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The Future in Retrospect: *Epistemological Frustrations during the IMF Crisis and Baek Yun-shik's Post-IMF Film Persona*

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Abstract

This paper probes the ways in which Baek Yun-shik's film persona, produced during the early to mid-2000s, reflects an encounter with the legacy of the authoritarian Park Chung-hee regime in the wake of the IMF Crisis. One noteworthy cultural phenomenon following the IMF bailout in Korea was the rise of discourse concerning Park, marked by a desire to reflect on our unnoticed embeddedness in developmentalism, even during the post-authoritarian period. By centering the intergenerational pairing of Baek's characters, all of which reference the authoritarian era, with young protagonists ignorant of the historical implications of their struggles, Baek's films simultaneously envision the state of epistemological blindness in the post-authoritarian period and our confrontation with the legacy of Park's developmentalism in the wake of the IMF crisis. It is only after cinematically reconstructing what was missed under the epochal marker of "post-authoritarian," up until the IMF crisis, that the films delve into describing the unprecedented nature of the crisis itself. Hence, I redefine the modifier of "post-IMF" to designate a modality grappling with a series of epistemological shifts provoked by the IMF crisis, and suggest that Baek's film persona has "post-IMF" traits which facilitate a collective reckoning with Park's surviving legacy, problematized retroactively during the crisis.

Keywords: Baek Yun-shik, IMF crisis, post-authoritarian, Park Chung-hee, materiality, haptic visuality, fetish

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Introduction

The IMF Crisis in Korea is often summarized as the moment when a set of common beliefs were severely shaken. According to a research report titled "Two Years After the IMF," conducted by the Federation of Korean Industries in 1999, four key beliefs, once revered as irrefutable, all at once collapsed: (1) banks never go bankrupt, (2) conglomerates are too big to fail, (3) real estate is the safest asset, and (4) one can easily work his entire life in one workplace (Federation of Korean Industries 1999, 1–5). Since the only option to deal with the collapse of Korea's economic pillars was the IMF's fast-track package bailout program, the government agreed to the terms of the IMF's intervention on December 3, 1997. As the term "fast-track" implies, the conditions for the relief required unprecedented levels of restructuring and employment flexibility across the nation, resulting in over 1.3 million layoffs and a sharp decline in job openings.

Korea's IMF Crisis was fundamentally caused by a failure to redeem immense foreign loans, particularly short-term debt. One primary reason for this failure was conglomerates' high-risk investments, boosted by the explosion of non-banking financial institutions beginning in 1994. Since the maximum amount of loans banks could distribute was regulated, the top thirty conglomerates in Korea sought alternative funding sources and, in a similar vein, demanded the liberalization of international financial transactions. This demand resonated with both the international financial market's desire to intervene more deeply in Korea, and the Kim Young-sam administration's aspirations of joining the OECD in order to become recognized as a developed country, as reflected by the government's motto, "New Korea" (*Sin Hanguk*). Following the OECD's demands, Korea opened most of its financial markets to the world, and it also converted its investment finance companies into non-banking financial institutions. Most of these ended up belonging to conglomerates in the guises of their foreign branches, working as gateways to easily borrow immense foreign capital (Kuk 2011, 142).

This dark connection between the Korean conglomerates and these non-banking institutions not only attested to the regime's hasty

incorporation into the neoliberal world order, it also revealed Park Chung-hee's surviving legacy. Neither Korea's reliance on foreign loans and conglomerates' high-risk investments, nor the intervention of foreign powers in structuring its economy, was unique to Kim's administration. The "miraculous" economic development under the Park regime had also been inseparable from foreign loans, in its case, under the Bretton Woods system. Under this system of monetary management, foreign capital could be injected in the form of loans, granting nations more independence in making investments. Exploiting the atmosphere of the Cold War bloc and the trauma of the Korean War, the authoritarian Park Chung-hee regime established a developmental state model wherein the government regulated capital's circulation and labor markets in the name of the nation's rebirth, and on the moral basis of defense against North Korea. Thus, the prevalence of risky investments on the part of conglomerates, based on the tacit belief that the government would compensate their immense losses if the investments failed, traces back to the Park regime. The regime provided concentrated financial support, including a cushion for investment losses, in order to allow a few promising enterprises to grow immensely within a short time and drive national development; as a result, overinvestment was frequently condoned. Not only did the Park regime formulate this *spoiled mentality* among the conglomerates, which persisted after the regime's demise, but it also left behind the legacy of a bureaucratic financial system which permitted high-risk investments even after the official end of the conglomerate-centered development model. As the government still had the authority to designate the leaders of key financial institutions, there were hardly any regulations on credit, investment, or short-term foreign loans made by conglomerates through their foreign branches. Under this system, conglomerates easily acquired financing for investments, with the still-implicit guarantee that the government would not audit the investments' actual viability (Ji 2011, 146–149; Kuk 2011, 141–143).

While identifying Park as *the* origin of the IMF Crisis may require further contemplation, it is noteworthy that Park was discursively summoned in Korea in the context of post-factum reflection on the IMF

Crisis, in order to discuss its surviving legacy in the *post-authoritarian* era.[1] What I find particularly interesting in this trend is that criticisms of the Park regime were eventually geared towards contemplating our epistemological blindness in the early *post-authoritarian* era. Marxist political scientist Sonn Hochul's 1998 analyses of the IMF Crisis are noteworthy examples in this vein. Pinpointing Park's developmental dictatorship as a fundamental reason for the IMF Crisis, Sonn attributes Korea's failure to predict the crisis to what he calls "post-minjung social science" (*poseuteu minjungjeok sahoe gwahak*). According to Sonn, the social science of the 1980s, which had grappled with the ongoing exploitation of the proletariat and self-colonization stemming from the Park regime, forms a stark contrast with "post-minjung social science"; the latter was overly optimistic about the new global system following the Cold War, seeing Korea's joining the OECD as evidence of its exemplary democratic and economic progression (Sonn 1998a). Self-referencing this argument in another essay published that same year, Sonn grandiloquently states, "Once again, social science will have to become an owl of Minerva who only flies to the sky after sunset and embarks on a 'belated' and 'shameful' post-factum explanation about the crisis" (the scare quotes are Sonn's) (Sonn 1998b, 17). While Sonn's distinction between the "*minjung* social science" of the 1980s and a "post-*minjung* social science" starting with the end of the Cold War in the early 1990s may sound rigid, it is intriguing to see that his identification of the Park regime as the origin of the IMF Crisis leads to the necessity of reflecting on the epistemological blind spot of the early 1990s.

One noteworthy expression of the unnoticed continuity of the Park regime into the post-authoritarian era was the phenomenon of "Park Chung-hee Fever," or to literally translate, "Park Chung-hee Syndrome" (*Bak Jeong-hui sindeurom*), which reached its apex in mid-1997 and remained

1. Admittedly, the official transition into post-authoritarian society, 1987, does not perfectly match the often-cited starting point of Korea's neoliberalization under Kim Young-sam's administration, marked by Korea's joining the OECD in 1996. But skepticism of the post-authoritarian epochal marker in the wake of the IMF Crisis mainly comes from the pairing of Kim's administration and Park's regime.

prevalent until mid-1998. This cultural phenomenon, led primarily by novelists, leading figures from the Park regime, and conservative newspaper journalists, was marked by an explosion in the number of visitors to Park's birthplace, politicians' unprecedented self-identification with Park during the election, and a spate of publications admiring Park's charismatic leadership and self-possessed personality. The common thread among these varied phenomena was the narrativization of Park as a martyr sacrificing himself for the nation, in contrast to Kim Young-sam, who was blamed for throwing the nation under "IMF trusteeship." Concerning this, political scientist Jung Hae-gu reads the syndrome as a result of having failed to come up with an alternative ideology to replace authoritarianism, exposing the "vacuum" (*gongbaek*) to a nationalism very similar to that mobilized by Park, which had remained "latent" (*jamjaejeok*) until the syndrome took over (Jung 1998, 68).

As we approach the discourse of Park Chung-hee Syndrome as an iconic cultural phenomenon connected to the IMF Crisis, we can see that the epistemological frustration the IMF provoked is double-layered, encompassing: (1) the unnameability of what unfolded before our eyes, due to the unprecedented, destructive way that restructuring shattered the "unbreakable" four rules, and (2) uncertainty over the epochal marker "post-authoritarian," which eventually led to questioning what we had failed to detect until the IMF Crisis. However, when it comes to analyzing Korean cinema within the rubric of the IMF Crisis, most research has focused on film's lack of critical engagement with Park's surviving legacies, or those of the authoritarian era more broadly. Rather, the conventional conceptualization of post-IMF cinema has centered on its attempt to assuage the wounded national pride and the collapse of masculinity, marked by the mass layoffs of salarymen, through recourse to gangsters, time travel and nostalgic melodramas. For example, Baek Moonim investigates the "cinematic detour" in the historical drama and time travel genres. According to Baek, both *Geonchuk muhan yukgak myeonche ui bimil* (The Mystery of the Cube; dir. Yoo Sang-wook, 1999) and *2009 Lost Memories* (dir. Lee Si-myung, 2002) reboot national identity by reconfiguring historical events into a dichotomy between righteous Korea versus malicious Japan, while

remaining silent on the authoritarian era (Baek 2003). Similarly, an article by David Martin-Jones on the time travel films *Kara* (Calla; dir. Song Hae-sung, 1999) and *Donggam* (Ditto; dir. Kim Jung-kwon, 2000), this time featuring the military dictatorship periods, discusses their suturing effect. On the one hand, the films he discusses speak to the epistemological landscape of the IMF Crisis, because they articulate the continuity between the military regime and contemporary eras through time travel. And yet, Martin-Jones is keen to point out that the potential of the films' time travel modality, with its promise of "decompressing compressed modernity," is betrayed by their lack of actual critical engagement with the military regimes in the context of the IMF Crisis. The films' recognition of the past generation's struggles against the military regimes remains in the background, overshadowed by melodramatic, gender-biased narratives, and thus the films work as more of a hasty closure of the military regimes' past than as venues for contemplating their surviving legacy (Martin-Jones 2007). Yi Youngjae also attributes the success of *Chingu* (Friend; dir. Kwak Kyung-taek, 2001) to the mobilization of a nostalgia that dehistoricizes the landscape of the 1970s and 1980s. Delicately arranging vintage artifacts and deploying the trope of brotherhood to recreate the "good old past," *Friend* romanticizes a time when masculinity still reigned, unlike in the aftermath of the IMF crisis (Yi 2001, 40–47).

Taking this tendency into account, the novelty of Baek Yun-shik's film persona from the early to mid-2000s, marked by its idiosyncratic references to the authoritarian era, primarily the Park regime, merits further scrutiny. To briefly summarize his acting career, Baek first appeared in *Meotjin sanai-deul* (Awesome Guys; dir. Im Won-jik, 1974), playing the lead as part of an ambitious and patriotic trio of airmen. That very same year, Baek played another soldier, this time an exemplary military cadet, in the then-most-popular government-sponsored television series, *Kkot pineun paldo gangsan* (Korea in Bloom, 1974), which propagandized the nationwide economic prosperity attained under Park. In a group interview I conducted with Yun Hyuk-min, the scriptwriter of *Korea in Bloom*, and its director Kim Soo-dong, they confirmed that one major reason for casting Baek was his trustworthy "physiognomy" (*sang*), befitting a character who converts his

indolent war-veteran father into a hardworking citizen.[2] Baek became better known to the public in the 1990s through *Seoul-ui dal* (The Moon of Seoul, 1994) and *Parangsae neun itta* (A Bluebird Has It, 1997), but his performances in these films were exemplified by the humorous discrepancy between his solemn manner and glib words. His popularity reached its apex in the early to mid-2000s, with *Jigu-reul jikyeora!* (Save the Green Planet!; dir. Jang Joon-hwan, 2003), *Geuttae geu saram-deul* (The President's Last Bang; dir. Im Sang-soo, 2004), *Beomjoe-ui jaeguseong* (The Big Swindle; dir. Choi Dong-hoon, 2004), *Ssaum-ui gisul* (The Art of Fighting, dir. Shin Han-sol, 2005), and *Tatja* (Tazza: The High Rollers; dir. Choi Dong-hoon, 2006).[3] The popularity of his characters from this period can be confirmed by visiting the Naver Movie website (https://movie.naver.com/), where anyone can participate in sharing the film's lines they find the most memorable. Not only do Baek's lines dominate this section, but quotes from his past films constantly appear in reviews of his more recent films. This extremely unusual phenomenon, for both a supporting-role specialist and an actor then in his 50s, demonstrates how deeply audiences remain impressed by his characters of that period.[4] In an interview I conducted in February 2017, Baek attributed a large part of his stardom in that period to the increased interest in "character actors" (*seonggyeok baeu*), that is, actors locked into repeatedly playing a certain "type" onscreen, usually somewhat eccentric.[5] It is then worth asking what type he presented and what its relevance was to the period when he was immensely popular.

Admittedly, I am not the first to call attention to Baek's film persona. In her research of 1960s-to-2000s consumer culture, sociologist Joo Eunwoo links Baek's popularity in the early to mid-2000s to the new economic

2. Yun Hyuk-min and Kim Soo-dong, interview by author, Cheonan, Korea, August 5, 2018.
3. While *The Big Swindle* has noteworthy features when it comes to theorizing Baek's film persona, this paper focuses on the other four films in the interest of length.
4. The fact that Naver Movie does not prevent people from posting incorrect quotes in the "most iconic line" section is useful for historicizing the climax of an actor's film career. It is very common for people to input lines from other films, rather than from the actual film they are reviewing.
5. Baek Yun-shik, interview by author, Seoul, Korea, February 3, 2017.

landscape after the IMF crisis. Deploying Jacques Lacan, Joo argues that Baek's joyful characters represent the promotion of "jouissance" following the ostensible end of the authoritarian era, in contrast to the authoritarian enforcement of savings and abstinence (Joo 2014, 89). However, as I will demonstrate, this binary approach is fundamentally limited in probing Baek's mediating role, which involves encounters with both the remnants of the Park regime in the post-authoritarian era and the new economic system after the IMF crisis. In other words, Joo's approach, which views Baek as a symbol of the aftermath of the IMF crisis, cannot explain how his persona also grapples with the pre-IMF era to exemplify multiple stages of epistemological shifts.

To answer this, I take up the lingering question in my short essay published in 2017 as part of an edited volume titled, *There is No Such Man: Questioning Korean Masculinity in a Misogynist Society* (*Geureon namja-neun eopda: Hyeomo sahoe-eseo hanguk namseongseong jilmunhagi*). Here, I argued that the rise of Baek's post-IMF stardom was closely linked with the collapse of the Park regime's developmental state model. Specifically, I highlighted how Baek's transnationality, realized through his multilingual competency, exotic dress, and similarities with iconic characters from Hollywood, Chinese, and Japanese cinema, is frustrated by the tragic end his characters inevitably meet, being either severely injured or killed. Through this, I suggested that we read Baek's film persona as a "symbol" of the authoritarian state's contradictory desires for both US-oriented cosmopolitanism and Korean nationalism, as was foregrounded during the IMF crisis (Bu 2017, 231–237). However, the more fundamental question remained: What differentiates the references made to Park through Baek's idiosyncratic film persona, under the rubric of the IMF crisis, from preexisting criticisms of the Park regime? In other words, is criticism of Park the ultimate goal of Baek's post-IMF film persona? As I argued earlier, the discursive fields concerning Park, marked by terms such as "latent" and "post-factum explanation," suggest that references to the Park regime in the context of the IMF Crisis are inseparable from the imperceptibility of Park's surviving legacy throughout the post-authoritarian period. Taking this into account, I seek to show in this paper how Baek's film persona attempts to

simultaneously present a vision of our interaction with the surviving legacy of the Park regime, and reconstruct our then-state of blindness to it. I argue that there are two key traits of Baek's film persona which allow it to achieve these ostensibly conflicting goals in the mode of visuality: (1) the references his characters make to the Park regime through esoteric words, bodily traits, or surroundings, the historical implications of which remain unmentioned, and (2) the pairing of Baek's characters with young protagonists, such that the latter rely heavily on the former to comprehend the world they live in. Accordingly, I underline *the way* his characters are presented to clarify that Baek's film persona mimics the mode of perception towards the Park regime's remnants unveiled during the IMF crisis, and renders it as a part of the content.

As my paper grapples with a cinematic response to the epistemological uncertainty provoked by the IMF Crisis, it is deeply indebted to Joseph Jonghyun Jeon's conceptualization of Korea's IMF cinema as a historiographical response to the suddenness of the crisis. Jeon argues that what he calls Korea's IMF cinema retrospectively asks "what happened" as a central question, and yet does not provide a clear answer, often foregrounding the protagonist's disorientation, which remains unresolved. However, Jeon does not see this as a failed critical engagement with the crisis; instead, he argues that this cinematic articulation of inexplicability alludes to the "simultaneously immanent and inaccessible" interlockings of exploitative economic systems, which he names "vicious circuits" (Jeon 2019). In this vein, *Boksu-neun na-ui geot* (Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance; dir. Park Chan-wook, 2002) and *Sarin-ui chueok* (Memories of Murder; dir. Bong Joon-ho, 2003) are remarkable examples of Korea's IMF cinema, because their protagonists are rendered helpless in the chaos amidst the overlap of the so-called post-authoritarian era's policies and those of the preceding regimes.

Similarly, most of the films I am considering here are marked by a complete silence on the historical implications of the intergenerational connection between Baek's characters and the young protagonists unknowingly embedded in the legacy of the Park regime's developmentalism. Yet, compared to Jeon's key examples, Baek's films present more of a *phased*

development of their young protagonists; only after interacting with Baek's characters do they witness the powerful flow of global capital and become incorporated. That is, Baek's film persona suggests how Korea's seemingly radical turn to becoming a neoliberal society after the IMF crisis involved complex epistemological stages, including encounters with both the remnants of the Park regime and capital's devastating power under the post-Bretton Woods system. Based on this cinematic emphasis on epistemological *stages*, I recast Jeon's central question of "what happened," into "what had happened before it [the unnamable crisis] happened." In a similar vein, I use "post-IMF Cinema" rather than "IMF Cinema," as the former better articulates how the retroactive desire to reconstruct what was missed up *until* the IMF Crisis is an essential part of any description of Korea's socioeconomic landscape *after* the crisis. Based on this, I redefine the modifier of "post-IMF," used somewhat vaguely in academia, to designate the modality of cinematically presenting a series of epistemological shifts provoked by the IMF crisis, as exemplified by Baek's film persona.

The Materiality of Blindness: The Fetishization of Bodies in Baek's Films

If the retrospective reflection on Park Chung-hee's connection with the IMF Crisis can be regarded as a post-IMF phenomenon, it would be wise to start with *The President's Last Bang* (hereafter, *The President*), a black-comedy film about Park's assassination. Here, Baek plays the role of Chief Kim, the director of the Korean Central Intelligence Agency (KCIA), who assassinates Park. Many people found the film extremely shocking for portraying Park as impotent, temperamental, and cowardly, contradicting his popular image as either a charismatic savior of the starving nation, on the one hand, or a cold-hearted dictator, on the other. Even before its release, the film was severely attacked by the conservative press and sued by Park's son, Park Ji-man, for defaming his late father. Intriguingly, scholars and film critics opposed to the glorification of Park also negatively reviewed the film for its "lack of depth"

in criticizing the intrinsic limits of the Park regime, and for relying instead on juvenile sight gags ridiculing the old, chubby, and smelly bodies of the regime's leadership (Jeong 2005). Even the film's few positive reviews focused on its audacity in desanctifying Park, but the compliments stopped there (H. Kim 2005). However, I argue that the film provides a thorough reflection on what it means to cinematically envision Park and his legacy following the IMF Crisis through its images of Chief Kim.

Literary scholar Hwang Ho Duk's reading of the film is worth citing in this context for its distinctive approach towards the film's heavy reliance on the bodies of the middle-aged leaders it portrays. Hwang attributes the film's novelty to its depiction of Park and his subordinates as walking corpses, thereby emphasizing the regime's predestined end in "ruins" on which no solid heroic narrative can stand. Instead of reading the wrinkled flesh and ailing physiological symptoms emphasized in the film as banal symbols of the regime's already well-known depravity, Hwang highlights the film's modality of representation in which this truth is conveyed through materiality without detailed exegesis, as if physical evidence is being thrown without words before the viewer (Hwang 2008).

Regardless, Hwang's essay leaves an important question unanswered: *Why* was Park's predestined failure presented on screen in the form of ruin, particularly in this period? Although Hwang hints at the necessity of considering the historical question by labelling *The President* an iconic case of "present-day history films" (*oneul-ui yeoksa yeonghwa*), he does not explain what defines the "present day," that is, the mid-2000s (Hwang 2008, 242). Taking this into account, what merits attention in the film, as much as the regime leaders' ailing bodies, is the cinematic emphasis on the epistemological limits of their subordinates. Despite being situated near the head figures, these *insiders* cannot detect any omen of the regime's impending demise and this echoes the state of blindness problematized through the discursive fields concerning Park in the wake of the IMF Crisis. For instance, the film frequently pairs a close-up of the heavily secured door behind which Park's private party is being held with a crane shot penetrating each room of his fortified villa, where bodyguards, cooks, and servers jovially chat and relax, completely clueless about the bloody spectacle

Figure 1. Chief Kim at the clinic in the opening sequence

Source: Captured from *The President's Last Bang* DVD.

awaiting them. A key phrase throughout the film is therefore the line "What the hell is happening?" following a series of gunshots in the villa, repeatedly uttered by various figures.

However, the film does not stop at juxtaposing the head figures and subordinates, as most readings of it argue. Amidst this disjuncture, Chief Kim acquires particular importance among the regime's head figures, because his body serves as an epistemological gateway allowing others to detect, if not fully interpret, the predestined fall of the Park regime. To understand how Chief Kim connects the film to the IMF Crisis, we must first probe how the figure acquires ambivalence through a series of bodily images. The opening sequence is of particular importance in this regard. The film presents an aerial shot of Seoul from the viewpoint of Park in a helicopter, as he randomly presents the twisted fantasy of a sexually potent man in fluent Japanese. It cuts to Chief Kim's eyeball in an extreme close-up, and then the camera slowly rotates while zooming out to show his entire face and torso as he is being examined by a doctor (Fig. 1). When the camera's movement comes to a stop, we hear Chief Kim being diagnosed with a rotting liver, the cause of his putrid breath and flatulence. After his diagnosis, Chief Kim obsessively checks his breath by breathing into his palm, and this new habit works as a cinematic tool to articulate the presence

of a foul smell whenever he speaks with others near him. This sequence encapsulates the distinctive role of Chief Kim in terms of visuality; unlike the others, his image appeals to the olfactory sense, a sense far more inconspicuous in visual media.

The concept of "haptic visuality" that media theorist Laura Marks proposes is worth mentioning here, to elaborate on the linkage between the film's deployment of olfactory details and our reflection on Park's legacy as a post-IMF phenomenon. Similar to Hwang, Marks approaches materiality as a phenomenon casting light on the blind spots of events, by depicting a body or object that was physically present at the very site of the event and thereby "bearing witness to forgotten histories." Building off of this, Marks defines the cinematic practice that strategically mobilizes "the witnessing quality" of a subject, a term used interchangeably with materiality, as the "fetish" (Marks 2000, 92–122). Unlike Marx, who emphasized the delusory aspect of the religious ceremony called "fetish," Marks draws critical potential from the fetish's material aspect, through which it escapes semiotic structures dominated by those in power. Expanding this further, Marks conceptualizes "haptic visuality" as a more concretized modality of the fetish, which seeks to appeal to haptic, gustatory, and olfactory senses rather than relying on audiovisual expressions. While it is harder to stimulate these senses through visual media, it is the very subtlety of haptic visuality that not only alludes to what has been ignored, but also renders the epistemologically limited situation, in which part of the event had to remain unnoticed, as part of the content (Marks 2000, 182–191). If we revisit the film's abovementioned opening sequence through the lens of haptic visuality, we can read the film's primary concern: just as significant as *what* is recorded through the eyes of this living archive of the Park regime is the *way* such records are vaguely conveyed through the olfactory sense.

The importance of Chief Kim's olfactory trait in the film becomes apparent when his character is analyzed in tandem with his right-hand man, Agent Ju (Han Suk-kyu), the Chief Agent of the KCIA, and his left-hand man Colonel Min (Kim Eung-soo). Building on the cinematic structure of the opening sequence, in which what has been witnessed—the eyeball—is translated into smell through haptic visuality, Chief Kim's secret

conversation with his two subordinates is one in which smell overpowers the detailed conveyance of information. The employment of haptic visuality in Marks's sense here accordingly speaks to the state of blindness in contemplating Park Chung-hee retrospectively problematized in the wake of the IMF Crisis. Despite being in positions to gatekeep the dark side of the *patriotic* regime, Ju and Min's power to always be in the know is undercut by Chief Kim's unexpected and vague remarks about his assassination plan. Although Ju and Min vaguely sense a strange ambiance surrounding Chief Kim and Park Chung-hee, the camera repeatedly shows Ju and Min being left perplexed behind the closed doors of the party room and Chief Kim's office, obstructed from discovering the concrete reason behind the tension. This creates a structure in which Ju and Min rely on Chief Kim, who freely travels in and out of the party room, as their only source to grasp the situation. Noteworthy here is the way Chief Kim's bad breath is foregrounded over his elaboration on what he saw and felt inside the party room that led him to come up with the assassination plan. Chief Kim urges the two to join his death band "for the sake of democracy," without further elaboration, and Min mildly holds his nose, having no clue, like Ju, what his boss is talking about. Noticing Min's discomfort, Chief Kim checks his breath as he exits the main hall after the conversation, reaffirming the presence of his bad breath throughout the speech (Fig. 2).

The film's ostensible framing as an authoritative account of Park's regime from the point of view of an insider is further undermined by the film's twist on Kim's motive for the assassination. Chief Kim's solemn tone in speaking of his assassination plan contradicts the fact that his decision in fact comes from personal outrage and jealousy over Park's implicit favoritism toward Cha, the president's chief bodyguard, which underlines that Kim himself is also blind to the intrinsic limitations of Park's regime. While many critics found the film's depiction of the hidden motive behind Park's assassination disappointing due to the lack of a "thorough analysis" of the regime's limitations which precipitated that assassination, it must be recognized that this audacious twist affords the film a new critical potential to engage with the key concerns surrounding Park in the post-IMF period. The seemingly groundless and politically negligent desanctification of Chief

Figure 2. Agent Ju and Colonel Min looking in perplexity at the receding back of Chief Kim. Chief Kim checking his breath with his palm while exiting the main hall alludes to the presence of his putrid breath throughout his grandiose yet extremely vague description of the assassination plan.

Source: Captured from *The President's Last Bang* DVD.

Kim into a "smelly" figure is in fact an employment of haptic visuality as a way of grappling with two seemingly conflicting goals at once: recovering what has been missed about the Park regime, and retrospectively reconstructing the very state of blindness.

Save the Green Planet! (hereafter, *The Green Planet*), arguably Baek's most acclaimed film and released two years ahead of *The President*, anticipates its deployment of Baek's physical traits engaging with our epistemological condition. Admittedly, there exists a rich scholarship focusing on how the film questions "official history" and unveils ongoing state violence through its fantasy-like narrative (Y. Kim 2004; Workman 2015). However, I want to situate the film's interest in questioning our mode of comprehension under the rubric of the IMF Crisis and suggest how it works as a prototype for Baek's post-IMF films. Interweaving sci-fi and thriller genres, both of which foreground careful examination of specimens to acquire epistemological breakthroughs, the film fetishizes the body of Kang Man-sik, played by Baek, and speaks to a series of concerns surrounding the IMF Crisis.

Byeong-gu (Shin Ha-kyun), the film's protagonist, is obsessed with an alien-invasion conspiracy theory. Beginning in childhood, Byeong-gu has gone through multiple traumatic events which are inseparable from authoritarian developmentalism in industrialist Korea. His father lost his arm in a coal mine explosion, presumably in the early 1980s, and his girlfriend was beaten to death in the labor movement in the 1990s. Furthermore, his mother lies comatose from industrial poisoning from a chemical plant owned by Kang; later, she is unwittingly killed by Byeong-gu as he falls for Kang's ruse. The frustration of a clear epochal boundary between the authoritarian era and the post-authoritarian era, shown here through the recurring tragedies of industrial workers, already speaks to the discursive field of the IMF Crisis. Yet the film's fundamental emphasis is on the state of epistemological blindness that prevents Byeong-gu from detecting such a continuity, as he never reflects on the historical implications of his tragedies. Instead, he spends all his time in a secluded laboratory, devising a plan to thwart aliens' ongoing evil experiments on humanity. To that end, he kidnaps seemingly random people, tortures them until they confess their alien identities, and then brutally slaughters them. In particular, the film focuses on Byeong-gu's torture of Kang, almost to the point of death, to force him to confess his secret identity as an alien prince. By torturing Kang's naked body in the name of saving Earth, Byeong-gu strives to blame his struggles on aliens, situating the origin of his suffering outside the normal epistemological scope. Unsurprisingly, most of his victims turn out to be not aliens but humans, though there is a minor twist when it's revealed that they are not just any humans, but the people who inflicted suffering upon him and his loved ones.

Byeong-gu keeps the severed limbs of his victims and labels them "non-alien," which is noteworthy here in light of the connection between materiality and his mode of comprehension (Fig. 3). As Byeong-gu's alien theory and his punishment of those involved in state-condoned violence intersect, the yardstick for comprehending the past becomes the chunk of flesh not labelled "human," but rather, "non-alien." In other words, this ambiguous negative modifier insinuates that Byeong-gu's frame of comprehension falls somewhere between the official history and a flesh-

based method seeking a reality outside the preexisting framework. Media theorist Kim Jihoon's reading of the film merits reference here. The "non-alien" label, along with the displayed body parts of those who harassed Byeong-gu, demonstrate the immense flaw in Byeong-gu's alien-invasion theory, based on his experiments. Yet Kim reads the experiments' ostensible failure as an allusion to the presence of an alternative semiotic system for writing history. This system, constructed by interweaving material fragments of the past, conveys an alternate history through "things" (*samul*) (J. Kim 2003, 1297–1301).[6] As we combine this reading with Marks's concept of the fetish, we see that the grotesquely catalogued display of body parts is less a banal tool for horror than a means of appropriating the fissures of *the* epistemological system that isolates Byeong-gu.

The constant torturing of Kang's body, which makes him sweat, bleed, and excrete, also falls under this flesh-based framework, explaining why it occupies a major portion of the film (Fig. 4). The brutal "alien investigation" reaches its climax when Kang finally gives in and narrates the long history of human violence he has observed as an alien in his spaceship. Until the end, the film tricks the audience into believing Kang is simply improvising to get away from the never-ending torture. However, it turns out that Kang is indeed an alien prince disguised as a human, and the history narrated by Kang turns out to be true, which can only be invoked by a character whose presence is outside the spectrum of our understanding. This is in itself crucial in terms of "post-IMF" modality, because the film's reference to circuits of violence and its nonrepresentability under the predominant semiotic system reverberates with the problem of our unnoticed embeddedness in the authoritarian era's surviving legacy. Yet, even more compelling evidence to connect the film to the IMF Crisis is how the

6. It is in this vein that Kim refuses to call Byeong-gu's manslaughter "revenge"; the term is conventionally premised on the clear identification of the avenged and implicitly reaffirms the efficiency of the predominant semiotic system for understanding the past, overshadowing Byeong-gu's attempt to escape from it (J. Kim 2003, 1300). Film scholar Lee Cheong also takes up Kim's argument and argues that Byeong-gu's obsession with flesh speaks to his status as subaltern, deprived of the power to speak for himself through society's predominant language (Lee 2015, 461).

Figure 3. The specimens of the severed limbs of his earlier victims labelled "non-alien"

Source: Captured from *Save the Green Planet!* DVD (Copyright by CJ E&M).

Figure 4. Byeong-gu *examining* Kang's body

Source: Captured from *Save the Green Planet!* DVD (Copyright by CJ E&M).

discovery of history's forgotten layers is followed by an encounter with the laser beam annihilating humanity. The most ironic twist in the film is that Byeong-gu's experiment leads to Earth's destruction by triggering the alien prince Kang, who had once deferred it. Despite Byeong-gu's confidence that dissecting what lies under Kang's "skin" (*gajuk*) will save the Earth, his fetishistic skin-based research fails to provide a proper vocabulary for the formidable power of the laser beam fired by Kang once it sheds its human skin. What comes to the fore then is the *phased* aspect of the film which overlaps with the abovementioned two-step desire to reconstruct *what had happened before the IMF Crisis* prior to describing the unprecedented destructive power of the crisis. In this vein, Kang is at the center of this *phased* envisioning of the crisis starting from the fundamental question of why the semiotics of *the* history started to be problematized in the wake of the crisis. If the pairing of Ju and Chief Kim in *The President* speaks to the discursive fields of Park specifically connected with the IMF Crisis in the form of historical drama, *The Green Planet's* centering of Byeong-gu and Kang has preestablished a comprehensive framing of the crisis that this historical contemplation of the authoritarian legacy ultimately leads to.

The Making of the Unnamable: After the Sensorial Engagement

While the aforementioned two films laid a cornerstone for Baek's stardom, it was *The Art of Fighting* (hereafter, *The Art*) and *Tazza: The High Rollers* (hereafter, *Tazza*) that earned Baek his immense popularity. Ostensibly, *The Art* and *Tazza* are strikingly different from the two earlier films. First, Baek's characters are less conspicuously connected to the authoritarian regimes, but are instead depicted as eccentric yet friendly old men who appear out of nowhere. Second, the young protagonists in these films have no traumatic experiences dating from the authoritarian era, let alone the motivation to reflect on such issues. Should this be read as a fundamental deviation from the key grammar of Baek's film persona in the two earlier films? I argue the contrary by demonstrating how the young protagonists in *The Art* and *Tazza* are unknowingly embedded in traumatic situations, the origins of which can be traced back to the Park regime. This dilution of the historical implications of their struggles synergizes with Baek's film persona, which also aims to evoke, rather than explicitly narrate, our unnoticed embeddedness in the Park regime's surviving legacy. Adopting a master-disciple narrative, in which the pivotal content is constituted by the young disciple's complete reliance on the master for adjusting his mode of comprehension, these two films grapple with the structure of perception in the early post-authoritarian era, problematized in the wake of the IMF Crisis, and thus resonate with the two films discussed earlier. *The Art* and *Tazza* once again employ the strategic deployment of the fetish, but this time the technique becomes much more multilayered; whereas *The Green Planet* and *The President* mostly focused on the human body as the object of fetishization, the later films also engage with various non-bodily objects—ranging from small decorations, to clothing, to houses and factory ruins—to imply the linkage between the young protagonists' suffering and the Park regime. Within this structure, the young protagonists' spiritual maturity requires an encounter with the surviving legacy of the Park regime.

To start with *The Art*, released eight months before *Tazza*, the protagonist Byeongtae is relentlessly bullied by his classmates, and the image of the chief bully, Pako, is particularly tied to military iconography. Not only

does he have an army buzz cut, but he also observes the convention of wearing an army uniform, which is rare among the gangsters he serves. Intriguingly, Pako abides by the uniform rule despite not even being an enlisted soldier, suggesting that its presence is not a coincidence. Even stronger evidence of the film's engagement with the legacy of the Park regime is the fact that Byeongtae attends a technical high school, where most of the violence he experiences occurs. In a *Cine 21* interview, Shin Han-sol, the film's director, said he chose the technical high school because it "evoked" (*neukkim-eul junda*) the eclipse of Gunsan, a once prosperous region industrialized in the Park Chung-hee and Chun Doo-hwan eras (S. Kim 2005). The connection Shin draws between technical high schools and developmentalism of the authoritarian era is historically tenable, considering the technical-school system was first established as part of the Park regime's Five Year Economic Development Plan, which was centered on boosting the economy by facilitating the growth of manufacturing. In this context, it is no coincidence that the film was mostly shot at Gunsan Mechanical High School, a prime beneficiary of the selective investment made in technical high schools during the Park regime (Y. Park 2011; S. Park 2018).

What connects Byeongtae, who has no memory of the authoritarian era, with his surroundings is the violence stimulating his sensorium. An original line, later cut, spoken by Byeongtae's homeroom teacher as he scolds students at the school's press machine training site, was the unnecessarily detailed threat: "You want to get your fingers chopped off by the press machine" (S. Kim 2005)? A related factor is the physical pain invoked by the imagery of metal tools. Every bully in the film uses industrial tools from the school to harass Byeongtae, the most horrendous example being Pako's attempt to cut off Byeongtae's penis with wire cutters, the camera zooming in on the wire cutters to emphasize their metallic texture. The camera work and audio represent Byeongtae's mode of perception, emphasizing the pain and fear evoked by the industrial tools through vibrating camera movement, zooming in on metallic surfaces, and amplifying the sound of metal being dragged on the floor. Byeongtae's ordeal reaches its peak when he powerlessly witnesses his only friend, Jaehoon, getting ruthlessly beaten up by Pako at an abandoned factory site. Here again, the metallic belt Pako

takes off to completely finish Jaehoon is presented in extreme close-up, suggesting that Byeongtae could not step in to save his friend due to the paralyzing fear evoked by the texture of the glistening metal. Recalling Marks's haptic visuality, the grammar in which a young protagonist is the recipient of these sensorial stimuli marked by a forgotten history is even more strongly foregrounded here than in the previous films, in proportion to his unawareness of his struggle's historical implications. It is notable that Shin emphasized in the same interview with *Cine21* a parallel between technical high schools and the factory ruins in Gunsan in the film, as "they both provoke reflection on the glory the region once boasted" (S. Kim 2005). Byeongtae's traumatizing experiences at these two sites, emphasized through haptic visuality, can be read as a cinematic attempt to reconstruct the landscape of our ongoing embeddedness in the dark side of the glory proclaimed by the Park regime.

Byeongtae's trauma becomes a key reason for his profound admiration for the powerful and charismatic Pan-su, played by Baek. After being accepted as Pan-su's disciple, Byeongtae forms an emotional bond with him and overcomes his trauma under Pan-su's guidance, growing strong enough to endure the pain of the bullies' industrial tools. Pan-su's advice to apply the "sensorial memory of getting beaten up" that is "inscribed" on Byeongtae's body is constantly underscored through flashbacks, demonstrating how this lesson shaped the protagonist's viewpoint and, above all, how it helped him reappropriate the materiality that once provoked overwhelming fear. During the final battle with Pako, Pan-su's advice on reusing sensorial memories instantly revives Byeongtae from his stupor and allows him to defeat the bully leader (Fig. 5).

A very similar structure appears in *Tazza*: a young protagonist overcomes his trauma, unknowingly connected to authoritarian industrial policies, with the help of an unusual mentor. The struggle of the young protagonist of this film, Goni, also begins in an industrial ruin, a dingy furniture factory warehouse where the owner has to make an extra profit by lending the space to illegal gamblers. Goni is a factory worker who becomes addicted to gambling and blows his entire savings, as well as a large amount of his sister's. The ordeal in the hinterland extends to Incheon, where Goni

Figure 5. Stills of the final fight sequence. Byeongtae has a flashback of Pan-su mentioning "sensorial memories"

Source: Captured from *The Art of Fighting* DVD (Copyright by CJ E&M).

travels to chase after the gambler who deceived him, when he loses the loan he has borrowed to try to win back his savings in another illegal gambling spot inside an abandoned textile factory site. However, this place also connects Goni to his "savior," Pyeong, who reigns over this transient gambling den.

The mobilization of objects, as well as seemingly random references to the Park regime, divorced from their historical implications, become even more pronounced when Goni is accepted by Pyeong as his disciple and offered room and board for training. When Goni enters Pyeong's house for the first time, the camera slowly pans to show the Japanese influences in the house's decor: a tatami mat floor and, in the front yard, a *tsuboniwa* courtyard garden. The camera is located behind Goni and emphasizes what

Figure 6. A still shot at the Hirotsu house showing Goni's first entry into Pyeong's home

Source: Captured from the *Tazza*: *The High Rollers* DVD (Copyright by CJ E&M).

he sees—both Pyeong and the surrounding objects—and this visual structure epitomizes the way Baek's character is perceived by the young protagonist in this film (Fig. 6). Equally intriguing is that later during their first dinner, Pyeong shows up wearing yukata, and constantly displays a tic with chopsticks, appealing to a Korean stereotype of Japanese behavior. Considering that the shooting of Pyeong's abode occurred at the Hirotsu house, a building formerly owned by a Japanese merchant during the colonial period (*jeoksan gaok*), the foregrounding of Pyeong's *Japanese taste* merits further reflection.[7] Also significant is Pyeong's seemingly random mention of Lee Byung-chul and Chung Ju-yung, the founders of Samsung and Hyundai, following the camera's initial pan across his home. As Pyeong teaches Goni how to pull winning cards from the deck, he easily draws a pair Goni requested and calls it "Lee and Chung." As is well known,

7. Choe Heung-su, "Tteundari budu, ilbonsik gaok, sachal…120-nyeon geunhyeondaesa-ga panorama-cheoreom " (Pontoon, Japanese Houses and Temples...A 120-year Panorama of Modern Korean History), *Hanguk ilbo*, September 24, 2019. I express my gratitude to Kelly Jeong who pointed out this historical fact at the 2019 Berkeley Korean Film Workshop.

"catching up with Japan" was a motto of Lee's throughout his life, and Chung modeled Korea's shipbuilding infrastructure after Japan's. Above all, these two corporations benefited from what economic historians call the "accumulation system" (*chukjeok cheje*) of the Park regime, which was marked by a high rate of enforced individual savings and massive loans from Japan—with problematic historical backgrounds stemming from the Korea-Japan Agreement of 1965—to fund the growth of conglomerates (Seo 2003). Pyeong's *Japaneseness* never appears in the graphic novel the film is based on, which makes his sudden mention of two industrial giants while being surrounded by colonial-period objects an even more obvious gesture toward Park's regime.

However, what I would like to emphasize in this scene is not how these colonial objects and Pyeong's reference to Lee and Chung are explicitly connected to the Park regime's identification with Japan; rather, I am interested in the opposite, since my focus is on the way historical references to Park in *Tazza* remain *dispersed* instead of being linked together coherently. As a seemingly *sporadic* arrangement of foreign objects is displayed by the moving camera, it not only conducts a kind of historical criticism against Park's period, but also cinematically envisions our unnoticed embeddedness in its shadow. Just as in *The Art*, Goni overcomes his traumatic experiences only by confronting them, returning to the industrial complex to duel with gamblers from across Korea, and his return takes place only after having been strictly trained by Pyeong. It is no coincidence that Goni's first victory as Pyeong's partner takes place in Pohang, where Pohang Steel (now POSCO) once spearheaded Park's heavy industrial development. In a similar vein, Goni defeats a retired General O, who is clearly related to Chun's regime, judging from his years of service. Notably, the general is played by Shim Woo-Chang, who also played the Park regime's Minister of National Defense in *The President*. This cross-casting is not a coincidence, considering that many of the actors who played regime figures in *The President* appear again in *Tazza*, mostly as Goni's enemies, and that even the director of *Tazza* himself made a cameo appearance in *The President*. Still, Goni's duel with General O is particularly crucial since Shim retains his military role, which articulates the key

connection between the two films.

Once again echoing *The Art*, Pyeong's guidance on mastering the sensorium plays an important role, especially in Goni's battle with his nemesis, Agwi (Kim Yoon-seok). Agwi's evocations of the developmental state era strike Goni through the sensorium vividly: Agwi's diabolical image is emphasized by heavy-industrial features, such as his usage of the term "basic wage" (*ingeonbi*) to describe a meagre pot, parodying its use in construction sites. Yet the most striking industrial image is that of a sledgehammer, originally a military and construction-site tool, which he uses to smash his opponents' hands. Just like the metallic tools in *The Art*, the metallic texture of Agwi's bloodstained sledgehammer is foregrounded through a zoom-in and amplified sound effects from Goni's viewpoint, provoking haptic discomfort in him (Fig. 7 and Fig. 8).

Here again, Pyeong's catchphrase, "The hand is faster than the eyes," is recited by Goni, and he even chants a nonsensical spell Pyeong taught him when focusing on his haptic sensorium. This illustrates how Pyeong has influenced Goni's mode of comprehending the world, favoring an instant haptic sense over vision. Furthermore, the fact that Goni attains a dramatic victory by following Pyeong's sense-centered guidance, as in *The Art*, shows how Baek's characters function as gateways to encounters with Park's legacy. Here, we can see that Baek's film persona does not merely evoke the limitations of Park's legacy, but also speaks to the desire to fill in the gaps

Figure 7. Agwi's bloodstained sledgehammer

Source: Captured from the *Tazza*: *The High Rollers* DVD (Copyright by CJ E&M).

Figure 8. The bully leader's wire cutters

Source: Captured from *The Art of Fighting* DVD (Copyright by CJ E&M).

missed by the pre-IMF mode of comprehension.[8]

The most striking commonality between the films is their structure, in which the historical significance of the young protagonists' trauma, linked with the remnants of the Park regime in the post-authoritarian era, remains completely unarticulated within the diegesis. And yet, overcoming their trauma requires the help of an eccentric figure who evokes the Park regime. Setting aside Byeongtae, who was presumably born in 1986 or later, even Goni, who would have lived through both Park's and Chun's regimes as a teenager, does not mention anything about them in the film. Rather, Goni's only direct reference to the authoritarian era in the film is premised upon its seemingly obvious end in the mid-1990s, when he taunts the retired General O: "Hey old man, quit your domineering tone with me. This is neither Park nor Chun's era now." In their presentation of a clear-cut epochal distinction, unknowingly frustrated by the young protagonists' ordeals, these films inherit the same critical task as that of *The Green Planet* and *The President*.

Noteworthy is that *The Art* and *Tazza* expand this modality of envisioning our epistemological limitations by adding another stage that the young protagonists move on to after having made an intergenerational connection with Baek's characters. By the time the young protagonists have finally overcome their major struggles with the help of Pan-su and Pyeong, respectively, they encounter their mentors' brutally destroyed bodies, which again, do not provide any detail about *what happened*. The materiality of the mangled bodies leaves the young protagonists of both films completely disoriented, not understanding why their mentors had to become severely wounded or die *now*. Suddenly, then, we see Baek's film persona mediating an incorporation into an "unnamable borderless power," as the protagonists of his later films radically change after witnessing the physical collapse of his characters, becoming incarnations of global capital themselves, or enthralled by an indescribable border-crossing power. For instance, when Goni in *Tazza* faces his mentor's dismembered body at the

8. The fact that *Tazza* is concerned with "filling in blind spots" of the early post-authoritarian period becomes even more evident when we consider that the film's major backgrounds evoke the early and mid-1990s, unlike the original graphic novel, set in the 1970s.

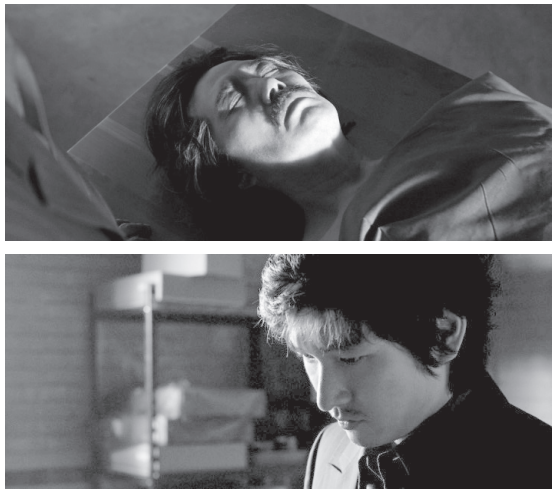

Figure 9. Goni confirming Pyeong's corpse at the morgue

Source: Captured from the *Tazza*: *The High Rollers* DVD (Copyright by CJ E&M).

morgue, the camera zooms in on his angry but confused face (Fig. 9). After defeating Agwi and discovering Pyeong's real murderer, Goni freely travels to casinos across the globe as a non-person, or an entity without a nationality, thanks to the misidentification of a corpse as him. Even the teenage protagonist of *The Art* expresses his desire to "cross the line," a phrase originally used by Pan-su. Interestingly, Byeongtae utters it for the first time only after witnessing the collapse of Pan-su's body due to a police shooting. Though he had once been able to cross borders freely with fake passports, Pan-su ended up being traced by the police within the national database.

Thus, we can see that the protagonists' seemingly random captivation with border-crossing follows a certain pattern: First, they sensorially engage with the remnants of the Park regime and those of its authoritarian successors and overcome them. Then they are suddenly left disoriented due to the sudden death of Baek's characters, which cannot be explained by their current mode of comprehension. Whereas *The Green Planet* ends at the moment the protagonist dies after encountering an unnamable Earth-

pulverizing laser beam that renders national borders meaningless, the protagonists in *The Art* and *Tazza* do survive. Yet, they are left alone in a world where their previous mode of comprehension is untenable. Finally, they blindly chase the new, indescribable power of crossing borders, remaining completely unaware of the historical implications of what they have been through and are currently undergoing.

Such a highly phased reading of these two films is, again, a return to the basic premise underlying the desire to retrospectively grasp our unnoticed embeddedness in the Park regime's legacy throughout the post-authoritarian era. As already shown through the discursive fields of Park Chung-hee after the IMF Crisis and its cinematic take in *The Green Planet*, articulating the unnameability of the crisis and its aftermath is impossible unless the *nameable* pre-crisis reality is first identified. Media theorist Erin Huang's concept of horror as a "historical mode of perception" is useful here. Rather than approaching horror as a prescribed response towards a nightmarish image, Huang defines it as a fundamental frustration of the preexisting mode of comprehension, i.e., "the sentiment that arises in the face of an unnamable crisis," and therefore, a cluster of "feelings of not knowing how to feel" (Huang 2020, 8). If the horror of the unnamable crisis comes from the discrepancy between "one's imagined interior reality" and "the perceived external world," then the skepticism towards the epochal marker of "post-authoritarian" brought on by the IMF Crisis shows that the horror the crisis provoked forced people to first reconstruct the landscape of the pre-IMF period, before describing the horror felt in the actual crisis period.

Lastly, it must be pointed out that the two films considered here do not fully exhaust the possibilities of their pre-IMF landscape reconstructions. The frustration of the "internal frame of comprehension"—to once again use Huang's formulation—that arises during a crisis of global capital could result in one of two outcomes: rebellious gestures against its flow, or the mere observation, or even embrace, of its power (Huang 2020). Baek's films are closer to the latter: the young protagonists' sensorial engagement with the actual ruins of the Park regime's developmental state projects, such as factory sites, alludes simultaneously to the immanence and the unrepresentability of the ongoing "vicious circuits" Jeon conceptualized. But

in the end, the films' deployments of linear progress, typical of the master-disciple narrative, leave what lies after the crisis still vague.

Conclusion

Even today, Baek appears frequently in both film and television, with his characters partially overlapping with his early-to-mid-2000s film persona. For instance, his roles are still exceptionally charismatic for a middle-aged man, especially in the eyes of the young male protagonists in films such as *Gwansang* (The Face Reader; dir. Han Jae-rim, 2013) and *Naebuja-deul* (Inside Men: dir. Woo Min-ho, 2015), and in the TV series *Wigi ilbal Pungnyeon Billa* (Golden House, 2010) and *Vagabond* (2019), to name a few. However, these recent works lack what I call Baek's "post-IMF persona" because they do not contain the key element of an intergenerational pairing that mediates the young protagonist's encounter with the unnoticed past, or with an incomprehensible present and future. One remarkable example of this is *Bandeusi jamneunda* (The Chase; dir. Kim Hong-sun, 2017), in which Baek plays the lead, Sim Deok-su, a curmudgeonly landlord who solves a serial-killer case originating in 1986. Here, Sim only serves as a stand-in for Korea's older generation, enforcing the generational gap between himself and the younger characters, and limiting the encounter with the past to those who experienced it. The young characters are either victims, passively waiting to be saved by Sim, or bystanders to his heroic exploits. If anything, this attests to how well Baek's earlier film persona synergized with the epistemological frustrations of the early to mid-2000s, following the IMF crisis. His persona answered the need to retrospectively envision the early post-authoritarian era, unknowingly haunted by Park's legacy, as a prerequisite to describing the unprecedented power of global capital unleashed by the crisis, and its cultural aftermath.

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