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Reading Apologetic Men in Lee Chang-dong's Films

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While Korean popular culture has infamously carved out innumerable number of 'soft masculine' icons through K-pop and K-drama that often blur gender boundaries and blot out historical traumas, Korean cinema by and large continues to draw on characters that are based on violent and brutalized male protagonists – often divided into two kinds: apologetic men and vengeful men. 2012's hit film, *Nameless Gangster* (*Pômjwe wa ûi chônjaeng*, Yoon Jong-bin), for instance, rearticulates the pressure of intense historical transformation from an authoritarian society where violence and corruption run rampant to a more humanized one where knowledge-power discipline, to borrow from Foucault, is disseminated

through the scarred male subjectivity.¹⁾ This traumatized male subject, which aims at but falls short of what Etienne Balibar calls “citizen subject,” is what draws my attention to the films of Lee Chang-dong.²⁾

Peppermint Candy (1999) developed an apologetic male protagonist that not only distinguished Korean cinema from other Asian cinema such as Chinese Fifth Generation that depicted women for Western arthouse film consumption,³⁾ but one that also became a stock character of the Korean cinema over the past decade and a half. Even blockbuster films such as *Memories of Murder* (*Sarin ûi ch'ûók*, 2003) and *Haendae* (2009) have deployed similar apologetic male characters through whom Korean historical scars are etched. The ‘apologetic man’ carved by the arthouse film director Lee Chang-dong also competes against another stock character of Korean films in action genre films of Park Chan-wook and Kim Jee-woon: the ‘vengeful men.’ In this rubric, films directed by Lee Chang-dong, Yoon Jong-bin, and others that deal with modern historical injuries have a tendency to depict the theme of salvation through an ex-perpetrator figure through

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- 1) One of the most famous arguments that are put forward by Michel Foucault is his concept of the power that simply cannot be subscribed to the property of the state. Power operates at the micro levels of social relations. He writes, “Moreover, [the political technology of the body] cannot be localized in a particular type of institution or state apparatus. For they have recourse to it; they use, select or impose certain of its methods. But in its mechanisms and its effects, it is situated at a quite different level. What the apparatuses and institutions operate is, in a sense, a micro-physics of power, whose field of validity is situated in a sense between these great functionings and the bodies themselves with their materiality and their forces” (26).
 - 2) The concept of “citizen-subject” appears several places in the works of Etienne Balibar, but most crucially in an essay called “Citizen Subject,” which appears in *Who Comes After the Subject?* (33-57).
 - 3) Rey Chow writes, “[i]n *Red Sorghum*, *Judou*, and *Raise the Red Lantern*, women occupy the traditional spaces of frustrated, dissatisfied, or tortured young wife, widow, mother, adulteress, and concubine, who despite their strength of character remain always trapped in a hopeless situation” (44). In other words, it is the woman embodies the historical processes of political suppression in key Fifth Generation films.

whom an apology is being issued. Kim Young-ho, the protagonist in *Peppermint Candy* (Pakha satang, 1999), of course, is one of the most important figures that provided the blueprint for this stock character. Though Park Chan-wook and Kim Jee-woon insist that their films are just as much as about restoration of humanity as they are about revenge through various interviews given to critics and to the press (Jeong 181), by turning to spectacular violence created by ex-victims seeking to exact revenge against their perpetrators, the cinematic world they create is all too often neatly divided between good and evil. There is perhaps no character other than Oh Dae-soo in *Oldboy* (2003) that better fits this profile of “vengeful man” who demand poetic justice. Also, in these revenge films, as argued elsewhere, the mystification of the spatial markers all aim to distort specific historical consternations of modern Korean history (Kim, *Virtual Hallyu* 178-99). This is not to suggest that all films that tend to carve up “apologetic men” totally withdraw from paying attention to spatiality, nor am I suggesting that historical references are completely abandoned in films that focus on “revenge” plots. But overall, it could be argued that the bifurcation between the “apologetic man” and the “vengeful man” is what has driven Korean cinema over the past two decades.

Apologetic Man	Vengeful Man
Specific historical reference	Non-specific historical reference
Historical trauma	Class conflict
Ex-perpetrator	Ex-victim
Ending with salvation	Ending with poetic justice
Non-genre	Genre
Temporality	Spaciality

Though *Poetry*, by focusing on Mija, a 65-year old female protagonist whose body and memory is rapidly failing, seems to depart from the genealogy of Lee

Chang-dong who is himself responsible for making the “apologetic man” a staple character in Korean cinema, this article argues that it is actually still a film where the process of remembering and forgetting as well as shifting acts or perpetuation and apology are anchored on insufficiencies of, not womanhood, but manhood. In other words, the temporality that relies on catastrophe and finitude, such as the one that vividly reminded us the end of the Y ng-ho’s life in *Peppermint Candy* (2000) when he yells “I want to go back” (나 다시 돌아갈래), remain prevalent in *Poetry*.



Peppermint Candy is the second film directed by Lee Chang-dong who has become a household name in Korea not only as an arthouse film director who routinely wins prizes in international film festivals, but also as a public intellectual who had once joined the cabinet of South Korea’s liberal government that was in power from 2003 to 2008. Though the film remains the only one unavailable for DVD rental in the US among the films directed by Lee Chang-dong,⁴⁾ *Peppermint*

4) Thus far four out of five titles of his are available for rental. *Oasis*, *Secret Sunshine*, and *Poetry* especially were theatrically distributed in the U.S. and, despite their limited availability, were met with overwhelmingly positive critical response.

Candy is considered one of the most important films over the past 25 years in the history of Korean cinema. It was widely praised among critics and moviegoers not only in Korea, but also in Japan. Naoki Sakai devotes an entire chapter on this film in one of his book written in Japanese, in which he claims to have been moved by the post-massacre guilt that is mobilized in the film (199-238).

Peppermint Candy begins with a prologue in 1999 with Young-ho's suicide on a railroad track, tells the story in reverse chronological order, and ends with a chapter that takes place twenty years earlier at the same railroad track where the film began. The time progresses backward without the use of flashback from 1999 to 1979. It provides clues as to why Young-ho, played by Sol Kyong-gu, has committed suicide. Because *Peppermint Candy* began with the final chapter of Young-ho's life, death functions as a strong invocation of temporality not in the sense of Heidegger-ian futurity that is capable of cutting up time from its linear fold, but as one that strongly links the failure of cogent manhood to a "culprit" that originated in Kwangju when his mistake led to an accidental killing of a young girl (Choe 132-44).

"With the last drop of money left in my account, I bought this. I was going to kill just one bastard with it," brandishing a pistol, decries Young-ho in the second chapter of the film, which follows the intro chapter where he purportedly commits suicide during a picnic. "I didn't want to die alone," continues to tell Young-ho to a stranger who has visited him. But as Young-ho himself acknowledges, it was the impossibility of finding that one "bastard" that disallowed him to commit murder. Youngho's self-professed culpability—his hesitation, reluctance, and indecisiveness—reminds us of Shakespeare's tragedy of the Danish Prince for Hamlet's fault too is that he cannot kill his uncle, who has ruined his father and him. Young-ho's inability to kill others, much like the tragic

failure of Hamlet, prepares us for a tragic ending in which he is fated to die. He blames others here for having cheated him, but we know by the end of the film, he was simply fated to die in a classic mold of a remorseful or an apologetic character against whom the historical inquisition that retrospectively questions post-Korean War South Korea's involvement with military dictatorship, hurried pace of industrialization, and the 1997 IMF-crisis is made and finds him guilty.

The 'apologetic man' such as Young-ho resonates deeply within recent Korean film history as a site where the traumatic repression and historical remembrance are being fought out. This figure is embedded in a compressed and finite temporality rather than in a temporality assumes the shape of a Mobius strip where the beginning, the middle, and the end are twirled in a non-linear sequence. By placing Yong-ho in a moral spectrum of a finite sense of historiography, the flow of time is kept in a linear continuum rather than a circular one where the end (or death) is allegorized in an absolute and irreversible sense of the real.⁵⁾ The rendez-vous scene between Young-ho and the stranger who turns out to be the husband of his former sweetheart Sun-im holds the key of rectifying Young-ho's memory that traces him back to Kwangju, which is a name of a city in Cholla Province in Korea and a site of a massacre that took place in 1980—a period during which Young-ho served as a soldier. Indirectly, this visitor reawakens the dormant memory of Young-ho who had then lost his innocence by accidentally killing a civilian.

The point of this inscription of historiography is not a post-structural one where the origin of trauma is erased. In other words, the memory of Kwangju

5) The freeze-framed image of Yong-ho reminds us that the death is going to happen and simultaneously invokes that *this will be* and *this has been*. See Steve Choe's essay on *Peppermint Candy* as well as Soyoung Kim (69) for an elucidating analyses on the use of the freeze-framed image of Young-ho.

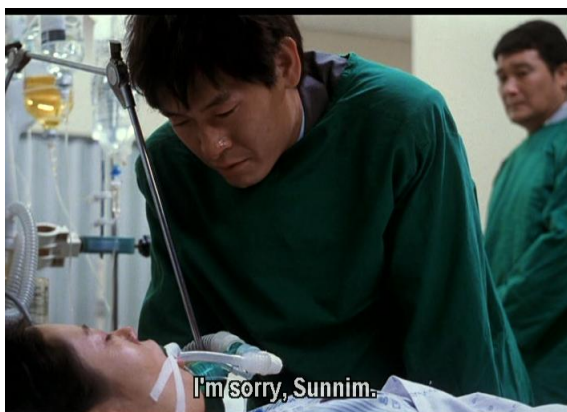
massacre reinscribed in Young-ho's memory tissue as a perpetrator is not a spectral home that exists only in a kind of deluded homesickness or nostalgia, but one that points to an epistemological formulations of history where facts, truth, knowledge become substantiated. By clarifying the root of the central protagonist's trauma as Kwangju Massacre and Young-ho's previous role as a soldier and then later as a plainclothes policeman who tortures labor activists, *Peppermint Candy* erases any trace of ambivalence about the reasons behind Young-ho's guilt, anxiety, and ultimately failure.

This frank and humble testimony of Young-ho's identification with history is what impressed Naoki Sakai the most. He writes "*Peppermint Candy* was a film that that I could not simply watch and forget. I was wondering where the power of this film was drawn from. Is it really a certain historical condition that attracts me? I was drawn to these questions, that have led me to the writing of this essay" (Sakai 202). I would however depart from Sakai's appraisal of the film because the 'universality' of *Peppermint Candy* to me falls short of offering a proper kind of apology that must undergo a pure form of what Jacques Derrida would call 'convulsion-conversion-confession' (3-con's) in order for it to successfully translate traumatic anxiety into post-traumatic recovery.⁶⁾ Young-ho's suicide complicates the process of reconciliation with Korea's violent history. His suicide that takes place on the railroad track to meet the oncoming train at full speed and yells, "I want to go back" can be, I agree, read as a justice that is belatedly served. The moment he retrieves the memory of his youthful self is when Young-ho sets on a path for this self-destructive act for it is paradoxically the

6) Jacques Derrida writes, "the 'globalization' of forgiveness resembles an immense sense of confession in progress, thus a virtually Christian convulsion-conversion-confession, a process of Christianisation which has no more need for the Christian church" ("On Forgiveness" 31).

only way he could recover the innocence that was lost when he not only accidentally shot a schoolgirl in Kwangju and subsequently abandoned his true love.

Is it possible that Young-ho has chosen suicide not because he is unable to kill others who are more responsible for the historical mess that Korea has gotten itself into, but because he is unable to deliver an apology that is acceptable both to the victims of massacres, unjust torture, and police brutality and thereby properly restore the national historiography? The stranger leads Young-ho to a hospital for him to offer kind words to Sun-im, the woman Young-ho ended up hurting when he was younger, only to arrive too late. Lying in her coma, Sun-im has lost her conscious right before Young-ho arrives and begins to offer his reluctant apology. The inability of Sun-im, who is a surrogate victim, to regain consciousness and also recover her memory disallows him to communicate his apology to her. She does shed a drop of tears after he leaves, but isn't it simply too little, too late?



In his essay, “On Forgiveness,” Jacques Derrida mentions several times Japan’s inability to fully disclose an apology to Korea over its past wrongdoings in order to provide an example of the impurity of language of forgiveness.⁷⁾ Derrida argues that only when all of the scenes of repentance, confession, apology, and forgiveness reach out not to the ordinariness of human, but to the sacredness of human, could forgiveness be properly claimed. If a pure form of apology and forgiveness must entail all three of these con’s (convulsion-conversion-confession) in order to overcome boundaries between private and public and between immanence and transcendence, is it natural for us to assume that a petty perpetrator like Young-ho is bound to fail (in delivering an apology) and the only option left for him is to meet his death on the railroad track? Also, how does this image of apologetic man that has become a stock character in Korean cinema over the past decade and a half (*JSA*, *Memories of Murder*, *The Host*, *Oldboy*, *Nameless Gangsters*, *Pieta* among others) implicate also *Poetry*, which is Lee Chang-dong’s most recent film?

In *The Remasculinzation of Korean Cinema*, I wrote that “even though *Peppermint Candy* re-authors the traumas to mourn the pain that ran askew to the one officially sanctioned by the state, it hardly ferments a vision of postnational imaginary or a nonmasculine universe” (26). In other words, *Peppermint Candy* may produce an affect that runs counter to the one that is recognized by the conservative government that was in power at the time when the movie was conceived, but I emphasized that the film makes it impossible for us to imagine a

7) Derrida writes, “I am thinking of those scenes where a Japanese Prime Minister ‘asked forgiveness’ of the Koreans and the Chinese for past violence. He presented certain ‘heartfelt apologies’ in his own name, [at first sight] without implicating the Emperor at the head of state, but a Prime Minister always implicates more than a private person” (“On Forgiveness” 31).

vision beyond a nationalist or masculinist discourse. 10 years after having stating these words, much remain unchanged within the cinematic imagination of Lee Chang-dong despite the fact that he tells his stories now from the viewpoint of the woman. *Poetry*'s lamentations, affect, mourning, and ultimately the inheritances of the national memory are deeply inscribed within the discourse of apologetic man – a figure that Lee Chang-dong helped to define for Korean cinema 15 years earlier. It is men's insufficiencies that lead to the accouterments of guilt, shame, and anxieties that ultimately disallow them to commit themselves in the Derridean act of 3-cons (convulsion-conversion-confession). This inability to then offer a proper apology makes any attempt to reconcile with the past's violence almost futile.

In *Poetry*, four male characters surround Mija, the 65-year old protagonist who works part-time as both a cleaner and a caretaker of a disabled retiree and a primary guardian of her 13-year old grandson: first is the handicapped retiree she takes care of and later with whom she has sex, second is the father of one of the young accused rapists, third is Wook the grandson who joins the gang rape of a female classmate that has led to her suicide, and lastly is the honest policeman who doubles also as a dirty poet. These characters, with the possible exception of the policeman, all underscore the masculine symptom of perpetual ongoing trauma that I have called the "male lack" elsewhere (Kim, *Remasculinization* 8-9). The three share the insufficiencies, which produce putative humiliation and secrecy that force them to police the border between private and public while Mija, the elderly woman who suffers from the Alzheimer's, becomes disassociated from the kind of traumas that these men suffer. How is she able to achieve this trauma-free independence? As a matter of fact, she simply does not care for such policing of the border between the private and the public (until she notices from time to time

the blurring of the boundary may ruin her grandson's future). This is the reason why she is at such ease when small talking with the rape victim's mother about dropped apricots—one that makes her forget her very mission. Mija was initially there to persuade the victim's mother to take the bribe money. She also blithely talks to the journalist about the shady negotiations that are ongoing between the boys' fathers and the victim's mother before she remembers that Wook is implicated and has to run away from the conversation. Also, this point could stir up some controversy, but when she allows herself to be seduced by the Chairman—the disabled retiree, I do not think that there is a strategic motive involved on her part.⁸⁾

Meanwhile, all of the men fear their private secrets being exposed to the public. The six young boys who are in trouble meet after hours in Wook's small room in order to hold an emergency meeting after the girl they had been sexually abusing commits suicide. When Mija asks them what the nature of their clandestine meeting is, Wook tells her simply that she's been annoying him. Barring her entry, he shuts the door and locks it. The door that obviously separates the boys from Mija is what polices the private and the public. Even when Mija breaks open the door later in the film to confront Wook, he refuses to neither confess nor converse. Out of the 3 *con*'s,—convulsion (violent twitching, physical pain, tears), conversion (repentance, cleansing of the sin, etc.), confession (verbal acknowledgement of wrongdoing, etc.) that furnish the discourse of legitimating forgiveness—the only *con* he is capable of performing is *convulse* as he twitches inside a blanket trying to avoid contact with his grandmother about the

8) In the conversation I had with other people who have seen the film, most seem to claim that the strategic motive for Mija to blackmail the Chairman was the intention behind her acceptance to have sex with him.

truth. Elsewhere in the film, there are a number of scenes where the male characters continue to be mindful of the border between the interior and the exterior. For instance, when the men are meeting at either a restaurant or a real estate office in order to discuss the exact amount of bribe money to pay off the victim's mother, the boys' fathers carefully monitor the doors that separate their private discussion from being overheard by people outside, and the Chairman leads Mija to his private quarter in order for the other family members not to eavesdrop. Any rumor spilled to the journalists, other members of the family, or to the law could jeopardize their honor. Though they engage in acts of surveillance and monitoring, these forms of vigilance have nothing to do with the 3 con's—that are essential to the transaction of apology and forgiveness. All of these three acts of convulsion, conversion, and confession must involve transcending the boundary between interior and exterior in order for the sinner to be forgiven and the guilty to repent. The boys' fathers share an accounting of responsibility for they acknowledge that boys have erred in their moral judgments, but they cannot make their boys repay their debts in a pure form of apology or repentance. Instead, the viable form of apology they can think of is monetary compensation: \$30,000 in exchange for the silence of the victim's mother. This maintenance of status quo does not require a violent conversion between the interior and the exterior.

By suggesting not one, but three men, who are apologetic and need to be forgiven by women, across generations, the film *Poetry* manages to tie the narratives of post-traumatic recovery and failure with each of the men who represent bruised ego in a recycling loop. The 13-year old grandson—without being able to learn how to apologize and earn his forgiveness—is likely to grow up to be the 40-something year old man, the owner of the karaoke bar who would rather settle for money rather than force his son into a meaningful apology and

forgiveness, and then this same man is likely to spend his final years as the impaired Chairman who may have still virility left, but will have to pay money for it to be reawakened (through Viagra) and unleashed (remuneration to Mija). The grandchildren who complain of his foul breath will soon grow up, and resemble Wook who teaches them hula-hoops at one point in the film which more or less complete the vicious cycle of endless chain of ‘apologetic’ man. This is quite different from the way in which women are spatially positioned in relation to each other—Mija strikes up a conversation with the Chairman’s daughter often in the public space of supermarket and also with the victim’s mother out in the farm where there is simply no door to shut to demarcate the exterior from the interior.

Figure-1 Wook: 13-year old adolescence



Figure-2 Ki-bum’s father—middle-aged



Figure 3: Chairman: Aged and disabled



The only character who may fall outside this ignoble chain of ‘apologetic men,’ in *Poetry* is the police detective who tells dirty jokes at the poetry reading as if it’s an open mike night at a stand-up comedy club. We find out, as does Mija, that he had been demoted to a sheriff’s position in this rural town when he blew his whistle against his corrupt superiors in the city. Obviously by being able to freely talk about erotic desires in the public, he is already transcending the boundary between the public and the private that is so closely monitored by other Korean men. And yet, we are not through with him just yet. Beneath his good-naturedness lurks what I find to be a relentlessness to search and destroy any instance of corruption. He in other words is far from being perfect. Though the crucial information as to how he was able to find out the fix between the victim’s mother and the perpetrator’s fathers is elliptically edited out in the film, the fact that he arrives to escort Wook away to the police station, despite the fact that 30 million Won (equivalent of US\$30,000) had been collected from the boys’ fathers and received by the victim’s mother, shows that he wasn’t going to let a cover-up concocted between the victim and the perpetrators’ family compromise his integrity. Isn’t his overzealousness also part of the reason why Mija has to mysteriously disappear at the end of the film? The police chief oscillates between

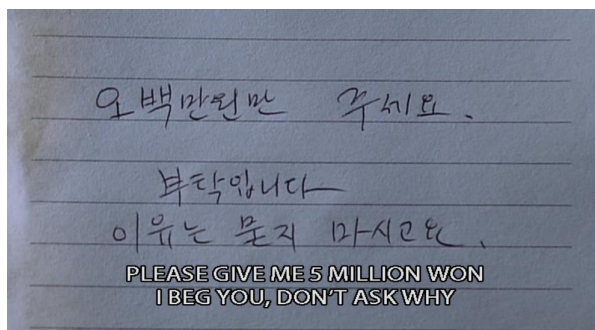
moral self-righteousness and contempt for corruption, exercising a vision of his truth that does not allow any of it to be compromised even when the case could simply be open and shut on the girl's suicide without necessarily trying the six underage kids on court.

A turning point takes place toward the end of the film when Mija adopts for herself what is imperceptibly a masculinist behavior. This happens when she visits the disabled Chairman to ask for the \$5000 she needs to pay off the victim's mother. She intrudes at a family gathering held in the living room, only to be led to the interior of the house to discuss privately the matter of money with the Chairman. Here in the most intimate mode, the film features for the first time a shot of Mija's notebook in which she has been leaving traces of her 'poetry.' Instead of poetry, however, the viewer gets a glimpse of the memo desperately written by Mija in her ordinary handwriting, "please give me 5 million won. I beg you, don't ask why." (오백만원만 주세요. 부탁드립니다. 이유는 묻지 마시구요.) I repeat this passage in Korean because it remains uncertain to me whether this writing achieves a nonphonetic moment that steals the spirit (and thereby femininity) away from Mija or one that ironically fulfills it. She has been forced to participate in this cover-up scheme concocted by other boys' fathers that rules out the possibility of a pure apology that may properly reconcile with the trauma of the memory of the rape and the death of the girl, and instead maintains a status quo simply by paying off the mother. By writing down the simple letters "5 million won," is the film suggesting that both the act of sex that took place through a mutual consent between Mija and the Chairman earlier in the film and the act of twisting and twirling of that is required in an apology communicated from the perpetrators to the victim's mother, be abstracted into an equivalent value? The invocation of money, numbers, and letters in this scene 'sterilize or

immobilize,⁹⁾ to employ Derrida's words, the spiritual or poetic potentials that could lead to the remembrance and reconciliation with history and trauma. Could any form of monetary figure ever be enough to repay a debt that involves rape and death of a young girl—much like the comfort women who are now either aged or deceased, and their demand to be properly recognized almost forgotten? And how could it also ever be equivalent in value to the sex that has occurred between Mija and her aged employer? When the Chairman demands to know whether or not this is a form of blackmail, Mija simply responds that it both could be or it could not be. But the moment she writes down the figures of money on her notebook for the Chairman to pay, we know that her writing is no longer a poetic act, but an act that belongs to the tradition of insufficient and cowardly men or the nation that has failed to properly reconcile with history. In other words, the writing down of the '5 million Won' disentangles the poetry of the voice that so remarkably characterized Mija thus far and strips away her spirit. The stripping of Mija's spirit eventually will pave the path to her finite place of her entombment where her final words will be etched through a voiceover over the shot of the river where the young girl committed suicide. Once she receives the money from the Chairman and throws it in the pot of money to be used to settle the incident, there can be no turning back. Her spirit can never be the same—much like the men's. Just as much as the turning back of the 'clock' is conjectured as an impossibility in *Peppermint Candy*, the debt of the death of the young girl can never be wholesomely settled, placing Mija forever peregrinating in

9) Jacques Derrida writes: "What writing itself, in its nonphonetic moment, betrays, is life. It menaces at once the breath, the spirit, and the history as the spirit's relationship with itself. It is their end, their finitude, their paralysis. Cutting breath short, sterilizing or immobilizing spiritual creation in in the repetition of the letter, commentary or the exegesis, confined in a narrow space, reserved for a minority, it is the principle of death and of difference in the becoming of being" (*Of Grammatology* 25).

the ‘apologetic’ sojourn.



In a film that is simply titled ‘poetry’ it was never the letters that had impressed the viewers. Because *Poetry* is not a book, but a film, it is capable of maximizing the potential of cinema to film both non-professional actors and professional actors to recite their poetry in a quasi-documentary form. What grabbed the viewers’ attention was certainly the ways in which many of the casts’ real life experiences were transposed into words, recited with their own voice before the camera, and revealed a visual trace that they were recollecting their actual memories. The combination of the letters, cast’s real voices, and their real facial expressions, all combine to produce exquisite and sublime moments in ‘the most beautiful moment in my life’ sections, which are scattered throughout the film. Even at the age of Youtube, Twitter, and Facebook where we are inundated with superfluous number of amateur performances of songs, commentaries, and even poetry, this section impresses us because of its cinematic ability to sublimely transcend the boundaries between real and fiction, between private and public, between immanence and transcendence, and between interiority and exteriority – all of which that cannot be achieved through writing alone.

The inability to maintain the freedom to roam about in what I would like to call a non-masculine space that ignores the boundary between exteriority and interiority had—before she had blackmailed the Chairman for the money—helped Mija to produce performative poetry that echoes at the end of the film. She has earned a category of what Etienne Balibar in his article called ‘Strangers as Enemies: Reflections on the Aporias of Transnational Citizenship’ calls a stranger or an alien who does not fit in in the masculine Korean society where the border between private and public must be tightly sealed and all apologies are bound to fail. Mija is, in other words, a stranger or a heretic in a land that is known for its failure of both giving and receiving an apology in its modern history. She ultimately fails, but she is a ‘stranger as citizen’ that fits the criteria of a ‘cosmopolitical’ institution of a citizen, to cite further from Etienne Balibar’s notion of ‘subject citizen’ who may both purely reaffirm the notion of Korea’s citizenship while also dissolving it at the same time.

In Korea, only inconclusiveness and uncertainties remain when it comes to historical issues. Korean War still remains an unfinished business, pro-Japanese Koreans were never properly placed on trials, history books are hotly contested when regime changes take place between liberal governments and the conservative ones, reparation from Japan for comfort women and other abuses never properly discussed, and military dictators responsible for massive number of civilian deaths were all too easily pardoned and even renewed when Park Keun-hye was inaugurated as the president last year. So, Korean men continue to dwell in secrecies and guilty anxieties never properly settling between mourning (I was a perpetrator) and denial (I too was a victim) even in today’s age that is better known for its post-national or transnational imaginary and are unable to cross the boundary beyond the national. Korea still is anxious about its trans-border

communication where poetry that sublimates the most private moments into public ones cannot be achieved—perhaps without self-destruction. This of course is strongly alluded to when Mija disappears at the end of the film. Forced into the masculine space and discourse where one must master the art of false apology and forgiveness in order to thrive, the only belonging she and her poetry unfortunately can claim is at the bottom of the deep river.

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Reading Apologetic Men in Lee Chang-dong's Films

While Korean popular culture has infamously carved out an innumerable number of 'soft masculine' icons through K-pop and K-drama that often blur gender boundaries and blot out historical traumas, Korean cinema by and large continues to draw on characters that are based on violent and brutalized male protagonists. Last year's hit film, *Nameless Gangster*, for instance, rearticulates the pressure of intense historical transformation from an authoritarian society where violence and corruption run rampant to a more humanized one where knowledge-power discipline, to borrow from Foucault, is disseminated through the scarred male subjectivity. This traumatized male subject, which aims at but falls short of what Etienne Balibar calls "post-subject citizenship," is what draws my attention to the films of Lee Chang-dong. *Peppermint Candy* (1999), which depicted the Kwangju Massacre, developed an apologetic male protagonist that not only distinguished Korean cinema from other Asian cinemas such as Chinese Fifth Generation that focused on female characters, but also became a stock character of the Korean cinema since then. Blockbuster films such as *Memories of Murder* (2003) and *Haeundae* (2009) have deployed similar apologetic male characters through whom Korean historical scars are etched. By focusing on Mija, a 65-year old female protagonist, *Poetry* (2010) seems to depart from the "apologetic man" genealogy of Lee Chang-dong, but this paper will show that it is still a film where the process of remembering and forgetting as well as shifting acts or perpetuation

and apology is anchored on insufficiencies of, not womanhood, but manhood.

Keywords: Lee Chang-dong, Masculinity, *Poetry*, *Peppermint Candy*, transnational citizenship