



ECHOES IN TIME: KOREAN FILMS OF THE GOLDEN AGE AND NEW CINEMA

**Key Scholar Lecture: Laugh Together,
Weep Alone: South Korean Cinema's
Ethical Ambiguities**

Thu 5 Dec 18:20

Golden Age

The Coachman Mabu

Sun 1 Dec 11:40; Mon 16 Dec 20:50;
Fri 27 Dec 18:20

Mother and a Guest

Sarangbang sonnimgwa eomeoni
Sun 1 Dec 15:20; Sat 14 Dec 12:40

Goryeojang

Mon 2 Dec 18:20; Sat 21 Dec 20:50

The Devil's Stairway Maui gyuedan

Mon 2 Dec 20:45; Mon 16 Dec 18:15

The Seashore Village Gaenmaeul

Sat 7 Dec 20:50; Sat 21 Dec 15:00

A Bloodthirsty Killer Salinma

Mon 9 Dec 20:40 + intro by Professor Jinhee Choi,
King's College London; Sat 14 Dec 20:45

New Korean Cinema

Memento Mori Yeogogoedam dubeonjjae iyagi
Wed 4 Dec 18:15 + intro by Yi Wang, Director and
Programmer of Queer East; Mon 23 Dec 20:45

Christmas in August 8wolui keuliseumaseu
Wed 4 Dec 20:55 + intro by Michael Leader and
Jake Cunningham; Wed 18 Dec 18:00

Oldboy

Thu 5 Dec 20:40; Thu 19 Dec 18:10;
Sun 22 Dec 18:00; Mon 30 Dec 20:35

The Day a Pig Fell into the Well

Doejiga umule ppajin nal
Fri 6 Dec 20:40; Fri 20 Dec 18:00

The Quiet Family Joyonghan gajok

Sun 8 Dec 18:15; Sat 14 Dec 15:20

New Writings: Forever Girls

Mon 9 Dec 18:30 BFI Reuben Library

Die Bad Jukkeona hogeun nappeugeona

Tue 10 Dec 18:10; Fri 27 Dec 20:50

Barking Dogs Never Bite Peullandaseuui gae

Thu 19 Dec 20:50; Mon 30 Dec 18:00

Untold Scandal

Seukaendeul: Joseon-namnyeo-sangnyul-jisa
Fri 20 Dec 20:35; Sun 29 Dec 15:00

Peppermint Candy Bakhasatang

Sat 21 Dec 17:50; Sun 29 Dec 18:20

The Foul King Banchigwang

Sun 22 Dec 15:00; Sat 28 Dec 18:00

In partnership with

Korean Cultural Centre UK (KCCUK) and
Korean Film Council. Special thanks to Eunji Lee.

ECHOES IN TIME: KOREAN FILMS OF THE GOLDEN AGE AND NEW CINEMA

Key Scholar Lecture: Laugh Together, Weep Alone: South Korean Cinema's Ethical Ambiguities

In the latest in this series of lectures featuring world-leading scholars, Professor Steve Choe from San Francisco State University will address how key works from the New Korean Cinema respond to the films from the Golden Age. Taking into consideration the drastic transformations of the South Korean economy and politics between the 1960s and the 1990s, Professor Choe will discuss the films that track these changes and pose critical questions about trauma, revenge and history, among other ethical concerns.

Presented in partnership with Department of Film Studies, King's College London.

Introduction to *Sovereign Violence: Ethics and South Korean Cinema in the New Millennium (2016)* by Steve Choe

I.

The opening scene of Lee Chang-dong's 1999 film, *Peppermint Candy*, begins with a picnic and ends with a suicide. A dishevelled, middle-aged *hwesawon*, or 'company employee', named Young-ho (played by Sol Kyung-gu) stumbles into a gathering of friends near a small river. The dozen or so happy picnickers, dancing and singing to a karaoke machine, seem at first not to notice the grey-suited, unkempt man, but they soon recognise him as an old friend from 20 years ago. Young-ho is offered *soju*, a Korean rice liquor, but he is not in a particularly celebratory mood. He volunteers to sing a song, but the sad melody the salary man belts out, with great anguish, only casts a sombre pall over the party. Silently returning the microphone, Young-ho wanders off into the shallow river toward a nearby railroad overpass.

While his friends resume their merriment, Young-ho somehow has managed to climb to the top of the bridge. He stands on the suspended tracks, looking grim and miserable. Soon a train rumbles toward him while repeatedly blowing its whistle. Tension builds with the nearing confrontation between Young-ho and the train, underscored by accelerated shot-reverse shots. A worried picnicker has left the party and stands beneath the tracks with a helpless look on his face. He frantically screams his suicidal friend's name above the loudening rumble: 'Kim Young-ho!' As the heavy train comes treacherously close, Young-ho turns to face it. The film quickly cuts to a perspective from the train and he yells out, with outspread arms and a wide-open mouth, 'I want to go back!' The camera-train relentlessly rails toward Young-ho, until it stops on a close-up of his anguished face, signalling the moment of impact. Over the freeze frame, the clanging of the train continues on the soundtrack.

Lee's film obeys Young-ho's desire to go back by narrating the course of his life backward, depicting significant scenes from his personal history: Spring 1999, Summer 1994, Spring 1987, Fall 1984, May 1980, and Fall of 1979. These moments provide snapshots of one South Korean man's life and allow the viewer to piece together how Young-ho's misery in the present is connected to a series of regrettable decisions made in the past. Each episode is flanked by a short interlude. Repeating the camera angle that captured the image of Young-ho's death, the interludes depict moving shots above railroad tracks, taken with a stationary camera placed on a moving train. The first two look as if they move

This landmark season was prepared in collaboration with the Korean Film Archive (KOFA), which is celebrating its 50th anniversary this year. Featured in the programme are 12 digital restorations and 5 digital remasters supervised by KOFA, as well as unique 35mm prints from its archival collection.



kofic



BECOME A BFI MEMBER

Enjoy a great package of film benefits including priority booking at BFI Southbank and BFI Festivals. Join today at bfi.org.uk/join

SIGHT AND SOUND

Never miss an issue with **Sight and Sound**, the BFI's internationally renowned film magazine. Subscribe from just £25*

* Price based on a 6-month print subscription (UK only). More info: sightandsoundsubs.bfi.org.uk



BFI PLAYER

We are always open online on BFI Player where you can watch the best new, cult & classic cinema on demand. Showcasing hand-picked landmark British and independent titles, films are available to watch in three distinct ways: Subscription, Rentals & Free to view.

See something different today on player.bfi.org.uk

BFI SOUTHBANK

Welcome to the home of great film and TV, with three cinemas and a studio, a world-class library, regular exhibitions and a pioneering Mediatheque with 1000s of free titles for you to explore. Browse special-edition merchandise in the BFI Shop. We're also pleased to offer you a unique new space, the BFI Riverfront – with unrivalled riverside views of Waterloo Bridge and beyond, a delicious seasonal menu, plus a stylish balcony bar for cocktails or special events. Come and enjoy a pre-cinema dinner or a drink on the balcony as the sun goes down.

Join the BFI mailing list for regular programme updates. Not yet registered? Create a new account at www.bfi.org.uk/signup

forward on these tracks, but with the third, the spectator comes to realise that the camera is positioned on the last car of the train, and that the film itself is projected backwards. Cars and vans are shown driving in reverse, children run the wrong way, and smoke grows smaller and thickens rather than disappearing into the air. While these interludes pull the diegesis backwards in time, they unfold in accordance with the spectator's inexorable, forward experience of the film. In lieu of a linear cause-effect relationship, Lee's film proceeds by an effect-cause movement, reiterated in the reverse movement of the train. By its end, *Peppermint Candy* will have spanned 20 years, taking the viewer back to the moment when Young-ho, singing songs with friends at a picnic near a small river in 1979, emerges into the sparkle of life and dreams about his future.

Travelling back in time, the film links moments from Young-ho's personal history to key moments from South Korea's democratisation process. As the spectator gradually comes to realise, the fictional world of *Peppermint Candy* cannot be separated from the historical events to which it constantly refers. Young-ho's third episode coincides with political uprisings that took place in early 1987, during the dictatorial presidency of Chun Doo-hwan. At this historical juncture, a 21-year-old student activist at Seoul National University, Park Jung-chul, was detained by authorities in January and died when he was tortured to disclose the names of fellow activists. His death inflamed the public and became the *cause célèbre* for the June Democracy Movement that took place later that year. In Fall 1984, when Young-ho is depicted joining the KNPA (Korean National Police Agency) in Lee's film, progressive groups became increasingly vocal in their demand for human rights and called for the end of Chun's authoritarian regime. In this year, college campuses saw a sharp rise in student activism while the Council of People's Democratisation Movement mobilised workers and peasants to become aware of their disenfranchisement. The primal scene, or the originating trauma, of Young-ho's misery in *Peppermint Candy*, however, is inextricably linked to one of the most dramatic political events in modern Korean history: the Gwangju Uprising in May of 1980. What began as a student demonstration protesting the closing of Chonnam National University, located in the South Jeolla city of Gwangju, quickly escalated over a ten-day period. Chun swiftly implemented martial law in response to the demonstrations. In solidarity, tens of thousands of student activists, workers, and citizens of the city rallied against his dictatorship while Korean army soldiers and paratroopers were dispatched to the city. They began beating and shooting the political dissenters. To this day, the number of civilian casualties remains in contention.

Young-ho's life may be read as a national allegory for these watershed historical events, as standing in for the South Korean nation in its struggle toward modern democracy. However, *Peppermint Candy* does not focus on the victims of the state's repressive power, but on Young-ho's violent exercise of this power. He is called up as a member of the national military to put down protesting students and workers in Gwangju. When Young-ho joins the KNPA, he is quickly indoctrinated into their inhumane methods of extortion. His violence causes a radical sympathiser to lose control of his bowels on Young-ho's hand during an aggressive interrogation session. He brutally extracts information from dissenting leftists by forcibly dunking their heads in water, techniques that were utilised to torture and presumably kill the progressive student, Park Jung-chul. In these events, Young-ho's originating trauma is equated to the South Korea's historical trauma that began in May of 1980: one act of violence is linked to the next, constituting a chain of brutality that links the progression of his life to the life of the nation. And with each repetition,

IN PERSON & PREVIEWS

**Missing Believed Wiped 2024 Session 1:
The Complete and Utter History of Britain
+ intro by Sir Michael Palin**

Sat 7 Dec 12:10

**Missing Believed Wiped 2024 Session 2:
Basil Brush and Friends**

Sat 7 Dec 15:00

Sir Richard Eyre in Conversation

Sun 8 Dec 15:00

**Iris + extended intro by Sir Richard Eyre
& Dame Judi Dench**

Sun 8 Dec 17:30

**TV Preview: Woman of Stone – A Ghost Story
for Christmas + Q&A with director Mark Gatiss
+ cast**

Mon 9 Dec 18:30

Reece Shearsmith Presents: Ravenous

Fri 13 Dec 20:40

Mark Kermode Live in 3D at the BFI

Mon 16 Dec 18:30

REGULAR PROGRAMME

Restored: The Roaring Twenties

Sun 8 Dec 12:30

Seniors' Free Talk: Writing for the Screen

Mon 9 Dec 11:00

**Seniors' Free Matinee: In Custody + intro and
Q&A with screenwriter Farrukh Dhondy**

Mon 9 Dec 14:00

**Relaxed Screening: A Sudden Glimpse to
Deeper Things + discussion**

Mon 9 Dec 18:40

Woman with a Movie Camera:

The Widow Mimangin

Wed 11 Dec 18:20 + intro; Mon 23 Dec 18:15;

Sat 28 Dec 20:30

Film Wallahs: Tere Mere Sapne + intro by

Vibhu Vaibhav Anand

Thu 12 Dec 18:30

Projecting the Archive: The Brighton Strangler

+ extended intro by curator Ehsan Khoshbakht

Mon 16 Dec 18:35

EXPERIMENTA: ANDREA LUKA ZIMMERMAN

Taskafa, Stories of the Streets + intro by

Andrea Luka Zimmerman + **Omnibus: Parting**

Shots with Animals

Sat 7 Dec 14:50

Wayfaring Stranger + Q&A with

Andrea Luka Zimmerman

Sat 7 Dec 18:00

**The Globalisation Tapes + intro by Vision Machine
project member Andrea Luka Zimmerman**

Wed 11 Dec 20:40

Art Class + discussion with Andrea Luka

Zimmerman and filmmaker Penny Woolcock

Fri 13 Dec 18:30

Young-ho stubbornly disavows the possibility of reflecting and working through the past. His inability to mourn, as film scholar Kyung Hyun Kim suggests in his reading of Lee's film, cannot be separated from his idyllic romanticisation of innocence, of a time before May 1980, and the impossible hope of rekindling innocence lost. Young-ho acts out, exercising sovereign power over the people he tortures as well as sovereignty over his past.

When *Peppermint Candy* premiered on December 31, 1999, South Korea was still reeling from the crisis that devastated the economy in 1997 and still suffering from the sudden mass layoffs and drastic restructuring of the financial sector imposed by the IMF. As a consequence of the \$57 billion bailout that prevented national banks from defaulting on their international debts, the IMF demanded that the Korean government implement a series of structural adjustments that included market deregulation, privatisation, and trade liberalisation. Interest rates rose to as high as 30 percent, and about half of the thirty largest *chaebols* ('business conglomerates') collapsed. Among those that survived, policies protecting the hiring and replacing of workers were repealed while companies promptly fired about 30 percent of their labour force. The middle class was subsequently drastically reduced and undermined.

Many unemployed male head of households were overcome with a sense of failure, reflected in Young-ho's character at the beginning of *Peppermint Candy*, and turned to divorce or suicide. Some became despondent and stopped looking for employment altogether. In February 1999, the unemployment rate was the highest ever recorded at 8.7 percent, but if those who simply stopped looking were added to this figure, the unemployment rate would have been well over 10 percent or around 2.5 million people. The history of modern South Korea and the story of Lee Chang-dong's *Peppermint Candy* are contemporaneous and inextricably intertwined: each informs the other and each provides the opportunity for historical reflection.

In the midst of social and economic upheaval, South Koreans were therefore willing, even if Young-ho was unable, to 'go back' and recollect with the reverse telos of the film. Following the trajectory of how South Korea emerged as a major economic player and ending with the widespread consequences of personal and financial crisis through the national allegory of Young-ho's life, Lee's film proved to be a sobering and humbling experience. In an interview about *Peppermint Candy*, Lee explains that the double movement between the audience's forward experience of the film and the backward narration of Young-ho's life places the viewer in a place of contradiction:

The audience project themselves onto the characters while watching a film. Through this act of projection, we can either absorb a character, or take objective distance and reflect on ourselves. Film viewing is innately contradictory because it functions in both ways. Cinema itself is full of contradictions. I wanted neither full identification nor objectification. This was my intention in the case of *Peppermint Candy*.

Eliciting an 'objective distance' from the drama, Lee's film compels the viewer to reflect upon Young-ho's ethics and his or her own means of identifying with his ethics. As he brutalises leftist sympathizers and radicals, Young-ho's sadism distresses and disturbs because his merciless cruelty seems unmotivated, his actions somehow nihilistic. And as the film unfolds and the spectator is led into his personal history, connections are encouraged between the trauma of Gwangju, Young-ho's inability to work through past trauma, and his subsequent acting out. Yet, while the viewer makes these connections, he or she may be compelled to ask: is it possible to sympathise with the hardened Young-ho and his acting on the wrong side of history? Projecting themselves

RICHARD EYRE: WEAPONS OF UNDERSTANDING

The Ploughman's Lunch

Fri 6 Dec 18:10; Wed 18 Dec 20:50

Play for Today: Just a Boys' Game

+ Screen Two: The Insurance Man

Sat 7 Dec 17:45

Iris + intro by Professor Lucy Bolton, Queen Mary

University of London

Thu 12 Dec 18:10

Philosophical Screens: Iris

Thu 12 Dec 20:00 Blue Room

Play for Today: The Imitation Game

Fri 13 Dec 18:10

Notes on a Scandal

Sat 14 Dec 18:10; Sat 28 Dec 14:45

The Dresser

Sun 15 Dec 18:00

Stage Beauty

Thu 19 Dec 20:40; Sun 29 Dec 15:10

The Cherry Orchard

Sat 21 Dec 17:40

Sunday Premiere: Tumbledown

Tue 17 Dec 18:10

Performance: Suddenly Last Summer

Sun 22 Dec 15:10

BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

Torch Song Trilogy

Fri 6 Dec 18:05; Fri 13 Dec 20:30

Female Trouble

Fri 6 Dec 20:50; Wed 18 Dec 20:50;

Sun 29 Dec 18:30

Fanny and Alexander Fanny och Alexander

Sat 7 Dec 19:30; Sun 29 Dec 14:15

The City of Lost Children

La Cité des enfants perdus

Sun 8 Dec 15:15; Fri 27 Dec 20:45

Tangerine

Mon 9 Dec 20:45; Sat 21 Dec 20:45

Monty Python's Life of Brian

Wed 11 Dec 18:10 + intro by Justin Johnson, BFI

Lead Programmer, Thu 19 Dec 12:30;

Sun 22 Dec 18:30

Carol

Thu 12 Dec 12:20; Sat 21 Dec 20:40;

Mon 30 Dec 17:50

Eyes Wide Shut

Sat 14 Dec 20:00; Wed 18 Dec 17:40;

Sat 28 Dec 17:00

Goodfellas

Sun 15 Dec 17:50; Mon 23 Dec 20:10;

Sat 28 Dec 20:15

Little Women

Mon 16 Dec 14:30; Fri 20 Dec 17:50

My Night with Maud Ma nuit chez Maud

Tue 17 Dec 20:30

When Harry Met Sally

Fri 20 Dec 20:50; Sun 22 Dec 12:15

Merry Christmas Mr. Lawrence

Sat 21 Dec 14:50

onto a victimiser who has been victimised by history, the viewer is placed in a position of ambivalent moral judgment. Can he or she forgive him, even when he cannot forgive himself? And to what extent is the viewer's capacity to forgive related to his or her ability to be emotionally engaged in the cinema? Vacillating between sympathy and aversion, which is, as Lee remarks, 'neither full identification nor objectification', the viewer is placed in a position of contradiction as *Peppermint Candy* unfolds, compelling judgement and questioning with regard to Young-ho's ethics. Elucidating how this judgement comes about, describing how this questioning produces an aporia, or an irresolvable problematic, specific to the cinema, while highlighting the historico-political urgency of this aporia will be the subject of the present book.

II.

Although a number of studies have been written about this period of Korean cinema history, none directly address the images of violent brutality and narratives of bleak nihilism frequently noted by audiences, academics, and critics. *Sovereign Violence* attempts to fill this gap. Far from dismissing this violence as gratuitous spectacle, I aim to reveal how some of the most significant and provocative films from South Korea, released in the first decade of the 21st century, imagine a critical, post-ideological ethics of everyday life under neoliberal capitalism. In addition to works by Lee Chang-dong, I will focus on selected films by Bong Joon Ho, Hong Sangsoo, Gok Kim and Sun Kim, Kim Ki-duk, Na Hong-jin, Park Chan-wook, and Park Ki-yong. Like *Peppermint Candy*, many of the incendiary films I have chosen to discuss in this book induce experiences of spectatorial discomfort and moral unease. They have divided audiences with their harrowing, graphic depictions of physical degradation and narratives of psychological cruelty. Yet, these disturbing films remain strangely compelling, having won the admiration of cinephiles around the world and top prizes at international film festivals.

In this book, I will consider Korean films of the new millennium not merely as products of the culture industry but also as works of art that pose urgent ethical dilemmas and subsequently point toward new modes of social existence. We shall see that they critically reflect on the relationship between the spectator and screen while teaching human viewers how they may relate to racial and ethnic others, strangers, outsiders, visitors, animals, and other non-humans. Akin to what Miriam Hansen calls 'vernacular modernism', these films train audiences how to think ethical questions critically after 1997 – that is, how to love, how to hate, as well as how to cohabit with others in an increasingly cosmopolitan, increasingly modern South Korea. As we shall see, these films exploit capacities specific to the film medium, and help us to understand the cinema as a machine for generating empathy.

Steve Choe is Associate Professor of Critical Studies in the School of Cinema at San Francisco State University who researches and teaches in film and media theory. He is the author of *Afterlives: Allegories of Film and Mortality in Early Weimar Germany* (2014), *Sovereign Violence: Ethics and South Korean Cinema in the New Millennium* (2016) and *ReFocus: The Films of William Friedkin* (2023). He is the co-editor of *Beyond Imperial Aesthetics: Theories of Art and Politics in East Asia* (2019) and editor of the *Handbook for Violence in Film and Media* (2022).