

Fantastic Folk

Beyond Realism

As in much of global cinema, there is a close affinity between melodrama and the fantastic in the North Korean film industry, due in part to the inherent mythological quality of many *juche* realist films. Because of the attention to the everyday in 1950s and 1960s North Korean melodramatic films, most of them remain in the realm of the mundane. However, through the reinvigoration of the total work of art through operatic elements and the dominance, beginning in the late 1960s, of epic representations of party leadership and the anticolonial guerrilla movements, there was a stronger tendency to push the melodramatic mode toward the mythological. The primary mythologies of North Korean film include elements such as the heroic exploits of the anticolonial guerrilla movement, the infallibility and generosity of the leader, and the inviolable goodness of the oppressed Korean people. These are not myths in the supernatural sense, but rather, in the language of Roland Barthes, they belong to a second-order semiotic system.¹ Such mythologies are metalanguages that take signifiers, the final terms of a linguistic system, and transform them into the first terms of a second-order mythical system.² For example, the common image of a partisan revolutionary combatting the Japanese signifies, in the linguistic system, the anticolonial movement. However, in *juche* realist films, the figure of the partisans become more than a signifier of a historical signified; they are the *signification* of moral and political purity, heroic willpower, and the perfection of party leadership. Barthes addresses bourgeois mythologies and argues that while myth exists on the left, it does not penetrate the whole of everyday life in the same way as bourgeois language. Bourgeois language is detached from materiality, production, and revolution, and therefore more prone to becoming a metalanguage. However, it is telling that Barthes's main example of left-wing myth is Stalinism and the Stalin myth, and North Korea and its film industry are an example of how state socialist representations of revolution, party,

and leader become a mythology.³ These mythologies make claims on reality through the referential illusion of the melodramatic mode—the real incarnation of ideas and the moral occult through affects.

This chapter will examine how North Korean films that indulge in supernatural and fantastic elements are mythological like the melodramas of *juche* realism but present alternative moods that challenge its dominant concepts of sovereignty and subjectivity. Following Csicsery-Ronay, if realisms furtively rely on “inherited ethical-mythic structures underlying the concrete details of quotidian existence,” then they often have a dialectical relationship with what Samuel R. Delany calls “mundane fiction.”⁴ One possible mediating mode in this dialectic is melodrama. In the case of North Korean cinema, melodrama and melodramatic moods work similarly in *juche* realist and fantastic films; in each case they mark a departure from verisimilitude to the affective expression of a moral occult. Of course, the moral occult is tied to the nation-people, typically pitting the good and noble Koreans against foreign aggressors and their collaborators. Fantastic films also employ the melodramatic mode and the moral occult to tell the story of the nation-people. However, because they are usually set in the distant past or in a utopia (in the neutral sense of non-place), their class politics often do not map clearly onto the modern nation’s history of imperialism, colonialism, and revolution. The subject of history is not the modern nation-people (*inmin*) per se, but rather the villagers or common folk (*paeksŏng*) of the past, a class that would include all the peasants, artisans, fishermen, and small merchants who had no broad political and economic power within the feudal system. By taking up or creating folktales and popular myths and visualizing them with special effects and the *mise-en-scène* of period drama (*sagŭk*), North Korean fantastic films transform the common folk into a magical subject of history and revolution.

However, to see how fantastic films share mythologies with realism through melodrama but still present distinct ideas of sovereignty and subjectivity, it is necessary to look beyond their own purported historical referentiality (i.e., their historical settings) and toward their moods. Tzvetan Todorov’s study of the fantastic in terms of the affect of hesitancy in the face of the supernatural is important for seeing how fantastic North Korean films challenge some of the conventions of the melodramatic mode, including the way melodramatic moods express an uncertain national history and identity. For Todorov, the primary characteristic of the fantastic is the moment when the protagonist, and the reader by way of identification, hesitates in the face of a supernatural phenomenon. Can the supernatural phenomenon be explained according to the laws of reason? This is the nagging question that defines the fantastic for Todorov. He also locates the fantastic in the middle of a continuum between the uncanny and the marvelous, each of which extends indefinitely away from the fantastic, encompassing a myriad of texts. In the broad genre of the pure uncanny, “events are related which may be readily accounted for by the laws of reason, but which are, in one way or another,

incredible, extraordinary, shocking, singular, disturbing or unexpected.”⁵ The uncanny would include many detective fictions, thrillers, and melodramas. In the pure marvelous, on the other hand, “supernatural elements provoke no particular reaction either in the characters or in the implicit reader. It is not an attitude toward the events described which characterizes the marvelous, but the nature of these events.”⁶ In other words, the pure marvelous is not defined by a hesitating reaction to the supernatural; supernatural events are accepted as reasonable within the diegesis. Todorov also discusses in detail two transitory subgenres, the fantastic-uncanny and the fantastic-marvelous, that exist between the fantastic and these other two genres on the continuum. These subgenres “include works that sustain the hesitation characteristic of the true fantastic for a long period, but ultimately end in the marvelous or the uncanny.”⁷ In other words, the supernatural event is ultimately found to have a reasonable explanation (the uncanny) or is found to belong to a larger supernatural world (the marvelous).

Todorov’s taxonomy of genre brings up many issues of border and exception that film and literary theorists have worked through with more attention to the historicity and process of the circuits of text, reception, and criticism, as well as the formal contradictions between the semantic and syntactic elements of genre.⁸ Nevertheless, by locating the defining feature of the genre of the fantastic in the realm of affect—that is, in the moment of hesitation—Todorov’s theory resonates with my discussion of the melodramatic mode as being defined by its mood. The melodramatic moods of suspense, melancholy, and lateness are comparable to Todorov’s hesitation. Of course, hesitation about a supernatural event is not typically the same kind of hesitation that characterizes melodramatic moods. However, crossover exists between the melodramatic mode, with its hybridization of historical referentiality with magical causality and a sense of fatedness, and the fantastic, with its suspension of a clear decision about the rational or supernatural determinacy of events. Furthermore, both melodrama and the fantastic are mediated by primary affects connected to the act of waiting and late arrival, not to mention spectrality and the hauntedness of mundane life by occult forces.

As Immanuel Kim has pointed out, analyses of North Korean politics and media tend to overstate the degree of ideological homogeneity and uniformity, and family comedies and other genres concerned with everyday life are an important contrast to dominant state and party mythologies.⁹ Another possibility opened up by the centering of political myth is to move even further away from the mundane, the rational, and the historical and include supernatural events. Politically speaking, the effects of the inclusion of supernatural events vary. They can be used to validate explicitly the mythology and cosmology of official ideology, to veil a social critique of the regime, or to follow the counterpoint of melodrama and combine these two possibilities. Just as significant as the political and allegorical dimensions of supernatural events in North Korean cinema, however, is how they restructure melodramatic affect—lateness, pathos, sympathy—around the hesitation toward

the supernatural discussed by Todorov. Many North Korean films with supernatural elements draw from folktales and fantasy myths and according to Todorov's strict taxonomy would belong to the fantastic-marvelous because they eventually show the supernatural events to be unremarkable aspects of a fully magical world. However, the turning points of their narratives are often moments of uncertainty when historical referentiality suddenly gives way to the supernatural. What is held in abeyance for the duration of the fantastic film is not necessarily whether there might be a reasonable explanation for the supernatural event but how the fantastic-marvelous story and aesthetic relate to the opening realist frame and therefore to the realist genres that are dominant in the film industry as a whole. Therefore, even when the diegesis is fully supernatural, a question of referentiality, a dialectical relationship with the ostensibly realist genres, remains in play.

Adaptations of folktales began in North Korea with *Tale of Chunhyang* (*Ch'unhyangjŏn*, dir. Yun Yong-gyu, 1958) and *Tale of Simchŏng* (*Simchŏngjŏn*, dir. Pak Pyŏng-su, 1957). That many fantastic films are also period dramas (*sagŭk*) set during the Koryŏ period (AD 918–1392) or the Chosŏn period (1392–1897) adds to the sense of historical distance, allowing the modern and contemporary history of Korea to appear only symbolically or tangentially within the synthesis of supernatural events with representations of peasant rebellion against the feudal system. Suk-Young Kim argues that because it predates the socialist revolution and unassailable state leadership of North Korea, theater and cinema have not focused on figures from the feudal past and have viewed it negatively.¹⁰ Although it is true that the number of period dramas set prior to the twentieth century is lower than in South Korea, it is notable that some of the most popular North Korean films—including *Hong Kildong* (dir. Kim Kil-in, 1986) and *Pulgasari* (dir. Chŏng Kŏn-jo and Shin Sang-ok, 1985)—are based on folktales and use the distant past as a backdrop. To explain the appeal of period dramas based on folktales, one should consider their incorporation of the fantastic and consider the new kinds of reflection on history and reality that the fantastic creates.

Hesitancy toward the question of referentiality is the primary mood of North Korean supernatural films; the fantastic folk of supernatural films are not allegorically equal to the nation-people of *juche* realism. The nation-people emerge organically out of the historical conditions of colonialism and civil war, whereas the fantastic folk tend to battle against mythical versions of feudal lords, the Sino-centric dynastic system, and the early modern Japanese invasion. Even more than revolutionary operas, fantastic films elevate the folk to a supernatural and transhistorical subject, creating a fully mythical version of ethnicity. This separation of the folk struggle and folk origins from a modern notion of historical processes pushes North Korean cinema yet further away from historical materialism and also takes the struggle of the folk out of the project of modern nation-building. If the modern state is haunted by the death of the nation-people, to which it can never be fully adequate, the fantastic folk create a temporal distance from this

modern problem while never fully circumventing it, because of the intractable allegorical connections to the modern historical present. Rendering the folk fantastic does not have a transparently hegemonic or subversive effect, but it changes the framing of the melodramatic allegory so that the historical and political references become more obscure or fungible. Therefore, the hesitation of the fantastic is also a matter of medium and form; it concerns an audience's hesitation in the face of the end of cinematic realism and the beginning of fantastic spectacle. Perhaps the introduction of fantastic elements was a matter of creating more mass appeal for North Korean films domestically and abroad—in other words, a simple consideration of entertainment—but it also had unintended effects.

The fantastic folk have no clearly defined moment of historical origin, such as the Japanese colonial period. On the one hand, this can make the Korean folk appear eternal and transform ethnicity into something purely mythological (and hence potentially powerful ideologically). On the other hand, the fantastic folk's enemies and historical mission are somewhat more ambiguous. Assuming that period dramas are always also about the historical present, the question arises what the allegorical connections might be between the fantastic folk of the film and the real national subject of the historical present. North Korean realism tries to make that connection as obvious as possible by explaining how the struggle against Japanese and US imperialism continues. But for fantastic films set in the ancient past, the heroes are heroes of the common folk, not the Korean nation per se, and the enemies are often class enemies. There is a manifest sense that the eternal struggle of the fantastic folk may not map onto the politics of North Korean nation-building. Hesitation in the face of the supernatural is one affect within the melodramatic mode of these fantastic films that makes the politics of their moods ambiguous and their stories potentially more universal and utopian than national history.¹¹

MAGICAL SOCIALIST REALISM

Tale of Hŭngbu (dir. Kim Sŏng-gyo and Yi Sŏng-hwan, 1963) is based on a p'ansori fiction recorded in writing during the Chosŏn period. There are numerous modern fictional, cinematic, and animated versions of the story, including fiction by major writers of colonial Korea (Ch'ae Man-sik) and South Korea (Ch'oe In-hun) and a recent South Korean film version, *Heung-boo: The Revolutionist* (dir. Cho Kŭn-hyŏn, 2018).¹² Interpretations of the story include historical studies that try to discern from the text the consciousness and imagination of Chosŏn-era people, philosophical studies that read the primary conflict between the brothers Hŭngbu and Nolbu as a Hegelian dialectic, and Marxist studies that anachronistically discuss their class dynamic in terms of capitalist alienation.¹³ The variety of possible readings show the cultural richness of the story in multiple contexts in Korea. The 1963 North Korean film adaptation reflects the context of post-revolutionary

socialist humanism, particularly in its melodramatic contrast between the greed and sloth of the elder brother, Nolbu (T'ae Ŭl-min), and the moral goodness of the humble and kind Hŭngbu (Kim Se-yŏng). The film hybridizes the fantastic narrative of a folktale with a local socialist realism film style. Although structured by the typical moods of melodrama, the moral and political meaning of supernatural events and the affect of hesitation in the face of them directs melodrama's temporality of waiting and late arrival toward the mystery of magical phenomena. Melodrama provides some consistency between realism and the fantastic within the hybrid aesthetic, while the fantastic transforms the allegories of the melodramatic mode even further away from historical referentiality toward a mystical and decontextualized moral occult. As explained above, the political and ideological effects of this hybrid aesthetic are ambiguous.

Studies of magical realism have tended to focus on contemporary literature and the synthesis of fantastic indigenous cultural traditions with the modern novel form.¹⁴ As a film that precedes the practice and label of magical realism in the international literature market, there is no artistic or contrived cultural synthesis to the fantastic narrative and aesthetic of *Tale of Hŭngbu*. The story follows closely the original folktale, which already contains proto-socialist moral ideals expressed through supernatural events. When their father passes away, Nolbu tricks his brother, cutting him out of the inheritance of the family home and property. Hŭngbu lives humbly in poverty while Nolbu is lazy and enjoys living off of his inheritance. Nolbu and his equally pernicious wife appropriate food that Hŭngbu has gathered for his children. Nolbu hits Hŭngbu's daughter when she steps on a paper spirit tablet (*chibang*) that has blown off the table during a *chesa* (ancestor worship) ritual. He refuses to provide any rice or money to Hŭngbu, even to feed his hungry children, forcing the family to migrate to the mountains, clear some land, and become farmers and clothing artisans. Three different socialist realist-style montages represent the joyful labor of the family clearing the land, planting crops, and making clothes. However, the kind Hŭngbu gives his meager profits away to a struggling young girl in the marketplace for her sick mother's medication. Upon his wife's urging, he reluctantly returns to Nolbu again to request assistance, but his brother again refuses to help with rice or a bit of money. He refuses to call him younger brother (*tongsaeng*) and beats him with a stick. Desperate for money, Hŭngbu agrees to receive punishment in place of a criminal, which upsets his wife; however, he refuses to go through with it when he realizes that another man waiting to be punished has received a higher rate from the same man, stating that he does not want that "dirty money."

The scenes of the first half of the film are typical socialist realist depictions of feudal land relations. Because the film is set during the Chosŏn period, the economic system depicted does not have all the same characteristics as the colonial-period system of *My Home Village* or *The Flower Girl*. There is no Japanese army, no colonial prisons, and no collusion between colonial capitalism and the

system of large landowning and tenant farming. However, the costuming, editing, and cinematography—such as a low angle of framing for Nolbu and a high angle of framing for Hŭngbu—present the class relationship similar to the way peasants and landlords are presented in films set during the colonial period. These shots, along with the dramatic and melancholy music, establish an aesthetic analogy between period dramas and socialist realism pertaining to social class and poverty, even if the period settings are different. The class conflict between peasants and landowners, which North Korean realism situates in the national problem of colonization and the class problem of the colonial economic system, is elevated into a nearly eternal moral struggle between humble commoners (*paeksŏng*) dedicated to mutual aid and those greedy for property. Although the meaning of the folktale would seem to be consonant with, or even prefigure, state socialism, the revolutionary party, state, and leadership are absent from the period folktale, opening new possibilities for political signification.

The supernatural events that make up the most memorable part of the folktale begin only in the last third. After setting up a nesting shelf for a swallow on the wall of his family's home, Hŭngbu fights off a snake, saves a baby swallow, and nurses it with his family before returning it to its nest. The swallow survives and can leave the nest. A voice-over describes the winter migration path of the swallow while typical North Korean cinematic images of nature romanticize the landscape. The following spring, the swallow returns and drops a seed from its nest, which Hŭngbu decides to plant, knowing the bird has returned from the south. The first supernatural shots show the massive gourds on the vines that grow from the seed, which are crosscut and contrasted with shots of his brother Nolbu gnawing on expensive meat at home (meat-eating being a common sign of large landownership in mundane films such as *My Home Village* and *The Flower Girl*). The first gourd they harvest is so heavy that Hŭngbu and his wife must cut it in half with a large saw. The scene again invokes socialist realism, despite the artisanal rather than industrial nature of the labor, as lyrical music accompanies the rhythm of their sawing. The couple's diegetic singing and rhythmic swinging, the close-ups of the faces of the onlooking children, and the subtitles that provide the emotive lyrics to the audience create a joyful mood glorifying the labor of the family. Then the giant gourd opens, revealing a nice house sitting in mist (figure 11). Two ghostly women walk down the stairs carrying some treasures. They bow to the family and say in unison that they have brought good fortune from the south. The inside of the house is immaculate and has a very large storehouse of rice and many reams of silk.

Nolbu finds out that his brother has become wealthy and visits his house, where he damages the garden and the paper wall before gazing at the furniture and treasures. After Hŭngbu tells him about the magic swallow, he takes a swallow from its nest and throws it to the ground. He ties a string around the bird and then grows his own giant gourds from its seeds, trying to replicate his brother's success. However, his ploy and his prayers do not pay off. In an analogous scene, he has two servants cut the giant gourd with a saw. Nolbu and his wife watch them and



FIGURE 11. On the left, as Hŭngbu and his family saw open the magic gourd as they sing a folk song from the source texts, whose lyrics appear on screen. On the right, the opened gourd reveals a large house for them.

sway rhythmically, but do none of the work themselves. And instead of treasures, the gourd reveals three *yangban* ghosts and their debt collector, who demand payment. Nolbu decides to saw open another gourd against his wife's advice, but they have to do it themselves because their servants have abandoned them. This time monks appear and encircle Nolbu, castigating him for his greed. The third gourd produces bandits who beat him and steal his possessions. Finally, the fourth gourd that they open unleashes a storm that destroys their house. In midst of these scenes, the film cuts to Hŭngbu as he shares his silk and rice freely with his fellow commoners.

The combination of socialist realism with a folktale creates the conditions for the hesitation that typifies the fantastic. Because the characters belong to the magical and marvelous world of the folktale, they do not express this hesitation in the face of the supernatural or question the possibility of the events that they experience and witness. However, the hesitation could be better described as an ongoing tension between the realist genre of the first two-thirds of the film and the allegorical speculation enabled by the turn to the fantastic. The first part of the film provokes sympathy for the kind and humble Hŭngbu and his family. What does one make of the moment when the first gourd cracks open, smoke fills the *mise-en-scène*, and the large house appears between the two halves of the rind? Because the folktale is widely known, one cannot expect great surprise or hesitation at the initial moment of the supernatural event. What would more likely cause hesitation, contemplation, and cognition in the audience is the question of how the mood of wonder at the supernatural elements of the folktale relate to or are integrated into the dominant conventions of socialist realism. When the two ghosts approach Hŭngbu's family, speak in unison, and hand them trays of goods, how does this magical reward and justice for the goodness and hard work of Hŭngbu's family relate to the film's familiar depictions of labor and social classes? What is the allegorical meaning of the fantastic aesthetic of the supernatural in this synthesis of it with socialist realism?

Part of the answer to these questions lies in the melodramatic mode. As analyzed in *The Newlyweds*, socialist realist films of the 1950s and 1960s presented mythologies of a socialist economy that would provide for those who dedicate themselves to economic development. The melodramatic mode—its temporality of lateness and its mood of melancholic psychological struggle—permeate these fictions and link the films to other genres. It allows the film to present a moral occult of socialist humanism, gender equality, and the nuclear family working against tendencies toward moral iniquity, oppressive paternalism, and the temporal lag of family traditionalism. In the case of *Tale of Hŭngbu*, the dominant mythologies of socialist realism become supernatural myths—Hŭngbu's humility and kindness are rewarded and Nolbu's greed and laziness are punished, both magically. The melodramatic mode, with its synthetic and trans-genre capacities, is able to create analogies between the mythological world of socialist realism and the fantastic world of the folktale, with their shared material and spiritual rewards for goodness and morality. The Korean people are not a historical subject formed through the resistance to colonialism and postwar reconstruction. Rather, they are a transhistorical subject whose origin is the commoners of a mythical and distant past. Likewise, the enemies of the commoners are not the historical enemies of the North Korean revolution, the large landowners who collaborated with the Japanese, but the lure of greed among the commoners themselves (Nolbu is visited by ghosts of the ruling *yangban* class, who demand payment of debts). Instead of economic and social conditions producing a certain outcome through a kind of allegorical causality, a magical nature intervenes to establish a more just social order.

Melodrama's turn to the fantastic re-enchants the good folk, giving them a mythical status supported by this magical nature—the sparrow, the seed, the gourd, and the ghosts. In the passage from mundane mythology to the supernatural, the folk and its heroes are glorified beyond the bounds of real nature and history. According to the story's original folktale philosophy, the tale is about the rewards that nature provides for those who are kind, humble, and good and the destruction by those who are greedy and try to manipulate the natural order for personal gain. On the other hand, the palimpsest of the folktale and the socialist realist aesthetic conveys that being kind, humble, and good entails doing the labor of the folk and sharing the spoils of nature with them. If the role of the fantastic folk is to act in accordance with the supernatural, the connection between this role and the historical role of the national people represented in realist genres remains unclear. Because the magical sparrow provides for Hŭngbu and his family and punishes Nolbu for his greed, the modern governmental role of the party, state, and leader as the representative of the interests of the people is rendered metaphysical through symbolism or set aside completely. The film questions all the philosophical and ideological presuppositions of *juche* thought as a human-centered philosophy, rendering magical what is supposed to derive from man, who is "the master of everything and decides everything."¹⁵ It remains unclear if the supernatural nonhuman elements function as symbols for secular human

actors, or if they represent what exists beyond human will and human action. The setting of the distant past explains the absence of human subjectivity to the modern viewer, without eliminating the persistent question of the relationship between the vague period setting and the contemporary moment. The mood of hesitancy and wonder, punctuated by folk songs, the laboring body, and the emotive expression of naive humility of Hŭngbu's family provide a backdrop for this question of the role of magical thinking in socialist realism. The moods of the fantastic, then, serve an affectively critical function, opening a space within it for a folk that is not yet a nation-people.

LEGENDARY BANDITS

Tale of Hŭngbu stands out as an example of a fantastic film made before the incorporation of elements of East Asian commercial cinema for the purposes of making North Korean cinema more entertaining to domestic and international audiences.¹⁶ As discussed in the previous chapter, North Korean cinema was already very international in 1963. However, filmmaking and film criticism were still structured fundamentally by the dichotomy between capitalist commercial cinema and socialist realism's political mobilization and articulation of ideological perspectives on national historical experience. As discussed by Steven Chung, by the 1980s the North Korean film industry was trying to compete with the spectacles of world commercial cinema from Hollywood to Hong Kong.¹⁷ The rest of this chapter traces the developments of the fantastic aesthetic and its representation of the folk beyond the era of socialist realism and into this period of incorporating capitalist commercial cinema. *Rim Kkŏk-jŏng* (1986–1993) and *Hong Kildong* (1986) also represent the commoners of the feudal, pre-national past, but because their supernatural martial arts spectacles create a mood of action and suspense that clashes with realism, they appear more aware of the conventionality, rather than referentiality, of realist films. Whereas the fantastic aesthetic of *Tale of Hŭngbu* engages with socialist realism and economic development, the emergence of the supernatural in these later films was a response to the exhaustion of *juche* realism of the 1970s and its repetition of the origin story of North Korean national subjectivity and leadership in partisan resistance to Japanese colonial rule. The two titular heroes are bandits and warriors of the distant past who battle the Japanese and the ruling *yangban* class, respectively, using their supernatural strength and martial abilities. In the context of the 1980s, the films were tasked with reinvigorating the dominant realist depiction of anticolonial revolution, and the heroes became representatives of the fantastic folk. These characters were therefore dialectically related to the real historical heroes of the North Korean revolution: Kim Il Sung and his partisan compatriots.

Although a great deal of literature of the 1970s tended to mythologize the biography of Kim Il Sung, it is telling that his image is absent from the cinematic classics of the period. There is a tendency for the cinematic image, no matter how

spectacular, to render the mythological mundane. Furthermore, Kim Il Sung seems to have been unwilling to allow actors to play the film versions of himself, the way that Mikheil Gelovani and Aleksei Dikiy portrayed Stalin in Soviet films. The mythical depiction of heroism in *Rim Kkŏk-jŏng* and *Hong Kildong* is able to occupy a space opened by the lack of explicitly biographical cinematic mythologies about the ultimate hero of the national revolution. On the other hand, these characters belong to the feudal past and therefore would not threaten the mystique of the leader, which is perhaps heightened by the absence of his image and his constant presence in dialogue and song more than it would be by a realistic performance.¹⁸ Just as *Tale of Hŭngbu* positions him between the fantastic realm of a supernatural nature that rewards goodness among the folk and the socialist humanist idealization of labor and mutual aid, *Rim Kkŏk-jŏng* and *Hong Kildong* are both inside and outside history. This positioning affects how the melodramatic narrative plays out in the films. They are fantastic heroes of the folk, but they are simultaneously restricted by a feudal class system that prevents the formation of any modern sense of national identity. As in *The Tale of Hŭngbu*, the folk remain commoners (*paeksŏng*) who can only suggest the future formation of a national people. At the same time, the melodramatic struggle between commoners and noblemen (*yangban*) can take on utopian desires and meaning that do not belong directly to the North Korean master narrative of state formation and are therefore more open to various affects and allegorical readings.

Based on a colonial-period novel by Hong Myŏng-hŭi, *Rim Kkŏk-jŏng* is fantastic in a limited sense.¹⁹ Hong was a socialist writer and wrote the novel as a historical novel meant to dramatize the exploits of a class hero in part to transform him into a precursor to the modern socialist movement. The story of the novel and the film is set in a realistic version of the Chosŏn period and follows Rim, a butcher who experiences class exploitation before joining and then leading a band of robbers against the noblemen. Although overlaid with a modern socialist message about global revolution, the narrative presentation of the economic and political reasons for the robberies and the revolt is mostly a realist attempt at historical accuracy. An authoritative voice-over at the end of each episode also marks the events of the story as historical.

Because of the pretension to realism in the novelistic story, many of the supernatural events of the film version are an effect of the visual and sonic aspects of the cinematic medium. By the 1980s, the cinema of attraction had returned to North Korean film in the form of special effects and spectacle.²⁰ Most of the supernatural events of the film are impossible moments of martial arts action in which a bandit throws an evil nobleman a long distance or exaggerated sound effects contravene natural sound. Perhaps these movements would be categorized not as supernatural events in Todorov's sense but as spectacular exaggerations in an otherwise mundane period drama. However, they belong to a depiction of a hero whose strength and abilities lie somewhere between the human and the superhuman. In episode

one, Rim (Ch'oe Ch'ang-su) and his brothers hunt birds with preternatural archery and rock-throwing skills. Later, a commoner is smashing open some walnuts using all his strength and then offers to do the same for Rim. However, Rim says it is unnecessary and takes some walnuts in his hand and cracks them open with a couple fingers. A close-up of another commoner's face captures a look of hesitation watching such seemingly supernatural strength. They defeat large numbers of Japanese invaders at the beginning of the episode and in later episodes defeat the noblemen's soldiers, tossing them great distances and fighting off their weapons with their bare hands. Much of the choreography and filming of the action borrows from East Asian martial arts films, particularly the Chinese *wuxia* genre, which frequently includes elements of the fantastic.

Despite its spectacular action and violence, *Rim Kkŏk-jŏng* retains the melodramatic pathos and moods of mundane melodrama. Along the lines of *The Flower Girl* and *Sea of Blood*, the commoners are led to revolution both by the immiseration and expropriation of the noblemen, the wounding or death of family members, or the protection of the innocence of women. For example, Rim's friend Kwak O-ju joins the bandits soon after the murder of his wife by a nobleman's son. At first, the governor gives Rim special permission to farm because of his exploits as a warrior against the Japanese invasion of the Cholla province in 1555, including beheading the leader. However, he is ostracized by the nobility once he reveals his identity as a butcher, and then the noblemen try to expropriate the villagers' crops. After he uses his superhuman strength to fight off the noblemen and their soldiers, the magistrate detains Rim, his father, and his sister. Rim is initially morally resistant to the activity of the bandits. However, the laughing evil magistrate orders the execution of his father and sister in front of him, and he narrowly escapes with the help of the villagers. He then dedicates himself fully to leading them, and his brothers join as well.

The scene of his brother Talsok's death at the conclusion of episode four is another example of how the film incorporates melodrama. At the climax of the multipart story, Talsok's death at the hands of noblemen's soldiers is depicted with the heightened weeping, sorrow, and pathos that appear in *juche* realist films. It is then that Rim declares in a speech to the bandits, "We will get our revenge a thousandfold" and "We should prepare for the big battle to cleanse the world of all *yangban* blood." As the episode ends, the voice-over describes the affective origins of the revolution: "The sorrow over Talsok's death has turned into a monstrous vengeance. All their battles were the revenge of the common people, and a dreadful vengeance toward which noblemen were too afraid to lift a finger." Close-ups, quick zooms, whip pans, and music give a melodramatic expressivity to these scenes of violence and mourning, mimicking the moods of melodrama while adding the movement and sound of martial arts action (figure 12).

Through the melodramatic mode and moods, the film creates analogies with its mundane counterparts, with which it has a dialectical relationship. Although its



FIGURE 12. In *Rim Kkŏkjŏng, Part I* (1986), the folk hero, after defeating a horde of soldiers with his superhuman strength, prepares for his mortal battle with the head nobleman.

historical references are limited to the Chosŏn period, multiple events in the film inspire comparison with the history of the Manchuria-based national liberation movement of the 1930s, the biography of Kim Il Sung, and the formation of the North Korean partisan state under conditions of the Cold War. After becoming a leader of the bandits, Rim creates a kind of guerrilla base in Yangju, scenes of which are reminiscent, besides the costuming, of rural partisan outposts in juche realist films. When Rim goes undercover as a nobleman in Seoul, there are echoes of Cold War espionage and the mapping of class conflict onto the geography of the two Koreas. The battle against the noblemen, including ecstatic scenes of ransacking their homes and expropriating their property and lands, are similar in style and action to the realist melodramas about peasant revolts against colonial-period landowners. Although not a modern political party, the band of robbers gradually becomes more than criminals, as Rim encourages a political consciousness beyond robbery, and their moral virtue is clarified in contrast to the evil noblemen. Finally, there is the personality of Rim himself. The bandits call him admiral or boss (*taejang*), a term used only occasionally for Kim Il Sung, who typically receives the grander honorific of general (*changgun*); however, the intentional comparison is obvious. Rim displays heroic qualities of martial prowess and ideological purity, the latter expressed through an absolute compassion for the commoners and enmity for the noblemen. The role Rim plays as the affective center of the melodramatic political conflict resonates with the personality cult of Kim Il Sung, even if the leader very rarely appears on screen as a character.

The fantastic aesthetic and the hesitation that it causes—particularly in the face of the question of whether Rim is a historical or supernatural being—reveal more explicitly the ethical and mythic structures underpinning realist genres. It takes the mythology of heroism, normally articulated through mundane melodrama, and renders it magical. As with magical socialist realism, the political and ideological effects are ambiguous. The film fits with, and even elevates into the realm of the eternal and supernatural, the representation of class struggle against landowners and noblemen, whether of the feudal or the colonial period. However, the historical setting means that the fantastic folk cannot be shown to develop into the national people represented by a virtuous socialist state. Considering the timeline of Korean history, the commoners must necessarily fail in their mission to eradicate the blood of noblemen from the world.²¹ Representing the folk through an allegorical and fantastic period drama in some ways highlights the temporal distance between the modern national people and the collective origins they are typically given. Bringing the people out of the realm of modern history and into folkloric history and reimagining them as commoners (*paeksöng*) lead to the generalization of their revolutionary spirit. Their class revolt against the noblemen is not a just a feudal peasant uprising; it takes on the meaning of a more global levelling. Allegorically speaking, this opens up the interpretive question of whether their revolution is consonant with North Korean national liberation, based in colonial politics and nationalism, or if it represents another mode of revolution. In historical and period dramas, these dialectical relationships with realist genres and with the distant historical past reflect a fundamental ambiguity and spectrality of the modern state and the degree to which it can adequately stand in for the nation-people that it governs.

According to Georg Lukács, it is the middle-of-the-road characters of historical novels who are best able to illuminate the contemporary meaning of the historical past—those characters who do not have strong allegiances from the outset but move between parties in a conflict.²² Although both *Rim Kkök-jöng* and *Hong Kildong* eventually take a clear political side, they begin on the middle way. Rim first fights for the ruling class in order to repel the Japanese invasion, and it takes discrimination, exploitation, and the execution of his family members before Rim fully commits to the bandits. Rim, the son of a butcher, is born into class discrimination. On the other hand, Hong Kildong, a literary character based in part on the historical figure of Rim Kkök-jöng, is organically in the middle, because he is the son of a nobleman and a concubine of low birth. Just as Rim's in-betweenness exposes multiple viewpoints and shows how ideology and political repression work in the maintenance of the political system, Hong Kildong moves from an early life among the nobility to training in the magic arts with an elder master and combatting bandits, to eventually leading those very bandits, along with the commoners, against a foreign invasion of Japanese ninjas. He is half noble by birth but also has a familial and political affiliation with the commoners, which allows him to become a hero with both learning and political authenticity.

In the North Korean film version, Kildong's movement between various classes ends with him becoming a protosocialist and protonationalist hero; however, the king refuses to reward Kildong for his victory over the Japanese invasion by approving his marriage to his love interest, Yŏnhwa, who is of purely noble birth. He is forced to escape with her, the bandits, and the commoner soldiers, sailing out on a ship to "find a land where all can enjoy equal rights and live harmoniously free from poverty," according to the final voice-over. As a middle-of-the-road hero, Kildong is able to reveal various social contradictions embedded in the historical representation of the Chosŏn period. His birth itself is a transgression against social class, suggesting the possibility of a world without it. His ostracization from the nobility allows him to train his skill and magic, through which he is able to contribute to the Korean national mission of resisting Japanese invasion. However, the intractability of class society under the feudal system leads him to seek a more ideal and utopian future, not so subtly projecting the future DPRK as the eventual leveler of social hierarchies and liberator of the commoners from poverty. The full social complexity of the contradiction between the nationalist narrative of nearly eternal anti-Japanese resistance and internal class conflicts would not be explored without Kildong's middle-of-the-road heroism.

The story of *Hong Kildong* is based on a Chosŏn-period novel whose authorship is unknown and the matter of some controversy.²³ Of course, neither the novel nor the film is historical fiction. Despite aspects of realism in both the novel and the North Korean film, the fantastic events and action are central. The film shares the details of Hong Kildong's birth and early life with the novel, but then diverges significantly, particularly in its depictions of Kildong's resistance to an invading band of Japanese ninjas, the Black Corps. There are so many versions of the Hong Kildong story that to facilitate comparison and maintain brevity, I will limit myself to the plot of the film. The circumstances of the births and social class of Rim and Kildong are different, but the effect is similar: Rim being a butcher and Kildong being the illegitimate son of a nobleman prevent each of them from reaping the rewards for their service in repelling a Japanese invasion. While this betrayal by the noblemen happens at the beginning of *Rim Kkŏk-jŏng*, it happens at the very end of *Hong Kildong*. Therefore, Rim turns gradually to combatting the noblemen in a class war after his resistance to a Japanese invasion in the opening scene. However, even though the legal wife of his father plots successfully to drive him and his mother out of the family and Yŏnhwa's family discriminates against him, Kildong (Ri Yŏng-ho) does not fully gain class consciousness until the end, after defeating the invading band of Japanese, when the king refuses to grant his marriage to Yŏnhwa.

Although each story ends up depicting class conflict with the noblemen and the feudal system, the difference between the two stories is important. One shows the veteran of a war with a foreign power refocusing his enmity toward an internal class enemy. The other is more overtly nationalist and uses stereotypes of the enemy Japanese—they are a sneaky army of ninjas infiltrating the Korean national

space; they are depicted as fascistic and intolerant of failure when one corps leader is executed for losing a battle; the leaders smile wickedly, and their evil cunning is accentuated by multiple zooms to close-ups, and so on. While the majority of *Rim Kkök-jöng* focuses on the evils of the noblemen, *Hong Kildong* is more concerned with defending the nation prior to the final scene when he, Yönhwa, and the bandits sail away in search of a more just and equal society. These two plot lines show how the modern adaptations transform the meaning of the folktales in order to present different versions of the fantastic folk, but that even in an obviously nationalist period drama such as *Hong Kildong*, the politics of the folk cannot be fully contained within the framework of the nation-state and nation building.

Much of the joyful and entertaining mood of the film derives from its *wuxia*-style magical martial arts sequences, as well as Kildong's iconic purple scarf, the fantasy-style costuming, and the outrageous sound effects. Unlike the novel, the fantastic sequences begin rather early in the film. Like Rim, Kildong's alliance with the bandits is gradual. He first encounters them as a young boy migrating with his mother after their ostracization from his father's home. He tries to defend himself and his mother from the bandits' theft, kidnapping, and sexual violence, but needs the aid of a magical "grandfather" who saves them. After seeing the old man easily fight off and freeze the enemies, Kildong requests to train with him. In an archetypal journey for a hero, the old man trains him in the mountains, teaching him both martial arts and magic. Kildong meets the bandits again and they ask him to join them, but he refuses and kills one of them. After the old man refuses to train Kildong further because he has become distracted by his love for Yönhwa, he leaves the mountains and returns home. Eventually, Kildong makes amends with the bandits, even the brother of the man he killed, as they join together to resist the Japanese invaders and eventually escape together on the ship.

Although clearly a nationalist and romantic melodrama—Korea struggles with Japan and Kildong deals with unrequited love—the fantastic fight sequences of *Hong Kildong* in many ways exceed melodramatic affect. Although an action film as well, much of the violence in *Rim Kkök-jöng* remains tied to mundane melodramas, particularly the many scenes of class violence against the families of Rim and the other bandits. The use of stop action to capture multiple ninja stars hitting trees (or in one scene Kildong's body); the repetitive use of zoom shots to capture the resolute or wry facial expressions of combatants; and the magical jumping, climbing, and use of spells—the affective forms of such shots and sequences are closer to the joy of martial arts spectacle and slapstick comedy. The Japanese villains have a cartoonish quality that at once racializes them and removes them from any historical context. The fantastic in *Rim Kkök-jöng* inspires hesitation, because it is unclear if Rim is a historical or supernatural being, if he is a folk hero fully of the past or a precursor to Kim Il Sung. *Hong Kildong* tends more toward the marvelous, because the supernatural events are a given and the story is more detached from any realist historical reference. It is certainly the closest that North

Korean melodramatic film has gotten to fantastic entertainment spectacle. This is an expression of the pressure in the 1980s to move beyond the aesthetic of realism. However, it is also a sign of the difficulty of containing the Hong Kildong story within the framework of a modern nationalist film culture.

The fantastic folk and the hero who appear in the Chosŏn-period story remain caught between a variety of political statuses as the story is adapted to North Korean political representation. For example, the typical North Korean narrative shows the utopian North Korean state emerging out of the struggle against Japanese colonialism; however, for both legendary bandits, Rim and Kildong, the struggle against the Japanese leads them to (a) an apocalyptic class war against the noblemen and (b) sailing away from Korea to find a society with equality and justice. In the very least, the hybridization of melodrama with the fantastic and with period drama disrupts the typical rhythm and causality of the unfolding of national and class consciousness.

THE MONSTROUS GAZE

The only fantasy film more well-known outside of North Korea than Hong Kildong is *Pulgasari*, a reptilian monster film often compared to the Godzilla franchise (figure 13). Adding to the mystique of the film, as well as the whole of 1980s North Korean film industry, is the story of Kim Jong Il supposedly ordering the kidnapping of actress Ch'oe Ŭn-hŭi, followed by her ex-husband, the director Shin Sang-ok. Without repeating the details of this affair, it suffices to state that the incorporation of the fantastic into 1980s North Korean films reflect Shin's artistic influence, as well as the goal of Kim Jong Il and the state to bring the film industry more in line with international standards. At the same time, fantasy was not the only recourse, as Shin and Ch'oe also made a number of realist films, including some based on the recuperated texts of colonial-period proletarian literature writers.²⁴ Nonetheless, of all the films Shin directed or produced in North Korea, *Pulgasari*, which he left incomplete when he returned to South Korea in 1985, has been subjected to the most speculation concerning its political message and its potential criticisms of the North Korean state.

Pulgasari is set during the twelfth-century peasant rebellions against the Confucian court. However, the image of the monster Pulgasari is based in part on Godzilla and features the veteran of Japanese monster films, Satsuma Kenpachirō, as the rubber-suit actor. The narrative of oppression and peasant revolution certainly fits the typical themes of North Korean melodramatic films. A father imprisoned for making metal tools for the peasant rebels constructs a Golem-like figurine out of boiled rice. When the daughter spills her blood on it, the figurine gradually grows into a monster that helps the peasants defeat the landed gentry. The narrative takes another turn, however, when the monster's insatiable and automatic need to accumulate metal endangers the very peasants he has helped to liberate, and the daughter, Ami (Chang Sŏn-hŭi), must sacrifice herself to destroy him.



FIGURE 13. Having grown enormous from being fed iron by the commoners, the revolutionary monster Pulgasari destroys the palace of the king.

The film is easily read as a thinly veiled allegory for either capitalism or the Korean Workers' Party, which both followed a similar trajectory from liberation to accumulation. Although *Pulgasari* probably avoided censorship because of its antifeudal themes and the conceivability that the monster represents the contradictions of the capitalist stage of development, it is difficult not to read the film's primary allegorical-historical reference as the Korean Workers' Party and the North Korean state socialist system, particularly in its passage from liberation in the 1940s to accumulation in the subsequent decades.

Pulgasari parodies the conventions of subject realism in both its narrative and its form. It takes up the science fiction theme of a monster that acts unconsciously and is therefore dangerous despite himself. Pulgasari emerges among the people and becomes a sublime physical force of revolution, but then unwittingly becomes the agent of accumulation endangering the lives of the peasants. This narrative works against the typical causality and referentiality of a production of subject realism in which peasant suffering, party-led revolt, and the smooth post-revolutionary construction of socialism are presented as the entirely conscious historical activity of the national subject. Considering the humanism of *juche* thought, which proclaims that man is the master of everything, the film's use of an unwitting science fiction monster in the narrative role of the revolutionary subject slyly parodies the master narrative of history as a process of a totalizing human consciousness

and highlights how the human sovereignty of the party or leader can never fully govern historical and natural processes.

Another way *Pulgasari* parodies realist conventions is through the reiteration and inversion of the socialist realist gaze.²⁵ In the final scene of *The Fall of Berlin* (dir. Mikheil Chiaureli, 1950), Stalin steps from the airplane and shots of the adoring stares of the Soviet soldiers and citizens visually articulate the leader as the subjective center not only of a popular personality cult but also the entirety of geopolitical history. Bazin discussed this centrality of Stalin in the socialist realist aesthetic as a mummified image of history and the subject of history.²⁶ Although Kim Il Sung rarely appears in North Korean films, characters often look toward the camera with the same kind of adoration and emotional attachment for the leader in countless North Korean films (often when a character is conveying a message from the invisible leader). After the villagers' political victory against the king, the camera takes the perspective of the monster's gaze rather than the leader, filming the villagers looking up at the monster, offering him their metal tools and lamenting his appetite. This analogy created formally between the monster and the leader is possible only in film, and it allows the film to throw into question the version of causality and referentiality in which the sovereign leader is shown to govern the trajectory of Universal History. *Pulgasari* takes the place of the human sovereign of subject realism and prepares to consume the metal tools that the peasants have gathered for him.

The end of *Pulgasari* resolves these cognitive tensions, but the allegorical meaning of the monster is not necessarily an image of the Great Leader or the Korean Workers' Party in a rubber suit. Before she sacrifices herself to kill the monster and save the village, Ami pleads to it, "Please do not keep eating iron, or someday we humans will have to use you to take over other countries." At this point, *Pulgasari* takes on a much more ecological and materialist connotation, differing both from a nation-centered parody of subject realism. In this scene, the allegory of accumulation is expanded, so that the monster no longer seems to refer to the North Korean state as such but to the process of enclosure and accumulation endemic to modernity. Ami speaks of a perpetual war between humans if the monster, which once embodied the will of the national people, forces the people to turn against other nations. This discussion about the inherent imperialism of the state, or perhaps the imperialism of the accumulative process in capitalist modernity, re-poses the question of historical referentiality in a much more ambiguous way. *Pulgasari* presents Ami's sacrifice as a way to preserve the revolution by extinguishing its sovereign power and its unconscious and monstrous turn to accumulation.

The history of fantastic films in North Korea carries with it these alternative possibilities for political allegory, because they move away enough from realism and the modern master narrative of the North Korean nation-state to create new constellations of supernatural signs whose historical meaning cannot be fully derived from an analysis of the diegesis. In this way, the fantastic can reinvigorate

the critical possibilities of the melodramatic mode, because it does not draw direct lines between the affects of suffering and the signs of the redeemers of that suffering: the nation-people, the party, and the state. The fantastic folk precede the nation-people historically and also exceed the history to which the nation-people belong. Therefore, the possibility remains that they belong to a different moral occult, a different locus of truth, perhaps one that extends beyond the boundaries of the DPRK. If the purpose of many North Korean film melodramas is to create as clear a conflation as possible between class interests and national interests within the war between colonialism and anticolonial nationalism, the fantastic folk might be a transnational subject. As the bandits sail away at the end of *Hong Kildong*, or Ami warns against the inherent collusion between accumulation and the nation form in *Pulgasari*, other kinds of utopian desire express other possibilities for the melodramatization of the political.

Because these films borrow from the spectacles of capitalist commercial cinema, these alternative utopian desires are alienated and reified through the commodity form. Although still within the realm of the melodramatic mode, they use rapid camera movement, action, and shorter shot lengths to create a mood of action and suspense in which the supernatural exists in expanded human abilities, not as a kind of magical nature outside human will. Melodrama is still present in the pathos of these heroes and in the primary moral conflict, but the use of such moods of entertainment cinema introduces new embodied subjectivities expressive of fantastic identities beyond the Korean nation-people. While commodified and reified in spectacle, these magical excesses of subjectivity no doubt provoked affects in their audiences beyond the limited scope of state politics.