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The Critical Social Turn of Queer Korean Cinema: *Hospitality and the Temporal Economy of Queer Kinship in* The Bacchus Lady *(2016)*

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Abstract

Recent queer Korean cinema radically questions the efficacy of normative family structures and envisions a more radical type of kinship that is not reducible to the marriage-based family. Refusing simply to celebrate public recognition and marriage equality, films showing this new trend are more concerned with intimate relations that bind various social others together. This shift in film production expands the concept of queer Korean cinema to encompass its evolution as a mode of critique regarding both hetero- and homonormative assimilation to mainstream society. This article specifically focuses on E J-yong's Jugyeojuneun yeoja *(The Bacchus Lady, 2016), and its engagement with theories of queer kinship and temporality. By portraying the quandaries of an aging prostitute involved in a series of assisted suicides and in caregiving of a national "other," the film troubles life-producing kinship structure that demands marriage, bi-parental rearing, and heteronormative relations. By analyzing the formation of alternative kinship and its relation to queer temporality in the film, this article argues that the issue of life and death no longer functions as a narrative trope of developmental logic, one that presupposes normative life cycle. Rather, the film foregrounds it as a critical tool to problematize normative kinship structure that buttress the Korean nation-state.*

Keywords: queer Korean cinema, queer kinship, queer temporality, hospitality, the death drive

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Introduction

In a 2013 interview with Sundance Film Festival director John Cooper, Phillip B. Crook, writing for *The Huffington Post*, asked what notable differences separate queer films made in the United States from those made in other countries. Cooper replied sympathetically that sexual minorities in many nations still suffer from oppression because they do not possess legislative freedoms and civil rights increasingly available to those living in America. His roundabout answer, however, implies that world queer cinema—and most notably, films from non-Western countries—does not yet enjoy enough freedom in either form or content.

Interestingly, Cooper frames his comment in relation to the cinematic representation of queer families, arguing that contemporary queer Western cinema has moved beyond "learning about [one's] identity," a thematic focus of previous queer film production, and now discusses "living an authentic life in the modern age" (Crook 2013). Although he came to this conclusion by observing a very specific geographic and cultural setting, which is an independent film festival circuit in the United States, Cooper's comment invariably invokes the neoliberal primacy of family values and queer communities' will to assimilation most clearly symbolized by the promise of marriage equality. By reducing the authenticity of queer lives on screen to the normative formation of a nuclear family unit that consists of two parents and their offspring, he also solidifies the tenacious rhetoric of "white heteropatriarchal middle-class families" or the "American standard of living" (Ferguson 2004, 86). Such an idea risks immobilizing the flexibility and fluidity of kinship. Likewise, as long as we perceive queer cinema as an exclusive, cultural product that imagines the fantasy of the nuclear family for LGBT-identified audiences, we diminish the political potential of queer cinema and media that challenge diverse forms of social injustice and extend their critical scope to discrimination against other marginalized beings. Cooper's assimilative move thus re-affirms and unfairly gauges the queerness of the non-Western world against the Western norm through the problematic misconception of queer freedom. It also neutralizes the political progressiveness of queer communities.

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But what if queerness still resides and thrives in bodies that are deprived of freedom as well as their cinematic representations? And what if one can imagine and actualize queer kinship that does not necessarily fall under the normalizing power of a "standard of living"? To put the question differently: If the family formation epitomizes the level of queer freedom, are there "not other ways of feeling possible, intelligible, even real, apart from the sphere of state recognition"? (Butler 2002, 26) If queerness means and embodies "notions and feelings of immorality, deviance, weakness, illness, inadequacy, shame, degeneracy, sordidness, disgust and pathos," queer subcultures may flourish even more where there is no institutional recognition of non-normative families (Dyer 2002, 6). And if the promise of state recognition did not fully attenuate the radical potentiality of queerness, then, contrary to Cooper's belief, films from countries without or with less "queer freedom" in their cultural-political systems ironically may allow for more freedom in representing queer lives through their commitment to imagining queer kinship that is not reducible to the institutional family formation sanctioned by the state.

The queer cinemascapes in South Korea, where the family-oriented community and the homophobic social structures affect many sexual minorities, provides a revealing example. The normative desire of forming an ideal family in socially intelligible forms has driven the narratives of countless films throughout history, but more and more queer films now question the value of the normative family structure and envisions a more radical type of kinship. Through a form of kinship that is not mediated through blood, but rather through non-consanguineous intimacies, these films exemplify what I call the critical social turn of queer Korean cinema.

Recent films such as *Yokjeong-i hwalhwal (*All about My Father, directed by Lee Sang-woo, 2015), *Dohui-ya* (A Girl at My Door, directed by Jung July, 2014), *Igeot-i uri-ui kkeuchida* (Futureless Things, directed by Kim Kyung-mook, 2014), *Kkum-ui Jane* (Jane, directed by Cho Hyun-hoon, 2016), *Bimil-eun eopda* (The Truth Beneath, directed by Lee Kyoung-mi, 2016), *Agassi* (The Handmaiden, directed by Park Chan-wook, 2016), and *Jugyeoju-neun yeoja* (The Bacchus Lady, directed by E J-yong, 2016) all illustrate

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this critical social turn and alternative forms of queer kinship.[1] Refusing to celebrate public recognition and marriage equality, these films are more concerned with intimate relations that bind various social others together. This critical social turn in contemporary films enables us to revise the concept of queer Korean cinema to include its critique of both hetero- and homonormative assimilation to mainstream society. This article examines the ways in which queer kinship troubles the heteronormative concepts of family and of progressive time by analyzing E J-yong's *The Bacchus Lady*. Set in contemporary Seoul, the film revolves around an elderly prostitute named So-yeong and her sudden and unexpected role as caregiver to a child abandoned by his father and the South Korean nation-state as well as her relationship to a series of elderly men, who, likewise, have been left behind by their families and the state.

This article argues that the film exposes the absolute hospitality of a queer family in its temporal and spatial formation. By foregrounding the protagonist's role as an aging prostitute who forms queer bonds of intimacy with her suicidal customers, while also becoming a caretaker of many different social others, the film undermines the fantasy of hetero-marital kinship and constructs alternative links between marginalized subjects ostracized by society. In the first part of the article, I will explore important aspects of the critical social turn in queer Korean cinema by introducing a few significant films that explore the idea of kinship. Through a close analysis of *The Bacchus Lady* as a case study, the remainder of the article will elaborate on the implications of the critical social turn as well as the cinematic representation of queer kinship and temporality.

The Critical Social Turn of Queer Korean Cinema

The growing popularity of queer cinema and media art in South Korea

1. The transliteration of Korean names in this article follows the "Revised Romanization of Korean" except where already established romanization is preferred by specific directors such as E J-yong and Jung July.

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in recent years has spawned optimism, in part due to the sheer visibility of queer subjects on screen.[2] Queer cinema that used to be appreciated by a small number of fans and LGBT populations is now drawing much broader audiences, attracting viewers of different social backgrounds and sexual orientations. Considering the low level of public visibility and social acceptance of sexual minorities in South Korea, the popularity of queer cinema is an unprecedented phenomenon. At the same time, recent queer Korean cinema has constantly expanded its thematic and formalistic scope beyond the traditional feature film format and the stereotypical banality of the coming-out narrative. Indeed, contrary to the term's common parlance in South Korea, the concept of queer Korean cinema has already outgrown the monolithic and parochial notion that is predominantly associated with a small number of identity-based categories such as gay and lesbian. In the process, it has become a new mode of cinematic art that engages with a wide spectrum of social injustices. In fact, queer cinema, broadly construed, should include not only films featuring LGBT characters and narratives associated with them, but also films revealing the innovative aesthetics that challenge heteronormative standards and films that are interpreted as queer by the audiences. For instance, *The Truth Beneath*, *A Girl at My Door*, *Futureless Things*, and *The Bacchus Lady* are not commonly categorized as queer films because the main focus of their narratives is not on LGBT characters. But, when viewed through the exploration of non-normative family and social relations as well as through a critique of rationalized temporality of human progress, these films acquire subversive quality in questioning heteronormativity.

The thematic and formalistic expansion of queer Korean cinema has generated a new, radical approach to representations on screen. Of course, queer cinemascapes in South Korea are not unidirectional; on the one hand, some films cater to the expectations of LGBT audiences and straight female fans, such as *Dubeon-ui gyeolhonsik-gwa hanbeon-ui jangnyesik*

2. I have explained elsewhere the recent popularity of queer Korean cinema in terms of its recognition in global cinemascapes, the aesthetic and formalistic innovation of independent queer cinema, and the financial success of big budget queer films by established directors (Kim 2017, 61).

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(Two Weddings and a Funeral, directed by Kim Jho Gwang-soo, 2012) and *Yagan bihaeng* (Night Flight, directed by Leesong Hee-il, 2014). These films either center on romantic relationships between same-sex couples or express sympathetic attitudes toward the portrayal of queer characters, thus allowing for the cultural and social recognition of sexual minorities. Citing B. Ruby Rich, one might call them "films of validation" (2013, 41). On the other hand, another group of films celebrate the radical potential of queerness. I argue that this latter trend is now creating a slow but significant change in the queer cinemascapes of South Korea. For instance, more queer characters are now portrayed as daring or unapologetic about their non-normative subjectivity, rejecting blind aspirations to assimilate into mainstream culture. These ostensibly opposing categories of films are not mutually exclusive and, in fact, are often complementary and even permeate one another. Nonetheless, the thematic and stylistic diversification of queer Korean cinema is a highly encouraging tendency. Because some films that belong to the former category tend to repeat generic conventions and similar themes found in the so-called Boys Love films, the diversified mode will engender artistic development and genre adaptability of queer Korean cinema in general. The latter tendency needs to be further examined because it means that queer Korean cinema is now engaged in more intimate conversations with the global queer cinemascapes.

Just over two decades ago, New Queer Cinema in Anglo-American countries demonstrated a similar critical intervention by presenting defiant and "antisocial" queer characters. Highly innovative in cinematic styles and non-apologetic in the portrayal of non-normative life styles, New Queer Cinema responded to the queer cultural movement and activism that consolidated in the late 1980s and early 1990s, a turbulent period characterized by the AIDS crisis. It is symptomatic that the daring narratives and stylistic ventures found in New Queer Cinema are now in full flourish in a country where homophobia in both the public and private spheres has accelerated in recent years.[3]

3. The recent surge of homophobia in South Korea ranges from public hate speech to violence in private and public sectors. In the spring 2017, for instance, the then presidential candidate,

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Yet, there is an interesting difference in the political and cultural stance between the earlier wave of New Queer Cinema and recent queer Korean cinema. Whereas New Queer Cinema committed itself to the disruption of the normative social order—a move that consequently brought accusations of antisocial posturing, I would argue that its contemporary counterpart in South Korea is marked by a critical social turn. In other words, recent queer Korean cinema has a tendency to temper any perceived antisocial drive with a nod toward a more critically social consciousness. An important consideration of this critical social turn is the intervention of these films in highlighting discrimination against a wide array of marginalized groups, beyond the restricted representation of members of the LGBT community. Jung July's *A Girl at My Door*, for instance, highlights systematic violence against women, sexual minorities, and migrant workers in a small rural village. Kim Kyung-mook's *Futureless Things* also features different marginalized characters such as a gay couple, a lesbian, and a North Korean defector, all of whom are working as temporary workers in a suburban convenience store. On the narrative level, these films suggest that those who are exploited, abused, and discriminated against in the margins of Korean society are loosely but intimately connected, regardless of their social, cultural, or identity-based background. Thus, the social here does not stand for blind assimilation to a normative social structure; instead, it refers to the formation of an alternative subculture that is contingent and resilient. It is not anchored in social norms per se, but rather exists outside regulatory powers aimed at disciplining non-conforming subjects. I would define the socializing force central to this loosely organized community as a sense of queer belonging. Or, one might also call it a more radical form of queer kinship. Hence, another important consideration of the critical social turn

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Mr. Moon Jae-in adamantly and publicly stated that he hated and opposed homosexuality. His homophobic remark brought about heated debates, which were, in turn, soon drowned out by calls for regime change. Though he might have pretended to be homophobic to win the conservative vote, the impact of his statement on Korean society cannot be underestimated. Another example is the recent witch-hunt against gay soldiers. The South Korean Military Criminal Act (92-6) criminalizes anal sex even though it is performed consensually and outside of military camps. And military prosecutors have continued to "out" and charge military personnel through alleged sting operations using gay dating apps.

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is the formation of queer kinship that binds its members together beyond either blood-based biological kinship or document-bound legal kinship.

In an attempt to discover hope that is not reduced to pure negativity, José Esteban Muñoz (2009, 277) introduced the concept of queerness as belonging. He argues that "[the negative] sentiments associated with despondence contain the potentiality for new modes of collectivity, belonging in difference and dissent." Questioning the "reductive binarisms between the social and the antisocial and between positive and negative affect," Ann Cvetkovich also argued that antisocial affect can "create new forms of sociality. . . . [and] serves as the foundation for new kinds of attachment or affiliation" (2012, 6). To me, the critical social turn observable in recent queer Korean cinema amounts to a cinematic call for such new modes of collectivity or affiliation. In other words, instead of blood-based kinship and gendered and hierarchical relations, the sociality represented in recent queer Korean cinema assembles its members through a sense of belonging in their common experiences of exclusion and isolation. Despondence, shame, and isolation construct their queerness. But, at the same time, their co-existence with those residual negativities ironically transforms them into hopeful beings. This ambivalent aspect of queerness enables a cinematic imagination of queer cohabitation or queer kinship as a cultural negotiation.

To be sure, previous queer Korean films, such as *Naeil-lo heureu-neun gang* (Broken Branches, directed by Park Jae-ho, 1995), also experimented with the negotiation of queers within a normative family structure. Yet, the representation of radical forms of queer kinship or belonging based on intimacies that extend to other marginal subjects is a more recent shift. All in all, the critical social turn and the cinematic reconstruction of kinship on screen should be understood as a cinematic process of opening spaces for queer subjectivities in a country where their access to public recognition is constantly disavowed and their admission to legal inclusion is always denied despite global waves of marriage equality and queer citizenship. Put differently, the critical social turn in queer Korean cinema is a newly invented mode of resistance that binds its kin members neither through blood nor through contract but through a sense of belonging and intimacy.

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At the same time, the investment of queer Korean cinema in imagining queer kinship suggests that queer Korean culture has now begun to challenge life-producing, sustainable, and reproduction-based forms of kinship and social structures that demand opposite sex marriage, a two-parent family structure, and heteronormative assimilation.

Hospitality and Queer Kinship

The Bacchus Lady is E J-yong's ninth directorial feature. Since his debut in 1998, E J-yong has produced a diverse array of genre films that include period dramas, mockumentaries, and comedy. But, he made his name mainly by directing star-studded melodramas, including *Jeongsa (*An Affair, 1998), *Sunaebo (*Asako in Ruby Shoes, 2000), *Dugeun dugeun nae insaeng* (My Brilliant Life, 2014), and *Seukaendeul: Joseon namnyeo sangnyeoljisa* (Untold Scandal, 2003). Indeed, E has shown great talent in experimenting with the potential power of stars, particularly that of actresses. In *The Bacchus Lady*, E consciously uses the established star system to evoke cinematic intertextuality, specifically alluding to Kim Ki-young's films. For instance, Yoon Yeo-jeong, the internationally renowned actress who made her debut in Kim's second installment of the so-called Housemaid trilogy, *Hwanyeo (*Woman of Fire, 1971), plays the lead in *The Bacchus Lady*. In addition to featuring Yoon, it also bears noting that another character, Jae-woo, is played by Jeon Moo-song, who starred in the third film of the Housemaid trilogy, *Hwanyeo 82 (*Woman of Fire '82, 1982), yet again underscoring the director's intertextual reference to Kim's films. *Woman of Fire* illustrates the disruption of an urban middle-class home after the family employs an innocent housemaid who fled her hometown in the countryside. The two films' intertextual relations are unmasked in a specific space. In one scene in *Woman of Fire*, the protagonist played by Yoon meets with her hometown friend who works as a hostess in Seoul. They meet in front of the 31 Building (then, the tallest building in the city) in the Jongno district, making themselves a promise of success. This tall, sleekly modern building in Jongno symbolizes the two girls' desire to ascend the social ladder. It

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also symbolizes the omnipotent power of modernization to which they can never catch up. Recalling this scene, I wonder whether the aging prostitute roaming around the same Jongno district in *The Bacchus Lady* could be the future portrait of a housemaid, assuming that she had survived. Because she is uneducated and lacks skills or knowledge in times of rapid modernization, she could not help but work as a housemaid at best or a prostitute at worst.

The Bacchus Lady begins with a two-shot scene of nature. The first shot shows the sky through the trees in an extremely low angle. The second shot is then superimposed through a dissolve, which shows a flower in a bird's-eye view shot. Jang Eun Mi and Han Hee Jeong (2017, 111) interpret this opening scene as a representational space for motherhood. By suggesting that the flower is a Siberian chrysanthemum, which is commonly associated with motherhood, they argue that "the withered flower represents So-yeong's motherhood in the director's articulation of contrasting innocent, sacred motherhood and prostitution" and that "the film's narrative compels So-yeong to have the virtue of motherhood." Since its world premiere at the Berlin International Film Festival in 2016, the film engendered many different controversies in South Korea as a result of its inclusion of enforced motherhood, the sympathetic portrayal of assistive suicide, male fantasy about women as a means of redemption, and the violent depiction of sexual intercourse between the protagonist and her customer. I cannot disagree with them in the sense that her customers take advantage of her motherhood and her status as a poor prostitute without family members; admittedly, there is the constantly lingering trauma of her "abandoned" son whom she had to give up for adoption in the film. Indeed, the soon-to-be-withered flower in the opening scene is obviously associated with So-yeong. But, it is also worth remembering that the first shot is a point-of-view (POV) shot of the flower, suggesting that So-yeong will discover hope at the close of her life. Immediately following the brief opening scene, her encounter with Min-ho illustrates this hope.

After the opening scene, we see a medium shot of Min-ho, a Kopino child, standing in front of a small private ob-gyn clinic in Jongno. "Kopino" is a neologism that refers to half Korean and half Filipino children, many of whom are abandoned by their Korean fathers. Because many South

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Korean heterosexual men have travelled to the Philippines for sex tourism over the last two decades, the Kopino problem has recently become a serious social issue. Instead of suggesting a didactic narrative frame about the Kopino issue, however, E complicates the Kopino issue by relating it to the biopolitical intervention of institutions. Following the medium shot of Min-ho, we see So-yeong approaching him. An elderly prostitute who solicits customers in public parks or mountain hiking trails, So-yeong is called a Bacchus Lady. “Bacchus Lady” is a euphemism that originated from the practice of these elderly prostitutes soliciting their customers by offering them a famous Korean energy drink called “Bacchus.” As their main customers are generally men of the same age, this euphemism implies the mythical function of these prostitutes who can rejuvenate the sexual drives of elderly men. More importantly, however, the elderly men in the film rejuvenate themselves through friendly interactions with So-yeong. For instance, all of her suicidal customers attempt to cultivate a kinship-like intimacy with So-yeong, one that bonds isolated or abandoned beings together.

Ironically, in this opening sequence, So-yeong finds herself at the institution that diagnoses sexually transmitted diseases, thus clinically disciplining and undermining her mythical function. So-yeong meets Min-ho as she sees her ob-gyn, who is in fact Min-ho’s biological father and who has abandoned him in the Philippines. Interestingly, the composition of this medium shot uses a specific prop: When So-yeong asks Min-ho why he is alone there and where his mother is, the director situates So-yeong on the left, Min-ho at the center, and the outdoor sign of the clinic on the right side of the frame, creating an image where Min-ho is stuck between So-yeong and the sign (Fig. 1). So-yeong visits the clinic for STD testing, while Min-ho is waiting for acknowledgement that his Korean father is irresponsible. At the same time, the outdoor sign of the ob-gyn clinic functions as visual evidence of the institutional power that controls and disciplines reproductive practices. Except in cases of rape, incest, serious health issues of the pregnant woman, or serious issues in the fetus induced abortion was officially outlawed in South Korea in 1953. Yet, as abortion is more profitable than contraceptives due to high demand and as the government and police rarely

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prosecute such cases, some ob-gyn clinics have conducted illicit abortions for many decades. It is thus revealing that Min-ho is symbolically "aborted" by his father, or the Korean nation-state, who can decide whether he is a "righteous" blood kin of the nation, even though his mother, a complete other, has raised and nurtured him.

Figure 1. A two shot of So-yeong and Min-ho in the opening sequence

In the introductory volume of *The History of Sexuality*, Michel Foucault presents two forms of biopower: "the disciplines of the body and the regulations of the population" (1990, 139). An institution that disciplines women's bodies as machines of reproduction and one that brings "life and its mechanisms into the realm of explicit calculations," it can be argued that the ob-gyn clinic has become a prime site of biopolitical control and negotiation (143). The biopolitical implication of this brief shot, however, extends itself to the issue of race and nation. Min-ho, the Kopino boy, whose life is dependent upon the recognition of his Korean father, is abandoned and marked as a national other right in front of the institution that helps the nation to advance through reproduction. Ironically, however, he is recognized as a family member by an elderly prostitute who is pathologized by the same medical institution regulating reproduction. Because the aging body of So-yeong has been infected with a sexually transmitted disease by one of her contacts, she is exposed to the situation of a miserable

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young body whose life is at stake. And the very institution that polices and regulates social hygiene, while allegedly helping society to secure and perpetuate its reproductive ideal, turns into a locus of abandonment and paternal disavowal of one's own child. Hence, the ob-gyn clinic, or the hospital, ceases its primary function of treating people based on a spirit of hospitality. At the moment of the Min-ho's disavowal, the hospital—here, a representation of the Korean nation-state—abandons the Kopino issue, thus revealing its appallingly racist, duplicitous nature.

The fact that So-yeong is an elderly prostitute infected with gonorrhea is crucially important. On the one hand, her existence is a symbolic threat to control the "body as a machine"; at the same time, her hospitality toward the Kopino child uncovers the national dimension of what Foucault calls "the regulations of the population," on the other. Later as the narrative proceeds, we learn that So-yeong used to prostitute herself to American GIs and was forced to send her half-African-American son for adoption, presumably due to both her penury as a prostitute and the public contempt toward her and her "half-breed" son. In the middle of the film, when So-yeong visits the Tapgol Park, a site where elderly prostitution thrives, she is confronted by several fellow aging prostitutes. They have harbored jealousy against So-yeong due to her "popularity" among their customers, and they subsequently spread gossip about having contracted gonorrhea. One prostitute directly defames So-yeong for having "spread her legs for Yankee soldiers," thus connecting the sexually transmitted disease to sexual intercourse with foreigners. So-yeong's tragic past and the insult she now suffers parallel that of Min-ho's mother. In this regard, the locus of abandonment I described above extends to the Korean nation-state well beyond the small clinic of Min-ho's biological father. After a brief encounter with Min-ho in front of the clinic, So-yeong sees her doctor. Following the shot/reverse shot that alternates between So-yeong's worried face and the scornful face of her gynecologist, we hear the Filipino woman's desperate shout from an off-screen space, revealing that the gynecologist never called her or their son for five years. Another shot/reverse shot of So-yeong and her doctor arguing with the Filipino woman ensues. And So-yeong sees the woman, Min-ho's mother, stabbing the gynecologist out of frustration. The woman is arrested

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and leaves Min-ho behind. So-yeong voluntarily claims custody of Min-ho and takes him to her home in Itaewon, where she, a transgender woman, a disabled and unemployed young man, and a migrant worker live together as a queer family.

Itaewon is a well-known entertainment district of Seoul where a multi-cultural population of Koreans, American GIs and other foreigners, strippers, gay men, and trans women cohabitate. By positioning So-yeong's home in the heart of this neighborhood, the film accentuates its own queer undertones. So-yeong's routine is limited to specific locations, such as Jongno, Itaewon, and Sowol-gil. Along with Itaewon, Jongno is another area where South Korean gay and trans people socialize. In addition, Sowol-gil and other trails around the South Mountain (Namsan), where So-yeong openly solicits customers on the street, are also frequently inhabited by aging transgendered prostitutes. Abandoned by their family and ignored by the lesbian and gay communities, prostitution is probably the only means of living for these trans women. So-yeong's helplessness and marginalized status lead her in an unending and circuitous path through the queerest spots of Seoul. Seen from a slightly different perspective, the film shows So-yeong's "cruising" around the queerscapes of Seoul.

Yet the director refuses to simply portray the dire predicaments of everyday life. Instead, the film directs our attention to the issue of ethics by highlighting the hospitality that these people offer one another. As noted above, it is an interesting irony that the life of the little boy abandoned by his Korean father and the South Korean nation-state is protected and sustained by So-yeong's queer family. This irony seems to be the director's satirical commentary on what Lee Edelman calls "reproductive futurity," a social perspective that sacralizes children as the future of mankind and blames queer people for destroying humanity's future with their sterile sexuality (2004, 4). The abandonment of Kopino children in both this film and in Korean culture thus suggests that the futurity that the Child symbolizes is secured only when he or she meets the racial standards of the nation-state. Min-ho, for instance, cannot be *the* Child but remains *a* child—an inconvenient other who now awaits deportation from South Korea. At the same time, by embracing hospitality from the queer family in Itaewon

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and by voluntarily remaining under custody of the queer family, Min-ho constructs another form of kinship that his biological father can never build. So-yeong, Min-ho, and her queer family in Itaewon share intimacies that have come into being through traumatic life experiences and the disruption of biological family relations. Throughout the film, we see how all members of this queer family offer hospitality to the Kopino child. In fact, it is arguably the arrival of the Kopino child that binds this queer family together.

According to Jacques Derrida's formulation, absolute hospitality "requires . . . that I give . . . to the absolute, unknown, anonymous other, . . . without asking of them either reciprocity (entering into a pact) or even their names" (Derrida and Dufourmantelle 2000, 25). Whereas the South Korean judicial system registers the racialized and criminalized status of Min-ho's Filipino mother as a foreigner, So-yeong's queer family shows absolute hospitality to Min-ho. This claim holds true considering that their hospitality does not presuppose any division between hosts and guests. For instance, Min-ho is not just a guest but sometimes unwittingly helps So-yeong to conduct her business. In one scene, she leaves Min-ho with the manager of a motel (because no one was available to look after him) while she is "serving" a customer. When the police arrive at the motel to arrest her for prostitution, she escapes the raid by pretending to be Min-ho's grandmother. Moreover, the film does not suggest home as an idealized community that necessarily reconstructs the heteronormative standard.

Instead, the film highlights each tenant's momentary occupation of their rooms. The camera shows neither the entire structure of the house nor occasions when all the tenants join in, but rather focuses on a fragmentary shot of the inside and outside of the house. Their house is portrayed as a temporary site they occupy along their itinerant paths. Even the landlady, Tina, is depicted as a temporary occupant of her own house. The only moments we see her room are those when tenants visit her without any prior notice, interrupting private moments with her lovers or customers. Just like the transgender bar, where she makes a living, her house also becomes her workplace as well as the place for alternative pleasures. E stylistically represents Tina's non-authoritative embodiment of the "mistress of the home." When Tina first appears, the camera observes Tina on the

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second floor overlooking So-yeong and Min-ho through a very low-angle POV-shot. As their intimacy intensifies, we see Tina spend time mostly on the first floor and other tenants go up to her private realm on the second floor, breaking down the spatial division of hosts and temporary guests. This elimination of spatial hierarchy is instantiated by the characters' mobility within the house, such as Do-hun's relocation from his small tenant room to Tina's room after he becomes her lover.

The film also rejects the notion of self-sufficiency. Everyone in this community needs mutual help: Do-hun's disability, Min-ho's temporarily orphaned status, Adindou, the African lady's precarious state as a migrant worker, So-yeong's need for community support, and even the stray cat whom So-yeong feeds all prove that they are not self-sufficient and are mutually dependent beings in need of help and intimacy. As already socially and culturally displaced beings, the absolute hospitality So-yeong and her queer family offer and are offered creates associative forces of solidarity, illustrating the critical social turn of queer Korean cinema.

The Death Drive and the Temporal Economy of Queer Kinship

The original Korean title of the movie, *Jugyeojuneun yeoja* literally translates as "killer woman." This title has both sexual and murderous connotations, and the film portrays both the erotic and thanatotic impulses of So-yeong. This ambivalence of sexual and murderous desires saturates the film with queer politics. Interestingly, we see graphic eroticism only when So-yeong is performing fellatio on her customers, acts that are commonly associated with infertile sexuality. Though So-yeong performs fellatio on her male customer in order to prevent the transmission of gonorrhea, the eroticism in the scene is abruptly graphic. In his famous polemic about nonreproductive sexuality during the AIDS crisis, Leo Bersani poignantly pointed out that the public discourse had deployed a certain rhetorical disdain for sterile sexuality to denounce such practices as prostitution and anal sex. In particular, Bersani finds allusions to contamination in both female prostitution and male homosexuality. He argues that "as contaminated

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vessels, conveyancing 'female' venereal diseases to 'innocent' men," there is "a [legitimated fantasy] of female sexuality as intrinsically diseased," just as anal sex among male homosexuals is associated with "insatiable desire" and "an unquenchable appetite for destruction" (2010, 17-18). As Bersani formulates, the selves of So-yeong's customers or the "masculine ideal . . . of [their] proud subjectivity" is buried in the nonnormative, nonreproductive and "death-inducing" queer body of So-yeong (2010, 29). The negativity of sterile sexuality as opposed to normative social structures not only characterizes So-yeong but also her queer family. The landlady, Tina, is a transgender nightclub singer; the other tenant is Do-hun, who lost one of his legs for an unknown reason and fails to find any stable job. Tina and Do-hun enter into a relationship with one another, constituting a micro-queer family within a queer family. In the middle of the movie, we see a two shot of Tina and Do-hun in which Tina lustfully studies Do-hun's well-built body as he works out. In a conversation with her, Do-hun ascribes his lack of sexual relations to his disability, while at the same time demonstrating his masculinity by showing off his well-built body. Do-hun mistakenly believes that his missing leg attenuates his masculine ideal. It is an interesting irony that Do-hun's lost leg, which results in involuntarily depriving himself of sexual pleasure, is symbolically substituted by Tina's transgender body. The "failed" heterosexual subject represented by Do-hun's prosthetic limb finally finds its match in Tina's queer body. Again, in Bersani's term, his already castrated "masculine ideal . . . of proud subjectivity is buried" in Tina's queer body (2010, 29). In this way, the director captures the queer relation between these two marginalized characters and incorporates it into So-yeong's story.

The death of So-yeong's former customers also accentuates the film's queer attitude. Whereas her current customers are symbolically destroyed in her queer body, So-yeong's former customers, lonely and emotionally devasted seniors who are abandoned by their children, aspire real death, a complete self-annihilation. What is interesting is that these suicidal gentlemen literally implore So-yeong to kill them. All of them willingly subject themselves to execution by the very hands that were once used to ease their sexual desire, which I understand as an interplay of both masochism and death drive. According to Sigmund Freud, masochism

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operates when "[the destroying instinct] remains inside the organism and . . . becomes libidinally bound there" (1961, 163-164). In other words, masochists are those who fail to divert their destructive instinct outward. Freud's description allows us to understand masochism not only as an eccentric form of hedonism, but also as a mechanism with the potential for a relational, if not ethical, attitude, particularly when it is practiced by male heterosexuals, as evidenced in the film. Kaja Siverman argues that the male masochist "prostrates himself before the Gaze even as he solicits it, exhibits his castration for all to see, . . . radiates a negativity inimical to the social order" (1988, 51). The gentlemen's masochistic death drive or their self-destructive aspiration, shares the queer quality of So-yeong in the sense that it operates against the heteronormative and sexist social order that both objectifies and consumes female bodies. Moreover, through the practice of the self-destructive death drive, the suicidal gentlemen also challenge the heteronormative biological timeline by denying its inevitable movement toward a natural death.

In "Beyond the Pleasure Principle," Sigmund Freud defines the death drive as "an urge inherent in organic life to restore an earlier state of things" (1957, 36). The counterforce to this death drive is the so-called "vital drive" (*Lebenstrieb*), which Freud aligns with the (hetero)sexual drive (*Sexualtrieben*). Just as he defines masochists as those who fail to divert their self-destructive instinct outward, Freud also views the death drive as destructive impulses that should "be diverted on to the external world" for the reproductive sustainability of heterosexual subjects (1961, 41). This argument suggests that the (hetero) sexual drive is incompletely assured because it is enabled only by repressing a ceaseless death drive. Hence, the gentlemen's death drive ironically reveals the vulnerable nature of heterosexuality. As Lee Edelman suggests, if "queerness undoes the identities through which we experience ourselves as subjects," the gentlemen's willingness to die at the hands of So-yeong could demonstrate the queerness of their ethical vision, whether consciously or not (2004, 24). They figuratively embody Edelman's notion of the death drive against the progressive temporality of heteronormativity that propels human beings to teleological future while rejecting any regressive or counter-progressive

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movement. In this regard, it can be said that the suicidal gentlemen in the film are challenging the normative life cycle that commands humans to get old and die a natural death. Their death drive first of all represents their willingness to eliminate themselves from biological kinship ties from which they are both symbolically and physically expelled. At the same time, their death drive also illustrates their desire to resist the normative biological timeline that propels one's body toward the moment of death through bio-developmental temporality.

As suggested above, the intimacies portrayed in the film conform neither to the life-producing sexuality nor to the developmental temporality marked by reproduction and child-rearing. If we could define the heterogeneity of intimacies presented in the film as kinship or belonging, their kinship then deviates from the teleological temporality of heteronormative society. As Elizabeth Freeman suggests, "in a chronobiological society, the state and other institutions, including representational apparatuses, link properly temporalized bodies to narratives of movement and change" (2010, 4). Freeman further argues that the heteronormative temporality contains "teleological schemes of events of strategies for living such as marriage, accumulation of health and wealth for the future, reproduction, childrearing, and death and its attendant rituals" (2010, 4). Enacting their queer desires and intimacies while simultaneously saving a national other whom the state and the biological family abandoned, the kinship of the queer family in the film thus troubles the heteronormative temporality of "movement and change."

In this respect, the solitary death of So-yeong in the ending sequence needs to be critically rethought. Her solitary death in prison seems to have disappointed an audience who expected a certain happy ending. Kim Young-ok (2016), for instance, grumbles about the film's narrative choice to have So-yeong die "without family or friends" by saying that it portrays "the quasi-family as superficial and a banal array or display of minorities." But I disagree with Kim's sentimental response and, instead, argue that we should focus on the codified messages behind the stylistic arrangements of the sequence. First of all, the narrative structure as well as the genre specificity of the film already rejects a happy ending. As Peter Brooks argues, "melodrama's

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relation to realism is always oblique" (1995, ix). We know Min-ho will never be recognized as his Korean father's son and thus as the "emblem of futurity" in the Korean nation-state. We know Tina will no longer be able to lead her fantastic show on stage as she gets older. Considering that the South Mountain (Namsan mountain) is a popular site for transgender prostitution, So-yeong's present might also presage Tina's gloomy future. Moreover, we know that So-yeong, the murderous prostitute in her seventies, is close to her own death. If melodrama's engagement with reality is "always oblique," then its representation of reality is also oblique. The melodramatic setting of films exists to be decoded and politicized. And by subverting the happy ending that we anticipate, the film transgresses conventional narrative progress and presents emotional pathos.

In the ending sequence, we see So-yeong's real name finally revealed. The camera captures the moment of covering her body with a white sheet in an overhead shot. Without nondiegetic sound (i.e., sad music), the camera then tracks along the morgue for unclaimed bodies without family or friends. It stops on a close-up of a coffin inscribed with "No Friends or Family. Yang Mi-suk (Cheongju Women's Prison)," at which point the film ends. This unexpected ending suggests that recognition is only available when the subject enters an intelligible matrix of the dominant social structure. Put differently, So-yeong finally joins society with her own death, while she used to live outside of the social norm. Inscribing her real name on her coffin is, in this sense, an act of fixing and disciplining So-yeong's wandering path or mobility in the intelligible and recognizable terms of the state. In fact, all the elderly characters return to the public realm through their death. This reoccurrence of institutional violence echoes the opening scene at the clinic. The note inscribed on her coffin, "Friends or Family," explains who is the "legitimate" heir of a deceased person, how the deceased can be remembered, and who is responsible for the rituals of remembrance. By identifying her with the state's given name and turning her into a body waiting to be claimed by legitimate heirs, institutional power wields its authority. The ephemeral death of So-yeong is hence not simply to suggest that her queer family abandoned her but to critique how the institutional power of the state disciplines nonconforming subjects. The ending sequence thus suggests a

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gloomy portrait of a heteronormative institution that places So-yeong under permanent control after death by erasing and neglecting her lived experiences as prostitute, queer, and the mother and friend of her queer family.

Figure 2. A reverse-shot showing Min-ho protected by So-yeong's queer family

Figure 3. A reverse-shot showing Min-ho in So-yeong's custody while his mother is incarcerated

Despite this gloomy ending, the most touching moment of the film leaves us with hope. After having been involved in a series of assisted suicides, So-yeong is apprehended by the police while she watches Tina's performance with Do-hun and Min-ho. Under the sign of a transgender bar, a shot/reverse shot alternates between So-yeong and her queer family (Fig. 2). The pathos created in this shot clearly resonates with that of a similar shot/reverse shot between Min-ho's mother and Min-ho in So-yeong's custody (Fig. 3). Just as he was taken care of by So-yeong, we know that Min-ho will be taken care of by the transgender performers. The subtle smile on So-yeong's face in the following shot suggests that her queer family will further survive and continue to sustain the life of other marginalized subjects like Min-ho. In other words, as the trope of death troubles the normative life cycle, queer kinship secures the lives of those whom the normative institution has abandoned. And through this radically ambivalent portrayal of queerness, we understand that queerness is already and always transpiercing the divisions between child and seniors, youth and aging, sexual vigor and impotence, able-bodiedness and disability, and reproductive (thus life-producing) heterosexuality and sterile (thus death-inducing) queer sexuality.

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Conclusion

E J-yong's melodramas embody both dramatic depth driven by emotional excess and realistic engagement with social issues of contemporary Korea. In *Melodrama and Modernity*, Ben Singer (2001, 44–48) identifies the melodrama's fundamental characteristics—the presentation of strong pathos; overwrought emotion and heightened states of emotive urgency, tension, and tribulation; an extreme moral polarization; nonclassical narrative structure; and sensationalism. Admittedly, *The Bacchus Lady* follows these melodramatic conventions faithfully. The narrative centers around the alienation of elderly people and So-yeong's involvement in their murder, creating pathos, sensationalism, and the question of illogical cause-and-effect. In addition, we find it morally polarizing to witness So-yeong and her neighbors save the Kopino child, while biological families mistreat their family members. At the same time, as the narrative proceeds, we learn that So-yeong herself is an embodied site of contemporary Korean history. After fleeing from North Korea after the outbreak of the Korean War, she used to work as a prostitute serving the US soldiers based in South Korea, commonly referred to with the pejorative term, *yanggongju*, or Western Princess. Moreover, So-yeong's work as the Bacchus Lady obliquely reflects the widespread social change characterized by an increase in the number of elderly people and related social issues such as poverty, isolation, and depression.

In the middle of the film, we see So-yeong is being filmed and interviewed by a young documentary director, who is obviously the director's double. So-yeong advises that he should produce a feature film telling a love story to make more profit. In response, the young director says he will reward her for her contribution to his film with a quality documentary. In this interlude episode, we find the director's self-reflexive confession of frustration that his feature film cannot fully approach or affect actual social issues. The difference between the Korean and English titles also reflects this deliberation. On the one hand, there is *the* Bacchus Lady, an a-filmic motif as well as socio-cultural reality; on the other hand, there is *a* Bacchus Lady, or a "killer woman," performed by a culturally and historically

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coded actress who is a pro-filmic figure chosen by the director. Yet, I argue that this very attitude of the director in building such a socially engaging melodrama as *The Bacchus Lady* enables a critical approach toward the heteronormative nation-state and kinship structure, situating this film in the critical social turn of queer Korean cinema.

As suggested above, the critical social turn in queer Korean cinema inevitably critiques both idealized representations of queers in most big budget queer films and the parochial purview of identity-bound LGBT cinema. The cinematic negotiation of "antisocial" queerness and the social desire to enable cohabitation with other socially marginalized subjects allowed directors to explore the issue of queer kinship in their films. Instead of fostering LGBT pride or marriage-based kinship, the critical attention of these films is directed at non-normative and non-assimilative ways of constituting kinship. Consequently, these films question and trouble the normative operation of society. As in the case of *The Bacchus Lady*, the incorporation of queer kinship in film narrative accentuates the political attitudes of recent queer Korean cinema. Recent queer Korean cinema attempts to disrupt the fundamental structure that drives heteronormative community to reproduce itself through marriage, child-rearing, aging, and dying a natural death. As I demonstrated in this article, queer Korean cinema symbolically reorients kinship. What the critical social turn of queer Korean cinema ultimately seeks is neither the deconstruction of social structures nor assimilation to the deceptive lure of normativity, but rather alternative kinship ties based on intimacy, interdependency, and absolute hospitality.

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