Korea as Interpretation: Negotiating the Gap Between Nation and Self

The appeal of the national idea relies on a paradigm of time moving forward towards the realization of that idea. Thinking the nation, as Benedict Anderson phrases it, is inherently progressive and inextricably tied to an investment in forward, linear motion. Progress insofar as it is bound to nationalist thought promises a lost wholeness—the wholeness of the nation—capable of delivering the national subject from its personal tragedies. The nation writes its official history but if nationalism is an investment in history, then it is a history that has neither a beginning nor an end. National identity is inextricable from the linearity of time where that linearity bears the progress of movement, but at the same time national identity refuses origins. There is at once an adherence to time and an apprehension towards it. Time to the extent that it implies a beginning undermines the sacred quality of the nation and marks it as construction. Forward moving time lays the basis from which the nation is able to emerge.

The shared structure of history forms the link between the nation and film. Film, as a medium born in the age of nationalism, explicates the destiny of individual or individuals and reinforces the movement of national history as it sweeps across individual histories in simultaneity. In this sense, national idea shares in the temporal mode of the film. The story of an individual tells the story of the nation to which the individual belongs. In line with Andrew Higson's examination of the implications of using the term national in discourse with cinema, the film is "invariably a hegemonizing, mythologizing process, involving both the production and assignation of a particular set of meanings," that naturally lends itself to the process of nationalist identification.[1] But if the nation is written as a history then the nation in the present is

[1] Higson, Andrew. "The Concept of National Cinema." *Screen* 30.4, 1989, 36.

but an illusory construction. There is no nation in the present; there is only myth.[2] The individual members with whom films are concerned lack collective identity insofar as there is no preexisting force that unites them. Instead, the national cause that nationalism generally identifies is ultimately nothing but the way that members of a community organize their enjoyment through national myths. This is precisely why nationalism fixates on the future. It must necessarily look forward in order to create any semblance of stability because its identity in the present is unfulfilled and remarkably uncertain.

Lee Chang-dong's reverse-chronologically narrated *Peppermint Candy* experiments with the temporality of cinema and severs its most direct link with nationalism, leaving behind only a set of contingencies. The reverse chronology of the film as a whole transforms cinematic experience into a confrontation with repeated personal traumas rather than a submission to a progressive movement towards wholeness. Film exposes the instability of the nation in the present, but to state its mission as anti-nationalist also misses the point. The nation as a neatly imposed ideology does not exist and has never existed, but is constantly being created in the individual's negotiation with the promise of national wholeness. The nation is not the juxtaposition of the collective ideal against the individual but rather what is created between these two pulls.

Disrupting the national idea is not, to no surprise, as easy as turning away from a traditional forward-moving narrative. In fact, a narrative in reverse is in some sense the most resonant way of writing the nation. Lee's project, however, uses reverse chronology to a different end. Rather than conferring a teleology that produces the present, *Peppermint Candy*'s backwards movement exposes those contingencies that destabilize the nation as a foundation for

[2] Ibid. 37

identity. In each of the film's seven vignettes, Yong-ho experiences some personal trauma that shares an intersection with some collective trauma simultaneously experienced by developing Korea. *Peppermint Candy* makes clear not only that there is no progress but that the ideal of progress renders these traumas unbearable rather than relieving their burden on the subject. The nation as progress promises to deliver the individual from trauma by restoring a lost wholeness with one of the national variety and making it possible to overcome traumatic loss. But the nation constantly defers the realization of this promise and thereby leaves the individual to contend with its experiences as neither a wholly national subject nor a fully autonomous self.

The title of Lee's film gives some idea of what is at stake and refused in Yong-ho's investment in national identity. National identity, as the film frames it, arises through its flight from and rejection of a lost individualism—in this case contained as objects[3]. Peppermint candy being one such embodiment of what is lost or abandoned, participates directly in Yong-ho's exchange for the prospect of a national identity when his superiors trample over his secret tin of candies gifted by Sun-im. In an earlier, chronologically later scene, Yong-ho refuses the camera that Sun-im offers to him as a present and as perhaps a romantic gesture. The value of the camera as a signifier of a passion both associated with and predating Sun-im stages the implications of this rejected exchange. Yong-ho emerges as a national subject through running away from and allowing others to kick a tin of peppermint candy and reaffirms his subject status by again adhering himself to the idea of the nation as an alternative to the promises of the past captured by the camera. The gifted camera, while analogous to peppermint candy in its embodiment of a loss, is in some sense even more hostile to the national idea. The moment captured by the camera, preserved as image, undermines and rejects the forward-moving time conferred by the national.

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[3] Kim, Soyoung. "Do Not Include Me in Your 'Us': Peppermint Candy and the Politics of Difference", *Korea Journal 46.1*, 2006, 65.

The image captured by the camera does not exist in forward-moving time but instead marks a different temporal modality altogether that prioritizes what is lost rather than what is to be gained. The national subject emerges through the act of detaching itself from an object that subsequently comes to orient the subject's desire insofar that it is lost. The national idea attempts to overcome and deny this subjectivity and thus deny the validity of anything but forward-moving time. But when forward-movement is subverted, the parts left behind reveal the contingency of nationalism's narrative and national history.

The reversal of time and the troubling of progress in *Peppermint Candy* forces recognition and experience of the contingency of the narrative and question its overdetermined, repetitious elements. If repetition in a forward, linear narrative suggests to us that an end is inevitable, then reverse chronology destabilizes that relationship. At every moment of the present, Lee Chang-dong questions the notion of nation as an entity that *evolves* through history when instead it may be more appropriate to conceive of the nation as an entity retroactively defined not by historical progression but by a process of remembering and forgetting in the present moment. The narrative simultaneously rejects the nation as a forward-moving, historical entity while conceiving of it as only the illusion of such. That is, whereas history marks the present and the past as episodes serving a teleology, the mechanisms of nationhood as conceived by the film instead suggests that the present remains caught up in the past as we continue to selective remember and forget traces of history. But to challenge self-inscribed and overdetermined history of the nation requires evidence of some mnemic traces of a traumatic past obscured by the official histories of the nation, and we have these intimations about the contingency and selectiveness of the past's work in the present manifested as Yong-ho's intermittent and crippling limp.

Despite the gunshot wound that he sustains on the train tracks during the Kwangju Massacre, Yong-ho appears to walk, run, and torture so well during the majority of later scenes that the leg wound almost appears inconsequential. We reserve this conclusion, however, because the injury does surface in select moments, as Yong-ho occasionally walks with a visible limp. The limp first appears as Yong-ho leaves Sun-im's bedside in the first vignette. As he walks downstairs his knee buckles, allowing Sun-im's husband to catch up to him to offer the camera, just as Sun-im did years ago. The limp recurs again in the 1987 vignette after Yong-ho's one-night stand in Kunsan. As his partners scramble to apprehend the demonstrator, Yong-ho is knocked over causing his limp to return. Again when he refuses Sun-im's camera, placing it back in her hands as her train departs, as Yong-ho walks along the platform alongside the moving train he moves with a noticeable limp.

The manifestation of the limp in 1987 Kunsan leaves Yong-ho temporarily useless to his colleagues. And it is perhaps no coincidence that the perpetrator at that time should be a student protestor, precisely the source of antagonism that *Peppermint Candy* positions as being the biggest threat to South Korean nationalism and at once it's most effective validating force. That is, nationalism paradoxically but necessarily relies on a xenophobic attack on some Other that threatens the stability of the national identity. For Lee Chang-dong's Korea, this hostility is mined from student protestors, who time and time again inspire the need to mobilize the nation in Kwangju, at the police precinct, and again in Kunsan. Therefore, it is telling that Yong-ho's limp, which otherwise appears exclusively as a response to Sun-im's presence, manifests in Kunsan. Here it is the act of policing a protestor that interrupts his sensory-motor continuity and leaves him immobilized as if it were an unconscious attempt to aid the protestor's escape from the nation and by extension, free himself from his own entanglements with national identity.

To consider it more broadly, each moment of potential change—the potential to refuse his national identity—is marked by a moment of sensory-motor failure. The intervening limp in a way makes visible his failure to act on the opportunities to deterritorialize his identity—detach it from the nation— and reclaim the self as an individual and not totally a South Korean subject. The limp as incapacitation intervenes between the processes of thought and action, announcing in the present the traces and possibilities of the past. The sensory-motor discontinuity that appears in the interval between perception and actions bears the consciousness capable of imagining possibilities without the nation. A limp and a trembling hand both function to illustrate a moment of indecision in the exercise of power, a moment of potential change. The same hand that he uses for torture is the recipient of praise from Sun-im. Perspective either declares that hand as "sweet" or tainted by human feces but it nonetheless contains the potential to be either. The potential for change exists but Yong-ho grasps onto his future wife Hong-ja rather than the potential that Sun-im offers.

The crystalline representation of sensory-motor discontinuity—particular in the form of Yong-ho's limp-- is the psychological and symbolic intervention of the past's work in the overdetermined national history that leads to the present. It is the past announcing itself to the national subject as the voice of individual before he gives himself to the nation. The limp reveals the contingency of the narrative that has been written for Yong-ho and offers instead an alternative to the narrative of national identity. It suggests that each historical episode should not be seen as just another mile marker in an inevitably linear saga of national thought but as a moment in which change was possible—or at the very least, not impossible.

Even as an adherence to the national idea forecloses individual paths, the national narrative never fully restricts the plentitudes of the past. The gap between these two stories—the

narrative of the nation and the experiences of the self—is the site of negotiation that produces "Koreanness". Koreanness is not a quality or way of being determined and prescribed by the state but rather the lived experiences of a population collectively investing in and contesting those ideas of what it means to be a nation conferred upon them by the state apparatus that does not embody the nation but attempts to monopolize it nonetheless. Lee Hae-jun's *My Dictator* offers the possibility of recovering the personal subjectivity marked as lost in *Peppermint Candy* by Sun-im's camera and Yong-ho's candies by explicitly marking nationalism as performance. Lee Hae-jun poses a markedly similar duality between the subscription to and performance of a national identity on one hand, and the personal subjectivities of the individual marked by abandoned objects stashed under a loose floorboard, on the other.

Lee Hae-jun territorializes time on two sides of a twenty-year gap that separates Kim Sung-geun before and after his delusional full-time undertaking of the Kim Il-sung persona. One period invests heavily in the objects between Sung-geun's and his son Tae-sik, so much so that a moment in which Tae-sik gifts his favorite trading card to Sung-geun is preserved and later resurfaced as a site for reclaiming Sung-geun's lost identity. Sung-geun's psychosis is the undertaking (and performance) of a national identity that requires, for Sung-geun at least, the total abandonment of devotion of these objects and associations. Like *Peppermint Candy*, *My Dictator* follows in simultaneity both an individual's and a nation's narrative and the reterritorialization of the two. For Sung-geun, these mnemic traces of the past—that is, his past and not Kim Il-sung's—momentarily resurface at least once before he eventually recognizes Tae-sik as his son. In this moment, as he's stumbling away from Tae-sik's rally, the individual's narrative and the nation's narrative recognizably collide for the first time since Sung-geun's

absorption into the role. These moments mark potential change, where change is the reterritorialization of a split subjectivity between nation and individual.

But what eventually breaks Sung-geun out of the Kim Il-sung character is perhaps the stash of Tae-sik's old toys under the loose floorboard of the house that they so desperately attempt to preserve. The instability of the floorboard, its susceptibility to collapse under heavy weight, on both literal and metaphorical registers makes the performance of nationalism vulnerable to the very thoughts that it has repressed. At its core, nationalism depends on an inability to remember. Yong-ho's Honeycomb Club in *Peppermint Candy* makes light of this fact. The concept of reunion itself indicates an inability to remember (or perhaps an ability to forget[4]) the experiences of trauma that occurred in twenty years of development. Reunions are staged in order to facilitate a nostalgic relationship with the past rather than recall the experience of trauma. As such, the members of the club are national subjects whose status depends on forgetting the traumas involved in affording a national identity. While Sung-geun's psychosis bars him from direct access to these memories, his investment in the national idea (as Kim Il-sung) results from his failed encounter with his abandoned objects, but unlike the Honeycomb Club whom have lost all memory of the abandoned object, Sung-geun's memories are preserved underneath the floor of his house.

Insofar as material goods are concerned, for both director Lees, there is nothing more important than the acceptance, loss, or rejection of these objects of desire. None of these privileged objects (the camera, peppermint candy, Tae-sik's trading card), however, embody a type of ultimate and impossible desire that neither of these protagonists could ever attain. And in

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[4] Magnan-Park, Aaron Han Joon. "Peppermint Candy: The Will Not to Forget", *New Korean Cinema*. Ed. Chi-Yun Shin and Julian Stringer. 1st ed. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005, 160.

that sense it's rather odd that they bear such weight in these narratives and become internalized by Yong-ho and Sung-geun as the most evident markers of a past that they wish to retreat to. But it is precisely because they are imperfect that they become such viable sources of power. These objects become metaphors for relationships in both characters' lives and the failures and antagonisms in those relationships that paradoxically serve as the sources of their bonds. It is precisely this reminder of failure that nationalism cannot tolerate and for that reason it is precisely why these objects become the site of conflict between two sources of identity.

Between Lee Chang-dong and Lee Hae-jun, we have at least two works of Korean cinema that negotiate the totality and illusory status of the national idea and national identity. For both, abandoned objects and sensory-motor incapacitation provide the modes of intervention that confront national identity with the lost subjectivity of the individual before the individual capitulates to the promises of a national identity. These films consider the nation and the subject on the two ends of a spectrum, where to possess "Koreanness" is not necessarily an adherence to the progressivism and positivism of the state and a complete internalization of national ideology but quite to the contrary the individual's act of negotiating those promises of wholeness provided by the nation and a defense of those experiences and traumas contained in objects and relationships that the nation threatens to foreclose.

Neither of these films are hard-hitting polemics. In a sense, there is no "perpetrator"[5] that Kim Soyoung identifies—there are only processes. Similarly, there is no solution—no time that neither Yong-ho nor Sung-geun can return to. Both narratives end in death rather than a return to a space of innocence. There is no "blank subjectivity" from which these narratives depart, only a

[5] Kim, Soyoung. "Do Not Include Me in Your 'Us': Peppermint Candy and the Politics of Difference", *Korea Journal 46.1*, 2006, 77.

"true nature"[6] of both protagonists which had in fact from the onset had already been stamped by a lack. But as Kim suggests, the "we" is charged with a "complicit participation in this evil"[7], yet the evil is not the "totalitarianism and dictatorship" that she identifies as being the subject of Lee Chang-dong's critique.

"We" participate in the nation and assume identities vis-à-vis the nation but that in itself is not the evil, nor is the regime. Rather, it is inclination to accept a national identity and a national subjectivity as if it could fill the desirous void left by their abandoned objects. That is precisely nationalism's promise and precisely why it is able to occupy such a central space in the psyches of its subjects. To return to the beginning for both Yong-ho and Sung-geun is not necessarily to cleanse themselves of their national identities and the traumas induced by the regime, thus the act of "not forgetting" is not the sort of courageous individualism[8] that seeks to withstand hegemonic identity history. When Yong-ho declares to the oncoming train, "I *want* to go back again!"[9] and sets the narrative on its reverse-chronological course, it is not a return to a world prior to his mistakes being made and the relative innocence of his youth. For Sung-geun, going back is not to refuse the part of Kim Il-sung otherwise he would not have participated in the simulation so many years later. To "go back" as Yong-ho wishes is not to recourse on failures and change the past so much as it is a rejection of the forward-moving time that prevents the subject from inhabiting the moment of its failure vis-à-vis the abandoned object. The problem that confronts Yong-ho at the beginning of the film is not a set of mistakes but rather an

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[6] Ibid. 75
[7] Kim, Soyoung. "Do Not Include Me in Your 'Us': Peppermint Candy and the Politics of Difference", *Korea Journal 46.1*, 2006, 82.
[8] Magnan-Park, Aaron Han Joon. "Peppermint Candy: The Will Not to Forget", *New Korean Cinema*. Ed. Chi-Yun Shin and Julian Stringer. 1st ed. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005, 160.
[9] Ibid. 161

adherence to the forward-moving temporality of the nation and its ideal of progress. Even when the film returns to the "beginning" as it were it was not a time of untroubled innocence. There is no romanticism in a supposed origin in which his romance with Sun-im has yet to develop and his alienation from the rest of the Honeycomb Club is already evident. The "origin" does not feature Yong-ho's inclusiveness within his circle of friends or his connection with Sun-im. Rather, the film ends with Yong-ho being drawn away from Sun-im and his friends to a moving train that at once seems to be the cause of allure and alarm. What Yong-ho calls for on the railroad is precisely what the film delivers: a rejection of the forward-movement that so easily displaced him from the objects of his past.

Peppermint Candy and *My Dictator* challenge the nation as a foundation for identity. We find the dynamic energies of identities from above and below locked in competition within the arena that we call nation. It is the drama of contemplating a totalitarian national ideology that inscribes its illusion of wholeness, its official history, and its categories of thought as truth. It is the mode of cinema embodied by these two films that we ascribe to the property of the national. In this case, "Korean cinema" is able to assert itself as such not because its thematic considerations, motifs, actors, or production companies draw from a distinctly domestic Korean body of options. It is not so much that "Korean cinema" is born from the nation of Korea that makes it Korean, because the idea of nation itself is unstable. It is that Korean cinema contributes to the formulation of what it means to be Korean and how Korean subjects negotiate the promises and anxieties of national ideology that puts it squarely within the national discourse as both moderator and subject. Whereas those horizons of expectations differ when we speak of French, Italian, or Korean film, national cinemas of different nations share in the text-based approach share in the exploration, construction, and questioning of the notion of nationhood

insofar as that conflict is contained within an individual or individuals. Korean cinema produces "Korea" as interpretation, the gap between ideology and representation that interrogates the collective set of tensions between ideology and the self that is the lived nation.

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