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## Do not Include me in Your “Us”: Peppermint Candy and the Politics of Difference

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\* This title is borrowed from Jo Won-gyu’s poem, “Don’t Call Me in the Name of the Group.”

### Abstract

The new, open Korean sociopolitical order has allowed a critique of the former military dictatorships that is unprecedented in Korean history. This paper, however, examines how a film that launches such a critique, a film that is furthermore, considered to be “progressive” emulates, like a mirror image, the very patriarchal and totalitarian thinking it purports to refute. This is not only an attempt to revisit the issue of progress in the name of feminism, but also to offer a critical framework for understanding similar films by deconstructing what is recognized as a contemporary canonical text constructed on male self-serving masochism and narcissism.

### The Cold War, Dictatorships, and Globalization, or Garibong-dong, Gwangju, and Seoul

In this section, I examine how the Cold War and military dictatorships are represented as cinematic memories in *Peppermint Candy* (*Bakha satang*) and how that historical site of memory is reconfigured in the cinematic space. *Peppermint Candy* deals with the 20-year span from 1979 to 1999, and two historical incidents and their resultant traumas are taken up as the kernel of the film.<sup>1</sup> The two incidents are the May 18 Gwangju Democratic

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<sup>1</sup> The website for *Peppermint Candy* (*Bakha satang*) is [www.peppermintcandy.co.kr](http://www.peppermintcandy.co.kr). This film, released in 2000, shows Kim Yeong-ho’s life path from 1979 to 1999 using an episodic structure based on flashbacks and train tracking shots. Kim Yeong-ho, who has lost everything, returns to the place where twenty years ago he shared a picnic with his first love, and then proceeds to kill himself by standing in front of an oncoming train. Along with Kim’s scream of, “I want to go back,” a close-up shot of his face is shown in the form of a freeze frame. The film traces Kim Yeong-ho’s life path by going back to the past. The spectators discover aspects of his life through various episodes: Kim Yeong-ho, who started his life as a laborer in the Garibong-dong area, is dispatched to Gwangju as part of the troops sent to suppress the Gwangju Democratic Uprising. While there, he kills a high school girl by mistake. This incident decisively changes his life. His relationship with Yun Sun-im

Uprising and the IMF financial crisis of 1997. As far as the Gwangju Democratic Uprising is concerned, the following explanation has been presented as its origin: Given that the contradictions arising from the uneven growth of South Korean capitalism and the uneven power distribution among different regions during the period of dictatorship came to be felt even deeper at the regional level, Gwangju citizens' political consciousness was heightened, and they made an all-out effort to resist the dictatorship.

Kim Yeong-ho (Seol Kyoung-gu), who, **during his military service had been sent as one emergency troops mobilized** to suppress the Gwangju uprising, is situated as an agent who upholds the military system and dictatorship, as well as the division of the peninsula into North and South Korea that occurred as a result of the Cold War. After the uprising, Kim Yeong-ho first becomes a policeman, and then owns a furniture business. In the end, he falls into the role of a victim of globalization, as epitomized by the IMF crisis. However, **despite the film's solicitation for sympathy, it is crucial to remember that *Peppermint Candy*** is a story about the perpetrator, *not* the victim. Dispatched to suppress the democratic revolt in Gwangju, Kim Yeong-ho accidentally kills a high school girl who not directly involved in the uprising. As a policeman, he then proceeds to torture political detainees. However, one of the interesting contradictions in this film is that Kim Yeong-ho believes that he is in fact the victim of these incidents. **After his business collapses and his partner absconded with the remainder of his investment, in pursuit of revenge, Kim** purchases a pistol, and decides to go after the stockbrokers and loan sharks who deceived him. He plans to kill the people who drove him to this miserable state; however, in the end he winds up killing himself instead. *Peppermint Candy* is allegedly the story of an innocent person who is corrupted by his historical conditions. By reversing the temporal order of the story, this film suggests that the viewers should go back to the point of innocence. As a result of this cinematic temporal structure, Kim Yeong-ho is emotionally exonerated of his crimes and receives the sympathy of the viewers in the end.

This film reminds viewers of the unresolved problems that form a vicious circle, through which the perpetrator becomes a victim and vice versa, and of the scars produced by these problems during the **eras of the dictatorships**. In addition, this film raises questions as to the historical causes, agents, and effects of these unresolved crises. The path of Kim Yeong-ho's life, from the May 18 Gwangju Democratic Uprising to the financial catastrophe of 1997, is consistent with an analysis of the Cold War offered within the United States, which view the Cold War as the platform of the United States which became the global economic and political leader after World War II.<sup>2</sup> In its Korean definition, "Cold War" is translated as

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is severed after he becomes a police officer following the uprising. He instead marries Yang Hong-ja, who is the daughter of the restaurant's owners. Kim becomes a more violent person, one that has been raised by the military system, and tortures political prisoners. Later on, he runs a furniture store and appears to be successfully operating his business. However, his family collapses as a result of his wife Hong-ja's affair with her driving instructor and of his own with his secretary. He eventually goes bankrupt as a result of the financial crisis. He then purchases a pistol and is attempting to kill himself when a stranger stops him from doing so. The stranger takes him to his first love, Sun-im. Kim witnesses Yun Sun-im's death in the hospital. Soon thereafter, he hears about a Garibong-dong laborers' reunion to be held in the same place where the last one was held, and decides to go back there. In the last episode, the viewers finally understand where Kim Yeong-ho wanted to go back to. The details of the story are rendered in a more interesting manner on the synopsis of the film that is found on the *Peppermint Candy* homepage.

<sup>2</sup> With regards to the arguments about how the fear of communism was the main impetus for an aggressive economic policy, racism, and the emergence of the Cold War, while also contributing to the establishment of

“Ice War” (*naengjeon*). The term “Ice War” implies a frozen state and clearly expresses the crux of the situation on the Korean peninsula. From the global perspective, the Cold War ended with the collapse of the Soviet Union and its Eastern European satellites. However, the Cold War continues unabated in Korea. The U.S. government has classified North Korea as part of an “axis of evil,” and U.S. forces are still stationed in South Korea. The recently organized movement for the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Korea since 2000 is a civic movement against the Cold War that has yet to be brought to end in Korea.

Cho Hee-Yeon, a sociologist, provides key points for understanding *Peppermint Candy*. According to Cho, *Peppermint Candy* clearly describes the structural and ideological characteristics of the military dictatorship, as well as that of voluntary and involuntary globalization. Defining South Korean society as a developmental regime rather than a developmental state, Cho argues that the anti-communist society acted as a prerequisite to the military dictatorship, and goes on to say that Korean people internalized the rationale of the Cold War following the Korean War, which can be epitomized as the survival politics of Korea. Anticommunist social control was based on pseudo-wartime rule that defines North Korea as the main enemy. It was also founded on the politics of fear, in which national security became the primary policy of the state.<sup>3</sup> The National Security Law is a tool of the politics of fear. This law has been used to classify numerous Korean activists or social groups, who have participated in the democratization, reunification, and labor movements, as communists and send them to prison, and even torture or kill them. Using this pseudo-wartime situation, the military dictatorship was able to reproduce Korean men as soldiers by implementing a strong military system.

*Peppermint Candy*'s Kim Yeong-ho is one of the soldiers that was produced by this situation. He was sent as a member of troop to suppress the Gwangju uprising and ends up killing an innocent girl. Kim thinks that this accident has caused him to lose his fundamental goodness and purity. At this point, **the peppermint candy of the title** becomes a metonymic object that Kim Yeong-ho has lost, like the rosebud in Orson Welles' *Citizen Kane*. Peppermint candy was given to him by Yun Sun-im (Moon Sori), who packed peppermint candies at a factory located in Garibong-dong, Seoul. Presumably, the innocence represented by the white peppermint candy, the taste of the candy in his mouth, and Yun Sun-im form a signifying chain of exchangeable objects that Kim Yeong-ho has supposedly lost in his life. To Kim Yeong-ho, peppermint candy is a lost object of days gone by. The year 1979 is identified as Kim Yeong-ho's prelapsarian period of innocence, and might have been true of the character individually, but this year was known historically as another endless “winter

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the United States as a global power, please see Ambrose and Brinkley (1997). The period around 1945 is described as follows on pp. 50-51 of the book:

In addition, the U.S. possessed nuclear bombs. These nuclear bombs were regarded as the most potent weapon in 1945. American politicians believed that the U.S. had the secrets needed to guarantee its military leadership for several decades. However, a problem soon emerged in relation to Asia. With the exception of South Korea, the United States did not have any forces stationed in the heart of Asia. In a world full of the hatred, death, destruction, deceit, and double deals, the U.S.A. was universally regarded as the champion of justice, peace, and democracy after World War II. Thereafter, few such occasions arose for the U.S. to advance its privileges.”

Considering all the military, political, and economic privileges that the U.S. has been able to gain under the cover of globalization, it is astonishing to see such a self-satisfying evaluation as the one found in the above statement.

<sup>3</sup> Cho (2000).

republic” of dictatorship, as it was aptly described in the well-known poem of the same title. The labor conditions in those days were miserable. As such, the zero point Kim wishes to return to is one that has been already “tainted” from the viewpoint of innocence and purity. Thus, *Peppermint Candy* can be interpreted as follows: First, the film introduced an “innocent time,” based on a willful historical blindness. Second, the film strove to construct a paradox that emerges as a result of this **misconstrued** of history. If we choose the second interpretation, then Kim Yeong-ho is in fact fantasizing about a lost object that exists only within a Mobius strip, a continuous closed loop with only one side. The site of memory where he thought he had lost the object is part of a void space where there is nothing left to lose.

From a global point of view, the Mobius strip in which Kim Yeong-ho is spinning is an intricate part of the Cold War, while at the level of national history, it is a part of the seemingly never-ending dictatorships based on the strong military system required by the “Ice War” era. Even with the global proclamation of the end of the Cold War, the political situation in Korea has remained an Ice War, under the burden of which many dissident voices have gone unheard, and many scars unhealed. These unresolved wounds are unconsciously exposed in many different forms, such as TV programs where people search for separated family members, novels, and even shamanistic rites. In addition, these injuries are found within individual family histories told through deep sighs and whispers in people’s everyday lives. Many contemporary Korean films sympathize with and react to this historical trauma, bringing about “affect” and related images.

*Peppermint Candy*, along with Park Kwang-su’s *The Uprising (Yi Jaesu-ui nan)* and *Chilsu and Mansu (Chilsu-wa Mansu)*, and Jang Seon-woo’s *A Petal (Kkonnip)*, is a film that deals with how the periodic trauma that has affected official Korean modern history has produced unresolved issues that have now fused indissolubly with individual injuries. These films were produced as the Cold War reached its ebb and a global post-Cold War era began to take its place; the Cold War however is still very much alive in South Korea.

Without true reconciliation, the knots that were produced as a result of the modernization that took place during the colonial era, the Korean War, developmental modernization, and globalization—which was the main cause of the financial crisis of 1997—will prove very hard to unravel. In addition, ghosts do not speak in a language that the living can understand. Rather, they favor sudden appearances in a manner similar to the emergence of hysteria. As such, ghosts do not appear in a manner that makes their description an easy task to understand.

The cinematic screen, especially in the case of horror films, is intended to express unspeakable things in a dark, unconscious space by making use of the images of ghosts, dreams, and illnesses. Although not included in the horror genre, commercial films as well serve as a “liminal” space that is different from the state ideology, with which it can show a scene of the past that conflicts with the state ideology, thus in effect criticizing the ideology.

In order to analyze the way the cinematic narratives and images are reproduced in a “liminal” space, more attention should be paid to “affect” or “the act of impressing,” thus making it possible to listen what had been or even what remains unspeakable. **Here, the “affect” refers to “심장, 가슴의 이성들의 논리다”라는 말은 번역이 어렵네요**. In order to understand the description and moving images of memories and oblivion that **resurface within the** liminal space, which are different from the official and chronicled history textbooks made by the state, this paper focuses on cinematic memories, such as the roles of things that have not yet been spoken, structuralized absence, and metonymy.

In *Peppermint Candy*, Kim Yeong-ho's parents—in their non-appearance—function as a structuralized absence. This film does not tell us anything about Kim Yeong-ho's life before 1979, which is regarded as the starting point of the film, except that Kim once worked in the Garibong-dong area, an area regarded as a low-wage blue collar part of Seoul. The only mention of his parents, who lived in a rural area, is the one made by Yun Sun-im when she visits him after he becomes a policeman.

The film allows Kim Yeong-ho to be cinematically born in the space of an outdoor picnic held in 1979. This area is depicted as a space of innocence, where the violence of history and the everyday betrayal of life cannot penetrate. In this space, the viewers, who have followed the film's cinematic timeline, can meet Kim Yeong-ho's character before he becomes corrupted. As mentioned earlier, the labor conditions in Garibong-dong were miserable in those days. The Kim Yeong-ho who existed prior to his joining the army in 1979 is depicted as being a nonviolent person. During the picnic, Yun Sun-im and Kim Yeong-ho express their feelings for each other. Kim Yeong-ho tells Yun Sun-im that he feels a certain sense of familiarity with this picnic area, almost as if he had been there before.

This scene is related to Sigmund Freud's concept of the *uncanny*. The scene ends with a freeze frame of Kim Yeong-ho's face looking full of hope, almost as if he is both overwhelmed by the familiarity of the field while being absolved of his sins at the same time. Although this film does not attempt to represent the existence of a biological mother, *Peppermint Candy* does conjure up mental images of the mother by enabling Kim Yeong-ho to simultaneously feel both familiarity and unfamiliarity, that is, a Freudian sense of the uncanny. In this uncanny space, Kim Yeong-ho meets Yun Sun-im and receives a piece of peppermint candy from her. He later returns to this place to kill himself. As such, both his symbolic birth and death occur in this place. In addition, the film opens with the scene of a train emerging from a dark tunnel, and ends with the cinematic birth and death of a male subjectivity whose biological mother is absent and déjà vu which is ominous now.

The erasure of parents, especially the simultaneous exclusion of the father and mother, as well as the process of replacing the mother with nature, Yun Sun-im, and the peppermint candy are one of the main psychoanalytical and political kernels of this film. The exclusion of the father is connected to the relationship between mother and child. [“아버지의 배제는 어머니와 아이의 관계로 이어지며”는 무슨 뜻인가요?], and takes the form of the psychosis of a subjectivity that has been expelled from the symbolized order.<sup>4</sup> The place of the absent father was usually taken over by the country's great dictators (Park Chung-hee and the dictators who would follow him). These bad fathers have raised Kim Yeong-ho to be a perpetrator. On the other hand, many objects take the place of the mother in *Peppermint Candy*. Who is comatose and minutes away from death when we first see her in the early climax of the backward-running present.

The absence of a parents' generation in *Peppermint Candy*, as a film to deal with the last twenty years and the related historical trauma, provides some interesting points: The first is the creation of the historical phase of 1979. The year 1979 was one in which the government-led strong developmental dictatorship, which had continued unabated since the 1960s, began to be challenged as a result of the Busan and Masan Democratic Uprisings. The spring of Seoul in 1980 was not yet on the horizon. However, in *Peppermint Candy*, the year 1979 is singled out and set up as the point of innocence. What matters is why was 1979 chosen as the cut-off point for the parent's generation, which can be said to belong to past

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<sup>4</sup> Please see the interpretation of Lacan, “The Psychoses” in Evans (1996).

history, and as the point where a new subjectivity is created?

The last shot of this film, set in the spring of 1979, ends with a freeze frame of Kim Yeong-ho's face, a face that reveals as yet unknown expectations. This close-up shot of Kim Yeong-ho's face is in direct contrast with the close-up at the beginning of the film (these were considered to be the images best describing the film and were used in the movie posters). These two close-ups show contradictory images: One shows Kim Yeong-ho's pathological state while the other displays his innocence. However, these two close-ups are processed in the same freeze-frames.

The second freeze frame of Kim Yeong-ho represents male subjectivity as a blank piece of paper that is opened for the next twenty years to come. He appears to have been born as part of a special structure that was set up by the timeline of the film, rather than from a biological mother. As such, the cinematic text found at the beginning of the film is one in which Kim Yeong-ho's life path returns to the past, and overlaps with Kim's scream of "I want to go back!" as he **opens his arms to embrace the train that will kill him in the next second**. Where does Kim Yeong-ho's chilling scream take the viewers? The journey to the starting point to which Kim Yeong-ho wishes to return is made possible by the magic of cinema, and we travel backwards along the train tracks. In addition to the rails, flower petals, which only moments ago were falling, return to blossoms on the trees; even the cars travel backwards.

The viewers arrive at imaginary stations **almost like stations of the cross** representing different time periods, which are depicted on-screen by tracking shots returning us to the past. The train stops at the spring of 1999, the summer of 1994, the spring of 1987, the autumn of 1984, and finally the spring of 1979. These are the objects that Kim Yeong-ho lost at the outset. Then, what exactly did Kim Yeong-ho lose? What does he reacquire when he returns to the past? The life path of Kim Yeong-ho can be explained by focusing on the loss of objects and the aftereffect of such a loss as understood through the concepts of mourning and melancholy developed by Freud.

Freud explains, based on his comparison of the notions of mourning and melancholy, that while a beloved dead person becomes an object of mourning, familiar places, work, or idealistic notions are the lost objects that are subject to the concept of melancholy. Melancholy, as a psychotic state of mourning, includes symptoms that do not occur during the natural mourning process, such as delusive guilt and self-criticism, loss of "affect," and the suppression of all affection.

Depending on the seriousness of the melancholy symptoms, the loss of objects may be transformed into a loss of ego. Self-confidence is thus lowered and delusive prescience about future punishment begins. The above-mentioned delusive guilt has its origins in self-criticism, which in turn is a special form of identification that encompasses the concept of narcissism. According to Freud, the melancholic ego internalizes the lost objects within the concept of narcissism, and treats these lost objects as part of the self-ego.

Kim Yeong-ho's suicide is in fact the self-punishment drama of a male subjectivity that has been lost, or from whom the ability to mourn has been taken, through a process involving delusive guilt, self-criticism, the suppression of all affection, loss of self-ego, and narcissism. In addition, the male subjectivity of Kim Yeong-ho, who must go through this psychotic process, is closely related to the process of South Korean modernization and to the history of industrialization. This paper will now delve into these issues using a detailed cinematic and historical analysis.

## Freeze Frame

The last shot of the film sequence in *Peppermint Candy* ends with a freeze frame. A freeze frame refers to **rendering motionless of the film, paralyzing it into a still**. This particular freeze frame stills the twisted, screaming face of Kim Yeong-ho in a manner akin to the historical trauma that has been imprisoned in the icy chill of the Cold War and has not yet had the chance to melt. In this freeze frame, these individual and social traumas are compressed, exhibiting different moments in history that include the spring of 1999, summer of 1994, spring of 1987, autumn of 1984, and the spring of 1979. The main kernel of these periodic traumas comes in the form of Kim Yeong-ho's killing of a high school girl while he was sent as a soldier to put down the Gwangju Democratic Uprising.

However, before this freeze frame appears, the prologue of the film has been set up in a manner designed to make viewers regard Kim Yeong-ho as an unpleasant character. We see him forcing himself on a group of people who came to have a picnic, then singing incoherently as he makes the women present stand up, which is followed by him causing a disturbance that eventually leads to him committing suicide on the train tracks. As such, the viewers are subjected to this pathological behavior before they are provided with any information about the character. The film forces viewers to watch the deranged behavior and suicide of Kim Yeong-ho; thus leaving the audience with an excessively unpleasant feeling for which it is as yet unprepared. While the beginnings of commercial films are usually used to make the film more alluring to viewers, the misbehavior of the main character in *Peppermint Candy* cannot be related to these devices. The latter period of the film explains the causes for the discomforting behavior and suicide by returning to the past.<sup>5</sup> His dramatic suicide is accompanied by a scream that is soon buried by the noise of the train as it comes out of the tunnel, as well as the freeze-frame of Kim's gruesomely twisted face. This freeze frame is like a last will and testament written on his face rather than on paper.

Shots of the train tracks play a de-freezing **or retroactively re-mobilizing** role in the freeze frame, which lead viewers back to the past, while dividing a timeline into several sections. In this way, shots of the train tracks contrast themselves with the "stasis" of freeze frame,

Kim Yeong-ho's face, as it is described in the freeze frame, becomes the first page of will, thereby opening up the different chapters of his life story, which, as we now know, eventually results in his suicide. The film viewers play the role of observers and witnesses watching the process that leads to his eventual decision to kill himself. Or, the spectators are perhaps required to identify with this unpleasant character and even feel sympathy for him. Either way, at the point in time when the viewers come to fully know the story of Kim Yeong-ho's life, they must ask themselves whether they should mourn his death, or whether Kim's death has any value that should be mourned.

The camera manages to maintain a certain distance as it follows the train tracks. In my opinion, this distance is consistent with the distance viewers feel in regards to the

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<sup>5</sup> Novelist Kim Yeong-hyeon has said the following about the first sequence of the film:

The first scene of *Peppermint Candy* was confusing. An outdoor picnic with a group of people in their 40s is shown. A man then dresses up and starts making a scene at the picnic. The film started with a scene that looked plain enough, but in the end this scene left me feeling uneasy. . . (*Cine 21*, February 2002).

individual historical incidents depicted in *Peppermint Candy*. Unlike *The Uprising* directed by Park Kwang-su, who chose to employ a bird's eye view, the shots of the train on the railroad, rather than implying a subjective viewpoint, have been selected to provide a passenger's—and thus more objective—view of history. More specifically, we see these things from the conductor's viewpoint. Of course, the conductor is akin to the film director controlling the timing of the film's frames. As such, as the person who controls the events specified during this compressed timeframe, the director is actually driving the train.

One more meaningful aspect of this film is the paradox between the direction of these tracking shots and the situation that must be reproduced in the film. The train and tracking shots appear to be going forward. However, these sequences are in fact moving backwards towards scenes that have already been filmed by the director. When the film is watched more closely, we find that while the train moves forward, the cars on the road are actually traveling backwards. The flowers falling on the ground are seen as flying back up into the tree. This is the equivalent of saying, though you have already passed your destination, I will use a magical time machine to return you to where you should have gotten off. The final destination of this film is the past that is the cause of the suicide, not the scene of the suicide in itself. As such, this film makes use of a dual time-frame. While it appears to be moving forward, it is really returning to the past; as such, this film can be regarded as a trip taken in search of a lost object. The time structure of the film is related to the historical traumas that have led Kim Yeong-ho to kill himself. Is this time structure also connected to the cure for his trauma?

### **Production of Male Masochism and Social Fiction**

The South Korean military system, produced as a result of the Cold War, has served as the most oppressive of state apparatuses. The **officially sanctioned/imposed** subjectivity of South Korean men is mostly formed as the result of the military training they receive during their compulsory military service. The soldiers produced by this military culture represent the male citizens of Korean society, who form the majority group in society. In addition, as the notion of citizenship is composed with soldiers at the center, female citizens are automatically omitted from the social structure. Men are further forced to endure the stress of serving as reserve troops even though they are no longer engaged in the military.

In her book entitled *The Morning After*, which deals with gender politics after the Cold War, Cynthia Enloe points out that the end of the Cold War meant that people had to radically change their way of living. As such, the Cold War regime has forced individuals to continue to find certain kinds of answers to the questions: Who can I trust? Where do my loyalties lie? Do I have any alternatives to what the government expects me to do? Cynthia asserts that the Cold War will truly end when people can find an answer to these questions. She also points out that these questions have a different meaning for women. The Cold War is based on a militarized understanding of identity and on the security of the state. Furthermore, militarization is dependent on notions of male subjectivity.<sup>6</sup>

The male subjectivity of Kim Yeong-ho in *Peppermint Candy* is also based on militarization and paranoia. During the various stages of his life—as a soldier, police officer, and as a businessman (and investor) that eventually goes bankrupt as a result of the financial

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<sup>6</sup> Enloe (1993).

crisis of 1997—Kim Yeong-ho is forced to go through some of the worst possible scenarios, both in terms of the nation's history and his own individual one. He plays the role of both the perpetrator and the victim. While in the army, he accidentally kills a high school girl after having been dispatched to quell the Gwangju Democratic Uprising. During the stage of his life where he serves as a police officer, Kim conducts an investigation of political activists and students, in which he uses water torture on suspects. Then, he appears to have become more economically stable after opening a furniture store, which we are led to conclude by the fact that he has purchased a new apartment and bought stock. However, his family collapses as a result of his affair with another woman and of his wife's subsequent affair with her driving instructor. His business also goes bankrupt after a business partner deceives him, which leads him to purchase a pistol.

Despite all of this adversity, to Kim Yeong-ho, the lost object is in fact Yun Sun-im. When he first meets Yun Sun-im, Kim Yeong-ho's male subjectivity had not yet been contaminated by military violence. The space used to describe the moment when Kim first meets Yun Sun-im is a field surrounded by a stream, railroad tracks, and flowers. Yun Sun-im is positioned in a spot where Kim Yeong-ho's innocence has yet to be tarnished by the national and individual traumas that will soon befall him and the nation. She is the only person who recognizes what the "true" nature of Kim Yeong-ho was before these tragic incidents. At one point, Sun-im visits Kim at the police station where he works and tells him that his family does not understand why he became a police officer. She describes Kim as a person with "good hands." While she is busy identifying Kim as a good person (he already has torturer's hands, or "bad hands," and as such cannot meet Sun-im's expectations), Kim is sexually harassing a restaurant owners' daughter with his "good" hands. Sun-im gives Kim a camera that she bought for him. However, Kim refuses Sun-im's affection and marries Hong-ja, the restaurant owners' daughter.

Here, the various types of hands, such as torturing hands (his hands, which have just finished torturing someone, are soiled with excrement right before he meets Yun Sun-im), good hands (the hands of a laborer), and harassing hands, represent the kernel of the problem. The device of national oppression exemplified by the military and police system that existed under the military dictatorship results in producing main social actors who are masochistic military machines, rather than citizens. The subjectivity of males, who are trained to play the role of violent actors in the public space, is reproduced in their relationships with women. Kim's sadistic attitudes in the torturing room become negative sadism and active masochism. These attitudes are repetitively exposed in his relationships with women in the private space.

Kim Yeong-ho winds up marrying Hong-ja (Kim Yeo-jin) after having created a misunderstanding that causes Sun-im to recognize him as a good person. As a result of another misunderstanding, he also replaces his first love, Sun-im, with a waitress in a café. Then while in Gwangju, Kim temporarily misconstrues a high school girl as Sun-im. He winds up killing the high school girl after firing his M16 by accident. As such, Kim is able to produce connections, and thus change the sado-masochistic intimacy and violence of his life, by continuously replacing the women he meets. As a result, the militarized male subjectivity of Kim Yeong-ho absorbs women into this circle of violence by reproducing military violence in his social and individual relationships with women. Therefore, women also become the victims of the military system.

## Who Are We? Metonymical Violence Against Women

Likewise, *Peppermint Candy* maintains a structure and viewpoint of perversion. This film deals with both the official and individual histories of the last twenty years, by using historical incidents as markers with which to divide the sequences of the film. However, the film in essence lays out the schizophrenic mental state of a perpetrator, that is, the viewpoint of a schizophrenic subject. The film tells us about sites where memories took place, revisits, and represents them, instead of adopting the viewpoint of the direct victim. In May 1980, some 20,000 crack troops were sent to Gwangju, which had a population of about 800,000 at that time. As a result of this suppression, scores of people were killed or injured, the exact number of which has yet to be ascertained. Many people have been forced to live out their lives with physical disabilities or mental disorder of schizophrenia as a result of the brutal violence that was carried out as part of the effort to suppress the Gwangju Democratic Uprising.<sup>7</sup>

However, this film's main character is a perpetrator and not a victim. Kim Yeong-ho was forced to go to Gwangju, and he ends up, by accident, killing a high school girl that will not be included in the official number of victims of the Gwangju Democratic Uprising. "Anti-hero" characters are often found in many films and novels, not only in *Peppermint Candy*. Whether the readers and spectators of these novels and films identify themselves with the "anti-hero," or adopt a position somewhere between the two points is dependent on the texts and the historical background. To give a perpetrator the main character's role in a film is not unwarranted. What matters is the following: to whom will this anti-hero speak and who will listen? Two phrases from the official homepage of *Peppermint Candy* are telling in this regard: "Now we will take a trip in search of lost beauty and innocent love."

Newly enlisted soldier Yeong-ho watches Sun-im as she turns away from the base. He wants to yell after her but instead keeps silent and climbs into the truck headed to respond to a state of emergency. . . . That day in May 1980 would go down in infamy for all of us.

Who is the "we" searching for this innocent love that has been lost? And who is the "us" for whom that day in May 1980 would go down in infamy? The "we" refers to viewers who, like Kim Yeong-ho, are assumed to have lost something. Therefore, they want to take a trip in search of this lost object. The viewers are thus located at the same point. However, as long as Sun-im is the object Yeong-ho has lost, the "we" excludes women. The "us" in the latter phrase is even more obscure. Yeong-ho kills a high school girl, thus making it clear who is the perpetrator and who is the victim. In order for the perpetrator and victim to be combined in this "us," a few conditions should be assumed:

First, the perpetrator is also a victim of a bigger system. Therefore, Kim Yeong-ho kills this high school girl in his capacity as the representative of the true perpetrator, which is the system, and not for individual reasons. *Peppermint Candy* clearly implies this. Another condition that must be assumed revolves around the fact that the position of spectators as the "we" must be preconditioned within the film's structure. Thus, the viewers should secretly comply with the development of Kim Yeong-ho's abnormal behavior and of his psychotic mental state. By implying this, it is assumed that the majority of "us" have lived the last twenty years as both the silent perpetrators and victims of the Gwangju Democratic Uprising.

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<sup>7</sup> Bak (2001).

The third is closely related to the above. In the politics of fear, both the character of Kim Yeong-ho and the viewers are not envisioned as moral, self-introspective actors capable of being responsible for their behavior. Instead, it is hinted that they are weak egos who should be included in the “us,” the obscure community, without any recognition being made of the difference between subjectivity and the world, the boundary between the ego and other as well as among alter egos themselves. At the same time, the scenes where misunderstandings occur (for example, Yeong-ho misconstrues a high school girl as Sun-im) are based on gender. There is another telling phrase found on the homepage of *Peppermint Candy*: “Perhaps what the train destroyed was *our* twisted concept of time of the last twenty years.” Furthermore, the poet Kim Yong-taek has the following to say:

What was crushed was the peppermint candy. Ah, peppermint candy! The train crushed this white peppermint candy that fills our mouths with such a fresh taste.<sup>8</sup>

Going further than the metonymy implied by the film, the replacement of the peppermint candy with Yun Sun-im, and innocence, which in itself is nothing more than an empty exercise, Kim Yong-taek asserts that Kim Yeong-ho and Yun Sun-im can all be connected to our twisted time and with the innocent peppermint candy that came into our mouths to provide us with a moment of joy. As such, Kim Yeong-ho, Yun Sun-im, the peppermint candy, and our twisted time become wrapped up to become “us,” and the train kills “us.” Therefore, the train, as the perpetrator, becomes the main enemy for all of us. How ridiculous is this as a tragedy? What kind of perception of history is this? By understanding the composition of the film’s metonymy and its inherent contradictions based on historical trauma, all of us, who have been as innocent as the peppermint candy for the last twenty years, become the victims that must be sacrificed to the black train. This train is the only perpetrator and monster. The subversiveness of such understanding, which *Peppermint Candy* might have brought about, is thus overturned by “us,” the oppressive train. At this point, the train becomes an abstracted signifier, just like the peppermint candy. The train is a symbol of modernity. Wolfgang Schivelbusch, for one, has pointed out the similarities between cinema and trains. Thus, according to the above, the interpretation that can be glossed from the conflicts between the “we” and the train is that all of us were suppressed by the modernization drive that was led by the dictatorship-based developmental model (the Gwangju Democratic Uprising was just a resistance movement staged in response to this modernization). All this resistance against the dictatorship is thus chalked up to defeatism, amounting to nothing more than suicide or murder.

This film’s attempt to connect this metonymy, which extends to non-relational factors, border on obsessiveness. As a result, “we” can coexist in this obscure metonymy as the victims. Is this film saying that the year 1979, the point to which Kim Yeong-ho leads us back, and nature are the places we have lost?

However, there are no places that have not been contaminated by modernization, or uncanny womb-like spaces, that is, which leave us feeling like we have been here before. The place that appears in the first and last scenes of *Peppermint Candy* also appears to concur with this point. As Kim Yeong-ho himself says, the train tracks are going through the picnic area.

The negativism towards modernity adopted by this film results in a paradox that

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<sup>8</sup> Kim Yong-taek’s review as introduced on the website of *Peppermint Candy*.

denies the possibility of the very existence of this film. *Peppermint Candy* signification is brought to life through film, which itself is a product of modernity. In addition, the magical ability to return to the past has most likely been made possible by tracking sequence techniques. Yun Sun-im, who is replaced with the space that Kim Yeong-ho wants to return to, is also actor involved in the historical period surrounding this film. She is a laborer, who wraps 1,000 peppermint candies a day in a factory in Garibong-dong. If *Peppermint Candy* produces any signification, it is not that of the innocent peppermint candy, but that of the peppermint candy resulting from the repetitive labor of a female worker forced to wrap 1,000 of these candies every day.

While the moment of Kim Yeong-ho's death in the first sequence is processed as a freeze frame, the last scene also ends with a freeze frame. A freeze frame does not always signify a stoppage or momentary freezing. Rather, as Walter Benjamin himself has pointed out, this may be a temporary stoppage caused by the dialectic image of the different dynamic energies fully existing inside the freeze frame itself being stillborn.<sup>9</sup>

However, it is difficult to find these dynamic energies are competing each other in *Peppermint Candy*. The dynamics of the train go backwards, and the flashbacks are frozen in such a way that makes a cure or restoration impossible. At a certain point in this film's historical timeline, the perpetrator becomes a victim. The film's translation and storytelling style forces spectators to connect themselves to the "us," which has been preferred by the film, that is, within the Mobius strip. Even though women are the objects of a metonymy that must be continuously replaced, they are unconsciously regarded as belonging to the "us" in this translation style. The peppermint candy signifies the over-evaluated fetish, the absence of innocence, and the veil of the impossibility of existence.

Looked at from the viewpoint of mourning and melancholy, Kim Yeong-ho's suicide is the self-punishment drama of a male subjectivity that is based on narcissism, as well as on a delusive guilt that has resulted in the loss of the ability to mourn. Jang Seon-woo, a film director, points out the following in his review of *Peppermint Candy*.

Anybody who desires to live a normal and beautiful life eventually becomes corrupted by school, the army, and other organizations. I picked this point up in *Peppermint Candy* I mean, the whole Korean system is composed this way. This film was trying to say that the existing social system is unbreakable. I thought this film cleverly described this point. I am not sure whether the social system will be changed in the future. Unlike Lee Chang-dong, I always tell myself, "Let's not expect that the world will change." It would be much easier for me to change myself. This is the position I take. Innocence, enlightenment, getting away from the established system. . . . People would not feel trapped by this system if they thought that there was still hope to be had within the system. Then, happiness could possibly be found within the system itself. People would feel freer. However, although they all recognize this fact, most people refuse to go this way. The enlightenment and freedom that I mentioned above imply a transcendental state.<sup>10</sup>

Putting aside the veracity of Jang Seon-woo's "my way," his observation that the kernels of *Peppermint Candy* are aimed at the entire social system, and about how much Kim Yeong-ho has been destroyed by this social system, are indeed insightful. Moreover, this repetitive description of a close-minded self-punishment structure makes it such that other global

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<sup>9</sup> With regards to Korean films and freeze frames, please see Kim (2001).

<sup>10</sup> Jang (2000).

powers, such as the United States, which played an important actor in Korean history, cannot be held accountable. Tellingly, all the critiques of this film have been concentrated solely on the internal system.

The anti-Cold War and democratization movements cannot succeed by using totalitarian ways of thinking and feeling, as they were the foundation of the Cold War and dictatorship. While ignoring the difference between perpetrators and victims, as well as that between men and women, these totalitarian ways of thinking and feeling put all of them in the chain of the metonymy of “we” and include them as part of the “we,” thereby making them complicit.

In order to criticize the last twenty years, this film should, rather than demanding that viewers comply with totalitarianism and dictatorship, focus on waking viewers from the long-lasting nightmares caused by their silent and complicit participation in this evil. However, the closed, male, narcissist structure founded in the film makes it impossible for viewers to escape from such complicity. Of course, the modern history of Korea over the last twenty years has not just been filled with such silent complicity; many people who have been scarred, who suffered from the traumas caused by modern Korean history, and who have not had a chance to talk, still want to talk about such “unspeakable” things.

## Conclusion

The historical sites and scenes *Peppermint Candy* reconstructs are not alternative or resistant ones, but were created through a consistent logic of collectively mobilizing “us,” while subliminally reenacting a totalitarian state ideology. Due to the repetitive promises of the camera’s tracking sequences, which tell us that we will go back to a certain place and find the object we have lost, this totalitarian state ideology, while being encrypted in the text, hides behind the consciousness embedded in the film. Our unpleasant recollection of our roles as accomplices is changed into a sympathy that is based on an alibi to exonerate us from our sins, that is, that “we” were once innocent. As such, this film says that “we” all were contaminated during the wrong period, and that “we” were, in truth, the “people who wanted to take pictures of the nameless, beautiful, and innocent flowers in the field.”

*Peppermint Candy*, which is presented as a cinematic “alternative” to a past stained by dictatorship, ironically, uses a decoded form of totalitarian theory to hook the viewers, which raises the question of how to foster alternative ways of writing history and ways of thinking aimed at democratization and dismantling of the Cold War. It is customary that some blockbuster films tend to reproduce the dominant ideology. However, taking into consideration the fact that even an art film such as *Peppermint Candy*, which has been considered an alternative film critical of the existing system, secretly encode and contain within themselves the current dominant belief, the necessity of establishing a theoretical framework of criticism should be keenly felt to de-freeze the frozen frames created during the Cold War and the dictatorship era.

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