



On 1987: South Korean Cinema in the Era of Re-democratization

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Abstract

This essay explores South Korean cinema in the context of the recent resurgence of democratic activism that crystalized in the 2016–2017 Candlelight Movement. Among the recent films that render ordinary people’s experience of the authoritarian era, the successful 2017 feature 1987: When the Day Comes provides a rigorous historical representation of the June uprising. Despite its unprecedented depiction of one of the milestones of democratization, the film glorifies the homogeneous action of the people against state power while presenting the past as completely detached from the present. The film’s limitations are brought into relief when it is juxtaposed with other films, such as The Six-Day Fight in Myeongdong Cathedral (1997) and Yongsan (2010), that offer alternative representations of the historic event. By tracing 1987’s impulse to restore the past in a particular fashion and its implications for the context of re-democratization, this paper claims that mainstream films like 1987: When the Day Comes tend to shut down the civic imagination in the service of an unending struggle toward justice and equality in post-authoritarian society.

Keywords: June uprising, Candlelight Movement, democracy, re-democratization, South Korean cinema, 1987

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The direct participation of citizens in mass protests over 23 consecutive weeks in 2016–2017 paved the way for South Korea’s re-democratization, from the impeachment of Park Geun-hye to the ascendance of Moon Jae-in to the presidency with a strong anti-corruption mandate (N. Kim 2017). In these protests, citizens bearing candles—or the smartphone-app equivalent—demanded government transparency and an end to Park’s rule while occupying Seoul’s central thoroughfare. Widely called the Candlelight Movement, this unprecedented action did not arise in a vacuum. The country’s transition to electoral democracy in 1987, followed by decades of military rule, led not to a fundamental reform of society but to a bipartisan polity that rested on legacies of autocracy that were deeply rooted in the existing structures. In particular, the authoritarian successor parties, benefiting from their inheritance, thrived under democracy, winning the 2008 and 2012 elections, the latter of which put Park Geun-hye in power. Park, the political heir to her father, Park Chung-hee, who ruled the country from 1961 to 1979, was involved in a sprawling corruption scandal and repeated repressions of civil society. In response, hundreds of thousands of citizens took to the streets, week after week, to oust her as a representative of the reanimated authoritarian rule. The persistent actions of the people signaled a moment when democratization was interrupted, or better yet, a moment when democratization was reimagined: the citizens rededicated themselves to slowing South Korea’s ever-increasing privatization and advancing the quest for justice and equality (Dudden 2017; Miller 2017). They embodied the importance of the counterbalancing power of the people and demonstrated new modes of activism for those living in or in relation to the state system—that is, all of us.

This recent democratic renewal in South Korea has generated a spate of popular Korean films based on one of the country’s most trying times, the 1980s. While the film industry’s interest in the era under military rule had already resulted in several productions since the early 2000s, a series of 2017 films, including *A Taxi Driver* (*Taeksi unjeonsa*, dir. Jang Hoon), *Ordinary Person* (*Botong saram*, dir. Kim Bong-han), and *1987: When the Day Comes* (*1987: Geunari omyeon*, dir. Jang Joon-hwan), depict the trajectory of one or multiple individuals who become caught up in, witness, or oppose the

ruling power's repression.¹ These newer films, rather than focusing on the lives of well-known political authorities or activist leaders, prioritize the lives of ordinary citizens under military rule. Among these films, *1987: When the Day Comes* (hereafter *1987*) offers a remarkable exploration of how common people come to recognize themselves as historical subjects of political action, an action of desperation in response to the state's direct threats to their survival. Chronologically organized and constantly referring to real dates, people, and events, the film vividly portrays what motivated people to protest, culminating in the massive uprising of June 1987, better known as a "breakthrough" in democratization (Cumings 2005, 391; Sunhyuk Kim 2002).² Over two weeks in June 1987, citizens across the country demonstrated against the Chun Doo Hwan regime's measures to protect its autocratic constitution and its use of excessive force and police brutality. The popular demands ultimately led to the institutionalization of direct presidential elections, which helped ensure the country's democratic transition in the following decade.

The film *1987* provides a vivid representation of the historical event with a narrative anchored in the experience of an ordinary college student, incorporating archival materials such as film footage to make

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1. A group of 2000s films had already depicted the historic events of the 1980s, including the Gwangju Uprising. The critically acclaimed *Peppermint Candy* (*Bakha satang*, 2000), although it has a broader temporal span, deserves mention because for the first time in the history of South Korean cinema, it focused on an ordinary man sent among the troops to Gwangju to repress civilians; the film captures how his accidental killing of a young girl in Gwangju haunts the rest of his life. For a convincing analysis of the film's representation of male subjectivity in relation to the nation's trauma, see Chung and Diffrient (2007). Bong Joon-ho's *Memories of Murder* (*Sarin-ui chueok*, 2003), based on a true story of serial murders in 1986, provides a nuanced critique of the ways the powerful—in this case, local police officers under the auspices of the central government—exercise systematic violence against the people. For a compelling discussion of the film, see Jeon (2011).
 2. While interpretations vary, both Korean and American scholars have considered the June uprising and the following June 29 Declaration on democratic reforms a major *breakthrough* in the country's political transformation. Although other terms such as "democratic movement" have captured the essence of the event to a certain extent, here I use either "uprising" or "June 1987," for I understand the uprising as part of a longer, broader democratic movement. For a dedicated discussion of the terminology, see Hanguk minjujuui yeonguso (2017).

the past more palpable to the audience. Yet a close reading of the film, particularly its ending, demonstrates that *1987* fails to take a critical view of the uprising's complexity and its implications for post-authoritarian society. Specifically, I consider the film's limitations in comparison to the compelling representations of the uprising in two documentaries: *The Six-Day Fight in Myeongdong Cathedral* (Myeongseong, *geu yukgil-ui girok*, dir. Kim Dong-won, 1997) and *Yongsan* (dir. Mun Jung-hyun, 2010). Based on this juxtaposition, I argue that *1987*'s restorative mode of representation serves more to celebrate the power of a homogeneous people than to allow other perspectives of the uprising to enter the official narrative. I close the essay with a reflection on *1987*'s depiction of the past in the landscape of the Candlelight Movement's protest culture, and I ponder how cinema and other audiovisual media can cultivate new civic imaginations.

Feeling the Past

1987 follows the official narrative of the uprising, which triumphantly celebrates the power of the people to effect democratization. Beginning with the death of a college student, Park Jong-chul, during a police investigation of purported anti-government activities in January 1987, the film traces the footsteps of people associated directly and indirectly with the uprising, from agents of state power to nameless participants in the protest. Park's death is narrated first from the viewpoint of the political authority—the Anti-Communist Investigation Bureau under the Korean Central Intelligence Agency—that was tasked with quelling anti-governmental voices in society. The authority's efforts to cover up the unjustified killing are foiled by a number of people who want to reveal the truth. The more powerful the scheme to deceive becomes, the closer the people get to the truth: doctors who were called on to perform CPR on the dying Park testify to the evidence of water torture; prosecutors leak Park's autopsy results to reporters; reporters make the cause of Park's death public against the government's guidelines; and prison guards collect evidence that riot cops have used water torture and relay it to activists and priests, who, along with university

students, play a crucial role in mobilizing a pro-democratic alliance. After the truth of Park's death becomes widely known, students organize a rally to take place on June 9. During the riot, the cops severely injure another college student, Yi Han-yeol, with a teargas canister. Yi's critical condition soon becomes public knowledge, fueling widespread anger and disgust among Korean citizens.

Crucial to the uprising's narrative is the film's painstaking reconstruction of the past. This reconstruction involves the integration of a variety of archival footage culled from the state-sanctioned film and television archives into the fictional narrative as a point of contact with the past. The opening sequence, for instance, shows footage of Daehan News, a state-sponsored news film produced by the National Film Production Center in early 1987. The original newsreel contains a scene in which Chun Doo-hwan, then the president of South Korea, gives a medal to his high-achieving staffers, who are de facto perpetrators of state violence under the guise of acting as patriots in the interest of national security. Authored by filmmakers at the National Film Production Center under Chun's auspices, the newsreel, like many other state-sanctioned films, praises the president's leadership in protecting the country from the "threat of communists and North Korean



Figure 1. Chun Doo-hwan (left) awards a medal to Park (right) in the opening sequence

Source: 1987 (Woojung Film, 2017).

spies.” While keeping the original setting and design of the newsreel, 1987’s special effects engineers digitally inserted a fictional character based on a real person, Park Cheowon, the head of the Anti-Communist Investigation Bureau: the actor performed the new scenes, and then the engineers replaced one of the staffers in the newsreel with the actor (Fig. 1). The archival footage that was formerly under the state’s strict control is pulled into the contemporary filmic space, which opens the door for the viewer to feel the indexical power of the past registered on celluloid.

In addition to its seamless incorporation of historical footage, the film adds a fictional first-year female college student, Yeonhee, to the narrative as a protagonist, inviting the contemporary viewer to feel the June uprising through her eyes. Disillusioned with the campus climate in which the everyday surveillance of students has been normalized, at first she distances herself from the demonstrations. In the midst of the street protest that commemorates the forty-ninth day after Park Jong-chul’s death, she receives help from a fellow student when she is misrecognized as a protester by cops who are ruthlessly beating protestors. This student, who turns out to be Yi Han-yeol, asks Yeonhee to join a small mixer on campus, where she and other students are pressed to watch *Oh, Gwangju!* (1981), a documentary film about the state’s violence toward innocent civilians in Gwangju in May 1980.³ Despite her eye-opening exposure to the fear and agony of the victims of military rule, Yeonhee remains reluctant to participate in the rallies, because she has no hope that change will come. However, when her uncle, a prison guard, is arrested upon the allegation that he has acted as a go-between for an imprisoned progressive reporter and the pro-democratic activists, Yeonhee’s life falls apart. To spare her uncle from torture, she

3. Combining foreign television footage filmed by NHK (Japan), ARD (Germany), and NBC (USA) on the Gwangju Uprising, *Oh, Gwangju!*, the first documentary on the topic by Korean-American activists and religious leaders, vividly demonstrates the ruling power’s violent oppression of the Gwangju residents over ten days in May 1980. The producers made around 4,000 copies of the videotape, all of which were sold to interested viewers around the world. The documentary was widely shown in small, often secretly organized screenings on Korean university campuses throughout the 1980s. The full documentary has recently been made available on the YouTube channel of the Korea Democracy Foundation.

volunteers to pass a prison note from the reporter to the activists, an action that leads to the note's publication and causes the truth of Park's death to go public. Students, knowing now that it was brutal torture that took Park's life, step out in full force to protest against the government. Soon Yeonhee learns that Yi Han-yeol has been fatally wounded. The news draws her into the streets, where she joins thousands of people calling for an end to the military regime. Throughout the film, the focus remains firmly on her awakening, giving the spectator a sense of being in the time and space of political uncertainty.⁴

The film's productive use of both found footage and fictional characters evokes affective responses to the uprising. In fact, many comments about the film posted online by viewers verify that the experience of watching *1987* is less informative than affective. One viewer, for instance, describes feeling "the real thing in real time."⁵ Another commentator, after watching the film, felt like "one of the many Yeonhee(s)" in the street.⁶ The critical acclamation that the film has received since its release confirms that this sense of feeling the past points toward an experience of historical presence that is not tied simply to factual detail or intellectual comprehension of the event. The film is affectively charged when, for instance, it calls upon the viewer to share the shock and despair that Yeonhee feels while watching the aforementioned documentary on 1980 Gwangju. The camera shows Yeonhee among others at the mixer and then zooms in on her. Her face shots are placed side by side with bloody moments in the documentary in which the riot cops and soldiers brutally attack the young protesters. The camera captures her strong emotions by dwelling on her bodily experience, with close-ups of her trembling chin, lips, and eyes (Fig. 2). *1987's* impulse to bring the past into a

4. I do not deny that Yeonhee's transformation into a willing participant in the protest is significantly mediated by more politicized male subjects—her uncle and Yi Han-yeol. Nonetheless, the film, especially in its second half, pivots around Yeonhee's changes, allowing the viewer to follow her emotions and the intentions behind her actions.

5. This line is from a comment (by a user named 'Gideon') on a film clip, *YouTube*, accessed June 1, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QdYor5e5QZw&t=31s>.

6. This line is quoted from a comment (by a user named 'Elly') on a film preview, *YouTube*, accessed June 1, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=358691bK4ZY>.



Figure 2. The documentary shot and Yeonhee's face in juxtaposition
 Source: 1987 (Woojung Film, 2017).

different time does not appear only in its restoration of the historical event as it was, but also in its elicitation of virtual relationships with its characters, particularly Yeonhee. By doing so, the film allows its contemporary audience members to immerse themselves in the historical presence of ordinary people's affective experience.

These film's constructive elements nonetheless work to replicate the tenor of the official narrative that romanticizes the uprising as a triumph of the oppressed against the authoritarian power. At this point, it should be noted that this historicization of the uprising began with the efforts of the liberal governments (1998–2003 and 2003–2008) to document the country's path toward democratization before this history receded into the distant past. With the passage of the Democratization Commemoration Act in 2001, the Kim Dae-jung administration established the Korea Democracy Foundation (Minjuhwa undong ginyeom saeophoe), which has since played a pivotal role in producing a seamless historiography of democratization that celebrates the people's power. This celebratory mode of historiography did not arise in a vacuum: radical intellectuals and university students in the 1970s and 1980s had already constructed the ordinary people as the "serious protagonists of a political and cultural project that was posited as opposed to and resisting the metanarrative of state-led development" (Lee 2007, 6). However, the historical production of the 1987 uprising as a milestone in democratization has recently gained force with the support and leadership

of the liberal governments and the generation of scholars, politicians, and activists who participated in or at least witnessed the uprising. The impetus to memorialize the people's power, which emerged in the early 2000s, has pulled the 1987 uprising from individual memories and academic research onto the public stage, legitimating a triumphant narrative of the uprising that serves as the backbone of *1987*.

Although I would not necessarily expect a big-budget, entertainment-oriented film to present a radically different narrative of the historic uprising, I want to ponder what *1987* conveys to contemporary viewers whose knowledge of the June uprising is likely to be in tune with the dominant narrative. Consider, for instance, a dramatic scene in which the father of Park Jong-chul scatters his son's cremated remains in a river. The father's last words to his son were later quoted by a reporter who was on the spot: "I am speechless, farewell, my son, I am speechless." These words were not only recited in the memorialization of the uprising undertaken by Park's activist peers but also repeated in the description of the uprising given in history textbooks and public media. By using the words for their evidentiary value, the film carries the bereaved family's voice to a new audience. In a sense, the film mediates such sites of memory as "points of reference not only for those who survived traumatic events, but also for those born long after them" (Winter 2010, 313). The restorative mode of representation, nonetheless, tends to encourage the viewer to accept the scene as it is written, without asking whether the past, and especially the relationship of the past to the present, could have been different. Shaped by the impetus to reproduce the conventional narrative, the film's meticulous reconstruction of the past prevents other voices and stories from entering the realm of representation. It is the detrimental impact of this exclusion, which is particularly well-manifested in the ending, that I will now discuss.

The Past in Question

1987's fictional space ends with the momentum that paved the way for an end to autocracy. The camera vividly revives the final scene: the student

demonstrations on June 9, the day when a teargas canister fired by riot police penetrated Yi Han-yeol's skull in the event time (of the protest) and the fictional character Yeonhee decides to participate in the protest in the filmic time (of recording the *post* event in a cinematic setting). In the final scene, now that Yeonhee knows that Yi Han-yeol's life is in danger, she runs without hesitation toward the downtown area, where she sees outraged citizens in the streets. The camera follows her running toward the city hall in tears and climbing on top of one of the buses used as barricades. It then turns to display the countless people in the city hall plaza, as if Yeonhee is gazing in awe at them. Although the camera quickly goes back to show the shock and despair on her face, it turns again to the landscape of the rally. This time, the camera zooms out to display the back side of the protest, permitting the viewer to see Yeonhee as one of the protesters on top of the bus, one among many ordinary people with flags and posters. As this landscape is displayed, the viewer hears the escalating voices of protesters chanting "Down with dictatorship!" The title "1987" is then registered over the full view of a massive protest, as if the narrative has ended.

Of particular concern here is not the film's final scene itself but what comes immediately after it. In the film's end credits, the film transforms its fictional space into a documentary space that consists of archival footage: a mixed-media representation that blends photographs and video footage with a background tune titled "When the Day Comes" (*Geunari omyeon*), a popular protest song of the late 1980s. My question is not about what particular effect the film's end credits produce, but about the kind of consciousness they fail to create in the viewer. I want to ask what popular cinema lacks in its cinematic imagination of the past that might otherwise challenge the dominant story of the uprising. Otherwise put: If films still have the potential to play a role in shaping the contours of social change, what choices might allow them to produce critical histories and ignite historical awakenings in our time? To answer this question, I will analyze the film's end credits and then put them into conversation with two other representations of the 1987 uprising that prompt a more radical imagination of history.

1987's end credits begin with a picture of Yi Han-yeol's funeral, which



Figure 3. The Reverend Mun’s calling out of Yi Han-yeol, the last frame of the end credits

Source: 1987 (Woojung Film, 2017).

was conducted as a communal mourning ritual, and then display an excerpt from the television documentary on the funeral made by MBC, a commercial broadcasting company. Yi lingered in a coma for about a month and died on July 5, a week after Chun’s regime surrendered to popular demand and issued a June 29 statement promising democratic reforms followed by direct presidential elections. The found footage of the ritual gives evidence of the number of people in cities across the country who mourned his death. Next, the viewer sees a set of photographs from public grassroots archives such as the Korea Democracy Foundation Archive and the Yi Han-yeol Museum. The pictures of Park Jong-chul and Yi Han-yeol from childhood to adolescence are located so as to memorialize the two whose lives were lost to state violence. This mixed-media representation of the 1987 uprising ends with a specific scene of the documentary in which Reverend Mun Ikhwan, one of the pro-democratic leaders, who had just been released from prison the day before, calls out the names of those who died during the long struggle for democracy. Here, the camera jumps back and forth between Mun calling out the names in sorrow and the weeping citizens, including Yi’s mother, who pack the city hall plaza. As Mun shouts the names of twenty-six “martyrs,” his voice breaks from time to time

(Sun-Chul Kim 2019, 212–216). The incorporation of footage finally stops after he calls out Yi Han-yeol's name (Fig. 3). Even after the audiovisual representation of the funeral is over, the credits continue with the climax of the song. Originally written by a pro-democratic folk musician in 1985, "When the Day Comes" is performed by a volunteer choir that features students and alumni of Yi Han-yeol's alma mater.

For more than three minutes, the viewer is taken to this non-fictional filmic space that seems to give the audience access to the real—or simply to "what happened." Many viewers, young and old, seem to be receptive to what is given as a conduit to the past in the film's final turn. One commenter on a YouTube video of the end credits describes having watched the movie with their father, a student protester during the June uprising, and having learned to appreciate the father and those who have "protected" democracy thanks to the "records" in the credits.⁷ Another commenter on the end credits, identifying themselves as belonging to the same generation as Yi Han-yeol and Park Jong-chul, pays tribute to the "sacrifice" they made to "ignite" democracy.⁸ In a sense, the credits invite the viewers to participate in the memorialization of the struggle that people like Yi Han-yeol carried out in the name of democracy. This invitation, however, does not lead to the awakening of a critical consciousness, or what Vivian Sobchack calls the "documentary consciousness" that can result from the integration of non-fictional footage into a fictional film. Sobchack notes that inserted footage often, but not always, creates an effect that moves the viewer into such consciousness, that is, into "a particular mode of embodied and ethical spectatorship that informs and transforms the space of the unreal into the space of the real" (Sobchack 2004, 261). When the fictional space becomes "charged with the real," it leads viewers to produce an ethical response to, and even assume responsibility for, what they see, hear, and feel. The limitations of *1987*'s ending can be seen in the scarcity of responses to the audio-images that go beyond remembrance of what the viewers have been

7. See a comment made by a user named "Choihyeeun" on the ending credits, *YouTube*, accessed June 1, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oKwbe2UUR14&t=171s>.

8. This is from a comment (by a user named 'hong jun lee') on the end credits.

told happened. Rather than encouraging questions about what happened (or what could have happened), the carefully assembled ending reinforces a definitive interpretation of the uprising; all of the sources used in the credits evince a desire to turn the archival fragments into a transparent narrative of the past, a narrative that pivots on the idea that “the people” were a homogeneous force.

If 1987's credits flatten the historical circumstances of the uprising by laying heavy emphasis on Yi's funeral, one of the earlier films on the June uprising, *The Six-Day Fight in Myeongdong Cathedral* (dir. Kim Dong-won, 1997), contests this tendency. It does so by looking back at the sit-in protest at Myeongdong Cathedral, where hundreds of citizens took refuge from the police and continued the demonstration for six days, starting on June 10. Combining video footage from the past and testimonials of student activists of the time, the film focuses on disputes among the protesters during the six-day protest. In doing so, the film raises a set of essential questions: Is democracy a means or an end, a process or a set of finite outcomes? What if those outcomes, whatever they may be, could be achieved by nondemocratic means? If democracy means rule by the people, what is the nature and extent of that rule, and who counts as *the people*? These questions are not answered by the director himself. Rather, they are entered into the film's representation of the sit-in protests that continued beyond the major protest site, where thousands of ordinary people contemplated and discussed what kind of society they wanted to live in and why (Fig. 4). In these disputes, support for ending the sit-in was voiced not only by the ruling power, but also by many dissidents, including opposition leaders, student activists, and the cathedral authorities. Tracing the disbanding of the protesters, the director discloses how the pro-democratic leaders marginalized the most vulnerable group of people: the low-class laborers and poor evictees living on the edge of a rapidly capitalizing, urbanizing society. Why did some of the voices overpower others in the name of unity and put a stop to the radical imagination of politics? The film leaves the viewers immersed in these seeming paradoxes of democracy, a form of governance that encompasses politics that are both unified and diverse, that mixes egalitarianism with hierarchy and autonomy with constraint.



Figure 4. The multiple voices of participants

Source: *The Six-Day Fight in Myeongdong Cathedral* (Pureunyeongsang, 1997).

In exploring the paradoxes of democracy, *The Six-Day Fight in Myeongdong Cathedral* goes beyond looking into the past. The director switches back and forth between the two temporalities—1987 and 1996—in such a way that the past is brought into the present, questioned by agents of the past struggle who live in the present time. When putting the past agents in the position of reflecting on the democracy they imagined in 1987 and pondering why it was not fully realized, the film becomes a generative site in which the past agents are held responsible for both their success and their failure. This is far more productive than the dominant way of remembering the uprising, as exemplified in the film *1987*, because it opens a way for the viewer to contemplate how the past lingers unresolved in the present. The precarious life of the underrepresented urban poor is one of the ongoing problems in the filmic time, and by putting it in the context of the democratic transition of 1987, the film ultimately dismantles the notion of the so-called “post-authoritarian” society. The film’s shuffling of the past and the present closes with a question posed by the director himself, one that also urges the audience members to reflect on how they can respond to the continued injustice.

In a similar yet more profound way, another take on the 1987 uprising, *Yongsan* (dir. Mun Jung-hyun, 2010), seeks to complicate the boundaries between the past and the present in the service of challenging the dominant

narrative of democratization. *Yongsan* begins with the director's first-hand footage of the so-called "Yongsan Disaster," a fire in a highly politicized urban renewal zone that claimed the lives of five evictee protesters and one antiterrorist riot cop in January 2009. These deaths trigger the director's memories of student protesters' self-immolation in 1991, of the loss of Yi Han-yeol in 1987, and of the 1980 civilian massacre in Gwangju. The recurring violence against the people pushes him not just to condemn the state's abusive power but also to ask a self-reflective question: "Where are the people now who once occupied the streets of Seoul in 1980, 1987 and 1991?" In addressing the question, the film counters the glorified image of the homogeneous people in the June uprising who, it has been claimed, paved the road for democracy. Juxtaposing the former student activists' and the bereaved families' memories of the uprising, the director reveals that the country's democratic transition has in fact glossed over the longstanding problem of violence and injustice against the dispossessed.

Yongsan also presents an example of what might be called "counter-practices of the audiovisual" that experiment with images and sounds to present an alternative narration of historical experience (Crary 2012). In the film's potent ending sequence, the director remixes shots from all of the often-cited markers of democratization into one sequence with sound recorded on the site of the Yongsan Disaster, where the protesters and riot cops witnessed people dying in agony and despair (Fig. 5). Like *1987's* ending credits, *Yongsan's* remix takes footage from both public archives and personal collections. None of the excerpts are simply quoted, however. They are transformed as the director reframes them and inserts new sounds, weaving together moments from different time periods. By collapsing the boundaries of presumably different historical events, the director creates a new space where multiple temporalities and plural pasts can join together to reclaim their right not to be forgotten or overwritten. Unlike *1987's* ending credits, which constitute a melancholic obituary of the past, *Yongsan* presents polyphonic moments that neither move toward the past nor embrace the future, and that consequently prompt the viewer to engage critically with what is seen and heard.

In his analysis of a Paul Klee painting, Walter Benjamin sees the



Figure 5. The scene of evictees dying in a fire that prompts the film’s director to meditate on different historical junctures

Source: *Yongsan* (Pureunyeongsang, 2010).

possibilities of radical time in the icon of the angel of history. The angel of history is neither moving backward nor completely swept up in a “storm from Paradise,” the idea of progress that is built upon developmental, capitalistic time (Benjamin 2006, 392). Rather than producing a corrosive conformity to the present, the angel of history resists homogeneous time, calling for a suspension on the threshold of past and future. Both *The Six-Day Fight in Myeongdong Cathedral* and *Yongsan* register this kind of radical time, dwelling in the precarious present while permitting the viewer to be suspicious of the retrospective gaze. The limitations of *1987* become evident when the film is compared to these two very different representations of the uprising that provoke a set of uncomfortable questions about our relationship to the past and the present. Despite *1987*’s affective rendition of historical presence, it closes its filmic time with a restorative audiovisual remix that fixes it as a memorialization of the past. In contrast, through the documentaries’ powerful layering of images and sounds and in their critical response to the linear narrative of the uprising, we can grapple with the past that inhabits the precarious present and generate more productive ways to think of history in the post-authoritarian era.

Re-democratization Unbound

Critically acclaimed and one of the highest grossing films of the year, *1987* arrived only a few months after the establishment of the Moon Jae-in administration, which replaced the corrupt Park Geun-hye regime. When it was released in December 2017, the film won favorable attention from many politicians, including Moon himself, who had participated as students or activists in the June uprising. Their public endorsement of the film worked not only to validate the filmic rendition of the conventional narrative of the uprising but also to legitimate many administrators in the new government as advocates for democracy. Since then, the June uprising has often been proudly recalled in public forums and media, with the recent regime change claimed as a valuable outcome of the Candlelight Movement. Public discourse on both junctures has highlighted the people's resilience in resisting state violence and injustice with visible and collectively organized actions. Framed in the bird's eye view images of the protests, the June uprising and the Candlelight Movement have been predominantly analyzed at once as that which must be explained (how do actors form?), that which must be described (what is a movement like?), and that which explains other phenomena (how does a movement change things?). The spectacle-oriented representation of the protest also assumes the notion of a homogeneous people who wield power. Similar to the way *1987* glorifies the unity of the people gathered in the central area of Seoul, portrayals of the Candlelight Movement have emphasized the importance of the people's harmonious action at a critical juncture of democracy. The dominant framing has continuously reinforced the notions that both the June uprising and the Candlelight Movement were national struggles fought uniformly around the country and that the end of the struggle marked a radical rupture in the country's history of democracy.

Is it possible, then, to challenge this frame to reflect on other creative and politically astute actions that might not be conventionally associated with either movement? If so, what can cinema and other audiovisual media do to diversify the current narrative of the uprisings and ultimately to expand our understanding of politics? Here I want to hold on to Walter

Benjamin's insight that cinema and its viewers are involved in a dynamic of displacement and dissemination that opens "a vast and unsuspected field of action" (Benjamin 1969, 229). In what he famously calls "politicizing art," Benjamin acknowledges the possibility that cinema and other audiovisual media can play a crucial role in activating the political consciousness of their audiences. This possibility, inherent neither in the medium nor the viewer, must be achieved by our intervention in cinema as a matter of urgent political concern in its own right. In the rest of this last section, I would like to consider the participants of the Candlelight Movement and some of the ways they activated and recreated the critical capacity of cinema and other audiovisual media. In doing so, I will address the possibilities that can be flourished in the new mode of participatory activism and discuss what these possibilities mean for the film culture of our time.

The Candlelight Movement was arguably the most digitally mediated protest in the country's history of democratization. The massive protests did not happen on the protest site alone. A majority of the participants actively used their smartphones, wireless networks, and online platforms to amplify their voices. Crucial to the potential of on-site images and videos was the fact that their creators were part of the action, unlike reporters of the dominant media, who merely reported the scene. If the corporate media registered the landscape only as it was shown in the aerial shots of the protest, the on-site images shifted the focus from the numerous bodies of the people to the flesh and bones of participants occupying the streets. The individual creators' videos also provided fresh perspectives due to their diverse shooting positions on site. The creators of audiovisual material often mediated the protest scene live, extending it visually and audibly to the distant viewers. Whereas the dominant media's products typically give the viewer little sense of how the editing takes place, individual creators' unedited scenes often carry a sense of immediacy. The videos of the Candlelight protestors, regardless of quality, took off on other platforms, including Twitter and YouTube, where unedited footage of the protestors was viewable almost immediately. The protestors' increased capacity for media production and circulation not only enhanced the visibility of the cause but also generated a sense of camaraderie and community.

I am less interested in the ways technology has transformed protest culture than in the question of how the participatory mode in the Candlelight Movement's media production and distribution manifests the ethos of re-democratization. Of particular concern are the ways participants and their audiovisual documentation of the movement challenge what Jacques Rancière terms the "distribution of the sensible," the norms about what can be seen and heard that are set and reinforced by the powerful (Rancière 2006, 13). The participants used various remix strategies that shifted the parameters of the sensible, and in doing so, interrogated the world where they lived. Among other remix strategies, parody often enabled the participants to translate politics into pop culture content worlds and create their own languages to criticize the government. For instance, the scandalous relationship between the former president and her unofficial adviser, Choi Soon-sil, provided rich source material for parody. Choi, the daughter of a shaman-fortune teller, secretly advised Park Geun-hye and became the real power behind the throne during Park's term. In Fig. 6, a cover of *Time* magazine that originally featured Park alone has been sophisticatedly manipulated to critique both Park and Choi; Choi's headshot replaces Park's, with a new headline: "The Strongman's Daughter's Shaman."⁹ A popular appropriation of the theme song from the popular TV show *Secret Garden* also exemplified the creative use of media as dissent. Because Park had been accused of receiving beauty and anti-aging treatments for free under the pseudonym Gil Ra-im, the name of the show's female lead, the theme song frequently kicked off the protests and was frequently tweaked for the purpose of political satire. These are just a few examples of how civic imagination functioned across and beyond the protest sites through new forms of media production and circulation.¹⁰ In this creative appropriation,

9. With Park's victory in the 2012 presidential election, the magazine released two different covers of *Time* (Asia Edition, published December 17, 2012). The print cover carried the headline "The Strongman's Daughter," while the headline of the online version of the article is more direct: "The Dictator's Daughter." The featured article by Emily Rauhala interprets Park's victory in the context of her father's controversial past (Rauhala 2012).

10. I borrow the notion of "civic imagination" from an active interpretation of youth and their proximity to remix culture in the case of the 2016 US presidential election. See Jenkins, et al. (2018).

the participants intervened in the order of the world. From video mashups to memes and parodies of design choices and typefaces, the Candlelight protesters produced social commentary, creating new spaces for political action and generating new possibilities of expression.

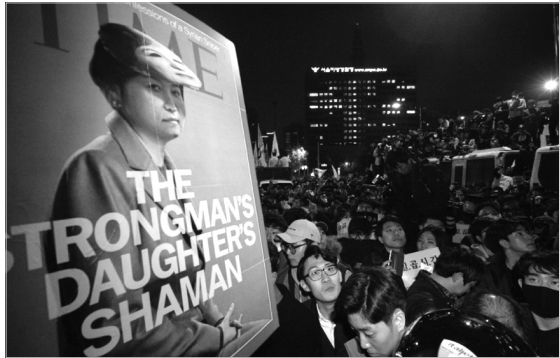


Figure 6. “The Strongman’s Daughter’s Shaman”

Source: Newsis, accessed June 1, 2020, <https://news.joinsonline.com/article/20863796>.

It would be dangerous to romanticize the audiovisual practices that have appeared in the new mode of participatory protest and representation. Nevertheless, these practices can teach us what it would mean not to lose the power of imagination at a time when democracy is being “hollowed out and emptied of meaning” (Roy 2009). Democracy, which promises the rule of the people, is a promise that can never be fulfilled because the questions of who counts as the people, how the people rule, and where they do so are constantly under debate. The call for re-democratization mounted by many South Korean citizens demanded, and continues to demand, that the debate be open and that it be sustainable in the future. The debate also has to address the ongoing paradoxes of democracy: not only corruption and unaccountable representatives, but also dehumanizing bureaucracy, blatant hypocrisy, and a lack of diverse voices. To keep the debate alive, the representation of democratic struggle must go beyond aerial images and triumphant narratives that obsessively fantasize about the power of the

people. To this end, it is essential to criticize mainstream South Korean films like *1987* that limit our civic imagination to the normative political sphere and to the homogeneous bodies of the people. Cinema's critical capacity has to be activated and recreated to embody the ethos of re-democratization. It is only in this tireless anticipation that the filmic rendition of democratic struggle can elicit a hope that will allow us to move forward.

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