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Horror and Revenge

Return of the Repressed Colonial Violence

The horror genre has often been theorized as a cultural form that dramatizes unsettled but repressed social dilemmas. With respect to the legacy of colonialism, the genre shares with melodrama a recurring structure of return through which past suffering and trauma are confronted. Utilizing the convention of "the unexpected arrival," such films furthermore delineate the problematic relationship between colonial rule and postcolonial reckonings. I here analyze two films that, although separated by several decades, both feature key dimensions of the theme of return that forms an important conceptual component of the postcolonial historical imagination. The 1966 melodrama *Yeraishang* is an obscure "fallen woman" film set against the backdrop of the April Revolution of 1960 and its aftermath.[1] The film's reference to that historic event compels us to pay close attention to the implications of the revolution for the project of decolonization. The 2007 horror film *Epitaph* belongs to a group of recent South Korean films that focus on Koreans' experience of colonial modernity and urban life through the prism of horror. The film is unique for configuring excessive violence and spectral haunting behind the veneer of the rational order of modern medicine. Through its use of the signs of terror, *Epitaph* presents a complex portrayal of colonial subjectivity rare in the South Korean film tradition.[2]

HORROR FILM, TEMPORALITY, AND REPRESENTATIONS OF COLONIALISM

Any discussion of South Korean horror film must include *Public Cemetery under the Moon* (*Wolha-ŭi kongdong myŏji;* Kwon Chŏlhwi, 1967) (hereafter *Public*

Cemetery), which features the tragic death of a virtuous woman.[3] A number of scholars have scrutinized this seminal horror film for its allegorical treatment of colonial history through spectral haunting and violence.[4] Significant for us here is the compressed image that encapsulates the larger problematic that I endeavor to tackle in this chapter. The film begins with a narrative device in which a "prologue character" appears on a nondiegetic stage to provide a brief introduction or warning for the audience about the upcoming drama. However, there is an interesting twist to the film's use of this device. The speaker is an abominable monster who instantly evokes a sense of fear and disgust, the affective response closely associated with the horror genre.[5] The hideous beast-man, who is set against the backdrop of a dark cemetery, acknowledges his own abject condition but also mentions his origins. The man claims that forty years ago he was a handsome *pyŏnsa,* or silent film narrator-commentator. With this statement, the film quickly, through a dissolve effect, transforms him into a poised middle-aged man who begins the *pyŏnsa* narration of the main narrative. The tone of narration is highly stylized and melodramatic, making apparent the *sinpa*-mode staging, the most recognizable melodramatic mode of representation of the colonial era. The film's recourse to a colonial form amplifies the affective power of a drama filled with betrayal, violence, and revenge.[6]

The opening sequence is thus the film's commentary on a past cultural form from the viewpoint of the present. The monstrous deformity of the ex-*pyŏnsa* narrator underscores the thorough marginalization of a mode of film exhibition that was once the most alluring component of colonial urban visual culture: the *pyŏnsa*'s oratory performance at silent film screenings. But what was it about the old form of film presentation that made it subject to such thorough devaluation in 1960s South Korea? I claim that the criticism was not to attack specific features of the *sinpa* genre but rather, as I noted in the previous chapter on the figure of the *kisaeng,* to dislodge the symbols of colonial culture. The denigration of the silent film world (and all its attendant modes, styles, and presentation practices) was part of a larger cultural politics.[7] The impulse derived from a fervent nationalist desire to overcome a cultural form that was imported from Japan and thrived during the colonial period.

The motifs in the sequence also allude to the power of the horror genre to stage complex questions of temporality. The film problematizes the multiple and immiscible temporalities *within* the modern time frame. It advances a peculiar gambit, according to which a certain aspect of popular film culture of the early twentieth century is already considered outmoded, foreclosed, and thereby denigrated. The demonization of the past suggests how the prior years are rendered "out of joint" with the linear, abstract, progressive notion of time in the modern era. Yet the dilapidated past insists on living on as a monstrous figure and even makes a triumphant return to tell the story of the spectral horror. To borrow Bliss Cua Lim's insight, this coeval collocation of the two temporalities—the demonized past in

the present time—confirms the immiscible nature of temporalities that is inherent in the horror imaginary.[8]

The treatment of the defunct cultural form alludes to the essential historico-political question of the cultural politics of nationalism: how South Korea is to bracket and engage critically with the colonial legacy. In South Korea's nationalist historiography, the colonial period signifies a unique conceptual conundrum, for it marks a fundamental rupture in the assumed "continuity" of the nation's linear and teleological trajectory of progress. A typical but "efficient" way to manage this dilemma is to portray the colonial period as a time of total injustice, subjugation, and suffering, which is addressed by collective resistance and struggle. But the notion of suffering and injustice invoked in this context is allegorical in nature, as it fundamentally is subsumed by the hegemonic discourse of the nation. The individual's hardship is invoked only to underscore the tenacious survival of the national collective.

One of the peculiar outcomes of this nationalist appraisal of history is that the colonial era turns into a truncated period, removed from the complex realities of the postcolonial present. The compartmentalization is an effective way to set aside the ramifications of the colonial legacy and its effects without negating them entirely. Yet this postcolonial production of temporality renders the colonial era devoid of sociopolitical ramifications for the present. It makes the colonial era a peculiarly self-contained period of time despite the obsessive linking of it to nationalist politics within cultural discourses. The mechanical juxtaposition of the colonial period against the postcolonial time frame seldom includes investigation of the complex connections between the two. Given the enduring linkage between the colonial power and the postcolonial social structure of South Korea, the persistent *displacement* of historical perspective and imaginings reflects a distinct but peculiar logic of time that South Korea has produced to render the dilemma of colonialism manageable.

The truncation of the colonial period also entails another recurring formal feature. As if following an unwritten general rule, most South Korean films do not resort to use of the flashback or backward-looking viewpoint to organize stories of the colonial past. Even though South Korea has produced many films since 1945 that relate to the subject of colonialism, there is a dearth of cinematic texts that mobilize the historical investigation of the colonial problem *from* the present viewpoint. Instead, these films often begin and end in the colonial period. Against this backdrop of the historical unconscious of South Korean films, the retrospective tendency of horror and revenge films offers exceptional instances for the investigation of history and memory. The postcolonial subject who suffers from spectral haunting or trauma elucidates how the temporal divide between the colonial and postcolonial is deeply problematic. The figure of the specter (or the figure with a spectral effect) traverses the historical divides that have been central to the discourse of the postcolonial nation. Violent revenge and horror films,

ranging from fallen-woman melodramas to ghost horror films, show a sustained critique of the dominant scheme of temporal "ordering" in South Korean cinema. Both *Yeraishang* and *Epitaph* thematize the profound and protracted inflection of unresolved colonial violence and injustice made visible through extreme forms of retribution and social disarray. The temporal span they encompass additionally makes them specific cultural responses to the limitations of the anticolonial nationalist framework for writing history.

THE APRIL REVOLUTION AND COLONIAL RESENTMENT

The April Revolution of 1960, which toppled the authoritarian regime of Syngman Rhee and created a new political energy directed toward the project of decolonization in South Korea, is the crucial historical context for the narrative of *Yeraishang*. The film begins with the male protagonist's street protest and his injury, which leads to the formation of the romantic couple and their subsequent hardship. Before turning to an analysis of the film's narrative, I would like to introduce a story of the revolution that offers a valuable insight into the thorny issue of the use of violence and the failure of decolonization.

In his account of the April Revolution and its aftermath, historian Bruce Cumings notes how the revolution channeled, albeit momentarily, the populist yearning for decolonization that had been kept at bay in the previous decade. Colonial police officers, many of whom had moved to higher ranks during Syngman Rhee's regime, either had to quit or were fired in the postrevolutionary political environment. However, in several areas the police officers' resignations and retirements were not enough to dispel the populist yearning for justice, as a number of people wanted to settle scores with police officers who had served the Japanese during the colonial period. One incident of vengeful execution of an ex-colonial officer was so shocking and gruesome that only the most violent horror film could possibly render its ghastly image: villagers "boiled a colonial policeman in oil."[9]

Cumings's description is brief, and the details of the incident remain unknown. Yet his laconic account conveys how deeply ingrained yet repressed the popular will to undo past colonial injustices was in the authoritarian political milieu of the 1950s Cold War. Righting the wrongs of colonial violence was an immediate task for the liberated nation in 1945; however, the ensuing political environment of the Cold War systemically repressed that priority, and demands for decolonization were marginalized as mere propaganda slogans of leftist ideology.

While the cruelty of the incident is shocking, such a "horrific" aspect of revolution begs some reflection. I am using the term *horrific* to refer not only to the horror-inducing aspect of the violence itself, but also to the episode's affinity with a crucial thematic motif of the horror genre. It possesses a structure of return,

specifically the return of the repressed that is conventionally found in the thematic universe of horror. A monster in a horror film typically signifies the combined projection of repressed desire and the contradictions derived from it. Similarly, the episode's eruption of violence illustrates the explosive revival of long-held resentments, affirming the need to revisit the past colonial dilemma while simultaneously promoting the desire to rectify injustice and the suffering incurred from such injustice. While the April Revolution has typically been labeled an "incomplete" project, one of its historically significant consequences was that it reestablished a social space for reflection in which overcoming the harmful legacies of colonialism was rendered once again an urgent and significant project for South Koreans.[10]

But the radical passion for justice unleashed by the revolution almost necessarily exposed problems that remained repressed under contemporary political conditions. As Cumings's episode illustrates so lucidly, the revolution challenged and changed South Korean politics. At the same time, the passion and awakening that it inspired continued to linger and engender new awareness and motivation for action in a later period. As I explain through the analysis below, the eruption of a passionate zeal for justice and the revolutionary spirit to undo colonial violence reemerged and coalesced most visibly in the mid-1960s, the period when South Korea was forced to confront the dilemmas of its colonial history and legacy on a total sociopolitical scale.

YERAISHANG AND THE MELODRAMATIC RECKONING OF VIOLENCE

The 1966 melodrama *Yeraishang,* directed by Chung Chang Wha, is one of the few Korean films of the era to address the issue of the protracted effects of revolution. *Yeraishang* also, significantly, confronts the colonial past. It is somewhat obscure in the constellation of South Korean melodrama films, and its motif of the "fallen woman" and theme of legal justice have not received much critical attention, presumably because of the film's dramaturgical problems. Moreover, it does not fit too well in Chung's perceived auteurist oeuvre, namely the masculine universe of martial arts and action genre films.[11] The film demonstrates an unusual narrative density that is the result of being a compressed adaptation of an original radio drama.[12] In addition, there is a sudden turnaround in the middle of the narrative, shifting the direction and tone of the narrative to a different thematic orbit and concern: a feature that calls for close analysis precisely because it is so abrupt and radical. The film begins with the event of the April Revolution as a backdrop to the drama, but by its end, it has addressed and thematized the essential passion of revolution: the unquenchable impulse to act out radical justice to undo colonial violence.

The film has a convoluted and compressed narrative. It centers on the tumultuous life of a nightclub hostess, Nanhŭi, whose fateful encounter with college student Seyŏng leads her into a difficult but redemptive romance. The film begins in

the turmoil of the revolution when Seyŏng is severely injured while taking part in a street protest and seeks refuge in a stranger's home. This stranger is Nanhŭi, who immediately offers her help to the young man, hiding him in safety and attending to his recovery from the near-fatal injury. Nanhŭi and Seyŏng subsequently fall in love as he recovers. Nanhŭi has previously developed an alcohol dependency problem, but with the help of Seyŏng she is able to overcome this personal demon.

The courtship comes to a halt when Nanhŭi's tainted nightlife profession becomes a humiliating target for those who financially support Seyŏng. After his recovery, Seyŏng finds a job tutoring the children of the wealthy Mr. Park. Park has his eye on Seyŏng as a prospective suitor for his eldest daughter, Chŏngsuk, who subsequently develops a romantic interest in Seyŏng. Home tutoring requires Seyŏng to reside at Park's residence, but he nonetheless makes frequent night visits to Nanhŭi. Suspicious of Seyŏng's nighttime whereabouts, Park orders him followed and learns of his courtship of Nanhŭi, the woman with whom he himself in the past had illicit sexual relations as her patron. Park then, dissembling, asks to be formally introduced to Seyŏng's girlfriend. This meeting turns into a disaster for Nanhŭi, as Park and his cronies maliciously use the opportunity to degrade her before her lover in public. She flees in humiliation and resentment, and Seyŏng expresses his indignation at Park's actions. The film subsequently focuses on Nanhŭi's despair and her relapse into alcoholism. To save her, Seyŏng forcibly hospitalizes her for alcohol rehabilitation. Initially resistant, Nanhŭi becomes convinced of Seyŏng's commitment to their love and slowly recovers from her alcohol dependency.

Up to this point, the film, other than in using revolution as a setting and plot device, shows no discernible departure from conventional melodrama, where the anxieties of love, the distress of misunderstanding, and the recognition of truth, as well as the attainment of redemption, constitute an affective universe of moral righteousness. However, the film careens in a different direction in its second half as new story information is introduced. Suddenly, an old man from Shanghai enters the picture. This man has been searching for Nanhŭi and later informs her of her family history. According to his account, Nanhŭi's father was killed by a pro-Japanese collaborator, an assailant who turns out to be Seyŏng's employer and her former patron, Park. Furthermore, Park sexually assaulted Nanhŭi's mother after her father's death and impregnated her with his child. (Nanhŭi's mother subsequently died in childbirth.) That child is Chŏngsuk, Park's eldest daughter. Upon learning of Park's violence against her parents, Nanhŭi swears her revenge. In the meantime, Park and his allies kill the old man out of fear that he might publicize Park's past collaboration. They also scheme to kill Seyŏng, who begins investigating the mysterious death of the old man. Their plan ultimately is foiled. Nanhŭi, however, is able to kill Park on the nightclub dance floor. She then awaits legal justice for the act of murder.

The film's origin as a popular radio drama series partly explains its excessive story information and complex dramatic turns. But what is nonetheless exceptional about the film's narrative is the sudden injection of the colonial theme via the appearance of the old man from Shanghai. The unforeseen knowledge that he imparts has a totalizing effect on the rest of the film, overdetermining the entire network of character relations and unfolding of events. Once known to Nanhŭi, her family's history of suffering and destruction becomes an overwhelming trauma that completely possesses her. The effort to act out her vengeance preoccupies her so thoroughly that she transforms from a passive woman into a fierce warrior who is no longer defined by her relationship with her man. Here we find the clearest instance of the colonial dilemma as "the return of the repressed," equivalent in structure to the ghastly shock and terror of Cumings's episode. The grand scale of Nanhŭi's past history as well as her thorough transformation also suggests the need to shift the interpretive focus of *Yeraishang* from its melodramatic properties of personal agitation, psychic tension, and the redemptive power of love to its function as an allegory of colonial history, violence, and justice in cultural, that is, cinematic, form.

When exposed, however, the criminal legacy of colonial violence is not represented as a manageable problem in any plausible sense. *Yeraishang* fails to hint at any effective measure of reckoning that is socially acceptable. Instead, the film stresses a personal vendetta, which is inherently transgressive in that it threatens the rule of law, as the only available recourse for the female protagonist to resolve her problem.[13] My emphasis is twofold here. On the level of narrative, the film showcases the colonial legacy as the most serious and grave social problem. Concurrently, it justifies the use of personal violence to rectify the injustice that legal institutions fail to recognize. Although the act of revenge is punished at the end through the female protagonist's trial and imprisonment, the film nevertheless elucidates the moral justification for this personal use of violence to exterminate an evil from the colonial era.

But there is more to the film's excessive dimension of violence. In a strictly formal sense, the return of the repressed triggers a series of actions that make visible the dire consequences of the brutal colonial legacy. The past is revealed through a pattern of representation particular to Korean cinema's way of rendering the colonial past. The film conveys the shock and terror of the female protagonist's family tragedy without recourse to any typical narrative devices such as flashbacks and cross-cut editing. Such devices tend to slow the progression of a narrative by allowing the viewer to comprehend hitherto undisclosed events of the past. Further, a prolonged segment of flashbacks often instills in the contemporary recipient of information in the film a fuller sense of what happened in the past, as he or she is presumed to sit through the duration of the oral account that triggers and accompanies the visualized past history. Such a formal option, however,

ironically is absent in the history-focused thematic world of *Yeraishang*. Instead, the film merely shows the old man telling the female protagonist the compressed information about the troubling past.

The absence of formal cinematic techniques to provide past information, I would argue, is indicative of how South Korean cultural works shape and pattern the representational contour of colonial history. By eliminating temporal devices like flashbacks, *Yeraishang* effectively underscores and amplifies the raw impact of the family history on the listener-protagonist Nanhŭi. Nanhŭi is not a reflective subject who develops a distinct viewpoint on the past event; rather, she is a traumatized subject who acts on her own for revenge partly because she has been alienated from developing a clear perspective on history. The fact that the narrator of her family tragedy is killed by the very assailant from the past only intensifies the psychic suffering she endures.

The way the colonial dilemma is rendered comprehensible to her and film viewers alike therefore alludes to representational limits and lacunae. The theme of colonialism almost always entails a certain crisis of cinematic representation that the drama's overt excess then is called on to conceal. While historical representation in general exposes self-reflection as its own mode of figuring the past, *Yeraishang* demonstrates little concern for such patterns of historicizing. Instead, the film resorts to the mode of excess, figured in terms of both the irrepressible pattern of return and the consequential action it instigates, to convey the suffering of the traumatized female protagonist. The setting of the April Revolution is then crucial in this regard because its attendant characteristics of mad passion, suspension of law, ferocious execution of justice, and sociopolitical subversion complement the mode of excess discussed above. It offers a crucial conceptual backdrop for the articulation of traumatic shock as well as unmediated and direct action for justice.

Although the film merely alludes to the April Revolution at the beginning when Seyŏng is injured through his participation in a street demonstration, it has a distinct way of prolonging the revolution's sway and keeping its aura intact: it makes no reference whatsoever to the subsequent military coup of 1961. This is no small matter, for such periodization produces a textual effect distinct from the way the revolution is understood as a historical event. The film deliberately paints the world of diegesis as an uninterrupted and continuous space of revolution and its aftereffects. By decoupling the April Revolution from the May Coup, the film casts aside the historicist reasoning that habitually focuses on the counter-revolutionary event despite its valorization of the revolution. The presupposed decline of the revolution never takes place in the film.[14]

The aura of revolution is perhaps most apparent in the courtship between Seyŏng and Nanhŭi that overcomes the barriers to their romance. Their relationship prevails over large differences in both age and social status: she is an older nightclub waitress, and he is a young, promising college student of law. Reciprocal

FIGURE 9. Nanhŭi exacts her vengeance against Park in *Yeraishang.* Courtesy of the Korean Film Archive.

caregiving forms the strong bond between the two, as Seyŏng receives medical care and treatment from Nanhŭi and, in turn, arranges for her alcohol rehabilitation. The series of medical treatments and recoveries function as a common rite of passage for the couple as they endure ordeals and attain redemption. Through their support for each other in dire conditions caused by larger political events, the couple achieves a fuller unity.[15]

By portraying Park's aggressions, which include both the present assaults and the past violence, essentially as acts related to sexual predation, the film rehearses and extends the nationalist imaginary according to which colonial violence commonly takes a gendered form in many cultural works.[16] Hence, the film's dramatization of the colonial problematic is not limited to politics, or the troubled legacy of colonial collaboration in the present. The film also engages on the level of form with the existing nationalist imaginary—the gendered pattern of colonial violence and struggle—to participate within the larger matrix of cultural representation of the colonial past.

Park also represents the intimate connection between political treachery and materialist benefit that surrounds the act of collaboration. Historically, collaborators have almost always been portrayed as ruthless money seekers in South Korea's cinematic tradition; they would do anything, the scenario goes, to acquire personal material gain, including betrayal of the nation. Park exemplifies this type of materialist collaborator in the "old" nationalist imaginary.[17] However, the film goes further in that it showcases Park as a successful businessman in present-day postcolonial South Korea. In fact, this linkage between colonial collaboration and higher social status in the present is a rare configuration in South Korean cinema, even though such continuity is indubitably clear in the country's postcolonial social history.[18] Whereas in other filmic representations the collaborator is often

punished for his selfish pursuit of money, Park appears to be running a successful business venture even during the April Revolution. Furthermore, he exemplifies how material accumulation from the colonial period, irrespective of its dubious origins, translated into social prestige and wealth for some in South Korean society.[19] Park thus embodies a peculiar continuity, albeit concealed, from colonial Korea to postcolonial South Korea—one that has received no sustained attention in either nationalist historiography or most South Korean films.

Just as there are complexities in Park's character, so too are there in Seyŏng's. Seyŏng appears as the archetype of a good-natured college student: a promising youth who will most likely become a member of the social elite. The fact that he studies law testifies to his secure path up the social ladder. Park's job offer then signifies not just a mere tutoring opportunity for him but also an entrance to a higher social circle, possibly through romance and marriage with Chŏngsuk. Park of course encourages this plan. What makes this scenario of upward social mobility through marriage potentially convincing is Seyŏng's strange lack of a past. He is a young man with no prior entanglements; he is an orphan with no close friends or associates. When he tries to convince Nanhŭi of his love, he speaks explicitly of the importance of a new start and calls for the urgent need to be unshackled from the burdens of the past. Thus, even though Seyŏng and Park become archenemies, they share a strange commonality as both devalue what is associated with the past. They are both future-oriented men, positioned to enjoy (or about to enjoy, in the case of Seyŏng) higher social status.

Seyŏng's association with prospects for future success stands in sharp relief with Nanhŭi's permanent affiliation with the legacy of the past. It is this chasm, defined in terms of temporal associations, that makes their union as lovers painfully impossible in the end. Here I am not referring simply to Nanhŭi's physical imprisonment. Rather, the conventional narrative logic of courtroom drama films, to which *Yeraishang*'s ending subscribes generically, makes it difficult to conceive of a romantic union as a plausible dramatic possibility. The visiting room sequence shows this dilemma clearly. Seyŏng visits Nanhŭi in prison and they face each other for the first time since her incarceration. The sequence presents the familiar generic imagery of courtroom drama films, where the affective moral truth of the fallen victim is pronounced and valorized, despite the adamancy of the legal system's refusal to acknowledge it. However, while other such films register signs of hope and optimism in the midst of legal pessimism, *Yeraishang* does not offer such a moment of relief. Instead, the prospect of the two lovers reuniting in the future remains murky at best, if not impossible.

Accentuating the pessimistic ending is the forced recognition of newly discovered sibling relations. Although Nanhŭi succeeds in fulfilling her vengeance against Park, she then faces an even more difficult ordeal of family trauma: reconciling with her half-sister, Chŏngsuk, who is the by-product of Park's sexual assault on her mother. The implication of this dilemma is apparent. Even though the agent

of past violence can be eliminated, his legacy in the form of family relations continues to exist. Those who survive are then required to achieve some type of reckoning or reconciliation with this impossible legacy. The two women confront it with ceaseless tears of sorrow and resignation. Complicating their reconciliation is the fact that they both have been romantically attached to the same man, Seyŏng, the future legal professional and social elite. Imprisoned Nanhŭi is painfully aware of her downfall when she meets Chŏngsuk in the visiting room and asks her to resume a relationship with Seyŏng, an offer Chŏngsuk adamantly refuses. But this normative communication of offer and refusal, whereby one is expected to refuse the offer, does not assume the provider's retraction of the offer. Nanhŭi's true misery lies in the fact that she is neither able to give up nor "take back" the offer she has proposed to her new sibling. Her prospect for reuniting with Seyŏng is virtually nil in this configuration of generic and social reasoning.

This brings us to a final appraisal of turmoil, violence, and reconciliation. The outright purge of the colonial collaborator by the long-suffering victim is resoundingly and mercilessly carried out. Justice, in short, is fully served as long as only this part of the story matters. Yet this form of justice, carried out by an abject social member, poses a question that has far-reaching legal and historical implications. That Nanhŭi has to resort to her own means to exact punishment testifies to the thoroughly personal nature of retaliatory violence. The necessary acting out of a personal vendetta paradoxically reveals the limits of the nation-state as the sole sovereign, that is, legal, authority, over its subjects. The point I am trying to make is not that the legal authority of the nation-state is challenged by Nanhŭi's transgressive act, but rather that the truly significant question the film poses is whether the postcolonial nation-state of South Korea is capable of handling the gross injustices committed during the colonial period, the era prior to the establishment of the state as a proper polity. In other words, is colonial violence within the parameters of the historical jurisdiction and legal reasoning of the South Korean state?

I think South Korea's social history informs us that the answer to this question is a resounding "no." The film's pessimistic ending and its attendant reasoning, moreover, have some sobering implications. Although Seyŏng the future lawyer speaks of the possible leniency of the court when he interviews Nanhŭi in prison, his statement remains largely an empty wish; it is not based on concrete legal reasoning. While the film upholds the moral intent behind her retribution, it also makes clear that she will pay a heavy price for her socially disruptive action. The male protagonist who is thoroughly defined in terms of his future prospects and legal profession cannot offer any effective help for the victim/criminal who took matters into her own hands to rectify colonial injustice. The film exposes troubling legal boundaries and the limits of the South Korean nation-state. The permanence of the sovereignty and legal authority that the South Korean state assumes and exercises, the film instructs us, is made possible by its structural and deliberate obliviousness toward the historical problem of colonialism. What *Yeraishang*

conveys through the story of a morally righteous female victim is an effort to render the hard lesson of colonial legacy meaningful and relevant against the historical machinery called "the nation-state" that ironically attempts to erase it.

The film's implicit critique of the permanence of the state in the domain of law and justice helps us perceive and understand how the revolutionary spirit expresses itself in cultural form. While the narrative of revolution has mostly been assimilated into the conventional historical account over which the nation presides, here we find a cultural text that deviates from such assimilation. Instead, it preserves the gist of the radical revolutionary spirit *without* giving in to the all-encompassing discourse of the nation. *Yeraishang* is thus a formidably scandalous work of South Korean cinema. It makes the subject of colonialism ultimately unsettling or "out of joint" with the prescribed social reality of postcolonial South Korea. What is so resoundingly unique about *Yeraishang* is its dramatization of a theme that is virtually absent from other South Korean films: the detrimental legacy of colonial violence on the postcolonial lives of the people. While indicting colonial violence, the film simultaneously justifies violence as a proper means to eradicate the lingering evil in the contemporary situation. As in the prologue, the film presents the thorny question of colonial violence and oppression as that which becomes irrepressible and intolerable and ready to explode violently in the present.

EPITAPH: SPECTRAL TERROR AND THE PERVERSE DESIRE FOR EMPIRE

Epitaph, the debut film of the Chŏng Brothers (Chŏng Pŏmsik and Chŏng Sik), was released in the summer of 2007 as seasonal genre fare.[20] *Epitaph* differs from conventional Korean horror films in a number of ways. Reminiscent of *A Tale of Two Sisters* (*Changhwa hongnyŏn;* Kim Jee-woon, 2003), *Epitaph* illustrates how formal properties of cinema, such as mise-en-scène, lighting, sound design, and production design, can be arranged to produce strikingly affective elements of horror.[21] But it is the production design of the set, the modern hospital where all events unfold, that in particular distinguishes the film. The hospital set transmits an eerie aura of uneasiness while expressing a mixture of technological rationalism on the one hand and supernatural terror on the other.

The film is made up of three episodes that take place at Ansaeng Hospital in Seoul in 1942 at the height of Japanese imperial wartime mobilization. But the film's prologue begins in 1979, a year of political turmoil and unrest, when the assassination of South Korea's president Park Chung Hee brought a heightened hope for democracy that provoked countermeasures of authoritarianism. The male protagonist Chŏngnam, an elderly professor in the medical school, learns of the impending demolition of the hospital. The news triggers his memories of the building where he began his career as a young intern, destined to marry the

daughter of the Japanese hospital owner. Three ensuing episodes show the inexplicable tragedies that befell him and two other young Korean medical professionals. After chronicling the three events, the film returns to the present time of 1979 and the sole survivor, Chŏngnam, who now confronts the demons of his own past.

In my analysis of the film, I focus on Chŏngnam's story, which makes up the first episode as well as the prologue and the epilogue.[22] The fact that the film begins with his recollection and ends with his demise underscores the significance of Chŏngnam as the principal character as well as the witness of all three incidents. It is through his perception and understanding (or lack thereof) of the supernatural phenomena that we the audience concurrently acquire layers of comprehension of the dreadful events. Because of this narrative design, we develop an emotional affinity with Chŏngnam, who believes he is an innocent victim of bizarre circumstances. This is further accentuated by the fact that he provides voice-over narration, reflecting upon what happened to him and other colleagues in the hospital. In other words, he carries the role of the narrator, framing and guiding the viewer's knowledge of the events depicted in the film.

The synopsis of Chŏngnam's episode is as follows: Chŏngnam is a young intern with an unusual background and status in the hospital, which is owned and run by a Japanese widow. From early on in the film, Chŏngnam is introduced to viewers as the prospective son-in-law of this Japanese owner.[23] When Chŏngnam's parents died in a traffic accident, the widow owner took him in as her son and supported his education. In return, Chŏngnam remained very grateful for her kindness. One odd feature of his prospective marriage is that although he is expected to marry the owner's daughter, Aoi, he has had no recent chance to meet her in person, as she has largely grown up in Japan. Chŏngnam, indeed, does not know what Aoi looks like, for she has not visited her mother in Korea for many years. The hospital owner anxiously waits for her daughter's return, but there is a problem.

Aoi has already fell in love with another man. Instead of following the path that her mother has laid out for her, she chooses to commit double suicide with her partner to escape the arranged marriage. Her dead body is brought to the hospital, where the grief-stricken hospital owner hides the death from her employees, including Chŏngnam. Simultaneously, she assigns Chŏngnam to work in the morgue where her late daughter's body lies. Chŏngnam subsequently becomes enthralled by the beauty of the dead girl. A once-aspiring art student, Chŏngnam starts drawing her image on paper and falls in love with her. Meanwhile, Aoi's mother puts a spell on Chŏngnam with the help of a female Buddhist monk's supernatural powers, a scheme that leads to his fantastic consummation with Aoi.

The fantasy consummation sequence requires careful examination here. It begins with an unknown woman's mourning at a Buddhist-style funeral altar inside the hospital. The creepy yet loud mourning sound reaches everyone, but the mourner's identity is never revealed until the end of the episode. By controlling the identity of the ritual host/mourner, the film maintains the mystery surrounding

FIGURE 10. Chŏngnam's perverse fantasy of interethnic romance is fulfilled in *Epitaph*.

the event. The film underscores the grotesque and uncanny sight of the ritual through various cinematic means, including the amplification of sounds, accentuation of sound-image matches, a high-angle shot to defamiliarize the site, and levitating camera movements that seem to approximate an otherworldly being, all the while blocking the viewer's clear access to the principal host/mourner of the ritual.[24] Toward the end of the episode the film unveils the information, hidden from others, including Chŏngnam, that the faceless mourner is the hospital owner and the mastermind behind the "spirit marriage" ritual. The inaccessibility of the true cause of events, the unknowability of the truth to all involved characters, is a recurring theme through all three episodes of *Epitaph*.[25]

The morgue sequence in Chŏngnam's story that features the spectral terror is most striking for its stupendous idealization of his double transgression: an act of perverse sexuality and defilement (necrophilia) that also breaks the social taboo against interethnic romance. The film introduces Chŏngnam's fascination with the beauty of the dead girl early on, but his infatuation enters a new phase when he comes under the supernatural spell. This moment begins immediately after the ritual arranged by the hospital owner to bind the dead (her daughter Aoi) with the living (Chŏngnam) through "spirit marriage." The unsettling sounds and music that accompany Chŏngnam's exposure to foreboding signs lead to his descent into the nightmarish consummation. He reacts to the strange phenomena—a snail crawling on the morgue rack, followed by the incessant gushing of dirty water from the morgue storage freezer—in a characteristically conventional horror-genre fashion. As if under a spell, he succumbs to his blind curiosity about the

irrational occurrences. He opens the freezer and looks at the dark void inside. This moment of suspense is soon accentuated by the crescendoing thumping sound from inside which is the prelude to the sudden attack of the female ghost, who grabs and Chŏngnam and pulls him inside. The door shuts immediately, completing the scene of spectral terror.

But it is the ensuing ethereal sequence that recontextualizes and complicates the meanings of the spectral haunting in the film. The film now transports viewers to a completely different setting charged with the sublime beauty of marriage, consummation, and domestic life. The rendition of this fantasy sequence comprises the following vignettes: formal greetings between Chŏngnam and Aoi, Aoi's pregnancy, the couple's child rearing, and recurring sexual intercourse. In short, the vignettes capture a progression of marriage, procreation, and domestic bliss, all presented against the backdrop of a traditional Japanese home and iconic references to Japan. The use of the sliding door, along with tracking-forward shots, organizes the visual representation of the interethnic marriage. The tracking-forward camera progresses toward the featured characters first, then continues its movement to the sliding doors with opulent images beyond. The door then slides wide open, offering the newly expanded field of vision where the next level of the conjugal relationship is staged. The process repeats until Chŏngnam awakens from the fantasy in terror at the morgue. Catapulted out of erotic kisses with Aoi, he is petrified at the sight he beholds: the corpse of Aoi in defilement, her face infested with snails and her mouth gaping open and releasing dark liquid. The reflected water on the floor shows Chŏngnam in terror but also the image of Aoi, standing behind his shoulder.

The first episode ends with the revelation that the hospital director is the culprit behind the creepy nocturnal ritual that cast a spell on Chŏngnam. It shows Chŏngnam's freakish experience to be the direct effect of the Japanese superior determined to bind her late daughter to him. Yet the ethnic and cultural specificity of Chŏngnam's staged fantasy raises questions. At its core, the sequence stages necrophilia in the displaced form of interethnic romance. But given how the latter social scenario also has been repressed in the postcolonial cultural imaginary and politics of South Korea, the imagery of interethnic romance has an equally compelling power. This is particularly the case when one considers that Chŏngnam was never given a clue that the dead girl was the daughter of the Japanese hospital owner. Nevertheless, Chŏngnam imagines the consummation in thoroughly Japanese style and terms. In other words, the sequence offers a scandalous rendition of *naisen ittai* (the Japanese colonial policy of assimilation, literally "making Japan and Korea into one body") but fantasized by a Korean man in terms of a sexualized liaison and domestic bliss. The allusion to necrophilia hence functions like an effective smokescreen for the more egregious transgression: the Korean man's fantasy to become Japanese through sexual union and marriage with a Japanese

woman. No Korean cultural trace is discernible once Chŏngnam sinks deeper into his domestic bliss. The sequence thereby explicitly illustrates what is in fact a cultural taboo in contemporary Korea's nationalist imaginary.[26]

Significantly, this necrophilic fantasy is the result of the imaginary scenario of interethnic consummation that the Japanese hospital owner has arranged for him *in the first place*.[27] Chŏngnam certainly expresses qualms about following the path of prearranged marriage, but his reluctance is rooted in his inability to know more about the event. His wariness is never about who he is going to marry, as the ethnic identity of the bride never becomes an issue for him. Thus his consummation with the Japanese woman, albeit in necrophilic practice, fulfills not only what the hospital owner intended but, more importantly, what he has yearned for at a deeper level. More precisely, it is through this ideal but also defilement-inducing union with the phantom woman that his desire becomes fully realized *and* perpetually suspended at the same time.

As for this suspension of desire, it must be remembered that this kind of unabashed desire for "becoming Japanese" could not be expressed openly in the hospital, where all staff members were Koreans. That is, the ethnic homogeneity among Korean staff workers meant a culture of cooperation that ensured at least some distinction between Korean and Japanese. The male protagonist Chŏngnam is portrayed as a member of this tight Korean ethnic circle. Even though he is destined to become a "Japanese man" through marriage, a social marker separates him from fully acquiring Japanese ethnic membership.[28] Seen in this context, his fantasy of consummation with a Japanese woman is a projection of his desire to earn the recognition of those in power: the Japanese. The problem is that what is pictured as benevolent authority, as embodied in the hospital owner, is already in peril. Her daughter's death does not signify simply a loss for her family; rather, it marks an irreparable dent in the owner's aura of authority that makes it impossible for her to sustain this harmonious and self-contained microcosmic world. The owner's endeavor to keep the secret of her daughter's death thus reflects the far-reaching ramifications of a larger order in trouble.

From Chŏngnam's viewpoint, not knowing the truth of the matter means that he can still believe in the colonial scenario of ethnic integration that he yearns for and has willfully accepted. Although the supernatural spell unleashes his true desire, the fact that this is unknowable to Chŏngnam leads him to develop his own unique scenario of perversion and self-victimization. The moral culpability of the owner recedes from view, and the blame is placed solely on the female specter, Aoi. The film's epilogue is Chŏngnam's effort to construct and complete the scenario of perversion, according to which he is a victim of uncontrollable forces and commands.[29] When Chŏngnam confronts the ghost figure of Aoi at the end, Chŏngnam accuses Aoi of making his a life one of loneliness and misery. Aoi does not answer. Instead, she remains largely silent, creating the sense that she is an unfathomable abyss for Chŏngnam and the audience alike. But Chŏngnam's

blame is fundamentally misdirected. On the level of the supernatural plot, Aoi's mother is the one who manipulates Aoi and Chŏngnam through the spirit marriage ritual. Following this logic, one can see Aoi's mother as also responsible for the suffering that the female ghost Aoi had to endure from her captivity to the supernatural spell.

The ambiguity surrounding Aoi illustrates how the film departs from South Korea's horror tradition where the female ghost possesses a considerable degree of agency in her vengeful actions. Often the social injustice that was once inflicted upon a woman becomes the focal point of the dominant ghost revenge narrative. It is the moral economy of vengeance, with the female ghost being able to exact her retribution, that compels us to perceive and understand the meanings of historical violence and justice. In contrast, Aoi lacks such an ability to elicit moral interpretation; instead, she remains in total silence, offering no room for us to read her inner thoughts other than apparent uncanny sorrow. The encounter between Chŏngnam and Aoi illustrates the protracted ramifications of the colonial power, in the form of supernatural ritual, that burden the living and the dead alike. The sign of mutual recognition finally takes place; however, the moment of encounter fails to lead to a proper historical understanding between the two parties. Instead, it features their inability to confront the historical nature of their problems. They reconcile with each other but are not given power or agency to reflect upon the past injustice.[30]

It is thus no surprise that the film ends with another sign of Chŏngnam's perverse tendency: a grand nostalgia for the colonial past. At the beginning of the film, Chŏngnam states in his voice-over narration that he was living in the safe zone during the height of Japanese imperialism. After the demolition of the hospital building, which coincides with Chŏngnam's death from his encounter with Aoi, the film's epilogue takes the viewer to a joyous moment of the past, the prelapsarian phase at the hospital before calamity struck. The moment is the night of a blackout, a power outage that halts all operations at the hospital, forcing everyone to take a break outside the hospital building. Everyone holds candles in apparent joy and relief at escaping the drudgery of work. The last image of the film captures the dark hospital hallway where main characters are slowly evacuating the building. Chŏngnam follows suit but turns around suddenly. As his face is shown to us, his expression freezes, and we hear his final voice-over narration: a remark that back then he and his colleagues thought everything would last forever.

The peculiarity of the narration should not be missed here. As the ultimate statement of the protagonist, this voice-over narration crystallizes the thought long withheld from view. The statement registers the obliviousness of the speaker, but the word *everything* plainly refers to the symbolic order of colonial rule generally. Furthermore, the disembodied and spectral voice returns to the surface to seal off the meaning of the wartime mobilization era. Having failed to grasp the root cause of the violence and suffering in his story, Chŏngnam now declares the colonial past an object of eternal yearning and fulfillment.

The willful ignorance of the historical cause of his suffering and the sentiment of self-pity form the film's historical view on the colonial past. *Epitaph* employs horror conventions and devices to problematize this perverse way of perceiving oneself in history. Perhaps confronting the problem of colonialism is itself an arduous task in South Korea, where the colonial legacy is viewed only through refracted and convoluted prisms.

Yeraishang and *Epitaph* both frame the colonial past and its unresolved trauma as the source of a contemporary aporia of history. The way the repressed past enters the frame of the narrative is extreme, enabling us to examine two otherwise separate films through the same aperture of analysis. The *sinpa* melodrama *Yeraishang* brings a remarkable intelligence and urgency to the question of the long-lasting impact of colonial violence. *Epitaph* makes use of the spectral return of horror to explore the unsettled remnants of the past. Questions of violence, victimhood, and revenge become complicated and entangled in this highly subjective narrative of fantasy. The film utilizes the surprising turns and surprises of the horror genre to depict underlying perverse desires in the psyche of the postcolonial Korean subject. It also puts forth a rare view of a perpetual state of amnesia and its grave consequences for the proper development of historical consciousness and moral agency.[31]

In both films, we find characters who look back or are forced to look back from the present because of spectral haunting or the eruption of past violence. To be sure, these retrospective gestures and returns have limitations of their own. But regardless of whether or not they advance sound critiques and raise proper consciousness toward the colonial past, they use spectral haunting and vengeful passion to explore what other films often do not: the unsettled legacies of the colonial period and the contemporary meanings of such encounters. These films therefore "translate" time, to borrow Bliss Cua Lim's term, to expose and explore the jarring dissonance between different modes of temporalities. They advance a pointed critique of the centrality and permanence of the postcolonial nation state of South Korea by dramatizing the effects of lingering ties to the colonial order.