



The Myth of Looking

Sovereign Violence: Ethics and South Korean Cinema in the New Millennium. By Steve Choe. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2016. 326 pages. ISBN: 9789089646385.

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The study of the new South Korean cinema poses striking challenges to the scholars who venture to write about it. While it is undoubtedly one of the most dynamic and productive cinemas in the world, the particular historical experience out of which it has emerged, along with a culture in which premodern and modern values coexist in a state of chronic tension, have made it difficult for Western-trained academics to develop intellectual approaches that are able to convey what is genuinely distinctive or novel about the new South Korean cinema. On the one hand, there is the sense that South Korean modernity is fundamentally untimely, arriving on the scene long after the US and Europe had already set in stone a definition of modernity that arose from their own particular experiences of industrialization. The consequence is that the idea of modernity has acquired something of a Medusa-like character in academic circles, giving rise to the implicit dogma that one can only talk about it after having become oneself modern, that is to say, after having taken up the Western perspective. On the other hand, it is clear that South Korean filmmakers

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have received myriad influences from Western art and literature, even as the potent and bracing emotions for which their films are well-known are distinctively Korean. How is it that art films have come to flourish in this part of East Asia in the new millennium, in the age of global capitalism and the mass migration of peoples? What is it that accounts for such creativity in such a distinct and resoundingly particular milieu? And what insights might South Korean cinema offer about the experience of modernity that are new and unexpected?

In *Sovereign Violence*, Steve Choe takes a theoretical approach to South Korean cinema that focuses on the critique of sovereignty. He takes as his point of departure the famous, if obscure, essay by Walter Benjamin, “Critique of Violence,” the final sentence of which furnishes the title of his study. In “Critique of Violence,” Benjamin distinguishes between two types of violence: the kind that is “law-preserving” and seeks to sustain the political status quo, and the violence that is “lawmaking,” which founds a new legal and political order (Benjamin 2004, 241). If “law-preserving” violence is a familiar quantity as it reflects the state’s monopoly of force and its legal operations of deterring violence and prosecuting crime, there is an indubitably virulent aspect to “lawmaking” violence, which by its nature threatens the existing order. For “lawmaking” violence cannot but be a criminal act from the standpoint of the political and legal status quo. But it is an act of violence, when it goes unpunished, subjects society to the domination of a new master. The course of modern political revolutions fits well with Benjamin’s idea of “lawmaking” violence, to which he ascribes a “mythic” dimension, as it is the form of violence that is “crowned by fate” (Benjamin 2004, 242). For any political revolution to succeed or for any new state to establish itself, one must, in the words of Machiavelli, “kill the sons of Brutus” or purge those who long for the fleshpots of Egypt (Machiavelli 1996, 45). One might also regard the indiscriminate slaughter that followed the Bolshevik and Maoist Revolutions as particularly extreme and excessive examples of “lawmaking” violence, in which the doubts and unease felt by the revolutionary elite about its own leadership resulted in the deaths of millions as well as gave rise to purges of the upper ranks of the party itself.

Benjamin proceeds however to speculate about the possibility of a third type of violence, which he calls “pure, revolutionary violence” or “divine violence.” He describes this form of violence, which he also calls “sovereign violence,” in a manner that is obscure and contradictory. “Divine” or “sovereign” violence does not make or preserve laws but destroys all law. If lawmaking violence belongs to the realm of myth, imposing “guilt” and provoking “retribution,” divine violence is antithetical to myth, and so in the words of Benjamin serves to “expiate” the guilt incurred by action (Benjamin 2004, 250). Whereas mythical violence is “bloody” and sets “boundaries,” divine violence is “lethal without shedding blood” (Benjamin 2004, 249–250). Divine violence is revolutionary action when it is undertaken not for the sake of “mere life” but in the name of “sacred” life (Benjamin 2004, 250). But Benjamin then stipulates that, in the overwhelming majority of cases, it is not possible for human beings to recognize divine violence or its expiating activity. Only “mythical violence,” represented most imperiously by the violence of political foundation in the sense understood by such political philosophers as Machiavelli and Hobbes, is “visible to men.” Indeed, Benjamin’s own effort to distinguish divine violence from mythical violence is notorious for its ambiguity. The Greek myth of the punishment of Niobe, whose children were slain by Apollo and Artemis because she had dared to compare herself to their mother, Leto, serves for Benjamin as the paradigmatic example of “mythic violence.” Benjamin by contrast calls “divine violence” the killing of Korah and his companions, who had risen up in revolt against Moses. They are destroyed when they are swallowed up into the earth, while over ten thousand other Israelites who sympathize with their cause are struck down by plague. In both cases, we are confronted by punishments meted on human beings by divine entities, but Benjamin fails to spell out why one form of punishment should be characterized as mythic and the other divine. Indeed, the claim that the destruction of Korah and the killing of the Israelites is “bloodless” cannot but come across as specious, as it appears based on the technicality that they died without bleeding. There appears to be a step missing in Benjamin’s formulation of the concept that would enable us to grasp its meaning as well as its stakes.

Choe, for his part, proceeds from the view that “divine violence” can serve as a productive critical term for examining contemporary South Korean cinema. In Choe’s view, divine violence is the force that serves to expose as illegitimate the mythic violence that plays the central role in the formation of the modern nation-state. Divine violence, or a violence of “pure means” that is not tied to any specific end, “deposes” all sovereignty and serves as the basis for a “new ethics” that summons forth a “new epoch”(Choe 2016, 16). If the ruling ideology under the military regimes of Park Chung-hee and Chun Doo-hwan or under neoliberal capitalism seeks to harmonize society by means of force and bribes, divine violence refuses all such efforts to coerce reconciliation for the sake of producing a disciplined and docile population. According to Choe, South Korean films are particularly well-suited for unveiling the mechanisms of mythic violence because they confront the viewer with protagonists who are caught in tragic predicaments in which every one of their choices has cruel and painful consequences. This observation about South Korean cinema is a powerful and potentially productive one, as it gets to why the best South Korean films have had such a potent impact on audiences across the globe. More than the sensationalistic violence for which films such as *The Isle* (2000) and *Oldboy* (2003) are notorious, it is the uncomfortable subjective position imposed on the viewer, who must witness the characters with whom he or she identifies committing cruel and violent acts—albeit for motives that are understandable, that has distinguished South Korean cinema. There is no clear moral line that separates good from evil or right from wrong. Every protagonist in Park Chan-wook’s *Vengeance* trilogy is both victim and perpetrator. Shin-ae, the grieving mother who converts to Christianity in *Secret Sunshine* (2007), is both believer and rebel, in the mold of Dostoevsky’s Ivan Karamazov. Young-ho, the police torturer of *Peppermint Candy* (1999), feels himself to be cursed by having caused the accidental death of a teenaged girl during the Gwangju uprising.

But after establishing an intriguing point of departure for his study, Choe does not produce readings of films that live up to the initial promise of his approach. One of the major problems of his book is that he does not

work with a concept of sovereignty that takes into sufficient account the constraints under which it operates. He defines “sovereign power” in terms of the capacity to exercise force against another and then to justify this violence as politically necessary and morally correct. But Choe does not engage the question of how a crime that goes unpunished somehow serves to generate political order. For example, in the South Korean context, the turn to military dictatorship is not merely the usurpation of rightful political authority by power-hungry and ambitious army officers. The success of such a venture is unthinkable in the absence of a weak and corrupt government and a population reeling under widespread poverty and hunger. For any group that seizes power must fulfill the needs of a majority of the people it rules if it is to continue holding power for any substantial period of time. Moreover, whatever latitude for sovereignty any South Korean government, both civilian and military, may enjoy is restricted by its alliance with the United States. Although the military juntas in South Korea were repressive toward their opponents, they could not always act as they pleased, as in the instance where the American ambassador Philip Habib intervened to save the life of then-opposition leader Kim Dae-jung when the KCIA was on the verge of executing him.

Choe extrapolates from the concept of sovereignty the figure of the “sovereign individual.” The “sovereign individual,” according to Choe, is someone who believes that he is “exceptional, liberated, privileged, and unified” (Choe 2016, 18). He feels “at home in the world,” and is not “troubled” by his actions, as he feels himself “empowered to create laws in response to chaotic disorder.” This particular image of the “sovereign individual” is of course easily recognizable as the humanist subject, or rather the caricature thereof, that has come to serve as a familiar target of critique in post-structuralist criticism of an overtly ideological bent. One could make the common sense observation that anyone who genuinely thinks and feels in the manner attributed to the “sovereign individual,” that is to say, who believes himself “exceptional, liberated, privileged and unified,” would in all likelihood lack the boundless ambition and brazen temerity to embark on imperialist projects or to overthrow governments. It is not the belief that one

is “exceptional” or entitled to success that leads one to undertake conquests and coups—it is the drive to prove oneself to be superior and preeminent that supplies the impetus to take up endeavors that entail terrible risks: loss of life, exile, or captivity. Such a blind spot, to be sure, has become common with the rise of the politics of intersectionality, which substitutes a crude and simplistic view of social privilege for historical understanding. In Choe’s case, his reliance on this strawman of sovereignty leads him to make some questionable claims—the self-centered but anxious protagonists of the films of Hong Sang-soo resort to “mythic violence” to fulfill their sexual desires, the aim of “sovereign subjectivity” is to turn oneself into an “untroubled human agent” (Choe 2016, 17–18).

Yet, as Benjamin himself points out, the sovereign as represented in baroque drama is anything but a smug and arrogant beneficiary of privilege, as the rigidly ideological critics of humanism would have it. The tyrant is a quintessentially tragic figure, being torn between the “impotence and depravity of his person” and the “sacrosanct power of his role” (Benjamin 2004, 72). Caught in a “struggle for the crown” or trapped by a “religious dispute ending in torture and death,” the character who becomes embroiled in the struggle over sovereign power, or who exercises it, emerges as a “radical stoic” (Benjamin 2004, 75). It would be no exaggeration to say that the sovereign is the one who is the most “troubled” by his actions and least “at home” in the world that he reshapes. For the exercise of sovereign power makes one all the more likely to become a victim of it, not least when it passes to other hands. The sovereign furthermore finds himself compelled to undergo the spiritual agony of having to kill the innocent or to betray his friends, as the role of the ruler demands the sacrifice of ordinary human affections.

Strikingly, the two films by Park Chan-wook that depict characters who pursue sovereign power—*Oldboy* and *Lady Vengeance*—emphasize the horror and anguish to which they are exposed once they gain this power. Oh Dae-su, after overcoming a series of cruel and vicious ordeals, relinquishes his revenge when he realizes there is something higher and more important than vengeance. He cuts off his own tongue in order to protect the daughter

with whom he has been manipulated into having an incestuous relationship. Geum-ja in *Lady Vengeance*, whose will and drive enable her to achieve the supreme position in the hierarchy of a women's prison, can have anyone murdered at her command. Yet, she too breaks down in grief and agony when she realizes that she has acquired this power at the cost of the lives of four young children. Even Lee Woo-jin, the wealthy and privileged antagonist of *Oldboy* who can draw on limitless resources to torture the film's hero, turns out to be melancholic and suicidal. Choe's readings of these two films never arrive at an examination at how sovereign power operates in them. Instead the study becomes bogged down in concerns that threaten to come across as callow and misplaced. For Choe, the main issue with regard to *Lady Vengeance* is how the film deconstructs "our ordinary notion of forgiveness." Rather than sorting out the network of grievances that bind the characters in the film—the parents whose children were murdered because the police detective took pity on Geum-ja, Geum-ja's daughter who was forced to grow up with adoptive parents, the playful but ultimately unappeasable ghost of Won-mo whom Geum-ja had kidnapped and whom her psychopathic lover had murdered—Choe appeals to Derrida's idea of unconditional forgiveness to make the unconvincing claim that Geum-ja "produces the terms of her own profane forgiveness, baking her own white cake and offering it as a token of her own redemption" (Choe 2016, 211).

The idea that Choe takes from Derrida, namely that forgiveness entails "silent, redemptive economy," not only has the effect of uncoupling the act of forgiveness from the agonizing entanglements that create the need for it. It also has the consequence of neutralizing the wrenching experience of grief and sorrow which *Lady Vengeance* imposes on the viewer. Similarly, when it comes to *Oldboy*, Choe misses the surprising twist whereby the conflict between Oh Dae-su and Lee Woo-jin concludes with a moment of mutual understanding: when Oh Dae-su cuts out his tongue, he not only forgoes his revenge, but he also ascertains what it is that Lee Woo-jin wants from him. This moment of communion is not to be confused with the exchange of commodities under the general law of equivalence that defines modern capitalism—it is not an unusually grotesque version of a market

transaction that Park is showing us here. Rather, what the resolution of *Oldboy* depicts is a potent example of what Jean Baudrillard calls “symbolic exchange,” which corresponds to the practice of gift-exchange in archaic societies. The amputation and presentation of the tongue are closer to the ritual of sacrifice, again a gesture that confers sovereignty on the one who makes the sacrifice. It is an action that operates beyond the bounds of “the immense polymorphous machine of contemporary capital” (Baudrillard 1993, 35). Indeed, Woo-jin does not “profit” from Dae-su’s fulfillment of his request—once Woo-jin accepts Dae-su’s offering, he keeps his promise to take his own life. In his reading of *Oldboy*, Choe starts off on a promising track with the idea that revenge, as a form of mythic violence, contains the potential to institute a “new law” that overthrows the old law (Choe 2016, 109). But he then veers off into an argument about how *Oldboy* demystifies the conventions of melodrama, obliging the viewer to take up a more critical relationship to the screen by thwarting his or her expectations for moral clarity. This move leaves Choe without the means to account for how the very act of breaking with cinematic conventions can heighten the experience of film spectatorship, producing more intense forms of pleasure by mixing it with horror. The twists in *Oldboy* are not merely sensationalistic and shocking—they are genuinely unexpected and reveal depths of character that make our identification with the protagonist all the more binding even as we are overtaken by alarm and distress over his eventual fate.

In invoking the idea of sovereignty in relation to cinema, Choe does not concentrate on those moments in which a significant and decisive action takes place that would serve as a correlative to action in the political sphere. Rather, he gravitates toward questions of emotions felt by the viewer and judgments he or she makes about the characters and actions on screen. For Choe, sovereign power ultimately resides not in actions performed on a political stage or decisions undertaken in a sacrificial frame, but rather in the experience of the viewer, whose “sovereignty” resides in the prerogative to hold opinions or make judgments about the characters and events on the screen. Thus, his critique of sovereignty is not so much directed at the exercise of state power per se, but rather at the identifications and judgments

of the viewer, who, by Choe's reckoning, believes he "possesses the power of moral discernment" and feels himself entitled to formulate definitive opinions about which characters are on the side of good and which are on the side of evil: "The pursuit of determining a moral interiority, grounded in the belief in an irreducible soul, guides the sympathies of spectator and allows him or her a position of sovereign judgment" (Choe 2016, 62). But the identification of film spectatorship with the exercise of sovereign power invites several elementary objections. For if the spectator is guilty of engaging in a form of "mythic violence," does he or she not do so in a position that is essentially passive, that is to say, as a spectator who has been interpellated by the cinematic apparatus and accordingly falls under the spell of the dominant ideology? Does not such a condition make spectatorial identification a process whereby one is reduced to being an object of sovereign power, while at the same time being tricked into believing that one wields sovereign power? Choe fails to take into account the argument that the moralistic standpoint he decries is a product of the normalizing control exerted over the viewer by sovereign power rather than the means by which the viewer can exercise of sovereignty himself or herself.

The distinction, after all, between the subject who decides, or is compelled to decide, on an action, and the one who views the action and the unfolding of its consequences, would be a necessary question to consider for this study. Note that the former may refer not only to the protagonist of the film but also to the filmmakers themselves. Artistic license is after all a type of sovereignty. The book suffers further from the fact that it does not give sufficient reflection to the difference between those who inflict mythic violence and those who enjoy the salutary consequences of mythic violence, a condition which is moreover conducive to forgetting altogether about the continuing presence of mythic violence. The elision of this elementary difference between power and the symptoms of power drives Choe's thinking into unfruitful and contradictory directions:

By allowing victims to be recognized as virtuous, melodramatic films also allow spectators to sympathize with their plight and be cathartically

moved before the image of their pathos. When their interior virtue is exteriorized for the film viewer, the viewer is also offered the opportunity to take up a position of moral judgment in relation to diegetic characters and to decide which of them are to be liked or despised. The pursuit of determining a moral interiority, grounded in the belief in an irreducible soul, guides the sympathies of spectator and allows him or her a position of sovereign judgment. Victimhood therefore solicits sympathy and mobilizes the moved spectator's demand for retribution against the perpetrator of violence, to decide who is to be rewarded and who is to be punished. (Choe 2016, 62)

The passage does not state directly what it is that melodrama does, other than produce a certain kind of empathetic response and the experience of catharsis. But the use of the modal verb “allow” implies that this operation is anything but authoritative or exigent. The “exteriorization” of “interior virtue” refers to the efficacy of melodrama in creating a sharply-defined moral universe, but Choe's choice of words serves to minimize the emotive force or seductive power of the genre of melodrama, to which he ascribes the capacity to exert an overwhelming grip over the moral and political consciousness of its audience. The overuse of passive constructions likewise yields a paradoxical view of the sovereign as an uncertain and hesitant entity that is preoccupied with cajoling and coaxing its subjects, rather than commanding their allegiance and taking for granted their obedience.

The stylistic tics in the aforementioned passage are symptomatic of a fundamental confusion in the overarching argument of the study. It is unclear whether the false representation of moral interiority in melodrama is what is harmful, or if all attempts at depicting moral interiority are ideologically pernicious. Choe appeals the Lévinasian concept of “responding ethically” to the “radical heterogeneity” or the “enigmatic otherness of the other,” but he does not offer a persuasive account of how one might be faithful to such an ethic while breaking away from the conventions of melodrama (Choe 2016, 46–47). Indeed, one could say that he circles back to the defense of these very same contrivances, or at least of their effects, when he defines cinema as a “machine for generating empathy” (Choe

2016, 13). The contradictions of Choe's approach are especially apparent in his commentary on Kim Ki-duk's 2002 film, *Bad Guy*, in which a middle-class college student is blackmailed into prostitution by a pimp whose advances she had spurned. The scandalous twist in the film is that the young woman actually grows accustomed to her profession. She comes to accept her fate and even to enjoy her job, and neither she nor the pimp receive the conventional rewards and punishments from a moral cinematic universe by the end of the film. Rather than view the film as a defiantly anti-social work that shows how people can come to make peace with degradation while being the recipients of unexpected forms of sacrifice, Choe chooses to recuperate the work as a form of social critique. In his view, *Bad Guy* gives the lie to the "ideological assumption that all human beings are to realize their full potential in capitalist democracy" (Choe 2016, 67). Such a move, which deprives the film of its unruly force and transgressive power, reduces the encounter with radical otherness to a problem that can be solved through the enlightened reform of social institutions.

The need to launch a critique of political authoritarianism leads Choe to make points that are doubtful and perplexing. He argues that the inability of the police in *Memories of Murder* to "read" the face of the suspected serial killer is what causes them to let the suspect go, as though the encounter with ineffable otherness of the human face is what leads them to the recognition of the limits of their judgment: "Divine violence begins as the appearance of the face itself, emptied of moral content, is recognized and affirmed" (Choe 2016, 180). But his reading sets aside the subtle manner in which Bong depicts how a bumbling and brutish country detective, whose usual practice is to torture suspects into making confessions, comes around to recognizing the value of due process and the need for evidence to reach a proper threshold of proof before locking someone up. That Bong's film serves as an understated allegory of democratization becomes swept aside with the overstatement that the "state of exception that was part and parcel of life in the 1980s continues into the present day" (Choe 2016, 183). Likewise, Choe attributes *resentiment* to the parents of the murdered children in *Lady Vengeance*, as though their grievances stemmed from envy and jealousy,

rather than from sorrow, rage, and anguish.

Such false turns are unfortunate, because Choe does have interesting things to say about South Korean films whenever he does peel himself away from the path that his understanding of sovereignty compels him to follow. His interpretation of Lee Chang-dong's *Poetry*, where Choe takes a more flexible theoretical approach, is moving and powerful, as he connects the major themes of the film to the particular configuration of historical and economic forces that have come to dominate South Korean society in the present. But this section stands out for its close attention to historical context, while the concept of sovereignty itself remains too little explored in the book as a whole. As Benjamin scholar Alison Ross points out, "Critique of Violence" has suffered at the hands of critics who, in treating it "as if it were a sacred text that contains an almost inaccessible revelation," have come to attribute "artificial and arbitrary meanings" to it (Ross 2014, 99). Of all subjects, the concept of sovereignty demands a strong intuition for the limits of power, even in its most authoritative expressions, for power is always finite. Such worldliness will lie outside our grasp so long as we persist in treating the sacred as a kind of void which can be filled with whatever revelation we wish it to contain.

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