

## Melodrama and Art Cinema

In 1959, in the inaugural issue of the journal *Film Art*, Yi Yöng-il, the most prominent South Korean film critic of the Cold War era, drew from Enlightenment ideas of aesthetics and subjectivity in stating the task of a future Korean national cinema:

The contemporary trend in film is to bring about an indomitable self-formation for the sake of the freedom of spirit and aesthetic liberation, which are the traditional tasks of art, while also aligning film with all the desires and criticisms of people who live with today's social characteristics and historical realities.<sup>1</sup>

Yi was drawn to Italian neorealism and the French New Wave, and in founding the journal *Film Art* he sought to contribute to the elevation of the mass medium of film to the status of an art form while maintaining its alignment with popular tastes, ideas, and experiences. Throughout the golden age of South Korean film (1953–1970), he would argue for the need to develop Korean national cinema through an avant-garde movement that would push the conventional and aesthetic boundaries established by imported commercial productions. By “freedom of spirit and aesthetic liberation,” he was imagining a vanguard of auteurs freely expressing the spirit of the times through a film aesthetic unrestricted by state censorship and unfettered by profit motive.

One year before the April Uprising and the deposing of President Syngman Rhee, a cinema liberated from censorship was certainly one concern. But this call for the aesthetic liberation *of* cinema was grammatically ambiguous and also connoted an aesthetic liberation *through* cinema. In 1950s South Korea, the term *haebang* (liberation) referred to much more than the liberalization of cultural production. The word *liberation* reverberated with the cataclysmic historical period of decolonization and immediate entrance into Cold War bifurcations that characterized the Global South's experiences of the mid-twentieth century. Therefore, even if Yi Yöng-il primarily aimed to secure for cinema the status of autonomous art and for South Korean films to accede to the level of European arthouse

cinema, his statement also suggested “freedom of spirit and aesthetic liberation” as a response to the problem of political liberation. Auteurs should be empowered with a freedom of spirit to create films with a liberated aesthetic but also films that would in turn contribute to the political liberation of the mass audience by way of the aesthetic. For Yi, this aesthetic liberation of the audience was to occur somewhat beyond the machinations of the state, in the sphere of national culture and the national cinema. And the audiences themselves were prepared for this liberation, because, as Yi stated, “They are beings who are drawn to satisfaction and sympathy about all the experiences of life and about aesthetic imagination, emotion, and thought. Though they may exult and be wild with joy when they view a superb work, they show justifiable hatred and criticism toward inferior works.”<sup>2</sup> Yi imagined an arthouse Korean national cinema that would enter the global sphere of film art while also contributing to aesthetic education and enabling new forms of subjectivity among Korean film artists and their sophisticated popular audiences.

Also in 1959, director Yu Hyun-mok was asked about film’s position between art and popular mass culture, a position that forces even experimental films to include commodified melodramatic elements. This inclusion of the melodramatic mode does not preclude the possibility of a film being an artwork. Echoing statements of the North Korean critics, he was interested in transforming film into a total work of art:

Question: How do you see the distinction between melodrama and art cinema?

Answer: If we speak of popular audiences, they include many fans who lack consciousness. Those works that entice these viewers and sufficiently arrange the necessary suspenseful scenes or bittersweet scenes, and have a story that is precious, and also satisfy their amusement by inserting dreams and hopes that are difficult to find in reality—this we view as melodrama. Therefore, it is a method of dramaturgy for the sake of the film’s value as a commodity, and as films that have many characteristics of mass communication, that is an inevitability I cannot lament.

That said, art films do not belong to aristocratic art. They only reject the complacency of pandering and have a difference of method whereby they prioritize the resonance and value consciousness that the pure spirit of the author supplies to the popular masses.<sup>3</sup>

On the one hand, Yu is critical of melodrama as the result of the pressure that commodification puts on the content of scenes. However, he understands that film is a mass art form and that mass communication unavoidably entails commodification and convention. Earlier in the interview, when asked what sort of film he would make if no conditions were in place, he answers “an avant-garde film.” His ideal avant-garde film would create a multisensory experience of utopia (or simply “no place”), one distinct from the false hopes and dreams that he associates with melodrama and commodification. He came closest to this ideal

with *The Empty Dream*, discussed below. Like Yi Yŏng-il, Yu was interested in developing an art cinema in South Korea, but he understood that film is a mass cultural form and that therefore it would always be conditioned by some sort of commercial pressure. Like nearly every prominent director of the North and the South during the Cold War era, therefore, Yu did not subtract melodrama from his films. He rather used it artistically in order to introduce self-consciously the very problems of which melodrama was one symptom: commodification, alienation, and embodied suffering.

As the above discussions of art cinema in 1959 suggest, the idea of cinema as both a fine art and a mass culture—important to the French New Wave—began in South Korea almost contemporaneously and was part of the global distribution of art films and film criticism. Therefore, leading up to the April Uprising and the brief and democratic Second Republic (1960–61), intellectuals and filmmakers were imagining art cinema's role in democracy. In addition to the loosening of restrictions on film content, the energy surrounding “aesthetic liberation”—which linked freedom in the arts to political democratization—is a significant reason why the year 1960–61 stands out as one of the most important in South Korean film history. However, as Charles Kim has detailed in relation to the radical youth of the April Uprising, after the Park Chung Hee coup in 1961, the state managed to channel much of the uprising's intellectual energy into state-centered national development projects or reform-minded civil society working under increasing constraints.<sup>4</sup> In her reading of Kim Su-yong's *Mist* (1967) and art cinema under dictatorship, Chung-kang Kim historicizes the influence of European art cinema on South Korean film during the Park Chung Hee era (1961–1979), showing that art cinema did not entail unambiguous freedom or liberation.<sup>5</sup> The state rather appropriated the idea of aesthetic liberation, instituting the Motion Picture Law of 1962 to protect the economy of South Korean film production and later supporting the production of “high quality films” for film festival exportation (including literary, anticommunist, and enlightenment films).<sup>6</sup> In watching 1960s South Korean dramatic films, one often senses the threefold pressure of the popularity and marketability of melodrama, the desire for art cinema auteurship, and state demands concerning the characteristics of quality art films.

Under an anticommunist dictatorship and Cold War US military occupation, ideas and practices of art cinema became involved in what Fredric Jameson terms “the ideology of modernism.”<sup>7</sup> Although the canon of modernism begins with the European avant-garde, Jameson reveals how the process of canonization itself was a postwar American enterprise that sought to differentiate high art from politically engaged art (specifically the socialist realism on the other side of the Cold War). Characterizations of aesthetic modernism in postwar US criticism, especially that of Clement Greenberg, emphasized modernism's self-reflexivity vis-à-vis form and medium.<sup>8</sup> Jameson argues that Greenberg's definition of modernism

in terms of self-reflexivity about form and medium was central to the ideology of modernism, which institutionalized a Kantian view of aesthetic form with an emphasis on fine visual art (e.g., Abstract Expressionism).<sup>9</sup> The strong interest and marketability of European art cinema in the American context, particularly in the 1950s and 1960s, belonged to the ideology of modernism, melding fine art with bourgeois mass culture and elevating cinema to an art form capable of self-reflexivity about form and medium and self-consciousness about its address to the spectator.<sup>10</sup>

Despite the stereotype that melodrama lacks self-reflexivity and brings social symptoms to the surface in a more or less unconscious manner, throughout 1960s South Korean melodramatic cinema, we find numerous examples of self-reflexivity about film form, reflections on the limits of representation, high degrees of abstraction, an attention to psychological complexity, distended or fragmented temporalities, and other qualities normally associated with the formal experiments of aesthetic modernism. South Korean films that straddle the line between melodrama and art cinema, the way Yu imagined was necessary under his circumstances, belong at once to the ethos of experimentation in aesthetic modernism and the popular engagement of melodramatic scenarios and pathos. At least in discrete scenes, these films are modernist melodramas concerned with self-reflexivity about form, the truth of subjective alienation, and the limits of realist representation. Although modernist melodrama may seem like a contradiction in terms, it indicates how the melodramatic mode worked as a point of departure into aesthetic experimentation. Film melodrama is not inherently lacking in self-reflexivity because of its expressivity and sentimentality but often exhibits self-reflexivity about visibility and mimesis that is specific to the cinematic medium. The notion of modernist melodrama is not an attempt to elevate the melodramas of this era to a higher art form. Nor is the point to contrast the vernacular modernism of melodramatic cinema to the ideal of high aesthetic modernism; it is rather to read the melodramatic mode and art cinema as inextricable, particularly in the context of Cold War South Korea.<sup>11</sup>

The hybridization of melodrama and art cinema, including art cinema's critiques of melodrama, is a broad-ranging topic that would have to include discussions of countless auteurs of global cinema, including Douglas Sirk, Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Ozu Yasujiro, Chantal Akerman, and many, many others. The purpose of this chapter is necessarily much more limited and concerns how art cinema techniques and forms of self-reflexivity appeared within the melodramatic mode of 1960s South Korean films, impacting how the art moods of the films establish a backdrop for the provocation and coding of human affects into emotions. The moods of art films, or art-cinematic moments in realist melodramas, often explicitly disrupt and question the apparatus of identification, revealing a gap between the affects of spectatorship and their coding by the moral occult. Although the idea of art cinema certainly belonged to the ideology of modernism and even

the development projects of state dictatorship, self-reflexivity about representation combined with the moods of melodrama could create politically critical effects that questioned the violence of the state apparatus and dominant social mores in the context of Cold War neocolonialism. By mimicking, re-creating, and transforming art cinema, melodramatic films did not achieve Yi Yŏng-il's enlightenment ideal of aesthetic liberation; rather, they interrogated their own conditions of production and lingered more consciously in the gap between the historical experiences of their audiences and their cinematic representation.

There are many possible entry points for a discussion of modernism in South Korean film melodramas, but I will narrow the focus to aesthetic forms that self-consciously disrupt the transparent personalization of melodramatic affect. These forms are perceptible in the same register as the melodramatic mode's typical contrapuntal moods and countervailing discourses, but they betray a higher degree of experimentation, self-consciousness, and irony. These qualities inhere most saliently in the *mise-en-scène* in both cinematic space and in attendant temporal breaks from the typical moralistic causalities of melodrama.

The first aesthetic form pertains to conspicuous scenes in *Aimless Bullet* and *Homebound* (dir. Lee Man-hee, 1967), and many other uses of offscreen space in the 1950s and 1960s. Through the invocation of spaces that remain off screen, these scenes create a formal and aesthetic tension between the visible and the invisible and thereby provoke conscious reflection on the limits of melodramatic representation. The next aesthetic forms are dreamworld and mist. Both melodramas with surrealist elements, *The Empty Dream* (dir. Yu Hyun-mok, 1965) explores the dream logic of cinema, and *Mist* (dir. Kim Su-yong, 1967) incorporates mist as part of the landscape, as internal to the mind, and as mediation between interiority and exteriority. Each film blurs the edges of perspective and reality, intervening into the personalization of affect and the articulation of ideology in melodramatic mimesis. The final aesthetic form is the uncanny, exemplified best by Kim Ki-young's *The Housemaid*, which takes the familiarity and hominess of the middle-class household and, by exaggerating the negativity of melodrama, renders it fearful and frightening. Kim's ironic and satirical intensification of melodrama into horror belongs to the aesthetics of Freud's uncanny and engages with the unconscious beyond the pathos and expressivity of a typical melodrama. By reflecting self-consciously upon the desires and gendered violence at the foundations of the melodramatic mode, it gives visual and sonic form to the fantasy structures and phobias that remain occluded in a more typical melodrama, despite the mode's pretension to reveal everything. Self-consciously pointing out the limits of the camera's perspective, or the arbitrariness of the framing of human characters and consciousness, or the way that the moral occult is connected to the unconscious through repression are limitations on the representation and personalization of affect within a melodramatic mode that purports to bring hidden truths to the surface through emotive expression.

## THE INVISIBLE

In a self-conscious scene in *Aimless Bullet*, the younger brother in the family, Yŏnggho, encounters the film industry. Yŏnggho's friend Miri surprises him with news that she has found him a job at a film company, despite the chronic unemployment and postwar destitution described realistically in the first segment. On the day of the interview, he is very happy, because he has reunited with Sŏrhŭi, a nurse who took care of him during the war. The assistant director tells Yŏnggho that he is perfect for one of the characters in their new film, a serviceman who is wounded in the stomach and has a personality similar to his own. In the film, a nurse will bring Yŏnggho's character back to health, just as Sŏrhŭi once had done for him in his life. Then the director asks to see the scars on Yŏnggho's stomach, to see if they will work for the film. Disturbed by the idea that a film would imitate his own life experiences so closely, Yŏnggho asks angrily, "Does it really say all that? . . . I did not get my wounds in a game," storming out of the studio. The assistant director replies, quoting the ethos of melodrama, "Precisely, art follows life."

This scene encapsulates the way that *Aimless Bullet*, while a popular melodrama with a realist ethos, also works against the cinematic illusion of intimacy upon which the South Korean film industry at the time often relied. The scene is self-reflexive in this regard because the script of the film they are making within the film is very similar to Yŏnggho's own experiences, and this is what angers him. His resistance to the notion that the director can make his art adequate to lived experience—that is, his unwillingness to have his relationship with Sŏrhŭi or his war wound exploited by the camera—is addressed to the spectator as well, who has already watched the previous scenes showing Yŏnggho and Sŏrhŭi's developing romance. While Yŏnggho's refusal gives him an aura of authenticity that helps move the narrative forward, it also turns our attention to cinema as a form of economic exploitation and puts into question, or estranges, emotional investments in the film. The director who appears in the film wants to extract value directly from Yŏnggho's body, by making a spectacle of a typified version of his wounds and his life story. To the extent that *Aimless Bullet* itself participates in a similar economy of generalizing traumatic experiences, it can only point out the problem and, in its self-reflexivity about its own form, convey that the historical experience of extreme violence exceeds the constraints of cinematic vision. The Brechtian approach of this scene aims to reveal the ideological character of the medium and mode of cinematic representation.

In Peter Brooks's discussion of the moral occult, he argues that melodrama brings the content of the unconscious to the surface of the body and the mind, in the manner of an exhaustive and hysterical visualization of pathetic symptoms that essentially erases the depth of unconscious material. However, in contrast to the complete exteriorization of the psyche, 1960s South Korean melodramas make creative use of the play between the visible and the invisible, visualizing some ideas

and experiences while strategically rendering others invisible. Therefore, the exteriorization of the psyche should in this case be amended to include film melodrama's strategic use of offscreen space.

The discussion of offscreen space in modernist melodramas not only is a matter of aesthetic experience but also concerns issues of historical referentiality and nation-building. In one of the notes that make up Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *The Visible and the Invisible*, which he was writing at the time of his death, he makes a statement about the relationship between history and perception that pertains to my approach to melodrama in the context of Cold War Korea: "The problem of knowing what is the subject of the State, of war, etc., are exactly of the same type as the problem of knowing what is the subject of perception: one will not clear up the philosophy of history except by working out the problem of perception."<sup>12</sup> Merleau-Ponty states that a phenomenology of perception is primary and preparatory to historical thinking. Although one might question whether a phenomenology of perception can by itself provide a sufficient foundation for a philosophy of history, Merleau-Ponty makes an important shift away from narrative, which dominated the philosophy of history and historical representation throughout modernity. In dealing with the melodramatic representation of history, Merleau-Ponty's assertion that problems of perception are primary and preparatory to historical knowledge is key. Film melodrama is not a reflection of a historical context, nor solely a symptom of knowable historical crises and impasses, but a poetic mode that actively creates perceptions of history. The phenomenological study of perception can deepen the view of melodramatic mimesis, or the way that film melodrama purports to reference or to imitate the empirical, historical world.

Sobchack quotes Merleau-Ponty's text in stating that films are "an expression of experience by experience."<sup>13</sup> Although Merleau-Ponty likely did not have cinema in mind, Sobchack quotes his phrase to explain that in the living exchange between cinematic experience and film language, film language is not abstract signification but an immanent expression of experience. Film expresses experience by the creation of a (virtual) experience. Mood is the affective backdrop or mode of attunement to the fictional world of the film; the expression of experience by experience accrues affective resonances through the mood. This phenomenological rendering explains how experience is made visible (or expressed) by film experience. However, in the living exchange between perception and language, Merleau-Ponty was also concerned with the limits of expression, with the realm of the invisible. In thinking through the question of invisibility and offscreen space in film melodrama, one should consider the horizon of bodily space—the horizon of our being-in-the-world beyond which we are aware we cannot perceive.

In *The Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty differentiates bodily space and its horizon from other senses of space: the Cartesian space in which all space is reducible to extended things and the thinking subject and the figure-background structure posited in Gestalt psychology:



The “body schema” is, in the end, a manner of expressing that my body is in and toward the world. With regard to spatiality, which is our present concern, one’s own body is the always implied third term of the figure-background structure, and each figure appears perspectively against the double horizon of external space and bodily space. We must, then, reject as abstract any analysis of bodily space that considers only figures and points, since figures and points can neither be conceived nor exist at all without horizons.<sup>14</sup>

Merleau-Ponty questions the notion that all perceptible figures appear against a transparent background such as the abstract mind of a disembodied subject (Descartes) or a negative background of a gestalt. In the relation between figures and their backgrounds, there is the implied third term of the body of the perceiver. If the body is understood too abstractly, as simply one figure or point in abstract space, then we imagine that there are only points and figures in infinite empty space. But figures and points can be conceived or exist only with horizons. Merleau-Ponty refers to these horizons as a “double horizon of external space and bodily space.” In other words, both the structures and limits of external space and the structure and limits of our bodily space determine our perception of the world.

The figure-background relation and the formal and technical aspects of cinematic framing and editing apply to the construction of cinematic spaces and our embodied experiences of those spaces. Cinematic photography and framing are engaged with both aspects of the double horizon. External space is analogous to the profilmic space being captured, whereas cinematography, editing, and sound construct an embodied film experience (an expression of experience by experience). The two horizons of these spaces are immanent to one another; they work simultaneously in cinematic experience. When a film draws our attention to offscreen space, it asks us to consider the horizon of external space and the figures and points that lie beyond the represented space of the film. However, more importantly for the melodramatic mode, drawing our attention to offscreen space also asks us to consider the horizon of bodily space, the limit of our embodied perception beyond which objects and figures become invisible.

As discussed, melodramatic mimesis depicts bodies and emotions to represent ideas and spiritual values struggling against an external reality. In melodrama, the figures on screen are not merely extended bodies that we perceive against an empty background. Nor are they merely objects of psychological identification. The horizon of bodily space refers to how cinematic framing creates a malleable and shifting boundary between the visible and the invisible, within which objects, figures, ideas, and values become perceptible. However, this film experience occurring within the horizon of bodily space is contiguous with invisible regions outside the frame. These invisible regions are not simply abstract figures and points that lie physically outside of the external space represented in the film. The invisible involves our cinematic body in the limits of its perception. Despite Brooks’s suggestion of a total externalization of the unconscious in the melodramatic mode,



melodramatic mimesis does not make all emotion and all thought visible on the surface of the characters' bodies against the background of the *mise-en-scène*. The visibility and narrative of melodramatic film touch invisible regions beyond which the embodied subject is no longer present to itself. Therefore, the invisible becomes a matter of self and other because what lies beyond the horizon of bodily space is other to our perception.

The dominant moods of a film serve as an affective background to our perception of figures in cinema. They set the affective agenda, so to speak, for our emotional connections with characters, events, and ideas. However, the figure-background relation is mediated by the third term of our body. The human moods that form in response do not necessarily align directly with the mood of the film. Therefore, melodramatic mimesis and its moods do not represent a closed system of identification and emotion. That is why Massumi writes of feedback between affects and emotions, not of a unidirectional translation.<sup>15</sup> Many film melodramas exhibit a high degree of self-consciousness about how cinematic framing expresses experience by experience—in other words, how they produce emotions and experiences that are owned, personalized, and given language. This self-consciousness involves critical reflection on the horizon of bodily space. It directs our attention to how cinematic framing does not merely express experience by experience but also creates invisible regions that cannot be experienced because they are beyond our perception (beyond the horizon of our bodily space). This self-consciousness in turn influences the mood, introducing affective uncertainty about our encounter with figures and otherness on screen.

The above scene from *Aimless Bullet* is a good example of the invisible and its pertinence for melodrama's ideas about history. On the one hand, the mood and moral occult of the film tells the viewer to sympathize with Yǒngho, to experience him as an object of pathos. On the other hand, this scene shows the exploitative dimension of the film industry's demand for moral authenticity conveyed through pathos when the director presents Yǒngho's own story as a generic war tale and asks to see and film his real scar. When Yǒngho refuses to show his scar, it remains invisible. While many scenes in the film certainly translate negative affects into ideological emotions and sympathies, in this scene the horizon of our bodily space does not extend to the wounds of the other. By questioning the complicity of the audience in melodramatic pathos and its representations of history, the scene also shifts the mood of the film. By demanding demarcation between film experience and historical experience, the mood of the film becomes less sensational and more contemplative about the limits of cinematic representation. This is a moment of modernist self-reflexivity in melodrama, when melodrama refuses to follow its tendency toward affective absorption in the experience of the diegesis.

The framing of the visible and the invisible can have various ideological and ethical implications, and the horizon of bodily space can even be defined in a totalitarian manner. The case of *The Hand of Destiny* shows how melodramatic

mimesis creates a bodily experience of paranoia and fear that is an expression of the idea of anticommunism; the constellation depends on the obverse of the facelessness and mechanism of communist thought, which is the romantic relationship and its associated affects. The close-ups of the faceless North Korean enemy subtract one element from the scene and, through this subtraction, create an illusion of coherence and completeness for the film's Manichaeian moral and political world. In contrast, when the camera shows Margaret and Yŏngch'ŏl sharing an embrace, for example, the camera is intimate with their intimacy. The film includes the first onscreen kiss in Korean cinema history, and this transformative event of mass culture epitomizes, in the narrative, the "humanistic" bond between the two characters. These filmic techniques create several oppositions typical to melodrama, oppositions that are then woven into a political allegory through the formal construction of the film's idea. The camera transforms characters into objects in a melancholic and allegorical play taking place in a Manichaeian moral and political world with clear demarcations between good and evil, purity and corruption, human and inhuman, emotional and mechanical, and so on. In this film, the invisible is used in a fairly obvious political way. The subtraction of a single element makes the invisible perceptible as an absence in order to instill a sense of fear and paranoia; the film attempts to completely politicize the horizon of bodily space, making the limit of embodied perception into a fearful inhuman enemy, in order to create an illusion of somatic transparency, identity, and wholeness in the audience. In this sense, the film creates a kind of totalitarian intercorporeality of the anticommunist nation.

With its focus on impoverished refugees from the North, unemployment among war veterans, and the April Uprising of 1960, *Aimless Bullet* works narratively against such totalitarian anticommunist politics; however, it also does so through the visual framing of bodies and experiences. The above scene at the film studio confronts cinematic mimesis self-consciously, questioning the morality of the notion that "art imitates life" while at the same time giving the character of Yŏngho an aura of masculine authenticity. However, the film's questioning of the limits of cinematic representation through the play of visible and invisible is not primarily concerned with masculine heroism. In the scenes that take place at the house, Ch'ŏrho's mother (No Chae-sin) is lying by the window. She intermittently sits, or wakes, up, and yells out, "Kaja!" (Let's get out of here!), often interrupting the other characters' dialogue. It seems that she relives the war, or one experience of the war, over and over again, but we never see an image of this experience, only the mother's facial expressions, her gestures, and her bodily movements as she relives it through the experience of her traumatic dream or hallucination. In these scenes, the face of the mother shows us the incompleteness of the cinematic perspective and calls for another kind of ethical relation with the other. The camera shows four jet fighters flying overhead and then cuts to the mother sitting up in bed, yelling



FIGURE 21. In *Aimless Bullet* (1961), Ch'orho's mother darts up from her sleep in a hallucinatory state after hearing jets flying overhead, reliving the war and yelling for everyone to flee; however, the experiences she is reliving remain invisible to the audience.

for the children to pack their things and escape toward the greener hills (figure 21). She is hallucinating that she is again fleeing south to escape the war, perhaps the US aerial bombardment of North Korea. The decontextualization of her body from any of the elements of the original scene of violence, except for the sound and image of the jet planes in the present, brings the war into the postwar but as a hallucination of a memory to which we have no visual access. The pained and terrified body of the mother asks how it is possible to respond to her memory of what is both present and invisible. The scene at the film studio and the scenes of the mother's hallucinatory war memories display both a modernist self-reflexivity about cinematic framing and mimesis and an ethical and political awareness concerning visibility and invisibility.

A remarkable scene toward the beginning of Lee Man-hee's *Homebound* (1967) is similar to those of the mother's hallucinations in *Aimless Bullet*. Ch'oe Tong-u (Kim Chin-gyu), a paraplegic veteran of the Korean War, receives a letter from the army of the Republic of Korea "on the fourteenth anniversary of our victory." His wife, Chiyŏn (Mun Ch'ong-suk), who will later be tempted by a romantic affair, seems to read the letter to Tongu, but she does not move her mouth and



FIGURE 22. In *Homebound* (1967), Tongu jumps out of his wheelchair as he relives the traumatic experience of his injury. Patriotic music plays on the record player as his wife Chiyön looks on in sympathy and horror.

the content of the letter is conveyed by a voice-over—the disembodied voice of a male officer. In this scene and a later one in which Chiyön flashes back to her military wedding, the voice-over conveys the spectral presence of the state in the lives of the couple, who in their sense of duty and their typicality stand in for the nation-people.

After the voice-over reads the content of the letter, Tongu is lying in bed and asks Chiyön to get his uniform. In the next scene he is dressed in his uniform and sitting in a wheelchair. We cut between high-angle shots of a record player playing a patriotic war song, low-angle shots of Tongu looking toward an invisible horizon, and medium close-ups of Chiyön watching uneasily. Tongu begins recounting the event of his wounding and Chiyön pleads for him not to continue. As the music crescendoes, calling on the soldiers to write their final letters to their lovers, Tongu's description of the battle becomes more and more gruesome. Chiyön covers her ears and turns away in horror while the record player spins. Tongu becomes fully immersed in his memory and tries to stand up but collapses to the ground (figure 22). Chiyön tries to help him, but he pushes her away. At this point, the voices of the two characters are completely drowned out by the patriotic military music, which takes on the quality of a non-diegetic soundtrack. While the music becomes the only sound, the camera captures a troubling and grotesque pantomime: Tongu is in the midst of a psychotic delusion, pointing his finger and giving commands while lying entirely prostrate on the floor; Chiyön is unable to watch the reenactment and cries inaudibly until she is finally able to stop the record player. In the mode of melodrama, the characters' bodies are hyper-expressive and hysterical, but their voices are mute. Their bodies express the suffering inflicted by a larger cosmology of moral and political organs—the ROK state, the Cold War system, the veterans' bureau, the family, and nationalist media.

The mood of the above scene is one of intensified and heightened pathos: the shots shorter and their scale closer, the gestures more pained, and the tears more abundant than other scenes. The technologies of reproduction—including the recorded voice of the state and the record player that plays the nationalist song—link the present to the past scene of Tongu's wounding during the Korean War, which becomes visible to us only through his reenactment on the surface of his present body. It is entirely present to him in his state of hallucination but still opaque to us—the scene is not a flashback. In this sense, we are put in a comparable position of sympathy as Chiyōn, who did not share the experience of battle with her husband. The pain of her loss of love and lack of sexual fulfillment becomes the film's more central focus and is the result of a trauma that she cannot directly share. Therefore, heterosexual love comes into conflict with Tongu's public mission and what it has done to his body, and the scene sets the melancholic mood of the film, which ends with a powerful image of Chōngsuk sitting on her bed alone and weeping, deeply saddened by her inability to consummate her love affair and suffering under the moral demands of the wife of a disabled veteran. Within the film's background melancholic mood, it communicates both a surface moral and political "message" and presents contrapuntal affects of disappointment and mourning connected to these same moral and political dictates.

The mood is neither an internal, subjective psychological state of the characters or spectator nor an external, objective setting or profilmic space. It is entirely virtual and cinematic, as much an affective *mise-en-scène* as it is an emotion cognized by a character's language or a spectator's thoughts. The historical referentiality of the mood to both real state institutions and a collective national experience is not direct, nor does it point to a context. Rather, these two primary points of historical reference, the state and the collective experiences of the nation-people it purportedly represents, appear at odds with one another, mutually contaminating and mutually haunting. Neither can be indicated in a direct or transparent manner because each appears mediated within the mood of the diegesis, whose melancholy, uncanniness, and anxiety pervade every affective gesture toward extra-cinematic reality. The letter from the veteran's bureau, the recorded patriotic song, Tongu's uniform, and the speech he gives—all signs of the state—are not univalent, because they are intertwined in the scene with the wounded, "incomplete" body of the veteran and the suffering of the veteran's wife, neither of whom can resolve the negative effects of the state's war through the mediations and repetitions—the recorded sound and patriotic anniversaries—offered to them by the state. Conversely, Tongu's and Chiyōn's patriotic and sympathetic emotions are directed less toward state institutions themselves and more toward the ideal nation, a Korean national community liberating itself from colonialism and the incursions of communist revolution.<sup>16</sup> Cheah refers to this mutual haunting as an "irresolvable haunting [that] implies that the nation and the state are the *différance* of each other."<sup>17</sup> Lee's aestheticization of this haunting goes directly against the

supposedly harmonious relation between state and nation-people disseminated by the official state nationalism of the Park Chung Hee regime.

The scene is complicated by its reflection on the technological mediation involved in the production of what Alison Landsberg terms *prosthetic memory*—the disembodied voice-over of the military officer reading his letter and the record player playing the patriotic song.<sup>18</sup> Tongu remembers the war and the traumatic event of his lower-body paralysis without a visible flashback. However, the director, Lee Man-hee, develops a more explicit critique of the South Korean state by contrasting official nationalist media and their mnemonic ecology of intentional affects with an invisible traumatic event that cannot be fully placed within it. Of course, for Lee, cinema itself is also complicit. Although a skilled director of Korean War films, the historical event itself remains for him partially unrepresentable.

In *Homebound*, invisibility does not pertain solely to the events of the war but also to the representation of sexual desire. The plot of the film concerns Chiyŏn's devotion to Tongu despite his paralysis and loss of ability for sexual intercourse and reproduction, despite any temptation she may feel toward other men. This is also the plot of the apparently autobiographical serial novel that Tongu is publishing. As Chiyŏn delivers installments of the novel to the newspaper, where the editor wants the character of the wife in the novel to be more realistic and have an affair, a reporter, Kanguk, falls in love with her and tries to free her from her duty to her husband. She spends an afternoon and evening with Kanguk after missing the train from Seoul to Inchon, and Tongu finds out from his sister, who witnesses them at Seoul Station. After Tongu shoots the family dog in anger, Chiyŏn entertains the idea of escaping with Kanguk, before staying with her husband in the final scene. After writhing around in pain on the bed, she speaks with Kanguk on the phone and enters her own state of metaphorical paralysis. She places the phone on a chair and then collapses on the bed, mouthing contradictory words to Kanguk about going to meet him and not being able to meet him. The inscrutability of the conflict between her desires and her devotion to her husband is captured here by the gap between her words and her inactive body on the bed, powerfully framed by the bedroom doors as though she were physically trapped between them. Through the metafictional inclusion of the film's plot diegetically in the form of Tongu's novel, the film builds up a melodramatic moral occult around Chiyŏn's faithfulness, because everyone, including Tongu's own sister, expect that she (and the wife character in Tongu's novel) will divorce Tongu and start a relationship with another man. What remains invisible and unexpressed are Chiyŏn's repressed desires; we can assume, as all the characters do, that she must have unfulfilled desires, but what, besides social mores that already seem outdated, prevents her from divorcing and finding a lover in Kanguk or someone else?

As Mary Ann Doane explains, the 1940s women's film was not concerned with representing the desires of real women but was often about male film directors' projections of their fantasies about women and their desires.<sup>19</sup> Lee Man-hee

introduces a bit of self-consciousness about addressing this structure of the women's film to the spectator by including the novel version of the plot diegetically and having the fantasy of the novel affect how the characters see Chiyōn. More importantly, however, Lee includes long scenes of Chiyōn's urban wanderings, both alone and with Kanguk, ornamented with a melancholic symphonic soundtrack. For many of these scenes, Chiyōn is completely silent, and beyond the basic knowledge of her conundrum, we are forced to try to make meaning of the actress Mun Chōng-suk's evocative facial expressions and, at the end of the film, bodily contortions. These affects are rather typical of melodramatic pathos, but there is a heightened connotation of sexual desire in the embodied expressivity. Lee's self-reflexive combination of melodramatic pathos and repressed sexual desire in his modernist take on the women's film identifies a classic enigma of the genre (i.e., the desires of women) and presents it in an impossible situation for a woman protagonist caught between a sexless marriage based in purely sentimental affections and, as Tongu's sister remarks, the things which she, "as a woman, can understand." By connecting the melodramatic pathos of war memory to the pain of libidinal alienation, Lee certainly gives voice to patriarchal anxieties about wounded masculinity and the dangers of women's sexuality. However, he also uses these tropes of melodrama to explore the philosophical problem of modern alienation, particularly when one's life is torn apart by the machinations of a disembodied state authority. This more intellectual treatment of melodramatic scenarios comes through saliently in many scenes, including the one described above. It repeats when Chiyōn receives a wedding invitation and then remembers back to their own wedding ceremony, when another voice-over, again by a military official, presides over her own wedding fourteen years earlier, explaining her duties as a wife of a soldier. As the voice plays, Chiyōn responds to this specter of the military state by darting her eyes about, and Lee capture this with a point-of-view shot moving rapidly across the ceiling, as both Chiyōn and the camera are searching for the invisible body of this voice that is capable of pushing her husband into post-traumatic hallucinations and herself into an existential panic and, eventually, her own kind of paralysis.

The invisible, therefore, is by definition indeterminate. *Homebound* exemplifies a more self-reflexive melodramatic cinema that tempers the pathetic moods of expressivity and sentimentality with an awareness of the persistence of the unrepresentable, at once gesturing toward possible objects of contemplation or sympathy—the experience of war, unrequited love or lust, the pain of loss—while not offering a full image of the historical reference. Taking the virtuality of melodramatic film moods seriously, modernist melodramas frame inaccessible landscapes and psyches, provoking a desire to know and to empathize without providing the aesthetic cues and experience necessary to do so. In the midst of a hallucination triggered by a military jet overhead, a mother calls out for her children to escape the war (but does she seek to escape the past or the present?). We inhabit a military



wife's perspective as it darts about the ceiling trying to place the transcendental voice of the state that she hears. Melodrama is capable of such critical delirium, which supersedes moral coding and responds to fascism's "aestheticizing of political life" with the "politicizing of art."<sup>20</sup> Creating such intellectual effects requires a deep knowledge of the workings of the melodramatic mood and an ability to manipulate film form and the cinematic framing toward a cognitive-corporeal play of presence and absence, visibility and invisibility. Psychoanalytically speaking, the play of visible and invisible is often no more than an expression of phallocentric fetishism; however, in the above examples and many more during the South Korean golden age, problematizing the horizon of bodily space is a way of questioning conventional corporeal, phenomenological, and ontological relations to history and the values and ideas that supposedly drive it.

#### DREAMWORLDS AND MIST

In the interview quoted above, the director Yu Hyun-mok states that if he could make any kind of film, he would make an experimental avant-garde film requiring fewer elements of popular melodrama.<sup>21</sup> *The Empty Dream* is probably the closest he came to realizing that aspiration, and yet the plot retains melodramatic aspects, including a love triangle. Two patients, a man (Sin Sŏng-il) and a woman (Pak Su-jŏng), go to the dentist and are treated at the same time. The woman passes out from anemia and the man receives Novocain. The majority of the film shows the man's dream while he is sedated and includes a number of nonlinear, expressionistic, and surrealist scenes. This was not the first time that Yu used dental surgery as a means of pushing the melodramatic mode toward dreamworld imagery. At the end of *Aimless Bullet*, Chŏrŏ wanders Seoul aimlessly after having two teeth pulled at two separate dentists. As the camera follows him walking around, he holds his cheek in pain and is oblivious to much of his surroundings. Although very much a waking reality, dark images of urban Seoul give the ending a dreamlike quality. *The Empty Dream* is more lighthearted, but it also represents dental surgery and the extremes of pain and drug-induced states in order to cross a threshold from a melodramatic mode closer to realism to a melodramatic mode that explores the juxtapositions, displacements, and repressed desires of dreamworlds. This section and the next are concerned with depictions of dreams and fantasies in melodrama and how they affect its mood and aesthetic.

As in *Homebound*, in important aspect of the modernist self-reflexivity of *The Empty Dream* are the erotic resonances of its melodramatic pathos and embodied suffering. Significantly, the film is a remake of a 1964 Japanese film, *Daydream* (*Hakujitsumu*, dir. Tetsuji Takechi, 1964), itself based loosely on a Tanizaki Junichirō short story of 1928. *Daydream* is an early *pinku* film, a genre of erotic film emerging in Japan whose audience was working- and lower-middle-class men.<sup>22</sup>

As Alexander Zahlten describes in his study of the *pinku* genre, it used sexual and eroticized violence to give expression to masculine anxieties and desires in Cold War, US-occupied, postwar Japan.<sup>23</sup> If the general mode of many *pinku* films could be described as soft-pornographic, masculine melodrama, *The Empty Dream* uses the dreamworld frame as a point of departure for experimentations in mise-en-scène, cinematography, and editing that are reminiscent of surrealism and expressionism and self-consciously disrupt the melodramatic elements of erotic films.<sup>24</sup> Despite Yu's artistic pretensions to rise above the aesthetic of erotic films and make something avant-garde, the film negative was nonetheless prosecuted as indecent for including a nude scene (although Pak Su-jōng was actually wearing a body suit). The real reason for Yu's prosecution was his presentation of a paper titled "Freedom of the Silver Screen" at an international conference of cultural figures, following Lee Man-hee's prosecution and imprisonment under the Anticomunist Law for his film *Seven Women POWs* (1965).<sup>25</sup> After Park Chung Hee's ban on screenings of *Aimless Bullet*, this was Yu's second confrontation with the regime's censorship. *The Empty Dream* does not contain the same kind of social realist references to poverty, unemployment, and left-wing political movements, but its eroticism, particularly combined with its aesthetic experimentation, was also clearly political, because it more directly challenged the sensibilities of mainstream nationalist cinema.

Freud and psychoanalysis had powerful effects on modernism, and the modernist literary and visual arts movements of surrealism and expressionism set out to explore the unconscious and dream life.<sup>26</sup> By filming and editing according to dream logic as opposed to the linear causality of realism or the allegorical causality of melodrama and by borrowing some of the music, rhythm, and eroticism of early *pinku* films, Yu reimagined the mood and affects of melodrama. A few main techniques stand out: the use of discontinuity editing and slow motion, a conscious borrowing of cinematic motifs, and the absurd juxtaposition of affects. Combined, these techniques express apprehensions toward modernity and modern technology that we also find in many melodramas, but without the moral desire for a new cohesiveness between modernity and traditional community.

The discontinuous editing begins before we enter the man's dream, heightening the uncanny interpenetration of waking life and dream life. The film begins with a scene of children dancing to "Blue Danube" and acting out the three main characters of the film—the man, the woman, and the dentist. Cutting to the next scene, the music changes to an upbeat lounge jazz with emphatic tom drums and cymbals and percussive vibes. There is a montage of the various dentures, tools, and medications in the dental office, with one loud and discontinuous image of a circular welding tool in a factory cutting into metal notches in a repetitive and rhythmic way, in time with the music. A series of graphic matches ensues. A patient sits in a dentist's chair and is worked on with a cleaning tool and there are

multiple cuts back to welding tools in the factory. The patient's moaning crescendoes along with the lounge music and the grinding sound of the factory tools. After cross-cutting to introduce the man and woman characters waiting in the lobby, there are further discontinuous cuts that introduce the dentist's chair as a place of visions, fantasy, and association. The point of view of a young boy looks at the fan above the chair, followed by a cut to the front of a propeller plane; he sees a kitten on the floor, followed by a cut to a rabbit in a field. Next, an old man looks at three lights shining down on him, followed by three images—three slips of hanging paper, two candles and an incense burner, and a large, dead tree in a desolate landscape. When the woman enters and begins her treatment, we see the same three lights from her point of view, followed this time by three white orchids and a botanical garden. The graphic matches between dental tools and industrial factory machinery and the repetition of trinities do not adhere to spatiotemporal continuity. The former presents an intensive image of the way that industrial technologies, including cinema, penetrate and affect the human body; the latter presents the religious and natural visions of the patients experiencing delirium-inducing pain and the effects of medication. Meanwhile, the lounge soundtrack adds an incongruent playfulness to the associations and ideas that govern the discontinuous editing.

There is very little dialogue in these first ten minutes, during which the subjective perspective is enveloped in a quick-paced montage. The logic of the editing does not follow the continuous space and time of melodramatic narrative, whether linear or allegorical in its causality. Rather, it follows the logic of a dreamworld, with associations, displacements, and symbolic connections created and energized through the desire of singular subjectivities—the boy sees an airplane and a rabbit, the old man sees ritual spaces, and the woman sees flowers. The opening is important for establishing the interpenetration of waking life and dream life, so that the main body, the man's dream, cannot be cordoned off from the rest of the diegesis. By the time the dentist finishes treating the woman and she passes out, there have already been fantasy montages of multiple characters' subjectivities, as well as the man's lascivious view of both the woman's mouth full of fluid and the dentist's invasive gaze. The dentist's inspection of the man includes further cuts to industrial machinery. He has his assistant administer Novocain to the man, lie the woman down, and remove her blouse, after which her chest heaves and her legs rub erotically. As the camera tracks in on the man and the scene fades, the conditions for his dream are in place, but the film has already shifted between multiple dreamlike fantasies of various characters.

The empty dream, or spring dream (*ch'unmong*), that constitutes the majority of the film leaves behind any semblance of mundane space and time through the continuation of discontinuity editing and intertextual motifs and a *mise-en-scène* drawn from the history of cinema. The narrative of the dream belongs to melodrama, but the violence is more overtly sexualized: there is a love triangle between



FIGURE 23. In *The Empty Dream* (1965), the man looks on as the dentist controls the woman, with sets and costuming reminiscent of *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920) and German expressionism.

the sadistic dentist, the hypnotized and violated woman, and the man who tries to save her. Musical and dance performances mean a break in the narrative action, and the dream begins with the woman dressed in a fancy ball gown singing “Padre” in English; the song was written by Jacques Larue and Alain Romans, translated into English by Paul Francis Webster, and sung most famously by Toni Arden in 1958. The man carries an expressionist painting through the dark and theatrical stage setting with art deco geometrical lines with men in white porter uniforms standing by. Halfway through the song, the dentist appears dressed like Dr. Caligari from *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (dir. Robert Wiene, 1920). The scene then cuts to a woman in a sparkling bikini performing an acrobatic dance to mambo music. In other words, for the first part of the dream sequence, narrative is almost entirely subordinated to the spectacle of music and dance performance. The 1950s art deco geometry, the Marilyn Monroe-type vocal performance, the 1920s-style expressionist painting and Dr. Caligari costume, and, finally, the mambo dance—this menagerie of juxtaposed moments in the history of styles, motifs, and mise-en-scène continues throughout the film: the angular urban backgrounds copied from *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, the castaway’s beach, a room of mannequins, and so on (figure 23). It is as though the three main characters are moving through sets from multiple films from multiple eras, and the dreamworld has merged with the history of cinema, which now appears in a pastiche of fragments.

After the dance performance, the man begins to follow the woman, witnessing, through a window, the dentist tying her up and subjecting her to electroshock. He also shares a kiss with the woman through the glass. In the manner of Dr. Caligari, the dentist uses electroshock to hypnotize the woman, visualized through her flashes to beautiful natural scenery when she is being shocked. As Siegfried Kra-cauer argued, Dr. Caligari’s hypnotism, through which he directs a somnambulist to commit murders, was a criticism of state authority and warmongering in the

aftermath of World War I and connected these to the industrial technology of cinema and its power to shape the unconscious.<sup>27</sup> Therefore, from the outset of *The Empty Dream* there is another set of references for understanding the relationship between technology and the body, distinct from the melodramatic mode and its coding of negative affect through pathos, sympathy, and the moral occult. The film's representation of mind control through electroshock and use of expressionist motifs harkens back to a moment in early silent cinema before melodrama and the "classical Hollywood system" became the normative ways of representing the violent intersection of modern technology and unconscious desires. The lack of moral Manichaeism and the adherence to dream logic becomes apparent at the end of the dream, when the man inexplicably stabs the woman on a theatrical city street while passersby, many dressed in traditional clothes with modern diagonal lines drawn on them, walk by without noticing and ignore his pleas, "I've killed this woman! I am a murderer!" This is more than melodramatic counterpoint, when good and evil characters share moments of analogy. Surreal moments of violence disrupt the causal connections between characters and actions in different scenes. Likewise, the man's identity follows the narcissism of the ego and the id (no moral high ground of the superego) and, as the kissing scene through the window glass suggests, his identity is formed only through his gaze upon the illusory specter of the woman other. Although he is a hero saving the damsel in distress within the dream's melodramatic scenario, the dreamworld does not follow that logic because it is beholden to the unconscious rather than to the moral occult; he kills the object of his desire.

The inconsistency in the man's character is doubled by the inconsistent affects of the woman as she is pursued by both men and tortured by the dentist. In part because of the dentist's manipulation of her psyche, which mimics the situation of being in the dentist's chair, she jumps from expressions of pained rapture to laughing to suffering and weeping (that is, when she is not performing musical numbers in a common way). These sudden shifts in affect and mood, accentuated by the man's confused watching, do not allow for a single mood, a single ontological condition for the conveying of narrative and ideology, to take hold. Are we supposed to sympathize with the woman? Laugh with her? Resent her? Enjoy her as performance spectacle or sexualized object? The kaleidoscope of affects does not easily allow for a settled mood or perspective at the center of the film's male scopophilia. As I will discuss in relation to Kim Ki-young's *The Housemaid*, this does not mean that the film is subversive of phallogentric visuality; however, it does present a modernist appropriation and critique of melodrama that denies any realist referentiality and whose moods and affects reveal, self-consciously, the dreamworld artifice of all cinematic experience. The result is an eroticized detachment from moral, political, and historical concerns, and therefore an idiosyncratic aesthetic for the time and for Yu Hyun-mok's filmography. The man awakens from the dream and uses the return of the woman's handkerchief, which she left behind

accidentally in the dentist's office, as a pretense for speaking with her and getting a ride home; but the return to reality in the final scene does little to abate the uncanny mood. With its discontinuous editing and lack of concern for historical referentiality, *The Empty Dream* represents one of the most radical experimentations in 1960s South Korean cinema.

Films did not need to represent dreams and dream logic to explore the fragmentation of subjectivity through surrealist imagery. Kim Su-yong's *Mist* (1967) follows very closely its literary source text, Kim Sŭng-ok's short story "Record of a Journey to Mujin."<sup>28</sup> Kim Sŭng-ok is known as a modernist writer, and the short story lends itself very well to an art film adaptation. In the years 1966–69, there was a dramatic increase in the number of literary films in response to the government's classification of literary films as "high quality films" and a decrease after they eliminated in the category in 1969.<sup>29</sup> The film employs experimental cinematography and editing techniques of European art cinema—Ingmar Bergman's *Wild Strawberries* being one reference for Kim Su-yong—in part to mimic the free indirect discourse, jumps between past and present, and hallucinatory descriptions of the literary source text.<sup>30</sup> However, these aesthetic and formal innovations are not simply a reproduction of literary technique, nor is Kim Su-yong's directorial style simply an imitation of an established art cinema film style. The artistry of Kim's style and the cultural significance of the film are best discerned not through an abstract comparison with other art cinema but by recognizing the film's foundations in melodramatic storytelling and affect, as well as its deliberate disruptions of the modes of subjectivity typically articulated through melodrama. Like its literary source text, the film is fundamentally about the shock of modernity and modern historical transformation and the feeling of time being out of joint. It suggests more typically melodramatic frameworks for dealing with the temporal problem of modernity, such as the binaries of modernity and tradition, urban and rural, and the sacred and mundane. However, flashes of memory, blurred perspective, hallucinatory images of a double self, and the intrusion of mist into the *mise-en-scène* constantly disrupt the mapping of these binaries.

The melodramatic qualities of the film are apparent. Most of the narrative and dialogue are based directly on the story, which highlights contrasts between urban Seoul and rural Mujin through a travel story. A manager at a pharmaceutical company (Kim Hŭi-jun in the story, Kim Ki-jun in the film) experiences mental strain, and his wife and father-in-law suggest he return to his hometown of Mujin, a foggy coastal town that he has not visited in four years. There he meets friends from his school days, Pak and Cho, and has an affair with a working-class music teacher, Ha In-suk (Yun Chŏng-hŭi). He also visits his mother's grave and remembers hiding out in the lumber room during the Korean War to avoid military service. Eventually, his wife calls him back to Seoul and he leaves Insuk behind, tearing up the love letter he writes to her. Thus, common narrative themes of melodrama appear: the lost opportunity for love explored through the protagonist's modern wife

and more traditional lover, the moral quandaries of draft dodging and infidelity, and the good and bad qualities of the claustrophobic rural hometown and the big city of Seoul. The musical theme played throughout the film is also a mood cue typical of melodrama. At several moments throughout the film, various instrumental versions of the song "Mist" play as non-diegetic soundtrack, including the pared-down and melancholic guitar version that accompanies Kim Ki-jun (Sin Sŏng-il) walking through town or remembering his youthful days and the more upbeat jazz version that ends the film. Most prominently, Insuk sings the song (or rather lip-syncs it) to Kijun at the climax of the film. This title song, recorded and then performed for decades by Chŏng Hun-hŭi, has lyrics about loneliness and walking into the mist, moving melancholically through chords in the C-minor scale over a slow Latin beat. In contrast to the fragmentation and intellectual abstraction of much of the film, this moody theme song situates the film within a media ecology of popular culture beyond cinema. It also makes the film a musical, lending vernacular and popular appeal to its depictions of alienation.

These conventions and expressions of melodrama are a point of departure into a more experimental visualization of memory, trauma, hallucination, and alienation than we typically find in melodrama. Kim Sŭng-ok's short story invites this experimentation in its first-person descriptive passages. The narrator Hŭijun describes synesthesia and other disorientations of the senses: "I used to have the sensation that the crying of the frogs was changed into innumerable, twinkling stars. It was a strange phenomenon, this sensation which used to occur, of an auditory image changing to a visual image."<sup>31</sup> Kim Su-yong does not attempt to render in film this particular synesthetic illusion, choosing rather to place it within a dialogue between Kijun and Insuk as they walk along the shore. However, such passages do invite visual experimentations. If the total work of art of film melodrama was meant to bring together sight, sound, and touch into an expression of experience by experience, *Mist* follows its source text in including fragments of illusion, hallucination, and memory that express non-normative sensory experiences and syntheses. The film expresses an awareness of the normative moods of melodrama and the moral and political ideas about subjectivity, sympathy, and the proper ordering of the affects into emotions that they typically express through a sorrowful yet cognitively stable pathos. The film's art cinema aesthetic is not an imitation of style but a series of reflections on subjectivity opened up by combining melodrama with the alternative ethos and discourse of art cinema.

A few examples suffice to show the effectiveness of these self-reflexive disruptions of the stable pathos of melodrama. We have seen how anxiety is one of the most prominent ground-moods of film melodramas of this period, but they rarely express anxious moods outside the framework of cinematic realism. In this context, the opening scene of *Mist* is shocking in its surrealism. As Kijun works in a high-rise office building, he looks down at the papers on his desk and then the scene cuts to a point-of-view shot. Like a few other point-of-view shots from



Kijun's perspective, the image is slightly out of focus, and crawling around on his papers is a horde of ants. He leans back in his chair and takes a pill, signaling that he realizes the image is an illusion and an effect of the stress and anxiety he experiences at work as a manager at his in-laws' pharmaceutical company. His wife suggests the trip to Mujin as a salve for his stress, promising a promotion to director from her father upon his return. In taking the pill and taking his wife's advice, Kijun's hallucinations become an object of a modern scientific perspective working to cure the presumed medical and psychiatric causes of his visions.

As this insertion of a surreal hallucination in the opening scene suggests, however, the film itself does not take up a realist, scientific view of psychic illusions. On the stuffy, hot train to Mujin, Kijun's first-person voice-over describes his fear of flying and contrasts the "blazing sun, cloying fog, and small minds twisted by poverty" of Mujin to the nostalgic and comfortable image of hometowns. Immediately, the film resists any pretense of restorative nostalgia, even though the trip home is supposed to restore him to mental health. Instead, as though on a movie screen, Kijun sees an image of his younger self reflected on the window of the train. Using the superimposition of two images to convey a split subjectivity, like the North Korean films discussed above, silent images of a younger Kijun appear layered on the window. The younger Kijun experiences mental anguish and, according to the voice-over, "insanity," biting his nails, smoking a cigarette, and moving in paroxysms while yelling. We soon find out the context for these images in a flashback to the Korean War, in which he pleads with his mother to allow him to leave the hideout in the lumber room and join the army. His sallow complexion and another blurry point-of-view shot of his mother convey his madness, and the empty shoreline and fog convey the malaise and starkness of his interior and exterior landscapes.

This scene stands out in the way that it frames the past as the past through an extended flashback, because so many other flashbacks are presented as brief flashes of memory or edited to interlace the past and present. When the bus to Mujin breaks down, the sign "10km to Mujin" provokes Kijun's memory and a shot/reverse shot and eyeline match show his young self exchanging gazes with his present self. Sometimes his younger self appears in the same space as Kijun like this; other times he appears in a reflection, such as in the train window or later on the surface of a pond. The repetition of traversing the same landscape around Mujin makes possible the insertion of the younger Kijun into the same space. This doubling of Kijun comes to a head after Kijun begins his affair with Insuk and is walking with her on the shore. Kijun looks ahead and an extreme long shot captures the back of his present self walking alongside his younger self. The scene then cuts to a conversation between the two (figure 24)—the older Kijun speaks to the younger about his marriage to wealthy widow and his stable life, but when he asks for a response, his younger self only spits. Then it cuts quickly back to Kijun and Insuk walking and talking on the same shoreline. This surreal doubling and



FIGURE 24. In *Mist* (1967), Kijun walks along the shoreline with his younger self, asking him about his decision to leave Mujin and marry, but his younger self refuses to respond.

even tripling of Kijun's identity conveys an alienation from himself that disallows any nostalgic view of his hometown or his youth. Likewise, while Insuk contrasts with his urban wife in typical ways for a melodrama—she is rural, poor, and artistic—the affair seems only to return him to his alienation from other selves. For example, as Insuk asks if she can go to Seoul with him while walking on the shore, he has the illusion of speaking with himself instead. At the end, as Kijun writes a letter to Insuk that he will ultimately tear up, he states, bluntly, “I love you, Insuk. Because you are me.” Despite its gendered melodramatic contrasts between the city and the countryside, therefore, the film never entertains a restorative nostalgia by figuring woman, hometown, or landscape as ideal objects. As in the films of Kim Su-yong's inspiration, Ingmar Bergman, what seems to exist outside the self ends up being an illusion of that same self reflected back. Another extreme long shot of Kijun walking across an empty square shows him in isolation, as he essentially is throughout, alone in his memories and anxiety.

In a brilliant performance, Sin Söng-il manages to express both the pain of this alienation and his character's detachment, particularly when he smiles furtively at a party with his old friends or when he remembers his past experiences of madness. These glimpses of levity, along with the melodramatic love story, prevent the film from becoming too painfully abstract or intellectual. The mist that covers Mujin and obscures objects in the *mise-en-scène* performs a similar function, creating mystery and invisibility through a common melodramatic trope of weather. In combining the forms of melodrama and art cinema, *Mist* introduces the topography of the protagonist's memories and unconscious to counterpoint the surface of identification and pathos. This spatial juxtaposition of hallucination and perspective, visualized emotion and invisibility, transforms the primary theme from infidelity (toward the nation and marriage) to the dreamlike interpenetration of past and present. The mood and mood cues of the film are less tied to the

emotional and moral problems of draft-dodging and extramarital affairs and are rather a backdrop for the expression of affects that remain irrational and unknowable. Pathos and sympathy provide a more comfortable social coding of affects and memories. By mimicking the temporal jumps and surreal descriptions of a modernist literary text, *Mist* does not provide the relief of knowing the meaning of memories and affects. Rather, it remains in the original mood of anxiety expressed through hallucination, unable to reconcile the past and present and caught in their uncanny interpenetration.

### THE UNCANNY

In their introduction to the history of Korean horror cinema, Alison Peirse and Daniel Martin state that the narratives of Korean horror films are “often preoccupied with *han* (a sense of agonizing grief at unfair suffering) and embedded in melodramatic plots.”<sup>32</sup> The connection between melodrama and horror through narrative structures and the aesthetic category of *han* is based on a culturalist understanding of affect propagated in both South Korea and abroad. It is also consonant with Linda Williams’s analysis of melodrama as a kind of Ur-genre at the foundation of other body genres such as horror and pornography.<sup>33</sup> However, how would melodrama and horror be differentiated from one another if not through their affects and emotions? If horror films, like melodrama, by and large express the same agonizing grief at unfair suffering, would it be the inclusion only of supernatural elements or moments of intensified suspense that differentiates melodrama and horror? Kim Ki-young’s *The Housemaid* is widely considered to have established the postwar horror genre in South Korean film and was made at the height of golden age melodrama. Therefore, understanding how the film brings together melodrama and horror is one starting point for figuring out the connections between melodrama and horror without conflating them in the typical ways—on the level of narrative, aesthetics, affect, or gender difference.<sup>34</sup> It can also allow us to avoid culturalist or nationalist assumptions about a shared collective psyche or set of aesthetic categories that define the collective consciousness of the Korean people.

This is particularly important for reading *The Housemaid* because it is neither a straightforward melodramatic horror film nor a straightforward horror-film take on melodrama. What elevates *The Housemaid* to art cinema is its meticulous mimicking and parodying of the tropes of melodrama. Kim Ki-young self-consciously and self-reflexively engages with the aesthetic and narrative forms of the melodramatic mode, ironically manipulating the mode in order to explore its unconscious desires and repressions. Because the horror genre challenges safe and enlightened affects, perhaps its driving ethos originates in modernist and avant-garde engagements with the grotesque, absurd, and ironic. More importantly for melodramas of the South Korean golden age, however, the horror genre can enable a social

critique at the level of affect, because it is capable of taking the sacred myths of a society (e.g., those of national melodrama) and revealing the underlying violence and arbitrariness of their signs. *The Housemaid* employs a horror style to satirize and critique the sacred myths of melodrama and to thereby question the moral occult of post-Korean War developmentalism and middle-class morality.

Kim's film is a self-conscious, ironic, but politically ambiguous engagement with the repressed contents of bourgeois domesticity and with the unconscious wishes that accompany the moral principles of patriarchy. It presents a phantasmagoria of desires, fetishes, and death drives that demand a consideration of the multiple relationships between the constitution of political power and the modern dream-factories of the bourgeois household and the cinematic apparatus. It displaces the moral dilemmas and Manichaean moral universe of melodrama and becomes a volatile suspense film whose enjoyment relies upon a dominant topography of femininity and a fear of the feminized masses. The film's political allegory, which takes place almost entirely within the setting of an uncanny house, can be read in relation to its historical moment, when the emergent neocolonial nation-state of South Korea was constituting itself through a fear of internal sedition.

The dominant aesthetic and mood of *The Housemaid* is the uncanny because everything that should be familiar within the moral occult of the family drama appears unfamiliar and alien through the mechanism of repression. By pushing the family drama toward the horror genre through dark satire, Kim creates an alternative view of modernity for which melodrama's simple tradition versus modernity dichotomy breaks down, revealing the underlying violence involved in the construction of the nation-state, the middle class, and the libidinal economy of the patriarchal household.<sup>35</sup> Kim's irony and satire do not prevent him from presenting his own sexist worldview based in the idea of the monstrous feminine, but his modernist and post-psychoanalytic version of the family drama does effectively mock its conventions and norms in the manner of a self-conscious critique (figure 25).

*The Housemaid* adheres to many of the conventions of the melodrama genre, including the excessive expression of emotion and simplified moral dilemmas. At the same time, many of the cinematographic and narrative techniques that Kim Ki-young deployed are more appropriate to the suspense and horror genres, particularly in their provocation of an anticipatory fear of violence or death.<sup>36</sup> The film also exceeds melodrama's moralistic framing, despite the somewhat ironic use of the frame-tale device, because the framed narrative completely compromises the virtue of its characters, drawing them into a struggle in which a righteous moral position can no longer be salvaged. Myŏngja's seduction of Tongsik and the cruelty that manifests in its aftermath compromise all the characters—except, perhaps, the handicapped daughter—to the extent that the victory of virtue over evil can only be reasserted at the end of the film by claiming implausibly that it is only a fantasy sequence with a negative didactic purpose. The only character who



FIGURE 25. At the end of *The Housemaid* (1960), Tongsik breaks the fourth wall and addresses the audience, telling men not to succumb to their desire for younger women as they age. Such a delivery of the didactic message only adds to the uncanny mood of the film.

remains virtuous and innocent throughout the film is the disabled daughter, who would typically be an icon for the innocence that needs to be redeemed but is instead treated sadistically both by her father, her brother, and Myŏngja.

During the long fantasy sequence that makes up the film, the most familiar elements of daily life appear, by way of the return of the repressed, as the most mysterious, secretive, and strange. In a 1919 essay, Freud puzzled over the contradictory qualities of the aesthetic experience of the uncanny—its combination of familiarity and frightfulness—and offered a preliminary observation that “the uncanny [*unheimlich*] is something which is secretly familiar [*heimlich-heimisch*], which has undergone repression and then returned from it.”<sup>37</sup> If the uncanny is the motif that emerges with the return of a repressed aspect of what is most familiar—a repression marked by the “un-” prefix added to “familiar” (*heimisch*)—then the disconcerting version of the household represented in the framed fantasy offers refracted elements of the unconscious.<sup>38</sup> The uncanniness of the house in *The Housemaid* is highlighted by the disarray caused by the ongoing construction, the stairs that the handicapped daughter cannot climb, and the many close-ups of aging art objects. Laura Mulvey has discussed such dilapidated houses in Hitchcock’s films as reminiscent of the decay and disintegration associated with the mother’s body, and it is perhaps fitting that the house in *Psycho* (dir. Alfred Hitchcock, 1960), which Mulvey refers to as the most uncanny of houses, was also released in 1960.<sup>39</sup> The ambiguity of the analogy between the house in *The*

*Housemaid* and the macro-political national community is perhaps best understood through this sense that the national subject both feels at home and is, at the same time, estranged from its home through the work of repression.

The political form and content of *The Housemaid* are directly connected to how it figures and negotiates gender difference. The negotiations of gender difference in the film produce more than a single version of the feminine, and the uncanny house is a site for other performances of femininity: sacred, dangerous, ideal, licentious, insubordinate, and so on. In particular, as Myŏngja becomes an object of suspense, the film seems to relish in her violent undermining of the family, while simultaneously it reestablishes strict boundaries between acceptable and unacceptable femininity, between proper and improper subjects, and between bourgeois propriety and the unruly masses. The film's fantasy of destruction and failed reconstitution and its allegory of gendered class conflict is structured around a fetishistic fear and denial of gender difference. This fear and denial of gender difference is negotiated through the household's relationship to Myŏngja and points to underlying class anxieties and their expression in the nation-building project.

This negotiation is apparent in the scene of seduction between Myŏngja and Tongsik. As Tongsik approaches her, the shot changes to view into the room from the outside, through the sliding glass door. We can see her face, but he cannot. While the camera is facing in from the outside, Myŏngja's eyes shift back and forth and she purses her lips; she quickly moves to the side to block him as he reaches to shut the cracked door, and she begins caressing her hair. It is almost as though she is performing a seduction that she herself has seen in a film, and it seems that neither she nor we are supposed to be sure of her intentions. However, when the camera angle shifts to Tongsik's perspective, she turns her head slowly toward him with a drawn-out, deliberate, and assured look reminiscent of classic Hollywood. In this second shot, Tongsik and the camera see what Laura Mulvey has described as "the erotic allure of the female star concentrated in a highly stylized and artificial presentation of femininity."<sup>40</sup> What we know from her facial expressions in the previous shot, however, is that Myŏngja may have multiple intentions in seducing him. The combination of the two shots depicts Myŏngja as duplicitous: she presents herself to Tongsik as the fetish object that Mulvey describes, but direction asks us to consider what her ultimate motivation might be. The scene presents Myŏngja's liminality as dangerous because she presents herself differently to the interior and the exterior of the house. As the story progresses, the duplicity she displays in this scene progressively intensifies, and following the abortion of her child and her realization that she cannot usurp the wife's position, she begins to exact revenge, becoming an object of pure fear and suspense. Much as the female factory workers were a source of confusion for Tongsik, Myŏngja is an enigma. Her look toward the outside of the house and therefore to the gaze of the public as an imaginary collective viewer incites uncertainty and the potential for misinterpretation. However, her look toward the inside of the house and toward Tongsik's

gaze presents a figure of pristine femininity, desirable for her performance of an idealized image.

Like the bourgeois household in *The Housemaid*, in the long Korean Cold War, the neocolonial nation-state (South Korea) and the imperial nation-state that occupies it (the United States) are often compelled to refashion their external borders into internal ones and to perpetuate a reciprocal terror between the state and the masses through the interpellation of national subjects as individual members of the totality.<sup>41</sup> The cinematic apparatus participates as an active agent in this process of refashioning borders, interpellating subjects, and rearticulating the terms of inclusion and exclusion. In this sense, the suspense in a film like *The Housemaid* is intimately tied to an aesthetics of belonging within the internal border, because it is the affect through which the film can represent the working-class woman as internally seditious and as the inassimilable element for an ambivalently circumscribed identity. By fixating upon her as the object of a fearful and pleasurable gaze, the fear of the masses becomes the affect through which (national) subjects are simultaneously individuated and totalized.

*The Housemaid* and other South Korean horror films should not be subsumed into aesthetic categories or terms of emotion such as *han* nor have their narratives conflated with melodrama. The meaning of fear is distinct from pathos, particularly when considering the problems of gender roles and social class. One purpose of Kim Ki-young's film is to deploy the tropes and conventions of melodrama but, by inserting fear where pathos and sympathy should be, to reveal the violence at the heart of sentimental projects such as nation-building. His irony clearly does not prevent the film from projecting a misogynist paranoia onto the working class. However, rather than wrapping this paranoia in a melodramatic narrative that defines good and bad affects by offering proper objects of identification, *The Housemaid* makes it difficult to sublimate the mood of the uncanny into an owned and personalized emotion without also recognizing one's complicity in horrific violence. Hence, every character is compromised by the violence of the house (and nation of houses). The film uses modernist techniques of self-reflexivity to show that there is nothing innocent about the spaces and moods of innocence to which every melodrama seeks to return.