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The Subject of Representation in Korean Cinema: Two Limit Cases

The so-called "Golden Age" of Korean Cinema – roughly the 1950s through the 1960s is widely believed to be dominated by a realist aesthetic. In her studies of the films of Kim Kiyoung – and in particular in rescuing his 1960 masterpiece *Hanyo* (*The Housemaid*) from undeserved obscurity[1] , Kim Soyoung illuminated a body of work that is a counter-example to such a characterization. I would like to make a complementary intervention. Rather than drawing attention to exceptions to the "realist cinema" of the time, I would like to reconsider *Obaltan* [*Aimless Bullet*] (Yu Hyun Mok, 1960), one of the so-called "realist" classics of the period to highlight ways in which the film exceeds the limits of that aesthetic[2]. I will then attempt a comparative reading of this film with a more contemporary film, *Nappeun Yonghwa* [*Bad Movie*] (Jang Sun Woo 1998). My larger aim is not merely to offer a new interpretation of a classic, nor merely to contest a truism of Korean film history, but rather to delineate modes of reading film attuned to the forms of representation and signification that are specific to cinema.

A substantial number of Korean films raise questions about the meaning of human life and the meanings of individual human lives. I will explore this tendency not thematically but cinematically. My point of entry into each film will be a scene in which a subject of the narrative (a character in a fiction film and a "real person" in a documentary) either questions the nature of its existence or negates that existence. It is in this limit-case of the on-screen figure that we find the difference between character and subjectivity.

Two questions

I will begin, quite perversely, by comparing a scene from *Obaltan* with a scene from *Kangwondo ui Him* [*The Power of Kangwon Province*] (Hong Sang-soo 1999) that will seem to exemplify the very dichotomy between classical and contemporary Korean cinema that I aim to displace.

a. *Obaltan*

Nowhere to Go *Obaltan* is the film adaptation of a 1955 short story by Yi Beom-seon (1920-1981), a renowned indictment of social degradation following the Korean war. It is the story of Song Chul-ho, the head of an extended family from northern Korea who become destitute refugees in Seoul following the Korean War. He works tirelessly at a dead-end office job to support his insane invalid mother, his pregnant wife, daughter, and his siblings, which include his younger brother Yong-ho –an unemployed wounded war veteran, and his younger sister who has become a prostitute patronized by U.S. servicemen.[3]

The film concludes in a cataclysmic day in which Yong-ho is arrested for armed robbery, Chul-ho's wife dies in childbirth, and Chul-ho finally has two rotten teeth extracted – instead of only one as the first dentist had advised. He walks the streets of Seoul heart broken, in shock – both emotionally and from loss of blood. Eventually he staggers into a taxi, but cannot decide whether he should go back to the tenement where the remaining members of his family await him, the jail where his brother awaits a possible death sentence, or the hospital where his wife will be cremated. The exasperated taxi driver describes his passenger as "one of those shells fired aimlessly,' which prompts Chul-ho's final reflections in voiceover, slumped and bleeding in the back seat:

An aimless bullet? I've tried so hard to be a good son, a good husband, a good father, a good brother, and a good clerk.

Why are there so many good things for me to be?

Maybe what he said was right – I'm a misfired bullet. Did god send me out like an aimless bullet, with no place to go?

Taxi Driver: Where do you want to go?

Chul-ho: Let's get out of here.

[Note: "Let's get out of here" – *Ka ja* is the saying that his delusional mother repeats incessantly.]

b. *The Power of Kangwon Province* – Going on vacation

The first section of *The Power of Kangwon Province* follows three women in their early twenties on a weekend trip from Seoul to the beach and mountain tourist spot of Kangwon Province. One scene shows the three on a beach, a song-book in hand, harmonizing in a Korean version of *My Darling Clementine*. After singing a verse, two of them debate over the actual lyrics. The women sang the line

Woman 1: Isn't it "you"?

Women 2: It's "forever"

Woman 1: [singing] "Where did you go?"

Women 2: No – it's that it's "forever" (gone).

So it's "forever".

Women1: [singing]: "You, you, you, where did you go?"

Woman: 2: That doesn't fit.

"forever" fits so much better.

The line they sang was "Gone forever." In Korean sentences subjects are freely deleted so context would make it clear that this means "Are you gone forever" – moreover this is rhetorical, so the line reads as the singer's realization that the someone has gone forever. Woman 1 wants to replace– "forever" with "you – where". While the explicit argument is over the words "you" and "forever," the connotation that is debated is that between possible accessibility and incontrovertible absence. If it is "where did you go?" it seems as if the communication is still

going on, and the addressee may return; if it is "gone forever" the question is asked rhetorically in the wake of a permanent loss. When the third woman sings the line again and the second woman concludes that "forever" is the correct word, she is also concluding that "gone" is better.

Ironically, the bitter final line of Chul-ho to the cab driver, "let's go" is also the conclusion that gone is better. The difference is that Chul-ho's conclusion comes from his despair and the woman on the beach's conclusion is merely the citation of a popular song. Two rather incongruous scenarios: a man self-destructs in the back of a dark cab; three young women casually harmonize on the beach. Yet both moments are preoccupied by the same question: "Is Gone Better?"

In *Obaltan* the question haunts the implications of the litany of questions the man poses to himself that are not at all rhetorical, albeit unanswerable. He had struggled to be a good clerk, a good son, and a good father. Yet his dedication could neither avert nor assuage the disasters that now make those duties look like pointless rituals. Wondering what meaning his endurance has had is both an expression of despair over the past and anxiety for the future. The meaning he seeks is not an object of knowledge so much as a value in life worth foregoing the cessation of suffering that death offers. His command to the taxi driver "Let's Go!" does not indicate a place he wishes to go, but rather intimates his suspicion that gone has to be better. In *Power*, the women openly debate that suspicion in their disagreement over the lyrics to "My Darling Clementine." Apparently it is not in the songbook (or they would have looked it up), so at that moment the question is as unanswerable for them as it was for Song. The context of their discussion, however, puts the question in semantic quarantine– the raising of the question neither reflects nor affects their attitude toward life. The question's present unanswerability as well as its eventual answer are inconsequential.

The differences in the two situations suggest a possible way to categorize differences between "classical" and "contemporary" cinema which I rather perversely illustrate here in order to contest. The classical film, such as *Obaltan*, portrays a psychologically coherent individual in a specific socio-historical situation. His suffering is realistic and identifiable. In his final crisis, his suffering becomes an existence that questions itself, a catastrophic yet authentic question, an experiential existentialism. [4] The contemporary film, such as *The Power of Kangwon Province*, signifies a world through a medium cool distance. Ultimate questions are placed in quotation marks, and truth is a communication noise. The film's citational irony evokes an existentialism so theoretical it does not endorse what it postulates nor even acknowledge its own speculations.

Ironically, in this case I also do not endorse what I have just postulated but I do acknowledge my speculation. In other words, I reject the binary opposition of static historical periods, but accept the differences between the two films as alternative capacities within the film form itself. When the women in *Power* argue whether "Gone is Better," they are not asking Hamlet's question, "To or not to be." But the *dialogue* does. The situation on the level of the plot delimits the significance of the question within the characters' conversation; the film restores that significance in its address to the audience. Both films take up a serious question seriously. *Obaltan* poses that question through the character in the narrative and *Power* poses it through the

discursive excess of the characters' dialogue. Here we find two different levels of articulation, which I will provisionally call the narrative-level (the level of the plot) and the filmic level (the level of the presentation).

In his reading of the same scene, Kyung Hyun Kim provides a context that is only revealed gradually in the film, in scenes far later than the scene on the beach:"Chi-suk, a twenty-two-year old woman and a recent college graduate, visits Kangwon Province . . . on her summer vacation trip with her two friends. A couple of months have passed since the termination of a relationship with her former teacher, a married man, and she wants to heal her wounded heart." To her travel companions she stresses the importance of knowing the difference between "things you can have and things you can't," and insists that she always gives up on what she can't have, she nevertheless starts a pointless sexual relationship with a married police officer the girls meet in Kangwondo.[5] Chi-suk's situation informs Kim's reading of the quarrel over the lyrics. He argues that the debate between "Where did you go?" and "Gone forever" enacts the "leaving behind love that is out of reach." Ironically, however, Chi-suk *does not participate in the debate* – she merely holds the songbook, and in fact changes the subject by starting to sing another song until the other two join in. If the debate reflects Chi-suk's dilemma, therefore, it suggests that the dilemma is not embedded in a single private psychology, but rather permeates the discourse of the film itself. In the next section, I hope to demonstrate that the subjectivity of the suffering figures of *Obaltan* also exceed the limits of the characters themselves to inform and configure the environments in which they operate, and finally, the question of "to be or not to be" that troubles Chul-ho's final scene is also articulated meta-cinematically between the filmic discourse and a subject of representation depicted as a refusal to be represented.

The argument for historical reference

Although one of my agenda items in this essay is to dislodge *Obaltan* from the category of 'realism' it has been associated with, I also want to distinguish my objections to the critical presumptions underlying that attribution and the interpretative limitations it imposes from the engagement with historical realities of Korean society and politics that distinguish both Yi Beom Seon's novella and Yu Hyun Mok's film.

Both texts depict the desperate situation of South Korea of the mid-1950s. Korea scarcely had time to celebrate the end of nearly half a century of Japanese colonial rule when the Korean War split the nation in two and rendered both halves venues for other power plays. Refugees from the north became permanent (and permanently destitute) internal exiles in the south. Even the "victorious" veterans of the conflict returned home to find devastation, massive unemployment, overcrowding, the spreading presence of the U.S. military, and the increasingly oppressive regime of Syngman Rhee. The film was shot between 1959 and 1960 when the conditions Yi Beom Seon described had significantly worsened, fomenting the April 1960 revolution that ended Rhee's government. [6] It was at this juncture that *Obaltan* was released. The realities also entailed the consequences for representing them so boldly. When the story was first published, Yi Beom Seon lost his teaching job. Unfortunately, that freedom of April was shortlived – all the

gains were reversed by a military coup in 1961, and Yu's film was one of the casualties. *Obaltan* was banned for being "anti-social" and "pessimistic."[7]

The historical situation of its production and its reception calls for keeping the referential in any reading. But historical engagement with realities is not a genre. Both the novella and the film evince revolutionary moments of representational strategies that equal the courage of their "realistic" exposes. And each text utilizes means specific to its respective medium. Let us turn to the strategies deployed in the film.

Dark streets of the mind

Yu Hyun-mok follows the original rather closely, but makes several significant additions. One concerns the sister, Myong-sook. In the film, she has a fiancé, Kyong-sik who returned from the war crippled, needing crutches to walk. Because of this, he broke off the engagement, thinking that Myong-sook should not settle for "half a man." She is devastated by his attitude, and attempts to persuade him to reconsider. One such attempt occurs in the opening sequence of the film. One night she sees him leaving a drinking party with his ex-soldier friends, follows behind him and confronts him. Here is the dialogue:

Myong-sook: I know we decided not to talk about it.
But why haven't you said even a word to me?
It's hard for me not to see you.
Kyong Sik: Please go home
Myong-sook**:** I can't go on being alone.
Kyong Sik**:** During the war, dear Myong Sook, I thought one of us would surely die.
That way, at least there might be a beautiful memory.

Nothing remarkable in the dialogue. But there is in the staging, usually simply written off as an example of the realistic use of little light in a dark street. But the use of both the light and the dark, and its relation to the blocking of the actors transfers the representation of subjectivity from the dialogue to the environment in which the dialogue is delivered. Myong-sook overhears Kyong-sik singing with his drinking buddies and follows behind him after he leaves them. The street is so dark it seems as if the two characters are traversing ink. But each actor is completely

lit. In an extended medium long shot, Myong-sook remains far enough behind Kyong Sik that she seems to be a miniature of herself, her size altered by the perspective against his larger body closer to the camera. And when she begins talking to him, she doesn't call his name but simply starts the conversation with the first line quoted above. Kyong Sik does not start or turn around but keeps walking forward, and when he speaks to the space in front of him or lifts his head slightly to the sky instead of looking at her. The combination of her diminished size in relation to his, the glow that the light yields off her silk hanbok, and his seeming monologue all make it seem as if this is not really an encounter between two lovers but a memory of Kyong sik's he is suffering alone. When he says the line: "at least there might be a beautiful memory," the mise-en-scene has already enacted that wish. It is purely fantasia for him, but Myong-sook suffers within the image he has rendered her. When she draws closer he puts out one of his crutches, lodging it perpendicular to the piling of the bridge they are under. And at the moment she suggests they marry right away and he refuses again, she walks up to the crutch, almost pressing against it. Although it is a "realistic" scene, with this arrangement and this small gesture, the "real" crutch also becomes the totality of the war tragedy that separated them and the concretization of Kyong-sik's intransigence that bars Myong-sook from moving forward into her desired future. Thus the "subjectivity" of each character is remapped and rearticulated in the environment itself.[8]

The no-escape route

The extension of subjectivity into the environment is not limited to the scene described above. In fact, this tendency is more pronounced in one of the climatic scenes, the failed bank robbery attempt by the younger brother Yong-ho. Because his motivation for the bank robbery is also the frustration over unemployment that is a widespread social condition at the time, his gesture is also a symptom of a larger social malaise. Furthermore, the chase scene disseminates his subjectivity in motion through a specific urban landscape, and it is not merely his subjectivity but a kind of group protest-"I". Below I trace the trajectory of what I will call his "No-Escape route" both in terms of the geography's significance and the elements of the mobile mise-en-scene.

Yong-ho had arranged with a former fellow soldier to borrow a jeep (not telling the friend it would serve as getaway car). As the friend waits for Yong-ho who is inside the windowless bank, a group of Christians parade by singing a hymn and carrying banners. One reads: "Shining Life – Long Lasting Wisdom". Another person carries a wooden cross; across the horizontal bar is written "Believe in Jesus." This display is a also a cry of pain – an attempt to embrace a belief that will rationalize the interminable suffering of the Koreans over the past 50 years, and seeking some trans-rational comfort for a situation whose grimness is only underscored by this gesture[9] . The unwitting look-out not so playfully pokes his cigarette at a little Christian girl's balloons. Two of them break exactly as a shot rings out. Perhaps borrowing from visual cues in silent films, instead of showing the scene in the bank, the shot includes an insert of a close up of a naked light-bulb breaking. Just then Yong-ho emerges from the bank, gun in one hand and a

burlap bag of money in the other. He crashes into a woman (who she is we will discuss shortly), and takes off. The woman then accompanies a police car on the chase. The remainder of the sequence alternates between stages in Yong-ho's flight and a police radio operator sending updates of Yong-ho's directions to police cars.

Every stage of Yong-ho's futile escape could be allegorical in its emblematic commentary on the state not only of Yong-ho's mind, but of the causes and conditions of national misery in South Korea at the time. Yong-ho's first ruse serves as an indigenous spiritual counterpoint to the Christian parade before the bank. He sits on the bag of money in front of a traditional fortune teller, giving him his palm and listening to his predictions. This resonates with the eerie futility of the Christian passion as it is evident that Yong-ho has just closed his future for good. After he is sure his pursuers have passed by, he leaps another fence and runs under some concrete structures that seem at once half finished and labyrinthine. And even the vacuity of the space contains visceral embodiments of the national agony. At one point Yong-Ho runs into a woman in a *hanbok* hanging by the neck from the overhanging pipes. As he backs up, her body swings causing the living baby on her back to start screaming. He only recoils again and keeps on running. From here he runs into a demonstration for workers' rights. The way this section of the episode is set up differs from the others. Instead of following Yong-ho's progress to and through the workers, the film cuts to a frontal shot of the workers' demonstrations. We hear their shouts clearly and the workers face the camera which also clearly captures their signs. It is only after that that Yong-ho works his way through this group from somewhere behind them. Thus we have a segment of a direct message from the aggrieved workers to the spectator. [10]

These markers of suffering are, however, joined by a path that is inscribed in a longer history of oppression and alienation. The radio operator repeatedly announces the section of Cheonggyecheon Yong-ho is following. Cheonggyecheon, originally called Gyecheon, is a small river that ran through a section of what is now Seoul and was used since at least the fifteenth century. The Japanese colonial authorities changed its name to Cheonggyecheon in 1914, as part of their policy to rename all the rivers and streams of Korea. The stream divided the neighborhood Jungno and Chungmuro; the Japanese gave the latter neighborhood the Japanese name "Honmachi" (Foundation Town) and reserved it for Japanese residents – leaving Jungno to the Koreans. Cheonggyecheon became an officially enforced border between the colonized's ghetto and the colonizers residential area. Subsequent Japanese construction projects (both completed ones and abandoned ones) radically altered the river's character. The pilings and pipes seen in the film are from the reinforcements the Japanese installed to support a trolly-car system. Such projects also diverted sewage systems directly into the river. The sewage and the thousands of displaced poor who took refuge in shanty houses by on these shores transformed the Cheonggyecheon into a fowl and hazardous scar across the face of the city[11]. And this is the wound that the wounded would-be thief traverses in his last desperate act of defiance.

Do you want to be in the movies?

The point in the film, in which the question of one's control over one's life's significance is most radically involved with cinematic representation, involves a character and subplot not in the original story at all. Yu gives Yong-ho a fiancé, Miri. Miri is a successful film actress who owns her own café, and is the only character apparently secure and cheerful. Like Myong-sook, however, Miri's plans to marry are stalled by her fiance's reluctance. Yong-ho has pledged not to marry her until he has found a job and can support himself. Hoping to find a solution to this impasse, Miri summons him to the film studio to discuss a job offer. Upon his arrival, Miri and an assistant director show him a film script that they want to cast him in. Looking it over Yong-ho realizes to his horror the plot is the story of his life. It concerns a soldier wounded in the stomach during the Korean War, whose recovery is aided by the extra care of a very special nurse. The assistant director asks to see Yong-ho's scars, hoping to use them on screen.Yong-ho becomes enraged and storms out, shouting that he "didn't get these scars in any children's game," and that they were "not for sale." On his way out he punches the glass out of the front door window.

The moment at the front door of the studio when Yong-ho rages is meaningful on several registers. We see him unable to open the door. Where he is trying the doorknob we see part of the *hangeul* character sa ('company'). This sa can also mean "society". A close-up of his angry face shows it trapped behind the rest of the Film Company's name. He's refusing to be in a film and yet cannot leave the site of its production. Here the sheer glass pane mimics the movie screen on which he appears – he then breaks through the pane and leaves the site of film production (in the plot of the narrative) and the plane of projection (metaphorically, on the level of filmic presentation). Smashing through the plane of the cinema also means that he smashed the "sa" of Company. And since this also marks his decision to rob a bank, he also has smashed the constraints of the "Sa" of society. Finally, in breaking the glass, he obliterates the left-hand side of the Korean phonetic character sa which leaves only a chinese character that means 'human being'.

Given the dire economic straits of his family, and his two years of unemployment, Yong-ho's reaction seems foolhardy and selfish. It is also at this point he decides to rob the bank, which reveals an even more extreme disparagement of the cinema. And it is at this extreme that the function of this incident reveals itself – not a conflict merely on the level of the narrative but a tension between the historically referential and its cinematic representation. Yong-ho's withholding participation in the film figures the material situations and actual suffering of historical individuals as excessive to any synoptic representation. Both inexhaustible and irreducible to any sign system. This is what his actions figure from the perspective of the

narrative. But from the perspective of the filmic presentation, Yong-ho's protest is purely ironic. He cannot keep his life and his wounds out of the movie, because they are already in one

– *Obaltan*.

The brother's decision to rob a bank, in terms of the plot is paradoxical at this point in terms of his own moral rhetoric – if he finds appearing in film dishonorable, why does he find crime acceptable**?** The very contradiction here determines the metadiscursive valence of the character's rejection of the cinematic representation. And this sets the stage for the film to reclaim him. On the way to the bank he is so convinced of his success that he stops at the film studios to talk with Miri. The conversation takes place amid rolling film reels on a projector. He tells her he is about to become wealthy and wants her to promise to be with him that night. This arouses her suspicion so she secretly follows him and leads the police to him. She is an agent of the cinematic system reasserting its claim over the entities within.

Timeless, bottomless Bad Movie [*Nappeun Yeonghwa*]

Jang Sun-woo is one of the most iconoclastic filmmakers to emerge in the 1980s. During his student days he was an activist and found himself jailed for his confrontations with the authorities. His experiences of that time and his courage to continue those confrontations are evident in his films. *Seoul Hwangje* [*Seoul Jesus*] (1986) is a satire on salvation and Korean bourgeois selfishness. *Gyeongmajang Ganeun Kil* [*On the Way to the Racetrack*] (1991) is a searing expose of middle-class hypocrisy. *Kkotip* [*A Petal*] (1996) is a controversial account of the military slaughter of thousands of peaceful protesters in Kwangju.

Gojitmal [*Lies*] (1999) is a notoriously explicit adaptation of a banned novel that chronicles the sado-masochistic sex games of a 37-year old academic and a 17-year old girl. *Lies* was preceded by a film in many ways even riskier *Nappeun Yeonghwa* [*Bad Movie*] (1998), which deals with the lives of street youth and homeless men. And like *Lies*, it was heavily censored in Korea and threatened to land the director in jail. My discussion of the film relies on the full-length version distributed abroad.

To make *Bad Movie*, Jang Sun-woo essentially made the same offer to his street youth that Miri and the film director made to Yong-ho. He taught them how to use a digital camera and gave them the opportunity to script, design and shoot their own accounts of their lives – the

crimes they committed and the outrages committed against them. In effect, he asked them to expose their wounds. And they did. The resultant mutual manipulation of apparatus and figure is *Bad Movie*.

a. Beginning at the End.

The beginning of the film describes its origins. It originally began as a short film by Jang's assistant director Kim. But one of the principles was arrested for robbery and sentenced to 18 months. One of the young women, addicted to paint thinner, died. The opening scene is in the boy's prison and is clearly shot with a hidden camera. The young man lowers his head to peer into the camera and say goodbye to the film. After the title credits the film resumes at the cremation of the young woman. It begins with a close-up of her memorial picture and then zooms back and pans to include the adult mourners and the young men of the film, who are dancing in the background. This is the last scene shot from the original film. In voiceover, the director says that this was the point at which they decided to stop shooting. But to placate the disappointed kids they promised to use them in a full length movie later, which became *Bad Movie*.

The image of the girl's memorial picture is the quintessential "sincere" image: It is an image to signify the subject's absolute absence – from the film and the world. This is in contrast to the image of the boys' dancing. Their inappropriate behavior underscores the comparative insincerity of their image which falsely represents their presence. And the voiceover contradicts image in that the image track is from a film that doesn't exist and the voiceover is from the film currently playing. *Bad Movie* begins with a film whose existence it negates, a clip from a film at the point of its death, a technological analog to the 'real' death it depicts, along with the images of boys who will survive this death and the death of the originating movie.

b. The Reality-Story Mix.

An episode in a bowling alley begins as if a cinema-verite look at the kids bowling. But it turns into the fictional representation of one of the women's stories when the rest of the kids [who have suddenly become a 'cast'] tell her they don't have enough money to pay the costs. She lets them all leave and she stays. Entering the locker room, she opens the window and leaps several stories down onto garbage bags. We see her look out the window and down into the alley

below. We also see her squeeze herself out of the window and perch precariously on the ledge. But at the moment she would jump we see the ground below from the perspective the camera being dropped from that height perpendicular to the ground. In place of the impact of the body on the bags there is garish, oversized cartoon of a bowling ball hitting pins with a loud crash and the comic-book like word screaming across the screen “Strike!” This is followed by the woman on the garbage bags shaking herself off and proceeding down the street.

The opening of the episode appears to be the youths bowling –making it documentary footage –but their situation clearly is scripted and so the woman who at first seems to be being herself is now merely playing herself, reenacting one terrible situation from the myriad that had composed her life up until that time. But then at the climactic moment, the camera no longer records the woman playing herself but substitutes itself for the woman. The camera does not film the woman playing herself but substitutes for the woman playing herself. Thus the sincere image is displaced by the insincere image playing the real person which is in turn replaced by the camera whose non-representation of the image is to signify the real person. Yet another variation on the opening formula in which the negation of the image re-adjudicates the difference between the subject of the narrative and the mechanisms of representation.

c. Jouissance VHS.

Because of the mixture of acting and real behavior, Bad Movie at times seems not so much a documentary but a porn film. And there is one scene in which the two forms represent each other. In one of the temporary dwellings that the young people live in, the scene opens with one of the men alone in the dark, watching a Japanese porn video and inhaling paint thinner fumes from a plastic bag. The woman from the bowling alley scene comes in and starts watching it with him. He then persuades her to give him a sexual favor. As she complies, the porn film on the screen undergoes a change too. The camera moves from the couple having sex to a woman peering at them through a tear in a paper screen. The way this is framed, it appears as if she is now looking at our “real” couple on the couch. There is no rapport between two separate image planes – the reality of the youths is put into brackets – reduced to the reality of the screen they watch, as it now watches them.[12]

The insincere image and the aborted negation

The episodes that the kids enact – even if they are their own stories – seem exploitative; as if Yong-ho's response was the vindicated. The episodes also are limit cases of experience – crimes committed, sexuality, and even attempted suicide. In one of the most disturbing scenes, it is not clear until the end whether this is a reenactment or an actual suicide attempt.

The scene opens claustrophobically with a young man almost leaning against a TV set in which a war film is playing. The very cramped space is shot slightly overhead and the angle is a bit askew. The young man is speaking to someone off camera as he opens packets of powder:

"I'm really going to take this. This is sleeping powder. It's how my mother died too.

I want you to keep filming to the end – film my dying." Each time he downs a packet of powders, his face is turned up towards the camera. Finishing off the drugs, he makes a phone call, with the light from the war film occasionally punctuating the conversation with a silvery blaze:

"Hey listen, it's me. I'm really going to end it this time. Thanks for everything. From now on, I want you to forget me and enjoy life. No – I'm telling the truth! Until now I've been kidding around but I'm totally serious this time. I'm leaving you the can tabs I've collected. I'd like you to continue the collection. I've collected about 10,000 can tabs. You can help some charity with them, make the world a little better, ok?"

He hangs up and lies on the floor. There is a barely distinguishable cut, and as he lifts himself up it's clear that the camera has also changed positions from above him to behind him but on roughly the same level. It also now moves to reveal the television set more clearly. In place of the war film there is a close-up of a man's placid face, and music faintly in the background. The boy makes another phone call: "Hello? Can you come right away? I'm dying. I took an overdose. I wanted to die but I've changed my mind. Now I want to live. It hurts a lot. Please hurry or I'll be dead." During the phone call, the camera backs up within the television broadcast showing the man is a Christian minister with a chorus behind him. During the conversation, the music comes into focus, until by the time the boy hangs up the chorus fills the screen and the music reaches a point of jubilation. Thus, his suicide gesture was reflected in the violence of the war film, and his change of heart was welcomed by the television's offer of salvation, of course redundant as he saved himself (if the rescue is on time).

At the beginning of the scene, the boy is filming his own suicide; he wishes to destroy himself but leave his image behind – both the image of destroying himself and the image of 'himself' that continues after the life that had sustained it had vanished. He is attempting a negation that will invest its posthumous image with the sincerity of the girl's image at the crematorium. But his nerve fails. Nevertheless, on screen he is irreducibly only an image. And as such, that screen image that is him, achieves a rapport with the screen images on the TV (similar to the rapport in the porn viewing scene). In the first half, the television helplessly witnesses the subject's would-be death. In the second half, it rejoices over the subject's salvation.

Conclusion

Despite the vast differences in historical situation, both *Obaltan* and *Bad Movie* deal with subjects of representation who are also subjects at the edge. And, correlatively, the stakes involved in the personal (of the plot) are irreducible to the stakes of the technologies of representation (in the cinematic form). Since the first film is an adaptation of a work of literature, and the second is a self-critical intervention in the documentary, I would like to close with parallel reflections on their respective contributions in rendering the cinematic vis-à-vis their chosen material.

The very notion of "literature" as a category and "literary criticism" as a discipline depend upon the conviction that a text is valuable to the extent that it does not mean what it says. Or more precisely, a text's value lies in the meanings it achieves through, yet beyond what it says. Cinema studies also presume a difference between what a film shows and what what it shows means. While the motivating assumptions of the two disciplines are analogous, their respective modes of reading are not. To read is not merely question of *what* something means but also *how* it means and *where* the meanings occur. The ability to read requires a preliminary mapping of the system in question.

To conclude, for example, that *Apocalypse Now!* (Francis Ford Copolla 1979) is an illustration of the insanity of power, is to read it as one might read *The Heart of Darkness*. Such an interpretation reduces the difference between the literal and the extra-literal to the difference between the story and its message, without considering the cinematic presentation of that story. To derive a conception of Eskimo psychology from *Nanook of the North* (Robert Flaherty 1922), is a similar error – making inferences from quasi-empirical observations of the world depicted, without inquiring into the mechanisms of the depiction. Such naïve readings extend the 'suspension of disbelief' to include both dramatic and documentary films. Critical reading, conversely, reanimates disbelief. The naïve reader accepts the story as the ground of meaning (of the fictional film) and as the record of truth (in the documentary). The critical reader discerns in both films two different planes of expression: the narrative and filmic presentation. In neither case can the meaning be fully determined in the narrative plane. The filmic presentation informs and shapes that story. Manipulation of that plane alters the story including the 'truth'.

Secondly, the naïve reading accepts the character in the fictional story and the 'real person' of the documentary as a coherent, self-identical individual, acting meaningfully within and upon the given world. A critical reading distinguishes the persona realized in the narrative from the technologically generated and sustained image on the level of the presentation. Furthermore, while the image becomes a persona within the narrative, its appearance qua image allows other socio-cultural discourses and historical or political contexts to invest it with additional layers of meaning. The on-screen entity, therefore occupies three registers of meaning: the narrative, the technological, and the discursive.

My reading protocol includes the triple-register of the on-screen entity and a dual-level of articulation. I will read the on-screen entity as subject of the narrative, image in the technology of representation, and figure in a dynamic socio-symbolic system. I will distinguish meanings

articulated on the level of the narrative from meanings articulated on the level of filmic presentation. While the conventions of dominant cinema usually obscure such divisions, each of the films I discuss here foregrounds the tensions between the represented subject and the system of representation, and illuminates the political stakes therein.

References:

[1] Kim Soyoung, *Sinema, Tekeuno Munhwa ui puleun kkoch*. (Seoul: Yeolhwa Dang, 1996) p. 137-140. See also Kim Soyoung, 'The Logic of Fetishism in Korean Cinema', *Traces 1* (2000), p. 301-318; particularly p. 309-317; Kim Soyoung, 'Video Essay on *The Housemaid'* (Appendix to Housemaid DVD, funded by Korea Foundation, under the direction of Kim Soyoung. This DVD also contains video highlights of the 'Inter-Asia Cultural Studies' Mini-Conference on The *Housemaid* and *Old Boy*, Seoul 2006. As an excellent example of the western critical attention to Kim Kiyoung Kim Soyoung's work stimulated and inspired, see Chris Berry, 'Introducing Mr. Monster: Kim Ki-young and the Critical Economy of the Globalized Art-House Cinema', in *Post-Colonial Classics of Korean Cinema*. Ed. Chungmoo Choi (Irvine: Korean Film Festival Committee, University of California, 1998): 39-47.

[2] For a good summation of the film's general reception and appreciation, see: Yi Ho-in, *Hankuk Yeonhwasa Kongbu 1960-1979* (Seoul: Hankuk Yeonghwasang Jilyro, 2004) p 75-76; 78.

[3] Yi Beom Seon. 'Obaltan' [1958-59] in *Hankuk Soseol ui eoleul* 4. *Lauljeon*. Ed. Choe In Hun. (Seoul: Puleun Sasang, 2006) p.90-130.

[4] Actually, existentialism became the premier philosophical orientation among philosophers and intellectuals after World War II. See Cho, Eunsu, 'Creating a Korean Philosophical Tradition: Pak Chong-hong and the Discomfiting Indispensability of European Thought', in *Review of Korean Studies*, Vol.5 No. 2 (2002) p. 163-193; and Kang Yeong An, *Kankoku Kindai Tetsugaku no Seiritsu to Tenkai* (Tokyo: Sekai Shoin, 2005)

[5] Kyung Hyun Kim, *The Remasculinization of Korean Cinema*. (Durham, Duke UP, 2004) 218-219.

[6] See: Kim, Ke-soo. 'The April Revolution, 1960: A Survey Analysis'. *The Journal of Social Research* 1 (April 1965): 42-70; Yang, Sung Chul. 'Student Activism and Activists: A Case of the 1960 April Revolution in Korea'. *Korea Journal* 12:7 (July 1972): 7-16; and Kim, Quee-young. *The Fall of Syngman Rhee* (Berkeley: Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, 1983).

[7] Apparently, the authorities found the line "Let's get out of here!" particularly offensive. It was allowed to be screened again in 1964. Ho Hyun-chan. *Wa ga shinema no tabi* [*Looking back at Korean Film*]. Trans. Nemoto Rie. (Tokyo: Gaifu, 2001) p. 189-191.

[8] At the conclusion of the scene, the geometry of his outstretched crutch in front of her becomes Myong-sook's view of the situation – the obstacle that her fiancé is needlessly putting between her and her future.

9 See: Ham Sok Hon. *Yukchonman Minjok Ape Burujijineun Malsseum*. (Seoul: Hangil Sa, 1988); Ham Sok Hon, Tteuturo Bon Hanguk Yoksa. (Seoul: Hangilsa, 1992); and Ito Kenji. *Seoul de kangaeta koto – Kankoku no gendai shisoo wo megutte* (Tokyo: Heibonsha, 2003) I include Ham Sok Hon as an example of a Christian existentialist who was also an activist. The conclusions I draw about the general functions of Christianity in Korea are my own and would not be shared by Ham or his followers. But conversely, I would argue that even Ham's writings include symptomatic searches for a meaning to suffering that would support my thesis.

10 On the relations between labor movements and the struggle for democracy see: Choi, Moon-hwan. 'The Path to Democracy: A Historical Review of the Korean Economy'. *Korean Quarterly* 3:1 (Summer 1961): 52-70; Kim, Youn-suk. 'Korean War and South Korean Economy', *Asian Profile* 19:6 (December 1991) p. 519-525.

11 For work dealing the relation of the city to contemporary Korean cinema, see Richard Pfennig, 'Das Thema Grossstadt im Koreanischen Film', in Special Issue of *Seoul Bang*:. Editors Nils Clauss and Udo Lee *Stadt Bauwelt* 179 (Dec 2008) p. 66-73; Abe Yoshiaki, 'Toshironteki Fuan: Kankoku Eiga Vs. Zeze Takehisa', in *Eureka*. (Nov 2001): 82-91.

12 The fact that it is a Japanese woman "watching" from the tv-screen is doubly ironic as it was Japan that first put the uncensored version of *Bad Movie* on a commercial DVD. Furthermore, the young woman in the film who is traumatized on camera later in the film when Jang Sun-woo stages a gang rape committed against her by the unwilling cast – was subsequently invited to Japan and was then offered opportunities to work as a model in Tokyo. Interest in her was particularly voyeuristic.