Special Feature

The Invention of the Other, Ethics, and the Question of "Geopolitical Unconscious" in Contemporary Korean Films: *Silmido*, *TaeGukGi: Brotherhood of War*, and *Shiri**

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Introduction

This paper analyses *Silmido* (2003), *TaeGukGi: Brotherhood of War* (2004; hereinafter *TaeGukGi*), and *Shiri* (1998). The films under discussion all won a mainstream local audience. *Silmido* and *TaeGukGi* attracted 10 million viewers for the first time in Korean film history. It is not unusual to find films attracting audiences of more than 10 million nowadays. For instance, *The Admiral: Roaring Currents* (2014) smashed the former box-office record set by *The Thieves*, attracting an audience of 17 million. In the early 2000s, however, this phenomenon appeared unexpected and even extraordinary. However, the release of *Shiri* fostered the renaissance of contemporary Korean film. By combining a Hollywood-based spectacular visual style with local content such as the South-North issue, the film localises the Hollywood pattern, thus situating contemporary Korean cinema in the global/local dynamics.

Shiri paid much attention to foregrounding North Korea as the Other on the basis of a nation-state model of geopolitical borders, distinguishing between friend and enemy. However, in contrast to *Shiri*, both *Silmido* and *TaeGukGi* blur the question of the identity of the real enemy in the film, although the two films depict the North Korean issue in terms of narrative. The question of representing North Korea seems to be relevant here. The representation of North Korea has varied according to political posture. In 2000, the former South Korean president Kim Dae-joong held a summit conference with North Korea's former president Kim Jung-il; this was the first such meeting since the South and North were divided. This event inevitably seemed to influence the representation of North Korea in the contemporary Korean film scene. That is, after the summit conference, representing North Korea as mere Evil seemed to be out of date in contemporary South Korean film culture. The representation of the North as a friendly counterpart culminated in *Welcome to Dongmakgol* (2005). The binary opposition of the narrative structure in this film is not that of the South and the North but, rather, that of the South-North Korean allies

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and the US-based allies. The film ends with a rather surrealistic scene in which the remaining North and South Korean soldiers die together fighting the US-based allies.

Silmido and *TaeGukGi* were produced before the release of *Welcome to Dongmakgol*. However, both *Silmido* and *TaeGukGi* seemed to reveal what Baek Moonim (2006, 81) calls "difficulties of the invention or discovery of the Other," since these films fail to draw a line between friend and enemy, thus leaving the figure of the enemy parenthesised. Although both films deal with the North-related issue, the figure of the North remains ambiguous in the films. In *Silmido*, Special Unit 684 is organised to assassinate the former North Korean president Kim Il-sung. However, throughout the film, the figure of North Korea is never represented. In *TaeGukGi*, the figure of the enemy is regarded not as North Korea but as the situation of the Korean War itself. The film seems to deal with how characters respond to the horrifying scenario stemming from the war situation in general, since it lacks a specific description of the Korean War. Accordingly, the question of the identity of the real enemy in this film does not remain significant. Even towards the end of the film, the male protagonist, Jin-tae, turns into a North Korean soldier. The blurred distinction of the friend-enemy dichotomy continues in *My Way* (2011). In this film, the friend-enemy distinction changes constantly throughout the film, ending in reconciliation between two characters.

Taking into consideration these aspects, both *Silmido* and *TaeGukGi* seem to have difficulty in positing the North as a mere enemy. Perhaps the changing political situation stemming from the South-North summit conference in 2000 influenced these films' narrative appeal. For whatever reason, the under-representation of the North remains symptomatic, since the logic of the friend-enemy dichotomy is a first step to (re)defining the concept of the political (Schmitt 1996, 26-27). Of course, the friend-enemy opposition is so unstable that it is likely to fall to pieces in the process of changed situations. Ultimately, the political proper must move beyond the basic dualism. Nonetheless, the friend-enemy opposition provides a foundation for imagining a new type of the political. Since "the mirroring relationship between Friend and Enemy provides a form of stability, albeit one based on projective identifications and repudiations," Kenneth Reinhard (2005, 17) argues that "the disappearance of enemy results in something like global psychosis." In contrast to the above-mentioned films, however, the North Koreans are depicted as the clear enemy in *Shiri*. As a classic

action genre film, *Shiri* follows the principle of the classic hero story.

This paper attempts to interpret these phenomena via the framework of ethics. It examines the way in which the films selected here have displayed the Other and the subject's response to the encounter with the Other through an ethical framework, while at the same time considering whether these films allow us to cognitively map modern South Korea's "geopolitical unconscious." The question of ethics in this paper is first and foremost the "ethics of the Real" (Zupančič 2000). For Lacan (1988, 66), the notion of the Real can be defined as "that which resists symbolization absolutely." It designates a point of failure, loss, and a fundamental gap that prohibits the normal running of social reality. Above all, it concerns trauma, referring to a traumatic moment evaporating social reality. The "ethics of the Real" is thus employed to examine how the subject should decide what to do in a traumatic moment of the disruption of the Real into reality. Situating the question of ethics as a crucial analytical tool, this paper attempts to examine how the subject in the films selected here responds to a traumatic confrontation with the Other. In this respect, *Silmido* and *TaeGukGi* are apparently more regressive than *Shiri*. These films do not arrive at any kind of narrative resolution; consequently, social antagonism is parenthesised and kept at bay permanently. The male protagonist's brooding over death towards the end of the film is intended to fill in the gap inherent in the big Other and/or to hide the inconsistency in the Other. Thus, in these films we see that collective male subjects have exhaustively appeared as full-scale actors supporting the nation-state model of historiography, and that the possibility of a non-statist politics is totally precluded, because the subjects' self-cancelling gestures (especially male subjects) preclude the possibilities of staging social antagonism that would give us access to a utopian project in the complexities of a specific historical conjuncture. This explanation enables us to justify the necessity of an ethical approach to analysing contemporary Korean films since the late 1990s, because a number of contemporary Korean films since that time have ended with the male protagonist's self-annihilating gesture.

I will also examine the films selected in terms of contemporary South Korea's "geopolitical unconscious." This theoretical effort seeks to examine whether the films contain an allegorical apprehension of totality as a way of providing "representability"—"the fundamental historical question of the conditions of possibility of such representation" (Jameson 1992, 4)—to what otherwise remains unrepresentable. In order to explore this question further, it is

necessary to introduce the relevant theories briefly. For Fredric Jameson (1981, 35), history can be identical not to narrative but to the Real in a Lacanian sense. Whilst history is not narrative, nonetheless, one cannot gain access to history except through "its prior textualization, its narrativization in the political unconscious." Mediating between an individual subject and history, narrative functions in at least two ways. Its elementary role is ideological, because it always offers us a resolution that prevents us from cognitively mapping the fundamental antagonism of a given society. It is also here, paradoxically, that narrative, for Jameson, produces a temporary apprehension of totality. As Jameson (1979, 144) notes, "the works of mass culture cannot be ideological without at one and the same time being implicitly or explicitly Utopian as well: they cannot manipulate unless they offer some genuine shred of content as a fantasy bribe to the public about to be so manipulated." Even in order for the ideological functioning of a film to be effective, some bits of social contradictions and anxieties must be given an initial staging.

This approach shifts our attention from the mere inscription of the Other on the surface level to which a true invention of the Other points. This point manifests itself in *Shiri*. This paper will demonstrate that, in the case of *Shiri*, real alterity derives not from the North Korean soldier but from the class antagonism inherent within the current South Korean capitalist system.

Film Studies and Ethics

This section examines in more detailed way the theoretical framework to approach the relevant topic. First, it begins by exploring the ethical question. In order to do this, it is necessary to define briefly the Lacanian/Žižekian vocabulary regarding the definition of other, Other as the Thing or the Real, and the big Other. Slavoj Žižek draws on the Lacanian distinction between the "little other" and the "big Other." The "little other," the other written with a small letter "o" designates our human fellows, colleagues, friends, and so on, projecting our ego, and having done so, constituting our imaginary relationship towards them (Myers 2003, 23). The "big Other," the Other written with a capital "O" refers either to the functioning of the Symbolic, or another subject in so far as that subject refers to the Symbolic (ibid.). What, then, would be the Symbolic? It is an impersonally distributed network of society which regulates a

human being's behaviour, ranging from language to the law (Evans 1996, 201-03). Although the Symbolic does not precisely correspond to the social reality, it consists of a great deal of what we term "reality." Through the operation of the Symbolic, most people are given their own identity, and participate as a member of a given community. In the meantime, the Other qua a horrifying Thing (the Real) is a point where the normal operation of the Symbolic disintegrates, leaving behind an excess or remainder after the symbolisation. What is crucial in psychoanalytic formulation is that the emergence of the Other/Thing can only be possible through a decisive break in the big Other: the Other (the Real) is intimately tied to the big Other (Žižek 2006, 44).

The clarification of other/Other/big Other through the use of psychoanalytic vocabulary leads us to explore the films through an ethical framework. As mentioned earlier, the question of ethics at play here is "the ethics of the Real" (Zupančič 2000). If the concept of the Real can be defined as a traumatic moment which intrudes into our everyday life, "ethics of the Real" can be seen as something in which the subject redefines the mode of being in this encounter with the traumatic abyss of the Real, thus to become a true subject. It is only through the form of the encounter that one can confront the Real: no one dares to gain access to the sphere of the Real; to do so would result in what Alain Badiou (2001, 73) and Alenka Zupančič (2000, 236) call "simulacrum" or "terror" as an oppositional form of the ethics of the Real. "The ethics of the Real," thus, presupposes "something which appears only in the guise of the encounter, as something that 'happens to us,' surprises us, throws us 'out of joint' because it always inscribes itself in a given community as a rupture, a break, and an interruption" (Zupančič 2000, 235). It, then, concerns the way in which the subject decides what to do in the moment of encounter with the Real. The central questions are: "will I act in conformity to what threw me 'out of joint,' will I be ready to reformulate what has hitherto been the foundation of my existence?" (ibid. 235). In sum, the question of ethics at work precisely concerns, when an unbearable, impenetrable trauma "happens to" the subject, how one can choose what to do in the course of an encounter with it. In the moment of decision without recourse to any strategical, pragmatic intervention, the subject would have been reconstituted as a true subject. The ethical maxim here is not to escape from the original traumatic situation, as is the case in sacrificial suicide, but to endure, "persist," and repeat what remains after the situation by "[acknowledging] one's exposure/thrownness,

being overwhelmed by Other(ness)" (Žižek 2005a, 138), because the ethical question in psychoanalysis is not a matter of healing the individual subject's psychic problem or assuring the subject's well-being, but of putting him/her in a position of coming across the fundamental deadlock of his/her desire.

While film studies (and cultural studies) have been reluctant to take up an ethical concern, more recently certain scholars have examined filmic practice in explicit ethical terms. In this context, it is not very surprising to see that Emmanuel Levinas's idea has been a pivotal point of reference (Aaron 2007; Downing and Saxton 2010; Zylinska 2005). Levinas (1969) suggests an essential contribution to how the concept of responsibility can be formulated with specific relevance to the vulnerable other on the basis of the face-to-face encounter: the self's subjectivity is constituted through its response to the other's difference from the self. According to Michele Aaron (2007, 111)'s outstanding explanation of the Levinasian concept of responsibility, it refers to "both…a kind of subjectivity-in-action (a reflexive state of self-constitution) and…our obligation to the other." However, the Levinasian perspective on ethics and the Lacanian concern for ethics arrive at the problematic from sharply distinct angles, and these angles seem to be clearly at odds with each other. In short, while a Levinasian perspective derives from the absolute vulnerability of the other based on hospitality, respect, and more significantly face-to-face encounter, "the ethics of the Real" would bring the subject into contact with a terrifying, monstrous Other-as-Thing in which the subject's ethical engagement designates how the subject gives "fidelity" or "consistency" to the encounter with it.

To take a Lacanian/Žižekian line, what a Levinasian approach rules out is "the monstrosity of the neighbor, monstrosity on account of which Lacan applies to the neighbor the term Thing (*das Ding*), used by Sigmund Freud to designate the ultimate object of our desires in its unbearable intensity and impenetrability" (Žižek 2006, 43). What is missing from a Levinasian perspective is that "the neighbor is the (Evil) Thing which potentially lurks beneath every homely human face" (ibid.). Why does the Levinasian approach fail to address the horrifying abyss of the Other? Perhaps because there is no space for the dimension of the Third (the big Other as an impersonal network of symbolic order) to mediate here; as mentioned earlier in the paper, I emphasise that the emergence of the Other as a horrifying Thing (or the Real) is only possible through the non-existence of the big Other. With a faceless Third "translated" into the other's face, the Levinasian approach might run the risk

of reducing the ethical dimension into "understanding" of the other's suffering and vulnerability (Žižek 2005a, 184). In contrast to Emmanuel Levinas's idea, what matters for a true "ethics of the Real" is to subtract the faceless from an individual subject's face, thus redirecting it into the Third.

With this in mind, *Silmido* and *TaeGukGi* pretend to present a situation that, when there is no neighbour whom I can rely on as a human partner, the big Other changes into the Other-as-Thing. However, *TaeGukGi* fails to stage the emergence of radical Otherness by maintaining a "human distance" in order to be able to prevent the male subjects being drawn into the deranged invocation of the big Other (Žižek 2005b, 295). Moreover, the male subject's self-cancelling gesture towards the end of *Silmido* can be understood as concealing the split in the big Other, such that the film does not belong to non-statist films, but to full-fledged statist films. In contrast, *Shiri* deals with how the friendly human fellow as an imaginary other turns into a monstrous Other-as-Thing. The whole narrative structure of this film is framed to re-symbolise the Other in its effort to "suture" the terrifying experience of the close proximity to it. However, this film unwittingly exposes the figure of radical Otherness by rendering the female protagonist as literally over-identified with her own role in a given community.

The Ethical Question on the Self-Cancelling Gesture: *Silmido* and *TaeGukGi*

Some of contemporary Korean films tend to make the figure of the male protagonist unseen at the end of the film. The big hits (with audiences of 10 million plus) such as *TaeGukGi* and *Silmido* provide good examples of this tendency. What supports the male subjects' suicidal tendencies in the films is the logic of sacrifice, in which they situate themselves in the position of sacrificial victim to illustrate the unfair predicament of the powerless. By maintaining social peace through localising violence, they, thus, prevent the total disintegration of social reality. I will explore the ethical/political valence of these films' increased tendencies towards sacrificial suicide.

Silmido portrays Special Unit 684, and is based on a true story. It ends up showing how historical fact was suppressed by the government's official historiography. In the closing sequence, the deaths of the Special Unit 684

members were shown as merely another document in the government's official archive. As shown in the closing sequence, *Silmido* tries to unearth the historical facts covered up in the governmental official history by borrowing fictionalised genre conventions. In the film, the South Korean government organised Special Unit 684, which consisted of ex-criminals and prisoners excluded from the social world, to assassinate the North Korean president Kim Il-sung, promising to eliminate their criminal records and return their lives to normal. However, towards the end of the film, a new head of the Korean Central Intelligence Agency takes over. He cancels the mission, and even orders all the members of the Unit to be eliminated because a tense stand-off between the South and North Korean states has been replaced by more amicable relations. The Unit members have to be excluded once again as their existence might disturb peaceful relations with North Korea.

Within this background, I first turn to how *Silmido* portrays the figuration of the Other in the narrative dimension. *Silmido* blurs who the real enemy or actual Other of Special Unit 684 is. Is their enemy Kim Il-sung of North Korea or Park Jung-hee of South Korea? An unclear description of the Other prevents the male subjects from being given some initial expression of social antagonism. Given that the Other has not yet gained its positive ontological entity, *Silmido* posits collective male subjectivities as pure instruments of the state, by hiding the fact that the state edifice is intimately linked with its own shadowy existence, and this shadowy area precisely sets the founding condition for building up the South Korean nation-state. As a result, the possibility of foregrounding a non-statist politics is fundamentally excluded in the organisation of narrative.

The foreclosure of a non-statist politics becomes prominent when the viewer's identification with the members is mediated through the look of a concealed "humanised" state: the point of view of Choi Jae-hyun in charge of the Special Unit 684 and/or Sergeant Jo. While they appear to be minor agents on the surface, one needs to take into account the role they play as observers, since they represent the role of the viewer. Towards the end of the film, Commander Choi is told that if his troops (mainly consisting of trainers) do not take part in the process of elimination, they also will be eliminated. Confronted with an impossible choice, the commander deliberately leaks the fact to In-chan, one of the Unit members, sending Sergeant Jo away from the island to renegotiate the government's elimination project. It is here that *Silmido* presents the state in two aspects: the good state and the bad state. If the new head of the

South Korean Central Intelligence Agency is the bad aspect of the state, which cancels the mission in accordance with the changed geopolitical context, the previous officer in charge of the South Korean Central Intelligence and/or the South Korean president Park Jung-hee refer to an aspect of the good state in this film. By leading the viewers to be identified with Cold War ideology mediated through Commander Choi and Sergeant Jo, *Silmido* conceals that the state, assumed to be positive, is the very condition of state violence.

The statist ideology exemplified in this film is manifested in the male protagonists' collective suicide at the end of the film. When the South Korean Central Intelligence Agency decides to eliminate the members of Special Unit 684, the members decide to resist: they kill their trainers and escape from the island in an attempt to let their story be known. The remaining members seize a local bus and head towards Seoul. However, when detained by military forces en route to Seoul, the members decide to commit group suicide, all setting off their hand grenades in the bus. As far as ethics is concerned, the male subjects' suicide does not pose an ethical question, by no longer "[keeping] going only by following the thread of [the] Real" (Badiou 2001, 52). Consider here that the ethical maxim in the Lacanian formulation is as follows: "do not give up your desire"; Badiou translates it into his own ethical terms: "do all that you can to preserve in that which exceeds your perseverance. Persevere in the interruption. Seize in your being that which has seized and broken you" (ibid. 47). This is what the "ethics of the Real" is meant to refer to practically. From the standpoint offered here, the male protagonists' suicides can be understood as an escape from an ethical dilemma by avoiding the encounter with the traumatic situation. When both the path back to the military camp and the path forward to Seoul are obstructed, they choose to kill themselves instead of engaging in direct confrontation with the state. The mere bodily death of the male subjects is not a key issue. What is crucial here is that they annihilate the traumatic confrontation with something uncanny, "pathological," and uneasy by ceding their desire to the state. They do not "keep going" and "persevere in the interruption" in the traumatic moment. Rather, they put themselves in the position to be victimised against by state violence in order to represent the pitiful situation of the powerless.

Taking the role of sacrificial victim, however, leads to concealment of an inherent inconsistency of the state. With the absence of confrontation between the state and the male subjects, *Silmido* has also lost the opportunity for staging

social antagonism. As I mentioned previously in this paper, following Jameson's formulation, commercial genre film tends to include as its primary elements both ideological vocation and utopian impulses. A paradox takes place here. To adequately perform ideological manipulation of some bits of social and historical content, utopian impulses must be given some basic representation. From the perspective presented here, this film fails to offer "representability" to what otherwise remains the unrepresentable by making the male subjects unseen, and furthermore keeping the question of social antagonism forever parenthesised. This has political consequences. By no longer making visible the opportunity to stage social antagonism, the possibility of moving beyond a state ideology is also fundamentally foreclosed.

The male subject's withdrawal from "keeping going" in terms of an ethical gesture also appears in the *TaeGukGi*. The film tells the story of two brothers influenced by the Korea War. It is structured as a flashback, as Jin-suk visits a memorial site to confirm that remains found belong to his dead elder brother Jin-tae: it begins in the present, but quickly flashes back to Seoul in 1950, ending again in the present. Jin-tae is the elder brother who has to support his family as a shoe-shiner while the younger brother is the fragile high school student. When war breaks out in 1950, the family is quickly separated and Jin-tae and Jin-suk find themselves forcibly drafted into the South Korean army to fight the North. To protect his younger brother, Jin-tae desperately tries to prove himself a war hero by winning honours with the purpose of sending his younger brother back home. But this provokes a growing conflict between the brothers: the conflict between the brothers, in fact, stems from Jin-tae, since he vacillates between his duty to send his younger brother back home and his evolving preoccupation with becoming a killing machine. His desperate attempt to protect his brother deprives him of his life towards the end of the film.

The first area of focus is that in *TaeGukGi*, the figure of the father is totally foreclosed upon in the realm of representation. Jin-tae's responsibility to protect his younger brother simply stems from his father's absence. The apparent foreclosure of a father figure, however, reproduces the myth of the father. The hypothesis of the myth of the primary father is that there was a primal father who was able to fully regulate the symbolic law. This produces a "fundamental fantasy" in that, without this prohibition, we would be able to fully enjoy our existence. It is fantasy, because the father has been internally barred from the outset (Žižek 1992, 24). This fantasy leads to the proliferation of the perverse

1 a

1 b

1 c

1 d

Figures 1 a–d. Jin-tae wrecognises Jin-suk in *TaeGukGi*.

figure of a father based on a repression/transgression model. With the withering of the repressive father in contemporary popular culture, this film demonstrates that the multiplicity of the perverse father figure has become the predominant mode of representation. The status of the perverse father figure is neither subversive nor reactionary in itself. The point is, thus, to consider the extent to which it can keep its ethical fidelity—though this fidelity would result in the destruction of the other as a human colleague, and thus undermines the public authority of the primal father from within.

Understood in this way, a serious drawback to this film is that it humanises a crazy killing machine, Jin-tae, in that beneath his terrifying appearance, there still resides warm humanity. One needs to look at how the film poses human distance. In the middle of the film, Jin-tae believes that Jin-suk died in a fire by mistaking a corpse with the skin burnt off for Jin-suk. This moves him to become a soldier for North Korea. Towards the end of the film, in a scene where the two brothers have a face-to-face encounter, Jin-tae attempts to kill Jin-suk. The two brothers continue to fight while Jin-suk urges Jin-tae to recognise him. Jin-tae finally recognises Jin-suk, after Jin-suk reminds him of their family story. The exchange in a shot/reverse shot schema leads us to examine the film in its explicit ethical terms (Figs. 1 a-d): an ethical question about the face and

its ethical implications. It is here that the film introduces an ideological fantasy, preventing Jin-tae from encountering the inconsistency of the social world. What *TaeGukGi* tries to escape in an ultimate form of fantasy is that the faces are an illusory temptation, since the faces themselves are literally the terrifying raw flesh of blood and muscle—what if the skinned corpse shown in the middle of the film refers to the real dimension of the face (Žižek 2002, 186)? Far from the Levinasian perspective, the face functions as an ultimate fetish which fills in the inconsistency of the big Other. Thus, encounter with the other's face is not "ethical" in Lacanian sense—the only way to become ethical in terms of the face is through "*defacement* in all its dimensions" (ibid. 187, emphasis original).

This film's withdrawal from an ethical engagement can be also found in the closing scene where Jin-tae throws himself into a barrage of bullets to save his younger brother. Shortly after Jin-tae recognises that his younger brother is still alive, he persuades Jin-suk to retreat. While Jin-suk reluctantly retreats from the battlefield, Jin-tae covers the retreating South Koreans, including Jin-suk, by means of firing machine guns blindly. He is soon killed by North Koreans when he gets caught in the crossfire. He finally looks at his retreating brother before he dies, as if satisfied that he has saved his brother. This scene most noticeably portrays the male protagonist's tragic heroism, typical of the narrative of the contemporary Korean film.

However, the character's self-cancelling gesture eliminates all the reference to the social and physical realities of death. What results is the male protagonist, Jin-tae's emotional excess. The emphasis, thus, is placed on the fascinating spectacle of the sublime image of martyrdom, which is also highlighted by solemn music. As is also the case with the male subjects in *Silmido*, Jin-tae is tightly bound up with the logic of sacrifice. He fails to reveal the internal discord of war ideology, but only perpetuates the reproduction of it. He never asks what the military ideological machine wants from him. Given that the authority of the military machine remains intact, his sacrificial suicide can be seen as "[sending] a message" to it by demonstrating the plight of the powerless (Žižek 1991, 44). By means of it, the ideology of war never gets damaged, but becomes even stronger. It justifies an individual subject's sacrifice for the sake of the larger social order, thus demanding another subject's sacrifice. In this respect, this film is a perfectly conformist film, being much more regressive than *Shiri*.

Overall, *Silmido* and *TaeGukGi* are not designed to mobilise the possibility of a non-statist politics. Rather, these tell a story of building a nation-state,

led by male subjects in extreme distress and agony, precisely because the official historiography of a nation-state is always dependent on the unwritten obscene underside. In ethical terms, these films depict a way to escape from the encounter with the Other-Thing via suicide on the basis of sacrifice. As a result, the addressing of social antagonism is fundamentally excluded in the given narrative field.

The "Geopolitical Unconscious" of *Shiri* Seen through an Ethical Framework

Shiri's narrative impetus is rendered by the male protagonist, Yu's scopophilic desire and aspiration to know the truth. On the surface, it adopts the classic Hollywood narrative pattern led by a male protagonist. This shows the oedipal trajectory in a very clichéd manner: Yu punishes his fiancée Lee Myung-hyun/ Lee Pang-hee. After the death of his fiancée in the final sequence, he strongly denies that Lee Pang-hee was a terrorist. This can be seen as the male subject's fetishised disavowal of the monstrous female Other. However, it is perhaps too easy to interpret *Shiri* in this way. *Shiri* seems to provide more complex and multi-dimensioned layers of interpretations by implicating the tension and contradiction in South Korea. Hence, what we need to pay attention to here is the way this film offers "representability" to what otherwise remains the unrepresented, by examining what *Shiri* has not represented and cannot represent for itself. *Shiri* paradoxically might provide the readings which lead us to map cognitively the core of the current capitalist system.

In order to explore this problem further, let us briefly describe the narrative of this film. In *Shiri*, South Korean security agent Yu Jung-won and his colleague Lee Chang-gil, who both work for the National Intelligence Service, are pursuing a North Korean female terrorist, Lee Pang-hee, and a North Korean terrorist unit led by Park Mu-young. In the first half of the film Lee Pang-hee masquerades as Yu's fiancée, Lee Myung-hyun. In this guise, Lee Pang-hee seeks to obtain top secret information and pass it on to Park Mu-young. The terrorist unit infiltrates South Korea and tries to reunify Korea with the use of a stolen bomb called CTX. They intend to destroy various sites throughout Seoul, especially a football stadium where North-South summit talks are supposed to take place, along with a friendly football match played by

North and South Korean teams. During a gunfight in the football stadium, all the members of the North Korean terrorist unit are killed by South Korean SWAT officers and Lee Pang-hee is also shot dead by her fiancé Yu Jung-won.

Figure 2. Lee Pang-hee is trained as a military machine in the opening sequence.

The primary motif concerns how Yu and his colleague Lee detect the location of Lee Pang-hee and the terrorist unit to which she belongs. Her existence is presented as both visible and invisible. When she is visible, it is only through Lee Myung-hyun that she is entitled to live in the transnational era of capitalism. But when she appears as Lee Pang-hee, she has to be an absolutely opaque figuration. It is important to note here that when we first see Lee Pang-hee as a monstrous Other in the opening sequence, the location is presented as North Korea not South Korea.

When we first perceive the existence of Lee Pang-hee in a large South Korean supermarket, where Yu and his colleague Lee are supposed to meet a weapons dealer to discover an important clue in the detection of Lee Pang-hee, she can just be glimpsed through the camera's shallow depth of field. Yu and his colleague Lee cannot identify Lee Pang-hee: only the weapons dealer can

Figure 3. Lee Pang-hee is glimpsed on a rooftop.

identify her invisible existence. In the subsequent scene, the dealer is running away from her, and the camera captures an outdated traditional alleyway in Seoul. But the dealer is shot by Lee Pang-hee.

Conveyed through the use of rapid and/or unstable camera movement, Yu desperately looks around for Lee Pang-hee. Through Yu's point-of-view shot, the blurred image of Lee Pang-hee on a rooftop can just be glimpsed (Figure 3). In contrast to the cutting-edge skyscrapers surrounding it, the rooftop looks like a stain disturbing the transparent logic of global capitalism. David Scott Diffrient (2000, 82)'s suggestion is helpful in illustrating how South Korean locations as "cinematic cityscape" are represented in *Shiri*:

> *Shiri* positions women and North Korean 'others' in peripheral zones, with no clear entryway or exit (the film, for example, does not show how or where the North Koreans enter the South). The locations where Lee Pang-hee can be briefly glimpsed (rooftops, the supermarket, dark alleyways) are chaotic, spatially fragmented sites of distance, commodification, and 'otherness.' These zones of invisibility, as pockets of potential resistance within Seoul's ethnoscape, are difficult to freeze into a temporal instance.

Shiri stages the locality of Seoul, the capital of South Korea, which has experienced the passage to the postmodern consumer society. Even if this landscape is presented in a very postmodern way—the hand-held camera does not point to a stable location—nevertheless *Shiri* foregrounds Seoul's indexical locality. For instance, in the rooftop scene, this zone of opaqueness might indicate the tension between modernisation forcibly imposed by the West and the underdeveloped cityscape of Seoul. It also becomes evident when the film deals with the exploding department store which might signal "the collapse of the Sampoong department store building in July 1995 in Seoul with the loss of 200 lives" (Dalton and Cotton 1996, 286). Moreover, when Yu dreams that he and his partner Lee are shot by Lee Pang-hee, the backdrop is the Western-style restaurant *Bennigans*. Even though it is described as a mere dream, it might still touch on the real fear of Yu, in other words, the fear of the South Korean capitalist system.

For this reason, *Shiri* offers us a moment to overthrow the standard interpretation of this film: it is the first Korean blockbuster to engage in local issues such as the question of national division. As the narrative continues, it obfuscates why the North Korean terrorist unit led by Park has come down

to South Korea. Even though Park claims that their strategy of terror will create a step towards reunification, it seems a little strange to regard them as the direct embodiment of North Korea (Ha 2013, 88). The terrorist unit does not represent North Korea, because it is also excluded from the North Korean government. It is sufficient to note here that, in the final sequence at the football stadium, the audience in the stadium raises *TaeGukGi* (the South Korean national flag) and *ArirangGi* (the flag for both South and North Korea) at the same time, and there are supposed to be South-North summit talks taking place in the stadium. Considering that the game of football functions as an important means of constituting nationhood, *Shiri* expresses a desire for reunification at least in narrative terms rather than positing North Korea as a mere enemy. The list could go on: when the North Korean president announces that he is visiting South Korea for the purpose of reunification, the important aspect of the scene is that the figuration of the North Korean president does not appear as invisible even though he is indirectly represented through the interface monitor screen. The representation of the North Korean president is contrasted with that of Lee Pang-hee as a terrorist, because she appears as an opaque figure before she reveals her own identity as a spy.

Hence, the standard interpretation of *Shiri* as a film that deals with the question of national division may miss the point. My hypothesis is that the Other represented in *Shiri* touches on the class antagonism inherent within the South Korean capitalist mode of production, rather than the mere representation of a North Korean soldier. This might be inferred from Park's remark to Yu: "[h]ow can you, who grew up eating Coke and hamburgers, understand that your brothers in the North are starving?" If the North Korean terrorist unit has not infiltrated South Korea for the purpose of the reunification of Korea in terms of narrative development, is it not possible to read the terrorist unit as highlighting South Korean current social issues (Ha 2013, 89)? In order to make this claim clear, it is necessary to contrast Park with Yu and his partner Lee: Yu and Lee no longer represent the bureaucracy of a brutally violent National Security Agency but are, rather, a global/local market allegory in the guise of a human face to associate the new technocracy of transnational corporations with the authority of law and order. In contrast to them, Park can be read as a seemingly now faraway South Korean past. If that is the case, while Yu and Lee refer to the alliance between the new technocracy and law and order which can be defined as an allegory of global capitalism, Park points to a

seemingly now distant South Korean past, i.e., a figure of collective aspirations in the guise of the North Korean terrorists before the new power system of transnational capitalism comes to full realisation in South Korea.

Situating the Other as class antagonism manifests itself in a scene where Lee Pang-hee and Yu stand off towards the end of the film. Director Kang Je-gyu provides a shot/reverse-shot pattern between them. Yu finally punishes and shoots Lee Pang-hee for the narrative resolution. But what is at stake here is how Lee Pang-hee "draws a line of separation" within the big Other as social order. It leads us to question the ethics inherent within the death drive which, I think, distinguishes *Shiri* from the series of subsequent contemporary Korean films.

4 a

4 b

The camera offers a shot/reverse pattern between Yu and Lee.

4 c

4 d

A person of actual political power is fleeting in a car from the Olympic stadium.
Lee Pang-hee searches for the car.

4 e

4 f

She turns away to shoot the president. But Yu shoots her first.

4 g

4 h

Yu is still pointing his gun at her. The president is fleeing in a car.

Figures 4 a–h. Yu kills Lee Pang-hee.

This scene begins with a shot/reverse pattern between Yu and Lee (Fig. 4 a, 4 b). It is necessary to turn to a sudden intrusion of the Third: a shot/reverse rendering is cut together with the fact that a person of actual political power is escaping in a car from the Olympic stadium, even though it is unclear whether the car belongs to North Korea or South Korea (Fig. 4 c). In the next shot, Lee recognises that the president is fleeing (Fig. 4 d), followed by a shot in which she attempts to turn away and assassinate the president, not Yu (Fig. 4 e). In the next shot, as Yu shoots her first, her attempt to shoot the president has failed (Fig. 4 f). The next cut allows us to see that Yu is still pointing a gun at her (Fig. 4 g), and that the president is getting away (Fig. 4 h). The point here is that as the Third intrudes between Yu and Lee Pang-hee, she over-identifies with the role in the big Other, such that she performs an ethical act via the Other. It is from Lee Pang-hee that a true subject emerges. Yu merely functions as an object to help her death drive unfold. Even though Yu kills her, it might be

construed that she reveals a masochistic desire to let Yu kill her. Hence, it shifts the attention from the sadistic Yu to her radical act.

In order to explore this problem further, it is necessary to examine the relevant theories regarding the definition of "act" in psychoanalysis. The first step to consider is that an individual subject's entry into the Symbolic is structured as "a *forced choice*" (Žižek 1991, 74; emphasis original). The Symbolic pre-exists the subject, constituting him/her as the subject, irrespective of whether or not he/she accepts it. As such, it produces a kind of dissatisfaction: this forced subjecthood is why the Lacanian subject is barred (ibid. 76). In this respect, fantasy can be understood as the situation in which the individual subject imagines a kind of solution out of the dissatisfaction evoked by the demands of the symbolic authority. In order for the Symbolic to reproduce itself and domesticate dissatisfaction, it requires a minimum of fantasy that aims to pacify the inherent contradiction within it. How, then, can one go beyond the realm of fantasy in ethical terms? Jacques Lacan's conceptualisation of an ethical act provides a clue. The act needs to be differentiated from "action" in the sense that "[the act] radically transforms its bearer (agent)" (ibid. 44): "after an act, I am literally 'not the same as before'" (ibid.). In the course of an act, the subject experiences a temporary annihilation, not being able to find a proper place in the impersonally distributed network of society. An act, thus, always refers to a site where the consistency of the reigning symbolic authority falls into disarray. The act can be defined as something which is "neither a strategic intervention *in* the existing order, nor its 'crazy' destructive *negation*; an act is an 'excessive,' trans-strategic intervention which redefines the rules and contours of the existing order" (Žižek 2004, 81; emphasis original). Therefore, the concept of "act" in psychoanalysis refers to the concept that "the abyss of absolute freedom, autonomy and responsibility coincides with an unconditional necessity: I feel obliged to perform the act as an automaton, without reflection (I simply *have* to do it, it's not a matter of strategic deliberation)" (Žižek 2002, 162; emphasis original).

How, then, does one perform an ethical act? Far from a strategic intervention or a kind of madness, an ethical act, paradoxically, emerges when the subject over-identifies with the demand of the symbolic authority: "we 'kill' ourselves through the Other, *in the Other*. We annihilate that which—in the Other, in the symbolic order—gave our being identity, status, support and meaning" (Zupančič 2000, 84). The act is not opposed to the realm of the big Other (the Symbolic); but rather, it is only through the referential anchoring to

the (big) Other that an ethical act can appear. If our inclusion in social authority is a forced choice, the act might be related to all-too-literal repetition of a forced choice. In the course of accepting a forced choice as a true choice, the subject transcends the realms of fantasy and experiences true freedom. If the role of fantasy serves to make a distance in order for society to maintain itself smoothly, the act can be seen as withdrawing this distance, thus presenting a possibility of redefining the contours of the existing social order. Thus, the truly political act might not arise from making such a distance by foregrounding ironic and dispersed political subjectivities, but from a too-literal identification with power, thus breaking down the distance itself on which ideology depends.

From the perspective presented here, Lee Pang-hee exhibits the figure of an ethical act. In an impossible situation of being forced to make a choice, she literally identifies her role allotted in the symbolic network (Ha 2013, 87). By sticking to a forced choice against the fantasy which maintains it, she breaks down the very ground of social reality. This point becomes clearer when we compare Lee's over-identification with her role in the symbolic network with the male subject's suicide on the basis of sacrifice (in *Silmido* and *TaeGukGi* for example). While the male subjects do not kill themselves via the symbolic network, and thus conceal its inconsistency, Lee reveals the inherent tension in the network by over-identifying with it.

Commercial popular film provides an imaginary solution that suppresses the sudden intrusion of radical Otherness. *Shiri* effectively gentrifies a figure of alterity by killing female protagonist Lee. In this regard, *Shiri* can be regarded as a conservative film on the surface. However, paradoxically, *Shiri* can open up a space for some social content. To the extent that Yu suppresses Lee towards the end of the film, this film, ironically, proves that Lee remains such a strong figure. As mentioned earlier, for a film to be capable of ideological manipulation, some social contradictions must be given initial expression. In this respect, the specific narrative figuration shown in the act of Lee Pang-hee/Lee Myung-hyun opens up the possibility of mapping cognitively the unrepresentable on a global scale: suppressing the Other, paradoxically, may expose the precondition of the emergence of the excesses of global capitalism. This point becomes relevant when we consider that capitalism is always characterised by excess within its own mode of production. If *Shiri* can be understood as posing class antagonism, it is through Lee's act, since class antagonism can be defined first and foremost as the split of capitalism from within.

Conclusion

By examining the approach to the Other through the framework of ethics, I considered whether the films selected here enable us to devise new maps of the current capitalist system. Within these circumstances, this paper mainly explores the way in which the protagonist's suicidal gesture, in both *Silmido* and *TaeGukGi*, uses the logic of sacrifice to back away from the social question, while considering how *Shiri* reveals an ethical act without being drawn into the logic of sacrifice. By failing to reveal the figure of the Other, *Silmido* and *TaeGukGi* disorient the viewer, preventing him/her from totally apprehending the complexities of contemporary South Korea's socio-political conjuncture. As a result, these films pose their male subjects as the shadowy underground figures of the state, thus failing to present a way of moving beyond statist ideology.

In contrast, *Shiri* depicts how the imaginary other turns into the Other-Thing through the figure of Lee Pang-hee. As this film shows that she literally sticks to the demands of social authority at the end of the film, it raises the question of how an ethical act might be accomplished. Moreover, this film enables us to cognitively map out the "geopolitical unconscious" of South Korea. To the extent that the male protagonist Yu suppresses her at the end of the film, *Shiri* paradoxically shows that the enemy is strong enough. This is where *Shiri* clearly differs from both *Silmido* and *TaeGukGi*. While the latter films obfuscate the friend-enemy opposition, *Shiri* clarifies the question of the identity of the enemy. However, this paper subverts the general interpretation that *Shiri* deals with South-North issue. Instead, it argues that the Other figured in the film may refer to the class antagonism immanent within the South Korean capitalist system, thus successfully enabling us to allegorically understand the contemporary South Korean socio-political situation.

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Abstract

By analysing *Silmido* (2003), *TaeGukGi: Brotherhood of War* (2004) and, finally, *Shiri* (1998), this paper discusses how each film works to respond to an encounter with the traumatic Other. The representation of the Other necessarily leads us to raise the issue of ethics. The term "ethics" here refers precisely to "ethics of the Real" (Zupančič 2000) in which the subject redefines the mode of being in this encounter with the traumatic Real, thus becoming a true subject. One of the prevailing tropes of contemporary Korean film is the way in which the protagonist's suicide keeps utopian impulses permanently parenthesised through the logic of sacrifice. *Silmido* and *TaeGukGi* demonstrate this. In contrast, *Shiri* opens up the inherent contradictions of all such ideas by revealing that the female protagonist maintains fidelity towards her own "acts" without being drawn into the logic of sacrifice. In so doing, this film enables us to cognitively map out the "geopolitical unconscious" of South Korea, i.e., the unrepresentable totality of the current South Korean capitalist system.

Keywords: *Silmido*, *TaeGukGi*, *Shiri*, Other, ethics of the Real, geopolitical unconscious

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