

THE MATRIX OF S&M IN KOREAN CINEMA

Time, Space, Trauma, Power

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Abstract

Just as Jean Baudrillard predicted that a new era would arrive wherein sexual desire would emerge, the late '90s in Korea were marked as the *fin-de-siècle* of sexual explosion in popular culture, in the transition of the culture from pre-modernism to modernism. Sex and nudity became prevalent properties in popular culture and film, as a window onto the world, also joined this parade by equipping its products with erotically provocative visuals and transgressive texts. This study aims to shed some light on the social meaning of sadomasochism (S&M) by viewing it as an expression of power relations (dominance/submission & discipline/punishment) within the larger social schema. This would involve the use of the body as the site where geopolitical conflicts are inscribed, in relation to the emergence of an authoritarian system that required masochistic acceptance of the concepts of dedication and self-sacrifice.

Keywords

Korean cinema, Korean War, trauma, Gwangju uprising; *jouissance*; "Sae"-*maul* movement

About the Author

Taeyun Yu is an M.A. Film candidate at the University of the Philippines Film Institute, where he was the first Korean to have completed a bachelor's degree in film (*cum laude*) and won a prize for his undergraduate research thesis. He is a member of the Society for Cinema and Media Studies and had participated in various international conferences including the annual SCMS Conference as well as the ASEAN Inter-University Conference on Social Development.

Sadomasochism can be generally regarded as a type of social behavior that is culturally produced, learned, and reinforced. This perspective sees the shifts in power corresponding to historical and social changes as key to determining the sexual and behavioral identities of the self. In the field of psychology, the widely accepted opinion is that all forms of deviant sexuality or perversion derive from an individual's or a group's regression and trauma, as sketched by Freud in his case study "A Child is Being Beaten." Although Freud was more concerned about the unconsciousness of the self and defined sadomasochism as "evidence of individual psychopathology" (Weinberg 289), his view was analogous with the social view of sadomasochism as a cultural sign, in that repression or trauma of the self can be greatly influenced by a socio-historical event.

In a nutshell, the most fertile soil for nurturing sadomasochistic culture would be a sexually, historically, and ideologically repressed society with heavy social burdens imposed on the self such as norms and values about class, gender, and national expectations. Such a speculation reinforces my initial constructivist hypothesis about the dynamics of power in relation to culture and history, which play a crucial role in forming the sadomasochistic characteristics of the self in Korean society. As a matter of fact, if one were to look closely into contemporary Korean culture and the subconscious of Korean nationals, one would be able to map out a territory for sadomasochistic (S&M) culture where the body is docile and tamed by the vertical order permeating every social institution including family, school, workplace, army, and nation as a whole. Thus, the primary issue that will be inspected throughout this paper is that of delineating a historical understanding of the discursive construction of sadomasochism as a cultural sign.

However, in order to avoid confusion, it will be essential to clarify the type of S&M that will be presented in this study. This article will take off from looking at the elements of Foucault's technologies of the self and of Fromm's authoritarianism and automaton conformity, which all suggest how the self uses the sadomasochistic impulse in order to cope with its feelings of lack in relation to power. In doing so, I hope to delineate the prototypical sadomasochism characterized by binary oppositions; this type of sadomasochism needs in turn to be distinguished from the transgressive type of sadomasochism that has the potential to subvert power through the technologization of desire. For this objective, I will deploy Foucault's notion of a "transfer point," which allows us to conceive of the interaction between power and the self, and the social rules that establish and govern one's subjectivity as well as oppress, define, and exclude Others in particular instances of historicity. In combination with an auteur-structuralist approach that will further allow one to see how the auteur constructs her relation with such social rules and forms the consciousness of resistance that serves as crucial motive for her work, this paper

aims to depict the dynamic of power signified in the works of Jang Sunwoo and Kim Ki-duk.

The determination of the turning point for modernization in Korea remains in dispute, with one school of thought tracing it to the introduction of capitalism and Western institutions during the Japanese occupation. This is a problematic perspective for two reasons: it is upheld by conservative forces (including apologists for Japanese colonization), and it delimits the idea of modernism to institutional evidence. If we adopt the perspective of the population, we can see this assertion at its weakest: except for the favored elite, a colonized people will only be able to perceive a globalized expansion of feudal principles at worst, or the unmitigated and exploitative enslavement that characterizes failed economic modernism at best.

Hence, for purposes of this article, it would be more productive to view that the process of national modernization in Korea began after the Korean War and attained its peak during Chung-hee Park's authoritarian regime (1961 to 1979), which played a pivotal role in the development of South Korea's economy by shifting the country's focus in the direction of export-oriented industrialization. The restoration project of the country implemented by President Park contained three important aspects: "[1] the establishment of export-oriented industrialization... [2] the buildup of national defense against Communist North Korea... [and 3] the solidification of national identity" (Lee Hyunjung 25, my translation), all of which have functioned in defining Korean identity even up to now. In this regard, I will divide the historicity of power in Korea into the tripartite conditions of pre-modernism ('50s-'60s), modernism ('60s-'90s), and postmodernism (after the '90s) to examine through each stage how power had been transformed and how the self of Korean nationals had been defined as its effect.

For the pre-modern stage, the subject of this paper, I will try to sketch how the consanguineous division that resulted from the Korean War would have created the sadistic discourse of power and Korean identities through the 2002 film *Hae anseon*, directed by Kim Ki-duk. For the modern stage, I will direct attention to a period interspersed with oppression and violence by militarists' despotism in the 1980s, to see how military power had disciplined the self and created automaton conformity as a result; this I will illustrate by looking at the 1996 release *Ggotip*, directed by Jang Sunwoo. The two films may appear to have been separated in period (pre- and post-millennium), but this is an artificial boundary. It would be more credible to maintain that they both belong to the New Korean Cinema, periodized from the late 1990s to the present.¹ More significantly, they were made by filmmakers now considered as enduring a certain degree of antagonism in relation to their national culture. Jang's notoriety peaked when he subsequently

directed *Gojitmal* [Lies], adapted from a banned novel whose author Jang Jung-il was imprisoned for obscenity, and which was pulled out from theaters in order to be trimmed by 15 minutes of its running time. He attempted an all-out commercial comeback, a big-budget project that subsequently bombed, and for the 15 years since then has remained inactive. Kim Ki-duk, for his part, had a controversial earlier release because of an accusation of animal cruelty, but his later declaration about refusing to distribute his films in Korea (a statement that he subsequently revoked and apologized for) indicated a longstanding difficulty encountered by citizens regarded as unruly, even those (as in Kim's case) who had dropped out of school, worked in factories, and left for France, only to work as a street portrait painter ("The Strange Case of Director Kim Ki-duk").

THE TRAGEDY OF A FRATRICIDAL WAR & POLITICAL SADISM: THE KOREAN WAR

The Korean War, which erupted on July 25, 1950, would be considered one of the strongest impacts of power in forming the self in Korean history. It was an internecine struggle triggered by the global geopolitical conflict between the Soviet Union and the Western powers, primarily the United States. As a result of the war, Korean nationalism has suffered from the fact that culturally the nation was still one but politically it comprised two different entities. In such a circumstance where Korean identity was, in effect, literally split by the hegemonic proxy struggle of the Cold-War superpowers, in order to reduce the Koreans to a state of obedience and make them docile, the local authorities constantly evoked the unstable truce by inculcating the idea of a terrifying Communist threat and forbidding any exchange and communication between North and South inasmuch as the ceasefire line was quasi-imperforate. This required a process of drawing of the Korean self on the *tabula rasa* of modern-era identity with strokes of the brush of power, the so-called "art of distribution" along with the introduction of a self-monitoring panopticism that aimed to eradicate the evil that was Communism.

More problematic about the impact of such a hysterical, witch-hunt-promoting ideology is that it caused disruptions and reinforced authoritarianism among Koreans, which is similar to the effects of Nazism in Germany and faith-based right-wing radicalism in the US at present. After the end of the war on July 27, 1953, South Koreans lost a sense of solidarity with their now-divided nation and they henceforth needed a way to restore the homogeneity that they had found in anti-Communism. Indeed, it perfectly fulfilled their sense of lack and resulted in a destructiveness caused by political sadism that the Koreans were eager to eliminate all Communists who might have been left in the South. For instance, South Koreans

then were hell-bent on hunting down leftists and anyone who expressed any doubt about the legitimacy of the state was executed under suspicion of being a spy. Such an infusion of extremist ideology becomes clear if one considers the fact that any film that failed to contain the anti-Communist ideology would be proscribed by the censorship board, known then as the Public Performance Ethics Committee. As a result, such a film would thereby play a primordial role in propagating the vigilant ideology of anti-Communism through “dichotomous depiction of the war that simplistically characterized all North Korean Communists as villains and all South Korean nationalists as virtuous victors” (Kim Kyunghyun 79).

In addition, this period can be distinguished as the stage for remasculinization as a form of sadism in order to recover an impaired masculinity, which was once fully legitimated by Confucianism, from the wounds of war. Psychologically, the fact that Korea was divided by foreign hegemony can be configured to mean that Korean men had surrendered their masculinity. And such a process was successfully done via the “re-stressed identification of woman” (Lee Dukwha 259, my translation), where the image of the nation was envisioned as feminine, thus rendering women, in the collective imaginary, essentially vulnerable under the state of violence. In line with such a logic, Korean women would now need men whose masculinity and nationalism were verified through war; as a corollary, women who had failed to maintain their purity during the war (rape victims for instance) needed to be purified for the nation. All these complexly woven nationalistic scripts reinforced the patriarchal structure that persists up to the present. These formations of self and socio-cultural structure created by power are critically illustrated in *Hae anseon*, a film where Kim Ki-duk introspects the then-political sadism that forced individuals to pull the trigger on consanguinity by describing the process of identity loss and the gain of masculinization as its result.

The film begins with a posted announcement in Korean, translatable as: “Warning! Anyone who infiltrates the border zone after 7:00 p.m. will be recognized as a spy and shot to death!” It then proceeds to depict the story of Private Kang, an automate soldier whose mind is filled with anti-Communism, but who is gradually disoriented after he had misrecognized a drunken civilian, who was having sex with his girlfriend in the restricted area, as a spy, and forthwith executed the guy. The film brings audiences into the vortex of the Korean War’s conflicts without any direct depiction of war, instead projecting madness and violence through the characters: Private Kang, who now haunts his marine unit like a specter after being discharged due to his mental disorientation; and Mi-yeong, the girlfriend of Kang’s victim, who becomes insane as well due to the trauma of witnessing her boyfriend getting blown to pieces by Kang’s grenade. Thus, my analysis of the film begins with the question of the symbolic meaning of space and its interaction with the characters.

On a superficial level, audiences can easily notice the film's setting from several scenes such as, to name two: the foot-volleyball sequence (Figure 1, left photo) where soldiers play on a court with a Korean map, drawn on its surface, that is divided by the barbed-wire net; and the awards-ceremony sequence (Figure 1, right photo) where Private Kang is honored with a special furlough for his stringent defense against the infiltration of spies in spite of his mistaken execution. Each scene serves as a metaphor to show the everyday ideological infusion of anti-Communism against North Korea (signified in the former scene) as well as the external ideology of the U.S. in provoking and facilitating the Korean War (signified in the latter). Thus, what these scenes represent is political sadism, that is, the transnational geopolitics of the Cold War through the art of distribution.



Figure 1. Foot-volleyball and awards ceremony: left, a signification of the everyday ideological indoctrination of anti-Communism against North Korea; right, a geopolitical power exercise upholding the Korean War. (Promotional stills courtesy of Korea Pictures and Prime Entertainment)

Nonetheless, such a superficial interpretation does not provide the symbolic interaction between space and the characters that is pivotal in understanding the subtext and directorial intention of the film. In *Hae anseon*, the concept of “boundary” represented as wire-entanglements plays a crucial role in dividing two different entities of realms (Figure 1, left photo). One is the realm of the real or the interiority of boundary governed by hegemonic power, akin to the Garden of Eden where the immortality of Adam and Eve (pleasure from docility) is promised by god (power); the other is the realm of the imaginary, or the exteriority of boundary, that promises the ultimate pleasure in *jouissance* through the phallus (emancipation from hegemonic power), as Lacan suggests in *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*.² The boundary of wire entanglements thus signifies the threat of castration executed by

the ideological power that keeps the self in the externality of boundary, away from the fruit of knowledge, and thus the latter can be only reached at the cost of death, as seen in the way that Mi-young's boyfriend Youngil was eviscerated by Kang's grenade. In such an interpretation, all the characters in the beginning of the film belong to the interiority of boundary where docile bodies can enjoy their pleasure safeguarded but limited by the sadistic power, blinding the self to the realm of the imaginary. This further signifies the masochistic selves automating themselves for the sake of prescribed ideology and norms in order to provide a sense of security without isolation, not knowing that such relief will never be granted.

However, there is an irony that the self can never satisfy her desire in the real, as Lacan's concept *objet petit a* which refers to the "cause of and stand-in for desire" (Lacan, *Ethics of Psychoanalysis* 48) due to unattainable *jouissance*, thus always being tempted to partake of the ultimate pleasure, just as Mi-young crosses the boundary with her boyfriend. In fact, for Mi-young, this was the only place where she could have intercourse with her boyfriend while avoiding the eyes of her brother, who represents the social panopticon which monitors and controls her sexuality and freedom. The act of crossing the boundary by Mi-young thus signifies her attempt to fulfill her desire for the phallus, a greater knowledge of power achieved when Eve picked the forbidden fruit of knowledge of good and evil. Mi-young fails, however, to acquire the complete phallus due to the deterrence of the internality of boundary that castrates and tears her phallicized partner apart with Kang's grenade. Now she is brought back to the real again and but remains as a dangerous rupture between the two realms, since she realized a *jouissance* that enabled her to see the face of power and is thus endowed (per the terms in Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts* 103) by the narrative with a phallus that may be incomplete but is nevertheless strong enough to undermine the discourse of power. Throughout the film, her phallus is occasionally substituted with images such as the fish (a symbol for the memory of the fetus floating in the womb and enjoying the complete oceanic oneness with her mother during the infertile sexuality), and the traditional totem poles standing by the seashore (as in Figure 2, right photo, symbolizing the phallic order in Korean culture). Now she is no longer a docile body but resurrected as Eve, seemingly endowed with a powerful phallus for which the sadistic power, in order to maintain its stranglehold over the community, has to destroy her, via the mechanism of constant rape by the soldiers. However, it was too late for the sadistic power and its masochistic followers in the real to realize the fact that the object of "being raped" is not her but the soldiers who are being lured by her phallus, to provide her with the seed for the dismantling of hegemonic power.

The dismantling process, in fact, begins with the castration of Private Kang as he gradually loses his hyper-masculinity, bestowed on him by power. Like an infection,



Figure 2. Two realms divided by wire entanglements and totem poles: left, Soldiers guard the realm of the real; right, Mi-young clutching a phallic totem. (Promotional stills courtesy of Korea Pictures and Prime Entertainment)

this loss spreads to the other members of the troop as the internal conflict among soldiers culminates in the narrative's climax and leads to each one's self-destruction. Indeed, Mi-young achieves the phallus at the same moment when Private Kang loses his, transforming him into a castrated Adam whose mortality is no longer guaranteed due to Eve's desire and success in acquiring the fruit of knowledge. Kang's loss of masculinity is suggested from several sequences such as the scenes where he is slapped by a child's mother in the bus, where his girlfriend leaves him during his furlough, where he is bitten by a group of men on the coast and even then ignored by his subordinate soldiers in the unit. For him, Mi-young has now attained the stature of an omnipotent being who deprives him of his phallus and shows the externality of boundary that tempts him, like it did her late boyfriend, to transgress for the ultimate pleasure at the expense of his own life. This is the most plausible reason why he runs away in fear when Mi-young approaches him while the other soldiers sexually take her. Just like Mi-young, he finally becomes an unwelcome rupture in the internality of boundary, triggered as he is by his conflicting desire between the maintenance of an ideology that formed his identity and the temptation of emancipation from this same ideology when he realizes that it will deform his self. And soon such rupture stealthily diffuses, virus-like, to the rest of the troop until it will destroy hegemonic power in the internality of boundary, as the soldiers wind up shooting one another by the end of the film.

As I so far tried to interpret the symbolic interaction between the space and the characters in the film, it appears that during and after the Korean War the

ideology of power, represented as space, forms the self-identity (signified in Private Kang's obsession over anti-Communism, that induces him to pull the trigger to consanguinity without hesitation) and deforms the identity of self along with the character's masculinity (signified by the breakdown of Kang and the other soldiers that results in an internecine struggle with one another). But in fact, the role of Mi-young is ambiguous, which leads audiences to question why she possesses the phallus and succeeds in dismantling power. The answer may lie in the director's critical point of view on the contemporary period, where the process of remasculinization silenced the women envisioned as nation, thus rendering them as valuable beings who need to be safeguarded by masculinity, a reinforcement of the Confucian patriarchal social order that persists up to the present.

In the film, remasculinization can be found in the sequence where soldiers force an abortion on the woman who got pregnant from the acts of rape. Likewise, in reality, Korean women in the contemporary period underwent a kind of social abortion operated by masculine power as a means of purifying the nation, so that the masculinity impaired by the Korean War could be restored. However, the process of dismantling power is significantly intensified after the sequence where Mi-young lowers herself into the aquarium after the surgery, signifying her decision to take vengeance against patriarchal power by polluting with her body the community's source of nourishment. In other words, the director wishes to deconstruct the patriarchal social order by endowing the powerful phallus to Mi-young, who at this point becomes a representation of seemingly irrational but extensively abused and consequently critically provoked Korean women as a whole.

In sum, the film *Hae anseon* depicts the madness and violence that erupts in the self, largely incited by the hegemonic power during and after the Korean War, as well as by the loss of identity and masculinity as its consequence. Kim Ki-duk further suggests the way for the docile self to transcend such hegemonic power, that is, to reach the realm of the imaginary (the exteriority of boundary) by overcoming political sadism, an ideological power that then governed Koreans' way of thinking and behavior. Thus it is the space for "freedom to," where the peninsula of Korea can be not only culturally but also politically reunified into one, as the director himself, toward the end of the film, intentionally removes the barbed-wire net on the volleyball court that had divided the area into two entities (the North vs. the South). Not only that, it is also a space for infertile sexuality where the Korean woman can be finally freed from the patriarchal constraints that had been imposed after the process of remasculinization.³

REMINISCENCE OF TRAUMA AND AUTHORITARIANISM: THE GWANGJU MASSACRE

Military dictatorship, springing up after the tragic division of the Korean peninsula that turned the country into a virtual wasteland as well as split the Korean national identity, found its justification under the slogan of the restoration project of the country and exercised its authoritarian power through various disciplinary techniques, especially the control of activity (time) such as imposition of a curfew, restriction of individuality by regulating hair and skirt length, and the “Sae”-*maul* (New Community) movement,⁴ all of which created a sort of masochistic personality where individuals found their sense of belongingness from their contribution to the economic growth of the nation at the expense of their self-identity. As its consequence, the Korean individual ethos has been reconfigured within a uniform and automated masochistic status perfectly suited for industrialization. However, the national call for self-sacrifice without thought for reward, faced with the increasing inequity between haves and have-nots and military oppression against intellectuals and the laboring class who clamored for an end to martial law as well as for democratization, minimum wage demands, and freedom of expression, brought about the national-scale indignation known as the pro-democracy movement in Gwangju in 1980, which was brutally silenced and covered up by the State.

Having experienced such political turmoil in the '70s and '80s, Jang Sunwoo naturally grew his antithesis and used cinema against political power, thus aligning him with the New Korean Cinema along with Kwontaek Im, and Kwangsu Park in the '80s (Kim Kyunghyun 119). If the previous generation of Koreans had endured Japanese colonization and the Korean War, this generation confronted brutal atrocities in Gwangju, where peaceful demonstrators including pregnant women and children were dispersed and massacred by riot police. Sixteen years later, Jang re-presented the trauma of Gwangju as “a form of broken memories” (Joo 124, my translation) through his 1996 film *Ggotip*.⁵ In short, where *Hae anseon* could still arguably reference the past, at least on a symbolic plane that serves to allegorize the events in the movie's present time, *Ggotip* is not only rooted in a more recent past that remains contemporaneous with a wider cross-section of the population; it also directs its appreciators to look toward the future (which is the present), by way of reminding the forgetful or the too-young of the price extracted by the republic's architects of development, paid for via an immense tragedy that could not be mitigated by symbolically pleading that the country had already suffered too much in the same century, from colonization through an ideological proxy war.

The film is structured with three different narrative strands consisting of a girl who became schizophrenic after witnessing the death of her mother, killed before

her eyes by the military troops on May 21, 1980; a wretched construction worker, Chang, who physically and sexually abuses the girl; and four college students indicated as “We” in the film whose mission is to trace their friend’s younger sister’s whereabouts. Throughout the film, via its symbolically interwoven narrative, the director implicitly criticizes the sadistic dictatorship-era military power through the then-docile Korean self in the ’80s.⁶ For instance, the schizophrenic girl (whose name is never divulged in the film), who is psychologically and physically being exploited and raped by Chang along with the soldiers and other neighborhood men but still finds her own way toward self-destruction, stands for the masochistic self whose trauma and guilt from the loss of her mother cannot be forgone – that is, until she attains her destruction as well as her struggle for freedom that had been trampled, ravished, and mythicized by the sadistic authoritarian power in the city of Gwangju. Following Gilles Deleuze’s theory on masochism that emphasizes the mother as the “primary signifier” for masochistic desire, Gaylyn Studlar claims “the masochist wishes to restore identification and oneness with her [the mother, a figure of idealized wholeness] and be reborn into a ‘new man [*sic*] devoid of sexual love who represents the denial of sexual difference and rejection of the father’s sexuality” (qtd. in Noble 75).⁷

In the film, the girl, not knowing that her mother is about to join a rally in Gum Nam Street, a now-historic site where a bloody massacre would be executed by the military forces, insistently rejects her mother’s pleas for her to stay home, and follows her instead. Pandemonium reigns in the street after peaceful demonstrators, including the girl and her mother, sing the Korean anthem – the moment that served as a cue for the soldiers to fire on the crowd. The girl falls among hurriedly fleeing protesters and witnesses the death of her mother, who had turned back to help her daughter get up. Then the next thing she can remember would be fragmented memories of the outcries, gunfire, and bloodshed that keep flashing upon her mind in the form of endless black-and-white images that stop only when the pieces of the puzzle have been put together in one piece: her mother’s death. The moment represents not only a realization of her mother’s death and her matricidal guilt but also a realization of the impossibility of her wish for oneness with her mother. The primary signifier for her desire is now forever lost and castrated, leading her to the road to self-destruction.

The laborer, Chang, who inflicts private violence on the girl, represents the sadistic authoritarian personality in the ’80s by revealing how violence had been internalized by the masses. It may appear that Chang is a sadistic character who rapes, beats, and stones the helpless girl. However, the importance of his character may lie not in how he reveals his sadism throughout the film but rather where such stores of coldness and cruelty come from. Chang is depicted as a mute-like character who does not engage even in small talk with his coworkers and lives

alone in a wretched shack, aimlessly repeating the same routine from work to home. However, when the girl materializes in his solitary life, his character significantly shifts from an impotent being to an impersonal malignant force within his home, while maintaining his nervous and impotent ordinary personality in the public sphere.

Fromm argues in *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness* that “the sadistic personality gets pleasure from having total life-and-death control over others in order to compensate for an extreme sense of powerlessness experienced as a child... [having] grown up in a situation of psychic scarcity” (Miedzian 61). Considering the fact that the self is defined by its surrounding power, then power can be interpreted as a sort of psychological father who beats and castrates the son (the self), leaving the latter with a sense of powerlessness and impotence, just as Chang (a stand-in for Korean nationals during the period) experiences. The early '80s was the time when Koreans were called upon by their government to sacrifice for the restoration of a state that had been ravaged by the Korean War and people responded for the sake of providing a better future for their next generation by willingly giving up their freedom and welfare. For Chang, the girl now epitomizes the perfect prey, a form of compensation for his extreme sense of powerlessness. He therewith exercises his limited power by raping, stoning, and humiliating the same person who needs him in order to escape the unforgivable guilt she endures from her mother's death as well as from the impossibility of completing desire. In this sense, both Chang and the girl share a sense of victimhood from sadistic power, leaving them no option except for a symbiotic relationship that could ironically heal the trauma handed to them by power.

And lastly, the “We” who self-loathe after abandoning the searching for the girl – the truth of Gwang-ju that had been silenced by military government – constitutes the portrait of automated figures, probably including the director himself who could not approach the truth from the power that had blinded them. Thus, the metaphorical narrative of *Ggotip* symbolically signifies the unconsciousness of guilt and the origin of violence through the reminiscence of the Gwangju massacre reconstructed onscreen.

Aside from the symbolic narrative, the formal aesthetics of *Ggotip* also serves as an important aspect in amplifying the effectiveness of reception and asynchronism in relation to realism. The film seemingly employs neorealistic stylistics in the sense that it frequently uses documentary excerpts and intentionally defocused compositions of the commonplace *mise-en-scène*, all of which are strategies of neorealist films to jolt spectators back to the structured reality, making the camera in effect a Kino-eye. Nevertheless, although Jang Sunwoo's films, *Ggotip* included, are often appreciated as neorealistic, they do not follow one of the most crucial

requirements of neorealism, that is the linear concept of time and space in narrative, in fulfillment of what André Bazin would call “the reflection of reality” (16). Rather, the film follows a New-Wave form that utilizes all available cinematic expressions, as when in *Ggotip* Jang uses Soviet montage and the recession of time and space in order to achieve, not the reconstruction, but rather a re-construction, of the historical trauma.

In *Ggotip*, the specification of time and space (even the identification of character) is ignored or mythologized; rather it relocates collective historical facts onto a personal sphere by establishing its narrative as someone’s episode that happened from an indeterminate point in time and space, like somewhere near Gwangju, about or later than May 1980. The only apparatus that gives any clue about historical circumstance is the real documentary excerpts of the massacre, occasionally presented in the film through a girl’s nightmares, or through flashback, or the insertion of newsreels where then-President Chun Doo-hwan, a military dictator, addressed the nation. These two discrete realities of time and space (a girl’s story vis-à-vis the real-time documentations of Gwangju) in the film are conjugated by the use of Soviet montage. For instance, a shot where Chang rapes the girl or another where she becomes paranoid upon seeing a group of soldiers in the street is cross-edited respectively with military troops mowing down the people of Gwangju and with soldiers burying casualties.

The extreme usage of montage can be found in the sequence of Gum Nam Street where soldiers shoot indiscriminately at Gwangju residents in front of the city hall, a culmination of the Gwangju uprising that is cross-edited with the cemetery scene, where the girl performs a shaman ritual for purifying the souls of her deceased mother and brother. Here, just like the famous Odessa Steps sequence in Sergei M. Eisenstein’s *Bronenosets Potemkin* (1925), the rhythmic composition of a series of shots (Figure 3) such as the formation of soldiers deployed for firing, protesters dispersing in chaotic waves, the mother crying over her daughter in extreme close-up, and a panoramic view of Gum-Nam Street filled with dead bodies, amplifies the emergence of national trauma.⁸

With the optimal utilization of a visual syntax traversing various times and spaces, the director not only reconstitutes the reality of the ’80s but also correlates specific military violence with the rape of the nation. In addition, the moment when audiences who begin by following the story of the girl finally associates the historical event with the girl’s trauma, the story of a girl who had been ambiguously refigured as somewhere between past and present in the film becomes a story of audiences “at present time transcending the space of Gwangju” in reality, an unexpected haunting by the phantom of trauma.



Figure 3. Rhythmic montage composition: clockwise from upper left: soldiers firing at civilians; protesters dispersing in chaos; panoramic view of Gum-Nam Street littered with dead bodies; mother crying over her fallen daughter. (Promotional stills courtesy of Miracin Korea)

The composition of Jang’s camera also plays an important role in revisiting the Gwangju event and drawing strong identification from the audience. The movement of the camera is unique in the sense that the lens that records what it captures substitutes for a naked eye that witnesses what happens before it, thus capturing and maximizing the juxtaposition of the powerlessness of people with the harsh display of military might. One of the recurring auteurist signatures throughout Jang’s filmography is “the humanization of the camera,” a concept drawn from his previous career as a performer in the traditional Korean folk play known as *madanggeuk* and formulated in his 1983 article, “The Open Film,” where he states:

The opened cinema can be obtained by rejecting the illusory nature of the camera, intercommunicating with the subject, and pursuing the act of sharing rather than possession, and disclosure rather than closure. The camera itself, by transforming from a mere machine into a personality, not only can observe and sometimes communicate with the subject, but also the personalized camera should fill a gap when the subject is away, and dance like a clown when the subject is crying.... It is the humanization of the camera that discords and simultaneously concords with the subject. (Qtd. in Kim Hyungsuk, my translation)

Such a humanized camera can be found in *Ggotip*'s sequence of Gum Nam Street whose montage effect I described earlier. What makes this sequence even more powerful in conveying the trauma of Gwangju to the audience lies in the *mise-en-scène* of the film's camera angles. In the sequence, the camera moves this way and that, mingling with panicked fleeing protesters, and when soldiers deliver fierce blows to a citizen's head, the camera reels together with the brutalized subject, then falls to the ground and looks haplessly at the gruesome sight of Gum-Nam Street, just like the gaze of someone about to drop dead. In this manner, Jang does not limit the function of his camera to merely capturing reality, he personalizes it as any available witness's bare eyes in Gum Nam Street.

Furthermore, the director also makes use of the camera to propagate his nihilistic consciousness and social commentary. This element can be best illustrated in *Ggotip*'s last sequence in a marketplace, where the girl walks away from people who automatically stand still as the national anthem starts playing. This ending functions as an *hommage* to a celebrated sequence in Ôshima Nagisa's 1976 film *Ai no corrida*. In *Ggotip* the national anthem serves as a cinematic apparatus to signal to the docile and masochistic Korean masses, who unquestioningly express their obedience once the chorus of power resonates. And soon a short black-and-white shot of Gum-Nam Street is flashed in order for the audience to reminisce about the forgotten trauma of resistance against power, before the camera returns to the diegetic reality of the girl's expressionless face in a tight close-up. The camera then frames her in medium and full shot until she fades from the screen, a black hole-like ending which suggests that neither space nor time nor identity can provide escape from sadistic power.

In short, by re-construction the historical truth with the cinematic imagination such as obscuring the time and space and amplifying the realistic sense through the use of camera and editing technique, not only does Jang Sunwoo invite the spectators into the historical reality but also forms a resistant ideology against the docile body and power.

SUMMARY

This article presented a differentiated historicity of power transformation and its effects on the self of Korean nationals from pre-modernism to modernism through the analysis of films that respectively contain various facets of the realities of the period.

For the pre-modern period, Kim Ki-duk through *Hae anseon* shows the madness and violence inhering in the Korean self during and after the Korean War (1950-60) and how the said war resulted in the loss of identity as its consequence. In the pre-modern stage, power played a pivotal role in triggering the Korean War and the formation of the Korean national identity was via political sadism, that is, the transnational hegemony known as the Cold War that maneuvered Koreans to commit violence against kith and kin and eventually displaced traditional Korean identity from the trauma of internecine guilt. After the division of the Korean peninsula, the hegemonic power in South Korea, equipped with disciplinary techniques primarily known as “the art of distribution” (geopolitics), not only propagated anti-Communist ideology in the mind of the self and created social panopticism in order to reduce the people to obedience and make them automated, but also reinforced the patriarchal order as a consequence of remasculinization by identifying women as the nation, rendering them as valuable but helpless beings who need to be safeguarded by masculinity.

Regarding the period of modernization, this can be distinguished as the transferring stage of power from the transnational hegemony to the national-scale military dictatorship. Going against U.S. hegemonic influence, the military government aimed to assert autonomy in South Korea through industrialization. To facilitate this agenda, a type of collective masochism where individuals found their belongingness from their contribution to the state’s economic growth at the expense of their individual autonomy had been created by military force. As a result, contemporary Korean nationals became mechanized and automated masochistically for the purpose of industrialization. In addition, the sadistic authoritarian personality as the outcome of this system also emerged. However, the national call to self-sacrifice, with social inequity alongside military oppression, brought about a national-scale indignation known as the pro-democracy movement in Gwangju in 1980. Such a dynamic of power and its influence on the self is effectively depicted in *Ggotip* where Jang Sunwoo reconstructed the trauma of Gwangju to criticize the authoritarianism that created the automated sadomasochistic personality among contemporary Korean nationals.

Notes

1. The online film source *IndieWire*, in its Playlist Staff's "Primer: 10 Essential Films of the Korean New Wave," mentions several films beyond its ten recommendations, only one (Lee Myung-se's 1999 *Nowhere to Hide*) of which was made before 2000.
2. In *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, Lacan clarified his concept of *jouissance* and its opposition of pleasure. According to him, the principle of pleasure is to limit its enjoyment by allowing the subject to "enjoy as little as possible." Nonetheless, the subject always desires the complete pleasure, *jouissance*, by transcending the mechanism of pleasure that plays a role in limiting its enjoyment, since *jouissance* is necessarily accompanied with pain. Therefore, *jouissance* is pleasure from pain, which is analogous to masochistic gratification (André 227-39).
3. A possible deconstruction of this reading can proceed from the fact that the film's focus is on Korean society circa the early 2000s (the period of the film's release), and that anti-Communism in Korea would have started before the Korean War. The reality is that *Hae anseon* is ambiguous enough to bear a variegated collection of interpretations. The starting points for the reading I have conducted are the fact that the camp where the action takes place is located next to the border of North Korea, with the ideologically conditioned protagonist mistaking the civilian for a Communist interloper; and that anti-Communism intensified with the war and its aftermath. The ease by which the film lends itself to the reading I have made, even among foreign viewers, can be seen in the customer review posted by Swederunner (apparently an alias) on the movie's Amazon DVD page:

The Korean division illustrates the aftermath of the Cold War that led to the Korean war, a proxy war,... [at the end of which] the border between North and South Korea was closed at the 38th Parallel and the coastline dressed with barbed wire and bunkers to keep possible North Korean infiltrators and spies away. Nonetheless, North Korea attempted several times to enter South Korea through the coastline and 20 times they were either captured or killed. Thus, the South Korean Coast Guard is in constant alert for possible foreign intruders and ready to shoot anyone who approaches the coastlines after sunset in order to protect South Korea....

The consequences [of the killing] display a traumatized Kang who finds himself shunned by both the civilians and his military unit. It leaves him wandering in a no man's land between the civil population and the military. This could be interpreted as a symbol for the the demilitarized zone between North and South Korea. Kang drifts further and further away from reality while trying to find something to grab onto that means something to him. Meanwhile, Mi-yeong's post-traumatic stress reaches the heights of psychosis, as she begin to slowly mutilate her own persona in several ways. Maybe, Ki-duk Kim intended this to be an analogy for Korea and the bloody war between fellow Koreans that eventually divided the nation in North and South.

4. Formulated on the concept of diligence, self-dependence, and cooperation, “*Sae*”-*maul* aimed to incite the development of the country by empathizing with the collective sacrifice for the nation. It has been regarded as the strong impetus for the unprecedented record of economic development in Korea after its successful implementation, but also reevaluated as a combination of capitalist and socialist principles that resulted in reducing labor to the status of tool for development, thus making Korean nationals docile and mechanized for the requisites of industrialization.
5. *Ggotip* was the first film that depicted the Gwangju massacre in Korea, which in turn motivated Jang to be a director. While he was in jail due to his participation in the student movement for democratization during the '80s, he thought of the cinema as an effective tool for social commentary.
6. The author wishes to acknowledge an anonymous peer reviewer for helping reformulate this passage. It originally read as if the filmmaker’s target of critique was the docile self, rather than the sadistic response that this self incited.
7. The analysis of the masochistic nature in the character of the girl, in relation to Deleuze’s pre-Oedipal emphasis, was suggested in Kim Kyunghyun’s *The Remasculinization of Korean Cinema*, where he points out the psychological relationship between the girl and her mother (119-29). I slightly adjusted his point in order to further delve into the mechanism of escape from guilt.
8. An unintended trend between *Hae anseon* and *Ggotip* is their observation of contrasting cinematic strategies: the latter (which was earlier made) relied on montage, a technique developed during the silent-film era by Soviet practitioners; the former, on the other hand, deployed deep focus, which facilitated an emphasis on the mise-en-scène of each shot, rather than on the shots’ juxtapositions. While it would be tempting to posit an argument in new Korean cinema of accelerated development (though I would prefer the psychoanalytically inflected term “hurried development”) for what David Bordwell has termed the “standard version of stylistic history” (12-45), I would hesitate to deploy the notion at this point, on the basis of only two independently produced films.

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