Responds to Book Review

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The Author of *Sovereign Violence* Responds to Book Review

Sovereign Violence: Ethics and South Korean Cinema in the New Millennium. By Steve Choe. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2016. 352 pages. ISBN: 9789089646385.

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Sovereign Violence: Ethics and South Korean Cinema in the New Millennium was published in 2016 (paperback in 2018) and is the culmination of many years of watching, researching, thinking, and writing on contemporary Korean cinema. In this book I tried to foreground some of its most salient themes and aesthetic characteristics, particularly those that revolve around the questioning of moral sentiment and the representation of violence. My aim was to show how this cinema delineates lines of critical ethical thinking by working with the relationship between emotion and moralization, while contextualizing individual films historically within the decade following the IMF crisis. In popular cinema, emotion often facilitates the moral imperative toward narrative action: the image of oppression and suffering typically solicits pity, outrage almost inevitably leads to the demand for justice. Films by Hong Sang-soo, Park Chan-wook, Bong Joon-ho, Lee Chang-dong, and other filmmakers belonging to the 386 Generation enthralled viewers with their high production values and sophisticated scripts while also provoking uneasy emotions with their morally ambiguous plots and seemingly unsympathetic characters. We may have felt shock at the violent imagery of these films and asked ourselves why they were necessary at all. *Sovereign Violence* takes these contradictory

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experiences as cues to examine how Korean cinema works with the emotions and ethics of popular cinematic narration. I argued that these experiences of moral incongruity provide opportunities for viewers to reflect upon the justification of violence within narrative cinema more generally, to question the complacency of moral certainty, criticize the obstinacy of the morally righteous, and examine the political emotions concomitant with vengeance. Films like *Oldboy* (2003), *Memories of Murder* (2003), *Secret Sunshine* (2007), and others discussed in *Sovereign Violence* are not avant-garde in their style and many of them, in fact, embrace the cinematic pleasures associated with Hollywood cinema. But they so do while elevating its form and aesthetics (as Jinhee Choi has shown us [2010]), while marking their difference through the critique of its narrational strategies. This elevation has enabled us to rethink long-held, mostly Euro-American, discourses distinguishing between commercial and art cinemas. (A recent interview with Shim Jae-myung by Lee Soon-jin [Joo and Lee 2020] tells the story of this famed producer's rise in the industry but also the ascendency of Korean cinema as a popular artform in the new millennium.) I believe this rethinking is key to understanding the appeal of Korean cinema and its contribution to world cinema more generally.

Sovereign Violence thus understands contemporary South Korean cinema, not only as a reflection of Korean culture and history, but also as a form that works with structures of feeling associated with the popular melodramatic mode. A brief explanation of this mode is perhaps in order. Here I follow Jinsoo An, Kelly Jeong, Travis Workman and others who have revealed the long tradition of melodrama in modern Korean storytelling, from the shinpa theater of the colonial period with its Manichean characterizations of good and evil, to the reiteration of melodrama in the popular Cold War cinema of the 1950s and 1960s, and its predominance in genre films and television dramas more recently. Melodrama is not merely a women's genre that conventionally features romance, heartbreak, and tears, but is a fundamental mode of narration that encompasses how emotion and characterization are registered in audiovisual media more generally. Elaborated by Thomas Elsaesser and Linda Williams, who were concerned with its manifestation in American cinema, the melodramatic mode seeks above all to make virtue

legible within secular modernity. Where traditional imperatives toward truth and the organization of social relations have faded, melodrama attests to the persistence of morality in public life and archetypically champions modern egalitarian values.

As such, it postulates a feeling and thinking self who embodies this modern morality, an individual who possesses desires, memories of the past, and a maeum, features that are expressed through speech honorifics, physiognomy, physical demeanor, and silent gesture. In the world constituted in the cinema, melodrama posits historical distinctions between the public realm and the private self, while informing what may be expressed before others as well as what should remain unsaid. Film analysis often reads the private individual as a reflection of societal tensions, where the clash between traditional and contemporary moral imperatives and the consequences of compressed modernity are played out. (This mode of analysis, and the division between the public and private, is already symptomatic of the metaphysics of modern melodrama.) This drama typically derives from the desire to restore a space of innocence embodied by the nation, a nostalgic past, first love, the hometown, or the family. Perhaps the most compelling image of moral sentiment in Korean cinema is that of the virtuous victim who unjustly suffers physical, emotional, or historical pain. Suffering compels sympathy for the victimized, outrage at the violence he or she endures, demand for their protection, and the demonization of those who perpetrated the violence. We might think here of the popular films about Korea's independence and democratization movements that build sympathy for those oppressed by imperial or authoritarian powers. The moral self, constituted by melodrama, makes key concepts like accusation, culpability, revenge, contrition, reconciliation, and many others that implicate the other meaningful in these films. Korean cinematic melodrama is a syncretic form that brings together traditional social hierarchies in tension with concepts of the modern, moral individual, concepts associated with an ostensibly global, post-sacred worldview.

The films I discuss in *Sovereign Violence* work critically with the Korean melodramatic mode. In doing so, they seek more compassionate ways of

relating to others, beyond those that adhere to the ethics of the popular mode of narration, and raise the question of whether it is possible to grant humanity to both heroes and villains, friends and enemies. The film, *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance* (2002), raises the issue of whether it is possible to sympathize with those who seek murderous retribution. *Memories of Murder* (2003) problematizes the act of judgment, realized through the act of looking, that accuses another of moral wrongdoing and crime. *Secret Sunshine* (2007) depicts the supreme difficulty of forgiving another for an intolerable transgression. Films such as *Address Unknown* (2001) and *Woman is the Future of Man* (2004) seem to draw from earlier Korean film genres while exposing the persistence of traumatic memory and the acts of violence that take place between men and women. Lee Chang-dong's *Poetry* (2010) seeks a form of redemption that departs from the notion of the modern moral human being. All of these films critically explore the limits of popular cinema, refusing to reiterate its transactional ethics of *quid pro quo* while raising the question of who is deserving of grief. By defamiliarizing how the spectacle of violence solicits moral judgment, and radicalizing melodrama from within it, these films reveal the logic of the exception that enables the intoxication of vengeful rage. We are provided the opportunity, in works like *Oldboy* (2003) and *Lady Vengeance* (2005), to critically consider the politics of those who perceive themselves to be powerless, who justify violent retaliation and their flouting of the law through the appeal to their own grievance. These are indeed difficult questions. Yet in posing them one begins to consider contemporary Korean cinema, not as subservient to mere politics, but as a critical art in itself.

Bong Joon-ho's *Parasite* (2019) raises such questions around sovereign violence. On the one hand, it sets up an allegorical story of class conflict between the rich and poor and directs our attention to the history of this conflict in the age of neoliberal capitalism. But on the other, it refuses to reiterate the moral stereotyping typical of melodrama and rebuffs the desire to sympathetically heroize one side in order to villainize the other. The explosive violence in the party scene remains bewildering in its justification, precisely because it is so ambiguous in its morality. The experience of unease registers the critique of moral sentiment.

I am grateful for the opportunity from the *Korea Journal* to articulate some of the main arguments that run through *Sovereign Violence* so as to avoid any misunderstanding or misrepresentation. Recent books on contemporary Korean film inspire enthusiasm to continue considering the place of Korean cinema, and the contours of modern Korean humanity, in the world. I am thrilled to be part of this growing body of scholarly work in English. Joseph Jonghyun Jeon's work (2019) shows us how the dehumanizing logic of neoliberal capitalism is expressed through the films of this period in their form and themes. Hye Seung Chung and David Scott Diffrient's study (2021) on human rights cinema sheds light on the role film plays in the relationship between the law and civil society, and the definition of the precarious human being that mediates this relationship. As Korean cinema continues to realize new standards in writing, acting, cinematography, and special effects, I am excited to see it continue to diversify, to become global while also aspiring toward universality.

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