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Cruising the Cityscape: Queer Temporality in Contemporary East Asian Cinema

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Abstract

Cruising the Cityscape: Queer Temporality in Contemporary East Asian Cinema

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This dissertation explores the aesthetic and political response of East Asian filmmakers to the neo-nationalism, social conservatism, and hyper-modernization that emerged after the Asian financial crisis of the 1990s. Despite rising homophobia in the region, queer filmmaking has prospered in the past three decades. I argue that over fifty films now form a cannon of new queer East Asian cinema, a category encompassing fictional dramas, genre films, independent documentaries, and experimental cinema. In like manner, each of the six chapters that comprise this project develop through close analyses of representative films, ranging from the glossy productions of Tsai Ming-liang and Park Chan-wook through the gritty indie trilogy of Kim Kyung-mook, to the nearly abstract documentaries of Im Cheol-min. Taken together, these films provide an aesthetic horizon for perceiving the shared traumas and emerging mode of "queer kinship" forged, however precariously, among sexual minorities, migrant workers, refugees and prostitutes in cities such as Seoul, Hong Kong and Taipei. Inspired by the formal innovations of

new queer East Asian cinema, I develop a concept of spatial translation to investigate the ways in which cinematic techniques transform urban settings into aesthetic and politically charged "queerscapes."

A second concept that organizes this dissertation involves what I call "queer temporality." The phrase enables me to assess several interrelated aesthetic categories shared by queer East Asian cinemas: retrospection, repetition, deferral, and strolling. The practices of retrospection, repetition, deferral, and strolling are all counter-progressive movements that problematize the notion of time and space as developmental, futuristic, and teleological entities. For example, in *The Handmaiden* (2016), the repetition of events and the differences it creates in relation to the original event work counter to the heteronormative management of time and the dominant narrative of history. And in *Stateless Things* (2011) and *Goodbye, Dragon Inn* (2003), compulsory strolling functions as a bodily resistance to the logic of development. Ultimately, my dissertation argues that these tropes and narratives of counter-progression are a means to critique the violence of progressive time and the ideology of development for marginalized subjects including homosexuals, refugees, migrant workers, the elderly, and prostitutes.

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DEDICATION

To My Mother, Gwak Nohui (곽노희)

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NOTES ON ROMANIZATION AND CITATION STYLE

The transliteration of Chinese, Japanese, and Korean words and names follows the Hanyu Pinyin system, the Revised Hepburn system, and the Revised Romanization of Korean system respectively except the cases where alternative romanization is already established and the case where the names of Hong Kong, Korean, Singaporean, and Taiwanese directors are introduced (e.g. Boo Junfeng instead of Wu Junfeng and E J-yong instead of Lee Jae-yong). Regarding the film titles, English titles are used with either Chinese original Pinyin titles or Japanese and Korean Romanized titles in parenthesis when the titles appear for the first time in the chapter. All Chinese, Japanese, and Korean names are transcribed in the order of surname followed by given name.

The citation and bibliography of this dissertation follow Chicago Author-Date system. I mainly referred to The Chicago Manual of Style Online, “Chapter 15. Author-Date References” at https://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/book/ed17/part3/ch15/toc.html

Chapter 1. Going Back to Dirt and Smell: An Introduction

1. National Crisis and the Narrative of Progress

On November 23, 1993, *The Straits Times*, a Singapore-based newspaper, released an article on the arrest of twelve men at the Tanjong Rhu district in Singapore, the most popular outdoor cruising site for gay males. According to the article, these men were arrested in a sting operation with "plainclothes policemen … posed as decoys" (Anon 1993). These men were charged with "allegedly outraging their victims' modesty," thus offending the "modesty" of the police officers who pretended to be gay cruisers at the site (Anon 1993). The names and occupations of six men, those who pleaded guilty out of the twelve, were publicized in the newspaper, further inflicting social punishment on the cruisers by public shaming. In fact, sting operations by undercover police had been routinely conducted since the 1980s (Leong 1997, 131). Yet, due to the relatively large number of convicted men and the public disclosure of their names and occupations, this incident soon became sensational in Singapore.

Legally speaking, Singapore already had the notorious Section 377A of the Penal Code, a legacy of the British colonial era which criminalizes consensual gay sex. In 2007, when some members of the public called for an abolishment of the anachronistic Section, a group of conservative Singaporeans sent an open letter to the then prime minister, Lee Hsien Loong, contending that the Penal Code should not be repealed for the sake of the nation's future and traditional way of rearing children.[1] In response, Lee emphasized that the government did not "proactively enforce the Section 377A" on gay people (Lee 2007). Moreover, to "find a better

[1] The writers of the open letter set up a website, www.keep377a.com, to solicit signatures from publics. The website has been closed since the government decided to retain the Code as it was. For further details of the debate on the Section 377A of the Penal Code in 2007, see Tan 2017; Radics 2015.

balance" between two parties, he stated that the government "decided to keep the status quo on section 377A, [because] it is better to accept the legal untidiness and the ambiguity" (Lee 2007). Lee's statement that the government does not actually enforce the sodomy law is untrue, because a man was charged according to both Section 377A and Section 23 of the Infectious Diseases Act in 2008. The HIV positive man, who was cruising in a shopping mall restroom, was charged first under Section 377A. Then an additional charge of violating Section 23 of the Infectious Diseases Act was applied to his case.[2] Section 23 criminalizes the sexual activity of HIV positive people who do not disclose their infectious status to their partners, and the conviction of such activity leads to "a fine not exceeding $50,000 or to imprisonment for a term not exceeding 10 years or to both" (Singapore Statutes Online, n.d.). The Section of the Act was amended and became effective in the same year, which made the middle-aged gay man the first charged under the new law. Lee's deliberation to "find a better balance" is thus already an impossible task. As in the case of the Tanjong Rhu raid in 1993 and the HIV positive cruiser in 2008, the juridical forces wielded their power effectively by both inflicting and circumventing Section 377A. And in practice, alternative ways of policing male homosexuals through different laws that are not directly related to homosexuality were powerfully executed during an era defined by the HIV/AIDS scare and the traumatic experience of SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) in the country.

This dissertation is not about the manifold policies that have rendered homosexuality illegal in Singapore and elsewhere. But I begin with these accounts to foreground the way in which a narrative of progress—the promise of a nation's robust future—is harnessed to heteronormative and homogeneous social mores, while expunging homosexuals and other

[2] See Hor 2012.

minorities as criminally "backwards." When Lee defends his decision to "stay one step behind the frontline of change," for instance, he refers to Singapore's economic, technological, and educational progress (Lee 2007). According to Lee, "when it comes to issues like the economy, technology, [and] education, [Singapore] better stay ahead of the game," while, in terms of what he calls "moral values," Singapore should "watch how things work out elsewhere before [they] make any irrevocable moves" for the sake of "a more successful, happier, more harmonious society" (Lee 2007). Here, two progressive temporalities clash with one another: the national time of Singapore that imagines financial (economy), industrial (technology), and reproductive (education) progress; and the cultural time of homosexuals "elsewhere," or in Western countries, that should be deferred for Singaporean society. To realize "a more successful, happier, more harmonious society," the progression of the latter should remain in an indefinite deferral (Lee 2007). And those who practice non-normative sexuality cannot and should not belong to "a more successful, happier, more harmonious society." Ostensibly, Lee seems to gauge traditional Asian values against more progressive ideas of Western countries. What he means by "how things work out elsewhere" is in fact to show how "marriage as an institution is dead. … the majority of children are born out of wedlock and live in families where the father and the mother are not the husband and wife" (Lee 2007). Yet, considering that the backlash against the then emerging institutional recognition of same sex marriage was not an Asian issue, but one affecting "elsewhere[s]" even more, the target of his criticism is the non-traditional family formation rather than Western countries, or that ambiguous "elsewhere." Thus, what is actually competing here is not the banal cultural clash between the East and the West. It is more precisely a tension between a national temporality of progress that supports reproduction, national prosperity, and development, and what can be best termed as a queer temporality that turns various foundational

institutions of a nation-state "backwards." The gay men whose names and occupations were publicized in both the Tanjong Rhu and the shopping mall restroom incident are in this sense not expelled to the ambiguous space called "elsewhere" but symbolically absorbed back into society as a model of national shame and backwardness and as an emblem of an indefinite deferral. Narrating queerness in the midst of this dominant national discourse of progress thus always requires "going back."

The nation-state's emphasis on the narrative of progress is, of course, not exclusive to Singapore. Indeed, East Asia during the 1990s was significantly marked by futuristic visions and narratives of progress. For instance, on July 1st, 1997, Chris Patten, the last governor of Hong Kong, delivered his final public speech about Hong Kong's handover to mainland China. While appreciating the resilience of Hong Kong citizens in embracing a new post-colonial era, his speech is rife with optimistic visions:

> I have no doubt that, with people here holding on to these values which they cherish, Hong Kong's star will continue to climb. Hong Kong's values are decent values. They are universal values. They are the values of the future in Asia as elsewhere, a future in which the happiest and the richest communities, and the most confident and the most stable too, will be those that best combine political liberty and economic freedom as we do here today (Patten 1997).

By using such terms as "star," "climb," and "future," Patten reaffirms a national temporality of progress previously manifest in the rhetoric of colonial governance. Though Patten wishes for a future of Hong Kong with "political liberty and economic freedom," Hong Kong was not in fact liberated from colonial powers. Rather, as Rey Chow aptly observes, it was "handed over to a

new colonial power called 'its mother country'" (Chow 1993, 23).[3] Despite this irrevocable otherness of Hong Kong that is neither Chinese nor Western, many unresolved issues and anxieties surrounding Hong Kong's handover to mainland China in 1997 were easily glossed over by the anticipation of an ambiguous but "happy" future and the promise of national prosperity. Ironically, three months later, the Hong Kong stock market irrevocably dropped with the onset of the Asian financial crisis.

Even as the financial crisis struck the whole of East Asia, the promise of a progressive future functioned as a panacea. Following the IMF (International Monetary Fund) bailout in 1997, now commonly regarded as one of the most humiliating incidents in contemporary South Korean history, the then president-elect of South Korea, Kim Dae-jung, urged his nationals to "take powerful strides forward, overcoming the trials that are obstructing our [*sic*] path …. [and to] make a new leap forward" (Kim 1998). Upon Kim's inauguration, Korean nationals voluntarily donated their gold or other gems such as rings and necklaces to the government so that the Korean government could pay the bailout debt. They accumulated about 230 tons of gold, which is still extolled and commemorated as the symbol of the Korean nations' philanthropic solidarity and patriotism. The economic crisis prompted by speculative global capital thus ironically offered an opportunity for the Korean nation-state to unite and rebuild their blood-based nationhood. In other words, the vulnerability forged by a nation-wide crisis was rhetorically sublimated into a nationalistic and patriotic call for collective solidarity and national belonging.

[3] Political interventions and controls of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in Hong Kong in the past two decades have catalysed public backlash and mobilization, including the landmark public demonstration called the Umbrella Movement in 2014. The political instability and counter-democratic atmosphere in post-colonial Hong Kong are instantiated by several incidents, including the abduction of the defiant booksellers in Hong Kong by the PRC authorities in 2015, the disqualification of young pro-democratic legislators in the parliament in 2017, and the proposed extradition bill in 2019.

Amidst the national mandate to move forward to a better future, the trope of backwardness should always be deferred or negated. In the same year, when South Korea's economic struggle was in its incipient state, the new Child and Youth Protection Act was introduced and promulgated, specifying homosexuality as having a harmful impact on children and juveniles.[4] This legal move regulating sexual minorities can be regarded as public backlash against the then increasing visibility of LGBT communities because, as in the case in Singapore, "protecting" children is the most powerful means of drawing public attention. The technology of manifesting national temporality takes different forms but, in its teleological narratives, a national temporality propagates the discourse of progress and sustainability, enhancing heteroreproductive fantasies. More often than not, children and "traditional" family values are favorite expressions for defying any non-normative moves. And particularly in times of national crisis, such as the pan-Asian financial crisis, the H1N1 pandemic, or HIV/AIDS outbreaks, the rhetoric of national temporality is yoked forcefully to the narrative of progress.

2. The Dirt and Smell of Tanjong Rhu

A year after Lee's statement, and fifteen years after the Tanjong Rhu incident, the almost forgotten incident was made into a short film titled *Tanjong Rhu* (Conglinwan, 2009) by the then recent film school graduate, Boo Junfeng, who is now one of the very few openly gay directors in Singapore.[5] The film reenacts the day's police raids through a mockumentary style storytelling and fake interviews. The main character of the film, whose name was publicized in the news, is now interviewed by two journalists. Through flashback scenes, we learn that one of the

[4] Following the official advice by the National Human Rights Commission in 2003, the act was amended in the following year and excluded the homosexuality as a harmful element.
[5] The film was originally made in 2008 and released in 2009.

journalists, now recording the interview, was a former military officer who met the interviewee at the site, and luckily escaped the raid that night. The flashback scene shows an intimacy built between the two men, however brief, and hints that the former officer is a closeted gay man. At the moment the two men kiss each other, however, the man, who is now confessing as an interviewee, suddenly leaves the journalist-turned officer. He shortly runs into another man without knowing that he is in fact an undercover policeman; the interviewee is thus caught in the trap, and eventually becomes one of the victims of the raid. The film reconstructs the incident through visual storytelling of the interviewee. On the other hand, as a closeted gay, who felt both affection and sympathy toward the interviewee, the male journalist is now filled with an irrevocable feeling of guilt as a "survivor." When the male journalist clips a pin mic on the collar of the interviewee, it is recorded by his camera. In this brief shot, the proximity of the two men within the frame becomes a visual repetition of their first encounter at the Tanjong Rhu district, in which both characters build transient intimacy and then fail to develop it into a meaningful relationship.

The recorded footage of preparing the interview thus becomes a reenactment of the intimacy of the now disappeared cruising site. On the visual level, the film shows only two cinematic time-spaces: the Tanjong Rhu district in 1993 is imagined by the protagonist's flash back; the interviewee's home is set in 2008, where another camera is recording his confession. And these two different time-spaces merge at the very moment of our viewing the two characters in proximity within a single frame. Through multiple layers of framing, the past then returns to become a mise-en-abîme as both a traumatic and intimate memory. As a witness to both the night's incident and the present interview, the closeted journalist moves across different temporalities, different emotions, and different media, traversing the spatio-temporal boundaries

between the cinematic space he is documenting with his camera and another cinematic space in which he is being filmed as an actor.

In 2009, when Boo's film was released, Singapore was commemorating 50 years of self-governance, a period inaugurated by the general elections held in 1959. Through these elections, Lee Kuan Yew, who is now respected as the "founding father" of Singapore, assumed the reigns of the government as the first prime minister. Yet, 2009 was not just the 50th anniversary of the national day for Singapore. In the same year, the first Pink Dot SG was held, which is the annual communal event for Singaporean LGBT communities promoting public awareness of diversity and the human rights of sexual minorities in the region. But the then proliferating H1N1 virus in Singapore gained the spotlight in both public and private spheres. On August 16, 2009, the then prime minister, Lee Hsien Loong, delivered a public speech commemorating the 50th anniversary of the national day of Singapore. Lee's speech addressed various issues, including the country's ever-growing economic success, the triumphant defeat of the Asian financial crisis in the previous years, and the pandemic of the H1N1 virus in the region. He contends that Singapore has integrated their people, "[enabling] all communities to move ahead" (Lee 2009). What does he mean by "[moving] ahead" in the times of national emergency, when the paranoia over the deadly influenza permeated all the Singaporean communities? Lee's remedy, though only through verbal speech, for the death-stricken nation-state is to "go back" to the past.

> We will start where it all began, with the Singapore River. This is what it looked like—lots of dirt. I am afraid I cannot bring the smell with me to show you. … There were coolies on the Singapore River slogging away, carrying heavy loads, rubber, copra, rice from the tongkangs to the godowns and back, slogging for a better life for themselves, at the same time the basis of prosperity for Singapore's entrepot. Today this is all gone. The

> river has become transformed. The skyline has changed. ... Boat Quay has no more coolies. You go there to enjoy yourself and have a drink, vibrantly. … Housing has completely changed. Singaporeans used to live in terrible living conditions (Lee 2009).

In this eloquent speech, Lee ostensibly attempts to appreciate the enormous contribution of migrant workers in the past. But the way he addresses the past in his speech is rhetorically astute and manipulative. As Singapore was one of the most affected countries when SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) broke out and claimed the lives of 33 people in 2003, the outbreak of the H1N1 influenza in 2009 was more than just a temporary health concern; though Singapore was in the midst of horror and paranoia originating from the H1N1 influenza pandemic, Lee assured his nationals of the futuristic visions their "harmonious" country promotes. More than two-thirds of the statement is full of Singapore's unity and resilience in the face of economic challenges and health concerns prompted by the influenza pandemic. In the speech, Lee constantly associates this harmonious racial and religious background of the state with national progress, assuaging anxiety over the infection of disease and possible death through a nationalistic rhetoric that appropriates the past in service of the future. Though recognizing the toil and labor of migrant workers in the current prosperity of Singapore, Lee's urge to "go back" to the past is soon overshadowed by his vision of current and future progress. Lee uses the tropes of dirt and stink when comparing the past with the state's progress. The economic contribution of coolies in the past is rhetorically disparaged with their "terrible living conditions" in "lots of dirt" that reeks with a horrible stench. The productivity of migrant workers is extolled even as their living standards are equally disparaged; the relatively poorer conditions of the nation-state in the past is commemorated, even as they are equally denigrated as dirt and smell.

In light of the then rampant influenza pandemic in the region, the tropes of dirt and smell inevitably evoke hygienic backwardness. Though Lee does not explicitly address non-normative sexual practices in his speech, the social circumstances of the time regarding the tropes of hygienic conditions and infections of disease reveal interesting undertones. As I briefly mentioned above, another news coverage about a gay cruising case shocked many citizens in Singapore in July 2008. Singapore's media reported a prosecution of a middle-aged gay man who performed fellatio on a boy without revealing he had been HIV positive (Chong 2008). The man, whose name and occupation were disclosed to the public, was sentenced to a year in prison, though the sexual activity he was engaged in was consensual and had minimal risk of infecting his partner. The article vividly describes the man's cruising in a shopping mall by revealing the actual cruising spot and the exact location of the restroom cubicle, where the man performed fellatio, as well as how long their sexual encounter lasted. The article's too detailed description of gay cruising in public restrooms not only functioned as a preventive measure for possible cruising in the future but, more importantly, sparked an associational analogy of gay cruising with HIV/AIDS infection, as well as with its unhygienic conditions. Returning to Lee's speech in 2009, one might say his urge to "go back" to the past already presupposes progress and (re-)productivity; the future vision of which lies rather in the selective acknowledging and forgetting of the past, where "lots of dirt" and unpleasant smells are associated with then prevailing H1N1, HIV/AIDS scare, and the trauma of SARS in Singapore. Put differently, Lee's speech discursively and metaphorically evokes horror of different diseases and sexual deviants that threaten national progress in terms of both hygiene and economy; it is an astute endeavor to divert Singaporeans paranoid of the H1N1 virus to imaginatively extreme ends: a progressive future in affluent living conditions and death-inducing backwardness in dirt and smell.

In the midst of national anxiety and concerns over various epidemics, Boo's film also goes back to the dirt and smell. But Boo's "going back" is ideologically as well as aesthetically opposed to Lee's "going back." The Tanjong Rhu district in the early 1990s was associated with hygienic backwardness, including "lots of dirt" and "promiscuous" cruising by gay males. Located at the mouth of Geylang River, the Tanjong Rhu district had been a barren land with several factories and some bushes on the shore until the 1980s. As the area was included into the Redevelopment Masterplan of the Kallang Area in the early1990s, the neighboring landscape changed enormously. Already in 1993, when the twelve gay cruisers were arrested, the redevelopment masterplan of the Tanjong Rhu district had been confirmed and officially publicized by the Urban Redevelopment Authority in Singapore. According to the masterplan, the Tanjong Rhu district was to become a recreational and residential hub with "urban high-density living along the river, a centre [*sic*] for sports, recreation and leisure, upgraded industrial estate offering employment opportunities, and major fringe commercial centres [*sic*] serviced by MRT (Mass Rapid Transit)" (Urban Redevelopment Authority 1993, 16).

Interestingly, the film, *Tanjong Rhu*, never shows the district in full scale, though the title itself refers to a specific geographical location. The landscape of Tanjong Rhu in the film does not register any specific site but is rather represented as fragmentary and illusionary. Considering that the district became one of the most speculative areas in Singapore in terms of real estate by the time the film was made, the director's selective framing of the area is revealing. Another interesting consideration in approaching the film's political attitude is its title. Officially banned from screening in Singapore, *Tanjong Rhu* premiered at the Berlin International Film Festival in 2009. When Boo submitted the film to the Film Festival, he added a subtitle, *The Casuarina Cove*. Though "Casuarina Cove" literally means "the cove with casuarina bush," as we see in the

cruising scene of the film, it may also refer to a different object, a luxurious apartment complex with the same name across the Tanjong Rhu. Built in 1996, the Casuarina Cove is a ten-story residential complex that represents one of the landmark buildings in the Tanjong Rhu district along with the National Stadium following the inception of a redevelopment project. Thus, the original title and subtitle create an interesting contrast between the primitive, sensual, and transient Tanjong Rhu and the hyper-modern, affluent, and family-friendly Casuarina Cove. Boo's positionality in regard to these two different time-spaces is obvious. Boo never shows the affluent cityscapes around the district of the time. Even the famous Tanjong Rhu Flyover that connects the district to downtown is shown very briefly in an oblique way; we only see the bottom of the flyover where a bit of debris and trash are messily scattered.

Indeed, what we see on screen is just bushes, trash, and the featureless scenery of the river at night. Following the interview, we see the male journalist silently document the Tanjong Rhu district with his camera under the Tanjong Rhu Flyover. His camera is directed towards the audience, as if we were the objects of the shot. Then, the camera cuts to a reverse-shot—close-up view of debris, empty liquor bottles, and other bits of junk. Another long shot follows, in which the journalist looks over the bushes while leaning on the safety fence that protects pedestrians from the traffic. The static camera shows him slowly walking away from the frame. Then, an intertitle explaining the Tanjong Rhu police raid in 1993 appears, superimposed on the long shot of the bushes. The safety fence in the foreground not only divides the cruising spot and the street but also separates us from the cruising spot, alienating the remains of an ecstatic, intimate, and even shameful past from the current moment. In view of both the epidemic crisis and Lee's emphasis on family values, the mise-en-scène of this last shot may suggest that the cruising site, or the country's dirt and smell, is being placed in permanent quarantine with the uncommonly

tall and wide safety fences. For all these gloomy pictures of the queer past, however, the disappearing and already disappeared queer space is stylistically reinstated in the film through cinematic mediations. Beyond mere visible representation of sexual minorities on screen, the film radically questions the heteronormative paradigm that effaces the lived history of queerness.

Tanjong Rhu reveals its queer attitude not only because it narrativizes the traumatic past of gay males but also, importantly, because its rumination on history is oblique. On the one hand, the film shows an imagined landscape of the area, where both queer intimacy and homophobic state power collapse; it also shows the remnants of the past that is now remembered and archivable only in cinematic imagination. By going back to the past, recollecting memories, and recalling the now forgotten stories, the film then reenacts and reinstates queer history. The film's representation of queer history entails many different questions. Why is it concerned with intimacy forged in the cruising site, albeit transient, as well as on the feeling of regret, instead of more directly accusing the homophobic social structure of the Singaporean society? Why is it retracing the trope of "dirt and smell," taking the risk of being received negatively in light of the HIV/AIDS scare and the H1N1 pandemic? Is it still to be called "queer" when the main plot revolves rather around identity-bound subjects such as gays and lesbians? How does cinema negotiate national temporality with queer temporality? And what national and transnational conditions, as well as cinematic movement, enabled this sophisticated mode of queer representation?

3. Queer Temporality and the Emergence of New Queer East Asian Cinema

This dissertation attempts to answer these questions, because the stylistic innovativeness and political attention of *Tanjong Rhu* participates in what I categorize as a much broader wave of

queer filmmaking in East Asia.[6] For instance, the critique of a national temporality of progress is one of the most commonly found motifs of queer East Asian cinema since the 1990s. I argue that queer East Asian cinema in its current form has developed and taken on a broader significance in the years following the Asian financial crisis. And the chapters that follow situate what I call new queer East Asian cinema as an aesthetic and political movement. The overall thesis of my project is that the new queer East Asian cinema has emerged in response to the normalizing power of progress-driven, development-obsessed national temporality. The counter-progressive and critical social concerns of this new cinematic mode are thus what characterizes its political potential. My use of the term "queer cinema" thus does not conform to its common parlance in East Asia, which is usually identical to LGBT films. Rather, I argue, each director's style and visual experimentation determine the queerness of this new cinematic mode.

Obviously, queer cinema has a long history in East Asia, though it has not always been labeled as such. Whenever films such as *Song at Midnight* (Yeban Gesheng, Ma-Xu Weibang, 1937), *Manji* (Masumura Yasuzo, 1964), *Funeral Parade of Roses* (Bara No Sōretsu, Matsumoto Toshio, 1969), and *The Pollen of Flowers* (Huabun, Ha Gil-jong, 1972), portrayed gender bending and cross-dressing or expressed a nonnormative imagination of sexuality, they surely pleased queer audience members even before the public visibility of sexual minorities. Yet, since the 1990s, the situation has changed dramatically. The incremental, quantitative abundance of queer films in the region is one obvious marker of change. Another is that queer cinema in East Asia has developed innovative modes of production, consequently drawing both regional and global attention.

[6] Singapore is commonly classified as a Southeast Asian country in comparison with Northeast Asian countries. Though the current organization of this dissertation does focus on the cinemas of the so-called Northeast Asian countries, I do not subdivide North- and Southeast Asia.

There are both small-scale and large-scale considerations in approaching the social and cultural circumstances that brought about the emergence of, as well as the relative abundance of, new queer films in recent years. Since the turn of the millennium, independent filmmaking has thrived in East Asia in accordance with the emergence of digital media platforms and the political democratization of both South Korea and Taiwan. The rise of digital technology in film production has enabled a robust ecosystem of independent filmmaking through a reduction in production costs and an increase in technical accessibility. For queer filmmakers who often cannot expect financial sponsorship, this remarkable shift in filmmaking offers a huge opportunity.

Secondly, the emergence of vibrant cinephile cultures and the inception of many different international film festivals in the region also paved the way for the phenomenon. Specifically, with its ever-growing development and global significance in promoting Asian cinema, the Busan International Film Festival has provided a venue for global queer cinema that could not have been screened in South Korea otherwise. Whereas regional queer film festivals, including the Tokyo International Lesbian and Gay Film Festival, the Hong Kong Lesbian and Gay Film Festival, and the Korea Queer Film Festival, have functioned as important venues for introducing queer short films and global queer films that are mostly from the U.S., large-scale international film festivals such as the Busan International Film Festival have enabled artistically ambitious directors to screen their queer films more generally. International Film Festivals in East Asia were specifically important for directors of queer films in mainland China, Singapore, and other Southeast Asian countries, where many queer films are banned by the government or made independently and thus do not enjoy the opportunity of public screenings. In September 1996, for instance, the inaugural date of the now annual Busan International Film Festival, Chinese

director Zhang Yuan visited Busan with several reels of film in hand. He secretly "smuggled out" from China a print of *East Palace, West Palace* (Dong Gong Xi Gong, 1996) that had been banned by the Chinese government due to its depiction of gay cruising.

Moreover, the critical success of queer films by established directors in other East Asian countries encouraged young filmmakers in South Korea not only to explore queer issues more explicitly but also to approach them through artistic considerations. Internationally acclaimed films such as *Okoge* (Nakajima Takehiro, 1992), *Happy Together* (Chunguang Zhaxie, Wong Kar-wai, 1997), and *East Palace West Palace* illustrated that queer East Asian cinema had begun to incorporate directors' innovative styles with thematic considerations, which in turn provided a welcoming environment for queer filmmaking in the region. The success of these precursors is, however, obviously encouraged by the global popularity of the New Queer Cinema in the U.S. during the 1990s. Being highly innovative in cinematic styles and non-apologetic in the portrayal of non-normative life styles, the New Queer Cinema in the US and other Western countries formed a cinematic response to the queer civil rights' movement and the AIDS crisis. In her introduction of an anthology dedicated to New Queer Cinema, Michele Aaron introduces several operating characteristics of New Queer Cinema in the Western countries. She argues that the films of New Queer Cinema first "give voice to the marginalized"; they are "unapologetic about their characters' faults or, rather, crimes"; they "defy the sanctity of the past, especially the homophobic past"; and they "defy death" (Aaron 2004, 3-5). In particular, as we can see in the representative films of New Queer Cinema, including *The Living End* (Gregg Araki, 1992), *Swoon* (Tom Kalin, 1992), and *Poison* (Todd Haynes, 1991), "unapologetic" characters that celebrate the disruption of the normative social order were the most distinguishing aspect of the New Queer Cinema in the West.

Yet, I would argue that its counterpart in East Asia shows a tendency to negotiate thematically antisocial drive with considerations of the formation of alternative sociality or kinship between different marginalized subjects. Of course, any assessment of these categories must be cautious of over-generalization, as there is a risk of "rendering [queer cinema] homogeneous or flattening their differences" (Villarejo 2008, 84). Highlighting what he calls "pulling and pushing" between queer cinema in the West and queer Asian cinema, for instance, Andrew Grossman argues that "the visibility of queer subjects in Asian films in particular has been relatively more radical and less apologetic than in their mainstream Western counterparts" (Grossman 2000, 2). If we limit the scope of queer Asian cinema to those released in the early or mid 1990s, Grossman's observation might be correct. Yet, as I will elaborate in the following chapters, the radicality found in queer East Asian cinema produced since the late 1990s is geared more toward stylistic innovativeness than toward thematic radicality.

Lastly, the diversification of screening platforms also triggered the vibrant wave of queer filmmaking as well as its consumption. Due to censorship and homophobic social structures, queer films were consumed in explicitly time- and space-specific contexts in East Asia at least through the end of the Millennium. In many cases, international film festivals were the only venues for the public screening of queer films. But existing and emerging media playback systems, including VHS, VCD, and DVD, as well as the emergence of the internet, made underground screenings and informal circulation of queer films possible. The emergence of different media platforms also changed our perception of temporality enormously. As Anne Friedberg argues, the widespread emergence of VCR encouraged users to treat films as an "object of knowledge to be explored, investigated, deconstructed as if they were events of the

past to be studied" (Friedberg 2000, 450). This shift of knowledge production is mainly because of the new media's ability to help us to defer, change, or rewind time on the video tapes we play.

Yet, one might ask what exactly separates queer East Asian cinema as a new mode of production from both its predecessors and its global counterparts? And why does queer cinema matter in the context of contemporary East Asian cinema? Just as the term "queer" is an elusive term that defies any clear definition, it is difficult to clearly delimit what queer cinema actually is. This creates, of course, the question of efficacy to view queer cinema as a cinematic mode differentiated from more specific gay, lesbian, and transgender cinema. But in so far as the category pertains to East Asian cinemascapes, I understand queer cinema as a mode of production that engages not only with non-normative or deviant sexualities but also with queer positionalities. According to Alexander Doty, queer cinema differs from gay and lesbian cinema insofar as it represents "the intersecting or combining of more than one specific form of nonstraight sexuality" (Doty 1993, Xvi). Yet, Doty also admits that it is important to mediate between "the impulse to deconstruct established sexual and gender categories and the feeling that these categories need to be considered" (Doty 1993, Xvi). Regarding the term's relation to identity politics, Doty uses "queer" as both an umbrella term and a critically disruptive concept. As Siobhan Somerville summarizes, queer has at least two different cultural connotations that are at odds with each other. Queer is first and foremost "an umbrella term that refers to a range of sexual identities that are not 'straight'"; it also used as a term "that calls into question the stability of any categories based on sexual orientation" (Somerville 2007, 187). This eclectic approach is particularly important in the study of queer cinema in East Asia, where many queer films seek to enhance identity categories and empower sexual minorities. Asking whether a specific film reinforces essentialism and assimilation into homonormativity because it represents

identity-based sexualities, or whether certain films are "queerer" than other films, is thus neither productive nor fair, considering that the discussion about the level of queerness is often gauged against the standard of the West.

What defines queer cinema as a cinematic mode or category is a troubling question. Our failure to delineate the characteristics of queer cinema shares the confusion surrounding the usage of the term generally. As Judith Butler argues, "queer," is still being in the process of formation, "never fully owned, but always and only redeployed, twisted, queered from a prior usage" (Butler 1993, 19). The instability of the term reflects the conundrum of defining "queer cinema"; any attempt to capture its meaning could risk consolidating it into an identitarian category, and thus attenuate its potential as a critically disruptive concept that might function as a "discursive basis for an opposition" (Butler 1993, 23). The elusive signification of the term "queer" also holds true for "queer cinema." Queer involves an "intersecting or combining of more than one specific form of non-straight sexuality"; it embraces a plethora of different non-normative sexual practices that are not actually recognized as proper or even possible (Doty 1993, xvi). Similarly, queer cinema engages in framing the unreal reality of those whose sexual practices resist or refuse the normalizing power of hetero-centrism. Apropos of more traditional LGBT films, B. Ruby Rich also proposes a similar definition by arguing that they can be called "a film of validation and a culture of affirmation: work that can reinforce identity, visualize respectability, combat injustice, and bolster social status" (Rich 2013, 41). Instead of the "film of validation," Rich foregrounds films that "push the edge, upset convention, defy expectation, speak the unspeakable," as constituting a New Queer Cinema (Rich 2013, 41).

Though New Queer Cinema in Europe and the U.S. was a "cultural response to troubled times as well as a breakthrough aesthetic movement" predominantly during the late 80s and 90s,

decades marked by the heightened homophobia in the aftermath of AIDS crisis and its concomitant public oppressions orchestrated by the conservative politicians and nationalism, its success both as an aesthetic work and as a commodity made it "dispersed in any number of elsewheres" including East Asia (Rich 2013, 134). As Barbara Mennel suggests, "queer" in queer cinema "encapsulates 'perverse' sexualities without fixing them into specific identities" and denotes non-normative desire even in the films that "do not include explicit representations of homosexuality" (Mennel 2012, 3). But queer cinema in practice is perceived to be identical to LGBT-themed cinema for most audiences in East Asia. If queer means "being in the process of formation" and can be "queered from a prior usage," then queer cinema also can and must be "queered" from its prior reductive affiliation with LGBT cinema. Hence, as I explained above, one should not overlook the time- and space-specific traits of the New Queer Cinema. What I call new queer East Asian cinema is not just a replica of its U.S. counterpart, but a cultural product that has negotiated with both Asia-specific contexts and global wave of queer filmmaking.

Hence, instead of demarcating the exact border of queer cinema, I suggest we direct our attention to its form and style rather than its subject matter. As Helen Hok-Sze Leung aptly puts the matter, the queerness of queer cinema can be "an effect of [one's] queer reading," and the queerness operates not because the films "represent certain sexual minorities or particular sexual practices," but because "they have a potential to enable a queer critique of sexual and gender normativity that queer reading practices realize" (Leung 2008, 2). As I will elaborate in the following chapters, the deliberate arrangement of mise-en-scène and the artistic choice of cinematography create a synergistic effect with queer narratives. Hence, in the remaining

chapters, I will focus on various techniques, including the unusual use of camera, long takes, static camera, or the repetition of the same takes, as much as I analyze narrative queerness.

As a cultural mode of resistance to the normalizing power of heteronormativity and the dehumanizing process prompted by rapid globalization, queer East Asian cinema has participated in reshaping and repositioning critical space within many progress-driven nation-states in the region. The Asian financial crisis marked a significant turning point in the formation of neo-nationalism and the social and political conservatism in East Asia. Optimistic belief in the government-initiated equity has been quickly replaced by the primacy of a competitive economy as well as the privatization and corporatization of public enterprises. Moreover, the experience of economic precarity caused East Asian countries to adopt neo-nationalism, putting the security and livability of many marginalized subjects in jeopardy.

Under the slogan of boosting global tourism, fostering industrial prosperity, or creating more family-friendly environments, the urban spaces that remind us of "dirt and smell" had to be transformed into hyper-modern cityscapes. The logic of neoliberal and neo-nationalist governance has induced massive changes in cityscapes and the instrumentalization of urban space through urban redevelopment and concomitant gentrification. Yet, urban redevelopment also has affected the non-normative life styles of certain minority groups, as it accelerated the decline of queer ghettoes, including gay theaters and bathhouses. The Tanjong Rhu raid is just one of many instances in which the nation-states police and regulate non-normative life styles. As I will discuss in the following chapters, the disappearance of queerscapes has been encouraged by the national governance in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and South Korea. Mainland China, which was not seriously affected by the Asian Financial Crisis, is no exception.

In September 2010, the Public Security Police raided a gay cruising site at the Peony Garden in Beijing (Anon 2010a). Unfortunately, official records, including social media postings, were mostly censored and eliminated thereafter. The People's Republic of China did not have any sodomy law back then and, according to different sources, the police allegedly raided the cruising site as a preventive measure of possible robbery or theft (Anon 2010b). This incident mirrors the Tanjong Rhu raid in Singapore, in which the police jailed the cruisers under different laws than the sodomy law. The unexpected police raid in Beijing should be understood as a part of an urban regeneration project including toilet modernization, or what is now commonly called the "toilet revolution" (Cesuo Geming), following China's winning the opportunity to host the 2008 Olympics in Beijing. As one can see in films such as *East Palace, West Palace* and *Men and Women* (Nanan Nünü, Liu Bingjian, 1999), public restrooms in various parks in Beijing have served as contact zones for gay cruisers and sex workers.

East Palace, West Palace is directed by Zhang Yuan, one of the most influential figure of the Sixth Generation of Chinese filmmakers, or the directors of the so-called underground films (Dixia Dianying). The film portrays a young gay man who is apprehended by a police officer at a regular police raid of gay cruising in a public park. In an overnight interrogation with a police officer, the main protagonist shares his stories filled with trauma and remorse, consequently affecting the emotions of police officer, who is presumably a closeted gay. The film vividly depicts cruising practices in a public restroom at the park as well as police raids. And interestingly enough, the film presages the actual incident in 2010, as I mentioned above. Co-written by Cui Zi'en, internationally well-known queer independent filmmaker, *Men and Women*, on the other hand, depicts a young country bumpkin who starts working in a boutique in Beijing. The film narrativizes the sexual awakening of both the young man and the boutique

owner as gay and lesbian respectively. As a minor narrative within their stories, there is another character, a young underground radio host who collects and broadcasts all types of "lavatory stories." It is an interesting attitude to collect vernacular histories of people, most of whom are presumably cruisers or in search of deviant sexual pleasure, magnifying the other side of solemn and normative society. The explicit portrayal of gay cruising in Beijing in these two films exemplifies how filmmakers of new queer East Asian cinema endeavored to engage with the lived history of sexual minorities at the time, which is often denounced as the "dirt and smell" of the nation-state. Indeed, starting in the late 1990s, the municipal governance directly and indirectly changed the lifestyles of gay cruisers through different modernization projects: unlicensed buildings were demolished; public restrooms that were not privately compartmented were "modernized"; and street vendors around derelict areas were permanently evicted.[7] Being "'dirty and disorderly' and often seen as symbols of backwardness," hundreds of informal markets were also targeted (Broudehoux 2004, 184).

As in the cases in Singapore and Beijing, the mandate to rearrange and redevelop cityscapes has become a normalizing power to discipline non-heteronormative, "unsanitary," and illicit sexualities, as well as non-conforming, "illegal," or untidy subjects that live at the margins of society. It is no coincidence that a considerable number of queer East Asian films released in the late 1990s and 2000s reveal melancholia about specific urban spaces, most specifically movie theaters, public bathrooms, dilapidated buildings, public parks, and backstreets. By framing those spaces through a melancholic gaze, queer East Asian cinema attempts to reinstate the forgotten temporality and spatiality of the marginalized that were effaced in the course of hyper-

[7] See Broudehoux 2004.

modernization. Queer temporality and queerscapes are thus important epistemes in approaching and analyzing the specificities of new queer East Asian cinema.

Indeed, queer temporality is the concept that puts different national cinemas into meaningful conversations. Queer temporality in queer East Asian cinema deflects and distorts dominant discourse, because it exposes the genealogy of fragmented queer history that has been forgotten or discarded in the mainstream discourse of national temporality. Unlike national and heteronormative temporalities that prioritize the narratives of origins, authenticity, and progress, queer temporality attempts to rewrite history. In his essay, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," Michel Foucault claims that genealogy "rejects the metahistorical deployment of ideal significations and indefinite teleologies. It opposes itself to the search for 'origins'" (Foucault 1984, 77). As a philosophical commentary on Friedrich Nietzsche's previous works, Foucault dedicates almost half of the essay to clarifying Nietzsche's concepts such as origin (*Ursprung*), emergence (*Entstehung*), and descent (*Herkunft*). Building on Nietzsche's concept of "effective history" (*wirkliche Historie*), he argues that "history also teaches how to laugh at the solemnities of the origin" (Foucault 1984, 79). Here, Foucault attempts to trouble the power dynamics behind the term "origin" as well as to find an alternative in the term "emergence." Instead of seeking the politically problematic and fundamentally essential "origin" of events, the task of genealogy is then "[to fragment] what was thought unified," as well as "to expose a body totally imprinted by history and the process of history's destruction of the body" (Foucault 1984, 82-83). I understand queer temporality as a genealogical endeavor to trace how "the process of [dominant] history's destruction of the body" is constituted, as well as to see how the alternative temporality is in constant "emergence" as a counter-force to the national temporality. Queer temporality moves against the normative progression of time. Though it is true that "utopian

desires are at the heart of the collective project of queer studies and integral to the history of gay and lesbian identity," queer subjects in East Asian context have to remain in constant deferral, and their "utopian desires" already presuppose impossibility unless they assimilate into the recognizable institutions such as marriage (Love 2007, 3). As Heather Love aptly points out, "moving into [the] future is conditional: one must leave the past behind" (Love 2007, 9). As we see in Boo's *Tanjong Rhu*, queer cinema excavates what's left behind; it always goes back to "dirt and smell."

Most scholarship on queer temporality concerns itself with the critique of unidirectional progress of history, as well as with the importance of the past in present moment. In her seminal work, *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern*, Carolyn Dinshaw calls this concern a "queer historical impulse, an impulse toward making connections across time between, on the one hand, lives, texts, and other cultural phenomena left out of sexual categories back then and, on the other, those left out of current sexual categories now" (Dinshaw 1999, 1). Indeed, queers and other marginalized subjects queer East Asian cinema has engaged with as its main subject matters have been left out of hegemonic accounts of history. Queer East Asian cinema's thematic and stylistic obsession with temporality, which is not necessarily moving forward but imagining alternative futures at the same time, situates queer temporality as its major conceit. This positionality regarding history and temporality inevitably "recognizes the historical past as a vibrant and heterogenous source of self-fashioning as well as community building" and traces "other kinds of relations—not reproductive, not mimetic, but rather affective and metonymic" (Dinshaw 1999, 142). Hence, queer temporality is a temporality of both relationality and responsibility vis-à-vis the past.

Critiquing the "reproductive" and "mimetic" fantasies of heteronormative matrix on which the Western societies operate, Lee Edelman associates the symbolic and figural value of "the 'innocent' Child performing its mandatory cultural labor of social reproduction" with what he calls reproductive futurism (Edelman 2004, 19). According to Edelman, the Child "marks the fetishistic fixation of heteronormativity: an erotically charged investment in the rigid sameness of identity that is central to the compulsory narrative of reproductive futurism," structuring the symbolic basis of our culture that constantly negates non-reproductive and death-inducing queers. In critiquing the social dynamics of life-confirming reproduction and death-inducing queerness, Edelman relates affective context of queerness to the death drive. Instead of searching for an ambiguous and already heteroreproductively charged concept of future or hope, he urges that the radical potential of queerness derives from its rejection of futurity. Edelman's acute observation that progressive futurity is symbolized by reproduction, as well as by the sacralization of the Child, offers a critical frame for understanding queer narrative as counter-discourse to the logic of progress (Edelman 2004, 21).

But as I demonstrate in the fourth chapter of this dissertation, not every child can be granted the symbolic position of *the* Child. Unless its racial, ethnic, and class register conform to certain standard, it remains as *a* child not as *the* Child. José Esteban Muñoz, for instance, criticizes Edelman's ignorance of racial dynamics. He argues:

> Although Edelman does indicate that the future of the child as futurity is different from the future of actual children, his framing nonetheless accepts and reproduces this monolithic figure of the child that is indeed always white. He all but ignores the point that other modes of particularity within the social are constitutive of subjecthood beyond

> the kind of jouissance that refuses both narratological meaning and what he understands as the fantasy of futurity (Muñoz 2009, 95).

The deliberation on the "other modes of particularity within the social" is in fact crucial to the analysis of the figure of children in new queer East Asian cinema, as several films that fall into this mode portray children either as the outcasts of the dominant social order or as already queer subjects challenging heteronormativity. Moreover, Muñoz's negotiation of queer negativity and futurity is useful to my arguments in this dissertation, as the retrospective turn of queer East Asian cinema eventually attempts to build hope. Indeed, going back does not necessarily obstruct a vision of the future, nor does it obliterate an attachment to the present.

4. Critical Concepts and Chapter Overviews

This dissertation turns its attention to several notable films that are characterized by spatial and temporal disorientation. Queer cinema across and beyond East Asia now demonstrates aesthetically and stylistically innovative attitudes, thus situating itself as an independent cinematic mode of production. Beyond representing certain identitarian groups such as lesbian, gay, bisexual, and trans people, queer East Asian cinema has evolved to become a political modality that challenges the normalizing power of progress-driven, development-obsessed national temporality, as well as the dominant conceptions of humanity and kinship defined by marriage, reproduction, bi-parental child-rearing and the telos of natural death. In short, queer temporality of this new cinematic mode is what characterizes its political potential.

Throughout this dissertation, I repeatedly use different concepts and terms along with queer temporality. As I have briefly discussed so far, in revealing its positionality, queer cinema manifests its temporal concerns. New queer East Asian cinema's deliberation on queer

temporality necessitates reformulation of the structure of kinship, because kinship is cathected to temporally constructed relations between its members, as well as to the regulating fiction of heteoreproductivity in most societies. Queer East Asian cinema's thematic investment in other socially marginalized subjects manifests itself in its portrayal of alternative belongings, constructing queer kinship. In general, new queer East Asian cinema has shown balanced views towards the radical deconstruction of social orders and more socially engaged queer kinship. I also use several interrelated aesthetic categories shared by queer East Asian cinemas: retrospection, repetition, deferral, and strolling. The practices of retrospection, repetition, deferral, and strolling are all counter-progressive movements that problematize the notion of time and space as developmental, futuristic, and teleological entities. In his incisive observation of urban modernity, Walter Benjamin melancholically illustrates fragmented lives and commodity-driven images of the modern city while strolling through the remnants and detritus of the nineteenth century arcades in Paris. Building from Benjamin's notion of compulsory strolling, I suggest these counter-progressive movements on screen not only generate self-reflexivity and socially critical attitudes among those whose lives are jeopardized in economic and cultural precarity; they also allow audiences to stroll through the queerscapes of Asian metropolises, most of which are now perceivable as mere tropes or vestiges of the past. Lastly, I also use the terms, "the queer translation of space," "queer heterotopia," and "queerscape" alternatively. I borrow the term "queerscape" from Gordon Brent Ingram and "queer heterotopia" from Michel Foucault. I understand queerscape as a contingent and deviant reappropriation of public space and queer heterotopia as a utopian space where our conventional perception of time is deflected. Whereas queerscape is a contingent reterritorialization of usually normative space, and whereas queer heterotopia in essence designates a real site, the queer

translation of space refers to the cinematic reconstruction of impossible space. To theorize this term, I rely on Walter Benjamin's notion of "translatability," about which he argues that the translation "issues … from [the original text's] afterlife" (Benjamin 1996, 254). The idea that the originality is temporally redefined through translational mediations, thus that the originality of what is perceived as original is always *nachträglich* determined allows us to understand queer cinema's strategy of reimagining various queer spaces that are now destroyed or forgotten, as well as its meaning-making process.

Each remaining chapter of this dissertation explores cinematic responses to these ideas and concepts. In the second chapter, I explore the inscription of a ghostly past in the films of two East Asian directors, Tsai Ming-liang and Im Cheol-min. For all their national, generational and stylistic differences, both directors document "haunted" movie theaters—historical sites of queer cruising in the metropoles of both Taiwan and South Korea—in order to generate what I call a queer heterotopic imagination. In their films, strolling through the haunted movie theaters functions as a bodily resistance to the logic of forgetting. By cinematically restructuring queer past, both directors investigate the past filled with trauma and shame as a means of critiquing heteronormative time of progress; they also retrace and reinstate forgotten histories of queer kinship by imagining alternative forms of sociality. In the third chapter, I relate the practice of walking on the street to the manifestation of queer history by analyzing *Stateless Things* (Jultakdongsi, 2011), a film by Kim Kyung-mook, an independent South Korean director. In this chapter, I demonstrate how queer Korean cinema as a critical mode of production has evolved into a political medium that questions the notion of progress and ethnocentrism in South Korea. In the fourth chapter, I illustrate how queer kinship troubles the normative progression of national temporality by analyzing a 2016 melodrama from South Korea, *The Bacchus Lady*

(Jugyeojuneun Yeoja, E J-yong, 2016). Building on Sigmund Freud's concept of the Death Drive and previous studies on queer kinship, I situate the film in the context of what I call the "critical social turn" of queer cinema in South Korea. In the fifth chapter, I deliberate on the practice of queer mimicry and storytelling that challenges the heteronormative management of time and the dominant narrative of history. In particular, I analyze Park Chan-wook's *The Handmaiden* (Agassi, 2016), a box office success set in colonial-era Korea, and one of the few East Asian queer films representing lesbianism. Finally, in the last chapter, or coda, I "go back" to 1997, when Wong Kar-wai's film, *Happy Together*, triggered heated debates on censorship and cinematic representation of homosexuality. The controversies around the film and the film itself, however, instantiate the aesthetic and temporal turn of queer East Asian cinema, which will flourish in the following two decades. By analyzing the film's vernacular translation and its concerns of temporality, I trace the "genealogy" of new queer East Asian cinema.

Chapter 2. Cruising the Ghostly Remains: Haunted Movie Theaters as Heterotopic Queerscapes in *What Time Is It There?* (2001), *Goodbye, Dragon Inn* (2003), *PRISMA* (2013), and *Glow Job* (2018)

1. Introduction

On March 7th, 1989, at around 03:30am, a 29-year-old man died of a stroke in an old double feature theater in Seoul. Later, people learned that he was a promising poet named Gi Hyung-do, whose posthumous volume of poems became one of the most influential and most important literary works in contemporary South Korea. Instead of mourning of his untimely death, however, people proliferated rumors and innuendoes about the poet's private life, because the double feature theater, where his dead body was found, was the most popular cruising site for gay people in Seoul during the 1980s. While his friends and colleagues repudiated any allegations about the young poet's nighttime cruising, they couldn't quash the rumor completely. Unfortunately, there is a dearth of reliable information or evidence concerning the poet's sexual orientation. What fascinates me, however, is not whether the deceased poet was a closeted gay or not, but rather, the tenacious vitality of the theater as a locus of non-normative sexual desires and its metamorphosis into another queer site. The theater, which used to be called "P-Salon" by the queer community instead of its real name at that time, continued its business both as a theater and a cruising site until 2001. Then, the building was renovated, divided into many different sub-sections, and rented to different business owners. As the Jongno 3-ga district in downtown Seoul, where the theater used to be located, became populated by poor and unemployed seniors, the first floor of the theater was transformed into a cheap restaurant for seniors in the daytime and a dance club after hours. The third floor of the theater was turned into *Goshiwon*, a cheap and

small residential complex commonly occupied by itinerant workers, seniors without family members, or poor college students.

It is interesting that a once gay cruising site has now become a contact-zone where the sexual desire or extramarital affairs of heterosexual seniors erupt, while at the same time providing accommodations to people marked by destitution and social isolation. This dramatic metamorphosis of the theater demonstrates that repressed queer sexualities, as well as the desire to form communities that exist outside of the social norm, tenaciously survive to evoke a lingering past. The past marked by desire never ceases to haunt a specific urban space—a movie theater—as belated incarnation of queer intimacy. It is belated because the public visibility of LGBTQ communities in South Korea became intense shortly after the theater had closed. It is also belated because the queer dimension of the nonnormative, extramarital sexual practices among seniors in the building, as well as their cohabitation with other marginalized people, can be inferred only retrospectively in relation to the building's history. Addressing the queerness of the former theater in the present moment is thus an act of narrating ghosts.

Many films that belong to the new Queer East Asian cinema, though not literally depicting the sexual practices of queer communities, also retain such elements of queerness due to their association with movie theaters as sites of cruising. It is a facile generalization, however, to claim that new queer East Asian cinema's thematic obsession with movie theaters stems mostly from the shared experiences of a certain minority group, namely gay men; rather, movie theaters represented in these films reveal social relations of different groups of people living under the influence of economic precarity, social isolation, and ignorance. In *Let's Love Hong Kong* (Hao Yu, Yau Ching, 2002), for instance, an abandoned movie theater becomes a shelter for different marginalized people such as a lesbian squatter and migrant workers who cannot

afford housing. The abandoned movie theater, which had presumably stopped its primary function a long time ago, now serves as a home for squatters living in precarity in the hyper-modernized city of Hong Kong. On the other hand, in *What Time Is It There?* (Ni Na Bian Ji Dian?, Tsai Ming-liang, 2001), the movie theater serves as a fantastic outlet of the desire to connect to a loved one who is physically not present in the world. In *Goodbye, Dragon Inn* (Bu San, Tsai Ming-liang, 2003), the movie theater becomes a nostalgic occasion of reflecting on the heterotopic pleasures of the past. Finally, in *Glow Job* (Yagwang, Dir. Im Cheol-min, 2018), we see how queer ghosts mediate the forgotten past of communal intimacy through the detritus of former cruising theaters for the viewers. In any case, movie theaters in the new queer East Asian cinema are portrayed as a critical medium that offers the opportunity to communicate with the traumatic experiences shared by different people whose lifestyles and even lives were jeopardized in the process of rapid social change, as well as to reflect on the collective memories of urban queerscapes, most of which are now perceivable as mere tropes or vestiges of the past.

As I argued in the previous chapter, queer East Asian cinema since the 1990s, or what I call the new queer East Asian cinema, has ardently engaged with visualizing queer temporality and instating queer kinship as a counterforce to the progress-driven nation-states and cultures in the region. In this chapter, I demonstrate how queer temporality is imagined through the cinematic rearrangement of space. My particular focus will be on new queer East Asian Cinema's engagement with queer collectivity in now forgotten or shut-down cruising theaters.[8]

[8] Following the Asian Financial Crisis in the late 1990s, cruising theaters for gay males in East Asia have undergone drastic dissolution. Many different social and historical backgrounds have affected this process. First, the then emerging cyberspace has offered much "safer" and often anonymous environment for cruising as well as for socializing, as the internet-based communities have shaped localization of LGBT cultures at that time. Secondly, the emergence of multiplex theaters in the region also accelerated the dissolution of cruising theaters which were predominantly independent second-run theaters. Thirdly, as I have argued in the introductory chapter, the Asian Financial Crisis has arguably given momentum to the intensification of nationalism and conservatism, as well as to the rise of neoliberal governance in the region, which in effect induced massive changes in cityscape through urban redevelopment and regeneration.

New queer East Asian cinema's representation of former cruising sites such as gay movie theaters, however, does not simply evoke nostalgic visions of sexually dissident practices. Rather, it is more concerned with the temporal critique of both cultural and political circumstances that cause cruising theaters to wane. Two significant strategies of these cinemas are, I argue, the deployment of ghostly characters or narratives and the exploration of queerness through an experimentation with aesthetic form. In the following sections, I will highlight queer East Asian cinema's strategy of situating queer temporality as a response to the logic of forgetting in times of hypermodernity. I will also analyze how this temporal critique translates movie theaters into politically charged queerscapes by exploring the interplay of the ghostliness with cinematic media.

2. Cruising and Ghostly Temporality

Born in Malaysia in 1957, Tsai Ming-liang has emerged as one of the most acclaimed directors in Taiwan since the late 1980s, a decade after his arrival there. Though Tsai's films are commonly associated with the second wave of Taiwan New Cinema, they do not resonate so neatly with the works of his predecessors including Edward Yang, Hou Hsiao-hsien, Wan Jen, or Wu Nien-jen. Tonglin Lu, for instance, points out that one of the principles of the Taiwan New Cinema is that "a film must reflect on local culture" (Lu 2011, 122). As Tsai himself admits, he never became a part of the Taiwan New Cinema circle, though he has unwittingly been associated with the movement (Berry 2005, 371). As the "apparently self-contradictory nature of the legacy of [the New Cinema] movement" is observable in Tsai's films, nailing down his artistic trajectory within a specific movement might risk taxidermizing the transnational, inter-Asian, and queer dimensions of his works in the paradigm of national cinemas (Lu 2011, 123).

Rather, as James Tweedie argues, his work can be viewed as a "spectral visitation by some of the earliest ambitions of the Taiwanese new wave and its desire for 'another cinema,'" thus a cultural negotiation between the already non-hegemonic tradition and the newly emerging visions that push past this very tradition (Tweedie 2013, 205). Addressing the "spectral urbanism" in Tsai's films, Tweedie further argues that filmmakers that he calls the second generation of new wave directors including Tsai, Chen Kuo-fu, and Lee Kang-sheng "counter the more common, futuristic, highly mediated tales about skyscrapers and fortunes rising upward, and … focus instead on the people and everyday structures of life that have gone missing in the city below" (Tweedie 2013, 196). Whether his films contain the legacy of the Taiwan New Cinema movement or are "independent from the New Cinema Movement and independent from the Taiwan film industry in general," this "downward" interest in the lives of people at the margins is epitomized by the two co-related themes: queerness and desperate communal desire (Lu 2011, 126). Even when his films are not directly concerned with queer themes or characters, they are saturated with what can be termed as a queer aesthetic. For instance, in his relatively recent film, *Stray Dogs* (Jiao You, 2013), we see refreshed and non-normative imaginations of home and family. In *The Wayward Cloud* (Tianbian Yi Duo Yun, 2005), the futility of human relations meets campy aesthetics and carnal desire. At the same time, though his films are commonly associated with such themes as human isolation and the impossibility of relations in an urban environment, they, in their last instances, reveal the director's imagination of restoring community, even as this imagination remains a contingent or ephemeral association of the marginalized. In *I Don't Want to Sleep Alone* (Heiyanquan, 2006), for instance, a construction site becomes a communal home for a gay migrant worker, an ethnic minority, and an abused woman. In *Vive L'Amour* (Aiqing Wansui, 1994), an empty apartment

represents solitude of people living at the margins of modern city on the one hand; it also becomes a site of queer sociality on the other.

In Tsai's films, urban space often dominates the narrative.[9] Moreover, urbanity in his films retains both a destructive and generative force; while it occludes profound interactions of human beings, it also engenders opportunities for certain groups of people who are living at the margins. In his analysis of *Vive L'Amour*, for instance, Yomi Braester discusses the ambivalent nature of urban space that causes the "deterioration of memory" in the process of redevelopment while also occasioning a certain reterritorialization in which each character "reappropriates [the space] for different purposes and enacts his or her own fantasies in it" (Braester 2003, 52). Among many different urban spaces portrayed in Tsai's films including apartments, public parks, construction sites, elevators, and grocery marts, this ambivalence can be seen most acutely in his use of movie theaters. Through its innate relation to the temporal manipulation of screened films and the structural particularity of movie theaters, this space becomes the sites of both isolation and communal intimacy.

The motif of the movie theater and Tsai's idiosyncratic play with cinematic time predominate in *What Time Is It There?* and *Goodbye, Dragon Inn*. Both films use the same theater in Taipei as their background. While the former places the theater as one of many places the main character visits or interacts with, the latter's narrative takes place only in the interior and exterior space of the theater. *What Time Is It There?* is Tsai's fifth feature film following *The Hole* (Dong, 1998) and shows a significant change in Tsai's filmography. As a campy musical feature film, *The Hole* exercises different genre conventions and narratives compared to the so-called "Taipei Trilogy" that consists of *Rebels of the Neon God* (Qingshaonian Nezha, 1992),

[9] For instance, Tsai argues that the main focus of *Vive L'Amour* is not on the characters but on the apartment building where three main characters interact with each other (Berry 2005, 377).

Vive L'Amour, and *The River* (He Liu, 1997). While *The Hole* presages the campy musical style of his later works such as *The Wayward Cloud* and *Face* (Lian, 2009), *What Time Is It There?* constructs another sub-group of films that are bound in terms of storyline: in addition to this film, two other films, *The Skywalk Is Gone* (Tianqiao Bu Jian Le, 2002) and *The Wayward Cloud*, are loosely interconnected by the same characters and actors, as well as by the overarching narrative.

What Time Is It There? begins with a long shot of Hsiao-kang's father preparing his meal in the kitchen. The static camera shows him silently moving in and out of the kitchen framed by two sliding doors. Following the three-minute long take, we are introduced to the sudden death of Hsiao-kang's father. The main character, Hsiao-kang, is a street vendor selling wrist watches on a skywalk near the Taipei Railway Station. While his mother is obsessed with the ghostly presence of her recently deceased husband, Hsiao-kang develops an odd obsession with a lady named Shiang-chyi who wanted to buy the exact wrist watch he was wearing instead of the other watches in the stall. She travels to Paris shortly after, and since then Hsiao-kang sets the time of all the clocks and watches he possesses or finds to the time in Paris. As E. K. Tan argues, anachronism or the "impossibility of escaping time" dominates the film's main motifs (Tan 2011, 99). For instance, Hsiao-kang's vain effort to temporally connect to Shiang-chyi mirrors his mother's vain effort to be connected to her deceased husband. In an early sequence of the film, we learn that his mother believes that her deceased husband responds to her by setting the time of clock differently, even though the clock was tampered with by her son. Since the loss of her husband, the mother's sense of time is marked by the ghostly time of the past. Yet, Hsiao-kang also unwittingly lives on ghostly time defined by absence through his naïve belief that changing the clock can build a kind of temporal and spatial intimacy. This argument holds true

when we see Hsiao-kang's already deceased father picks up Shiang-chyi's luggage that is floating on a pond in Paris, thus recasting the time of Paris as ghostly time relative to that of Taipei perceived by Hsiao-kang. It thus makes sense that, in addition to tampering with clocks, Hsiao-kang develops an odd obsession with French New Wave films, another ghostly media of the past.

One day, Hsiao-kang steals a clock from the hallway of the movie theater and sets the time to that of Paris. Stealing a clock here is represented as the manifestation of one's desire to possess an object that cannot ever be reached, whether that object is a living human being or a ghost. Hsiao-kang's futile efforts to live by the time of Shiang-chyi's location parallels a gay man's attempts to have sex with Hsiao-kang in the restroom. While Hsiao-kang watches a movie, holding in his arms the huge clock he stole, a man sitting next to him snatches the clock and runs away to the men's restroom. As Hsiao-kang follows, he sees the man suddenly open the door of a restroom stall, covering his exposed genital area with the twice-stolen clock (see fig. 1 and 2). Though the man is proposing casual sex to Hsiao-kang with his suggestive posture, Hsiao-kang rushes out of the restroom. Interestingly, when the man shows the clock to Hsiao-kang, we see that the hands of the clock no longer move in a clockwise fashion; rather, lingering at the 12 o'clock position, they subtly move back and forth. This movement metaphorizes the man's erection in the presence of Hsiao-kang.

Fig. 1 (left): A gay man is attracted to Hsiao-kang, while Hsiao-kang is obsessed with clocks; Fig. 2 (right): The clock covering the man's erection stops moving forward.

Simultaneously comic and abrupt, the one-shot restroom scene builds what Roland Barthes calls *punctum*, an affective shock or emotional "pricking" that a certain detail of an image arouses because it "accommodates a certain latency" of meanings (Barthes 1981, 53). It is a queer *punctum*. It is precisely the moment that the film's contemplation of time, haunting, loss, and longing is pierced by queer temporality. The clock in the film is a fetishized avatar of a desire to control time, whether the temporal flow of Eros or the temporal manipulation of loss or deficiency. And the malfunctioning clock, which replaces the gay man's genitals, visually demonstrates that queer temporality flows counter to normative progressive time, thus inducing temporal disorientation. Significantly, throughout the film's narrative, several clock-like structures, or what I might call "emblematic" clocks, move counterclockwise. For instance, in the middle of the film, Hsiao-kang sits in a train station blankly gazing at the railroad timetable. In the foreground, a waterwheel moves counterclockwise in our viewpoint. Numerous numbers on the timetable that designate precise time of the train departures and arrivals contrast with the "backward" movement of the waterwheel, accentuating Hsiao-kang's emotional structure. The end of the film presents another emblematic clock. Hsiao-kang's already deceased father appears in Paris and picks up Shiang-chyi's suitcase which is floating on a pond. He then slowly disappears into a huge Ferris wheel that runs counterclockwise. This eccentric movement of time, or temporal disorientation, in relation to the sensation of loss and emotional emptiness is the major thematic conceit of the film. The queer temporality materialized as the gay man's clock in the restroom stall is thus visually manifest in almost every part of the film.

At the same time, the man's coquettish demeanor, along with the huge clock in the movie theater, reminds us that the film is invested in the issue of cruising in both a literal and

metaphorical sense. Hsiao-kang's desire toward Shiang-chyi, whether it is heterosexual carnality or emotional obsession driven by emptiness, is suspended at the moment of the man's erection. In fact, all three characters in the film more or less "cruise" their restrictive time-space, seeking what might best be termed a ghostly temporality. Later in the film, we see erotic moments of all three characters. While Hsiao-kang engages in sex with a prostitute, his mother masturbates with the portrait of her deceased husband on the other side of the frame. Then, Shiang-chyi kisses a woman from Hong Kong that she met in Paris. None of the characters, however, find solace in sex, an act that serves as an impoverished substitute for the lost objects of desire.[10] For instance, the prostitute steals all the fake watches Hsiao-kang is supposed to sell. And when his mother masturbates, the portrait of her deceased husband remains visible on the other side of the frame, creating pathos. Lastly, the woman from Hong Kong rejects further erotic bonding with Shiang-chyi and treats her callously the following morning. Though ephemeral, their eroticism is interconnected obliquely on the line of temporal disorientation. And their respective temporal cruising converges onto the very scene in the male restroom of the theater in which the gay man's huge clock, or his sexual organ, stopped moving forward, thus rejecting the construct of heteroreproductive time. Obviously, the three characters' perception of ghostly temporality goes hand in hand with both cinematic and cruising time.

As modern inventions, movie theaters and movie going practices operate along with the regime of temporal precision, calculated timeframes, and profit-making. Indeed, film screening

[10] All three characters in the film are obsessed with a sort of return: return of Shiang-chyi; return of her deceased husband; Shiang-chyi's trip to Paris in pre-anticipation of her own return (she bought a wrist watch that shows two different time zones). But the actual returns they presumably crave are actualized in oblique ways. The deceased husband does not return to the mother in Taipei but appears as a ghostly figure in Paris, picking up Shiang-chyi's suitcase from a pond. And as the film ends we do not see the reunion of Hsiao-kang and Shiang-chy, as Shiang-chyi remains in Paris. Analyzing the "ternary structure of desire" of Tsai's films, Andrea Bachner argues that "it is almost exclusively in scenes in which arousal happens in strongly mediated sexual (non)contacts that the specter of *jouissance* appears on-screen," and that "whenever two characters in Tsai's films relate to each other, it is always more than a twosome" (Bachner 2007, 79).

is arranged at a specific time and date for the limited duration of its running time, while specific seats are assigned and designated to audiences. Some films are screened during prime times with higher ticket prices, while others are screened only once a day as a discounted matinee program. Upon the purchase of movie tickets, audiences thus voluntarily enter this regulating economy of modern temporality. Yet, this regulated time in movie theaters is constantly troubled by the distinctive temporality of the very medium it incubates—the cinema. Critically reassessing Henri Bergson's critique of homogenous time in the light of postcolonialism, Blis Cua Lim describes this distinctive and ambivalent temporality of cinema:

> The cinema, like habitual perception, reduces time to the homogeneity of measurable space. Both in filming and projection, the cinema is a kind of clockwork mechanism, exposing and projecting immobile photograms at regular, equidistant intervals—say, sixteen or twenty-four frames per second—producing a convincing illusion for spectators, for whom the frozen frames, in rapid succession, appear to move. … Paradoxically, and often very pleasurably, I argue, the cinema can also provoke a critical assessment of modern time consciousness. … fantastic narratives strain against the logic of clock and calendar, unhinging the unicity of the present by insisting on the survival of the past or the jarring coexistence of other times (Lim 2009, 11).

For Lim, the homogenous time of modernity is concerned with the art of controlling and regulating anachronistic practices that are perceived as existing in the past by Euro-Western colonizers. On the other hand, the "fantastic" in cinematic narratives, where "the past is not dead, but instead paradoxically coexists alongside the present," opens the critical possibility of what she calls "immiscible times" (Lim 2009, 2). Immiscible times, thus, point to cinema's ability to deconstruct its kinship with modern time consciousness. The notion of a cinematic temporality

that is redefined through the "fantastic" intervention of the past in the present suggests that cinema, as both a temporal mode of production and a spatial entity, can neither be glossed over as the cultural product of Euro-Western modernity nor be understood as a temporally coherent entity. It is rather a critical matrix on which different temporalities are contested and redeployed.

When we think of cruising in movie theaters, we understand that the "regime of modern homogeneous time" is being re-appropriated according to the logic of contingency, disorientation, and ephemerality. Enacting non-normative sexual desire in movie theaters allows us to view the cinematic time associated with this modern "clockwork apparatus" from a different angle. The regulated time and pleasure of watching a movie, compelled by numerous agreements including the film's running time and designated seats, are troubled by the practice of cruising in the theaters. The experience of narrative catharsis is replaced by ephemeral ejaculation. Cinematic spectacles are supplanted by sexual contact with multiple strangers and bodies in proximity. And comfortable, designated seats are mobilized as restroom stalls for cruising and vice versa. In other words, cruising transforms the whole structure of a movie theater into another screen on which different temporalities are negotiated. Tsai's next feature, *Goodbye, Dragon Inn*, intensifies this contemplation on ghostly time and cruising in the context of the cinematic medium.

Indeed, *Goodbye, Dragon Inn* can be viewed as a response to what Tsai did not fully address in *What Time Is It There?*, that is, the sense of community in cruising movie theaters. As Tsai admits, if time is the main concern of *What Time Is It There?*, then a movie theater is the main character of *Goodbye, Dragon Inn* (Rapfogel 2004, 28). The same Fu Ho Grand Theater, which appeared briefly in *What Time Is It There?*, now becomes the central character of *Goodbye, Dragon Inn*. The film's opening credit sequence is synchronized with the voice-over

narration from the opening scene of King Hu's 1967 martial arts film, *Dragon Gate Inn* (Long Men Ke Zhan). In fact, the first image of *Goodbye, Dragon Inn* is the opening shot of *Dragon Gate Inn*, due to the camera's exact framing of the movie screen. Following the opening credit, we see people enjoying the last screening of *Dragon Gate Inn* in the Fu Ho Grand Theater before its permanent closure, thus finally revealing that we are watching an audience that is watching the earlier movie.[11] At first glance, the theater seems to be filled to capacity. But the following sequences clarify that the actual theater is almost empty, revealing this robust spectatorship to be a mere illusion or fantasy. Following the illusionary opening scene, the camera dwells on the entrance to the theater in a static long take. Presumably seeking shelter from the rain as well as an anonymous sex partner, a gay Japanese tourist enters the theater to find that the ticket clerk has vacated her seat to wash her water glass in the lady's room. The man then sneaks into the auditorium without buying a ticket. The camera captures the missed encounter of both characters in a single frame divided by the doorframe of the restroom.[12] As the man makes his entrance to the theater, the disabled ticket clerk limps alongside the dark hallway of the theater. The missed encounter or failure to achieve one's intended goal traverses these two characters throughout the film: for all his efforts to meet a cruising partner, the Japanese tourist fails to find one and leaves the theater mistakenly believing it is haunted; meanwhile, though the clerk toils up and down the theater to present a steamed bun to the projectionist, her love interest, she ultimately fails to run into him. I believe this continuation of missed encounter in the search of one's desire invites us to entertain another important motif of the film—cruising.

[11] Kenneth Chan interprets this transition as the film's "mise-en-abîme to foreground the materiality of place in the viewing culture that the Fu Ho Theatre represents" (Chan 2007, 94-95).

[12] The same frame is a repetition of a shot in *What Time Is It There*? The exactly same framing with different lighting shows Hsiao-kang stealing the clock hanging on the wall of the hallway, thus suggesting a spatial link between the two films.

Everyone in the film cruises the theater, evoking the coterminous relationship between cruising and the movie theater. In the middle of the film, we see several men congregate in the men's restroom. For about three minutes, they study each other through curious side glances while pretending to urinate. And the disabled ticket clerk cruises almost every interior part of the theater in search of the projectionist. Beautiful and painful at the same time, her distinctively slow and struggling bodily movement accentuates her apparitional status in the film's narrative. Though she is the only visible employee along with the projectionist, she neither speaks nor interacts with anyone in the theater. Her cruising has multilayered dimensions in the film; it is both a temporally and spatially mediated practice. In the middle of the film, we see a seamlessly arranged shot/reverse shot sequence, where the ticket clerk enviously sees a battling scene of the film, *Dragon Gate Inn*. While the swordswoman in the screened film checks the multiple directions of enemy attacks, her gaze meets that of the ticket clerk in the reverse shot (see fig. 3 and 4). The film heroine's agile movement and determined facial expression clearly contrast the ticket lady' motionless spectatorship and emotionless face. Moreover, the dynamic action scene in the movie, enabled by a tracking shot, contrasts the slow-paced limping of the ticket clerk. Yet, in this shot/reverse shot, mediated through the feeling of both envy and admiration, the ticket lady is incorporated with the spectral image of the film's heroine. Her affective and physical inconvenience caused by disability and frustration of love is fantastically sublimated to the martial arts of the film's heroine. As an apparitional figure, as I have mentioned above, the ticket clerk's wish fulfillment is projected onto another apparition on screen, creating a temporal rapport between the two figures.

Fig. 3 (left): The female protagonist of *Dragon Gate Inn* shows a determined face before defending enemy attack; Fig. 4 (right): A reverse-shot of the ticket clerk admiringly watches the heroine of the film.

This temporal cruising also characterizes the other marginal characters in the film. In the later part of the film, an old gentleman sheds tears while watching King Hu's movie and we see another gentleman in the theater who sits in a different row. Practically, they are the only spectators who watch the movie from the beginning to the end, since others leave the theater in the middle of the screening for various reasons. After the screening ends, these two old gentlemen run into each other and exchange greetings. They are in fact the original actors from King Hu's movie which they have just watched in Tsai's film, thus blurring the demarcation between the cinematic narrative and extra-cinematic reality. One gentleman says "No one goes to the movies anymore. And no one remembers us anymore." The two actors, Miao Tien and Shih Chun, reached their theatrical apotheosis in the 1960s and 1970s. Establishing the closure of the ghostly past that will disappear along with the shutdown of the theater, the gentleman's nostalgic comment puts "a final end to the uncanny spell cast by the film in the very act of articulating its affective impulses" through the temporal cruising of both reality and cinematic fantasy (Ma 2010, 118).[13]

[13] David Caron, on the other hand, interprets the scene in light of Tsai's personal history of going to the movie. Pointing out that one of the old gentlemen came to see the movie with his young grandson and that Tsai's grandparents used to take Tsai to movie theaters, Caron asks whether the scene is "a hint that the perpetuation of film rests in the hands of queer kids" (Caron 2014, 201).

Even the actual cruising practices of gay people in the film reveals this temporal concern. While roaming around the theater's hallways, the Japanese tourist runs into a mysterious, handsome young man. Following a long exchange of glances, the young man, speaking in Chinese, tells the tourist that the theater is haunted by ghosts. A moment later the Japanese man makes advances to the mysterious man, but the man avoids his approach and walks away. Without any context, the Japanese man says that he is Japanese, and the mysterious young man responds by saying goodbye in Japanese. Kenneth Chan attributes this dysfunctional encounter to the lingering trauma of the Japanese occupation of Taiwan as well as the still effective influence of Japanese culture in the region (Chan 2007, 97). But instead of interpreting the scene as a historical allegory, I would like to contemplate the possibility of reading this communicative dislocation as a cardinal juncture of two different queer temporalities.[14] When they exchange farewell greetings in Japanese, the Japanese man bows to the mysterious man, seemingly showing huge respect. This moment of farewell evokes both eulogies and lamentation of the transition from the ghost of the bygone era to the present moment. While analyzing this abrupt farewell scene, I inevitably think of the renovation of the infamous Red House Theater (Honglou Juchang) in the Ximending district of Taipei in 2000. The Japanese built octagonal theater has long been used as one of the most popular cruising sites in Taipei.[15] After a serious damage due to an arson fire in 2000, the building was renovated to include highly modern annexes. As its

[14] Kenneth Chan associates this "ghosted" representation of gay cruising with homophobic social structure that "[creates] liminal zones of ghostly existence" (Chan 2007, 99). Though I agree with Chan's analysis of the social context in which sexual minorities in Taiwan are situated, I believe it is more productive to view the farewell scene along with Tsai's temporal visions as an overarching theme of the movie. For instance, following this farewell scene, the Japanese man mistakenly believes that a lady sitting in the back row, who had to move to the front row to retrieve her dropped shoe, teleported and is in fact a ghost. He then rushes out of the theater in fear. From this moment on, the fantastic undertone of the film quickly turns into a realistic narrative, thus constituting another "farewell," in this case a farewell from fantastic narrative.

[15] For the cruising practices in movie theaters in Taipei, Pai Hsien-yung's memoir novel, *Crystal Boys* (Niezi), can be an important source. Though not available in English, Zhengzhe 'Eric' Lai's book offers vernacular history of cruising practices in Taipei. See Lai 2005, 39-40.

surrounding area has been developed through the municipal plan of regeneration projects, modern gay bars and clubs began to fill the neighborhood since then, making the district one of the most popular entertainment districts for both national and international gay people. The transformation of the theater and its surrounding environment presages the transformation of gay culture from shame-driven, closeted cruising culture to ubiquitous consumerist culture in East Asia since the 2000s. Whereas the mysterious young man embodies the waning moment of on-site cruising with his apparitional traits as well as his ghostly association with the theater in which he is roaming, the failed cruising of the Japanese tourist reflects on the already globalized economy of queer pleasures and consumerism exemplified by sex tourism of gay males. It is revealing that the "ghosted" figure who is to be forgotten in the shift of sexual practices haunts another "ghosted" site as apparition. The farewell greetings of the two men are thus a powerful recognition of cultural transition. They are not just cruising the theater; they are cruising different temporalities traversing the then and the now of the communal *jouissance* of queer people.[16]

Obviously, the film's narrative revolves around the regretful inconvenience of unfulfilled desire and nostalgia. Svetlana Boym, however, warns us of the "restorative" character of nostalgia as a "longing for continuity in a fragmented world" that inevitably "reappears as a defense mechanism" working as an "abdication of personal responsibility, a guilt-free homecoming, an ethical and aesthetic failure" (Boym 2001, xiv). Yet, nostalgia does not retain the same reactionary valence when it is harbored by subjects who already are dispossessed of the

[16] Building on Georg Simmel's definition of sociability and Michel Foucault's discussion of relationality of sexual practices, Leo Bersani provides particularly interesting arguments about cruising and sociability, where he argues that cruising as "impersonal intimacy" can only be "referred to by the oxymoron of metaphysical sociability" in which the pleasure turns into a "pleasure of existing … at the abstract level of pure being" (Bersani 2010, 45-62).

possibility of restoring the past, not to speak of the future. Indeed, the film's nostalgic undertone cannot be reduced to simple escapism. Rather, the film constantly reinstates and reconstructs the past in the now dissipating movie theater by showing the endless cruising of both actual ghosts and humans who are ghosted by the present. In this process, the past returns as a ghost and becomes a critical vessel that troubles the logic of forgetting in times of hyper-modernization.

3. Assembling Ghostly Remains of Queer Heterotopia

In his 1967 lecture, "Of Other Spaces," the French philosopher, Michel Foucault, introduces the concept of heterotopias as "counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted" (Foucault 1986, 24). Elaborating on the historical shift of heterotopias, Foucault differentiates "crisis heterotopias" as "privileged or sacred or forbidden places, reserved for individuals who are, … , in a state of crisis: adolescents, menstruating women, pregnant women, the elderly, etc." from the "heterotopias of deviation" (Foucault 1986, 24). He argues that the former is now disappearing and being replaced by the latter, such as psychiatric hospitals, prisons, or retirement homes, in which "individuals whose behavior is deviant in relation to the required mean or norm are placed," thus illuminating the interconnectedness of those heterotopias with modernity (Foucault 1986, 25). In the lecture, Foucault sees the movie theater mainly as an example of heterotopias' capability of "juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible," that is, its capability of projecting a three-dimensional space on a two-dimensional screen (Foucault 1986, 25). This trans-boundary spatial quality of the movie theater evokes its role as a medium that negotiates ghostly temporality with reality as evidenced in the temporal cruising in *Goodbye, Dragon Inn*.

Foucault's idea of heterotopia not only helps us correlate ghostliness and cinematic media; it also offers a critical framework for understanding the sociality forged by cruising in movie theaters. Though he does not clearly posit the movie theater as a heterotopia of deviation, in the following passages of the same lecture, Foucault delineates the heterotopic quality of movie theaters in a variety of ways. For instance, as an "absolutely temporal" heterotopia, movie theaters provide a contingent, "fleeting, transitory, precarious" experience of the imaginary space that is projected on the screen, as well as its idiosyncratic sense of time, and its association with non-normative sexual pleasure (Foucault 1986, 26). As I argued in the previous section, cinema itself always enacts different imagined temporalities on screen, deconstructing its own regime of temporal precision. In like manner, the practice of cruising exposes the very nature of movie theaters that generate the communal pleasure of viewing, touching, and feeling the existence of (often) anonymous others who are nonetheless physically proximate. In fact, cruising is a variant of practices inaugurated when cinema first entered the theatrical space. From its inception as a communal space of entertainment, the movie theater has been a heterotopic space of pleasure—a critical social space.

Insofar as cruising is a practice that can reconstruct queer sociality through the mediation of ghostly temporality, then cinematic representations of the movie theaters can provide a heterotopic vision of queer sociality. To borrow Foucault's terms, queer heterotopic experience in the cruising movie theater is always "fleeting, transitory, [and] precarious." As I explained the metamorphosis of a former cruising theater in the introductory section, this ephemerality ironically enables the surviving spirit of queerness even when the very cruising site is no longer existent. Im Cheol-min's experimental documentaries best exemplify the cinematic portrayal of this lingering queerness in and beyond cruising sites. For instance, his most recent film, *Glow*

Job, documents the remnants of former gay theaters, most of which have now been transformed into high-rise buildings, and situates queer ghosts as an ethical response to the hyper-modernity of South Korea. Indeed, *Glow Job* can be viewed as a belated response to what Tsai Ming-liang melancholically traced 15 years ago. Though it is true that the rise of digital technology in film production has accelerated the decline of traditional single-screen movie theaters in many East Asian countries, thus also leading to the decline of cruising theaters, digital technology has contributed to the formation of the new Queer East Asian Cinema by enabling a robust ecosystem of independent filmmaking through a reduction in production cost and an increase in technical accessibility.

Glow Job is a cinematic exploration of the spectrality of queer remains and the forgotten history of cruising, as well as their relation to the film medium. By documenting abandoned or already demolished former gay cruising theaters in Seoul, it interpellates and communes with queer ghosts. Refusing to make commercial films, Im has committed himself to the production of experimental films since 2009. Though the driving force of his films lies rather on the exploration of the cinematic medium and techniques, the motifs and themes he adopts exemplify the critical social turn of queer East Asian cinema I have been theorizing in this dissertation thus far. Shot in a residential complex for poor itinerant laborers, his experimental short *228* (2010), for instance, juxtaposes the miserable life of a Korean-Chinese minority woman with that of the director himself. The Korean dream of the female migrant worker is shattered by the xenophobic and sexist social structure in the Korean nation-state, whereas the director, who is now recalling his encounter with the woman, experiences social isolation that originated from his poverty. The sloppily built wall between the director's room and the woman's room is not properly sound-proofed, consequently enabling the director to overhear the woman's desperate situation and

remorseful life. This unintentional overhearing creates a certain type of association between these two people who suffer from ignorance and discrimination at the heart of the highly-modernized city of Seoul. And by using a reversed shot of himself crawling on the narrow hallway of the residential complex, the director suggests that the temporality of queers and other marginal figures is out of joint with normative time prompted by hyper-modernization.

As a highly acclaimed experimental project, his first feature documentary, *PRISMA* (Peurijeuma, 2013), reflects the director's deep interest in the queer potential of the digital media. The film begins with the ambient sound of a suburban area on a black screen. For about two minutes, the audience observes a black screen against the backdrop of different sounds. Following the black screen, we see disturbing images of glaring colors and scratching lights with screeching noises. This seven-minute long opening sequence was made by accident. One day, the director attempted to record ambient sounds of blowing wind with a small microphone attached to his HD camera. While he was collecting the ambient sound at night, he forgot to turn off his HD camera, which was then tuned to daytime use. Consequently, when he began to process the sound, he found the odd footage with scratch-like exposure. As the opening sequence displays, the film consists of assemblages of mistakenly acquired images, disposable footage, and "useless" digital files. For instance, the third part of the film is made up of seventeen minutes of edited footage borrowed from the cell phone recordings of many different people. Here, the director assembles the prime time or the happiest moments of others preserved in their phones and freezes them into this non-linear sequence. Considering his status as a poor, reserved queer director, who has long suffered from isolation and depression, the assemblage sequence is rather self-referential. The sequence begins with the flashlight shot of Im's cell phone camera. His

camera eye roams around the compilation of others' happy memories, lingering like a lone melancholic ghost.

Following the opening sequence, a long shot reveals the director lying on his bed. A cinematographer is filming him behind the camera, and the director continuously calls "cut" (See fig. 5). Ostensibly meaningless shots continue, and what we see are multiple takes of the same scene edited together, where the director spends a tedious amount of time lying down and getting up. Karl Schoonover argues that lethargic characters in slow cinema who spend non-productive time can be related to queerness. He introduces an interesting question of "how notions of utility conspire against queer temporality, how 'reproductive futurism' demands that queer forms of exertion and labor go unseen, and how alternate forms of living may remain unfigured in mainstream cinematic language" (Schoonover 2012, 74). As Schoonover observes, the primacy of utility values is constantly negated and rethought in the presumably non-productive practices of queer subjects in film such as cruising, idling, and what society defines as "wasted lives" (Schoonover 2012, 73). Not only does the scene portray the non-productive life of the director, the multiple takes showing the "wasted lives" of the lethargic director also achieve a queer quality because of the re-use of disposable or useless footage. Contrary to common understanding that cinema is a temporally coherent medium, the medium depends on a matrix that defies the regime of temporal precision. As Mary Ann Doane aptly points out, the temporal continuity of cinema is "in fact haunted by absence, by the lost time represented by the division between frames" (Doane 2002, 172). By absence, Doane means that edited shots or scenes construct our perception of cinematic continuity, thus suggesting that the temporal ellipsis

always lingers on in the cinematic medium.[17] The "useless" takes that are destined to be edited in the post-production process gain their afterlives in the scene in Im's film, thus revealing what the screened film hides in its communication with audiences. Again, the queer quality of "wasted lives" manifests itself powerfully in the director's assemblages.

Fig. 5 (left): Director Im looking outside of his room. The same shot repeats multiple times; Fig. 6 (right): A shot filmed using a broken gimbal. The camera's horizontal level is not stabilized.

Following the scene of director in his room, the film cuts to a slow-motion scene. The scene implies Im's emotional and stylistic investment in the issue of failure. The dreamlike movement of the camera was in fact enabled by a broken gimbal. Due to the broken gimbal, the mounted camera was not stabilized, consequently creating the liquidity of camera movement (See fig. 6). Instead of disposing of this non-normative scene, Im chose to highlight it by situating it at the climax of the film, thus projecting the ghostly engagement of queer failure on screen.[18] José Esteban Muñoz's meditation on the potential of failure in queer contexts is useful here. He argues that queer failure is a manifestation of willful escape and a kind of virtuosity that

[17] At the same time, Doane's notion of cinematic time echoes the concept of heterotopia in the sense that cinematic time we perceive in theaters "function at full capacity when [we] arrive at a sort of absolute break with their traditional time" (Foucault 1986, 26).

[18] According to Im, the film was initially submitted to the Seoul Queer Film Festival. But the festival organizers rejected the film commenting that they didn't understand what the film was really about. The organizing committee's qualms about accepting Im's film in the line-up of Seoul Queer Film Festival is obviously derived first of all from their biased preference for popular narrative films and also from their point of view to see queer cinema as a means of expressing and bolstering LGBT pride.

certain minoritarian subjects in the dominant social order adopt. Thus, it can be inferred that "a generative politics can be potentially distilled from the aesthetics of queer failure" (Muñoz 2009, 173). Im's experimentation with cinematic failures can also be understood as his artistic vision that "rejects normative idea of value" (Muñoz 2009, 173). By structuring his film with multilayered assemblages of useless images, Im constructs an aesthetic of reutilization, which I see as another stylistic dimension of contemporary queer East Asian cinema.

It is a natural flow of thought that the director has paid attention to the disappearance of former cruising theaters in Seoul. Without catering to the tastes of ordinary movie goers, Im intensifies his interest in queer ghosts in *Glow Job*. The film's title, *Glow Job*, alludes to the illumination in the darkness on the one hand and the blow job in the darkness on the other. These ostensibly irrelative phenomena or actions are conjoined in the context of movie theaters. The film is an artistic result of multimodal projects of the same title. Before the release of the film, Im showed its conceptual ideas as an experimental performance work. By using the actual lamps attached to the only surviving former gay cruising theater in Seoul for the lighting of the stage, Im attempted to illuminate the forgotten histories of queer ghosts in Seoul. Indeed, both light and darkness metaphorically signify cruising. In an interview, Im clarifies that:

> Movie theater is a space where light and darkness attain their significance. … The fact that movie theaters have long served as cruising sites drew my attention. I thought there was analogy between movie theaters and cruising. The clash between light and darkness in the movie theater reminded me of the clash of desires that one would like to reveal and simultaneously to conceal to the end (Lee 2019; my translation).

The film begins with a black screen with the sound of rain. For more than four minutes, we are exposed to complete darkness. Then, the long-take night-for-night shooting without any artificial

lighting follows the dark screen. The camera patiently waits until it can absorb natural light that can illuminate what it is shooting. The long take is in fact shot somewhere in Nam Mountain (Namsan), which marks the center of Seoul city. Mount Nam served as an outdoor cruising site for gays and the transgendered until very recently. This scene thus figuratively re-enacts outdoor cruising through the practice of filmmaking in the dark.

The camera lurks in the darkness like a ghost looking for its victim, waits for the exposure time, and then greedily absorbs light. In other words, the camera or the eyes of queer ghosts are optically "penetrated" by the natural light. In José Esteban Muñoz's terms, the penetration of the natural light is a "ghostly aura, an otherworldly glow" (Muñoz 2009, 40-41). In analyzing the photographic works of Tony Just, Muñoz further elaborates the enlightening moment of our perception of ghostly aura in relation to cruising: "If the eye is sensitized in a certain way, if it can catch other visual frequencies that render specific distillations of lived experience and ground-level history accessible, it can potentially see the ghostly presence of a certain structure of feeling" (Muñoz 2009, 42). As Muñoz precisely points out, cruising evokes what Raymond Williams calls the "structure of feeling," an affective experience shared by a certain group of people that have lived in a specific time and space. To queer audiences that are familiar with the cruising practices around Mount Nam, the filming location already provides an extra-filmic reference.

The camera literally "cruises" almost every cruising site in Seoul city, most of which are now either shut down or even demolished. For instance, the camera visits the now night-club turned movie theater I mentioned in the introductory section. It also shows the small residential complex which used to be the third floor of the same theater. As the film's ending approaches, we see an actress record the voice-over in a recording booth. She dubs the voice-over narration

to a scene, where two girls chill out somewhere on Nam Mountain. The camera then cuts to another scene, where a film-within-a-film is screened in a movie theater. The film is composed of 3D images followed by bright colored basic structures of the same 3D images (See fig. 7 and 8). After the film-within-a-film sequence, footage of a public restroom that used to be a cruising site appears on screen; this footage, too, is rendered as bright blue colored structures that resemble negative films. These blue and green tinted images are commonly called the normal map that constitutes the basic framework of a 3D image.

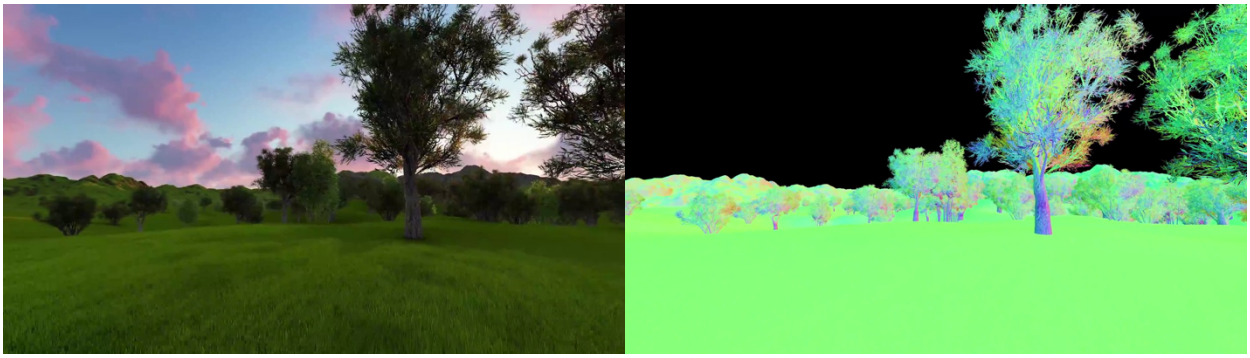

Fig. 7 (left): A frame of a 3D shot, which is the part of a film-within-a-film, *Paradise*; Fig. 8 (right): Immediately following the 3D shot, the normal map of the same shot continues.

Normal mapping is a process of modifying and dissecting either a plane figure or an imaginary object through the use of only red, green, and blue colors, so that the three colors signify the depth of a complete 3D image. Thus, the normal maps of the public restroom and the residential complex are created through purposefully suspending the 3D mapping process. This visual experimentation is another way of engaging with the queer ghost. Being suspended and ephemeral, defined by the incomplete future to come, the queer ghost is lingering about like the unfinished 3D map. Through the eighty minutes of running time, the director assembles and archives the ghostly remains of a queer past marked by shame, self-contempt, and isolation.

Yet, *Glow Job* does not just rest on the melancholic remembrance of vernacular queer history. It attempts to reinstate the past in the present moment. In the middle of the film, we see

the interior structure of an abandoned theater. It is one of the former cruising theaters in Seoul that closed a few years ago. As the static camera patiently documents the dimly lit theater, we hear the sound of cooing pigeons that inhabit the now abandoned theater. Then, the flashlight of the camera penetrates the dreary space. As in the Mount Nam scene, the light is used as an allegory for cruising. After a series of static shots of the former cruising theater, the film suddenly shows a construction site of a high-rise building. At the very location, where the unknown building is now under construction, another cruising theater which was populated by gay men in the 1980s existed. Unlike the empty theater in the previous sequence, there is no material evidence of the theater left. Though the high-rise building effaces the lived history of queer pleasure, as the brief shot shows, queerness lingers there as a poltergeist. Along with the ambient sound of wind and traffic, we hear an electronic alarm sound, which is the alarm sound of Grindr notifying a new message. Grindr is one of the most popular dating apps for gay males, a contemporary and upgraded version of cruising sites. Here, the director mediates the lingering queer ghost with the present moment.

The ghost is a form of collectivity that haunts specific sites where previous histories are buried, manifest as materialized beings demanding the recognition of the living. They relate themselves to the living somatically and affectively, creating a sort of belonging or kinship. In Carla Freccero's expression, "to speak of ghosts is to speak of the social" (Freccero 2015, 196). The ghosts are then to be understood as a visual manifestation of queer temporality and kinship that troubles normative progress of time and the heteronormative, heteroreproductive temporality. Moreover, not to speak of the metaphorical usage of the term such as "being ghosted" that has long been associated with queer subjectivity in heterosexist social matrix, the mutability of queerness as non-identity as well as the transience of queer practices such as

cruising bear resemblance to the traits of the ghost. Yet, ghosts and hauntings do not only demand our attentiveness or responsibility for the past; they also propel us to a new future, which is different from that of heteronormative or homonormative futurity. As José Esteban Muñoz argues, queerness is "a temporal arrangement in which the past is a field of possibility in which subjects can act in the present in the service of a new futurity" (Muñoz 2009, 16). Bearing the responsibility for the lost past, while at the same time imagining an alternative future, queerness is then an ethical positionality and possibility. Put differently, queer futurity is ghostly futurity that can be imagined through the mediation of disappearance, failure, and absence. It is this sense of futurity forged by negativity that brings queer sociality to the "ghosted" beings. And Im's film deliberately demonstrates this sociality by patiently documenting the remnants of vernacular histories in queer communities.

To better comprehend the queer sociality this film interpellates, I would like to go back to Michel Foucault's notion of heterotopia. In the preface of *The Order of Things*, Foucault introduces the discursive function of heterotopia by explicating Jorge Luis Borges's passages. Describing its specificity against utopias, he argues that heterotopias are "disturbing, probably because they secretly undermine language, … , because they destroy 'syntax' in advance, and not only the syntax with which we construct sentences but also that less apparent syntax which causes words and things (next to and also opposite one another) to 'hold together'" (Foucault 2002, xix). Foucault's description of heterotopias that construct a certain type of sociality through the deconstruction of our intelligibility share the similar vision Muñoz illustrates in his argument about queer futurity. The sociality, (or if I may call it) kinship, that the director finds in the abandoned cruising theaters, also exists on this heterotopic vision of unintelligibility. If the cruising theater is a heterotopia, then it is not only because the place accommodates "individuals

whose behavior is deviant in relation to the required mean or norm are placed," but more importantly, because it undoes our common belief that sociality and kinship can be achieved only through the intelligible and recognizable institutions such as home, marriage, schools, or workplaces (Foucault 1986, 25).

Whereas Tsai Ming-liang's *Goodbye, Dragon Inn* fills the movie theater with the presence of cruising ghosts, ghosts in both literal and metaphorical sense, *Glow Job* contemplates such issues as loss, forgetting, and community through the absence of ghosts. Yet, before the closure of the film, the director obviously attempts to show a materialized form of the ghost. At the end of *Glow Job*, we see the alternating illumination of red, green, and blue colors, and simultaneously hear the alarm sound of the gay dating app. The red, green, and blue colors that stand for incompleteness or failure are shown as an illuminating flashlight along with the present moment of online gay cruising. Then, the film ends with an extreme close up shot of a spectator's eyes in a dark movie theater. Without any equipment that assists nighttime filming in the darkness, this closing shot transports us back to the early 2000s, the last moment of gay cruising theater where transient queer intimacies were formed in complete darkness. The sensory function of our eyes and ears are attuned to the ghostly moment of a long gone past. With its intentionally arranged low-resolution and the grotesque close-up shot, the closing shot reveals the eyes of the ghost whom we can now perceive only through cinematic mediation.

The ghost is a materialized residue of the past. Lingering around a specific place, it refuses to go back to the other space to which it is supposed to belong. It is returning. As Jacques Derrida reminds us, ghosts involve "a question of repetition, [because] a specter is always a *revenant*. One cannot control its comings and goings because it *begins by coming back*" (Derrida 2006, 11; italics in original). It warns us not to forget by getting us tensed up. As an absolute

other, its presence makes us shudder and wonder why it is in our world. The ghost thus always occasions not only anxiety but also reflections on its existence as well as our own. We ask ourselves: what kind of grudge brought the ghost back to our world? What does it demand? And why does it haunt me? As Carla Freccero aptly puts, "the ghost comes back because there is something unfinished" and its demand "engenders a certain responsibility" (Freccero 2015, 196). With this reflection on responsibility, Freccero suggests the concept of spectrality as a relational field between the past and the present, where "the teleological drive of heteroreproductive futurity on the level of the form" is being countered (Freccero 2015, 195). Instead of blindly partaking in the lure of promising futurity, the ghost urges us to be responsive to and responsible for the unfinished, unjust past. The ghost thus becomes a medium of the past and the present, consequently forging an ethical collectivity. In other words, it opens up heterotopias.

4. Conclusion

In his short film, *It's a Dream* (Shi Meng, 2007), Tsai Ming-liang re-enacts his memories of an old theater in Kuching, Malaysia.[19] The three-minute long film begins with a dreamy shot, where the narrator as a young boy sits on the floor of an old theater sharing durian with his still young father, and now old mother, thus interweaving the past memories of his young father and the narrator himself with the present portrait of his old mother. Then another shot follows, where the portrait picture of narrator's deceased grandmother, the narrator, his young father, and his old mother all occupy each of their seats and watch a movie. The movie theater in this short film thus functions as a materialized occasion in which one's memory of the past revives and return

[19] The film is a segment of an anthology film titled, *To Each His Own Cinema* (Chacun Son Cinéma: Une Déclaration d'Amour au Grand Ecran, 2017), which was a compilation of short films by acclaimed international directors to celebrate the 60th anniversary of the Cannes International Film Festival as well as to commemorate Italian director, Federico Fellini.

as ghostly collectivity. Yet, the film goes beyond the materialization of one's familial intimacy. The next shot shows a Chinese-Malay lady shares her skewered pears with a Malay man sitting behind her, who is obviously a total stranger to her, while watching a movie in the same theater. In the director's memory, the movie theater is represented as a heterotopia inhabited by people of different ethnicities, gender, cultural backgrounds, and ages; it is also a locus of belonging or alternative kinship that, as a distant past, can only be imagined belatedly in the present moment.

As my earlier discussions of movie theaters and haunting in the films of two East Asian directors illustrate, queer East Asian cinema has engaged with queer ghosts as a counterforce to the progressive time and the lure of forgetting. On the surface level, these filmmakers' respective approach to the movie theater appear quite different, as they highlight queer ghosts in two different times and spaces. While Tsai traces the last avatar of the then waning gay cruising theater in the wake of digital cinema and multiplex theaters by using a 35mm film format, Im contemplates the same fortune of gay theaters in South Korea by experimenting with the queer potentiality of digital cinema. Pointing out that the "golden age of Taiwan cinema … has disappeared," Song Hwee Lim, for instance, argues that Tsai Ming-liang's "nostalgia for a disappearing cinematic space is partly rooted in the changing materiality of film production and consumption" (Lim 2014, 69). Indeed, the late 1990s appear as a revolutionary period for both queer politics and the film industry. The then emerging queer politics, forged as a response to the intensifying homophobia and the plethora of biopolitical discourses surrounding the AIDS crisis, situated queerness as a critical episteme in articulating non-normative, culturally and sexually dissident subjectivities. At the same time, the advent of digital technology affected the waning of traditional projection systems as well as the demise of single or double feature theaters. Yet, as we witness in Im's films, a "ghostly aura" still manifests itself in times of digital filmmaking.

Indeed, the radius and scope of ghostly aura have the capacity to expand immensely through the digital technology. At the same time, the films of both directors are interrelated in their critique of the present moment. Current gay and lesbian cultures in East Asia, many of which are saturated with consumerism and trendy spectacles as evidenced in the growing sex tourism of gay people from China, Japan, and South Korea in South East Asian countries as well as the LGBT community's obsession with fashion and well-built bodies, arguably exist upon the remains of cruising theaters. Put differently, the global homonormative waves epitomized by the call for same-sex marriage, homo-nationalism, and gay consumerism are enabled by the logic of forgetting. The ghosts haunting the remnants of cruising theaters in queer East Asian cinema, then, can be understood as an ethical call not to forget.

Chapter 3. The Critique of the Heteronormative Nation-State in *Stateless Things* (2011)

1. Introduction

Despite the ongoing interventions of the state and a homophobic social structure, continuous and favorable recognition of queer Korean cinema in major international film festivals has enabled even the most sensitive topics and the most explicit homoeroticism to be presented on screen.[20] Ironically, the public repression of queer cinema has diversified and enriched its thematic breadth and depth.[21] Most recently, the commercial and critical success of Park Chan-wook's *The Handmaiden* cultivated interest in queer cinema among South Korean spectators. These exhilarating achievements of queer Korean cinema, however, are not exclusively recent phenomena. Rather, the commercial success of several big budget films that portray homoerotic intimacies such as *Bungee Jumping of Their Own* (Beonjijeompeureul Hada, Kim Dae-seung, 2001), *King and the Clown* (Wangui Namja, Lee Joon-ik, 2005) and *A Frozen Flower* (Ssanghwajeom, Yoo Ha, 2008) presaged the commercial potentiality of homoeroticism on screen before 2010. Despite recent big budget successes, a full historical account of queer Korean cinema remains incomplete without an assessment of the contributions of independent cinema to its aesthetic and formalistic development. The financial success of *No Regret* and *Two Weddings and a Funeral* offers an optimistic outlook on the future of queer independent cinema. These achievements might be indebted to these films' "blurring of the lines between mainstream

[20] The internationally recognized queer Korean films since the 2010s include *No Regret* (Huhoehaiji Anha, Leesong Hee-il, 2006), *Fly by Night* (Yaganbihaeng, Son Tae-gyum, 2011), *The Weight* (Muge, Jeon Kyu-hwan, 2012), *Two Weddings and a Funeral* (Dubeonui Gyeolhonsikgwa Hanbeonui Jangryesik, KimJho Gwangsoo, 2012), *A Girl at My Door* (Dohuiya, Jung July, 2014), *Troublers* (Buronhan Dangsin, Lee Young, 2015), and *Stateless Things* I will further discuss in the rest of this chapter.

[21] With that said, one could be reminded that the ban of Wong Kar-wai's *Happy Together* ignited queer discourse in the late 1990s and helped crystalize queer activism in South Korea (Lee 2000; Kim and Singer 2011; Lee 2006). I will further discuss the ban of *Happy Together* and its impact in chapter 6.

and independent aesthetics," while at the same time, making use of the "decreased cost of making feature films due to new digital technologies" (Parquet 2009, 108).

Scrutiny of several recent independent films highlights a need for the conceptual expansion of the term, "queer Korean cinema," beyond those films that deal explicitly with "coming out" stories or that focus on the social acceptance of sexual minorities. Recent queer independent cinema in South Korea has diversified, as several filmmakers have begun to see the issues of queer lives to be bound with other social repressions and thus have incorporated the voices of other socially liminal characters into queer narratives. Lee Sang-woo, for instance, interrogates the heteronormativity of Korean society by exposing the perverse economy of a patriarchal family system. His films such as *Tropical Manila* (Teuropikal Manilla, 2008), *Mother Is a Whore* (Eommaneun Changnyeoda, 2010), *Father Is a Dog* (Abeojineun Gaeda, 2010), and *All about My Father* (Yokjeongi Hwalhwal, 2015) vividly portray dysfunctional family systems and the violence Korean society inflicts on the marginalized. Elsewhere the feminist documentarian, Lee Young, captures the violence against sexual minorities in South Korea with journalistic discourse and cinematography. Her most recent documentary, *Troublers* ambitiously interweaves the past history of sexual minorities with the intensifying homophobia of recent years. The film extends its critical perspective beyond the national boundary by featuring a lesbian couple who realize the need for institutional recognition of their relationship after witnessing the Tohoku earthquake of 2011. As I discussed in the previous chapter, another young independent director, Im Cheol-min, experiments with manipulated digital images and sound as a means of expressing non-normative life styles. His acclaimed experimental project, *PRISMA*, offers the affective experience of viewing moving images. Expressive experimentation with a subjective camera in the film depicts the hesitation of coming-out and suggests the malleability

of any singular identity. The films of these directors mark a notable departure from the coming-out narratives familiar in queer melodrama and the so-called "boy's love" (B.L.) films that portray love stories of young gay male couples which are consumed predominantly by heterosexual female fans.

Among many others, I believe director Kim Kyung-mook's *Stateless Things* exemplifies what I call the critical social turn of queer Korean cinema.[22] By depicting the abject state of three young characters trying to survive in the remorseless city named Seoul, the film suggests that different marginalized groups construct the constitutive outside of South Korea, and that the logic of progress and development the country had promoted should be problematized. Yet, the queerness of both characters and narrative space is made possible through cinematic techniques and styles. In what follows, the first section of this chapter revisits the concept of "queer Korean cinema" and expands its definitional scope. The second section analyzes *Stateless Things* as a case study, delineating how the film appropriates the queerness of national others in its criticism of dominant narratives of development-driven South Korea. The final two sections explore the way in which *Stateless Things* queers the cityscape of Seoul. In particular, the film re-evaluates and deconstructs the heteronormative, nationalistic, and progress-driven cityscape of Seoul by disclosing its seamy and perverse side through stylized experimental cinematography. My interpretation of *Stateless Things* shows how the presence of national and cultural others in South Korea can be re-examined and re-imagined through queer cinema, while at the same time expanding and clarifying the definition of queer Korean cinema.

[22] Initially, I called the shift in queer Korean cinema to engage with various social injustices the "social turn." Thanks to Todd A. Henry's insightful suggestion, I augmented this phrase to the more apt "critical social turn." I appreciate his suggestion.

2. Queer Korean Cinema

In early 2015, Leesong Hee-il, one of the very few openly gay directors in South Korea, contributed an op-ed article to the Korean Film Archive's KMDB website expressing concern about waning public interest in queer cinema. For Leesong, a "genuine" queer film must feature "a moment when its protagonist comes out openly as a gay" (Leesong 2015; my translation). The disclosure of one's sexual orientation or identity is said to be what makes a film queer. Leesong uses both a term that stands for one's identitarian category and a term that defies any fixation of those identitarian registers, i.e. gay and queer, interchangeably. His comment raises a long unanswered question: is "queer cinema" identical to "LGBT cinema?"[23] By gesturing to a conventional gay-themed coming out movie, Leesong's definition confines the radical potentiality of queer cinema to a very limited spectrum, I would argue, and occludes other forms of non-normative desires and practices that are irreducible to homoerotic relationships or acts. His definition, however, reflects the common parlance in South Korea where queer, LGBT, and *iban*, which is a more inclusive vernacular term for diverse sexual minorities, are more or less synonyms. It also reflects the lack of academic consensus regarding the meaning of those terms, especially regarding a distinctly queer cinema.

A number of important English-language studies have attempted to survey this cinematic category. Perhaps unsurprisingly, most of these studies equate queer Korean cinema and LGBT-themed films. Jooran Lee, for instance, investigates a slow but significant shift in the Korean

[23] My use of LGBT or LGBT-themed cinema/films in this dissertation denotes those films that feature LGBT identified characters and thus not necessarily include the films celebrated by LGBT communities or audience regardless of the sexualities of characters in the film. The (usually mainstream) films favored by LGBT people can be further explored as practices of queer reading or queering of canons (See Doty 2000; Dyer 2004; Farmer 2000).

film industry's embrace of what she calls "homosexual films."[24] She uses the term "queerness," as a tool for reconciling older and newer generations in *Broken Branches*, but she never defines "queer." More importantly, Lee focuses primarily on the social impact of "homosexual films" alongside the thematic aspect of films that speak to identitarian categories of sexual preferences to the neglect of their aesthetic dimension and formal structure. She concludes her article with the expectation that Korean cinema will "carry out a great duty … to let Korean society recognize homosexuality not as taboo" (Lee 2000, 281). Put simply, Lee understands LGBT activism as both the driving force and the raison d'être of queer cinema. Though I agree with Lee that the independent filmmaking movement possibly frees filmmakers from governmental intervention and thus has opened new directions for queer cinema, I believe queer Korean cinema's kinship with LGBT activism is not an absolute valence in understanding its characteristics as in the case of other socially engaged independent films that I mentioned above.

More recently Kim Pil Ho and C. Colin Singer have suggested the term "queer Korean cinema" instead of "homosexual films."[25] Their concept of "queer Korean cinema" is more inclusive than Lee's. But, for all their eloquent description and comprehensive historicization of queer Korean cinema, the authors still use queer and LGBT or LGBT-themed films interchangeably without providing a sufficient distinction. By citing Choe Seonyeong's master thesis on Leesong Hee-il's *No Regret*, they argue, for instance, that one of the queer strategies in the film is its "naturalization of homosexuality" (Kim and Singer 2011, 129). Given that what queer politics aims at is to "denaturalize categories such as 'lesbian' and 'gay' … revealing them

[24] Lee mainly reads *Broken Branches* (Naeillo Heureuneun Gang, Park Jae-ho, 1996) and *Ascetic: Woman and Woman* (Geumyok: Yeojawa Yeoja, Kim Su-hyeong, 1976) as primary examples. But the article also surveys the slow change in the production and the spectatorship of queer Korean cinema.

[25] Kim and Singer use the term, "Korean queer cinema" instead of queer Korean cinema. In order to make the term consistent, I changed the order of adjectives in the quotation.

as socially and historically constructed identities" and trouble the normalizing power of identity-based strategy, Kim and Singer's use of the term queer is still confusing (Somerville 2007, 187).

Robert L. Cagle, on the other hand, offers an alternative stance towards queer Korean cinema. Through an analysis of Kim Dae-seung's *Bungee Jumping of Their Own*, Cagle introduces an aesthetic dimension of cinematic queerness instead of a usual account of homoerotic representations. Though he does not labor to define queer Korean cinema per se, Cagle convincingly demonstrates that the queerness in queer cinema emerges not only from its themes but also, more importantly from the cinematic grammar. He detects a "perverse strategy" in the film's narrative structure, showing how patterns of repetition in the film "serve both to obscure and at the same time underscore discontinuities and interruptions in the representation" (Cagle 2007, 289). Such elements as "irregularities or glitches in an otherwise smooth textual system that point toward a misalignment of desire and representability" constitute the film's stylistic queerness and augment its queer narrative (Cagle 2007, 289). The term "queer" in queer cinema is first and foremost a stylistic and formalistic attitude that disrupts or alters cinematic conventions in addition to the more widely-recognized thematics of non-normative sexual desires. Consequently, the queerness of queer cinema does not necessarily derive from a thematic focus on a certain identitarian group of people as its central characters.

My purpose here is not to debunk previous studies of queer Korean cinema or validate which cinematic subjects are more suitable to queer Korean cinema. Nor do I support the idea that queer cinema refers only to those films that defy any fixed sexual identities or any normative (whether it is hetero- or homo-normative) representation of cinematic subjects, ignoring the lived experiences of actual queer subjects in South Korea by clinging to an implicit faith in theory. Rather, I would like to argue that there is a need for more flexibility in defining queer Korean

cinema. In their recent book, Karl Schoonover and Rosalind Galt also emphasize an openness in specifying queer cinema. They argue "over-specifying what counts as queer can place an unfair burden on those living in non-heterosexual and gender-dissident formations" (Schoonover and Galt 2016, 21). Alternatively, they suggest a taxonomic diversity and capaciousness that are "necessary so as not to determine in advance what kinds of films, modes of production, and reception might qualify as queer" (Schoonover and Galt 2016, 14). Instead of confining it to predetermined aesthetic and thematic boundaries, I also suggest that the diversified modes of queer Korean cinema already resist restrictive categorization. Given that more and more queer films are made by openly straight directors, and given that more and more independent films use queer characters or stylistic queerness in the service of social critique, there is an urgent need to extend the concept of queer Korean cinema to match this shift in film production. The semantic extension of queer Korean cinema, observable in *Stateless Things*, is more inclusive and more diverse, and occasions the question: what can queer Korean cinema offer to its viewers? I argue this very question must weigh heavily with us when we assess the then and the now of queer Korean cinema.

3. National Others Mapping the Cruel City

Kim Kyung-mook made his directorial debut with *Me and Doll Playing* (Nawa Inhyeongnori, 2004) at the age of nineteen. Since then, he has made six films and co-directed a documentary. *Stateless Things* is the second feature-length installment of the commonly called "Things Trilogy," which consists of *Faceless Things* (Eolgul Eopneun Geotdeul, 2005), *Stateless Things*, and *Futureless Things* (Igeosi Uriui Ggeuchida, 2014). As an openly gay, dissident cultural figure, he has undergone various hardships including having been bullied by his peers and battling depression. Yet, the hardest obstacle might have been his incarceration. In early 2015,

Kim was sentenced to eighteen months in prison. He was charged with conscientious objection to military service. The South Korean government did not allow any alternative to military service for male citizens until the landmark ruling of the Supreme Court in November 2019 that upheld the justification of conscientious objection. Consequently, more than six hundred males had been imprisoned each year for objecting to service. Kim has continuously expressed concern about the violence of compulsory military service in South Korea. As a pacifist, he chose imprisonment over military service.

Military service supports a significant part of masculinization of South Korean society, and it is also one of the key methodologies by which the state disciplines its citizens. Moon Seungsook, for instance, argues that "the maintenance of the military through a specific method of recruitment [called "universal male conscription system" in South Korea] is … central to the nation-state's sustained claim to territorial sovereignty, and this territorial in turn constitute the very socio-political context in which gendered citizenship in constituted, maintained, and potentially contested" (Moon 2005, 10). Moon further argues that the "universal male conscription system" in South Korea generates "not only a hierarchy that separates women and men but also a hierarchy among men" through the ideological division between the healthy, able, and patriotic bodies and the bodies that are excluded from the military service (Moon 2005, 126). Indeed, anyone who attempts to avoid military service duty is a target of public criticism, and his action will be publicly denounced as shameful. These personal experiences of homophobia, institutional violence, and chauvinistic bias against conscientious objectors might have affected his cinematic representation of socially marginalized people. The noun, "things," in the English titles of all three films, points to the focus in the "Things Trilogy" on dehumanizing processes of contemporary Korean society. By aligning queer individuals and North Korean defectors as

victims of virulent homophobia and ethnocentrism respectively in progress-driven South Korea, *Stateless Things* symptomizes an emerging voice in the history of queer Korean cinema.[26]

The film begins with an extended long take in which Jun, a young North Korean defector, rides a motorbike with his love interest, Sun-hui. Homeless and without a family, Jun makes his living moving from one menial job to another. Sun-hui is his female co-worker at a gas station. She is a Korean minority from China commonly called *Joseonjok*. As an undocumented migrant worker, she experiences both discrimination and sexual harassment and is chased by police. The opening scene locates itself chronologically at the conclusion of the first section of the film's three parts. By opening with a chronologically later scene, however, Kim suggests that mobility or transience is an important feature of Jun and Sun-hui's characteristics. Indeed, the film's narrative is full of temporal disorientation and ambiguity; the chronological flow of narrative is constantly troubled by the DVCAM footages inserted in the middle of each section of the film. Moreover, as the film's opening demonstrates, the director rearranged most of the narrative's chronology, intentionally creating confusion.

In the impressive long opening take, the two characters are crossing a bridge over the Han River that connects the Gangnam district, the richest area of Seoul with the Gangbuk district, the northern part of Seoul. The latter often refers to as an underdeveloped and old district compared to the recently developed Gangnam area. The two terms "Gangnam" and "Gangbuk" respectively translate to the South and the North of the Han River. The dichotomy in Seoul's cityscape—the richer South and relatively underdeveloped North—reveals a spatial asymmetry of the wealth within the capitalist metropolis, but it also, and more importantly, metaphorizes capitalism (Gangnam) and the institutional power of South Korea (Gangbuk) respectively.

[26] A "defector" refers to those people who have fled from North Korea.

Whereas Gangnam emerged as the new center of Seoul after extensive urban developments and financial investment in this area beginning in the early 1980s, Gangbuk represents both the historical and political center of Seoul, where one can find former palaces of the Joseon dynasty and the governmental quarter including the presidential office and residence. The characters' homelessness, however, blurs the historical and cultural border between these two symbolic halves of Seoul. These characters have a strong affinity with such concepts as ghettoizing, diasporic, or "stateless" and their geographic affiliation is neither to Gangnam's prosperity nor Gangbuk's power.[27] Beginning with the river crossing, the film features Jun and Sun-hui's circuitous wandering in both parts of Seoul. Their mobility is tied to their precarious status, or as the film's title suggests, by their being "stateless."

Their northward trajectory also represents their desire to escape the cruelly capitalist city of Seoul. When the camera pans to follow the motorbike in the first shot of the film, both the diegetic sound and the non-diegetic soundtrack are synchronized. The ominous tones of the soundtrack sounds are soon overwhelmed by the screeching noise of the subway, as the speedy subway catches up with their motorbike. The image of their small motorbike and the huge metallic subway running parallel divides the screen into two different spaces; the two characters' space is inconvenient, slow, and aimless, while the subway is ultra-modern, speedy, and destination-bound. Immediately following this opening scene, the camera cuts to Jun distributing advertising business cards, moving from one car to another in the subway. The passengers take indifferent glances at him. The consumption value of public transportation like the subway is

[27] At least in this film, the characters' status as national others marks their geographic locations. And this in part mirrors what migrant workers are experiencing now in South Korea. Han Geon-Soo aptly points out, in times of multiculturalization, the multicultural topography created by migrants 'display a hierarchical spatial distribution' constantly ghettoizing the space foreign migrant workers occupy such as Chinatowns in Guro district of Seoul or other satellite cities including Ansan or Siheung (Han 2007, 47).

defined by the convenience relative to its reasonable price, at the intersection of timely and regular service and relatively high speed. Jun's use of the subway does not lie in these values but in making a living or surviving. The contiguity of the motorbike and subway scenes creates a nonlinear sequence that portrays the social isolation and economic alienation of the main character.

The second episode of the film begins with Hyeon, a South Korean gay prostitute, waking up in a luxurious high-rise apartment full of shattered glass and traces of a fight. Like Jun, homeless and alone, he barely makes a living. One day he meets a rich fund manager and starts living at his luxury apartment, dreaming of a stable relationship with him. He soon discovers his lover is a married man, which initiates a crisis in their relationship. The signs of violence in the opening scene of the second episode visualize the end of a misguided love affair. The chronology of the second episode begins with the end of the affair and retraces it retrospectively. Outwardly, this second episode seems unrelated to the first, but the figurative affinity between Jun and Hyeon is palpable. Jun's struggle to survive and his economic precarity are conditions that also haunt Hyeon. Whereas Jun wanders from one menial job to another, Hyeon moves from one motel to another. And just as Jun meets Sun-hui, his possible life companion who ultimately leaves him, Hyeon meets his prospective life savior, the rich fund manager who turns out to be married. Moreover, Jun's heavy manual labor in the first episode echoes Hyeon's sex labor in a sex scene with the fund manager.

The three main characters of *Stateless Things* are far from being "ordinary" citizens of contemporary Seoul. As national others to the political and cultural aspects of South Korean citizenship, each character embodies the multi-faceted social discrimination in contemporary South Korea. As cultural imaginaries, the nation, national belonging, and national culture take

shape by differentiating themselves from their constitutive outsides.[28] The nation-state comes to exist by negating what it "unbinds, releases, expels, [and] banishes" (Butler and Spivak 2007, 4-5). The project of national identity formation that excludes racial and sexual others assumes a heteronormative logic preoccupied with reproduction, familial kinship, coherence, and futurity. In this project, the standardization of national language is achieved in parallel with the heteronormative standardization of kinship and family formations. The formation of a homogeneous language community in the process of nation-building creates the fantasy of unified and identitarian subjectivities, excluding the groups that exist outside of this normative structure.

Yet. arguing that language is basically "not an instrument of exclusion," Benedict Anderson eloquently observes that language has the "capacity for generating imagined communities, building in effect *particular solidarities*" (Anderson 2006, 136; italics in original). What matters in Sun-hui's case is that her use of Korean language does not conform to the vernacular use and standard accent of Korean in South Korea. Sun-hui's use of accented Korean in *Stateless Things* thus stigmatizes her identity as the national other. Hence, one should be aware that not only national language itself but more importantly how the language is spoken or uttered builds what Anderson calls "particular solidarities" among the people in the nation-state. Comprised of predominantly homogenous racial and ethnic populations, the politics and culture of the South Korean nation-state have deliberately marginalized other ethnic and national groups. National others such as North Korean defectors or Korean-Chinese migrant workers, as well as cultural others such as LGBT and queer individuals, are easily marked as non-conforming or non-normative. The recent increase of films that feature the Korean-Chinese minority as evil

[28] For the conceptualization of constitutive outside, see Laclau 1990, 17-26; Butler et al. 2000, 12.

characters threatening the South Korean social order reflects this trend.[29] The English title of the film, *Stateless Things*, thus, already explains their marginalized status. Insofar as they are not politically recognized as proper citizens by the state, they are stateless. By not being culturally recognized as proper human beings, they are also things. The film portrays their endless circulation on the periphery of Seoul as well as their failure to escape from the city.

Stateless Things also highlights the characters' status as national others through experimental editing techniques and disruptive, non-chronological narrative structures. The film adopts a dialectical narrative structure. The first episode portrays hardships, discrimination, and the precarity of both a young North Korean defector and a Korean-Chinese minority. The second episode tells a failed love story of a young gay prostitute. In the last episode, the two main male characters meet to attempt suicide. While the first and second episodes are not narratively related, all three episodes are connected by the formal techniques of discontinuous editing. For instance, Hyeon, the main character of the second episode, occasionally appears in DVCAM footage inserted in the first episode. Later, we learn that Hyeon has in fact made the footage. As the director's double, Hyeon directs, enacts, and documents various sexual transgressions. Through the eyes of this director figure, or camera eye, viewers are invited to the diegesis of queer narrative. The footage contains highly explicit images of a sadistic spanking of a woman, a blowjob that Jun gives to a man wearing a black mask, and Hyeon masturbating.[30] This footage

[29] Films, such as *The Yellow Sea* (Hwanghae, Na Hong-jin, 2010), *Midnight Runners* (Cheongnyeongyeongchal, Jason Kim, 2017), *The Outlaws* (Beomjoedosi, Kang Yoon-sung, 2017), *RV: Resurrected Victims* (Huisaengbuhwalja, Kwak Kyung-taek, 2017), and *The Villainess* (Angnyeo, Jeong Byeong-gil, 2017), represent crimes and gang-related activities among the Korean-Chinese minority communities in South Korea. With the exception of *RV: Resurrected Victims*, all these films became box-office successes despite protests from the Korean-Chinese minority groups in South Korea. In responding to the criticism of representing negative images of the Korean-Chinese minority, Kwak Kyung-taek, who directed *RV: Resurrected Victims*, stated that "looking into our society, minorities are implicated in more crimes," further exposing ignorance and prejudice against the Korean-Chinese minorities (Jeon 2017).

[30] The graphic eroticism in the footage led to the censorship of the film. Cinematic censorship has played a critical role in obliterating the emerging visibility of queerness in the public sphere and in reinforcing normatively

seems to be fragmentary and nonlinear, but at the same time it functions as an important synthesizing link between the three disparate narratives. At first, Jun's and Sun-hui's miserable standard of living and Hyeon's relative affluence attained by prostitution seem to constitute a social antipode. But in the footage, their different social class, identity, economic interests, and even desire converge in non-normative sexual deviations. Thus, the film unifies the three different narratives in a dialectical structure by excavating the queerness that all three characters share.

As the film progresses, it develops its queer point of view even further, blurring the demarcation between each character marked by identity, class, and sexuality. The third episode, the shortest part among the three, negotiates the different subjectivities of two disparate groups: North Korean defectors and homosexuals. In the third episode, Jun and Hyeon meet each other and attempt to commit suicide together by inhaling poisonous gas. For more than 20 minutes of screen time, ominous music and sound effects replace dialogue altogether. Jun, as a penniless North Korean defector, and Hyeon, as an abandoned gay prostitute, both desire one another. The medium close-up shot shows Hyeon strangling Jun followed by their mutual caress. The two boys, committing suicide, lie in the apartment of Hyeon's "sugar daddy" filled with thick poisonous gas. Soon, Hyeon recovers his consciousness and escapes from this deadly space. He runs out of the apartment to get fresh air; however, a quick cut reveals that he has turned into Jun. In the final shot, the person we see is a half-naked Jun, not Hyeon, roaming around an unknown construction site near the apartment. When the film ends with a sudden cut to closing

marked sexual and gendered identity categories. Upon the request of manipulating his original film, Kim obscured the fake penis in this restroom stall scene, the contour of which was still visible to viewers. The obscured penis by mosaics has ironically achieved the most intensified visibility at the very moment of its erasure. In other words, censorial practice here has been folded into a sensorial manifestation of what that practice had attempted to obliterate.

credits, the audience understands that these two characters are in fact doubles that ultimately possess one single body yet are divided into two souls.

This ambiguous ending suggests a schizophrenic structure of each character's mind and body. If one survives, then the other one should die. The performance of the two boys oscillates between love and death, Eros and Thanatos, or desire and destruction, revealing in a moment of extreme despair both their emotional bonding to one another and their self-destructive death wish. The original Korean title of the film is *Jultakdongsi*, an idiom that originates from the Chinese Song dynasty meaning that mutual effort and cooperation are needed to achieve certain meaningful results, just as the hen helps its chick hatch by pecking from the outside while the chick pecks from the inside. The mutual effort and cooperation in the Korean title might refer to the efforts, however helpless, both male characters are making. Instead of portraying the successful story of the "coming-out" of the eggshell, the film shows the constant failures of a schizophrenic self who is abandoned and marginalized by South Korean society.

4. Closets and Gazes

French philosopher Michel de Certeau observes that the modern city prioritizes urban development and forces the spatial connotations of the city to disappear into the oblivion of its inhabitants. In the cosmopolitan oblivion, certain spaces that refuse to accept the logic of development are ignored or repressed. The modern city continuously differentiates and redistributes its "waste products" like queer subjects, in accordance with logics of "functionalist administration." The process of exposing the space those waste products occupy can thus be "spatial and signifying practices" through re-appropriation (de Certeau 1984, 94-105). It is never a coincidence that queer cinema regularly portrays urban images and landscapes, especially those of oblivious or forgotten spaces, hidden spaces, and unsanitary or unhealthy spaces. The

reconstruction of space on screen is part of the spatial politics of cinema. *Stateless Things* spatializes the perverse modernity of South Korea, and in doing so, relocates the cityscape of Seoul. If seen inattentively, the film captures various sceneries of Seoul unaffectedly. However, Seoul's cityscape in this film is rearranged and reinterpreted to constantly reveal the other side of the city's splendid development—a queerscape. As Gordon Brent Ingram defines them, queerscapes are both geographical and metaphorical space where "the interplays between assertion and marginalization of sexualities are in constant flux" (1997, 41). Queerscapes are contingent or tentative re-appropriations of the heteronormative public sphere that consequently contributes to reclaiming and redefining heteronormative space.

First of all, *Stateless Things* articulates the queerness of its two main characters, Jun and Hyeon, by using the spatial metaphor of the closet, an epistemological symbol of both homosexual repression and the difficulty of embracing one's self-identity. Yet, the closet metaphor in this film entails neither one's awakening in terms of sexual orientation nor oppressed homosexual experience, unlike its usual connotations in the Western world. Rather, the film deploys closet to create queerscapes in the middle of heteronormative space. The film presents two different public spaces, namely, the restroom stall and the karaoke room, for this purpose. In the middle of the second episode, having separated from his girlfriend, Jun returns to Seoul. Penniless, he decides to prostitute himself to other gay men. His prostitution scene contains lurid and graphic images. Shot in the form of first-person low-resolution DVCAM footage, the scene shows Jun giving a blowjob to a masked man in a small public restroom stall. Hyeon is following them into the small restroom stall with his camera on. The camera first shows a close-up shot of Jun's terrified face. The shot obviously parodies the visual conventions of Japanese adult videos with an intentional voyeuristic look by showing Jun's facial expression

as a queer virgin and the sadistic demeanor and performance of his customer. The camera then shows his customer offering Jun a bottle of water and then cuts to the guy urinating in the toilet. Hyeon's camera captures a moment of both excretory and physical pleasure that this familiar public space can offer. There is no intimate affection. There is only the alternative use of one's body parts; the very mouth that just took in the liquid to sustain one's body is now being penetrated by the organ that excretes the liquid. This activity of water intake and excretion, or the ritual of life and death, is being observed, documented, and digitized by Hyeon's DVCAM. By transposing the diegesis of a film into the digitized world of Hyeon's electronic device, *Stateless Things* freezes cinematic space in a gay prostitute's private collection.

Yet, more importantly, the scene offers a critical perspective on the perception of looking or the gaze on screen. The most apparent dilemma of the audience is it is hard to identify with anyone within frames. There is no fetishization or eroticization of male body. The comfortable position of the audience as a gazer is constantly interrupted, because the camera never frames the whole bodies of the two characters but only shows their specific body parts fragmentarily in close-up shots. Gazes and (in)visibility are constantly recurring motifs in Kim's films. In *Futureless Things*, for instance, Kim uses glass walls to visualize this motif. *Futureless Things* portrays a small convenience store as a locus of human disposability. Adopting an episodic form, the film shows the toils of temporary workers and various injustices they face. Kim begins and ends the film with customers looking into the convenience store's glass walls. The architecture and space of a common convenience store in South Korea are arranged to maximize the visibility of goods. The inside is constantly in service of the public gaze, therefore the visual pleasure of passerby. At the same time, temporary workers in these convenience stores are also rendered an object of the public gaze. The abjectness of the workers in the film is thus illuminated not just

through their precariousness as temporary workers but also through their subjection to the public gaze.

In *Faceless Things*, the issue of visibility dominates the narrative. *Faceless Things* is a three-shot film, in which each shot constitutes a different episode. In the first episode, a spy cam planted by someone records a brutal anal sex act between an old man and a teenage boy in a motel room. Soojin Maeng points out that it is important that the old man is wearing a black mask while "raping" the boy. "By attaching the symbol of 'machismo' through the mask," she argues, the film shows "how the old man attains power and how he inflicts violence on a young boy, which is a replication of violence heterosexual males use when they rape women" (Maeng 2014, 96; my translation). By reading the scene through the simplistic dichotomy of dominance and docility, however, Maeng fails to elucidate Kim's real intention of showing the graphic sex act in the film. Moreover, by reducing the penetrative sex act between males to a violent rape, she replicates the very heterosexual frame which she apparently wants to criticize. In fact, the young boy in the scene is the one who orchestrates everything. The voyeuristic representation of the two men meets a sudden shift when we see the boy take his DVCAM out of his backpack and look into the viewfinder after his partner leaves the room. The suggestion is that his hidden camera might have recorded their sex, as has the spy cam on the wall. The second shot is full of sexually graphic and visceral images, where director Kim shoots himself defecating on an unknown man's face. And in the third episode, we see Kim look into the viewfinder of the DVCAM and slowly turn his face toward us. The absence of any expression on his face seems to accuse spectators of their privileged gaze. Multiple layers of looking are arranged in the film: the boy's DVCAM; the motel's spy cam, which is in fact the director's static camera; the spectators' gaze through the screen; and the director's gaze to audiences beyond the screen. This in effect

frees “the look of the camera into its materiality in time and space and the look of the audience into dialectics, passionate detachment” citing Laura Mulvey’s famous call for a feminist dynamics of visual pleasure (Mulvey 1985, 315).

The restroom stall scene in *Stateless Things* also structures multiple gazes. The man in the black mask is obviously freed from the exposure of his identity or the risk of putting himself in public visibility as a gay, a rapist, and a customer of prostitution, whereas Jun is subjected to the anonymous eye of Hyeon’s camera. Hyeon’s DVCAM implies that we are watching this violent scene through his perspective. Yet, the director intentionally obscures the division of the two main characters. Close to the ending of the film, the audience realizes Jun is an alter ego of Hyeon. Thus, the recording of Jun’s rape with Hyeon’s DVCAM is self-reflexive. The gaze here is not directed to the object of the gaze but in fact bounced back to the gazer. Hyeon’s self-reflexive act of video recording overturns the hierarchy of heterosexual and homosexual, dominant and passive, top and bottom, gazer and gazed, and even actor and spectator. Here, the found footage style that is now widely deployed in horror films effectively conveys the abject state of Jun, who is involved in situational homosexuality in order to survive. Moreover, because the gaze in the composition of this scene has multiple planes enabling the “identifications which are multiple, contradictory, shifting, oscillating, inconsistent, and fluid,” the voyeuristic position of the audience is reversed (Evans and Gamman 2005, 217). This anti-identificatory gaze is achieved in *Stateless Things* at the very moment of spectators’ perception of the self-reflexive camera. Considering that Jun’s, and thus Hyeon’s, identity is never fully fixated on a cohesive identity group, the DVCAM scene not only questions the issue of gazes but also interrogates spectators’ notion of identity. By forcing the viewers to participate as *voyeur* in this explicit same-sex prostitution scene, and by forcing the viewer to experience the passive position of

being gazed at, the footage even re-territorializes the movie theater as a place of prioritized vision.

A similar queer spatialization can be observed in Hyeon's episode as well. The restroom stall scene is followed by a karaoke scene in which Hyeon meets with his customer. After discovering his lover's marital status, Hyeon reengages with prostitution. Unlike Jun's smelly and disgusting space of prostitution, Hyeon's bordello is a karaoke room. There, the utility value of a karaoke room transforms: it functions, at first, as a space for establishing oneself as a queer laborer for Hyeon; it also functions as a space for the eruption of closeted homosexuality for his middle-aged and presumably married customer. Considering that prostitution between male customers and party girls called *doumi* (lit. "helper") is pervasive under the tolerant law enforcement throughout South Korea, this scene shows a queer rupture in the space of non-normative, extra-marital sexual pleasure. Hyeon/Jun's same-sex prostitution in a public space re-appropriates the normative use of such spaces as public restrooms and karaoke rooms. Jun's and Hyeon's closet thus embodies the queer reterritorialization of the most ordinary place; it is now a space for cruising, violence, survival, spontaneous sex, intimate relationship, prostitution, and voyeurism—a queerscape. The film reduces the city of Seoul into two different closets.

5. Queering the Heteronormative History

Another key example of the reterritorialization of public space, or queerscaping, is found in the interlude scene between the second episode and the last one. At the end of the second part, a long take follows Jun as he wanders around in the streets of Seoul. This scene takes more than four minutes of screen time and echoes the tracking shot of the opening sequence. The camera eye follows the boy objectively, resisting any staged performance or artificial mise-en-scène. Kim has continuously shown his interest in the use of tracking shots as well as long takes. His use of

the long take is more often than not bound up with the issue of mobility. The long take deftly interacts with other cinematic elements to express both the physical and the psychological state of the characters. More precisely, the film shows the characters' diasporic state not through the storytelling but through the highly objective use of cinematography and editing. The patterns of the extended shot reveal the director's interest in space in relation to mise-en-scène. Needless to say, the long-take scene should be understood in the context of a cut, since what enables a long take is its relative duration in comparison with other scenes after (as well as preceding) the cut. With its awkwardly long duration, a long-take scene can be effectively isolated and highlighted by a sudden cut. In Brian Henderson's famous phrasing, a long take is "the presupposition or a priori of mise-en-scène," since it is "the time necessary for mise-en-scène space" (Henderson 1980, 49).

Jun's wandering scene, an ostensibly meaningless long-take tracking shot, offers a prime example of what Henderson calls the "a priori of mise-en-scène." The street where Jun aimlessly walks throughout the shot is actually the north street of Cheonggyecheon Stream, an artificially restored stream. The intensity of the scene comes not only from its tenacious long tracking of the character but also from what the camera hides. Though the camera does not show the image of the stream, which runs about one story down below the street level, an audience with even a cursory knowledge of Seoul will easily recognize the location. The stream's cultural and ideological implications are crucial. In the middle of South Korea's modernization process in the 1960s and 1970s, the stream was covered with cement and an elevated highway was added. But in 2003, the dry stream was restored by pumping tap water through its former course. Former president Lee Myung-bak, who had executed this project, propagated its naturalness and environmental friendliness under the motto "Sometimes, the Nature Could Be Created." The

stream was returned to its previous state to boost tourism, re-created with the use of immense skills and technology. Previously, Cheonggyecheon Stream served as a home for the poor people who were cast off during the process of modernization in South Korea. But due to the Cheonggyecheon Restoration Project, hundreds of street vendors were evicted and forced to move outside of Seoul. As one of the top tourist attractions in Seoul, the stream eventually became a relaxing urban park for both tourists and citizens. The displacement of certain marginalized groups in the process of gentrification was quickly replaced by the logic of convenience and recreation, leaving little space for criticism of the cruel mechanism around the restoration project.

Kim's previous film, *A Cheonggyecheon Dog* (Cheonggyecheonui Gae, 2008) includes a deep allusion to the city's perversity regarding the stream. The movie portrays a male-to-female transgender individual and her mundane life. In the film, Kim juxtaposes the desire to reassign one's physical sex with the desire to reassign the cityscape. The insertion of the official song of the Saemaul Undong (a.k.a. New Community Movement) of South Korea—which is the government led modernization movement of rural areas in the 1970s and 80s—in the middle of the film shows Kim's attitude towards the stream and the progressive agenda of urbanization. In an interview conducted in 2008, he further emphasized:

> I thought one could be reminded of the changing history of South Korea in Cheonggyecheon Stream. … It is a rapidly changing space. For instance, people now chill out and soak their feet in the water, though the stream is not a natural stream. Such an aspect of the stream and such imbalance, I thought, had an affinity with that of Korean society that is both natural and uncanny. … It is not easy to recognize

> which one is real and which one is not. For instance, is the stream real or fake? This is a political question (Kang 2008; my translation).

Kim aptly theorizes that the queerness of the city intersects with its neoliberal modernization. The Cheonggyecheon Restoration Project changed the landscape thoroughly by artificially creating an "uncanny" cityscape, while evicting the former residents outside of Seoul city. The stream itself has never been restored. What was actually restored was just its imaginary.

Jun's walking scene embodies the queerness of this space as well as his queer state. A long-time dweller of Seoul would easily recognize that Jun is walking against the current. The stream per se does not appear on screen, but by effacing the stream, the film expands the viewers' perspective beyond what the camera captures. The effaced stream dominates the attitude of the scene as well as the experience of reading it, overwhelming the poor young North Korean defector who now has nothing but his own body. He neither turns around nor stops walking. He just keeps walking against the flow of the water (See fig. 9 and 10). The Cheonggyecheon Stream represents the face of a modern Seoul that is technologically driven, modernized, capitalized, and heteronormative; and the artificial restoration of the stream symbolizes the visual and spatial aspects of perverse modernity in the city. Jun's opposing movement, then, represents the resistance to or rejection of the history of development, progress, and futurity. In a hyper-capitalized and heteronormative society like South Korea, Jun's physical rejection of the logic of progressive future, whether such a position is voluntary or not, is an act of impious treachery.

Fig. 9 (left): Jun is walking along the Cheonggyecheon Stream; Fig. 10 (right): As Jun disappears from the frame, the title credit appears.

Rejecting the logic of futurity or what Elizabeth Freeman calls the "chrono-normativity" entails the critique of violence that promotes the ideology of progress (2010, xxii). In his "On the Concept of History," Walter Benjamin introduces the angel of history, the face of which "is turned toward the past" and who "sees one single catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it at his feet" (Benjamin 2006, 392). The catastrophe from the past continues in the present, and it never stops piling wreckage upon wreckage. To Benjamin, the history exists or should exist in the present moment only. The angel of history is described as being caught by the blowing storm from Paradise, which "drives him irresistibly into the future, to which his back is turned" since he is facing the past (Benjamin 2006, 392). Benjamin calls this storm progress. The double-bind of the angel is the representation of the historical materialist, who insists that "the subject of historical knowledge is the struggling, oppressed class itself" (2006, 394). This struggling, oppressed class is the reality of the now, entrapped in its everlasting present time. Therefore, the history of the oppressed is marked by discontinuity or catastrophe. For Benjamin, history is "the subject of a construction whose site is not homogeneous, empty time, but time filled full by now-time (*Jetztzeit*)" (Benjamin 2006, 395). In this manner, he criticizes the optimistic historicism that presupposes continuity and sequential temporality. Since it is the most urgent issue to see the "now-time" as catastrophe, Benjamin urges disillusion with the specious

logic of futuristic utopia. The temporality of history as catastrophe is not "straight" but inflected, while the temporality of the utopian future is straightforward, and therefore the temporality of the oppressors.

History, understood as progress, thus, can be heteronormative. For some queer theorists, Benjamin's inflected temporality of history as catastrophe has been an important consideration. In his polemic against progress-driven futurity, Lee Edelman, for instance, criticizes the progressive culture in that it ceaselessly reiterates an idealizing ideology of the Child as "the emblem of futurity's unquestioned value," consequently rendering sterile or non-reproductive sexual desire such as that of queers a threat to the future (Edelman 2004, 4). Heather Love also supports this idea by arguing "queers have been seen … as a backward race. Perverse, immature, sterile, and melancholic" (Love 2007, 6). As an alternative to the logic of time as productive and teleological, queer temporality then "generates a discontinuous history of its own … an escape from history" (Freeman 2010, xi). In this regard, Benjamin's theses might be read to suggest a "potentially queer vision of how time wrinkles and folds as some minor feature of our own sexually impoverished present suddenly meets up with a richer past" (Freeman 2007, 163). Jun's countercurrent or retrospective gesture in the scene embodies the angel of queer history. *Stateless Things* refuses to adopt melodramatic portrayals of abject beings but rather historicizes their subjectivity by relating them to the historical space of exclusion, in this case the Cheonggyecheon Stream. The effacement of mise-en-scène hides its own visual representation, but at the same time it exposes the historicity of place, a rather non-archivable narrative of queer people who have been victimized by logics of progress. In the course of the restoration project, what disappears is rapidly replaced by the conveniences of modernity. What we see through the camera eye is the perverse aspect of Seoul and its queer reimagination. In this perverse city

center, the young North Korean defector becomes queer, an angel of queer history, not because he prostitutes himself to gay customers, not because he gets involved in a series of situational homosexual encounters, but rather because he resists the progressive futurity.

6. Conclusion

Stateless Things can be categorized as a city film. It not only "involves a reconsideration of both urban environment and cinema" while also representing "the chaotic and protean form of urban space, and the power politics and utopian promise of the city" (Braester and Tweedie 2010, 7-10). But the film represents those elements in oblique ways. Instead of representing the dazzling prosperity and splendid development of Seoul city, *Stateless Things* highlights the abjections and expulsions caused by urbanization. The film begins with a failed heterosexual bonding of Jun and Sun-hui, moves to a failed homosexual bonding of Hyeon and the fund manager, and ultimately ends with the ephemeral union and death of the two boys. By presenting three important Korean ethnic groups, namely South Korean, North Korean, and Korean-Chinese minorities, *Stateless Things* rewrites Korean nationhood in a queer context. Moreover, portraying the abject state of the North Korean defectors and their diasporas in a high-tech capitalist city such as Seoul, this film questions what being queer means in this globally neoliberal era.

What matters in reading queer cinema like *Stateless Things* is then our attitude to read the queerness in both form and narrative of a film relative to the socio-cultural context in which it is made. As an important element of "attitude" waiting for viewers' "queer reading," mise-en-scène and cinematic techniques create queerness in their relation to the narrative. *Stateless Things* offers a generative example of a film that prompts its viewers to attempt a queer reading. The reconfigured imagery and imagination of both the found footage and narrative diegesis that permeates the film suggest that queerness is its central conceit. *Stateless Things* re-appropriates

the national propaganda of South Korea and rearticulates the queer space and temporality in the city of Seoul. And in so doing, it criticizes South Korea as a coherent unity that is highly developed, charming, and technologically driven. *Stateless Things* is an important cultural artifact in the history of Korean cinema. It uncloaks ideologically concealed aspects of South Korea by portraying abject beings or stateless things whose existence the law denies acknowledging. It highlights the importance of formal techniques to social and political critique. In *Stateless Things*, queerness intersects with those who have been deprived of human rights and social recognition. What we eventually find in this film is the potentiality of queer independent cinema as a mode of cinematic art that functions as a catalyst for politicizing the use of cinema altogether.

Chapter 4. Hospitality and the Temporal Economy of Queer Kinship in *The Bacchus Lady* (2016)

1. Introduction

In a 2013 interview with Sundance Film Festival director John Cooper, Phillip B. Crook, writing for *The Huffington Post*, asked what notable differences separate queer films made in the United States from those made in other countries. Cooper replied sympathetically that sexual minorities in many nations still suffer from oppression because they do not possess legislative freedoms and civil rights increasingly available to those living in America. His roundabout answer, however, implies that world queer cinema—and most notably, films from non-Western countries—does not yet enjoy enough freedom in either form or content.

Interestingly, Cooper frames his comment in relation to the cinematic representation of queer families, arguing that contemporary queer Western cinema has moved beyond "learning about [one's] identity," a thematic focus of previous queer film production, and now discusses "living an authentic life in the modern age" (Crook 2013). Although he came to this conclusion by observing a very specific geographic and cultural setting, which is an independent film festival circuit in the United States, Cooper's comment invariably invokes the neoliberal primacy of family values and queer communities' will to assimilation most clearly symbolized by the promise of marriage equality. By reducing the authenticity of queer lives on screen to the normative formation of a nuclear family unit that consists of two parents and their offspring, he also solidifies the tenacious rhetoric of "white heteropatriarchal middle-class families" or the "American standard of living" (Ferguson 2004, 86). Such an idea risks immobilizing the flexibility and fluidity of kinship. Likewise, as long as we perceive queer cinema as an exclusive,

cultural product that imagines the fantasy of the nuclear family for LGBT-identified audiences, we diminish the political potential of queer cinema and media that challenge diverse forms of social injustice and extend their critical scope to discrimination against other marginalized beings. Cooper's assimilative move thus re-affirms and unfairly gauges the queerness of the non-Western world against the Western norm through the problematic misconception of queer freedom. It also neutralizes the political progressiveness of queer communities.

But what if queerness still resides and thrives in bodies that are deprived of freedom as well as their cinematic representations? And what if one can imagine and actualize queer kinship that does not necessarily fall under the normalizing power of a "standard of living"? To put the question differently: If the family formation epitomizes the level of queer freedom, are there "not other ways of feeling possible, intelligible, even real, apart from the sphere of state recognition" (Butler 2002, 26)? If queerness means and embodies "notions and feelings of immorality, deviance, weakness, illness, inadequacy, shame, degeneracy, sordidness, disgust and pathos," queer subcultures may flourish even more where there is no institutional recognition of non-normative families (Dyer 2002, 6). And if the promise of state recognition did not fully attenuate the radical potentiality of queerness, then, contrary to Cooper's belief, films from countries without or with less "queer freedom" in their cultural-political systems ironically may allow for more freedom in representing queer lives through their commitment to imagining queer kinship that is not reducible to the institutional family formation sanctioned by the state.

The queer cinemascapes in South Korea, where the family-oriented community and the homophobic social structures affect many sexual minorities, provide a revealing example. The normative desire of forming an ideal family in socially intelligible forms has driven the narratives of countless films throughout history, but more and more queer films now question the

value of the normative family structure and envisions a more radical type of kinship. Through a form of kinship that is not mediated through blood, but rather through non-consanguineous intimacies, these films exemplify what I call the critical social turn of queer Korean cinema.

Recent films such as *All about My Father*, *A Girl at My Door*, *Futureless Things*, *Jane* (Kkum-ui Jane, Cho Hyun-hoon, 2016), *The Truth Beneath* (Bimireun Eopda, Lee Kyoung-mi, 2016), *The Handmaiden*, and *The Bacchus Lady* all illustrate this critical social turn and alternative forms of queer kinship. Refusing to celebrate public recognition and marriage equality, these films are more concerned with intimate relations that bind various social others together. This critical social turn in contemporary films enables us to revise the concept of queer cinema to include its critique of both hetero- and homonormative assimilation to mainstream society. This chapter examines the ways in which queer kinship troubles the heteronormative concepts of family and of progressive time by analyzing E J-yong's *The Bacchus Lady*. Set in contemporary Seoul, the film revolves around an elderly prostitute named So-yeong and her sudden and unexpected role as caregiver to a child abandoned by his father and the South Korean nation-state as well as her relationship to a series of elderly men, who, likewise, have been left behind by their families and the state.

This chapter argues that the film exposes the absolute hospitality of a queer family in its temporal and spatial formation. By foregrounding the protagonist's role as an aging prostitute who forms queer bonds of intimacy with her suicidal customers, while also becoming a caretaker of many different social others, the film undermines the fantasy of hetero-marital kinship and constructs alternative links between marginalized subjects ostracized by society. In the first part of the chapter, I will explore important aspects of the critical social turn in queer Korean cinema by introducing a few significant films that explore the idea of kinship. Through a close analysis

of *The Bacchus Lady* as a case study, the remainder of this chapter will elaborate on the implications of the critical social turn as well as the cinematic representation of queer kinship and temporality.

2. The Critical Social Turn of Queer Korean Cinema

The growing popularity of queer cinema and media art in South Korea in recent years has spawned optimism, in part due to the sheer visibility of queer subjects on screen. Queer cinema that used to be appreciated by a small number of fans and LGBT populations is now drawing much broader audiences, attracting viewers of different social backgrounds and sexual orientations. Considering the low level of public visibility and social acceptance of sexual minorities in South Korea, the popularity of queer cinema is an unprecedented phenomenon. At the same time, recent queer Korean cinema has constantly expanded its thematic and formalistic scope beyond the traditional feature film format and the stereotypical banality of the coming-out narrative. Indeed, contrary to the term's common parlance in South Korea, the concept of queer Korean cinema has already outgrown the monolithic and parochial notion that is predominantly associated with a small number of identity-based categories such as gay and lesbian. In the process, it has become a new mode of cinematic art that engages with a wide spectrum of social injustices. In fact, queer cinema, broadly construed, should include not only films featuring LGBT characters and narratives associated with them, but also films revealing the innovative aesthetics that challenge heteronormative standards and films that are interpreted as queer by the audiences. For instance, *The Truth Beneath*, *A Girl at My Door*, *Futureless Things*, and *The Bacchus Lady* are not commonly categorized as queer films because the main focus of their narratives is not on LGBT characters. But, when viewed through the exploration of non-

normative family and social relations as well as through a critique of rationalized temporality of human progress, these films acquire subversive quality in questioning heteronormativity.

The thematic and formalistic expansion of queer Korean cinema has generated a new, radical approach to representations on screen. Of course, queer cinemascapes in South Korea are not unidirectional; on the one hand, some films cater to the expectations of LGBT audiences and straight female fans, such as *Two Weddings and a Funeral* and *Night Flight* (Yaganbihaeng, Leesong Hee-il, 2014). These films either center on romantic relationships between same-sex couples or express sympathetic attitudes toward the portrayal of queer characters, thus allowing for the cultural and social recognition of sexual minorities. Citing B. Ruby Rich, one might call them "films of validation" (Rich 2013, 41). On the other hand, another group of films celebrate the radical potential of queerness. I argue that this latter trend is now creating a slow but significant change in the queer cinemascapes of South Korea. For instance, more queer characters are now portrayed as daring or unapologetic about their non-normative subjectivity, rejecting blind aspirations to assimilate into mainstream culture. These ostensibly opposing categories of films are not mutually exclusive and, in fact, are often complementary and even permeate one another. Nonetheless, the thematic and stylistic diversification of queer Korean cinema is a highly encouraging tendency. Because some films that belong to the former category tend to repeat generic conventions and similar themes found in the so-called Boy's Love films, the diversified mode will engender artistic development and genre adaptability of queer Korean cinema in general. The latter tendency needs to be further examined because it means that queer Korean cinema is now engaged in more intimate conversations with the global queer cinemascapes.

Just over two decades ago, New Queer Cinema in Anglo-American countries demonstrated a similar critical intervention by presenting defiant and "antisocial" queer characters. Highly innovative in cinematic styles and non-apologetic in the portrayal of non-normative life styles, New Queer Cinema responded to the queer cultural movement and activism that consolidated in the late 1980s and early 1990s, a turbulent period characterized by the AIDS crisis. It is symptomatic that the daring narratives and stylistic ventures found in New Queer Cinema are now in full flourish in a country where homophobia in both the public and private spheres has accelerated in recent years.[31]

Yet, there is an interesting difference in the political and cultural stance between the earlier wave of New Queer Cinema and recent queer Korean cinema. Whereas New Queer Cinema committed itself to the disruption of the normative social order—a move that consequently brought accusations of antisocial posturing, I would argue that its contemporary counterpart in South Korea is marked by a critical social turn. In other words, recent queer Korean cinema has a tendency to temper any perceived antisocial drive with a nod toward a more critically social consciousness. An important consideration of this critical social turn is the intervention of these films in highlighting discrimination against a wide array of marginalized groups, beyond the restricted representation of members of the LGBT community.

Jung July's *A Girl at My Door*, for instance, depicts the systematic violence a rural community inflicts upon a queer girl and a lesbian police officer. Beyond merely portraying the

[31] The recent surge of homophobia in South Korea ranges from public hate speech to violence in private and public sectors. In the spring 2017, for instance, the then presidential candidate, Mr. Moon Jae-in adamantly and publicly stated that he hated and opposed homosexuality. His homophobic remark brought about heated debates, which were, in turn, soon drowned out by calls for regime change. Though he might have pretended to be homophobic to win the conservative vote, the impact of his statement on Korean society cannot be underestimated. Another example is the recent witch-hunt against gay soldiers. The South Korean Military Criminal Act (92-6) criminalizes anal sex even though it is performed consensually and outside of military camps. And military prosecutors have continued to "out" and charge military personnel through alleged sting operations using gay dating apps.

struggles a queer adolescent and a lesbian police officer face, however, the film models a form of queer kinship, as well as with an alliance with other marginalized subjects. The film features a physically abused middle school girl named Do-hee and a police captain named Young-nam who was relocated after her sexual identity as a lesbian had been reported to the local authority. In the small town where everyone is conniving with each other and somehow contributing to the abuse of a little girl, Young-nam volunteers to be her private police, her mother, her friend, and even her possible lover. Interestingly, the abuse of the girl is associated with her father's physical abuse and the exploitation of migrant workers in the village. Before Young-nam's relocation, the small town operated smoothly, because the villagers acquiesced in the exploitation and abuse of both migrant workers and the girl in the name of a peaceful and sustainable community. It is revealing that domestic violence and child abuse are deterred only by a lesbian character who is excluded from the heteropatriarchal family system and normative organization of community. By portraying the concealed violence in a bucolic town as a microcosm of South Korea, the film radically questions the function of a heteronormative community. Moreover, by situating a lesbian character as the foster mother of a queer adolescent, *A Girl at My Door* also attempts to reconstruct notions of family and kinship that drives the heteropatriarchal community to continue and sustain itself.

As I briefly analyzed in chapter three, Kim Kyung-mook's *Futureless Things* also features different marginalized characters such as a gay couple, a lesbian, and a North Korean defector, all of whom are working as temporary workers in a suburban convenience store. In one episode in *Futureless Things*, for instance, we see how a North Korean defector suffers from social stigma and ostracization. Obviously attracted to her, a man constantly harasses one of the clerks at the store who speaks with a North Korean accent, knowing that she is indifferent to

him. He insults her by saying that the "commies" living in "her country" are firing missiles and threatening innocent South Koreans. As I briefly addressed in chapter 3, the accented Korean language either of Korean-Chinese minority or of North Korean defectors commonly functions as a stigmatized register of social others. Interestingly, the man's Korean has a heavy accent of Southern Korea, which is not "standardized" Korean either. This situational absurdity creates black humor about the gloomy portrait of contemporary South Korea. Despite the violence inflicted on them, different types of social and cultural others in the film's narrative help one another, forging an alternative sociality.

On the narrative level, these films suggest that those who are exploited, abused, and discriminated against in the margins of Korean society are loosely but intimately connected, regardless of their social, cultural, or identity-based background. Thus, the social here does not stand for blind assimilation to a normative social structure; instead, it refers to the formation of an alternative subculture that is contingent and resilient. It is not anchored in social norms per se, but rather exists outside regulatory powers aimed at disciplining non-conforming subjects. I would define the socializing force central to this loosely organized community as a sense of queer belonging. Or, one might also call it a more radical form of queer kinship. Hence, another important consideration of the critical social turn is the formation of queer kinship that binds its members together beyond either blood-based biological kinship or document-bound legal kinship.

In an attempt to discover hope that is not reduced to pure negativity, José Esteban Muñoz introduces the concept of queerness as belonging. He argues that "[the negative] sentiments associated with despondence contain the potentiality for new modes of collectivity, belonging in difference and dissent" (Muñoz 2009, 277). Questioning the "reductive binarisms between the

social and the antisocial and between positive and negative affect," Ann Cvetkovich also argues that antisocial affect can "create new forms of sociality. . . . [and] serves as the foundation for new kinds of attachment or affiliation" (Cvetkovich 2012, 6). To me, the critical social turn observable in recent queer Korean cinema amounts to a cinematic call for such new modes of collectivity or affiliation. In other words, instead of blood-based kinship and gendered and hierarchical relations, the sociality represented in recent queer Korean cinema assembles its members through a sense of belonging in their common experiences of exclusion and isolation. Despondence, shame, and isolation construct their queerness. But, at the same time, their co-existence with those residual negativities ironically transforms them into hopeful beings. This ambivalent aspect of queerness enables a cinematic imagination of queer cohabitation or queer kinship as a cultural negotiation.

To be sure, previous queer Korean films, such as *Broken Branches*, also experimented with the negotiation of queers within a normative family structure. Yet, the representation of radical forms of queer kinship or belonging based on intimacies that extend to other marginal subjects is a more recent shift. All in all, the critical social turn and the cinematic reconstruction of kinship on screen should be understood as a cinematic process of opening spaces for queer subjectivities in a country where their access to public recognition is constantly disavowed and their admission to legal inclusion is always denied despite global waves of marriage equality and queer citizenship. Put differently, the critical social turn in queer Korean cinema is a newly invented mode of resistance that binds its kin members neither through blood nor through contract but through a sense of belonging and intimacy. At the same time, the investment of queer Korean cinema in imagining queer kinship suggests that queer Korean culture has now begun to challenge life-producing, sustainable, and reproduction-based forms of kinship and

social structures that demand opposite sex marriage, a two-parent family structure, and heteronormative assimilation.

3. Hospitality and Queer Kinship

The Bacchus Lady is E J-yong's ninth directorial feature. Since his debut in 1998, E J-yong has produced a diverse array of genre films that include period dramas, mockumentaries, and comedy. But he made his name mainly by directing star-studded melodramas, including *An Affair* (Jeongsa, 1998), *Asako in Ruby Shoes* (Sunaebo, 2000), *My Brilliant Life* (Dugeun Dugeun Nae Insaeng, 2014), and *Untold Scandal* (Seukaendeul: Joseon Namnyeo Sangnyeoljisa, 2003). Indeed, E has shown great talent in experimenting with the potential power of stars, particularly that of actresses. In *The Bacchus Lady*, E consciously uses the established star system to evoke cinematic intertextuality, specifically alluding to Kim Ki-young's films. For instance, Yoon Yeo-jeong, the internationally renowned actress who made her debut in Kim's second installment of the so-called Housemaid trilogy, *Woman of Fire* (Hwanyeo, 1971), plays the lead in *The Bacchus Lady*. In addition to featuring Yoon, it also bears noting that another character, Jae-woo, is played by Jeon Moo-song, who starred in the third film of the Housemaid trilogy, *Woman of Fire '82* (Hwanyeo 82, 1982), yet again underscoring the director's intertextual reference to Kim's films. *Woman of Fire* illustrates the disruption of an urban middle-class home after the family employs an innocent housemaid who fled her hometown in the countryside. The two films' intertextual relations are unmasked in a specific space. In one scene in *Woman of Fire*, the protagonist played by Yoon meets with her hometown friend who works as a hostess in Seoul. They meet in front of the 31 Building (then, the tallest building in the city) in the Jongno district, making themselves a promise of success. This tall, sleekly

modern building in Jongno symbolizes the two girls' desire to ascend the social ladder. It also symbolizes the omnipotent power of modernization to which they can never catch up. Recalling this scene, I wonder whether the aging prostitute roaming around the same Jongno district in *The Bacchus Lady* could be the future portrait of a housemaid, assuming that she had survived. Because she is uneducated and lacks skills or knowledge in times of rapid modernization, she could not help but work as a housemaid at best or a prostitute at worst.

The Bacchus Lady begins with a two-shot scene of nature. The first shot shows the sky through the trees in an extremely low angle. The second shot is then superimposed through a dissolve, which shows a flower in a bird's eye view shot. Jang Eun Mi and Han Hee Jeong interpret this opening scene as a representational space for motherhood. By suggesting that the flower is a Siberian chrysanthemum, which is commonly associated with motherhood, they argue that "the withered flower represents So-yeong's motherhood in the director's articulation of contrasting innocent, sacred motherhood and prostitution" and that "the film's narrative compels So-yeong to have the virtue of motherhood" (Jang and Han 2017, 111). Since its world premiere at the Berlin International Film Festival in 2016, the film engendered many different controversies in South Korea as a result of its inclusion of enforced motherhood, the sympathetic portrayal of assistive suicide, male fantasy about women as a means of redemption, and the violent depiction of sexual intercourse between the protagonist and her customer. I cannot disagree with them in the sense that her customers take advantage of her motherhood and her status as a poor prostitute without family members; admittedly, there is the constantly lingering trauma of her "abandoned" son whom she had to give up for adoption in the film. Indeed, the soon-to-be-withered flower in the opening scene is obviously associated with So-yeong. But it is also worth remembering that the first shot is a point-of-view (POV) shot of the flower,

suggesting that So-yeong will discover hope at the close of her life. Immediately following the brief opening scene, her encounter with Min-ho illustrates this hope.

After the opening scene, we see a medium shot of Min-ho, a Kopino child, standing in front of a small private ob-gyn clinic in Jongno. "Kopino" is a neologism that refers to half Korean and half Filipino children, many of whom are abandoned by their Korean fathers. Because many South Korean heterosexual men have travelled to the Philippines for sex tourism over the last two decades, the Kopino problem has recently become a serious social issue. Instead of suggesting a didactic narrative frame about the Kopino issue, however, E complicates the Kopino issue by relating it to the biopolitical intervention of institutions. Following the medium shot of Min-ho, we see So-yeong approaching him. An elderly prostitute who solicits customers in public parks or mountain hiking trails, So-yeong is called a Bacchus Lady. "Bacchus Lady" is a euphemism that originated from the practice of these elderly prostitutes soliciting their customers by offering them a famous Korean energy drink called "Bacchus." As their main customers are generally men of the same age, this euphemism implies the mythical function of these prostitutes who can rejuvenate the sexual drives of elderly men. More importantly, however, the elderly men in the film rejuvenate themselves through friendly interactions with So-yeong. For instance, all of her suicidal customers attempt to cultivate a kinship-like intimacy with So-yeong, one that bonds isolated or abandoned beings together.

Ironically, in this opening sequence, So-yeong finds herself at the institution that diagnoses sexually transmitted diseases, thus clinically disciplining and undermining her mythical function. So-yeong meets Min-ho as she sees her ob-gyn, who is in fact Min-ho's biological father and who has abandoned him in the Philippines. Interestingly, the composition of this medium shot uses a specific prop: When So-yeong asks Min-ho why he is alone there and

where his mother is, the director situates So-yeong on the left, Min-ho at the center, and the outdoor sign of the clinic on the right side of the frame, creating an image where Min-ho is stuck between So-yeong and the sign (See fig. 11). So-yeong visits the clinic for STD testing, while Min-ho is waiting for acknowledgement that his Korean father is irresponsible. At the same time, the outdoor sign of the ob-gyn clinic functions as visual evidence of the institutional power that controls and disciplines reproductive practices. Except in cases of rape, incest, serious health issues of the pregnant woman, or serious issues in the fetus induced abortion was officially outlawed in South Korea in 1953. Yet, as abortion is more profitable than contraceptives due to high demand and as the government and police rarely prosecute such cases, some ob-gyn clinics have conducted illicit abortions for many decades. It is thus revealing that Min-ho is symbolically "aborted" by his father, or the Korean nation-state, who can decide whether he is a "righteous" blood kin of the nation, even though his mother, a complete other, has raised and nurtured him.

In the introductory volume of *The History of Sexuality*, Michel Foucault presents two forms of biopower: "the disciplines of the body and the regulations of the population" (Foucault 1990, 139). An institution that disciplines women's bodies as machines of reproduction and one that brings "life and its mechanisms into the realm of explicit calculations," it can be argued that the ob-gyn clinic has become a prime site of biopolitical control and negotiation (Foucault 1990, 143). Indeed, Foucault precisely points out the biopolitical turn of the power that regulates people through such institutions as the clinic. He argues:

> The law always refers to the sword. But a power whose task is to take charge of life needs continuous regulatory and corrective mechanisms. It is no longer a matter of brining death into play in the field of sovereignty, but of distributing the living in the

> domain of value and utility. … I do not mean to say that the law fades into the background or that the institutions of justice tend to disappear, but rather that the law operates more and more as a norm, and that the judicial institution is increasingly incorporated into a continuum of apparatuses (medical, administrative, and so on) whose functions are for the most part regulatory (Foucault 1990, 144).

As Foucault's insightful observation on the regulatory process of the power suggests, the ob-gyn clinic that secures the life of a fetus or an infant and assigns them "the domain of value and utility" on the one hand also abandons the life of a "disposable" fetus, in this case, Min-ho's life, through either actual or symbolic abortion. The biopolitical implication of this brief shot, however, extends itself to the issue of race and nation. Min-ho, the Kopino boy, whose life is dependent upon the recognition of his Korean father, is abandoned and marked as a national other right in front of the institution that helps the nation to advance through reproduction. Ironically, however, he is recognized as a family member by an elderly prostitute who is pathologized by the same medical institution regulating reproduction. Because the aging body of So-yeong has been infected with a sexually transmitted disease by one of her contacts, she is exposed to the situation of a miserable young body whose life is at stake. And the very institution that polices and regulates social hygiene, while allegedly helping society to secure and perpetuate its reproductive ideal, turns into a locus of abandonment and paternal disavowal of one's own child. Hence, the ob-gyn clinic, or the hospital, ceases its primary function of treating people based on a spirit of hospitality. At the moment of the Min-ho's disavowal, the hospital—here, a representation of the Korean nation-state—abandons the Kopino issue, thus revealing its appallingly racist, duplicitous nature.

Fig. 11 (left): So-yeong meets Min-ho in front of the clinic; Fig. 12 (right): Min-ho's mother stabs Min-ho's father.

The fact that So-yeong is an elderly prostitute infected with gonorrhea is crucially important. On the one hand, her existence is a symbolic threat to control the "body as a machine"; at the same time, her hospitality toward the Kopino child uncovers the national dimension of what Foucault calls "the regulations of the population," on the other. Later as the narrative proceeds, we learn that So-yeong used to prostitute herself to American GIs and was forced to send her half-African-American son for adoption, presumably due to both her penury as a prostitute and the public contempt toward her and her "half-breed" son. In the middle of the film, when So-yeong visits the Tapgol Park, a site where elderly prostitution thrives, she is confronted by several fellow aging prostitutes. They have harbored jealousy against So-yeong due to her "popularity" among their customers, and they subsequently spread gossip about having contracted gonorrhea. One prostitute directly defames So-yeong for having "spread her legs for Yankee soldiers," thus connecting the sexually transmitted disease to sexual intercourse with foreigners. So-yeong's tragic past and the insult she now suffers parallel that of Min-ho's mother. In this regard, the locus of abandonment I described above extends to the Korean nation-state well beyond the small clinic of Min-ho's biological father. After a brief encounter with Min-ho in front of the clinic, So-yeong sees her doctor. Following the shot/reverse shot that alternates between So-yeong's worried face and the scornful face of her gynecologist, we hear

the Filipino woman's desperate shout from an off-screen space, revealing that the gynecologist never called her or their son for five years. Another shot/reverse shot of So-yeong and her doctor arguing with the Filipino woman ensues. And So-yeong sees the woman, Min-ho's mother, stabbing the gynecologist out of frustration (See fig. 12). The woman is arrested and leaves Min-ho behind. So-yeong voluntarily claims custody of Min-ho and takes him to her home in Itaewon, where she, a transgender woman, a disabled and unemployed young man, and a migrant worker live together as a queer family.

Itaewon is a well-known entertainment district of Seoul where a multi-cultural population of Koreans, American GIs and other foreigners, strippers, gay men, and trans women cohabitate. By positioning So-yeong's home in the heart of this neighborhood, the film accentuates its own queer undertones. So-yeong's routine is limited to specific locations, such as Jongno, Itaewon, and Sowol-gil. Along with Itaewon, Jongno is another area where South Korean gay and trans people socialize. In addition, Sowol-gil and other trails around the Mountain Nam (Namsan), where So-yeong openly solicits customers on the street, are also frequently inhabited by aging transgendered prostitutes. Abandoned by their family and often ignored by the lesbian and gay communities, prostitution is probably one of the very few means of living for these trans women. So-yeong's helplessness and marginalized status lead her in an unending and circuitous path through the queerest spots of Seoul. Seen from a slightly different perspective, the film shows So-yeong's "cruising" around the queerscapes of Seoul.

Yet the director refuses to simply portray the dire predicaments of everyday life. Instead, the film directs our attention to the issue of ethics by highlighting the hospitality that these people offer one another. As noted above, it is an interesting irony that the life of the little boy abandoned by his Korean father and the South Korean nation-state is protected and sustained by

So-yeong's queer family. This irony seems to be the director's satirical commentary on what Lee Edelman calls "reproductive futurism," a social perspective that sacralizes children as the future of mankind and blames queer people for destroying humanity's future with their sterile sexuality (Edelman 2004, 4). The abandonment of Kopino children in both this film and in Korean culture thus suggests that the futurity that the Child symbolizes is secured only when he or she meets the racial standards of the nation-state. Min-ho, for instance, cannot be *the* Child but remains *a* child—an inconvenient other who now awaits deportation from South Korea. At the same time, by embracing hospitality from the queer family in Itaewon and by voluntarily remaining under custody of the queer family, Min-ho constructs another form of kinship that his biological father can never build. So-yeong, Min-ho, and her queer family in Itaewon share intimacies that have come into being through traumatic life experiences and the disruption of biological family relations. Throughout the film, we see how all members of this queer family offer hospitality to the Kopino child. In fact, it is arguably the arrival of the Kopino child that binds this queer family together.

According to Jacques Derrida's formulation, absolute hospitality "requires . . . that I give . . . to the absolute, unknown, anonymous other, . . . without asking of them either reciprocity (entering into a pact) or even their names" (Derrida and Dufourmantelle 2000, 25). Whereas the South Korean judicial system registers the racialized and criminalized status of Min-ho's Filipino mother as a foreigner, So-yeong's queer family shows absolute hospitality to Min-ho. This claim holds true considering that their hospitality does not presuppose any division between hosts and guests. For instance, Min-ho is not just a guest but sometimes unwittingly helps So-yeong to conduct her business. In one scene, she leaves Min-ho with the manager of a motel (because no one was available to look after him) while she is "serving" a customer. When the police arrive at

the motel to arrest her for prostitution, she escapes the raid by pretending to be Min-ho's grandmother. Moreover, the film does not suggest home as an idealized community that necessarily reconstructs the heteronormative standard.

Instead, the film highlights each tenant's momentary occupation of their rooms. The camera shows neither the entire structure of the house nor occasions when all the tenants join in, but rather focuses on a fragmentary shot of the inside and outside of the house. Their house is portrayed as a temporary site they occupy along their itinerant paths. Even the landlady, Tina, is depicted as a temporary occupant of her own house. The only moments we see her room are those when tenants visit her without any prior notice, interrupting private moments with her lovers or customers. Just like the transgender bar, where she makes a living, her house also becomes her workplace as well as the place for alternative pleasures. E stylistically represents Tina's non-authoritative embodiment of the "mistress of the home." When Tina first appears, the camera observes Tina on the second floor overlooking So-yeong and Min-ho through a very low-angle POV-shot. As their intimacy intensifies, we see Tina spend time mostly on the first floor and other tenants go up to her private realm on the second floor, breaking down the spatial division of hosts and temporary guests. This elimination of spatial hierarchy is instantiated by the characters' mobility within the house, such as Do-hun's relocation from his small tenant room to Tina's room after he becomes her lover.

The film also rejects the notion of self-sufficiency. Everyone in this community needs mutual help: Do-hun's disability, Min-ho's temporarily orphaned status, Adindou, the African lady's precarious state as a migrant worker, So-yeong's need for community support, and even the stray cat whom So-yeong feeds all prove that they are not self-sufficient and are mutually dependent beings in need of help and intimacy. As already socially and culturally displaced

beings, the absolute hospitality So-yeong and her queer family offer and are offered creates associative forces of solidarity, illustrating the critical social turn of queer Korean cinema.

4. The Death Drive and the Temporal Economy of Queer Kinship

The original Korean title of the movie, *Jugyeojuneun Yeoja* literally translates as "killer woman." This title has both sexual and murderous connotations, and the film portrays both the erotic and thanatotic impulses of So-yeong. This ambivalence of sexual and murderous desires saturates the film with queer politics. Interestingly, we see graphic eroticism only when So-yeong is performing fellatio on her customers, acts that are commonly associated with infertile sexuality. Though So-yeong performs fellatio on her male customer in order to prevent the transmission of gonorrhea, the eroticism in the scene is abruptly graphic. In his famous polemic about nonreproductive sexuality during the AIDS crisis, Leo Bersani poignantly pointed out that the public discourse had deployed a certain rhetorical disdain for sterile sexuality to denounce such practices as prostitution and anal sex. In particular, Bersani finds allusions to contamination in both female prostitution and male homosexuality. He argues that "as contaminated vessels, conveyancing 'female' venereal diseases to 'innocent' men," there is "a [legitimated fantasy] of female sexuality as intrinsically diseased," just as anal sex among male homosexuals is associated with "insatiable desire" and "an unquenchable appetite for destruction" (Bersani 2010, 17-18). As Bersani formulates, the selves of So-yeong's customers or the "masculine ideal . . . of [their] proud subjectivity" is buried in the nonnormative, nonreproductive and "death-inducing" queer body of So-yeong (Bersani 2010, 29). The negativity of sterile sexuality as opposed to normative social structures not only characterizes So-yeong but also her queer family. The landlady, Tina, is a transgender nightclub singer; the other tenant is Do-hun, who lost one of his

legs for an unknown reason and fails to find any stable job. Tina and Do-hun enter into a relationship with one another, constituting a micro-queer family within a queer family. In the middle of the movie, we see a two shot of Tina and Do-hun in which Tina lustfully studies Do-hun's well-built body as he works out. In a conversation with her, Do-hun ascribes his lack of sexual relations to his disability, while at the same time demonstrating his masculinity by showing off his well-built body. Do-hun mistakenly believes that his missing leg attenuates his masculine ideal. It is an interesting irony that Do-hun's lost leg, which results in involuntarily depriving himself of sexual pleasure, is symbolically substituted by Tina's transgender body. The "failed" heterosexual subject represented by Do-hun's prosthetic limb finally finds its match in Tina's queer body.[32] Again, in Bersani's term, his already castrated "masculine ideal . . . of proud subjectivity is buried" in Tina's queer body (Bersani 2010, 29). In this way, the director captures the queer relation between these two marginalized characters and incorporates it into So-yeong's story.

The death of So-yeong's former customers also accentuates the film's queer attitude. Whereas her current customers are symbolically destroyed in her queer body, So-yeong's former customers, lonely and emotionally devasted seniors who are abandoned by their children, aspire real death, a complete self-annihilation. What is interesting is that these suicidal gentlemen literally implore So-yeong to kill them. All of them willingly subject themselves to execution by the very hands that were once used to ease their sexual desire, which I understand as an interplay of both masochism and the death drive. According to Sigmund Freud, masochism operates when

[32] Robert McRuer argues that "both disability and nonheterosexual identity must be visually located elsewhere … [to] buttress compulsory able-bodiedness" (McRuer 2006, 24). The formation of multi-layered queer family, including that of Tina and Do-hoon, is thus a cinematic imagination to reinstate the desire that was "visually located elsewhere" and to denounce the heterosexist notion of life-confirming heterosexuality vs. death-inducing queer desire.

"[the destroying instinct] remains inside the organism and . . . becomes libidinally bound there" (Freud 1961, 163-164). In other words, masochists are those who fail to divert their destructive instinct outward. Freud's description allows us to understand masochism not only as an eccentric form of hedonism, but also as a mechanism with the potential for a relational, if not ethical, attitude, particularly when it is practiced by male heterosexuals, as evidenced in the film. Kaja Silverman argues that the male masochist "prostrates himself before the Gaze even as he solicits it, exhibits his castration for all to see, . . . radiates a negativity inimical to the social order" (Silverman 1988, 51). The gentlemen's masochistic death drive or their self-destructive aspiration, shares the queer quality of So-yeong in the sense that it operates against the heteronormative and sexist social order that both objectifies and consumes female bodies. Moreover, through the practice of the self-destructive death drive, the suicidal gentlemen also challenge the heteronormative biological timeline by denying its inevitable movement toward a natural death.

In "Beyond the Pleasure Principle," Sigmund Freud defines the death drive as "an urge inherent in organic life to restore an earlier state of things" (Freud 1957, 36). The counterforce to this death drive is the so-called "vital drive" (*Lebenstrieb*), which Freud aligns with the (hetero-)sexual drive (*Sexualtrieben*). Just as he defines masochists as those who fail to divert their self-destructive instinct outward, Freud also views the death drive as destructive impulses that should "be diverted on to the external world" for the reproductive sustainability of heterosexual subjects (Freud 1961, 41). This argument suggests that the (hetero-)sexual drive is incompletely assured because it is enabled only by repressing a ceaseless death drive. Hence, the gentlemen's death drive ironically reveals the vulnerable nature of heterosexuality. As Lee Edelman suggests, if "queerness undoes the identities through which we experience ourselves as subjects," the

gentlemen's willingness to die at the hands of So-yeong could demonstrate the queerness of their ethical vision, whether consciously or not (Edelman 2004, 24). They figuratively embody Edelman's notion of the death drive against the progressive temporality of heteronormativity that propels human beings to teleological future while rejecting any regressive or counter-progressive movement. In this regard, it can be said that the suicidal gentlemen in the film are challenging the normative life cycle that commands humans to get old and die a natural death. Their death drive first of all represents their willingness to eliminate themselves from biological kinship ties from which they are both symbolically and physically expelled. At the same time, their death drive also illustrates their desire to resist the normative biological timeline that propels one's body toward the moment of death through bio-developmental temporality.

As suggested above, the intimacies portrayed in the film conform neither to the life-producing sexuality nor to the developmental temporality marked by reproduction and child-rearing. If we could define the heterogeneity of intimacies presented in the film as kinship or belonging, their kinship then deviates from the teleological temporality of heteronormative society. As Elizabeth Freeman suggests, "in a chronobiological society, the state and other institutions, including representational apparatuses, link properly temporalized bodies to narratives of movement and change" (2010, 4). Freeman further argues that the heteronormative temporality contains "teleological schemes of events of strategies for living such as marriage, accumulation of health and wealth for the future, reproduction, childrearing, and death and its attendant rituals" (2010, 4). Enacting their queer desires and intimacies while simultaneously saving a national other whom the state and the biological family abandoned, the kinship of the queer family in the film thus troubles the heteronormative temporality of "movement and change."

In this respect, the solitary death of So-yeong in the ending sequence needs to be critically rethought. Her solitary death in prison seems to have disappointed an audience who expected a certain happy ending. Kim Young-ok, for instance, grumbles about the film's narrative choice to have So-yeong die "without family or friends" by saying that it portrays "the quasi-family as superficial and a banal array or display of minorities" (Kim 2016). But I disagree with Kim's sentimental response and, instead, argue that we should focus on the codified messages behind the stylistic arrangements of the sequence. First of all, the narrative structure as well as the genre specificity of the film already rejects a happy ending. As Peter Brooks argues, "melodrama's relation to realism is always oblique" (Brooks 1995, ix). We know Min-ho will never be recognized as his Korean father's son and thus as the "emblem of futurity" in the Korean nation-state. We know Tina will no longer be able to lead her fantastic show on stage as she gets older. Considering that the Mount Nam is a popular site for transgender prostitution, So-yeong's present might also presage Tina's gloomy future. Moreover, we know that So-yeong, the murderous prostitute in her seventies, is close to her own death. If melodrama's engagement with reality is "always oblique," then its representation of reality is also oblique.[33] The melodramatic setting of films exists to be decoded and politicized. And by subverting the happy ending that we anticipate, the film transgresses conventional narrative progress and presents emotional pathos.

[33] Indeed, E's melodramas often represent "oblique" reality through non-normative characterization and narrativization. His melodramas often feature characters who fall into non-normative relations or situations. In his feature debut, *An Affair*, he introduces a character who is both "a mother and wife deserting her family without fear of repercussions" (Chung and Diffrient 2005, 201). In the more recent family melodrama, *My Brilliant Life*, he tells a story about a family with a child diagnosed with generic disorder progeria. In *Asako in Ruby Shoes*, we even see the protagonist build a romantic relationship with a foreign woman, whom he finds on a porn site. Interestingly, just as the malfunctioning biological kinship in *The Bacchus Lady*, the traditional image and expectation of family is also being suggested as either brutal or defective in *Asako in Ruby Shoes*. Considering that characters in *Asako in Ruby Shoes* are also non-assimilative and isolated but eventually find intimacy and hope through certain perverse, or non-normative events, comparing it with *The Bacchus Lady* might be worthwhile.

In the ending sequence, we see So-yeong's real name finally revealed. The camera captures the moment of covering her body with a white sheet in an overhead shot. Without nondiegetic sound (i.e., sad music), the camera then tracks along the morgue for unclaimed bodies without family or friends. It stops on a close-up of a coffin inscribed with "No Friends or Family. Yang Mi-suk (Cheongju Women's Prison)," at which point the film ends. This unexpected ending suggests that recognition is only available when the subject enters an intelligible matrix of the dominant social structure. Put differently, So-yeong finally joins society with her own death, while she used to live outside of the social norm. Inscribing her real name on her coffin is, in this sense, an act of fixing and disciplining So-yeong's wandering path or mobility in the intelligible and recognizable terms of the state. In fact, all the elderly characters in the film return to the public realm through their death. This reoccurrence of institutional violence echoes the opening scene at the clinic. The note inscribed on her coffin, "Friends or Family," explains who is the "legitimate" heir of a deceased person, how the deceased can be remembered, and who is responsible for the rituals of remembrance. By identifying her with the state's given name and turning her into a body waiting to be claimed by legitimate heirs, institutional power wields its authority. The ephemeral death of So-yeong is hence not simply to suggest that her queer family abandoned her but to critique how the institutional power of the state disciplines nonconforming subjects. The ending sequence thus suggests a gloomy portrait of a heteronormative institution that places So-yeong under permanent control after death by erasing and neglecting her lived experiences as prostitute, queer, and the mother and friend of her queer family.

Fig. 13 (left): A reverse-shot between So-yeong and her queer family; Fig. 14 (right): An over-the-shoulder shot between Min-ho and his mother.

Despite this gloomy ending, the most touching moment of the film leaves us with hope. After having been involved in a series of assisted suicides, So-yeong is apprehended by the police while she watches Tina's performance with Do-hun and Min-ho. Under the sign of a transgender bar, a shot/reverse shot alternates between So-yeong and her queer family (See fig. 13). The pathos created in this shot clearly resonates with that of a similar shot/reverse shot between Min-ho's mother and Min-ho in So-yeong's custody (See fig. 14). Just as he was taken care of by So-yeong, we know that Min-ho will be taken care of by the transgender performers. The subtle smile on So-yeong's face in the following shot suggests that her queer family will further survive and continue to sustain the life of other marginalized subjects like Min-ho. In other words, as the trope of death troubles the normative life cycle, queer kinship secures the lives of those whom the normative institution has abandoned. And through this radically ambivalent portrayal of queerness, we understand that queerness is already and always transpiercing the divisions between child and seniors, youth and aging, sexual vigor and impotence, able-bodiedness and disability, and reproductive (thus life-producing) heterosexuality and sterile (thus death-inducing) queer sexuality.

5. Conclusion

E J-yong's melodramas embody both dramatic depth driven by emotional excess and realistic engagement with social issues of contemporary Korea. In *Melodrama and Modernity*, Ben Singer identifies the melodrama's fundamental characteristics—the presentation of strong pathos; overwrought emotion and heightened states of emotive urgency, tension, and tribulation; an extreme moral polarization; nonclassical narrative structure; and sensationalism (Singer 2001, 44–48). Admittedly, *The Bacchus Lady* follows these melodramatic conventions faithfully. The narrative centers around the alienation of elderly people and So-yeong's involvement in their murder, creating pathos, sensationalism, and the question of illogical cause-and-effect. In addition, we find it morally polarizing to witness So-yeong and her neighbors save the Kopino child, while biological families mistreat their family members. At the same time, as the narrative proceeds, we learn that So-yeong herself is an embodied site of contemporary Korean history. After fleeing from North Korea after the outbreak of the Korean War, she used to work as a prostitute serving the US soldiers based in South Korea, commonly referred to with the pejorative term, *yanggongju*, or Western Princess. Moreover, So-yeong's work as the Bacchus Lady obliquely reflects the widespread social change characterized by an increase in the number of elderly people and related social issues such as poverty, isolation, and depression.

In the middle of the film, we see So-yeong is being filmed and interviewed by a young documentary director, who is obviously the director's double. So-yeong advises that he should produce a feature film telling a love story to make more profit. In response, the young director says he will reward her for her contribution to his film with a quality documentary. In this interlude episode, we find the director's self-reflexive confession of frustration that his feature

film cannot fully approach or affect actual social issues. In fact, the interlude scenes featuring the young documentarian mainly follows So-yeong's confession and personal history as a prostitute. E alternates between the master camera and the camera the documentarian is using in the narrative diegesis. Thus, when So-yeong is confessing to the documentarian's camera, it is doubly framed. But by constantly alternating the two cameras in this sequence, E incorporates the two different profilmic events, namely the story of So-yeong and the story of every elderly prostitute in South Korea, into one, blurring the boundary demarcating the framed reality and another cinematic reality, as well as situating the audience in the position of documentary viewers. The difference between the Korean and English titles also reflects this deliberation. On the one hand, there is *the* Bacchus Lady, an a-filmic motif as well as socio-cultural reality; on the other hand, there is *a* Bacchus Lady, or a "killer woman," performed by a culturally and historically coded actress who is a pro-filmic figure chosen by the director. Yet, I argue that this very attitude of the director in building such a socially engaging melodrama as *The Bacchus Lady* enables a critical approach toward the heteronormative nation-state and kinship structure, situating this film in the critical social turn of queer Korean cinema.

As suggested above, the critical social turn in queer Korean cinema inevitably critiques both idealized representations of queers in most big budget queer films and the parochial purview of identity-bound LGBT cinema. The cinematic negotiation of "antisocial" queerness and the social desire to enable cohabitation with other socially marginalized subjects allowed directors to explore the issue of queer kinship in their films. Instead of fostering LGBT pride or marriage-based kinship, the critical attention of these films is directed at non-normative and non-assimilative ways of constituting kinship. Consequently, these films question and trouble the normative operation of society. As in the case of *The Bacchus Lady*, the incorporation of queer

kinship in film narrative accentuates the political attitudes of recent queer Korean cinema. Recent queer Korean cinema attempts to disrupt the fundamental structure that drives heteronormative community to reproduce itself through marriage, child-rearing, aging, and dying a natural death. As I demonstrated in this chapter, queer Korean cinema symbolically reorients kinship. What the critical social turn of queer Korean cinema ultimately seeks is neither the deconstruction of social structures nor assimilation to the deceptive lure of normativity, but rather alternative kinship ties based on intimacy, interdependency, and absolute hospitality.

Chapter 5. The Temporality of Revenge: Mimicry, Storytelling, and Queer Futurity in *The Handmaiden* (2016)

1. Introduction

Though one should not overlook the enormous contribution of independent filmmakers to the new wave of queer filmmaking since the 1990s, one should also equally take into account the financial success of mainstream queer films that were made by openly straight directors. Films such as *Farewell My Concubine* (Bawang Bie Ji, Chen Kaige, 1993), *The Wedding Banquet*, *Happy Together*, and *Intimates* (Zi Shu, Jacob Cheung, 1997) all enjoyed both critical and box office success nationally and internationally. However, imbued with diverse genres and themes, the popularity of mainstream queer films can be more clearly observable in South Korean cinema. As I briefly addressed in the third chapter, queer South Korean cinema as a critical mode of production has been constituted not only through the contributions of independent cinema but also through the vibrant queer filmmaking cultures among established directors. *Bungee Jumping of Their Own*, *King and the Clown*, and *A Frozen Flower*, which narrativize male homoeroticism, are just a few examples of this trend. Yet, as I have demonstrated thus far, films that do not explicitly portray homoeroticism but defy any normative representation of sexuality, lifestyles, and family formation, including *Moebius* (Moebiuseu, Kim Ki-duk, 2013) and *Oldboy* (Oldeuboi, Park Chan-wook, 2003), also participate in this trend, though it may be contestable to call these films as queer cinema.[34] Park Chan-wook, in particular, has constantly incorporated queer or potentially queer elements into his films ranging from the illicit brotherhood between

[34] Park's and Kim's films are also commonly categorized as "Asian Extreme" films in the U.S. The naming came from the marketing decision of the U.S. and British DVD distribution company, Palisades Tartan. Starting from 1993, Palisades Tartan released the DVDs of mostly violent or horror Asian films under the brand of The Tartan Asian Extreme. For the criticism regarding the undertone of orientalism in this branding, see: Chung, 2010.

North and South Korean soldiers in *Joint Security Area* (Gongdong Gyeongbi Guyeok J.S.A., 2000) to non-normative intimacies that include incestuous relations and non-normative kinship in *Oldboy*, *Lady Vengeance* (Chinjeolhan Geumjassi, 2005), and *Stoker* (2013).[35] Considering the thematic trajectory of his previous films, it is no surprise that he made an explicitly queer film, *The Handmaiden*, a lesbian revenge thriller adapted from Sarah Waters's novel, *Fingersmith*, in 2016.[36]

Being one of the most internationally acclaimed directors in South Korea, Park Chan-wook has produced an eclectic body of creative works since his directorial debut in 1992, including feature films, TV mini-series, screenwriting, and film criticism. Arguably, Park ranks as the most influential and internationally acclaimed feature filmmaker in contemporary Korean film history. His career path is not limited to directing; he made significant contributions to South Korean cinema as a producer, screenwriter, and film critic too. As a director, he made his name with highly detailed and impeccable arrangement of mise-en-scène, most obviously observable in his framing of different objects on screen. Yet, along with the international recognition of Park's unique visual style, it bears stressing that the sympathetic representation of social others at the margins of the Korean nation-state has always been an important element of the stories told in Park's films. *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance* (Boksuneun Naui Geot, 2002), the first installment of the so-called "Revenge Trilogy," for instance, not only explores the unpredicted chain of revenge but also satirizes the situational absurdity of socially ostracized people, including a poor and deaf foundry worker who tries to save her dying sister and a not-so-

[35] In analyzing the homosocial brotherhood in *Joint Security Area*, Kim Kyung Hyun, for instance, argues that "The prohibited companionship between the four male soldiers, the breaking of political taboo through games of bodily contact (playing the children's game on-leg wrestling), the exchange of bodily fluid, … , and the use of actual guns and bullets as instruments of pleasure, threat, and eventual killings all post allegories of same-sex eroticism" (Kim 2005, 264).

[36] Though it is not the film's central conceit, lesbianism as a trope of women's solidarity was already portrayed in *Lady Vengeance* through the bonding and sociality of female inmates.

affluent single father whose only daughter is abducted and killed. One of his shorts, *Never Ending Peace and Love* (Mitgeona Malgeona Chandeuraui Gyeongu, 2003), also reveals this attitude in both subject matter and cinematic style. Based on a true story, in which a Nepalese migrant woman named Chandra was mistakenly put into an asylum in South Korea for more than six years, the film primarily consists of POV shots of Chandra, who is the victim of prejudice and hostility towards migrant workers in South Korea. Through the POV shots reenacting the xenophobic injustice and predicament the woman had to suffer, audience are forced to inhabit the perspective of a female migrant worker instead of just objectively viewing acts of discrimination. The film begins and ends with the director asking a wide array of Nepalese women whether their name is Chandra. Park and his crew members visit a small village in Nepal to find Chandra. And by calling her with her own name, or giving her own agency, which she deserves but was denied as a racial other in South Korea, Park seeks to atone for her experience in his home country.

In *The Handmaiden*, Park also uses innovative narrative and cinematic techniques to accentuates women's agency and autonomy; in this case, women who challenge heteropatriarchal and colonial masculinity. In an interview following the film's premiere at the 69th Cannes International Film Festival, Park states that the film can be "viewed as a story about women's victory and the victory of the disadvantaged" (Jang 2016; my translation). Indeed, *The Handmaiden* allegorizes colonial patriarchy and absurdity by revealing the perverse economy of colonial collaboration and the queer resistance of two women. To be sure, the film's visual representation of lesbian sexual activity has been criticized as overly exotic or eroticized by some viewers, as I discuss briefly in the following sections. In this chapter, however, I focus mainly on the film's construction of a queer temporality as well as the narrative of revenge.

Instead of discussing whether the film indulges male fantasies of lesbian sexuality or not, I analyze how cinematic techniques and narrative choices create what can be termed a queerness, both overt and covert. Queerness in Park's films commonly meets with ruthless revenge. *The Handmaiden* also amalgamates queerness with a revenge plot. Whereas the film's explicit queerness manifests itself mainly through the narratives, I argue that a latent queerness in *The Handmaiden* is locatable in its form and style as I have demonstrated so far with the analyses of other queer East Asian films.

2. Hyper-eroticism, Colonial History, and Companionship

Set in the 1930s Korea, an era of Japanese colonialism, *The Handmaiden*'s plot revolves around two women: an orphaned Korean pickpocket named Sook-hee, and a wealthy orphaned Japanese heiress named Hideko. Sook-hee is enlisted by Count Fujiwara, a Korean swindler, who is disguised as a Japanese aristocrat, to help him vie for Lady Hideko's love so that Fujiwara can legally extort her wealth. Hideko lives in a secluded manor with her uncle-in-law, Kouzuki. Kouzuki used to be a Korean colonial collaborator working as a Japanese translator and now became naturalized as Japanese after having married Hideko's aunt. As a collector and dealer of pornographic books with obscene pictures, he regularly convenes readings of those books for potential buyers. After his Japanese wife committed suicide, he forces Hideko to read his pornographic collections in front of Japanese gentlemen who are interested in buying the books, and Hideko languishes in her prison-like manor. Driven by a desire to possess Hideko's beauty and wealth, Kouzuki wants to marry her. Yet, as the narrative proceeds, we learn that Sook-hee's enlistment in the Count's plan is an elaborate ruse devised by the Count and Lady Hideko; they intend to place Sook-hee into a mental hospital under Hideko's name, so that Hideko can escape

from both Kouzuki's tyranny and live her life elsewhere. As the two female characters develop mutual trust and love, however, they eventually team up to seek revenge on both male characters.

Though its primary plot and motifs are borrowed from the original novel, *Fingersmith*, the latter part of the film, including the climax and denouement, departs from its original source. Whereas the original novel is set in Victorian era Britain, the historical setting of the film is in the 1930s. Moreover, the film includes several scenes of lesbian sex which visualize what the novel had left to the reader's imagination. Indeed, immediately following the press preview of *The Handmaiden* at the Cannes Film Festival, several critics voiced disgruntlement with the film's hyper-erotic depiction of lesbian sex. An initial screening review from *The Guardian*, for instance, compares Park's film with *Carol* (Todd Haynes, 2015), which was released the previous year, and points out that "unlike Haynes's chemistry-free drama, [*The Handmaiden*] is simmering with genuine sexual tension" (Lee 2016). An interview with the director from the same newspaper more critically questioned the exploitation issues of female actors by an "older male director," thus reminding its readers of the pungent criticism *Blue Is the Warmest Color* (La Vie d'Adèle, Abdellatif Kechiche, 2013) had received (Barnes 2016). In his turn, film critic Tim Robey opined that the viewers of the film "will be sharply divided on whether they're beautifully, liberatingly erotic or a male wet dream" (Robey 2017). Highlighting multidimensional gazes beyond the screen, film critic, Nam Da-eun, takes a different stance by arguing that she "cannot agree with opinions that understand *The Handmaiden* as a superb narrative of women's liberation while ignoring the cleverly dishonest arrangement of gazes" (Nam 2016; my translation). Literary critic, Shin Hyung-cheol, however, questions the stoicism behind these feminist readings: "given that women's sex is portrayed in the way that it does not alienate women, does it deserve blame for female desire, cinematic desire, and the desire of

spectators to 'respond' to and 'conspire' with one another?" (Shin 2017, 118; my translation). Though the focus of this chapter is not on whether *The Handmaiden* shows a politically correct representation of lesbian sexuality or not, these controversies need to be addressed because they demonstrate how the film's broader queer discourse and design have been overlooked entirely.

Responses from scholars were not much different either; many reviews shed doubt on the film's male gazes and hyper-eroticism, while lauding its innovative styles and aesthetic integrity. Indicating that neither the director nor the screenwriter identifies as queer, Tammie M. Kennedy argues that "a masculine omnipresence is ever vigilant" in the three main lesbian sex scenes in the film (Kennedy 2018, 237). In observing the "insidious nature of the male gaze," Kennedy further argues that the sex scene mostly framed in medium shot is "less liberating than voyeuristic" (Kennedy 2018, 237). But what is a "liberating" portrayal of lesbian sexuality? Are there sexual practices of lesbians that are more proper? In the following paragraph, Kennedy argues that "it is difficult to claim that Izumi's psyche is liberated from the repression and commodification of female sexuality" because her sexual practice is still entrapped in male fantasies through her repetition of what she has learned through the reading of the pornographic books (Kennedy 2018, 237). It is true that the film's depiction of lesbian sex more or less reproduces clichés about lesbian sex and male fantasies. Yet, according to the plot, the pornographic books Hideko was compelled to read were the only source of learning about sexual pleasure. One might say that those critics who expect Hideko and Sook-hee to engage in "liberating" sex, which is already a rather ambiguous concept, offer a critical response to the film that overlooks narrative coherency. In commenting on the criticism about the film, Patricia White, for instance, points out that "the question of voyeurism is also a cultural one" (White 2016). Though she admits that the film is both "liberatingly erotic" and "a male wet dream,"

White reminds us of the difference of spectatorship according to different cultures by stating that "Western viewers will find no more authenticity in the film's East than male viewers will find in its sapphism" (White 2016).

Interestingly, Kennedy precisely addresses the issue of cultural identity, but in an opposite way. Though she is highly critical of the representation of lesbian sex in the film, which she reads as "titillating and [a] cliché within the male gaze," Kennedy underscores her identity as "a white, American, middle-aged, feminist-lesbian-queer scholar" (Kennedy 2018, 237). This reflection ironically suggests that the film's spectatorship and affective response to the film's lesbianism could be the effects of one's cultural, ethnic, and racial backgrounds. Park's obsessive articulation of equality between two women is mainly visualized as the perfectly symmetrical composition of two female protagonists in their sex scenes. This obsessive framing certainly resonates with a cliché about lesbian sex. Yet, one should not underestimate the emergence of a huge female fandom of the film, arguably led by young feminist and lesbian communities in South Korea. Moreover, as there has been "a tendency in queer cinema to eroticize only gay male bodies," and as lesbian eroticism in Korean cinemascapes has been historically absent, the hyper-erotic representation of lesbian sexuality in *The Handmaiden* is rather stimulating (Leung 2008, 34). Hence, I argue that it will be more productive to direct our discussion of the film's queerness to its form and style, as well as to the narrative arrangement, rather than isolate the depiction of lesbian sexuality.

When the film begins, we hear children singing a traditional Korean folksong. The black screen then cuts to the Japanese Imperial army soldiers marching through an alley in colonized Seoul followed by several Korean children (See fig. 15). Annoyed by the children's tagging along, one of the soldiers pulls out his sword to threaten them. The children run away screaming,

and then run into one of the protagonists, Sook-hee. A POV shot of Sook-hee looking at her pickpocket family immediately follows. She is saying her farewell to the family, who appears to be in deep sorrow. The opening scene is intentionally over-sentimental. Sook-hee's friend, Keutdan, for instance, weeps openly while saying: "It should have been me. I should be the one going to that Jap's house." Her speech accentuates the sentimental mood created by the gloomy dull gray background on a rainy day. In this opening sequence, audiences would likely expect the narrative to be melodramatic in its association with the colonial history of Korea or at least to portray the handmaiden's adversity. This expectation becomes even more true to most Korean audiences who are familiar with the history of Japanese colonialism marked by ruthless governance and violence towards women, including wartime sexual slavery.

Fig. 15: Children tag along the Japanese Imperial Army soldiers, while chanting the song of companionship.

By beginning with a group of Japanese Imperial Army soldiers marching through an alley in colonized Korea, Park hints at the film's critique of colonial masculinity. Yet, the director refuses to adopt the binary logic of colonial representation. Instead, Park directs our attention to the perverse economy of the colonial collaborators as well as the queer resistance of two women. Soon after the opening sequence, we hear Sook-hee's voice-over telling that she was voluntarily participating in Count Fujiwara's plot in order to take the share for her "service" and leave Korea. Keutdan's lament is thus out of jealousy. On the level of the diegesis, this opening

sequence is part of Sook-hee's visualized memory. The inversion of the audience's expectation in this opening sequence thus foreshadows the subversive aspect of her storytelling, or the frequent deployments of peripeteia in her story. As I will further analyze in the pages that follow, peripeteia is not only the driving force of the film's plot; it is also, more importantly, a main narrative strategy for critiquing the heteronormative progression of story-telling norms. In fact, the inversion of audience's expectation even complicates the genre of the film; the film begins as a colonial melodrama, transitions to a typical heist film, moves to a buddy movie saturated with queer romance, and then ends in the manner of a tragicomedy. The Korean title of this film also reveals an ambiguous or subversive attitude to the narrative being told. The original Korean title, *Agassi*, literally translates to "Lady." But the term can be used both vocatively and in the third person. Previously, it was a polite form of calling or responding to a lady of a higher-class status. Currently, it refers to any woman whom one presumes to be young. It is thus ambiguous if the title refers to Lady Hideko or Sook-hee. This ambiguity in terms of the title's reference demonstrates Park's intention to assign equality to the two main characters despite their ethnic, situational, and class difference. Indeed, the first chapter of the film is mainly told by Sook-hee, whereas the second chapter is mostly narrated by Hideko.

The use of music in the opening scene is additionally interesting. The song the children are singing in the scene is a traditional children's song, in which the word *Dongmu*, meaning friend or companionship, repeats as a refrain.[37] It is an irony that the children of colonized Korea are enchanting the importance of companionship while tagging along behind the Japanese soldiers, who came to devastate their home country. This sense of betrayal from a trusted

[37] *Dongmu* means both companion(ship) and friend. The English translation of the lyric of the song is as follows: Friends Friends We Are Good Companions / Going Hand in Hand Anywhere / Friends Friends We Are Good Companions / Playing Together Anytime / Friends Friends We Are Good Companions / The Sun and the Moon Also Tag Along / Friends Friends We Are Good Companions /You and I All Play Together (my translation).

"companion" traverses both historical and thematic attitudes of the film. Judging from various elements in the film, including Koreans whose names were changed into Japanese ones and the cross-channel liner between Kobe city and Shanghai, it is not difficult to guess that the story is set in the late 1930s.

The 1930s marks a significant turning point in the colonial history of Korea. In order to cement the annexation of Korea into Japan, as well as to stretch the territorial colonization of Korea to spiritual colonization, the Japanese General Government of Korea implemented the policy of *naisen ittai* that translates to Japan and Korea as one single body since 1936. The *naisen ittai* policy compelled Koreans to change their Korean names to Japanese names and to adopt the Japanese language as the official as well as the common language in the Korean peninsula. As a continued endeavor of this policy, the then governor-general, Minami Jiro, enacted and widely circulated the so-called *kōkoku shinmin no seishi* that literally translates to the "Narrative of the Imperial Subjects," or the "Oath of the Imperial Subjects," that forces Korean nations to pledge loyalty to the Japanese emperor, in 1937. In other words, Japanese colonizers intended to compel Koreans to think Japan as a "companion" not as a colonizer. Interestingly, when Sook-hee introduces herself to Hideko, she says that Lady Minami was her previous employer and that she came to the manor through Lady Minami's introduction. Though Lady Minami never appears in the diegesis of the film, as she is a fictitious person Sook-hee and Fujiwara created to dupe Hideko, audience with some acute knowledge of colonial history of Korea may notice the historical undertone of the film with the name.

The song of companionship is thus a stylistic device to incorporate the narrative subversion created by the unexpected flow of narrative into the grand narrative told by the master storyteller, Sook-hee. In the second chapter of the film, the Korean word "*Dongmu*" is

repeated by Hideko, when Sook-hee consoles Hideko. After hearing Hideko's remorseful confession that her mom died giving birth to her and that she wishes she had never been born, Sook-hee tells Hideko that no baby is ever guilty of being born. In her inner monologue, Hideko asks herself: "Is this the companionship they write about in books?" This moment is important for Hideko, who has been confined in the manor for almost her entire life reading pornographic books to gentlemen; it is also the first moment that she finally enacts what she has read about in those books. The fantasy she acquired as a passive reader now becomes actualized in a lived reality. And this brief shot forms a diametrical opposite to the compelled "companionship" by the Japanese Imperial Army soldiers in the opening scene, who are obviously moving forward.

3. Passing and Queer Mimicry

The children eulogizing companionship or friendship in the opening sequence foreshadows the companionship of the two women that eventually resist and overturn the colonial patriarchy. Instead of falling into either nationalistic or sympathetic portrayal of Korea's colonial past, *The Handmaiden* attempts to translate the colonial modernity and the schizophrenic selves of colonial collaborators into queerness, while it also suggests a queer bonding of two female protagonists as a source of resistance to the masculine, patriarchal, colonial, and heteronormative system. As the marching of the Japanese Imperial Army soldiers in the opening sequence suggests, colonialism in the film is allegorized in the demonstration and practice of patriarchal masculinity. Mirroring each other as doubles, for instance, the two male protagonists in the film represent the perversity of colonial modernization of Korea. In narrative space, their desire to pass as Japanese, thus pseudo-colonizers, renders them to be self-excessive male figures. Count Fujiwara, a son of a Korean peasant farmer, now passes as a Japanese aristocrat to deceive Kouzuki, a colonial

collaborator, who is now naturalized as a Japanese. As the audience knows they are both native Koreans, their use of Japanese language in mutual conversations exposes the theatricality and mimicry of their passing identities.

Indeed, mimicry and passing are two strategies each character in the film adopts to survive in colonial Korea. Ostensibly, mimicry is more apparently practiced by the two male figures, especially, Kouzuki, who is naturalized as Japanese. Chi-Yun Shin, for instance, argues that Homi Bhabha's notion of mimicry is useful "to discern [Kouzuki]'s potentially threatening aspect that blurs the boundaries of colonial identities" (Shin 2018, 6). I agree with Shin that Kouzuki's characterization discloses the irrational and ludicrous subjecthood of not just colonial collaborators but also of colonizers. Yet, the film does not depict the two male collaborators as agents of subversive mimicry. Instead, their mimicry of colonizers is marked by petty obsession with fetishistic desires, eventually revealing their inability to become colonizers. In Freudian paradigm, the process of one's construction of fetishism operates with the disavowal of mother's lack of phallus. Freud argues that the fetish is "designed to preserve [the mother's penis] from extinction. … the fetish is a substitute for the woman's (the mother's) penis that the little boy once believed in … and does not want to give up" (Freud 1968, 199). In the context of colonial history of Korea, the figure of mother can be replaced with the Korean nation-state without its sovereignty. For these two male figures, the lack of autonomy of their mother country under colonial regime offers the ground for their fetishism and castration fantasy.

In Kouzuki's case, his castration fantasy, which stems from the mother country's lack of sovereignty, is reverted safely to and invested in his obsession with pornographic books. His vain desire to transform himself from a mere collaborator to a fully naturalized colonizer symbolically manifests itself in his obsession with pornographic books, infusing perversity into literacy. At the

same time, his eccentric taste of enjoying translated pornography not through solitary reading but through theatricalized storytelling embodies the "impotence" of colonial collaborators. Kouzuki is portrayed as a sadistic bibliophile, whose failed masculinity as well as anxiety over symbolic castration can be reinstated only through the fetishistic obsession with pornographic books and the acoustic experience of pornographic storytelling. It is an act of condensing the volatile, ephemeral, and transient properties of story. Just like the luxurious and modern bookbinding devices Kouzuki possesses, both his late Japanese wife and her niece, Hideko, belong to his collection, with which he everlastingly attempts to replace his unattainable phallic ideal, namely becoming an absolute colonizer. Considering that Kouzuki is not just Hideko's guardian, but at the same time her pseudo-father and compulsory heterosexual lover, and considering that his bibliophilia is his manifestation of phallic fetishism, the destruction of his study by two female protagonists can be understood as a ritual of patricide.

Similarly, Count Fujiwara's impotence also originates from his deficiency of a symbolic phallus; he is the son of a poor Korean manservant in Jeju Island. His inferior complex drives him to be a self-excessive male figure. But this vain desire to belong to the colonial patriarchy eventually leads to a catastrophic tragedy. His obsession with both phallic authority and his actual penis can be observed in many sequences of the film. For instance, he expresses a strong attachment to his phallic pride even at the moment of his own death by saying that "at least I will die with my cock intact." Interestingly, Park associates Count Fujiwara's phallic pride with his fingers, the bodily device of his art forgery, which enables him to approach Kouzuki and Hideko. The guillotining of his fingers by Kouzuki in the third chapter thus represents the castration of his already impossible desire to attain the phallic ideal. It is a tragicomic irony that a colonizer-to-be is castrated by another colonized man who is naturalized as a colonizer. Just like the

preserved genital specimen Kouzuki collects in the basement, both males become another collection in the Kouzuki's erotic museum.

Fig. 16: Hideko's forged passport; she passes as a Korean man with Fujiwara's real name.

Noticeably, however, the mimicry of the two female characters departs from this perverse economy of colonial collaboration. Their practice of mimicry can be observed in two different contexts: Hideko's passing as a Korean man and their lesbian sex that critically mimics heteropatriarchal fantasy. Unlike the passing of the two male characters as Japanese, the passing of Lady Hideko at the end of the film as a Korean man exemplifies a very different effect of passing. In order to escape from Japan with Sook-hee, she passes as a Korean man with Count Fujiwara's real Korean name, Go Pandol, a name used by a common lower-class Korean man at that time (See fig. 16). Namely, from a wealthy Japanese heiress, thus from a colonizer and a master, Hideko transforms herself into a lowborn Korean John Doe. As a bilingual of both Japanese and Korean, Hideko constantly converses with Sook-hee in Korean, as she feels obnoxious when she speaks the language she uses in the pornographic reading. This practice of self-othering marks the queer companionship of the two female protagonists, which is differentiated from the perverse homosociality between two male figures. Hideko's voluntary becoming of a colonized subject forms a diametrical comparison with the passing of the two male figures. Linda Schlossberg suggests that passing is a fundamentally queer practice. She

notes that passing's ability "to be both playful and serious asks us to reconsider our interpretative strategies and forces our most cherished fantasies of identity to self-deconstruct" (Schlossberg 2001, 3-4). This process of self-deconstruction, however, has very different valences in women and men in the film. Whereas Hideko's self-deconstruction as well as the lesbian sex the two female characters enact instills subversive quality in their mimicry of subjects with different class, ethnicity, and gender, the two male characters' self-deconstruction prompted by their mimicry or passing as Japanese colonizers eventually reveal their absurdity.

The controversial sex scenes between two female characters can also be understood as a queer mimicry of male fantasy. Contrary to the existing criticism about the sex scenes that they replicate clichés of lesbian sex without deliberation, I argue that these scenes disclose the very epistemological matrix on which male fantasy operates. In the first and second chapter of the film, we see Hideko and Sook-hee make love while imitating what Hideko has learned through her reading of pornographic books. As they are still concealing their intent as deceivers of each other at the moment, they are using Count Fujiwara, a male conman, as a means of bogus coquetry. After reading a pornographic novel portraying lesbian sex, Hideko returns to her room and asks Sook-hee to sleep with her. The first cue of seductive coquetry comes from Hideko's mouth: "What is it that men want?" We, as the audience, know that Hideko already knows that the Japanese gentlemen, who attended the pornographic reading, enjoyed the narrative of lesbian sex full of clichés and male fantasy. From the perspective of the plot, this question is not replicating or acting out male desires but a means of fathoming Sook-hee's real intentions. But from the overall structure of the film, this seemingly naïve but actually intentional question is not just testing Sook-hee's innocence; it rather bounces back to audiences who know what happened in the reading. By asking this already apparent question at least in the diegesis of the film, as

well as by directing the question, the answer of which she already knows, to the audience, Hideko disrupts the very process of fantasy making. This strategy of speaking back can also be observed when Hideko asks Sook-hee whether the Count will not think he's making love to a corpse or not. In a previous scene, Hideko overhears a conversation between Count Fujiwara and Kouzuki, where Fujiwara says Hideko's body would be as cold as waterfowl and that her eyes have no desire and her soul is dead inside like a corpse. Though posed in the form of an interrogative sentence, Hideko's question becomes an affirmative sentence that she is making love vigorously when she is freed from male fantasy. In other words, she is overturning expectations and fantasies of both male figures in the film and the audience by "mimicking" their own narratives; male desires and fantasies are appropriated in service of a bigger picture of both Hideko and Sook-hee.

Homi Bhabha argues that the threat of mimicry "comes from the prodigious and strategic production of conflictual, fantastic, discriminatory 'identity effects' in the play of a power that is elusive because it hides no essence, no 'itself'" (Bhabha 1984, 131). The highly sensual sex between Hideko and Sook-hee, which is full of clichés and male fantasy, also reveals the elusiveness of the very premises both male characters in the film and we, as audiences, have in regard to lesbian sex, namely penetrative sex, mutual caressing of female genitals knowns as "scissoring," and even cunnilingus, which is not an exclusively heterosexual practice. What is important in the sex scene is that Hideko knows that she is replicating and reproducing a male fantasy. Moreover, as the narrative is reconstructed and told by two female characters retrospectively, Sook-hee, as one of the master narrators, also knows that they are mimicking the pornographic novel. In so doing, they disclose the ambiguity of the power dynamics in Hideko's compelled reading of pornographic books as well as heterosexist expectation of lesbian sex. The

audience no longer identifies who is wielding power over whom. And in their process of mimicry, what manifests itself is the insignificance and ludicrousness of male fantasy. The "sexual" mimicry of two women even troubles the male figures' hypocrisy as "learned" gentlemen. When Hideko and Sook-hee use the geisha ball for their pleasure in the final scene, both characters as well as audiences know that the ball as a sex toy is mentioned in the pornographic novel Hideko was reading. Moreover, the shape of the geisha ball looks very similar to the ball-shaped paperweight that Kouzuki used to discipline Hideko. As a bibliophile, Kouzuki's fetishistic attachment to pornographic books and his ruthlessness as a colonial collaborator as well as a patriarch are embodied in his use of the paperweight both as a disciplinary tool and as it is. The geisha ball or, symbolically speaking, the paperweight, used in their final sex scene is thus not an alternative dildo, or a substitute penis. It is rather a means of degrading and ridiculing the contemptuous male characters who are literate and frequent users of the paperweight.[38]

4. The Temporality of Revenge and Queer Storytelling

Arguably, in East Asian cinema, Park Chan-wook's works have been associated with the revenge narrative more than any other directors in the region. Indeed, one of the recurring motifs in Park's films is revenge. From his "Vengeance Trilogy" to *The Little Drummer Girl* (2018), his most recent TV miniseries, Park scrutinizes the emotional excess of those whose lives are put in extreme suffering, as well as the affective and social dynamics of violence and revenge. Though the thematic association of his films with revenge is often discussed in conjunction with his

[38] In the context of visual repetition, the geisha ball is also the substitute of the lollipop we see in the bath scene of the first chapter. While bathing Hideko, Sook-hee studies her fair skin and beautiful body. Hideko hands in the lollipop she was sucking on to Sook-hee, amplifying the romantic tension in the scene. The sensuality of exchanging the lollipop is exactly repeated in the final sex scene with the geisha ball.

"Revenge Trilogy," all of his stories involve a revenge plot of one sort or another. Even his debut film and his second feature film, *The Moon Is What the Sun Dreams of* (Daleun...Haega Kkuneun Kkum, 1992) and *Threesome* (Saminjo, 1997), which flopped at the box office and not commonly considered as major works, explore the issue of social ostracization and revenge.

But the way Park addresses revenge in his films is often obliquely plotted. Most of his films, including the "Revenge Trilogy," narrativize a respective character's inner conflict in the process of taking revenge rather than the triumphant accomplishment of that revenge. Indeed, the practice of taking private revenge instead of appealing to public revenge or legal justice inevitably transforms one's status of victim to that of the convict, because, as Terry Eagleton aptly formulates, "to clamour for justice as an avenger is to be sucked into the very order which denies it" (Eagleton 2009, 151). *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance*, for instance, demonstrates this dilemma through the violent fall of all the characters. Innocent characters are put into an unwanted circuit of violent revenge, where all of them are eventually killed at the cost of following their own will to seek revenge. Revenge in the film is thus portrayed as a byproduct of absurd tragedy rather than a fulfillment of justice. *Oldboy* also blurs the traditional distinction between a righteous avenger and an evil victim of the revenge. As in Oedipus' tragedy, knowing the truth of one's suffering leads to one's downfall, turning the avenger, a truth-seeker, suddenly into a penitent. Kelly Y. Jeong, for instance, argues that "the journey towards revenge, which begins with the notion of restoration and reclamation, ironically blurs the line separating the victim from the victimizer and ends with a more profound loss, that of the stable self" (Jeong 2012, 170). Indeed, the revenge in Park's films becomes a catalyst of one's absolute dissolution, making the avenger's "restoration and reclamation" impossible. This fundamental dilemma in regard to revenge obfuscates the moralistic positions of audience towards the good and the evil.

Yet, *The Handmaiden* differs from Park's previous films because the revenge in the film neither evokes futile fulfillment of justice nor blurs the line between the good and the evil. At least in terms of the denouement that satisfies the main characters as well as the justification of one's violent revenge, the film is much closer to *I Am a Cyborg, But That's Ok* (Ssaibogeujiman Gwaenchanha, 2006) and *Stoker* (2013) than to the more popular "Revenge Trilogy," because the conflict the main characters undergo is resolved without damaging their psyche. In comparison with the "Revenge Trilogy," many South Korean media categorized these three films as the "Girl Trilogy." This nomenclature is in fact derived from Park's interview about *Stoker*, where he jokingly expressed his ambition to direct another film featuring a young girl as a main protagonist (Kim 2013). Though this arbitrary categorization is not officially confirmed by the director, reading the three films in light of the narrative of girls, or female *Bildungsroman*, offers an interesting dimension to Park's *oeuvre*.[39] When the inner and outer conflicts of women, specifically young girls, become the main conceit of Park's films, the way the conflicting situation is resolved, whether it is concerned with injustice or trauma, is different from the films where male protagonists seek revenge. The difference lies in the way that the girl characters in his films commonly come to terms with the situation they are in and eventually advance to the future. Put differently, Park endeavors to situate women's agency and autonomy in the midst of a patriarchal and misogynistic culture in South Korea by using a variation of the revenge narrative.

Revenge is in essence a temporally charged concept. Revenge always engages with unfinished justice or unfulfilled remorse in the past. As the past is presumably forgotten or ignored by the perpetrators of certain injustice, revenge becomes a practice of reinstating the past inscribed in the victim's memory in the current moment. Friedrich Nietzsche, for instance, points

[39] Film critic, Kim Hyeri, for instance, reframes the three films commonly called "Girl Trilogy" as "the films of female growth" (Kim 2016).

out the temporal dimension of revenge in the revenger's remorse for the irrevocable time: "Thus, the will, the liberator, took to hurting; and on all who can suffer he wreaks revenge for his inability to go backwards. This, indeed this alone, is what *revenge* is: the will's ill will against time and its 'it was'" (Nietzsche 1985, 140). To the avenger, the present is thus an eternal continuation of the past, or what Nietzsche calls "it was" until his or her vengeance is accomplished. Yet, seeking revenge necessarily reaffirms one's "inability to go backwards." This contradictory movement of one's willful attachment to the past and to the present creates tragic pathos, stirring up artistic imaginations of different authors and filmmakers.

The Handmaiden, however, plays with this "inability to go backwards" by manipulating cinematic time and narrative structure. The narrative of revenge in the film revolves around temporal disorientation and narrative ambiguity. The eccentric temporality of this film comes firstly from the fact that the narrative expectation is constantly overturned by two female narrators—a peripeteia. Another consideration regarding the temporality is that the revenge narrative in the film basically reveals the two women's will not to forget. It also needs to be noted that the mode of revenge the two female characters take also differs from the gory violence of revenge in other films made by Park. In *The Handmaiden*, those who are engaged in the bloody violence are two male figures. As orchestrators of all the plots, the two female characters don't get blood on their hands. The film's revenge plot is thus a process of revealing the schemes and narratives of two women both chronologically and counter-chronologically; it is a temporally constructed revenge. I understand the temporally charged techniques in the film, including eccentric use of language, repetition, and the restructuring of events through storytelling, as the manifestation of queer revenge.

Whereas the two male figures never escape from the doomed circuit of impossible passing, two female protagonists successfully escape from both Kouzuki's perverse manor house and the colonized territory, enacting their resistance to both the modernized, regulated, and compulsory (hetero-)sexuality and the perverse space of colonization. Yet, it is interesting that throughout the film's diegesis and beyond the diegesis, their resistance is articulated mainly through language. To modern Korean viewers, the overwhelming existence of subtitles creates foreignness in the familiar, unless they are bilingual in Korean and Japanese. This is also applicable to the diegesis of the film, in that Lady Hideko constantly communicates with Sook-hee and Count Fujiwara in the co-called "minor language" or what Hamid Naficy calls "accented language" under the colonial regime, where only Japanese was considered official. This bilingual plane gets even more accentuated in the US release version, since Korean and Japanese are distinguished by the color of the subtitles. Naficy argues that "multilinguality …. necessitates extensive titling, which turns the film frame into a calligraphic page, contributing to the film's overall accent" (Naficy 2004, 143). Thus, the accent of *The Handmaiden* comes not only from the orality by itself but from "the coexistence and intermixing of orality and literacy" (Naficty 2004, 140). In terms of spectatorship, this accentedness or foreignness of reading the subtitles compel Korean audiences to defamiliarize the film's national and linguistic origin.

On the level of structure, the women's queer resistance is achieved through repetition. The film's second chapter provides clues in understanding the mystery by revisiting the same scenes presented in the first chapter. Whereas the first chapter is narrated by Sook-hee, the second chapter shows Hideko's perspective. Interestingly, by deconstructing and reconstructing already told stories in the second chapter, the film shows a certain queer rupture in the practice of storytelling. The presumably same shots we see in the first chapter are mostly different in the

second chapter, though the narrative diegesis is allegedly the same. This is mainly because Park uses a single camera, which means all the same diegetic scenes are in fact different takes, which the director shot with slightly different direction and different cinematography. Though Park Chan-wook's refusal of using multi-cam attenuates the actuality and the verisimilitude of repeated scenes, it creates both intentional and unintentional differences between the takes, which eventually contributes to the non-normative organization of stories. Building on Gilles Deleuze's temporal dynamics of repetition, Claire Colebrook, for instance, argues that "the self who asks to be recognized is, in the very claim for recognition, never reducible to the norm or system through which she speaks or performs. Without a difference or deviation in the repetitions of the norm one could not be a subject who subtends or performs that norm" (Colebrook 2009, 14). In this process of repetition, audio-visual difference or interstice, which defies both the narrative and productive norms of the film, is exposed to us, constantly affecting and modifying our sensorial experience of the film.

For instance, throughout the film's narrative, the trope of hanging lingers through repetition. Sook-hee's mother is said to be executed by hanging for theft. Hideko's aunt hanged herself on a cherry tree Kouzuki cherishes after having suffered from his exploitation.[40] And Hideko, frustrated by Sook-hee's constant deception even after they built mutual affection, decides to hang herself on the very cherry tree on which her aunt took her life. Hideko's attempted suicide also reminds the audience of the guilt she carries regarding her mother, who died while giving birth to her. Ostensibly, Hideko's decision to hang herself reveals her death

[40] In an extra-filmic context, it is worthwhile to note that the cherry tree scene was in fact shot in Sorok Island in the southwest part of South Korea. Sorok Island had been a leper colony starting from the Japanese colonial era and had remained as such until recently. Patients on the island had to undergo numerous state violence, including forced sterilization and forced labor. It is thus revealing that not only the narrative diegesis but also the film location is bound to the traumatic history of the marginalized.

drive as we can guess from her repeated statement: “I wish I’d never been born.” But at the very moment of Hideko’s decision to eliminate herself from the chain of suffering and exploitation, the real “companionship” of two women begins, as both of them disclose their real intents and plan their schemes to take revenge on both male figures. The repetition of hanging as a trope suggests an interesting undertone: the future the two women are building is rooted in the traumatic past other women had to suffer. If queer futurity is a positionality vis-à-vis intangible and obscure relations that will be forged in the future but defy progressive visions that simply negate the past, the hanging motif in *The Handmaiden* demonstrates two women’s endeavor to move on to the future without surrendering themselves to the logic of forgetting. Leaning on the past or negative sentiments filled with traumatic memories, the two women eventually build an alternative kinship in their pursuit of liberation as well as revenge.

Queer kinship is a form of companionship or association of marginalized beings who experience suffering under heteropatriarchal, progress-driven social structures. At the same time, as the repetition of the hanging motif suggests, queer kinship is also a mediation between the ghostly figures of the past and the present subjects who manage to survive under the same oppressive social structures. In other words, through the repetition of certain motifs, the film suggests that the traumatic past is not something to be denounced but something to be retained as a driving force of queer futurity. Park’s stylistic use of repetition even traverses the boundary between this film and his previous films, subverting preexisting arrangement of images to a different context. The shot, where Sook-hee scrapes Hideko’s sharp teeth with a silver thimble, forms a visual repetition of a shot in *Oldboy*, where a bunch of thugs try to pull out teeth from the main character, Oh Dae-su (See fig. 17 and 18). One of the most physically violent and emotionally abusive scenes of his previous film is being repurposed in a new context in this film.

Fig. 17 (top): An over-the-shoulder shot of Sook-hee scraping Hideko's teeth; Fig. 18 (bottom): A shot in *Oldboy*.

Lastly, on the narrative level, it is important that Sook-hee is illiterate. The fact that she can read neither Korean nor Japanese situates her outside of the perverse modernity materialized as pornographic books. Sook-hee's illiteracy renders her a purely authentic listener of the story Hideko is confessing, in the sense that Sook-hee can appreciate the volatile, ephemeral, and transient properties of the story. Sook-hee's status as a pure listener also authorizes her as another storyteller. In his essay, "The Storyteller," Walter Benjamin addresses the reproducibility of storytelling by arguing that "it has seldom been realized that the listener's naïve relationship to the storyteller is controlled by his interest in retaining what he is told. The cardinal point for the willing listener is to assure himself of the possibility of reproducing the story" (Benjamin 2002, 153). Unlike Hideko's forced storytelling of pornography that is in the service of male fantasy, Sook-hee plays with narrative norms by "reproducing" and queering both her own and Hideko's memory. In the first chapter of the film, the story is told mainly by Sook-hee's voice-

over narration. With the exception of the third chapter, the shortest of three, where there is significantly less voice-over narration, all two main chapters of the film are narrated primarily by Sook-hee. Though the narrative of the second chapter flows mainly from Hideko's perspective, it begins with Sook-hee's narration telling us about Hideko's traumatized childhood due to her uncle's abuse. It is important that Hideko's story surfaces in Sook-hee's flashback. The narrative gravity of the film is in fact coming from Sook-hee's memory.

This retrospective storytelling challenges the normative progression of story and reconstructs the representational undertones of each character's experience. In the first chapter of the film, when Hideko, Sook-hee, and Count Fujiwara together elope to Japan, for instance, Park introduces a highly stylistic sequence, showing his masterful implementation of cinematic techniques. The sequence begins with the long tracking shot of Sook-hee and Hideko escaping from the manor. The camera zooms in to show them opening multiple sliding doors; it then shows their backs in bird's eye view. The act of opening the multiple doors is an obvious metaphor of Hideko's breaking out of emotional seclusion. After a series of shot transitions, we see the three characters on a ferry to Japan followed by the shot of a running train. Inside the train, three characters are having lunch. We first see a medium shot of Sook-hee looking somewhere. Another medium shot then shows Count Fujiwara chewing his food while looking at either Sook-hee or Hideko. This is followed by an extreme close-up shot of Hideko's mouth eating just one grain of rice at a time. Here, Sook-hee's POV shot is directed to Hideko's extreme close up. Yet, the image of Count Fujiwara is neither Sook-hee's nor Hideko's POV shot but remains completely isolated. The repeated extreme close-up shots of Hideko's eating are then edited with the intercut of the close-up shots of their feet climbing to a shrine. At the shrine, Hideko and Count Fujiwara are supposed to get married. This sequence condenses temporal

advancement by using cross-cutting. Because the master narrator Sook-hee does not explain her plot in the first chapter of the film, we do not have any other option but to follow the narrative flow of the film. This cross-cutting sequence suggests the narrative is moving forward to a specific goal, namely the marriage of Count Fujiwara and Hideko. This sequence consists of very short shots and fast transitions of those shots, accentuating both women's emotional and situational urgency.

This sequence ostensibly suggests a normative narrative progress which aims at a heterosexual bonding, but when we get to the second chapter, we learn that Sook-hee, the master storyteller is reversing the narrative flow and rewriting what we have seen so far. In other words, she is translating an already completed story retrospectively. As Sook-hee's storytelling narrativizes, queer desire is also situated in past tense, or more precisely, in retrospect. History, understood as progress, is marked by heteronormative ideals. In her polemic against progress-driven futurity, Heather Love, for instance, argues that "queers have been seen … as a backward race. Perverse, immature, sterile, and melancholic" (Love 2007, 6). As an alternative to the logic of time as productive and teleological, queer temporality then "generates a discontinuous history of its own … an escape from history," as Elizabeth Freeman aptly suggests (Freeman 2010, xi). What Sook-hee is enacting in her retrospective storytelling is then to be understood as a narrative practice that rejects the logic of futurity or what Freeman calls the "chrono-normativity" (Freeman 2010, xxii).

5. Conclusion

Before closing my discussion, I would like to go back to the criticism around the presumed male fantasy and hyper-eroticism in *The Handmaiden*. Though the criticisms around hyper-eroticism

in the film indicate important points about representational propriety of marginalized subjects as well as the problematic deployment of male gaze, it is also true that they all emphasize on the authorial significance, including the gender and sexual identity of both the director and screenwriter. As I have argued in previous chapters, queer cinema is not an absolute entity that is defined solely by specific elements, such as its subject matter, author, spectatorship, or its impact on the community of sexual minorities. Moreover, considering that many LGBTQ-identified people in the film industry across East Asia are still closeted, discussing the recognized sexual identity of directors in relation to the queer representation of their films is not very productive. Instead, I argue that the way Hideko enacts the sexual fantasy that was originated from the books should be considered as a subversive mimicry of both colonial atrocity and heteropatriarchal fantasy about female sexuality. It is important to note that Park's film adaptation consciously reminds us of what lacks in Sarah Waters's novel that is set in 19th Century Britain, the ghost of colonial legacy. It is striking that none of the reviews criticizing Park's arrangement of lesbian sex scenes refer to the shadow of colonial history during the Victorian era, which is the temporal background of *Fingersmith*, while Park's adaptation is precisely set in colonial period of Korea, which was annexed to Japan, a new colonial power of the 20th Century. Indeed, revolving around the utopian form of queer kinship, the lesbian relationship of the film's two female leads radically undoes the underlying domestic structure of colonial governance, namely heteropatriarchy. Lesbianism in the film is thus not just a thematic representation of a certain type of intimacy but more importantly functions as a critical device that enables audiences to retrace and critically engage with the traumatic history of the Korean nation-state. The historical and cultural undertone of the film is so deliberately arranged that *The Handmaiden* as a cinematic text already begs a "symptomatic reading." For instance, Sook-hee's room in the

manor is in fact a Japanese closet called *oshiire*. Though it is in the shape of a closet, it does not follow the conventions of "closets" in Euro-American context, which is commonly associated with self-secluded homosexuality. Rather, it refers to the mobile essence of her character; she can always flee and change her home, as she has her luggage ready below her bed. Moreover, people with some knowledge of colonial architectures in Seoul will promptly recognize that the psychiatric ward scene in the middle of the film was in fact shot in the Seodaemun Prison, a landmark historical site of the atrocity of Japanese colonization of the Korean peninsula. But I am neither arguing that the film's lesbianism is merely a historical allegory, nor am I arguing that illuminating culturally and historically coded subtexts is the only way of reading the film properly; I am rather suggesting that lesbianism in the film acquires more powerful meaning and significance when it is understood in its relation to historical contexts. Moreover, alternative queer kinship in the film that traverses a bi-gender limit, national origin, class difference, and educational backgrounds situates the film as a more politically charged cinematic text.

For all the encouraging changes and innovations new queer East Asian cinema has brought about, films that engage with lesbianism have been marginalized in East Asia. Though a few notable filmmakers such as Yau Ching from Hong Kong and Zero Chou from Taiwan clearly made their voices heard among dominantly gay male queer filmmaking, lesbian films have not garnered the same spotlight as gay-themed films. This marginalization has been more seriously observable in South Korea. Though mainstream queer films enjoy financial success, throughout the history of South Korean cinema lesbianism has been a thematic and representational lacuna. A few notable works, including *Ascetic* and *Sa Bangji* (Song Kyung-shik, 1988), have portrayed lesbianism as an alternative mode of engaging with the world under

the patriarchal social structure.[41] Except for a few short films and *Memento Mori* (Memento Mori: Yeogogoedam Dubeonjjae Iyagi, Kim Tae-yong and Min Kyu-dong, 1999), however, lesbianism continues to be almost absent in South Korean cinema. It is thus encouraging to see that the number of films featuring lesbian characters, lesbian relationships, or possibly coded lesbianism have significantly increased in the 21st Century. Moreover, as in the case of *The Girl Princes* (Wangjaga Doen Sonyeodeul, Kim Hye-jeong, 2012), *Our Love Story* (Yeonaedam, Lee Hyunju, 2016), *A Girl at My Door*, *Futureless Things*, *Troublers*, *The Truth Beneath*, and *The Handmaiden*, most of these films have enjoyed critical acclaims both nationally and internationally, consequently proving the potential of queer cinema representing lesbianism as an important cultural product in South Korea.

Yet, the way these films approach lesbianism does not conform to the conventional representation of identity-bound subjects. The South Korean films I mentioned above negotiate lesbian-specific experiences within the much broader wave of the critical social turn of queer Korean cinema. Moreover, the temporal disorientation and the imagination of queer kinship in these films further accentuate my argument that the recent popularity of queer Korean cinema about lesbianism needs to be understood in the larger context of the general evolution of queer cinema in the region. If queer Korean cinema, or more broadly queer East Asian cinema, in recent years departs from both the New Queer Cinema in the U.S. during the 1990s and recent queer cinema in Euro-American contexts, and thus can be labeled as "new," it is because they demonstrate this alternative sociality while still retaining the legacies and radical politics of global queer cinemascapes. Queer temporality observable in *The Handmaiden* suggests that

[41] Though I categorized *Sa Bangji* as a lesbian-themed film here, its narrative is in fact about the eponymous intersexual person, whose affairs with a noblewoman was recorded in the Annals of the Joseon Dynasty. Yet, the film adaptation features a female actress for Sa Bangji, which made the visual representation of the affair similar to that of lesbianism.

history of the marginalized always lingers in present moment in spectral form. Whether it's cinematic repetition or the restructuring of narrative, what *The Handmaiden* demonstrates in terms of queer aesthetics is that queerness as a positionality or attitude towards normativity can be stylistically constructed or at least experimented with.

Chapter 6. Starting Over, Temporality, and Translation in *Happy Together* (1997): A Coda

1. Introduction

In concluding my discussion of temporality and new queer East Asian cinema, I would like to "go back" to the 1990s to re-contextualize my previous discussions. In particular, I now direct my attention to Wong Kar-wai's 1997 feature film, *Happy Together* and its visions of temporality, as well as its socio-cultural impacts in South Korea. *Happy Together* obviously stands out in this new wave of queer filmmaking, insofar as its political stance and aesthetic style anticipate those of films released in the 2000s and 2010s. Whether *Happy Together* forms a trigger point for assessing the inter-Asian wave of queer filmmaking I have delineated in this study is a different question. B Ruby Rich, however, situates *Happy Together* as a crucible for what she calls the (predominantly Euro-American) New Queer Cinema of the late 1980s and 1990s. By praising "how brilliantly a heterosexual director could capture the essence and nuance of queer romance, lust, jealousy, and rage," Rich argues that *Happy Together* "signaled a moment of triumphant consolidation for the [New Queer Cinema]" (Rich 2013, 133-134). Yet, as I argued in the introductory chapter, one should not overlook the particularities of queer East Asian cinema that are deeply rooted in the social and historical contexts of the region, though there is a thematic influence of the Euro-American New Queer Cinema on its counterpart in East Asia. Obviously, the traits of new queer East Asian cinema that I have discussed in previous chapters, namely an interest in reconstructing non-progressive temporality, an investment in forming alternative kinship with different marginalized subjects, and aesthetic experimentation, are observable in films released simultaneously with or even before the heydays of the Euro-American New Queer Cinema. In fact, new queer East Asian cinema is a wave that was neither

led by a certain group of filmmakers nor initiated by a specific director. Thus, seeking an ultimate "origin" of new queer East Asian cinema might be a futile effort.

Even before *Happy Together* was released in 1997, this wave was informed and affected by inter-Asian cinemascapes. Nakajima Takehiro's 1992 feature film, *Okoge*, for instance, created a huge sensation in film festival circuits with its explicit depiction of gay sex as well as with the then relatively less well-known concept of the so-called *okoge* or "fag hag," a woman who forms amorous attachments to gay men. The impact of the film was so influential that the "the term *okoge* has gained wide currency, [making] the young and attractive *okoge* a familiar character appearing frequently in the pages of magazines and comic books targeted at both teenage and adult female readers, as well as in cameo roles on adult soap operas, and television and print advertising for everything from menswear to soft drinks" (Buckley 2000, 218). What is equally important about the film, especially in the context of this study, is that one can discern an incipient investment in queer kinship. Deconstructing the conventional narratives of family melodrama, the film dramatizes the process of negotiating between one's sexual orientation and the formation of an alternative family.

Yonfan's 1995 feature, *Bugis Street* (Yao Jie Huanghou), more directly criticizes a logic of progressive temporality. Full of melancholic vision of "good old days" of a queer community in Singapore, the film tells a story of a young Peranakan girl who migrates to Singapore and finds a job as a servant at a hotel inhabited by transgender sex workers and transvestites. Through the considerate caring and abiding friendship of those "deviant" citizens of Singapore, the young girl starts making sense of the world in which she lives. The Bugis Street, the eponymous street in Singapore, previously served as an entertainment district dominated by transgender and transvestite sex workers until the early 1980s. During the 1980s, the district

underwent urban redevelopment and emerged as one of the most popular shopping areas in Singapore. After the ebb and flow due to the rearrangement of the city center, the district has recently regained economic strength with the popularity of its street market. Yet, it is not easy to trace the history of the trans community that previously inhabited the district. The film's ending scene precisely shows the dawn of the urban transformation of Singapore. As the main character merrily walks out of the hotel, saying she has learned that life is always full of ups and downs and that these ebbs and flows constitute the promise of life, a crane shot following the girl slowly moves upward to show the high-rise buildings in the downtown area. As the girl merrily accepts her life and the lives of her trans friends, the high-rise buildings overlooking the old and dirty Bugis Street become a harbinger of the demolition and redevelopment of the street.

While the influence of films like *Okoge* and *Bugis Street* remain palpable, *Happy Together* arguably occupies a unique position in the development of new queer East Asian cinema. The heated controversies around the film's representation of homosexuality as well as the film's social impact across East Asia hints at its importance. New queer East Asian cinema is deeply rooted in the cinematic tradition of media politics, as the history of its consolidation as a unique mode of production cannot be divorced from the critique of national temporality. Hence, the representation of certain types of intimacy in the films often registers political inscriptions. As a politically charged queer film, the critique of which lies in the questioning of normative and progressive temporality, *Happy Together* exemplifies the politics of new queer East Asian cinema. In the following sections of this chapter, I will elaborate on the film's engagement of temporality in both intra-cinematic and extra-cinematic contexts. The first section explores the temporal politics of the film in its relation to the emergence of new queer East Asian cinema. The second section discusses the practice of queer translation by investigating the impact of the

banning of *Happy Together* in South Korea. I specifically highlight how public space was transformed into a queerscape through a queer translation of the original film. And finally, in the concluding section, I will recapitulate and assess the thesis of this dissertation.

2. "Let's Start Over!": The Beginning of a New Era

The year 1999, when Wong Kar-wai's *Happy Together* generated controversy in many parts of East Asia, is marked by an array of important events and historical turning points that are crucial to this dissertation. First of all, Hong Kong's handover to mainland China enabled filmmakers to critically engage with the issue of temporality. As I introduced briefly in the first chapter, the official narratives of the state, that is, of both mainland China and British colonial governance, were filled with futuristic visions and positive prospects. Yet, when we remind ourselves of Hong Kong's situation that it is "always already mixed, hybridized, and flexible, [and thus,] the local is, not unlike identity formation, rather becoming than being," we learn how Patten's narrative of progress and stable community is already contradictory (Chu 2004, 14). What mattered to Hong Kong at the transient moment in 1997 was, however, not whether it would continue to prosper and flourish as a global city under a new regime but whether it would stay permanently in-between uncertainty and anxiety. The surge of emigration out of Hong Kong before the actual handover, or what Ronald Skeldon calls "reluctant exiles," who chose to leave Hong Kong out of fears about uncertain future, offers the glimpse of urgency among Hong Kong citizens at the time (Skeldon 1994, 12). Thus, it could be said that two competing attitudes toward the future dominated Hong Kong in 1997: progressive future and deferred future. *Happy Together* deliberates on these contradictory visions of futurity in its narrative and style.

As Wong's sixth feature film, *Happy Together* is a transnational project with transnational crew members, co-invested by Hong Kong, Japan, and South Korea. The film's narrative also revolves around the transnational mobility of three young men. The film narrativizes the failed love triangle between a gay couple from Hong Kong, who moved to Buenos Aires to "start over," as well as an inspiring friendship one of the couple builds with a Taiwanese man in Buenos Aires. Buenos Aires is at the other side of the globe from Hong Kong, and as a postcolonial city, it symbolically mirrors Hong Kong's historical situation at the time. The film begins with close-up shots of the two main characters' passports being stamped at an immigration control booth in Argentina. Significantly, the faces of the two main characters, Yiu-fai and Po-wing, are introduced to the audience as profile pictures on their passports. One of the close-up shots captures the moment when the index finger of an immigrant officer points at the nationality section of their passports as overseas British nationals. In light of the release year of the film, the connotation of the close-up shot is revealing. Moreover, along with their nationality, that of the other character, Chang, who is from Taiwan, invokes a subtext of political issues, including the surge of political tension between mainland China and Taiwan. In fact, the film has another signifier of political and historical issues of the time. At the end of the film, when Yiu-fai wakes up at a hotel in Taipei, the camera briefly shows a news report on TV announcing the death of Deng Xiaoping. The news is announced in a flash moment without drawing the attention of the character. In fact, the announcement is presented only as an ambient sound to Yiu-fai. Yiu-fai's inattentiveness to the news, however, ironically reveals a strong political connotation, namely, the political lethargy of Hong Kong citizens facing the handover.

Not surprisingly, many critics have addressed the political undertone of the film. Wong himself seems to have felt fatigue in regard to the constant questions directed to him about the

handover. Circumventing the political tag of the film, Wong, for instance, states that "*Happy Together* applies not only to the relationship between two persons, but also the relationship between one person and his past. If people are at peace with themselves and their past, this is the start of being able to be happy with somebody else" (Han 1998). Such a perspective stresses the universal themes of *Happy Together*, as well as its focus on temporality. Yet, as Stephen Teo convincingly points out, "the further away that Wong travels, the more 1997 and Hong Kong become visible issues" (Teo 2005, 100). And even when we see the film purely as a film about gay love and loss without any allegorical viewfinder, the film cannot escape from its association with Hong Kong's handover to mainland China, because "the one group in Hong Kong that felt the most anxious and had the most to lose in terms of individual and civil liberties was the gay community" (Teo 2005, 99-100).

Hence, regardless of Wong's real intention of making the film, *Happy Together* cannot be disassociated from the turbulent moment it was released. Reading the ending of the film as a positive stance regarding the handover, Sheldon H. Lu argues that "the film does not end on a pessimistic, apocalyptic note of impending doom in view of Hong Kong's return to China but with the possibility of a new beginning" (Lu 2000, 282). Indeed, the film addresses the issue of futurity. Yet, whether the futurity aims at the prosperous and harmonious future following the handover is not clear; this kind of reductive reading of the film is not easily verifiable since the film's attitudes toward Hong Kong's future is more ambiguous than unidirectional. Admitting that the film contains political allegories, John Powers, for instance, states that:

> [Wong's compatriots] knew it wasn't coincidental that the film should open in Hong Kong one month before that historical transfer of power. Nor was it coincidental that it should begin with a shot of Hong Kong passports and end with Tony Leung's Lai on a

> train in Taipei, not Hong Kong, heading into an indeterminate future ... Even the movie's defining image, the aerial shot of water rushing down Iguazu Falls, is layered with political intimations that cut in different directions. At once thrillingly spectacular and patently dangerous … the roaring waters that combine in these falls are an expression of the inexorably rushing power of reunion that can be seen as both a symbol of great strength or the downward pull of destruction (Wong and Powers 2016, 50).

As Powers eloquently addresses, though the film contains certain political subtexts, they do not adhere to any clear or singular position. Even if we read the allegory of Hong Kong's handover in the film, we cannot assess whether it signifies "great strength or the downward pull of destruction." Rather, as Stephen Teo argues, the film is viewed as "a protest about time" (Teo 2005, 100). In fact, the ambiguity of the film's narrative, including the open question about Yiu-fai's homecoming, as well as whether the film's title is an affirmative sentence or interrogative sentence, comes from the film's engagement with temporal disorientation.

Indeed, the narrative of *Happy Together* gravitates around various temporal concepts that often challenge the normative progression of time, such as deferral, hesitation, and retrospection. The film mainly follows Yiu-fai's perspectives and his voice-over narrations. They sometimes coincide with the events that are simultaneously happening; they also reconstruct past events in retrospect. The couple's decision to travel to Argentina is to "start over" their relationship. The phrase, "start over," constantly reverberates throughout the film's narrative, as Po-wing repeats the same phrase to Yiu-fai. Following the passport control scene and opening credits, we see Po-wing's naked torso smoking a cigarette on a bed. Then, the shot cuts to an almost naked Yiu-fai leaning on the mirror attached to a wardrobe. As we see Yiu-fai's agonizing face, we hear Po-wing's off-screen voice saying the phrase. As a man of relational loyalty and dedication, Yiu-fai

voluntarily falls into the repeated cycle of reunion and separation, though he knows that Po-wing's refrain will soon evaporate with his betrayal. The sex scene is followed by Yiu-fai's flashback in black and white. On their way to the Iguazu Fall, their car broke down, and Po-wing suddenly leaves Yiu-fai. As Po-wing is seriously beaten one day after stealing a watch from a man, who was presumably dating him, Yiu-fai takes care of him at his shabby studio room. In fear of Po-wing's leaving, Yiu-fai hides Po-wing's passport, which in effect brings about an irrevocable dissolution of their relationship. Having been betrayed by Po-wing numerous times, Yiu-fai eventually leaves him and probably returns to Hong Kong to see his estranged father.

At least for the first half of the running time, we see how Yiu-fai manages to defer their time so that he can prolong happy moments with Po-wing. Wong illustrates this notion of temporal suspension through various short scenes that are not necessarily following the flow of narrative. Intercut between main events, these scenes are in fact Yiu-fai's fragmented memories of being "happy together" with Po-wing. In the middle of the film, for instance, we see Po-wing teach Yiu-fai how to dance tango in their cramped studio room. Po-wing patiently leads Yiu-fai by demonstrating how to do Tango steps. The red shirt Yiu-fai is wearing as well as the slightly pink colored lighting adds warm atmosphere to the scene. Then, the scene suddenly cuts to a landscape of an empty street near the harbor (See fig. 19). The blue and gray filter used in this shot creates a feeling of loss and frustration different from the dance lesson scene. The shot then cuts to another scene, where both men are passionately dancing tango in the shared kitchen of their apartment (See fig. 20). Temporally and spatially, it happens in a different setting. The overexposure of high-key lighting highlights both characters, diminishing the cold and sterile mood created by the empty white brick wall.

Fig. 19: A shot of a harbor street in Buenos Aires; Fig. 20: A frame from the kitchen tango scene.

Yet, seen from Yiu-fai's perspective, the film's narrative is about both the will to start over and a rejection of the same, since Yiu-fai's personal journey to "start over" can be accomplished only by rejecting to "start over" with Po-wing. Rey Chow usefully points out the contradictory nature of the phrase. She argues that "this seemingly simple and innocent plea nonetheless already contains its own contradiction, for the wish to start anew often turns out to be a wish to retreat, to revisit something familiar, something that has already been lived through before. The desire to begin from the origin—from "the first" as it were—is thus haunted by the inherent duplicity of its own articulation" (Chow 1999, 34). This temporal entrapment between the repetition of the origin, which is, in Yiu-fai's case, an everlasting repetition of his troubled relationship with Po-wing, and the process of starting anew dominates Yiu-fai's emotional structure. As David L. Eng states, to start over "marks an ostensible departure, a willful attempt to move forward in a new manner that would bring one to another place or effect a different outcome or relation," though it ostensibly signifies a return to the beginning (Eng 2010, 85). Unlike Po-wing's empty and ephemeral request of starting over, Yiu-fai's decision to start over thus enacts his attachment to a new futurity, which is not bound to emotional, geographical, political, or situational constraints.[42]

[42] Audrey Yue, however, maintains a highly critical stance toward Yiu-fai's "starting over." Unlike promiscuous Po-wing, who is thus to be punished, she argues, "both Yiu-Fai and Chang are 'rewarded' in their quests through the

Interestingly, Yiu-fai's decision to genuinely "start over" is initiated when he builds a romantic friendship with another character, Chang. Chang is an interesting character. As a free soul traveling abroad without any fixed relation or responsibility, he helps Yiu-fai to overcome his despair. Chang appears in the middle of the film, when Yiu-fai starts a new job as a cook in a Chinese restaurant after he was fired at the tango bar. A young Taiwanese man who travels around the South American continent, Chang temporarily stays in Buenos Aires, working at the Chinese restaurant to earn some pocket money for his travel. Though it is not clearly confirmed in the diegesis, the film offers some clues about Chang's sexual orientation as a possible gay man. Rejecting a date request from a girl who also works at the restaurant, Chang is more interested in whom Yiu-fai talks to on the phone. Ostensibly, he never learns about Yiu-fai's sexual identity through the end of the film. Yet, in the later part of the film, we learn that Chang knows or at least strongly believes that Yiu-fai is dating a man. Chang makes Yiu-fai uncomfortable by constantly questioning whom Yiu-fai is talking with on the phone all the time. When the two men are working in the Chinese restaurant, Yiu-fai calls someone and asks: "Is Mr. Po-wing there?" We watch Chang's attentiveness to Yiu-fai's dialogue in shallow focus. A medium shot of Chang, who looks serious, then follows. In the latter part of the film, we learn that Chang has a remarkably good sense of hearing. In a different scene, Chang impresses Yiu-fai with his acute sense of hearing. According to Chang, he developed a good sense of hearing, since he had some issue with his eyes during childhood. Then, Chang adds that "you see better with your ears. You can pretend to be happy, but your voice can't lie." Hence, both Chang's

neo-Confucian 'values' of decent hard work, thrift and normativity, … [as] they both reach their respective destinations" (Yue 2000, 255). Yet, it is unclear whether Yiu-fai actually reached his destination. Moreover, the neoliberal flow of labor portrayed in the film is not simply represented as the mode of economic exchange between hard work and financial reward at least on the level of visualization. For instance, the film does not shy away from portraying miserable conditions of Yiu-fai's labor, as we can see the blood-tainted floor of abattoir where he works to move beef carcasses.

identity and the slight tension between Yiu-fai and Chang in their mutual interest are revealed afterwards. In other words, unlike obvious gay relations between Yiu-fai and Po-wing, queerly charged mutual affection between Yiu-fai and Chang is only *nachträglich* determined in the film's diegesis.

The temporally disorienting relation between Yiu-fai and Chang continues through the end of the film. Before Yiu-fai and Chang take their mutual farewell, they go to a bar to drink. Chang tells Yiu-fai about his plan to travel to Ushuaia; a place which, according to what Yiu-fai heard, is located "at the end of the world" where people can "dump all their troubles." Chang then asks Yiu-fai to vent his "troubles" by recording them on a cassette tape recorder, promising that he will dump Yiu-fai's "troubles" in Ushuaia. When Chang leaves Yiu-fai alone to let him comfortably vent his emotional pain to the tape recorder, Yiu-fai just sobs without any words. At the end of the film, we see Yiu-fai visit Taipei. While dining at a small noodle stall run by Chang's parents, Yiu-fai steals a picture of Chang that hangs on the wall mirror. The picture shows Chang standing by a lighthouse at Ushuaia. The moment captured in Chang's picture is the moment when the recording of Yiu-fai's sobbing, or his "troubles," is buried at the end of the world. And by taking that very picture, Yiu-fai commemorates the symbolic closure of his sorrow. Here, two time-spaces are merged: Yiu-fai's time of starting over in the middle of the Taipei city and Chang's time of consoling Yiu-fai's sorrow at the end of the world.

While eating noodle soup at Chang's family-owned stall, we hear Yiu-fai's inner monologue: "I didn't see Chang, but I saw his family. I finally understood how he could be happy running around so free. It's because he has a place he can always return to." Ostensibly, his monologue hints at a conventional narrative of homecoming or family reunion. Yet, the film stops at the very moment of his sojourn in Taipei. We never see him return home. The final

scene shows Yiu-fai looking out of the window while sitting in an MRT train in Taipei; the film ends with a freeze frame of an MRT station, which is Yiu-fai's POV shot. According to the flow of narrative, we don't know whether he actually returns to Hong Kong or not. His journey in the diegesis stops neither in Hong Kong nor in Argentina but in downtown Taipei, Chang's hometown city.

Throughout the film, we see the image of Hong Kong very briefly only once. The image is even presented as an upside-down tracking shot of the city, as Yiu-fai imagines the city from the other side of the world. It may be interpreted as a prescient portrayal of the city, which is now entrapped in its political and democratic backwardness. One might also interpret the upside-down image of the city as a visual representation of Yiu-fai's emotion that is about to "start over" by reversing the starting point of his relationship with Po-wing. Either way, the film experiments with both temporal and spatial allegories through the unique arrangement of mise-en-scène. *Happy Together* is a stylistically and discursively complex text. What I highlighted in this section in regard to the film's temporal concern is just one way of reading the film. Yet, despite many different ways of reading the film and many different desires to read the political allegories of the film, it is evident that the film's investment in queer temporality situates *Happy Together* as a pioneering film of new queer East Asian cinema. Hence, Yiu-fai's "starting over" in the film can be *nachträglich* viewed as a declaration of the new beginning of an era in which a new mode of queer cinema develops and flourishes.

3. Queer Translation

On June 24, 1997, the Korea Public Performance Ethics Committee (KPPEC, hereafter) officially banned the screening of *Happy Together*, declaring that homosexuality as a theme runs

counter to the general sentiment of the Korean society. In the following month, a second review took place and the KPPEC upheld the original verdict. According to the then effective Promotion of the Motion Pictures Industry Act, a film which is rejected in the second reading cannot be submitted for review for another year; this means *Happy Together* could not be legally screened or circulated in South Korea at least for a year.[43] Arguing that the KPPEC's decision attempted "to isolate society from unfavorable global cultural trends," Lee Hyung-sook suggests three different factors likely affecting the KPPEC's anachronistic decision: the film's main actor, Leslie Cheung's indirect coming-out as a gay man as well as his influential stardom in South Korea; the fact that *Happy Together* is a cultural product of East Asia, thus more impactful than queer films from Western countries; and the then prevalent AIDS scare in South Korea (Lee 2006, 253-264).[44]

Though Lee's observation makes a meaningful contribution to the censorship issue of queer films in South Korea, I do not agree with her premise that the censorship of *Happy Together* reflects a tension between a homophobic South Korea and homophilic global, or more precisely Western, cultural trends. Just like Lee Hsien Loong's statement regarding the refusal to amend the Sodomy Law in Singapore, which I analyzed in the introductory chapter, reducing the incident to another cultural clash between the East and the West simplifies the cunning dynamics

[43] The KPPEC released the verdict pursuant to the Article 6:15 of the Enforcement Regulation of the Promotion of the Motion Pictures Industry Act stating that "the direct or indirect portrayal of incest, gang rape, homosexuality, bestiality, group sex, and other perverse sexual acts" is not considered for review (Enforcement Regulation of the Promotion of the Motion Pictures Industry Act, Article 6:15).

[44] I disagree with the Lee's claim that Leslie Cheung was already a gay icon in South Korea at that time. Though rumors about his sexual orientation circulated, they did not properly reach public attention. Rather, Cheung garnered his popularity in South Korea mainly from popular movies, where he acted straight characters, including *A Better Tomorrow* (Ying Xiong Ben se, John Woo, 1986), *A Chinese Ghost Story* (Qian Nü You Hun, Ching Siu-tung, 1987), and *The Bride with White Hair* (Bai Fa Mo Nü Zhuan, Ronny Yu, 1993). General audiences at the time tended to find either masculine or sentimental ideal in his images. Her point about the AIDS scare is also not much convincing considering that films explicitly portraying the ADIS epidemic among gay males, such as *Philadelphia* (Jonathan Demme, 1993) and *Savage Nights* (Les Nuits Fauves, Cyril Collard, 1992), were imported and released in South Korea without any reservation of the KPPEC.

of national temporality in regulating queer desires on screen. In fact, compared to other queer films or films about the AIDS epidemic that were imported and released in South Korea without the intervention of censorship authority, such as *The Crying Game* (Neil Jordan, 1992), *Philadelphia*, and *Savage Nights*, the depiction of homoeroticism in *Happy Together* was rather moderate. Hence, I believe it is more productive to deliberate on the changes both the film itself and its banning created than to concentrate on the reasons of its banning, which is not positivistically provable.

Soon, the KPPEC had to face a strong backlash from filmmakers and cinephiles in South Korea. Considering that Wong Kar-wai was enjoying a huge fandom in South Korea at the time of the film's release, such a backlash was already inevitable. Moreover, as several other films portraying homosexual intimacies at their central theme were released in South Korea before the banning of Wong's film, the KPPEC's inconsistent attitudes toward homosexuality enraged not only cinephiles but also the general publics.[45] In the aftermath of the banning of *Happy Together*, various groups of people, including student associations in different colleges, LGBT communities, and film organizations, voluntarily organized guerilla screenings of the movie in public spaces as a resistance to state power. These unauthorized screenings were often arranged with live performance of translators, who are commonly called *benshi* in Japanese or *byeonsa* in Korean, as it was hard for organizers of those events, who are non-specialists of film editing, to superimpose Korean subtitles on the VHS copy of the film. This alternative screening platform as well as the cultural translation of *Happy Together* allows us to think of queer East Asian cinema from a refreshed angle. As I explained in the introductory chapter, international film

[45] Pointing out that queer films such as *The Crying Game*, *Farewell My Concubine*, and *The Wedding Banquet* (Xiyan, Ang Lee, 1993) were imported and screened in South Korea, Lee Hyung-sook, for instance, argues that "the release of such films proved that Korean film audiences were not averse to seeing films dealing with the [homosexual] issue" (Lee 2006, 249).

festivals served as the primary venue for viewing queer films at least until online file sharing became prevalent in the mid 2000s. As Cindy Hing-Yuk Wong aptly observes, film festivals "embody the idea of the film as a field of knowledge, past, present, and future" (Wong 2011, 18). This ironically suggests that the establishment of film festivals as a sanctuary of queer cinema not only has secured the circulation of many such films but also has limited and consolidated the cinematic representation of queer desire in the course of a new knowledge production; spectators now often view queer cinema as an intellectual artifact rather than a mode of resistance.

The screening of *Happy Together* in auditoriums, classrooms, and various open spaces with alternative or "deviant" translations is then an endeavor not only to challenge state intervention and censorship but also to overcome the limit and elitism of large-scale film festivals. As Stuart James Richards observes, even queer film festivals have now "grown to become part of an elite film institution" (Richards 2016, 1). Just like Park Chan-wook's *The Handmaiden*, *Happy Together* initially gained the spotlight as a product of a world acclaimed director, rather than as a queer film per se. And the banning of *Happy Together* would not have been so sensational if the film had not been awarded at the Cannes Film Festival or if it had been made by an emerging film director. The unauthorized, or "illegal," screening of the film in public spaces thus can be seen not just as a political mobilization that resists state power but also as an effort to actively question the site-specific and elitist modality of international film festival circuits. Moreover, the vernacular translation of the film by non-professional *benshi* troubles the premises of textual originality or "authorship" in the film.

When the film screening was facilitated by LGBT-related communities, for instance, the translators not only delivered their translation of dialogues in the film as a metaphrase but provided additional information about gay sexuality and colloquial terms used in their

communities.[46] In 1997, the visibility of sexual minorities was still scarce in South Korea, and the groups organizing the respective screening would use it to their advantage in promoting and defending their rights. Within film media and film festival circuits, *Happy Together* was often considered as an arthouse film of a master filmmaker from Hong Kong. And the textual analysis of the film was also more geared towards the political allegory of the film in regard to Hong Kong's handover to mainland China. Yet, these screening events with vernacular translations turned the film's socio-historical contexts into a localized and immediate issue about queer communities. Whether consciously or unconsciously, the vernacular translators at the events translated the whole space of spectatorship into a locus of heated debates and deliberations on sexual minorities in South Korea. In so doing, they created another "original" discourse out of the original film text. Hence, the translation practices accompanying the unauthorized screenings of the film can be said to have opened a new temporal and spatial meaning that is not necessarily bound to the national and regional context of the original film.

In "The Task of the Translator," Walter Benjamin offers a remarkable insight about temporality and plasticity in the process of translation. He opens his arguments with a provocative assertion that "translation is a form" (Benjamin 1996, 254). The form here has a functional connotation: to view the translation as a form entails the exploration of what he calls "functional transformation" (*Umfuktionierung*) in the process of its production.[47] Thus, he continues, "one must go back to the original, for the laws governing the translation lie within the

[46] I am specifically referring to the public screening of *Happy Together* at Seoul National University in 1997. Sponsored by the student council, the then LGBT student group members at the college organized the screening with a live translator.

[47] In his influential essay, "The Author as a Producer," Walter Benjamin suggests that authors should be attentive more to the formal aspect of their own writings and their relation to the mode of production. He argues that the author's "products must have, over and above their character as works, an organizing function" (Benjamin 1999, 777). And this organizing function can be achieved through a collective effort of technical change, or *Umfunktionierung* (functional transformation).

original, contained in the issue of its translatability" (Benjamin 1996, 254). It is interesting that the original text manifests itself in "its translatability." Unlike our common belief, he argues that the original text already expects its future history of translation *a priori*. Thus, the primary task of the translator is not to convey the meaning of the original as it is, but first to learn whether the "nature [of the original text] lend[s] itself to translation and, therefore, in view of the significance of this form, call[s] for it" (Benjamin 1996, 254). What matters here is the translator's acute sense and attitude vis-à-vis relational power dynamics between the original and the translation. And translation is no more a means of communication than a technology of negotiating cultural relations. Benjamin's idea that radically reorients relation between the original and the translation as well as the concept of cultural translation sheds meaningful lights on the context of the unauthorized screenings of *Happy Together* in South Korea.

Instead of screening the film clandestinely, which used to be the case for the screenings of politically sensitive films that had been banned by the Korean government, the organizers of the screening arranged public screenings in public spaces. With less access to editing techniques, the organizers' attempt to translate the dialogue dramatically transformed both the film and its screening into a site of collective resistance and a pedagogic occasion. Citing Benjamin, through their "functional transformation," the "translatability" of the original film effectively manifested itself in several unauthorized screenings in South Korea. The future meaning and context of the original film, which is the formation of queer counterpublics in this case, can always be measured when the original film is "translated."

In fact, every practice of translation already passes through a queer moment of functional and epistemological transformation. Translation, whether taken as an actual practice or as a metaphor of transformation, is always a practice of mediation and negotiation of power

dynamics. William J. Spurlin, for instance, argues that translation becomes a site of struggle "in the negotiation of meaning not simply embodied in, or reducible to, the original text by calling into question the very gendered relation between the sovereign original text and the impossibilities of translation as pure fidelity" (Spurlin 2014, 206). The "gendered relation" here exemplifies the traditional view regarding the conventional notion of the original and the translation that are dichotomized as a hierarchy between the active and the passive, thus, the masculine and the feminine, or the top and the bottom. Yet, Spurlin finds certain subversive possibility in translation that could trouble this gendered hierarchy, as he acknowledges that the original no longer contains its sovereign power, once it is translated. Spurlin's idea echoes the Benjaminian episteme of translation, as Benjamin argues that the translation "issues … from [the original text's] afterlife" (Benjamin 1996, 254). It means that the "translatability" of the original text is not achieved until the original text survives the shift of the aesthetic standard in history, and therefore "attains its latest, continually renewed, and most complete unfolding" (Benjamin 1996, 255). He further argues that "in translation the original rises into a higher and purer linguistic air," since the translation "signifies a more exalted language than its own" (Benjamin 1996, 257-258). Here, he subverts common sense that the translation is a copy of the original in another language and that fidelity to the original is the best virtue of translation.

Along with the radical transformation of gendered hierarchy between the original and the translation, another critical point in Benjamin's notion of translation is that he has directed our attention to the temporal aspect of translation, which I would like to understand as another epitome of queer temporality. If queer temporality moves against the normative progression of time and reformulates premises of kinship, translation also deconstructs the normative progression of textual transformation that is presumably originating from the original. Moreover,

it also troubles kinship between the original and the translation. As I briefly introduced in the introductory section of this chapter, initial responses to *Happy Together* in general focused on the film's attitudes toward the then impending handover of Hong Kong to mainland China. Yet, as the vernacular translation of the film in "illegal" screenings in South Korea exemplifies, the film's queerness manifests itself more powerfully in its "afterlife," meta-queering the already queer essence of the film.

Considering that *Happy Together* is a transnational film with transnational narrative, actors, and film crews, then the queer translation of the film in South Korea also consolidates the transnational efficacy of queerness in different times and spaces. For instance, the off-cinematic context of the film bound up with the film's mobility radiates an intriguing echo in the film's narrative that also speaks to the issues of diaspora, translations, and acousticity. While the South Korean ban of *Happy Together* as a whole was officially lifted in 1998, the film's opening, where we see very "moderate" depiction of the two main characters' sex, was still censored. But thanks to several "illegal" screenings of the film, the film had been viewed in its original form by many audiences. Now, we may argue that, unlike the concerns of censorship authorities in South Korea, the real "danger" of *Happy Together* at the time was not the depiction of gay sex on screen but its "translatability" into vernacular, localized, and geopolitical contexts regarding queer communities in South Korea.

4. Conclusion

Though Wong Kar-wai probably did not give much thought to a broader wave of queer filmmaking when he was making the film, the very elements that characterize *Happy Together* as a work of art—including temporal disorientation, aesthetic innovativeness, politically charged

allegories, and considerations on race and migration—as well as its extra-cinematic impact on society, situates the film as one of the pioneering films of new queer East Asian cinema. Moreover, the film's narrative of "starting over" clearly echoes the formation of new queer East Asian cinema and the emergence of LGBTQ activism in East Asia at the time. The line of inquiry I have pursued in this dissertation redirects the focus of queer East Asian cinema away from both the constraint of national cinema and the parochial notion of LGBT cinema, and towards a broader trans- and inter-Asian context in terms of assessing each film's innovative style and structure. In an East Asian context, the term "queer" is used as either a noun or an adjective. Yet, "queer" can and must be understood as a verb as well, a grammatical component that makes space for agency, that performs certain tasks, or that makes things happen. What I have aimed thus far is to reveal "queer" as a verb in several cinematic texts in East Asia.

A region of diverse culture and complex history, East Asia has been undergoing drastic transitions prompted by rapid globalization. Moreover, changes of trans-regional geopolitics in the recent past such as the Asian financial crisis, Hong Kong's handover to China, and both escalating crisis and conciliatory mood between the two Koreas have further affected nations and their cultures in the region. At the same time, as trans-Asian co-productions and cultural interchange have become an important mode of cinematic practices, East Asian cinema in general has actively responded to these turbulent times by ardently tracing the living conditions people constantly negotiate. Indeed, East Asian cinema as a concept has now outgrown its national scale of production and circulation. Moreover, as the East Asian soft-power has become globally popular as in the case of *Hallyu* or Korean Wave, cross-Asian, or inter-Asian cinema studies has never been of greater importance and more pertinent to Asian studies in general than

now. Though admittedly incomplete, this dissertation attempts to draw a small picture of inter-Asian cinema in queer contexts.

Though its narrative revolves around the traumatic experiences of certain identity-bound groups, the way the new queer East Asian cinema addresses the issue, or, more precisely speaking, the way it reveals its positionality, is queer. As David Halperin convincingly formulates, if queer is "a positionality vis-à-vis the normative—a positionality that is not restricted to lesbians and gay men but is in fact available to anyone who is or who feels marginalized because of her or his sexual practices," we can possibly include many different films into the category of queer cinema that demonstrate such positionality (Halperin 1995, 62). As I discussed in chapters three and four, one of the most remarkable shifts in the development of queer East Asian cinema is its interventions in the discriminatory issues of other marginal subjects in heterosexist nation-states. Unlike its counterpart in Western countries, queer East Asian cinema in the 1990s and thereafter has repeatedly represented the alternative sociality of many different marginal subjects such as migrant workers, ethnic others, sex workers, seniors, and people with disabilities. At the heart of this critical social turn is the critique of a homogeneous national temporality that always strives to efface the "dirt and smell" of the past.

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