

Save the Green Planet!, Memories of Murder, and the 80s in Cinema

by Byun Sungchan

translated by Hyongshin Kim

Translator's introduction:

Around the year 2000, when South Korea was going through a severe economic depression causing high unemployment among the younger demographic, the term *386 Sedae* (386 generation) was coined. *386 Sedae* refers to those who are in their thirties, did their university study during the 80s, and were born during the 60s.

Of all the post-Korean War decades, the meaning that “the 80s” occupies in South Korea is unique. To put it as briefly as possible, it was the era of democracy demonstration (mainly led by university students). The streets of Seoul were full of the smell of tear gas; songs considered to be related to North Korea were not allowed to be played. On the other hand, the 80s were an era of economic boom resulting from the government’s centralized economic policies from the 1960s on (and based on the exploitation of factory laborers by capitalists). Thus, in addition to the convoluted and still unresolved histories of colonialism by Japan and USA-Western Europe since the beginning of the 20th century, the abrupt industrialization, social formation, and vestiges of military dictatorship during the 1950s-1980s are also significant factors which make the discourse about modernity of Korea very argumentative.

This film review, which deals with two South Korean films, *Save the Green Planet!* and *Memories of Murder*, both released in spring of 2003 in South Korea, was published on the web magazine of Changbi Publishers in June, 2003. The review was written by the South Korean film critic Byun Sungchan, who was born during the 60s, graduated from the most prestigious university in South Korea, worked in factories, and went to prison because of his political beliefs. Besides writing film criticism for several leading magazines such as *Cine 21* and *Changbi*, Byun is currently working on a book about Deleuze and cinema.

Since translation is not just a matter of translating words, especially when the text is involved with image, imagination, and representation, I made several footnotes to clarify some of the words’ contexts. By choosing a film review which discusses the modernity of South Korea, the nation’s collective memory of the 80s, and the way the 80s are represented in contemporary South Korean cinema, I hope this translation will help broaden the discourse surrounding Korean cinema, which is now going through its golden age again, and starting to emerge as a part of *world* film history.

-Hyongshin Kim

Save the Green Planet! (2003) and *Memories of Murder* (2003). These two films gave richness to the Korean film scene in April and May of 2003. The aesthetic and political abundance contained in these two films have already been through various routes of

discourse. Nonetheless, the reason that I would like to talk about these films is that the critics have not been diligent enough in exploring every corner of the “plateau.” Although there might be several paths to the plateau, I will approach these two films in the context of the larger currency, “the cinematic representation of the 80s,” which Korean cinema has been symptomatically revealing for the past several years. In the view of “the cinematic representation of the 80s,” how are these two films different from the films that preceded them, and what’s the difference between the two films?

After examining short films by several young directors during the past 3 to 4 years, the film critic Yu Woonsung has concluded that “the common features which are clearly shown in the films made by directors who were born in the early to mid-70s and spent their childhood during the period of the *Yushin* dictatorship, the Kwangju uprising, and the Jeon Doo-hwan regime, are read as follows: the family and the school as the space of struggle and conflict, clinging to childhood and the complete decoloration of public history surrounding that period—I call it ‘the seal of childhood’, and clinging to genre as a false memory to fill in the empty past due to the seal of childhood” (Yu Woonsung, “A Certain Tendency of Contemporary Korean Cinema: The Rhetoric of Nostalgic Memory”). The tendency that Yu perceived in the short films was realized in the Korean commercial cinema scene in 2002. Although the people who led the currency were those of “that generation” who just made their debuts, such as *No Comment* (*Mudjima Family*, dir. Park Sangwan, 2002), *Hae-jeok, Disco King* (*Hae-jeok, Discowang Doeda*, dir. Kim Dongwon, 2002), *No Manners* (*Pumhaeng Zero*, dir. Jo Geunshik, 2002), etc., the same way of representing the past was sometimes made beyond that generation, such as *Classic* (*Classic*, dir. Kwak Jaeyong, 2003). It was, indeed, “*Bokko* fever.” (1) Those films, on the one hand, showed an aesthetic and rhetorical richness based on the cinematic knowledge of each director, yet on the other hand, they symptomatically revealed a sort of political regression. Through the process of cinematically representing the 70s and 80s, they almost obsessively showed that they were clinging to “the memory of the closet” and avoiding “the memory of the street.” “The process causes misrecognition and oblivion by paradoxically borrowing the power of meticulous memory, roundabout statements, or the dependence on genre as a strategy of disguise as there-is-no-trauma.” (Yu, “A Certain Tendency”)

The reason that *Save the Green Planet!* and *Memories of Murder* attract attention is not merely because of their formal mastery. Directors Jang Joonhwan and Bong Joonho, who can be considered as the generation halfway ahead of the aforementioned “that generation,” demand our attention in that, above all, they overcome the regressive nostalgia of “that generation” and show the political accomplishment which newly makes our “80s” (or the establishment of a problem with the 80s style) present. Yet, on the other hand, there is a clear difference between Jang’s way and Bong’s way of transcending the regressive nostalgia toward the 80s, and between the emotional wavelengths that each film brings to us. “The different degree of intensity,” can never be “the difference between superiority and inferiority.”

Memories of Murder: The Return of “The Memory of a Public Square”

Above all, in terms of subject matter, *Memories of Murder* is superior to the aforementioned *Bokko* cinemas. The starting point of this film is not an individual memory but the collective trauma of all of us, the Hwasung serial murder incidents. Here and there in the film, we encounter “the memory of the street,” including some of the dominant images of the 80s (e.g. high school students mobilized at the welcome ceremony of President Jeon Doohwan, a demonstration of university students and the mobilization of detective Cho Yonggu (Kim Rweha) to suppress the demonstration). Bong’s own individuality fully permeates the memory. Bong, in his previous films *Inconsistence* (*Jirimyulul*, 1994), and *Barking Dogs Never Bite* (*Flandersui Gae*, 2000), has shown a keen political tentacle, grasping the split consciousness of the petit bourgeoisie (i.e. intellectuals) of Korean society. His trope which satirizes their hypocrisy through small incidents in our daily lives was detailed and sharp. When his individuality meets the big social and epochal event, the Hwasung serial murder incidents, and meets the generic grammar of the crime thriller, what kind of film would come out was an interesting matter in and of itself. Fortunately, he overcame the struggle and presented a good film.

However, Bong, who reads “the 80s” through the Hwasung serial murder incidents (2), fails to distance himself from it and falls into the gravity of that era, probably due to his guilt over being too late. He feels uneasy about the premodernity and impotence of that era and has excessive empathy with the victims (i.e. the women (3) and the detectives). In this film, “Hwasung” is not merely a spatial locale. Hwasung, with respect to premodernity, is the metaphor of the 80s. The metaphor is expanded in the following ways: a scamplike investigative routine habitual to the detectives in a rural area, *Deunghwagwanje* (4) (blackouts), police mobilized to suppress demonstration, and the absence of any DNA identifying device. And the detective Seo Taeyoon (Kim Sangkyung), who volunteered to go to the rural area of the city, is an outsider from a world that can hardly be called “premodern.” The emotional trajectory of Seo Taeyoon, who at the beginning keeps a cynical distance from the premodernity of the detectives of the agricultural city yet at a certain point feels suffocated and goes crazy, might be the emotional trajectory of the director himself. Perhaps because of the strong transference, the process of the character transformation of Seo Taeyoon is not fully objectified – not motivated within the narrative, thus failing to arouse a strong emotional wavelength.

The song “A Gloomy Letter” (5) can be read as another symptom. In the film, Seo Taeyoon goes insane when the song leads him to believing that the man (Park Haeil) who works at a factory is the murderer. Likewise Park Duman (Song Kangho) comes to believe that one of the small town scamps is the murderer by projecting his emotions onto them, while Seo Taeyoon believes the factory worker is the murderer through the song’s urban sensibilities. In a sense, Seo Taeyoon and the factory worker (who is also outside of the code of the “80s”) are like doubles of the same person. Isn’t “A Gloomy Letter” the emotional link merging Seo Taeyoon, the factory worker, and the director himself into one? Wasn’t the director constructing a defensive fantasy against belated guilt about the 80s through that?

Although *Memories of Murder* successfully calls back “the memory of the street,” which has been obsessively avoided by recent Korean films, the viewpoint of “calling back” is that of petit bourgeoisie (intellectuals) like Bong himself. This is at once the film’s chief virtue and limitation.

Save The Green Planet!: To “The Memory of Closet” Once Again

Save The Green Planet! calls back the 80s as the out-and-out “memory of the closet” (private memory). The traumatic images of childhood (of the 80s), e.g. sadistic violence of father and his death, shown through the flashback in the middle of the film and through the epilogue at the end, are extremely personal. Although I wonder whether this is a product of the director Jang’s personal experience, that is not an important issue here. What is important is that the tentacle of his imagination as an auteur is the inner workings of “a human” who is struggling with severe pain. For the people in his films (the man of *2001 Imagine* (1994), Byunggoo of *Save the Green Planet!*), pain is so acute and intense that it can be overcome only by paranoiac fantasy and “medicine.” In one sense, this establishment is conventional and clichéd in its subject matter and theme. What is surprising in *Save the Green Planet!* is the fact that it starts from this cliché and manages to arrive at a completely different plateau in the tradition of Korean cinema. Like the feature film debuts of many directors, Jang’s *Save the Green Planet!* expands the world shown in his previous short film, *Imagine 2001*. Yet what he expands is not merely the length of time. As he comes into the world of commercial film, he shows the spirit of progression, both political and aesthetic. This ambitious advancement is a virtue which is rare in recent Korean films.

The two films made by Jang have as their narrative origin trauma left by the father and excessive attachment toward the mother: Oedipus mythology, reenacted once again. However, he doesn’t confine the story into the narrow composition of a family triangle. To quote Gilles Deleuze, Jang’s work is “deterritorializing Oedipus into the world instead of reterritorializing everything in Oedipus and the family” (Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*). There is the moment of symptomatic leap in Jang’s short film, *2001 Imagine*: the moment when a man, who suffers from the guilt that he is the person who killed his mother, jumps to the recognition that “You all killed my mom.” Through this leap, he gets out of oedipal “neurosis” and goes into “schizophrenia” to get revenge on the capitalistic system, which is the world on the other side of neurosis. He constructs an elaborate and systematic paranoiac fantasy; through this mediation, he carries vengeance toward actual reality. The act is, in other words, a “criminal” act to shake the symbolic order. Yet in *Imagine 2001*, the revenge is limited to just fraud and burglary. The struggle for flight fails and the result is suicide. But, the schizophrenia in *Save The Green Planet!* expands and develops into a universal kidnapping drama in order to *save the earth*, as the title suggests. This kidnapping drama advances into “the fight for the view of the world” (Yu, “A Certain Tendency”), and in that sense, it utterly actualizes “the establishment of the matter of the 80s” as the matter of now/here. Byunggoo’s death fight appears in the present progressive form in a part of this society. The joint strike of freight workers in the spring of this year is an explosion of anger of the *jiib* freight workers (who bring their vehicles to get a job from a freight

company) expressed through the suicide of a worker by fire. They were angry because they had brought up their problems for 30 years but never saw results. The reality that the longer they work the more they are in debt still continues to the present, and the government's view of worker dissatisfaction and anger as anachronistic is still as it was in the past.

Byunggoo's line, "who's going to save the earth...?" uttered with eyes half shut at the moment of his death, is much clearer than the silence of Park Duman in *Memories of Murder*, uttered with eyes staring at us aggressively. Therefore, it gives a piercing emotional shock. While the man of *Imagine 2001* chooses Yoko (who basically belongs to "you all" whom the man wants to revenge upon) as a woman to substitute for his mother, Byunggoo of *Save The Green Planet!* fights against the world with Sooni as "the object of solidarity."

Reviewing the events retrospectively, everything starts from images of Byunggoo's childhood. Byunggoo has the wings of Superman attached to him at one point when he is happy with his father. And, at the moment he gets beaten by his father, he has an ET doll in his hand. The director makes weapons to think about our problem here with "their stuff" (John Lennon's songs, countless videos and books which Byunggoo watched and read, and cinematic references here and there in the film) which he himself was fascinated by. He faces the whole problem of us now with a traumatic memory from the childhood of an individual. That moment is indeed an instance of a happy encounter, when the aesthetic vanguard meets the political vanguard, a rare moment not only in Korean film but also in the history of cinema.

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<http://www.changbi.co.kr/webzine/content.asp?pID=278&pPageCnt=3&pWmuTitle=???%20??>

(1) Literally, *Bokko* means restoration of the old. But, conceptually, which is somewhat vague, *Bokko* usually refers to visual and emotional atmosphere of the 50s, 60s, 70s, or 80s in the context of contemporary Korean culture and/or society. It often connotes nostalgia toward the past.

(2) Hwasung is a small city near Seoul in Korea. From 1986 to 1991, ten women aged from 13 to 71 were brutally murdered in the city and many of them were raped as well. Although 1,800,000 police officers were called out and 3,000 of suspects were investigated, the criminal(s) is still at large.

(3) Byun uses the word *keunyedeul*, which is the plural form of "she." But, since there is no English word exactly equivalent to the plural form of "she," I used the term, "the women," instead.

(4) This was a rule to turn off all lights on the streets after midnight during the 80s. The critic interprets this (somewhat ridiculous) rule as a metaphor of an autocratic and premodern state.

(5) A popular song of the 80s.

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