

Toward a New Cinema

The Seoul Film Collective's Aesthetic and Political Subversion

In April 1980, the Korean Motion Picture Promotion Corporation, a state-run organization with the mission of facilitating the consumption of domestic cinema, faced unpleasant survey results. Among 680 college students, fewer than one percent of the respondents found Korean cinema appealing, and only nineteen percent anticipated that Korean cinema would flourish in the future.¹ These results must have frustrated those at the state institution, but it was no secret that the industry had gone downhill throughout the previous decade. The domestic film market had seen a significant decrease in audience members, from 170 million viewers in 1969 to 98 million in 1979. The number of movies produced per year also declined from its peak of 229 in 1969 to 100 in 1979.² Filmmakers identified the state's regulation of cinema as the biggest source of their decade-long struggle. In a roundtable organized in July 1979, the veteran filmmaker Kim Su-yong lamented: "In this country, cinema, the most democratic genre of arts, has been subjected to the awfully undemocratic film policy."³ True, the stricter film policy of the Yusin era had aggravated the downfall of domestic film, but Kim missed another crucial factor here: the increased accessibility and nationwide diffusion of a new medium, television. Household ownership of television sets in the country increased dramatically from two million in 1969 to fifty-nine million in 1979; in Seoul, the country's capital city, 92.7 percent of households owned a television set by the end of the decade. No one could deny that the film industry seemed to have lost the competition against the expanding television network that lured moviegoers with entertaining programs such as daytime and nighttime soap operas and variety shows.

The industry's struggle would likely astonish many of today's South Korean film aficionados at home and abroad who have enjoyed the country's domestic and

international successes since the early twenty-first century. However, it came as no surprise to young Korean film enthusiasts of the time. The members of the Seoul Film Collective (Söulyöngghwachipdan, hereafter SFC) were among them. After beginning as a small university film club called Yallasöyng in 1979, a group of cinephiles formed a collective to make their own films in 1982. Among the SFC's members were Pak Kwangsu, Kim Hong-joon, Song Nünghan, and Hong Kisön, who later directed commercial films that are considered part of the Korean New Wave of the late 1980s and early 1990s.⁴ Together with others who joined the club later, like Kim Myöngjun and Pae Injöng, these SFC members set out to imagine a new cinema ("saeroun yönghwa") that would oppose and subvert what the older cinema—commercial and state-sanctioned films—presented.

The collective's aspirations for a more radical kind of cinema blossomed during and immediately after the so-called Seoul Spring, the short period under the interim government. To them, Park Chung Hee's abrupt death in October 1979 signaled an end to nearly two decades of his autocratic rule, which was poetically captured in the metaphor of the Winter Republic.⁵ Amid the shock of the nation, they witnessed campuses and streets slowly but surely fill with unleashed hopes for the arrival of spring in every corner of society. In less than two months, these hopes were dashed when General Chun Doo-hwan and his fellows declared martial law. While using their military power to take over the interim administration, they brutally cracked down on the prodemocratic protests that were spreading across the country. Their most notorious suppression took the lives of hundreds of innocent civilians in Gwangju, a regional capital in the southwest.⁶ The military-controlled media aggressively framed the peaceful protesters and others who stood up to protect themselves against the randomly exercised violence as "rebels" and "mobs" who threatened the community's well-being and safety. Against this deceitful frame, witnesses and journalists on site strove to reveal the truth that the state-controlled media was silencing. Yet their efforts were almost immediately met by the military power's complete ban on broadcasts, publications, and even public speech about Gwangju. It was this regulation and manipulation of media that aggravated what the SFC identified as a crisis of representation, one that urged them to select an affordable 8mm camera to document what rarely appeared in the mainstream media operating under the wing of the state.

This sense of crisis shaped each member's idea of what should and could be shown in a new cinema in varying ways. As Seung-hoon Jeong aptly observes, the SFC's vision of a new cinema was neither thoroughly nor uniformly conceptualized during its formative time.⁷ It should be noted, however, that the propagated framing of Gwangju, not to mention the brutality of state violence, opened the eyes of SFC members and others on campus. Any evidence of the atrocities that had become unrepresentable in the media—reports, pictures, and videos secretly circulated among underground circles—evoked humiliation and even guilt about their powerlessness. Indeed, the unrepresentable Gwangju compelled numerous

college students to use their privilege to fight against the military power and its destruction of democracy, seeing their ability as elites to speak about and act on the injustice as an issue of conscience (“yangsim”). According to Namhee Lee, Gwangju became not only a “historical burden” to many students and intellectuals but also a “point of departure” for the so-called minjung movement, that is, aesthetic, intellectual, and social activism anchored to the power and potential of the “people (minjung).”⁸ Despite their fear about the repercussions of their actions, the SFC members were also drawn to imagine a new kind of cinema that would serve the people under oppression, not the oppressor.

This chapter traces how the SFC’s creation of a new cinema began in this complex interplay of the members’ interest in radical film practices, their national mediascape, and the social and political atmosphere. Through their making and showing of films, the SFC members experimented with enacting new relationships to the filmed object, technology, and their audience. In so doing, they allowed diverse voices from the margins of society to enter the domain of representation, activating the possibility of a counter-history that challenges the dominant representation of the poor. The SFC’s search for a new cinema also generated a vision for the alternative distribution and exhibition of nonprofit films like theirs—what they called “small film” (“chakün yŏnghwa”). Their notion of small film literally meant a smaller format, such as 8 and 16mm, but also distinguished itself from “big” commercial cinema. Apart from the mainstream industry, the collective attempted to build a more inclusive and organic network that would connect many participants in filmmaking and viewing while also modeling new kinds of media coverage of the “people” and formations of democratic resistance. Despite its short life, spanning less than five years in its initial formation, the collective reconfigured cinema to undermine the hegemonic capitalist media system, imagining more radically democratic futures for film and its community.

NEW PRINCIPLES OF FILMMAKING

Before discussing the SFC’s films, I will describe who made up the collective and what brought them together. Born in the early postwar years, the SFC members belonged to the generation whose adolescence and early adulthood spanned the military rule of Park Chung Hee. They grew up seeing police officers in plainclothes almost everywhere. They were told that it was not only protesters who risked detention and arrest, but also anyone who read books or watched films that were considered “suspicious” by the police. Early in college, they tended to identify as political moderates rather than radicals, viewing street protests as an activity in which only the latter engaged. Remaining distant from protests was also a practical choice, as most members, particularly those from the lower class, faced pressure to get a stable job upon graduation and support their family. Although some had started to make films even before college thanks to their relative economic advantage, most members had no previous experience of filmmaking before joining the collective.⁹

What united them was their social status as students at Seoul National University, the country's most prestigious college. Their higher-education background made it easier for them to find well-paying part-time jobs like private tutoring that allowed them to save time and money for their film work. They could obtain books about how to use film cameras from the black market, secondhand foreign bookstores, and college libraries—resources they used to familiarize themselves with filmmaking.¹⁰ Living in Seoul, the largest metropolis of the country, they also enjoyed significantly more social capital relative to people in other areas of the country. Founding members such as Kim Hong-joon frequented foreign cultural centers in downtown Seoul, where they could watch and discuss European and American arthouse films that most Koreans did not have access to at the time.

However, neither their political orientation nor their privilege shielded them from the harsh realities of the early 1980s. Sending troops and tanks to Gwangju was only the beginning of the military power's ruthless oppression of civilians. Even before Chun Doo-hwan endorsed himself as the new president in March 1981, the military leaders quickly consolidated their power base and took the media under their control. In November 1980, sixty-four newspapers and broadcasting companies were either forced to shut down or were merged into eighteen state-sanctioned organizations.¹¹ Meanwhile, the state regulation of cinema continued, yet its approach to sexual content appeared to be more liberal than in the previous decade. As part of the "3S policy" (Sex, Sports, and Screen), the regime's investment in entertainment aimed to divert the public attention from politics to eroticism.¹² Filmmakers began to seek respite in the so-called ero genre—with depictions of partial nudity and the inclusion of sexual themes—in hopes of bringing audiences back to domestic cinema.¹³ Soft pornography films such as *Madame Aema* (*Aemapuin*, 1982, dir. Chŏng Inyŏp) became box office hits and gave rise to the boom of ero films. While this genre became a temporary relief for those in the dwindling industry, its proliferation attested, at least on the surface, to the success of the regime's policy that appropriated cinema to shape depoliticized consumers.

When the dominant media seemed to comply with the regime's policy, the SFC members insisted on their own agency in transforming cinema into a medium of documentation and a platform of civic participation. In one of their unpublished manifestos, they declared:

Cinema has the right to participate in the world. Film must not be used as a mere tool of propaganda. When film speaks to the audience, the audience has agency to figure out what is true or wrong. Even when film serves the purpose of propaganda, it, as an audiovisual technology, still documents a piece of reality that can bear the truth of society. One's participation in society with cinema thus can begin with a [new] documentation practice that delivers the truth to the audience.¹⁴

To tap into cinema's ability to document and speak the truth, the collective had to challenge what it saw as a crisis of representation augmented by the existing power and its instrumentalization of cinema. To the collective, signs of the crisis

did not emerge only from the media's silencing of Gwangju or the boom of ero film. They seemed ubiquitous when it came to representation of the marginalized in the capitalistic society. Mainstream media rarely showed the experiences of those who led precarious lives, and when it did, they typically appeared as passive victims of the state's modernization or examples of pastoral purity. This sentimentalization of the poor can be seen, for instance, in *A Small Ball Shot by a Dwarf* (*Nanjangiga sson chakün kong*, 1982, dir. Yi Wönse), a film based on a realistic novel by Cho Se-hüi. The original text illustrates the struggle of a dwarf and his family as they are evicted by the government's new urban planning in the name of "regeneration," navigating the complex desires of the characters as they are torn between the agony of poverty and fantasies of social mobility.¹⁵ The film, however, flattens this complexity by portraying these evictees as helpless victims of urbanization. Similarly, popular television shows simplified the lives of the dispossessed. The television series *Pastoral Diary* (*Chönwönilgi*), which first aired in October 1980, portrays farmers and their families as united under the state's promise of a bright future for a rural area. Despite its unprecedented in-depth portrait of a rural community, the farming villages are depicted as both resourceful and cooperative enough to resolve any trouble, even structural problems such as the unstable rice market.

The SFC members viewed this crisis of representation as a mirror of the logics of the state and market that restricted the parameters of the sensible, or what Jacques Rancière terms the "distribution of the sensible."¹⁶ Restricting what could be seen and heard, the powerful prevented nonnormative voices and perspectives from claiming their space in the realm of representation. To disrupt this crisis, the filmmakers believed their practices had to be distinctly different from those of the mainstream media. Similar to Khaidu, discussed in the previous chapter, the SFC prioritized the equal participation of "multiple authors," with no single author governing the others.¹⁷ They also advocated small-budget filmmaking over the commercial, industrialized production mode. Denouncing the alliance of the major corporate media companies and the political regime, the filmmakers considered it essential to be independent of external support in order to document society. Last but not least, they sought to challenge the grammar and language of commercial cinema by rejecting seamless editing, linear pacing, and a high density of incidents—all elements they saw as reinforcing the conventional media's narrative structure and style.

The SFC's first film, *P'annori Arirang* (1982, 8mm, color), demonstrates its early exploration of these principles. The film is a short but highly experimental documentation of a folk performance called "madanggük," which features the lives of the marginalized in song, dance, and dialogue. Four of the SFC members—Pak Kwangsu, Kim Hong-joon, Mun Wönlip, and Hwang Kyutök—chipped in on the production and collaborated on planning, shooting, and editing. Together, they recorded the pre-stage preparation, the performance, the audience's response, and the dialogue between performers and critics in the post-stage phase.¹⁸ With its

camera in constant motion, its unsynchronized sound and images, and the filmmakers' active engagement with audience members, the film presents the SFC's experimental articulation of a unique film language.

At its beginning, *P'annori Arirang* invites us to a series of still photographs of the stage. This scene appears in disjunction with the sound of the climax of the theatrical piece, when performers and their audiences sing a popular folk song, "Arirang."¹⁹ This dissonance of the image and the sound is expanded in the following scene. This time, the camera takes us to a pre-stage scene of performers preparing for the show, integrating more nondiegetic sounds of the rehearsal; as we see performers changing costumes, practicing instruments, and dancing, we listen to a part of the stage where they play their characters. The disjunctive construction of filmic space continues through a longer sequence in which we see a few fragments of the stage scene while being introduced to the voices of audience members, taken from an off-stage interview with the filmmakers. The diegetic dissonance is resolved for the first time in the film when performers, audiences, and filmmakers appear in harmony. This is a climactic moment that nicely captures the dynamic movement of all on stage; the performers and audience members dance along with the traditional instruments and with the camera. The final scene returns to the dissonance of sounds and images, showing the stage photos overlapping with the performers' post-stage reflections in voice-over.

Not meant to be a rigorous documentation of the performance staged by a prominent Yŏnwu theater, *P'annori Arirang* focuses on translating the ethos of madanggŭk, typically performed in open areas called "madang," into the language of cinema. This translation entails the filmmakers' deliberate engagement with the manifold borders between sound and image, media, and social relations of performers and their audiences (the filmed object) as well as filmmakers. Throughout the film, the camera fluidly moves along with the performers and the audience members, refusing to be bound to any specific space or object. The unconventional audiovisual components constantly intervene in a viewing experience that differs strikingly from the experience of most conventional films, where a harmonious synchronization of sound and visuals is backed by a linear narrative style.

All these formal experiments, as Young-a Park notes, resonate with the principle of "open cinema," a notion of alternative cinema proposed by the renowned young playwright Chang Sŏnu [Jang Sun-woo] (who later became one of the important filmmakers of the late 1980s and the 1990s).²⁰ As opposed to the closed nature of narrative cinema, he suggests that the openness and communality of madanggŭk be merged with the cinematic medium.²¹ One of the most important ways *P'annori Arirang* realizes his vision is the film's destabilization of the diegetic illusion that invites the viewers to actively engage with what is shown and what is heard throughout. For spectators accustomed to the dominant media, the film's anomalous representation of the events could be surprising or shocking. Viewing in a mainstream media setting, as Rancière warns, not only inscribes but also normalizes a fixed position of viewers in relation to the camera, often with the assumption that the viewer is a

passive receiver of what the camera shows.²² *P'annori Arirang* unsettles the viewers' position. Its strategic intervention in the progression of the filmed events, most notably in its disjunctive images and sounds, asks the audience members to engage with the construction of both performance and film. It is this display of construction that enables viewers to take part in the creative process that, according to Chang, goes beyond what is shown on the screen. This participation did not involve a large audience: the SFC held only small, local screenings. Nonetheless, this should not lead us to dismiss the dialogical relationship of filmmakers and viewers that *P'annori Arirang* initiates: from this point on, creating this relationship became a pillar of its practice, regardless of topics and formats of the collective's work.

FILMING THE MARGINALIZED

Between 1984 and 1986, the SFC increased its collaborative output, including film production and publication. As the founding members left campus upon their graduation, the remaining collective members welcomed new faces. Together they produced several mid-length 8mm films, including *That Summer* (*Kū yŏrūm*, 1984, color), *Water Tax* (*Surise*, 1984, color), and *Bluebird* (*Parangsae*, 1986, color), experimenting with the norms of both documentary and feature films. Their second publication, *On Film Activism* (*Yŏnghwaundongron*, 1985), also came out. As its title indicates, the book reflects the collective's growing interest in politicizing their film practice. The book includes the SFC's translations of several manifestos from Latin America, including Glauber Rocha's "Aesthetic of Hunger" (1965), Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino's "Towards a Third Cinema" (1969), and Jorge Sanjinés's "Problems of Form and Content in Revolutionary Cinema" (1976).²³ Common to the authors of these manifestos is their dedication to what they called "third cinema"—one conceived in opposition to both Hollywood and European arthouse cinema, which served the hegemonic system built only for the wealthy and the elite in the West. Regardless of the differences in their style and process, they aimed to film the lives of the oppressed under capitalism and imperialism, supporting national liberation movements in their countries and regions. Although the SFC members had few opportunities to watch works by third cinema advocates at the time, the sheer presence of a counter-hegemonic film movement in other parts of the world demonstrated the possibility of a new cinema that could be realized in their hands.²⁴ Despite the temporal and geographical distance, the Korean filmmakers were in sync with these radicals in the southern hemisphere when it comes to the imperative of transforming cinema into a medium in the service of the people at the bottom, not the top, of the extant system.

The SFC found a viable model of radical cinema in third cinema, but its realization was more complicated than the collective had anticipated. Practically, filmmakers needed to sort out the challenges of the guerrilla mode of filmmaking, characterized by extremely low budgets, skeleton crews, and limited props. What



FIGURE 12. In an assemblage of still and moving images of the stage performance, *P'annori Arirang* (1982) incorporates the voices of the audience members being interviewed by the filmmakers. Credit: Korean Film Archive.

hit the filmmakers harder than these challenges seems to have been the growing awareness of their own elitism as a barrier to filming the marginalized. In a reflection on the SFC's practice, one filmmaker admitted that he had to unlearn his "naïve" assumption that he could speak *for* the farmers during production of *Water Tax*, as this assumption was substantially challenged by the farmers who could express themselves very well without mediation from the "elite" like himself.²⁵ This kind of recognition led the filmmakers to face their hypocrisy in having assumed that they were the subjects of knowledge production while, albeit unwittingly, discrediting those filmed. Without working against their own hidden assumptions about their filmed object, it appeared "almost meaningless" to imagine a new cinema: for whom would it be a new cinema if it continued to objectify—and commodify—the marginalized just as the dominant media did?²⁶

In many ways, *Water Tax* (1984) answers this question. A film about the farmers who were struggling against the government's tax system, it goes against the typical dynamic of the documentary in which filmmakers position themselves as speaking for the "other" while positioning the filmed as receivers of the documenting. The filmmakers spent a significant amount of time with the peasants and participated in the daily activities in the farming community.²⁷ In this process, they prepared themselves to experiment with a mode of filmmaking that entailed making cinema *with* farmers and their families, as collaborators, not as objects. To them, enacting this mode was essential to a new cinema that would disrupt the state power, whose control of mainstream media prevented many stories of marginalized subjects from being told.

The film skillfully pieces together voice-over, pictures, footage, and interviews to demonstrate the community's collective action as its members seek to pay their taxes, in the absence of sufficient cash, with products. In its opening sequence, we can see that farmers in the early 1980s who were taking on crippling debt called for the government to support prices that would cover their production costs. Soon we learn that the sources of their struggle were manifold: the increasing numbers of cheap American imports in the local market had threatened local farmers; the government's policy had provided no protection for local products; and a handful of regime-friendly corporations had manipulated the marketplace, pushing down the prices paid to farmers and driving them out of business.²⁸ In its careful contextualization of these challenges, the film reveals a powerful story that was otherwise excluded or distorted in the mainstream media: the farmers were forming county-level organizations to protest the government's top-down policy that favored the US and big businesses, ultimately seeking to democratize the agricultural sector.

As a result, *Water Tax* presents a rich reservoir of the voices of the farmers. In contrast to the dominant media's sentimentalization of farmers, *Water Tax* also accentuates the peasants' agency. The filmmakers deliberately refrained from taking their traditional positions while focusing on the ordinary farmers and their actions. We can find this dynamic in the filmmakers' limited usage of voice-over narration and in their existence out of the diegesis so that the farmers could govern the realm of representation without interruption. The film portrays the peasants as savvy and active political agents who refuse to simply wait for the government's actions to affect them. Such images of peasants challenge the constant denial of their struggle—whether the denial was expressed through physical crackdowns on their protests or through the mis- or underrepresentation of their real lives and the issues affecting their well-being in the national media. In parallel, the film documents the rural landscape without dramatization. Throughout the film, the pastoral landscape is not used to show that the rural community is peaceful and bountiful, as in the popular media. Rather, it is invited to dismantle the stereotypical image: we hear the voice-over of the protesters in their struggle against economic injustice and are led to understand their common history and cultural identity rooted in the land and its past. The fluid movement from character to character and the blending of diverse discourses (common slang, folk songs, popular rhymes) also suggest the community's textured complexity, refusing to reduce it to nationalist imagery.

The SFC's 1986 film *Bluebird*, a fictive documentary about a rural family's struggle, similarly weaves diverse materials—newspaper clips, photographs, and folk songs—into a people's history. Following long shots that pan across the landscape, we are introduced to the life of the family, and soon the film reveals each family member amid difficulties: the poor parents cannot pay their son's tuition, and they are forced to send their eldest daughter to work in a city as a bus guide for less



FIGURE 13. *Water Tax* (1984) interweaves the daily rituals of the farmers and the memories of their protest against the government. Credit: Korean Film Archive.

than minimum wage. When the daughter becomes ill and needs surgery, the father decides to sell their only cow as a last resort. Yet the falling domestic beef prices leave him with nothing but devastation, as the money from the cow's sale will not be enough to pay his daughter's medical bills. Then the camera abruptly shifts to a close-up of a dying bluebird on the soil, lingering on the body, head, and leg. The dramatic percussion sound grows until the father, throwing aside his sickle, strides toward the community-based march against the government. The film ends with a collage of photographs documenting the actual protests of farmers, their banners and slogans, and their confrontation with the police and local government.

Bluebird emphasizes the continued struggle of peasants in reference to the 1894 Tonghak Uprising, in which impoverished peasants resisted the government's unjust exploitation on an unprecedented scale. The film opens with a folk song, "Parangsae," that is said to have been sung during the rebellion, with its lyrics: "Bird, bird, blue bird, dare not sit on the mungbean patch; if the mungbean blossom fails the beancurd seller will leave in tears." Mungbean is said to have been the nickname of the uprising leader Chon Pongjun, and with the good wishes for the mungbean in the lyrics, the song implies the peasants' support for the Tonghak Uprising. In her analysis of the uprising's symbolic meaning in the 1980s social movement, Chungmoo Choi points to the song's contemporary

resonance with the devastation of rural economies.²⁹ The struggle of the rural community in the 1980s is represented as a beancurd seller in the last verse, who is “so precarious that one crop failure may force him to leave his land.” Using the song to evoke the peasants’ past struggles against poverty and oppression, *Bluebird* establishes its critique of the unending exploitation in its filmic time. When the film parallels the resistance in these two temporalities through the symbolism of the dying bluebird, it poignantly alludes to a longer history of peasant exploitation and resistance, and in so doing, positions the contemporary farmers’ movement in dialogue with this history.

Creating a rich portrait of the ongoing struggle proved to be a collective effort on multiple levels. The filmmakers were touched by stories of the resilient peasants published in the periodical of the Korean Catholic Farmers Association, a progressive religious organization for rural activism. Thanks to this organization, they made contact with a local community in the North Cholla province and eventually worked with its members.³⁰ But their mode of production—collaboration *with* the farmers—had to be radicalized. One of the filmmakers, Yi Hyoin, remembers: “When we wrote the script for *Bluebird* based on the stories we learned from the community, we told the farmers, ‘This film will be shown to other farmers who have also struggled with the government’s lack of commitment to rural communities.’”³¹ However, it was not this promise that paved the way for the community’s collective endorsement and participation. The filmmakers instead were invited to learn how to work with the farmers. For instance, they earned the support of the community members throughout a filmmaking process that invoked the rural tradition of shared labor (“p’umatsi”), in which the community worked together to harvest the crops. The filmmakers’ participation in the community, under the guidance of its leaders, substantially shaped the entire dynamic of the production. The filmmakers bore much of the decision-making responsibility for shooting and editing, but the farmers, as both sources of local knowledge and protagonists of the film, codetermined, for instance, where to shoot and when to stop, as well as who could play which part.

In this sense, the filmmakers and community members cocreated the content of the film: a story of the actively resistant farmers that had hitherto been unheard and undocumented. This collaboration with the farming community also structured the film’s exhibition. After the premiere in the town where the film was shot, the community leaders helped contact other village leaders who were likewise burdened by the government’s unfavorable tax system. The screenings in other areas often led to informal town hall meetings that raised awareness about self-denigration and encouraged the viewers to conclude that change had to start in their own lives and communities.³²

As shown in *Water Tax* and *Bluebird*, the SFC’s work intervened in the conventional media’s silencing of the manifold struggle of the peasantry at that time. The filmmakers rejected the existing power relations that framed the peasants as embodiments of pastoral peace or impotent victims. Instead, the filmmakers



FIGURE 14. Close-up of the head of a bluebird at the climax (left) and a picture integrated into the collage that attests to the persistent struggle of peasants (right) in *Bluebird* (1986). Credit: Korean Film Archive.

portrayed them as oppressed by a social condition and yet fully capable of representing themselves, and in the end, as agents of their own destiny. *Water Tax* generates a unique picture of the rural community by bringing an otherwise unrepresented farmers' protest and its vital community culture together on the screen. *Bluebird* offers a constructive site in which an underrepresented present and a forgotten past come together to claim space in the realm of representation. With its recognition of the dispossessed as agentic participants in both filmmaking and local politics, the SFC transformed the cinematic space into a generative site where neglected representations, memories, and experiences were permitted to assume their own forms of expression.

I find the power of this transformation in what is offered by what Michel Foucault terms "counter-history," albeit in a different context. For Foucault, official histories are produced by monopolizing knowledge-producing practices; official histories create and maintain the unity and continuity of a political body by imposing an interpretation on a shared past and its ongoing present, and simultaneously silencing alternative interpretations of historical experiences.³³ Counter-histories try to undo these silences and undermine the unity and continuity that official histories produce. If the mainstream media created a narrative of national prosperity that projected the state's developmental vision of modernity onto the viewers, the SFC members' work, by documenting and exhibiting the voices of the poor, challenged the dominant narrative. In their counter-history of the underrepresented, we can see how their actions not only bear traces of the daily struggle of the people but also resist the state's monopoly on producing and distributing knowledge about them. The counter-history registered in the collective's films could block the unifying function of the official history that normalized a singular imagination of modernity led by the powerful state. The disunifying effects of a counter-history in the SFC's work, when brought to the viewer, contain the potential to destabilize the normative order by introducing a counter-perspective that resists and invalidates the normative expectations of the state's dominant ideology.

STRUGGLES FOR A SMALL FILM

While tackling the issue of aesthetic and political representation, the SFC members gradually asked themselves how to bring their work to viewers beyond their small network on campus. In order to maintain their integrity, it seemed clear to many that they would need an independent network of their own, one that would break from the mainstream media tendencies and practices. Typically, distributors and exhibitors, based on a film's perceived marketability, decided how long they would run the film and at which theaters it would play. After its theatrical screenings, a film was put on VHS tapes that circulated through official channels such as rental shops and private video markets, which were experiencing a quick rise in urban areas. Film, in this process, was deemed a commodity—a particular kind of commodity due to its intangible materiality as a moving image projected in commercial theaters for a certain amount of time, broadcast on television, and viewed on rented VHS tapes. In the eyes of the SFC members, this seamless lifecycle of film that we might take for granted today was thoroughly subjected to the process of capitalistic commodification. They wanted to complicate this process and its alienation of the audience while imagining an alternative channel through which small films like theirs could meet viewers. This channel would challenge the dominant one that positioned the viewers as mere consumers with little to no option of seeing motion pictures produced outside the commercial market.

In many ways, the emergence of small-film advocates in South Korea resonated with the rise of video guerrillas of the 1970s United States, as the media creators in both contexts attempted to create a more democratic media ecology by taking full advantage of media portability.³⁴ Their goal was to see the roles of consumer and producer merge by allowing ordinary people to create their own culture and seize control of their lives and environment. The SFC shared close links with the video guerrillas' outlook in its emphasis on the importance of, in the words of its member Hong Man, "liberating both the viewer and the filmmaker from commodification of the medium and film technology."³⁵ Hong identified the underlying alienation that accompanied the capitalistic industry of cultural commodification. Rejecting this alienation by establishing networks in the hope of escaping such bureaucratic institutions and outlooks, Hong claimed that these networks of small-film creators and consumers would enable a more sustainable film ecology for all participants. According to him, cinema could help "humanize" society if it could be incorporated into many small-scale communities.³⁶ For this incorporation to occur, the film's makers, protagonists, and viewers should create an "organic system of collaboration" at all stages, from production to exhibition. This system, as Hong emphasizes, would enable a ubiquitous presence of small film "at the heart of the people's life, in virtually any place, including colleges, churches, factories, small theaters, squares, lounges, and play yards."³⁷

An alternative ecology appeared particularly promising at a time when a surge of college film clubs was bringing new opportunities for small-film advocates to share their work with broader audiences. As early as July 1984, the SFC, in partnership with four other film clubs, organized the first Small Film Festival, during which six movies, including *P'annori Arirang*, were shown to an off-campus audience. This inaugural event planted a seed that soon led to a multicampus small-film movement; within a year, a group of student filmmakers succeeded in securing bigger screening events at six universities across the country.³⁸ Organizing these screenings brought clarity to the SFC members about who they made films for and how they could build a more sustainable platform for exhibition. While keeping most screenings free and open to the public, the filmmakers launched a small campaign to crowdfund other projects and attracted a sizable number of individual sponsors.³⁹

Yet these expanded opportunities for exhibition provided no immediate solution to the collective's concern about sustainability. From the beginning, the SFC's work was volunteer based: its members provided key equipment, personnel, and money that made it possible to continue the group's existence independent of state or corporate sponsorship. Indeed, most members tended to see the structure based on voluntary free labor as inherently democratic. Such idealism and naivety existed in almost all student film groups at that time. Many filmmakers assumed that unpaid labor naturally led to nonmonetary and "authentic" goals in contrast to the capitalist practices that associated paid work with professionalization.⁴⁰ The free labor celebrated in the collective, however, required most members to support themselves and subsidize their productions with other paid work.⁴¹ Although they were able to raise some funds for future productions during the first two small-film festivals, the lack of sustained financial resources placed a strain upon its members.

Before the filmmakers could sort out how to move forward, they were interrupted by the state's framing of their practices as "illegal." In October 1986, two members—Hong Kisŏn and Yi Hyoin—were arrested on the grounds of distributing and exhibiting *Bluebird* without authorization. This move indicated the political regime's intensified regulation of any form of campus activism, and it simultaneously signaled the state's subjugation of the SFC's independent film practice to the logic of capitalistic filmmaking and markets. The two directors were sentenced to two years in prison because they had charged other college film clubs a small, fixed fee to borrow the film print for public screening. The state power did not justify its arrest and imprisonment of the student filmmakers merely by citing the film's social—or "leftist," in the words of the prosecutors—commentary on the precarity of life in a rural community.⁴² Rather, it pointed more explicitly to the SFC's violation of the Performance Law that mandated all media producers and exhibitors register with and receive approval from the Korea Media Rating Board (Kongyŏnyulliwiwŏnhoe) for public viewings. Operating as a government-sanctioned gatekeeper, the rating board wielded unlimited power over virtually

all South Korean profit-based media content to prevent antigovernmental content from reaching the public.⁴³ Despite the SFC's claim to be a nonprofit media collective, in the state's view it was deriving a profit, however small, from unapproved public showings. In response, the SFC claimed that the fee covered only the cost of delivering the film print, but the court did not reverse its decision. Feeling guilty about their two peers in prison, some collective members supported them financially and morally; others moved on with a new mission of more militant filmmaking. In both cases, the SFC members were forced to face the cost of what they believed to be the realization of a new cinema.

In addition to this external intervention, the collective could not resolve an internal conflict that stemmed from the nature of its outside-the-ivory-tower collaboration—not only with the protagonists of its films but also with its audience members. The making of *Water Tax* and *Bluebird* opened the young filmmakers to a unique mode that encouraged them to speak with, not for, the peasants. Yet this experience raised further suspicions about the nature of their practice, and factions developed over the group's mission in this regard. This kind of division did not occur only in the SFC but evolved more broadly among student activist groups of the era that promoted a close alliance with factory workers. Seeing laborers as subjects of history and instigators of social movements, student activists organized the networks for workers' education and even became "disguised workers" to experience life in factories.⁴⁴ They shared the goal of activating workers' potential as agents of social change, but this did not stop rising concerns about their relationship to workers. At the heart of their activism, an inherent contradiction grew between what Namhee Lee aptly calls "the Gramscian aspiration to fuse organically with the workers" and "the Leninist one to lead them."⁴⁵ This contradiction, in the context of the SFC, came from what they had believed to be a more horizontal filmmaking mode that expanded the participation of the marginalized. At least some members painfully acknowledged that their practice was not entirely free of the normalizing impact of college students' widely accepted social status as elites.⁴⁶ As a result, they were uncomfortable listing the SFC as sole producer, an action that looked disrespectful to the farmers with whom they closely collaborated. This credit might have been justified by the fact that the filmmakers bore more responsibility than the farmers throughout the production and postproduction processes, but this justification did not alleviate their discomfort. Several SFC members found themselves facing a dilemma: while questioning injustices in the dominant field of media representation, they inevitably inscribed their privilege as intellectuals in a deeply hierarchical world that their film activism ostensibly intended to reject.

These internal and external difficulties did not put an immediate end to the SFC's struggle for a new cinema. Even after the imprisonment of the two filmmakers, which ultimately contributed to the group's reformation, many filmmakers kept going amid their contradictions to realize what they believed was a more just

representation. Some SFC members distanced themselves even more from conventional filmmaking, participating in the rapidly expanding prodemocratic movement at the time. With millions of protesters flooding the streets, the nationwide movement in June 1987 led to the end of the military rule of Chun Doo-hwan. However, his stepping down did not open a new chapter of democracy. His successor, Chun's fellow general Roh Tae-woo, won less than thirty-seven percent of the vote in the first direct election in December 1987. In less than a year, demands for a drastic social reform became sidelined by the Roh administration's push for a smooth and uneventful Olympic debut in 1988. Yet urban workers and peasants continued their struggle against the unjust economic structure that kept pushing them to the margins of society. In response to the increased need for alternative media to represent these workers, SFC members such as Kim Myŏngjun and Pae Injŏng formed a new militant video collective, Labor News Production (Notongchanyusŭ chechakdan). These filmmakers recommitted themselves not only to documenting the nation's growing progressive labor movement but also to teaching workers to make their own small films as a tool of resistance. Meanwhile, Yi Hyoin founded the National Cinema Research Group (Minjok'yŏnghwayŏnguso) to radicalize film criticism and historiography. Through writing and public education, he and other founders, such as Yi Chŏngha, articulated a vision of a new cinema committed to anti-capitalism and anti-imperialism, crystallized in their notion of "minjok'yŏnghwa" (national cinema).

Other SFC members pursued filmmaking in the mainstream industry in hopes that they could challenge the system from within and rejuvenate film language. The founding member Pak Kwangsu debuted with *Chilsu and Mansu* (1988), which brought the struggles of the urban poor in a rapidly commercialized Seoul to the screen. The film features Chilsu, who works as a billboard painter, and Mansu, who paints buildings by rappelling. While tracing their bonding as working-class men estranged from their families, Pak captures their isolation in a society that is not built for those who are poor and undereducated. The film's finale captures their frustration at society with substantial nuance. They are shown painting a billboard on the roof of one of the tall buildings in Gangnam, a newly urbanized district under the government's developmental plan. As the two stand up and begin to shout at everyone below, their voices are mistaken as dissident by the police, the press, and the uncaring crowd, all of whom have failed to understand the socially alienated. As the country was marching toward its Olympic debut in the same year, Pak succeeded in making the voices of the marginalized heard across commercial theaters. His success was hard won. As Kyung Hyun Kim points out, a new generation of the filmmakers, like Pak, needed to constantly negotiate with the rules of commercial industry that operated without government or public support. This meant they had to survive in the market, where their work competed with Hollywood features distributed freely across the nation since 1988, all while keeping their artistic integrity.⁴⁷

A few members, including Hong Kisŏn, did not follow either of these paths, continuing their work at the limits of campus film activism until the end of the decade. They collaborated with younger filmmakers from other campus clubs such as Yi Ŭn and Chang Yunhyŏn, contributing to launching off-campus collaborations and genre experiments. Their films, such as *Oh, Dreamland* (*O kkumŭinara*, 1989) and *The Night before the Strikes* (*P'aŏpchŏnya*, 1990), addressed the state violence in Gwangju and the precarious lives of factory workers on the path to unionization, respectively.⁴⁸ As social realistic features with coherent narratives and dramatization of characters, these films depart from the earlier aesthetic and political experimentation promoted by the SFC. Still, both films attest to the possibility of new cinema in their testing of the boundaries of what could be seen and heard, and also in their mode of exhibition: the filmmakers reinvented a grassroots network of exhibition, just as the SFC had envisioned, incorporating a guerrilla style of screening in various spaces that reached more than a million viewers, a strikingly high number for any nonindustry film project of the era.⁴⁹ Apart and together, the young dreamers of a new cinema laid the groundwork that would allow a new era of film and video activism to flourish, even as the next generation would also have to confront the difficulties of film activism under capitalism.

As we have seen, the SFC's struggle for a new cinema was not perfect and at times replicated some of the structural problems it was attempting to address. Nonetheless, the collective represented an important part of the mediascape at a time when all media were strictly controlled by the government and no anti-state criticism, much less any defense of social activism, was ever approved for broadcasting. Their pursuit of a new cinema did not completely dismantle the "older" cinema, yet it succeeded at breaking the dominant media's conventional film practice that prevented the lived experience of those dispossessed from being seen and heard in public. The SFC's vision of cinema as a self-reflexive medium also complicated the mode of filmmaking that typically imbued the director with a great capacity to speak for others. Encouraged by their work to contemplate their own privilege, the filmmakers navigated the unprecedented possibility of speaking with others in mediating the reality of farmers that had been erased across the mainstream media. In this way, despite the limits of their practice, the SFC members proved that film media could bring together people who had been isolated from one another and, in so doing, disrupt the isolation of the people and the silencing of their voices. Although the SFC's aspiration for an alternative distribution and exhibition network did not come to fruition in its time, it influenced the next generation's countercultural media festivals and grassroots cinematheques. Thanks at least in part to this generation's advocacy of more equitable distribution and exhibition, the seed planted by the SFC's small cinema grew to produce a set of nonstate and noncorporate-sponsored media networks.⁵⁰

Bringing the SFC's quest for a new cinema to our time does not mean replicating the tendency in film history to romanticize the film activism of the 1980s. Starting in the late 1990s and through the 2000s, critics and filmmakers legitimated the SFC and other film collectives as the foundation of independent cinema that intersects with the country's democratic struggle in the 1980s. Their affirmation often appeared to be a collective form of authorizing themselves as the successors of the SFC's vision of a new cinema, and this, in turn, contributed to their territorialization of the independent sector that began to sprout with the civilian government's support in 1999. One of the earliest examples can be seen in *From Periphery to Center* (*Pyönbangesö chungsimüro*, 1997)—in both the documentary film and the sourcebook—on top of other similar retrospectives on the history of independent cinema.⁵¹ Based on the recollections of a few former SFC members and other filmmakers of their generation, these works endorse these filmmakers as progressives at the forefront of social and film activism. Without attending to the SFC's multifaceted struggles, particularly its reflexive engagement with its positionality and sustainability, these works—most notably *From Periphery to Center*—celebrate the SFC's quest for a new cinema as a homogeneous force that yielded its vision of the poor as victims of capitalist developmentalism under autocratic rule. To a certain extent, this glorified tradition has lauded the successive experiments with film languages and film modalities that led to a boom in interactive documentary forms. As exemplified in late 1980s and early 1990s films such as *Sanggyedong Olympic* (1988, dir. Kim Dong-won) and *Kkangsuni* (1989, dir. Yi Sangin), many filmmakers integrated their artistic practice into social activism by bringing the camera close to the still-unheard voices of the marginalized urban poor. These works, together with the SFC's formative films, have been continuously positioned as the “origin” of independent cinema in the linearly imagined path of South Korean cinema.

Rather than prompting rigorous self-reflection, this established narrative has augmented the unquestioned authenticity (“chinchöngsöng”) of the filmmakers who became the main force in the independent film scene and film industry in the late 1990s and 2000s. It has resonated with the conventional narrative of democratization in its celebration of the past to validate the present without permitting any new visions of cinema or democracy. At the limits of these histories that celebrate a seamlessly constructed past, I am concluding this chapter by returning to the burning question that the SFC members originally asked themselves, with the hope of more stories of subversion to come. If cinema can be a critical medium to reflect on ourselves and the world we live in, what vision of a new cinema today might carry forward the ethos of celluloid democracy?