the island to renegotiate the government's elimination project.

The foreclosure of a non-statist politics becomes prominent when the viewer's identification with the members is mediated through the look of a concealed 'humanised' state: the point of view of Choi Jae-hyun in charge of the Special Unit 684 and/or Sergeant Jo. While they appear to be minor agents on the surface, one needs to take into account the role they play as observers, since they represent the role of the viewer. Towards the end of the film, Commander Choi is told that if his troops (mainly consisting of trainers) do not take part in the process of elimination, they also will be eliminated. Confronted with an impossible choice, the commander deliberately leaks the fact to In-chan, one of the Unit members, sending Sergeant Jo away from the island to renegotiate the government's elimination project. It is here that *Silmdo* presents the state in two aspects: the good state and the bad state. If the new head of the South Korean Central Intelligence Agency is the bad aspect of the state, which cancels the mission in accordance with the changed geopolitical context, the previous

officer in charge of the South Korean Central Intelligence and/or the South Korean president Park Jung-hee refer to an aspect of the good state in this film. By leading the viewers to be identified with Cold War ideology mediated through Commander Choi and Sergeant Jo, *Silmido* conceals that the state, assumed to be positive, is the very condition of state violence.

The statist ideology exemplified in this film is manifested in the male protagonists' collective suicide at the end of the film. When the South Korean Central Intelligence Agency decides to eliminate the members of Special Unit 684, the members decide to resist: they kill their trainers and escape from the island in an attempt to let their story be known. The remaining members seize a local bus and head towards Seoul. However, when detained by military forces en route to Seoul, the members decide to commit group suicide, all setting off their hand grenades in the bus. As far as ethics is concerned, the male subjects' suicide does not pose an ethical question, by no longer '[keeping] going only by following the thread of [the] Real' (Badiou, 2001: 52). Consider here that the ethical maxim in the Lacanian formulation is as follows: 'do not give up your desire'; Badiou translates it into his own ethical terms: 'do all that you can to preserve in that which exceeds your perseverance. Persevere in the interruption. Seize in your being that which has seized and broken you' (ibid.: 47). This is what the 'ethics of the Real' is meant to refer to practically. From the standpoint offered here, the male protagonists' suicides can be understood as an escape from an ethical dilemma by avoiding the encounter with the traumatic situation. When both the path back to the military camp and the path forward to Seoul are obstructed, they choose to kill themselves instead of engaging in direct confrontation with the state. The mere bodily death of the male subjects is not a key issue. What is crucial here is that they annihilate the traumatic confrontation with something uncanny, 'pathological', and uneasy by ceding their desire to the state. They do not 'keep going' and 'persevere in the interruption' in the

traumatic moment. Rather, they put themselves in the position to be victimised against by state violence in order to represent the pitiful situation of the powerless.

Taking the role of sacrificial victim, however, leads to concealment of an inherent inconsistency of the state. With the absence of confrontation between the state and the male subjects, *Silmido* has also lost the opportunity for staging social antagonism. As I mentioned previously in this chapter, following Jameson's formulation, commercial genre film tends to include as its primary elements both ideological vocation and utopian impulses working on the fantasy level. A paradox takes place here. To adequately perform ideological manipulation of some bits of social and historical content, utopian impulses must be given some basic representation. From the perspective presented here, this film fails to offer representability to what otherwise remains the unrepresentable by making the male subjects unseen, and furthermore keeping the question of social antagonism forever parenthesised. This has political consequences. By no longer making visible the opportunity to stage social antagonism, the possibility of moving beyond a state ideology is also fundamentally foreclosed.

The male subject's withdrawal from 'keeping going' in terms of an ethical gesture also appears in the *TaeGukGi: Brotherhood of War*. The film tells the story of two brothers influenced by the Korea War. It is structured as a flashback, as Jin-suk visits a memorial site to confirm that remains found belong to his dead elder brother Jin-tae: it begins in the present, but quickly flashes back to Seoul in 1950, ending again in the present. Jin-tae is the elder brother who has to support his family as a shoe-shiner while the younger brother is the fragile high school student. When war breaks out in 1950, the family is quickly separated and Jin-tae and Jin-suk find themselves forcibly drafted into the South Korean army to fight the North. To protect his younger brother, Jin-tae desperately tries to prove himself a war hero by

winning honours with the purpose of sending his younger brother back home. But this provokes a growing conflict between the brothers: the conflict between the brothers, in fact, stems from Jin-tae, since he vacillates between his duty to send his younger brother back home and his evolving preoccupation with becoming a killing machine. His desperate attempt to protect his brother deprives him of his life towards the end of the film.

The first area of focus is that in *TaeGukGi*, the figure of the father is totally foreclosed upon in the realm of representation. Jin-tae's responsibility to protect his younger brother simply stems from his father's absence. The apparent foreclosure of a father figure, however, reproduces the myth of the father. The hypothesis of the myth of the primary father is that there was a primal father who was able to fully regulate the symbolic law. This produces a 'fundamental fantasy' in that, without this prohibition, we would be able to fully enjoy our existence. It is fantasy, because the father has been internally barred from the outset (Žižek, 1992: 24). This fantasy leads to the proliferation of the perverse figure of a father based on a repression/transgression model. This point was discussed in chapter 3 in order to demonstrate how my conception of 'concrete universality' is different from Judith Butler's emphasis on 'translation', resistance, and re-signification based on plurality. With the withering of the repressive father in contemporary popular culture, recent South Korean films, as exemplified in this film, demonstrate that the multiplicity of the perverse father figure has become the predominant mode of representation. The status of the perverse father figure is neither subversive nor reactionary in itself. The point is, thus, to consider the extent to which it can keep its ethical fidelity – though this fidelity would result in the destruction of the other as a human colleague, and thus undermines the public authority of the primal father from within.



6-2 a

6-2 b



6-2 c

6-2 d

Figures 6-2 a –d: Jin-tae recognises Jin-suk in *TaeGukGi*.

Understood in this way, a serious drawback to this film is that it humanises a crazy killing machine, Jin-tae, in that beneath his terrifying appearance, there still resides warm humanity. One needs to look at how the film poses human distance. In the middle of the film, Jin-tae believes that Jin-suk died in a fire by mistaking a corpse with the skin burnt off for Jin-suk. This moves him to become a soldier for North Korea. Towards the end of the film, in a scene where the two brothers have a face-to-face encounter, Jin-tae attempts to kill Jin-suk. The two brothers continue to fight while Jin-suk urges Jin-tae to recognise him. Jin-tae finally recognises Jin-suk, after Jin-suk reminds him of their family story. The exchange in a shot/reverse shot schema leads us to examine the film in its explicit ethical terms (Figs. 6-2 a-d): an ethical question about the face and its ethical implications. It is here that the film introduces an ideological fantasy, preventing Jin-tae from encountering the inconsistency of the social world. What *TaeGukGi* tries to escape in an ultimate form of fantasy is that the faces are an illusory temptation, since the faces themselves are literally the terrifying raw

flesh of blood and muscle – what if the skinned corpse shown in the middle of the film refers to the real dimension of the face? (Žižek, 2002b : 186) Far from the Levinasian perspective, the face functions as an ultimate fetish which fills in the inconsistency of the big Other. Thus, encounter with the other’s face is not ‘ethical’ in Lacanian sense – the only way to become ethical in terms of the face is through ‘*defacement* in all its dimensions’ (ibid.: 187, emphasis original).



6-3 a

6-3 b

Jin-tae throws himself into a barrage of bullets to save his younger brother.

Figures 6-3 a – b: Jin-tae’s sacrificial gesture

This film’s withdrawal from an ethical engagement can be also found in the closing scene where Jin-tae throws himself into a barrage of bullets to save his younger brother. Shortly after Jin-tae recognises that his younger brother is still alive, he persuades Jin-suk to retreat. While Jin-suk reluctantly retreats from the battlefield, Jin-tae covers the retreating South Koreans, including Jin-suk, by means of firing machine guns blindly. He is soon killed by North Koreans when he gets caught in the crossfire. He finally looks at his retreating brother before he dies, as if satisfied that he has saved his brother. This scene most noticeably portrays the male protagonist’s heroism, typical of the narrative of the Korean blockbuster. The character’s self-cancelling gesture eliminates all the reference to the social and physical

realities of death. What results is the male protagonist, Jin-tae's emotional excess. The emphasis, thus, is placed on the fascinating spectacle of the sublime image of martyrdom, which is also highlighted by solemn music. As is also the case with the male subjects in *Silmido*, Jin-tae is tightly bound up with the logic of sacrifice. He fails to reveal the internal discord of war ideology, but only perpetuates the reproduction of it. He never asks what the military ideological machine wants from him. Given that the authority of the military machine remains intact, his sacrificial suicide can be seen as '[sending] a message' (Žižek, 1991: 44) to it by demonstrating the plight of the powerless. By means of it, the ideology of war never gets damaged, but becomes even stronger. It justifies an individual subject's sacrifice for the sake of the larger social order, thus demanding another subject's sacrifice. Within this background, this film prevents us from apprehending the question of social antagonism in modern South Korean society by obfuscating the fact that public power is always dependent on its own shadowy obscene area. In this respect, this film is a perfectly conformist film, being much more regressive than *Shiri* (this point will be further clarified in the section of the analysis on *Shiri*).

I have dealt with how two films fail to deliver an ethical concern. But the ethical question is not confined to the representation of characters on screen. This moves us to pose an ethical inquiry in terms of the spectacle of suffering. I would like to turn to *Silmido* first. All the members of Unit 684 in *Silmido* are presented without names. They are not allowed any bond with their former experience of the actual life world. *Silmido* precisely stages *homo sacer* and its catastrophic suicide towards the end of the film, focusing on the filmic representation of victimisation. According to Giorgio Agamben (1998), in ancient Rome, the notion of *homo sacer* was used to refer to an existence which was totally excluded from the symbolic order, so that anyone who kills this existence is not entitled to be punished in the

sphere of law. But, at the same time, its existence is also excluded from the sphere of the religious. Thus, it is not allowed to be sacrificed to God. It is an existence in which both exclusion and inclusion take place at the same time. It does not refer to the dimension of going beyond sovereignty, but touches exactly on how the logic of sovereignty works. To the extent that the Special Unit 684 members belong to *homo sacer*, and the filmic representation of *homo sacer* only draws attention to the victimisation of powerlessness itself without any mediation of transcendental form, *Silmido* unexpectedly reveals how the filmic representation of the image of the camp can easily fall into step with the essential part of the global spectacular mode of representation.

Moreover, we can also witness that *Silmido* uncritically provides the female victimised body raped by some of the members: the image of the human being is exposed in its victim status. What response does this film produce in spectatorship by means of the victimisation of the other? Most of all, this film does not acknowledge the impossibility of representing human suffering. By focusing on the representation of the human being as it really was, it contributes to reinforce the logic of spectacle, because the essential part of spectacle needs to be understood in terms of the exclusion of what is possible from what it is. As Agamben notes, ‘what is always given in the media is the fact, what was, without its possibility, its power: we are given a fact before which we are powerless. The media prefer a citizen who is indignant, but powerless. That’s exactly the goal of the TV news. It’s the bad form of memory, the kind of memory that produces the man of *ressentiment*’ (2002a: 316, emphasis original). As far as ethics is concerned, the representation of the victimised other and/or powerless people is caught in the moral framework. The mere display of victimised bodies in our contemporary media scape disables the viewer from engaging ethically, but instead produces discourses about duty and obligation. Whereas morality can be understood as ‘an established set of rules

and norms, a system according to which judgments about right and wrong are made', the ethical is a matter of 'deciding for or against what is *not known* or *cannot as yet be recognized* from the point of view of currently available knowledge systems (moral, religious, ideological, etc.)' (Butchart, 2006: 430, emphasis original). To the extent that the ethical question at play here always concerns excess beyond the scope of the moral system, the representation of the powerless victim only empowers the moral system, because it depends on the representation of what it is, rather than on what exists but at the same time does not exist as present things, that is, the potentialities. In this respect, *Silmido* fails to present a way of foregrounding the processes through which an ethicised engagement is brought about between viewers and the filmic images.

TaeGukGi also finds a full realisation of the spectacular mode of representation, but in a different manner from that of *Silmido*. It de-privileges any on-screen observational role, leading viewers directly to face the violent graphic image. The war represented in this film does not refer to the indexical trace of locality. As the space-time connection in *TaeGukGi* serves as a mere instrument to display the bodily pain of combat, it does not offer a moment to think about the issue of historicity concerning the Korean War in 1950. Among Korean blockbusters' two principal trends that combine visual spectacle with local issues, the cinematic practice in this film emphasises visual techniques based on rapid and/or unstable camera movement. Whilst *Shiri* attempts to represent the locality of Seoul as a postmodern consumer society, *TaeGukGi* completely forecloses the material traces of Korea based on the special effect-driven 'scopic regime'. The battle scenes, characterised by rapid montage-effect editing, are very similar to the opening sequence of *Saving Private Ryan* in the sense that the spectacular imagery serves to display the corporeal quality of combat: the spectacle-driven action in *TaeGukGi* launches the war debris and the raw flesh of blood and muscle

towards the viewer for the purpose of integrating viewers with the suffering of combat. Rather than drawing on point-of-view shot, the more subjective-seeming position is constituted as a wide range of spectacular qualities (King, 2003: 117-18).

In *TaeGukGi*, attention is drawn not only to the violent representation of the experiences of warfare as a way of screening the historical past, but also to generate the corporeal effect of combat's horrific bodily pain in the body of the viewer. When *TaeGukGi* tends, however, to obliterate film's own indexicality and draws greatly on the display of simulation itself, what the cinema-machine produces is only the 'spectacle of fear' typical of contemporary global capitalism, subordinating the fundamental impact of cinematic shock to the represented concrete violence. No matter how it attempts to produce 'accuracy' in the depiction of war, it cannot stage the intrusion of the Real working on the transcendental level.

How can one conceive of the spectacle of suffering in ethical terms? As mentioned near the beginning of this chapter, the 'ethics of the Real' comes into play when the subject 'encounters' the impossibility of the traumatic abyss of the Real: the Real is not about the direct goal of the subject, but 'happens to' the subject, and throws him/her off balance all of sudden. In this respect, the visceral description of combat in *TaeGukGi* has nothing to do with the subject's encounter with the unfathomable Real, because it aims to force the Real to appear. One needs to, thus, distinguish and even rescue the dimension of ethics from terror as the 'simulacrum' of ethics. '[T]error occurs when one takes the effect that the event (or the "encounter with the Real") has upon the subject for one's immediate objective, believing that in producing this effect one will also produce the event itself, the Real' (Zupančič, 2000: 236). In a similar vein, Badiou presents a penetrating formulation of simulacrum or terror in which the term defines itself in opposition to the event: where the event (the Real/void) in Badiou's sense refers to a radical break in a given particular situation, simulacrum or terror points to

‘the “full” particularity or presumed substance of that situation’ (Badiou, 2001: 73). In this respect, when the spectacle of the human body’s suffering simply seeks to produce the effect of the void on its own, it does not deliver the void to viewers, but merely represents what the void ‘was’ and what it might be in the future. The spectacular mode of representation is, thus, irrelevant to the invention of a cinematic event, but with simulacrum or terror precisely in the sense that it does not derive from a void from within a given specific situation, but from what covers up the void in its effort to render the previously unseen seen. Enhanced visibility conceals the inaccessible aspect of the void. The more it shows everything, the less it shows enough. This is not to say that the scene does not move viewers. They are certainly moved and affected by filmic images of atrocities. However, it deprives viewers of being ethically engaged with the void, because the viewer’s encounter with the void implies a disturbance in the process of looking. Just as ‘the ethics of the Real’ concerns how the viewer decides what to do in the encounter with the cinematic distortion inherent in the cinematic apparatus, so the spectacular visualisation of human suffering, aimed at forcing the Real to emerge, is unethical, because it only allows the viewer to be moved in the plenitude of an actively assumed simulacrum of the void.

Overall, *Silmido* and *TaeGukGi* are not designed to mobilise the possibility of a non-statist politics. Instead, these tell a story of building a nation-state, led by male subjects in extreme distress and agony, precisely because the official historiography of a nation-state is always dependent on the unwritten obscene underside. In ethical terms, these films depict a way to escape from the encounter with the Other-Thing via suicide on the basis of sacrifice. As a result, the addressing of social antagonism is fundamentally excluded in the given narrative field. Moreover, in an endeavour to represent the unrepresentable directly, the repressive nature of spectacle in these films conceals the unreachable dimension of the

unrepresentable. What is missing in the flood of violent images is the viewer's ethicised engagement with the images.

6.2 Failing in the Encounter with Radical Otherness: *Joint Security Area*

Joint Security Area deals with the issue of national division, interrogating the anxieties stemming from the 'historical division system'. The film begins with a scene where two North Korean soldiers are shot in the DMZ on the North Korean side. Sergeant Lee Soo-hyeok escapes from the North Korean side and tries to return to the South Korean side. Major Sophie E. Jean, a Swiss-Korean, the daughter of a Korean expatriate and a Swiss mother, and hired by the Neutral Nations Supervisory Commission, arrives in Panmunjom to investigate the shooting of the two North Korean soldiers. Thus, *Joint Security Area* is structured by two major narrative threads. On the one hand, it deals with Major Jean's investigation of the events that led to the killing of the two North Korean soldiers. On the other hand, it attempts to see what happened there through the use of flashbacks. On the border dividing the nation, Sergeant Oh Kyeong-pil and Jung Woo-jin from North Korea, and Lee Soo-hyeok and Nam Sung-shik from South Korea form a male-bonded community. But this archaic community is soon broken up by the intervention of a foreign intruder, another North Korean soldier, Lieutenant Choi. Despite Sergeant Oh's efforts to mediate between the South Korean soldiers and Lieutenant Choi, the two South Korean soldiers shoot both Lieutenant Choi and Jung Woo-jin, and even pull the trigger of the pistol pointed at Sergeant Oh. Portraying exactly how nation formation is structured to repress a traumatic kernel of the Real, however, the film never shows who first shoots Jung Woo-jin. The hidden truth about the traumatic event remains intact until near the end of the film.

This film splits time into that of the nation-state and that of the nation-as-people. The opening section of the film first describes how North and South Korea, as territorial nation-states, attempt to define, in their favour, what really happened at the small cottage where the incident took place. The apparent opponents, South and North Korea, complement each other, however, for they can each benefit from maintaining the Cold War ideology pervading the Korean peninsula. While portraying the physical border of the nation-state, *Joint Security Area* also offers us a series of moments to cross over it, thus providing the split between nation as people and the modern nation-state. While the border line between South and North Korea appears as a fixed territorial boundary, the space of the people, which eludes the semantic chains of nation-state, offers a moment to render visible social fantasy as a utopian type. This film posits a utopian sense of the male-bonding community based on the shared memory of the archaic nation as an alternative way of resisting the territorial boundary of the nation-state. This kind of utopian impulse is shown in an archaic mode of primitive nativism. Consider how the four male soldiers constitute a male-bonded space through regressive playground games for children: one-leg wrestling, a spitting game, five stones, and so on.

Projecting brotherhood as an egalitarian friendship around the codes of respect, this film reinstates preexisting collective values of the people, and furthermore the issue of populism. Even though the definition of populism might vary, the term defines itself here as ‘an anti-status quo discourse that simplifies the political space by symbolically dividing society between “the people” (as the “underdogs”) and its “*other*”’ (Panizza, 2005: 3, emphasis original). This approach understands the problem of populism not as a positive social group but as the consequences of political construction through the division between friend and enemy. According to Francisco Panizza, populism is constituted through ‘the very process of naming – that is, of establishing who the enemies of the people (and therefore the people

itself) are' (ibid.). One of the problems in terms of populism is that, as the enemy is always externalised into the particular social categories, it neglects an internal limitation or split inherent in the concept of the people. As Žižek puts it, '[populism] displaces the immanent social antagonism into the antagonism between the unified people and its external enemy, it harbors in the last instance a long-term protofascist tendency' (Žižek, 2006b:557).

In this film, the figure of the enemy is represented as the nation-state, for instance, exemplified in Lieutenant Choi who represses the populist impulse on the level of the National/Popular and represents the interests of both Koreas' national security. It can also be translated into either Sophie Jean or America. In the process of the constitution of populism, it is worth investigating why this film privileges the role of Sergeant Oh: he is portrayed as calm and graceful, and he is more honourable than Sergeant Lee. In a scene where Sergeant Lee asks Oh, 'If war really broke out, would we have to shoot each other, too?' the film offers the shot as a celebration of spatial unity among the four male soldiers. Tracking right and then back left among them, the camera ends up with a shot of Sergeant Oh announcing that 'If the Yankee bastards play their war games, we will be obliterated. Zero. Three minutes into the war, both countries would be destroyed'. By offering preference to the role of Sergeant Oh, this film rediscovers and authenticates populism based on the tones of anti-Americanism (Kwon, 2001: 127-29), which a great part of the student movement in the 1980s possessed but has since lost.

The collective fantasy of a utopian hope in the form of populism in *Joint Security Area* is reminiscent of what Paik Nak-chung (1998) calls overcoming the 'division system' through 'the national literature movement'. Paik has played a key role in producing these discourses about 'national questions' affecting a number of intellectuals in Korea. 'The "national question" for the current movement thus entails not only the general task of defending

national dignity and autonomy from colonial/neocolonial powers, but the specific one of overcoming national division' (Paik, 1993: 575). He puts the 'division system' within a wider-ranging world-system, considering that 'the national division' is 'certainly a legacy of colonial rule and even more a direct product of neocolonial intervention', and that it 'has taken on a systemic nature of its own with self-reproducing antidemocratic structures on both sides of the dividing line' (Paik, 1998: 227). His suggestion for solving the complexities of the 'division system' is 'an innovative state structure responsive to the real needs of the population in the globalizing age rather than to any preconceived notion of the nation-state' (ibid.: 228). For him, the overcoming of the 'division system' will thus allow for 'a crucial reordering of the world-system itself, perhaps even a decisive step in its transformation into a better system' (ibid.). This perspective based on the 'national question' is not limited to the field of literature but extends over a major cultural discourse in South Korea. And some critics in Western film scholarship adopt this 'national question' first and foremost in the agenda to explore the characteristics of South Korean cinema (James, 2002: 13; Robinson, 2005: 16).

I partly agree with Paik's assessment of the 'division system' as a by-product of (neo) colonial domination. There remains a deep legacy of colonisation in South Korea, which differentiates its contemporary history from that of other nations. Even though I agree that this divided nation is truly a legacy of (neo) colonial competition, reunification does not necessarily offer a proper answer to coping with this dilemma. Aspiration towards an autonomous state based on a populist stance constitutes a fundamental fantasy, since any existing historical form of state cannot fully coincide with the notion of the state. There must be a gap between the concept of the state and the historical forms of the state. The inherent gap in separating two different spheres leads us to conclude that it is no longer possible to

establish and maintain fully an autonomous state structure, as Paik assumes. Furthermore, this theoretical position might be dangerous for the reason that it presupposes a ‘narrative of developmentalism’ characteristic of modernisation: Korea remains underdeveloped in the form of the ‘division system’, so that building an innovative state structure is a matter of the utmost urgency. This perspective obscures the antagonism of social conflict in both South and North Korea respectively. To put the notion of the nation in the most extreme way, South and North Korea might be understood as two different national peoples, not one divided national people. That is because the imagination has been worked in absolutely different ways.

Whilst *Joint Security Area* offers the collective fantasy of a utopian aspiration in the form of populism, it also renders us a moment where nationhood is confronted with a self-impediment in the way that male bonding can be easily shattered at any time by the presence of a foreign intrusion. Never showing the traumatic event directly, towards the end of the film, it depicts how the traumatic situation ‘happened to’ the two South Korean soldiers through the intervention of the third mediator. The existence of Sophie Jean is thus important not only for mediating the encounter with the traumatic past, but also for conveying complex global/local dialectics. As she is trying to literally interrogate the truth about what happened in the cottage, it provokes great tension between Nam Sung-shik and Sergeant Lee. As too close proximity to the incident invokes an increasing tension between the two nation-states as well as the surviving South Korean soldiers, Jean’s boss suggests that she stop the investigation. As a result, she first hears about her father’s past as a Korean expatriate when the film shows the newsreel footage of the Korean War through her boss’s point-of-view shot. As a result, Jean decides to withdraw from the incident, thus leaving the truth permanently unresolved: she thinks that the investigation of the truth is not important in a Cold War situation, and that hiding the truth is the only way to save the lives of both Sergeant Lee and

Oh.

The film, however, portrays well the way in which the horrifying Other-Thing emerges through a temporary disruption of the big Other (the Symbolic), as mentioned at the beginning of this chapter. It is manifested in the following scene.



6-4 a

6-4 b

Figures 6-4 a – b: Jean reveals that Sergeant Lee is responsible for the killing of Jung Woo-jin.

When Jean unwittingly announces that Sergeant Lee is responsible for the killing of Jung Woo-jin, the camera abruptly cuts to a close-up of Sergeant Lee while Jean's voice continues off-screen. We never see how he feels, for the film does not show us his face, especially not his eyes. The encounter with the traumatic past can only be seen through his finger holding a cigarette. This insert shot seems to offer a moment of stasis to break up a homogenous male-bonding community as a sequential progress of an organic totality, providing a moment to traverse the subject's fundamental fantasy. This film, thus, succeeds in foregrounding the unrepresentable Real which structures the impossibility of nation formation; this differentiates it from any nationalistic Korean blockbusters.

However, I now come to why Sergeant Lee cannot confront the encounter with the traumatic past, and turns to suicide. The two South Korean soldiers, Nam Sung-shik and

Sergeant Lee commit suicide in the narrative. This kind of suicide refers to the logic of sacrifice to preserve the consistency of the male-bonding community. As far as ethics is concerned, it is unethical, because the ethics at play here confronts the subject with the self-impediment of the subject's own desire. The subject's withdrawal from contact with the loathsome abyss of radical Otherness does not bring the 'geopolitical unconscious' fully into view, but leaves a much deeper fundamental fantasy to be left intact. What, then, would be the fundamental fantasy that *Joint Security Area* demands? It is primitive nativism in the form of populism, i.e. a strong desire towards reunification on the basis of the national/popular resulting in an 'innovative state structure'. Whilst providing collective fantasies on the basis of a utopian impulse, however, I would like to claim that this utopian type is even more regressive than in *Shiri*.

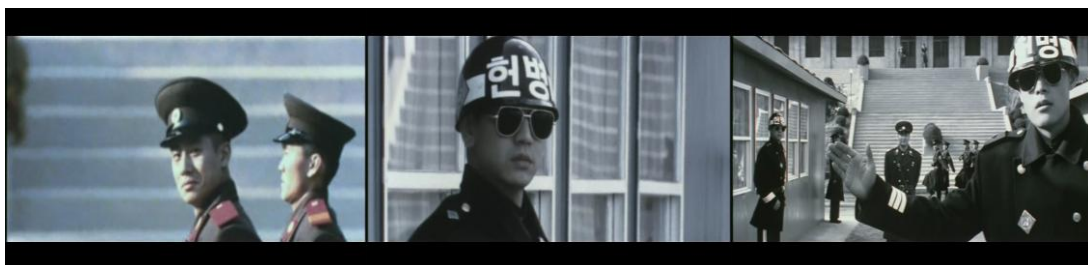


6-5 a

6-5 b

6-5 c

The closing scene begins with a medium close-up of Sergeant Oh passing the hat over to the American soldier, and ends with a freeze-frame of Sergeant Oh, with the tourist clicking the shutter on the soundtrack.



6-5 d

6-5 e

6-6 f

The camera animates this photographic static image, and ends up focusing on Sergeant Lee's face.

Figures 6-5 a – f: the closing scene of *Joint Security Area*

The fundamental fantasy that this film seeks to address is manifested in the closing scene. It is a good example of explaining where the special focus is placed in this film. It is a repetition of a scene shown towards the middle of the film, but is offered in a different way. In a scene in the middle of the film, while a foreign tourist group is visiting Panmunjom on the South Korean side, a woman's hat is blown over into the North Korean territory. The tourist group is surprised to see Sergeant Oh collecting this hat and passing it over to an American soldier on the South Korean side. The camera, then, shows the American soldier approaching Sergeant Oh from an extreme high angle. In this shot, the film adopts a foreign vantage point to highlight the physical territorial boundary between North and South Korea. The film then cuts to a medium close-up shot of Sergeant Oh while the American soldier is framed out, saying 'thank you'. The next shot allows us to see that, while a tourist is approaching the border line and taking a photograph, Sergeant Lee stops the tourist from doing so, again from an extreme high angle. This is presented once again in the closing scene. This scene begins with a medium close-up of Sergeant Oh passing the hat over to the American soldier (Fig. 6-5 a, 6-5 b), and ends with a freeze-frame of Sergeant Oh, with the tourist clicking the shutter on the soundtrack (Fig. 6-5 c). What is crucial here is that the camera then animates this photographic static image. The camera first captures Sergeant Oh (Fig. 6-5 c), tracks forwards and backwards to show the other soldiers, such as Jung Woo-jin (Fig. 6-5 d) and Nam Sung-shik (Fig. 6-5 e), and ends up focusing on Sergeant Lee's face as he stops the tourist from releasing the shutter (Fig. 6-5 f). While the scene towards the middle of the film highlights the fact that Korea has been divided by a visible territorial border line, and does so by adopting a privileged foreign vantage point, the closing scene is very indicative of the fact that the film attempts to motivate a performative dimension of nation-

as-people through the use of mobile framing, emphasising the ‘liminal space’ crossing over the territorial border line, if we borrow Homi K. Bhabha (1994)’s terminology.⁸ Even though the closing scene ends with a freeze-frame as well, inscribing movement into a frozen photograph provokes a contradictory signifying practice between nation-as-people and nation-as-state, by putting us in a position which confronts the split between the two opposite poles. By referring nation-as-people to mobility and contrasting it with nation-as-state based on a fixed geographical boundary, the closing scene seems to emphasise the plurality and diversification of nation-as-people as opposed to the homogenising, monolithic rhetoric of the nation-state.

However, the closing scene raises a much more complicated problem. Two points might be suggested here. First, in terms of plot order, this event happens before the incident in the cottage takes place and the four male soldiers become aware of one another, thus working as the ‘origin’ before a utopian sense of community is shattered. To deploy the scene in the closing sequence fetishises the ‘origin’ before an encounter with the traumatic Real, thus empowering the fundamental fantasy that the male-bonding community might have developed in a different way. Second, and more important, this closing scene is also shot from an anonymous tourist’s point of view. The sudden intrusion of a genuinely naïve, neutral, and innocent look, such as a foreign tourist’s look, conveys this shot’s ideological implication: the role of the nostalgic look. This look gains no significance in the narrative dimension. But it also serves as an interpreting frame of neutral universality, that is, an ideology in its purist form through which to see the conflicting tension between the divided nations. At this time, Korea on the geopolitical level appears to a Western foreigner as a

⁸ I am indebted to Kwon Eun-sun(2001) for this analysis.

‘time-lag’, in the sense that Korea as an imperfect modern nation-state does not correspond to a current foreign present. This nostalgic look blurs the aspect of ‘the coexistence of various synchronic systems or modes of production, each with its own dynamic or time scheme’ (Jameson, 1981: 97).

In sum, *Joint Security Area* offers the crucial point that, beneath neighbours as comrades, there always hides an unbearably monstrous Other-Thing. This film shows how the South Korean soldiers encounter the catastrophic Other in two ways. On the one hand, when a male-bonding space is shattered by the mediation of the Third in the form of Lieutenant Choi, the two South Korean soldiers are suddenly forced into confronting the unfathomable chaos of radical Otherness. On the other hand, when the male-bond community is once again ‘suspended’ by the intervention of Sophie Jean, this film opens up a space for the emergence of radical Otherness, by demonstrating that what grounds a harmonious male-bonding community is fundamental fragmentation and contradiction. However, the film ends up with the South Korean soldier’s sacrificial suicide, which prevents us from witnessing the ruptured nature of this male-bonding community. Sacrificial suicide permanently defers the encounter with the traumatic past, strengthening the deepest fundamental fantasy of a strong aspiration towards reunification.

6.3 The ‘Geopolitical Unconscious’ of *Shiri* Seen through an Ethical Framework

Shiri’s narrative impetus is rendered by the male protagonist, Yu’s scopophilic desire and aspiration to know the truth. On the surface, it adopts the classic Hollywood narrative pattern led by a male protagonist. This shows the oedipal trajectory in a very clichéd manner: Yu punishes his fiancée Lee Myung-hyun/Lee Pang-hee. After the death of his fiancée in the

final sequence, he strongly denies that Lee Pang-hee was a terrorist. This can be seen as the male subject's fetishised disavowal of the monstrous female Other. However, it is perhaps too easy to interpret *Shiri* in this way. *Shiri* seems to provide more complex and multi-dimensional layers of interpretations by implicating the tension and contradiction in South Korea via the impossibility of representation. Hence, what we need to pay attention to here is the way this film offers 'representability' to what otherwise remains the unrepresented, by examining what *Shiri* has not represented and cannot represent for itself. The impossibility of representation paradoxically might provide the readings which lead us to map cognitively the core of the current capitalist system.

In order to explore this problem further, let us briefly describe the narrative of this film. In *Shiri*, South Korean security agent Yu Jung-won and his colleague Lee Chang-gil, who both work for the National Intelligence Service, are pursuing a North Korean female terrorist, Lee Pang-hee, and a North Korean terrorist unit led by Park Mu-young. In the first half of the film Lee Pang-hee masquerades as Yu's fiancée, Lee Myung-hyun. In this guise, Lee Pang-hee seeks to obtain top secret information and pass it on to Park Mu-young. The terrorist unit infiltrates South Korea and tries to reunify Korea with the use of a stolen bomb called CTX. They intend to destroy various sites throughout Seoul, especially a football stadium where North-South summit talks are supposed to take place, along with a friendly football match played by North and South Korean teams. During a gunfight in the football stadium, all the members of the North Korean terrorist unit are killed by South Korean SWAT officers and Lee Pang-hee is also shot dead by her fiancé Yu Jung-won.



Figure 6-6 Lee Pang-hee is trained as a military machine in the opening sequence.

The primary motif concerns how Yu and his colleague Lee detect the location of Lee Pang-hee and the terrorist unit to which she belongs. Her existence is presented as both visible and invisible. When she is visible, it is only through Lee Myung-hyun that she is entitled to live in the transnational era of capitalism. But when she appears as Lee Pang-hee, she has to be an absolutely opaque figuration. It is important to note here that when we first see Lee Pang-hee as a monstrous Other in the opening sequence, the location is presented as North Korea not South Korea.

When we first perceive the existence of Lee Pang-hee in a large South Korean supermarket, where Yu and his colleague Lee are supposed to meet a weapons dealer to discover an important clue in the detection of Lee Pang-hee, she can just be glimpsed through the camera's shallow depth of field. Yu and his colleague Lee cannot identify Lee Pang-hee: only the weapons dealer can identify her invisible existence. In the subsequent scene, the dealer is running away from her, and the camera captures an outdated traditional alleyway in Seoul. But the dealer is shot by Lee Pang-hee.



Figure 6-7 Lee Pang-hee is glimpsed on a rooftop.

Conveyed through the use of rapid and/or unstable camera movement, Yu desperately looks around for Lee Pang-hee. Through Yu's point-of-view shot, the blurred image of Lee Pang-hee on a rooftop can just be glimpsed (Figure 6-7). In contrast to the cutting-edge skyscrapers surrounding it, the rooftop looks like a stain disturbing the transparent logic of global capitalism. David Scott Diffrient (2000)'s suggestion is helpful in illustrating how South Korean locations as 'cinematic cityscape' are represented in *Shiri*:

Shiri positions women and North Korean 'others' in peripheral zones, with no clear entryway or exit (the film, for example, does not show how or where the North Koreans enter the South). The locations where Lee Pang-hee can be briefly glimpsed (rooftops, the supermarket, dark alleyways) are chaotic, spatially fragmented sites of distance, commodification, and 'otherness'. These zones of invisibility, as pockets of potential resistance within Seoul's ethnoscape, are difficult to freeze into a temporal instance (Diffrient, 2000: 82).

Shiri stages the locality of Seoul, the capital of South Korea, which has experienced the passage to the postmodern consumer society. Even if this landscape is presented in a very postmodern way – the hand-held camera does not point to a stable location – nevertheless *Shiri* foregrounds Seoul's indexical locality. For instance, in the rooftop scene, this zone of

opaqueness might indicate the tension between modernisation forcibly imposed by the West and the underdeveloped cityscape of Seoul. It also becomes evident when the film deals with the exploding department store which might signal ‘the collapse of the Sampoong department store building in July 1995 in Seoul with the loss of 200 lives’ (Dalton and Cotton, 1996: 286). Moreover, when Yu dreams that he and his partner Lee are shot by Lee Pang-hee, the backdrop is the Western-style restaurant *Bennigans*. Even though it is described as a mere dream, it might still touch on the real fear of Yu, in other words, the fear of the South Korean capitalist system.

For this reason, *Shiri* offers us a moment to overthrow the standard interpretation of this film: it is the first Korean blockbuster to engage in local issues such as the question of national division. As the narrative goes on, it obfuscates why the North Korean terrorist unit led by Park has come down to South Korea. Even though Park claims that their strategy of terror will create a step towards reunification, it seems a little strange to regard them as the direct embodiment of North Korea. The terrorist unit does not represent North Korea, because it is also excluded from the North Korean government. It is sufficient to note here that, in the final sequence at the football stadium, the audience in the stadium raises *TaeGukGi* (the South Korean national flag) and *ArirangGi* (the flag for both South and North Korea) at the same time and there are supposed to be South-North summit talks in the stadium. Considering that the game of football functions as an important means of constituting nationhood, *Shiri* expresses a desire for reunification at least in narrative terms rather than positing North Korea as a mere enemy. The list could go on: when the North Korean president announces that he is visiting South Korea for the purpose of reunification, what is important in the scene is that the figuration of the North Korean president does not appear as invisible even though it is indirectly represented through the interface monitor screen.

Hence, the standard interpretation of *Shiri* as a film which deals with the question of national division might miss the point. My hypothesis is that the Other represented in *Shiri* touches on the class antagonism inherent within the South Korean capitalist mode of production, rather than the mere representation of a North Korean soldier. In order to make this claim clear, it is required to contrast Park with Yu and his partner Lee: Yu and Lee no longer represent the bureaucracy of a brutally violent National Security Agency, but are rather a global/local market allegory in the guise of a human face to associate the new technocracy of transnational corporations with the authority of law and order. In contrast to them, Park can be read as an excess within the current capitalist system. This could be inferred from Park's remark to Yu: 'How can you, who grew up eating Coke and hamburgers, understand that your brothers in the North are starving?' Given that capitalism is always characterised by excess within its own mode of production, is it not possible to read that these terrorists represent the figure of class antagonism in South Korea?

Situating the Other as class antagonism manifests itself in a scene where Lee Pang-hee and Yu stand off towards the end of the film. Director Kang Je-gyu provides a shot/reverse-shot pattern between them. Yu finally punishes and shoots Lee Pang-hee for the narrative resolution. But what is at stake here is how Lee Pang-hee 'draws a line of separation' within the big Other as social order. It leads us to raise a question in terms of ethics inherent within the death drive which, I think, distinguishes *Shiri* from the series of subsequent Korean blockbusters.



6-8 a

6-8 b

The camera offers a shot/reverse pattern between Yu and Lee.



6-8 c

6-8 d

A person of actual political power is fleeing in a car from the Olympic stadium. Lee Pang-hee searches for the car.



6-8 e

6-8 f

She turns away to shoot the president. But Yu shoots her first.



6-8 g

6-8 h

Yu is still pointing his gun at her. The president is fleeing in a car.

Figures 6-8 a – h: Yu kills Lee Pang-hee.

This scene begins with a shot/reverse pattern between Yu and Lee (Fig. 6-8 a, 6-8 b). It is necessary to turn to a sudden intrusion of the Third: a shot/reverse rendering is cut together

with the fact that a person of actual political power is escaping in a car from the Olympic stadium, even though it is unclear whether the car belongs to North Korea or South Korea (Fig. 6-8 c). In the next shot, Lee recognises that the president is fleeing (Fig. 6-8 d), followed by a shot in which she attempts to turn away and assassinate the president, not Yu (Fig. 6-8 e). In the next shot, as Yu shoots her first, her attempt to shoot the president has failed (Fig. 6-8 f). The next cut allows us to see that Yu is still pointing a gun at her (Fig. 6-8 g), and that the president is getting away (Fig. 6-8 h). The point here is that as the Third intrudes between Yu and Lee Pang-hee, she over-identifies with the role in the big Other, such that she performs an ethical act via the Other. It is from Lee Pang-hee that a true subject emerges. Yu merely functions as an object to help her death drive unfold. Even though Yu kills her, it might be construed that she reveals a masochistic desire to let Yu kill her. Hence, it shifts the attention from the sadistic Yu to her radical act.

In order to explore this problem further, it is necessary to examine the relevant theories regarding the definition of “act” in psychoanalysis. The first step to consider is that an individual subject’s entry into the Symbolic is structured as ‘a *forced choice*’ (Žižek, 1991: 74, emphasis original). The Symbolic pre-exists the subject, constituting him/her as the subject, irrespective of whether or not he/she accepts it. As such, it produces a kind of dissatisfaction: this forced subjecthood is why the Lacanian subject is barred (ibid.: 76). In this respect, fantasy can be understood as the situation in which the individual subject imagines a kind of solution out of the dissatisfaction evoked by the demands of the symbolic authority. In order for the Symbolic to reproduce itself and domesticate dissatisfaction, it requires a minimum of fantasy that aims to pacify the inherent contradiction within it. How, then, can one go beyond the realm of fantasy in ethical terms? Jacques Lacan’s conceptualisation of an ethical act provides a clue. The act needs to be differentiated from ‘action’ in the sense that ‘[the act]

radically transforms its bearer (agent)’ (ibid.: 44): ‘after an act, I am literally “not the same as before”’ (ibid.). In the course of an act, the subject experiences a temporary annihilation, not being able to find a proper place in the impersonally distributed network of society. An act, thus, always refers to a site where the consistency of the reigning symbolic authority falls into disarray. The act can be defined as something which is ‘neither a strategic intervention *in* the existing order, nor its “crazy” destructive *negation*; an act is an “excessive”, trans-strategic intervention which redefines the rules and contours of the existing order’ (Žižek, 2004a: 81, emphasis original). Therefore, the concept of ‘act’ in psychoanalysis refers to the concept that ‘the abyss of absolute freedom, autonomy and responsibility coincides with an unconditional necessity: I feel obliged to perform the act as an automaton, without reflection (I simply *have* to do it, it’s not a matter of strategic deliberation)’ (Žižek, 2002b: 162, emphasis original).

How, then, does one perform an ethical act? Far from a strategic intervention or a kind of madness, an ethical act, paradoxically, emerges when the subject over-identifies with the demand of the symbolic authority: ‘we “kill” ourselves through the Other, *in the Other*. We annihilate that which – in the Other, in the symbolic order – gave our being identity, status, support and meaning’ (Zupančič, 2000: 84). The act is not opposed to the realm of the big Other (the Symbolic); but rather, it is only through the referential anchoring to the (big) Other that an ethical act can appear. If our inclusion in social authority is a forced choice, the act might be related to all-too-literal repetition of a forced choice. In the course of accepting a forced choice as a true choice, the subject transcends the realms of fantasy and experiences true freedom. If the role of fantasy serves to make a distance in order for society to maintain itself smoothly, the act can be seen as withdrawing this distance, thus presenting a possibility of redefining the contours of the existing social order.

Given that ideology operates by maintaining a distance, it might be helpful to examine

how Žižek illustrates this point by comparing *MASH* (Robert Altman, 1970) with *Full Metal Jacket* (Stanley Kubrick, 1987) (Žižek, 1997: 20). For Žižek, *MASH* does not subvert the operation of the military machine. But instead, it can be seen as ‘a perfectly conformist film’ (ibid.).

For all their mockery of authority, practical jokes, and sexual escapades, the members of the MASH crew *perform their job exemplarily*, and thus present absolutely no threat to the smooth running of the military machine. In other words, the cliché which regards *MASH* as an anti-militarist film, depicting the horrors of the meaningless military slaughter which can be endured only through a healthy measure of cynicism, practical jokes, laughing at pompous official rituals, and so on, misses the point – this very distance *is* ideology (ibid., emphasis original).

However, for Žižek, *Full Metal Jacket* successfully resists this kind of ideological manipulation based on ‘the distance’.

What we get in the first part of the film is the military drill, the direct bodily discipline, saturated with the unique blend of a humiliating display of power, sexualization and obscene blasphemy (at Christmas, the soldiers are ordered to sing ‘Happy birthday dear Jesus...’)... This part of the film ends with a soldier who, on account of his overidentification with the military ideological machine, ‘runs amok’ and shoots first the drill sergeant, then himself. The second, main part of the film ends with a scene in which a soldier (Matthew Modine) who, throughout the film, has displayed a kind of ironic ‘human distance’ towards the military machine...shoots a wounded Vietcong sniper girl’ (ibid.: 20-1).

To pose an ironic distance as with *MASH* is not radical enough, because this kind of distance seems to offer another alibi for the edifice of power. As mentioned in the preceding chapters, the public power edifice is empowered and supported by its own obscene underside

which ‘break[s] its own public rule – in short, by its “inherent transgression”’ (SŽ: 217). To put it another way, power operates not simply in the mode of identification (one becomes the subject by taking on the symbolic space imposed on us by it), but rather in the mode of disidentification (ibid.: 218). An ideological manipulation is most effective when we are aware that we are not fully identical to power. Within this situation, *Full Metal Jacket* might present a way of subverting the functioning of ideology. Instead of mocking the military power in a cynical way, it foregrounds the way in which the subject is too literally identified with the power, thus shattering the operation of power from the inside. ‘In so far as power relies on its “inherent transgression”, then – sometimes, at least – *overidentifying* with the explicit power discourse – *ignoring* this inherent obscene underside and simply taking the power discourse at its (public) word, acting as if it really means what it explicitly says (and promises) – can be the most effective way of disturbing its smooth functioning’ (ibid.: 220). This is also what the Lacanian notion of ‘act’ refers to. That is because, to act is not a matter of ‘a mere displacement/resignification of the symbolic coordinates that confer on the subject his or her identity’, but of ‘the radical transformation of the very universal structuring “principle” of the existing symbolic order’ (ibid.). Thus, the truly political act might not arise from making such a distance by foregrounding ironic and dispersed political subjectivities, but from a too-literal identification with power, thus breaking down the distance itself on which ideology depends.

From the perspective presented here, Lee Pang-hee exhibits the figure of an ethical act. In an impossible situation of being forced to make a choice, she literally identifies her role allotted in the symbolic network. By sticking to a forced choice against the fantasy which maintains it, she breaks down the very ground of social reality. This point becomes clearer when we compare Lee’s over-identification with her role in the symbolic network with the

male subject's suicide on the basis of sacrifice (in *Silmido*, *TaeGukGi*, and *Joint Security Area*, for example). While the male subjects do not kill themselves via the symbolic network, and thus conceal its inconsistency, Lee reveals the inherent tension in the network by over-identifying with it.

Commercial popular film provides an imaginary solution that suppresses the sudden intrusion of radical Otherness. *Shiri* effectively eliminates a figure of excess inherent within capitalism, not only by the alliance between the new technocracy and law and order, which can be defined as an allegory of global capitalism, but also by the containment of a seemingly now distant South Korean past, that is, a figure of collective fantasies in the guise of the North Korean terrorists before the new power system of transnational capitalism comes to full realisation in South Korea. However, paradoxically, *Shiri* can open up a space for some social content, and even for a solution to be given some basic expression. In this respect, the specific narrative figuration shown in the act of Lee Pang-hee/Lee Myung-hyun opens up the possibility of mapping cognitively the unrepresentable on a global scale: suppressing the Other, paradoxically, might expose the precondition of the emergence of the excess of global capitalism. If *Shiri* can be understood as posing class antagonism, it is through her act, since class antagonism can be first and foremost defined as the split of capitalism from within.

6.4 *The Host*: The Encounter with Loss Itself

Some Korean blockbusters tend to focus on a nation-state model of history through the use of geopolitical imagination based on the territorial border of the nation-state. This tendency is offered as 'imaginary history' in the following films, for example: *Mystery of the Cube* (1998), *2009 Lost Memories* (Lee Si-myung, 2001), *Phantom, the Submarine* (Min Byung-

chun, 1999), *Heaven's Soldiers* (Min Joon-ki, 2005), *Welcome to Dongmakgol* (Park Kwang-hyun, 2005), and *Hanbando* (Kang Woo-suk, 2006). These films reveal 'difficulties of the invention or discovery of the Other' (Paek, 2006: 81), that is, those whom they will posit as an enemy. That is because it is difficult for these films to portray a desire to colonise others in the post-colonial era of cultural exchange when the geopolitical context surrounding South Korea has changed: to posit North Korea as a mere Evil is regarded as out-of-date in contemporary South Korean film culture; it is also hard to posit East Asian countries such as Japan and China as an enemy, for, at least at the time of writing, those countries have been the major film export markets for recent South Korean films. As these films are all set in South Korea, they tend to reveal claustrophobic anxiety which is often projected onto a postmodern pastiche of the national past, allowing themselves to imagine a colonialist desire through the form of 'imaginary history'. As 'time-space compressions' in these films are represented in a fully mystified form, it may indicate that the Korean blockbuster has accommodated itself to a postmodern era of cross-border flow in the name of unsettled space-time coordinates.

The Host is much more subversive than any of the films mentioned above. Because *The Host* portrays the contemporary South Korean historical condition, it cannot be identified with the postmodern configuration of the national past. However, it is here paradoxically, as we shall see below that *The Host* discloses its weak point. Because a great deal of its narrative indicates the weight of history, paradoxically, *The Host* fails to pose the question of history. I will analyse this point soon, but first I examine this film from an industrial perspective.

The Host broke the South Korean box-office record, attracting an audience of 13 million people. It broke the previous record set, just one month after its release. It was then embroiled

in a huge controversy, particularly with respect to the issue of monopolising screens and oligopoly: Showbox, the local distributor of *The Host*, secured 620 screens, more than one third of the total available, for the release of the film (Kim Soo-kyung, 2006: 10-1). It is worth noting that Kim Ki-duk's *Time* was also released at the same time as *The Host*, securing only 12 screens in South Korea: the release was only possible because Sponge, which has imported and distributed arthouse films, purchased the domestic copyright of the film (Han, 2006: 7). The screen dominance of *The Host* reflects how the contemporary South Korean film industry has been transformed by the changing boundaries of the global visual economy, in the sense that screen dominance not only applies to Hollywood but also to local distribution practices. How can one construe this phenomenon? My basic mode of interpretation, as mentioned in my chapter on methodology (chapter 4), stems from the fact that, although industrial forces imprint their influences into the film text, a film text does not necessarily correspond to external forces. For my purpose, what is at stake here is an analysis of *The Host*, particularly looking at how it configures the geopolitical imagery and to what extent it moves beyond a historicising strategy, and more importantly in what ways it raises an ethical inquiry into film.

The Host tells the story of a huge creature that surfaces from the Han River in Seoul, runs amok through a park packed with crowds, and jumps back into the river with a schoolgirl snatched in its tail, using a generic combination of monster film and family melodrama. It begins by presenting detailed information as to how the creature has emerged, designating it literally rather than allegorically as a product of U.S. based neo-colonialism.

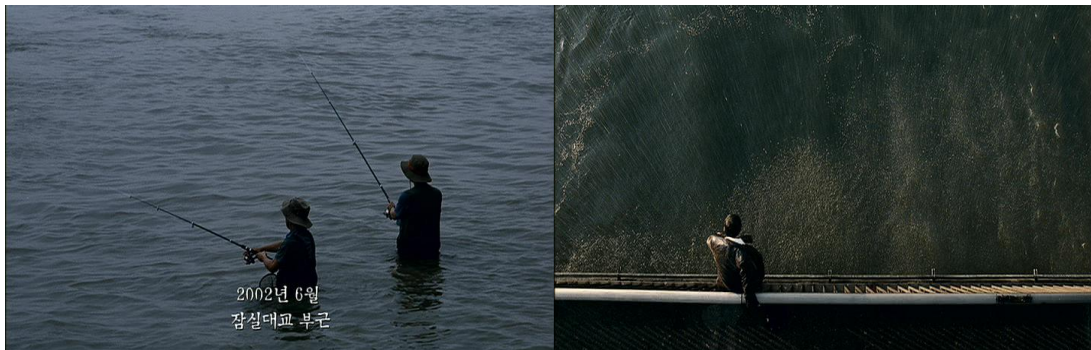


6-9 a

6-9 b

The first shot shows the exact date and place in which the U.S. military dumps a huge amount of formaldehyde into the Han River.

Bong Joon-ho tracks from left to right to emphasise the huge amount of formaldehyde.



6-9 c

6-9 d

Two men fish in the Han River on June 20 2002.

A man attempts to plunge into the river in October 2006.

Figures 6-9 a – d: the prologue of *The Host*

The first scene in the prologue portrays the birth of the creature in detail: the first shot depicts how the U.S. military in Seoul dumps a huge amount of formaldehyde into a drain leading to the Han River, revealing the exact date and place as ‘February 9, 2000 and Morgue, U.S. Army Base –Yongsan, Korea’ (Fig. 6-9 a). After the camera tracks from left to right to reveal how the formaldehyde has been dumped (Fig. 6-9 b), it cuts to a shot of two men fishing in the Han River on 20 June 2002 (Fig. 6-9 c): one of the men finds an uncanny mutant amphibian; but he frees it back into the river. In the following scene, set in October

2006 on a Han River bridge, a man plunges into the river, just after seeing that there is 'something dark' in it (Fig. 6-9 d). Despite its heavy reliance on the genre conventions of the monster film, this film shows direct and linear causality in producing the mutant creature. The birth of the creature echoes an historical fact that occurred in 2000: Albert McFarland, the U.S. military mortician at the Yongsan camp, issued an order to pour 80 litres of formaldehyde into the Han River (Hsu, 2009).

Just after the prologue, the creature emerges from the Han River, attacks and devours people. After the creature grabs a schoolgirl, Hyun-seo, in his tail and disappears beneath the Han River, the family unite against the creature's threat. Hyun-seo's father, Gang-du, seems a bit slow-witted. He runs a small food stand near the Han River with his father, Hee-bong. Nam-ju is Gang-du's younger sister, a national medal-winning archer who always hesitates before shooting. Nam-il is Gang-du's younger brother, a former student dissident who is now unemployed. In the narrative, the capture of Hyun-seo functions as an 'empty signifier' to gather the scattered family members together. Their confrontations with the creature and the hunt for Hyun-seo are, however, ceaselessly delayed as a result of the interventions of the national government deeply influenced by U.S. based neo-colonialism. The South Korean government concludes that the creature is a host to a deadly virus, thus detaining the family in a hospital. The police do not believe that Gang-du has received a phone call from Hyun-seo, and the hospital won't discharge Gang-du's family so that they can continue their search for Hyun-seo. While deploying this subplot to delay the confrontation with the creature, the film continues to contextualise the contemporary political landscape around South Korea. *The Host* provide a passage to the high-capitalist global system, particularly with its emphasis on communicative capitalism. This is conveyed in the scene where Hee-bong is killed by the creature. The film cuts to a great deal of video footage about the death of an American soldier,

announcing that the U.S. and World Health Organisation (WHO) have decided to intervene in South Korea's biological situation as it cannot cope with a new virus, and that they will use 'Agent Yellow', a chemical agent, to kill the creature. Interestingly, only televisual media functions here as determining the meaning of the creature's assault. This video footage does not work as a secondary component to complement the main character's actions, but has an independent role narrating the bio-political situation of current capitalism. What we can see here is contemporary capitalism's direct intervention, using media itself as a pure function of global sovereignty.

In rendering visible the cause of the birth of the monster at the beginning of the film, and subsequently contextualising the contemporary political landscape of South Korea in the global/local context, *The Host* is very different from the classical monster film. In the case of *Jaws* (1975), the existence of the creature is not established fully at the beginning of film, structuring the narrative around an exploration of the creature's identity. Even though the creature has been shown to exist, only the protagonists believe in its existence. Here, the focus is clearly placed on the creature itself. More importantly, *Jaws* does not account for the cause of the birth of the creature, leaving open the interpretation of its political implications. In contrast to this kind of classical monster genre convention, *The Host* not only foregrounds the cause of the birth of the monster from the very beginning of the film, but also weaves it into the larger framework of an historical background. However, the mere registration of contextual knowledge is not fully effective, because it not only overlooks the 'cognitive mapping' of the current capitalist system in an allegorised manner, but also – more importantly – tends to exclude the non-historical (the Real) within a given historical context. For instance, the creature in *The Host* does not designate the Real as the unrepresentable X which already always resists its symbolisation, but invokes contemporary South Korean

histories, since the creature is rendered as a direct product of U.S. based neo-colonialism. *The Host* therefore runs the risk of historicism, precisely because it merely reflects historical fact. Hence, the crucial point should be on how a given film text brings us to apprehend historical conditions through its own organisation, and how this kind of historical knowledge is exploded by the intervention of the non-historical moment. It is through the emphasis on the non-historical that the concept of ‘concrete universality’ can be made explicit against the Korean blockbusters’ tendency to historicism.

However, it is important to note that *The Host* is not confined to the realm of historicism. Let us develop this argument by first noting the way in which the film confronts the subjects with a horrifying monster, and their response to it. Towards the end of the film, the family’s search for Hyun-seo has been fruitless because she is dead: only Se-ju, a homeless child, survives. After Hyun-seo’s death, the three siblings (Gang-du, Nam-il, and Nam-ju), along with a homeless man, launch their last attack on the creature in the course of a stand-off between student protestors and South Korean police. Nam-il attempts to throw Molotov cocktails at the creature – throwing a Molotov cocktail is indexical of many violent demonstrations of the 1980s. But he repeatedly fails to hit the creature. The homeless man pours gasoline down the monster’s mouth, but Nam-il also fails to throw a flaming Molotov cocktail at the creature as the last bottle slips out of his hands. The scene is followed by a shot of Nam-ju in which she shoots the lit fragments with her arrow into the creature, provoking it to scream in agony. When the creature flees from Nam-il and Nam-ju, Gang-du finally spears a street sign into its gullet, heralding its death.

What is at issue here is, as Chung Sung-ill (2006) notes, why the family’s rescue effort is too late: Nam-il accidentally drops his last Molotov cocktail; even though Nam-ju and Gang-du attack the creature, this happens only after Hyun-seo dies (Chung, 2006: 105). According to

Chung, this resistance arrives too late so that Nam-il and Nam-ju's actions echo the cynicism that is today's prevailing ideological attitude (ibid.: 104). Moreover, a certain type of shot, writes Chung, carries apparent cynical implications. For example, Chung cites the shot in the middle section of the film where Hyun-seo and all her family members join together to eat noodles. In contrast to Chung's idea, I believe that this shot might present a key point of reference for understanding the film's radical dimension.



6-10 a

6-10 b

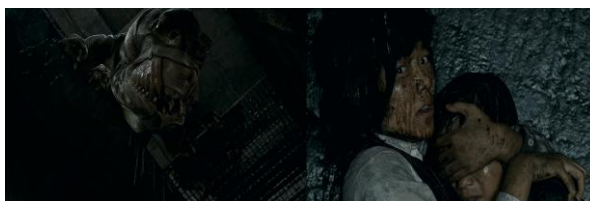
The homeless children, Se-jin and Se-ju are threatened by the monster. When the children are about to be swallowed by the monster, the camera cuts to a shot that shows Gang-du's father's hand opening the stall's door.



6-10 c

6-10 d

The family members sit and have noodles. A few seconds later, Hyun-seo enters the frame and joins her family.



6-10 e

6-10 f

Hyun-seo is overwhelmed by the monster in the sewer. She protects Se-ju from the monster.



6-10 g 6-10 h
Gang-du keeps nodding off.

Figures 6-10 a – h: Hyun-seo makes a hallucinatory appearance.

It is necessary to elaborate on how this shot is deployed within the sequence. This sequence begins with a scene where the family search for Hyun-seo, crosscut with the homeless children, Se-jin and Se-ju, being threatened by the monster. When the children are about to be swallowed by the monster (Fig. 6-10 a), the camera cuts to a shot of Gang-du's father's hand opening the stall door (Fig. 6-10 b). In the next shot, Bong Joon-ho depicts a scene in which the family members sit and have noodles (Fig. 6-10 c). They do not have any dialogue but just keep eating noodles. A few seconds later, Hyun-seo enters the frame and joins her family in having noodles (Fig. 6-10 d). The family are not surprised to see her, and they simply give her some food. Despite the fact that Hyun-seo is still captured in the creature's hideout, she abruptly turns up as a hallucinatory figure. This scene is also the first time all the family members gather together. This shot is followed by a scene where Hyun-seo is overwhelmed by the tremendously horrifying monster, having just witnessed the creature regurgitating the two children Se-jin and Se-ju in the sewer hideout: only Se-ju survives (Fig. 6-10 e, 6-10 f). The camera, then, returns to the shot of the family as Gang-du's father excuses his son's obvious incompetence by pointing out that he was neglected by the family as a child (Fig. 6-10 g). During the scene, we can glimpse that Gang-du keeps nodding off (Fig. 6-10 h).

The abrupt insertion of the food stand shot where Hyun-seo makes a hallucinatory

appearance enables us to interpret this film from a quite different angle. Given that Gang-du takes a nap shortly after Hyun-seo's scene in the sewer, it seems appropriate to construe the earlier brief interlude as part of Gang-du's dream (Chung, 2006: 102). Logically, Hyun-seo's scene in the sewer, positioned as it is between the food stand shot and Gang-du's nap scene, can be seen as part of the overall process of his dream. The linking of the images here introduces the film's most implicit subplots. To demonstrate this argument, Chung suggests that a similar pattern recurs towards the end of the film; whenever Hyun-seo appears, her appearance is always mediated by a scene featuring Gang-du (ibid.: 102-3). Hyun-seo appears to be trapped in the sewer twice after this point, but each time, Bong inserts Hyun-seo's scene within Gang-du's scene. In a scene where Gang-du is captured in a hospital, Gang-du is given an anaesthetic and forced to have a lobotomy. However, Bong cuts from this to a scene where Hyun-seo devises a means of climbing out of the sewer by making a rope from the other victims' clothes. Bong then cuts back to Gang-du in hospital. As a result, Hyun-seo's scene in the sewer is reduced to one of the episodes in Gang-du's scenes in hospital. Moreover, given that Hyun-seo's scene appears shortly after Gang-du goes under anaesthetic, does it not imply that 'her existence can be seen as the vision of semiconscious Gang-du? (ibid.). This pattern is repeated once again. In a scene when Gang-du escapes from hospital and heads towards Wonhyo Bridge looking for Hyun-seo and crying out her name, Bong cuts to a scene where she puts her escape plan into action by climbing up the rope. However, the creature snatches her and puts her back into place. At the moment when the creature swallows her and Se-ju, the scene fades out. Bong then cuts to a close-up of Gang-du. Again, here, Hyun-seo's scene is inserted between Gang-du's scenes. More than anything else, when Bong cuts from Hyun-seo's scene back to a close-up of Gang-du's face, he seems to suggest that her existence is motivated by Gang-du's state of mind.

On the basis of the editing pattern detailed above, Chung concludes that both the brief inserted shot in the middle of the film where Gang-du's entire family gathers together in the food stand and Hyun-seo makes an abrupt appearance and the subsequent scene with Hyun-seo in the sewer belong to Gang-du's dream (ibid.: 103). If it is true that Hyun-seo's scene in the middle of the film is part of Gang-du's dream, it redefines the ensuing narrative development: her scenes towards the end of the film are also part of Gang-du's fantasmatic scenario (ibid.). Chung continues to ask a very serious but complicated question here: what happens if all of Gang-du's efforts to hunt for Hyun-seo belong to his dream, and she might have died when she was first captured by the monster? What would be the political implication of this? The problem at work in this film, according to Chung, is Bong's cynicism in political-ethical terms: Bong mocks public ideology, and also mocks resistance itself by revealing nothingness in a nihilistic manner.

Although I share Chung's theoretical framework, my position is quite different. If Hyun-seo dies at the end of the film, it could be argued that *The Host* breaks the genre convention of the last-minute rescue based on the fetishistic investment of 'I know, but...'. We all know that although the victim is under siege, a saviour will rescue her in the final instance. This genre convention is sometimes twisted if a certain film is based on a recognised historical fact. For instance, in *Memories of Murder*, we all know that a solution will remain elusive, precisely because we all know the historical fact. It is important, however, to note that the violation of genre convention is not necessarily subversive. This is all the more so, because in our postmodern era, transgression has become the dominant rule. The violation of genre convention is merely a type of genre convention. It denotes the limit of the convention, situated as just one among an infinite range of elements that are waiting to be violated.

However, if we understand that Hyun-seo might have died when she was snatched by

the monster, in what ways is it truly subversive? Hyun-seo's death at the starting point might be understood in terms of the transgression of genre convention. However, it would be wrong to focus on it only within the framework of the violation of the genre code. There is something more there. Bong does not portray primordial happiness that Gang-du subsequently loses. Rather, he situates the subject in the process of a constant repetition of failure. For this reason, Hyun-seo's death at the beginning cannot be understood as a preexisting entity subjected to loss but marks the loss itself. After Hyun-seo is snatched by the monster, Gang-du experiences a wide range of traumatic cracks, but in each case, he does not lose what he possessed, but just loses what he never had. This shifts ethical attention from the actor's ethical dilemma on screen to how the subject redeems herself/himself by means of the repetition of a forced choice. Hyun-seo's death is presented as a forced choice which alienates Gang-du from the larger social order. However, he does not escape from the encounter with the Real in the same manner as the male subjects committing suicide in other Korean blockbusters. Instead of withdrawing from the original traumatic situation, he restages it, and in doing so, redeems himself. By means of repeating past catastrophic failure, the past is rendered visible 'in its "openness", in its possibility, only to those whose present situation is threatened by the same abyss, who are caught in the same deadlock' (Žižek, 1991: 79). From the perspective presented here, the caring for Se-ju at the end of the film might be construed as the traumatic past made visible in its 'openness' to those who experience the same deadlock. Moreover, Gang-du (and the family)'s attempt to rescue Hyun-seo during much of the film needs to be seen as repeating the existential deadlock which is forcibly imposed on him, rather than as a form of cynicism.

If Hyun-seo dies at the moment the creature snatches her, the viewer has to engage ethically with a fundamentally traumatic situation that remains unseen throughout the

narrative. What this film poses in terms of ethics is that the promise to rescue Hyun-seo is forever betrayed, by directly confronting the viewer with a fundamentally terrifying radical Otherness, that is, the void. By confronting the viewer with the family's unending failure, and furthermore modern South Korea's social order, Bong reveals that the past of catastrophic failure might have already happened, but that what had seemed finished is incomplete. The ethical enquiry into *The Host* can be sustained by comparing it with *The Chaser* (Na Hong-jin, 2008), in terms of the victim's death. *The Chaser* tells a story of the search for a kidnapped woman. A serial killer detains an innocent woman in his house. The male protagonist desperately seeks out her location, which causes a sense of suspense. Against our normal expectation that the female victim will be rescued at the last minute, the film shows how she is brutally slaughtered by the serial killer. This is the way in which today's cynicism operates, based on the mere violation of genre convention. However, the cases of *The Host* and *The Chaser* are not the same. The crucial difference between the two films is that in the case of *The Chaser*, it renders the death of the victim visible, such that instead of putting the void in the realm of the unrepresentable, it substantialises the void in its full exposure, by offering the previously unseen. This constitutes what Badiou calls the simulacrum or terror, as I described in the case of *TaeGukGi*. The more visible a film tries to make the victim's suffering and wounding by means of filling the void with substitutes, the less the film presents the possibility of encountering the traumatic kernel of the void.

Far from mere description of the weight of history, *The Host* poses the question of how cinema itself reveals a cinematic distortion as a way of representing what is not explicitly represented on the narrative dimension, thus making us face the internal tension in a given community. The strength of this film, therefore, does not reside in the simple fact of relating a historical issue to a larger context, but in inserting a seemingly nonsensical shot to

retrospectively redefine the film's narrative structure. Once again, this can be seen in the food stand shot in the middle of *The Host*. Let us analyse it in a more specific way. Viewers initially see the shot as part of diegetic reality. But as Hyun-seo enters the frame and disturbs the linear continuity of reality, part of that reality, however briefly, is misrecognised. As Hyun-seo's is resituated back into diegetic reality, viewers may construe this shot as part of an illusion. At stake is not that Hyun-seo's appearance should be integrated into our sense of reality, but that it retrospectively serves to overthrow that sense of reality. This shot reveals that Hyun-seo has not occupied the space of diegetic reality for some time, indicating the way in which, although already rooted in particular time-space coordinates, Hyun-seo is doubled with reference to the other collective protagonists. This constitutes the tension between collective protagonists (the families) and an individual protagonist (Hyun-seo), blurring the question of who controls the narrative. This tension enables us to apprehend the complexities of contemporary South Korea's historical situation, by revealing the "troubles" concerning the manipulation and inscription of the narrative voice, typically in the form of difficulties around the problem of "who speaks?"... and "how to narrate events-in-spaces" (Willemen, 2002: 175).

Understood in this way, the main focus drawn from the analysis of this shot is that the constitution of the family community and furthermore South Korea's social reality is always curved by the immanent tension and contradiction already contained in diegetic reality. For that very reason, it provides the very condition of 'concrete universality' since it refers to the way in which a sort of disruptive element in a film text's formal structure obtrudes into diegetic reality, thus revealing a cinematic distortion in the normal operation of reality. By revealing the inherent rupture from a very concrete historical situation not through the narrative but through cinematic form, *The Host* demonstrates the applicability of 'concrete

universality' par excellence. In doing so, it makes us rethink the dominant conventions of Korean blockbusters, which borrow form from Hollywood, but engage with local issues on their own. After *Shiri*, a great many Korean blockbusters attempted to articulate Hollywood genre conventions, but also engage deeply in local issues. In this regard, one might suggest the possibility that the Korean blockbuster can work as an agent of local translation which imitates Hollywood but nonetheless creates a new 'signifying practice'. If we follow this line, *The Host* can be seen in this way: although borrowing and mixing genre conventions from Hollywood to a great extent, the film emphasises the centrality of historical issues not with reference to a nostalgic approach, but to concrete contemporary South Korean social reality. However, a great advantage of this film is that it subverts the standard interpretation described above. The radicalism of *The Host* is the opposite: although it stages local issues in the form of historical knowledge, it, nonetheless, implies the non-historical, that is, the Real which enables us not only to redefine a whole series of narrative lines, but also to cognitively map the social antagonism of the current capitalist system.

6.5 Conclusion

This chapter looks at how Korean blockbusters have foregrounded the Other on the basis of the nation-state model of the geopolitical boundary. The invention of the Other allows us to cognitively map the current capitalist system. It also brings us to examine this ongoing process in terms of ethics, because the ethical refers to the way in which the subject responds to a traumatic encounter with the Other, and it is faithful to the encounter with the unbearable Real, thus constituting a new mode of subjectivity. Within these circumstances, this chapter mainly explores the way in which the protagonist's suicide uses the logic of sacrifice to back

away from the question of social, while considering how some Korean blockbusters – *Shiri* and especially *The Host* – reveal an ethical act without being drawn into the logic of sacrifice.

Silmido and *TaeGukGi* pose their male subjects as the shadowy underside figures of the state. By maintaining a ‘human distance’ in order to be able to reconcile them into the crazy command of the state, and using sacrificial suicide to permanently defer the emergence of social antagonism, those films fail to present a way of moving beyond statist ideology.

Joint Security Area examines the problem of national division. In this film, when the symbolic network is temporarily ‘suspended’ by Sophie Jean’s intervention, the film provides an opportunity to witness radical alterity. However, as the two South Korean soldiers escape from contact with the Real through sacrificial suicide, it fails to address the staging of the ruptured nature of the national formation.

Shiri depicts how the imaginary other turns into the Other-Thing through the figure of Lee Pang-hee. As this film portrays that she literally sticks to the demands of social authority at the end of the film, it raises the question of how an ethical act can be accomplished. Moreover, it is through her act that this film paves the way for thinking about the issue of class antagonism.

The Host reveals what cannot be said in an explicit narrative line in terms of the purely formal aspect of the film. As it provides an interpretive possibility that Hyun-seo dies at the moment she is snatched by the monster, it challenges the viewer to an encounter with the inherent contradictions of family and South Korea’s social fabric.

Chapter 7

Suspension, the Spectral, and the Question of the Void in Marginal Space

This chapter analyses Park Chan-wook's *Oldboy* (2003) with reference to his other vengeance films, Kim Ki-duk's films (*Bad Guy* [2001], *Breath* [2007] and *3-Iron* [2004]), and Zhang Lu's films (*Grain in Ear* [2005] and *Hyazgar* [2007]). It examines the way in which the films under discussion portray marginal lives on the shadowy and unwritten underside of public law. To the extent that the Real can be defined as the nonsocial moment which cannot be incorporated into an ordinary life, the films under discussion are candidates for the staging of the Real. In *Oldboy*, the male protagonist Dae-su has been imprisoned in a private cell for 15 years, unaware of the reason for his incarceration. Even after he is released from his cell, he is still in a precarious situation regarding his captor's decision over his life and death. The characters in Kim's films are configured as being situated outside the law, but nonetheless, subordinated to the law: *Bad Guy* and *Breath* describe brothel life and a death row prisoner respectively; in *3-Iron*, the spaces (empty houses and a prison) that the male protagonist Tae-suk enters are shown as both real and unreal. *Grain in Ear* follows the life of a Chinese-Korean female protagonist in China, highlighting how ethnic minorities live on the threshold of society in China; in *Hyazgar* the configuration of the excluded appears as an ethnic Korean refugee on the Mongolian Steppes.

Not only do these films approach the Real in terms of narrative trajectory, but also they attempt to show it through their use of cinematic devices. The ways that these films utilise cinematic strategies in depicting the plight of marginal figures who live in situations characterised by poverty, torture, violence, and other forms of social oppression vary greatly. They include suspension between a reality and its representation through delaying realism's

aspiration to render everything seen (*Oldboy*); the figuration of the spectral (Kim's films); and a void fully disconnected from diegetic reality, thus radically undermining reality (Zhang's films). The main goal in this chapter is therefore to examine the extent to which each film's central cinematic strategies are applicable to the large framework of 'concrete universality', namely the Real (void), rather than investigating how these films dramatise the theme of marginal lives in marginal spaces in terms of the subject matter. Although the selected films all turn around the question of the Real, only Zhang's films are effective in staging the Real. Park and Kim's films seem to offer an approach to the Real, but fail to stage it in its most distinct form. In brief, Park's films produce a similar effect to the Real, but not to show the Real itself in its entirety at any point throughout the film. While Kim initially stages the Real, he tends to domesticate it towards the end. Although Park and Kim's film fail to disclose the Real, they are worth analysing, because these films show how ideology works through the form of the text rather than its obvious contents. By analysing how Park and Kim's films retreat from revealing the Real, I will clarify the condition under which radical cinema emerges. Zhang's films are significant because they realize the theoretical framework outlined in the earlier chapters (see chapters 1, 2, 3, and 4).

The basic presupposition in this chapter would be that any attempts to merely enfranchise marginalised minorities who present themselves as excluded from the major social groups, by producing the ghettoised space in which they can negotiate and reconcile their identity, fall into the trap of media spectacle. By examining film's relationship to spectacle and discussing different kinds of films in this perspective, this chapter aims to find a new way of going beyond the spectacularisation of powerless people in ghettoised space. The feature of the spectacle can be first defined as 'the annihilation of historical knowledge – in particular the destruction of the recent past' (Crary, 2002: 463). However, Jonathan Crary's

definition is only the first part of the spectacle I bear in mind throughout this thesis. The essential part of the spectacle revolves around the question of how to represent marginal figures such as the homeless, the dispossessed, and the victims of torture in the lawless world. As Guy Debord (2005) puts it, ‘the modern spectacle depicts what society could deliver, but in so doing it rigidly separates what is possible from what is permitted’ (Debord, 2005: 14, emphasis original). In the same manner, and as mentioned in chapter 6, Giorgio Agamben (2002 a) highlights how the contemporary media contribute to the production of the spectacle: ‘what is always given in the media is the fact, what was, without its possibility, its power: we are given a fact before which we are powerless. The media prefer a citizen who is indignant, but powerless. That is exactly the goal of the TV news’ (Agamben, 2002 a: 316). Accordingly, the spectacle here refers to the way in which a film displays the plight of the suppressed, thus forging cinema’s forward desire to realism. In other words, rendering the configuration of marginal figures as merely victimised existence echoes the very functioning of contemporary spectacle.

How is it, then, possible to go beyond the globally distributed network of the spectacle? To answer this question, one must consider that while ‘as an index, cinema necessarily fixes a real image of reality across time ... the very reality of the index creates uncertainty’ (Mulvey, 2007: 10). The point should not be on how accurately a filmic text delivers the atrocities of a nameless victimised other, but on revealing ‘the elusive nature of reality and its representations’ (ibid.). To the extent that filmic representations of vulnerable people who are precarious draw attention to the victimisation of powerlessness itself without ‘the elusive nature of reality and its representations’, they indicate that an essential part of the global spectacular mode of representation is ultimately grounded on fear. What results from the display of fear could be that ‘the viewer may recoil in distaste or terror out of fear of being,

haunted by unheralded painful images (as in trauma itself) rather than being empathetically or ethically moved' (Kaplan, 2001: 204). The conclusion to be drawn here is that a film text should contain a gap between social reality and its representations. And the gap here is not matter of merely slowing down cinema's forward drive, but of revealing a void fully deprived of positive substantial consistency. It is here that this asymmetry between social reality and the intangible nature of reality will present a way of moving beyond the global system of the spectacle.

From this perspective, *Oldboy* forces us to confront a form of visuality based on the mutual inter-play between what we can and cannot see of the lawless space, with the mark of local indexicality completely annihilated. Park's cinematic technique, however, struggles to provide a new kind of radical vision, in the sense that the gap between the visible and invisible shown in this film does not present a true threat to the credibility of a linear causality governed by cause and effect. Given that the gap here is presented as waiting to be covered up by some particular content in a predictable way, it struggles to address the radical disruption of diegetic reality through cinematic style. This point will be manifested in Park's display of violence. Although *Oldboy* does not fully expose visual violence, through posing the suspension between action and reaction, Park does not seem to go far enough, for the suspension at work here still remains caught up with a linear succession of progress, with action and the extension of action connected in means-ends chains.

The second section will examine Kim Ki-duk's films: *Bad Guy*, *Breath*, and *3-Iron*. Kim's films have always provoked controversy regarding visual cruelty, not only in the local film industry but also at international film festivals. It would be wrong, however, to construe Kim's films as merely a sensational provocation based on the representation of the atrocities of physical suffering in ghettoised space. Instead, this chapter seeks to provide a new

opportunity to read Kim's films by examining how Kim arranges the figure of the spectral apparition. The main purpose of this section is to explore whether or not the haunting that surfaces in his films involves an ontological shift. An ontological inquiry of the filmic image in the film texts involves the following questions: do the films stage the spectral figure in terms of the purely formal aspect; or, do they reduce it to a particular identity, thus perpetuating the empirical description of marginal lives as opposed to cinematic distortion in depicting them? The basic argument here is that the films oscillate between the two opposite terms, and often tend towards the latter. This chapter will demonstrate that the films' orientation towards an empirical view on the spectral is problematic, for it masks cinematic tension, thus occluding the distortive nature of reality.

The final section will turn to Zhang Lu's films: *Grain in Ear* and *Hyazgar*. As cultural production and consumption in East Asian areas has significantly increased at various levels in the era of changing transnational capitalism, it has been more difficult to categorise a film based on its nationality. Zhang Lu's films are emblematic for this growing difficulty of categorising a film text's nationality. For example, in *Grain in Ear*, the crew and actors were employed in China but pre- and post-production was done in South Korea. Even though the greater part of the dialogue is narrated in Mandarin Chinese, the main protagonists, described as Korean (*Chosunjok*), speak Korean. As a third-generation Korean-Chinese, Zhang Lu himself perhaps contributes to enhancing the difficulty of categorizing this film's nationality. However, rather than investigating what factors have promoted these films' appeal to the international film scene and examining the films within the force-field of transnational screen cultures, this section will argue that Zhang reveals the question of the border through the tensions amongst the textual mechanisms and not merely on the narrative level. Moreover, I will explore how Zhang's films disclose a radical vision of precarious lives in marginal

spaces which, however, does not turn into the representation of a victimised other. The central points to be raised, thus, are: how do Zhang's films present a way beyond the mere inscription of a victimised other, and what specific aspect of Zhang's films activates that way? I will demonstrate that the films successfully address a void itself fully dislocated from its bodily support in reality, thus enabling us to see a way beyond the spectacularisation of marginalised minorities.

With this in mind, a key tool in developing my argument is the relationship between void and its resonance in the elements that fill it up. Does a certain film text reveal the void or serve to fill it up in the course of filmic development? Each section will conclude by examining the extent to which each filmic text can reveal the void transcending the historical situations out of which it grows, and/or the extent to which the void, caught in the process of filling it up, lays a foundation for a radically different filmic image. In an effort to achieve this goal, I will explore how objects in the film are newly grouped and what these groupings imply for the invention of a new theory of filmic ontology.

7.1 The Interplay between the Visible and Invisible in the Lawless World: *Oldboy*

Park Chan-wook works with violent depictions of bodily pain in *Oldboy*. Yet the film does not make public the description of visual brutality as much as other Asia Extreme films, in an effort to push the limit-case between action/reaction cycles. However, this is not to say that it is no longer possible to anticipate which direction the action will take in this film. The intervals dividing the segments of action do not become fully independent of each other, so that they remain bound up with a predictable universe where action and reaction are connected in linear succession. Park's cinematic practice is, thus, largely irrelevant to the

question of the void as a cinematic event.

In order to demonstrate my argument, let us begin the analysis by describing the narrative of *Oldboy*. A middle-class businessman, Oh Dae-su, wakes up in a private prison. As the film identifies the viewer's knowledge with Dae-su's, it does not explain why he has been taken there and who is responsible for his captivity. The viewer is only told, through Dae-su's voiceover, that fifteen years have passed. Located in a single-room flat furnished with only a bed and a television set, he is forced to forget all his connections to the past: he realises that his wife has been murdered, and that he has become the main murder suspect. It is through television that he comes to know what is happening in the outside world. Television is Dae-su's only communication tool. As narrated by his voiceover, television is 'a clock, a calendar, a school, a home, a church, a friend, and a lover'. During captivity, Dae-su's life turns into a full realisation of banality: he watches television, eats fried dumplings, and inhales gas that makes him fall asleep. Offered an extra chopstick accidentally, Dae-su begins to dig an escape hole through the wall of the private jail with it. Simultaneously, he gradually trains himself to fight by shadowboxing and punching the framework of a person he has drawn on the wall. He also tattoos one line for each year on the back of his hand, in order to monitor the lapse of time. After Dae-su is released from his shabby cell, *Oldboy* dramatises his desperate pursuit of his captor, narrating a subplot about Dae-su's romance with the sushi restaurant chief, Mido. Strongly motivated by a desire for revenge, he seeks to discover who locked him up for 15 years. In the midst of his investigation, Dae-su is confronted with the man who confined him for fifteen years, Lee Woo-jin, and comes to know that Woo-jin is the conspirator behind his imprisonment. However, Dae-su still does not understand why Woo-jin imprisoned him for such a long time. Towards the end of the film, Dae-su recollects a memory from the past which has been foreclosed for fifteen years.

Pursuing his past, Dae-su finally realises that he was responsible for the death of Soo-ah who had committed incest with her brother, Woo-jin, when they all were high school students; an inadvertent conversation between Dae-su and his friend about Soo-ah's forbidden affair led to her death and Woo-jin's lifelong quest for revenge. Woo-jin's final act of revenge is to make Dae-su engage in an incestuous relationship with his own daughter and then tell him what he has done. However, when Woo-jin's compulsion towards retribution culminates near the end of film, the film fails to offer a narrative solution by letting him commit suicide.

Kim Kyung-hyun (2009) argues that in Park's films 'the heroes and villains operate outside the domain of the law', adding that 'vengeance is carefully restricted to the realm of the personal, never crossing over into the public domain: it is always aimed at other individuals and almost never against state institutions' (Kim, 2009: 182). He goes on to say that *Oldboy* refers to a 'mythical, transhistorical world beyond the mundane realities of a legal system in which figures such as the protagonist Dae-su and the villain Woo-jin freely roam' (ibid.). For Kim, this constitutes what he calls 'Park Chan-wook's realm of *the unknowable*' (ibid.: 183, emphasis original). In this realm, writes Kim, the police bear a very marginal role. For instance, he contends that in a scene where Dae-su turns up at the police station, the figure of the authorities is not present in the frame throughout the whole sequence, and is only present in so far as the viewer can hear the policemen's voices. The police station sequence, he argues, is clearly at odds with the configuration of the South Korean authorities in Park Kwang-su's *Chilsu and Mansu* (1988) and Hong Sang-soo's *The Day a Pig Fell into the Well* (1996). This perspective leads him to conclude that 'in this post-authoritarian era ... abuses of power by figures of authority no longer occupy the central concern of the drama' (ibid.). In contrast, my argument would be that although the role of the police is presented as limited in this film, this is not to say that *Oldboy* reflects a 'post-authoritarian era' in

comparison with *Chilsu and Mansu* and *The Day a Pig Fell into the Well*; but rather, *Oldboy* is precisely situated at the space of exception, in which exception is defined by law to be lawful and a one-time citizen is exposed to the sovereign's decision over his life and death.

In order to explore this question further, it is instructive to examine the relationship between law and its exception. While tracing the origins of sovereignty, Agamben argues that it was Carl Schmitt in his book *Politische Theologie* (1922) who first established a linkage between the 'state of exception' and sovereignty when he defined the sovereign as 'he who decides on the state of exception' (Agamben, 2005: 1). The 'state of exception' is the moment of 'a *suspension* of the order that is in force' (ibid.: 31), a suspension of a normal juridical enforcement and the process of history (emphasis original). However, it does not mean that there is a deficiency in the state of normativity. Instead, a 'state of exception' emerges 'as the opening of a fictitious lacuna in the order for the purpose of safeguarding the existence of the norm and its applicability to the normal situation' (ibid.). If the sovereign reappears when it suspends the juridical order, it is at this point that the threshold figure of marginal lives, that is, the 'bare life' of *homo sacer*, appears as central to a form of being. As presented in chapter 6 in an analysis of *Silmido*, the 'bare life' of *homo sacer* can be understood as a 'one-time citizen rendered *outlaw* who has no recourse to law other than that of the sovereign's power over his life and death' (Downey, 2009: 111, emphasis original). The very elusive and accursed figure of 'bare life' gains currency in our time when the sovereign power produces a 'state of exception' by incarcerating and monitoring its own citizens, as is the case with the 'war on terror'. Within the logic of a 'state of exception', the sovereign power always operates on the basis of 'indistinction' between the 'bare life' and its own way of life. At the zone of indistinction, the marginal lives of 'bare life' are included in politics through its exclusion, such that they are subjected to sovereign violence. To put it another way, 'bare life'

appears at the point where the distinction between the natural and the political, the inside and outside, and the law and violence is obsolete, blurred, and suspended. For Agamben, this dynamic of inclusive exclusion based on the division between the natural and the political is central to the current spectacular mode of representation: the representation of a powerless ‘bare life’ constitutes the present-day spectacle at work. As was briefly described in chapter 6, the modern system of spectacle starts to operate at the moment when what once occurred in the private domain is transferred into the public domain by perpetually reproducing the inclusive exclusion of the private domain.

Presented in this light, if the sovereign operates through the suspension of its own order, and is secretly sustained by its own obscene unwritten underside, *Oldboy* cannot be seen as indicative of being situated in the ‘post-authoritarian era’, but as directly foregrounding how the figure of authority is supported by its own unwritten underside. In this respect, this ‘unknowable’ point in the films is not a matter of subverting the rule of law, but of empowering the law as a way of showing how the seemingly different two poles between law and its outside, in fact, complement each other.

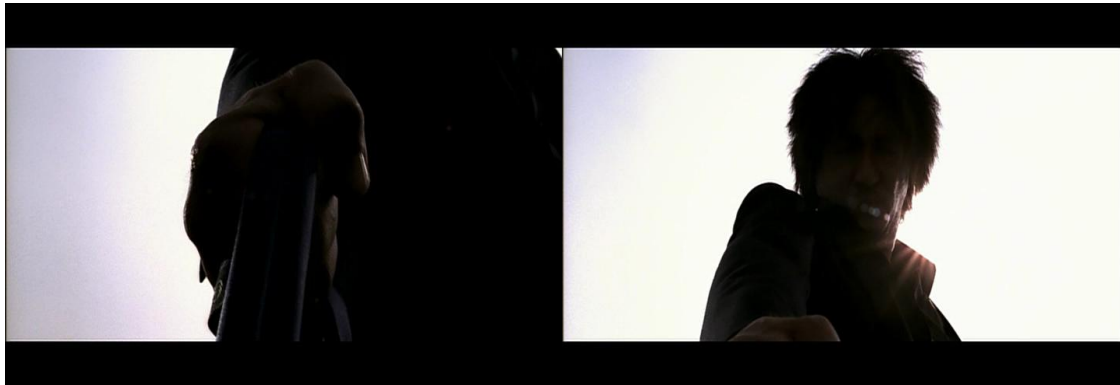
From a similar but slightly different angle, Steve Choe (2009) emphasises that Park’s revenge trilogy cannot be understood as hinging on the theme of punishment and retribution, but that it is ‘the failure of revenge in the trilogy that in fact makes way for an ethics initiated by the cinema itself, namely, the possibility of pure and unconditional forgiveness’ (Choe, 2009: 31). For Choe, this failure of revenge is an impossible aporia and it holds the key to understanding the essential nature of Park’s vengeance trilogy. ‘Throughout Park’s Vengeance Trilogy’, writes Choe, ‘cinema’s particular representative powers are always kept in check, at once refusing the fantasy of total vision while respecting the capacity to present the elusive “unknowability” of these films’ (Choe, 2009: 45).

It is necessary here to narrow his focus to the case of *Sympathy for Lady Vengeance*. Towards the end of this film, Geum-ja finally uncovers Mr. Baek who kidnapped and murdered the children, binds him up, and brings him to an abandoned school on the outskirts of Seoul. The parents of the murdered children, after some hesitation, eventually conclude by collectively killing him. They use knives and axes in their retribution against the child murderer in turn. After this collective punishment, they come together for a group photo, and bury the disfigured corpse of Mr. Baek outside. In his analysis of this scene, Choe contends that this sequence conveys ‘intense irony’, in the sense that the parents are rendered ‘as potentially monstrous as the initial transgressor himself’. Park’s treatment of irony here, argues Choe, leads to the fact that ‘the spectator may distance himself or herself from the otherwise horrifying behavior of the parents’ (ibid.: 41). In contrast to Choe’s idea, does Park’s insistence on the need for irony precisely illustrate the way in which cynicism or nihilism – today’s prevailing ideology – works? I argue that Park’s use of irony is not subversive, but rather reinforces ideological hegemony. That is because, in order for the power edifice to reproduce itself, it has to hinge on a kind of empty container which founds it (this point was also made in chapter 3 whilst critically reviewing Ernesto Laclau’s idea). Such a procedure is not secondary to the practices of power, but constitutes the core of it. ‘An ideological identification’, Slavoj Žižek writes, maximises its effect ‘precisely when we maintain an awareness that we are not fully identical to it’ (Žižek, 1997: 21). This kind of distance in its attempt to disidentify the power edifice is the very operation of ideology. In this respect, ideological functioning presupposes ‘a kind of “trans-ideological” kernel’, because ‘if an ideology is to become operative and effectively “seize” individuals, it *has* to batten on and manipulate some kind of “trans-ideological” vision which cannot be reduced to a simple instrument of legitimizing pretensions to power’ (ibid., emphasis original). Given

that the ideological functioning is predicated on an empty container, and that it is only through reference to such an empty container that an ideology becomes effectively operative, an attempt to establish distance from the public law – as is shown in Park’s films – cannot disintegrate the basis of the Law. In relation to spatial terms, an empty container as ideology is an external place beyond law that law cannot control. However, law is not subverted by posing an exterior place beyond law, that is, a place held by exception, but only by a decisive break point that posits the incompleteness of the place from within. In this respect, in order to subvert the existing structure of the law, one of the ways is ‘not to disregard the explicit letter of the Law on behalf of the underlying fantasies, but to *stick to this letter against the fantasy which sustains it*’ (Žižek, *ibid.*: 29, emphasis original).

Identifying with the manipulation of power literally without calling forth a distance from its explicit rules might pave the way for radically redefining the balance of the existing ideological hegemony. For this reason, any attempt to move beyond the law is not corrected by the suspension from the law, but by full immersion into the law, thus addressing the incompleteness of the law itself from inside.

Analysis of Kim Kyung-hyun (2009) and Steve Choe (2009)’s review of Park’s films emphasises how the films concern the space of exception in terms of subject matter. It is necessary to clarify my point with a few examples of how Park weaves exception together with the formal aspects of *Oldboy*. What first comes into scrutiny is the invariable use of close-ups. Rather than first locating the master shot in the spatial composition of a scene, *Oldboy* often deploys a close-up first. This is in contrast to *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance*, in which Park aims to observe an object at a relatively long distance.



7-1 a

7-1 b

Oldboy begins with a close-up of Dae-su's hands. It then shows a medium close-up of Dae-su's face.



7-1 c

Dae-su suspends a man from a lofty apartment building by his necktie.

Figures 7-1 a – c: the opening scene in *Oldboy*

For example, *Oldboy* begins with a close-up of Dae-su's shivering hands holding the necktie of a strange man (Fig. 7-1 a), followed by a quick tilt to show Dae-su's face (Fig. 7-1 b). In the next shot, the camera allows a glimpse of spatial awareness: the two men are hanging from the ledge of a lofty apartment building (Fig. 7-1 c). The camera's pattern of configuration into the space of a scene is often repeated at other points in *Oldboy*.



Figure 7-2 the camera focuses on a close-up of Dae-su's face when he was taken into custody at a police station.

When one scene is replaced by another, the face in the close-up tends to serve as a primary vehicle bonding each scene together. The opening scene, shot on the rooftop of a lofty apartment building, is interrupted with the unexpected insertion of Dae-su's face in close-up; the film allows us to see that Dae-su was taken into custody at a police station 15 years earlier. The list of similar shots goes on. A scene where he wakes up in a dingy private cell also begins with Dae-su's face in close-up wherein the viewer can recognise him through a narrow slot. In a scene where he is released from imprisonment and meets a young sushi chef, Mido, at a Japanese restaurant, the first shot begins with Dae-su's face in close-up. This principle, characterised by lack of spatial knowledge, continues until the closing sequence, to one degree or another. In the closing scene where Dae-su wakes up from hypnosis, the viewer is presented with an extreme long shot to show that Dae-su is lying on a mountain. Although this shot is presented as the master shot, the viewer does not know where he is due to the absence of any specific locale marker. Echoing a postmodern configuration of space beyond any determinate space-time coordinates, the camera alternates between Dae-su's and Mido's faces in close-up, and then ends with Dae-su's face in close-up. The frequent use of the close-up, especially for the male protagonist Dae-su, serves as a pivotal tool for understanding this

film's vexing lack of indexicality and spatio-temporal markers.

In this regard, Kim Kyung-hyun (2009)'s essay misses the point once again. He praises *Oldboy*'s erasure of local markers. For him, the film's lack of locality can be seen as '[achieving] a similar sense of the unknowable or the uncanny' (Kim, 2009: 191). He goes on to say,

Compounded by the sense of global anonymity, the postmodern space constituted in *Oldboy* remains outside a specific locale or time. All of the spatial configurations depicted in this film such as Cheol-ung's private cell enterprise, Dae-su's high school, the cyber chatroom shared by Mi-do and Woo-jin, Mi-do's sushi restaurant, and Woo-jin's penthouse suite located on the top of a high-rise building are framed within post-national, a-historical or *virtual* realms (ibid., emphasis original).

Park's revenge trilogy, argues Kim, is thus 'symptomatic of a Korean cinema that has been ushered into a definite kind of post-remembrance and post-political mode' (ibid.: 196), moving beyond the realist tendency that constituted the pervasive cinematic trope of the Korean new wave. I partially agree with Kim in so far as the Korean New Wave's cinematic use of historical trauma, especially that depending on a realist mode of representation, is problematic because it is predicated upon a really existing people, therefore reducing the dimension of the cinematic event to an empirical description of people. However, it does not mean that the main tropes of Park's films can provide a radical disruption of the Korean New Wave's dominant strategy of representation. The full erasure of the historical past and, in particular, an intensifying annihilation of the recent past, struggle to present a void in which objects in the film are ontologically transformed. In order for that void to appear, there must be a minimal description of social reality, because the void emerges from the internal incompleteness of that reality. As mentioned throughout this thesis, the relationship between the

void and reality are simultaneous and immanent. It is thus important once again to recall dialectical thought elaborated in chapter 1 concerning the relationship between social reality and the non-social moment. ‘History –Althusser’s “absent cause”, Jacques Lacan’s “Real” – is *not* a text, for it is fundamentally non-narrative and nonrepresentational; what can be added, however, is the proviso that history is inaccessible to us except in textual form, or in other words, that it can be approached only by way of prior (re) textualization’ (Jameson, 1981: 82, emphasis original).

To explore further the ideological dimension of this film, it is necessary to examine how the violent image is rendered in this film. In contrast to most interpretations, *Oldboy* is not actually filled with varieties of bodily pain and physical suffering; not every aspect is given full exposure. This argument can be demonstrated as follows.



7-3 a

7-3 b

Dae-su puts a hammer near the manager's teeth.

The camera shows Dae-su's face.



7-3 c

A pile of extracted teeth is put on a keyboard.

Figures 7-3 a – c: Dae-su extracts the private prison manager's teeth.

In the scene where Dae-su extracts the private prison manager's teeth, the film does not show exactly how he extracts them. The first shot allows us only to see that Dae-su puts a hammer near the manager's teeth (Fig. 7-3 a). In the second shot, the camera focuses on a medium close-up shot of Dae-su, who torments the manager by pulling out his teeth with the hammer (Fig. 7-3 b). In the third shot, the viewer can identify a pile of extracted teeth on a keyboard (Fig. 7-3 c). This pattern can also be observed in a scene from *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance*, where the male protagonist Dong-jin kills Ryu, towards the end of the film. The camera only shows the fact that Dong-jin kills Ryu in an extreme long shot. The viewer can only glimpse and so does not know fully what is really happening. In the next shot, the camera then cuts to a close-up of Ryu's violently stabbed foot. In contrast to general expectations, by staging the suspension between action and reaction, Park's films lack a vivid description of excessive violence. Fear is present not because the viewers see the visceral bodily pain directly, but because they are forced to occupy the interval between action and reaction through their imagination. Although, by suspending us between action and reaction, the film does not show excessive violence in detail, it nonetheless does not radically subvert a realist mode of behaviour: to the extent that the film invites the viewer to fill in the gap

between action and reaction, the film's strategy of displaying visceral imagery still revolves around the organic totality of cinematic realism, based on the sensory-motor system. This kind of cinematic strategy cannot invoke the emergence of the subject in psychoanalytic terms, because the definition of the subject refers to the void in the process of signification. In this respect, by inviting the viewer to project all his or her imagination in the course of looking, *Oldboy* fails to incite the disruptiveness of a nonmeaningful element through which the viewer remains fully impotent – insofar as the Real refers to a point of non-sense which cannot be symbolised (see chapter 3). This is why this film is not far removed from the general tendency of enhanced visual display that reveals the world in an explicit way.

7.2 The Ontological Scrutiny of the Spectral Apparition: *Bad Guy*, *Breath*, and *3-Iron*

This section exhausts how Kim Ki-duk approaches the depiction of the ghostly figure through the analysis of *Bad Guy*, *Breath*, and *3-Iron*. An ontological scrutiny of the ghostly being recurs throughout this thesis. As mentioned in chapter 3, given that social reality is structured around the exclusion of the dispossessed, it is important to explore how the exclusion of the dispossessed returns through the form of the ghostly figure. However, merely to identify the ghostly figure with a particular identity might fall into the trap of empiricism. This is the very reason why I criticised Judith Butler's theory in chapter 3. With this in mind, this section raises an ontological question about the status of the spectral, by examining whether the spectral belongs to a particular identity or a void in its purist form. I will conclude this section by arguing that Kim switches between the two poles, but tends to reinforce the empirical perspective on the spectral, thus turning away from the emergence of the void.

Let us set up the terms by first describing the narrative of *Bad Guy*. It tells a story of a

brothel thug, Han-gi, who forces a young college student, Sun-hwa, into prostitution. The film begins with a scene where local pimp Han-gi sees the young college student Sun-hwa sitting on a park bench in downtown Seoul. After he forcibly kisses her, an irritated Sun-hwa asks him to publicly apologise. As Han-gi refuses, he is beaten by some marines emerging from the crowd. She spits in Han-gi's face, calling him 'a crazy bastard'. Before long, Han-gi exacts a fearful vengeance on her for this humiliation in the street by engineering a situation in which she steals some money and forcing her to work off her debt through prostitution.

Before investigating the ontological inquiry of spectral apparitions in Kim's films, it is worth considering some relevant analyses of his films. This will later lead to a fuller diagnosis of hauntology. Chung Hye-seung (2010) challenges the idea that Kim's films can be seen as mere sensorial stimulation crammed with images of violence. Kim's works, argues Chung, can best be understood as 'a *necessarily* brutal cinema, one that accurately reflects and symbolically avenges the cruelty of a classist, conformist society' (Chung, 2010: 100-01, emphasis original). Whilst the Korean New Wave films paid great attention to the representation of the harsh realities of South Korean society by favouring a male intellectual protagonist who functions as a representative of the oppressed subaltern, she argues that Kim's film can be seen as directly staging the socially marginalised subaltern characters, 'whose only means of communicating their *ressentiment* is a shared sense of corporeal pain resulting from sadistic or masochistic acts of violence' (ibid.: 101, emphasis original). By linking Kim's preoccupation with the enhanced visibility of a wretched situation in the South Korean historical context, she contends that 'Kim's cinema creates an allegorical (and often fantastical) space where men and women from different class backgrounds encounter one another and reconcile their antagonisms' (ibid.: 105).

For instance, she argues that the opening sequence of *Bad Guy* constitutes a good

example by foregrounding the configuration of subaltern resistance against colonial power as suggested by Frantz Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth* (2004) : ‘Not unlike the colonial power structure explained by Fanon, postcolonial South Korean society can be characterized by the decades-long collusion between militaristic, educational, and capitalistic powers, together exerting a hegemonic hold on the populace’ (ibid.: 108). As a result, not only can Sun-hwa’s demand to Han-gi to apologise in public be interpreted as the ‘arrogance’ of the middle-class, but also the marine’s intervention during the course of the opening sequence can be construed as ‘[safeguarding] privileged members of the consumption-driven middle class who possess both material and cultural capital’ (ibid.). If dominant power operates by forcing the subaltern to speak what it hopes to hear from them, the voluntarily muted subaltern protagonists in Kim’s films – who ‘can but *will not* speak’ to borrow a phrase from Chung – not only reflect Kim’s own mistrust of language, but also refer to ‘subaltern resistance’ or the ‘nonconforming minority’ (ibid.). For Chung, it would, however, miss a point to construe Kim’s insistence on non-verbal gesture as a full escape from communication. Instead, the essential intention of Kim’s films can best be understood as an attempt for ‘faint yet discernible hopes of interclass communication against all odds and despite social prejudices’ (ibid.: 106). Chung’s claim can be sustained by Kim Ki-duk’s remarks regarding *Bad Guy*. In his interview with Volker Hummel (2002), Kim reveals the main intention of *Bad Guy*:

The question that I was trying to ask is, why is it that though everyone is born the same, with equal rights and equal qualities, we are divided and categorized as we grow older. Why are we judged according to our looks and appearances? Why does it become important if we are good looking or ugly, if we have money or not? According to these standards, which are imposed after we are born and grown up, we become divided into ranks and social classes that don't get along with each other. I

wanted to ask if it's really impossible for these classes to get along and for their worlds to merge (Hummel, 2002).

For similar reasons, Chung claims that Kim's films should not be read as 'extreme' cinema filled with the exploitative use of violent images, but as both a critique of the brutality of South Korea's class system and an appeal for 'interclass communication' beyond class divisions.

This study partially agrees with Chung's assertion that Kim's corpus – especially *Bad Guy* – can be understood as an allegory of class antagonism. There are, however, three problems with defending Kim's films in these terms. First, Kim's insistence on the reconciliation between different class backgrounds can be seen not as opportunities but as limitations, since it fails to address the essential core of antagonism at work by focusing on the reconciliation of opposites in its basic form of positive dialectics. In contrast to Chung's idea, my critical approach privileges the negative founding condition rather than the reconciliation of opposite poles. Second, given her emphasis on the empirical view of the subaltern character, what Chung fails to take into consideration here is that the mere description of the subaltern character is insufficient to present the question of radical alterity, since the focus on an already existing subaltern figure amounts to the recognition of a given difference. For this reason, my critical move – against Chung's direction – is to emphasise the significance of a subject defined as a radical rupture in a given symbolic order. Third, by construing Kim's configuration of the marginalised subaltern character as an attack against a classist society, Chung necessarily falls into the trap of the standard version of historicism. In contrast to this historicist approach in which the film 'reflects' the historical situation in South Korea, special focus should be on looking at how the social and historical dimensions can be decipherable through the film text's own mode of address; and, furthermore, to what

extent the film text contains the non-historical within itself, thus presenting a cinematic event on the level of the transcendental, one that remains ‘impersonal’ and ‘pre-individual’, subtracted from the constituted reality of everyday life (this is the core argument of my methodology in this thesis, which was discussed in detail in chapter 4). One might suggest that this sounds like a contradiction of my demand of *Oldboy* that it should depict South Korean local markers. To avoid misunderstanding, it is important to note once again that whenever I focus on the non-historical moment of the Real, it arises from inside the force-field of reality. The upshot of my theoretical perspective is clear here: in order to make claims about the proper escape from a concrete historical condition, a minimal portrayal of social reality should be given in advance. This is what I mean by the dialectics between social reality and the non-historical kernel of reality explored in the earlier chapters (especially see chapter 1). Surely, I privilege the distortive nature of reality throughout this thesis. However, in order to achieve that goal, this goal should be predicated on the fact that a certain film text should stage a historically specific condition, relying on cinema’s own capacity to preserve and record an indexical locality.

With this in mind, the scene where Sun-hwa and Han-gi sit together by the seashore towards the middle and end of the film is very important in reconstituting the whole narrative structure of *Bad Guy*. Near the mid-point of the film, Sun-hwa attempts to escape from street life, but Han-gi takes her back to the brothel. As a result of her escape, Han-gi takes her to the seashore where she spots a suicidal woman (herself) walk through the sea.



7-4 a

7-4 b

Sun-hwa finds a torn-up photograph on the beach.
 After going back to brothel life, she attaches it to her mirror.

Figures 7-4 a – b: a torn-up photograph found near the mid-point of the film

She discovers a torn-up photograph in the sand which seems to indicate the implausible couple's future union (Fig. 7-4 a). Returning to brothel life, Sun-hwa pieces the torn-up photograph together by attaching it to her mirror. She has all the pieces except the faces of the couple (Fig. 7-4 b). From this point, much attention is drawn to the painful love between the two characters. Sun-hwa and Han-gi leave the brothel. They sit on a park bench again as in the opening sequence. However, in this case, Sun-hwa holds his hands. Han-gi lets Sun-hwa go, leaving her alone in the street.



Figure 7-5 the missing faces in the photograph are revealed as those of Han-gi and Sun-hwa.

Towards the end of the film, they meet again at the beach to which Han-gi took her. In this scene, Han-gi and Sun-hwa enter the frame and sit together by the seashore, leading the viewer to realise that the missing faces in the photograph are those of Han-gi and Sun-hwa (Fig. 7-5). From the seashore scene in the middle of the film, this film divorces itself from the realist mode of representation, thus opening up 'the indiscernible' between the real and the unreal. When Sun-hwa is taken to the beach, she is divided into two different ontological registers: she and a suicidal woman. In the first seashore scene, the viewer cannot identify who the suicidal woman is and who the couple is in the torn-up photograph. From this moment, the film reveals the emergence of the time-image in the Deleuzian sense, by splitting the present into the preserved past and/or the coming future (the Deleuzian conception of time-image was explained in chapter 3). In other words, it is at this point that the film reveals the moment of cinematic time in which past, present, and future are condensed into a single moment, but not as a linear succession of time, since the torn-up photograph connotes the gap between the diegetic personality and the void of its own place. It is also here that Kim's film does not tend towards the realist mode of representation coupled with the marginalised world, but towards the 'impersonal' and 'pre-individual' level. If the film cannot be understood as merely sensational provocation filled with exploitative use of violence, this is because *Bad Guy* leads us to view the cinematic event, not the corporeal reality of the world. However, there is, nonetheless, a serious problem in this film. This is manifested towards the end of the film where the couple refers to Sun-hwa and Han-gi. Where Sun-hwa and Han-gi's vulnerable exposed faces are made explicit, Kim gives body to the empty void by filling in the void with positive content. Kim's cinematic strategy here exposes its own danger, since it tends towards the alternative order by overcoming an initial blockage, failure, and negativity. What we miss by filling in the void is a subject defined as

the lack of place in the symbolic force-field: ‘by way of “filling in the gaps” and “telling it all”, what we retreat from is the void as such, which, of course, is ultimately none other than the void of subjectivity (the Lacanian “barred subject”)’ (Žižek, 2001: 148). For this reason, the main theme of this thesis rests on preserving an initial failure of negativity since ‘concrete universality’ must be seen as an attempt to separate the void from its material condition, thus opening up the full explosion of reality itself.

By focusing on this point, we need to take into consideration the way Kim distorts the conventional shot/reverse change, thus creating distortion of the filmic image. In the case of *Bad Guy*, there is no evidence of a sexual relationship between the two protagonists. Han-gi only watches Sun-hwa’s distress as she slowly becomes accustomed to brothel life from behind a double mirror in her bed room; he sits watching her having sex with other clients with little effort to stop her. Han-gi’s face is reflected in the mirror such that the viewer can both identify his face and witness Sun-hwa’s actions at the same time. So the viewer witnesses Han-gi’s remorse and suffering in watching her from behind a two-way mirror and sees his growing affection for her. It would be, however, wrong to focus on the character’s raw emotions. Rather, what matters here is the way the harsh realities resulting from violence are mediated through a third party’s disruptive gaze in its purist form.

This pattern also becomes prominent in Kim’s *Breath*. In that film, a death row prisoner, Jin, repeatedly attempts suicide by stabbing himself in the neck with a sharp toothbrush, before his sentence can be executed. After hearing Jin’s story on the television news, Yeon unexpectedly visits the prison, and asks whether she can meet him, insisting that she is an ex-girlfriend of Jin’s. She is rejected at first, but is allowed into the prison by an invisible figure operating the prison’s CCTV. She repeatedly visits the prison to see him, thematising her subsequent visits depending on the season: during her visits, she decorates the visiting room

to depict a season, dresses in seasonal clothing, and even sings a seasonal song in front of a silent Jin. He watches her curiously at first, but increasingly becomes sympathetic to Yeon. The point is not simply that their mutual relationship on the basis of vulnerable exposure opens up the possibility of reconciliation between two different class backgrounds. Rather, the crucial point is that their relationship is mediated by an unseen figure running the security camera. The film is structured to allow the viewer to see Yeon and Jin's face-to-face encounter through 'non-human' mediation such as the CCTV operator's monitor screen, which also reflects the operator himself (played by Kim himself).



Figure 7-6 the CCTV operator is watching Yeon and Jin on the monitor screen.

This leads us to redefine the concept of suture. As briefly described in chapter 1, in contrast to the standard conception of suture in which the external is internalised, hence generating the effect of totalising self-enclosure and obliterating the process of film production, Žižek links the concept of suture to the case of 'concrete universality', highlighting that 'suture means that, precisely, such self-enclosure is *a priori* impossible, that the excluded externality always leaves its traces within' (Žižek, 2001: 58, emphasis original). The redefinition of suture – what Žižek calls 'interface' – concerns the way in which external opposition is always transformed into an internal opposition, such that there is always only the inherent gap of the One, not as the gap between its two externally opposite elements. The

standard concept of suture exemplified in a shot/reverse-shot pattern concerns an endless process of re-signification wherein the gap in a first shot is filled by an additional reverse-shot. In contrast, ‘interface’ means that ‘when the gap can no longer be filled by an additional signifier, it is filled by a spectral *object*, in a shot which, in the guise of the spectral screen, includes its own counter-shot’ (Žižek, 2001: 54, emphasis original). The spectral dimension basically serves as a phantasmatic supplement to fill in the gap in a first shot. But when a shot encompasses its own reverse-shot within itself, this shot can reveal the inherent interstice between signifier and its spectral *objet petit a*. Kim’s cinema pushes to the limit the ‘interface’ effect, thus opening up the emergence of the spectral *objet petit a*. The reflected image of an invisible operator is the crack itself which disturbs Yeon and Jin’s mutual relationship. *Breath* introduces a spectral dimension in its pure cinematic form, thus dismantling the conventional rendering of cutting into an exchange. The tangled exchange of a shot/reverse-shot pattern in *Breath* shows how *objet petit a* qua the non-human disturbs the personalised characters’ mutual relationship, because it makes the normal operation of the field of vision opaque.

This formulation on the spectral apparition leads us to critically examine some relevant essays concerning ghost films. This becomes more important when it comes to issues of national cinema, since ghost films in non-Western film industries have been regarded as an example of breaking the linear chronology of the West. For instance, Bliss Cua Lim (2001) argues that ghost narratives can be seen as a moment to imagine ‘a strong notion of spatiotemporal nonsynchronism – the existence of noncontemporaneous aspects of social life that cannot be fully translated into modernity’s disenchanting time’, thus revealing an alternative path to suspend modernity’s progressive, homogenous, and uniform temporality (Lim, 2001: 288).

In a similar vein, Rob Wilson (2003) also highlights the importance of ‘haunting’ that always returns in the South Korean film scene, by drawing attention to the fact that this uncanny effect of hauntology in a wide range of trans-Pacific localities can be an alternative way to threaten neo-liberal globalisation. Although basically agreeing with the spectral politics that is mobilised to disrupt homogenous contemporaneity, this study tries to suggest that a truly radical moment in which a film can open up through the intervention of a spectral dimension is not mediated by standard ghost narrative films, but by transcendental forms such as the effect of ‘interface’ as described above. What matters here is to examine whether a certain film text inscribes the sudden intrusion of a spectral apparition on the level of purely cinematic form, not on positive content.

With this in mind, this study examines how Kim approaches the spectral. My basic argument is that Kim’s treatment of the spectral is subsumed into the personalised identity, as a way of being filled up by a particular content. To foreground the spectral in this manner is not political, because the eruption of the void is ontologically different from a situation where particular identities are clearly recognisable. Let me clarify this point in relation to *3-Iron*. In this film, the male protagonist Tae-suk puts advertising fliers on the front doors of houses and apartments. He then returns, a day or two later, to check whether the fliers are still on the door knobs. If a flier is still there, it means that the occupants of the house or apartment are on vacation. He roams through empty properties in Seoul while the residents are away. In each empty property, this uncanny, ghost-like being not only settles down to help himself to any food in the fridge but also compensates the occupants for his short residence by mending broken items such as a toy gun, a clock, and some scales, as well as doing their laundry by hand. While he is occupying a luxurious house for a short time, he does not know that he is being watched by an unhappy housewife, Sun-hwa, who has been beaten by her abusive

husband. When Tae-suk finds out that her husband is battering her, Tae-suk smashes her husband with a golf ball and rescues her. Sun-hwa escapes with Tae-suk into his marginal life. The couple begin to drift through empty properties in Seoul. Continuing to break into houses – from modern flats to traditional Korean-style houses – they get into trouble when they break into the flat of an elderly man who is already dead. However, only Tae-suk is sent to jail. While in jail, Tae-suk trains himself to be a real ghost, invisible to ordinary people. His continual practising of invisibility frustrates the prison guards.

In a scene where Tae-suk trains himself to be a ghost in prison, Tae-suk’s movement lies at the edge of the frame to disrupt the prison guard’s surveillance. If the guard represents the panoptic visual regime of the sovereign power, Tae-suk’s becoming a ghost offers a good example of how an elusive spectre can escape from the surveillance of the sovereign power. In this scene, the prison guard enters the cell, and attempts to discover where Tae-suk is hiding. While the camera depicts a series of the guard’s partial objects such as shoulder, face, feet and back from Tae-suk’s point of view, there is a sudden intrusion of Tae-suk’s hand into the frame to tap the guard’s back, followed by a shift to a close-up of Tae-suk’s arm, about to smash the guard.



7-7 a

7-7 b

Figures 7-7 a – b: the prison guard is attacked by the invisible Tae-suk.

In the subsequent shots, putting Tae-suk's violence into a pure out-of-frame field, the viewer can only see how the guard is assaulted by Tae-suk's invisible violence (Fig. 7-7 a). The camera then returns to a long-shot, to reveal that violence 'happens to' the guard (Fig. 7-7 b). Violence here is not reduced to an individuated character, but exhibited as 'pure violence' devoid of instrumental reason. This scene delivers a new condition of the visible that involves the invisible, thus exemplifying the fleeting nature of reality and its representations.

However, this radical aspect is soon subsumed into the personal sphere of a character. To explore this point, we need to look at the latter half of this film. After the prison scene mentioned above, Tae-suk succeeds in disappearing from the outside world, and then once again returns to the properties that he and Sun-hwa had occupied. He haunts the house like a ghostly being, unseen by those who occupy the house.



7-8 a

7-8 b

Figures 7-8 a – b: Tae-suk enters the Korean traditional house.

By suggesting how *3-Iron* '[places] oneself face to face with an image', Thomas Elsaesser (2009) argues that this film exemplifies the significance of how 'frontal staging –

the limit case of “classical cinema” – now re-emerges as the default value, just as it had been in early cinema’ (Elsaesser, 2009: 18, emphasis original). He goes on to say: ‘the story’s premise about how to enter houses allegorizes the seemingly perverse desire to make oneself an empty signifier or a “blur”, and yet to leave traces in the perceptual field of the other’ (ibid.). While fully acknowledging the importance of the theoretical framework elaborated by Elsaesser, I develop my argument from a completely different angle. A series of scenes where Tae-suk revisits the houses in which he stayed with Sun-hwa is not politically effective, because these scenes shot with a hand-held camera are most often organised through Tae-suk’s moving and unstable point-of-view shots. As already mentioned in the analysis of *Memories of Murder* (chapter 5), standard horror film is also organised by ‘[adding] a shot “subjectifying” the Thing’ (Žižek, 1992: 118): the standard shot of a shaking hand pulling back a curtain and looking at the future victim from the point-of-view of the Thing with the sound of shallow breathing (Žižek, ibid.; Homer, 2005: 125). In the same manner, Tae-suk can be seen as ““subjectifying” the Thing’, reduced to a personal, empirical, individuated character just as in a normal ghost film. As Kim retreats from a pure spectral dimension devoid of bodily coordinates into another diegetic personality, an ‘uncanny’ effect of the spectral is lost, because the Real in its most distinct form does not refer to a substantial entity existing in diegetic reality.

Towards the end of the film, Kim also seems to continue the production of ideology. Crosscutting a scene of Tae-suk’s ghostly being with Sun-hwa’s marital life, Kim seems to synthesise the opposing poles, reducing the radicalism of the spectral into Sun-hwa’s imaginary double. In a scene where Tae-suk revisits Sun-hwa’s house, Sun-hwa’s husband feels that someone has broken into his house, but does not realise Tae-suk’s existence. Tae-suk is felt but unseen by the husband. It is only Sun-hwa who fully realises that traces of a

shadowy existence are coming into play.



7-9 a

7-9 b

The camera reveals Sun-hwa standing in front of a mirror with the focus on Tae-suk's face in the background.

It cuts to show a close-up of Sun-hwa, with Tae-suk's face in the background plane going out of focus.



7-9 c

7-9 d

The husband comes into the living room, holding a golf club.

The camera cuts to show Sun-hwa standing in front of the mirror, with the focus on her husband.



7-9 e

The husband embraces Sun-hwa.

7-9 f

Tae-suk enters the frame from the left, and kisses Sun-hwa.

Figures 7-9 a – f: Sun-hwa meets up with Tae-suk in her house towards the end of the film.

The camera shows Sun-hwa standing in front of a mirror. While Sun-hwa is thrown out of focus near the camera, the sharper background plane draws the viewer's attention (Fig. 7-9 a). The camera shows Sun-hwa and Tae-suk reflected in a mirror, making Sun-hwa's face hazy and Tae-suk's face sharp. As a reverse shot of the first, Kim shows a close-up of Sun-hwa, making Tae-suk's face in the background plane go out of focus (Fig. 7-9 b). The camera shows that the husband opens the door and comes into the living room, grabbing a golf club (Fig. 7-9 c). It shifts to show Sun-hwa standing in front of the mirror, which displays her husband standing behind her (Fig. 7-9 d). It offers the same framing as 7-8 a: the camera captures Sun-hwa and her husband reflected in the mirror, allowing only the husband's face to remain sharp and leaving Sun-hwa out of focus. In the next shot, the film captures Sun-hwa and her husband confronting each other (Fig. 7-9 e); Sun-hwa turns around, and unexpectedly addresses her husband, saying 'I love you'. Surprised at her response, the husband turns around, and embraces her. Simultaneously, the camera allows us to see Tae-suk entering the frame from the left, and kissing Sun-hwa (Fig. 7-9 f).

First of all, the closing shot (Fig. 7-9 f) in this scene is unrelated to any 'interface' effect,

because ‘interface’ refers to the distortion of cinematic space when a shot includes its own counter-shot within itself. As a result, the status of the spectral conveyed in this scene is reduced to one among several particular identities. Identities are always reproduced by a concrete situation, and if a cinematic event as void should be what fundamentally eludes the situation, it can never recognise the importance of identity as its basis. When *3-Iron* just manages to fill in the void with the positivity of particular content based on the identitarian mode of practice, it falls into the trap of empiricism. This is why I criticised Butler’s account of ‘spectral universality’ in chapter 3.

Moreover, putting the husband and Tae-suk’s planes in the same focus and framing (Fig. 7-9 a, 7-9 d), the film seems to suggest that Tae-suk can be her husband’s stand-in: Tae-suk can be understood as Sun-hwa’s own phantasmatic imagination needed to maintain her part of reality. In so doing, the film struggles to derail the mutual relationship of the couple. Kim’s films are most clearly characterised by having a third party intervene between the couple. However, when the figuration of the third party is presented as giving body to the void in diegetic reality, this film stabilises the harmonious relationship of the couple rather than radically disrupting it.

7.3 From the Gesture to the Void : *Grain in Ear* and *Hyazgar*

Zhang Lu’s films can be understood as foregrounding the issue of borders. It is not the case, however that these films can be understood as merely dramatising issues regarding ethnic minorities, fear of immigration, and refugee status in terms of subject matter. Nor is it the case that Zhang’s films describe how each national identity has taken form differently in differing national contexts, and how each identity is blended in the course of translation, thus

opening up the possibility of re-signification from a multicultural perspective. Instead, this section attempts to discuss how his films stage the issue of the border through their aesthetic organisation, thus inviting the viewer to comprehend the complexities of historical conditions. The way in which these films present a void deprived of all content offers a clue to how the objects in the films are regrouped for the invention of a new filmic image.

Grain in Ear tells a story of a Korean-Chinese, Cui Shunji, who settles in an industrialised city in China. She lives with her son, Chang-ho, in a cement box bungalow, next to a group of prostitutes. She supports herself and her son by selling kimchi, a pickled Korean side dish, from an illegal mobile stall. As she sells it illegally, she is subject to the attention of the local police, and thus she has to sell it at different locations alongside dreary roads to elude the police. Three different men make advances on her, but she is betrayed by them: a married Korean-Chinese, Kim, a police officer, Wang, and one of her neighbours. Towards the end of the film her son Chang-ho is found dead. In absolute despair, she takes revenge on Wang by putting poison in the kimchi served at his wedding. In the closing sequence, she walks with hurried steps from her home to a field that extends into the horizon. Once she arrives at the field, the film ends with a freeze frame.

There are only a few people in the street, and the configuration of the architecture in the backdrop is presented as being disconnected from any particular character. The depiction of an empty space becomes intensified when the figures that inhabit Zhang's films are characterised by the way they perceive the world and especially by the way they perform gestures. Cui walks, moves, and shifts, but this does not constitute a successive line of action waiting to be extended. She appears helpless in the film's full exposure of an inability to act. She does not react, but just sees and hears, producing a shift in the nature of perception. By withdrawing perception from its extension into action, Zhang presents a move beyond the

way in which a human body's movement is exposed as successive segments. Moreover, as Cui is depicted as the figure who 'sees' rather than acts, Zhang presents a way of engaging with the world that cannot be supported by mutual communication. Instead of representing 'an image of anything' (Noys, 2004), Zhang allows the viewer to witness the appearance of 'imagelessness'. There are two very different types of 'imagelessness' in the Agambenian formula (Agamben, 2002a: 319). 'One is pornography and advertising, which acts as though there were always something more to be seen, always more images behind the images'. Although they start from the status of 'imagelessness', they only allow us to view more and further images. The other way is 'to exhibit the image as image and thus to allow the appearance of "imagelessness", which, as Walter Benjamin said, is the refuge of all images' (ibid.). By no longer facilitating more images, 'there is no longer some other image but the end of image' (Noys, ibid.). From the perspective presented here, Zhang's cinematic use of the gestures refers to the latter's notion of 'imagelessness'. Meanwhile, the sex workers in the film sometimes perform their gestures in a highly theatrical manner, which is contrasted with Cui's inert gestures. In one scene they stare at the camera directly, sing a song and dance together. However, their gestures are shown without any consideration for the narrative situation. Cui and the sex worker's gestures are two distinct manifestations of physical action, which are different in kind but not in nature. It would be wrong to say that their gestures can be understood as expressing their inner emotion. Rather, their gestures are exhibited as 'pure means without end' by 'de-creating what exists, de-creating the real, being stronger than the fact in front of you' (Agamben, 2002a: 318).

This leads us to look at Zhang's films in terms of 'gestural cinema'. Agamben begins his characterisation of gesture by contending that 'by the end of the nineteenth century, the Western bourgeoisie had definitely lost its gestures'. Gilles de la Tourette's 1886 study of

human gait, Agamben argues, is emblematic of the loss of gesture. He identifies Tourette's study with the chronophotographic studies of Jean-Martin Charcot, Eadweard Muybridge, and Étienne-Jules Marey, in which the movement of the human body is imaged fragmentarily, thus situating the loss of gesture into the broader context of the integrated spectacle of modernity. Accordingly, Agamben's theorisation of the loss of gesture can be read as the 'shift in the means of knowing the body, the move from an internal, or external but human-scaled, perception of gesture to its capture by scientific-technological analysis' (Levitt, 2008: 198). On the contrary, the sphere of gesture can be seen, instead, as revealing 'a pure and endless mediality' of human beings (Agamben, 2000: 58). Let us examine how Agamben develops his idea of a medium and a 'pure means':

The current concept of expression is dominated by the Hegelian model, in which all expression is realized by a *medium* – an image, a word, or a colour – which in the end must disappear in the fully realized expression. This expressive act is fulfilled when the means, the medium, is no longer perceived as such. The medium must disappear in that which it gives us to see, in the absolute that shows itself, that shines forth in the medium (Agamben, 2002a: 318).

In opposition to this, Agamben advocates the idea of 'a medium that does not disappear in what it makes visible'. It is what he calls 'a "pure means", something that 'shows itself as such' (ibid.). Gesture refers to a movement of the human body that is done without any purpose, such that it cannot be 'produced or acted' but, instead, 'endured and supported' (Agamben, 2000.: 57). It cannot be expressed through language, thus signalling something that is 'not able to figure something out in language' (ibid.: 59). 'Gestural cinema' can render 'inoperative' movement characterised by extension in space. The spatiotemporal logic of classical cinema identifies movements with a character's action, and breaks down movement

by dividing it into equidistantly spaced intervals. Time here can be seen only through rationally measured intervals. This is why Zhang presents a way of exploding the spatial rendering of time by revealing gestures marked by elements such as the standstill, slowness, and numbness. 'Gestural cinema' can thus be defined as something which prevents linking actions in any predictable, measured, action/reaction schema. Movement drained from an action/reaction pattern does not serve as the measure of time, but gains an autonomous value.

But the emphasis on gesture, in my view, does not necessarily provide a true threat to the spatiotemporal exposure of classical cinema. In other words, although Zhang's increased emphasis on gestures present a way of going beyond the linear succession of movement associated with action, it is not enough to disclose a new form of image. It is useful to follow Gilles Deleuze's line of argument here. In his analysis of neo-realism, Deleuze rightly points out the limitation of neo-realism in the following way: 'the creators invent obsessive framings, empty or disconnected spaces, even still lifes: in a certain sense they stop movement and rediscover the power of the fixed shot, but is this not to resuscitate the cliché that they aim to challenge?' (Deleuze, 1989: 21) More than anything else, what should be taken into consideration is, however, 'to make holes, to introduce voids and white spaces, to rarify the image, by suppressing many things that have been added to make us believe that we are seeing everything' (ibid.: 21-2). How is Deleuze sharply different from Agamben? Where Deleuze defines cinema as dissolving boundaries between the image as psychic reality and movement as physical reality (1986: 56), Agamben argues how the cinematic image's blurring of these boundaries is related to the modern biopolitical logic of the spectacle. The images generated by a physiological revelation of human movement constitutes what Agamben calls biopower, in which what was once the private interior of the gesture unrolls into a public exhibition of images. This leads Agamben to suggest that 'the element of cinema

is gesture and not image' (Agamben, 2000: 55). Although Agamben's characterisation of gesture presents the basis for moving beyond the spectacular mode of representation, I still believe that Deleuze's idea on cinema is more useful. This can be sustained by considering Michelle Langford's comments on Agamben. In her critical diagnosis of Agamben's gesture, Langford argues that Agamben's formulation is problematic, because 'in his attempt to extend Deleuze's argument, however, Agamben does not appear to go far enough, for his notion of gesture remains tied to movement, albeit stunted, fragmented, inhibited movement'. Agamben writes only of "images", failing to make the distinction between movement-images and time-images' (Langford, 2006: 177). While 'gestural cinema' provides a preliminary condition for constituting a new cinema, it, nonetheless, needs to open up to staging the void on the pre-individual and impersonal level. From the perspective presented here, I will situate the void as the key tool in analysing Zhang's films, while examining how the void is displayed in the films.

The void here is manifested in the closing sequence. To fully explore this question, it is first necessary to examine the opening sequence, since the opening and closing sequences contrast sharply. In the first shot of the opening sequence, Cui looks out from inside the house at something through the window. She just sees what happens to the world. The next shot allows us to see her coming out of the house and moving to the left side of the frame through an extreme long-shot. It can be argued that the opening sequence contains the features of spatial configuration that are central to what Hamid Naficy (1996) calls 'transnational independent cinema': claustrophobia and agoraphobia (Naficy, 1996: 129-30). While the first shot refers to the enclosed phobic space that Cui is in, the second shot presents an agoraphobic situation. However, this is only the first part in filming precarious lives on the threshold where outside and inside are blurred. Zhang takes a step further, culminating in the

closing sequence.

The situation in the opening sequence is repeated in the closing sequence, but in a very different way. In the opening sequence, it is cut into two shots. Even though the opening sequence reveals the contrast between tight physical space and open space, it nonetheless still relies on extensiveness in space as a linear unfolding of spatial fragments. In contrast to the opening sequence, the closing sequence is rendered as a sequence shot, and enables us to experience a sense of unfamiliarity. The effect of uneasiness is increased when this sequence is presented through the use of a handheld camera. Up until this point, the film has used shots during which the camera does not move.



7-10 a

7-10 b

Cui looks out at something from inside the house.
She leaves the house, and walks quickly.



7-10 c

7-10 d

She walks to the field.
The camera fades out, with her footsteps increasing in volume.

Figures 7-10 a – d: the closing sequence of *Grain in Ear*

In the closing sequence, Cui looks out at something from inside the house (Fig. 7-10 a), comes out of the house, and walks quickly to the field which meets the horizon (Fig. 7-10 c). The hand-held camera just follows her movement from behind her, never showing her face. Refusing any emotion from her face, the camera simply follows her movement, with the viewer unaware of her destination. As she walks away, a train passes through the shot. Immediately after the train passes by, she just resumes her walk towards the field. The moment she enters the field (Fig. 7-10 c), the film stops and the end credits roll up. Even after the end credits roll up, the sound does not fade but still continues with her footsteps increasing in volume (Fig. 7-10 d).

The viewer cannot identify where she is going but can only appreciate how far away she is moving through her continuous footsteps in the off-screen space. By no longer presenting the particular location from which the sound is coming, the closing sequence just provides the direction itself. The footsteps diminish. Yet, at a certain moment, we hear them progressively increasing in volume, making us aware that Cui is returning and coming much closer to us than the point at which she started. By calling upon the viewer to participate in a cinematic event fully subtracted from any empirical description, this scene confronts the viewer with the full groundlessness and inconsistency of diegetic reality. The bodiless sound dislocated from its corresponding image, which does not fade away and persists even after the film ceases to show Cui in motion, is an instance of the passage ‘from the excess, which is still contained in reality, although already disturbing it, sticking out of it, to its full autonomisation, which causes the disintegration of reality itself’ (Žižek, 2004b: 168). The sequence successfully serves ‘to make holes, to introduce voids and white spaces, to rarify the image’ as mentioned earlier, by radically dislocating an uncanny element from reality itself.

Zhang's presentation of the void is continued in the case of *Hyazgar*. In *Hyazgar*, the male protagonist Hangai lives with his wife and daughter on the Mongolian Steppe, persisting in planting trees in the barren land. When his wife and daughter leave for the city, he finds himself welcoming a pair of North Korean refugees, Choi Soon-hee and her son Chang-ho. Having fled from North Korea, they crossed the border into Mongolia. Despite the language barrier, they become increasingly familiar with each other. Forming a pseudo-familial relationship, Soon-hee and Chang-ho help Hangai to run the house. However, one day Hangai makes a sexual advance towards Soon-hee, misunderstanding Soon-hee's warmth. She shows her strong rejection by killing a lamb in the barn. After their relationship becomes uncomfortable, Soon-hee decides to escape from Hangai's house and starts to repeat her walk across the vast sandy steppe. She comes across a South Korean film crew. She returns to the house to collect Chang-ho before setting off for where the South Korean film crew is staying. They walk across the steppe only to find the South Korean film crew has disappeared. Soon-hee and Chang-ho return to Hangai's home. Towards the end of the film, while Hangai is in the city, checking on his daughter's medical condition, they remain in Hangai's home. But when he finally returns, he finds that they have already left the house. An uncomfortable affair between Soon-hee and a young soldier from a nearby military base has made it almost impossible for them to stay, as Chang-ho witnesses the affair. Soon-hee and Chang-ho attempt to walk across the sandy steppe again.

The first point to be made here concerns the question of framing. In *Grain in Ear*, Zhang often uses off-screen space to let characters enter and exit the frame. The film attempts to capture empty space by letting the characters simply pass through segments of the frame. Many shots in *Grain in Ear* begin with characters entering the frame, or end with their exiting from the frame. In particular, when Cui drags her mobile stall, the film leaves screen

space empty before an entrance, and after an exit. As Zhang tends to prefer letting his characters just move in and out of frame through the frequent use of off-screen space, the film allows the viewer to observe the delayed movement of characters and the subsequent fragmented space. In contrast, in *Hyazgar* he lets some of the action take place outside the frame, then follows those actions to catch up again. He isolates the character's actions from particular spaces, lumping them together in a higher unity.

Deleuze divides the relative and absolute aspect in terms of the role of off-screen space (Deleuze, 1986: 17). Framing, according to him, can be inherently defined as geometry limit qua closed space. Relative movement adds a space that is not yet seen but that nonetheless could appear, thus subordinating cinematic movement to a succession of empirical images. Even though movement presents time, this kind of time is presented indirectly. However, the other aspect of off-screen space refers to the 'absolute aspect by which the closed system opens on to a duration which is immanent to the whole universe, which is no longer a set and does not belong to the order of the visible' (ibid.: 18). The absolute aspect of off-screen space relates to the emergence of direct temporality, by no longer fostering the transformation from one image to another in any definite way.

As the characters pass through the limits of the frame, as in the case of *Grain in Ear*, the space loses its connection to a certain character, and remains empty. In the case of *Hyazgar*, the camera attempts to capture a new unseen character or object in terms of the relative aspect of framing. As the camera reframes the movement of the characters through the frequent use of panning in *Hyazgar*, the space is represented as an enclosed space which invokes a sense of claustrophobia; in a sense, Zhang's framing here can be seen as analogous to sovereign violence in its effort to capture and monitor the marginal lives, which are subject to the sovereign power's decision over his/her life and death, by enhancing the relative aspect off-

screen. However, it is necessary to note that the framing can be understood as staging a certain kind of gap itself between one point of view and another within the same sequence shot, thus revealing an 'interface' effect. Furthermore, the changed status of point of view in the same sequence shot shifts the relationship between the filmed objects to the relationship between the filmed objects, Zhang, and the viewer, by allowing the viewer to encounter this gap.

However, it must be acknowledged that Zhang also runs a risk in representing the wretched situation of ethnic minorities. This is manifested in a scene where Soon-hee is raped by a young soldier. After Hangai has left for the city, a young soldier revisits the house. The camera presents a long-shot of Soon-hee and the young soldier. When he attempts to touch her, she hits him hard in the face, and then exits the frame to the right. He also exits to the right and then rapes her. The rape is presented at first as occurring in off-screen space. But the camera pans to the right to show her being raped by the soldier. This framing pattern is also applied to another scene where Chang-ho sees Soon-hee and the young soldier have sex near the house. This sequence shot begins with a long-shot of Chang-ho who is standing just outside the house. The camera pans to the left to focus on the couple having sex, and then pans to the right to show Chang-ho's reaction. Then, Chang-ho and Soon-hee exit the frame to enter the same house. This scene is problematic, especially in that the catastrophic incident is mediated by the innocent look of Chang-ho. This innocent look functions to obfuscate the traumatic encounter with the Real by placing the viewer in the position of the naive, innocent Chang-ho.

Despite such a lapse, if Zhang's films can be seen as filming the issue of borders, it is not because he deals with the contemporary issues such as transnationals, emigration, and refugees in terms of narrative components, but because he enables us to understand the issue

through the filmic device's own mechanism. In other words, by staging the gap, which can be identified with social antagonism through this textual mechanism, the complexities of contemporary East Asian historical conditions can be more easily understood.

Zhang's insistence on the need for revealing the gap within framing can be found at another point in the film. In the scene where Hangai makes his awkward sexual advance towards Soon-hee, she snatches Hangai's knife and walks off-screen. Still in off-screen space, she kills a lamb. She then re-enters the shot, drops the lamb at Hangai's feet, and walks off-screen. We need to point out that only after Soon-hee enters the shot again in the same sequence shot can the viewer discern what she has done off-screen: this violence takes place in off-screen space. By situating the violence out of the field of vision, Zhang refuses the mere provocation of destructive violence which serves to fill up the gap between stimulus and response. More importantly, even if only for a short moment, Zhang puts the viewer in a position where he/she is unable to recognise what is happening off-screen. This can be understood as analogous to 'the basic coordinates of the child's primordial sexual encounter': when the child sees the parent's lovemaking, he/she is exposed to remain impotent, unable to fix the meaning of this scene' (Žižek, 2004b: 165). By situating the viewer in the sense of helplessness, Zhang succeeds in repressing the meaning of the filmic image and leaving it unseen, thus to foreground its subtraction.



7-11 a

7-11 b

Soon-hee and Chang-ho walk across the steppes. The film fades out while Chang-ho's voiceover is heard: 'Mom, there's a wide road ahead of us'.

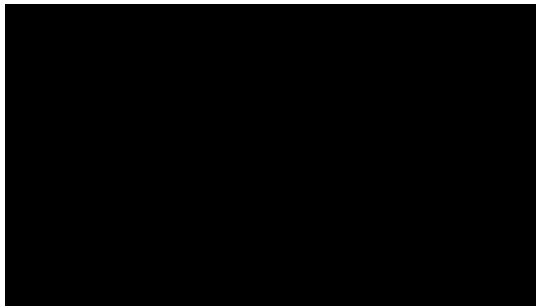


7-11 c

7-11 d

The camera shows a bridge.

After the camera executes a 360 degree rotation, blue flags flap against the bustling winds of the steppe.



7-11e

The film fades out with the sound of flags still rustling.

Figures 7-11 a – e : the closing scene of *Hyazgar*

The revelation of the 'rarity of the image', that is, the question of the void through the process of subtraction becomes more prominent in the closing sequence. In this sequence, Chang-ho starts off on a long journey together with his mother, Soon-hee, walking across the steppe (Fig. 7-11 a). The film then fades out with Chang-ho's voiceover: 'Mom, there's a wide road ahead of us' (Fig. 7-11 b). The closing shot of the film starts to execute a 360 degree rotation, panning from the bridge (Fig. 7-11 c). While the panning continues, the soundtrack is mute. When the camera stops panning in front of the bridge again, blue flags

flap against the rustling winds of the steppe with the soundtrack on again (Fig. 7-11 d).

Finally, the film fades out again with the blue flags still rustling in incessant winds.

Let us first turn to the scene where Chang-ho leaves with his mother (Fig. 7-11 a) and the camera does not allow the viewer to see what Soon-hee and Chang-ho see (Fig. 7-11 b). By thrusting the blank space between the images, Zhang does not respect classical cinema's principle of the linking of actions through montage. He does not enhance the shift from one image to another in a defined or predictable way. Instead, he poses an unbridgeable gap between the associated filmic images, thus staging 'displacements in space marked by false continuity' (Rodowick, 1997: 143). As a result, the interval functioning as the ending of the first and the starting of the second gives way to the revealing of the 'irrational' interval, namely the interstice (Deleuze, 1989: 277). 'The interval is no longer filled by a sensorimotor situation; it neither marks the trajectory between an action and a reaction nor bridges two sets through continuity links. Instead, the interval collapses and so becomes "irrational"' (Rodowick, *ibid.*). Moreover, Zhang poses an incommensurable gap between the visual image and sound: while Chang-ho says, 'Mom, there's a wide road ahead of us', the camera inserts a blank space (Fig. 7-11 b). The interstice between the visual image and sound suspends the viewer in a state of uncertainty. With the contradiction between the image and sound heightened, the viewer can see that the filmic image and sound are independently autonomous, forming a conflictual relationship. While supplementing each other, they resist being incorporated into an organic whole.

This pattern recurs in the following shot. After the camera shows a bridge, it begins to execute a 360 degree rotation (Fig. 7-11 c). What the viewer can see after the rotation is that blue flags flap against the bustling winds of the steppe (Fig. 7-11 d). Zhang adds an uncanny filmic image, i.e. the blue flags that appear to have come out of nowhere, in this closing shot.

The passage from one image to another is also not shown in a predictable way. As a result, the interval here dividing the two segmentations of space becomes fully autonomous as well. As Deleuze puts it, ‘instead of one image after the other, there is one image *plus* another; and each shot is deframed in relation to the framing of the following shot’ (Deleuze, 1989: 214). For my purpose, this closing shot indicates that Zhang adds a certain nothing in the previous image. What the insertion of a certain nothing stages is that something is absent from the previous one and that what is initially seen is not complete (Butler, 2005: 38). Moreover, Zhang lets the soundtrack remain live after nothing is seen in this closing shot (Fig. 7-11 e). The image no longer represents what the sound indicates, and the soundtrack never describes what the image shows. They form an incommensurable relationship. The interstice simply ‘passes’ between the image and sound, thus preventing them from falling into classical cinema’s law of continuity editing. In the logic of classical cinema, sound tends to become a constituent part of the visual image. However, in the closing shot of this film, sound is not subordinated into the dimension of visual image, and instead it becomes a fully autonomous realm. It is here that the interstice is manifested through the revealing of a fully autonomised dislocation from reality itself.

The film withdraws from the realist mode of representation, by adding the void in the association of filmic images. If this film privileged the vivid representation of marginal figures, it would fall into the trap of spectacular display of the dispossessed. Instead, Zhang’s films effectively resist spectacle to pose the interstice (or void) not only between the before and after in the chronological succession of filmic images, but also between the image and sound, thus manifesting the elusive nature of reality par excellence. Given that the globally distributed network of visual images operates through foreclosing upon marginal lives, it is urgent to render fragmented and disconnected human movement ‘visible’ – a figure that

remains caught in the realm of the invisible, with no proper place in the global sovereign order. This configuration is not a matter of the mere representation of a particular identity, but of a new content. However, fully recognising the significance of making visible the elusive figure of marginal lives, this section has suggested that this effort needs to be more productively articulated with the ‘rarity of the image’ through subtraction, that is, the void. Zhang’s films – especially the closing sequences in both films – instantiates how a void devoid of all content radically disrupts reality itself, thus rendering a new vision of life. Finally, it is here that the revelation of the void in these closing sequences is precisely echoed in ‘concrete universality’, if ‘concrete universality’ can be defined as appearing in a particular filmic object which cannot gain its full identity: namely, the non-coincidence of a particular filmic object with itself.

7.4 Conclusion

The characters in *Oldboy* work outside the rule of law. The role of the police is presented as very limited. However, this film is not the work of a ‘post-authoritarian era’, but indicative of being situated at the space of exception, in which exception is defined by law to be lawful. Where some commentators (Kim, 2009; Choe, 2009) emphasise the importance of the ‘unknowable’ and elusive points in the films, this study claims that a way of moving beyond the law at the space of exception is not corrected by posing an outside to the law, that is, suspension of the law, but by full immersion into the law, thus addressing the disruptiveness of the law itself from within. In terms of the formal aspect, this film is characterised by the lack of specific spatiotemporal knowledge, as is shown in the frequent use of close-ups. The erasure of local indexicality, however, directs this film into postmodern cultural logic. Finally,

Oldboy is not filled with varieties of violent provocation, but works by suspending us between action and reaction and drawing the viewer's attention through their imagination. However, it struggles to present a new filmic image; the relationship between the filmed object and the viewer still remains caught up with the linear succession of causality.

Kim Ki-duk's films can be seen not as another example of Asian Extreme cinema, but as addressing the conflict between opposite class backgrounds in an allegorised manner. Yet, rather than insisting on communication and/or reconciliation, this section has emphasised the centrality of negativity, since communication and/or reconciliation serve to mask the fundamental antagonism in a given symbolic order. This emphasis on negativity finds its culmination in what Žižek calls the 'interface' effect, where a shot includes its own reverse-shot within itself, and the excluded reverse-shot returns in the guise of the spectral *objet petit a*. Accordingly, the main purpose of this section is to examine how Kim's films inscribe the spectral *objet petit a*: do they stage the spectral accompanied with an ontological shift, or do they merely substantialise the void with positive content? The films oscillate between two different poles. On the one hand, Kim's films present a way of revealing the spectral *objet petit a* by leading the viewer to witness the character's mutual relationship through non-human mediation. On the other hand, Kim's films tend to give body to the spectral, reducing the radical aspect of the spectral apparition into diegetic personality.

Zhang Lu has presented a way of filming boundaries by staging the conflicts at the boundaries between countries and between people. However, the most relevant conflicts in Zhang's films are not predicated on external conflicts in the sense of directly engaging with issues such as emigration and refugees, but on enabling us to understand the fundamental core of historicity through the film text's deployment. The characters in Zhang's films do not find their way into sensory-motor connections, thus constituting 'gestural cinema' in the full

exposure of their incapacity to act. This section also suggested that Zhang took these disturbed sensory-motor connections further by revealing a void that remains after rendering visible the character's fragmented gesture. The closing sequences in both *Grain in Ear* and *Hyazgar* instantiate this point. Those sequences stage the way in which the configuration of marginal lives in ghettoised space appears through the subtraction of pre-determined identity and diegetic personality. By no longer providing any information about the individualised character, the closing sequences disclose the full autonomisation of the void which is included in reality itself but, nonetheless, remains uneasy about its situation. Thus, these sequences completely throw diegetic reality off balance. It is through the pure status of an incommensurable gap, accompanied by a change in the ontological terms, that Zhang's films become 'concrete universality'.

Chapter 8

Conclusion

This chapter will sum up some of the key points throughout the whole thesis in brief, while seeking to suggest a possible route for future research. The thesis has taken some key contemporary South Korean films from the late 1980s up to the present day as the object of study, whilst raising the question of the limitations, pitfalls, and possible radicality inherent in the contemporary Korean film scene. This study has initially separated the transformation of contemporary South Korean cinema into its industrial and discursive aspects. It has argued that the transformation of the recent South Korean film industry may be understood in terms of Karl Marx's 'real subsumption', in which it has increasingly been subsumed as an integral element of the global film system. In contrast to the idea that sees the transformation of the contemporary Korean film industry as rapid growth or success, this thesis has stressed the danger left behind it, by exploring the transformation of the local film industry within the larger framework of the current capitalist system.

Although a film text is determined by capital-intensive industrial forces, the thesis has stressed that it cannot be reduced only to its industrial and historical aspects. In other words, although every film appears from within the constraints of its industrial and historical context, not every film corresponds to its external background. Cinema can tackle its external relevance only through its own practices. How, then, do Korean films develop their own aesthetics? This is where my approach differs from that of many other scholars of Korean films. Where they have claimed that the growing appeal to the audience at home and abroad, together with commercial strength, is the basis of considering Korean films as achieving a kind of newness, this thesis seeks to challenge that idea, by critically examining the defining

criteria of why, how and on what conditions Korean films might be considered to have gained newness. Can the commercial strength in the contemporary Korean film industry be a key reference for considering it as a new cinema? Are there more continuities than change? If it emerges as a truly new cinema, on what terms does it emerge?

In order to explore this research question further, it was necessary to look briefly into what hermeneutic problems have appeared in Korean films. Some films – especially Korean New Wave and Korean blockbuster films – can be regarded as addressing local issues in their effort to distinguish themselves from both the dominant norms of Hollywood and their previous filmic production environment (see my analysis of Park Kwang-soo's films and the Korean New Wave in chapter 5; and the case of the Korean blockbuster in chapter 6). This allows us to explore what special strategies of difference these films have employed to resist the norms of Hollywood or any other national cinemas. The overarching premise in the thesis is that the simple description of historical material alone cannot open up the domain of radical alterity, and furthermore a neat binary based on a single coherent unity – for instance, Hollywood – as opposed to multiple differences cannot lead us to think of the domain of radical difference. In the schema of a single coherent unity versus multiple differences, the latter has usually been accepted as an alternative model to move beyond the linear succession of official historiography. However, this research questions this idea by arguing that cultural difference can be assumed and that we need to go further if we consider the question of radical alterity. This may seem unfamiliar, because posing the question of difference against a linear succession of totality has been generally accepted as an alternative model to move beyond it. However, this is not to say that the thesis is hostile to other forms of difference. But rather, the crucial question concerns the ways in which the question of radical difference emerges. My answer to this is that the various levels of temporalities and histories need to

imply a void – the Real, or what is missing in a given historical context –thus revealing the inherent tension between historical reality and the void within that historical context. For this reason, while many other scholars in the field of film studies have focused on the historical context of individual films, this study favours the non-historical in a certain historical context. This is not to say that the study has ignored the question of history. The crucial question concerns how a certain film text enables us to apprehend the fundamental antagonism at the heart of South Korea’s historical context by arguing that the non-historical and the question of history are simultaneous.

On the other hand, some contemporary South Korean films – especially Asia Extreme films – differentiate themselves from the prevailing cinematic trope of the Korean New Wave and the Korean blockbuster by increasingly annihilating the question of the historical condition (see my examination of this point in *Oldboy* in chapter 7). Those films have tended to rely on more universal filmic strategies such as visual sensation and violence. The appeal of those films to audiences both in and outside of South Korea has brought some critics to claim that those films have become more innovative than Korean New Wave and Korean Blockbuster films. In contrast to this idea, my study has argued that the mere emphasis on a sensuous experience in film viewing cannot be seen as staging a new vision of filmic image, by concluding that if it foregrounds the multiplicity of sensual violence without revealing the Real (void) inherent in the cinematic apparatus, it eventually gives body to the Real, but only to produce the spectacular mode of representation. Korean films’ growing insistence on visceral effects has nothing to do with the dimension of the Real. In order to expose the Real, a film text presupposes its insistence on local indexicality, since the Real emerges precisely within a concrete historical situation, and for this reason, the Real is immanent to a given reality.

By focusing more on the film texts themselves rather than their relationship to an historical context, this research project has initially proposed that the question of the South Korean cinema can be read neither as reflecting the essence of national identities, nor engaging in the formation of them. Instead of externalising film texts into a higher level of social reality, the crucial question here is to examine how a film text through its textual mechanisms enables us to cognitively map the historical condition – the hierarchically structured forces within the current capitalist system – since the founding condition at the heart of all societies is based on a traumatic moment of social antagonism. This is also an attempt to examine how a certain type of film text can involve within itself a nonsensical, meaningless element that leads to the cinematic distortion of diegetic reality. *Beyond the Years* (chapter 5), *The Host* (chapter 6), *Grain in Ear*, and *Hyazgar* (chapter 7) offer good examples for exploring this question. All the films reveal cinematic distortions which do not manifest themselves in an explicit narrative line, thus confronting viewers with the core of South Korea's ongoing (post) modernity. Other films which could be explored in this way include *Mother* (Bong Joon-ho, 2009), *Dooman River* (Zhang Lu, 2009), *The Yellow Sea* (Na Hong-jin, 2010), *Helpless* (Byun Young-joo, 2011), *The Color of Pain* (Lee Kang-hyun, 2010), and *2 Doors* (Kim Il-lan and Hong Ji-you, 2011). All the films mentioned above will demonstrate the potential radicalism of contemporary South Korean films.

Having outlined the study's overall argument and some of the key points through the whole thesis, this chapter will now go on to examine the further questions and possibilities that this thesis opens up. The scale and scope of the selected films in this thesis are limited; this thesis is just the beginning of long-term research. Related to the main research question of the thesis, there are several major things I keep in mind for possible future studies.

First, I have developed throughout this thesis that the notion of the Real never has a

substantial entity, thus indicating the void which has no place in the functioning of diegetic reality. Although I have admitted that the void begins only with an explosion at a particular time and space, I have focused more on the Real as the void with no positive-substantial entity to attack particularist claims based on the politics of identity. In other words, in terms of relationships between the void and the particular situation, priority has been consistently given to the void. However, one might ask if this sort of theory fully explains the specificity of any particular situation. In the translator's introduction of Alain Badiou's *Ethics* (2001), Peter Hallward (2002) points out that too much emphasis on the void can struggle to 'grasp the specificity of any particular situation' (Hallward, 2002: xxxi). He continues,

Arguably, however, Badiou's consequent characterization of all human situations, individual and collective, as *immeasurably* infinite multiplicities (and thus as bundles of pure and immeasurable 'differences', such that 'there are as many differences, say, between a Chinese peasant and a young Norwegian professional as between myself and anybody at all, including myself) [Badiou, 2002(2001): 26] dramatically *simplifies* these situations, leaving no space for the acknowledgement of effectively universal structuring principles (biological, cognitive, linguistic...) on the one hand, or of certain 'specifying' attributes (based on culture, religion, class, gender...) on the other (Hallward, 2002: xxxii, emphasis original).

Similar claims can be made of my thesis: does it fully account for the specificity of contemporary South Korean films? How can one, then, move beyond the "despecification" (or "singularization") of situations in general' (ibid.)? I want to point out that the notion of the Real is a polysemantic category, so that one needs to take into consideration that it can also be understood both as 'the substance, the hard resistant kernel of the Real' (Žižek, 2002a: 11) or as 'a radically new content' (Žižek, 2004b: 15). The two seemingly opposite explanations of the Real can be dialectically articulated, insofar as the concept of the Real as

the universal refers to the distortion as such of all particular content. If the Real can be understood in terms of substance and/or a ‘radically different content’, it will be equated with Paul Willemen’s (1994) reformulation on the cinematic uses of landscape. Willemen’s elaboration on the radical uses of landscape is clearly different from the tourist gaze. If the tourist gaze is related to ‘[seeing] in the landscape only mirrors or projections of his or her fantasms, and thus [‘seeing’] landscapes exclusively in terms of a correspondence with subjective experience, either that of the tourist-author or that of his or her delegates in the narrative, that is to say, the characters’, the radical uses of landscape can be seen as ‘offering landscape as itself an active, multi-layered discursive space demanding to be read in its own right’ (Willemen, 1994: 156). How do the radical deployments of landscape, whether rural landscape or cityscape, become clearly different from the configuration of landscape in conventional narrative? In classical cinema, the diegetic backdrop is mobilised as complementing a character’s psychological status. Space is subordinated to the development of plot or character. In contrast to this, the political uses of landscape refer to the revealing of ‘a space where a different historical dynamic can be traced, a dynamic proceeding with different historical rhythms and patterns of determinations’ (ibid.). For this reason, the subversive arrangement of landscape cannot be conceived of simply as one of an infinite multiplicity of diverse differences, but as a radically different content. I have not fully explored this issue throughout this thesis. But it needs to be explored further in the future research. Given that contemporary South Korean films tend to avoid addressing historical knowledge to the viewer, this sort of approach might gain urgency and immediacy.

For example, South Korean film saw the emergence of the Korean Western from the 1960s to the early 1970s. The emergence of the Korean Western attested to Korean cinema’s local translation of the Hollywood Western, indicating that the Western genre format is not

confined to Hollywood, but as plural and diversified. The Korean Western gave birth to the emergence of the so-called ‘Manchuria Westerns’ in which these films go beyond national boundaries by foregrounding their stories in the huge field of Manchuria. Among the representative films are *Eagle of Wilderness* (Im Kwon-taek, 1969) and *Break the Chain* (Lee Man-hee, 1971). In a sense, Manchuria Western films can be seen as satisfying local audiences with an exotic display of foreign landscape, given that the majority of South Korean people were not allowed to travel overseas at this time. As Kim Soyoung (2011) puts it, these Manchuria Westerns such as *Eagle of Wilderness* and *Break the Chain* might function as ‘a utopia-like “some place elsewhere” to the audience of the time when overseas trips were not freed up and people felt as if they were confined in South Korea during the Cold War’ (Kim, 2011: 172). She continues: ‘the audience of the time had the opportunity to experience geopolitical fantasy happening in a pseudo-continental place through the Manchuria Western movies’ (ibid.).

Displays of foreign landscapes are frequent in contemporary South Korean cinema. They reflect South Korean film’s increasing blurring of national boundaries based on transnational cultural flow. For example, *The Good, the Bad, the Weird* is partly borrowed from *Break the Chain*. Even though this film is also influenced by Sergio Leone’s film *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly* (1966), *Break the Chain* is regarded to have much impact in terms of story and development of the characters. Within this context, *The Good, the Bad, the Weird* was set during the Japanese occupation of Manchuria in the 1930s, when the area operated as a melting pot of Koreans, Chinese, Japanese, Mongols, and Russians. It tells a story of three bandits as they escape Japanese soldiers and each other, searching for a treasure map buried in the desert. Within the situation of South Korean film’s increasing focus on transnational imageries, what implication does the foregrounding of foreign landscape such

as Manchuria convey in the contemporary South Korean film scene? Is there any difference between Manchuria Westerns from the 1960s to early 1970s and *The Good, the Bad, the Weird*? If there are differences, which evaluative criteria are needed to interpret those phenomena?

Second, while chapter 5 looked into Im Kwon-taek's works, they need to be explored further because I believe Im provides a key reference for understanding the real dynamics of South Korean cinema. As his films have shown cinema's engaging role in the formation of national identities and then moving beyond them, further investigation of Im's films may provide a framework for understanding the question of whether Korean films have achieved newness, and of how, why, and on what terms the concept of newness emerge, if there have been truly radical innovations.

Third, while this thesis has dealt with the problem of violence through a close reading of *Oldboy* (see chapter 7), to explore the nature of visual violence requires further investigation. The central questions can be raised in the following way. Is this phenomenon unique to the contemporary South Korean film scene? What has initiated contemporary South Korean films' violence-orientated strategies? Does the growing emphasis on bodily suffering enable us to cognitively map out the ungraspable totality, given that filmic image's hybridisation across national boundaries is becoming more visceral and sensuous? Or, does it fail to apprehend the core of global capitalism? Is the increasing focus on the corporeal effect of visual sensation seen as a 'rehabilitation' of realism? Is it being more faithful to recording reality? All the questions mentioned above may, hopefully, provide another different angle for supplementing this study.

Alongside these questions, I want to add a question: what are the theoretical frameworks for illustrating contemporary Korean films' increasing dependence on visual sensation?

Perhaps Walter Benjamin's essay on the 'critique of violence' holds the key to examining the nature of violence. In his essay, Benjamin (1978) divides violence into 'divine violence' (or 'pure *violence*') and 'mythical violence', in which 'mythical violence' consists of lawmaking and/or law-preserving violence. 'If mythical violence is lawmaking, divine violence is law-destroying: if the former sets boundaries, the latter boundlessly destroys them; if mythical violence brings at once guilt and retribution, divine power only expiates; if the former threatens, the latter spikes; if the former is bloody, the latter is lethal without spilling blood' (Benjamin, 1978: 297). What is first necessary to take into consideration in the contrast of the two conceptions of violence is that when just ends can be gained by justified means, and justified means could be used for just ends, violence repeats a circular process of lawmaking and law-preserving violence. But instead, 'divine violence' is not a matter of the signifying practices of means and ends, but of the direct expression of violence itself apart from a means for ends. However, Benjamin's argument on 'divine violence' seems to be somewhat ambiguous because Benjamin himself does not illustrate how it can find its way into the human domain. Slavoj Žižek appropriates Benjamin's notion of 'divine violence' in such a way: 'divine violence is an expression of pure drive, of the undeadness, the excess of life, which strikes at "bare life" regulated by law' (Žižek, 2008:168). Nonetheless, definition of 'divine violence' still remains ambiguous even in Žižek's appropriation of it. For my purpose, if 'mythical violence' refers to a means to justify the rule of law by making and preserving law, 'divine violence' might be tied to the void in symbolisation, such that it can belong to the pre-individual and impersonal level of the event. In this context, it is important to explore further the notion of 'divine violence' and on which terms and conditions we can distinguish 'divine violence' from 'mythical violence' prevalent in the contemporary spectacle. There is not enough space for me to explore this question in this thesis. So it will be a possible future

research topic.

In sum, this thesis places the discussion of a universalising theory into the analysis of contemporary South Korean film not only by forging a sharp defining criterion of the terms on which Korean films have achieved newness, but also by considering the problem of difference differently. It advocates the importance of theory in the general context of current film studies, and in the growing study of South Korean films. The critical investigations on Slavoj Žižek, Alain Badiou, Fredric Jameson, Gilles Deleuze, Paul Willemen, and many other thinkers are meant not only to redefine the problem of difference theoretically, but also to show my dismissal of the de-politicising fashion currently advanced in film studies. Its investigation of Korean films on the basis of theoretical terms that have been specifically ignored in the study of Korean films will hopefully serve to draw further academic attention to this issue.

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2009 *Lost Memories* (로스트 메모리즈 / 2001) Lee Si-myung.

2 *Doors* (두개의 문/2011) Kim Il-lan and Hong Ji-you.

3-*Iron* (빈집 / 2004) Kim Ki-duk.

A Bitter Sweet Life (달콤한 인생 / 2005) Kim Jee-woon.

Alien (1979) Ridley Scott.

A Petal (꽃잎 / 1996) Jang Sun-woo.

A Single Spark (아름다운 청년 전태일 / 1995) Park Kwang-su.

A Tale of Two Sisters (장화, 홍련 / 2003) Kim Jee-woon.

Bad Guy (나쁜 남자 / 2001) Kim Ki-duk.

Beyond the Years (천년학 / 2006) Im Kwon-taek.

Black Republic (그들도 우리처럼 / 1990) Park Kwang-su.

Blood Rain (혈의 누 / 2005) Kim Dae-seung.

Break the Chain (쇠사슬을 끊어라 / 1971) Lee Man-hee.

Breath (숨 / 2007) Kim Ki-duk.

Bungee Jumping of Their Own (번지 점프를 하다 / 2001) Kim Dae-seung.

Calla (카라/1999) Song Hae-sung.

Chilsu and Mansu (칠수와 만수 / 1988) Park Kwang-su.

Christmas in August (8월의 크리스마스/1998) Hur Jin-ho.

Contact (접속 / 1997) Chang Yoon-hyun.

Ditto (동감 / 2000) Kim Jung-kwon.

Dooman River (두만강/ 2009) Zhang Lu.

Eagle of Wilderness (황야의 독수리 / 1969) Im Kwon-taek.

Festival (축제/1996) Im Kwon-taek.

Friend (친구 / 2001) Kwak Kyung-taek.

Full Metal Jacket (1987) Stanley Kubrick.

Grain in Ear (망종 / 2005) Zhang Lu.

Hanbando (한반도 / 2006) Kang Woo-suk.

Heaven's soldiers (천군, 2005) Min Joon-ki.

Helpless (화차/2011) Byun Young-joo.

Hiroshima Mon Amour (1959) Alain Resnais.

Histoire(s) du cinema (1997, 1998) Jean-Luc Godard.

Hyazgar (경계 / 2007) Zhang Lu.

Jaws (1975) Steven Spielberg.

Joint Security Area (공동경비구역 JSA / 2000) Park Chan-wook.

Jurassic Park (1993) Steven Spielberg.

The Lake House (2006) Alejandro Agresti.

Marathon (말아톤 / 2005) Chung Yoon-chul.

MASH (1970) Robert Altman.

Memories of Murder (살인의 추억 / 2003) Bong Joon-ho.

Mother (마더/2009) Bong Joon-ho.

MUSA-The Warrior (무사 / 2000) Kim Sung-su.

My Sassy Girl (엽기적인 그녀 / 2001) Kwak Jae-young.

Mystery of the Cube (건축무한 육면각체의 비밀 / 1999) You Sang-wook.

My Wife is a Gangster (조폭마누라 / 2001) Jo Jin-kyu.

No Manners (품행제로 / 2002) Joh Keun-shik.

Oldboy (올드보이 / 2003) Park Chan-wook.

Peppermint Candy (박하사탕 / 1999) Lee Chang-dong.

Phantom, the Submarine (유령 / 1999) Min Byung-chun.

Psycho (1960) Alfred Hitchcock.

Saving Private Ryan (1998) Steven Spielberg.

Shiri (쉬리, 1999) Kang Jae-kyu.

Seopyonje (서편제 / 1993) Im Kwon-taek.

Silmido (실미도 / 2003) Kang Woo-suk.

Spring in My Hometown (아름다운 시절 / 1998) Lee Gwang-mo.

Sympathy for Lady Vengeance (친절한 금자씨 / 2005) Park Chan-wook.

Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance (복수는 나의것 / 2002) Park Chan-wook.

TaeGukGi: Brotherhood of War (태극기 휘날리며 / 2004) Kang Je-gyu.

The Birds (1963) Alfred Hitchcock.

The Chaser (추격자 / 2007) Na Hong-jin.

The Color of Pain (보라/2010) Lee Kang-hyun.

The Day a Pig Fell into the Well (돼지가 우물에 빠진날 / 1996) Hong Sang-soo.

The Foul King (반칙왕 / 2000) Kim Jee-woon.

The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly (1966) Sergio Leone.

The Good, the Bad, the Weird (좋은놈, 나쁜놈, 이상한놈 / 2008) Kim Jee-woon.

The Host (괴물 / 2006) Bong Joon-ho.

The Isle (섬 / 2000) Kim Ki-duk.

The Marriage Life (결혼이야기 / 1992) Kim Eui-suk.

The Night Before Strike (파업전야 / 1990) Lee Eun, Lee Jae-gu, Chang Yoon-hyun,

Chang Dong-hong.

The President's Last Bang (그때 그사람들 / 2005) Im Sang-soo.

The Soul Guardians (퇴마록/1998) Park Kwang-chun.

The Yellow Sea (황해/ 2010) Na Hong-jin.

Threesome (삼인조, 1997) Park Chan-wook.

Tidal Wave (해운대, 2009) Youn Je-kyoon.

Time (시간 / 2006) Kim Ki-duk.

Two cops (투캡스 / 1993) Kang Woo-suk.

Typhoon (태풍 / 2005) Kwak Kyung-taek.

Welcome to Dongmakgol (웰컴투 동막골/ 2005) Park Kwang-hyun.