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Breaking the Retrospective Curse:
Ethical Identity in South Korean Film and Literature

DISSERTATION

Submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
For the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in East Asian Studies

by

Sue Heun Kim Asokan

Dissertation Committee:
Professor Kyung Hyun Kim, Chair
Associate Professor Chungmoo Choi
Associate Professor Serk-bae Suh
Assistant Professor David Fedman

2020

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DEDICATION

To

my husband
for his humor, warmth, and love

my mother
for her patience and affection

my sister
for being my best friend

and

the memory of my father,
who continues to be the foundation for my perseverance and passion.

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CURRICULUM VITAE

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FIELD OF STUDY

East Asian Cinema, Korean Studies, Film and Media Studies, Critical Theory

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Breaking the Retrospective Curse:

Ethical Identity in South Korean Film and Literature

By

Sue Heun Kim Asokan

Doctor of Philosophy in East Asian Studies

University of California, Irvine, 2020

Professor Kyung Hyun Kim, Chair

This dissertation studies filmic and literary portrayals of sacrificial "heroes" and asks two main questions. First, why do so many contemporary Korean films deny their heroes or heroines a successful and happy ending? Second, what do such failed acts of heroic sacrifice reveal about the nation's shifting relationship with history, memory, and ethics? Despite the recent rise of Korea's cultural economy, historians often note the nation's habitual focus on its historical failures rather than successes. Modernity came hand-in-hand with colonization (Japan, 1876-1945); global alliances brought about a fratricidal war and national division (Korean War, 1950-53); and economic growth resulted from decades of military dictatorships (1960-1988). As a result, Korean identity has been bound by its communal and nationalistic duty to sacrifice personal sovereignty for the sake of national recovery. This pattern of retrospection and redemption also characterizes Korea's cinematic history from the 1950s to the late 1990s. Postwar filmic narratives attempted to recover from past traumas by re-

presenting them as moral lessons. Then, as modernization set in, the aim of historical recovery was abandoned to place more faith in the malleability of memory. My dissertation contends that recent millennial films are beginning to move away from such retroactive "fixes" of the past by relying on the transformative potential of affect and ethics. By recognizing the repetitive and non-progressive nature of Korea's fixation on remembrance, I argue that contemporary narratives have exhibited a new trend to break what I call the "retrospective curse." Rather than restore historical memory, the texts I read seek to unveil the hegemonic boundaries drawn by the process of historicization itself (i.e., identity becoming grounded in trauma; morality becoming enmeshed with nationalism). Bringing to the fore affective patterns, such as love, guilt, faith, or resentment, I emphasize how such sacrificial "emotions" call attention to *immediate* relationships with individual others, rather than with a collective past. Looking beyond defining identity within the scope of the national and historical, this project investigates how, conversely, its collectivized and "retrospective" identity may also work to define, or limit, the conditions of Korea's ethical conscience.

INTRODUCTION

South Korea's *Retrospective Curse*

> The modern history of the state as the locus of the sacrificial quest is testimony to … perversion. In positing itself as a sacrificial stage and the genuine realm of noninstrumental action, the state threatens to exhaust and monopolize the realm of the transcendent. It thus becomes a false god, providing the loyal citizen a misdirected sense of redemption from his selfish cage.[1]
>
> — Moshe Halbertal, *On Sacrifice*

[1] Moshe Halbertal, *On Sacrifice* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 116.

Breaking the Retrospective Curse: Ethical Identity in South Korean Film and Literature studies filmic and literary texts that center their narratives around transgressions of morality in order to map the shifts in South Korea's construction of identity. Looking beyond already established methods of defining identity within the scope of the national and historical, this project aims to investigate how, reversely, this national identity—so entrenched in the act of redemption—may also work to define, or limit, the conditions of Korea's *ethical* conscience. I argue that the intangible realm of ethics and affect has provided a platform for contemporary filmmakers and writers to consider Korean identity beyond spatial and temporal borders. Informed and affected by the changing world around them, these film directors and authors highlight the fact that the scale and scope of individual choice and responsibility that Korea of the 21st Century demands may be entirely different from those that occupied the minds of previous generations. Opposing previous patterns of collective nationalism that primarily aimed to rewrite traumatic memories or redeem historical failures, the texts I examine present a directional shift and open up new and progressive avenues of reading and articulating identity. I consider the medium of film or literature as not just a reflection of society's histories and memories, but as a diagnostic tool that can call attention to the fact that the very process of historicizing and memorializing can form their own hegemonic boundaries and de-limit the discourse of moral subjectivity. My ultimate goal is to not only expand our understanding of Korean subjectivity, but also highlight the importance of considering ethical identity, apart from national identity, within an increasingly Neoliberal and transnational world order.

I. Retrospective Legacies

Amidst a worldwide pandemic, where most countries are on lockdown with no definitive end in sight, a headline in a South Korean (Korea from here on) news website reads, “Americans praise Korea’s reaction to Covid-19 more than *Parasite* win at Oscars.”[2] Transcribed from a live radio broadcast from New York City, the news anchor begins the interview by asking the reporter a series of standard questions regarding the city’s progress in mitigating the spread and after-effects of the new coronavirus. The report maintains its focus on New York’s precarious situation until the end of the interview, when the questions suddenly shift toward the ways South Korea is viewed by Americans. “We have donated our testing kits to America, even prompting one of Trump’s senior officials to express gratitude. How have Americans reacted to Korea’s aid, Korea’s widespread quarantine efforts, and the cooperative actions of Korean citizens?” asks the anchor.[3] To which, the reporter replies,

> When we received the Oscar for *Parasite*, Korea received a lot of praise. And with this pandemic, Korea is being regarded as a model country for its quarantine implementation and even called a leader

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[2] South Korea was one of the few nations to not implement a nation-wide lockdown during the 2019-2020 coronavirus pandemic, opting instead for wide-spread testing and tracking procedures. Pyŏngryul Pak and Hyemin Kim, “Migugindŭl. kisaengch'ung susangboda k'orona19ro Han'guk tŏ ch'ingch'anhae [Americans praise Korea’s reaction to Covid-19 more than *Parasite* win at Oscars].” *YTN*, April 14, 2020, https://www.ytn.co.kr/_ln/0104_202004141638580730

[3] My translation of Pak and Kim. 지금 마스크 이야기 나왔으니까요. 우리 진단 키트를 미국에 지원하기도 하지 않았습니까? 그래서 트럼프 행정부 고위 당국자가 굉장히 감사하다고 이야기하기도 했는데. 미국인들의 한국에서의 지원, 아니면 한국에서 펼쳤던 그런 방역 행동들, 국민들의 행동들에 대한 평가는 어떻습니까?

> amongst all democratic nations. … This is something that would never have occurred in the past. Once this situation passes, I believe Korea's image will have drastically changed for the better.[4]

As if mentioning a recent Oscar-winning film in a news report on New York City's pandemic situation isn't strange enough, the headline for the transcribed article — "Americans praise Korea's reaction to Covid-19 more than *Parasite* win at Oscars" — chooses to focus, not on the actual topic of the report, but on Korea's collectively sacrificial efforts and the consequential improvement of its national image. A single director's success at a foreign award show in the United States is equated to the domestic success of its governmental policy during a viral epidemic. And both accomplishments are attributed to the communal efforts of the homogenous Korean "we." This conflation of collectivism, nationalism, and a desire for national redemption is not unique to this one article.

Notwithstanding the recent rise of Korea's cultural economy, historians have outlined the nation's habitual focus on its historical failures rather than successes. Modernity is said to have come hand-in-hand with colonization, specifically by the Japanese Empire between the years of 1876-1945; global alliances brought about a fratricidal war and national division in the 1950s; and economic growth during the

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[4] My translation of Pak and Kim. 2 월에 우리가 기생충으로 오스카상을 받았을 때, 한국 대단하다는 칭찬을 많이 받았습니다. 그리고 이번 코로나 사태로 인해서 거의 한국에 대해서는 방역의 모범국, 민주주의 국가의 가장 선도국 이런 식으로까지 보도되고 있는 상황입니다. ...과거 같으면 절대 상상할 수 없는 그런 상황인데. 이번 사태가 지나면 한국에 대한 이미지도 상당히 달라지지 않을까 하는 생각이 있습니다.

postwar period is noted to have resulted from decades of military dictatorships from the 1960s on to the late 1980s.[5] As a symptom of anxiety that stems from such critical views of the past, South Korean consciousness is described as continuously drawing inward and gravitating towards modes of collectivism and nationalism in order to soothe these supposed failures of history and the nation.

It is important to emphasize here that while this project will involve Korea's national or ethnic identity, its primary concern does not lie in its definition, but rather in its *direction* of construction. I argue that the "imagined" narrative of modern Korean identity was from the very start a product of redemption that paved the way for a specific pattern of self-reflection within the Korean conscience.[6] With each historical moment of crisis, this already "redeemed" autonomy of Korea's collective subjecthood was repeatedly perceived as being lost or in threat of being "taken away" by a slew of past iniquities, persistently reinforcing the need to *retroactively* reify its value. Put simply, Korea's modern construction of national identity has been informed and maintained by cyclical patterns of retrospection—to remember, recover, and redeem.

Despite continuing debates on the origins of Korean nationhood and identity, many recent scholars have stated that the ideological conception of the Korean "nation" and the identification of its people—*minjok*—occurred in conjunction with, and in some ways in reaction to, modernity.[7] As Andre Schmid and Henry Em point out, the

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[5] The framework of "colonial modernity" has received considerable pushback especially from South Korean scholars, some of whom argue that the roots of modernity (i.e. capitalism) originated from indigenous sources.

[6] I borrow this concept of "imagined" narratives of nationalism and identity from Anderson (1991).

[7] The debate regarding the origins of Korean nationhood and the historical foundations for its nationalism has been cogently outlined by Shin (2006), Em (1999), and Park (1999). Historiographical trends within

cultivation of an "autonomous subject for the nation," encapsulated in an essential and collectivized conception of the "nation," was the predominant nationalist narrative of the modern era. [8] As collective opposition to the loss of state, citizenry, and thereby national identity during the period of Japanese colonization, Korean intellectuals of the time tasked themselves with articulating a uniquely "Korean" subjecthood, or *minjoksŏng*, that did not require physical boundaries or an active government. By taking inspiration from native foundational myths (Tan'gun), they conceived of an "essential" nationhood and identity – an "essence of Koreanness" (*minjoksŏng*) – that was autonomous from the more powerful imperialist states of Japan and China.[9]

In his book, *Korea Between Empires*, Schmid investigates newspapers and various writings by Korea's enlightened elite between the years of 1895 and 1919, beginning

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the study of Korea, ranging from nationalist, post-nationalist, post-colonial, to modernist (or postmodernist), are discussed. Henry Em's more recent book, *The Great Enterprise* (2013), further elaborates the discourse regarding the historiography of modern Korea over the past two centuries. Gi-wook Shin, *Ethnic Nationalism in Korea: Genealogy, Politics, and Legacy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), 4–8. Henry Em, "Nationalism, Post-nationalism, and Shin Ch'ae-ho," *Korea Journal* (Summer 1999): 284–317. Chan-seung Park, "Should Korean Historians Abandon Nationalism?," *Korea Journal* (Summer 1999): 319–342.

[8] Broadly speaking, nationalist historiography describes histories written as a narrative of resistance, specifically to colonial and imperial forces. Because of this so-called "biased" perspective, many historians have critiqued nationalistic renditions of Korean history, focusing mostly on discrediting theories of indigenous development. The "sprouts" theory counters the claim that Korean capitalism is rooted in industrialization during the Japanese occupation and instead re-locates capitalism's foundations to the indigenous farmers of the 17th century. See, Man-gil Kang, *Chosŏnhugi sangŏp chabonŭi palt'al* [The development of commercial capital in the late Choson Dynasty] (Seoul: Koryo University Press, 1974), and Kim, Yong-soˇp, *Chosoˇn hugi nongoˇpsa yoˇn'gu* [Studies in agraian history of the late Choson Dynasty] (Seoul: Ilchogak, 1971).
For texts countering "sprouts" theory, see Carter Eckert, *Offspring of Empire: Koch'ang Kims and the Colonial Origins of Korean Capitalism 1876-1945* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1991) and Jun Uchida, *Brokers of Empire: Japanese Settler Colonialism in Korea, 1876-1945* (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2014).

[9] Andre Schmid, *Korea Between Empires* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002). And Henry Em, "*Minjok* as a Modern and Democratic Construct: Sin Ch'aeho's Historiography," in *Colonial Modernity in Korea*, edited by Gi-wook Shin and Michael Robinson (Boston: Harvard University Asia Center, 1999), 336–362.

with the work of Sin Ch'aeho for the *TaeHan maeil sinbo* (*Korea Daily News*), and articulates how their penned resistance established the foundation for the ideological formation of Korea's national identity. During a period of constant crisis due to external (colonization) and internal (uprisings, failed governmental reforms) factors, the enlightened elite aimed to propagate a reform project called the *munmyŏng kaehwa*, through which the Korean populace could be disciplined into adopting certain behaviors that would allow the nation to join the global capitalist system of modernity. This reformist ideal attempted to create anew a type of nationalism that not only touted "civilization and enlightenment" as its guiding principles, but also negated colonial sovereignty.[10] The nation was viewed as "an object in need of reform" and through this reform a new nationalistic framework that was separate from the colonialist enterprise would emerge. Ironically, however, the Japanese colonialists also strived for Korea to reach a capitalist modernity, but instead of envisioning the nation achieving that through self-enlightenment, the colonial vision emphasized the nation's lack of disciplining and inserted a need for colonialist intervention.[11] The Korean intelligentsia's diagnosis for the ailing nation in turn served as yet another impetus for colonialism to become the treatment. While the overall project of enlightenment may have backfired, the elite's consideration of creating a new form of national agency that moved to negate colonial influence still proved to be an important step towards locating Korea's inherent nationhood.

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[10] Schmid, 37.

[11] Schmid, 126.

Additionally, as the nation moved away from a tributary relationship with China, after the Treaty of Shimonoseki in 1895, Korea's northern neighbor was viewed by the elite as an example of a nation lacking the civilization required to join the global (Western) community. A number of political and cultural changes were adopted to essentially "scrape off" the past's Chinese influence to uncover the indigenous elements of Korea alone that was hidden underneath the layers of Chinese-Korean hybrid culture. Relocating the "purely Korean" meant that there was a need to clearly demarcate the difference between what was foreign and most importantly what was Chinese. Nationalism was redefined by emphasizing the nation's solitary sovereignty over its culture and history through methods such as: the veneration of heroes from the past before the influence of China; the acclamation of the Korean vernacular language; the elevation of the king to emperor; the creation of a national flag; and the consideration of Korea as a member of a larger *Tongyang*, or Eastern, community through which China was no longer a stand-alone influence but could be considered just another element within a greater ideology of pan-Asianism.[12] By disavowing the nation's previous reliance on China and embracing a purely indigenous nationalism, the intellectual elite continued their mission to redefine and redeem Korean identity.[13]

Dissatisfied with Korean nationhood's continued reliance on such dichotomies, a select few members of the intelligentsia strived to reclaim Korean identity in strictly essentialist and spiritual terms. By homing in on grandiose terms of national subjectivity

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[12] Schmid, 87.

[13] Em, "Nationalism, Post-Nationalism, and Shin Ch'ae-ho."

such as, *kukhon* (national soul), *kuksu* (national essence), and most importantly of all *minjok* (national, ethnic, and collective identity), intellectuals attempted to articulate the Korean spirit through a reconsideration of history and memory presented as empirical evidence. *Minjok* was conceived as unencumbered by national borders or foreign powers because it relied purely on a mythical genealogy that begins with the nation's foundational myths.[14] It was a spiritual and historical identity that offered an inherent subjectivity, which required no conscious adoption by its subjects but was rather just existent within.[15] This essentialist (and totalizing) formation of Korean subjectivity allowed the members of the collective unit (*minjok*) to completely disregard outside interventions through a method of absolute exclusion. "To be Korean" no longer required re-interpreting or re-defining but was entirely and inherently essential and objectively spiritual.

Because this newfound "essence" was conceived from the start as a form of national redemption, maintaining its value required a cycle of validation through acts of collective and nationalistic sacrifice. As such, each historical moment of crisis, from the Korean War (1950-53) and the subsequent era of Cold War imperialism to decades of military dictatorships and civil unrest, called upon a collective effort to retroactively "fix" the past and thereby (re)affirm the strength of the Korean spirit and its impact on the preceding moment in history.

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[14] Schmid, 172.

[15] Gi-wook Shin also discusses Korea's "ethnic nationalism," in which national identity was inherited and maintained through bloodlines. His book discusses how this conception of a unique Korean ethnie influenced all aspects of Korean society, culture, and politics to the modern day. See, Shin, *Ethnic Nationalism in Korea: Genealogy, Politics, and Legacy*.

For example, after the Korean War, which further intensified the need to emphasize "wholeness," subsequent political leadership introduced a tradition of authoritarian rule that lasted well into the late 1980s. While there is no question that these imperialistic and militaristic regimes under Rhee Syngman, Park Chung Hee, and Chun Doo Hwan demanded physical, political, and spiritual sacrifices from the nation, it is also important to note that citizen reaction to these decades of political strong-holding also exhibited a desire to redeem from past failures. Despite the nation's rapid economic growth, especially during Park's reign, student activists interpreted Korea's post-war experiences with modernity as detrimental to the nation's collective conscience. Calling for the end of authoritarianism and foreign imperialism, they began what is called the *minjung* movement, or the people's movement, to recover, what they saw, as Korea's lost subjectivity from the post-colonial narrative of negative and failed modernity. [16]

Namhee Lee's *The Making of Minjung* is as much an investigation of yet another redemptive form of Korean collective identity as it is an analysis of the origins and historical trajectories of the *minjung* movement. *Minjung*, or more literally the "common people," is defined as the "subject of historical and social change" in opposition to the "failed history" brought on by the agents of negativity. Conceived in response to authoritarian regimes under Presidents Park Chung-hee and Chun Doo-hwan, the movement touted an active and collective identity that aimed to reverse "the crisis of historical subjectivity" and re-evaluate the failed past to thus bring about a successful

[16] Namhee Lee, *The Making of Minjung: Democracy and the Politics of Representation in South Korea* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009).

future. By articulating and then opposing a number of totalizing "others," such as communism, state oppression, and American intervention, the *minjung* practitioners or intellectuals (*undongkwŏn*) aimed to resituate the past's negativity formed through passivity to a rebellious and active agency capable of transformation and redemption. Re-conceptualizing past events, such as the Tonghak peasant uprising of 1894, the April 3 1948 Jeju Uprising, the Korean War, and most importantly the 1980 Gwangju uprising, as representative of a greater *minjung* resistance rather than isolated events, the *undongkwŏn* supplied Korean history a platform upon which the "oppressed" could rise up against the "other."

As members of an exclusive and elite class of students and intellectuals, however, the *undongkwŏn* were also forced to conceive a way to overturn their own privileged subjectivities and *earn* the right to join and fight alongside the *minjung*. The leaders of *minjung* movement, then, struggled with contending with two opposing factors: on the one hand, they touted an ideology of inherent *minjung* spirit in all Koreans, while on the other, their self-adopted role to enlighten placed them in a state of privilege that contradicted their identification as a part of the masses themselves. As a result, the *undongkwŏn* were completely dependent on their own guilt, need for atonement, and acts of self-sacrifice to attain status as *minjung* activists.[17] The historical agency the *undongkwŏn* attempted to relocate could only be granted through a process of negation and reversal. The replacement of a totalizing meta-narrative was not done through a localized individual story but through another universal history that the *undongkwŏn*

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[17] Lee, 19, 52, 215.

created through a process of redemption and a disavowal of the self.[18] *Undongkwŏn* members, for example, adapting or disguising as workers within factories could not be fulfilled without first acknowledging a difference between the two and thereby demonstrating a moral superiority or privilege over the other through the practice of self-negation.[19] The collective identity embodied within *minjung*, while inherently capable of social change, could not itself be attained without self-sacrifice.

Successively, this moral code to sacrifice for the sake of national redemption became habit and expectation even during the democratic era and was further solidified during the Asian Financial Crisis of 1997. Called the "IMF period" by Koreans because of the state's bailout of $58 billion by the International Monetary Fund, this economic breakdown demanded yet another collective act of sacrifice in the form of not only gold, but also national diligence to bring the nation back from the brink of economic ruin. Largely stemming from a series of bankruptcies of big-scale conglomerates (*chaebol*), an economic system inherited from the Park regime, in conjunction with currency depreciation from banking system failures as well as political instability, the IMF period called for extreme austerity measures throughout the nation. The policies that brought great economic rise during the 1960s through to the 1980s could not be sustained once the nation required more complex economic strategies during the global era. The result was nearly 1.66 million jobs lost and an unemployment rate that increased from less

[18] Lee, 43, 154.

[19] Lee, 153.

than 3 percent to over 7.9 percent.[20] In order to aid in paying back the IMF loan, the Korean government launched the national gold collection campaign. And as an article in Forbes magazine put it, the campaign "today stands as one of the most moving shows of patriotism and self-sacrifice the world has ever known."[21] This nationalized call for self-sacrifice saw participation by well over 3.5 million citizens and collected over $2 million worth of gold.

Summarily, negative historical interpretation solidified the nation under a common goal to recover, and that common goal further intensified the need for a nationalized identity fueled by a unified conscience. Collectively burdened to protect this essential and uniquely Korean conscience, national duty soon overshadowed or subsumed private moralities. Citizens were compelled, not just by the government but by their own collective conscience, to sacrifice their time, labor, and personal goals for the redemption of national economy, standing, and identity.

II. The Ethics of Identity[22]

Such collective efforts to retroactively "fix" the past is where the confluence of nation, identity, and historiography seep its way into affecting the formation and

[20] Hyun-Hoon Lee, "Korea's 1997 Financial Crisis: Causes Consequences and Prospects," *Agenda* 6, no. 4 (1999): 351–363.

[21] Frank Holmes, "How Gold Rode to the Rescue of South Korea," *Forbes*, September 27, 2016, https://www.forbes.com/sites/greatspeculations/2016/09/27/how-gold-rode-to-the-rescue-of-south-korea/#527544ce33d3.

[22] I borrow this phrase from Kwame Anthony Appiah. See Appiah, *The Ethics of Identity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

practice of local ethics. But what does identity really have to do with ethics in the first place? Looking beyond the processes of forming *national* identity, this project aims to investigate how, conversely, this national subjectivity—so entrenched in the act of redemption—may also work to define, or limit, the conditions of Korea's *ethical* conscience. According to Kwame Anthony Appiah,

> Identities make ethical claims because—and this is just a fact about the world we human beings have created—we make our lives *as* men and *as* women, *as* gay and *as* whites. Immediately, conundrums start to assemble. Do identities represent a curb on autonomy, or do they provide its contours? What claims, if any can identity groups as such justly make upon the state? These are concerns that have gained a certain measure of salience in recent political philosophy, but, as I hope to show, they are anything but newfangled. What's modern is that we conceptualize identity in particular ways. What's age-old is that when we are asked—and ask ourselves—*who* we are, we are being asked *what* we are as well.[23]

Using John Stuart Mill as philosophical touchstone, Appiah concludes that one's individualism is defined and presented through choice. He claims, however, that the choices we make are often, if not always, affected by greater powers at play. He defines our "social identity" as one that is outlined by the choices presented to us by any given society we occupy. He gives the example of a person who identifies as Jewish. By virtue of this social (and religious) identity, this person is given the choice to accept or reject

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[23] Appiah, xiv.

certain choices—such as, food, dress, interest in shared histories, etcetera—pertaining to a variety of values defined by that specific society. Speaking against a strictly liberal and unencumbered vision of autonomy, Appiah stresses that despite the individual self's capacity to reject a given choice, society's influence upon the existence of that choice, in the first place, cannot be ignored. And so, Appiah's solution is for the individual self to work in tandem with the values shaped by society in order to create an algorithm of "soul making" that may lead to "ethical success." In other words, society holds the obligation to guide individuals into making ethical decisions, while the ultimate act of decision-making is left to the individual.

Put another way, apart from the obvious stipulation that my morality shapes my identity, this project focuses on the reverse contention that identity itself can very much mold and frame how I make decisions and relate to my surroundings. So, if Korea's societal and national history has been formed through repeated acts of collective redemption, would it not be safe to say that such contours of Korea's *national* identity may, in turn, determine the direction of its *ethical* identity?

I have coined the term "retrospective curse" to describe Korea's one-directional state of moral reflection. I use the word "retrospective" to signal the directional ties between the nation's historical identity and its moral subjectivity. Although self-reflection and then the resulting self-transcendence is often noted to be key in the practice of sound ethics, I argue that Korea's particular method of reflexivity, or "soul making," has been constrained to a singular and collective trajectory, ultimately obfuscating the element of choice. In order to redeem, one must look back, thus presenting a directional conundrum in which Korea's communal habit of retrospection

can supersede the necessity of individual introspection. In other words, despite the necessity of particularity in tandem with transcendence in the practice of responsibility, Korea's ethical identity, appears to be stuck in a holding pattern with the nation's collective and redemptive past.

My use of the term "curse" can be explained two-fold. The first explanation connects back to the "holding pattern" I refer to in the previous paragraph. In line with Benedict Anderson's contention that the origins of nationalism are based on the "imagined" conceptions of a limited and sovereign community, in combination with Melissa Brown's depiction of nation-building as reliant on "constructed narratives of the past" (what she calls "narratives of unfolding"), I emphasize the veiled and limiting conditions of Korea's ethical identity because of its entrenchment in the parameters of nationhood.[24] As the historiography on the construction of Korea's modern national identity shows, every stage of Korea's "imagined" national narrative relies on establishing, relocating, or protecting the nation's essential subjecthood. Each time the *minjok* is redeemed, the nationalistic narrative builds and compounds, eventually converting it to myth imbued with sacred character.

Taking cue from Emile Durkheim's "totemic principle," which envisions the worship of sacred totems as mechanisms of moral force that unifies a given society, Carolyn Marvin and David Ingle, in their discussion on the moralistic structure of

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[24] Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* and Melissa J. Brown, *Is Taiwan Chinese?: The Impact of Culture, Power, and Migration on Changing Identities* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004).

nationalism, goes so far as to equate nationalism with religious sectarianism. Identifying the necessity of sacrifice in the sustaining of both, the authors state,

> Perhaps nationalism and sectarianism recognize something about each other that they hesitate to recognize about themselves. Each fears that members of the other community are willing to kill and die for truth as they understand it. For what is really true in any community is what its members can agree is worth killing for, or what they can be compelled to sacrifice their lives for. The sacred is thus easily recognized. It is the set of beliefs and persons for which we ought to shed out own blood, if necessary, when there is a serious threat. Rituals that celebrate this blood sacrifice give expression and witness to faith. Sacrificial death thus defines both sectarian and national identity. This is the first sense in which both are species of religion.[25]

On top of this, the authors point out that the sacred nature of nationalism, in addition to unifying the community under a single truth, makes sacrifice not only necessary but also secret in its true purpose. "Our deepest secret, the collective group taboo, is the knowledge that society depends on the death of [a] sacrificial group *at the hands of the group itself*."[26] They claim that a society's unity and endurance can only be manifested in

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[25] Carolyn Marvin and David W. Ingle, "Blood Sacrifice and the Nation: Revisiting Civil Religion," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 64, no. 4 (Winter, 1996): 768–9.
For more on the impact of nationalistic sacrifice in warfare on the construction of national identity, see John Hutchinson, "Warfare, Remembrance and National Identity," in *Nationalism and Ethnosymbolism: History, Culture and Ethnicity in the Formations of Nations*, edited by Athena S. Leoussi and Steven Grosby (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 42-54.

[26] Marvin and Ingle, 771.

the fact that the society is worth dying for. And this worth, in order to be sustained, must be demonstrated openly *by* the members of the group and *for* the members of the group. In other words, a community's collective identity is collectivized and moralized, not by the destruction of enemies, but through the sacrifice of the community itself.

While I will not go so far as to say that Korea's *minjoksŏng* is a totem or that its nationalism is a religion, it is important to point out the moralistic hold any forms of society can enact on its inhabitants. Not only does the act of redemption already live within the realm of human moral conscience, but because Korean national subjectivity itself has been formed through such "moral" acts, the resulting identity becomes sacred and in need of constant protection. Put another way, Korean ethical identity has been bound by its communal duty to sacrifice personal sovereignty for the sake of national redemption.

Furthermore, when nationalism meets sacrifice, the binding pattern multiplies in intensity. Just as Korea's past intellectuals invoked the nation's mythical heroes (i.e. Tan'gun) to validate the nation's collective identity, so national origin narratives are usually predicated on the sacrifice of the founding generation. And once that initial sacrifice is mythologized, future generations are burdened with the responsibility to remain loyal and prove themselves worthy of that first act of national heroism. A cycle of sacrifice then, must continue because if betrayed, the mythical sacrifice will be stripped of its meaning and foundational importance. What is interesting about this pattern is that over time, rather than indicating that the state is valuable and thus deserves sacrifice, the act of sacrifice itself imbues meaning and sacred value onto the state. National duty is demanded, not because the nation is already so deserved, but reversely,

because the performance of sacrificial duty retroactively solidifies the nation's sovereign worth. In other words, sacrifice has the inherent ability to manufacture future obligation just by the virtue of its requirement to endlessly replicate. The more a citizen sacrifices and gives to his/her nation, the more they are invested in validating their own previous actions. They are "cursed" to repeat the past.

The second reasoning behind using the term "curse" lies in Korea's relationship with the evolving conditions of postmodern society. In a span of about thirty years, Korea has positioned itself as one of the most economically developed nations in the world. Korea's sudden emergence into the politics of modernity and industrialization, which Kyung-sup Chang has referred to as "compressed modernity," has undoubtedly affected the social *and* moral structure of the nation that once touted homogeneity and tradition as its founding principles.[27] Authors such as Chang and Gi-wook Shin have commented on the schisms that globalization, urbanization, and democratization has brought to the fabric of Korean society.[28] Chang states that, "As modern (Western) values and institutions literally poured in with many traditional (indigenous) values and institutions still remaining effective, the absence of systematic principles for their harmonization and integration has led to a situation of *accidental pluralism* in the systems of values and institutions."[29] Focusing mainly on the transformation of the

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[27] Kyung-sup Chang, *South Korea under Compressed Modernity: Familiar Political Economy in Transition* (New York: Routledge, 2010).

[28] See, Gi-wook Shin, *Ethnic Nationalism in Korea: Genealogy, Politics, and Legacy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006).

[29] Chang, 8.
Also see, Kyung-sup Chang and Min-young Song, "The stranded individualizer under compressed modernity: South Korean women in individualization without individualism," *The British Journal of Sociology* 61, no. 3 (2010): 539–564.

family, Chang laments that one of the unfortunate side effects of rapid modernization is that it has degenerated "traditional" familial values into a sort of "familial egoism" that prevents development of the social, and in some ways moral, elements of the Korean community. The generational dissonance incurred by the rapid succession of shifts in sociocultural patterns is so great, in fact, that some scholars have dubbed Korea's version of modernity a "quasi-modernity" that exhibits a "mixture of heterogeneous and conflicting institutional and cultural programs, with native Korean, Chinese, Confucian, Japanese, American, and European elements."[30] Additionally, historiographical trends have also recognized the need to incorporate "post-nationalist" methods in the study of Korean history. Repositioning the Korean *minjok* as a modern construct, Henry Em contends that nationalistic historiographies that emphasize exclusive homogeneity prevent the recognition of internal heterogeneity and particularity within modern Korea.[31]

Cultural theorists, such as Lauren Berlant, have spoken to postmodern society's tendency to rely on misguided perceptions of the present as a way to extend an already fractured sense of belonging. She states that a state of "cruel optimism" that "exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing," articulates a reliance on an affective structure and a condition of possibility that sustains the fantastical inclination towards "the good life."[32] The postmodern predicament is defined by a state

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[30] Suk-man Hwang and Jinho Lim, "Unfinished modernity or another modernity?: The South Korean case," *The Journal of Korean Social Science* 42 (2015): 86.

[31] Em, "Nationalism, Post-Nationalism, and Shin Ch'ae-ho."

[32] Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University, 2011), 1.

of, what Berlant calls, "crisis ordinariness" in which society has lost the ability to apprehend the true state of its surroundings because it has accustomed itself to modes of survival that obfuscate the present impasse. The world is said to live through the everyday not to overcome traumas of the past but to ward off future crises. They are in perpetual preparation for what-is-to-come, a sort of futuristic or anticipated haunting, in order to protect the good life from imaginary threats.

On the other hand, Korea's already fragmented, and perhaps even "incomplete," experience with modernity incites even further disorientation when confronted with such states of postmodernism. I argue that Korea's current state, although displaying a similar pattern of ignoring the present truth, suffers not from *anticipated* fear, but instead exhibits a systematic pattern of retroactive reflection that nonetheless instills dissonance and confusion during an era already disjointed. Just as threats to a "good life" can work to reaffirm its goodness and bring about motivations to protect it, attacks to its shared "essence" prove the value of South Korean communal morality and reinforces the necessity to redeem it when it is lost. As a result of such redemptive moral traditions, South Korean society, in its current day, finds itself ill-equipped to deal with the immediate ramifications of what Jameson calls, a "crisis of historicity."[33] While postmodern society calls for a destructuring of the ontological subject — the "I" — Korea remains encapsulated to the homogenized "we." Accustomed to anchoring itself to a unified narrative of the past, the Korean conscience becomes aimless when

[33] Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, Duke University Press, 1991).

historicity and even memory itself becomes unreliable. Lacking historical foundation for particularized moral agency and no longer motivated by the same nationalistic urgency, the people are unable to adequately reorient themselves with the changing times. They are trapped in a "retrospective curse."

III. No Turning Back: Summary of Chapters

Up until the late 1990s, Korea's films mimicked society's historical preoccupation with redemption. Allegorical figureheads, such as the sacrificial mother, the national patriot, or the solemn patriarch were first, utilized to demonstrate the nation's need to return to a period of tradition before the onslaught of modernism during the 1950s and 1960s, and then, presented as tools to understand or "fix" the disappearance of concrete historical memory as films moved on to the 1990s.

Kelly Jeong's consideration of Golden Age melodramas, for example, investigates Korea's meta-narratives and teleological structuring during a time of social chaos and political change. Her analyses of the perpetually nostalgic father-figure of a lower-middle class family within these melodramas state that such characters represent the nation's postcolonial condition of rapid modernization. The Golden Age patriarch allegorizes Korea's attempts to rebuild the nation and articulate its nationhood during the postwar period through the construction of a national masculine figure as metaphor

for the nation as a whole.[34] Steven Chung, too, discusses how "melodramas of development," such as Shin Sang-ok's *Evergreen* and *Rice*, embody teleological themes of rural revitalization and national reconstruction to relocate national subjecthood.[35]

Successively, films of the 1990s also emphasized the need for re-evaluation of the nation's tumultuous history. David Martin-Jones, for example, focuses on time-travel narratives such as *Ditto* and *Calla*. Although his analysis still attempts to negotiate a unified national identity amidst a period of transition, the two films reject a linear temporal structure and replaces it with one that weaves in and out to collapse two points in history.[36] The films acknowledge that one cannot change the past, but still emphasizes the importance of looking back and evaluating the *memories* of the past. Joseph Jeon also discusses *Memories of Murder*'s postmodern failures, rather than successes, at situating national identity and history.[37] Although the film utilizes Todorov's detective schematic, it fails to reach a discernible end and, instead, demonstrates millennial films' tendencies to counteract hegemony and sovereign subjectivity through a collapse of modernity's anchors, such as history, singular agency, and the archive. Aaron Magnan-Park's discussion of *Peppermint Candy* also focuses on

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[34] See, Kelly Jeong, "Nation Rebuilding and Postwar South Korean Cinema: *The Coachman* and *The Stray Bullet*," *The Journal of Korean Studies* 11, no. 1 (2006): 75–95.
And, Kelly Jeong, "The Quasi Patriarch: Kim Sung-ho and South Korean Postwar Movies," in *The Korean Popular Culture Reader*, edited by Kyung Hyun Kim and Youngmin Choe (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 126–144.

[35] Steven Chung, *Split Screen Korea: Shin Sang-ok and Postwar Cinema* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014).

[36] David Martin-Jones, "Decompressing Modernity: South Korean Time Travel Narratives and the IMF Crisis." *Cinema Journal* 46, no. 4 (2007): 45-67.

[37] Joseph Jeon, "Memories of Memories: Historicity, Nostalgia, and Archive in Bong Joon-ho's *Memories of Murder*," *Cinema Journal* 50, no.1 (2011): 75-95. Also see, Joseph Jeon, "Residual selves: Trauma and Forgetting in Park Chan-wook's *Oldboy*," *Positions* 17, no.3 (2009): 713-740.

the film's reverse chronological narrative structure to "directly challenge the progressive, linear, and teleological construction of historicism and its incorporation within official history."[38] Through what the author calls "rhetorical pauses" and "repetitive mnemonic traces," the audience is given temporal gaps within the narrative to contemplate the past and bring it to the present.

The narratives that are dealt with in Magnan-Park's, Jeon's, and Martin-Jones's articles all reject a linear or chronological format in order to understand the past or the "compressed modernity" that Korea has undergone in the past few decades. The debates regarding fact versus memory, linear versus hybrid narrative, and history versus nostalgia all focus on an aspect of narrative that relies on reclaiming a lost history or past through a reinterpretation or acknowledgement of temporality.

Unlike such previous trends of remembrance, where redemption from past failures—whether by re-considering history or memory—was the enduring goal, the texts in this study question the value of redemption itself by entering the realm of ethical deconstruction. This project studies filmic and literary portrayals of sacrificial heroes in South Korean film and literature and asks two main questions. First, why do so many contemporary Korean films deny their heroes or heroines a successful and happy ending? Second, what do such failed acts of heroic sacrifice reveal about the nation's shifting relationship with history, memory, and ethics? I will attempt to answer these questions by utilizing the theme of transgression as a methodological framework. In

[38] Aaron Han Joon Magnan-Park, "*Peppermint Candy*: The Will Not to Forget," in *New Korean Cinema*, edited by Chi-yun Shin and Julian Stringer (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 159-169.

order to perform transgression, one must first locate the limit. Keeping this in mind, each chapter will first identify a limitation of sorts in South Korean society's particular mode of identity construction, and then highlight culture's efforts to illuminate and thereby transgress those hidden boundaries. By recognizing the repetitive and non-progressive nature of Korea's fixation on remembrance, and the emotional hold narratives of nationhood has on moral trajectory, I argue that contemporary filmmakers and writers have begun a new trend to break the "retrospective curse" and move away from the teleological boundaries of historical and national subjectivity. Bringing to the fore *affective* patterns, such as love, guilt, resentment, or faith, each subsequent chapter will emphasize how such sacrificial "emotions" call attention to *immediate* relationships with individual others, rather than with a collective past.

Chapter one focuses on the "good" mother archetype and investigates how the inherent reversals within her paradigm of selflessness actually possesses the capacity to not only transform her maternal acts to a performance of violent redemption, but also, conversely, mistake that violence for a demonstration of sacrificial motherhood. Perhaps influenced by a greater Confucian and colonial discourse regarding gender roles, Korea's filmic treatment of the maternal has mostly delegated her to past pre-conceived morals of the sacrificial mother paradigm. Her devotion must be atemporal, illogical, and, most of all, without consideration of her own self. But when this formula is deconstructed, the "good" mother's unconditional love, rather than signal a love with no bounds, reversely displays its ability to indicate and delimit the very conditions of her unconditionality. Her inevitable failure to perform this "conditional" unconditionality, in turn, demands an insurmountable guilt that can only end in a violent act of self-sacrifice. I argue that

Mother (Bong Joon-ho, 2009) and *Pieta* (Kim Ki-duk, 2012), rather than trap the "good" mother within the traditional domain of selflessness, locate her conditions of possibility within the regressive trappings of guilt and resentment. By considering the inherent violence within the act of sacrifice itself, this chapter upends the expectations of the national and sacrificial mother-figure by presenting the possibility for her to forgive, forget, and perhaps re-establish motherhood on her own terms.

Chapter two transfers the focus over to the sovereign (and male) hero within *Snowpiercer* (Bong Joon-ho, 2013) and *Train to Busan* (Yeon Sang-ho, 2016). Just as the previous chapter investigated the "good" mother's unavoidable path to resentment, the deconstruction of the hero's ethical sacrifice also manifests within a desire for redemption, which in his case hinges on utility. In reference to Korea's historical experiences with utilitarian leadership, I problematize the hero's foundation in such a formula of economy that necessarily mandates an evaluation of worth regarding his sacrificial identity. Before the hero's death, the performance of sacrifice in of itself is inadequate, and must be evaluated within a scale of *utilitarian value* that necessarily places the sacrificed-by and the sacrificed-for within an economy of exchange and valuation. In other words, the hero's sacrifice enters an economic space in which "to sacrifice for" transforms from an act of pure giving to one that finds motivation within its capacity to retrieve and redeem. I place the actions of *Snowpiercer*'s (Bong Joon-ho, 2013) protagonist, Curtis, in conversation with these preconditions of heroism. By seeking heroic sovereignty at all costs, Curtis reveals the twisted paradigm of sovereign guilt in which the hero can remain as such, if and only if, he has performed a sacrifice equivalent to death. While Curtis becomes trapped in his self-employed cycle of

redemption, *Train to Busan* (Yeon Sang-ho, 2016) presents an opportunity to release the hero from his utilitarian binds. I argue that through a performance of "double sacrifice" — erasures of both his human and zombie self — the film's hero Seok-woo succeeds in relinquishing his utilitarian sovereignty and restoring the possibility of a truly heroic performance of responsibility. Ultimately, this chapter reveals the aporia within utilitarian redemption as well as present an alternate and vulnerable sacrifice that is not simply equivalent to death, but overflows its signification.

Chapter three moves on from the spiritual realm of redemption, to a more fundamental consideration of memory and its relation to responsibility, both individual and communal. By first considering the politics of memory and its relation to vulnerability, I probe the ethical parameters of remembrance itself by studying Byun Young-joo's film *Helpless* (2012) and O Chong-hui's short story *Spirit on the Wind* (1986). Although the narratives center around vulnerable women with traumatic histories, the primary line of inquiry does not dwell on the protagonist's personal and first-hand memories with the past, but instead considers our, the spectator's, second-hand response to and framing of those events. As a point of contact for the viewer, both narratives rely on the woman's male partners to translate, mediate, and reconstruct her traumatic memories. Through their indirect, but still significant, encounters with her past — the spectator's memory of (her) memories — the viewers are introduced to memory's influence upon, not only the sustaining of past relationships, but also the building of new ones in the future. By considering how the politics of remembrance interacts with the ethics of memory, the chapter highlights the fact that simply remembering, or even commemorating, trauma may not be enough — in fact, an over-

dependence on memory's transcendental power can accentuate, rather than soothe, the other's vulnerability.

Building upon the previous three chapters, the final chapter concludes the dissertation by utilizing a wider angle to place the platforms of identity, ethics, and the national in conversation. By first demonstrating the enduring nature of Korea's canonical narrative of sacrifice, the chapter considers the question: Is sacrifice indeed necessary to maintain a community? A key component to tackling this inquiry lies in the fact that Korea's national identity, because it is forged through collective sacrifice, is made sacred and thus ethical. National identity invokes specific behaviors; those habitual behaviors are promoted as acts of nationalism; and finally, this nationalized ethos becomes not only reasonable, but also absolutely vital. Ultimately, the boundaries between the nation and the national, the public and the private, as well as the communal and the particular are not only blurred, but oftentimes exempt from consideration. Put simply, the national becomes universal. I first look at director Yoon Je-kyun's *Ode to My Father* (2015) as a contemporary film that exemplifies this concept of the "universal national." Then, by reading the film *The Terror: Live* (Kim Byung-woo, 2013), I investigate how such practices of ignoring the particular for the sake of the universal can bring about acts of sacrifice that is not only necessary, but more importantly inescapable. To conclude the project, I utilize Richard Kim's novel *The Martyred* in the final section to outline the distinctions and tensions between the performances of faith, ethics, and duty in order to demonstrate how the act of sacrifice, through *particularized* modes of moral emergence, can be rescued from its fate of universal inevitability.

CHAPTER ONE

Self(ish) Sacrifice:

The "Good" Mother in Bong Joon-ho's *Mother* and Kim Ki-duk's *Pieta*

Tout autre est tout autre.

… the concepts of responsibility, of decision, or of duty, are condemned a priori to paradox, scandal, and aporia. Paradox, scandal, and aporia are themselves nothing other than sacrifice, the revelation of conceptual thinking at its limit, at its death and finitude. As soon as I enter into a relation with the other, … I know that I can respond only by sacrificing ethics, that is, by sacrificing whatever obliges me to also respond, in the same way, in the same instant, to all the others.[1]

— Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*

[1] Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 68.

I. Introduction

Mother's blood-splattered face fills the screen as she mutters with disgust, "You're not even worth the dirt in my son's toenails" (Fig. 1.1). Her expression remains distant yet determined, even as she wipes a speck of blood from the corner of her eye. It is only when she notices the pool of blood oozing from the man's bludgeoned head that she regains awareness and shifts to a more human response. She screams and starts to frantically mop of the blood with a piece of fabric (Fig. 1.2). The panic does not last long, however, as she quickly returns to her stony glare and slips back, both physically and mentally, into her role as the "good" mother.

Figure 1.1 Mother commits a violent sacrifice in *Mother* (Bong Joon-ho, 2009)

Figure 1.2 Mother struggles to mop up the blood oozing from her murdered victim in *Mother* (Bong Joon-ho, 2009)

This scene in Bong Joon-ho's aptly titled *Mother* (2009), exemplifies a trend in South Korean contemporary cinema in which the narrative presents a moral archetype, such as the "good" mother-figure, only to upend her pre-determined morality and utilize its tropes, not as demonstrations of proper behavior, but as justifications for gross misdeeds and violent transgressions. The act of bludgeoning a man to death, in of itself, is immoral in any circumstance. But, when the violence is committed by a doting mother whose sole motivation in life is to protect her son, the murderous deed enters an ethical gray zone. She does not commit these acts of her own accord, but is compelled to do so by her pre-ordained title of "mother." Her maternal duties trump her individual morality and in the end, any action, whether moral or immoral, performed under the umbrella of motherhood is considered an act of selfless sacrifice.

This chapter traces this paradigm and investigates how the inherent reversals within the "good" mother's pre-determined guilt actually possesses the capacity to not

only transform her selfless sacrifice to an act of violent redemption, but also, conversely, mistake that violence for a performance of sacrificial motherhood. The absolute nature of the mother's "unconditional" love ironically conditions her behavior and re-interprets her original passive moral code to one that can conflate a redemption of guilt for motherly affection with a performance of violence for maternal duty. I will attempt to trace the foundations that lead to such deconstructions of ethical norms within the maternal by outlining two filmic narratives, Bong Joon-ho's *Mother* (2009) and Kim Ki-duk's *Pieta* (2012), and their explications of the "sacrificial mother" in relation to the nation's moral circumstance. By re-evaluating the "good" mother within the context of guilt and resentment and their subsequent moral twists, the chapter aims to reveal, and perhaps break from, the totalizing and redemptive nature of her self-sacrifice.

II. The "Good" Mother as the Melodramatic Paradigm

As a discursive subject formed to reflect and uphold the nation's redemptive moral framework, the "good" mother's general condition of possibility relies on the "retrospective" affects of guilt and resentment. She, as a subject, an identity, and a socially/culturally constructed archetype, is defined, not by her inherent selflessness for her child as one might assume, but by the inescapable loop of guilt and responsibility that ultimately must end in self-sacrifice. In other words, a "good" mother's unconditional love may signal a love with no bounds, but it may also indicate and delimit the very conditions of her unconditionality. Her devotion must be atemporal, illogical,

and, most of all, without consideration of her own self. Her inevitable failure to perform this "conditional" unconditionality, in turn, demands an insurmountable guilt that can only end in a violent act of self-sacrifice. She is forever in a state of irresolvable atonement or contradictory subjecthood; she is trapped within a cycle of never-ending redemption that is at once inevitable and impossible to surpass.

Although this "representation" of the mother-figure should be differentiated from the actual real-life practice of mothering, the grand paradigm of "good" motherhood has always disregarded the individual mother and positioned her within the confines of mother-as-institution or social discourse. Ann Kaplan, in her study of representations of the mother in American popular culture, attempts to separate her discussion of the "historical mother" and the "discursive mother," but ultimately agrees that society's understanding of her role will always emerge as reaction or rejection of more powerful hegemonic modes of subjectivity. "[A] "female" discourse manifests itself, not in any return to some "essential" femaleness, but in the very process of struggle against dominant discourses that position women in oppressive ways; it emerges, that is, in the "gaps" of patriarchal hegemony discovered in moments of struggle, disruption, rebellion." Whether her emergence from hegemony manifests as a consumer rather than producer within the nuclear family structure, a liberated figure threatening that nuclear framework, or a member of the postmodern workforce that obliterates that institution altogether, the mother's condition of being is always determined by and predicated on her relation to the collective status quo.[2] The mother, regardless of her "good" or

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[2] Kaplan formulates the constructions of and shifts to the paradigm of the motherly of ideal through three historical events within American history. The industrial revolution is said to have conceived the "modern

subversive performance, is never more than a "gap" or gray zone within a larger system of social discourse. Her subjectivity is never located individually or internally, but is always found by looking beyond or above her limited representation within a master paradigm of sacrificial selflessness.

This "master paradigm" is most often articulated through the study of melodramas specifically because of its mass appeal and its consideration of the female subject as both narrative character and audience. Peter Brooks defines the "melodramatic mode" as a construct to reveal the "moral occult" of the real world hidden within the gestures and emotions shown in metaphoric narratives. He strives to relocate the inexpressible and the unspeakable through the analyses of a clear and stark sentimentalization of ethics.[3] For example, Thomas Elsaesser discusses how Hollywood melodramas of the '40s to '60s were stylistically and narratively structured around a closed loop in which characters navigated through struggles and influenced events within an internal environment of set moral constructs. They were "locked into a universe of real and metaphoric mirrors."[4] This development of the "melodramatic

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mother," who consumes as much as she produces within the newly formed middle-class home. The first World War sees the birth of the "high modernist mother," who begins to threaten the safety of the nuclear family through her political liberations. And finally, the second World War brings about the "postmodern mother," who completely topples the contained family unit by engaging in the technological and corporate space. See, E. Ann Kaplan, *Motherhood and Representation: The Mother in Popular Culture and Melodrama* (London: Routledge, 1992), 6–17.

[3] Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976).

[4] This is also demonstrated by Kelly Jeong's discussion of actor Kim Sung-ho See, Kelly Jeong, "The Quasi Patriarch: Kim Sung-ho and South Korean Postwar Movies," in *The Korean Popular Culture Reader*, ed. Kyung Hyun Kim and Youngmin Choe (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013). And, Jeong, "Nation Rebuilding and Postwar South Korean Cinema: *The Coachman* and *The Stray Bullet*," *Journal of Korean Studies* 11, No. 1 (2006): 127–162.

imagination" stems from the transfer of emphasis on strict metaphors to generic binary formations of good versus evil within literary and filmic narratives.[5]

To counteract this strict binary, recent feminist scholars of the genre have re-interpreted the maternal melodrama through the female spectator. By re-harnessing the affective power of the female viewer's gaze, the maternal subject is perceived as something other than just a reflection of the moral code and the narrative's pathos is utilized as a gateway to understanding the incongruities of "the good life" fantasy. American maternal melodramas, such as *Stella Dallas*, are said to elucidate their own era's predicament of grasping for unattainable fantasy by undermining the "melodramatic mode.".

For example, Mary Ann Doane and Linda Williams investigate the role of female spectatorship and its relationship to representation instead of on one alone. Doane argues that within a patriarchal visual system, the feminine gaze and its tendency to desexualize the female body does *not* garner the female more subjectivity but actually works to decenter the female subject and spectator. The "de-specularization" effect of the female gaze renders the direction of the look object-less and therefore anxious, horrific, and silent. This decentering, however, should not be read as a white flag for female subjectivity, but should instead be understood as a mechanism for educated intervention. As female spectators, we are able to read the excess pathos, "or the "hypersignification of the domestic" as not an over-sentimentalization and thus a

[5] Elsaesser, Thomas. "Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on the Family Melodrama," in *Imitations of Life: A Reader on Film and Television*, ed. Marcia Landy (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1991), 68-92.

disruption of the female gaze, but as a practice of double mimesis. Through this process, the woman subject can reveal the mimicry involved to the female spectator so that she can truly understand the fantasy or parody of the characterization and thereby move to acknowledgement and action. In a predominantly patriarchal medium in which the look is preemptively gendered, the de-eroticized gaze disembodies the spectator and transforms her into a hermaphrodite that can do only two things: Identify with the female spectacle or identify with the male hero. The woman's position as spectator is rendered unstable. Williams adds to Doane's methods of intervention and argues that the female spectator has enhanced the ability to "read" women as more than a single entity or target of representation. The woman's gaze, she states, allows for both the acknowledgement of the voyeuristic or fetishistic depictions of the female body as well as a belief in the female subject's ability to transcend that patriarchal perspective.[6]

As such, maternal melodramas, in particular, allow women to reflect upon their own perspectives and lives, but only as response to a larger hegemonic structure. *Stella Dallas*'s representation of a mother stuck within a genre of separation and sacrifice performs William's task of dual acknowledgement and Doane's call for intervention through two relationships between women: the mother and daughter or the female spectator and the female heroine. Our reading of *Stella Dallas*'s narrative relies on our ability to look past the overtly sentimental and harness its affective structures. Stella's

[6] Mary Ann Doane, "The 'Woman's Film': Possession and Address," in *Home is Where the Heart is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film*, ed. Christine Gledhill (London: British Film Institute, 1987), 283–298. Doane, *The Desire to Desire: The Woman's Film of the 1940's* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987).

pathos should not be dismissed but recuperated to understand the multiple facets of signification embedded within it. Just as Lisa Cartwright utilizes affect as the structural basis to create a new ethics, and thus empathetic, form of identification and spectatorship, Stella should not be understood simply as a metaphoric reminder of what the moral code dictates a "good mother" should be. She should be read and understood to be a new intersubjective and "hypersignified" formulation of a new code of female subjectivity.[7]

It is important to remember, however, that the representation of Stella by itself, without the help of the female spectator, fails to completely transcend the patriarchal and hegemonic conception of the mother-figure. While discussing maternal "resistance" films in which the mother's sacrifice is predicated on her subordination of her actual desires for her responsibility as a "good" mother, Ann Kaplan articulates how Stella does not completely succeed in this "resistance" and eventually falls back into "complicity" with the grand paradigm.

> Stella's resistance takes the forms, first, of literally objecting to mothering because of the personal sacrifices involved (mainly sensual pleasures); second, of expressing herself freely in her eccentric style of dress and being unabashedly sexual; finally of growing too attached and needful of her daughter.[8]

[7] Lisa Cartwright, *Moral Spectatorship: Technologies of Voice and Affect in Postwar Representations of the Child* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008).

[8] E. Ann Kaplan, *Motherhood and Representation: The Mother in Popular Culture and Melodrama*. (London: Routledge, 1992), 170.

Kaplan points out that all of Stella's "resistances" are linked to her working-class status and her failure to fully embody the desired middle-class. These initial resistances against the pre-determined role of motherhood melts away towards the end of the film, when Stella is once again judged for her maternal inadequacies not only by others, but also by herself. "The film punishes Stella first by turning her into a "spectacle" produced by the upper-class, disapproving gaze (a gaze that the audience is made to share through camera work and editing), but second, and more devastatingly, by Stella to the recognition that she is an unfit mother for her daughter."[9] Going against Williams' claims, Kaplan contends that *Stella Dallas*, although possessing some resisting elements at the beginning, closes by once again pulling "the spectator toward dominant patriarchal class and gender ideology."[10]

Similarly, Korea's filmic treatment of the maternal has historically been ambivalent at best. Perhaps influenced by a greater Confucian and colonial discourse regarding gender roles, Korea's Golden Age melodramas of the late 1950s mostly delegated the maternal figure to past pre-conceived morals of the selfless mother paradigm.[11] While condemning any form of active motherhood outside the family, these dramas highly prioritized the passive affects that valorize maternal sacrifice. Korea's

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[9] Kaplan, 172.

[10] Kaplan, 173.

[11] This paradigm is heavily influenced by the mother's "wise mother, good wife" role (현모양처: *hyŏnmo yangch'ŏ*) constructed in reference to Korea's traditional Confucian morals and propagated during the colonial era as a branch off from Japan's Meiji period gender roles, which emphasized similar maternal virtues. For more see, Hyaeweol Choi, "Wise Mother, Good Wife": A Transcultural Discursive Construct in Modern Korea," *The Journal of Korean Studies* 14, No. 1 (Fall 2009): 1–33.

filmic mother-figure was, much like the nation she embodies, trapped within the retrospective binds of the national and collective.

Soyoung Kim defines South Korea's *yosong* film (woman's film) as a cinematic category that "inevitably deals with the colonial past, which provides a matrix of unresolved anxiety that spills over into the present." While discussing the 1968 film *Bitter but Once Again*, directed by Chong So-yong, she investigates how the "fallen" maternal figure was used to antagonize the female audience's anxieties regarding the changing times and the resulting shift in class structure. By simultaneously judging the character's failed motherhood and identifying with her struggle to reconcile her newfound middle-class status, the female audience was placed within an emotional push-pull that provoked and mobilized female affect. "Between the oscillation of these two spectatorial modes [of identification and judgement], lies a gray area that aims to provoke tears, frustration, and anger from female spectators who are asked to derive meaning from the film according to their own experiences as women."[12] Not unlike the Hollywood films discussed above, these maternal melodramas struggled to emerge beyond those "gray areas" and provided only "a momentary glimpse of the repressive system." Despite its acknowledgement of the female spectator and her affective power, the films' contrast between the female viewer and the filmic subject – namely that of the fallen housewife, widow, and maid – created a contradictory and ambivalent

[12] Soyoung Kim, "Questions of Woman's Film: *The Main, Madame Freedom*, and Women" in *South Korean Golden Age Melodrama: Gender, Genre, and National Cinema*, ed. Kathleen McHugh and Nancy Abelmann (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2005), 185–200.

representation of women that failed to formulate a mother-figure that stood outside the bounds of the hegemonic paradigms of guilt, shame and sacrifice.

Figure 1.3 Two images of Seon-Young as traditional housewife (left) and modern woman (right) in *Madame Freedom* (Han Hyeong-mo, 1956)

Kathleen McHugh, too, argues that such Golden Age heroines remain trapped as paradigmatic emblems representing the failures of the nation as a whole.[13] The mother's eschewing of her sacrificial duties for the sake of her economic independence, for instance, embody the nation's subjugation by modernism and thereby its regret and guilt for losing track of tradition, the true past. Maternal films of the Golden Age, such as *Madame Freedom*, still depict the modern female, both her subjectivity and body, as

[13] McHugh and Abelmann define the Golden Age as taking place between the years of 1955 and 1972 when, "a number of South Korean directors produced a body of work as historically, aesthetically, and politically significant as that of other well-known national film movements such as Italian Neorealism, French New Wave, and New German Cinema." See, Kathleen McHugh and Nancy Abelmann, *South Korean Golden Age Melodrama: Gender, Genre, and National Cinema* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2005).

discursive embodiments of the collective national subjecthood rather than of her individual morality itself (Fig. 1.3).

> [T]he woman becomes the focus of this irresolvable ambivalence, inhabiting the place of what both is and is not South Korean. Through her, the film plays the domestic against the global, with the nation hiding behind her figure. She takes the fall, her husband and son, marginalized past and virtual future, divided and frozen over her fate. And this arrested, ambiguous moment, insinuated through family gender, and sex roles, becomes the only possible representation of nation, one that is irresolute, contradictory, and ambivalent, local only within a transnational familiar.[14]

Even though the mother-figure is front and center, allowing for a more nuanced articulation of her changes as a modern subject, she still remains within the confines of collective judgement. Her narrative categories, especially in terms of her economic independence, may be more realistic and thus a bit more expansive than her Hollywood counterparts, but she still does not venture far from the conditions of her paradigmatic moral structure.

Much like Stella's initial "resistances" and eventual condemnation for those very acts of freedom, Madame Freedom's depictions emphasize her choice to reject responsibility for decadent pleasures only to use them as consequence for her eventual punishment. Her giving-in to the dangers of modernity, portrayed through her blatant pursuit of sexual and economic independence, risks not only her duties as a responsible

[14] McHugh and Abelmann, 37–38.

mother and wife, but also her function to uphold the nation's moral grounding during a period of rapid change. And in the end, her actions come back full circle and the only way to redeem herself from her failures to practice "good" motherhood is to retreat right back into her pre-ordained role as guilty and shamed mother. She is allowed to position herself as individual subject only through "gaps" or "glimpses" outside the hegemonic system of sacrifice and national embodiment.

Films that perpetuate this previous melodramatic mode rely on the continuation of certain ethical narratives: The good remain good even through suffering, while the bad are wrong precisely because they embody the general evils of the world. Such films operate under strict binaries that leave little room for moral ambiguity. *Pieta* and *Mother* do not continue this tradition. The films display a theme of moral reversals, rather than perpetuations, that revolve around the relationship between the respective mothers and sons, which perhaps indicates another element of separation from previous trends. Rather than portray a mother within a hazy gray area that only allows glimpses of her repressive system while she still operates within the realm of retrospective and collective morality, the films, instead, aim to completely deconstruct her paradigmatic moral code as well as reverse their affective patterns to not just reveal gaps but completely redefine the scopes and margins of her sacrificial subjectivity.

By allowing the "good" mother to manifest without conditions, the two films articulate the convoluted ways in which the unbridled practice of "good" motherhood can actually reveal its inherent contradictory boundaries. *Mother*'s maternal figure works against all odds to overturn her mentally-disabled son's murder charge and never falters from her sacrificial duties. *Pieta*'s mother-figure, too, in an attempt to rekindle a

relationship with her abandoned son, Kang-do, performs her sacrificial motherhood perfectly; so perfectly and stubbornly, in fact, that she is able to slowly chip away at her son's violent lack of empathy to regain his trust and love. As the viewers are led deeper into the two mother-son relationships, however, they are also confronted with the fragility and impossibility of "good" motherhood as well. *Mother's* unconditional love leads her to murder, a selfish sacrifice stemming from her own atonement of guilt, and *Pieta*'s revengeful love ends in a double suicide, an eventuality guided by the possibility of a resentful forgiveness.

III. Selfish Sacrifice in *Mother*

Mother is a murder-mystery narrative that follows an elderly single mother on her quest to prove her son's innocence. The film begins in a small town, where Mother makes a meager living by selling medicinal herbs and providing illegal acupuncture services. Perhaps out of guilt for causing his mental disability after a botched double-suicide attempt, Mother is completely selfless when it comes to caring for her son, Do-joon. Their quiet life in harshly interrupted when Do-joon becomes the primary suspect for the murder of a teenage girl and is placed in prison. Determined to overturn his verdict, Mother first employs a lawyer, but quickly loses faith and decides to investigate the incident herself. After a few mishaps, Mother discovers that the murdered girl, who was working as a prostitute to support her alcoholic grandmother, kept pictures of her clients on her cellphone. As she goes through the pictures, she recognizes one of the men

as the old vagrant, who roams around town collecting and selling trash. Convinced that he is the true culprit, Mother visits the old man in his run-down workshop and begins to question him. But rather than confirm her suspicions, the old man provides proof that Do-joon is in fact the actual killer. In a moment of pure rage and protective instinct, Mother bludgeons the man to death and sets fire to his workhouse. Just when she is about to lose all hope, the police inform her that Do-joon will be set free because the girl's former boyfriend had confessed to the crime. When she visits the new suspect, it becomes clear that he is even more disadvantaged than her son and was, most likely, coerced into giving a confession. Deciding to sacrifice her morals once again for the sake of her son, Mother allows the innocent boy to take the blame and returns to her quiet life with Do-joon. The film's ending shows Mother waiting at a bus station, as Do-joon brings her a bag of snacks to take on her trip. Just before she is about to leave, Do-joon slides her a scorched tin box, scolding her for leaving such valuables for anyone to find. Mother recognizes the box as her acupuncture kit and looks up at Do-joon in horror as she realizes that he must have found it among the ruins of the workhouse fire and was now fully aware of her murderous sacrifices. Sitting quietly on the bus, Mother carefully takes out a needle from the tin, lifts her skirt, and jabs her upper thigh. After a moment of silence and now seemingly blind to her past misdeeds, Mother slowly stands up to join the dancing crowd.

The film's moribund setting of rural Korea with its seedy and destitute inhabitants only adds to the tragic plotline. No stranger to social commentary, Bong Joon-ho often employs themes of criminal injustice, poverty, and societal dysfunction in his films. Having gained international attention through films such as *Memories of*

Murder (2003), *The Host* (2006), *Snowpiercer* (2014), and most recently the Oscar-winning *Parasite* (2019), Bong is often noted to appropriate and rework common genre conventions, "using them as a framework for exploring and critiquing South Korean social and political issues."[15] In line with such interpretations of his work, readings of *Mother*'s violent transgressions has focused mainly on her relationship to the elements of patriarchy represented throughout the film. Mother's violence is made inevitable by the male-dominated society and "is effectively pardoned through the (re)constitution of the patriarchal family."[16] Ji-yoon An, for example, reads Mother's "extremization" of maternal instinct as not only conforming to "motherhood cultivated and fostered by patriarchy," but further reinforcing the contemporary prevalence of that very ideology.[17] Michelle Cho, specifically invoking the "generic" signification of Kim Hye-ja (the actress playing Mother) as her own genre, also discusses how her activation of a "fantasy of idealized maternity" highlights the dangerous effects of a national ideology centered on the preeminence of the family.[18] To further engage with these readings, which envisions Mother's excessive display of maternal instinct as a product of or reaction to dominant social norms, I would like to direct attention to the "good" mother's *inner* workings to reveal not only the imbalance of such social predeterminations, but also and more

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[15] Christina Klein, "Why Americans Studies Needs to Think about Korean Cinema, or, Transnational Genres in the Films of Bong Joon-hyo," *American Quarterly* 60, no. 4 (December, 2008): 873.

[16] Nancy Abelmann and Josie Sohn, "Revisiting the Developmentalist Era Mother in 2000s South Korean Film: Domesticating Maternal Excess." *Korean Histories* 3, no. 2 (2013): 35.

[17] Ji-yoon An, "The Korean Mother in Contemporary Thriller Films: A Monster or Just Modern?" *Journal of Japanese and Korean Cinema* 11, no. 2 (2019): 154–169.

[18] Michelle Cho, "Face Value: The Star as Genre in Bong Joon-ho's *Mother*." In *The Korean Popular Culture Reader*, edited by Kyung Hyun Kim and Youngmin Choe (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 188. Kim Kyung-ae (2010) also discusses Kim Hye-ja's face and treats it as a "psychological space" actively depicting Mother's unstoppable spiral into violence.

importantly, the inherent paradoxes of redemptive sacrifice itself. By placing ethics at the forefront of my reading, I bring attention to Mother's transgression of moral boundaries in order to expose the inevitable nature of her transgression in the first place.

Figure 1.4 The beginning scene from *Mother* (Bong Joon-ho, 2009)

Figure 1.5 The end scene from *Mother* (Bong Joon-ho, 2009)

As if caught in a loop, *Mother* begins and ends with the same scene: Mother dances carelessly, first in an empty field and then on a crowded tour bus, with a haunting expression on her face (Figs. 1.4, 1.5). This visual choice to "repeat the beginning" mimics the film's narrative theme that focuses on a cyclical return to self-sacrifice. Mother's "retrospective curse" lies in her inability to escape the boundaries of motherhood that is infinitely selfless and thus, perpetually inadequate. This disjunction between the mother's ultimate mission and the impossibility of ever performing that goal to completion creates a narrative in which Mother's selfless love not only justifies and condones a violence *for*, but also facilitates a one-sided and thus immoral relationship *with* her child.

According to Moshe Halbertal, sacrifice, whether it comes from genuine self-transcendence or a twisted sense of self-victimization, inevitably leads to violence. Halbertal argues that the human need to justify actions, good or bad, will often transform a seemingly selfless act into one that can condone or even create immoral decisions. The first and more elemental aspect of sacrificing, what Halbertal refers to as "sacrificing to," alludes mostly to making an offering, of either a physical object or devotion, to a higher being. This type of sacrifice creates three forms of violence manifested by an anxiety regarding: One, the possibility of rejection (of the offering); two, the asymmetrical relationship of love and devotion with the higher being; and three, the harm that must go to an innocent substitute of the self in the process of atonement.

"Sacrificing for," on the other hand, refers to an act of giving or self-restraint on behalf of, or for the sake of another. This type of sacrifice also creates three forms of

violence, all caused within the process of rationalization: An unjust cause may be touted as a higher purpose, an aggressor may justify his aggression through self-victimization, and an act of pure violence may disguise itself as a form of moral sacrifice. As Halbertal writes,

> …within the realm of "sacrificing for," three contexts of violence emerged: the sacrifice, an unjust cause might be sanctified by a reversal in the casual order, form the justified claim that valuable things are worthy of sacrifice to the assertion that what was sacrificed for is itself of value; self-sacrifice also can serve as a lethal reversal of aggressor and victim, in which the aggressor perceives himself as the "true" victim of his own crime when his crime involves self-sacrifice; and mostly, when the quest for self-transcendence is recruited for an unworthy and misguided cause, it becomes an impetus for widespread destruction.[19]

Because sacrifice is always self-justified through its very designation as a performance "for the sake of an other," the act is often manipulated to reversely and pre-emptively imbue value to its cause or intent, regardless of its actual moral implications.

Within the film, Mother's selfless sacrifices *for the sake of* her son fully employs these reversals to foment an immoral mother-son relationship that not only perpetuates a never-ending cycle of guilt and redemption within the maternal, but also necessarily maintains the ensuing inferiority of the dependent child. In other words, the mother's

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[19] Moshe Halbertal, *On Sacrifice* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 114–116.

pre-determined conditions of selflessness or self-sacrifice, in effect, provides a platform for violence.

The first source of violence caused by the selfless maternal lies in the imbalance and thus inequality in the relationship between giving-mother and receiving-son. As Halbertal points out, "the exclusion from the possibility of giving is a deeper source of violence than the deprivation that results from not getting. Forced barrenness stands at the source of violence." The act of giving, or even giving-back, is seen as an expression of moral humanity and thus the foundation for an ethical relationship. While reciprocity within the marketplace is a legal expectation, it becomes a moral duty between two individuals. By being relegated to a solely receptive role, the receiver is forbidden from acting on his moral duties to reciprocate and thus, becomes unable to contribute to the relationship. This induces humiliation and provides cause for a violent reaction against what the receiver sees as an asymmetrical and exploitative relationship.[20]

As per the previously outlined "good mother" paradigm, a child's default position within the mother-son dichotomy is already designated to receive, rather than give. *Mother*'s son-character, Do-joon, is rendered even more helpless, however, by his limited mental capacity. He receives, not only because he is the son, but also because he is incapable of performing any other role. This inability to join the gift exchange as an equal participant, forces subservience and dependence; it diminishes his effectiveness as a moral human who is able to express gratitude or remorse, even after performing acts

[20] Halbertal, 20–25.

of immorality. Mother, on the other hand, is able to fully control the relationship by maintaining her son's passive receptivity.

Figure 1.6 Do-joon climbs into his mother's sheets and caresses her breast like a child in *Mother* (Bong Joon-ho, 2009)

Figure 1.7 Mother stares at her son while he relieves himself in *Mother* (Bong Joon-ho, 2009)

The film portrays this immoral relationship through Mother's everyday sacrifices that serve to continuously infantilize her son and thereby exaggerate her selflessness through his utter dependence (Fig. 1.6). Towards the beginning of the film, for example, Mother chases Do-joon around with a bowl of herbal medicine in hand (Fig. 1.7). Do-joon expresses annoyance and fusses over taking his daily dose, until he finally stops to relieve himself against a wall. In a move that exemplifies his subservient and dependent position, Mother stares down at her son's penis as she holds the bowl against his lips. Mother's hierarchical positioning from this type of one-sided giving continues until it is finally solidified through the ultimate moral sacrifice. While her jailed son is literally incapacitated from practicing any form of reciprocity, Mother commits murder for his sake and demonstrates the extent of her maternal love.

But does murder qualify as an expression of love? Or is it just simply too immoral to be categorized as a performance of maternal sacrifice? The second source for selfless violence lies in Mother's need to demonstrate her maternal duty through increasingly violent methods of self-inflicted atonement. As mentioned before, the "good" mother's condition of possibility lies in her ability to exhibit and practice infinite and unconditional love. This "condition of unconditionality," however, by its very definition, is a contradiction in terms. Mother's inability to fully meet her "selfless" requirement creates an insurmountable level of guilt, which in turn perpetuates her need to continuously seek redemption. Mother can never give enough, and so her ensuing guilt forces her to cyclically redeem. And in the case of the film, her redemption is practiced through an act of murder, a literal sacrifice, for the sake of her son, thereby forcing her within a loop of retroactive justification.

The film narrativizes this cycle of guilt and redemption and also presents a distinct point of origin for its beginning – namely that Mother is responsible for her son's current state of mental disability. The self-inflicted quality of Mother's guilt transports it to the symbolic realm, in which redemption is not achieved through actions towards the son, but through punishments directed towards the self: Mother's guilt demands atonement. But, ironically, "atonement [can only be] achieved through the symbolic substitute of the self."[21] Within the realm of atonement, the victim's right to enact retributive punishment for the crime is replaced with the aggressor's need to punish oneself. But, since retribution against the self is impossible, a substitute offering for and of the self must be made. And so, Mother atones for her sins by making a sacrifice *to* her son, while at the same time, working to achieve redemption for herself in the process. An interesting aspect of sacrificial atonement, however, lies in the fact that the sacrificial object must be innocent to prove worthy of its role. "The necessary innocence of the sacrifice creates an inherent crime in any sacrifice; the atoned party achieves atonement through an innocent substitute. The act of atonement seems to need atonement in itself."[22] This indicates that Mother's murderous act of atonement begets yet another act of atonement, and so on.

It is at this point where Mother demonstrates the film's third instance of selfless violence: Mother's morality is actually justified and bolstered by immoral sacrifice. It is important to note that Mother's initial sin, ensuing guilt, and attempt to alleviate that

[21] Halbertal, 31.

[22] Halbertal, 34.

guilt through atonement have all been self-inflicted. While her physical offering of an innocent victim can act as a substitute *for* the self, a symbolic offering manifested through suffering can substitute the need for punishment *of* the self. "The self becomes the locus of giving. Sacrifice, through pain and prayers as forms of offering, enters a new dimension: self-sacrifice."[23] This atonement through self-inflicted suffering is the foundation upon which self-sacrificial martyrdom is formed. Within this element of redemption through self-victimization lies the ultimate reversal that connects the act of self-sacrifice and its inherent aptitude to promote violence against morality itself.

Although Mother is able to justify her murder by equating it to an act of sacrifice to her son, the ultimate immorality of the act further compounds her guilt and expands her failure to be a "good" mother. Ironically, however, guilt possesses more than this capacity to bind and immobilize, but in fact acts as an "instrument of reversal" that can enable a flip in the aggressor-victim dynamic and thereby re-grant Mother her lost morality. This process of redemptive self-victimization is achieved by Mother equating her guilt with suffering-as-punishment. Her guilty suffering not only acts as further atonement, but also presents proof of Mother's morality in despite of, as well as resulting from, her justified violence. In other words, Mother may have sacrificed to compensate for her lack of "goodness," but on the flip side, her act of sacrifice and her very willingness to perform it despite its immorality may be what indicates and perhaps even creates her goodness in the first place. She does not feel guilty because she is a "good" mother, but her very act of feeling guilt denotes her fulfillment of the role. Once

[23] Halbertal, 53.

Mother considers herself to be "suffering" from her own self-inflicted guilt, she regains footing within morality and becomes free to resent and even blame her son, the person she sees as the source of her pain.

Conveniently, this reversal of roles between aggressor and victim does not require a genuine display of suffering or self-sacrifice. Her acknowledgement of the inhumanity of her actions alone is enough to carry her acts of violence to the sacrificial dimension and redeem her righteousness. While Mother may atone by committing a sacrifice of a substitute, she only achieves full redemption as a "good" mother when she is righteous enough to sacrifice her morality itself. Only a "good" mother would risk her morality for the sake of her son and only a redeemed mother would feel guilt even after performing such a "selfless" act. Mother's violent atonement grants her the right not only to further violence, but more importantly to see herself as a sacrificial victim in her own right. Thus, the impossible nature of Mother's unconditional role leads her to seek redemption through a repetitive and perpetual cycle of self-sacrifice in order to fulfill her duty as the "good" mother. But, a "good" mother does not perform sacrifices *for* morality, but in fact, insists on sacrifices *of* it. Mother's selflessness, rather than perpetuate self-sacrifice for the sake of, actually works to accentuate a self-victimization in spite of her responsibility for her child. In other words, Mother's *self*-sacrifice transforms to a *selfish* sacrifice.

Figure 1.8 Do-joon gives back Mother's acupuncture kit and "returns" her sacrificial gifts in *Mother* (Bong Joon-ho, 2009)

The ending scenes depict Mother and Do-joon sitting at a bus-stop just before she is about to go on a trip tailored for the retired and elderly. With a concerned look, Do-joon offers Mother advice as he slides her scorched metal acupuncture kit across her lap. "You shouldn't leave this kind of thing just lying around. What if someone else had found it?" he whispers (Fig. 1.8). Mother's expression turns from confusion to pure horror, as she realizes that Do-joon has discovered her violent acts of atonement. The hierarchical relationship, in which Mother was the only one empowered to give, breaks down as Do-joon is finally able to offer his gift of silence. With this equilibrium, the necessarily "selfless" duty of the maternal breaks down. Since her son has also "sacrificed" his morality for the sake of his mother, her own previous acts of sacrifice, committed in the name of selfless motherhood, can no longer be designated as such. Mother must finally confront her acts of violence for what they are; she must come to terms with her selfish motherhood.

The film's extensive portrayal of the "good" mother's inherent capacity for selfish sacrifice reveals how a break from her redemptive cycle is necessary. The film's ending reiterates this need by choosing erasure as the alternative to once again entering a pattern of redemption for the past. Mother's choice to use her son's "gift" to forget and effectively erase her sins acts as a fitting tool to break her cycle of selfless violence. This drastic choice to forget, however, is not exactly a solution and actually perpetuates her immorality even further. We are often told to "learn from our past mistakes," but Mother has obviously chosen to go against this oft-recommended prescription. The director presents his audience with this ending not only because it is narratively convenient, but also because it is the only end that will actually put a stop to Mother's repetition of guilt and sacrifice. Considering her habitual tendencies to practice sacrifice in the name of "good" motherhood, not unlike Korea's national preoccupation with collective sacrifice for the sake of national sovereignty, the film may have chosen the only conclusion that will actually act as the end to her "retrospective curse."

IV. Resentful Forgiveness in *Pieta*

It is important to remember that *Mother*'s acupuncture needle of erasure is only a filmic device to end the narrative of a murder-mystery. Mother's amnesic self-victimization may demonstrate the need to break from a cycle of retrospection based on collective assignments of guilt and shame, but it does not articulate a moral solution. We cannot simply erase the past and history cannot and should not be forgotten. Kim Ki-

duk's *Pieta*, despite its plot of revenge and violence, presents its audience with an opportunity to bridge the gap between the need to move on and the imperative to still remember: It offers this possibility through resentful forgiveness.

Griswold states that resentment is a "reproduction of anger considerably past the event that occasioned it" and so, "requires not just memory of that event, but a memory that continues to provoke."[24] This would indicate that resentment requires remembrance as much as it does anger. This reliance on temporality, the need to elongate memory, allows resentment to co-exist and foreground the act of forgiveness. To forgive means to "foreswear resentment or revenge." It is not a sudden erasure of the past, but an acknowledgement that despite the past's unchangeable nature, our response to the event is a matter of choice. We extend painful memories in order to resent, but through that process, we are also given the opportunity to forgive despite that extension. Without resentment, we cannot forgive.

Kim Ki-duk's *Pieta* begins and ends with death. But, unlike *Mother*'s use of death as catalyst for an investigative narrative, the motivations and perpetrators behind *Pieta*'s numerous deaths are clear as one act of suicide spreads death like a contagion. The film's heartless main protagonist, Kang-do, makes a living as a loan shark. Every day, upon receiving a text message with information about his next victim, Kang-do goes out to mutilate or paralyze as retribution. His daily routine, however, is abruptly interrupted when a strange lady, Mi-seon, barges in and begins to tidy his apartment. After

[24] Charles Griswold, *Forgiveness: A Philosophical Exploration* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 23.

identifying herself as his mother who abandoned him as a child, Mi-seon stubbornly clings to Kang-do in order to gain his forgiveness and love. Kang-do repeatedly and violently shuns her until finally, after days of watching her perform humiliating acts of repentance, he begins to appreciate her maternal sacrifice and accepts her into his life. At this point, while Kang-do is still left in the dark, the audience is provided the truth – namely that, Mi-seon is the mother of one of his victims and that she is after revenge. As soon as she has acquired his trust and devotion, Mi-seon fakes her own kidnapping and lures Kang-do to an abandoned building. As he tearfully begs the non-existent kidnapper to spare his mother's life in exchange for his own, Mi-seon jumps to her own death in front of him, thereby performing an act of self-sacrificial revenge. Even after learning the truth, Kang-do maintains his love for his "mother," and gingerly lays her body down next to her actual son, before burying the two in the same grave. The film ends with Kang-do, while wearing the sweater Mi-seon knit for him, also committing suicide by tying himself to the back of a truck belonging to one of his victims.

If *Mother* presented the pre-established selfless maternal only to expose the inherent violence in her self-sacrificial habits, *Pieta*'s mother-figure employs her selflessness as a tool to enact revenge. While both mothers abide by the same conditions of being and "play" their maternal parts in equal degrees, their main difference lies in their varying intents. Mother's selflessness is motivated by her guilt and need to redeem, but Mi-seon's is founded upon her resentment and desire for retribution. In other words, *Pieta*'s director fully embraces the reversals and hypocrisies within the sacrificial maternal and utilizes her violent tropes to articulate a revenge plot based on the intricate affects shared between mother and son. While Mother's need to redeem fuels

cyclical self-sacrifice, Mi-seon demonstrates how this cycle of retrospection can be surpassed even within the realm of resentment, an affective structure also deeply entrenched within retroactive redemption.

Pieta's mother-son relationship is also formulated through the same tropes of "unconditional conditionality." But this time, the performance of those very tropes is geared towards a stranger and stands in as acts of self-sacrifice for the sake of her real son. The methods through which Mi-seon attempts to gain Kang-do's acceptance employs a similar one-sided dynamic that works to privilege the mother's humanity by rendering the son utterly dependent and subservient. This manipulative demonstration of her sacrificial motherhood is portrayed and emphasized through multiple scenes of Mi-seon literally "giving" or "returning" an item to her target of revenge.

Figure 1.9 Mi-seon's first encounter with Kang-do in *Pieta* (Kim Ki-duk, 2012)

Figure 1.10a Repeated motifs of Mi-seon literally “giving” to her son in *Pieta* (Kim Ki-duk, 2012)

Figure 1.10b Repeated motifs of Mi-seon literally “giving” to her son in *Pieta* (Kim Ki-duk, 2012)

As if to emphasize his inhumanity and animalistic tendencies, Kang-do’s daily routine consists of bringing home a live animal to kill and cook for dinner. While holding

a live chicken, his choice of animal sacrifice for that day, Kang-do walks through an alleyway, slips on a pool of water, and loses his grip on the bird. Mi-seon's very first encounter and confrontation with Kang-do is to "return" this chicken to him (Fig. 1.9). This motif of "giving" repeats itself numerous times throughout the film (Figs. 1.10a, b) and culminates to a point where Mi-seon presents her own body as sacrifice to her fake son. "I don't mind dying if it's by your hands," she says.[25] Despite Mi-seon's obvious detachment while performing these acts of giving, the mere gesture seems to be enough to completely subjugate and tame Kang-do and elevate Mi-seon to the status of "good" mother. But unlike *Mother*'s subjugation of Do-joon, *Pieta*'s one-sided giving is motivated not by her own selfless guilt, but by resentment. The introduction of such a "selfish" emotion that is unwelcome within the boundaries of "good" motherhood provokes the standing conditions enough to present the possibility of release from the repetitive cycle of redemption and lay the groundwork for a progressive forgiveness.

Resentment, like guilt, possesses the capacity to present itself as an "instrument of reversal." According to Charles Griswold,

> Resentment embodies the demand that the wrong-doer show the proper respect, and be accountable for not having done so. Implicitly, then, it not only expresses the view that the wrong-doer is an accountable being, but even shows a certain respect toward the wrong-doer. Forgiveness does so as well…; it expresses that respect,

[25] 네 손에 죽어도 괜찮아.

and recognition of accountability, by way of a remarkable transformation on the part of injured and injurer alike.[26]

Rather than signal immorality, resentment relies on the hope that the wrong-doer actually possesses decency. As an expression of self-respect, resentment asks the wrong-doer to take accountability for his actions. And this request to be accountable requires the victim to "trust" in the wrong-doer's ability to do just that. Triggered by the existence of such respect between the victim and wrong-doer, rather than the lack of it, resentment relies on a "shared fallibility" between the two parties and creates a relationship of vulnerable interdependency.[27]

Figure 1.11 Mi-seon shows genuine affection to her target of revenge in *Pieta* (Kim Ki-duk, 2012)

[26] Griswold, 46.

[27] Griswold, 58–81.

Completely succumbing to her feigned expressions of love and sacrifice, Kang-do becomes a devoted son, who is constantly in a state of anticipation and expectation for his mother's affection and approval. Exhibiting a complete reversal in demeanor, Kang-do transforms from a heartless monster to a helpless man-child, who exhibits a full range of human emotions. While Kang-do's dependency on Mi-seon begins quite early on, the film takes an interesting turn when Mi-seon, too, displays gestures of genuine affection and concern for her target of revenge. Contrary to his inhumanity during the day, Kang-do lets slip his mental and physical vulnerability in his sleep. Unable to reconcile his adult body with his adolescent mind, he is perpetually plagued by nightmares and whimpers like a child, all the while rocking his lower body back and forth in order to find relief from his uncontrollable erections. Even though Mi-seon has no reason to continue her charade of "good" motherhood while he is asleep, she is compelled to comfort him. She climbs into his bed, caresses his face, and goes so far as to sexually stimulate him, before regaining reason and returning to her state of disdain (Fig. 1.11).

Regardless of Mi-seon's selfish intents, her resentment forces a bond and incurs a positional shift between the victim and perpetrator. Through Mi-seon's resentment, Kang-do is able to locate his humanity and exhibit expectation and devotion. And because her plan of revenge demands such a transformation, Mi-seon, herself, reveals her reliance on the perpetrator's existence of morality and goes through a transformation as well. Although Mi-seon is depicted as and considers herself to be the victim, her very practice of resentment actually reveals her weaknesses rather than empower her to a position of control. According to Griswold, "the perfected person is

nearly or totally immune from mistakes in judgement there is nothing of the past for him or her to undo, reframe, or accommodate, at least so far as the past is connected with perfected agency."[28] This would indicate that a perfectly moral person would have no reason to resent, regret, or forgive. She would have no reason to give the wrong-doer any leeway in terms of his wrongful acts. A perfectly moral person would not require or desire the wrong-doer's remorse, since this would in fact humanize him rather than affirm her own moral superiority. But the fact that Mi-seon does resent, she reveals her own fallibility, her own imperfection.

Sara Ahmed explores how such vulnerable emotions can "affect" bodies, their ideological movements, and their contact with objects. Rather than understanding emotions as coming from within the object, Ahmed sees emotions as social structures of circulation that "stick" to objects and create their very surface of existence and perception. This is exemplified by the statement: I fear the bear and so fear is inherent in me, while the bear is inherently fear-worthy. Emotions are not *in* anything, but produce platforms delineating and making "objecthood" possible. So, contrary to Brian Massumi's assertions that "affects are *virtual synesthetic perspectives* anchored in the actually existing, particular things that embody them," our fear of bears does not indicate any inherent affective core within the bear itself, but signifies a structure of exchange and circulation that allows the bear to be perceived by us in such a way.[29] In

[28] Griswold, 14.

[29] See, Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 35.
Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 36.

other words, the emotions of fear "stuck" to the bear and created his character, not the other way around. Kang-do's transformation from wrongdoer to pitiful victim proves Ahmed's point. Kang-do is not inherently resentment-worthy or villainous, but is created to be as such through Mi-seon's affective attachments. And as her attachments and their "affective economies" become more convoluted with increased interaction, their once strict binary relationship also becomes more and more intersubjective and interdependent. As Kang-do is afforded humanity through her resentment, his renewed morality, in turn, affects Mi-seon and prompts her to re-evaluate her own grip on resentment.

Figure 1.12 Mi-seon fails to resentfully forgive in *Pieta* (Kim Ki-duk, 2012)

In this way, resentment can act as a moral stop-gap. Because resentment is oftentimes the step before revenge, it can be viewed as a tool to implement virtue rather

than accentuate moral flaws. The film, however, betrays this moral responsibility and portrays Mi-seon, in her final scene, going through with her revenge. Despite showing a moment of weakness in which she pities Kang-do, Mi-seon jumps to her death (Fig. 1.12), thereby restarting the redemptive chain of self-sacrifice. Despite the failed ending, *Pieta* presents the possibility of surpassing "the retrospective curse."

By revealing the vulnerability and imperfection of both the injured and injurer, resentment presents a gateway to re-instituting a moral relationship between the two. "One of the striking consequences of this interdependence is that each party holds the other in its power, in this sense: the offender depends on the victim in order to be forgiven, and the victim depends on the offender in order to forgive."[30] Herein lies the moral element within resentment that demands the resenter to make a choice: She can elect to focus on the past's visceral anger as impetus for revenge or she can make the moral decision to distinguish sudden anger from resentment and choose to forswear it; she can choose resentful forgiveness.

V. Conclusion

> "I always try to look for another side to that which we always praise or worship something for— like seeing the dark side of the moon. We tend to regard the maternal instinct as being wonderous, holy and

[30] Griswold, 49.

> noble. But there must be another, darker side to it. That's the sort of twisted approach that I took.[31]

Although he does not refer to it directly, Bong Joon-ho, in an interview with *Sight & Sound* magazine, identifies *Mother*'s theme within the parameters of moral transgression. Recognizing the "sacred" character of motherhood, especially within the Korean context, the director sought to release, or at least, antagonize the bonds keeping Mother in such an absolute and universal place. When asked if he had a "wish to make any comment on life in present-day Korea," Bong replies, "If you had to be strict about it, *Mother* is set in the present… However, the past is all mixed up into it. … I wanted to break away from territorial [and temporal] boundaries."[32]

Such themes that juxtapose moralistic universals against critique of the state of contemporary society is greatly reminiscent of Korea's own experience with modernism.[33] In a span of about thirty years, Korea has positioned itself as one of the most economically developed nations in the world. Korea's sudden emergence into the politics of modernity and industrialization, which Kyung-sup Chang has referred to as "compressed modernity," has undoubtedly affected the social *and* moral structure of the nation that once touted homogeneity and tradition as its founding principles. Authors,

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[31] Joon-ho Bong, "In the Name of Love," by James Bell, *Sight & Sound* 20, no. 9 (September, 2010): 24–25. In an interview with the Korean film magazine *Cine21* that has now become infamous, Bong Joon-ho also made this comment about Mother's transgression, "*Mother* is actually a film about sex. The characters are divided between humans that can have sex and humans that can't. Kim Hye-ja's character is also sexually constrained at first but then enters a sexual realm. The previously dry mother who seemed to have no connection to that world is moving into the moist world." (my translation; quoted in Kim 2019).

[32] Joon-ho Bong, "'Mother': Bong Joon-ho Q&A about Undying Maternal Love Drama," by Andre S. *Alt Film Guide*, 2010.

[33] So-jeong Moon (2010) also reads *Mother* as allegorically depicting Korea's shifting familial values during the Neoliberal age.

such as Chang and Gi-wook Shin, have commented on the schisms that globalization, urbanization, and democratization has brought to the fabric of Korean society.[34] Focusing mainly on the transformation of the family, Chang laments that one of the unfortunate side effects of rapid modernization is that it has degenerated "traditional" familial values into a sort of "familial egoism" that prevents development of the social, and in some ways moral, elements of the Korean community. Calling Korea's current state a "situation of *accidental pluralism*," he attributes the nation's societal disorganization to the inadvertent mixing of indigenous values and "Western" institutions without proper harmonization.[35] The generational dissonance incurred by the rapid succession of shifts in sociocultural patterns is so great, in fact, that some scholars have dubbed Korea's version of modernity a "quasi-modernity" that exhibits a "mixture of heterogeneous and conflicting institutional and cultural programs, with native Korean, Chinese, Confucian, Japanese, American, and European elements."[36]

As mentioned before, cultural theorists, such as Frederic Jameson and Lauren Berlant, have spoken to *postmodern* society's tendency to ignore or even propel social fragmentations and fractured subjectivities. While Berlant disagrees with Jameson's contention that postmodernism is marked by a "waning of affect," instead attributing the

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[34] Kyung-sup Chang, *South Korea Under Compressed Modernity: Familial Political Economy in Transition* (New York: Routledge., 2010).
Shin, Gi-wook. 2006. *Ethnic Nationalism in Korea: Genealogy, Politics, and Legacy*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

[35] Chang.

[36] Suk-man Hwang and Jinho Lim,"Unfinished modernity or another modernity?: The South Korean case, " *The Journal of Korean Social Science* 42 (2015): 87.

era's disorientation to the "waning of genre," both theorists agree that previous attachments to rigid structures of historical and moral expectation no longer hold in the current age.[37] When taking into account Korea's already fragmented, and perhaps even "incomplete," experience with modernity, this spread of postmodernism, whose influence has become unavoidable in this global era, makes Korean society doubly impacted.

These moralistic shakes caused by the clash of the "modern" and the "postmodern" are well-demonstrated by the tenuous conditions of contemporary motherhood, embodied by the shifting subjectivities of the Korean woman herself. As Haejoang Cho notes in her study on the transitions of Korean women from the colonial period to postmodernity, female subjecthood, in three generations, experienced as much "compression" as did the society she inhabits. Moving from the "motherly woman" to the "modern wife" and finally to the conflicted postmodern daughter, who is caught between her mother's greed (*yokshim*) and her own self-realization, the Korean woman is read as a subject in desperate need of intervention from dominating familial and universal values.[38] In conjunction with this burgeoning of female autonomy in the postmodern age, Korean women, and especially mothers, have adjusted their system of "care" to

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[37] Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991).
Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University, 2011).

[38] Haejoang Cho, "Living with Conflicting Subjectivities: Mother, Motherly Wife, and Sexy Woman in the Transition from Colonial-Modern to Postmodern Korea," in *Under Construction: The Gendering of Modernity, Class, and Consumption in the Republic of Korea*, edited by Laurel Kendall, 165–196 (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press. 2002).

compensate for Neoliberal demands. As a result, they have been exposed to enormous societal critique that label their motherhood as excessive and overbearing.[39] It would seem that while the requirements of the "good" mother's sacrificial subjecthood remains intact, the environment surrounding the actual practice of her identity has shifted dramatically. Still required to uphold long-standing familial values, all the while juggling added responsibilities that come with the changing times, the contemporary "good" mother is caught between moral expectation and circumstantial reality. Judged for her failures to perform impossible conditions of being and caring, she continues her commitment to a system of redemptive retrospection that may not be entirely suitable for the rapidly shifting sociocultural background.

Mother's and *Pieta*'s references to the "good" mother's "nationalized" identity is by no means overt. But the subtle overtones of universal expectation, much like those experienced by the contemporary "real" mother, do serve as entry points for her ethical dissonance.[40] Mother's extensive portrayal of her inherent capacity for selfish, rather than selfless, sacrifice interrogates the "good" mother's precarious moral positioning and drives her to the edge, where she may finally transgress her retrospective identity. In order to perform transgression, one must first locate the limit. The film's stark ending

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[39] So Jin Park discusses neologisms, such as "helicopter mothers," that contemporary mothers have been exposed to as Neoliberal maternal subjects. So Jin Park, "Educational Manager Mothers as Neoliberal Maternal Subjects," in *New Millennium South Korea: Neoliberal Capitalism and Transnational Movements*, edited by Jaesook Song, 101–114. (London: Routledge, 2010).

[40] As the director himself states, "From the very beginning, I was most interested in portraying the mother as a dark destructive figure—not the typical gentle maternal representation… Simultaneously, although it is dark, I wanted people to think, "I would do that," or "My mother would do that." I needed the universality to be there, despite the extremity of the situations." In Bong, "'Mother': Bong Joon-ho Q&A about Undying Maternal Love Drama."

unveils the "good" mother's "limited" condition of impossibility. Upon locating the constrained boundaries of her retrospective (and sacrificial) identity, Mother chooses amnesia as the only alternative to once again entering a pattern of redemption for the past. Mother's choice to use her son's "gift" to forget and effectively erase her sins acts as a fitting tool to break her cycle of "selfless" violence. This drastic choice to forget, however, is not exactly a solution and actually perpetuates her immorality even further. Perhaps the director presents his audience with this ending not only because it is narratively convenient, but also because it is the only end that will actually put a stop to Mother's repetition of guilt and sacrifice. In a radical attempt to make her look forward, rather than behind, the film presents the audience with the only conclusion still in play.

While *Pieta*'s Mi-seon meets an equally drastic ending, her sacrifice introduces the element of choice and progression. To resent is to create a narrative. It requires a conflict, a resolution, a beginning and end.[41] But because resentment also demands a private, un-conditioned, and individual morality, it allows that narrative to change. The "good" mother is in need of a new narrative. Rather than remaining within the limits of a "good" motherhood that wholly relies on a pattern of selfless sacrifice, unsurpassable guilt, and relentless resentment, patterns all dependent on the past, *Mother*'s selfish sacrifice and *Pieta*'s resentful forgiveness allows the viewer to look beyond the inevitable failures of retrospection and contemplate the truth of normative ethics itself. While the mother's love and guilty sacrifice allows her to violently forget, it is her decision to resentfully forgive that fully permits her to unshackle her retrospective

[41] Griswold, 30.

conditions of unconditionality and impossible responsibility. Guilt and resentment, when considered as affective structures based on retrospection, can perpetuate immoral relationships reliant on stalled circular exchanges. But they can also free the individual, when their power is not limited only to redeem or forget, but is instead harnessed to expand out from the past and forgive. As Griswold puts it, "the forgiver too tells a narrative, but one that requires changes in resentment's tale. This is achieved in part by virtue of its incorporation into a larger account in which resentment becomes but a chapter."[42] By recognizing her selfish sacrifice and embracing her possibility for resentful forgiveness, the "good" mother too must re-locate her individual moral subjectivity so that her selfless violence and "conditioned" love can be surpassed but not forgotten; so that her retrospective curse "becomes but a chapter."

[42] Griswold, 30.

CHAPTER TWO

Giving Death:

The Hero as Sovereign Utility in Bong Joon-ho's *Snowpiercer* and Yeon Sang-ho's *Train to Busan*

. . . . the meaning of death does not begin in death. This invites us to think of death as a moment of death's signification, which is a meaning that overflows death. We must note carefully that 'to overflow death' in no sense means surpassing or reducing it; it means that this overflowing has its signification, too.[1]

— Emmanuel Levinas, *God, Death, and Time*

[1] Emmanuel Levinas, *God, Death, and Time*, trans. Bettina Bergo, ed. Jacques Rolland (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 104.

IV. Introduction

In Kim Tong-in's short story, *The Red Hills: A Doctor's Diary*, the narrating doctor writes about an unlikely hero who performs the ultimate sacrifice in silence and for no logical justification.[2] Ik-ho, or Wildcat as he is often called, is a vagrant who is portrayed as a dangerous disturbance within an otherwise quiet Korean town in Manchuria. He is despised and shunned by the townspeople as he roams from house to house each night in search of shelter. The community's disdain continues until, one day, a well-respected elder is killed by the village's Manchurian landlord as punishment for the bad harvest. Although each member is outraged, no one volunteers to confront the landlord. Later that night, as the villagers gather to discuss the events, they discover a severely beaten Wildcat lying on the ground. Despite being castigated and spurned by the whole community, Ik-ho had taken it upon himself to do what no else dared. The doctor's narration ends with the entire village circling Ik-ho's body, singing a Korean folk song, and watching him slowly fade away.

Kim's short story is most often read as a realist piece depicting the struggles experienced by the Korean people during the colonial period. Ik-ho's death exemplifies the immense strength of the Korean spirit and its capacity to unite even in the hardest of times and places. From a nationalistic and postcolonial standpoint, Ik-ho, by virtue of his death, is worthy of praise and respect. The short story's tragic end outlines how death

[2] Kim, Tong-in. "The Red Hills Diary: A Doctor's Diary." *Modern Korean Literature: An Anthology, 1908–65*. Ed. Chung Chong-wha. London: Kegan Paul International, 1995.

acts as a pivot to determine the validity of heroic sacrifice. Death, or lack thereof, either establishes the hero's status, or places him and his actions on trial. The hero's value is reliant on death.

Before death, the act of or intent to sacrifice, on its own, is not enough to hold moral weight. The hero's sacrifice must be judged, measured, and evaluated according to its after-effects. But how and who dictates the *value* of sacrifice? Is the worth determined quantitatively or qualitatively and is the scale chosen by the sacrificed-by or the sacrificed-for? Ik-ho, without apparent cause or explanation, decides to perform a 'sacrifice for a greater good' and is honored as a hero by the villagers. But, was Ik-ho's sacrifice *worth* it? If Ik-ho had survived the beating, the answer would depend not only on his intent, but also on the act's effectiveness, rendering the hero dependent on the judgement of the community. Before the hero's death, the performance of sacrifice in of itself is inadequate, and must be evaluated within a scale of *utilitarian value* that necessarily places the sacrificed-by and the sacrificed-for within an economy of exchange and valuation. Since the story ends with Ik-ho's death, however, the question itself is invalidated. His death renders his heroic deed simultaneously use-ful and use-less; he has given the village an irreplaceable and un-repayable gift, and so his sacrifice is undeniably valuable regardless of its actual effect. The finality of his ultimate self-sacrifice negates the very consideration of value and removes the question of utility altogether. The moment of death stops the clock, so to speak, on all other moral considerations and places the sacrifice-er in a liminal space in which his willingness to sacrifice in the first place singularly designates him a hero.

According to Derrida, death itself is valuable precisely because it is value-less. He contends that death may be the only sacrificial gift that is devoid of any economy of exchange. The "gift of death" is a said to be a true gift because of its capacity to present absolute responsibility, apart from a universal or general duty. If we were to think of death as an object, a gift, we can say that it is a possession that is wholly and singularly owned by the self.[3] It was never given, borrowed, or taken by or from an other. Even if someone were to cause death to the extent that it means to kill me, the death itself remains absolutely mine, a process only I can experience. Death is irreplaceable and thus represents non-substitution or absolute responsibility. By "giving death" through an act of self-sacrifice, Ik-ho is offering an in-exchangeable gift that demonstrates his performance of an ultimate responsibility, precisely because no one else can do it in his stead.

For such a self-sacrifice to remain pure, authors such as Marion have discussed the importance of emptying or erasing the giver as a way to "rescue" the act of sacrifice from an immoral system of exchange that fosters indebtedness. Marion argues that in order to separate the "gift" from its exchange value without losing its significance as a gift in the first place, the receiver must recognize the gift as such, while at the same time, the giver must shed his attachment to it completely.[4] Put simply, the gift must be received anonymously.

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[3] Jaques Derrida, *The Gift of Death* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

[4] Jean-Luc Marion, "The Sketch of a Phenomenological Concept of Sacrifice," in *The Essential Writings*, edited by Kevin Hart (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), 436–449.

But Ik-ho's offer of death presents a paradox. Although Ik-ho offered his death in silence, meaning he did not seek credit for his actions, the receivers of his gift feel gratitude and a sense of debt. They feel beholden to his sacrifice and is further burdened with the need to validate it retroactively. This is where the purity of Ik-ho's gift encounters an ethical dilemma. Even though he did not seek it, Ik-ho becomes a sacrificial hero and his act of sacrifice is imbued with utilitarian value. In fact, Ik-ho's death is deemed valuable precisely because he has relinquished his heroic sovereignty. The process of hero-making, despite his best efforts, prevents Ik-ho from remaining anonymous.

In the case of the moral hero and his utilitarian function, a large part of defining the validity of his sacrifice has to with its relationship to duration. Since the utility of an object or an act in an industrial society is largely measured through its sacrifice of time and labor, the act of sacrifice itself relies on the measurement of time for its self-fulfilled justification. Sacrifice becomes embedded within an economy of exchange for a greater purpose. This is exactly where Park Chung Hee, Korea's dictatorial president from 1963 to 1973, locates his version of proper sacrifice. In his 1970 manifesto, where he implores all Koreans to sacrifice for their country, Park privileges physical labor over the pursuit of humanistic knowledge. He writes, "You, a young girl sitting in the second-class compartment, your white hands holding a book of French poetry. Your white hands I abhor. We must work. One cannot survive with clean hands. Clean hands have been responsible for our present misery."[5] Park, much like Engels, considers labor, or

[5] Park, Chung Hee, *The Country, the Revolution, and I* (Seoul: Hollym Corp, 1970), 178–9.

production through work of hands, to be a building block of sorts for what they each consider the epitome of human existence.[6] While Engels's version of labor is the foundation for the construction of human society, Park's labor is a sacrificial requirement for the formation of the communal and economic body ready for national revolution.[7] The sacrifice of the worker's time and labor defines his nationalism and cultivates his morality. As such, a hero is defined, not by the virtue of his intent, but by a combination of his willingness to exchange his time for sovereign status and the community's utilitarian valuation of that temporal sacrifice. If we are to follow Park's egalitarian but utilitarian definition of sacrifice, a hero's sacrifice is propelled by a standard of morality that is based, not on pure acts of compassion *for* the other, but on acts of exchange by the hero *with* the other. The hero's sacrifice enters an economic space in which "to sacrifice for" transforms from an act of pure giving to one that finds motivation within its capacity to retrieve and redeem.

Chapter one investigated how the "good" mother's inescapable guilt can lead her down a path of violence and resentment. Similarly, Ik-ho's story also accentuates the fact that a hero's seemingly ethical sacrifice is oftentimes intrinsically linked to the desire for redemption, which in turn can bring about a violent quest to restore lost sovereignty. Whether the need to redeem sovereignty stems from guilt or subservience, the underlying commonality lies within the hero's (pre)determined role to prove his worth.

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[6] See Frederick Engels, *The Part Played by Labor in the Transition from Ape to Man* (New York: International Publishers Co., 1950).

[7] Carter Eckert discusses Park Chung Hee's militaristic utilitarianism in his book, *Park Chung Hee and Modern Korea: The Roots of Militarism, 1866–1945* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2016). He locates roots to his revolutionary ethos and martial character within his experience in the Japanese military.

Just as Ik-ho's seemingly selfless and formulaic heroism revealed the unethical exchange underlying the act of sacrifice, *Snowpiercer* (Bong Joon-ho, 2013) and *Train to Busan* (Yeon Sang-ho, 2016), too, expose the twisted paradigm in which the hero can remain as such, if and only if, he has performed a sacrifice equivalent to death. This chapter problematizes such predeterminations of, as well as the aporia within, the hero's sacrificial morality by considering and re-considering its capacity to not only manipulate, but also become manipulated by its inherently utilitarian function.

II. Sovereign Utility in *Snowpiercer*

As mentioned in chapter one, Moshe Halbertal discusses how sacrifice inevitably leads to violence.[8] A good example of sacrifice's violent tendencies can be seen most clearly in the relationship between Yu-bong and Song-hwa in *Sopyonje* (1993). The film, directed by Im Kwon-taek, tells the story of an itinerant family of *pansori* musicians during the 1950s. The main characters are younger brother Dong-ho, older sister Song-hwa, and Yu-bong, the adoptive father and the children's *pansori* teacher. Told through a series of flashbacks, the film follows a grownup Dong-ho in his attempts to find his sister after decades of separation. Most of the film concentrates on Song-hwa's training as a prolific *pansori* singer and Yu-bong's efforts to "help" her embody and express a sense of

[8] Moshe Halbertal, *On Sacrifice* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 114–116.

han,[9] or grief, through her singing. As Yu-bong detects a lack of *han* in Song-hwa's singing even after the many hardships he puts the children through, the step-father chooses to take action "for her sake." He slowly but deliberately blinds his adopted daughter so that she may experience first-hand and thus express *han*. Yu-bong's violent actions against Song-hwa is a perfect example of sacrifice's "reversals." While the viewers may recognize Yu-bong's actions as cruel and immoral, the character himself believes that he has performed a self-sacrifice for his daughter. He possesses a sense of justification and even moral license for the acts he has committed. Yu-bong's self-victimization, and thereby his "reversal of guilt," operates in two steps. First, he believes that his acts of blinding his daughter was as equally self-sacrificial for him as it obviously must have been for her. He has "transcended" his morality for her sake and given up his humanity and innocence for a greater cause, which in this case is the cultivation of Song-hwa's *han-filled* singing voice. While the daughter is an obvious victim of her father's deliberate aggressions, Halbertal's theories of sacrifice includes another layer of victimization. The father, the aggressor, can transform himself into the victim through an act of self-proclaimed self-sacrifice. Secondly, in addition to Yu-bong's self-sacrificial moral "transcendence," the step-father's guilt also gives him license to deem himself a victim. His guilt, regardless of the fact that they originate from his own actions, is twisted and transformed into a self-prescribed form of atonement or punishment.

[9] *Han* is most often translated as a deep-seeded resentment that is inherent within all Koreans. It is a feeling and expression of sadness, grief, and bitterness.

Because he feels guilty, he is being tortured by himself and therefore is once again a moral and righteous person, who is able to become a victim of his own "sacrifices."

Bong Joon-ho's film, *Snowpiercer* (2013), reveals the detrimental effects of such sovereign and utilitarian sacrifice. The dystopic narrative takes place on a single train that carries the last remaining members of humanity. In order to withstand the apocalyptic frozen environment, the train must maintain perpetual motion and circle a track that loops around the globe once every year. With the sacred engine and its conductor at the head, the train has developed its own ecosystem with each car serving its individual function. The front carries the elite members of society, while the last car holds the lowest class in cramped and dilapidated conditions. As a member of this last cabin, Curtis conspires to lead a revolt, travel to the front, and take over the train's mythical engine. A quintessential tortured soul with a hero complex, Curtis is plagued by guilt and self-loathing for his past criminal ways. With the help of Gilliam, an elderly sage-like figure, Curtis has changed his ways and now wishes for nothing else than to redeem himself from his past sins. Spurred on by the kidnapping of two small children and the eventual execution of his mentor, Gilliam, Curtis and his team lead a bloody revolt all the way to the front of the train. There, Curtis confronts Wilford, the train's conductor, only to learn the shocking truth: Wilford and Gilliam had been working together and Curtis's revolt was part of a calculated scheme to reduce population and maintain the train's fragile ecosystem. Wilford informs Curtis that certain sacrifices must be made in order for the "greater good" to survive and then offers him the keys to the engine. Although he seems convinced at first, Curtis is jostled back to reality when he discovers the two kidnapped children trapped underneath the floor tiles and being used

as replacement parts to keep the fragile engine running. After thrusting his arm into the machine to save one of the boys, Curtis sacrifices himself by becoming a human shield to protect the boy and a young girl before the train careens off the rails. The train explodes and the film ends with the two surviving children stepping out into snowy landscape.

Figure 2.1 Gilliam and Curtis plot a revolt in *Snowpiercer* (Bong Joon-ho, 2012)

Figure 2.2 Curtis's scar, showing his failure to sacrifice his arm, in *Snowpiercer* (Bong Joon-ho, 2012)

This retroactive system of heroic sacrifice poses an ethical conundrum: If the hero speaks to his heroism, in other words, equate his actions to a heroic death, the very process of this equivocation of self-worth negates his claim to his heroic status. But on the other hand, if the hero does not make his sacrifice known, he becomes reliant on the judgment of others, thereby forcing him to relinquish his sovereign right to heroism in the first place. The only way a sovereign hero can remain as such is to, not seek anonymity, but enact a selfish process of validating the utility of his sacrifice by the self and for the self. And so Curtis, rather than erase the giver or the sacrificer, as proposed by Marion, must evacuate the need for a sacrificed-for, or the other, from the equation completely.

Snowpiercer's relationships between the three main characters, Curtis, Wilford (the train conductor at the front of the train), and Gilliam (Curtis's saintly mentor),

reveal their own ambiguous divisions of guilt and morality brought on by the introduction of sacrifice to the narrative. The relationship between Curtis and Gilliam possesses a twisted aspect of guilt that, rather than induce a deprecating sense of the self, actually offers him, not only the right to lead, but also the right to kill in exchange for his self-righteousness (Fig. 2.1). Gilliam, a mysterious figure who seems to possess the qualities Curtis most desires, physically embodies the act of sacrifice. In order to save a child's life from cannibals, Curtis among them, Gilliam chopped off an arm and a leg to offer them as substitution. Because of his sacrifice, all members of the train's last car, especially Curtis, respects him and deems him worthy as a leader. In keeping with his wise and humble character, Gilliam refuses this role and instead passes the torch to Curtis by acting as his mentor and encouraging him to lead the rebellion. Curtis, however, feels that he does not possess the necessary sacrificial experiences that would grant him the right to accept such a position. With only a scar on his arm to further remind him of his failures to sacrifice himself, Curtis is not self-transcendent enough and is thus laden with a deep sense of inadequacy and guilt (Fig. 2.2).

Curtis's self-induced guilt, however, rather than take away, returns and re-enforces his self-sovereignty. Curtis's road to self-inflicted suffering and thus self-righteousness forms through four steps. At first, Curtis's self-worth begins in a subservient position because he is effectively denied the right to sacrifice. As mentioned in chapter one, if a person is denied the right to give, then the tenuous relationship this creates between the giver and the receiver can become a source of anxiety and violence. As such, Curtis is limited by his own lack of sacrifice and is placed in a position that allows him only to receive, thereby robbing him of the chance to express his humanity.

Morality, as such, is introduced in the gift cycle through the concept of reciprocity; it is one's moral duty to reciprocate and reciprocation is crucial to maintaining equality between the participants of the relationship. It is this lowly position, however, that propels Curtis to seek out a more beneficial and equal position within the train's society. The rebellion is a method through which Curtis may overturn his submissive position and escape a relationship he deems as exploitative and asymmetrical.

Once Curtis has discovered his motivation to lead, he must earn the right to do so as well. Armored with his guilt, Curtis seeks to regain his self-righteousness through violent atonement. To atone for a misdeed or a transgression is to create a substitution by a symbolic form of penalty that may be lesser in severity or may not even be directed at the transgressor himself. This symbolic punishment or atonement may take form through the sacrifice of an innocent representative or substitution, such as the sacrificial animal, or through a self-administered form of punishment. Curtis may not have been able to demonstrate his morality through an act of self-sacrifice, but he is able to regain what he has lost by feeling morally guilty. Halbertal demonstrates this ironic twist between life and death, sacrifice and guilt, through a discussion of a soldier's actions in war.

> By risking their lives, soldiers earn their right to live. They become, through this baptism of fire, owners of their own lives. What was given to them at birth arbitrarily and without choice belongs to them now. In risking their lives they mock death, and in killing they own death by

taking life; it is as if they work out the drama of rebirth and death in that same action.[10]

Curtis's re-acquaintance with his self-sovereignty and his subsequent right to lead, however, ironically requires him to risk his life and commit violence to preserve what he has gained. Through this willingness to sacrifice oneself, Curtis thus is able to return full circle and reclaim his sovereign right to live.

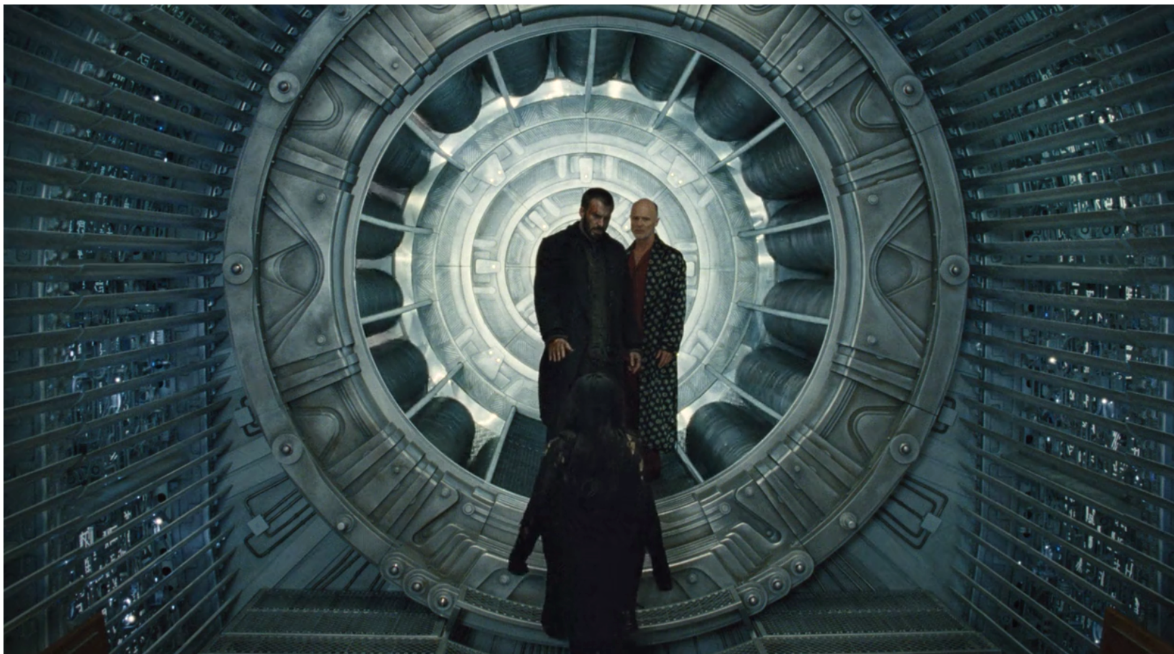

Figure 2.3 Curtis considers taking over the train in *Snowpiercer* (Bong Joon-ho, 2012)

Towards the end of the film, Curtis and a few others finally reach the head of the train (Fig. 2.3). Curtis meets Wilford, the mythical train conductor and discovers that his revolution was in fact orchestrated by Wilford and the one person he trusted most, his

[10] Halbertal, 89.

mentor Gilliam. Wilford explains that the train is a fragile ecosystem and that Curtis's revolution solved its overpopulation problem. Curtis is encouraged to see the "big picture" and think of the "greater good" of the collective, rather than the individual members of the last cabin. *Snowpiercer*'s final scenes display how Curtis's heroic motivations can transform a hero's desire to give, into the hero's right and privilege to take, in a single instance. Much like Mother's twisted elevation of murder to moral act, Curtis, too, must go through a process of self-promotion that allows him to fully embrace his heroic status and deem himself worthy to lead the train. A twisted logic goes through Curtis's head. He has reached this point because he has already sacrificed. But depending on how he looks at the situation, his previous sacrifice can be viewed as sin against the last cabin or dutiful heroism in service of the larger collective. If he doesn't choose to lead, his sacrifices become sin, and so he loses heroic status. If he does choose to lead, he must take it upon himself to transform his useless violence into a sovereign sacrifice. Curtis's final scenes displays how his regained right to live, achieved through an ambiguity of guilt and morality, can be taken so far that he may even feel he has the license to further self-victimize. Believing that he has suffered enough, regardless of the fact that the suffering was self-inflicted, Curtis begins to pass blame onto the very train members he was risking his life for because he views them as being the instillers of his guilt. Protected by his newly acquired guilt-propelled right to live, Curtis may give himself an even greater right: to become another head of the train.

In the end, Curtis dons his hero's uniform and acquires, not only a right to commit violence, but also a justification for that violence after the fact. Since it is the moral and good who risks his life, the reverse must be true – namely, that sacrifice can actually

make something or someone into a good. Thus, Curtis's sacrifice becomes a self-fulfilled and self-justified act of heroism. No longer dependent on the judgement of others, and no longer burdened by his guilt, he becomes fully redeemed and thus fully sovereign. Put another way, the guilt that once took away the hero's status, is shown to possess the ability to not only return but amplify the sacrificer's sovereignty. The hero has fully invoked the power of sovereign guilt. And so, Curtis considers Wilford's offer, not only to justify his own violent acts, but also to remain the sacrificial hero.

If Curtis's self-victimization leads to a twisted logic through which guilt ironically redeems his self-sovereignty, Wilford's self-sacrifice depicts another level of righteousness that provides Curtis further justification to take his place. Wilford, the main villain of the film and the subject of Curtis's guilt-ridden violence, does not feel Curtis's guilt or need for atonement, but in fact views himself *already* moral and good. Instead of guilt motivating him to violence, Wilford practices a reversal of roles and a pervasion of morality to further his motives of sustaining the train's fragile ecosystem. Wilford's sacrifice lies, not in his physical life, but in his willingness to lay bare his humanity for what he deems is the greater good.

Wilford's self-sacrifice and his eventual license to kill operates through four steps. First, Wilford shrouds the train in an origin narrative that demands loyalty and sacrifice from its occupants. As is common with most nations, the train possesses a tale of heroic sacrifices made by the founding members or member, in this case Wilford. Loyalty, not unlike contemporary visions of nationalism, is demanded by the occupants of the train through a process of teleological meaning-making. The members of the train must remain loyal to Wilford to prevent his sacrifices from being stripped of importance,

thereby creating a situation in which each subsequent generation must carry on the burden of maintaining the sacrificial weight of the origin narrative and its main protagonist.

Once the train's, and thereby Wilford's, origin narrative is established and enacted, Wilford's second step to achieving his right to kill involves further binding the train's occupants into relying on his sacrifices to the point of complete dependence. With this control, Wilford is able to assume a hierarchical position in which he is able to not only ask the occupants to sacrifice for the train, but also place himself as the sacrificial victim who has given his all to protect the overall well-being of the train. In this way, another reversal occurs in the form of self-sacrifice within the relationship between an aggressor of violence, Wilford, and his victim, the train's members. As a prerequisite to upholding a higher cause, the aggressor may consider his violent acts as a form of self-sacrifice, or a sacrificing of his own morality. The aggressor has sacrificed his own goodness for the greater good and is ultimately the true victim within the relationship. Of course, this would also indicate that the initial victim of the violence cannot be a victim as well and so, is blamed for the aggressor-victim's sacrifices. This reversal of the victim-aggressor dynamic is generated by the act of self-sacrifice on Wilford's part. Wilford views his position at the front of the train as a necessary burden through which he is sacrificing his own morality for the sake of the other members of the train. The train's occupants may be physically suffering from his decisions, but he is the one who must relent his sense of humanity and do what is required to keep the train running, no matter how unpleasant. "Morality, in this view, is a great temptation to be overcome in

the name of a higher mission."[11] Wilford has "conquered his temptation" to follow his morality to become "the real victim" of his own crimes. With this self-administered righteousness and redefined morality, Wilford is given the license to kill. Just as Curtis reacquires his sovereignty though a practice of guilty violence, Wilford's self-sovereignty not only justifies his violence, but also perpetuates an ontological morality that only further bolsters his own self-worth.

Bong Joon-ho's *Snowpiercer* values the sacrificial hero's sovereignty above all else. From the very beginning, the audience is introduced to Curtis's motivations to redeem self-worth. Curtis's self-induced guilt transforms into a desire to exchange that guilt for a redemption of sovereign status. He is not a hero because he has chosen to lead, but must wait to be judged as one *after* his heroic sacrifices have been performed. In other words, the guilt that once took away the hero's status, possesses the power to not only return but amplify the sacrificer's sovereignty. This retroactive system of sovereign guilt poses an ethical conundrum: By placing the sacrificed-by and sacrificed-for within an economy of exchange, the act of sacrifice necessarily becomes a product of valuation, rather than a pure gift, that privileges the hero's sovereign status over the receiver's. Rather than erase the giver or the sacrificed-by, Curtis's redemptive self-sacrifice negates the need for a sacrificed-for, or the other, in the first place. Motivated by a desire for sovereign status, the hero's sacrifice becomes truly a selfish sacrifice that no longer signifies an act of pure giving *for the sake of* the other, but instead becomes an exchange *with and against* the other.

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[11] Halbertal, 70.

It is important to note that Bong Joon-ho's film is an adaptation of the French graphic novel of the same by Jacques Lob. The backgrounds of both narratives remain the same. There is a train in an apocalyptic future, the last remaining members of humanity, and a male protagonist with a goal to reach the front. But Bong's screenplay makes a crucial change. While Lob's main character, Proloff, wants to fight his way to the front of the train for his own survival and benefit, Curtis's desire to reach the head of the train is fueled by guilt, duty, and heroic sacrifice. Proloff's selfish motivations exclude his actions from being defined as sacrifice and so by extension, he cannot be deemed a hero. Curtis, on the other hand, is not violently forging through the train because of his own selfish desires, but supposedly for the benefit of the larger collective. He is risking his life for a greater cause; he is a revolutionary hero. But, if we take a step back and evaluate the consequences of their actions and the end results, we can see that they possess more similarities than differences. Both Proloff and Curtis reach the head of the train through violent means and both protagonists are offered the chance to take over the train as the new conductor. Proloff's motivation may have been selfish from the very beginning, but Curtis, too, eventually reaches a self-aggrandizing and unethical point in his heroic journey where his supposed revolution is transformed into a justification for yet another dictatorship. As mentioned before, in this way, sacrifice always begets another and another in order to retroactively justify the importance of each previous act. And Curtis's sovereign heroism must be validated at all cost. So, much like the selfless Mother, the dutiful hero, fueled by his sovereign guilt, becomes trapped in a retrospective cycle with no end in sight.

III. The Undecidable Hero in *Train to Busan*

Figure 2.4 Seok-woo and his daughter, Sun-woo, aboard the *Train to Busan* (Yeon Sang-ho, 2016).

Just as Bong Joon-ho's *Snowpiercer* is a microcosm of human exchange, Yeon Sang-ho's *Train to Busan* also encapsulates elements of larger society onto a single train in order to consider the balance between utility and responsibility. The film follows a fund manager, Seok-woo, and his daughter as they travel by train towards the south to escape a zombie epidemic, caused by mismanagement of a biotech company (Fig. 2.4). Almost too allegorically, Seok-woo is portrayed as a workaholic who cannot let go of his utilitarian role within an industrial and morally decaying society. While Curtis, in the previous film, had something to prove and gain, Seok-woo's sacrifice, all throughout the narrative, reads as a fulfillment of his fatherly duties rather than an act of heroism for a

greater and collective good. He actively shuns leadership positions until his daughter's life calls for his interventions. Seok-woo's heroic sacrifice does not come until the very end of the film, when he throws himself at a zombie in order to save his daughter and her caretaker, eventually transforming into a zombie himself. But rather than give in to his zombie impulses, Seok-woo knowingly leans over the edge and allows himself to fall off the train, essentially performing a double sacrifice—first sacrificing as a human and then as a zombie. His acts of sacrifice stand in direct contrast to Curtis's because of their lack of retrospective motivation; he did not seek to redeem, nor did he perform out of guilt. His final sacrifice occurred, not from the desire to regain lost sovereignty, but from the liminal and particular moment of decision that required no consideration of utility. Unlike Curtis, Seok-woo's sacrifice relied on individual choice to bring forth a non-utilitarian and wholly particular act of giving that, rather than redeem, relinquishes sovereignty from the self to the other.

As with most zombie films, *Train to Busan* depicts the two most extreme sides of society and human interaction. The first "human" society is based on the basic tenets of capitalism in which utility determines production and relationships are founded upon exchange, while the second apocalyptic "zombie" society turns everything on its head. The film's first society and its "human condition" is trapped in a cycle of meaningless production in which the end product justifies the means—utility for utility's sake.[12]

Hannah Arendt categorizes human activities into the three divisions of labor, work, and action. According to Arendt, the modern world is said to be plagued by "the

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[12] Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958).

victory of *animal laborans*" in which the value of life, productivity, and abundance are privileged over permanence and freedom, acquired through work and action. The act of labor corresponds to the realm of the biological and the practices that are required to maintain life itself. Commanded solely by necessity, labor produces only to quickly consume and then renew the process again and again to sustain life. Labor binds humans, much like animals, to a life of primacy in which no permanence or meaning is created. In order to compensate for this lack of permanence, man enters the next realm of human activity. While labor privileges necessity-based consumption, work transports man to utility-based production. Through work, man creates artificial objects and through these objects, man separates himself from animals by extending temporality, durability, and independence from the natural world. Now in command of creation itself, humans are transported from the strictly private realm of labor to the public sphere of social and political society.

What is important to note here is the fact that because the desire to consume and live life purely for living's sake dominates modern society, the *animal laborans* reigns supreme and threatens the sustaining of the public collective. So, in such a world, the object created by the worker to create permanence and durability is misappropriated as a tool for the alleviation of labor. Machines that were once created for man, in turn, replaces human work and forces man to become reliant on his own creation. Rather than adjusting tools to man's needs, the privileging of labor adjusts men to the rhythms and demands of the machine. As Arendt states,

> Unlike the tools of workmanship, which at every given moment in the work process remain the servants of the hand, the machines demand

> that the laborer serve them, that he adjust the natural rhythm of his body to their mechanical movement. This certainly, does not imply that mean s such adjust to or become the servants of their machines; but it does mean that, as long as the work at the machine lasts, the mechanical process has replaced the rhythm of the human body. Even the most refined tool remains a servant, unable to guide or to replace the hand. Even the most primitive machine guides the body's labor and eventually replaces it altogether.[13]

If tools replace human work, then the utility of that tool and its product supersedes all other considerations. Rather than work creating and extending the meaning and value of life, the human reliance on utility determines the work and foments a cyclical pattern of meaningless production and consumption. Utility is produced solely for the sake of continuing even more utility.

[13] Arendt, 147.

Figure 2.5 Seok-woo hard at work as a ruthless and greedy fund manager in *Train to Busan* (Yeon Sang-ho, 2016)

Train to Busan's Seok-woo resides in this world of utility. The audience's first introduction to the character is telling. Seok-woo, working as a fund manager, sits at his desk and receives a call from a client (Fig. 2.5). After hearing the client voice concern over some stock shares, he immediately orders his underling to drop all of their investments as well. The employee expresses surprise and warns Seok-woo that dropping so many shares at once may negatively impact the other "worker ants" at the company. In response, Seok-woo quips, "Do you expect me to worry about the worker ants?" Disregarding the ramifications to his actions, Seok-woo allows greed and pure utilitarianism to dictate his decisions. Just as Arendt warned, human interaction and responsibility is overshadowed by the need to continue a cycle of utility. The end result is a character devoid of care or morality. Any and all human relationships that are not deemed immediately useful or necessary are either discarded or pushed to the sidelines.

His relationship with his wife, for example, is deteriorating and in the process of divorce. He blatantly disregards his mother's sacrifices to raise his daughter and support his career. And most of all, he completely fails at being an adequate father to his only daughter, Sun-woo. Once the film enters its apocalyptic climax, Seok-woo must fight his way through the train to save himself and his daughter. When Sun-woo gives up her seat for an elderly woman, Seok-woo pulls her aside and warns her, "You have to only think about yourself now. Don't worry about the others."

Figure 2.6 Seok-woo receives a call from his employee and discovers his connection the outbreak in *Train to Busan* (Yeon Sang-ho, 2016).

As such, Seok-woo's world is plagued by the *animal laborans*. And it is this plague that creates yet another. During a short break in the warding-off of zombies, Seok-woo receives a phone call from Mr. Kim, his employee from the first scene (Fig. 2.6). Speaking in a low tone, Mr. Kim informs Seok-woo that the zombie virus outbreak originated from

a biotech company he and Seok-woo saved from bankruptcy. In order to save his investment, Seok-woo had ordered money to be funneled into the faulty and disorganized company. Voicing concern and regret, Mr. Kim asks, "Please tell me this isn't our fault. It's not our fault is it?" Seok-woo calms him down, but he now knows the truth—namely that his greed and utilitarianism had indirectly caused the fall of society as he knew it.

In following, the eventual outcome of such extreme greed is a virus outbreak that transforms humans into the allegorical embodiment of complete and utterly useless consumption. Zombies are meaningless, but at the same time, their emptiness signifies opposition and indetermination. They occupy a liminal space because they are neither living nor dead; they teeter on the margins of transgression, but do not hold enough subjectivity to fully bypass the boundary. The only purpose a zombie possesses is to consume.

Besides signaling excessive human want, the zombie's insatiable desire to consume also highlights the existence of excess in the first place. Georges Bataille defines this excess as "the accursed share." Resulting from centuries of industry and economy, Bataille argues that the world now contains an enormous amount of surplus energy. Driven purely by necessity—as Arendt argues as well—man is said to have lost control of his own productive forces and has disturbed the equilibrium of the natural economic cycle. Describing a world dictated by utility, Bataille outlines a paradoxical glitch in the system. In order to reinstate balance to the skewed distribution of wealth and surplus, Bataille calls for drastic measures of consumption.

> The living organism, in a situation determined by the play of energy on the surface of the globe, ordinarily receives more energy than is necessary for maintaining life; the excess energy (wealth) can be used for the growth of a system (e.g., an organism); if the system can no longer grow, or if the excess cannot be completely absorbed in its growth, it must necessarily be lost without profit; it must be spent, willingly or not, gloriously or catastrophically.[14]

Since the purpose of utility is to meet an end (be of use), the only way to end utilitarianism itself would be to negate usefulness in general. The "accursed share" must be expended so that society is no longer beholden to utility.

Although zombie films mostly focus on the undead's destruction, Bataille's call for a revolution of "glorious consumption" also returns the possibility of meaning and choice. The individual, who once was bound to a cycle of meaningless labor, can now shed those bonds and reclaim consciousness.

> The exposition of a *general economy* implies intervention in public affairs, certainly; but first of all and more profoundly, what it aims at is consciousness, what it looks to from the outset is the *self-consciousness* that man would finally achieve in the lucid vision of its linked historical forms.[15]

As mentioned before, Park Chung Hee's call for a "human revolution" promotes self-sacrifice for the betterment of a common good. But, Bataille's version of a non-utilitarian

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[14] Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share Vol. 1* (New York: Zone Books, 1988), 21.

[15] Bataille, 41.

sort of revolution, while not exactly promoting it, acknowledges the need for sacrifice. According to Bataille, self-realization or self-consciousness is a human tendency quite different from the immediacy and immanence of animality. And because of this tendency, humans have evolved to rely on the binding nature of duration, thereby forcing themselves into a stranglehold cycle of self-inflicted utilitarian slavery. With the introduction of utility, objects hold an equal position of immanence as subjects, creating a hierarchy and a binary of two separate realities: the subject's perceived reality and the reality of the intimate (the sacred). With this separation, humankind must find a way to break out of the binding cycle of utility through sacrifice. What is different between Park and Bataille, however, lies in their end goals. Park encourages self-sacrifice to promote the common welfare of the state, while Bataille wants to rid our need for sacrifice entirely. Although both authors are striving to achieve equality, Park's version requires sacrifice, while Bataille's is achieved through pure and total consumption, a sort of leveling of the playing field. He desires a reality in which we would no longer require a sacrificial ritual to appreciate the importance of the liminal moment of non-utility. He calls for a return to or a rediscovery of our connection to the intimate world, in which we are not bogged down by the hassles of production, but are free to simply consume. Pure consumption, according to Bataille, albeit with a clear consciousness, is the only way to achieve a reality in which the moment, the furtive moment, takes precedence over duration and we are rid of the bonds of utility.[16]

[16] Georges Bataille, *Theory of Religion* (New York: Zone Books, 1989). And Georges Bataille, *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927–1939* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985).

As a result of this condemnation of excess, of all mediation including knowledge, Bataille privileges what he calls inner experience. “Inner experience” is immediacy without utility, without goals. It is perversion, such as disgust and humiliation, not because these emotions are more common or “useful,” but because they represent and rely on the immediate. They can and must only consider the end or death, the liminal moment, while emotions such as joy remain subservient to duration and still possess utility. According to Bataille, such inner experiences are the only way to free humanity from “project,” or work (and perhaps capitalism), and limitation.[17]

Figure 2.7 Seok-woo performs his first sacrifice in *Train to Busan* (Yeon Sang-ho, 2016).

[17] Georges Bataille, *Inner Experience* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988).

In following, Seok-woo's choice to fight the zombie and become one himself—his first sacrifice—is not justified because it is a sacrifice for the sake of his daughter and thus a higher common good, but because it separates him from the mediated world and its bonds of utility (Fig. 2.7). His sacrifice is deemed "useful" precisely because of its utter lack of utility and association with economy. Towards the end of the film, Seok-woo, his daughter Sun-woo, and a pregnant traveler narrowly escape a horde of zombies by climbing onto a passing train. Just as they are about to arrive in Busan, the one city that has succeeded in establishing a military stronghold, Seok-woo discovers an infected businessman in the engine room. This zombie, who the audiences recognize as the self-centered man from earlier in the film, lunges at Sun-woo and the pregnant woman. In an attempt to stop his attacks, Seok-woo wraps his arm around the zombie's mouth and pulls him back. After throwing the zombie off the train, Seok-woo looks over at his daughter fulling knowing he has been infected.

This initial erasure of his *human* self depicts Seok-woo's first of two sacrifices, signaling the relinquishing of his utilitarian sovereignty. As mentioned before, Jean-Luc Marion analyzes the act of sacrifice through his theorization of the "gift." He argues that a gift may not be truly considered as such unless it is completely separated from its exchange value. In order to achieve this, the gift's "giveness" must be emphasized through an erasure of the giver. But since the gift will lose its status as a gift without the giver to signify it as such, Marion claims that the "giveness" of the gift should be resurrected through a process of "regiving." As such, the author aims to reestablish sacrifice as gift-giving, and not destruction, by viewing sacrifice as this sort of return. Just like the re-gifting process, the recipient of the sacrifice still receives but does so

without the attachment of a sacrificer, so that the sacrifice may still be recognized as such but remain free of the economy of exchange.

Along the same line, John Caputo, in his book *The Weakness of God* deconstructs faith or the relationship one has with God and argues for a sovereign-less and vulnerable practice of ethics. He begins with the name of God contending that it refers to an *event* rather than a single entity and that it is "a call rather than a cause, a provocation rather than of a presence."[18] Once again straying away from a uniform and essentialist mindset in which God is embodied by an absolute being, Caputo presents God as a name that encompasses more than a body, but a promise, an "event" yet to come. This deconstruction of the absolute goes hand in hand with his next contention. Just as God cannot be limited to a single entity, His power and truth should not be condensed into a single source. Hence, Caputo argues for a "sacred anarchy," or a sacred "an"-*arche*, in which the weakness of God is presented as the origin of His sacred truth. Such "weak theology," which is largely based on Levinasian theory, contends that the strength of God lies in His weakness and that our faith too should stem from a non-ontological provocation of the self. God's transcendence and His unconditional promise of what is to come are derived from His subversion of His own sovereignty.

With the erasure of his human self, Seok-woo is released from the bondages of utility. What is important to note here is the fact that within a system of utility, it was impossible for Seok-woo to be responsible. And according to Derrida, the practice of

[18] John Caputo, *The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 12.

true responsibility cannot be achieved without first going through a stage of "undecidability." Rather than defining "undecidability" as merely as oscillation between a dichotomy of choices, Derrida describes the process as a necessary experience that one must go through for even the possibility of responsibility to exist. As he claims,

> in accordance with what is only ostensibly a paradox, this particular undecidable opens the field of decision or of decidability. It calls for decision in the order of ethical-political responsibility. It is even its necessary condition. A decision can only come into being in a space that exceeds the calculable program that would destroy all responsibility by transforming it into a programmable effect of determinate causes. There can be no moral or political responsibility without this trial and this passage by way of the undecidable. Even if a decision seems to take only a second and not to be preceded by any deliberation, it is structured by this experience and experiment of the undecidable.[19]

The "undecidable," by virtue of his ability to make a choice or decision in the first place, is called to action, subjected to obligation, and exposed to a duty to be responsible.

Seok-woo's first sacrifice of his sovereignty returns the possibility of "undecidability." Understanding that he is now a danger to his daughter, Seok-woo is placed under another obligation to sacrifice. Derrida discusses this simultaneous and paradoxical occurrence of inevitability and nonutility within the act of sacrifice.

[19] Jacques Derrida, *Limited Inc.* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988), 116.

According to Derrida, the sacrifice of Isaac acts as an allegory for the paradox of responsibility that also occurs in everyday life. "Tout autre est tout autre."[20] Every other (one) is every (bit) other. Just as the sacrifice of Isaac demonstrates how moral responsibility for the universal may disrupt the ethical responsibility for the particular, our relationships and our responsibility towards them are also trapped within an inescapable dualism. If I am ethical to one, I am also being unethical to all other others. And so my decision, in order to be as responsible as possible, must rely on a moment of pure liminal indecision, on undecidability. This moment of decision, of pure unmediated and inexplicable madness, "demands a temporality of the instant without every constituting a present. …it belongs to an atemporal temporality, to a duration that cannot be grasped: something one can neither stabilize, establish, *grasp*, *apprehend*, or *comprehend*."[21] So, a truly ethical sacrifice must be a wholly singular, completely-mine, decision that understands the paradoxical nature of the act as ultimately ending in failure to all other others, regardless of my responsibility towards a single other. Derrida's ethical being must, then, in a sense, make a leap of faith in the hopes that his liminal decision will be responsible while still acknowledging that it may not be wholly so.

[20] Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, 82.

[21] Derrida, *The Gift of Death,* 65.

Figure 2.8 Seok-woo performs his second sacrifice in *Train to Busan* (Yeon Sang-ho, 2016).

And so, Seok-woo, despite his infected and clouded consciousness, makes that leap of faith (Fig. 2.8). Tearfully saying goodbye to his daughter, Seok-woo releases her grip and runs out of the engine room, locking the door behind him. Stepping onto the platform at the edge of the train car, his mind flashes back to Sun-woo's birth and he remembers holding her in his arms for the first time. As his eyes glaze over and his veins start to glow with the infection, Seok-woo smiles and allows himself to fall off the ledge onto the tracks. Just as Derrida expounded, my duty to be responsible to the other "must be endured *in the instant itself*," despite and simultaneously because of paradoxical nature.[22] Fully acknowledging that his sacrificial death can never be justified, Seok-woo's zombie self, in its irrational and marginal state, makes a decision in the furtive

[22] Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, 66.

moment. Performed in two acts, Seok-woo's double sacrifice allows him to relinquish his sovereign utility and finally achieve true responsibility.

IV. Conclusion

The fact that both films take place on trains, linear tubes that force the protagonists to choose a singular path in either direction, helps to not only simplify their heroic patterns, but guide the narrative to a single end. Levinas states that, "…the meaning of death does not begin in death," "We encounter death in the face of the other." As opposed to Heidegger, who derives the meaning of being and time through the comprehension of death's finality, Levinas witnesses the expansion of time and being by acknowledging the fact that understanding and controlling death is impossible. Rather than consider death the ultimate sacrifice because it fulfills an end goal, Levinas views death as the possibility to encounter the truly ethical self. Since we can never witness our own, death embodies a radical and absolute alterity, which in turn provides an opportunity to fully encounter that substitution of the self by the other. *Snowpiercer*'s Curtis and *Train to Busan*'s Seok-woo exemplify the ways in which the ethical hero must also navigate the trappings of their heroic roles and perform a sacrifice free from utilitarian exchange. In the end, each hero comes face to face with death and each hero performs their ultimate sacrifice. Curtis chooses death as utility to finalize and solidify his spatial and temporal quest to redeem sovereignty, while Train to Busan's Seok-woo embraces death in the furtive moment, not as an end-product accrued from his own temporal being, but as an irreplaceable gift borrowed and signified through the other.

Against Korea's normative tradition of cyclical sacrifice for the sake of restoring national sovereignty, the two filmic narratives in this chapter reveal the aporia within the hero's utilitarian and redemptive sacrifice as well as present an alternate and vulnerable sacrifice that is not simply equivalent to death, but overflows its signification.

CHAPTER THREE

Violent Vulnerability:

The Politics of Care and Memory in Byun Young-joo's *Helpless* and O Chong-hui's *Spirit on the Wind*

> Why should I care if my soul is swallowed up by a collective? It is like a drop of water, which tries to gain salvation by merging with the ocean, thereby losing it identity as a drop without adding much to the ocean.[1]
>
> The horror of falling into utter oblivion is not necessarily the fear of what will happen to us after death but of what it says about our relationships now. It is the fear of not amounting to much in our present relations with others.[2]
>
> — Avishai Margalit, *The Ethics of Memory*

[1] Avishai Margalit, *The Ethics of Memory*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 100.

[2] Margalit, 94.

I. Introduction

Avishai Margalit begins the first chapter of his book, *The Ethics of Memory*, with a story he encountered from a daily newspaper. He summarizes the article about a "certain army colonel," who cannot recall the name of a fallen soldier previously under his command. This particular soldier, according to the colonel's friends, was worth remembering because he had been killed by friendly fire. How could the colonel forget the name of such a valiant warrior? How unethical to forget such a sacrifice! Reading this, Margalit states,

> I was struck by the moral wrath heaped on this officer simply for not remembering something, and it led me to think about the officer's *obligation* to remember – and if indeed he has an obligation. …Is it really of special importance that the officer did not remember his dead soldier's name?[3]

Upon asking the question, Margalit proceeds to dissect the role of memory and the actors such roles pertain to, especially in historical cases where remembrance is all that is left. Remembering the name of the solider is deemed important because his name acts as a metonym for the soldier himself. But on the other hand, Margalit points out that if the colonel was able to describe the soldier in detail, this would equally suffice as remembrance. Here is where the complication arises. If the colonel were to remember the valiant soldier as having a "huge red dripping nose," this particular memory would

[3] Margalit, 19.

not be suitable as a point of valorization. Such a negative description would not satisfy the colonel's ultimate goal – namely, to not simply remember the soldier, but *commemorate* him. "The human project of memory, i.e., *commemoration*, is basically a religious project to secure some form of immortality."[4] This distinction between the simple act of r*emembering* the soldier's name to *commemorating* the person and his actions underlies the fact that the very process of remembrance holds a slew of complications and thus makes necessary an 'ethics of memory.'

But is there such a thing as an 'ethics of memory'? If so, what are the parameters of remembering ethically? And whose responsibility is it to do so? The first two chapters discussed the aporia within the act of sacrifice and its relation to the maternal and heroic desire to redeem guilt. All four of the films previously discussed (*Mother*, *Pieta*, *Snowpiercer*, and *Train to Busan*) pivot their narratives around sacrificial characters to thereby demonstrate the dangers of relying too heavily on the supposed purifying power of redemption. In this third chapter, I would like to move on from the spiritual realm of redemption to a more fundamental consideration of memory and its relation to responsibility, both individual and communal.

Byun Young-joo's film *Helpless* (2012) and O Chong-hui's short story *Spirit on the Wind* (1986), center their narratives around vulnerable women. They are vulnerable because the past haunts them. One desires freedom *from* memory, while the other locates solace *in* memory. This chapter's primary line of inquiry does not dwell on the protagonist's personal and first-hand memories with the past, but instead considers our,

[4] Margalit, 25.

the spectator's, second-hand response to and framing of those events. An other's vulnerability puts a spotlight on the spectator's responsibility toward them. So, as a point of contact for the viewer, both narratives rely on the woman's male partners to translate, mediate, and reconstruct her traumatic memories. Through their indirect, but still significant, encounters with her past – the spectator's memory of (her) memories – the viewers are introduced to memory's influence upon, not only the sustaining of past relationships, but also the building of new ones in the future. By considering how the politics of remembrance interacts with the ethics of memory, the two narratives highlight the fact that simply remembering, or even commemorating, trauma may not be enough – in fact, an over-dependence on memory's transcendental power can accentuate, rather than soothe, the other's vulnerability.

II. Community of Care, Not Just Memory

On August of 2019, the Japanese government announced the removal of South Korea from its "white list" of trustworthy countries that receive preferential treatment on trade regulations. Restricting import of semiconductor materials critical to South Korea's technology industry, these sanctions plunged the two nations in a political standoff. The Korean government retaliated by removing Japan from their own white list with the president, Moon Jae-in, stating in an emergency cabinet session, "If Japan intentionally hurts our economy, it will also have to suffer big damage… We will never

again lose to Japan."[5] Many analysts labeled Japan's actions as retaliation for the South Korean Supreme Court's landmark ruling that would require Japanese companies to pay restitution to Korean laborers forced to work before 1945.[6] Viewing the move as yet another threat from a previous colonizer, the Korean people also reacted by participating in a nation-wide boycott of any and all Japanese-made goods. An incident of contemporary national politics had reopened old wounds from decades back, once again prompting Korea to gravitate to collectivism.

Stemming from its colonization by the Japanese Empire (1910-1945), Korea has long harbored a deep-seated resentment towards its neighboring country. Although the degree to which this "anti-Japanese" sentiment has been "politicized" varies depending on the nation's regime changes and their corresponding priorities – a conservative government often desires reconciliations with Japan for the sake of economic and national security, while a liberal government demands harsher expressions of atonement for the sake of human rights issues – Korea's relationship with Japan, whether political, economic, or social, has largely been predicated on Korea's emphasis on the preservation of and redemption from its collective and traumatic past.[7] At the

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[5] Ben Dooley and Choe Sang-hun, "Japan Imposes Broad New Trade Restrictions on South Korea," *New York Times*, August 1, 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/01/business/japan-south-korea-trade.html.

[6] Celeste L. Arrington, "Japan claims it's restricting exports to South Korea because of 'national security.' Here's the real reason why," *The Washington Post*, July 18, 2019, www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2019/07/18/japan-claims-its-restricting-exports-south-korea-because-national-security-heres-real-reason-why/

Gregg A. Brazinsky, "How Japan's failure to atone for past sins threatens the global economy," *The Washington Post*, August 11, 2019, www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2019/08/11/how-japans-failure-atone-past-sins-threatens-global-economy/

[7] After Liberation and during Park Chung-hee's dictatorial regime from 1963 to 1979, increased interest in establishing economic relations with Japan led to a normalization treaty in 1965. Under this Treaty of

heart of this collectivized memory stands the 'comfort woman.' A moniker used to represent the thousands of women and girls, mostly from Korea and China, who suffered sexual enslavement by the Imperial Japanese Army during the Second World War, the 'comfort women' have come to occupy center-stage in any conversation regarding Korea's tense relationship with Japan.

Every Wednesday since January 8, 1992, for example, The Korean Council for the Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery has led a protest in front of the Japanese Embassy in Seoul. Demanding an apology and legal reparations from the Japanese government for the atrocities committed against the 'comfort women,' the demonstration's rally cry has predominantly centered around the act of remembrance. Additionally, the official 'comfort women' website run by the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family, posts front and center the phrase, "The truth that we must remember, we're

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Basic Relations, the South Korean government essentially relinquished any further right to claim grievances against the Japanese government for its occupation in return for monetary compensation. When the treaty documents were declassified in 2005, Koreans were finally able to see that the funds were not used to compensate victims, but instead invested Park's development projects and political war chest. Ever since, Korean politicians have invoked or repressed the 'comfort women' issue depending on their political aspirations. As Jennifer Lind puts it, "Korean resentment about history has been a constant over this period. It is the South Korean government's interest on activating, or suppressing, this resentment that has varied." Most recently in 2015, for example, conservative leader Park Geun-hye (Park Chung Hee's daughter) signed an agreement with Japan, announcing that the issue had now reached the "final and irrevocable resolution." The agreement was soon followed by the 2016 intelligence-sharing pact between Japan and South Korea in order to improve bilateral relations and defend against threats from North Korea. After her impeachment in 2017, the current president Moon Jae-in, from the liberal opposition party, took office and criticized Park's 2015 agreement, prompting a review of the negotiations. Although terms were not re-negotiated, President Moon continued to call the agreement "defective" and demanded Japan to "accept the truth and apologize with a sincere heart."
Jennifer Lind, "The Japan- South Korea dispute isn't just about the past," *The Washington Post*, August 20, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2019/08/30/japan-south-korea-dispute-isnt-just-about-past/.
Tom Le, "Why Japan-South Korea history disputes keep resurfacing," *The Washington Post*, July 23, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2019/07/23/why-japan-south-korea-disputes-world-war-ii-keep-resurfacing/.

with them now for their proud, courageous behavior."[8] A notable addition to the front page of this website is a list of five statistics that record a range of numbers, such as the year the first 'comfort woman' came forward to testify or the total number of years activists have been protesting on their behalf.[9] The most notable statistic is listed last and showcases the decreasing number of currently surviving 'comfort women.' On January 28, 2019, this number dropped to 20 – down from the 240 officially registered – with the death of long-time activist and survivor, Kim Bok-dong. Acting like a ticking counter, the slowly but surely decreasing number reminds visitors to the website of how little time is left to set things right. The weekly rally held on the following Wednesday saw hundreds gather to mourn her death, while holding signs that read, "We will not forget."[10]

As such, the 'comfort women' issue has become an undeniable part of Korea's nationalist narrative. And the few remaining 'comfort women' survivors have been cast in a heavily symbolic role in which their very bodily existence, ravaged by suffering and the passing of time, is an indication of how little of that time activists have left to seek justice from the Japanese government. In a way, the protesters want to put the Japanese government on trial and the survivors are their only witnesses to the crimes committed.

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[8] *'Comfort Women' Survivors e-Museum*, The Ministry of Gender Equality and Family, accessed January 13, 2020, http://www.hermuseum.go.kr/mainPage.do.

[9] The first 'comfort woman' to come forward and testify was Kim Hak-sun in 1991. She shared her story of being imprisoned by the Japanese in China. The following year, Kim Bok-dong also broke her silence and gave her account. Choe Sang-hun, "Kim Bok-dong, Wartime Sex Slave Who Sought Reparations for Koreans, Dies at 92," *New York Times*, January 29, 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/29/obituaries/kim-bok-dong-dead.html.

[10] Agnes Constante, "'Comfort women' activist, dead at 92, fought for reparations 'until the end'," *NBC News*, January 30, 2019, https://www.nbcnews.com/news/asian-america/comfort-women-activist-dead-92-fought-reparations-until-end-n964936.

As the number of survivors dwindles and first-hand memories fade with age, however, these witness accounts must be replaced by the memory of others. The 'comfort woman,' then, becomes vulnerable to our memory of memories. As mentioned before, the question at stake here is not the validity of the woman's personal attachments to her past; nor is there any doubt regarding Japan's moral obligation to hear, acknowledge, and even atone for its part in inflicting suffering.[11] The primary issue at hand has to do with how tactics of remembrance – or commemoration – often rely on the generalization and continuation of suffering as a method to maintain a community of shared memories. In other words, Korea's reliance on creating and sustaining *collective* memory, rather than individual responsibility, holds the potential to extend the vulnerability of the other.

For Levinas, vulnerability of the *self* toward the other is what drives true responsibility. Through a process he calls "substitution,' Levinas locates the practice of ethics in relationships that transcend Being. Contrary to Kant's ontological and universal morality, Levinas outlines an ethics of alterity and singularity.[12] Stemming from a Judeo-

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[11] For more on Japan's denial see, Alexis Dudden and Kozo Mizoguchi, "Abe's Violent Denial: Japan's Prime Minister and the 'Comfort Women,' *The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus* 5, no. 3 (March, 2007), https://apjjf.org/-Alexis-Dudden/2368/article.html.

[12] Kant envisioned morality within the realm of a larger universal metaphysics rather than individual experience. He aimed to outline a strictly absolute, essentialist, and rational morality based on the a priori concept of the "categorical imperative." The "categorical imperative," as opposed to the "hypothetical imperative," is at once the condition of possibility for moral action as well as it sole justification. Morality is not based on personal experience but is purely dictated by reason: You act morally because it is moral to do so and you perform your duty because it is your duty to do so. In order to bypass the problematic of choice, Kant claims that free will and autonomy is also derived from the "categorical imperative" and can only be achieved through the practice of it. To have reason is to have free will and that autonomy is only possible through a reverence for an a priori imperative. The "noumena," things-in-themselves, of reason guides us through the "phenomena," appearances, of everyday life. Morality, then, is not based on the "other" but is considered an universal code of conduct; it is Being as end-in-itself within an internal,

Christian background, Levinas describes subjectivity as being established *through* and *for* the "other" – the other is the source of my subjectivity and the other is the reason for my morality. For Levinas, substitution is the very form and essence of the ethical self. Rather than defining the "essence" of being within itself, he locates subjectivity's condition of possibility within the act of dismantling and inverting, *substituting*, that very essence for and by the other. In other words, substitution is the manifestation of the ethical and responsible self. "A subject is a hostage."[13] Responsibility is not a return to oneself to constitute a uniform Being, but instead a contracting, a boundary-breaking, and completely vulnerable "otherwise than being."

It is important to note, however, substitution does not indicate a complete replacement of subjectivity. As Levinas states, "I am not a transubstantiation, a changing of one substance for another, I do not shut myself up in another identity, I do not rest in a new avatar."[14] Instead, substitution is manifested through a purposeful vulnerability toward the other so that the subject, or what Levinas deems "the same," is disturbed with restlessness by the "other." It is not a taking away or a lack of intuition, but an overabundance of subjectivity caused by the "other-in-the-same." This purposeful vulnerability toward the other, then, requires an ultimate singularity of the self. The self is irreplaceable and unsubstitutable in its capacity to be exposed and rendered passive

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inherent, and self-contained ontological formation. See, Immanuel Kant, *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publications Co., 1993).

[13] Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being, or, Beyond Essence* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998), 112.

[14] Levinas, *Otherwise*, 14.

to the other. In other words, my state of being is engulfed by my responsibility for the other and no one else can perform that responsibility in my stead.

> Substitution is not an act; it is a passivity inconvertible into an act, the hither side of the act-passivity alternative, the exception that cannot be fitted into the grammatical categories of noun or verb, save in the said that thematizes them. This recurrence can be stated only as an in-itself, as the underside of being or as otherwise than being. To be oneself, otherwise than being, to be dis-interested, is to bear the wretchedness and bankruptcy of the other, and even the responsibility that the other can have for me. To be oneself, the state of being a hostage, is always to have one degree of responsibility more, the responsibility for the responsibility for the other.[15]

On the other hand, the process of commemoration, or second-hand remembrance, must always go through a process of mediation that goes against Levinas's call for a singular encounter with the other. In order to commemorate, for example, memory must be represented as a statue, a memorial, a picture, a song, or even a national holiday. This is where the problem arises. The process of representation introduces two changes to my relationship with the other. First, by forbidding direct contact with a singular other, my own subjectivity becomes lost. I transform from a singular and irreplaceable subject to a collective and distant spectator. Second, in order to become represented, the other becomes generalized and his memory narrativized. In

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[15] Levinas, *Otherwise*, 117.

other words, the process of remembrance can often force the ethics of memory to intersect with the politics of spectatorship and even pity.

For example, the 'comfort women' are commemorated through a particular memorial statue, first erected in front of the Japanese Embassy in Seoul on December 14, 2011. This bronze figure, also called the Statue of Peace or *P'yŏnghwaŭi sonyŏsang*, depicts a young barefooted girl in traditional Korean garb sitting in a chair with her hands clasped tight on her lap. She stares directly at the Embassy and next to her is an empty chair that serves a dual purpose. The chair leaves room to signal the importance of recognizing the many other 'comfort women' survivors, while at the same time providing visitors a place to sit and join the young girl in her silent demand for justice. The statue has been replicated more than forty times all throughout South Korea and also erected in a number of states in the United States, including Virginia, New Jersey, and California.[16] Each memorial serves as a powerful reminder of a regrettable point in history and seeks to inspire remembrance and demand apology. The statues *represent* the memory of suffering.

According to Luc Boltanski, such forms of mediated spectatorship brought on by the memorialization of suffering introduces a moral dilemma in which the individual responsibility to become vulnerable *for* the other is replaced by a collective duty to remember and sustain the vulnerability *of* the other. This confusion is caused by the fact that representation creates an unavoidable and necessary distance between the

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[16] Adam Taylor, "Why Japan is losing its battle against statues of colonial-era 'comfort women'," *The Washington Post*, September 21, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2017/09/21/why-japan-is-losing-its-battle-against-statues-of-colonial-era-comfort-women/.

spectator and the represented subject. As a memorial, the *Sonyo* (girl) statue represents not a singular experience but the amalgamation of the 'comfort woman' experience, in general. And as a spectator to this representation, the viewer's encounter with the 'comfort woman' is mediated through this generalization of suffering. But, at the same time, the memorial must point to a range of specifics, or "hypersingularities," that narrativize suffering in a way that can convey feeling and emotion within the spectator. The statue must embody the singular memories of any and all 'comfort women,' while at the same time collectivize their singularities as to convey an understandable and relatable narrative of suffering for the spectator.

> The unfortunates conveyed [through representation] definitely must not be characterized in preferential terms… They must be hyper-singularised through an accumulation of the details of suffering and, at the same time, underqualified: it is he [the suffering child], but it could be someone else; it is that child there who makes us cry, but any other child could have done the same. Around each unfortunate brought forward crowds a host of replacements. The sufferings made manifest and touching through the accumulation of details must also be able to merge into a unified representation. Although singular, they are none the less *exemplary*.[17]

[17] Luc Boltanski, *Distant Suffering: Morality, Media, and Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 12.

The memorial, in an attempt to inspire responsibility, must demonstrate suffering through a collectivization and generalization of memory, thereby inadvertently relying on the existence of vulnerability within the other.

Through this extended vulnerability forms a community founded upon the sharing of such memories of memories. United under a collective duty to remember, the community becomes oblivious to the fact that remembrance, by itself and without consideration of individual responsibility, may not be enough. As such, the 'comfort women' issue has come to represent yet another way in which Korea has gravitated towards a mode of collectivism and retrospection to counter history's negativities. The nation's insistence on maintaining the collective and the subsequent reliance on memory thereof, although conceived with good intentions, nevertheless forbids an ethical account with the vulnerable other.

As such, memory, or more accurately the process of remembering, can often incite as much violence as the act of forgetting. Taking Byun Young-joo's film *Helpless* and O Chong-hui's short story *Spirit on the Wind* as example, the following sections will outline two key components to consider when vulnerability intersects with the realms of memory and ethics. The following section will investigate how relationships forged solely around shared memories can incite further vulnerability in the other by encouraging an ontological return to mediated spectatorship. The next section will consider how such mediated encounters with the other can be provoked so that vulnerability, and not just memory, can be shared to form more ethical relationships.

III. Vulnerability Extended in *Helpless*

Figure 3.1 Just before her disappearance, Son-young receives a mysterious phone call while Se-jung runs to get snacks in *Helpless* (Byun Young-joo, 2012)

Director Byun Young-joo's film *Helpless* follows Mun-ho, as he searches for his fiancée Son-young, who has mysteriously vanished in the middle of a road trip. The film begins with the two lovers in a car on their way to introduce Son-young to Mun-ho's parents for the first time before their wedding in a month. Stopping at a rest-stop, Mun-ho leaves Son-young in the car to buy snacks for the road. Suddenly, Son-young's cell phone rings and her smile abruptly turns to shock and fear (Fig. 3.1). Upon returning to the car, Mun-ho discovers it empty and Son-young nowhere to be seen. Desperate to find her, Mun-ho enlists the help of his cousin, a former police detective, and discovers one shocking truth after another. His fiancée, whose actual name was Kyong-son, had been

masquerading as someone else and as the investigation into her past moved further along, it also became clear that she had murdered the real Son-young to claim her identity. Even after discovering her violent truth, Mun-ho is determined to find her and continues the investigation by visiting and interviewing Kyong-son's past acquaintances. Mun-ho finds out that because of her abusive father's irresponsible habits, the family had been brutally hounded by loan sharks, eventually leading to her mother's murder. Kyong-son had tried to move on by marrying a poor but kind-hearted man, but even he had decided to leave her once the loan sharks found her once again and threatened to ruin his business. Left with nothing, Kyong-son resorts to prostitution, becomes pregnant, and suffers through the loss of her child. Deliriously searching for reprieve, Kyong-son stalks a random woman – the real Son-young – and kills her in desperation. After learning the full truth, Mun-ho decides to report his findings to the police and initially gives up his search until it becomes clear that she has begun stalking yet another woman. Mun-ho and his cousin track her to a train station and the two finally meet for the first time after her initial disappearance. Deciding to let her escape, Mun-ho calls out to her, using the name Kyong-son, and hugs her goodbye. Mun-ho's cousin, however, chases her and corners her on the roof of a building next to the train tracks. Once again desperate for escape, Son-young/Kyong-son falls to her death just as a train passes underneath.

The film is an adaptation of a novel *All She Was Worth* (1992) by the Japanese author, Miyabe Miyuki.[18] Apart from the film's location being transported from the

[18] Miyuki Miyabe, *All She Was Worth*, trans. Alfred Birnbaum (Boston: Mariner Books, 1992).

novel's 1992 Toyko to 2009 Seoul, the film's setting and overall themes surrounding the pitfalls of a consumer-driven economy and the victims that succumb to them remain true to the original novel. The sudden disappearance of a mysterious woman and the investigation into her past also stays intact in the film. What the director does choose to change, however, shifts the focus from a lesson on the evils of capitalism to an incredibly nuanced consideration of human relationships and the responsibilities they must garner. The first major difference between novel and film is the protagonist. While the novel follows Shunsuke Honma, the police detective and uncle of the grieving fiancé, the film focuses its attention on Mun-ho rather than his cousin the retired detective.

The director, Byun Young-joo, first gained notice as a filmmaker with a series of documentaries on 'comfort women.'[19] Lauded for her careful consideration of the human element amidst the grander schema of war crimes and forced prostitution, Byun is known for her ability to spur sentiment and personal responsibility within the viewer. She herself has equated her filmmaking philosophy to a provocation of the self.

> If making a film can be considered the same as writing a novel, I believe making anything at all has to come with deciding on 'how one should live her life.' Whether I decided to make a romantic comedy or any other genre, my point-of-view, my philosophy, and my mind will always revolve around the question, 'As someone living in the year 2012, what type of person should I be?' Even if one is making a comedy film that has nothing to do with politics, a supporter of the rightist

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[19] The first of the series is *The Murmuring* (1995), followed by *Habitual Sadness* (1997) and *My Own Breathing* (2000).

> party and a supporter of the leftist party will each make a different film. This is not because of the director's political affiliations, but actually because each director will have a different view on how to conceive the film's characters, the relationships between them, and the parameters between what one wants to do and what one should not do. For example, a vegetarian director will probably not film a scene in a *bulgogi* [Korean marinated beef dish] restaurant. Ultimately, making a film is more than just making it. It is deciding on how I, as an individual, will live my life.'[20]

Perhaps in keeping with this philosophy, Byun shifts the focus of the film from the detective to the fiancé, allowing the narrative to veer away from societal commentary and deeper into the realm of human interaction and personal responsibility. While the novel's plot centers around locating investigative truth, the film follows Mun-ho's attempts to reconstruct memory as a method to rebuild a fractured relationship with his mysterious fiancée. Such efforts to re-form his relationship with Kyong-son through a

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[20] My translation from the original Korean: 영화를 만드는 것이 글을 쓰는 것과 똑같은 것이라면, 결국 무엇을 만든다는 것은 '어떻게 사는가'를 결정하는 것이라고 생각한다. 내가 로맨틱 코미디를 만들건, 어떤 영화를 만들건 간에 그것을 만들고 있는 나의 시점과 신념과 뇌는 언제나 '나는 지금 2012 년을 어떻게 살고 있고, 나는 어떤 인간으로 살 것인가'를 결정하는 것 안에 있는 거다. 정치적인 것과 전혀 상관이 없는 코미디영화를 만들더라도 새누리당 지지자와 진보신당 지지자의 영화는 다르다.(웃음) 그것은 그 사람의 정치적인 성향이 아니라 영화에 나오는 캐릭터와 캐릭터의 관계가 어떻게 형성이 되는지, 하고 싶은 것과 해서는 안 된다고 생각하는 것이 무엇인지를 바라보는 시선의 차이인 것이다. 채식주의자인 감독이라면 영화에 불고깃집이 나오기는 힘든 것과 마찬가지다. 결국 무언가를 만든다는 것은 그것을 그냥 만드는 게 아니라 '나는 내 삶을 어떻게 살 것인가'를 결정하는 것이라는 거다. Byun Young-joo, Interview with Kyoung-mi Kim, *Pressian*, October 1, 2012, http://m.pressian.com/m/m_article/?no=4983#08gq.

"reconstruction" of her memories dooms Mun-ho from the start. By defining their relationship solely on the construction and maintenance of a shared past, Mun-ho demonstrates how an overreliance on memory and the mediated relationship that comes with it can inadvertently induce a selfish and ontological encounter with the other that not only accentuates, but oftentimes relies on the existence of her vulnerability.

Memorialization and remembrance are both performed with the hope that emphasizing the importance of recovering or maintaining memory may eventually induce care. Margalit, however, states that it is the opposite – namely, that caring is what gives something importance, not the other way around. The goal should not be to simply remember, but to invest in cultivating care. Care, even in the absence of shared memories, is the foundation for Margalit's "ethical community." While acknowledging the role memory has on maintaining relationships, he finds fault in relying too heavily on shared memories as a platform to cultivating new ones. Against a Kantian codification of ethics, Margalit distinguishes between "ethics" and "morality" in terms of the human relations each informs. "Ethics, in the way I use the term, tells us how we should regulate our thick relations; morality tells us how we should regulate our thin relations."[21]

According to Margalit, "thick relations" are "anchored in a shared past or moored in shared memory," while "thin relations" are defined by the mere "attribute of being human."[22] In other words, my family, friends, and even fellow countrymen, by virtue of

[21] Margalit, 8.

[22] Margalit, 7.

our shared histories, occupy an entirely different realm of responsibility to that held by my relation to complete strangers. Due to this distinction between ethics and morality, Margalit insists that while there may be a clear articulation of an "ethics of memory" that can define the parameters of how to remember a shared history, the methods through which to uphold a "morality of memory" is far less clear. My "thick relations" are formed by shared memories, hence making my responsibility to remember these shared histories a fairly easy task. On the other hand, my inclination to perform my responsibilities to remember (or commemorate) the past of a "thin relation" often needs motivation. This "natural" proclivity to "care" *only* for my community of memory is where the problem lies.

> Ethics is based on thick and involved relations in which emotions toward the other play a major role. Morality walks a thin rope, with very little emotion among mere human beings to keep the rope tight. …So we want love and we want rationality, but we should be clear about what we get from the one and what we get from the other. In an ethical community it is love, or rather caring, that should reign supreme; in a merely moral community merely rationality will do…[23]

Our "thick relations" are formed by sharing memories, and this act of sharing induces emotional bonding, or caring. This emotional relationship is defined and maintained by ethics. Morality, on the other hand, because it is delineated by "thin relations," has very little to do with emotions and thus operates within a separate realm

[23] Margalit, 143–146.

and direction. Our "thin relations" are deprived of our "care." What is important to note here is the fact that if caring is triggered only through memory, or the past, it is lost to all present or future relationships. While the past should not be forgotten, it should also not define or replace the present. Hence, our ultimate goal, as an individual and a member of a larger community, should be to cultivate not only a moral community based on remembrance, but also an ethical community that can invoke care outside the realm of memory or retrospection.

In following, Mun-ho and Kyong-son begin their relationship as a "thick relation" cultivated through shared memories. As such, caring for one another comes easily. Once Kyong-son disappears, however, effectively running away from him and their shared memories together, Mun-ho must reconcile his feelings for her without the solid backing of a shared past. Their once "thick" relationship all of a sudden turns "thin." Their previous shared memories are invalidated as the investigation moves along and Mun-ho must make an attempt to "reconstruct" his sentiments with his fiancée. The temporality of care, in which love can only stem from past mutual experiences, forces Mun-ho to revert back and re-build through memory. And so, because she is unable to remember for him, he tasks himself with "reconstructing" her past without her. He re-begins a relationship with Kyong-son, not through direct interaction, but through representation and mediation — a memory of memories.

The director expertly articulates this process of mediated relationship-building through the manipulation of genre and temporal structure, ultimately enhancing *her* vulnerability while privileging *his* agency. In order to analyze the atypical tendencies of *Helpless*, we must first trace the narrative temporalities of a more typical detective story.

David Fincher's *Gone Girl* (2014), for example, also circulates its narrative around the disappearance of and subsequent mysteries caused by the main female protagonist. It is a haunting story of a relationship between a seemingly tranquil husband and wife gone awry. With the sudden disappearance of Amy, Nick her husband, is placed under investigation by the local police for suspicion of her murder. Despite the body not being found, Nick undergoes a series of unfortunate incidences that only perpetuate his fate as the culprit for her disappearance and supposed death. What is important to note in Fincher's narrative style is that Amy's presence is never missed throughout the entirety of the film. Separated by clearly marked time-stamps, each scenario is actively narrated and manipulated by Amy, either through her diary entries or her subsequent acts of violence in the latter half of the film. Even after we, the viewers, discover the true motives behind Amy's self-enacted disappearance, the narrative continues to follow the character as she twists her way through her plans to punish her disloyal husband. Her meticulous schedule goes accordingly at first, but as she meets hurdles of her own, she constructs another crime and finds her way back home. Due to the combination of public opinion and personal masochism, Nick is forced to take her back and even agrees to act as a dutiful father to her unborn child. The film ends in much the same way as it began, except this time Nick doesn't stop at contemplating her past thoughts but attempts to predict her future motivations as well.

Gone Girl is an apt example of what many theorists have deemed the "detective chronotope." Chronotope, as coined by M. M. Bakhtin, is defined as a narrative device to measure particular combinations of time and space as they are manifested in specific genres of literature. Directly translated as "time-space," it articulates, "the intrinsic

contenders of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature. In the literary artistic chronotope, spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole.”.[24] As such, a “detective chronotope” is a form of time-space that depicts itself through repetitions and linear progressions. The typical detective narrative portrays two temporal series: one from the perspective of the investigator retroactively and reversely retracing the steps leading up to the death or disappearance after his initial discovery; and the other from the viewpoint of either the killer or the murdered linearly narrating the crime to reach the same point in time as the investigator. This duality leads to a narrative structure that finds two temporally separate but inextricably linked plot lines that may weave in and out of each other to ultimately provide a tidy conclusion in the end. As Todorov states in his discussion of the typology of detective literary fiction,

> The first story ignores the book completely, that is, it never confesses its literary nature (no author of detective fiction can permit himself to indicate directly the imaginary character of the story, as it happens in “literature”). On the other hand, the second story is not only supposed to take the reality of the book into account, but it is precisely the story of that very book.[25]

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[24] M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 84.

[25] Tzvetan Todorov, *The Poetics of Prose,* trans. Richard Howard (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), 45.

What is important to note within this narrative construct is the fact that the first and second stories are actually one and the same but from varying perspectives; they are mere repetitions of each other.

This concept of two stories depicting a single narrative, of repetition, can be traced to the narrative theories of the Russian formalists and French structuralists, who coined the two plot lines as the *fabula*, the order of events referred to by the narrative (what really happened), and the *sjuzet*, the order of events presented in the narrative usually as a repetition.[26] According to Peter Brooks, the plot, or "the design and intention of narrative," is the interpretative device or action that is caused by the distention and extension of these two separate but linked temporalities. Plot, then, is a dynamic structure, an organizing principle, that articulates narrative into a temporal succession of beginning, middle, and end.[27] If the *fabula* and *sjuzet* are comprised of stories or events, it is the plot that temporally structures them to make a narrative, making it a cross-point between temporality and narrativity, or Bakhtin's "time-space." And since plot can then be viewed as an activity to be puzzled together using multiple temporalities and various spaces, it can also be seen as a mechanism that represents the reader's or viewer's interpretation or desire to comprehend the narrative. "Plot as we have defined it is the organizing line and intention of narrative, thus perhaps best

[26] See, for example, Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*, trans. Laurence Scott (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1968); Gerard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980).

[27] Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984).

conceived as an activity, a structuring operation elicited in the reader trying to make sense of those meanings that develop only through textual and temporal succession."[28] Plot, as the organizing activity, is our desire to comprehend and it is what propels the narrative forward.

Desire as the narrative motivation and desire as the psychoanalytic demand to understand are, thus, inextricably linked. If Freud's "death drive" is what propels life forward through its pushes and pulls to eventually reach the "end," narrative desire to return to the basic instinctual state, to reach death, must also move ahead in order to reach its own conclusion. Freud's pleasure principle states that a child, for example, will constantly repeat an act of trauma in order to take control of a situation he has no choice but to submit to. Repetition, then, is the act of going from passive to active, of controlling or mastering an imposed drive to comprehend life. In other words, we are forced to repeat because we have the desire to understand. And this understanding can only be achieved at the start of the end. Only with death, can one look back and contemplate life. Narrative repetition, similarly, may also be viewed as an attempt to define, understand, and master the end or conclusion of the plot.[29] Narrative, then, is a form of repetition, a metonymy or substitution, through the use of plot as a driving force to create a middle and compel us to desire the end. The reader or viewer starts with the desire to understand, to move forward, to reach the end which possesses the possibility of understanding, but at the same time, is forced to remain in a state of repetition within

[28] Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative*, 37.

[29] Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, ed. James Strachey (New York: W. W. Norton, 1961).

the middle. Such narrative bindings to temporality, to repetition, is a striving for the conclusion (death), which reflects not only a mode of morality, but also the key to human understanding.

A detective story, thus, is two stories in one, a repetition of the same event from different perspectives. One narrates the actual occurrence, while the other narrates the repetition of it as the investigator or victim retraces the first story. It is important to understand that within this temporal and perspectival duality, the primary agent of forward movement must be the criminal herself precisely because she is at once the start and end of any detective plot. She possesses the agency and the drive to propel the story. All others within the narrative are merely repeating or retracing *her* steps .

Gone Girl's narrative structure possesses all of these genre norms of repetition and linear progression. Just as Todorov has stated, *Gone Girl* begins with Nick narrating directly to the viewers as if he is reading from a book. From the very start of the film, the viewers understand that what we are about to witness has already happened, everything is in the past, and we are merely watching a repetition. Then the scene shifts to Nick standing outside of his tranquil home and the words "July 5: The day of" appears at the corner of the screen. Interestingly, the director has decided to split the film in two, with the first half displaying the typical dual and parallel plot lines, while the latter half converge the two temporalities together creating yet another linear narrative progression.

During the first half of the film, the viewers witness two separate but linked stories working together side by side, weaving in and out of each other. As we follow Nick's downward spiral from concerned husband to suspicious culprit, the audience is

introduced to Amy and thus her active manipulations of her husband through the writing and reading of her diary entries, which show not only her premeditated intentions against Nick, but also her strong grasp and control of the narrative progression itself. Even without her physical presence, Amy is able to manipulate the occurrences within the first story through her cleverly placed riddles to her husband and her strategically organized journal evoked immediately before any flashbacks. Her entry for July 8, 2010, for example, discusses their once perfect marriage slowly faltering because of financial and family health burdens. Although the viewers up until this point were feeling sympathy and attachment to Nick more than Amy, with her introduction to their marital discord in Amy's portion of the dual plot, we are also, as a result, privy to Nick's infidelities with a younger woman. And so, our judgments of Nick are almost immediately swayed solely because of Amy's purposeful maneuvering of the plot progression. With each diary entry, which naturally emphasizes the linear temporality of the narrative with the dates visible at the start of each page, the viewers witness two plot lines that seem to mimic each other in terms of investigative development. The more instances of marital failure we encounter in the journal, the more one-sided and definitive the investigation against Nick becomes. With each plot line, Nick's and Amy's, clearly demarcated with a timestamp that follows a strict calendrical time, *Gone Girl*'s initial temporal structure displays that very duality that is representative of a typical "detective chronotope." Even when the two dual plot lines converge to create a single narrative in the latter half of the film, the temporality still remains linear with a definitive timestamp marking the days that have passed since Amy's initial disappearance. With Amy herself always in control as she twists her way through the

workings of her master plan, the linear temporality not only underscores but solidifies Amy's agency to drive the plot forward.[30]

Now that we have seen how a detective thriller film is constructed and how a temporally linear format works to cement a conclusive agent, we can then move on to analyze the ways in which *Helpless* diverges from these genre conventions. While *Gone Girl*'s focus on investigative truth emphasizes themes of manipulation and revenge, *Helpless*'s plot re-works the detective narrative's standard temporality to highlight themes of vulnerability and responsibility. In order to trace the atypical temporality of *Helpless*, it is necessary to track the order in which each and every flashback is rendered and placed within the narrative's temporal sequence. The film displays a total of eight analepses or flashbacks. What is unique about the way Byun utilizes this particular narrative strategy is that the flashbacks are neither in chronological calendrical order nor are they completely detached from the main investigative plot. While *Gone Girl*'s flashbacks were essentially visualizations of Amy's own diary entries, making them materially associative to Nick's investigative plot line, *Helpless*'s flashbacks are never prompted or recounted by Kyong-son herself. The visualizations of the past, a narrative tactic so common to detective stories, are not objective repetitions of what happened thereby lending themselves to be read as truth by the viewers, but are *constructions* of the past through the eyes and voices of other characters. The analepses

[30] As Amanda Yam states, "… by allowing Amy's perspective to partake in such an important role in the delivery of the film, it deconstructs both our gaze and the male gaze. Amy is no longer an object of passivity but rather an active subject. She is not simply the story but the storyteller and therein lies her power both within and outside the actual narrative." In Yam, "'Gone Girl' and the Female Gaze," *Indiewire*, October 7, 2014, https://www.indiewire.com/2014/10/gone-girl-and-the-female-gaze-125694/.

within *Helpless* are not flashbacks in the truest sense because they are not the same repeated scene from a different perspective, but are in fact depicted as someone else's personal memories that are constructed in an altogether separate time, space, and agent. While *Gone Girl*'s flashbacks are direct objective repetitions of what really happened, *Helpless*'s analepses are mediated and subjective representations of what may have occurred.

If we are to order the flashbacks according to their calendrical, and not narrative, time, we would have: 1. Kyong-son's ex-husband's testimony in which she experiences her first violent encounters with the debt collectors; 2. Older sister's testimony in which Kyong-son is hospitalized for her pregnancy and mental instability; 3. The detective's visualization of Kyong-son's murder, which later turns out to be wrongfully deduced; 4. The detective's reconstruction of Kyong-son's befriending and killing of the real Son-young; 5. Mun-ho and Kyong-son's first meeting through the camcorder lens; 6. Mun-ho's memory of Kyong-son's fascination with the moth larva (signaling her desire for rebirth); 7. The detective's visualization of Kyong-son cleaning out her apartment in haste after her initial disappearance; 8. Kyong-son's friend's testimony regarding her coincidental meeting with Kyong-son at her workplace.

If the film was a typical detective narrative, as in if the actual goal of the investigators were to trace and find Kyong-son, it would be most reasonable for the flashbacks to be displayed moving forward in this order or moving backwards but still keeping with the consecutive nature of the events. They would tackle Kyong-son's disappearance by first returning to her apartment and discovering clues that would lead them to a body. Then, the body would lead them further down the path into her past,

perhaps beginning with her divorce and moving forward to once again reach full circle to her disappearance. This way, the flashbacks would aid in solidly defining the narrated past as clear, linear, and most of all the real investigative truth.

The way in which Byun actually organizes the narrative structure, however, turns these typical strategies on their head. The director creates an atemporal progression that prevents the viewers from making those ordinarily simple and logical conclusions about the character and the film. The film is narrated as 7 - 5 - 3 - 1 - 2 - 4 - 8 - 6. The real calendrical order of events is completely jumbled and rearranged to take on a whole new narrative temporality that, rather than clarifies, muddles and disorients instead. As opposed to *Gone Girl*'s linear progression of time solidifying Amy's agency, *Helpless*'s fragmented temporality does exactly the opposite by not only destabilizing Kyong-son's ability to possess agency, but also accentuating the need for her vulnerability during processes of representation.

Figure 3.2 Se-jung's detective cousin investigates at Kyong-son's ransacked home in *Helpless* (Byun Young-joo, 2012)

Figure 3.3 Kyong-son performs an act only after the detective visualizes it in the previous scene in *Helpless* (Byun Young-joo, 2012).

The scene in which the detective cousin visits Kyong-son's ransacked home, for example (number 7 in the sequence of events), displays Kyong-son's past only as a mediation through another character. The detective walks into the room and surveys the various elements he deems important. As he crouches down in front of each piece of overturned furniture or each article of torn clothing, he pictures Kyong-son in the act of placing the items in such a way. Kyong-son's actions are never shown alone, but always in tandem with the detective's piercing glare (Figs. 3.2, 3.3). Byun makes sure to never allow Kyong-son's "reconstructions" of the past to stand separate from the investigative second plot. The investigator is not discovering the clues as she has placed them; she is performing the scenes as the investigator sees them.

Figure 3.4 Kyong-son's ex-husband recounts their past to Se-jung and the detective in *Helpless* (Byun Young-joo, 2012).

Figure 3.5 Kyong-son at her ex-husband's restaurant as he narrates the past in *Helpless* (Byun Young-joo, 2012).

Another sequence in which Kyong-son's ex-husband recounts their marriage and subsequent divorce (number 1 in the sequence) also diverges from a typical dual plot, double agent, perspective. As the detective and Mun-ho sit across the table listening, the ex-husband describes the occurrences of the past that led to Kyong-son's banishment from the village (Figs. 3.4, 3.5). They fall in love, get married, and open a restaurant business while caring for his elderly mother. But their tranquility does not last long as Kyong-son's father's debt comes to haunt them in a never-ending torrent of violence and intimidation. What is unique about this flashback, besides the fact that it is told entirely through the ex-husband's perspective, is the detective's choice to overlap the present investigative scene with the past reconstruction. As the ex-husband orally reconstructs the events, the film juxtaposes his narration with the visual reconstruction of Kyong-son

performing his exact words. The recollection of the past is forbidden to stand separately and in its own time-space, but is instead depicted solely through the mediation of others within the present. The scene, rather than acting as a repetition, or the second reenactment of the same first story, becomes instead a subjective construction by someone completely other than Kyong-son. While in a traditional detective narrative we have two plots, one absent in the sense that it has already happened and the other insignificant in the sense that it is merely a repeat of the first, *Helpless* relies entirely on the re-creation by the actors of the second story. The first is not absent nor is it real. It is a reconstruction by the mediators in the second plot made to take the place of the real, thereby stripping the agency and reliability of Kyong-son's actual story.

Through such re-constructions, Mun-ho attempts to return his "thick relation" with Kyong-son through a re-enactment of memory. As Margalit points out, love is cultivated through an accumulation of shared memories. With the dissolution of their mutually shared past, Mun-ho's love and care must find a new anchor. And so, he seeks to re-establish their relationship, not through direct contact with Kyong-son, but through his own representations of her past. Rather than maintain his care for her despite memory, Mun-ho allows memory to manipulate his responsibility towards her. Thus, his overreliance on memory eventually enforces a privileging of the self over the other, thereby enhancing her vulnerability.

As mentioned before, Levinas envisions the enactment of proper care, one that is not reliant on history or memory, within the act of "substitution." Just as Margalit separated the parameters of ethics and morality, Levinas also differentiates human behavior within the ontological realm from that of the ethical realm. Within the

ontological, the ego or the individual self is defined by memory. Individual free will is enforced by a refusal to be subsumed under totality, or the universality of being in general. Through memory and interiority, the self forms its particular consciousness. In other words, being able to remember allows for individual autonomy. Within the ethical realm, on the other hand, the self does not value memory, but in fact actively seeks to shun it. Rather than rely on memory's power to uphold autonomous consciousness, Levinas's ethical being relies solely and completely on the "Other." As he states,

> The neighbor assigns me before I designate him. This is a modality not of a knowing, but of an obsession, a shuddering of the human quite different from cognition. Knowing is always convertible into creation and annihilation; its object lends itself to a concept, is a result. Through the suppression of the singular, through generalization, knowing is idealism. In an approach I am first a servant and a neighbor, already late and guilty for being late. I am as it were ordered from the outside, traumatically commanded, without interiorizing by representation and concepts the authority that commands me. Without asking myself: What then is it to me? Where does he get his right to command?"[31]

The ethical being, as opposed to the ontological being, does not care for himself or the order of natural or rational laws. It has no need for context or history. It is solely and absolutely defined by its submission to the other. As Annabel Herzog puts it, "In its sacrifice or care for the Other – Levinas calls this care "substitution" – the ethical ego is not concerned with its own particular story or history: "When man truly approaches the

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[31] Levinas, *Otherwise*, 87

Other he is uprooted from history.""[32] Whereas the morality of the ontological self operates under the temporality of history and its reliance on memory, the ethical self relies only on the "time of the Other."[33] This "time of the Other," or the self's "face-to-face" encounter with the other, does not operate within the realm of social or historical time, but occupies a liminal and instantaneous space that disturbs the self and calls it to action.

The other's "face" is at once vulnerable and transcendent. For Levinas, the other's face is not reducible to mere countenance, representation, or reproduction. When the face turns towards us, we are not privy to its entirety; the other is always "otherwise" to us. The other's face transcends our complete understanding and escapes our reductive gaze. But, at the same time, it is this very irreducible and insurmountable alterity that renders the face vulnerable to our judgement. The other's face is in danger of being reduced to mere countenance. In our attempt to understand the other, without realizing that the other is beyond comprehension, we project meaning and render the other dependent. As Roger Burggraeve states, "As "countenance," the other is vulnerable, and can very easily be reduced to his appearing, as social position, "accomplishments," and image of health or illness. The appearance of the face as countenance, as it were, invites the "I," or "ego," to reduce the other to that countenance. This "invitation to reduction"

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[32] Annabel Herzog, "Levinas, Memory, and the Art of Writing," *The Philosophical Forum* 36, no. 3 (Fall 2005): 335. Herzog quotes Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1992), 45.

[33] Emmanuel Levinas, "The Trace of the Other," in *Deconstruction in Context, Literature and Philosophy*, trans. Alfonso Lingis, ed. Mark C. Taylor (Chicago: The University of Chicago, 1986).

depends not only on the vulnerability of the face but also on the way of being of the I to whom the face appears.[34]

Levinas's ethical being, then, takes it upon himself to reject this ontological impulse and approach the other in submission and without context. Rather than judge the face based on its visibility and its relation to my historical reality, the ethical being must recognize the other's vulnerability and commit oneself to the other's whim in an instant. Through the other's face, I am given the opportunity to realize my responsibility.

Figure 3.6 Kyong-son on the roof of the building just before she falls to her death in *Helpless* (Byun Young-joo, 2012).

Besides the director's choice to focus on Mun-ho's effort to understand Kyong-son through her past (rather than on the police detective's investigation of her crimes),

[34] Roger Burggraeve, "Violence and the Vulnerable Face of the Other: The Vision of Emmanuel Levinas on Moral Evil and Our Repsonsibility," *Journal of Social Philosophy* 30, no. 1 (Spring 1999): 30.

Byun makes one other crucial change to the original novel's narrative. While the novel leaves the female protagonist's fate ambiguous in its conclusion, the film ends with Kyong-son falling to her death and presumably carried away by the passing train underneath.[35] Just before Kyong-son's drastic choice, she meets Mun-ho face-to-face for the first time since her initial disappearance. Mun-ho is finally able to interact with her directly, rather than through reconstructions and mediations of memory. He is given the opportunity to approach Kyong-son's vulnerable face and realize his ethical responsibility towards her, despite her historical sins. Instead, however, Mun-ho calls out to her using the name, "Son-young." Even as she tells him, "I am not Kang Son-young," Mun-ho hugs her and prevents her from going further. "Stop. Don't say anything else," he says. Realizing there is nothing left between him and the woman he loved, Mun-ho lets her go. As she attempts to walk on, Mun-ho's cousin the police detective chases her screaming, "Cha Kyong-son! Stop!." She runs to the roof and stands at the ledge of the building (Fig. 3.6). Ironically, it is not the detective's call to her real identity that spurs her to jump. Although forced on the ledge by her haunting past, Kyong-son's decision to jump occurs only when Mun-ho once again yells, "Son-young!" Upon hearing this name, Kyong-son's eyes shift from fear to sadness just before she falls off onto a passing train. And Mun-ho grieves for Son-young's death. Unable to relinquish his reliance on "shared memories," Mun-ho has relegated Kyong-son to her mere countenance. Stuck in the past, he does not succeed at cultivating Levinas's

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[35] The original title of the novel and film is 화차/火車. This "fire chariot" refers to a mythical train in Japanese Buddhist scripture that transported the evil dead to hell.

responsibility nor Margalit's care for the other. In fact, vulnerability is extended and the other is rendered *helpless*.

IV. Vulnerability Harnessed in *Spirit on the Wind*

The second section of this chapter mentioned how community is formed through a sharing of memories and also how that act of reliance on memory can create a dangerous collectivization of the private and a generalization of the singular. Such paradigms of community-building force the self to continuously revert back to the past to thereby forbid a personal responsibility that is based on active outreach toward the forming of new ethical relationships. *Helpless* demonstrated how this dependence on historical memory can extend vulnerability in the other by operating within a platform of mediation and representation. This next section will further address the ramifications of such mediated spectatorship of vulnerability and suffering as well as posit the possibility of a return to true "substitution" by re-conceptualizing the parameters of "distance" with the other.

Unlike the narration tactics utilized in *Helpless*, what if the spectator is never given access to the other's memory, mediated or otherwise? O Chong-hui's short story *Spirit on the Wind*'s vulnerable female, Eun-su, cannot find peace in her daily life as a wife and mother, and frequently leaves home for days on end. While her husband initially attributes her absences to womanly dramatics, he eventually kicks her out of the house, separating mother from son. With only a faint memory of a pair of black rubber

shoes lying on the ground to work with, Eun-su asks her adoptive mother about her past and learns that she had witnessed the killing of her entire family during the war as a young child. Even with her memory restored, however, Eun-su's soul still wanders through the dusty streets of her past.

While *Helpless* pursues freedom *from* memory, O's story seeks reprieve and redemption *in* memory. What is interesting about O's story is the fact that two of the four chapters are narrated in the first-person by Eun-su's husband. Within these chapters, the readers are only given access to Eun-su's neglect of her wifely and motherly duties and her husband's reactions to her sporadic disappearances. But unlike *Helpless*'s Mun-ho, *Spirit on the Wind*'s husband is not desperately trying to find the truth about his wife. Even more starkly than *Helpless*, the story creates a strict separation between the spectator-husband and the object of his gaze. Perhaps because of his distance from her pain, Eun-su's husband appears callous and irresponsible, urging the reader to hold him partly accountable for her suffering.

Levinas argues that, "distance between the same and the other, in which language occurs, is not reducible to a relation between concepts that limit one another, but describes transcendence, where the *other* does not weigh on the same, but places it under obligation, make it responsible, that is, makes it speak."[36] In essence, the distinction between alterity and the self, "the same" as Levinas calls it, is not spatial but relational, experiential, and even spiritual. Approaching the other requires a constant

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[36] Emmanuel Levinas, *Time and the Other*, trans. R. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1987), 41.

balance between proximity and distance so as to compel the "same" to obligation for and of the other. This call to "approach" the other, referred to by Levinas as *l'approche* or *la proximité*, articulates two characteristics in Levinasian ethics. The first defines personal responsibility as a wholly singular experience that cannot be subsumed under a totalizing paradigm of morality (i.e. Kant). Each encounter with an other must be experienced and embraced individually. One "approaches" another. This singularity emphasizes the second characteristic which envisions the other as an entity that requires and demands "approach" in the first place. The other is ungraspable, absolutely exterior, and non-thematizable, but "the same" must "approach" the other anyway. Ethics does not stem *from* my subjectivity, but is actually what forms and defines it *a priori*.[37] What is important to understand here is that this constant push-pull between my desire to achieve proximity with the other and the other's ungraspable exteriority creates a never-ending call for responsibility. Distance, understood as a necessary state before the obligation to "approach," is required in tandem with proximity for the practice of sound ethics. And this balance between distance and proximity is ultimately achieved through an absolute vulnerability toward the other.

When it comes to the actual practice of "approaching" the other, however, the misinterpretation or misappropriation of distance can create a situation in which the other, rather than inform a provocation of the self, reversely elicits vulnerability in the other. O Chong-hui's *Spirit on the Wind* is structured towards locating a single source

[37] Levinas, *Otherwise*, 5. Also see, Desmond Manderson, "The Ethics of Proximity: An Essay for William Deane," *Griffith Law Review* 14, no. 2 (2005): 295-329.

within the past that is responsible for the characters' pains in the present. This plot trajectory tends to render all of the characters, Eun-su, her husband Se-jung, her son Sŭngil, and the two mothers, as victims of one woman's post-traumatic experiences. But what if the characters are read, not as a victimized collective, but as individual agents each capable of acting as subject rather than relegated to objects viewed by the reader? What would Se-jung, for example, have to say (or not say) about Eun-su's suffering? Through an analysis of the novella's character dynamics, *Spirit on the Wind* complicates the act of watching pain through the employment of multiple structures of spatial and temporal distance. How can one be an ethical spectator? What transforms passive watching to active involvement? Who is responsible for preserving the memory of suffering? By considering the ethics involved within the spectatorship of suffering, Eun-su's various roles, as either a passive and pitiful object subjected to the unethical gaze of her husband, or an active moral witness that encompasses a dual capacity to act as both subject and object simultaneously, reveals the possibility of overcoming trauma and surpassing vulnerability.

In order to analyze Se-jung's role as a spectator, we must first outline the object of his gaze. Interestingly enough, the novella begins with Se-jung's point of view as he describes his first encounters with his wife and her current tendency to leave home sporadically for short periods of time. He speaks in the first person and expresses his frustration as well as his lingering love for her. Despite his self-proclaimed attempts to understand his wife's need to disappear once in a while, Se-jung's "understandings" make it clear that he is more full of self-pity than true acknowledgement. When his wife tries to explain how she is plagued by "random spells" that force her to wander, Se-jung

dismisses her concerns and immediately returns to himself. "How could she talk so irresponsibly, a woman with a baby at her nipple? "*Is this how I'm supposed to live?*" I couldn't believe that a woman in her thirties could be so childish, talking like a teenage girl, not giving a damn about anyone else."[38] By chastising Eun-su for neglecting her motherly and wifely "duties," Se-jung ends up relegating her suffering to frivolous complaining by a childish woman. Rather than treat her with compassion, Eun-su is deemed to be nothing more than a pitiful object.

In her dissertation thesis, Hannah Arendt discusses Saint Augustine's description of love as a desire for the eternal and how it may lead to self-negation and thus an overly personalized form of ethics that ignores the present and relegates the world to an order dictated by utility. Arendt contends that within our current societal state, we tend to deny plurality and rely instead on singular and personal experiences to dictate political thought. This personalization of "public" duties has made society, as a whole, unethical. In order to demonstrate how this circumstance came to be, Arendt considers the ways in which human society has distorted the conception of love and happiness. Love and happiness is defined, by Saint Augustine, as a desire for an object that cannot be lost, a desire for fearlessness. Since love as a craving is determined by its goal and these goals are in constant danger of being lost, our happiness is reliant on the shunning of fear.[39] Here is where the problem lies. If we crave that which cannot be taken away, all worldly objects should not be craved on account of their permeability. So, our only recourse is to

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[38] O Chong-hui, "Spirit on the Wind," trans. Burce and Ju-Chan Fulton, *Acta Koreana* 11, no. 2 (June, 2008): 159.

[39] Hannah Arendt, *Love and Saint Augustine* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1996).

desire the eternal, the other-worldly, the non-present so as to escape fear. Hence, our seeking of the eternal is associated with our denial of worldly goods and a process of self-negation. Absolute futurity can only be achieved by a negation of the present and the current temporal self. The danger of this type of personalized form of ethics, Arendt states, is that in constantly seeking for a future eternal, we tend to ignore or denigrate the present. We leap over the immediate moral acts associated with everyday life. Instead of looking to others and relying on them through a mutual moral relationship, we isolate ourselves in our own self-pity and completely disregard present conditions. If one cannot love oneself, it is impossible to love one's neighbor. So then, what happens to the worldly objects shunned from being the target of our desires? They are ordered and measured according to their utility. Love, too, in the temporal world, becomes evaluated in terms of its utilitarian value to its subject; according to a self-measured need.

Se-jung's love for Eun-su operates within this realm of utility. She is judged based upon her role as a wife and a mother and hence is deemed unworthy of compassion because of her failure to live up to those duties. Her wanderings render her "not useful" to her husband and this frustrates Se-jung to the point of self-pity. In order to solve this dilemma of utility, Arendt argues for a separation of personal desires and the public need for political action. According to her pluralist approach, Se-jung's love should remain within his private realm and its value within his public realm should not be an issue. By merging the two varied spaces of morality together, Se-jung's love becomes a "worldly object" that must be considered only for its need. Se-jung's failure to separate his private love from his public need forbids the forming of an ethical relationship between husband and wife. Se-jung becomes an unethical spectator that privileges his

position as the gazing (and judging) subject, while relegating Eun-su to a pitiful object of utility.

As mentioned before, Luc Boltanski addresses the dangers of such pity and the paradoxes involved.[40] He separates pity from compassion specifically because the latter may lead to ethical action, while the other benefits through sustained distance. Taking the example of the "good Samaritan," Boltanski explains the steps one must take to accomplish a compassionate deed. First come the spectacle of suffering and the affective response of compassion. Then, surprisingly and perhaps most importantly, an absence of speech must follow. If one were to exclaim through words his emotions incurred by the spectacle, this would indicate an affect of pity rather than compassion. Only through the determination to form a face-to-face encounter, not exclamations of pity that relegate the sufferer to object, can a relationship and thus a community be formed. While compassionate deeds are reliant on this proximity and presence, pity, Boltanski argues, is entirely dependent upon distance and generality. Within the politics of pity, commitment to action becomes problematic because the gazer must perform two paradoxical movements simultaneously: He must first view the spectacle as a particular source of suffering so as to arouse sentiment and interest, but then associate that particular to a larger general, and distant, source that pardons him from any commitment to act. The viewer must maintain singularity to sustain pity but also hypersingularize or generalize to forgo responsibility. The sentiment of pity also justifies his inaction because he can associate his morality within the politics of pity and deem

[40] Boltanski.

himself a “moral being.”[41] While the distant spectator may feel a tinge of sorrow for not intervening, he also has an invested interest in separating himself from the sufferer to maintain his own community of gazing subjects. So for Se-jung, Eun-su does not inspire compassion, but pity – he maintains enough distance to her so that he is not responsible for her pain, but imbues her with enough singularity that he can pity and blame her. Eun-su’s suffering is particularized just enough to arouse pity and assign morality to Se-jung, but is simultaneously generalized and equalized to abstract his commitment and strip her of her individual subjectivity.

Then is compassion with proximity and presence enough to satisfy ethics? Even if Se-jung were to feel compassion rather than pity for Eun-su, would this have been enough to change Eun-su’s fate or position within her husband’s mind? While admonishing the politics of pity, Boltanski, along with Susan Sontag, also acknowledge that the very distance that spurs pity can in turn motivate enough interest and caring to eventually lead to action and responsibility. Boltanksi states that it is not positivity in the world that inspires morality, but exposure to negativity. Distance allows the viewer to step back and acknowledge the existence of the suffering rather than get caught up in just the politics. Sontag, similarly, discusses how distance is actually inherent within the quality of watching because we intentionally “crop” out certain particulars to focus on the portions that affect us. She argues that it is precisely because of the abundance of images of suffering that we can no longer resort to ignorance or superficial amnesia. We have no choice but to be haunted by those images and consider them “an invitation to

[41] Boltanski, 17.

pay attention, to reflect, to learn, to examine the rationalizations for mass suffering offered by established powers." Images of suffering, especially photographs, are paradoxical in themselves because while they have the veneer of objectivity, they nonetheless contain a specific point of view. And so, the issue at hand has nothing to do with the act of watching suffering but everything to do with the methods of mediation and interpretation. "Images have been reproached for being a way of watching suffering at a distance, as if there were some other way of watching. But watching up close – without the mediation of an image – is still just watching."[42] Distance is the only way to watch and this is not inherently immoral. What the viewer commits to do after is where the crux of the issue lies. In order to reach active responsibility, one must practice a level of detachment to allow for rational reflection.

Then who is ultimately capable and responsible for sustaining the ethics for the spectatorship of suffering? Is Se-jung the only one held to this ethical standard of compassion and is he even capable of bridging this gap between necessary distance and moral action? As mentioned previously, Margalit differentiates the responsibilities of a single individual in proximity from that of a larger community. Individuals and their thick relations operate within the realm of ethics, while the general community can rely on a more rational morality. Thick relations possess shared memories and operate under loyalty and caring, while thin relations dictate general human interactions and focus more on mutual respect. Contrary to Derrida, who claims that we are perpetually unethical, Margalit offers a way to separate human responsibilities towards a single

[42] Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Picador, 2003), 117.

"other" and all other "others" through the differentiation of morality and ethics. Since the forming of "thick" relations with the whole of society is impossible, this separation of roles is necessary so that a community based on a larger moral tradition can take control. In other words, "we" as a moral community are obligated to collectively respect and remember, while "I" as an individual is ethically compelled to care and love. Se-jung's situation is extremely awkward and complicated because, while he, as her husband, is in a thick relation with Eun-su that should be based on caring, the two do not share the history of her trauma, which is a requirement for sustaining that thick relationship. So, based on Margalit's considerations, he may not be responsible for remembering the source of his wife's suffering (that is the community's responsibility), but he is responsible for acknowledging the existence of it and caring for her pain.

Margalit, too, advocates for the necessity of the *negative* memory of emotions because of their ability to incite moral behavior. He views these affective connections between people absolutely vital to sustaining a moral community. But his most ideal scenario would not be a separated moral community and an ethical individual, but the formation of an ethical (thick) community based upon caring. *Spirit on the Wind* locates the possibility of such a community within Eun-su's role as what Margalit and Lisa Downing call a "moral witness." Downing claims that the "moral witness" actively resists immoral viewing through her ability to simultaneously share suffering and contemplate rationality. As Margalit states, the "moral witness" is differentiated from a mere spectator through her actual involvement in the suffering. "Being a moral witness

involves witnessing actual suffering, not just intended suffering."[43] Eun-su is at once the victim of suffering in her past and the witness of that suffering in her present. She experiences the suffering along with the object of her gaze and possesses a moral purpose to act upon that suffering under the hope that her testimony can bring about clarity not only for herself but also for her family. This possibility of sustaining morals and ethics within one is where Margalit locates the possibility for an ethical (thick) community. And so, Eun-su as the moral witness singularly embodies the spectator subject as well as the object of suffering. Through a temporal distance, rather than spatial, she is not only capable of emotionally watching *and* rationally contemplating, but through her simultaneous acts of commitment she is also able to unite the ethics of the individual and the morality of the general community into one single body.

Spirit on the Wind's consideration of one woman's past traumas and the gaps they create between her and her family allow us to contemplate the numerous perspectives such separations of subject-object, proximity-distance, pity-compassion, and morality-ethics entail. Through Se-jung, we the readers, contemplate our own modes of immoral viewing and through Eun-su we witness the possibility of overcoming that immorality to bind those previous separations within a caring, compassionate, responsible, and ethical community.

[43] Lisa Downing, *Film and Ethics: Foreclosed Encounters* (London: Routledge, 2010), 149.

V. Conclusion

An other's vulnerability puts a spotlight on the spectator's responsibility toward them. So, as a point of contact for the viewer, both narratives, *Helpless* and *Spirit on the Wind,* rely on the woman's male partners to translate, mediate, and reconstruct her traumatic memories. Through their indirect, but still significant, encounters with her past – the spectator's memory of (her) memories – the viewers are introduced to memory's influence upon, not only the sustaining of past relationships, but also the building of new ones in the future. By considering how the politics of remembrance interacts with the ethics of memory, the two narratives highlight the fact that simply remembering, or even commemorating, trauma may not be enough – in fact, an over-dependence on memory's transcendental power can accentuate, rather than soothe, the other's vulnerability. Ultimately, memory, or more accurately the process of remembering, if performed without care or responsibility, can often incite as much violence as the act of forgetting.

CHAPTER FOUR

Ethical Emergence:

The Public, the Private, and the Particular in *The Terror: Live* and *The Martyred*

> Morality concerns the individual in his singularity. The criterion of right and wrong, the answer to the question, what ought I to do? depends in the last analysis neither on habits and customs, which I share with those around me, nor on a command of either divine or human origin, but on what I decide with regard to myself.[1]
>
> — Hannah Arendt, *Some Questions of Moral Philosophy*

[1] Hannah Arendt, "Some Questions of Moral Philosophy," in *Responsibility and Judgement*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken Books, 2003), 97.

I. Introduction

Figure 4.1 Deok-soo's argument with his wife is interrupted by the daily broadcast of the national anthem in *Ode to My Father* (Yoon Je-kyoon, 2015).

Towards the middle of Yoon Je-kyoon's film *Ode to My Father* (*Kukcheshijang*, 2014), the sacrificial patriarch, Deok-soo, and his wife, Young-ja, have an argument regarding his decision to enlist for the Vietnam War. After working in Germany as a coal miner for the government-sanctioned guest worker (*Gastarbeiter*) program to pay for his brother's university fees, Deok-soo had once again volunteered to leave Korea to fund his younger sister's wedding. Young-ja pleads him to stay, revealing the central theme of the entire film. Deok-soo tries to explain,

> "Honey, you have to understand. I'm the eldest son.
>
> "You're also the head of our family!
>
> "Exactly. Either way, I need to look after my family.
>
> "You've done enough! What more do you think you need to do? Why is it always you who must sacrifice?
>
> …

> "You think I want to go? This is my damned fate! What do you expect me to do about a fate I can't control?
>
> "What's wrong with your fate? Live your life for yourself for a change, not just for others! It's your life, but why is there no part of you in it?[2]

Young-ja's heartfelt plea is poignantly interrupted by the nation-wide broadcast of Korea's national anthem and the lowering of its flag (Fig. 4.1). This daily ritual that compelled Korean citizens to halt all activities and pledge allegiance to the nation began soon after the Korean War and continued until 1989, when President Roh Taewoo halted the practice.

As mentioned in the introduction, this theme of personal sacrifice for the sake of national duty and familial responsibility is frequently invoked by historians of South Korea. The nation's repeated instances of so-called "failed" histories have prompted the conception of a uniquely "Korean" national identity that simultaneously consolidated and equalized its individual citizens. In turn, such an essentialized and totalized form of Korea's national identity has defined the scope and direction of the nation's moral framework to privilege retroactive and collective reflection. In following, the previous chapters have deconstructed the virtue of sacrifice, remembrance, and redemption as practices established and valorized as a result of such "retrospective" patterns of nation-building and identity-making.

This final chapter will utilize a wider angle to place the platforms of identity, ethics, and the national in conversation. By first demonstrating the enduring nature of

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[2] Dialogue from *Ode to My Father* (Yoon Je-kyun, 2015).

Korea's canonical narrative of sacrifice, the following sections will attempt to answer the question: Is sacrifice indeed necessary to maintain a community? A key component to tackling this inquiry lies in the fact that Korea's national identity, because it is forged through collective sacrifice, is made sacred and thus ethical. National identity invokes specific behaviors; those habitual behaviors are promoted as acts of nationalism; and finally, this nationalized ethos becomes not only reasonable, but also absolutely vital. Ultimately, the boundaries between the nation and the national, the public and the private, as well as the communal and the particular are not only blurred, but oftentimes exempt from consideration. Put simply, the national becomes universal.

Contrary to director Yoon Je-kyun's *Ode to My Father* (2015), which exemplifies this concept of the "universal national," the film *The Terror: Live* (Kim Byung-woo, 2013) demonstrates how the practice of ignoring the particular for the sake of the universal can bring about acts of sacrifice that is not only necessary, but more importantly inescapable. Then, in the final section, I utilize Richard Kim's novel *The Martyred* to outline the distinctions and tensions between the performances of faith, ethics, and duty in order to demonstrate how the act of sacrifice, through *particularized* modes of moral emergence, can be rescued from its fate of universal inevitability.

II. The Patriotic Patriarch in *Ode to My Father*

In her discussion of Taiwan's process of identity negotiation, Melissa Brown describes how ideologies of a solidified and unified nation undermine singular and

particular experiences of belonging or departing. She studies the complex mechanisms at play in Taiwan's construction of the national and asks the question: "Is Taiwan Chinese?"[3] Her answer is a negative one and the basis for this lies in her characterization that identity is primarily informed, not by culture or ancestry, but social experience. Distinguishing between "constructed narratives of the past and the totality of what is actually known about past events," she labels the former as "narratives of unfolding," which places identity negotiation within the realm of ideology and politics, thereby forbidding variability and flexibility.[4] Ultimately, Brown articulates how the process of constructing a national identity is as much about forgetting (and constructing) as it is about remembering.

Ode to My Father is an apt example of Korean nationalism's "narrative of unfolding" that valorizes personal sacrifice for the sake of redemption of a collective good. The film's plot follows Deok-soo, the quintessential sacrificial patriarch, on his journey through Korea's historical timeline from the beginning of the Korean War (1950–53) to the contemporary age. The audience is first introduced to Deok-soo as a child at the scene of the 1950 Hŭngnam evacuation, when thousands of refugees fleeing incoming Chinese forces were transported to the south by United States naval ships. With his mother and father carrying the younger siblings, Deok-soo is charged with protecting one of his younger sisters, Mak-soon. In the struggle to board the ship, however, Deok-soo loses his grip, forcing his father to deboard and search for his

[3] Melissa J. Brown, *Is Taiwan Chinese?: The Impact of Culture, Power, and Migration on Changing Identities* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004).

[4] Brown, 5.

daughter. Unable to find Mak-soon in time, Deok-soo's father and younger sister get left behind and the remaining family members travel to Busan, where Deok-soo's aunt makes a modest living operating an imported goods store in Busan's international market. Determined to keep his promise to his father to protect his family as the new man of the household, Deok-soo embarks on a life-long mission to do just that, no matter the sacrifice. A decade passes and his younger brother receives acceptance into the prestigious Seoul University. To pay for his tuition, Deok-soo signs up for the government-sanctioned guest worker program and leaves for Germany to work as a coal miner. Performing dangerous and back-breaking work in a foreign country, Deok-soo is able to find some relief when he meets his future wife, Young-ja, a nurse also recruited from Korea to serve in the guest worker program. After nearly losing his life in the mines, Deok-soo returns to Busan, where he marries Young-ja and starts to build a new life. When his uncle threatens to sell the store at the market after his aunt's death, however, Deok-soo announces to his family that he will be joining the army to fight in the Vietnam War. As mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, he tells his wife that he is leaving to make money for his sister's wedding. But, Young-ja knows the truth—namely that he wants to save the market store because it is the only place his father and lost sister may remember from their past. After suffering wounds to his leg in Vietnam, Deok-soo returns to Korea with his pockets full enough to save the store from closure. He maintains the store with Young-ja until 1983, when major broadcast stations begin to run television programs with the goal of locating and reuniting relatives separated during the Korean War. Through this television special, Deok-soo is reunited with his long-lost sister, Mak-soon—she had been adopted to the United States. Mak-soon visits

the family in Korea with her own children in tow and a year later Deok-soo's mother closes her eyes in peace. The film concludes with the whole family gathered at Deok-soo's house for the ancestral memorial service. Retreating into the bedroom after dinner, the now gray-haired Deok-soo talks to a picture of his father, "I kept my promise. I did enough, didn't I? But you know, it was so hard." And knowing that his father will never return, Deok-soo finally gives Young-ja permission to sell the family store.

While the film was a huge hit at the box office—the fourth highest-grossing film in South Korea with over 14.2 million tickets sold— it also faced some hefty criticism for its glorification of generational sacrifice and justification of blind nationalism.[5] In fact, Jae-hyung Ryu attributes the film's immense popularity to the nation's conservative turn beginning in the mid 2010s. Outlining Korea's entrenchment in patriarchal familism, itself rooted in Confucian legacies from the Choson period, Ryu analyzes Deok-soo's self-sacrifices not only as a catalyst for the nation's economic development, but also as allegorical representation for its nationalistic values. As he states, the film's sacrificial sequences always portray themes of "the state founded upon patriarchal authority or the state symbolically taking the place of the patriarch."[6]

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[5] Sung-mi Ahn, "'Ode to My Father' stirs nostalgia, controversy," *The Korea Herald*, January 6, 2015, www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20150106000904.
Elli S. Kim disagrees with this analysis, stating that the film's "multi-faceted narratives destabilize the normative narratives of the nation and its recent past, thereby reassuring the unstable and transformative identity of the Korean nation and people," in "Intertextual Dynamics in *Ode to My Father*: Competing Narratives of the Nation and the People," *International Journal of Korean History* 20, no. 1 (2015): 153-160.

[6] My translation from Jae-hyung Ryu, "'Kukcheshijang,' kabujangjŏk kajokchuŭiŭi chaehyŏn" ['Ode to My Father,' the Representation of Patriarchal Familism], *Hyŏndaeyŏnghwayŏn'gu* [*Contemporary Film Studies]* 11, No. 3 (2015): 257-286.

Unsurprisingly, the film garnered praise from Park Chung Hee's daughter and Korea's then president, Park Geun-hye (2013–2017). A conservative legacy, whose rise to power has been largely aided by nostalgia for the "good ol' days" of her father's developmental but militaristic regime, Park addressed the audience at a screening of the film, stating,

> As many already know, the film is based on the real life of the parents' generation, depicting their sacrifices and experiences with fun and touching scenes. I head the film has greatly helped the younger generation communicate better with the elderly, which led me to realize that good cultural content contributes to social integration.[7]

Even more tellingly, while presiding over a political committee meeting, Park invoked the sacrificial themes of the film once more. Citing the scene mentioned above (Fig. 4.1), when Deok-soo and Young-ja halt their argument at the sound of the national anthem, Park states, "There are lyrics in the anthem that concern loving the nation regardless of whether you are happy or in pain. That way, our precious community can continue developing under any adversity."[8]

It should come as no surprise, then, that the historical roots for this ethos of nationalism as moral imperative can also be traced back to the authoritarian regime of Park Geun-hye's father, Park Chung Hee (1963–1979). Hwasook Nam, in his book *Building Ships, Building a Nation*, views the post-liberation era of South Korean history

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[7] Translation from Ji-eun Seo, "President takes a day off to go to the movies," *Korea JoongAng Daily*, January 28, 2015, www.koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/news/article/Article.aspx?aid=3000252.

[8] Seo, "President takes a day off."

through the activities and operational goals of labor unions, specifically that of the Korea Shipbuilding and Engineering Corporation. Moving against the understanding that leftist labor organizations of the period immediately after the war had little to no impact on the unionization and revolutions of the 1980s, the author attempts to recover the importance and impact of the 1960s labor activism. He claims that the unionizers operated under a strong conviction of solidarity and equality with unwavering belief that the nation's democratic and economic development would rely on the active participation from the workers.

The late 1950s saw a renewal in unionizing after anti-communist policies, a domestic depression, and the aftereffects of the Korean War had stalled activism for nearly a decade. After the April Revolution of 1960 and the subsequent fall of Rhee Syngman, the nation as a whole was full of democratic promise and consequently allowed the labor unions to increase membership as well as the number of labor disputes. Until Park's military coup a year later, unions operated with extraordinary democratic process and followed a moral code of fairness and justice, especially for the weaker groups of workers, such as temporary laborers. With Park's militarism in place, however, unions were disbanded and placed under the Federation of Korean Trade Unions (FKTU) that operated in a top-down system that served to undo the past year's democratic resurgence. And while most scholars would state that 60s labor was weak and was only concerned about economic unionism rather than larger industrial relations and justice, Nam argues that the activities of many labor unions proved otherwise. The unionizers achieved autonomy and a degree of egalitarianism, demonstrated by the solidarity shown in the rank-and-file revolt, until Park's focus on a high-production and

export-focused economy slowly started to challenge the goals of the labor activists.[9] While the state's consideration of the worker's role as passive sacrificer created tension in many ways, the unionists viewed their vision of democratic labor relations directly contributing to economic development and coinciding with Park's nation-building plans.

> …the radicalism and militancy workers exhibit in [the so-called Workers' Self-Management Movement] were not the product of propaganda and guidance by the labor leaders at the top. Workers in the self-management movement showed a diverse range of attitudes toward the idea of workers' right to own, manage, or profit from the businesses they had toiled for. The moralistic, nationalistic, and sometimes even entrepreneurial attitudes workers displayed produce great militancy, even if they did not fit neatly in the Communist-prescribed "class consciousness" ideal workers supposedly learn to possess.[10]

By the beginning of 1969, the charged political economy of authoritarianism, in which the state increasingly relegated labor's role to passivity, saw the unions completely supervised and subsumed under central control of "cooperation" and eventually transformed to a state-controlled unionism. Wage increase, lagging urban migration, and unionization posed a threat to the state's alliance with big business and were thus impetuses for the state to take a strong stance on labor. By 1972, Park had declared martial law and unions grew increasingly complacent and were relegated to focusing on

[9] For more on Park's labor policies, see Yong Cheol Kim, "Administrative Neutralism and the Politics of Survival: Labor Policy Under Park Chung Hee, 1961-1971," *Pacific Focus* 9: 125-152.

[10] Nam, 27.

state enforced "new community" projects rather than internal worker struggles. Although the 70s saw a rise in the individual worker's leverage against the company due to overall economic growth, the unions lost almost all power to mediate industrial relations. After the suppression of 1960s militant unionism and the rise of privately maintained industry, union democratization efforts did not begin again until a decade later in the 1980s.[11]

Summarily, the development of the postwar labor groups formed around the agenda of nationalism and enlightenment. A sense of revolution that was planted during the occupation continued post-liberation, where labor groups from both left and right formed under a militant Korean "worker" collective that toted self-sufficiency. Then immediately after the Korean War, labor unionism further evolved to promote a spirit of enlightenment that not only retained a call to self-management, but also considered the workers' laboring roles as crucial to the national goal of modernity and economic development.[12]

What is interesting about this particular point in Korean labor history lies in the fact that an ethos of self-sacrifice for the sake of national development was touted not only by the government, but by the workers' themselves. While the state viewed the

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[11] The mid-to-late-1970s' unionless environment saw a rationalization and modernization of the industrial process and thus an increase in private profit in all industries. During the 1980s, however, after Chun Doo-hwan's coup, a resurgence of union militantism occurred in the alongside the *minjung* movement. Radical student movements calling for change in the political authoritarian system revived the 1960s' tradition of democratic social and political revolution. Emphasis on solidarity, militancy, and democracy signaled a continuity between the 60s labor union struggles and the 80s social revolutions. For more on the *Minjung* movement, see Namhee Lee, *The Making of Minjung: Democracy and the Politics of Representation in South Korea* (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2009).

[12] Hwasook Nam, *Building Ships, Building a Nation: Korea's Democratic Unionism under Park Chung Hee* (Seattle: University of Washington, 2009).

laborers simply as passive figures incapable of possessing any political agency, it still demanded a militant cooperation for the nation-building effort. Even though their overall goal of retaining autonomy failed, the workers, too, assigned themselves to a collective role charged with fomenting national development, all the while envisioning themselves as active practitioners of modernity. From both directions, the workers of 1960s Korea, toiling under the weight of nationalistic urgency, were mobilized through moralistic, rather than purely economic, motivations.

Figure 4.2 Deok-soo (third from left) as a miner for the Germany guest worker program in *Ode to My Father* (Yoon Je-Kyoon, 2015).

These historical manifestations of self-sacrifice mimics *Ode to My Father*'s narrative theme. One of Deok-soo's sacrifices occurs in the mines of Germany in the mid 1960s to early 1970s (Fig. 4.2). With Park's first Five Year Plan in full swing by this time, Korean workers were shipped to West Germany to simultaneously alleviate Germany's labor shortage and bolster Korea's war-torn economy. By 1969, the economic agreement between the Federal Republic of Germany and the Republic of Korea

(*Gastarbeiterprogramm*) brought approximately 18,000 miners and nurses to work on foreign land. Although there is some dispute over the exact amount, the economic remittances sent by these guestworkers back to their families still contribute to the nationalist narrative of reconstruction and foundational sacrifice of modern Korea.[13] In fact, Park Geun-hye officially invited some of these past guestworkers to her inaugural address, acknowledging that Korea was built upon the "blood, toil, and sweat of the people."[14]

Figure 4.3 Deok-soo and his wife, Young-ja, at the family imported goods store in Busan's International Market in *Ode to My Father* (Yoon Je-kyoon, 2015).

Additionally, a running narrative theme within the film has to do with Deok-soo desperately trying to keep his aunt's small imported goods store from shutting down (Fig. 4.3). Going so far as to enlist to serve in the Vietnam War, Deok-soo is willing to

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[13] Helen Kim, "Making homes here and away: Korean German nurses and practices of diasporic belonging," *Journal of Cultural Geography* 36, no. 3 (2019): 251–270.

[14] See, Park Geun-hye, "Full text of Park's inauguration speech," *Yonhap News*, February, 23, 2013, en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20130225001500315

sacrifice even his life to sustain, what he sees as, his generational and familial responsibility. It is no coincidence that his sacrificial actions as patriarch overlaps so neatly with the sacrificial requirements of a patriot. Nor is it a new phenomenon to tout the sacrificial patriarch as a moral pillar standing in as representation of a universal "goodness," also aptly emphasizing the nostalgic element of the film.

Kelly Jeong's discussion of actor Kim Sung-ho cogently discusses this convergence of the patriot and the patriarch through the act of stoic sacrifice. Kim Sung-ho's roles within Korean "modernization melodramas" show the character as a pre-modern patriarch standing in for the "moral occult" on which the viewers can rely on during a period of sudden national development. Films such as *The Coachman* and *Mr. Park* reflect, "Korea's nationhood, its masculine character, and its responses to postwar chaos…Through their reaffirmation of patriarchy, construction of a modern masculine national subject, and vilification of women… the films offer insight into postwar Korean life and values…."[15] By viewing Kim Sung-ho as a metaphoric representation of the nation's struggles as a whole, the films provide a way for viewers to sympathize and thus make sense of the chaotic onslaught of modernization. Korea's nationhood and the act of rebuilding the nation during the postwar era brought about a trend in which masculinity, specifically of the familial patriarch, is constructed to represent a larger state-sanctioned model of a modern national subject.[16]

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[15] The connection between melodrama and the "moral occult" was discussed previously in Chapter 1.

[16] Kelly Jeong, "Nation Rebuilding and Postwar South Korean Cinema: *The Coachman* and *The Stray Bullet*," *Journal of Korean Studies* 11, No. 1 (2006): 127–162. Also see, Kelly Jeong, "The Quasi Patriarch: Kim Sung-ho and South Korean Postwar Movies," in *The Korean Popular Culture Reader*, ed. Kyung Hyun Kim and Youngmin Choe (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013).

Ultimately, Deok-soo continues to embody the role of the patriotic patriarch even in contemporary Korea in much the same fashion as Kim Sung-ho did through his characters or the laborers did through their contributions in the 1960s. And much like Melissa Brown's contention that national narratives are "unfolded" and constructed, Korea's "narrative of unfolding" still continues to uphold a universal ethos of moralistic collectivism. In many ways, in fact, *Ode to My Father*'s ability to instill a sense of nostalgia within the viewer not only exemplifies the surviving valorization of nationalistic sacrifice, but also furthers the canonization of the "universal national."

III. Sacrifice of the Particular in *The Terror: Live*

Figure 4.4 Young-hwa attempts to connect with the terrorist as the Mapo Bridge burns in the background in *The Terror: Live* (Kim Byung-woo, 2013).

While *Ode to My Father* reinforces the necessity of nationalistic sacrifice, *The Terror: Live* narrativizes the ramifications of blind compliance to such a universal moral system. The main protagonist of the film, Young-hwa, is host of a daily radio program. Formerly an acclaimed news anchor, his career has taken a downturn and he is on the verge of divorce with his journalist wife. Determined to make it back to the top, the ambitious Young-hwa will take any opportunity that comes his way. His chance finally arrives when a listener, by the name of Park No-gyu, calls in to his program. Claiming to be a construction worker for the past thirty years, the caller announces that he will bomb the Mapo bridge. Mistaking the threat as a prank call, Young-hwa disconnects, only to see the bridge explode outside his window. Young-hwa is unwilling to let this opportunity pass by. Transforming his small radio booth into a news desk ready for live broadcast, Young-hwa re-connects with the terrorist for an exclusive interview (Fig. 4.4). In exchange for his cooperation, Park makes two demands: He wants 2,179,245,00 Won in reparations for the death of three colleagues during a government-sanctioned repair project of the Mapo bridge two years back and, more importantly, a public apology from the president. Park also informs Young-hwa that his in-ear device contains an explosive, which will detonate if Young-hwa attempts to exit the booth or if his demands are not met. After negotiating with the government's terror task force, Young-hwa is unsuccessful at convincing the president to apologize and is forced to host the head of the national police force instead. Unsatisfied and frustrated by the commissioner's antagonistic attitude, Park detonates an explosive and kills the government official. Going against the network director's orders to halt cooperation, Young-hwa pleads with the terrorist, asking to allow at least the women and children on

the bridge to be moved to safety. The bridge collapses during the rescue attempt and kills Young-hwa's wife, who was reporting on the scene, along with many others. When the police finally locate the terrorist's whereabouts, Park blows up the adjacent building, causing it to crash into the one Young-hwa is in. Just when things can't get any worse for Young-hwa, he receives a call from the president's secretary, informing him that if the terrorist is not apprehended, Young-hwa will be charged for the crimes instead. Soon after, the terrorist himself calls Young-hwa and tells him to leave the building before it collapses. Now realizing that he must locate the terrorist himself to clear his name, Young-hwa investigates and discovers that the terrorist is in fact Park No-gyu's young son, who was avenging his father's untimely death in the aforementioned construction accident. The ending finally has Young-hwa and Park meet in person. Eventually, the terrorist is shot and killed by snipers on the ground, leaving Young-hwa alone once again in his radio booth. Trapped between a rock and a hard place, Young-hwa, too, chooses death and presses the detonator Park left behind.

While *Ode to My Father* maintains that collective sacrifice is what founded the nation and bolstered its economic success, *The Terror: Live* reveals how such political and moral structures not only encourage, but also make inevitable a sacrifice of the particular. In this film, labor is not utilized as a representation of democratic self-efficiency, but as a catalyst for social injustice. Even though the film never visualizes the exact circumstances surrounding the laborers' deaths, the narrative makes certain to emphasize that the government and its nation-building schemas are to blame. During the repair project of the Mapo bridge, the three day-laborers had volunteered to take on extra danger for the equivalent of a $20 increase in pay. With no safety precautions in

place, unsurprisingly, the three workers fell to their death. To make matters worse, emergency personnel had been called away to provide support to a government event, making the fatal accident even more inevitable. Their deaths received a single line in the newspaper and a brief mention on that night's news broadcast. The government and the media are quick to bury the facts, even during the son's avenge plot, emphasizing the film's overarching message of injustice and the imbalance of power within Korean society.

Considering this, then, it becomes easy to place blame on the lack of equality and tout the importance of building an egalitarian society. But doesn't this solution pose a contradiction to Korea's "narrative of unfolding" outlined in films like *Ode to My Father*? At the beginning of this chapter, I posed the question: Is sacrifice necessary to sustain a community? In Korea's case, the resounding answer would seem to be yes, absolutely. The message of *Ode to My Father* is very clear: Without the generational (and patriarchal) sacrifices of our fathers, like Deok-soo, the nation and its people would not have access to such economic prosperity nor moral strength. So, how can we reconcile the inherent contradiction in the fact that on one hand, sacrifice, which by its very definition necessitates a level of inequality, is demanded for the sake of maintaining and developing a community, while on the other, that same sacrifice is considered non-egalitarian and a matter of injustice? How do we live in the world presented to us in *The Terror: Live* with the specter of *Ode to My Father* still very much in our memory and ethical frame?

Jean-Pierre Dupuy investigates this very conundrum. First outlining John Rawls's theories of "justice based on fairness," Dupuy moves on to deconstruct his logic and

point out its paradoxical nature. While Rawls totes equality and "fair" distribution, he also delineates his "difference principle," in which divergence from strict equality is allowed if this momentary inequality benefits the least advantaged more than if there would have been strict equality. Put more simply, "injustice is inequalities that are not to *everyone's* advantage." This consideration of "everyone" in Rawls's maxim is where Dupuy locates the paradox. By considering "everyone," and emphasizing equality if and only if all is better off, Rawls's theories inadvertently privilege the more advantaged. "The difference principle, then, favors a transformation that betters the condition of the better-off without bettering - nor damaging - the condition of the worse-off."[17] In other words, a wealth differential of 10:5 is preferable to that of 8:5 because overall, the first scenario is more to *everyone's* advantage. Ultimately, this sacrifice of equality, which was supposed to benefit a greater good for the sake of the individual, actually maintains the status quo or creates a larger discrepancy. Dupuy demonstrates the "irrationality" of Rawls's "rational sacrifice" theory by revealing its inherent paradox: Rawls's Theory of Justice is paradoxical because it is both sacrificial in its principles and anti-sacrificial in its goals. While it aims to achieve ultimate equality, it simultaneously encourages the abandonment of that very equality by sacrificing one for a greater goal. By revealing the aporias within Rawls's non-utilitarian theories of justice and equality, Dupuy uncovers the paradoxical nature of rationality in general.

[17] Jean Pierre Dupuy,"On the Rationality of Sacrifice," *Contagion: Journal of Violence, Mimesis, and Culture* 10, no. 1 (2003): 28.

Horkheimer and Adorno, in "Dialectics of Enlightenment," also highlight the dangers of ignoring the particular for the sake of the universal. Speaking against Bacon's privileging of knowledge, or reason, over belief, the two authors critique the "totalitarian" methods through which enlightenment attempts to exact utility and equality. For the sake of the collective, enlightenment logic goes beyond unifying to disregarding the singular. "The unity of the manipulated collective consists in the negation of each individual and in the scorn poured on the type of society which could make people into individuals."[18] As every aspect of experience must be contained within the borders of enlightenment, all relationships are thereby measured and calculated in terms of their utility. Such mechanized treatment of thought and subjectivity forces the world to exist within the realms of its own logical formalism rather than leave it autonomous and individual. Just as Dupuy warns us of the paradoxes embedded within "rational" equality, Horkheimer and Adorno reveal the dangers involved in a complete reliance on the universal, no matter how reasonable.

[18] Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectics of Enlightenment* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 9.

Figure 4.5 The police commissioner antagonizes the terrorist in *The Terror: Live* (Kim Byung-woo, 2013).

The Terror: Live depicts this type of world that operates under a formula of universalism that forces the implementation of equality into the realm of equalization. "This program is different. Rather than put the show first, we will put the people first. I will strive to report the news fairly and always on the side of weakness," Young-hwa exclaims daily on his program. But, in practice, this grandiose agenda becomes impossible to execute. Caught between two systems of power, the terrorist is utilized (and in some ways sacrificed) by Young-hwa and his network, and then in turn, the government regains control of the message by manipulating the network (Fig. 4.5). The terrorist demands apology from the president on Young-hwa's program not only because his father perished working for a government-sanctioned project, but also because, in this world, his demand for equality can only be granted in public and by the political sphere. Rather than exhibit equality as an inherent condition of human society,

human society has warped equality into a matter of justice that can be given or taken away, all in the name of communal unity.

While Dupuy, Horkheimer, and Adorno critique the paradoxical nature of "fair" enlightenment, Hannah Arendt understands that, realistically, society cannot exist without a measure of both equality and inequality. According to Arendt, however, the primary issue at hand does not lie in the fact that the political system cannot adequately instill universal egalitarianism, but rests in the circumstance that equality has entered the public arena in the first place.

As mentioned in chapter two, Hannah Arendt separates human experience into the categories of labor, work, and action. In regards to labor, she states that it, "is the activity which corresponds to the biological process of the human body… The human condition of labor is life itself."[19] In essence, labor is performed simply and exclusively for the sustaining of human life. Anything created or produced though labor is impermanent and consumed without excess. In order to compensate for this lack of permanence, humans enter the realm of work. Through work, humans delve into production of the unnatural and artificial. Human mortality is battled with the creation of "things" that may disrupt the ever-recurring cycle of life. Above these conditions of life and objects, is the realm of action. In the hierarchical structure of the human condition, Arendt views action as the ultimate. Action is what brings to the platform of plurality. Through action, man is able to form relationships and involve himself in social. Action is the requisite condition of the political and the social.

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[19] Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 7.

The issue at hand, according to Arendt, is that modern society has reversed the hierarchical order, privileging labor over all other actions. This reversal has contributed to a conflation of the public and private realms of society. In contrast to the times of antiquity, where the public realm of free and political action was strictly separate from the private realm of individual life, modern capitalism has reduced work to labor and action to mere maintenance of the status quo. In a society where life is measured by value and that value is determined by the instrumentalization of labor, exchange and production become the end goals. Workers and even laborers become merely an extension of their product, and that product, driven by consumption demands, in turn must enter the public space (i.e. the market) to establish its value. "Value is the quality a thing can never possess in privacy but acquires automatically the moment it appears in public."[20] Among this merging of the public and private, the importance of human plurality becomes lost. In other words, in a world of things and appearance, man is required to labor as an equalized collective rather than work as a meaningful artisan. Within this formulation of modern society emerges one crucial observation regarding collectivist societies.

> The sameness prevailing in a society resting on labor and consumption and expressed in its conformity is intimately connected with the somatic experience of laboring together, where the biological rhythm of labor unites the group of laborers to the point that each may feel that he is no longer an individual but actually one with all others. To

[20] Arendt, 164.

> be sure, this eases labor's toil and trouble in much the same way as marching together eases the effort of walking for each soldier. …This unitedness of many into one is basically antipolitical; it is the very opposite of the togetherness prevailing in political or commercial communities… The equality attending the public realm is necessarily an equality of unequals who stand in need of being "equalized" in certain respects and for specific purposes.[21]

In essence, modern society has equated conformity with equality. And according to Arendt, equality is not a public matter, but a private one. It was not meant to be a matter of justice, a public issue, but a state of being that is pursued individually. In antiquity, she states, the private was meant to sustain life and the public was about sacrificing that life for participation in society.[22] So, the public arena did not require equality but actually preferred difference. While some have argued that this stance of distinction in the public sphere is elitist and sometimes even discriminatory, ultimately, Arendt's philosophy seeks balance and egalitarianism in both realms. In fact, it was the existence of individual difference in the private sphere that paved the way for the thriving of equality in politics. Essentially, the greater the plurality, the greater the quality and spread of political equality.

In the modern era, however, because of its consistent "privatization" of public politics and its emphasis on conformity, equality is no longer an essence of freedom and autonomy, but a privilege that justice must protect and distribute. With such a conflation

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[21] Arendt, 214–215.

[22] Arendt, 36.

of the public and private realms, equality becomes equalizing and freedom becomes a matter of economy. The public realm depends upon a diversity of opinions and operates at its best in states of compromise and moderation. By inserting a universal value system, as show in *Ode to My Father*, the public becomes corrupted and society loses its balance.

Figure 4.6 Young-hwa chooses death and plummets into the parliamentary building in *The Terror: Live* (Kim Byung-woo, 2013).

In *The Terror: Live*, both Young-hwa and the laborer's son, Park, is forced to choose death for the sake of truth. Park's sacrifice is made inevitable by the fact that the only platform for him to seek justice is made unavailable to him. His only option is to make himself heard through violent and public outcries. Young-hwa, a member of the public from the beginning, is equally forced into an inevitable sacrifice. Left to fend for himself in the teetering building, Young-hwa grips the detonator in hand and

contemplates whether to push the trigger. If he does not, Young-hwa may get to keep his life but will surely take the fall for the crimes committed by Park. If Young-hwa does, his life will be forfeit, but hope for the truth to reveal itself will not be completely lost. Staring straight into the camera, as if to challenge the audience to do the same, Young-hwa pushes the trigger, causing his building to crumble and collapse. The film's last scene shows Young-hwa still glaring into the camera, just mere feet away from plummeting into the nation's parliamentary building (Fig. 4.6).

Arendt's ultimate goal was to restore action into the political sphere. Action and speech are inextricably linked. Speech, however, has an opposing relationship with ethics. "Goodness," however it may be defined, is usually predicated on a level of selflessness. But, the act of making one's good deeds public, giving a voice to my sacrifices, prevents that deed from retaining any characteristic of its "goodness." The secretiveness of the "good," even to the agent himself, is essential to the nature of ethics. So, by forcing the judgment of "good," as well as the practice of "good," to the public and political sphere where speech is a mandatory component, not only is the public role in danger of being corrupted, but the very understanding of the "good" is threatened as well.[23] With Park's public outcries, he immediately becomes tainted and can no longer be a "good." But by keeping silent, Park risks the possibility of making himself irrelevant. By juxtaposing the practices of public speech and social injustice, *The Terror: Live* reveals how, in a world dependent on universality, political action can be misinterpreted

[23] Hannah Arendt, *Responsibility and Judgement* (New York: Schocken Books, 2003). Also see, Alice MacLachlan, "An Ethic of Plurality: Reconciling Politics and Morality in Hannah Arendt," in *History and Judgement*, edited by A MacLachlan and I. Torsen (Vienna: IWM Junior Visiting Fellows' Conferences 21, 2006).

and misappropriated. It demonstrates how the performance of sacrifice is forced to become equivalent to an act of terror.

So, is sacrifice required to maintain a community? Few would argue that any community can function without some sort of individual compromise. With the conflation of public duty and private morality, however, the option of particular choice becomes moot. Contrary to *Ode to My Father*'s valorization of nationalistic sacrifice, *The Terror: Live* highlights the ramifications of such blind practices of universal duty. In *The Terror: Live*, rather than designate a performance of responsibility, sacrifice becomes not only violent, but more importantly inevitable. The particular becomes sacrifice for the sake of the universal.

IV. The Emergence of the Moral in *The Martyred*

What is the difference between a martyr, a hero, and a patriot? In common understanding, a martyr must choose death for the sake of a belief or a social cause and his bodily sacrifice grants him authenticity and salvation. A hero risks his personal safety or even death for the sake of protecting a universal truth and his sacrifice grants his "goodness." A patriot, similarly, relinquishes his personal sovereignty for the sake of the nation. While a patriot's "awards" for his sacrifice are not as self-evident, most would agree that patriotism grants integrity, pride, and a sense of belonging in the larger national community. What all these sacrificial identities have in common is the fact that in order to gain or maintain their status as such, they must relinquish their particularity to adopt the universal values and expectations of each role. The martyr must abide by a

totalizing faith; the hero must rely on a common good; and the patriot is commanded through universal duty.

While *The Terror: Live* describes the ramifications of private considerations entering the public sphere, Richard Kim's novel *The Martyred* dismantles this universal frame to explore the necessity of relativity in truth and particularity in morality. While still acknowledging the need for sacrifice in sustaining a moral community, the novel returns the option of choice to the act by highlighting each character's individual struggles with the matters of faith, ethics, and rationality. Rather than allow identity to dictate behavior, in the end, each character's particular conscience takes over to dismantle that identity and uncover the possibility of plurality not only in the community, but also within the self.

Perhaps because of the Richard Kim's personal background that saw him move to the United States after having served in the Republic of Korea Marine Corps during the Korean War, *The Martyred* presents a deceptively simple plot that nonetheless agitates a multitude of moral considerations.[24] The novel is set in 1950 Pyongyang, just before the north invades the south of Korea. Fourteen ministers are captured by the communists and only two mysteriously survive. Of the two survivors, Mr. Hann is now insane and the other, Pastor Shin, seems tortured but remains tight-lipped. Hoping to validate their martyrdom for propagandistic purposes, military intelligence is tasked to find out the circumstances surrounding the deaths of the twelve murdered ministers. Colonel Chang,

[24] Jooyeon Rhee discusses how his "self-assumed position of exile" contributed to his writing thematics. "Against the Nihilism of Suffering and Death: Richard E. K. Kim and His Works," *Cross-Currents: East Asian History and Culture Review* 18 (March 2016).

chief of Army Political Intelligence, orders the novel's narrator, Captain Lee, to investigate and elicit a confession from Pastor Shin that would paint the dead as martyrs and the pastor as a denouncer of faith. Captain Lee soon discovers, however, that there is more to the story — the martyrs may not have kept their faith in the end — and as a strict rationalist, becomes frustrated by Pastor Shin's refusal to reveal the truth. Hesitant to paint the dead in a bad light, Pastor Shin keeps changing his story, until finally he confesses to betraying the twelve ministers to save himself. In the end, despite the fact that the truth is never fully revealed, each character experiences a shift in their once firmly-held core beliefs.

At the beginning, each character embodies a specific core identity. For example, Pastor Shin's identity seems to be based on faith and Captain Lee's identity privileges the rational truth. But is truth, ethics or even faith unchangeable? Are they absolute and universal? As mentioned before, ethics, or the practice of responsibility, is inherently inherent paradoxical. Derrida, for example, has outlined the impossibility of responsibility in his phrase "Tout autre est tout autre"—if I am responsible to one, I am simultaneously irresponsible to all others.[25] And in terms of the paradoxes of rationality and even faith, I would like to turn to Kierkegaard. As opposed to Hegelian logic in which experiences and the Ideas that constitute them interconnect to create an absolute and universal whole, Kierkegaard's theories attempt to repudiate this method of teleological rationality by focusing on its limitations and the importance of particularity. Rather than define Truth as a Totality embedded in indisputable rationality, Kierkegaard

[25] Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 82.

demonstrates the weaknesses of Hegel's "system of dialectics" by calling attention to the individual's relationship with faith. Taking the sacrifice of Isaac as example, Kierkegaard argues that because of the inherent tensions between the practice of faith and ethics, the consideration of truth can never be fully rational or universal. Abraham intends to sacrifice Isaac in the name of faith, but must simultaneously embrace the dilemma that defines this same act as ethically immoral. Faith, in its immense and particular form of powerlessness, one that brings about "fear and trembling," is at once impossible and yet necessary.

> This paradox [of faith] cannot be mediated, for it is due precisely to the fact that the single individual is only the single individual. As soon as this single individual wants to express his absolute duty in the universal, becomes conscious of this in the latter, he perceives himself to be in a temptation and the, if he otherwise resists it, does not come to fulfill the so-called absolute duty; and if he does not resist it, then he sins, even if his act in reality is equivalent to that which was his absolute duty.[26]

This paradox of faith demonstrates what Kierkegaard calls "the teleological suspension of the ethical." By striving to perform one's duty to a higher purpose — a universal ideal — one is often forced to abandon one's responsibility to society. Put simply, the individual is forced to neglect the consideration of particular responsibility as it reaches to meet the expectations of the Absolute.

[26] Soren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 61–2.

In following, Pastor Shin's experience with faith is complicated by the fact that his silence, rather than manifest faith, demonstrates doubt and reinforces his "secular" responsibilities towards the larger community.[27] And on the other hand, Captain Lee's insistence on rationality, where truth trumps all considerations, is challenged by the sudden insertion of faith. The paradoxes inherent in faith, ethics, and rationality all contribute to a dismantling of each character's universal truth. At the beginning of the narrative, the pastor keeps his silence to protect the twelve murdered ministers. Saying that he and the other survivor were saved by luck and divine intervention, Pastor Shin seems to maintain his silence in faith. But, when a captured communist intelligence officer reveals that the twelve "martyrs" had "died like dogs," denouncing their faith and begging for mercy, the pastor suddenly changes his tune and makes a shocking confession. He was not only present at the scene of the killing, but he had betrayed the twelve ministers to save his own life. As if to make up for his sins, Pastor Shin preaches to the community about the dead's noble departure and the absolute importance of faith. Incredulous about the pastor's version of the story and confused by his refusal to tell the truth, Captain Lee asks pries the pastor, until he and the captain both come to a stunning realization.

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[27]Again invoking Abraham's particular ethical and religious dilemma, Kierkegaard also points out the importance of secrecy when considering the separations between ethics and faith. Ethics is dependent on a relationship with others and so understanding becomes a necessity which in turn requires expression through speech. While esthetics, with its focus on experience, desire, and emotions, relies on absolute secrecy to maintain separation from the universal, ethics is entirely dependent on the lack of secrecy and demands disclosure to remain moral and within the universal. Faith, Kierkegaard argues, is an altogether different contention in which the experience is so particular that even if one were to choose to disclose, no one else would be capable of understanding. So, just as Abraham did for the sake of his duty, there are times when our morality must be sacrificed for the sake of our faith.

"Why? Why do you do it! Your twelve ministers — they were butchered for no good reason. They didn't die for the glory of your god. They were murdered by men and your god couldn't care less. Tell me, then, why glorify god! Why glorify him while men are murdered by men! And why betray your people?"

We both fell silent.

"Mr. Shin, Mr. Shin! Why all that?" I said in desperation. "Why all that, why deceive your people, when our sufferings here and now have no justice to seek for beyond this life?"

He clutched my arms and whispered compassionately, "How you must have suffered! How you must be suffering. I too, Captain! I, too, suffer!"

Hardly knowing what to say, I looked at him in wonder. "Then you, too," I said at last, "you too, don't believe…?"

He interrupted me with an agonized gesture. "Don't! Don't say it!"

Tears filled his eyes.

…

The searing anguish in his pale face was overwhelming.

"Help me! Help love my people, my poor, suffering people, tortured by wars, hungry, cold, sick and weary of life!" he cried. "Help me! Sufferings seize their hope and faith and toss them adrift into a sea of despair! We must show them light, tell them there will be a glorious welcome waiting for them, assure them they will triumph in the eternal Kingdom of God!"

"To give them the illusion of hope? The illusion of life beyond the grave?"

> "Yes, yes! Because they are men. Despair is the disease of those weary of life, life here and now full of meaningless sufferings. We must fight despair, we must destroy it and not let the sickness of despair corrupt the life of man and reduce him to a mere scarecrow."
>
> "And you? What about you? What about your despair?"
>
> "That is my cross!" he said. "I must bear that alone."
>
> I took his trembling hands. "Forgive me!" I cried out. "Forgive me! I have been unjust to you!"[28]

The pastor's identity should be determined by his unknowable, but absolute, faith. And the captain's identity should remain anchored in his rational belief in the superiority of truth. But in the end, their affective interactions dislodge their foundations to leave room for the pastor's "faith-full ethics" and the captain's "ethical faith." Realizing that the truth is not always "rational" in the realm of human interaction, Captain Lee embraces the irrationality and importance of faith. Pastor Shin, choosing to bear the burden of doubt alone, transfers his faith from the Absolute to the immediacy of human relationships.

In the end, none of the characters in Richard Kim's novel are left the same. Colonel Chang, who appeared so determined to utilize the ministers' deaths for political gain, remains the ever-dutiful soldier until his last days, when he reveals his shifted beliefs. Upon receiving a letter regarding Colonel Chang's death, Captain Lee discovers that the colonel has left him some money along with instructions on how he would like it spent, "It was Colonel Chang's wish that you use the money to purchase Bibles for your

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[28] Richard Kim, *The Martyred* (New York: Penguin Books, 1964), 159–160.

church at the camp, for he had seen that you had very few of them available for your people…"[29] Even Captain Park, the son of one of the killed ministers, is able to rekindle his love for his lost father. Before the minister's death, Captain Park had resented his father's unwavering faith in the unknown. His obstinance frustrated the captain and had prevented the son from fully connecting with his father. Once Captain Park learned that his father desired to live more than retain his devout character, the captain felt enough release to return to the church. While the whereabouts of Pastor Shin are unknown at the end of the novel, Captain Lee embraces the future with a "wonderous lightness of heart."[30]

While Richard Kim's novel still remains a story surrounding the Korean War and its themes of separation, trauma, and violence, it also succeeds in changing the narrative. Rather than attempt to sculpt memory — the question of "*what* should we remember?" — the author shifts our focus away from the past and toward the unknowing, but hopeful horizon. He challenges us to contemplate instead, "*How* should we move forward?"

V. Conclusion

Derrida claims that the gift's condition of possibility relies on secrecy, atemporality, an-economy, and impossibility. A gift relies on secrecy because a true gift

[29] Kim, 191.

[30] Kim, 199.

cannot be recognized as a gift by either the giver or the receiver. A gift is atemporal and *aneconomic* because it is only possible at the instant the "circle of time," the economy, is fractured. Since a gift cannot be an exchange, gift-giving is predicated on the "paradoxical instant" in which the act is no longer "present," but is instead a moment of temporal madness. The gift represents a desire to break away from the cycle.[31]

So, is sacrifice necessary in maintaining a community? A truly ethical community is predicated on the gift, rather than sacrifice. For if the gift is considered a sacrifice for the giver, a debt will be formed for the receiver, reigniting the circle of time and exchange. Sacrifice should not achieve redemption. A truly ethical community is formed only when singular responsibility is performed in its immediacy. Like the characters in *The Martyred*, a commitment to community requires a leap of faith. The ethical emerges only in particular absurdity.

Like most of the texts in this project, *The Martyred* does not have a hero nor a happy ending; even though we crave resolution, redemption, and certitude. Ultimately, this is why we are left with a bitter taste in our mouths. Not only have we lost our familiar moral pillars, but we have been denied a conclusive ending. This lack makes us anxious and ill at ease, but at the same time we become contemplative.

> …since the creation of the world it has been customary for the result to come last and that if one is in truth to learn anything from the great, it is precisely the beginning to which one must be attentive. If the one who is to act wants to judge himself by the outcome, then he will never

[31] Jacques Derrida, *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

> begin. Even though the outcome may delight the whole world, it cannot help the hero, for he only came to know the outcome when the whole thing was over, and he did not become a hero by that but by the fact that he began.
>
> …But people are curious about the outcome, just as they are about the outcome of a book. They do not want to know about the anxiety, the distress, the paradox.[32]

Because as Kierkegaard states, it is the beginning, not the outcome, that brings about "the anxiety, the distress, the paradox." But at the same time, this is how transgression identifies the limit and works to surpass it. Georges Bataille states that, "dogmatic presuppositions have given experience undue limits; someone who already knows cannot go beyond a known horizon." And so, the texts take their audience to the breaking point. Known moralities are shattered and familiar horizons are expanded. The retrospective curse has been identified. Our comfort zones, within history and memory, are displaced in order to make room for the unknown. And the unknown is uncomfortable indeed. But at least now, the future, rather than the past, is finally in contention.

[32] Kierkegaard, 55–6.

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