

Articles

26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31, 32 ... Years:
The Politics of Kang Full's Webtoon
26 Years

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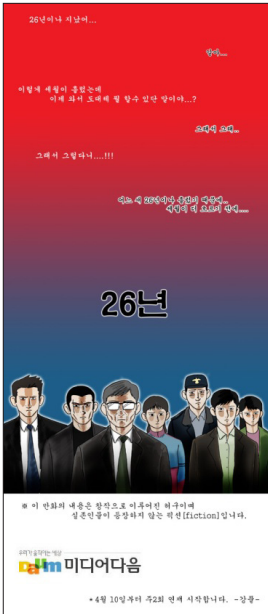


Figure 1.

26 years have passed...
 I know...
 So much time has gone.
 What on earth can we do now...
 That's the thing...
 So that's what it is... !!!
 In just a moment 26 years have passed...
 Before more time passes...

Source: Kang Full, "Prologue," *26 Years*, April 3, 2006, <http://cartoon.media.daum.net/webtoon/viewer/1143>.

This paper examines the emergence of the webtoon *26 Years* (2006) created by South Korean *manhwa-ga* Kang Do-young under the pen name Kang Full and its reception in on- and offline South Korean media. Presenting itself as faction, *26 Years* deals with the aftermath of the 1980 Gwangju Uprising (hereafter May 18). The webtoon envisions a radical response to this contested and traumatic event in contemporary South Korean history through the planned and attempted assassination, in 2006, of former President Chun Doo Hwan by a group of victims of the uprising. In the story, Kim Gapse, who was sent to Gwangju as a trooper in May 1980 and there shot and killed two citizens, decides to take action when, in 2006, some 26 years later, a doctor tells him that he is dying from cancer and has two months left to live. Together with his son, he assembles a group of young people, who had all lost a parent in Gwangju during May 18. After accepting Gapse's remorse over his actions, they together scheme and successfully intrude into former President Chun Doo Hwan's heavily guarded house in order to challenge him to take responsibility. When Chun does not take that responsibility, they instead attempt to take his life. As the story ends, one of

the Gwangju descendants, surrounded by two guards who are ready to shoot her, aims her rifle at Chun. In the final image, a shot rings out.

In response to the serialization of *26 Years* on Daum Communications' *manhwa* portal (30 chapters were uploaded from April 3 to September 28, 2006), a large number of users left comments below each chapter. Here, and in a plethora of webfora, netizens reflected on the webtoon and the political and juridical aftermath of May 18. Some demanded a public re-evaluation of the event, while others debated the potential for and pitfalls of this kind of politicized pop culture. These reflections and debates eventually also reached conventional media. A clear divide, however, was obvious, with progressive media such as the online version of the *Hankyoreh* covering the work more extensively than conservative media. *29 Years*, a cinematic adaptation of the webtoon, was also planned to open in cinemas in 2009. Unlike Kang's other webtoons, which were adapted for cinema, the project was temporarily abandoned. At the time of writing (October 2012) the film is scheduled for release in November 2012 during the last stage of the Presidential election campaign. Once again *26 Years* is frequently covered in the media, focusing on the adaptation, the controversial contents, its employment of social funding in raising money for the projects, and support by so-called 'socialtainer' Kim Jedong and progressive media the *Ddanzis* among others. 26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31, 32... *26 Years* shows no signs of "ending" six years after its serialization and 32 years after May 18.

This paper presents a close reading of Kang Full's webtoon, with a focus on his "faction" approach to May 18 and the particular media affordances of the webtoon: its temporal dynamics, interactivity and employment of metalepsis. The close reading is contextualized through an examination of Kang's wider body of work; in particular, his role in various webtoon relays which counter conservative politics in South Korea. Further, in drawing on literary and media representations of May 18 and an author interview with the artist, this paper attempts to map the emergence of this particular political webtoon, and discuss its impact and limitations as a vehicle of change in current South Korean civil society. Central questions raised by *26 Years* and its reception include how the politicized webtoon as a pop culture phenomenon is related to the appearance of new forms of protest within social movements; how *manhwa* artists exercise agency in this context. Following the temporal dynamics of the webtoon, the paper is structured

in sections, which examine how Kang Do-young and his graphic alter ego Kang Full, various forms of media, readers and non-readers engaged with the webtoon during its serialization. First, however, an introduction to Kang and his work prior to 2006.

Prelude

By 2006, Kang Full was a towering figure among the first generation of webtoon artists in South Korea (Bak and Kim 2010).¹ Many visitors to Daum’s free *manhwa* portal were familiar with him through his immensely popular love-story webtoons *Love Story* (2003) and *Fool* (2004), and his mystery-thrillers *Apartment* (2004) and *Timing* (2005). In this context, *26 Years* may have seemed to be a drastic departure, even a rupture. If not because of its humanist emphasis on overcoming interpersonal and societal barriers which also informed his previous webtoons, then because of its political take on the contemporary meaning of a traumatic historical event.



Figure 2. *Love Story* (2003), *Fool* (2004), *Apartment* (2004), *Timing* (2005), and *26 Years* (2006)

Source: <http://cartoon.media.daum.net/search/webtoon/강풀?category=anotherDiscovery>.

Kang’s online *manhwa* production prior to and in parallel with these popular webtoons, however, demonstrates an artist already actively engaged

1. For a short introduction in English to Kang Full’s career, see Russell (2008).

in socio-political issues. His published collections *Let's Play, Films!* (*Yeonghwa ya nolja!*, 2007) first posted around 2002 on Daum, *Untiring Question Mark* (*Jichiji aneul mureumpyo*, 2002), first posted on KangFull.com² in 2002, and *An Ordinary Life* (*Ilssang dabansa*, 2004), first serialized on *Sports Today* in 2004, all contain seemingly autobiographical elements that demonstrate the author's long engagement. In *An Ordinary Life*, Kang Do-young presents his graphic alter ego, Kang Full, as a former member of the left-radical student movement National Liberation Line,³ for which he illustrated and wrote propaganda in his college days in the mid-1990s (Kang 2007, 191). In *Untiring Question Mark*, he acknowledges that Park Jae Dong's political cartoons (*sisamanpyeong*) in the progressive newspaper *Hankyoreh* had a formative influence on him.⁴ We also see Kang making posters for the Sangji University student struggle against corruption and for autonomy. In a descending metalepsis, we see a graphic rendering of Kang Full standing in front of an August 20, 1995 cartoon by Park, which satirizes the legal approach to May 18 during Kim Young-sam's presidency. Metalepsis is a recurrent feature in comic media (broadly referring here to U.S. comics, European bande dessinée, East Asian *manhwa/manga/manhua* and recent graphic novel genres). Metalepsis is a narratological concept concerned with the paradoxical transgression of the boundaries between narrative levels or logically distinct worlds. The term, in other words, denotes the interaction between the fictive and reality levels in comic narratives, and is one way in which the media self-consciously points towards its own fictive character. Descending metalepsis is produced when 'real persons,' the artist, for example, enters into the fictive universe as graphic characters to interact with his graphic characters. Ascending metalepsis comes about when fictive characters enter into or rhetorically address the outside world, the readers, for example by "breaking the fourth wall of the window pane" (Kukkonen

2. The homepage is no longer available. Apparently, it was attacked by Chinese hackers (Kang, interviewed by the author, 2009).

3. For an introduction to the National Liberation Line policy on the unequal relationship between South Korea and the United States, and the focus on national independence rather than class struggle, see Park Mi (2008).

4. Kang worked for the Korean Teachers and Education Workers Union (Jeon Gyojo) and People's Solidarity for Participatory Democracy (Chamyeo Yeondae) (Kang, interview 2009).

2011, 224).⁵ Kang Do-young, through his graphic personae, Kang Full, and his various interactions with the storyworld, creates a social universe in which the boundaries between fiction and reality are transgressed and blurred.

Not only establishing himself as a person with student activist *undonggwon* credentials, Kang had already explored online *manhwa* as a medium for issue-based social commentary prior to April, 2006. In fact, his online ‘issue’ *manhwa* production closely follows the emergence and consolidation of the South Korean ‘netizen’ as a key social agent in civil society. His first contribution to this genre, *The Story of Miseon and Hyosun* (*Miseon i Hyosun i iyagi*) focuses on the tragic death of two Korean middle-school girls hit by a U.S. tank in 2002. It relates how the event was soon forgotten during the euphoric World Cup soccer days in Seoul and the frustration that was felt at the “not guilty” verdict passed on the U.S. tank driver by an American military court in Korea. By combining digital drawings with private family photos of the two girls and press photos of the incident, *The Story of Miseon and Hyosun* renders the incident in a human interest frame (Kim and Hur 2009). Its multi-modal approach is a characteristic feature of the eclecticism found in essay web cartoons during their boom in the early twenty-first century (Kwon 2005). While *The Story of Miseon and Hyosun* explicitly criticizes the legal status of the U.S. military presence in the Republic of Korea, it is also critical of how Korean citizens forget such events and how politicians fail to engage in the issue. Reacting to this situation, the *manwha* ends with a “collective apology” written below two funerary photographs of Miseon and Hyosun: “What words can we say to you... Only, that we are sorry... Sorry...” This ceremonious gesture aimed at the young victims of alleged deficiencies in democracy is performed with a confident appropriation of the collective voice, which re-engages fickle public memory of the incident.

Kang’s webtoon *Presidential Impeachment: In Fact Roh Moo-hyun was a Pushover* (*Daetongnyeong tanhaek: Sasil No Muhyeon manman haetgeodeun*), a contribution to an anti-impeachment campaign in support of President Roh Moo-hyun in 2004, is more proactive in engaging with the politics of

5. For an elaboration on metalepsis in comics and other popular media, see Kukkonen and Klimek (eds.) (2011) and, in particular, Kukkonen (2011).

memory. Not only is the collective engaged in the graphic narrative, the participatory vein is also foregrounded in joint artistic collaboration. In the heat of civil society anti-impeachment activities, Kang was the driving force behind the posting of around 80 *manhwa* by just as many artists in a so-called web relay on his homepage (Kang, interview 2009). Notably, however, this web relay was not the result of an organized effort as such.⁶ Rather, the relay was the spontaneous response of loosely coordinated groups of *manhwa* artists to Kang's initiative to open his homepage in an attempt to use his own influence to serve as a conduit for concentrating the resentment of like-minded thinkers; making it a temporary locus for such popular disenchantment.⁷ If *The Story of Miseon and Hyosun* was at the vanguard in the Korean context in its exploration of the issue-raising potentials of a multimodal webtoon, the anti-impeachment web relay amplified Kang's homepage as a locus of loosely organized *manhwa-ga* discontents with the perceived disproportionate powers of conservative politics. In the final sequence of Kang's own contribution to the web relay, an increasing number of people with determined, agitated faces gather. Below them the text states: "Wait and see... We are standing behind you. We are living with our eyes wide open. Wait and see... Wait and see."⁸

Employing here an ascending metalepsis, the politics of memory are engaged in a manner that almost corporally manifests potential power in the angry stares of the illustrated citizens, who are invoked as (primarily) former voters for President Roh, and potentially as future voters "against" the 159 Grand National Party and Democratic Party members.⁹

Thus, prior to the posting of *26 Years*, Kang had experience with participating in popular events in which a new generation of Internet users, so-called netizens, re-shaped civil society's forms of protest, and challenged

6. Young web comic artists were, however, connected in various ways, most notably through The Cartoon and Animation Society in Korea (Uri Manhwa Yeondae), as well as the so-called *LoveToon* community events.

7. For an interview with Kang Seong-su, one of the participants in the anti-impeachment relay on Kangfull.com, see Choe Hyonju (2004)

8. For a short discussion of the event in the context of *manhwa* and politics, see Bak (2005).

9. Likewise, the Citizen Alliance for the 2000 General Elections which led a campaign in order to discredit 88 candidates. Eventually 59 candidates were not elected.



Figure 3. The warning expressed by the illustrated masses of citizens who voted for President Roh in the 2002 presidential election is juxtaposed with a photo lineup of the 159 parliamentary members (108 from the Grand National Party and 51 from the Democratic Party) who signed the Impeachment Bill.

Source: Kang Do-young personal possession.

the political establishment. A challenge, which scholarship argues had already manifested itself significantly in mobilizing young voters in the election of President Roh Moo-hyun on a progressive platform in 2002.¹⁰ While his prior issue-oriented webtoons had been timed with popular issues and demonstrated notions of participation, extra-institutional empowerment, and perhaps direct democracy, Kang engaged in an altogether different sort of timing with *26 Years*. While the issue of May 18 had been a point of discursive contention since 1980, it was not a particular focus of debate in 2006. Rather, Kang responded to the *willed amnesia* he perceived to be surrounding the issue and in indignation with the media appearance and coverage of former President Chun’s economic fortune in 2003.¹¹ From this perspective, the artist, now a pivotal figure in the online

10. Kang was temporarily a member of the Nosamo (president Roh Moo-hyun’s fan club), which had been credited with influencing the outcome of the presidential elections of 2003, and led to much debate in conventional media as well as academics on the political impact of social / online media on politics. For a discussion of the relative success of early 2000s online activism, see Kim and Kim (2009).

11. For Kang Full’s linkage of this statement and his decision to make *26 Years*, see Kim Miyeong, “Kang Pul “Isipguman won bakke eopda” Jeon Doo Hwan ssi mal deutgo gusang,”

universe and experienced with shaping issues through *manhwa* postings, could be seen to be attempting to set the agenda in the experimental, ad-hoc field of online issue making in mid-2000s South Korea.

2006.04.10: Chapter 1. Remember That Death!



Figure 4.
May 18 Gwangju People's Uprising
(5.18 Gwangju *minjung hangjaeng*) 1980.5.18–27.

Source: Kang Full, Chapter 1, “Remember That Death,” *26 Years*, April 10, 2006, <http://cartoon.media.daum.net/webtoon/viewer/1157>.

Fiction + Fact = Faction

26 Years opens in the concise, authoritative format of an encyclopedic text. The text describes the events of the spring of 1980, when Chun Doo Hwan, who was in the process of winning presidential power in South Korea, “suppressed the democratization movement of Gwangju citizens” by means of “ruthless armed killings.” As one scrolls down the webpage, a black background fades into a grayish night view of the Jeonnam Provincial Office

in downtown Gwangju. The building is lit up by speech balloons shaped like warped stars: “Tang! Tang! Ta Ta Ta.” In the panel below, the light faintly illuminates the face of a young soldier. Gun in hand, he sees, yet does not see the body spread on the asphalt in a pool of blood in front of him. The reader follows the soldier into the city hall.

The young soldier shoots another already wounded man. Tears well in his eyes.

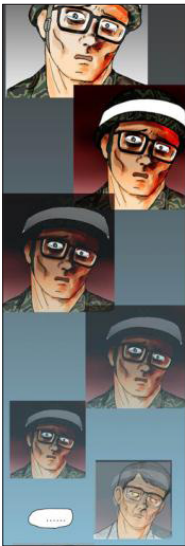


Figure 5.
26 years in one scroll.

Source: Kang Full, Chapter 1, “Remember that Death,” <http://cartoon.media.daum.net/webtoon/viewer/1157>.

As one scrolls further down, the tear-swollen face of the young soldier blends into the face of another man in a sequence of images that fast forwards the reader 26 years into a ward in Seoul Central Hospital. Kim Gapse, the soldier who had done the killing, is now a middle-aged man himself and dying from terminal cancer. The doctor gives him two months to live. Afterwards, in the parking lot, his secretary awaits him. The sickly, dreaming face of Kim Gapse shows determination: “Before my life is gone, there is something I’ve got to do. I have to go to Gwangju.” Thus ends the first chapter of Kang Full’s web *manhwa* posted April 4, 2006.

To readers already well-informed about the event, and aware of the discursive struggles around its verbal representation, Kang’s perspective is obvious. To the unfamiliar reader, the text serves as a factual framing of the narrative. Kang’s ‘faction’ indicates that the historical background is based

on facts but that characters and events are fictive. As displayed in *26 Years*, Kang employs his widely acknowledged narrative skills and the media affordances—the sweeping scroll—to effectively link encyclopedic historicity with visual conflation of Kim Gapse's traumatized face then and now. Kang's designation of the term corresponds with a trend in 2000s historical *manhwa*, which however are based on historical events centuries earlier (Kim Chi-young 2008).

2006.05.13: Chapter 9. People, and People, and People

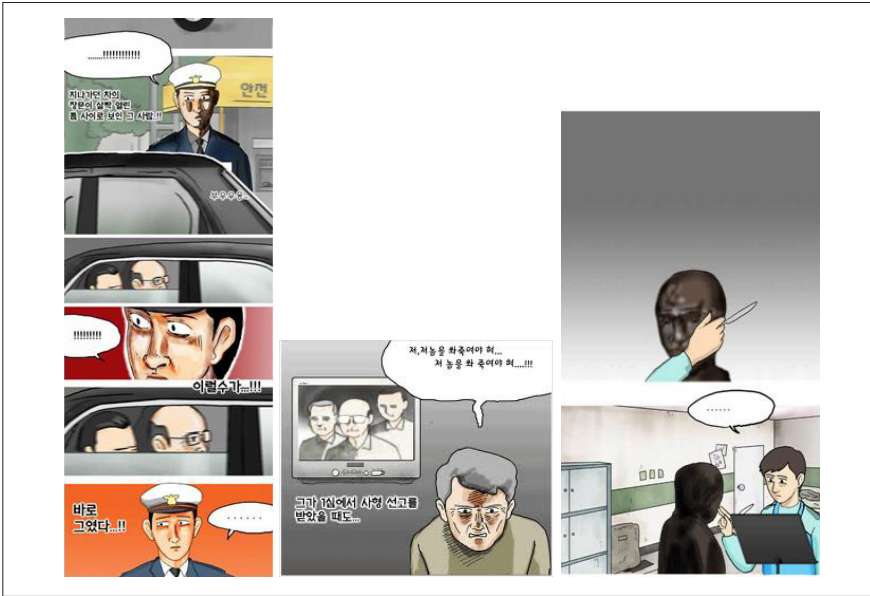
Chun, and Chun, and Chun

On the 13th of May 2006, Kang Full posted the ninth chapter of *26 Years*. Former soldier and current cancer patient Kim Gapse is back from Gwangju. A group of young people in their mid-twenties sit around him: a sculptor, a marksman, a novice policeman, and a Gwangju gangster. They are sons and daughters of Gwangju citizens who lost their lives at the hands of Chun Doo Hwan's soldiers in May 1980. The fifth person, Kim Gapse's son, has grown up in the shadow of his father's lost spirit. Their lives have all been shaped by loss. All six are victims. Contacted by Kim Gapse, they are meeting to plan a mission. The exact nature of this mission is still unknown to both readers and the group of descendants of May 1980, but there are hints of violence in the previews placed at the end of the post.

Former President Chun is omnipresent as memory, in mass media, and in plaster: in the victims' recollections, on TV screens, and in a black car passing by the young policeman, who on his first day on traffic duty is ordered to hold the lights for the former president. Chun is also present as a bust, which Kim Gapse commissions the sculptor to make, including a hollow "to hold something like a gun." He is also present in the obsessive, pent-up anger over his trial and subsequent release from prison. Like a palpable black hole of willed amnesia floating through downtown Seoul, his omnipresent opaqueness is a manifestation of lingering trauma.¹²

12. Kang is not the only *manhwa* artist who has used the motif of present day Chun as an engine

Figure 6. Chun, and Chun and Chun



Source: <http://cartoon.media.daum.net/webtoon/viewer/1205>.

Kang effectively has made the present into a matter of solving one past event—May 18—and does not confuse young readers with further-reaching aspects of national history, nor does he, for that matter, in dealing with May 18, include the otherwise much debated role and responsibility of the U.S. military and government. However, this unrelenting spotlight on a former president has the consequence of almost mystifying Chun as a hegemonic, near-transcendental enigmatic social agent, rather than making the former president understood as a product and manifestation of authoritarian history, or as a cynical manipulator of social codes, as was arguably the case in the contemporary 2005 MBC TV drama *The Fifth Republic* (*Je o gonghwaguk*). While the oeuvre of Kang’s political webtoons and his interviews demonstrates that he does not subscribe to such reductionist

for narratives of a traumatized past and its willed amnesia; nor is he the only artist who has made the representation of this public persona into a site of conflict. In *Manwha Chun Doo Hwan* (2007), Baek Muhyeon opens his graphic narrative of Korea in the 1980s with a prologue in which a golf-playing Chun is greeted in 2004 with the good news that a park has been named after him.

determinism in the embodiment of contemporary history, the populist (*daejungjeok*) vein of *26 Years*, which must be considered in the perspective of the particular affordances of the *manhwa* genre and its narrative economy, facilitates readings of Chun as a super-human agentive force, whose overcoming is of key importance to un-binding the nation from historical trauma.

Netizens, and Netizens and Netizens

In stark contrast, the social space evolving just a scroll below the webtoon in the so-called “netizen opinion” (*netijeun uigyeon*) comment field, is vibrating with fans, supporters, a few critical voices and some seeming political radicals who make statements, debating and testing the boundaries of the right to freedom of expression. Key to the understanding of this space is its interactive qualities which congenially fit Kang’s blurring of on-/off-line realities through his recurrent employment of multi-directional metalepsis. *Manhwa*-reading netizens direct their “stares” and utterances at the webtoon in short responses, as if mirroring the May 18 group that stares out of the imagined window pane at the reader (See Fig.1 and 2). Thousands of readers leave comments concerning the chapter on the day of its release. Many are merely short greetings; some comment on their excitement over the preview of the following chapters and Kang Full’s narrative talent. Other responses reflect on the memory politics of *26 Years*. Some users write with the intention, or at least the pretense of an intention, to influence how Kang will continue the story. Other users apparently lament that the reality of the webtoon is only conceivable in fiction: “This cannot take place... Because those bastards have the money... Because we are powerless... Because the few hold more than the many...”¹³ Some emphasize the possibility, even necessity, of making the *manhwa* into reality.¹⁴ A few critical voices raise questions about the political intentions and affiliation of Kang. “Which political party are you supported by [...] are you a simple *manhwa-ga*? Or is it to obstruct the presidential election? What is the reason that you have broken the promise, and serialize

13. “사랑이♡”, May 13, 2006, comment on Kang Full, Chapter 9, “Saram gwa saram gwa saramdeul,” *26 Years*, May 13, 2006, <http://cartoon.media.daum.net/webtoon/viewer/1205>.

14. 토미hg, May 13, 2006, comment on Kang, “Saram gwa saram gwa saramdeul.”

it one year prior to the election?¹⁵

Figure 7. Netizen opinion below Chapter 9, “People and People and People.”
(Posted on June 23, 2008 and October 30, 2010, respectively)



Source: Kang Full, Chapter 9, “People and People and People,” *26 Years*, May 13, 2006, <http://cartoon.media.daum.net/webtoon/viewer/1205>.

The key point is not so much the extent to which Kang incorporates user responses into the serialization of *26 Years* as it is the sense of participation and collective engagement around a *manhwa*, which employs its media affordances to reach out, and a readership, which employs the ‘extended gutter’ to reach into, the work. It is important to understand these particular discontents and the larger discontents in civil society not only from the perspective of the lingering oppressive mechanisms of conservative hegemony, but in close relation as well to the discursive struggles of progressive politics as manifested in the media politics of President Roh, and through the issue framing activities of not least the national broadcasters (MBC, KBS) and progressive media in the period (Kim and Hur 2009; Kwak 2012). Stephen Epstein and Sun Jung in a study of the so-called

15. 청연, May 13, 2006, comment on Kang, “Saram gwa saram gwa saramdeul.”
www.kci.go.kr

pyein, loosely defined as “those who indulge their enthusiasm in the digital sphere” (Epstein and Jung 2011, 79), have noted how cyber vigilantism, in an apparent effort to uphold justice and public morality in response to perceived social deviants at times manifests itself in ways where the use of power can bear a sinister resemblance to authoritarian oppression. The demarcation between fantasies of violent justice and enacted vigilantism then subtly depends on whether these verbal expressions are received as being confined within the social space facilitated by Daum through the netizen commentary field.

The interface between the regularly posted *manhwa* chapters and the user comments create the particular media affordance of the Daum webtoon universe. With the dynamic interaction between *manhwa* and comments, it is a site of multidirectional transgressions between real and fictional worlds. Kang employs ascending metalepsis in the webtoon as do the users who leave comments in the comment field, which may be seen as an extended gutter. The effect of these metalepses of “primary artist” (Kang Full) and “extended gutter artists” (netizen opinionists) is to indicate the part illusory, part real boundary between the fictional and the real world, which had already been explored by Kang in his previous works and which were reflections of a larger engagement with online political potential. In one of his short *manhwa* essays from *Let's Play, Films!*, titled “The Intersection of Film and Reality” (*Yeonghwa wa hyeonsil ui gyocha*), Kang refers to cinematic representations of police torture in *Peppermint Candy*, *Hourglass*, and *Nowhere to Hide* (*Injeong sajeong bol geot eopda*, 1999), and how hearing the news about police torture on the radio makes him ponder: “Once in a while, when well made, memorable scenes from films happen in real life, I am at a loss. Is this reality imitating film... or film imitating reality... Oh, what I am saying is please do not commit acts that make me think once again of these very good films” (Kang 2007, 199).

This remark suggests uncanny continuities between the violence of the authoritarian repression of the 1980s and its translation into film, which, balancing between a criticism of the phenomenon and its aesthetization, may inspire police torture. Kang's concern for the unintended—even contrary to intention—impact that fictive (and critical) representations of historical police violence may have on present day police practices, raises an enduring question mark over *26 Years*. What is the ethical dimension of a

narrative, which, in the interrelationship between fiction and reality itself, may unleash unwelcome intersections? In other words, the question is where Kang Full plans to take this project and his agitated community?

2006.05.16: Talking about 26 Years

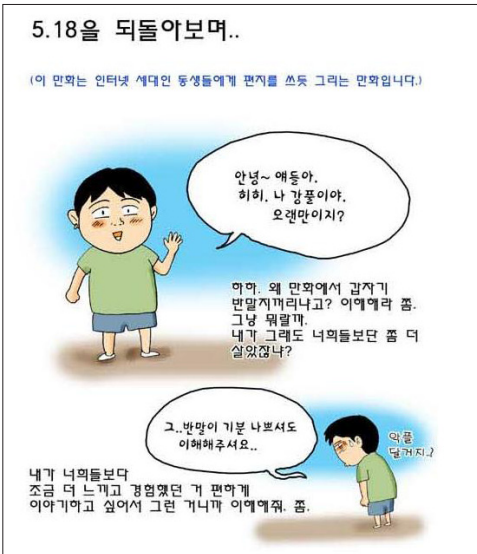


Figure 8. Kang Full—a mellow online *undonggwon*

Source: Kang Full, “Talking about 26 Years,” 26 Years, May 16, 2006, <http://cartoon.media.daum.net/webtoon/viewer/1209>.

Interlude

As if to answer this question, Chapter 9 is succeeded not by Chapter 10, but by “Talking about 26 Years.” It is an assembly of *manhwa* essays and short texts. It is uploaded two days prior to May 18, 2006 and consists of two short texts (an introduction and a closing text), the *manhwa* essay “Looking back on May 18...,”¹⁶ and an artist’s statement titled “A Word to the Readers,” which is illustrated with just a few sketches. With its timing and interrupting effect, it serves as an enactment of memory of the events

16. “Looking Back on May 18...” was first posted on Daum in May 2005.

haunting the nation for 26 years. Simultaneously, it may also be read as the poetics and apotheosis of the *26 Years* chapters that have yet to be posted.

“Looking Back on May 18...” introduces Kang Full in a descending metalepsis as protagonist. An elder-brother wearing shorts and a mellow smile, he addresses his Internet Generation siblings in informal, intimate language (Fig.7). The graphic persona portrays the formative experiences of his own journey towards realization of the truth about May 18. It begins with his middle school experience of seeing university students posting photos of May 18 victims in the Seoul metro, only to be chased by police officers, and culminates in his university days when the full truth, which has been repressed in official narratives, is brought to him in the narrative of a senior *undonggwon*.¹⁷ The *manhwa* ends with the now familiar motif of a crowd of agitated people with angry stares ‘breaking the fourth window’ of the *manhwa* frame in an ascending rhetorical metalepsis and with the words: “We all remember!! We do not forget the 5.18 Gwangju Democratic Uprising” (Fig.8).



Figure 9.
“We all remember!!”

Source: Kang Full, “Talking about 26 Years.”

With such self-representation and meta-reflexivity, the political web *manhwa* of the mid-2000s is a re-configuration of late 1980s posters and 1990s street protest fliers. Kang Full, the mellow *undonggwon* character, promotes an image of his *manhwa* as being embedded in an almost organic

17. For another *manhwa* with a similar narrative, see Choi Gyuseok (2009).

continuum of social protest in which the walls of subway stations, the street pavement, and university campuses are in part supplemented, and in part substituted, by online spaces for the enlightenment of younger citizens.

From a thematic perspective, Kang explicitly inscribes *26 Years* in a canon of political pop culture dealing with May 18 and its aftermath. In “Looking back on May 18...,” he reprints the May 27, 1992, *Hankyoreh manhwa* by Park Jae Dong, *In May* (*Oweol e*), which depicts the shame of May 18 survivors.¹⁸ This stands alongside frame shots of the immensely popular 1995 TV drama *Hourglass* (*Morae sigye*), and in particular the film *Peppermint Candy* (*Bakha satang*, 1999). Like *26 Years*, *Hourglass* and *Peppermint Candy* depict men sent to Gwangju as paratroopers in May 1980, and how this experience formed them. They are prototypes for Kim Gapse in *26 Years*, and their descending metalepsis in this interlude of *26 Years* invites readers to evaluate Kim Gapse’s reaction to the willed amnesia of the past from an inter-medial perspective.

In “Victims and Heroes: Competing Visions of May 18,” Korean studies scholar Don Baker discerns two trends in popular representations of May 18: those that depict the people of Gwangju as innocent victims and those that hold them as “heroes, idealistic political activists who risked their lives in a noble attempt to build a democratic and just society on the Korean Peninsula” (Baker 2003, 91). *Peppermint Candy*’s main character, Yeongho, is a (self-) destructive archetype, whose trauma experienced in association with May 18 drives him into social isolation and suicide. Standing in the beginning of the film on a bridge, about to be hit by a train, he shouts, “I want to go back!” While the film is an uncompromising journey backward in time towards May 18, *26 Years* is just as uncompromising in its push forward in time. It has already been noted how Kim Gapse’s plans begin to take shape when he goes to Gwangju to start forming his group of May 18 victims, and how disillusion is shown to lead to a subversive form of collective activism with the city of Gwangju and its descendants as a pivotal site. Not quite victims or heroes by Baker’s definition, the group headed by Kim Gapse is prepared to attempt to assassinate the former president.

18. Park Jae Dong has been active into the 2000s with socially engaged *manhwa* production. See for example, Park (2003).

In the name of clarity and popular appeal, *26 Years* has reduced the cleansing of the past to the rectification of May 18.¹⁹ Kang's argument, in "Talking about *26 Years*," that the democratic governments following Chun and Roh have failed to bring about this rectification, excludes the fact that President Kim Dae-jung, himself commonly identified as a main victim of May 18, was instrumental in the release of Roh Tae-woo and Chun Doo Hwan in the name of reconciliation. Though *26 Years* inscribes itself into the pantheon of narratives which have revisited May 18, its radical take implies that Kang's ambition to shape the collective memory of the past is a matter of making the link between collective memory and the social activism of previous generations of *undonggwon* and other self-identified *minjung* representatives into a politically-motivated mass project for the Internet Generation.



Figure 10. "Oh, oh, oh.. Hi-history.. it's falling..."

Source: Kang Full, "Talking about 26 Years."

The second work posted on May 16, "A Word to the Readers," is written

19. As for the theme of fictional retaliation in response to historical traumas, Kwon (2005) identifies how some pre-2000 South Korean *manhwa* respond to the dependent liberation of Korea from Japan on August 15, 1945: "[...] the future relationship between Korea and Japan is described catastrophically. In this 'fictional' future, Korea always inflicts revenge on or punishment on Japan."

in honorific language and accompanied by only four sketches, implying that Kang here is not specifically addressing his online siblings, but also the adult reader. The statement is a disclaimer that hints at Kang's choice to clarify in a predominantly non-graphic form the character of his online *manhwa* experiment. We are told that *26 Years* has no political intention, nor is it guided by partisan tendencies. Its ambition is simply that of a popular (*daejungjeok*) commercial *manhwa* artist who wishes to make people remember May 18, and to do this in an entertaining manner. As stated in the preface of the book version of *26 Years*:

When speaking about Gwangju, it is always the people who already know about Gwangju who are speaking. When drawing Gwangju, it is always only the people who already know about Gwangju who have any interest. Gwangju was not for the masses. Gwangju was for the *minjung* [i.e., oppressed, subaltern] (Kang 2007, 1).

Further, in “A Word to the Readers,” Kang avails himself of the occasion to bestow CopyLeft rights to the readers/users, who are allowed to freely use and distribute the *manhwa* works, except for commercial purposes, agitprop for political parties, and politically colored civil organizations. The work, whether distributed as fragment or in its totality, is intended to have a social life beyond the social space defined and partially controlled by Kang and Daum. This move towards the undoing of copyright limitations reflects another point of contention in Korean society taken up by progressives in the period, namely the protection of personal information vis-à-vis state and capital, and the communal right to distribute (Park Whon-il 2007).

Lastly, Kang, who launched *26 Years* as a work of fiction, here defines his take on the genre as follows: “The main characters appearing in the *manhwa* are not real persons; only the historical background and events are real.”²⁰ With this very loose definition, Kang explicitly refrains from laying claim to realism/factuality in his depiction of South Korea in 2006. The question, however, is how *26 Years* distinguishes itself from previous works like *Peppermint Candy* and *Hourglass*, which were both marketed as fiction

20. Kang Full, “26 nyeon eul iyagi handa.” <http://cartoon.media.daum.net/webtoon/viewer/1209>.

and thus did not in terms of genre lay claim to a certain factuality but, as we have already seen, shared the post-Gwangju/post-May 18 perspective. Different from Kang's own definition, it may be argued that the manner in which the serialized *manhwa* engages with its readers, and how this engagement explores the boundaries between fiction and reality, author and his graphic personae, opinionizing netizen and offline citizen, is a more productive frame for understanding the factual attributes of *26 Years*. On these terms, the factional designation is less fertile as a genre classification; it is more precisely located in the transgressing, accumulative effects of metalepsis, interactivity and CopyLeft as they are enabled through the serialization.

2006.08.25: Chapter 27. Does He Remember that Day?

By Chapter 27, which was posted August 25, the small group of May 18 victims has managed to get Kim Gapse into the heavily guarded house of former President Chun on the pretext of a business meeting. Along with him are Kim's son and the sculptor. Next to them is the bust of the former president with the secret hollow. Outside, Chun's guards and the police have finally grasped that this is a scheme. They face the gangster and his former gang members, who have come up from Gwangju to support Kim Gapse's



Figure 11.

Kim Gapse sits on a sofa facing the former president.

Kim: "I have something I would like to ask you... That day 26 years ago... Do you remember it?"

Chun remains silent. When he finally speaks, after Kim Gapse persistently implores him, the former president merely says, "It was a really long time ago..."

group. On the top floor of a parking garage in the neighborhood, the markswoman is looking through the telescopic sights of her rifle. A building obstructs the view. Guards working for Chun are starting to make their way up the parking building.

This scene, in which the May 18 group tries to communicate with the former president, but utterly fails to find common ground for interaction, marks a point of no return in the narrative. Hereafter, words are once and for all replaced by violent intent. Chun is presented with a chance to show remorse, but neglects it.

We have seen how the serialized work interacts—or establishes the illusion of interaction—with its readers, and how at least some readers have implored Kang Full to bring graphic justice to the Republic of Korea. However, the successive postings of new chapters hinting at an ever-approaching cleansing of history, arguably also leaves an interactive sphere open for individuals, who subscribe to another understanding of history. Becoming aware of what seems to be the impending assassination of former President Chun's fictive persona, these individuals might be provoked to interact with Kang Full's work, whether, for example, through a libel suit or through making public excuses for May 18. In this sense, the former president and his circle (but in a much larger perspective also the conservative spectrum of Korean society, which implicitly is deemed responsible for the willed amnesia) may be seen as another target(ed) readership of the work—albeit in a rather uncanny sense. In formal terms, the recurrent motif in Kang's *manhwa* production of angry communities with their gazes piercing the imagined window of the *manhwa* frame, gives the illusion that the graphic figures are communicating directly with readers. Sympathizing readers are invited to mirror and express their own agitated selves. At the same time, however, the employment of ascending metalepsis implies how *26 Years* opens a communicative space for those “non-readers” who are in one way or another held responsible for a traumatic event in history. The *manhwa* figures are also staring out at them.

Whether Kang deliberately employed the temporal dynamics of his work to enforce such a communicative interface with those held responsible for May 18, and by extension with those considered responsible for suppressing memories of May 18, is irrelevant. As things turned out, there was only scant public response of this kind to his work. Public response from

politicians—whether critical or positive—could have contributed further to making the subject matter into an issue (Kang, interview 2009). By this logic, a critical response from public figures would have contributed to Kang Do-young's explicitly stated agenda to further popularize the memory of May 18. This did not quite happen. In a telling example, however, former social activist and, at the time, Grand National Party member of parliament, Won Hee-ryong, in an interview on the *Hankyoreh* website on September 3, with carefully weighted words, stated that he was impacted by the narrative and even once himself considered becoming a terrorist, but that due to the contemporaneousness (*hyeonjaeseong*) of Gwangju one should avoid speaking about Gwangju carelessly and, as he went on to say: “It is not the victory of history to get retaliation by shooting a mass murderer (*haksalbeom*). We need to take in this point. I am certain about that. Certain that *26 Years* is not the right answer.”²¹

The former president kept silent, as did, to a large extent, the conservative press as represented by *Chosun Ilbo*, *JoongAng Ilbo* and *Donga Ilbo*, which also remained aloof from the work's complex intentionalities.²² Daum portal's vibrant, agitated space, with its thousands of sympathizing readers and CopyLeft idealism—which carried an implied potential to widely distribute Kang Full's May 18 narrative—did not break down all barriers between on- and offline social communities; the digital divide did not come undone.

2006.09.28: Chapter 30. Withered Leaves Revive I

06.09.28| Annyeong haseyo: Let's sign up! Let's do the Agora Netizen
Petition together [...]

06.09.28| djfn: Kill. Kill. Smash. Rotten bastard history.

It is September 28, 2006, and users leave their heated comments below

21. Yi Yong-ju and Kang Eunji, “Won Hee-ryong ‘Wae Hannaradang?... Hanguk bakkwiryeomeyon Hannaradang bakkwoya,’” *Hankyoreh*, September 3, 2006 (modified: September 5, 2006) http://www.hani.co.kr/arti/politics/politics_general/153921.html

22. This observation is based on a keyword search on the web sites of the three newspapers conducted by a research assistant, Seo Hayoung.

the first of the final three chapters which are uploaded on the same day. Kim Gapse has long since abandoned dialogue with former President Chun. The May 18 group has made several attempts at assassinating him. All have failed. No authoritarian figures (politicians)—neither former nor present—contact Kang Full. Except for critical blogs, negative comments, and an anonymous phone call, he is left in peace to finish *26 Years*. In two chapters it will all culminate. Although the webtoon will be available on Daum for years to come, Kang's hold on readers will no longer be in the same collective spatio-temporal sphere. In this sphere, readers temporarily congregate around the digital *manhwa* en masse and with intensity, which further sustains and nourishes the apparent collective intention to re-shape offline reality through the platform of online fiction. The moment the last chapter of *26 Years* has been posted, read and responded to, the *manhwa* will lose its suspension in time. Hundreds of thousands of readers will know how it ends. The narrative will no longer carry with it the potential of being negotiable between Kang and the readers, nor, for that matter, between Kang and his “non-readers,” between fiction and fact.

The interaction with *26 Years* has long since transcended the commentary field below the chapters and moved across the Internet into blogs and other online media. The progressive newspaper *Hankyoreh* is at the forefront of conventional media covering the webtoon.²³ However, for the readers of this progressive newspaper familiar with *minjung* discourse, the memory of May 18 arguably is already activated. While conservative printed media to a large extent does not cover the *manhwa* project, digital activists clearly seek to re-direct its momentum into new online social spaces. One social space that resonates with Kang's memory-based political activism is the petition board on the Daum debate forum, Agora.daum.net. Here, one netizen reader called Coolgirl has initiated a petition: “We demand a retrial of former President Chun Doo Hwan.” It gains 9,649 votes in the period between September 4 and October 9, 2006. This petition campaign represents an attempt to turn fiction into reality by challenging the South Korean legal body and the pardoning of Chun in 1997. More radical and much less popular is the Agora petition “End Kang Full's *26 Years* in the way we want!!!!” In the text

23. The *Hankyoreh*, for example, published an interview with the author on September 22, 2006.

below the headline, the petitioner asks for a “headshot.” One hundred sixty-three individuals sign this petition from September 13 to September 30, 2006. This second petition is an intra-fictional imploring of Kang Full to actualize readers’ vigilante fantasies, and does not relate to life beyond the Daum web portal. And yet, it may also be seen as addressing Kang Full as a performer of volt magic, as a *manhwa* artist/figure with the ability to impact off-line reality through the webtoon media.

The third petition, “Please make Kang Full’s *26 Years* into a film,” which was posted on September 29, 2006, is inter-medial: an adaptation of the *manhwa* into a film would not only further popularize the narrative, it would transform the representation of the attempted assassination from a graphic rendering into a human one performed by actors on screens across the country, arguably making it more difficult for non-readers/viewers to disregard the agitated gazes emanating from the *manhwa* frames, cinema and computer screens, posters and ads on subway walls, university campuses, and in newspapers.

2006.09.28: Chapter 32. Withered Leaves Revive III



Figure 12.

Kim Gapse is sitting facing former President Chun again. “At last... it is you and me. There is not much time left. Listen to my story.” He receives no response. Busts do not speak. It just sits there in front of him. Humans have a habit of communicating with spirits through images. And humans give spirit to material forms—for example, by inserting materials inside hollows. Inside this particular hollow is a detonator. Kim does not speak to a spirit, at least not in the conventional sense of the word. If anything, he speaks to an allegory of national trauma turned lethal by its willed amnesia. “That moment in time will be the day when you live again or die,” Kim says to the former president, who is held responsible for the massacre of citizens demonstrating in front of Gwangju City Hall 26 years ago. “Time is up,” says Kim Gapse.

In an analysis of another narrative dealing with May 18, the film *A Petal* (*Kkonnip*, 1996), Kim Kyung Hyun argues that “reading *A Petal* as national allegory produces futile and frustrating results, despite the temptations the film presents” (Kim 2004, 120). By comparison, Kang’s work seems to readily facilitate allegoric readings of the graphic representation of Chun and the bust. Narratological approaches, however, cannot stand alone in an analysis of the interrelation between *26 Years* and the ‘reality’ beyond the Daum webtoon universe. Here, British anthropologist Alfred Gell’s elaborations on the social efficacy of art offer a model for understanding the indexicality of *26 Years*. Gell’s approach to the social practices of consecration and volt sorcery points towards a reading of the bust of Chun as a metonymic representation of *26 Years*. Elaborating on the notion that things just like humans are social agents, Gell defines consecration as “the management of transition between the religious image as a ‘mere’ manufactured thing and a vehicle of power, capable of acting intentionally and responding to the interactions of devotees,” (Gell 1998, 143) while as for volt magic “the action of making a representational image of any kind involves a kind of binding in that the image of the prototype is bound to, or fixed and imprisoned within the index” (Gell 1998, 102). From this perspective, the making of the bust of Chun is a metonymic representation of volt sorcery, the binding of prototypes created by Kang in his spatio-temporal experiment. The comments below the *manhwa* re-enact, socially amplify, and quantify this agentive approach to the work as a vehicle of power. *26 Years*, in other words, from such an anthropological perspective, is informed by notions that art can deliver poetic justice (the positive spin on volt sorcery). “At last... it is you and me. There is not much time left. Listen to my story,” Kim says. The bust indexes Kim Gapse’s intentionalities, like *26 Years* indexes Kang’s intentionalities, just as *26 Years* seems to imply that the passing of 26 years in the history of the Republic of Korea (and the resulting willed amnesia) indexes Chun’s intentions. In other words, the detonator inside the hollow was put there by Kim Gapse hours before, by former President Chun 26 years ago, by Kang by imploring petitioners, by silent politicians, and by *Peppermint Candy*’s introverted suicidal. The bust is the index of 26 years of twisted history. “Time is up,” says Kim Gapse. Then the inside of the bust explodes.

Along with the bust, which bears an uncanny resemblance to the

former president, Kim Gapse and a house (which has thus far blocked the view of the markswoman, on the top floor of a parking structure, who is looking through the telescopic sight of her rifle at the former president) explode. This obviously is not another May 18 narrative imploding in the *han* felt by shameful paratroopers and survivors as is the case with *Peppermint Candy* and Park Jae Dong's *In May*. Kim Gapse's suicide is anything but introverted. He is not like *Peppermint Candy*'s lonely, deranged, and heart-broken central character, Yeong-ho, who throws himself in front of a train and thereby forces spectators to re-live his life in a relentless retrogression towards the innocence he lost in Gwangju, May 1980, when he took another innocent life. Aaron Han Joon Magnan-Park has argued that "*Peppermint Candy*'s reverse chronological narrative structure directly challenges the progressive, linear and teleological construction of historicism and its incorporation within official history" (Magnan-Pak 2005, 167). By comparison, *26 Years* employs progressive, linear time to facilitate a rewriting of history in the making. If anything, Kim Gapse then may be seen as a re-versioning of Jeon Tae-il, who in 1970 immolated himself with the book of labor standard law in hand to change working conditions.²⁴ However, by



Figure 13.

The house is gone. The sniper on top of the parking structure has a clear view of the former president's house. A faithful security guard, who has been blocking the former president with his own body then steps aside. The former president stands in a window without the protection of his faithful security guard. The markswoman aims at him. Two security officers point their guns at her, commanding her to drop the weapon. Three fingers are frozen on three guns. Time is suspended.

There is a full view of the inside of the parking structure, where three fingers are frozen on three guns. A shot rings out.

END

Source: Kang Full, Chapter 32, "Withered Leaves Revive," <http://cartoon.media.daum.net/webtoon/viewer/1471>.

24. In *Let's Play, Films!* Kang relates that the cinematic rendering of Jeon in *A Single Spark* (*Areumdaun cheongnyeon Jeon Tae-il*, 1995) affected him in his college days.

comparison, Gapse, the *manhwa* figure, performs his self-immolation in a much more instrumental and “other-destructive” manner. What comes to mind is Old Testament vengeance or graphic novels from North Korea in which the hero sacrifices his own life for the sake of the nation in the very last pages.

With the sound of a gunshot, Kang’s relentless stride from April through September, 2006 towards popular, mass-based, ritual cleansing and historical resolution, culminates in indeterminate open-endedness. *26 Years* ends as a whodunit in which ultimately the only perpetrator of the crime is no one but the reader. With no more images left, the reader is left on his or her own to bring closure to the story: imagining a bullet going in this or that direction with this or that result, experiencing disappointment in Kang’s refusal to bring closure to the story, or at a meta-level to reflect on his employment of narrative techniques, engagement with temporal dynamics, and interactivity.²⁵

Arguably, *26 Years* could not but end in an indeterminate and anti-climactic manner. Not because the *manhwa* did not bring closure to historical trauma in the way some netizens pleaded for. That would not only be an ethical dead end, but possibly also legally problematic; more precisely because it points towards the impossibility of resuscitating history from its trauma by punishing one focal perpetrator. Most importantly, because it thereby, in both content and form, attains the same ‘unfinished’ character which it has attributed to contemporary Korea with its not-so-remote authoritarian past. From this perspective, the significance of Kang’s webtoon is more productively teased from its temporary engagement with readers and non-readers, communities and non-communities, and from its alleged empowerment of the masses in the dual name of entertainment and memory politics. Its significance is nestled in its metaleptic potency: the multidirectional transmutations between work and online communities, its blurring, if not transgression, of boundaries between fiction and “reality,” Kang Do-young and Kang Full, and its potency as a late modernity volt, which is made to bring about social change through the rectification of May 18. Chun and the conservative media—two distinct entities to be sure—resisted this mind-trap, thereby reaffirming the limits of transgressability

25. For a discussion of closure in comics and graphic novels, see McCloud (1994).

between the on- and offline, and in the particular case, the limits to progressive agenda-setting even in a period in which the presidency, parliament and public broadcasters were all dominated by progressives (Kwak 2012). As a product of its time, we have to consider the issue-making aspect of *26 Years* in close relation with the relatively progressive tenor of mainstream Korean politics at the time. In other words, its features of interactivity, transgression and metalepsis were in part accentuating societal tensions and boundaries which were at least partially being framed or coming undone in public discourse.

26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31, 32... Years: Outro

In 2012 Kang Do-young is still making webtoons on Daum. After *26 Years*, he has not returned to the faction genre, exclusively producing romances and mystery-thrillers. He is still at the vanguard of online *manhwa* activism, however, with contributions to the Mad Cow web relay (2008), The MB Bad Laws web-relay (2009), as a co-signer of the 2009 *manhwa* artist declaration (*siguk seoneon*), in commemorations of deceased Presidents Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun, in support of a 2012 MBC strike concert and protesting the plans to blast Gureombi Rock on Jeju Island (2012), for example. The return to conservative politics with the 2007 election of conservative candidate Lee Myung-bak as president arguably brought the tension between political institutions and a vibrant civil society on the Internet to a climax in the 2008 candlelight protests (Kim and Kim 2009), which has been seen as complex discontents with a neo-liberal regime (Lee, Kim and Wainwright 2010). In this perspective, Kang has been preoccupied with responding to issues as they evolved rather than elaborating on the issue-making platform he attempted with *26 Years* during the presidency of Roh Moo-hyun.

26 Years is still accessible on Daum. Even without the collective momentum of 2006, its narrative timing still captivates its readers, who continue to leave postings on the site. The continuing life of this *manhwa* and its netizen commentaries may be seen as indicative of the degree of artistic freedom and censorship in the late 2000s under President Lee Myung-bak.

Former President Chun has not been re-tried in court nor has the cinematic adaption yet come into existence. The significance of these “non-events” may be construed as a victory for deceased President Kim Dae-jung’s reconciliation policy, as yet another sign of the suppression of popular memory of May 18, or as a sign of the power of the conservative press and politicians, who were not disrupted by the intentions of a popular *manhwa* in its attempt to impact the future of the Republic through its ambiguous engagement with temporal dynamics, community management, and memory politics. At the time of writing, the cinematic adaptation of *26 Years* is scheduled to be screened in November, 2012 in the last stage of the presidential election campaign. In retrospect, and in anticipation of the next phase in the unfolding narrative of *26 Years* and its cinematic adaptation, *26 Years* with its employment of ascending and descending metalepsis, and with its timing and interactivity, has evolved into a late modernity volt raised not least by Korean progressives and netizens in the face of what they perceive to be the willed amnesia of May 18.

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Abstract

This paper examines the emergence and on-/offline reception of the webtoon *26 Years* (2006) created by South Korean *manhwa-ga* Kang Full. Presenting itself as faction (factual fiction), *26 Years* deals with the aftermath of the 1980 Gwangju Uprising. The webtoon envisions a radical fictional response to this contested and traumatic event in contemporary South Korean history through the planned and attempted assassination, in 2006, of former President Chun Doo Hwan by a group of victims of the uprising. Central questions raised by *26 Years* and its reception include how the politicized webtoon as a pop culture phenomenon is related to the appearance of new forms of protest within social movements and how *manhwa* artists exercise agency in this context. By addressing these questions, the current paper presents a close reading of Kang Full's webtoon, with a focus on his faction approach to the Gwangju Uprising and the particular affordances of the webtoon, its temporal dynamics, interactivity and employment of metalepsis.

Keywords: webtoon, May 18 (Gwangju Uprising), Kang Full, metalepsis, netizens

