

Conclusion

In June 1987, millions of South Korean citizens rallied against the Chun Doo-hwan regime's attempt to extend its military rule and violent repression of dissent. For two weeks, the center of Seoul was occupied by people demanding an end to autocracy. Their action fueled the country's process of reinstitutionalizing direct presidential elections, which has been regarded as a decisive first step toward a peaceful transition of power to civilian government in the ensuing decade.¹ Almost thirty years later, downtown Seoul was once again filled with hundreds of thousands of citizens expressing anger and frustration. This time, the streets were taken over for much longer; every Saturday from October 2016 to March 2017, protesters publicly rejected the demoralizing corruption and impunity of Park Geun-hye's rule. The citizens of a notoriously polarized society came together to oust Park, whose approval rating had fallen to four percent, by far the lowest of any South Korean president. Their call for government transparency swiftly paved the way for the unprecedented impeachment of the incumbent and the ascendance of Moon Jae-in to the presidency with a strong anti-corruption mandate in May 2017.²

Both the June uprising and the so-called Candlelight Movement have been viewed as historic "victories" of the citizens against the powerful. In 2017 alone, a number of publications and conferences commemorated these mass protests under the banner of the thirty-year anniversary of the uprising.³ Often depicting the protesters as "awakened" citizens who provided the basis for a "hard-won" democracy, scholars and pundits celebrated the counterbalancing power of the people. Amid this triumphant climate in the post-Candlelight era, the first blockbuster film about the June uprising, *1987: When the Day Comes* (hereafter *1987*), achieved remarkable success.⁴ With an emphasis on ordinary citizens and their experiences under the dictatorship, the film brought the story of the uprising to a contemporary audience, becoming one of the biggest box office hits of 2017. Its narrative begins with the death of a college student, Park Jong-chul, during a police investigation of purported anti-government activities in January 1987.

Concerned about the public outcry over police brutality, political authorities attempt to cover up the unjustified killing. Their efforts to hide it are foiled by a few people who want to reveal the truth. The more powerful the scheme to deceive becomes, the closer the people get to the truth: doctors who were called on to perform CPR on the dying Park testify to the evidence of water torture; prosecutors leak Park's autopsy results to reporters; reporters make the cause of Park's death public against the government's guidelines; and prison guards collect evidence of riot cops having used water torture and relay it to activists and priests, who, along with university students, play a crucial role in organizing prodemocratic coalitions. After the truth of Park's death becomes widely known, students organize a rally for June 9, and during the riot, the cops severely injure another college student, Yi Han-yeol, with a canister of tear gas. Yi's critical condition soon becomes public knowledge, igniting widespread anger and disgust at the state's violence. The film ends with a spectacular mass of citizens occupying downtown Seoul and condemning the Chun regime.

The film tells us nothing new about the actual uprising. Instead, *1987* vivifies an official history of the protest that stresses the collective, homogeneous power of the people. This emphasis has its roots in the early 2000s historicization of democratic struggle that was vigorously undertaken by a generation of scholars and activists with the support of the liberal Kim Dae-jung (1998–2003) and Roh Moo-hyun (2003–8) administrations. Their efforts established the uprising as a breakthrough of democratization, simplifying matters—most notably the uprising's limitations—in the service of producing a coherent narrative. *1987* amplifies this official narrative of the June uprising in many ways. When it was released a few months after Moon Jae-in took office in 2017, the film received nothing but praise for its seamless restoration of the past. In a sense, the film's arrival, following the overthrow of Park, could not have been better timed. The film would never have been completed, let alone positively received, during the conservative rule of the preceding decade. Both the Lee Myung-bak (2008–13) and the Park Geun-hye (2013–17) administrations had blacklisted about ten thousand artists who had voiced anti-regime opinions and who were, as a result, placed under state surveillance, barred from receiving state funding and, in some cases, prevented from producing or publishing their work.⁵ The *1987* director Jang Joon-hwan—blacklisted due to his participation in the 2008 rallies against the government—later admitted that the film's preproduction had been anything but smooth until the end of Park's rule.⁶ Released amid the rosy expectations of the new “Candlelight government,” the film won favorable attention from many now gray-haired politicians, including President Moon himself, who had participated in the June uprising as students and activists. Their public endorsement not only validated the rigorous restoration of the uprising in the film but also gave credibility to many administrators in the new regime as longtime, dedicated supporters of democracy who embodied the ethos of the “victories” of 1987 and 2017.⁷

Yet as a conveyor of official history, 1987 can dangerously envelop us in a restored past even as it entertains us. In fact, the film's restorative power overwhelmingly continues even after the fictional narrative draws to a close. The film's closing credits introduce the viewer to a mixed-media representation of "what happened" after the mass protests. Beginning with a picture of Yi Han-yeol's funeral, which was conducted as a communal mourning ritual, the credits turn to an excerpt from the television documentary on the funeral made by MBC, a public broadcasting company. Yi lingered in a coma for about a month and died on July 5, a week after Chun's regime surrendered to popular demand, issuing a statement on June 29 promising democratic reforms followed by direct presidential elections. The found footage of Yi's funeral gives evidence of the number of people in cities across the country who mourned his death. A set of pictures of Park Jong-chul and Yi Han-yeol from childhood to adolescence follow, all located so as to memorialize the two whose lives were lost to state violence. The commemorative force in the end credits crystallizes in a specific scene of the documentary that is quoted at length in the film. There, the Reverend Mun Ikhwan, a renowned prodemocratic leader, calls out the names of "martyrs" who died during the struggle. His sorrowful face is juxtaposed with the weeping people, including Yi's mother, at the funeral until Mun finally shouts Yi Han-yeol's name. The credits continue with the climax of a background tune, "When the Day Comes," a popular protest song of the late 1980s.

Local audiences seem to have been receptive to the film's final turn to the documentary space. One commenter on a YouTube video describes having watched the movie with their father, an uprising participant, and having learned to appreciate all those who have "protected" democracy thanks to all the "records" in the credits.⁸ Another commenter, identifying themselves as belonging to the same generation as Yi Han-yeol and Park Jong-chul, pays tribute to the "sacrifice" their generation made to "ignite" democracy.⁹ To these viewers, the film invites them to memorialize the struggle that people like Yi carried out. But this invitation can be detrimental, if not perilous, because it operates under an assumption that the struggle is in the past. The film's restorative gaze, culminating in a sentimental glorification of the people in the uprising, produces a fantasy that the struggle for a better world came to an end. Simultaneously, the film fed the elevated hope in the post-Candlelight Movement era that democracy had matured thanks to the resilience and resistance of the people, including some who were now in national leadership positions. The belief that the past is completed business, however, tends to foreclose questions about our relationship to the past or, better yet, what we want to do with this past to move forward in the present.

From the point of view of the actors examined in this book, and in keeping with the ethos of celluloid democracy they helped to construct, both historical moments—1987 and 2017—must be called into question rather than celebrated. True, these junctures brought about important changes within political leadership in the respective forms of direct presidential election and regime change.¹⁰



FIGURE 15. 1987's (2017) last mob scene, with the title superimposed, is followed by a documentary space that continues to narrate the official history of the uprising. Credit: Woojung Film.

However, these outcomes were far from sufficient. Some of the surviving creators of celluloid democracy admit that such changes neither represented nor entailed what they imagined as democracy in action. To their eyes, the immediate post-1987 era was instead driven by a state-led synchronization with the world in celebration of the “opening” of communist bloc countries to the market economy and of the rise of information technology. Under the first civilian regime of Kim Young Sam (1993–98), the doctrine of the “new economy” soon became the force behind the internationalization of the Korean economy and the state’s deregulation of the market. Violently channeling the ethos of neoliberal globalization into every level

of society, South Korea's post-authoritarian governments and corporations have soared toward the top of the ladder of global progress as measured by capitalist and developmentalist metrics instilled during the Cold War.¹¹ Before the directive of democratic transition could reach consensus among citizens, the possibilities of a new society have been replaced by the numbers, statistics, and indexes that measure the country's development on a global scale. For instance, South Korea's membership in the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), obtained just a year before the bottom fell out of the country's economy in 1997, was widely embraced as a global recognition that the formerly war-torn country had become one of the most advanced countries (*sönjin'guk*) in the world. In the view of my interlocutors, there has been little to no debate about which and whose parameters of development are known as norms, or for whom and for which goals democracies are pursued, or who exercises the power to legitimate them.

Over the past two decades, the neoliberal forces of market and state have even more seamlessly constructed a dominant configuration of cinema as commodity. At least some of my interlocutors admit the challenges in discerning an array of cinematic expressions, methods, and practices that would revitalize their imaginations of celluloid democracy. The Kim Dae-jung administration's abolition of censorship clearly signaled a new phase of Korean cinema.¹² Yet because it coincided with the profitability of the cultural industries, this liberalization of cinema became a lens through which Korean society could envisage and comprehend the country's economy.¹³ Both the commercial and independent film sectors started to receive unprecedented support from the government in the form of comprehensive grant programs for production and incentives for theaters to screen low-budget films, all administered through the Korean Film Council. Amid the rise of the growing overseas demand for Korean popular culture, known as the Korean Wave (*Hallyu*) phenomenon, the emerging consensus that culture is an economic domain brought more corporate investment to the film industry. From competitive financing in big budget, blockbuster productions to the consolidation of large theater chains, the influx of corporate capital quickly transformed the landscape of film culture throughout the 2000s.¹⁴ Productions at the margins of the mainstream film industry also received new resources in the name of promoting "cultural diversity." This promotion expanded opportunities for independent filmmakers to make and show their work through the newly rising circuits of cinematheques and film festivals across the country.¹⁵ It also, however, drove a substantial centralization of the independent film sector that relied increasingly on institutional support from government agencies, and this dependence, in turn, started to challenge the very notion of independent cinema. The growth of domestic cinema continued in the ensuing decade under the conservative rule that sought to maximize the economic power of Korean cultural content.¹⁶ While implementing more export-oriented cultural policies to expand the market for Korean cultural products, the government also significantly increased its control of

cinema, most notably in the form of the targeted investigation and surveillance of so-called left-leaning film workers whose efforts did not share the ruling power's political stance.

For most creators of celluloid democracy to whom I spoke, the Candlelight Movement at first seemed like a turning point for South Korean society. With unparalleled momentum, many South Koreans were introduced to the country's unresolved historical grievances: political crimes unresolved, perpetrators unprosecuted, and socioeconomic disparities unredressed.¹⁷ Citizens, particularly the younger ones, recognized that their twenty-first-century issues—the lack of government transparency and redistributive justice, among others—came from authoritarian pasts that overshadowed and bled into their present.¹⁸ Thousands of film workers also joined forces to end the government's abuse of power: from policing the programs of film festivals to surveilling artists, including the world-renowned Park Chan-wook and Bong Joon-ho.¹⁹ Reckoning with what felt like the revival of autocracy may have led South Koreans to hold Park Geun-hye accountable not merely as the president but also as the political heir to her father, Park Chung Hee, who ruled the country with an iron fist from 1961 to 1979.²⁰ This reckoning, however, has not grown into the kind of vital force that would be necessary to reform Korean society at every level. One of my interlocutors observes: “Beyond the flame-like movement, our challenge is to figure out ways to create a space where the complexity of democracy [in a ‘post’-authoritarian society] we are facing can be questioned, not ignored, again and again.”²¹

In this book, I have written about a number of South Korean visionaries of celluloid democracy who refused to partake in the construction of cinema as a monolithic medium in the service of the powerful. They confronted the norms imposed by imperial and authoritarian state power, the prison of preconceptions about cinema's purpose and capacities, and the illusion of democracy as an abstract system. From rejecting the industrial norms of cinema to inventing alternative modes of filmmaking and film showing, they approached cinema as a medium with which to redefine the contours of a society that they experienced as highly alienating and oppressive. Inside and outside the limited domain of the film industry, they reconfigured film as an arena through which democracy might be thought, experienced, and enacted differently from the norm. By pushing the limits of what could be shown and considering whose voice mattered, their film practices yielded a more expansive realm of representation. Simultaneously, these film workers refused to comply with the state's monopoly on resources and the power to distribute them. Through the inventions of strategies, networks, and platforms to work around the constraints on cinema, they reclaimed it as an ecology that generated a sense of community backed by horizontal social relations and shared hopes for a different world. Shaped by their reckonings with the boundedness of the state's protocols and rules, their reclamation of cinema appropriated the existing system that was designed to instrumentalize it for what they saw as nondemocratic ends.

As imaginations of a more just and equitable and inclusive world system, the possibilities of celluloid democracy cannot expire. Recent documentary films by independent collectives have revitalized these possibilities in what Jihoon Kim calls “new constellations of aesthetics and politics.”²² Diverging from the earlier mode of militant or participatory documentation, this new tendency presents more subjective and creative engagements with the filmed object. What is crucial to our discussion is that these films often work as an antidote to the system of images and sounds in which the state and mainstream media exercise the right to exclude those deemed “other” from anti-communist, capitalist modernity.

Yongsan (2010) provides a particularly relevant example that undermines the power of exclusion and, more important, the “post” in post-1987, a division that has long sustained the dominant narrative of democratization. The film addresses the so-called Yongsan disaster, based on the state’s violent evacuation of the residents of slum quarters in the Yongsan district of Seoul by mobilizing the riot police in 2009. During this event, the evictees, occupying a watchtower on the roof of a building in the area, were protesting the government’s unreasonable redevelopment plan when the riot police’s forceful operation sparked a fire that killed five protesters and one riot cop.²³ *Yongsan* begins with the filmmaker Mun Jung-hyun’s firsthand footage of the fire but evolves into a critical reevaluation of the country’s democratic struggle. Triggered by the deaths in the devastating fire, the filmmaker traces his memories of student protesters’ self-immolations in 1991, the loss of Yi Han-yeol in 1987, and the 1980 civilian massacre in Gwangju. These junctures all point to the state’s abuses of power that took the lives of many innocent citizens who stood against tyranny. While it is easy to blame the politicians and military forces here, the recurring violence pushes the filmmaker to a less comfortable stance: holding the “people”—including himself—accountable. He asks: “Where are the people now who once occupied the streets of Seoul in 1980, 1987 and 1991?”

The rest of the film is an attempt to answer this question. The filmmaker pauses at each historic juncture that is said to have been a turning point on the road to democracy. His gaze, rather than mourning the sacrifice of the people involved in these moments, stops at the glorified image of the people imagined as a homogeneous and potent social force, particularly in the June uprising. It turns to deconstructing this populist imaginary that has substantiated the myth that democratic struggle emerged triumphant in the past and is no longer necessary. Refusing to flatten the people into a singular group, the filmmaker parallels the collective body of the protesters in the past to the voices of self-defined “former” student activists in the present. This assemblage leads us to see that many protesters have lost their aspiration for a more just world to an illusion of progress, one that circumscribes their outlook. At least in their own eyes, they inhabit a better world than they did in the authoritarian past. Another juxtaposition interrupts their comfort in the illusion by pointing to their active disengagement with ongoing injustice in the Yongsan disaster; it shows that even as these older activists sentimentalize their

days in the streets over drinks, the “democratic” government uses its excessive force to make the lives of the marginalized even more precarious. These creatively mixed assemblages encourage the viewers to face the fact that the country’s democratic transition has been celebrated at the cost of ongoing segregation and violence, a cost that has been almost completely erased from the mediascape.

The power of constructive assemblages explodes in *Yongsan*’s ending in a way that presents, compared to *1987*, an alternative narration of the historical experience of democracy. The filmmaker remixes shots from the most-cited markers of democratization into one sequence with sound recorded on the site of the Yongsan disaster, where the protesters and riot cops witnessed people dying in agony and despair. This constellation of image and sound captures what Jonathan Crary calls “counterpractices of the audiovisual,” disrupting the seamless construction of the world in cinema. It is radically different from the documentary space in the closing credits of *1987*, which remixes images and sound to give force to the established narrative of the uprising.²⁴ In *Yongsan*, none of the excerpts is simply quoted; rather, all the images are transformed as the director reframes them and inserts new sounds, weaving together moments from the country’s history of prodemocratic movements. Here the film’s potent layering of images and sounds resists the illusion of democratic transition in which we are embedded and which we take for granted. If *1987* presents a melancholic obituary that looks backward, *Yongsan* offers polyphonic voices of the past that prompt us to reckon with the unending injustice in front of us. Also in this space, multiple past junctures recorded in video footages are creatively cited to collapse the borders of different historical events. Erasing the borders between the past and the present, the film ultimately generates an alternative vision of a history that challenges the dominant one grounded in a linearly constructed time of progress.

Through its creative expressions and methods, *Yongsan* gives rise to a new iteration of the space I have identified in this book as celluloid democracy, the space that pushes back the boundedness of what is representable and of who can access the power to imagine differently. This space created in *Yongsan* may well be seen as a temporary one, but it sparks a light in our time. Like the works of the film workers examined in the previous chapters, it radicalizes cinema as an alternatively creative and democratic terrain, one that invites us to be vigilant to the violence and injustice happening before our eyes and ears in the name of progress. This invitation calls on us to choose to notice, and in choosing to notice, it also asks us to transform ourselves so that we can continue to imagine other possibilities for the world.

What would it mean if each of us could live with this imagination as our horizon? How could such an imagination, however modest, be anchored by the reflective invitation to undo the exclusion of those who are dispossessed and the indulgence in the illusion of progress? How could this undoing help us open ourselves to other expansive capacities of cinema that have been buried in plain



FIGURE 16. In *Yongsan* (2010), the scene of evictees dying in a fire transports the film's director to other forms of state violence at different historical moments. Credit: Mun Jung-hyun.

sight? Celluloid democracy led neither to a dismantling of the state's hegemonic system nor to a revolution in the film industry during the historical period examined in this book. Yet it challenged people to see how the statist democracy and modernity had collapsed into a nationalist developmentalism that harmonized with colonial and authoritarian forms of governance and essentially forced all citizens to see the world through the eyes of the state. In response to their own political and aesthetic crises, the creators of celluloid democracy noticed contradictions, especially in the realms of representation and distribution, that were undermining what they envisioned as democracy. Using all the agency they possessed, they transformed not only the existing order of cinema but also their relationship to the world at moments when the powerful wanted to pulverize that agency. If there is anything we can learn from them, it is that we, regardless of who or where we are, must ask ourselves what kind of world we want to fight for. Their struggle reminds us that we share an obligation to undermine the status quo, and celluloid democracy reveals ways we can work toward meeting this obligation by imagining radically different futures.