



FILM
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IN TRANSITION

Sovereign Violence

ETHICS AND SOUTH KOREAN CINEMA
IN THE NEW MILLENNIUM

STEVE CHOE

Amsterdam
University
Press

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The transliteration of Hangul follows the Revised Romanization rules of July 2000. Following Korean convention, surnames precede given names unless an author indicates otherwise in their work.

Introduction

I.

The opening scene of Lee Chang-dong's 1999 film, *PEPPERMINT CANDY*, begins with a picnic and ends with a suicide. A disheveled, middle-aged *hwesawon*, or "company employee," named Young-ho (played by Sol Kyung-gu) stumbles into a gathering of friends near a small river. The dozen or so happy picnickers, dancing and singing to a karaoke machine, seem at first not to notice the grey-suited, unkempt man, but they soon recognize him as an old friend from twenty years ago. Young-ho is offered *soju*, a Korean rice liquor, but he is not in a particularly celebratory mood. He volunteers to sing a song, but the sad melody the salary man belts out, with great anguish, only casts a somber pall over the party. Silently returning the microphone, Young-ho wanders off into the shallow river toward a nearby railroad overpass.

While his friends resume their merriment, Young-ho somehow has managed to climb to the top of the bridge. He stands on the suspended tracks, looking grim and miserable. Soon a train rumbles toward him while repeatedly blowing its whistle. Tension builds with the nearing confrontation between Young-ho and the train, underscored by accelerated shot-reverse shots. A worried picnicker has left the party and stands beneath the tracks with a helpless look on his face. He frantically screams his suicidal friend's name above the loudening rumble: "Kim Young-ho!" As the heavy train comes treacherously close, Young-ho turns to face it. The film quickly cuts to a perspective from the train and he yells out, with outspread arms and a wide-open mouth, "I want to go back!" The camera-train relentlessly rails toward Young-ho, until it stops on a close-up of his anguished face, signaling the moment of impact. Over the freeze frame, the clanging of the train continues on the soundtrack.

Lee's film obeys Young-ho's desire to go back by narrating the course of his life backward, depicting significant scenes from his personal history: Spring 1999, Summer 1994, Spring 1987, Fall 1984, May 1980, and Fall of 1979. These moments provide snapshots of one South Korean man's life and allow the viewer to piece together how Young-ho's misery in the present is connected to a series of regrettable decisions made in the past. Each episode is flanked by a short interlude. Repeating the camera angle that captured the image of Young-ho's death, the interludes depict moving shots above railroad tracks, taken with a stationary camera placed on a moving train. The first two look

as if they move forward on these tracks, but with the third, the spectator comes to realize that the camera is positioned on the last car of the train, and that the film itself is projected backwards. Cars and vans are shown driving in reverse, children run the wrong way, and smoke grows smaller and thickens rather than disappearing into the air. While these interludes pull the diegesis backwards in time, they unfold in accordance with the spectator's inexorable, forward experience of the film. In lieu of a linear cause-effect relationship, Lee's film proceeds by an effect-cause movement, reiterated in the reverse movement of the train. By its end, PEPPERMINT CANDY will have spanned twenty years, taking the viewer back to the moment when Young-ho, singing songs with friends at a picnic near a small river in 1979, emerges into the sparkle of life and dreams about his future.

Travelling back in time, the film links moments from Young-ho's personal history to key moments from South Korea's democratization process. As the spectator gradually comes to realize, the fictional world of PEPPERMINT CANDY cannot be separated from the historical events to which it constantly refers. Young-ho's third episode coincides with political uprisings that took place in early 1987, during the dictatorial presidency of Chun Doo-hwan. At this historical juncture, a twenty-one-year-old student activist at Seoul National University, Park Jung-chul, was detained by authorities in January and died when he was tortured to disclose the names of fellow activists. His death inflamed the public and became the *cause célèbre* for the June Democracy Movement that took place later that year. In Fall 1984, when Young-ho is depicted joining the KNPA (Korean National Police Agency) in Lee's film, progressive groups became increasingly vocal in their demand for human rights and called for the end of Chun's authoritarian regime. In this year, college campuses saw a sharp rise in student activism while the Council of People's Democratization Movement mobilized workers and peasants to become aware of their disenfranchisement. The primal scene, or the originating trauma, of Young-ho's misery in PEPPERMINT CANDY, however, is inextricably linked to one of the most dramatic political events in modern Korean history: the Gwangju Uprising in May of 1980. What began as a student demonstration protesting the closing of Chonnam National University, located in the South Jeolla city of Gwangju, quickly escalated over a ten-day period. Chun swiftly implemented martial law in response to the demonstrations. In solidarity, tens of thousands of student activists, workers, and citizens of the city rallied against his dictatorship while Korean army soldiers and paratroopers were dispatched to the city. They began beating and shooting the political dissenters. To this day, the number of civilian casualties remains in contention.

Young-ho's life may be read as a national allegory for these watershed historical events, as standing in for the South Korean nation in its struggle toward modern democracy. However, *PEPPERMINT CANDY* does not focus on the victims of the state's repressive power, but on Young-ho's violent exercise of this power. He is called up as a member of the national military to put down protesting students and workers in Gwangju. When Young-ho joins the KNPA, he is quickly indoctrinated into their inhumane methods of extortion. His violence causes a radical sympathizer to lose control of his bowels on Young-ho's hand during an aggressive interrogation session. He brutally extracts information from dissenting leftists by forcibly dunking their heads in water, techniques that were utilized to torture and presumably kill the progressive student, Park Jung-chul. In these events, Young-ho's originating trauma is equated to the South Korea's historical trauma that began in May of 1980: one act of violence is linked to the next, constituting a chain of brutality that links the progression of his life to the life of the nation. And with each repetition, Young-ho stubbornly disavows the possibility of reflecting and working through the past. His inability to mourn, as film scholar Kyung Hyun Kim suggests in his reading of Lee's film, cannot be separated from his idyllic romanticization of innocence, of a time before May 1980, and the impossible hope of rekindling innocence lost.¹ Young-ho acts out, exercising sovereign power over the people he tortures as well as sovereignty over his past.

When *PEPPERMINT CANDY* premiered on December 31, 1999, South Korea was still reeling from the crisis that devastated the economy in 1997 and still suffering from the sudden mass layoffs and drastic restructuring of the financial sector imposed by the IMF. As a consequence of the \$57 billion bailout that prevented national banks from defaulting on their international debts, the IMF demanded that the Korean government implement a series of structural adjustments that included market deregulation, privatization, and trade liberalization. Interest rates rose to as high as 30 percent, and about half of the thirty largest *chaebols* ("business conglomerates") collapsed. Among those that survived, policies protecting the hiring and replacing of workers were repealed while companies promptly fired about 30 percent of their labor force. The middle class was subsequently drastically reduced and undermined.

Many unemployed male head of households were overcome with a sense of failure, reflected in Young-ho's character at the beginning of *PEPPERMINT CANDY*, and turned to divorce or suicide. Some became despondent and stopped looking for employment altogether. In February 1999, the unemployment rate was the highest ever recorded at 8.7 percent, but if those who

simply stopped looking were added to this figure, the unemployment rate would have been well over 10 percent or around 2.5 million people. The history of modern South Korea and the story of Lee Chang-dong's *PEPPERMINT CANDY* are contemporaneous and inextricably intertwined: each informs the other and each provides the opportunity for historical reflection.

In the midst of social and economic upheaval, South Koreans were therefore willing, even if Young-ho was unable, to “go back” and recollect with the reverse telos of the film. Following the trajectory of how South Korea emerged as a major economic player and ending with the widespread consequences of personal and financial crisis through the national allegory of Young-ho's life, Lee's film proved to be a sobering and humbling experience. In an interview about *PEPPERMINT CANDY*, Lee explains that the double movement between the audience's forward experience of the film and the backward narration of Young-ho's life places the viewer in a place of contradiction:

The audience project themselves onto the characters while watching a film. Through this act of projection, we can either absorb a character, or take objective distance and reflect on ourselves. Film viewing is innately contradictory because it functions in both ways. Cinema itself is full of contradictions. I wanted neither full identification nor objectification. This was my intention in the case of *PEPPERMINT CANDY*.²

Eliciting an “objective distance” from the drama, Lee's film compels the viewer to reflect upon Young-ho's ethics and his or her own means of identifying with his ethics. As he brutalizes leftist sympathizers and radicals, Young-ho's sadism distresses and disturbs because his merciless cruelty seems unmotivated, his actions somehow nihilistic. And as the film unfolds and the spectator is led into his personal history, connections are encouraged between the trauma of Gwangju, Young-ho's inability to work through past trauma, and his subsequent acting out. Yet, while the viewer makes these connections, he or she may be compelled to ask: is it possible to sympathize with the hardened Young-ho and his acting on the wrong side of history? Projecting themselves onto a victimizer who has been victimized by history, the viewer is placed in a position of ambivalent moral judgment. Can he or she forgive him, even when he cannot forgive himself? And to what extent is the viewer's capacity to forgive related to his or her ability to be emotionally engaged in the cinema? Vacillating between sympathy and aversion, which is, as Lee remarks, “neither full identification nor objectification,” the viewer is placed in a position of contradiction as

PEPPERMINT CANDY unfolds, compelling judgment and questioning with regard to Young-ho's ethics. Elucidating how this judgment comes about, describing how this questioning produces an aporia, or an irresolvable problematic, specific to the cinema, while highlighting the historico-political urgency of this aporia will be the subject of the present book.³

II.

Although a number of studies have been written about this period of Korean cinema history, none directly address the images of violent brutality and narratives of bleak nihilism frequently noted by audiences, academics, and critics. *Sovereign Violence* attempts to fill this gap. Far from dismissing this violence as gratuitous spectacle, I aim to reveal how some of the most significant and provocative films from South Korea, released in the first decade of the twenty-first century, imagine a critical, post-ideological ethics of everyday life under neoliberal capitalism. In addition to works by Lee Chang-dong, I will focus on selected films by Bong Joon-ho, Hong Sang-soo, Gok Kim and Sun Kim, Kim Ki-duk, Na Hong-jin, Park Chan-wook, and Park Ki-yong. Like PEPPERMINT CANDY, many of the incendiary films I have chosen to discuss in this book induce experiences of spectatorial discomfort and moral unease. They have divided audiences with their harrowing, graphic depictions of physical degradation and narratives of psychological cruelty. Yet, these disturbing films remain strangely compelling, having won the admiration of cinephiles around the world and top prizes at international film festivals. In this book, I will consider Korean films of the new millennium not merely as products of the culture industry but also as works of art that pose urgent ethical dilemmas and subsequently point toward new modes of social existence. We shall see that they critically reflect on the relationship between the spectator and screen while teaching human viewers how they may relate to racial and ethnic others, strangers, outsiders, visitors, animals, and other non-humans. Akin to what Miriam Hansen calls "vernacular modernism," these films train audiences how to think ethical questions critically after 1997 – that is, how to love, how to hate, as well as how to cohabit with others in an increasingly cosmopolitan, increasingly modern South Korea.⁴ As we shall see, these films exploit capacities specific to the film medium, and help us to understand the cinema as a machine for generating empathy.⁵

In the span of historical time depicted in Lee's PEPPERMINT CANDY, South Korea experienced an unprecedented rate of modernization and capitalist

industrialization. Korea did not enter the modern era by overcoming feudalism and by gradually replacing traditional worldviews with scientific rationality over hundreds of years. In the span of roughly three decades, Korea emerged from its former status as a “Third World” nation, inseparable from the politics of the Cold War, to become one of the most economically developed democracies in the world. As Gi-wook Shin has argued, nationalism, globalization, anticolonialism, authoritarian politics, and democratization have informed, in complex and unique ways, the politics of South Korean modernity in the twentieth century.⁶ Korea’s exceedingly rapid development, which sociologist Chang Kyung-sup has called “compressed modernity,” came about not without its social and moral consequences. He notes that, “As modern (Western) values and institutions literally poured in with many traditional (indigenous) values and institutions still remaining effective, the absence of systematic principles for their harmonization and integration has led to a situation of *accidental pluralism* in the systems of values and institutions.”⁷ As tradition encountered modernity through Korea’s incredible rate of economic development, the clash of generations brought a plurality of formerly non-synchronous discourses – local and global, urban and rural, superstitious and rational – into irresolvable tension. Moreover, technologies such as fast broadband internet, available cheaply to most of the population, has reshaped how information is received and disseminated, while restructuring and remaking social relations.⁸ The upheavals of twentieth-century modernity in Korea, inseparable from the experience of colonization and military dependence, have upended the ethics of how individuals and institutions relate to each other as well as challenged established moral principles for their integration.

The films I will analyze in this book directly reflect on the legacy of these upheavals, focusing on key ethical and political issues that have been brought into crisis in the new millennium: changing definitions of sexuality and gender, new formations of class politics, the legacy of authoritarian governmentality, shifting ethnic distinctions between Koreans and non-Koreans, the increasingly significant role of Christianity in Korean culture, the legacy of *minjung* politics, and novel definitions of the human being that implicitly critique those circumscribed by Western humanism. These films appeared in a socio-political climate when an economic state of emergency bolstered the mandate of the government to decide between those who may be supported as productive citizens and others who would be allowed to fall through the social safety net. As anthropologist Jesook Song has shown, only “deserving” members of the homeless and the unemployed were granted public housing, education, and the opportunity to rejoin the workforce

within the neoliberal welfare state.⁹ Reinscribing the capacity of the sovereign to decide upon the exception, the Korean government implemented social policies that excluded unmarried women, progressive activists, and unemployed youth without computer skills from public assistance. The films allegorically critique the formations of power that hierarchize and categorically dehumanize human beings in the post-IMF economy. Yet, by illuminating the metaphysics that grounds these dehumanizing biopolitics, we shall see that they also propose an ethics of “harmonization and integration” appropriate to contemporary postmodern South Korean life.

While the 1997 financial crisis marked a watershed trauma for many Koreans, it also led to new forms of venture capital investment for film production in the 2000s. The diverse films produced by dynamic directors such as Na Hong-jin and Bong Joon-ho reflect the radically changed conditions of production in the first decade of the twenty-first century. Some have bigger budgets and higher production values, while others are more gratuitous, and perhaps, due to the filmmakers’ distance from the traumas of the 1980s, are less explicitly political. This book will explore the ethical ramifications of Korea’s rapidly liberalizing economy during this key decade and think about how the watershed cultural changes, concomitant with what Rob Wilson calls “killer capitalism,” are thematized in the films of this period.¹⁰ If neoliberalism after 1997 insistently interpellates pro-capitalistic, productive, exemplary, docile human beings, then we shall see how contemporary Korean cinema interrupts these discourses of sovereignty by baring the violence that underpins them, utilizing brutal imagery that, in turn, interrupts the discursive suturing of spectator to screen. A number of contemporary global cinemas, for instance “extreme” European cinema (including films directed by Catherine Breillat, Lars von Trier, Michael Haneke, Ulrich Seidl, and others), have also utilized violent imagery to pose ethical and spectatorial problematics. US filmmakers such as Quentin Tarantino and Sam Peckinpah, whose most articulate commentator has called his a “savage cinema,” have also produced similarly critical work.¹¹ Nevertheless, millennial Korean cinema remains unique in the way its concern with ethics is realized through the depiction, as described by Walter Benjamin, of a violence of “pure means.” For this reason, I believe contemporary Korean cinema has something significant to contribute to notions of moving image spectatorship in our technologically mediated world.

In his essay called “The Critique of Violence,” Benjamin lays out two uses of violence in its compensatory role within the norms set out by law and modern notions of justice. On the one hand, “mythic” violence may be quickly recognized as corresponding to our everyday, rational notion of

politics – the give and take of generosity, outrage, excuses, regrets, apologies, punishment, and reconciliation between political actors. These ethical actions belong to a world organized by the logic of means and ends. As long as a predetermined telos exists for the individual who seeks political action, regardless of whether this aim is considered moral or immoral, the violent means for realizing this goal are considered to be not only just, but also necessary. Mythic violence is compliant with the law of cause and effect and, as such, is often tacitly understood as “natural” and therefore legitimate. Yet, as Benjamin suggests, the carrying out of mythic violence is essentially an act of idolatry and should be understood as a secularized or political theology, for it is constituted through a decision made by a mortal human who desires to become God. Mythic violence is concretized through its “bastardized”¹² codification in positive law; it imposes guilt and retribution, instills fear and can be “bloody.”¹³ Through bloody vengeance, the punishing sovereign gains power over the one who has been deemed the enemy of the people, blamed as the initial perpetrator of violence, and demonized as the embodiment of evil.

Antithetical to the blame-attributing righteousness of mythic violence, Benjamin tells us of a politics of violence that does not conform to the linear reasoning of means and ends. He suggests that this violence is a “pure means,” one with ambiguous ends.¹⁴ It destroys the idolatry of mythic violence and with it the moral certainty of the sovereign who exercises it. This form of violence is “lethal without spilling blood,” it expiates and atones, releases the punished from the endless suffering of guilt, and does not take recourse to a pre-existing concept of justice.¹⁵ Through the representation of such violence, it paradoxically renders the ethics of violence inoperable as it appears to have no reasonable telos. A violence of pure means is essentially critical and promises a “new historical epoch” that is to come.¹⁶ Benjamin names this critical violence, which deposes sovereignty and makes way for a new ethics, “divine violence.”

While I will explore both formulations of violence in contemporary South Korean cinema, my aim in the later chapters of the book will be to excavate the ethics of divine violence in these films, a violence that carries the potential to undermine the experience of narrative cinema itself. As we shall see, the ambiguities of divine violence accord with what Lee calls the “contradictions” of film spectatorship. The ostensible pointlessness of the violence depicted in millennial Korean cinema compels the viewer, provoked and offended, to take up a position of objective distance in relation to their cruel protagonists. And through this alienation, the spectator is given the opportunity to allow mythic violence to pass over into its expiatory

antithesis. These and other key theoretical terms, crucial for my analysis of the experience of Korean cinema, will be clarified and elaborated upon as I move through the individual films.

The one who asserts power over another and justifies the carrying out of mythic violence exercises a power that resonates with our modern concept of sovereignty. The work of Giorgio Agamben, who himself has engaged with Benjamin's writing on violence, has renewed philosophical interest in the problem of political power within modern governmentality, specifically in the critique of its seemingly groundless metaphysics, which is at once unrestricted yet simultaneously bound to law. Referencing a key formulation from political theorist Carl Schmitt, this critique has reminded us that the sovereign is he who decides on the legal exception.¹⁷ I will draw from Agamben's work at key moments in my analysis of contemporary Korean cinema, not in order to explain the articulation of authoritarian state power, but to articulate the discourse of sovereignty itself and the justification of violence that is legitimated through the exercise of sovereign power. In *The Great Enterprise: Sovereignty and Historiography in Modern Korea*, Henry H. Em lucidly shows how Korea's tumultuous struggle for national sovereignty in the twentieth century deeply informed questions of national historiography.¹⁸ Indeed, many *minjung* intellectuals worried that Koreans were not subjects of their own history, and they took it upon themselves to reevaluate major historical events in order to consolidate renewed formations of national identity. As modern Koreans emerged into a position of knowledge with respect to the past, they were striving toward a position of sovereignty in relation to how the past is to be represented.

Such a struggle is continued and allegorically embodied in the individuals depicted in the new millennial Korean cinema. Their main protagonists seek not only self-mastery and mastery over the past, like the men in the films of Lee Chang-dong and Hong Sang-soo, but also pursue mastery over others, their surroundings, and their futures. These are authoritarian individuals, emboldened by their power of decision, who engage in the politics of the other and pursue emancipation from the constraints of normative morality through recourse to mythic violence. The definition of sovereignty that concerns me in this study may be aligned with the humanist self, which resonates with the definition of the "sovereign man" put forth by Friedrich Nietzsche. He writes:

This man who is now free and who really does have the right to make a promise, this master of the *free* will, this sovereign [*souveraine Mensch*] – how could he remain ignorant of his superiority over everybody who

does not have the right to make a promise or answer for himself, how much trust, fear and respect he arouses – he ‘*merits*’ all three – and how could he, with his self-mastery, not realise that he has necessarily been given mastery over circumstances, over nature and over all creatures with a less durable and reliable will?¹⁹

I will discuss Nietzsche’s *On the Genealogy of Morality*, from which this reverence is derived, in greater detail. The one who performs sovereignty believes him or herself to be exceptional, liberated, privileged, and unified, behaves without controversy, remains at home in the world, and is empowered to create laws in response to chaotic disorder. In films such as N.E.P.A.L.: NEVER ENDING PEACE AND LOVE (2003) and SECRET SUNSHINE (2007), sovereign individuals cast judgment, and in so doing exhibit a profound lack of empathy for the other. Their aspirations toward self-legislation are simultaneous with acts of violence committed against others, and both are inseparable from the reification of the other within capitalist modernity. Working with specific films produced in the new South Korean millennium, I will explain how this quest toward sovereign subjectivity, of becoming an untroubled human agent, is inextricably linked to the compacted development of modernity in twentieth- and twenty-first-century Korea.

Perhaps no other cinematic form has dominated film production in Korea more than melodrama, particularly as a narrative means of moving the viewer’s emotions and eliciting his or her sympathies. Within the field of Film Studies, cinematic melodrama has often been understood as a genre that exists in a relation of excess to realist cinema, featuring exaggerated, “over-the-top” acting and sentimental narratives that, at least in the US context, have pejoratively been called “weepies,” “tearjerkers,” or “women’s pictures.” In this book, I will not consider cinematic melodrama simply as a genre, but will follow the claim, put forth by both Linda Williams and Christine Gledhill, that melodrama should be understood as a dominant “mode” of popular cinema. Williams observes that key to this mode, and key to the construction of realistic characters with which the viewer may sympathize, is the recognition of suffering victim-heroes as virtuous human beings. The melodramatic mode is constituted by figures, “who embody primary psychic roles organized in Manichean conflicts between good and evil,” and who play out this drama in order to make his or her moral virtue legible to the film spectator.²⁰ With the normative expectation that a feature film will unfold through a clear, linear logic of means to ends, from plot to *dénouement*, a viewer is encouraged to be entertained and moved by the narrative drama presented by a film through its solicitation

of pathos and character sympathy. In the popular melodramatic mode, victims realize justice precisely by exercising mythic violence, as we shall see, thus convincing the viewer once more of its legitimacy.

The melodramatic mode enables spectators to believe that human beings depicted in the cinema embody a coherent interiority or a moral "soul." The sovereign individual coincides with the individual constituted through melodrama, who embodies a will, a psychology, identifiable feelings, thoughts and values, who possesses "a moral compass," a point of view, a unique personality, or an invisible, but nevertheless real, essential humanity. Melodrama is what allows spectators to believe that they can "get inside the head" of a character on-screen, a traversal that, as Gledhill writes, leads "inward to where social and ideological pressures impact on the psychic."²¹ Both analyses by Gledhill and Williams suggest that the presumption of such an interiority is an attribute of the viewer's anthropocentric look. He or she is compelled to know the "heart" of fictional characters in the cinema so that they may be sympathized with. Yet, to sympathize is also to moralize, to ascertain virtue, and to evaluate the justness of their actions.

Millennial Korean cinema tests the limits of this compulsion and the capacity to know the other through melodrama. When Chris Berry observes that the South Korean film industry has produced high-budget films that have effectively "de-Westernized" the blockbuster film, he observes that they do so by ambivalently mimicking its popular forms and modes of narration.²² If melodrama constitutes the dominant mode of US popular cinema, the most important Korean films in the post-IMF decade aim, in a manner akin to postcolonial mimicry, to overturn this mode from within.²³ Violent films by Kim Ki-duk, Park Chan-wook, and others critically foreground the ethics of their victimized characters, who are rendered morally ambiguous, unsympathetic, and one-dimensional, thus revealing the interlock between resentment and their exploitation of mythic violence. The shocking imagery depicted in films such as *BAD GUY* (2001) and *SYMPATHY FOR MR. VENGEANCE* (2002) aim to induce audiences to recognize and critically assess the epistemological underpinnings that make the other knowable at all. On-screen characters in these films seem at moments elusive and devoid of moral character and, as such, operate at the limits of melodramatic mode. From the films' refusal to depict characters that perform humanist assumptions about the melodramatic individual, frustration and spectatorial displeasure ensues.

Historical violence and the bitter feelings of the disenfranchised beget the violent imagery depicted in contemporary Korean cinema, which, moreover, violently assaults the spectator. Films such as *CAMEL(S)* (2002),

LADY VENGEANCE (2005), and I'M A CYBORG, BUT THAT'S OK (2006) offer plot conclusions that frustrate the expectations of most escapist cinema, providing the viewer with the experience of exasperation and deep unease rather than narrative closure. In *Discipline and Punish*, Michel Foucault writes that the body of the wrongdoer, "displayed, exhibited in procession, tortured, served as the public support of a procedure that had hitherto remained in the shade; in him, on him, the sentence had to be legible for all."²⁴ By making a grotesque spectacle of the mythic violence exercised on the wrongdoer, Korean cinema radicalizes and undermines from within, amplifies and critiques the spectator's capacity to ascertain a character's humanity through the image of their suffering body. Pushing this logic to the limit, these films function to question the ethical presuppositions intrinsic to the melodramatic mode. We shall see that the circuit of violence, between contemporary Korean culture, cinema, and the spectator of this cinema, opens the way toward a line of fundamental critique necessary to the expiatory power of divine violence. To affirm the affective encounter with these violent, inhumane films is to make way for the possibility of a new ethics, new ways of looking, hearing, and perceiving the world. Korean cinema destabilizes settled expectations associated with the consumption of popular cinema, producing the experience of difference and not of identification, and which calls on us as human spectators to reflect on how it may be possible to cohabitate with our ontologically precarious others.²⁵

After having glanced at the table of contents, the reader may notice that I have omitted a number of films or genres in this study. I do not discuss horror films, such as A TALE OF TWO SISTERS (2003) by Kim Jee-woon, CINDERELLA (2006) by Bong Man-dae, and DEATH BELL (2008) by Yoon Hong-seung, as these so-called "extreme" films have recently received detailed treatment.²⁶ I occasionally make quick reference to films such as EYE FOR AN EYE (2008) by Ahn Kwon-tae and Kwak Kyung-taek, BREATHLESS (2009) by Yang Ik-joon, I SAW THE DEVIL (2010) by Kim Jee-woon, A COMPANY MAN (2012) by Lim Sang-yoon, and NEW WORLD (2013) by Park Hoon-jung, but I do not discuss these otherwise fine films in detail. These omissions are, in part, due to my belief that the most original contemporary films from South Korea emerged from the first half of the millennial decade, before the screen quota was slashed from 146 to 73 days in 2006, and before the global financial crisis of 2008. This was a moment when a number of key economic and social reforms helped set the tone for life after the IMF crisis, as new relations between South Korea and the world were sought out and forged. From 1998 to 2007, Kim Dae-jung's Sunshine Policy laid out a set of guidelines that encouraged interaction and economic assistance

between the two Koreas. The reflective humility and self-critical tone inspired by the financial crisis gave way to compromise and forgiveness in South Korea's dealings with the North. Although the films I listed above utilize representations of violence to raise ethical problematics, works such as *OLDBOY* (2003) and *MEMORIES OF MURDER* (2003) remain innovative and fresh, even after repeated viewing, in their conceptual sophistication and play with genre conventions. *ADDRESS UNKNOWN* (2001) and *VIRGIN STRIPPED BARE BY HER BACHELORS* (2000) still provoke viewers in their daring experimentation with narrative form and unflinching critique of social power. All of them express the spirit of self-reflection and risk-taking in the realm of reconciliation that seemed to pervade the spirit of the times, a spirit that is paramount to the ethics I will develop throughout *Sovereign Violence*.

Recent book-length scholarship has tried to account for the meteoric rise in interest in contemporary Korean film, taking either a cultural studies or genre oriented approach. In her 2011 study, *Korean Masculinities and Transcultural Consumption*, Sun Jung looks at the dissemination and consumption of *hallyu* and cinema in Japan, Singapore, and Australia. *Hallyu*, or the "Korean Wave," has been the catch-all term that signifies the incredible success of Korean pop culture – music, television shows, films, and stars – that has been exported regionally and globally. Drawing from participant observation, group questionnaires, and other empirical methodologies, Jung shows how and why images of *hallyu* masculinity, associated with the actor Bae Yong-joon, the singer and performer Rain, K-pop idol bands, and the "cool" masculinity depicted in Park's *OLDBOY*, have been appreciated outside the Korean context. Jinhee Choi's 2010 book, *The South Korean Film Renaissance*, illustrates how the Korean film industry modernized itself after the financial crisis, arguing that it responded to the increasing threat of Hollywood cinema by combining blockbuster aesthetics with nation-specific content. Arguing that the success of Korean film in the age of *hallyu* is based on this appropriation of recognizable American formulas, Choi's book is divided into chapters that treat some of the most successful genres in Korean cinema: the gangster, romance, and teen films, among others. As her incisive close readings elucidate, the traditional binary between commercial and art cinemas is not so clear-cut with respect to the cinema of contemporary Korea.

While I will reference these studies throughout this book, I remain, with Kyung Hyun Kim, wary of scholarship that "avoids analyzing the forms, structures, and ideals of *hallyu*."²⁷ If, as I contend, contemporary Korea films do not simply represent national culture, we should remain sensitive

to the way they put into motion forms of critical thinking and feeling that interrogate the forms, structures, and ideals of Korean cinema. Kim's two books, *The Remasculinization of Korean Cinema* (2004) and *Virtual Hallyu* (2011), have laid down important groundwork for our understanding of Korean cinema's "fantastic, elusive, and even erratic identifications."²⁸ He believes that his role as a film scholar is to "unveil the latent meanings" that lie beneath the surface of the film text and to read the culture symptomatically through the cinema.²⁹ Utilizing a similar approach, Hye Seung Chung's 2012 monograph on Kim Ki-duk reads the films of this controversial director to similarly diagnose their pervasive sense of Nietzschean *ressentiment*, expressed through the many male characters that allegorically stand in for the auteur and who remain excluded from Korea's post-IMF economy. Her insightful and creative analysis recuperates the intense structures of feeling that are too often excluded from the ideological forms of dominant cinema.

It is impossible to ignore these studies when one speaks about this period of Korean cinema and I will make regular reference to some of their insights. However, in this book I aim to place emphasis on the ethical consequences for the viewer of these intense films in order to show how the damaged characters depicted in them, their narratives of unjust consequence as well as their formal experimentation, compel alternative ways of worldly being. The symptomatic reading of the Korean film, one that "unveils the latent meanings" of the film text, helps to illuminate the parameters of the modern Korean subject, but such an approach does not help explain the explosive effect of these films on their audiences. Directly addressing this effect will be crucial for drawing out their ethics.

Although the reader may turn to a section of this book and find a focused reading of an individual film, each chapter is organized so that it cumulatively builds upon previous chapters. It is therefore best that this study be read sequentially from beginning to end, as my aim is to induce a singular but continually developing line of fundamental questioning. Chapters one to three will perform various critiques of mythic violence. Chapters four to six will show how this critique gives way to an ethics of exception associated with divine violence.

In chapter one, "Unredeemable Images," I examine two early films by Kim Ki-duk, *BAD GUY* (2001) and *ADDRESS UNKNOWN* (2001), and an early film by the twin brothers Gok Kim and Sun Kim called *CAPITALIST MANIFESTO: WORKING MEN OF ALL COUNTRIES, ACCUMULATE!* (2003). My aim in this chapter is to introduce a number of themes that will be explored throughout the book: namely, the ethics of the face and its relationship to melodrama. I begin with Kim's *ADDRESS UNKNOWN* and argue that it stages an encounter

with the otherness of the marginalized, postcolonial South Korean, while illuminating the discursive contours of the film spectator's sovereign, narcissistic gaze. Kim's film pushes the episteme of this spectator to its limit, such that the film apparatus forces a confrontation with radical difference. Working with writings by Emmanuel Levinas, I move beyond an identity politics approach to film toward a more nuanced reading of the spectator's relationship to the moving image in order to raise ethical questions relevant to modern Korean film history and broader aesthetic concerns within Film Studies. In *BAD GUY*, an envious pimp forces a college student into prostitution; the film's final images do not end with her liberation, but invert the film's melodramatic *dénouement*, thus problematizing one of the most basic assumptions of narrative film: the imputation of the moral self. I show how *BAD GUY* introduces a mode of untimely critique that is a feature of all his films. *CAPITALIST MANIFESTO*, an irreverent avant-garde work about the ubiquity of exchange relations in everyday life, dispenses almost completely with narrative continuity. Through this, in conjunction with repetitive dialogue and split screen techniques, *CAPITALIST MANIFESTO* critically depicts the circulation of morality and money among the disenfranchised.

In chapter two, "Love Your Enemies," I take a close look at Park Chan-wook's *JSA* (2000), and the first two films of his so-called "Vengeance Trilogy." *JSA* dramatizes the enduring political tensions between North- and South Korea through the friendship of individual soldiers on each side. In this year, Kim Dae-jung held an historic summit meeting with North Korean Leader Kim Jong-il that initiated a temporary thaw in the Cold War relations between the two Koreas. In this reconciliatory spirit, *JSA* introduces a number of themes that will be worked through in his next few films, namely revenge and forgiveness. Reflecting upon the experience of those who were marginalized by the neoliberal economy, Park's *SYMPATHY FOR MR. VENGEANCE* (2002), tells the story of a recently laid-off factory worker who pursues revenge against his former boss. *OLDBOY* (2003) depicts the desire for retribution stemming from a past rumor. Both films reiterate the interlock between subjectivity and cinematic narrativity, as well as the struggle for the consolidation of sovereign identity in South Korean modernity. Both push the logic of vengeance to its point of untenability, shedding light on the affinity between "payback" and the logic of capitalistic exchange, a connection that is motivated by *ressentiment* felt toward the rich. Getting even is, as Park asserts, "the most foolish thing in the world to do," and in this chapter I describe the phenomenology of revenge, identifying the metaphysics of exchange that subtends both films.³⁰ I suggest that by forcing audiences to confront the logic of revenge, the foolishness of

retributive justice is depicted as radical critique in Park's films, which, in turn, paves the way toward the possibility of unconditional forgiveness.

Chapter three, "Serial Sexualities and Accidental Desires," considers two works by film festival favorite, Hong Sang-soo, in order to analyze narrative and formal repetition, not as figures of sameness, but of difference. The men in Hong's films seem doomed to repeat the traumas of their pasts, but I show that their repetitions may be read as producing the very terms of that which remains other to their hermetic narcissism. In *VIRGIN STRIPPED BARE BY HER BACHELORS* (2000), the story of a love triangle is told in flashback, twice; first, from the point of view of the main male, and then of the female protagonist. Drawing from Henri Bergson's critique of free will, I show that these differing versions of the past pique the relationship between desire, coincidence, and intentionality. In *WOMAN IS THE FUTURE OF MAN* (2004), two male friends reconnect with a shared former girlfriend. In doing so, both men awkwardly repeat their previous missteps in love and confront their inability to work through their own fears and anxieties. This inability to overcome past loss is particularly acute when Hong's men go on holiday. I end this chapter with an allegorical analysis of Park Ki-yong's *CAMEL(S)* (2002) that expands on the notion of futurity through the filmmaker's searching attitude toward the digital medium. This analysis is inextricably linked to the individuals of the so-called "386 Generation" that make up so many of the filmmakers, writers, and actors that were key to the new millennial Korean cinema.

Chapter four, "The Face and Hospitality," returns to the face to begin delineating the ethics of divine violence. Park's short film, *N.E.P.A.L.: NEVER ENDING PEACE AND LOVE*, is part of an omnibus film called *IF YOU WERE ME* (2003). It tells the true story of a Nepalese woman who was mistaken to be mentally ill and incarcerated for six years. *N.E.P.A.L.* highlights the problem of accepting the otherness of the foreigner in Korean society, reflecting the ethics of affirming the immigrant worker. Similar in its critical scope, Bong Joon-ho's *MEMORIES OF MURDER* (2003) stages an encounter between the viewer and the cinema, pushing the reading of face, as a surface that expresses moral interiority, to its breaking point. The film's penultimate close-up shot of the killer's face deposes the sovereign judgment of the detective's gaze in a manner that is reminiscent of divine violence. Kim's *3-IRON* (2004) performs an "untimely critique" through the silence of the film's main protagonists. Showing how the face may be interpreted as an image of openness and hospitality, I argue that Sun-hwa and the drifter Tae-suk problematize the paternal law and the ordinary course of historical temporality. At the beginning of *3-IRON*, Sun-hwa suffers from a violent

and dysfunctional relationship with her husband; however, by the end all three characters, the couple and Tae-suk, manage to find a way to co-exist. Recalling the original Korean title of the film, “Empty House,” I argue that their ethics are not ontologically “full,” and that they exist as non-sovereign exceptions to the ethics of neoliberalism and its organization of private property.

I begin chapter five, “Forgiving the Unforgivable,” with Park’s last film of the Vengeance Trilogy, *LADY VENGEANCE* (2005), arguing that it utilizes visceral imagery to foreground the collusion between the logic of melodrama and post-1997 subjectivity. In its bloody climax, the child killer, Mr. Baek, is ceremoniously punished with kitchen knives, a hammer, an axe, and a custom-made gun. The film’s critical foregrounding is definitively affirmed when Geum-ja realizes a discourse of profane forgiveness, put into relief in my analysis through writings by Jacques Derrida, which breaks out of the endless cycle of vengeful payback in a manner that is also intrinsic to the logic of exchange. After having served as the Ministry of Culture and Tourism from 2003-2004, Lee Chang-dong returns to filmmaking with *SECRET SUNSHINE* (2007). I look at a number of key scenes from this film that problematize Christian forgiveness as a political gesture. Far from granting the pure gift that will end her suffering over her murdered son, the female protagonist, Shin-ae, reveals that the linguistic performance of forgiving the hated other is always already implicated in the everyday exchange of suffering and debt. At the film’s conclusion, Shin-ae remains profoundly at a loss with respect to her inability to work through trauma. With my reading of Lee’s *POETRY* (2010), I return to some themes raised by my discussion of *PEPPERMINT CANDY*. Though Lee’s 1999 film ends tragically for Young-ho, I explain why *POETRY* ends with the affirmation of the life of cinema in the face of death. Lee’s 2010 film moves allegorically between the main protagonist, an elderly woman named Mija, and the vitality of the film medium. Mija must deal with the responsibility of her grandson’s crimes as well as with the onset of Alzheimer’s disease. Struggling in her poetry class, she comes to terms with her deepening involvement with her disaffected grandson and her own mortality, writing an inspired poem about a victimized girl who committed suicide.

Chapter six, “Global Cinema in the Age of Posthumanity,” begins with a discussion of *I’M A CYBORG, BUT THAT’S OK* (2006). Park’s film tells the story of two young psychiatric patients, Il-sun and Young-goon, who fall in love. In stark contrast to the generic “rom-com” film that depicts human characters who embody seemingly transparent interiorities, *CYBORG* presents Il-sun and Young-goon as hermeneutically problematic for the film spectator.

Because of their odd behavior and flights of irrational fancy, depicted through surreal CG effects, their motivations remain mystifying, defying the recognition of human virtue that is paramount to the melodramatic mode. Taking recourse to psychoanalytic discourse and passages from Søren Kierkegaard, I argue that *CYBORG* presents the spectator with an extreme instantiation of love, one that asks how romantic love between two people is possible at all. In Kim's *TIME* (2006), Ji-woo and Seh-hee's relationship has become routine. Ji-woo off-handedly and cruelly remarks that he has become "tired" of seeing Seh-hee's face. She seeks plastic surgery to reignite their lost passion and a number of surrealistic incidents ensue. Kim's film reflects the social reality described by Cho Joo-hyun and the booming, post-IMF cosmetic surgery industry where both men and women have been increasingly subject to social competitiveness and approval based on having the "right" face.³¹ Referencing ideas around narcissism and cinema, I argue that the depiction of love in *TIME* allegorizes and criticizes the sovereign spectator, compelling affirmation of the posthuman face. Finally, the good priest Sang-hyun in Park's *THIRST* (2009) models a form of self-questioning that speculates on a life that must be lived at the expense of others. When Sang-hyun is profanely resurrected as a vampire, his thirst for blood, and therefore for murder, forces him to question his own morality. Other human beings become not precarious forms of life, but a means of sustenance, mere objects to be used, bags of blood. In the conclusion to *THIRST*, the vampire protagonists, Sang-hyun and Tae-ju, commit suicide and implicitly come to terms with their deaths and, by co-extension, the death of cinema. Like an overexposed photograph, in the very last scene they dissolve when exposed to the harsh light of daybreak.

III.

In order to demonstrate how we can move from mythic to divine violence, I would like to quickly return to *PEPPERMINT CANDY*, continuing my reading with questions of cinema and the ethics of the spectator in mind. As we will see, this ethics is inextricably linked to the phenomenology of the cinema experience.

I began with the suicide of Young-ho that concluded the first scene of *PEPPERMINT CANDY*. We saw how the film's structure, reverse episodic narration, contributes to the poignancy of its final moments. With two tears falling from his eyes, a naïve Young-ho lays beneath the train tracks that will be the very site of his death twenty years later. In the manner of

films such as *CITIZEN KANE* (1941), Christopher Nolan's *MEMENTO* (2000), and Gaspar Noé's *IRRÉVERSIBLE* (2002), *PEPPERMINT CANDY* produces a split between *fabula* and *syuzhet*. Moving backwards three days, five, twelve, and then twenty years, Young-ho at every moment steadily progresses away from the sense of crisis portrayed in the film's opening scene. And while disappointment is added to failure, tragedy and catastrophe accumulate like the pile of debris that grows skyward before Benjamin's angel of history.³² The imminence of Young-ho's death contained in the image of him at the start of his life startles the spectator who has been present since the film's beginning. Its cyclical structure, ending where it began, makes the contrast explicit. The first scene reiterates the certainty of Young-ho's futural death and the juxtaposition of its inevitability with the naïveté presented in the film's final shots attest to his being-towards-death that subtends the film as a whole. In these final moments, when Young-ho is most vulnerable, the viewer registers the futural certainty of his life trajectory in its full tragedy.

As Williams notes, melodrama "begins, and wants to end, in a space of innocence."³³ Its pathos stems from the spectator's awareness of the loss of innocence as the film unfolds in time and is heightened by the awareness that what was lost cannot be regained. "Time is the ultimate object of loss," Williams continues, "we cry at the irreversibility of time. We cry at funerals, for example, because it is then that we know, finally and forever, that it is too late."³⁴ Her observations remain true for these last moments of *PEPPERMINT CANDY*, when Young-ho is at his most innocent and his eyes well up with tears. Yet, this image of innocence is suffused with the spectator's awareness of his future suicide, made particularly poignant if we understand Young-ho as a victim of the violence and trauma of modern Korean history since 1980. We can better understand the melodrama of this moment, and its self-critique, if we pursue the ontology of Young-ho's life and the temporality of the moving image as intertwined and inseparable from each other.

Death throughout Young-ho's life persists as a latent, continuous possibility, but it is made especially so at this moment, such that, as Martin Heidegger writes: "Death is a way to be, which *Dasein* takes over as soon as it is. 'As soon as man comes to life, he is at once old enough to die.'"³⁵ Present and future are fused in Heidegger's claim, revealing to us that the constitution of *Dasein* is contingent on the persistent possibility of non-being, as a "way to be." In the last scene from the film, Young-ho aims to become a photographer and to develop his love for Sun-im. But taking this logic much further, a more significant implication reveals itself in

PEPPERMINT CANDY, for death is made explicit as Young-ho's most futural possibility of being. Young-ho *will* die and he *already has* in the film's last shot, presented as a kind of tableau-vivant that summarizes the film while heightening its melodrama. The tears he sheds underneath the train tracks allude to the certitude of this possibility and an uncanny awareness of that final certainty, which is part and parcel of what he is to become.

The recurrence of the camera given to Young-ho by Sun-im and his desire to produce photographs thus compels inquiry into the ontology of the photographic image. The still image plays a key role in understanding the temporality of Young-ho's life and its presentation in Lee's film, particularly at the moment of his death and at the conclusion to the film. In *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes looks at an 1865 photograph of Lewis Payne, the young man who attempted to assassinate then Secretary of State W. H. Seward, and takes notice of a "new punctum, which is no longer of form but of intensity." He calls this punctum "Time, the lacerating emphasis of the *no-eme* (*that-has-been*"), its pure representation" – the representation of Time itself, not in the moving image but in the still photograph.³⁶ How does he read its temporality? Continuing, Barthes writes:

Alexander Gardner photographed him in his cell, where he was waiting to be hanged. The photograph is handsome, as is the boy: that is the *studium*. But the *punctum* is: *he is going to die*. I read at the same time: *This will be* and *this has been*; I observe with horror an anterior future of which death is at stake. By giving me the absolute past of the post (aorist), the photograph tells me death in the future. What *pricks* me is the discovery of this equivalence. In front of the photograph of my mother as a child, I tell myself: she is going to die: I shudder, like Winnicot's psychotic patient, *over a catastrophe which has already occurred*. Whether or not the subject is already dead, every photograph is this catastrophe.³⁷

For Barthes, the photograph embodies two temporalities: it consolidates the past, what he calls the "this has been," and the future, the "this will be." The former is the ontology of the photograph as it is most familiar to us. It attests to a reality that once was and is no longer. The latter is a feature that points decisively toward the future, the inevitability of Time and the certitude of death. Key for this passage is that he reads both simultaneously in the still image, observing "with horror" the anterior future of the photographed subject. Lewis Payne *will have been*: at some past moment he posed for this photo and he will soon be hanged for his crime. The photo then tells Barthes of a catastrophe that has already occurred, the realization that Payne will

surely die and that he already has. This knowledge subtly reconfigures the undead body captured in the still image. Whether or not death has already occurred, the ontology of every photograph is riven with this catastrophe.

This double temporality characterizes the final image of PEPPERMINT CANDY, when a young Young-ho lies beneath the train tracks where he will commit suicide twenty years later. It embodies the tension between the film's reverse narration and the irreversible unfolding of the film in time. Lee called this double movement a "contradiction." But Barthes's interrogation of the photograph's ontology provides us with a way to bolster the filmmaker's claim with an analysis of the still image that stops on Young-ho's face, while revealing new hermeneutic possibilities of the conclusive still image so ubiquitous in Korean film history. Like Heidegger's *Dasein*, Young-ho *will have* died. The image collapses clear-cut distinctions between past, present, and future, telling us of a catastrophe "which has already occurred." The ostensible dynamism of the moving image is here supplemented by the paradoxical temporality of the photograph as Barthes reads it. And here, another contradiction emerges, between stillness and movement, for though the film stops on a freeze-frame, the film nevertheless continues to unfold, as a series of identical frames that produces the illusion of stillness. Both are suffused by Time.

Accordingly, the image that concludes the first scene of PEPPERMINT CANDY, Young-ho's suicide in Spring of 1999, may be understood in a similar manner. Everything that follows thus serves, as Barthes might understand it, to illustrate the "will have been" of Young-ho's existence, for while the film proceeds backwards in his life trajectory, the living spectator is also aware of the inevitable death that will take place in Young-ho's future. Every frame of the film foregrounds this logic, for "there is always a defeat of Time in them."³⁸ The images of Young-ho irreversibly becoming a broken man: each of these images is haunted by the possibility of his ontological impossibility. "[T]hey have their whole lives before them," Barthes continues, "but also they are dead (today), they are then *already* dead (yesterday)."³⁹ The temporality of the image is underscored with each passing episode, as the temporal gap between today and yesterday widens. Death is immanent to the duration of PEPPERMINT CANDY; movement is constituted through flickering of still frames, death 24x a second.⁴⁰ And throughout, the signifiers for the photograph and the camera intermittently interrupt the inexorable movement of the cinematic image, as if to grant Young-ho opportunities to see what Barthes sees, and finally to understand how his own temporality is intimately linked to his finitude. But in the end, in Fall of 1979, it is he who is photographed. The last shots of PEPPERMINT CANDY

make this explicit, as it concludes in the same way the opening scene ended, with a still frame on Young-ho's face.

Lee's film not only premiered during a time of unprecedented economic crisis but also during a moment when sentiments for working through the traumas of Gwangju were gaining momentum in the public sphere. In 1994, the May 18 Memorial Foundation was formed to acknowledge and commemorate the victims of the violence as well as to promote the continuing struggle toward democracy. A 24-episode television series, *SANDGLASS* (1995), one of the highest rated dramas in Korean history, centered around the aftermath of May 1980 and weaved footage of the events into its fictional diegesis. Jang Sun-woo's film *A PETAL* (1996) confronted the reverberations of the Gwangju Uprising on the present, utilizing non-linear montage, experimental techniques, and provocative depictions of violence and cruelty. In the year of Jang's film, former President Chun was sentenced to death for his role in the 1980 Uprising. And in 1997, he was pardoned by Kim Young-sam, on the advice of incoming President Kim Dae-jung.

Two years after this momentous gesture of forgiveness, *PEPPERMINT CANDY* was shown to Korean audiences. In this year, *Korea Journal* published three essays that provided new interpretations of the Gwangju incidents and its historiography. Each of them stays close to the historical material, while eschewing rhetoric that openly reproaches the perpetrators. They account for the ways in which the citizenry actively came together in the face of state violence, beyond their characterization as passive, helpless actors. The temporality of death and the ontology of the photographic image coincides with the conditions of precariousness that gave rise to what Choi Jungwoon calls an "absolute community": a communal ethics that arose in the midst of Gwangju's state of emergency in May 1980. In his essay, "The Kwangju People's Uprising: Formation of the 'Absolute Community,'" Choi argues that the outbreak of the citizens' revolution should be seen as a culmination of a number of historical factors that were galvanized by pro-democracy demonstrations. Frustration due to regional discrimination and class differences, the ideology of the *minjung* people's movement, and the existing communal structure culminated in the realization of an ethics beyond identity, one based on the shared finitude of the protestors. As KCIA paratroopers indiscriminately killed students, beat the elderly, and inflicted barbarisms upon women, the citizens of Gwangju came together to support the students, locking arms and singing *Arirang*. "Citizens helped each other in the streets, sharing *kimbap*, rice balls, beverages, towels, cigarettes [...]. As if an unspoken understanding existed between them, all of the citizens simultaneously overcame their fear and joined together

in the demonstrations.⁴¹ And so, in the face of death, according to Choi, the people “reaffirmed their humanity,” freely sharing their possessions while offering support at a time of extreme precariousness.⁴² The absolute community momentarily transcended class distinctions and gave way to mutual recognition of each other as participating in an experience of shared struggle. “At the same time,” Choi writes in an evocative passage,

insofar as individuals had freed themselves of their fear of death, they had overcome finitude. In this place, then, time possessed no meaning whatsoever. In addition, the experience of having overcome the fear of death by means of community engendered a liberation from the sensations and anxieties of the mundane world. Everyday ideals and desires lost their meaning – all that remained in this community was absolute life itself.⁴³

It is through a communal ethic of care that finitude is “overcome.” Choi describes it almost as a religious experience, as an event that flashes up in the moment of danger, lifting the everyday world into another existential register altogether. The recognition of the other and concern for his or her safety became the grounds for a new civil order.

Community here is spontaneously conceived as an alternative to martial law, dissolving and transforming the mythic, legalistic violence of the military state, which coerces the binding of its citizens to the law, into the divine violence of the people in the continuing protests. It recalls the proletarian general strike that Benjamin appropriates from Georges Sorel, a non-violent violence that operates as a pure means without ends. “For it takes place,” Benjamin writes, “not in readiness to resume work following external concessions and this or that modification to working conditions, but in the determination to resume only a whole transformed work, no longer enforced by the state, an upheaval that this kind of strike not so much causes or consummates.”⁴⁴ The violence against the metaphysics of the current legal order is, as he continues elsewhere, contingent upon the sacredness of life, “or however sacred that life in him which is identically present in earthly life, death, and afterlife.”⁴⁵

Young-ho is consistently shown to be on the wrong side of contemporary South Korean history. He is much too stubborn to give up his fiction of an idealized masculinity. The image of Young-ho as a young man, lying underneath train tracks, could be said to be pregnant with this possibility. Indeed, even the perpetrators of violence were once naïve and even they must die. Is it possible to forgive Young-ho for the violence he committed

as an enlisted soldier during the Gwangju massacre? Is it conceivable to imagine him a finite human being, possessing a particular dignity, even as he treated his victims inhumanely and perpetrated countless cruel acts against his political adversaries? Perhaps the broader lesson that could be gleaned from Lee's film, taking into account the history to which it refers, revolves around this: not only the political price South Korea has paid for its spectacular economic rise since the late 1960s, but also the fundamental vulnerability of this achievement.⁴⁶ The temporality of Young-ho, and his still image, makes this lesson all the more poignant and melodramatic.

PEPPERMINT CANDY gives us a chance to reflect on the ways in which Young-ho has willfully forgotten the historical legacy of Gwangju in contemporary South Korea. The original source of his trauma, intertwined with personal and national history, seems to repeat itself, for Young-ho refuses to remember the ontological precariousness that has constituted his being all along. His achievements as a *hwesawon* or as working for the KCIA only served to cover up the possibility that was present at the beginning of his life, occluding as well the ethical possibility opened up by the absolute community that spontaneously emerged under martial law in Gwangju in May of 1980. As contemporary spectators of the film, PEPPERMINT CANDY teaches us how to consider the death of the other, even when he is a hated figure. Yet, this consideration of death also compels consideration of a profound precariousness that subtends the existence of the modern democratic nation. As I shall argue throughout this book, some of the most important Korean films that appeared in the new millennium insist on such questions of ethics, grounded in the experience of the cinema.