

Introduction: Hunting for the Whale

Whale *Hunting* (Korae *sanyang*, Pae Ch'ang-ho, dir., 1984), one of Korea's biggest box-office films of the 1980s,¹ begins with a fantasy sequence in which the protagonist, Pyöng-t'ae, dreams that he is standing naked before a laughing public. He is scantily clothed and lined up with bodybuilders whose muscularity accentuates his unattractive, bantamweight physique. The audience in the auditorium hosting this competition bursts into laughter. His oversized eyeglasses, his gap-toothed grin, and his petit stature are laid bare on stage, where he is left alone after the bodybuilders exit. Pyöng-t'ae slowly regains his confidence and proceeds to strike a few bodybuilding poses, only to fall comically on his back. He is loudly jeered off the stage. Although the film's spectator at first laughs along with the auditorium audience at this surreal scene, it doesn't take long before the scornful laughter turns into sympathy. The scene thus sets the stage for the weak and emasculated Pyöng-t'ae to make a strong appeal to the audience, who eventually want him to win back his love and, through a heterosexual reunion, regain his manhood. The audience will now root for him as he goes on the road to acquire his social, psychological, and libidinal autonomy.

This dream symptomizes not only the fear and anxiety of Pyöng-t'ae, an idealistic college student who pledges to find a "whale" after failing to attract the attention of a female schoolmate he fancies, but also the predicament of a postcolonial and rapidly industrializing nation. Made just before the fervor for democracy hit the streets, *Whale Hunting* follows Pyöng-t'ae as he falls in love with a mute prostitute, Ch'un-ja, and takes her back home to a remote island.

(After being rejected by the student he desires, he had slept with Ch'un-ja at a brothel.²) Aided by Wang-ch'o, a wise vagabond with a mysterious past, they journey to the very edge of Korea in bitter cold weather. The trip is Pyöng-t'ae's quest for a heroic and autonomous identity through the realization of a romantic reunion while overcoming threats of death. Because this is ostensibly a comedy, many explicit symbols of male sexual anxiety are displayed through farcical situations. In one sequence, Pyöng-t'ae narrowly escapes from a room full of outraged men by turning on a fire extinguisher. The limp hose attached to the red can "ejaculates" its content of white fluid. A couple of scenes later, he falls into a small pond located in a zoo. Cold, wet, and naked, Pyöng-t'ae's primitive instincts are revived in this act of rebirth. It is here that he declares to Wang-ch'o that he will help Ch'un-ja find her way back home. (Ch'un-ja had been abducted from her hometown and sold into prostitution in the city.) Despite the fact that the three of them are hounded by a gang of muscular pimps equipped with sharp weapons, trendy motorcycles, and leather gear, the woman is returned to her mother. Upon the completion of their journey together, Ch'un-ja regains her voice, which was temporarily lost when she was traumatized in Seoul, and Pyöng-t'ae regains his virility.

This image of Pyöng-t'ae as a wandering college student during the 1970s and the 1980s is a popular icon of Korean subculture,³ one that encapsulates several key themes. First, his transformation from a pathetic, masochistic, and aimless youth to a responsible man who is destined and determined to acquire his adulthood is the linchpin that anchors the narrative movement of not only *Whale Hunting* but also the New Korean Cinema of the 1980s and 1990s. This book traces the trajectory of masculinity as it undergoes this radical transformation, and seeks to explain the socio-political dynamics that underscore such narrative maneuvering.

Second, the remasculinization of Pyöng-t'ae can only be defined by his relation to the woman and to historical trauma. The two characters who accompany Pyöng-t'ae on his trip to look for a "whale," the whore and the male vagabond, function as displacements for the "castrated" subject. The predicament of Pyöng-t'ae, a college student from a privileged background, pales beside that of Ch'un-ja, the wretched whore. The pairing of Pyöng-t'ae with a woman who is far more disenfranchised than he is helps to disavow his male anxiety.⁴ Pyöng-t'ae's relationship to the vagabond, who is euphemistically called *Wang-ch'o* (Captain), identifies a more profoundly complicated and ruptured sense of history than the relationship between Pyöng-t'ae and Ch'un-ja. Even though Wang-ch'o is a beggar who makes a living by panhandling for loose change in



An explicit scene of male sexual anxiety. *Whale Hunting* (1984).



Wang-ch'o (left) accompanies Pyong-t'ae and Ch'un-ja on their quest to find a "whale." *Whale Hunting* (1984).

the street, he dispenses an eccentric authority and mysterious wisdom to which Pyong-t'ae immediately submits. "Who exactly are you?" asks Ch'un-ja when she recovers her voice. Is Wang-ch'o a former student activist who lost his mind after being tortured by the police? Or is he just a restless youth who left his bourgeois home in disgust to search for the truth and salvation associated with a Buddhist way of life? The film does not answer these questions, but what is clear is that he is a camouflaged man who cannot easily reveal his past, a past that surely embodies a "trauma," which Slavoj Žižek defines as "an impossible kernel which resists symbolization, totalization, symbolic integration."⁵

The character of Wang-ch'o resists any specific symbolic representation that linguistically defines his trauma, and he becomes a repository of the historical Real or, to use the Freudian "sublime," an experience so intense that it cannot be properly enunciated. When asked by Ch'un-ja who he really is, Wang-ch'o first winces painfully and then bursts into a playful dance and sings a *p'umba*, a "beggar's song" that became popular during the 1980s. Wang-ch'o's secret identity rests within the repetitive "ölssigo . . . chölssigo" which he hums, a celebratory signifier that has no specific meaning. Ch'un-ja has found her home and her voice and Pyong-t'ae has found his whale, but the words that can decode the mysteries of Wang-ch'o and link his identity to a specific event or to history remain unspoken; he is left as a floating subject. Only by the decade's end will

his camouflage, madness, and “hidden kernel” be illuminated. This knowledge not coincidentally overlaps the arrival of the New Korean Cinema.

The third theme that the icon of Pyŏng-t’ae embodies is resistance to an absolute, collective identification to project a self that is defined by private and libidinal principles. When Ch’un-ja’s home is found, Pyŏng-t’ae has to return to the city alone, and this fact represents a new subjectivity that departs from Confucian ideals or rural identity. Pyŏng-t’ae’s character has a modern self-awareness that is bewildered by both the resistance against and the need for social integration. He desires to be a free individual while also trying to struggle against an urban sense of alienation.

The mission of “finding a home” is realized in the rural space where salient families and pastoral views putatively still exist. This helps to accentuate the city as a space of disfiguration where beauty exists only in the imagination. Urban alienation is the theme of many Korean films from the 1980s and the 1990s and sets up the psychic condition that depicts a typical crisis of a modern world where humans are severed from their natural environment. What is not so typical however is that the struggle for lucid interiorities and for the safe recovery of intelligible language from traumatic experiences is exercised in the exclusive domain of men’s fantasy. The symptom of dislocation is translated into a metaphor of the “whale” that stands in as an elusive phallus. This battling for an imaginary Whole on one hand underscores the phantasmal nature of modernity, but on the other lays the foundation for Korean cinema’s male anxiety. The spectral self-image of the male that perpetually suffers from the fantastic nightmare of deprivation, homelessness, and castration becomes something more desperately real in cinema than the reality itself.

A Bad Guy

The emasculation and alienation of male characters offered strong political, economic, and cultural implications for both the intense industrialization and the harsh rule of military dictators from the 1960s to the 1980s. Throughout the early 1980s, the films that featured the transformation of aimless and anxious men undergoing the process of maturity through violent, introspective searches were ubiquitous. Either physically handicapped or psychologically traumatized (sometimes both), many of the characters emblemized the period’s frustration when protest against the military government was disallowed. These men displayed rage, but they were only hapless victims who induced melodramatic viewer identifications. They commonly came from poor urban backgrounds, and they would leave for the countryside, the temples, and ultimately

the woman's womb. With significant strides toward political democratization and modernization came new themes that emerged out of the crisis and the loss such radical changes ushered. The quest for the self in this new period hinged upon a specifically gendered position, one that mobilized the question of subjectivity as it relates only to men. While the cinema embraced and yearned for a new historical agent, the negotiation of a post-authoritarian sensibility and value system was structurally rewoven through gendered relations that reinforced masculine subjects. This recuperation of male subjectivity was necessary in order for Korea to cope with its rapid shift into modern, industrial, urban, and global nationhood.

Several representative images drawn from the most well known films of the period illustrate this acute sense of masculine crisis. In *A Fine, Windy Day* (*Param purö choün nal*, Yi Chang-ho, dir., 1980), Kil-nam, a young man who works in a love motel, is swindled out of his money by a woman he loves. In frustration, he demonstrates his tae kwon do moves while a bulldozer digs a pit at a construction site in the background. His kicks and punches punctuate his rage, but they unthreateningly glide in the air without finding any specific target. Kil-nam's slender body pathetically simulates an act of protest against the dominant power structure that has stripped him of money and love, but his protest draws nothing but silence. This vision of desperate masculinity evinces ineffectiveness and frailty when juxtaposed against the industrial machinery and corrupt urban space. It anticipates other forms of escape or search to redeem the self. In *Mandala* (Im Kwon-Taek, dir., 1981), Pöb-un, a Buddhist monk, recites religious hymns while his devoted colleague Su-gwan burns his index finger to alleviate his psychological hardship. The practice of burning a part of the body to achieve spiritual sanctification brings out the fear in Pöb-un, who chose a monastic life to escape memories of a childhood fraught with oedipal anxiety and traumatized by sexual obsessions. Pöb-un's asylum from his mother, his college girlfriend, and the red-light district in Seoul does not ease his anxieties but instead affirms and aggravates his agony even more.⁶

The absence of the mother is sometimes as crucial to the son as is her presence. That mothers are cast to the periphery in many of these films is hardly surprising given that frenzied postwar urbanization had seriously altered familial relations to a point where "mothers," in their traditionally represented form, gradually disappeared from contemporary-milieu fictions. Yet this absence of the mother had hardly nullified her fascinating and spectral presence, which is structured around the male subject's unconscious desire to return safely to his place of origin. Even though the mothers are not ubiquitously present in *Whale Hunting* and *Mandala*, they are central to the narratives.



Pöb-un (right) chooses a monastic life to escape his oedipal anxiety. *Mandala* (1981).

In *Whale Hunting*, Ch'un-ja comes home to her mother while Pyöng-t'ae watches their reunion; at the end of *Mandala*, Pöb-un reunites with his mother. In the films made during this period often romantic desires and traumatic historical experiences are intertwined to evoke a vivid dream that drives ultimately toward the mother's womb, a part of the female body where both sex and birth are sublimely conjured. For instance, Park Kwang-su's second feature film, *Black Republic* (*Ködül to urich'öröm*, 1990), which centrally depicts Kim Ki-yöng, a blacklisted intellectual hiding in a mining town, unconsciously invokes the mother without physically representing her. In one crucial scene, after having been interrogated all night at the police station, he murmurs "ömöni" (mother) while his girlfriend, Yöng-suk, nurses him. "Ömöni" is not discussed elsewhere in the film, yet Ki-yöng's unconscious calling for his mother suggests that the film has relegated the role of the "mother" to Yöng-suk, a call girl. She is now both the "mother" and the lover for the dissident intellectual who is severed from his family because of his political troubles. Through the displacement of his anxieties onto Yöng-suk, Ki-yöng, who is disillusioned by the self-righteous dogma of the leftists, wishes to be reborn.

The conflation of the iconic whore and mother affirms and complements the masculine drive to disavow the need to sever the umbilical cord and com-

fortably seek asylum in the woman's womb. It is not coincidental that Yöng-suk is physically "contaminated" but has a "heart of gold," taking care of the man who is in danger.⁷ Since the transformation and recuperation of masculinity compose a crucial drive in the films consulted in this book, it is perplexing that the representation of women has made virtually no progress in them. The images of women remain prefixed on the rigid, bifurcated conventions of whores and mothers. Although the "whore" is figured in a sexualized body and the "mother" putatively stands radically apart from it in a desexualized form, their roles as nurturers of the male subject attest to their resemblance, as far as their contingencies to men are concerned. Because I recognize that any discussion of masculinity hinges only upon its relationship with femininity, in reading the films that best represent the South Korean cinema since 1980, I question how and why the representations of femininity remained strikingly unchanged while the representation of masculinity underwent various mutations and diversifications in configuring itself to mould a modern subjectivity.

The underrepresentation of women not only relegates them to marginal positions in cinema but also allows for the cinema to underscore themes that interest men. A misogynistic tendency against women constitutes perhaps the most visible and disturbing symptom of a cinema that has earned its reputation abroad as consisting primarily of "violent introspective melodramas."⁸ Perhaps nowhere are the violent melodramatic forms of narrative more prevalently featured than in the films directed by Kim Ki-dök. His films sparked controversies both in Korea and at international film festivals at the turn of the century.⁹ So explicit is the violence (vivid representations of blood, scalping, bruises, and mutilated body parts) and so dramatic are the characters (dialogue and acting deliberately depart from realism) that the male subjectivity constructed by Kim gravitates toward performativity and deviancy. His narrative structure usually involves a wretched man who becomes infatuated and eventually captivated by the very woman whom he kidnaps and sexually violates. It allegorizes the pathetic men that have long been a fixture of Korean cinema. Kim Ki-dök's characters suffer from lack. But unlike the male protagonists of Hong Sang-su — another contemporary filmmaker with equal distinction — their lack is from both familial and economical deprivation. While Hong Sang-su's male characters firmly pivot around an intellectual, middle-class background, Kim's characters often constitute the lowest possible social stratum of hoodlums, pimps, beggars, and petty thieves. The only assets they have are their muscular bodies, and in this way Kim Ki-dök's characters are distinguished from such wretched men as Pyöng-t'ae in *Whale Hunting*. Their corporeal mastery, however, does not translate into psychic fulfillment. Their

desperate efforts to “reintegrate” into the society that has already rejected them solicit pity, but also horror since the only viable option in their reacquisition of subjectivity is through women. In both *Crocodile* (*Ak-gŏ*, 1996) and *A Bad Guy* (*Nappŭn namja*, 2002), Kim Ki-dŏk uses the same narrative foregrounding: the women are kept captive by the male protagonist because he does not know any other way of loving the opposite sex.

Despite the fact that there are abject qualities in Kim Ki-dŏk films that lead the viewers to often pity the criminals, hoodlums, and other social outcasts, troubling issues linger. My contention rests not on the fact that his films consistently appeal for the abnegation of the men who have committed rape, or that Kim’s depictions of sexual violence are too graphic, but rather that *only* men are given performative roles in them. Women function as masochistic and passive objects predicated on the patented image of mother and whore. The male characters shuffle between virtue and irredeemability, between care and violence, and between reality and fantasy while often the women must remain immutable even in these “folktale-like” films. This pattern—so often conjured up in many of the films analyzed in this book—begs a question: Could a story ever be conceived in Korean cinema that focuses on a self-centered woman who is freed from her duties as a mother or a wife, without framing her in the convention of a vamp? Even the best of the Korean directors that are featured in this book—while busy pursuing the male-oriented drive to recuperate their insufficiencies—have never seriously considered vital questions appertaining to women.

Just as Hollywood has used the Vietnam War as a springboard for what Susan Jeffords describes as the “remasculinization of American culture,” South Korean cinema renegotiated its traumatic modern history in ways that reaffirm masculinity and the relations of dominance.¹⁰ The word “remasculinization” presumes a condition of threatened masculinity or emasculation. Men are, as Xueping Zhong writes in her study of masculinity in post-Mao literature, “besieged,” unable to overcome or transcend their anxieties and miseries.¹¹ While the notion of emasculation in Korea’s popular culture discourse intended to serve as a critique of masculinization ushered in by the postwar military regimes, the tremendous attention paid to emasculated masculine subjectivities did not forgo masculine themes and ideology. Instead, these popular narratives, like the one featuring Pyŏng-t’ae, invoked the need for masculine rejuvenation that ironically ended up affirming the hegemonic political agenda rather than resisting it. The depictions of emasculated and humiliated male subjects set the stage for their remasculinization, and occasioned a revival of images, cultural discourses, and popular fictions that fetishized and imagined dominant men



Agent Yu signals a departure from the traumatized male character of the 1980s. *Shiri* (1999).

and masculinity. And the longing for an ideal male hero became integrated in the production of a new symbol for Korea in the era of industrialized, modern, and global subject formation.

By the late 1990s, the typical representation of Korean men in cinema was no longer solely composed of self-loathing and pathetic male characters; images of well-proportioned bodies in sleek suits and professional jobs also began to appear with regularity and unprecedented force. No longer merely the targets of public embarrassment, many screen males emerged instead as objects of desire. One of the defining moments of masculine rejuvenation can be found in *Shiri* (Kang che-gyu, dir., 1999). The film focuses on Yu, a South Korean intelligence agent, who counterplots against North Korean agents—forces that conspire to nullify the reconciliatory mood between the two Koreas. Stylistically departing from the realist convention of the 1980s, the film also tosses together several formulaic genre codes: a stolen bomb, romantic betrayal, and conspiracy theories. The masculinity of *Shiri*'s protagonist veered away from the Korean male icons of the 1980s, but it did so by simulating Hollywood action heroes. Alert, expeditious, and physical, Agent Yu represented a popular cookie-cutter version of blockbuster-type masculinity, one that stretches fanfare and familiarity across national borders.¹² The recovery of masculinity from Pyŏng-t'ae's flaccidity is evinced through the heroic figuration of a government agent who must defend the security of the nation, and it offers nostalgic references to the local

viewers who had grown up watching anticommunist spy dramas on television in a nation that had not yet moved beyond the cold war era.

Even though *Shiri* demonstrated that the subject of masculine domination has again become fashionable in a once-traumatized nation, the following year's blockbuster, *JSA: Joint Security Area* (*Kongdong kyöngbi kuyök JSA*, Pak Ch'an-uk, dir., 2000), also reminded us that the continuing national crisis of military confrontation between the two Koreas hardly ferments a hegemonic cinematic masculinity completely beyond trauma. In *JSA*, Su-hyök, a private who is guarding the South Korean border of the DMZ, is disturbed by the fact that his crossing of the border at night to mingle with his North Korean counterpart has produced a bloody *melée*, leaving several men — including his friends — dead. This confirms that the war is not a thing of the past but remains the crux of the present crisis. Su-hyök's inability to tell the truth to his superiors puts him in a state of shock and schizophrenia. It reminds us of the dysfunctional characters that so haunted South Korean cinema throughout the 1980s and the early 1990s, best represented by a sentiment stammered by Tök-pae in *A Fine, Windy Day*: "it is best to remain mute even when you know how to speak." Unable to free himself from psychological guilt and the weight of history that punishes even the slightest gesture of reconciliation between the North and the South, Su-hyök takes his own life in the end. The friendship he had fostered with a North Korean soldier transgressed the nation's ban of personal contact with the enemy, a condition that usually prompts narratives of sentimental love and tragic denouements.¹³

These two images of manhood — one of Agent Yu, an exemplary depiction of a self-sufficient and attractive man, and the other of severely traumatized Su-hyök, whose life must be claimed at the end — project subjectivities that seem radically distant from each other. Yet they are both crucially bound to the hegemonic values of modern gendered self-awareness, borne of individualism, fantasy, and narcissism. Both are ambitiously articulate and project desires that carve out an identity that can better accommodate the newly shaped modern environment. The last two decades, the 1980s and the 1990s, bracket South Korea's transformation from an insular, authoritarian society to one that is more cosmopolitan, global and post-authoritarian. The dawning of a new modern era is normally punctuated by hope and optimism, but the weight of intense history and its attendant violence loomed so excessively large that it ended up traumatizing, marginalizing, and denaturalizing men. Wrecked and disordered was the male subjectivity after the Korean War, the subsequent division, and the continuing legacy of colonialism through military dictatorship; the metaphor of the "symbolic lack" was astutely installed as one of the primary

thematic impulses in the postwar cinemas. The male lack was located in every field imaginable: of the accoutrements of power in sexual potency, paternal authority, communal function, historical legitimacy, and professional worth. The South Korean films of this period sought to reorient the subject back on its track into the Lacanian Symbolic where language could be reacquired, the Name of the Father reissued, and the castration anxiety disavowed. The next section presents a few conceptual strands through which I intend to frame the male subject and its unnatural representations—both splendid and inauspicious—in recent films.

Death and the Modern

Odysseus is warned by Circe, that divinity of reversion to the animal, whom he resisted and who therefore gives him strength to resist other powers of disintegration. But the allurements of the Sirens remains superior; no one who hears their song can escape. Men had to do fearful things to themselves before the self, the identical, purposive, and *virile nature of man*, was formed, and something of that recurs in every childhood. [my emphasis] The strain of holding the I together adheres to the I in all stages; and the temptation to lose it has always been there with the blind determination to maintain it. The narcotic intoxication which permits the atonement of deathlike sleep for the euphoria in which the self is suspended, is one of the oldest social arrangements which mediate between self-preservation and self-destruction—an attempt of the self to survive itself.—Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno (1943)¹⁴

Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno invoked this famous passage from Homer's story to illustrate, first, that the impending danger of civilization, progress, and modernity could not be detached from the allurements of destruction, death, and fascism; and second, that the obedience of laborers (Odysseus's men) would cause them voluntarily to enslave their bodies and souls to allow their master to indulge in the Siren's songs. The competing temptation between death and pleasure is only compromised when the laborers plug wax in their ears while Odysseus is "bound impotently to the mast."¹⁵ The sexual innuendos raised by the "impotence" to which the "virile" man has bound himself are as equally lurid in the passage above as the references to fascism and the critique of capitalism. This psychic repression to which the man has voluntarily yielded is a perplexing, irresolvable paradox of the modern.

That there is a touch of Freud in the above passage is undeniable. The conflict between "self-preservation" and "self-destruction" that the self must me-

diate was also a matter of urgency and of tremendous importance in the work of Freud. To him, the death drive was as instinctual to humans as “life instincts” that are composed of self-preservative and sexual instincts. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud initially writes, “[The sexual instincts] are the true life instincts. They operate against the purpose of the other instincts, which leads, by reason of their function, to death.”¹⁶ But in what seems to be a swift movement away from the bifurcated system where the two instincts of self-preservation (life) and self-destruction (death) are knotted in fundamental opposition, Freud states later in the same essay that “the drawing of a sharp distinction between the ‘ego-instincts’ and the sexual instincts, and the view that the former exercises pressure towards death and the latter towards a prolongation of life” is “bound to be unsatisfactory in many respects even to ourselves.”¹⁷ The difficulty of separating the ego instinct (which he equated with death) from the sexual instinct (which he equated with life) is attributed to their critical link commonly bound to the libido that is surely sexual, while also “operat[ing] in the ego.”¹⁸ This ambivalence created by Freud (who himself was perplexed by “so many bewildering and obscure processes”¹⁹) drew the life and death instincts closely together rather than in a binary opposition. But also articulated in this framework are the critical workings of libido, repression, and the phallic lack that form the basis of the modern principles of desire—a formula that is rooted in the masculine universe.

It is interesting that the risk of pleasure even at the cost of death is strongly tied to the constitution of a modern subjectivity that acknowledges the miscues and frailties in mapping its autonomous terrain and that overcomes the historical burden that has troubled it. There are many scenes of violence in recent Korean films, but also equally ubiquitous are images of tormented men who end up destroying themselves. From blockbuster films like *JSA* and *Libera Me* (Yang Yun-mo, dir., 2000) to low-budget films directed by auteurs like Hong Sang-su and Kim Ki-dök (*The Day a Pig Fell into the Well* [*Tweji ga umul e ppajin nal*, 1996] and *Crocodile*), it is not uncommon to find endings where the protagonists commit suicide. The death drive is intricately tied to the lure—simultaneously libidinal and narcissistic—that seeks to both preserve life and edge closer to death. The compulsion toward death that is a recurrent motif in many films demonstrates that ontological finality is inseparable from the fallible masculinities imagined on screen. The death drive and the reconstitution of the elusive phallus posit an inevitable goal of many narrative movements in the films so far discussed.

Pyöng-t’ae also struggles against death at the end of *Whale Hunting*. During the climax, he is threatened at the edge of the cliff by three villains—the

pimps who have come to claim their eloped woman. The ambition to prove his worth as a man—the film claims—can only be actualized by an earnest sacrifice, one that must offer nothing short of his life. The film casts Pyöng-t'ae as a hero, not by having him outmuscling or outsmarting the villains to save her, but by pleading to them that he is prepared to sacrifice anything, including his life, to complete his mission. When Pyöng-t'ae disappears from the frame after being thrown off the cliff by the pimps, viewers are momentarily startled by the possibility of his death. But he soon reemerges from the edge of the cliff—without his glasses and scars on his face—in essence to proclaim the arrival of a new self. The villains are surprised. Showing a glimpse of humanity, they turn their backs and leave for Seoul . . . without the girl. Pyöng-t'ae emerges victorious; he has found his “whale,” a “phallic” metaphor in the film’s title that has been referred to as his elusive object. The reclamation of the phallus—to follow Lacan—is desired only in an imagined form because of the very impossibility of attaining it. The choice of the film to end with the reclamation of Pyöng-t'ae’s manhood is then only a male fantasy that seeks to suture the viewers to fetishistic and misogynistic conventions typical in a Hollywood film. But this salvation is only momentary and incomplete, as the film will conclude by placing Pyöng-t'ae back on the road with Wang-ch'o while singing the beggar’s song, p'umba.

The modern subjectivity conceived in the Korean films of the 1980s and the 1990s is both gendered and endangered. Ubiquitously present in many of the characters in the film is a wound, an ineradicable scar that atrophies the screen subjects and activates an *objet petit a*, the “Other” in the Lacanian graph of retroactivity and the slippery object of desire that is centrally figured in the question, “What is ‘it’ that the other wants of me?”²⁰ So scarred is the castrated subject that the male lack in Korean films is almost a normative function of masculinity. Struggling to accommodate Korea’s rapidly changing social and personal relations, men often find themselves to be incompatible with individualism and its values that define the new world. The male subject’s pursuit of the mastery of his world (his family, home, work, etc.) and knowledge is repeated ceaselessly, and with it the phallus emerges as a signifier of both desire and destruction, precisely because it is a fetishistic object that lures the castrated male subject as the “it.” In all of the films directed by Hong Sang-su, *The Day a Pig Fell into the Well*, *The Power of Kangwon Province (Kangwon do öi him, 1998)*, and *Virgin Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors (O, Sujöng, 2000)*, the elusive object of the “it,” for which many of his characters are searching, at least on the surface, self-explanatorily articulates itself. “It” functions primarily in the sexual realm, which triggers aromatic pursuit. Suffocating underneath the tightly-sealed so-

cial system still dictated by Confucian decorum, the “it” becomes intransigently a symbol of obsession and frustration. Even when sexual unions do materialize through adulterous affairs in dingy, cramped motel rooms, psychic wounds are not healed, but expose further pain. The desire for intimacy and romance in Hong’s films is denaturalized, as phrases such as “I would like love you,” exchanged between a call girl and a married man on a business trip, enters “a system of exchange: an economy of intimacy governed . . . by scarcity, threat, and internalized prohibition.”²¹ The artificiality of the love motels, where the glow of neon lights seeps inside, unfortunately elicits a moral dilemma that intensifies guilt and repression rather than spiritually liberates men. Ultimately, the “it” that manifests the lack of the subject cannot be satiated nor eliminated.

Fictionalizing History in the Era of Military Rule

For a nation that underwent several historical traumas during the twentieth century, emasculation was a normal rather than aberrant condition. Korea was violently ravaged and virtually annihilated during the first half of the twentieth century. It was colonized by Japan from 1910 to 1945, and the subsequent civil war, lasting from 1950 to 1953, totally destroyed any sign of industry, pride, and humanity. What was even more devastating than the direct impact of the war was the denial of a peace process between the two Koreas after the war. The cold war replaced the hot war during the remaining half of the century when both North and South Korea claimed victory. There was thus no chance to come to terms with psychic wounds or war traumas. The rivalry between the two Koreas also necessitated rebuilding an efficient economy that could hurry along postwar industrialization under tightly disciplined political and ideological structures. Regarded as a bulwark against communism by the United States, South Korea was a valuable American ally in the northeast Asian region for its strategic cold war purposes throughout the remainder of the half-century. Under the auspices of the United States, Korea quickly became a model of economic success for developing nations that could not afford to “sentimentalize” its war wounds and simply redirected its painful past into vehement expression of anticommunism and spectacular war heroism. The traumas promulgated by the colonial experience, a destructive war, and repressive military rule explicitly compelled a sense of anguish and misery that demanded attention, but the prerogative given to the rejuvenation of a masculine identity under the era of President Park Chung Hee (1961–79) deterred it from becoming a pivotal element in the dominant fictions of the day.

Any successful fascist regime seeks to blur the boundary between society’s

reality and the “dominant fiction”: the stories of the nation’s birth and the heroic accounts of mythological figures burdened with a historical base as if they are no longer mythological. Taking her cues from Jacques Rancière, Louis Althusser, and Ernesto Laclau, Kaja Silverman considers the term “dominant fiction” a “popular-democratic interpellation” that “represents primarily a category for theorizing hegemony.”²² The consensus critical for amassing this hegemony was of course mobilized from images and stories that recounted history from a specific ideological perspective.

Invoking Confucianism and the renewal of masculine nationalism as two founding principles of war-ridden Korea, Park Chung Hee urged the authoring of an “androcentric,” militaristic view of history that was transposed to cinema.²³ During the 1970s, strong male agencies began forcefully to appear in Korean cinema. Yi Sun-shin, a wartime hero during Hideyoshi Toyotomi’s invasion of Korea (1592–99), was widely disseminated as a cultural model of Korea’s nation-narration process.²⁴ As the leader of the naval fleet that had at its disposal the world’s first armor-clad warships called *Kōbukuōn* (Turtle Ships), the maritime admiral Yi was the sacrificial hero who best represented Korea when it sought to reorganize its economy from a spectacular light industry of textile to a heavy industry of steel, shipbuilding, and automobiles. His dramatic death pictured in the middle of a battle was widely disseminated as an official image that best suited the imagination of self-effacing, fascinating, and sacrificial nationhood and masculinity.

Yi Sun-shin was one of the onscreen agencies in the 1970s, a period when the Golden Age of Korean Cinema of the 1960s was woefully dismantled.²⁵ His iconicity was cinematically reproduced to appease the government, which offered a lucrative license to distribute foreign films only to the companies that made what were certified as “quality films” (*usu yōnghwa*).²⁶ *Yi Sun-shin the Hero* (*Sōngung Yi Sun-shin*, Yi Kyu-ung, dir.) was made in 1971 as a costly venture. Even though this first release was only moderately successful even after a massive public campaign to encourage people to see it, Yi Sun-shin was depicted again in *The Diary of the Korean-Japanese War* (*Nanjung Ilgi*, Chang Il-ho, dir., 1977), another expensive epic.²⁷ As more narratives of nation-saving heroes and their sacrifices dominated screens, people were less inclined to visit movie theaters, extinguishing the postwar fervor for cinema that spurred the Golden Age.²⁸ There was one crucial reason for the failure of Yi Sun-shin to generate more popular success for ushering an effective “dominant fiction.” Even though Yi Sun-shin projected a version of masculinity that vied to sever the tradition of emasculated males that conditioned the popular projections of Korean screen masculinity,²⁹ it was an icon that offered a good view of total and self-sacrificing

belief, not one of modern sensibilities and dilemmas that celebrate nuclear family values and pit social mores against private desires—a key to most film industries’ success in the postwar era. The public would have to wait two more decades before a salient manhood could eschew collective imagination and renew the irresistible, combustible, libidinal energy eliminated after the Golden Age. Only after the name of the father was sufficiently processed in a cycle of desecration, disavowal, and re-inscription, I will argue, would the conveyance of a new male subjectivity—persuasive and affable—become possible.

The 1980s was the decade of post-trauma—one that anxiously awaited the replacement of a father-figure of South Korea and the implementation of a social structure alternative to capitalist relations, both of which would not materialize.³⁰ Two events spurred the crisis that momentarily blacked out public conscience before reawakening it at the end of the decade. First, on October 26, 1979, Park Chung Hee was shot to death after almost twenty years of tyrannical rule.³¹ Tightly controlling freedom of expression, labor wages, and market laws, he had been responsible for laying the economic foundation of the so-called “Miracle of the River Han.” (The economic infrastructure dependent on the system of *chaebols* [conglomerates], however, eventually produced Korea’s bankruptcy in 1997.) So sudden and unexpected was Park’s assassination by his right-hand man that the news shocked the nation.³² Park Chung Hee’s legacy has been so strong that he still influences Korean politics even in the twenty-first century, two decades after his death.

The second event to put the nation into an even deeper crisis was a massacre that took place in Kwangju,³³ the regional capital of Chōlla Province in the southwest, only a few months after Park’s death, and startled the nation even more. Representing the region of neglect and underdevelopment for many decades, the city of Kwangju in May 1980 staged an uprising and demanded the removal of Chun Doo Hwan, a general who rose to power in a silent coup. In an effort to restore order, Chun, who would soon declare himself president later that year, ordered the deployment of special forces to Kwangju. Those forces reportedly “bayoneted students, flayed women’s breasts, and used flamethrowers on demonstrators” in urban streets.³⁴ These acts of unspeakable atrocity that claimed the lives of more than two thousand civilians—more violent than the ones remembered when the people’s liberation army from North Korea briefly controlled the city during the Korean War—had a lasting impact because they were immediately silenced. Kwangju did not receive as much attention from the international media—unlike the “global” response to China’s Tiananmen—because the United States chose to acquiesce and condone the atrocities in Kwangju even though Americans had far more influence on South Korean mili-

tary matters than the South Koreans themselves. Because of the biased local report announcing the massacre as the roundup of “North Korean spies and leftist infiltrators,” as well as the period of terror that continued well after Kwangju (through the silencing and sentencing to death of political leaders, including Kim Dae Jung), the massacre did not immediately summon national rage and grief. But it would continue to serve as Korea’s Tiananmen, which for the next two decades became a specter that haunted South Korean politics. The events at Kwangju eventually led to a popular movement for democracy in the latter part of the decade. Ultimately, the two generals (also the two former presidents) responsible for the crime, Chun Doo Hwan and Roh Tae Woo, were found guilty by the court in 1996.

Kwangju split the already partitioned nation in half. The loss of Park Chung Hee loomed large especially in his home province of Kyöngsang in the southeast, which had reaped the most benefit from his tenure. And the thousands who were killed in Kwangju by the soldiers deployed by Chun Doo Hwan (who like Park was also from the Kyöngsang Province) left an indelible scar in the psyche of Chölla, Korea’s southwest. In all of the elections held since then, the vote is split along regional background more than along gender, class, or education.³⁵

The 1980s was an anomalous decade that accommodated both leftist insurgency and consumerist excess. Two so-called “Springs of Democracy” took place, one in 1980 and another in 1987, which flowered the streets with an intense yearning for democracy. The authoritarian center was temporarily weakened before its hegemony was restored through political compromises and the inability of the dissident politicians to agree on a united front. It was a period of political inquietude when millions of people marched in the streets protesting the military rule and the complicit role of the United States in sustaining dictatorships in South Korea. It was also complicated by the fact that economic prosperity enabled millions to found their middle-class identities in the boulevards, shopping malls, and high-rise apartment buildings that mushroomed throughout Seoul.³⁶ The value placed on thrift savings and frugality to foster an export-oriented economic structure during the Park era was thrown out in dramatic fashion, replaced with a consumerist culture of high spending that boosted the domestic economy by the late 1980s.³⁷ By then, the state had learned the secret recipes of Western-style capitalism, which was built on the fostering of middle-class identity and consumption. With over forty million people (about half of the population concentrated in cosmopolitan areas) and the per capita annual income reaching U.S.\$5,000 during the 1980s, South Korean domestic markets attracted the interests of foreign companies. The shift of the so-

cial values (developments of suburbia, consumer spending, system of personal credit and loans) and the expansion of the middle class were the key ingredients in fertilizing the major industries of electronics and automobiles during the 1980s that no longer simply relied on exports.³⁸ Laura C. Nelson writes, “Following the Olympics [in 1988], local markets offered a greatly increased supply of imported consumer goods. These imports entered into the material and imaginative lives of people in Seoul.”³⁹ Chun differed from his predecessor, Park, at least on one account by recognizing the importance of leisure and consumer spending as the crucial engine of capitalism and the comfort pill for the masses to temporarily forget the dispossession of their voting rights.⁴⁰ Complementing the time of radical change, a new consumerist culture was made available through special rates for loans on cars, electronic goods, and furniture and in new retail stores, credit cards, and homes, which were in previous decades denied to the middle class. An attempt to curtail and condemn public excesses and foreign imports also appeared.

Peppermint Candy

If the cinema in the 1970s vied to inscribe an unimpaired masculine icon, one that forged a “dominant fiction” out of collective historical memory, the cinema that was touted in the Western film festival circuits during the late 1980s and the 1990s as the New Korean Cinema attained its status, I argue, by demythologizing the name of the national father for the sake of issuing a new modern masculinity. Initially figuring characters who remained candidly fallible and inept without effecting any specific allegiance to the historical traumas throughout the early part of the 1980s, masculinities were shored up to directly confront the male lack and its historical origin by the decade’s end. Canvassing a wide range of classes from the alienated intellectual son from a bourgeois family to the traumatized hoodlum wandering in the dilapidated section of the city, the cinematic subjects of the modern era that were rushed onto film were gendered, with the aim of rewriting history from the perspective of the male individual. The films of Park Kwang-su and Jang Sun-woo, who began their careers toward the end of the 1980s, distinguished themselves from the unremarkable cinema of “quota quickies” and “quality films” of the 1970s and the 1980s, as did the works of Im Kwon-Taek that throughout the decade represented Korean cinema in overseas festivals.⁴¹ Park and Jang decoded and interrupted what the official history constituted as the master narrative by engaging public traumas in the private domains. No longer were screen subjects willing to sacrifice their lives for the nation. The New Korean Cinema’s contestation was waged not

only against the official historiography of South Korea that consistently invoked nationalist agencies but also against the new *minjung* (people's) history that claimed to be the "collective will of the people" while countering the government's version.⁴² The films of the New Korean Cinema, which later constituted the films directed by Yi Ch'ang-dong and Hong Sang-su, further invoked pains and injuries that extended far beyond their individual psyche, while standing at odds with what Ernesto Laclau calls a "will to 'totality.'" ⁴³ Instead of offering closure to historical questions, the New Korean Cinema opted for an indeterminate open-endedness; rather than firmly shoring up a historical subjectivity, the films denied easy accessibility to its coherence and salience. These films claimed that the truth was more difficult to expose because of its discursive and subjective condition. In other words, these new Korean films, while allegorizing history, denied the rendering of the immanent subjectivity that is predestined in an absolute hold of, what Fredric Jameson termed, the "Necessity," something that explains "what happened had to happen the way it did."⁴⁴

There were two strands of masculinities that stood out in the New Korean Cinema. The new men were in crises, first in forms of angry young men and second, more specifically, as intellectual writers. The images of angry young men persisted throughout the last two decades of the twentieth-century: a male protagonist working as a barber's assistant slashes to death a loan shark who has been having a secret affair with the woman he loves in *A Fine, Windy Day*; two billboard painters climb to the rooftop of a high-rise building in Seoul to privately demonstrate their pent-up frustrations in *Chilsu and Mansu* (*Ch'il-su wa Man-su*, Park Kwang-su, dir., 1988); a college student leaves Seoul when two of his best friends kill themselves in a protest against, respectively, the anti-democratic government and Confucian family values in *The Portrait of Youth* (*Chölmün nal üi ch'ösang*, Kwak Chi-kyun, dir., 1991); a soldier accidentally shoots and kills a child in Kwangju only to suffer a life-long debacle that eventually leads to his suicide in *Peppermint Candy* (*Pakha sat'ang*, Yi Ch'ang-dong, dir., 1999). These images of despair widely proliferated even as the struggle for democracy intensified during the late 1980s and the early 1990s, and they continued to linger in the latter decade because of the incessant national crisis caused by political uncertainty and economic decline. These epigraphs and the increasing images of angry men and their violence replaced the Korean cinema's tendency to create masochistic and self-loathing characters. Youth violence — sometimes explicit and disturbing — was surely redemptive and cathartic like those pictured in other emergent national cinemas of the West and Japan during the post-World War II era, and the compulsion toward inwardness and self-destruction tendered and imagined a pure form of male subjectivity.

After a period of crisis, that many representative images of the New Korean Cinema picture writers who are anxious over their work should perhaps come as no surprise. As Michel Foucault writes, “[w]riting . . . automatically dictates that we place ourselves in the virtual space of self-representation and reduplication.”⁴⁵ The birth of a new self was sought through the claim to language that is integral to writing and representation.

Chŏng Chi-yŏng’s *White Badge* (*Hayan chŏnjaeng*, 1990), Jang Sun-woo’s *To You, from Me* (*Nŏ ege narŭl ponenda*, 1994), Park Kwang-su’s *A Single Spark* (*Arŭmdaun ch’ŏngnyŏn Chŏn T’ae-il*, 1996), and Hong Sang-su’s *The Day a Pig Fell into the Well* all pivot their narratives around a male writer who in his thirties is undergoing personal crisis, something that is stalling his writing. Han Ki-ju in *White Badge* is a novelist recounting his personal experiences in Vietnam as a Korean mercenary soldier. A couple of months have passed since the death of Park Chung Hee, and he enjoys an unprecedented — albeit brief — freedom in artistic creativity. But his only surviving comrade from the war, Private Pyŏn, appears in his life for the first time since the war and startles him by showing signs of insanity and suicidal tendencies. This — compounded by the fact that his wife has left him — makes his remembrance and narration of the war difficult, if not impossible. In a drama that situates his writer’s block as the primary thematic anxiety that needs disentanglement for both narratives’ successful resolutions (the novel in the film and the film itself), equally crucial is Han’s recovery from sexual impotence that has already cost him a wife.

In *To You, from Me*, the writer also suffers from penile impotence — just when his friend who works as a bank clerk recovers from his own medical impotence — in the middle of the film when he is exposed and humiliated by his girlfriend to be a porn writer in disguise. Unlike Han in *White Badge*, who recovers his writing ability as well as his manhood through a violent ending when he abets the suicide of Private Pyŏn, the writer in Jang Sun-woo’s film is never able to liberate himself from his writing block, something that torments him when he pledges to return to the serious writing of novels. In an unconventional move that has patented Jang’s work in the last decade, *To You, from Me* disallows the male subject to recuperate from his phallic loss or opt for self-destruction after lamenting his fallibility. He will simply accept — happily — his new role as the assistant/chauffeur of his girlfriend who has become a media star.

The two writers in *A Single Spark* and *The Day a Pig Fell into the Well* (hereafter written as *The Day*) do not suffer from penile dysfunction, but their writings are equally complicated by women in their lives. In *A Single Spark*, Kim Yŏng-su, an underground intellectual who is determined to author a biography of a labor union martyr five years after his self-immolation, is living with

his girlfriend. As a worker in a small factory that has no union representation, she tries to organize a union despite the company's violent and treacherous effort to disband it. She is in a perilous situation moreover because she is pregnant with Kim's child, heaping more pressure on him and his work. *The Day* also depicts the banal everyday life of a writer, Kim Hyo-söp; his loitering in cafés and restaurants, waiting for his paycheck at the publisher's, and drinking at an evening dinner party are meticulously depicted. His debacle and eventual death are precipitated by his love affairs. He is in love with a married woman who cannot easily leave her husband. Because he is not able to fulfill his desire all the time, Hyo-söp keeps a girlfriend, someone lesser than him in social stature, who holds true admiration of him. Rather than spending his day writing, he oscillates between the two women, living in anxieties generated by the male lack and the libidinal economy that is asynchronous with his solemn reality.

The authorial subjectivity and consciousness in the fictional films mentioned above are only secured through either the remembrance of traumatic history (*White Badge* and *A Single Spark*) or the acknowledgment of its impossibility of remembering (*To You, from Me* and *The Day*). In both instances, however, unconsciously raised is the profundity of sexual matter that privatizes the trauma in the phallic function. The impregnation of the woman, the inability of the penis to erect, the illicit adultery, the exposure of the novelist as a soft-porn writer, all point to the male phallus as the elusive yet critical origin where wounds of the day are articulated.

The desire for psychic wholeness and the putative recovery from the male lack continue to be asserted throughout the two decades, perhaps best appropriated in the film that drew the curtain on the period: *Peppermint Candy*. Covering the two decades focused upon in this book, *Peppermint Candy* addresses the male lack and delineates its historical roots. In it, the polyvalence against the linear time is made possible by structuring the film's narrative movement in reverse order, beginning with a prologue in spring 1999 and ending with a segment that takes place twenty years earlier at the same place where the film began. The time progresses backward without the use of flashback, arranging the seven segments to travel in reverse after the prologue, from 1999, 1994, 1987, 1984, 1980, and to 1979.⁴⁶

If "the libidinal investment of patriarchal capitalism," according to Helene Moglen, can be exposed through the "link between materialism and desire,"⁴⁷ there is one more theme that *Peppermint Candy* tries to link to the strains in Korea's postwar industrialization and patriarchy: the *historical trauma* as the origin and also the culprit for its dubious failure. Unveiled is the origin of trauma that was previously concealed in a film like *Whale Hunting*. *Peppermint*



Yǒng-ho (left) joins the police force, which routinely tortures labor activists during the 1980s. *Peppermint Candy* (1999).

Candy reveals that Yǒng-ho's troubles began in May 1980 when he, as a conscripted soldier, was sent to Kwangju to quell the uprising. He was wounded, and while injured he had accidentally shot and killed a local girl. Before his involvement in Kwangju in his early twenties, the film has already chronicled his downward spiral where he had taken part in crisis after crisis. If one takes the narrative in linear time, not in its filmic rearrangement, Yǒng-ho accepts a job in the police force after Kwangju and takes an active role in cracking down on labor and student movements during the 1980s. Just around the time when a civilian president is inaugurated in Korea in 1993 for the first time in thirty years, he quits the force and becomes an owner of a small business. It is here that he gets involved in an adulterous affair with his young staff. After a brief financial success, Yǒng-ho, like the Korean economy that suffered bankruptcy, falls on hard times. In 1999, the year the film begins, his wife, whom he had consistently neglected and brutally beaten, is no longer with him, and he lives isolated in a flimsy shack. He ultimately commits suicide.

There are many metaphors for nostalgic references and masculine anxiety that the film literally renders: a bullet wound in the leg during the Kwangju massacre suffered by the protagonist (like the toothache of Ch'ól-ho in *The Stray Bullet*, a 1960 classic) returns as a physical limp at later moments of crisis and

punctuates his irredeemable phallic lack; the peppermint candy, symbolizing the sweet love and pure emotions of youth, is first cherished by Yǒng-ho and later rejected when offered by his mistress from work fifteen years later; Yǒng-ho's first torture victim defecates on him and stinks his hands with an odor that won't easily go away, his romanticism forever lost; and finally a view of the railroad tracks from a moving train is framed in every interlude between segments (the sound of the train whistle is also heard in almost every segment) and signals the omnipresence of modernity and its impending killing of Yǒng-ho.

In a film that mobilizes each and every thematic impulse through metaphors, there is perhaps no better symbol that best illustrates Yi Ch'ang-dong's obsession with the trauma and its impossibility of representation than a still camera. Immediately before Yǒng-ho commits suicide, he is summoned by a man who leads him to a hospital. The man had been asked by his dying wife, Sun-im, to find Yǒng-ho with whom she had once fell in love. Yǒng-ho and Sun-im had not seen each other for fifteen years, and when he visits her, she has already become unconscious—her life sustained by a respirator. He leaves her bedside with a camera, a gift for him that she kept for over a decade. Yǒng-ho had once told Sun-im that his dream was to photograph nature including “nameless wildflowers.” However, the camera is now useless to Yǒng-ho and he exchanges it at a camera store for petty cash.

The pawned camera symbolizes not only the permanent loss of Yǒng-ho's youth even in the form of a nostalgic photograph, but also his male insufficiency. The failure of Yǒng-ho to photograph “nameless wildflowers” that he so wanted as a young innocent worker recapitulates a motif that is familiar in the films of the 1990s. His inability to photograph beauty after becoming irredeemably corrupt and violent reminds us of *White Badge's* novelist who cannot continue his novel until Private Pyön, a victim of trauma after witnessing a civilian massacre in Vietnam by his Korean comrades, is killed. It is not only the beauty of the world the camera could capture that frightens Yǒng-ho, but also the camera's power of representation that he cannot accept; they impede his growth as a coherent subject. Intimately tied to the process of representation is the discourse of the “other”ing of an object that can help to constitute the self. After suffering from trauma associated with a wounded leg and accidentally shooting an innocent civilian (permanently injuring both the body and the psyche), he is incapable of entering the realm of the Symbolic through representational-linguistic faculties. To be in control of a camera, an instrument that captures and reproduces something desired, means becoming a subject through the very praxis of mimetic objectification. The very thought of image reproduction, however, is categorically unappealing and resisted by the



Rather than facing humiliation, Yǒng-ho decides to die on the railroad tracks. *Peppermint Candy* (1999).

impaired Yǒng-ho, who is increasingly becoming afraid of his own “ugly” reflection and his putative phallic lack projected in the mirror. I argue in this book, though *Whale Hunting* (1984) and *Peppermint Candy* (1999) represent two different periods of Korean film history (one before the new cinema movement and the other afterward) and two different styles of filmmaking (one commercial and the other art) the characters, Pyǒng-t’ae and Yǒng-ho, are almost identical in their astute refusal to confront and reconcile their mirrored selves, at the expense of even preferring death.

The projection of melancholia, which laments and fetishizes the lost object that is stained with impurity, insists that there once was a hope for the pure, the good, and the beautiful to sublimely emerge in a subject. The nostalgic evocation of Yǒng-ho’s romanticized youth before he is enlisted by the army does not ambivalently obfuscate the boundaries between good and evil, between real and fiction, but instead affirms them. What can then be problematized is not just the fact that the violence and the impurity, which is clearly demarcated from the good and the beautiful, can be abominated, but also that, by so doing, the hope that the pure, splendid form of beauty lying somehow, somewhere, is rekindled. This hope treads dangerously toward an essentialist position that is even more abhorrent than the idea that “life can be ugly.” The film literally asks through Yǒng-ho several times whether or not a “life can be beautiful.”

Beneath this lamentation and melancholia lies the blame on the “ugliness” of life that has robbed him of his youth and his romantic ideals, but also a consideration that the phallic lack, the castrated condition that Yǒng-ho has been bound to, is only putatively real. The fall of Yǒng-ho is surely exacerbated by the historical catastrophes, such as Kwangju, the military dictatorship, and the so-called “I.M.F.-crisis” of 1997, but the culprit is also his perceived sense of the lack that is persistently threatening unless its fictiveness is unveiled. Life may not be beautiful, and the belief that a beautiful and splendid subjectivity—free from trauma—can be recuperated is only capable of projecting and lamenting beauty and its loss rather than intimately embracing it.

Even though *Peppermint Candy* re-authors the traumas to mourn the pain that ran askew to the one officially sanctioned by the state,⁴⁸ it hardly ferments a vision of postnational imaginary or a nonmasculine universe. What is absent still in a film made almost twenty years after *Whale Hunting* is a female plot, never mind a feminist one. The foreclosure of female agency prematurely ratifies after all that the film’s female roles are again relegated to the familiar, contingent, and overlapped inscriptions of mothers and whores. The sense of melancholia that sentimentalizes the loss and heals the pain renders a determined purpose to embrace the lack—not in the feminist sense of the “abject”—but to offer a masculine lamentation of its castration anxiety. The death then prompted at the end of the narrative by Yǒng-ho, a brutal soldier in Kwangju, a violent secret agent, and an adulterous husband, who hustles from one crisis to another and loops himself in a chain of crisis, converts the psychic loss and unspeakable horror into a sense of renewal. But this renewal is possible, the film claims, only through self-destruction. The suicide of Yǒng-ho, where he stands on the railroad track to meet the oncoming train at full speed and yells, “I want to go back!” is haunting. This is an image that is as compelling and desperate as the image that began this chapter and featured the naked Pyǒng-t’ae standing ignominiously onstage, but it is also equally contrived and problematic because *Peppermint Candy* reveals the narcissistic and obsessive tendencies of the male that laments only his loss and failure though the man has enjoyed a privileged representation so far. Turning back the clock is only possible in the fantastic realm of the movies, where *Peppermint Candy* ends with the young Yǒng-ho holding a flower in his hand and wondering about the origin of his “déjà-vu” at the river by the railroad track, the very spot where he will die twenty years later. But the Korean cinema’s misogynistic hope of recovering a wholesome maleness and purity from a fantasy, as if it can be transposed to be absolutely real, is, in the final analysis, impossible.