Book Review Essay

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Culture Industry Revisited: *Academically Engaging Korean Cinema in the Era of Hallyu*

The Late and Post-dictatorship: Cinephilia Boom and Art Houses in South Korea. By Andrew David Jackson. Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press, 2023. 296 pages. ISBN: 9781399514200.

Fate and Freedom in Korean Historical Films. By Kyung Moon Hwang. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023. 255 pages. ISBN: 9783031272677.

Political Moods: Film Melodrama and the Cold War in the Two Koreas. By Travis Workman. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2023. 272 pages. ISBN: 9780520395695.

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In their *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, written in 1944 in Los Angeles while in exile from their homes in Germany, Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno famously argued that '[t]he idolization of the cheap involves making the average the heroic. The highest-paid stars resemble pictures advertising unspecified proprietary articles" (Horkheimer and Adorno 1994, 156). What is perhaps most striking is not that the two German Marxists were cynical about Hollywood and the culture industry that it had engendered, but that, more than 80 years after its publication, their critique still rings true. The rapid decline of motion pictures as we know it in recent years, along with the precipitous rise of streaming culture—especially during and after the pandemic—seems to have only confirmed Horkheimer and Adorno's evaluation of mass culture inspired by cinema. The ability of the masses to now pay "a few coins [to] see the film which cost millions," was not necessarily, an incentive for humankind to triumphantly advance great modernist art (Horkheimer and Adorno 1994, 156).

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Horkheimer and Adorno's challenge—namely, that cheap entertainment and commercialism advanced by mass media technology, which now is brought to your living room almost free of charge, is hardly a good idea—provides the context in which the three new books on Korean cinema were written and published: Andrew David Jackson's *The Late and Post-dictatorship: Cinephilia Boom and Art Houses in South Korea*, Kyung Moon Hwang's *Fate and Freedom in Korean Historical Films* and Travis Workman's *Political Moods: Film Melodrama and the Cold War in the Two Koreas.* Though these books stem from divergent fields—sociology (Jackson), history (Hwang), and literary theory (Workman)—they share a common goal in their narratives: to both celebrate and mourn Korean films made over the past 80 years since Korea's liberation from Japanese colonial rule.

Each of these studies recognizes the significant power of cinema as both mass entertainment and artistic expression, with the potential to usher in political agency. However, they also acknowledge the unfulfilled power of cinema in different epochs of Korean cinematic history. For Workman, the scope of his research includes the films of both Koreas—North and South—from the 1950s and the 1960s when the two film industries competed against each other as a direct reflection of political Cold War confrontation between socialist North and capitalist South. For Jackson, his focus is on the long 1980s, a period that began in the late 1970s and lasted until the mid-1990s, when the culture of cinephilia flourished in urban centers in Korea. This cultural movement laid the foundation for youth culture, which was pivotal not only in the political democratization of Korea, but also in the active blossoming of Korean culture, known as Hallyu, in the subsequent years. Hwang, in contrast, examines the first two decades of the 21st century, a period marked by an outpouring of films dealing with history—many of which became blockbuster hits in Korea.

Having spent much of my youth during the long 1980s in Korea—both on and off—that became the basis of Jackson's research on Korea's cinephilia, and as both an avid moviegoer and a film critic who then regularly published in the film journals *Cine 21* and *Kino* (discussed in this study), Jackson's *The Late and Post-Dictatorship Cinephila Boom* feels almost like a trip down memory lane. Many of the cinematheques that led this cinephilic

movement, such as Core Art Hall and Dongsung Art Center, which were places bustling with young energy during the 1980s and the 1990s but now find themselves firmly shut, are featured in these pages through detailed personal testimonies from the programmers and moviegoers of the era. Unlike the other two books reviewed in this essay, Jackson's work is less concerned with interpreting the significance of specific filmmakers and films that constitute the body of Korean cinema that contributed to the arthouse boom during the period he examines. Instead, he focuses on capturing the pulse of social transformation as it shifted from a period of intense political dictatorship to post-dictatorship, through personal interviews and an examination of financial arrangements forged between the newly inaugurated post-dictatorship government and the arthouse film venues.

Perhaps the most intriguing aspects of Jackson's study is his focus on governmental policies, especially during the Kim Dae-jung era (1998–2003), which sought to support the arthouse film venues and domestic indie film production. The 2002 Waranago Incident, occurring in the midst of liberal rule (1998–2008), marked a turning point. This incident took place when four notable Korean arthouse films were abruptly pulled from commercial theaters due to a lack of venues that could provide space for independent films to reach their target audiences. This event drove a decisive policy shift in the Korean film industry.

During the following decade, the so-called *diversity* policy, engineered by the Korean Film Council (KOFIC), the government agency overseeing the Korean film industry, launched various distribution and exhibition networks, such as KOFIC Art Plus and Next Plus. These initiatives led to more openings of venues and production subsidies for local films seeking exhibition space. Jackson notes that the "[t]otal audience numbers for art houses…increased steadily between 2004 and 2011, and seat occupancy rates climbed to the highest levels seen in the sector over the same period" (187).

By the 2010s, however, despite such early success of the diversity policy administered by KOFIC, a decline was evident. The successive presidential elections in 2008 and 2013, which returned Korea to conservative rule for much of the second decade of the 21st century (2008–2017) reversed

some of KOFIC's earlier funding and grant decisions that had supported non-commercial films. This shift adversely affected arthouse theaters and the distribution network KOFIC had established a decade earlier. As expected, the relationship between KOFIC's public sector grant officers and independent theater managers and programmers began to sour.

Despite his detailed analysis of the relationship between state and arthouse cinema, Jackson fails to delve deeper into two essential non-political causes that contributed to the demise of cinephilic culture. First, by the time the 2010s arrived, youth culture had undergone a radical transformation since the long 1980s. Before the Internet provided Korea's middle class with a connection to the outside world and the flourishing of international film festivals in the 2000s, small venues like the Goethe Institute and French Cultural Center in Seoul, which screened European art films on special occasions during the Park Chung-hee era, and mom-and-pop videotheques of the 1980s, attracted young Korean moviegoers who needed respite from the suffocating climate of military dictatorship. What was once considered an anachronistic movie-going activity of the parents' generation in the 1960s became again fashionable during the 1980s and the 1990s through a cultural renaissance that coincided with the political activism of the so-called 386-generation youth. As Jackson explains, theaters became alternative public spaces that accommodated "cinephiles' autonomous and autodidactic tendencies and their sense of a non-conformist identity" (235). However, as Korea's globalization accelerated, along with rapid modernization and the expansion of the middle class around the turn of the century, Korea's youth turned to other forms of entertainment. Gaming—especially among males—travel, restaurant and café visits, shopping, and K-pop fandom all became popular alternatives, challenging cinephilia as a preferred activity for young people reveling in the cinematic imaginations of the outside world. No longer restricted by governmental limits on overseas travel, they instead embraced Korea's rise as a tech giant with the world's fastest Internet speed and mobile culture.

If Jackson's research remains mystifyingly reticent about the shifting spending habits of youth over the past 30 years—habits that can be considered part of Hallyu studies—another crucial factor in the demise of cinephilia

in Korean cinema is completely missing. Before the diversity campaign that jumpstarted the grant system subsidizing arthouse theaters in Korea, successful cinematheques were often run by the wealthy. For instance, Art Seonje Cinema, which was for many years synonymous with Seoul Art Cinema's indie film programs, was owned by family members of Kim Woo-jung, one of Korea's most prominent corporate leaders who was later responsible for the collapse of Daewoo around the time of the IMF crisis. Similarly, the fall of Dongsung Art Center was directly tied to its owner, Kim Ok-rang, who faced legal troubles after being tried in court for forging her post-secondary degrees and buying her way into cultural prestige and an academic career. While Jackson's book features extensive interviews with film programmers like Kim Nan-suk and Lee Kwang-mo, who worked directly with Dongsung, it fails to explore how corporate greed and ambitions contributed to both the making and unmaking of cinephilic culture in Korea.

Just as films, throughout the history of cinema, have been fascinated in representing history, beginning with D. W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), questions have arisen about whether film is even the right medium for resituating historical discourse. In *History on Film/Film on History*, Robert A. Rosenstone asks, "Just what, if anything, do history films convey about the past, and how do they convey it?" (Rosenstone 2017, 7) Kyung Moon Hwang's *Fate and Freedom in Korean Historical Films* capably answers Rosenstone's first question of *what*, but struggles to respond to his second question of *how*. Of course, grappling with the *how* is perhaps a far more complicated narrative process, one that would require theoretical probing into the limitations of traditional history. Hwang acknowledges that his work is "not an examination of cinema through its historical depictions, but rather a study of historical understanding depicted in cinema" (8). His study appreciates cinema's craftmanship and its contribution to opening up different ways of offering perceptions of history. *Fate and Freedom* recognizes that cinema can make a crucial contribution to the making of historical discourse, but sidesteps the ongoing debate among historians whether historical films are worthy of scholarly scrutiny.

That Hwang has chosen perhaps two motifs, "fate" and "freedom," to explore in a book about commercial big-budget films is perhaps not

coincidental. Since theaters and movies were driven by mass taste and demand, as famously argued by literary scholar Peter Brooks in his *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1976), melodramatic narrative arcs have consistently presented their audiences with dramatic tension created between pre-determined destiny and post-sacred freedom of choice. Travis Workman, as will be discussed later, points out that this tension constitutes, in Peter Brooks' words, the "moral occult," which amounts to the "melodramatization of the political and the politicization of melodrama" (8). Such a bold declaration, undoubtedly stemming from Walter Benjamin's famous dictum that communism responds to fascism by politicizing art—while fascism aestheticizes politics—can perhaps be applied to Hwang's exploration of the intertwining of history and melodrama. *Fate and Freedom* examines the interchangeable nature between history and melodrama by situating the conundrum where the *melodramatization of history* occurs just as frequently as the *historicization of melodrama* in recent Korean historical films.

Many of the films Hwang discusses feature characters drawn from historical events, ranging from one of the most infamous villainous historical figures from the early Joseon era, Prince Suyang (who would depose his nephew through a bloodbath coup and become king himself) to modern dictator Park Chung-hee. Hwang recognizes the need for films to create drama through characters who challenge their fates. After examining *The Admiral* (*Myeongryang*, 2014) which features one of Korea's most celebrated heroic figures, Yi Sun-sin, Hwang exclaims that "the people [of Joseon featured in the film] themselves determined their collective fate" (36). This moment, which highlights the common people and slightly de-centers Yi Sun-sin's heroicism "testifies to the pull of modern populist sentiment as well as of the traditionally transmitted narratives." (36). Therefore, what happens repeatedly in Korean historical films, Hwang argues, is that these films provide "a reprieve to allow Koreans to self-correct" (45). Hwang's analysis of historical films—ranging from lavish period pieces such as *King and the Clown* (*Wang-ui namja*, 2006) to contemporary settings featuring ordinary people such as *Peppermint Candy* (*Bakha satang*, 2000)—explores the filmic

possibilities of recreating to rearticulate the "firm connection between historical burdens and later outcomes" (176).

Hwang is particularly persuasive when he explains how the tension between fate and freedom ultimately manifests itself through films with a cyclical trajectory of historical time. For instance, Hwang argues that Lee Chang-dong's classic *Peppermint Candy* draws on both Buddhist philosophy and a modernist sense of time, which enables filmmakers like Lee to deploy "a wonderous variety of time narratives—time-shifting, flashbacks, parallel time frames, concurrent or conflicting chronologies—that sometimes appear even within the same film" (177). Hwang is correct to point out that as *Peppermint Candy* tracks backward in time, Yeong-ho, its unforgettable protagonist, fights against the tragic destiny that tries to entrap him in his traumatic violent past. But Yeong-ho's struggle fails, and the end (or the beginning for those who have seen the film), is unfortunately not a happy one.

However, there are other questions that remain unaddressed in Hwang's study. Period film genre, *sageuk* 史劇, throughout the 1980s and much of the 1990s fell out of public favor in Korea, existing primarily on television as a pastime mainly targeted at retired male audiences. Even Pak Chong-won's *Eternal Empire* (*Yeongwonhan jeguk*, 1995), discussed extensively by Hwang as quite possibly the first postmodern historical film to emerge out of Korea, failed to capture the public's attention at the time. What, besides the obvious renewed nationalist discourse—where *sageuk* allow Koreans to reimagine a historical past in which national unity is intact and resistance against foreign invasions is entirely successful—precipitated the success of *sageuk* in the first two decades of the 21st century?

Beyond melodrama or its theme of the moral occult, cinema's fascination operates on the level of visual spectacle and the maximization of photographic faculty that can mummify the past. Moviegoers are attracted to both visual and dramatic elements. Perhaps needless to say, not all Korean historical films fit neatly into the melodramatic structure. For instance, *The Throne* (*Sado*, 2015), a film about Prince Sado's tragic death in a rice chest ordered by his father King Yeongjo, and *President's Last Bang* (*Geuttae geu saram-deul*, 2006), which stunningly captures the death of modern-day Korean quasi-

royalty—Park Chung-hee, who never fulfilled his mission to be the king forever—do not necessarily delve into what I have earlier described as the moral occult between individual choice and historical destiny. These films are *not* built on melodramatic impulses, but rather on the grandiose visual scale in which Korea's past comes alive in a spectacular fashion through the *big picture*. Both films did relatively well at the box office, not necessarily because of their narrative arcs, but because of the fantastic spatial reproduction of Gyeongbok Palace in *The Throne* and the equally impressive interior design of the presidential quarters of Park Chung-hee in *President's Last Bang*. These set designs blur the "boundary between 'the way things really were' and 'the way things are remembered' or the 'way things now appear in our consciousness,'" which I elsewhere argued suggest an iteration of the Deleuzian *power of the false* that falls somewhere between historical truth and falsity (Kim 2011, 211).

Furthermore, an erudite reader may feel that the disappointment of *Fate and Freedom* stems not from Hwang's total disengagement from the all-too-familiar theory of melodrama and its invocation of moral occult—both of which figure centrally in the tension between his two main motifs, fate and freedom—but rather from an excesses of film synopsis. Even for someone who might be familiar with many of the films featured in the book, it is easy to lose track of Hwang's narrative flow due to the excessive number of films discussed. Far too many titles are summarized—sometimes with very little payoff. Instead of organizing the chapters along a chronological timeline—spanning from the early Joseon era to the long 1980s, when democratization struggle took place—with some of the chapters featuring discussions of more than ten films (the Korean War chapter discussing no less than twelve), readers might have benefitted from chapter rearrangement. Headings such as "Kings," "Generals," "Presidents," and finally "People," each highlighting just a couple of titles best suited to these subjects, could have provided greater clarity.

Hwang—likely unintentionally, though somewhat mystifyingly given he is, after all, a historian who values precision and accuracy of data—also makes an egregious error in identifying director Jang Seon-u as being involved in *May 18* (Kim Ji-hoon dir., 2007), a commercial film about the Gwangju

Uprising. Hwang writes, "Among the numerous cinematic recreations of Gwangju are two from director Jang Seon-u…The second film from Jang is *May 18*" (163). While Jang was at the helm of *A Petal* (*Kkonnip*, 1996), one of the first films to depict Gwangju, he had already retired by the time *May 18* was released. Moreover, *May 18* bears no resemblance to a film style Jang has been associated with. Hwang appears to have confused *May 18* with Jang's last film *Resurrection of the Little Match Girl* (*Sungnyangpali sonyeo-ui jaerim*, 2002), which includes a few scenes that metaphorically invoke the memory of Gwangju.

If a reader's frustration with *Fate and Freedom* lies with its refusal to theoretically engage with the moral occult that stemming from the conflict between the two forces (one predetermined and the other individual choice) that guide the main characters in historical films, *Political Moods* takes a radically different path—at times overwhelming the reader with an oversaturation of theories on melodrama that sometimes does not get to the heart of the matter. Rather than accepting the presupposed notion that the national cinemas of North and South Koreas have been fundamentally oppositional since the Korean War, Workman argues that these two post-war Korean cinemas remain quite closely connected, both thematically and perhaps, in their cinematic identification with the mood of melodrama. The aim of his research, Workman notes, is "to read film melodrama of the two Koreas to expand the comparative breadth of Korean studies, to contribute to the global history of film melodrama, and to provide new ways of historicizing the Cold War beyond the binary frameworks of national cinema" (26).

Political Moods shifts its main thesis of *mood* away from the putatively shared pathos among Koreans, such as *han* and *jeong*, and instead reframes it through a more universal, Western lens of affectivity and the aforementioned moral occult. Workman explains that the purpose of his book is to "bring affect into a discussion of Korean film and to develop a method of comparison across the Cold War divide without falling back on culturalist interpretations of aesthetic categories like *chŏng* [*jeong*] and *han*" (204). It is the melodramatic *moods*, which emphasize, for instance, the "lateness of many of the characters to the historical moment of national reconstruction"

(77) that usher in narratives of social displacement and personal failure, ultimately binding the two kinds of cinema together.

While this objective of unfurling two seemingly very different kinds of cinemas—one capitalist and the other socialist—may have succeeded, some of the most critical questions that also bind the two post-colonial film industries remain unanswered. Specifically, Workman does not fully address why there may still be a particular kind of sentimentality unique to the Korean condition. What remains unclear, in other words, is why the melodramatic impulses of suffering and negativity that underpin both Korean cinemas as narrative platforms are specific to Cold-War divided Korea. Aren't these pathos and moral conflicts raised by Workman equally present in almost every narrative film featuring family or romantic dramas from that period? How does the *mood* of Korean cinema from the 1950s and the 1960s then differ from general narrative modes in which melancholia must ultimately be reconciled (at least partially) by the end of the film? Are Korean films of this period and beyond necessarily more driven by what Workman calls, "social negativity" than other national cinemas?

Though Workman primarily focuses on Korean films after 1945, a particularly significant aspect of his study is his examination of colonial-era films, and the lingering influence of Japanese colonial rule on Korean cinema. *Political Moods* is perhaps novel for its innovative research on Korean-language material on film criticism during both colonial and post-colonial periods. Throughout *Political Moods,* he references colonial-era films such as *Military Train* (*Gunyong yeolcha*, 1938), *Volunteer* (*Jiwonbyeong*, 1941), and *Korea Strait* (*Joseon haehyeop*, 1943)—all infamous propaganda films from that period. For instance, echoing Korean film scholar Yi Yeong-jae, who has written extensively about *Volunteer* as a film paced by a mood of melancholia despite its propagandic intent to erase such negativity, Workman observes the "continuation of the [similar kind] of melancholic mood in cinema of the liberation period," which extends well into nation-building period of the 1960s (127). One might hope he would also directly address one of the most discernible vestiges of cinematic elements that North Korean socialist realist films have co-opted from Japanese colonial era propaganda films: namely, the obligatory two- or three-minute

didactic speech scene in which protagonists must express their loyalty and patriotism, pledging their will to continue the battle against inequality and oppression, to the nation. This didactic speech scene, which still exists in North Korean films today, does alter and makes austere any *mood* in moviegoing—something upon which Workman could have elaborated.

After reading *Political Moods*, it remains uncertain whether the negativity induced by suffering and melancholia—elements that lay bare the precondition of melodramatic works emerging from a recently liberated post-colonial nation—is truly unique to Korea's experience. Equally underwhelming is *Political Moods*' attempt to address the fundamental difference between socialist realist film's binary depictions of good and evil and South Korean realist films' blurring of these boundaries. As tempting as it may be to stake out common *haptic* ground between North Korea's *The Flower Girl* (*Kkot paneun cheonyeo*, 1972) and South Korea's *Aimless Bullet* (*Obaltan*, 1960), the thematic gap between these two films is simply too large. Even at the level of mood, the South Korean film, like many others from this period, cannot overcome the gravity of social negativity whereas North Korean films typically conclude on a utopian future that, as Workman would agree, completely pulverizes the social contradictions of the day.

Furthermore, *Political Moods*, though scrupulous in its exceptional archival research analyzing and highlighting film criticism essays from both North and South Korea in the mid-20th century, remains inexplicably lacking in acknowledging and cross-referencing prior scholarly work in English on Korean cinema. For instance, Kathleen McHugh and Nancy Abelmann's anthology, *South Korean Golden Age Melodrama: Gender, Genre, and National Cinema* (Wayne State University Press, 2005), had already introduced the trope of *moral occult* in Korean melodrama and explored how its excessive trope parallels the neo-realist aesthetics of the South Korean films from the 1960s. Consulting the key theoretical tropes from McHugh and Abelmann's anthology would have strengthened *Political Mood*'s legitimacy within burgeoning film studies.

As suggested in the opening paragraph, every mass product, in the end, tends to reproduce itself as merely a copy of another. As we now evaluate Korean cinema's place in the age of Hallyu in 2025, its apparent collapse—

marked by the shutdown of CJ Entertainment's film production wing, a global force in the industry just a few years earlier—suggests that Horkheimer and Adorno's premotion of mass culture leaving no alternative to Hollywood's dominance remains eerily prescient. Despite the shortcomings expressed above regarding these three books on Korean cinema, their publication attests to the immense expansion of Korean film studies over the past twenty years. Fueled by both the enormous overseas success of Korean films in the past two and a half decades and the rapid increase in college students worldwide enrolling in Korean culture and literature courses—including those prominently featuring Korean films—film studies has arguably yielded more substantive books, articles, and academic discussions than any other field in Korean studies. Korean cinema was the first wave crest in the history of Hallyu, so perhaps it is no coincidence that it is the first to trough. Likewise, it may be no irony that we are historicizing the achievements of Korean cinema, which, as late as the 1990s went scarcely mentioned in English-language literature, just as it exhales its last breath.

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