The Meaning of Newness in Korean Cinema: Korean New Wave and After

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Abstract

Contemporary Korean cinema is both innovative and industrially successful. Its historic achievement dates back to the cinema movement from the 1980s to the mid-1990s and its effect, the so-called "Korean New Wave." The Korean New Wave films tried to overcome the limitations of modern Korean movies with auteurism and realism, showing a departure in its criticism of mainstream movies and oppressive social conditions.

Since the mid-1990s, however, Korean films have diverged again from the Korean New Wave. While critical attitudes and a search for realism significantly waned, an ironic tendency and interests in genre and mass culture grew. Post-Korean New Wave films now focus on image more than on theme, which tells us that the newness of today's Korean cinema only functions as a stylistic strategy used to distinguish themselves from other films. Closely related to changes in Korean politics, economy, and culture are those of the meaning, role, and function of newness in Korean films, through which we can understand the circumstances and trends of Korean films today.

Keywords: Korean cinema, Korean New Wave, auteurism, realism, irony, spectacle,

Desire for Newness and "Korean New Wave"

Newness and innovation has been largely welcomed throughout film history, whatever its country of origin. Generally, in the writings of most film histories, each period has been represented by aesthetic advances. However, passion for change in Korean cinema is distinct in that a compelling and even obsessive drive toward innovation has undergirded the entire history of the film industry.

This Korea cinema's distinctiveness originates in its embattled modern history, which spans Japanese colonization, war, and military dictatorships. During these times the Korean film industry had difficulty acquiring a secure financial base, which resulted in the release of mostly small-scale and crude films. Film content was not artistic or thoughtful enough to interest intellectuals. In a culture that esteemed letters over images, moreover, it was difficult for film to achieve a position in high culture. Critics called Korean movies vulgar and cheap and saw the industry as an embarrassment when compared with well-made films of the West. In the late 1970s, film critic and director Ha Gil-jong excoriated the Korean film industry: "Where does Korean film stand in the world? Nowhere. It's neither alive nor dead. It's no more than a half-baked imitation with a dirty commercial spirit."[1] The weaknesses of Korean cinema had to be overcome by innovation, which had been the historical task of Korean filmmakers.

This ambition for innovation went hand-in-hand with the desire for modernization. Modernization and innovation were the dearest wish of a country like Korea that had undergone colonization. If innovation in the film meant striving to strengthen business and to construct a more efficient industry, as well as establishing Korean cinema as an independent art form, all this devolved to the problem of how to overcome the pre-modernity of Korean film. At the same time, filmmakers hoped to move film from a peripheral status to a focal one. In sum, the desire for change was equivalent to the desire for recognition.

Recent efforts in Korean film have almost satisfied this desire. The success of Korean films in the past few years has been surprising. Korean films have exceeded 50% of the domestic film market share, and some films have drawn in over ten million viewers. Not only that, but films like *Swiri* (1999) and *Taegukgi* (*Taegukgi hwinallimyeo*, 2004) became Korean sell-outs in the style of the

[1] Ha (1981, 345).

Hollywood blockbuster. Today Korean films are no longer understood only within the borders of Korea. As films like *Chihwaseon* (2002), *Oasis* (*Oasiseu*, 2002), *Old Boy* (*Oldeu boi*, 2003), and *3-Iron* (*Binjip*, 2004) win awards at international film festivals and receive accolades by international film critics, they are becoming objects of global interest. Korean film no longer occupies a peripheral status. Within country, Korean film seems to take the place of literature and has become a popular subject of scholarly research as it leads the field of visual entertainment. Not long ago all this would have seemed impossible.

These changes have been generally estimated to begin to take hold in the mid-1990s. The structure of film culture and film industry was revamped and a new generation of directors and viewers emerged. The drive for these changes that had existed before led to Korea films' success in the mid- and late-1990s conditions, including policy-level support from the government; a change in the constitution of the film-making industry with a new socio-cultural atmosphere due to economic progress and the advance of democratization; the emergence of new directors and viewers known as the screening generation; and the opening of various film festivals, starting with the Pusan (Busan) International Film Festival. Analysis of these changes should be based on an understanding of their relations with the cinema movement and New Wave in the 1980s and early 1990s because contemporary Korean films have a tendency both to depart from as well as rely on the foundations that New Wave laid down.

The decade from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s marked the era of the greatest fervor and energy for change in Korean film history. Film critic Yi Jeong-ha called this "the era of struggle and the new," yet it was also an era of repression under military dictators Chun Doo-hwan and Roh Tae-woo. The cinema world as well was not free from these social conditions. As Yi Hyo-in pointed out, "The new trend of 1980s Korean film formed when external influence sparked the dormant inner will of our cinema."[2]

The vanguard of change consisted of a fresh young generation, many of whom were cinephiles or student activists from divergent backgrounds. They held in common, though not as a group, certain attitudes towards cinema. Many had been greatly influenced by Marxist political movements and believed that film should be used as a tool for social change. This group generally worked outside the mainstream, seeking an alternative cinema under the rubric of art film. But this was either connected

[2] Yi H. (1989, 21-51).

with Korean movements for societal change or aimed to intervene critically in the mainstream of Korean film that was represented by "Chungmuro."[3] The innovations of this new generation led to the independent cinema movement of the 1980s and, moving into the mainstream of the 1990s, led to the changes in Korean cinema today.

From the late 1980s, the so-called "Korean New Wave" (hereafter New Wave) began with figures like Park Kwang-su, Jang Sun-woo, and Lee Myung-se. The strategy of Korean New Wave for implementing change was to combine auteurism with realism, thus creating a new approach to film they called auteur-realism. While the Western concept of auteurism emphasized film as art, auteur-realism in Korea operated as a practical strategy for challenging every facet of the Korean film institution. Film critics began to criticize the production of cheap films for mass opportunism and emphasized the director's creative consciousness and film's social responsibilities.

The New Wave films were also critical of reality. Representative ones that captured the political tension and social contradictions of the era include director Park Kwang-su's *Chil-su and Man-su* (*Chilsu-wa mansu*, 1988), *Black Republic* (*Geudeul-do uri-cheoreom*, 1990), and *Berlin Report* (*Bereullin ripoteu*, 1991); Jang Sun-woo's *The Age of Success* (*Seonggong sidae*, 1988); and Bak Jong-won's *Guro arirang* (1989). As filmmakers probed society's complexity, class struggle and postcoloniality were the issues they most often brought into relief. Through film, they challenged the governing powers and tried to redefine traditional national values with the aim of redefining their history and identity by rediscovering present experience. Here, the post-division (*tal bundan*) perspective was also one that lay behind the New Wave films. Films that treated the ideological confrontation of that era include *North Korean Partisan in South Korea* (*Nambugun*, 1990), *The Tae Baek Mountains* (*Taebaek sanmaek*, 1994), and *Berlin Report*. From this, it can be found that nationalistic rhetoric was mobilized to restore national homogeneity in these films. The desire to modernize Korean films sprang from consciousness of the social responsibility of films and the resulting author's consciousness.

[3] Chungmuro is an area between Toegyero and Myeongdong in Seoul. "Chungmuro", a cluster of Korean film companies after the mid-1950s, had represented Korean mass films by its name. The age of "Chungmuro", however, ended in the mid-1990s when conglomerates and finance capital entered the film industry, and film companies moved out to Gangnam-gu in Seoul.

Actually, auteurism and realism were not strictly emphasized only in the period of New Wave film, but were significant players in the entire history of Korean cinema from the time of the Korean War. In 1960s and 1970s film auteurism and realism became a way to overcome premodernity. Directors who endeavored to rise above the poor conditions for filmmaking with their artistic vision and consciousness of social reality achieved modernity in Korean cinema for the first time. Their ideational and romantic arguments could not lead to concrete actions, but the New Wave directors succeeded by showing novelty in practice, maintaining a position of emphasizing the enlightening role film directors had in transforming Korean films.

Today, however, social contradictions are no longer treated as the subject of film, and a director's historical consciousness or recognition of current social situations is no longer an important virtue. Concerning the relationship between film and reality, in the past films were conceived through reality, while today the new generation of directors conceive of reality through film, or endow film with more importance than reality. The self-identifying consciousness of history or reality is weaker for today's directors than for New Wave directors. Even the directors called auteurs show a different consciousness from that of the New Wave directors whose desire for newness originated from criticism of pre-modernity, ahistory, and commercialism.

What is the desire for and substance of newness? What is the meaning of newness and which imagination makes it? This paper tries to uncover the meaning of the newness of contemporary Korean films in an historical context by examining the trends of recently spotlighted Korean film directors and comparing them to the New Wave directors. This attempt helps us to understand the general trend of contemporary Korean films with a focus on the change in Korean auteurs' films.

The Loss of Confidence in History and the Decline of Realism

Recent Korean film differs from New Wave in a way that can be understood from a historical perspective. Just as Gilles Deleuze understood the emergence of modern cinema not to be limited to

simply a question of style but to react to specific geographic and historical circumstances,[4] the changes in Korean film today also react to changes within the nation.

Director Bong Joon-ho's *Memories of Murder* (*Sarin-ui chueok*, 2003) provides a window onto these changes. The film treats a specific instance of murder in the 1980s but aims to describe not the outward appearance of that era, but rather the reigning collective unconsciousness. The issue of "seeing" is key in this film. Detective Bak Du-man (played by Song Gang-ho), the protagonist, views the world with stout conviction. He carries a photo album of suspects with him and always states confidently, "My eyes see straight. No one can deceive these eyes." Here, the eyes of Bak Du-man are ones that Lacan tried to differentiate from "gaze" while he speaks of the way the subject is formed in the scopic field. According to him, the eye viewing the object is on the side of the subject, while the gaze is directed towards the object.[5] Because the gaze functions like a blot on the transparency of viewed images, it undermines the subject's position as a neutral, objective observer, while pinning the subject to the observed object itself. Due to this "gaze," the subject can never exactly see the subject, nor take full, scopic control of the object.

Bak Du-man, however, failed to realize this "gaze." He views without realizing that he is also viewed. As a result, he believes what he views to be so evident and flawless that he does doubt what he sees . As the film progresses, however, he loses his confidence little by little and becomes deeply confused. In the final scene, twenty years later, Bak Du-man returns to the scene of the crime and encounters a child who tells him someone suspicious visited the spot. Shocked, Bak turns to the camera blankly. At this moment, he who has always been in the position of observing turns into an object observed by the unknowable one. Also in this moment we, as viewers, transform from being the ones who observe to the ones who are being observed. The intensity of the scene comes from turning the line of sight inside out. The "eyes" always full of conviction now turn into the gaze.

Bak Du-man was not the only one who believed in the eyes' clarity and conviction. The 1980s, in which this film was produced, was an era under the rule of the "eye." The pursuers and the pursued, the suppressors and the suppressed were all in severe straits. All passed through this mad, blind era, an era that dulled "eyes" full of conviction and belief. The 1980s was a period driven by a historical

[4] Deleuze (1989, 1-13).
[5] Lacan (1979, 109)

philosophy based on liberation and freedom from oppression. It was the same in the realm of film activism and the film movement for alternative cinema. A rational and practical consensus on liberation and freedom were formed among film movement activists across society, not to mention among progressive intellectuals.

The story that can be told from Bak Du-man's final, confused expression is the darkness of history: uncertainty engendered by a history that cannot be plumbed. This is reiterated throughout the film by the motif of holes and tunnels, which represent the mystery or monster of unknown history. The final scene indicates confusion in the present when faced with the overwhelming question of history. The loss of conviction points to the loss of a clear view of the historical present.

The loss of confidence in the progress of history began with the social and political changes Korea experienced in the late 1990s, in which the advent of democratization caused political fervor to slacken dramatically. The downfall of Eastern bloc socialism shocked the progressive camp. Also, although modernization had been achieved to a certain degree, societal confusion persisted. The contradictions of colonization that remained, the conflicts following integration in a global system, and the economic crash symbolized by the IMF bailout created doubt in the promises of modernization.

The shift in interest within Korean film from grand narrative to smaller stories has a deep connection with this historical situation. For example, Hong Sang-soo received praise for his depictions in Western minimalist style of the boredom that cankered daily life after the era of political fervor. Hur Jin-Ho described the value of daily life, which was dissipating in the current of history amidst an atmosphere of loss. In other films, personal memory and private experience function similarly as the main topics of interest. Poet-*cum*-director Yu Ha depicted the psychology idolized by the masses in the 1970s and 1980s in his work *The Spirit of Jeet Keun Do—Once Upon a Time in High* (*School Maljuk geori Janhoksa*, 2004), and Kwack Kyung-tack described homesickness through autobiographical experiences in *Friend* (*Chin-gu*, 2001).

Attachment to the past or to memory is connected to the aforementioned societal changes. The biggest trend in recent popular cinema, regardless of genre or director, is making the past its main subject. *Peppermint Candy* (*Baghasatang*, 1999), *The Foul King* (*Banchigwang*, 2000), *Ditto* (*Donggam*, 2000), *Bungee Jumping of Their Own* (*Beonji jeompeu-reul hada*, 2001), *Spring in My Hometown* (*Areumdaun sijeol*, 1998), *No Manners* (*Pumhaeng jero*, 2002), *Silmido* (*Silmido*, 2003), and *The President's Last Bang* (*Geuttae geusaramdeul*, 2005) demonstrate this trend. These films

reproduce the past through the lens of nostalgia, thereby emphasizing a sense of loss in the present. As Fredric Jameson said about postmodern film, there is evidence of a regression that cannot imagine a new history. However, the images of the past are not merely represented anachronistically, but are the cinematic response to social, cultural, and political changes. This is a strong reaction to current contradictions and crises, as well as an expression of them.

It is along these lines that auteurism, which led New Wave and innovation in Korean cinema in the 1980s, was faced with a considerable crisis. The most significant characteristics of Korean auteurism at the time, "modern desire based on history's rationality" and "rationality in practice," began to disintegrate. Accordingly, auteurism, which led to changes in Korean cinema by playing its part in enlightening the public, was no longer possible as such, and doubt was cast on the brand of criticism that regarded socially critical film as realism film, as auteur film.

Sensibilities of Mass Culture

The changes in the post-New Wave reestablish relations with the popular. Actually in the 1990s the dominant themes in Korean society were globalization and culture. In the mid to late 1990s, debates over popular culture increased rapidly, finally securing a position of hegemony over discourse. Of course, this was not a sudden occurrence. Already in the 1980s with economic growth and the expansion of consumer culture, mass culture acquired a significant base.

However, the explosion of cultural discourse came later, with the weakening of political energy. In the era of ideologies, the 1980s and early 1990s, and under the oppressive political situation of North-South division, ideological conflicts between the right and the left and between progressives and conservatives were often severe. In the 1990s the ideological bridle was not entirely broken, but various discourses that abandoned political and economic debates did emerge. Particularly the revolutionary discourse based on Marxism and Eastern socialism found its influence suddenly weakened. Instead, cultural discourse, which replaced the social science discourse that preceded it, came to the fore. Also during this time progressive intellectuals began to show an interest in cultural criticism.

Moreover, viewers also changed. The current generation of consumers of visual culture, who are familiar with video, television, and computers, has a greater understanding of or sensibility for images created by others, and they love pop culture. Film is a natural draw. Recognizing the importance of film from a business perspective, the theory of cultural industry that sees film as the nation's main industry gained power, followed by government policies that strongly supported the industry. The Kim Dae-jung administration, designating film as the next generation's national industry, promised to support it strongly as a cultural industry. In the wake of government policies, financial, administrative, and technological support of the film industry was achieved.

This era's emphasis on popular culture initiated a change in the elitist stance towards film. As the dichotomous view contrasting popular film with art film crumbled, it was necessary to forge a relationship between auteur film and pop. Hence the emphasis on genre films. Director Jang Youn Hyun was politically oppressed for his controversial film of the late 1980s, *The Night Before the Strike* (*Paeop jeonya*, 1990); when he made his feature-length film debut, it was with the trendy, romantic melodrama, *The Contact* (*Jeopsok*, 1997). Having focused on the issue of female discrimination, the independent documentary filmmaker Byun Young-Joo debuted with the erotic *Ardor* (*Mirae*, 2002). Many other independent filmmakers also made their debuts in genre film.

Further, historical contradictions like the North-South division became tools of enjoyment in genre films. In films like *Swiri* (1999), *The Spy* (*Gancheop Ri Cheol-jin*, 1999), and *Love: Impossible* (*Namnam bungyeo*, 2003), the reality of political division itself was not a matter of interest; the issue was how to thematize historical reality for use in a genre film. The reality of political division as a subject in new wave and other, older films could no longer be found.

Even director Lee Chang-dong, who claims to depict social critical consciousness, is no exception. For example, *Green Fish* (*Cholok mulgogi*, 1997), which charges industrialization and urbanization for devastating society, relies on the grammar of the genre of the noir film rather than using techniques of realism. *Peppermint Candy* is similar. This film takes a surprisingly critical view of modern history's contradictions, but the film as a whole is in the form and sensibility of a melodrama. Film is sensitive to popular trends, but also wields the power to change trends anew. As a result, today's Korean cinema churns out a variety of complex genre films, including sci-fi Hollywood-style blockbusters and fantasies.

New directors prioritize the receptivity of popular film. Low-brow pop culture in the 1970s and 1980s such as TV, kitsch, comic books, etc., now provide an important foundation for directors. *Old Boy* (*Oldeu boi*, 2003), *Beat* (*Biteu*, 1997), *Fighter in the Wind* (*Baram-ui paiteo*, 2004), and *Deulist* (*Hyeongsa*, 2005) were originally comic books. Compared with auteur films, which were connected with high art like literature or fine arts, recent films represent a sea change. Representative examples of this include Jang Jun-whan's *Save the Green Planet* (*Jigu-reul jikyeora*, 2003), in which we see kitschy scenes and a comic book-like quality; Yu Seung-wan's *Dazzimawa Lee* (*Dajjimawa ri*, 2000), which finds a new aesthetic source in the 1960s *sinpa*[6] style acting; Yu's *Arahan* (*Arahan jangpung dae jakjeon*, 2004), which exploits the imagination of the chivalrous hero; and the popular sensibility used in *Memories of a Murder*.

No longer do B-grade and cult films constitute a secret code just for outsiders. They have become a wellspring for the mainstream imagination. In the past this style shocked mainstream filmgoers or was used to spur resistance, but now such styles have been incorporated into mainstream language and newly conventionalized. Similarly, non-mainstream language that is deviant and incoherent has also become familiar and popular.

Thus the form of auteur film within Korean cinema is changing. In the past, films that received attention from film critics distanced themselves from popular films, but films now at the center of attention do not distance themselves from conventions of genre film, but rather put those conventions to use. Current films effectively mix the popular with the artistic. Though they rely on commercialism, by adopting new and non-mainstream elements they differentiate themselves from other commercial, popular films. Films by directors like Park Chan-wook , Bong Joon-ho, Jang Jun-whan, Kim Ji-un, and Yu Seung-wan are neither entirely "art" films as in the traditional Western sense of an art film, nor are they pure entertainment with the single goal of making money. Yet they are also not "independent" films that attempt to dismantle mainstream movies based on political convictions. As these Korean works dissolve the boundary among art films, commercial films, and independent films, they establish

[6] *Sinpa* is a new type of play developed in Japan, which is distinct from Japanese traditional play, Kabuki. *Sinpa,* which first dramatized Shakespearean works and modern Japanese novels, became popular for their expression of romantic love and the feelings of ordinary people. During Japanese colonization, *Sinpa* was imported to Korea, giving significant impact to popular culture, including plays and films, and evoking criticism of the excessive emotion and vulgarity. After the end of Japanese colonization, *Sinpa* was considered a pre-modern form of Korean films.

a relationship between art films and genre films. In this manner these films fashion their own peculiar characteristics.

This trend in Korean film has become an important factor in drawing international attention. In the past, Korean cinema mainly garnered international interest by depicting local Korean customs. But today Korean film no longer portrays only the local, and when it does, the method is more universal. Escaping the localized "Korean" space of Korean film and being understood on a global level stems from the ability of these new directors to combine the language of Hollywood and of European art film successfully with Korean subjects. The *hallyu* (Korean wave) blowing through Asia is possible through this same trend.

Ironic Imagination

Traditionally Korean film relied heavily on melodramatic imagination. The greatest number of and the most popular films among those that have been produced were melodramas directed at the masses. In the era of New Wave film, directors did not entirely sidestep the melodramatic imagination. New Wave auteur films relied on melodramatic imagination in their attitude toward the world, though not in style or expressive technique.

Peter Brooks situates melodrama as a worldview or a lifestyle rather than a genre; borrowing his expression, melodrama is central to the modern sensibility.[7] Christine Gledhill sees melodrama as the "structure of feeling" that ruled Europe after the French Revolution. According to her, melodrama is not a style or subject of drama, but an imaginary system that understands the experience of reality.[8] According to Brooks, melodrama seeks hidden moral values in a world in which values are being destroyed and attempts to explain the experience of reality; as such it can be called a world of "moral occult."[9] In other words, the core of melodramatic imagination is the locus where primal secrets or essential nature has been suppressed and awaits liberation.

[7] Brooks (1976, 21).
[8] Gledhill (1990).
[9] Brooks (1976, 14-15).

New Wave, then, which sought historical truths within limping modernization and the nation's division, and which intended to criticize and overcome the contradictions of contemporary reality, was in some measure based on melodramatic imagination. Even though it sought realism it did not believe in an objective reality. It did not entirely escape melodramatic imagination, though, in that it attempted to represent reality within the logic of surface and depth.

Further, New Wave's view of history is melodramatic. The movement criticized the contradictions of reality while seeking the humanism and morals of historical reality. For example, two films judged to have realistically and objectively depicted the conflicts of national division are Jeong Ji-yeong's *North Korean Partisan in South Korea* (*Nambugun*, 1990) and Im Kwon-taek's *The Tae Baek Mountains* (*Taebaek sanmaek*, 1994). These films take a humanistic and moral view of people who were sacrificed in the long running North-South conflict. Here the emotions of sacrifice emphasized by historical suppression belong to the "melodramatization of history."

Today many auteur films, rather than hinge on this kind of melodramatic imagination, rely more on what John Caughie calls "ironic imagination." Irony is the use of words to express the opposite of the original meaning of a word or phrase. It distances you from your language and is always characterized by the ambiguity of meaning afforded by the phrase, " . . . and yet."[10] In other words, irony, when interpreted on a social or historical level, points to the uncertainty of history by showing that positive truth is not possible.

Irony does not directly draw out meaning, but in opening possibilities of meaning through gaps effectively captures the ambiguity and multiplicity of reality. Given that realistic representations in film ~~is~~ are losing steam these days, irony can elicit an important political effect. In today's Korean film industry, however, irony is not being used for political effect, but for creating a new personal style.

Probably the most representative director of this style is Park Chan-uk. Irony can be found in the black humor seen in *Joint Security Area* (*Gongdong gyeongbi guyeok*, or *JSA*). In the uncertain space of an underground bunker, the humorous banter and play of North and South Korean soldiers evoke a sense of irony~~an ironical feeling~~. Humor in this context veils the contradictions of national division. Alenka Zupančič notes that humor creates an apparent indifference to danger by distancing characters from the menacing "the Thing."[11] Humor, then, is a strategy for evading an encounter with

[10] Caughie (1992, 38).
[11] Zupančič (2000, 154).

what Lacan calls "the Real." Therefore, in *JSA* humor emerges in the pretense of not caring about the political situation in order to not have to face the "reality" of national division: four young soldiers in an underground bunker engage in childish games like jacks, the alphabet game, and farting contests in a gesture of turning away from the traumatic encounter of North-South military confrontation. Thus, it can be said that this film employs irony in order to distance itself to a certain degree from the social reality or historical contradiction.

Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance (*Boksuneun naui geot*, 2002) uses irony in a similar way. It introduces disinterest in the antagonist that suddenly appears. The scene in which laid-off workers intimidate their boss demonstrates society's latent class struggle and labor issues. One worker, after pleading with the boss to get his job back, slashes himself in the stomach. It is a brutal scene that is suddenly offset by the introduction of humor. The manner in which the man cuts himself looks ridiculous, and even the knife he uses looks comic because it is an office tool used for sharpening pencils. At the moment this irony appears, it creates distance from the serious situation and thereby muddies the political issue at hand. For this reason, though the film uses provoking imagery, it is not politically radical. Although this film covers political issues like revolutionary anarchy, class hostility, socioeconomic woes, and ostracization of disabled people, the possibility of extreme readings is eased through the defensive effect of irony's moderating and cold-hearted black humor.

Employed on the level of style, irony shocks the viewer and stirs his emotions by strongly contrasting mutually contradictory things. Take for example the masturbation scene of this film. The scene shows several single men masturbating while moaning emanates from the next room. But when the camera moves to the next room in a horizontal tracking shot, the protagonist's sister is seen suffering from an illness. The extreme and sudden reversal of the pleasure of sex turned to physical suffering causes in the viewer a sort of vertigo. Techniques executed to similar effect include the juxtaposition of a close-up shot with an extreme long shot or the conflict of three-dimensional depth perception against two-dimensional flat image. Like the introduction of humor in a violent situation, the energy excited by a close-up shot vanishes with the distance of a long shot, and the three dimensional dizziness of the wide-angle lens is softened by the flatness of the two dimensional image. Through this kind of irony created by technique, the viewer experiences not so much a confusion of meaning, but more a confusion of feeling.

Nietzsche suggests that the widespread use of irony indicates the flourishing of decadence and the near collapse of the life and strength of culture. In recent Korean films, however, there is no moral judgment of irony. Though in Pak Chan-uk's films irony is used as a circuitous route around political issues or reality's conflicts, circumvention itself is clearly a particular gesture. In sum, the use of irony is a sign of the dilemmas facing several of Korea's directors today.

Will to Image

Traditionally, Korean film criticism valued narrative or theme over image. Today, image and spectacle have become the staples of Korean film. Films are made with more attention to surface image or spectacle than depth of narrative or plot complexity. With these aims in mind the industry has amped up special effects and styles. These have, of course, led to an increase in production costs. In addition self-conscious use of cinematic language is strong, focusing on terms like editing and mise-en-scène. This adulation of image, using Nietzsche's expression, could well be termed "will to image."

For example, in *Volcano High School* (*Hwasango*, 2001) the narrative is relatively poor, but the brilliant images created by computer graphics capture the gaze of the viewer. This trend is especially prominent in action films, in which the images of action serve to create motion, speed, spectacle, and excitement rather than being used for identification or psychological description. The visual effects representing an action are more important than the action itself. Slow motion, wire action, quick editing, and computer graphics, which seem to have been influenced by Hong Kong action films, have come together to make what film scholar Tom Gunning calls "attraction cinema"[12] to lure the gaze of the viewer.

However, Korean film's emphasis on visual sensation leaves room for more than flashiness and spectacular special effects. Many so-called auteur directors today tend to portray intense violence or physicality in their films. Two examples are Park Chan-wook, a Cannes Film Festival award winner, for his idolization of violence and Kim Ki-duk for causing contention with his intensely cruel reflections. Jang Jun-whan, with his uniquely heretical imagination, also fits in this category. In Jang's

[12] Gunning (1989, 35)

Save the Green Planet created an aesthetic of confusion by exceeding the normal level of expression. The film tanked in the box office, but critics ardently praised it. Films like *Friend (Chin-gu*, 2001*)*, *Blood Rain* (*Hyeol-ui nu*, 2005), and *A Bittersweet Life* (*Dalkomhan insaeng*, 2005) never failed to include a scene of cruelty. Hong Sang-su's films do the same. Hong's films disturb by exposing the baseness of life to such excess that they could be viewed as a kind of pornography.

Why are today's directors extreme in their use of the visual sensation of the image? Why are they attached to negative, deviant, and violent images that give rise to visual shocks, excitement, and disgust? Is this a sign of pathology or personally destructive perversion? No, this can rather be understood as the product of a drive or an impulse toward innovation. In film, violence has sometimes been a means of aesthetic experiment. Examples can be found in the emphasis on sex and violence in European art films or in New American Cinema. Aside from directors like Sam Peckinpah, Stanley Kubrick, and Martin Scorsese, who have sought a straightforward aesthetic of violence, many art film directors have attempted to innovate the language of their films through violence. Treating violence in this manner exposes the basic essence of a film and is one way of seeking innovation. Violence, cruelty, and the allure of repulsion crafted by contemporary directors can be seen in this light.

On the other hand, sustained violence increasingly dulls the sensibilities of the viewer. Only more severe violence will move the viewer. The task of renewing sensibilities is best understood on a historical level. "Deleuze asks, if the true world no longer exists, and the world is not what it appears to be, what is there left to believe in? The Nietzschean answer is bodies."[13] Realism's decline and the increased interest in the body in Korea seem to be part of the natural course of history. If so, then the emphasis on physicality and sensibility becomes more than simply a way to arouse feeling; it becomes a method of restoring our relationship with a lost reality. In these "post-reality" times, are not the body and feeling the only real things left?

Today, then, the key is not a re-enactment of reality or a drawing out of the hidden truth, but is related to power and intensity. In a weary reality in which everything has become commodified, in a world in which people immediately get used to new things, the important question is how to maintain intensity. Would not relying on violence be a way to maintain that kind of intensity? In other words, is not violence an expression of change? A sort of addiction to physicality or intensity of feeling, then, holds meaning on a historical level.

[13] Quoted in Pisters (2003, 85).

At the same time, violence (including the irony mentioned above) is also a symbol of the aesthetic deadlock of contemporary Korean auteur films. In Jang Jun-hwan's *Save the Green Planet*, the plot centers on saving the planet by standing up against an alien invasion. The film is a good example of violence upon the body as well as the sensibilities of popular culture and irony. Although this film demonstrates a bizarre imagination without precedent in Korean cinema – with its paranoid protagonist, comic book-like nonsense setting, and kitschy mise-en-scène – it nevertheless takes on reality by using the protagonist's paranoia as a device to draw out the stage of Korean social conflict. Further, despite its absurd content, insofar as the film brings to mind a historical labor dispute (the Wonjin Rayon incident), its roots are set in reality. How then is the reality dealt with in this film?

First and foremost, this film displays an infantile imagination. There is something of a child's fantasy or a game about this film: the aliens' telepathy can be blocked by wearing a helmet, the aliens can be eradicated with a bandage, a barber shop chair and a toilet seat are used as torture implements, new characters are underdeveloped, and the handwriting in the research notes is childlike. Even a naughty inclination toward violence or obscenity speaks to this film's childish tones. This film, like a child who brags about a dirty word he learned, revels in morbid jokes and random acts of violence. The lack of distinction between kitsch and abject things further demonstrates the childish side of this film. Moreover, the film is full of degrading images of an attachment to mother: an underground secret room shaped like a vagina, a male boss wearing women's underclothes, torture devices for abnormal sexual use, a spaceship in the shape of a fallopian tube used to destroy the earth, etc. This kind of childishness can be seen as the site of the new generation's sensibilities and as a test of a new style of film based on infantilism and crudeness.

However, this childish imagination is also tied up with the desire to kill the father and to destroy the language of genre film. Genre film is the father that has fostered the sensibilities of the pop culture generation. Genre films have constructed the thought framework of this generation. Like the "replicant" trying to destroy the creator, "Tyrell", in the movie *Blade Runner*, this film takes existing pop films and creates confusion through irony and distortion. Through this carnival and destruction of form the author hopes to create something new. Making ridiculous and changing the usage of everyday objects like bandages, mannequins, note paper, and helmets can be seen as an attempt to enliven familiar things by twisting our experience of them. Mixing seriousness with jokes, violence with humor, tragedy with comedy, reality with cartoonishness, the everyday with the extraordinary, and

high value with superficiality provides the shock needed to create a new grammar. The strategy for this is dubbed “childishness” or “returning to childhood.”

However, this childishness can be understood instead as a reflection of the aesthetic confusion that the director, who has gotten astray between responsibility for historical reality and free imagination, unconsciously displays. The film retains a critical interest in reality while enjoying the extremes of imagination. This is why the film is felt to be melancholic. The last scene played demonstrates this well. After the earth has been blown up a single television set floats through space, and on the screen memories of childhood flicker painfully. This signifies that today the only way for the past to be represented is through pop culture (television). But this image is contradictory. Although as we are imprisoned within an illusive mechanism of television, we cannot be certain whether what we see on it is real or false, what is reality or imagination, we cannot free from the utopic memories of the past. If the past lit up on he TV signifies a wish for a utopic history beyond oppression and conflict, the wish remains in places like paranoia, confusion, destruction, and even within that fictional mechanism called television. They cannot possibly be given up even in the eras of image and post-history. No matter how extreme our imagination is, no matter how crazy we pretend to be, and no matter how violently we try to refuse, reality is still painful. This bitter irony characterized by the coexistence of image and reality as well as ideology is therefore melancholic. Thus, the melancholy found in *Save the Green Planet* demonstrates well the dilemma that the director, who does not find its way out between the responsibility for reality and free imagination, falls in.

The Meaning of Changed Newness

Korean cinema has always thirsted for innovation. Innovation was first sought by breaking away from films that were considered premodern and cheaply produced in the hope that Korean film would be born again as a national art, but this remained a historical task. As the New Wave movement arrived, change became more visible. The power to inspire that kind of change lay in the recognition of film’s social roles and responsibilities.

Contemporary Korean films are still changing beyond the Korean New Wave. It is not the philosophy and belief that directed the New Wave that fuel today's innovation of Korean films. It seems that the pursuit of newness can no longer follow the same path as the cinema movement and New Wave, due to the wave of commercialization that forces newness and innovation to follow the logic of the culture industry. Roughly speaking, shock, change, and revolution have become a part of the system. Unlike innovation in the film world in days past, contemporary Korean film whirls through a maelstrom of sudden change. Korean cinema has begun to take its place within the flow of global media, communications, video games and other new visual industries.

Though in the past, New Wave attempted to create a space between itself and popular film by setting forth the enlightened role of the author, today directors strive to work directly with popular film. New Wave was unable to overcome the gravity of reality and tended to view things through a political lens, while today's directors have broken the fetters of film's need to fill a social role, and they allow themselves to imagine freely. They no longer feel compelled to present all things Korean, but when they do treat Korean topics, it is through a universal cinematic language so that the world can understand. Films with this agenda are not necessarily art films. Technology is important to up-and-coming directors, and they emphasize spectacle or emotionally charged images rather than deep themes.

This circumstance tells us that the newness of contemporary Korean auteurs does not lead to innovation of mainstream films or criticism of social reality. The meaning, role, and function of newness are now changed. However, this change is just a symptom. In other words, newness in contemporary Korean films is not merely image play beyond the gravity of reality or a tool for boasting of cinematic talents, but an indicator of the dilemma faced y Korean auteur films. It is necessary to pay attention to the fact that auterism functions through distinction. According to Pierre Bourdieu, the field of art and culture is also a kind of field of power, where distinguishing my products from others is prerequisite for occupying high status.[14] New Wave films criticized commercial films and searched for newness and innovation, which was regarded as the key accomplishment of modernity. However, this strategy can no longer work, as there is no clear distinction between art films

[14] Bourdieu(1993, 30)

and entertainment or mainstream films and alternative films. Thus, how can distinctions be made in filmmaking? Aren't sensibility, irony, and strong and sensitive images the strategy for distinction adopted by Park Chan-wook, Jang Jun-hwan, and Yu Seung-wan? In a way, this may show what newness and innovation in contemporary films really means.

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