



Building the Post-Traumatic Nation: *Mourning and Melancholia* in Korean Films about the Gwangju Massacre

Seung Cheol LEE

Abstract

This paper explores the cinematic representations of the Gwangju massacre in three films: A Petal (1996), Peppermint Candy (2000), and May 18 (2007). Drawing on Freud's distinction between mourning and melancholia, this paper examines and compares the different ways of commemorating the massacre in these films and the kinds of political and ethical implications produced by their different forms of commemoration. Since the mid-1990s, national mourning for the Gwangju massacre has played a pivotal role in reconciling past antagonisms and legitimizing the hegemony of liberal democracy. As the sacred origin of the pro-democracy movement, the memory of Gwangju has been appropriated to construct a linear, teleological narrative of national development that represents the present as the culmination of national-democratic progress. In exploring in detail how the three films depict the massacre, this paper illuminates how the representations of Gwangju in these films reflect and correspond to the post-traumatic nation-building process in post-authoritarian South Korea, which can be encapsulated as a shift from melancholia to mourning for its traumatic past. In so doing, this paper raises the question of what constitutes an ethico-political way of commemorating historical trauma.

Keywords: Gwangju massacre, mourning, melancholia, nation-building, representation of trauma, cinema, *A Petal*, *Peppermint Candy*, *May 18*

Seung Cheol LEE is an assistant professor of anthropology at Seoul National University.
E-mail: sclee@snu.ac.kr

Introduction

If a national history can be understood as a “narrative” that provides its subjects with a source of imagined identification (Bhabha 1990), a nation’s historical trauma can put the national narrative at risk, because the trauma’s compulsory repetitiveness and unrepresentability can disrupt the historical narrative’s integrity and thus threaten the identity of the national subject (Caruth 1996; LaCapra 2001). For a nation to retain its imaginary unity, its traumatic pasts—such as wars, massacres, and failed revolutions—should be either entirely repressed and forgotten or properly commemorated and mourned in the name of the nation. Conversely speaking, only by successfully incorporating traumatic historical memories, can a national narrative be effectively recreated and reconstructed.

There is no doubt that the Gwangju uprising and massacre is one of the largest traumas in contemporary South Korean history. On May 18, 1980, the residents of Gwangju, the regional capital of southwestern Korea, rose up in protest against a nationwide extension of martial law that had followed a military coup. But the protesters were soon brutally crushed by the military: the number of the deaths, including the missing presumed dead, has been estimated in the hundreds.¹ The military authorities tried to conceal the massacre by announcing that the uprising had been planned and incited by pro-North Korea communists and that, with the exception of these, there were very few civilian casualties. Once Chun Doo-hwan, the leader of the military coup, was officially inaugurated as president four months after the massacre, discussions and representations of the massacre were strictly prohibited and censored until the democratization of South Korea in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

Despite the government’s repression, news about the massacre circulated quickly through underground networks, and outrage over Gwangju fueled a strong anti-military-rule movement throughout the 1980s. Thus, it is not surprising that, after democratization, the truth of

1. For detailed discussions of the uprising and its implications in South Korea’s democratic movement, see Choi (2006) and Katsiaficas and Na (2006).

the Gwangju massacre has come to light and become the focal point of political debates (Ahn 2002). Since the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s, the post-military, liberal government has re-investigated the truth of Gwangju. The Special Committee on Investigation (Gwangju minjuhwa undong jinsang josa teukbyeol wiwonhoe) was established in 1988 and congressional hearings about the massacre have been held time and again. Such efforts include what can be called the *nationalization* or officialization of the memory of Gwangju. In 1993, President Kim Young-sam declared in an official statement that “as an extension of the Gwangju Democratization Movement, today’s government is a democratic one” (quoted in Ahn [2002, 115]). The government has renamed what was conventionally called the “Gwangju tragedy” (Gwangju *chamsa*) as the “Gwangju Democratization Movement” (Gwangju minjuhwa undong) and designated May 18, the day of the uprising, as a national anniversary. A national cemetery has been constructed for commemorating the victims, and teaching about the uprising and massacre has been inserted into the national curriculum.

These efforts can be regarded as a just restoration of suppressed memory and history. What should not be neglected, however, is the fact that this extensive restoration is not unrelated to the construction of a new unified national narrative under the exigency of nation-building (K. Kim 2004; Sun-ah Kim 2006). Since the late 1990s, the South Korean government has promoted a new wave of nationalism, including the nationwide “Rebuilding Korea” campaign (Je-2 Geonguk undong) launched in the wake of the 1997 Asian financial crisis. At the heart of the new nation-building project lies the construction of a progressive and linear national narrative that reduces the traumatic events of the past under military dictatorship into successive moments of national development leading up to liberal democratization. By representing the present as the culmination of national-democratic progress, the liberal government not only established itself as the legitimate heir of the pro-democracy movement but also muffled potential discontent caused by the neoliberal restructuring of the economy. If all past conflicts were *for and pro* democratization, there must be neither struggle nor conflict anymore under the *now democratic* nation. In this process, the polyvalence of the Gwangju uprising has been simply reduced to a pro-

democratic movement (see, for example, Choi [2006]), and the memory of Gwangju has been conjured and reified as the sacred provenance from which the teleological narrative of democratization progresses.

In this paper, I trace how the cinematic representations of the Gwangju massacre have reflected and contributed to the formulation of this new national narrative in post-authoritarian South Korea, by exploring three films about Gwangju that were made from the mid-1990s to the late 2000s: *A Petal* (*Kkonnip*, 1996), *Peppermint Candy* (*Bakha satang*, 2000), and *May 18* (*Hwaryeohan hyuga*, 2007). These historical films represent and commemorate the Gwangju massacre in different ways and, in doing so, form different relations with the new national narrative that seamlessly integrate the traumatic experience of Gwangju into progressive democratization.² In investigating and comparing each film's representation of Gwangju, I will draw on Freud's distinction between mourning and melancholia. Whereas the act of mourning includes the process for reconciling a traumatic loss and the establishment of a coherent narrative about the experience, melancholy defers reconciliation and holds open the wound of loss in order to sustain a bond with the past. That is to say, mourning and melancholia can be understood as different ethico-political stances in relation to a traumatic loss. Before turning to the films themselves, it may thus be useful to briefly examine the Freudian notions and relevant discussions.

2. Although it is not novel to illuminate the intimate relationship between cinema and nation-building (see Hjort and MacKenzie [2000]), South Korea's particular context seems to be noteworthy here. In post-authoritarian South Korea, the work of representing and re-evaluating the darkness of the history of military dictatorship has been carried out mainly through historical films made by a group of socially informed filmmakers than by other media. Since the mid-1990s, with the enthusiastic support of the liberal government, historical films have not only become one of the main genres in Korean cinema but have also incurred high public regard, both domestically and internationally, under the banner of the "Korean Cinema's New Wave" (Paquet 2009). For example, the three films I analyze in this paper all succeeded in receiving high public attention, despite their tragic tones. It should also be noted that the popularity of national historical films, aside from the political context, is a result of the commercial strategy that emphasizes the *locality* against the hegemony of Hollywood movies (Sun-ah Kim 2006).

Mourning and Melancholia

Since Freud first tried to clearly distinguish between mourning and melancholia (Freud [1917] 1955), these two different, sometimes seemingly opposite, responses to the experience of loss have been extensively explored (see Jackson [1986]; Butler [1997]). Rather than providing a comprehensive psychoanalytic explanation of these two terms, however, I will here focus on the political and ethical implications of mourning and melancholia in remembering and recalling traumatic past events.

According to Freud, mourning is a psychic response in which the subject's libido is detached from a lost object. This withdrawal is gradual rather than instantaneous, and is completed when the subject declares the object to be dead and finds a new attachment. Through this *regular* process of mourning, a subject successfully reestablishes emotional order and integrates the experience of loss into his or her life narrative. Freud says that, "when the work of mourning is completed, the ego becomes free and uninhibited again" (Freud [1917] 1955, 245). Melancholia, on the other hand, occurs when the subject does not know what she has lost or when she knows a lost object itself but not precisely what she has lost in it. In this case, the withdrawn libido moves into the ego instead of toward a new object, and thus the loss of an external object is transformed into a loss within the ego. As a result, the subject's ambivalent feelings of love and hate toward the lost object become invested in her ego, so that she ends up reproaching and criticizing herself: "In mourning it is the world which has become poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself" (Freud [1917] 1955, 246).

Although Freud concedes that "it is only because we know better about the mechanism of mourning that this attitude does not seem to us pathological" (Freud [1917] 1955, 244), it seems rather obvious that he opposes normal mourning to pathological melancholia. For Freud, mourning means the successful and proper acceptance of a loss, whereas melancholia is deemed an undesirable and disabling mental state that may lead to suicide. Consequently, melancholia is equated with failed, or at least incomplete, mourning—i.e., something that should be developed into proper mourning.

After Freud, however, the status and meanings of melancholia, especially its political and ethical potentials, have been reconsidered and retrieved. What if, for example, melancholia can be understood as an ethical attitude that insists on a continuous bond with a lost object or the past, whether consciously or unconsciously, in a situation where mourning or oblivion is forced? According to Eva Tettenborn (2006), who studies melancholic figures in African-American slave literature, melancholia has served as a “resistance strategy” of preserving the cultural record of loss and sustaining a bond with the past against a hegemonic white historiography. Likewise, in discussing collective ways of remembering traumatic events, Eng and Kazanjian highlight melancholia’s potential to re-actualize the past in the present:

...in Freud’s initial conception of melancholia, the past is neither fixed nor complete. Unlike mourning, in which the past is declared resolved, finished, and dead, in melancholia the past remains steadfastly alive in the present....While mourning abandons lost objects by laying their histories to rest, melancholia’s continued and open relation to the past finally allows us to gain new perspectives on and new understandings of lost objects. (Eng and Kazanjian 2003, 3–4)

As an endless and repetitive mourning, melancholia thus not only enables the subject to maintain a bond with the past, it also brings “its ghosts and specters, its flaring and fleeting images, into the present” (Eng and Kazanjian 2003, 4).³ Whereas the completion of mourning turns the traumatic memory into a “narrative memory” by assigning the experience a proper place in a successive narrative of loss and reconciliation (Herman 1997), melancholia instead disrupts the symbolic continuity and conjures the remainders of the past catastrophe, to borrow Walter Benjamin’s term, into now-time (*Jetztzeit*).⁴ In this way, the melancholic subject is able to remain

3. In her book about traumatic experience and memory, Cathy Caruth (1996) also argues that the ethics of remembrance becomes possible when the subject conjures past remainders in the present rather than pursues commemorative healing.

4. Walter Benjamin is one of the most important thinkers among those who emphasize the redemptive possibility of melancholia. For the relationship between melancholia and redemption in Benjamin’s thought, see Jay (2005).

faithful to the past, refusing hasty or false commemorative healing that aims to reconcile the irreconcilable. By leaving the wound unsutured, melancholia opens up the possibility of both the present and future redemption of the past.

This reevaluation of melancholia seems to provide a compelling answer to the question of how a historical event should be remembered, without falling into the trap of official commemorations that often “remember to forget.”⁵ Although this paper’s analysis draws upon this reevaluation of melancholic ethics that challenges official memory, this reversal of the Freudian hierarchy between mourning and melancholia should be done with one significant caveat. As Slavoj Žižek aptly warns, the melancholic position always carries the risk of relapsing into the fetishization of the lost object. When the melancholic positivizes and idealizes what she has lost, melancholia can turn into a regressive gesture to substitute “the original lack” with a lost object and create a fantasy in which she has lost what she never had:

What melancholy obfuscates is that the object is lacking from the beginning, that its emergence coincides with its lack, that this object is nothing but the positivization of a void of lack, a purely anamorphic entity that does not exist in itself. The paradox, of course, is that this deceitful translation of lack into loss enables us to assert our possession of the object. (Žižek 2000, 660)

In other words, the melancholic subject pretends there is a loss in order to possess the object. In this way, she is able to not only preserve the object intact but also elevate it into the ideal—insofar as she has already lost it, the object can be imagined to be as ideal as possible. In this light, the

5. Of course, one needs to be cautious when applying Freud’s conceptions to collective and social loss because his main interest was an individual unconscious, not a social unconscious. However, it is also important to note that it was Freud himself who attempted to apply his clinical analysis to explain various social phenomena, including the origin of human societies and religions. See for example, Freud ([1913] 1957). While keeping this ambivalence in mind, this paper apprehends mourning and melancholia less as individual pathologies than as social and collective ethics in commemorating the past (see also, Gordon [2008]).

melancholic is comparable to a fetishist who denies women's lack of the penis and seeks it in its substitutes, for example, buttons or shoes: replacing the lack with other objects, both desperately hide the original void and fetishize what they lost.⁶ In other words, if melancholia has the potential to disrupt the continuum of history and to maintain a secret bond with the past, it also carries the risk of idealizing the lost past and turning a veil of the original lack into a fetish.

Therefore, the ethical and political aspects of melancholia should be presented not as clearly given, but as offering a set of questions: Under what conditions can melancholic intransigence open up the possibility for the redemption of the past? When and how does melancholia fall prey to an idealization of the lost object or a desperate gesture to disavow the original lack? The point is thus not the mere reversal of Freud's evaluation, but rather an attempt to understand more carefully the ambivalent properties and effects of melancholia in remembering historical events. Such ambivalence in melancholia raises the necessity of exploring the political and social circumstances that surround the acts of mourning and melancholia. In what follows, I will show how the ways of commemorating the Gwangju massacre have dramatically changed from melancholia to mourning by analyzing *A Petal*, *Peppermint Candy*, and *May 18*, respectively. In exploring how the mourning and melancholia in these films challenge, negotiate with, and contribute to the political necessity that integrates trauma into the national narrative of progressive democratization, I will focus on the kinds of political effects and implications produced by these different forms of commemoration.

6. Freud also points out that fetishism can be understood as a response to the traumatic experience—i.e., the experience of recognizing the possibility of castration (Freud [1927] 1957). If so, we could say that there is an affinity between fetishism and melancholia, in that both are possessed by traumatic loss and repeat the experience in their own fantasies. For the relation between fetishism and melancholia, see Agamben (1993).

A *Petal*: Melancholic Ethics and Re-actualization of the Past

A Petal, which was released in 1996, can be regarded as the first mainstream movie to deal with the Gwangju massacre, albeit indirectly. Two pioneering attempts to represent the massacre preceded *A Petal*, but these films—*Oh! Land of Dreams* (*O kkum-ui nara*, 1989) and *Song of Resurrection* (*Buhwal-ui norae*, 1990)—could not be publicly released due to government censorship. After democratization, however, discussions about the Gwangju massacre, which had until then spread mainly through underground sources, finally entered the public discursive sphere.⁷ This emancipatory atmosphere enabled *A Petal* to be produced with the enthusiastic support of Gwangju citizens. The year 1996 also has special meaning in the political history of South Korea because in that year the Kim Young-sam administration, the first civilian government since 1960, formally charged and brought to trial two former presidents, Chun Doo-hwan and Roh Tae-woo, for the military coup and Gwangju massacre. Considering that President Kim had compromised with and received support from these former presidents during his election campaign, it was never clear whether the conviction and trial were genuine or a mere symbolic performance (Ahn 2002). These circumstances, nevertheless, helped draw extensive attention to *A Petal*, which ranked third at the year's box office despite its unconventional narrative structure.

The narrative of *A Petal*, which takes place just after the Gwangju massacre, can be divided into two strands: one story is about a girl who lost her sanity after witnessing her mother's death during the massacre, and the other is the itinerary of four student activists—the friends of the girl's dead brother⁸—who search for the insane girl. The wandering girl, who

7. For example, in 1995 the soap opera *Morae sigye* (Sand Glass) dealt with the Gwangju massacre for the first time in history of Korean drama. This attempt, which drew extensive attention (46% of nationwide viewership), produced a phenomenon called “*Morae sigye* syndrome.” See Lee (2005).

8. The film suggests that her older brother was killed while in the military after being forcibly conscripted as punishment for participating in a student movement. Under the military government, forced conscription was a common way to discipline student protestors. They were often tortured in the military, sometimes fatally.

narrowly escaped death herself, meets and follows a disabled and wretched worker, Mr. Jang, whom she mistakes for her dead older brother. Jang, who is depicted as violent and ruthless, repeatedly rapes and beats her at first. Yet, after understanding why the girl has become insane, he feels deep sympathy for her.⁹ Despite his efforts to redress his faults, however, the girl realizes that Jang is not her older brother and leaves him. In the meantime, *we*, the narrators of the film and the friends of the girl's brother, are looking for her in the countryside near Gwangju. However, the search only turns up some witnesses who have seen her. In the last scene of the film, *we* finally reach Jang's house, but only after the girl has already left.

In this respect, it could be said that *A Petal* is all about searching for a lost object: the girl is wandering to find her dead brother; *we* are seeking her traces in vain; and Jang begins to insanely search for her after she has already left. The fact that they all eventually fail to find what they have lost indicates a peculiar homology between the narrative structure of the film and melancholia. If the girl seems to signify the truth of Gwangju, both *we* and Jang—who are, respectively, allegorical representations of Korean intellectuals who seek the truth of the massacre and wretched people who are not informed about the massacre but eventually become aware of it—fail to grasp it fully. *We* and Jang only find its traces and, to some extent, seem to be *haunted* by the existence of the girl. The last narration of the film made by *us* is meaningful: “You might meet this girl when you pass by a cemetery, a river or the corner of a street... If one day she comes up to you, please do not be afraid and do not frighten her.” Here, the girl is depicted as “a wandering ghost” who does not have a proper place (K. Kim 2004, 122). It appears that Jang and *our* attempts to find her a proper place end in

9. The male-centered perspective of *A Petal* has been extensively criticized, especially by feminist critics. According to such criticism, using a raped girl as an allegory for the suffering of a nation is deeply related to the nationalistic fantasy in which men are represented as agents and women are relegated to passive victimhood (K. Kim 2004, 120–121). Neither are *Peppermint Candy* and *May 18* free from this valid criticism. For a criticism of the male-centered perspective of *Peppermint Candy*, see So-young Kim (2006). This perspective provides another possible criticism of the nationalist aspect of these films, but is beyond the scope of this essay.

failure, and, as a result, symbolic mourning and commemoration cannot be completed: she is elusive and still wandering.

The melancholic nature of the film can also be found in its way of representing the Gwangju massacre. In the film, the massacre is mainly described through the girl's subjective reminiscences. As a result, the representation is confusing and disjointed: the narrative is often broken, and the images, which are sometimes intentionally blurred, are open to interpretation. For example, in one scene the girl, chased by the military, loses consciousness, and in the next scene she finds herself in a heap of corpses. The film does not explain how she escaped from the massacre and how she got to where she meets Jang, let alone how the massacre unfolded. In addition, the girl's reminiscences are often entangled with her fantasies and nightmares. To illustrate, in her first fantasy sequence, which is done as an animation, the soldier following her is suddenly replaced by a gigantic, monstrous spider and killed by a man who has rescued her. It seems unclear, however, whether this really happens or is just her dream. In a word, both the massacre itself and her experience still remain obscure. The film thus seems to testify to the *unrepresentability* of trauma: the remembrance of traumatic history can never be satisfying or complete (Caruth 1996). The girl's experience can neither be integrated into a coherent narrative nor represented transparently. The attempt to build a narrative continues to be interrupted by obscure images and phantasms. Whenever she is forced to remember the massacre, she goes into a spasm. The re-membering of the dis-membered past seems impossible.

Instead of accurately representing the massacre and revealing its truth in historically verifiable detail, the film weaves a story that foregrounds the guilt and responsibility of survivors and witnesses. The film implies that the reason the girl has gone mad is her guilt for leaving her dying mother alone during the massacre; the reason why *we* are desperately searching for the girl might come from the fact that *we* escaped from Gwangju before the massacre; Jang also has gone mad from his guilt at abusing the poor girl. The film even tacitly holds the spectators responsible for the massacre. For example, in a sequence that shows Jang gambling with his fellow workers, the camera lingers for a while on the TV news as it reports that the Chun

Doo-hwan administration is being supported by a large percentage of the people. In an interview, the director Jang Sun-woo has confirmed that the news scene was intentionally inserted in order to raise the question of whether the people who were blind to the Gwangju massacre were really innocent (Yun 1996, 55). Just as in melancholic self-condemnation, in which the object of blame is never clear, in the film the senses of guilt and responsibility cannot be localized or confined to a specific figure. They instead form an endless chain of guilt that is expressed by the film's prevalent sadomasochism. Whenever a ghost appears in her fantasies and blames her for leaving her dying mother, the girl injures herself; *we* who fail to find the girl fall into alcohol abuse; Jang loses his own sanity. These sadomasochistic self-recriminations might seem to be self-destructive (K. Kim 2004). As asserted by Tettenborn (2006), however, such destructive gestures can also be read as “melancholic resistance” to preserve a bond with the past against commemorative atonement. By choosing to leave the wound open and unsutured, the film holds its viewers and others responsible for the catastrophe, in defiance of the hasty narrativization and reconciliation of the experience.

In consequence, the film intentionally leaves the girl and the truth of Gwangju “between two deaths”—the real and the symbolic one: the girl has vanished, but her loss has not been integrated yet into the symbolic order (Lacan 1997, 270–287; Žižek 1989). Like the ghost who accuses the girl in her illusion, the girl and Gwangju repeatedly return and require us to shoulder the responsibility and guilt for the massacre. This melancholic gesture seems to assert the impossibility of official commemoration, while summoning the specters of Gwangju. Such an effort, however, appears to be in vain, at least in real politics. In 1996, as a result of the trial, Chun Doo-hwan and Roh Tae-woo were sentenced to death and life imprisonment, respectively, for their responsibilities for the coup and the massacre. Yet, only after one year, in the middle of the Asian financial crisis, both were pardoned and released by the government—in the name of *national compromise and a new beginning*.

***Peppermint Candy*: Lost Innocence and Desire for a New Nation**

Peppermint Candy was released on New Year's Day 2000, when South Korea was caught up in anxiety and hope for the new millennium. Between 1996 (when *A Petal* was released) and 2000, Korean society underwent significant transformations, both economically and politically. Along with the devastating national and personal consequences of the 1997 Asian financial crisis, the end of 1997 brought the first peaceful power transfer between ruling and opposition parties in contemporary South Korean history, when Kim Dae-jung, a dissident leader who had been sentenced to death by the military government for inciting the Gwangju uprising, was elected president. The new government was thus faced with the difficult tasks of overcoming the economic crisis and creating its own basis of legitimacy. On the one hand, following the IMF's prescriptions, the government began to push a series of harsh neo-liberal reforms, including the privatization of public services, the flexibilization of labor, and the suppression of labor movements (Song 2009). On the other hand, to resolve the crisis of legitimacy caused by these reforms, the government began to stir up a new wave of nationalism. As already discussed, the promotion of nationalism has been made possible by rewriting contemporary Korean history from the perspective of gradual democratization, and by representing the present neo-liberal government as the legitimate heir of pro-democratic movements. The official commemoration of Gwangju can only be adequately understood when placed within the wider context of this effort to build a new nation that overcomes *past* confrontations.

Peppermint Candy, which is directed by Lee Chang-dong who served as the minister for culture and tourism in the Kim Dae-jung administration, seems to faithfully reflect this aspiration for rewriting history and building a new nation (Sun-ah Kim 2006). As can be guessed from the teaser poster's catch line ('I want to restart [my life]!'), the film highlights the debacle of an ordinary Korean male, Yeong-ho, and his search for redemption. The film begins with Yeong-ho's suicide scene in which he stands on the railroad tracks to meet a fast approaching train, yelling, "I want to go back!" Then, the film progresses backward through his life and ends with the sequence of

a peaceful picnic that Yeong-ho enjoyed with his first love, Sun-im, and his fellow workers, twenty years earlier, in 1979. If we reorder the narrative in linear time, the narrative becomes simple and easy to follow. Yeong-ho, an innocent young factory worker who enjoys peppermint candy and dreams of becoming a photographer of wild flowers, is conscripted and dispatched to quell the Gwangju uprising, and there he accidentally shoots and kills a local girl. His innocence is lost in this traumatic experience. After Gwangju, he leaves Sun-im and joins the police force. For the rest of the 1980s, Yeong-ho plays an active role in torturing labor and student activists and cracking down on social movements. In the early 1990s, when the Korean economy is booming, he quits the police force and becomes a small business owner. With the financial crisis in 1997, however, Yeong-ho goes bankrupt along with the South Korean economy, gets divorced, and lives alone in a flimsy shack. Asked to do so by Sun-im's husband, he visits his first love Sun-im who is in a hospital, comatose and dying of a disease. After seeing her, Yeong-ho realizes that his life is a catastrophe, derailed by past events. He re-visits the place where he enjoyed the picnic with Sun-im before being conscripted and throws himself in front of an approaching train, yelling "I want to go back!" In retrospect, the message of the film thus seems quite straightforward: Yeong-ho's current failure was destined by the Gwangju massacre, and Gwangju is where Yeong-ho lost his innocence and his (and our) tragedy began.

Although the film apparently follows the narrative form of successful mourning in that it integrates all the events of the past, albeit in reverse order, into a coherent life narrative for Yeong-ho, in some respects, *Peppermint Candy* can also be viewed as a text of failed mourning or melancholia. Above all, it is a story about the attempt and failure to search for missing innocence, and ends up in the suicide of the melancholic subject. The film's melancholic gesture, however, differs from that of *A Petal* and produces different political effects. Whereas *A Petal* depicts Gwangju and its memory as a ghost in order to open the possibility of its return, *Peppermint Candy* positivizes lost innocence with various metonymic substitutes: peppermint candy, a still camera, and above all, Yeong-ho's first love, Sun-im (Magnan-Park 2005). In the film's final sequence, Yeong-ho in 1979

has a peaceful picnic with Sun-im, talking about their dreams and eating peppermint candies together. After Gwangju, however, Yeong-ho does not enjoy peppermint candy anymore, refuses a camera that Sun-im gives him as a gift, and leaves her. Such narrative plot points serve to romanticize the time before the Gwangju massacre while presenting Gwangju as “the original injury” that produces all the losses (So-young Kim 2006). This approach is exactly what *A Petal* wants to avoid. If Gwangju is represented in *A Petal* as the “original lack” and as a ghost that repeatedly returns and holds the subjects responsible for history, *Peppermint Candy* represents Gwangju as a cause for losses that, as will be discussed below, gives the subject a pretext for evading responsibility and reaching a compromise with history.

In discussing mourning in postwar German films, Eric Santner (1990) observes that these films, by romanticizing prewar society as innocent and peaceful, tend to ascribe responsibility for people’s experiences during World War II to external forces or to the intrusion of alterity. The same criticism can be applied to *Peppermint Candy*. Although the Gwangju massacre should be understood as the historical result of various contradictions and antagonisms embedded in Korean modernity (Park 2007), *Peppermint Candy* describes the massacre as an abrupt intrusion of state violence into peaceful individual life, and thus the film seems to successfully parry the question of guilt and responsibility. For example, the reason why Yeong-ho joins the police force is never explained, although, as pointed out by many critics, there is no necessary causal relationship between experiencing the trauma of Gwangju and assuming an active role in torturing activists. In fact, in the film Yeong-ho is repeatedly asked by others why he has become a policeman, but he never answers. Given the film’s narrative, the omitted answer must be because of the trauma of Gwangju. The memory of Gwangju is thus presented as the cause of loss to which people can ascribe their moral, political, and even economic failures.

This half-mourning, half-melancholic gesture ultimately serves as a call for reconciliation with traumatic history. The effect of the self-victimizing narrative, whether intentional or not, creates a symmetry between the oppressing and the oppressed (So-young Kim 2006). If we are all victims of traumatic history, we need to cooperate to mourn and overcome the trauma.

The entire victimization of the nation thus leads to the necessity of founding a new post-traumatic nation. In this respect, the suicide of Yeong-ho, who is an “allegorical figure” of South Korea’s tragic and painful contemporary history, must be viewed as “a sacrificial and foundational act” for building a new nation (Sun-ah Kim 2006, 50). Like a fetishist who disavows the original lack by veiling the lack with a fetish, the film’s desire seems to seek an imaginative substitute to supplement Yeong-ho’s loss—i.e., a new nation without lack, violence, or antagonism. Starting from Yeong-ho’s suicide, we trace back this history and ultimately reach the scene of Yeong-ho and his fellow workers having a peaceful picnic, a kind of pristine arche-nation that has been lost and destroyed by the trauma of Gwangju. That is the place to which Yeong-ho wholeheartedly “wants to go back.” In *Peppermint Candy*, therefore, what must be redeemed through the commemoration of the catastrophe of Gwangju is not the returning specters of traumatic memory but the immaculate and innocent nation that is assumed to be lost.

May 18: The Completion of Mourning and the Birth of a New Nation

May 18 is the first film that represents head-on what happened in Gwangju in May 1980. Whereas *A Petal* takes place just after the massacre and *Peppermint Candy* explores Korean history after Gwangju, *May 18* reconstructs the massacre in detailed chronological order from the uprising to its defeat. This reconstruction was made possible in part by the government’s and civilians’ steady efforts to uncover the truth of Gwangju. The completion of state compensation for the victims also enabled the detailed representation of this politically sensitive issue. In 2000, the government revised the Compensation Act for the Gwangju Democratization Movement and enacted the Act for Democratization Movement Activists’ Honor-Restoration and Compensation. Although the whole process caused fierce political debates and served as a focal point of political confrontations throughout the early 2000s, compensation for the 5,060 confirmed victims of the massacre was finally completed in 2007—the year *May 18* was released. Given this situation, *May 18* was expected to

reveal the objective truth of Gwangju and its exact representation. Whether or not the film met that expectation, it reignited debate over the massacre, and became one of the most popular films in Korean cinema, with 7.3 million tickets sold nationwide.

As the film begins, the camera pans over the serene landscape of Gwangju. In contrast to *Peppermint Candy*, which opens with a catastrophe and traces back to the harmonious past, *May 18* begins with peaceful everyday life and centers on how this peace is shattered. Min-u, a taxi driver, lives in Gwangju with his brother, a high school student named Jin-u. Min-u falls in love with Sin-ae, a local nurse.¹⁰ Their happiness is destroyed, however, when Jin-u is killed by military troops during an anti-government protest. Outraged, Min-u joins the uprising with Sin-ae's father, Heung-su, and the protestors succeed in temporarily seizing the local government building. When the military returns in full force, however, they and other protestors are all slaughtered. Sin-ae is the only survivor. By overlapping the tragedy of Gwangju with the pathetic love story of Min-u and Sin-ae, the film faithfully follows the formula of melodrama. The narrative contains no ambiguity as it gradually builds up to its woeful climax. In this respect, the narrative strategy of *May 18* sharply contrasts with that of *A Petal*. If *A Petal*, through the ambiguous images in the girl's fantasy, deliberately avoids the explicit representation of the massacre and leaves the possibility of interpretation open, *May 18* succeeds in providing a complete description of the events in chronological order. Furthermore, the approach of the film also differs from that of *Peppermint Candy*. If *Peppermint Candy* illustrates through Yeong-ho's suicide the failure of mourning and the desire for a new nation, *May 18* seems to signify the completion both of mourning and

10. In contrast to *A Petal*, in which the characters are anonymous or only identified by their last names, all the characters in *May 18* are addressed by their first names. This is not unrelated to the differences in the ways these films represent the massacre. In melancholia, in which the distinction between the external world and the ego is collapsed and the integrity of the subject is threatened, a proper name cannot be given to the subject. Therefore, the fact that the characters in *May 18* have their own proper names can be regarded as evidence that mourning is complete and the unity of the subject has been restored. For the role of proper names in mourning, see Morris (2003).

of building a new nation. In the film, this completion is manifested in two ways: first, the de-politicization of the uprising; second, the sharp contrast between the *good nation* and the *bad state*.

Above all, *May 18* deliberately eliminates any political dimension from the uprising. Unlike *A Petal* and *Peppermint Candy*, it does not aim to illuminate the political meanings of the uprising and massacre—this does not mean, however, that the film produces no political effects. To accomplish the political de-politicization of Gwangju, the early part of the film is devoted to describing the political ignorance and innocence of the uprising's participants. For example, when Min-u consults his friend about dating Sin-ae, they turn off the news about politics because it distracts them from "thinking about the more important issue." In a later scene, before Jin-u is killed, Sin-ae simply passes through a group of demonstrators on her way to a date with Min-u without showing any particular interest in what they are doing. It seems that resentment over the death of Jin-u is the sole motivation for their participation in the uprising. In an interview, the director Kim Ji-hoon admits that he did not want to describe the massacre as a political issue: "the film's only concern is the humanism deeply embedded within the event" (Kang 2007). Perhaps nothing reveals such de-politicization more clearly than the unnatural disappearance of political rallying cries from the film. In the film, the protesters are killed, only crying "Long live Korea!"—I shall explain the meaning of this refrain later—and "we are not rebels [but citizens]!" Given the vast research available on the radical slogans and the cultivated political consciousness of the participants in the uprising (Katsiaficas and Na 2006), this de-politicized description seems to be deftly manipulated to emphasize the protagonists' political *innocence*. By erasing the political and historical background of the uprising and massacre, the film tacitly displaces the ideological and political antagonisms into a conflict between *good* and *evil*; as the film goes on, this opposition is developed into a significant contrast between the *good nation* and the *bad state*.

The most haunting sequence in the film, the segment about the first slaughter by the army, is devoted to establishing such a contrast. In the scene, the protesters confront the military in front of the local government building. The national anthem begins playing, and the demonstrators

stand and show their respect.¹¹ Meanwhile, the soldiers load their guns and begin to fire wildly into the protesters. While the national anthem is playing, a terrible slaughter is committed. The meaning of this sequence seems obvious: by juxtaposing the protesters who are faithful to the nation with the soldiers who ignore it, the film separates *the nation*, signified by the protesters, from *the state*, represented by the troops. Indeed, attempts to associate the protesters with the nation can be found throughout the film. To illustrate, the corpses of victims are covered with national flags; Min-u's first job when the demonstrators seize the government building is to hang a national flag at half-staff to mourn the victims; the victims are dying and crying "Long live Korea!"—even though they are being killed by Korean military forces.

This abiding belief that the good nation of people can be clearly separated from the evil state is what decisively distinguishes *May 18* from *A Petal* and *Peppermint Candy*. As discussed above, *A Petal* consciously avoids and blurs this type of stark contrast. When Mr. Jang, the allegorical figure of the ignorant and the wretched, brutally rapes the girl, it signifies that the state violence at Gwangju can be reproduced by the oppressed themselves. In this way, the film holds all the people responsible for the massacre and its aftermath. A clear distinction between the good nation and the bad state is also impossible for the tragic figure of Yeong-ho in *Peppermint Candy*: Such impossibility may explain why he joined the police force after the massacre. It is only on the basis of the distinction that *May 18*, in contrast to *A Petal* and *Peppermint Candy*, succeeds in creating a coherent narrative of mourning for the Gwangju massacre. We can easily locate in its narrative the lost object (the good nation), the reason for that loss (the bad state), and the subject of mourning (represented by Sin-ae, the sole survivor).

11. Under the military government, all government buildings had to play the national anthem twice a day, once in the morning and once in the evening. While the anthem was playing, passersby had to stand and show their respect by putting their right hand on the left side of their chest. This practice is also described, though differently, in *A Petal*: the insane girl leaves Jang and passes through people who stand facing the national flag as the anthem plays. Jang cannot follow her because he does not want to break the rule. This scene seems to contrast the girl's placelessness with Jang's conformity, in relation to state power.

If, as noted by Freud, the completion of mourning is accompanied by the reestablishment of the ego, the coherent narrative of *May 18* can be read as signifying the birth of the post-traumatic nation that has already completed mourning its tragedy.

The last scene of *May 18* embodies such a reconstruction of the nation. In the scene describing the imaginary wedding party of Min-u and Sin-ae, which is now impossible because of Min-u's death, each of the victims is brought back to life to happily take a picture together. It is only Sin-ae in her wedding dress who does not laugh and who appears to know that they are all ghosts except for her. This poignant scene can be construed as a perfect allegory of the birth of a new nation. As a female subject who mourns the national tragic history and hence embodies the continuity of the nation,¹² Sin-ae conjures up the ghosts of the dead and assigns them their proper places. Of course, those who belong to the bad state are not invited to this wedding party. With this act of mourning and celebration, the bad state seems to be finally superseded by the new nation that has originated from Gwangju. Because there is no longer a bad state, the new nation will have no antagonisms, conflicts, or even history. In this way, we will finally succeed in building a new, post-traumatic nation.

Conclusion

In *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, Judith Butler claims that “we have to consider the obituary as an act of nation-building” (Butler 2006, 34). The intimate relations between mourning, death, and the nation are far from new, not to mention Benedict Anderson's famous argument that the cenotaph and tombs of unknown soldiers are the emblems of modern nationalism and

12. In the nationalist imagination, men and women are often assumed to take on different roles. While male subjects “represent the progressive agent of national modernity,” women are represented “as the atavistic and authentic body of national tradition, embodying nationalism's conservative principle of continuity” (McClintock 1997, 96). From this perspective, one of the most important roles of women is to mourn the death of the male subject (Redfield 1999, 69–71).

that the collective mourning of particular deaths constitutes the foundation of a nation (Anderson 1991, 9–10). As Butler is quick to add, however, the matter is not a simple one because not every death can be mourned in the name of a nation. That is to say, we must still answer the question of whose death deserves national mourning, and whose does not. After the Korean War, South Korea officially mourned and commemorated the deaths of soldiers who had defended the nation against North Korea and its communism. Such acts of mourning were used to justify and legitimize the military dictatorship that was based on the bloody suppression of leftist movements. After democratization, through the late 1990s and mid-2000s, the sacrifices in the Gwangju massacre have been registered as other *mournable* deaths and have increasingly become the main object of national mourning. Perhaps no more adequate evidence to show the success of the birth of a new nation in South Korea could exist than this shift in the object of national mourning.

By examining three films about the Gwangju massacre, this paper has attempted to illuminate how commemorating the massacre has changed since the mid-1990s and how these changes were consonant with the remedial desire to (re-)build the nation. Over the decade from *A Petal* in 1996 to *May 18* in 2007, the representation of Gwangju has changed just as dramatically as the political and social contexts surrounding its representation. What this paper has shown is that the change in representation can be encapsulated as a shift from melancholia to mourning, as the process of curing the injured nation and building a new post-traumatic nation. *A Petal*, *Peppermint Candy*, and *May 18* each represent distinct moments within this change. If *A Petal*'s melancholia asserts the unrepresentability of the traumatic experience and tries to re-actualize the past in the present by bringing up the question of who is responsible, *Peppermint Candy* reveals another aspect of melancholia that positivizes the lost object as innocence and desires its restoration. By summoning the *good nation* and purging the *bad state* in Gwangju, *May 18* signifies the fulfillment of such a restoration and celebrates the birth of a new nation. In this way, the South Korean nation, which has experienced a harsh history under long military dictatorships, could complete its mourning of the past. Furthermore, by integrating this trauma as the origin of the new nation, it

would live long as a post-traumatic and post-historical nation.

The truth of the Gwangju massacre has recently re-emerged as a focal point of political contention. While right-wing, conservative politicians and ideologues continue to deny the massacre and disparage its victims as “welfare parasites,” liberals strive to defend the sacredness of Gwangju as the origin of the pro-democratic movement by insulating and reinforcing its *official* memory (Cho 2014; M. Kim 2017). What is missing in this fierce battle over history, however, seems to be the question of how to remember the uprising and massacre not as calcified memory but as a recurring interrogation that questions and disrupts the present domination and oppression. Walter Benjamin once presented what can be called the *melancholic redemption* of history through the allegory of the “Angelus Novus” (Benjamin 1968). Against “the storm of progress” that ceaselessly pushes it toward the future, this angel of history lingers in the catastrophic past and seeks a redemptive, dialectical image in the fragments and wreckage of that past to “blast open the continuum of history” (Benjamin 1968, 258). Like this angel who refuses a *progressive* historiography from the victors’ point of view and goes against the grain to seek the redemption of the defeated, the melancholic desires to maintain a secret bond with the past and to re-actualize the past in the present—even though the gesture always carries the risk of falling prey to fetishism. How can we then practice a *melancholic ethics* in representing and commemorating the traumatic memory of Gwangju beyond the hegemonic reconciliation of the wound and its teleological, progressive narrative of democratization? What can provide alternative forms of redemption for the dead and the ghosts of history? This is a difficult, if not impossible, question to answer.¹³ If one thing is certain, however, it is that future work for commemorating the traumatic past in a different way should challenge not only the bad state, who is the assailant, but also the good nation, who is the self-appointed successor of the victims. This dual struggle, of course, will be a strenuous and laborious task.

13. Han Kang’s recent novel, *Human Acts* (*Sonyeon-i onda*) is a rare achievement that engages with these questions. By narrating from the perspective of the dead, the novel raises the issue of the trauma’s unrepresentability and adopts the strategy of melancholic ethics or melancholic resistance to conjure up the haunts of the massacre (Han 2017).

REFERENCES

- Agamben, Giorgio. 1993. *Stanzas: Word and Phantasm in Western Culture*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Ahn, Jong-cheol. 2002. "The Significance of Settling the Past of the December 12 Coup and the May 18 Gwangju Uprising." *Korea Journal* 42.3: 112–138.
- Anderson, Benedict. 1991. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. New York: Verso.
- Benjamin, Walter. 1968. "Theses on the Philosophy of History." In *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, edited by Hannah Arendt, 257–259. Translated by Harry Zohn. New York: Schocken Books.
- Bhabha, Homi K., ed. 1990. *Nation and Narration*. New York: Routledge.
- Butler, Judith. 1997. *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- _____. 2006. *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. New York: Verso.
- Caruth, Cathy. 1996. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Cho, Yeon-jung. 2014. "'Gwangju'-reul hyeonjaehwahaneun il: Gwon Yeoseon-ui 'Regato' (2012)-wa Han Gang-ui 'Sonyeon-i onda' (2014)-reul jungsim-euro" ('Gwangju' unceasingly summoned, based on Kwon Yeosun's 'Legato' [2012] and Han Gang's 'Here Comes a Boy' [2014]). *Daejungseosa yeongu* (Journal of Popular Narrative) 20.3: 101–138.
- Choi, Jung-woon. 2006. *The Gwangju Uprising: The Pivotal Democratic Movement that Changed the History of Modern Korea*. Paramus, NJ: Homa and Sekey Books.
- Eng, David L., and David Kazanjian. 2003. "Introduction: Mourning Remains." In *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*, edited by David L. Eng, et al., 1–28. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Freud, Sigmund. [1913] 1957. "Totem and Taboo." In vol. 13 of *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, edited by James Strachey, 1–255. London: Hogarth Press.
- _____. [1917] 1955. "Mourning and Melancholia." In vol. 14 of *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, edited by James Strachey, 237–258. London: Hogarth Press.
- _____. [1927] 1957. "Fetishism." In vol. 21 of *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, edited by James Strachey, 147–158.

- London: Hogarth Press.
- Gordon, Avery. 2008. *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Han, Kang. 2017. *Human Acts: A Novel*. Translated by Deborah Smith. London: Hogarth. Originally published as *Sonyeon-i onda* (Seoul: Changbi, 2014).
- Herman, Judith. 1997. *Trauma and Recovery*. New York: Basic Books.
- Hjort, Mette, and Scott MacKenzie, eds. 2000. *Cinema and Nation*. New York: Routledge.
- Jackson, Stanley. 1986. *Melancholia and Depression: From Hippocratic Times to Modern Times*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Jay, Martin. 2005. "Walter Benjamin, Remembrance, and the First World War." In vol. 3 of *Walter Benjamin: Critical Evaluations in Culture Theory*, edited by Peter Osborne, 186–208. New York: Routledge.
- Kang, Byeong-jin. 2007. "An Seonggi, Kim Sanggyeong, Yi Yowon juyeon-ui hwaryeohan hyuga jejakbogohoe" (Report on the Production Presentation of May 18: Featuring An Seonggi, Kim Sanggyeong, and Yi Yowon). *Cine 21*. May 10.
- Katsiaficas, George, and Kan-chae Na, eds. 2006. *South Korean Democracy: Legacy of the Gwangju Uprising*. New York: Routledge.
- Kim, Kyung-hyun. 2004. *The Remasculinization of Korean Cinema*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Kim, Mi-jung. 2017. "'Gieok-jeongdong' jeonjaeng-ui sidae-wa munhakjeok hangjaeng: Han Gang-ui 'Sonyeon-i onda' (2014)-ga noin jari" (The Age of the 'Memory-Affect' War and the Literary Resistance: The Place of Han Gang's 'Human Acts' [2014]). *Inmunhak yeongu* (Journal of Humanities) 54: 249–278.
- Kim, So-young. 2006. "Do Not Include Me in Your 'Us': Peppermint Candy and the Politics of Difference." *Korea Journal* 46.1: 60–83.
- Kim, Sun-ah. 2006. *Hanguk yeonghwaraneun natseon gyeonggye: Korian nyu weibeu-wa hangukyeong beullokbeseuteo sidae ui gukga, seksyueolliti, beonyeok, yeonghwa* (The Strange Border of Korean Cinema: The State, Sexuality, Translation, and Cinema in the Age of the Korean New Wave and Blockbusters). Seoul: Communication Books.
- Lacan, Jacques. 1997. *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*. New York: Norton.
- LaCapra, Dominick. 2001. *Writing History, Writing Trauma*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Lee, Kee-hyeung. 2005. "Morae Sigye: Social Melodrama and Politics of Memory in Contemporary Korea." In *South Korean Golden Age Melodrama: Gender, Genre, and National Cinema*, edited by Kathleen McHugh, et al., 229–245. Detroit:

- Wayne State University Press.
- Magnan-Park, Aaron Han Joon. 2005. "Peppermint Candy: The Will Not to Forget." In *New Korean Cinema*, edited by Chi-Yun Shin and Julian Stringer, 159–169. New York: New York University Press.
- McClintock, Anne. 1997. "No Longer in a Future Heaven: Gender, Race and Nationalism." In *Dangerous Liaisons: Gender, Nation and Postcolonial Perspectives*, edited by Anne McClintock, et al., 89–112. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Morris, Rosalind. 2003. "Returning the Body without Haunting." In *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*, edited by David L. Eng, et al., 29–58. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Paquet, Darcy. 2009. *New Korean Cinema: Breaking the Waves*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Park, Myeong-jin. 2007. "Hanguk yeonghwa-ui yeoksa jaehyeon bangsik—gwanguju hangjaeng sojae yeonghwa-reul jungsimeuro" (The Method of Representation On History in Korean Films—Focusing on Films about Gwangju Democracy Movement). *Gukje inmun (International Humanities)* 41: 217–254.
- Redfield, Marc. 1999 "Imagi-Nation: The Imagined Community and the Aesthetics of Mourning." *Diacritics* 29.4: 58–83.
- Robinson, Michael. 2005. "Contemporary Cultural Production in South Korea." In *New Korean Cinema*, edited by Chi-Yun Shin and Julian Stringer, 12–27. New York: New York University Press.
- Santner, Eric. 1990. *Stranded Object: Mourning, Memory, and Film in Postwar Germany*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Song, Je-sook. 2009. *South Koreans in the Debt Crisis: The Creation of a Neoliberal Welfare Society*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Tettenborn, Eva. 2006. "Melancholia as Resistance in Contemporary African American Literature." *Melus* 31.3: 101–121.
- Yun, Chul-ho. 1996. "Kkeuteomneun byeonsin, kkonnip-ui gamdok Jang Seo-nu: yeonghwa-neun gajang jeongchijeogin haengwida" (An Interview with Jang Sun-woo, Director of A Petal: 'Filming is the Most Political of Acts'). *Wolgan sahoe pyeongnon gil (Road: Monthly Social Critic)* 96.4: 46–55.
- Žižek, Slavoj. 1989. *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. New York: Verso.
- _____. 2000. "Melancholy and the Act." *Critical Inquiry* 26.4: 657–681.