Epilogue

When Yi Yŏng-il proposed his arthouse ideal as the proper foundation for a future Korean national cinema, he referred to aesthetic liberation of and through cinema. As discussed in chapter 1, an analogous connection between film and subjectivity was made contemporaneously on the other side of the Cold War divide in North Korea. Ch'u Min, Yun Tu-hŏn, and Sŏ Kwang-je argued that a film should be a total work of art that incorporates many styles and media into a unified aesthetic experience whose effect would be the subjectification and individualization of a national community that could continue the spirit of the anti-Japanese revolution and resist US imperialism and occupation. Boris Groys traces the continuities between the avant-garde's attempts to radically transform society through artistic experimentation and socialist realism's program for political and economic revolution.[1] Writing under Soviet occupation during late Stalinism, North Korean film theorists came to consider cinema to be the most powerful medium for North Korea's version of such a project of aesthetic and cultural revolution, in large part because of film's synthetic capacity, its bringing together of various senses and sensations into the integrated whole of the artwork. Although this version of aesthetic liberation seems at odds with that of Yi Yŏng-il, who sought to refashion Korean national cinema in the mold of the best of Hollywood and the European arthouse cinema, the versions of aesthetic liberation in North Korea and South Korea are intimately connected; they not only belong to the same geohistorical era of the Cold War but also share an emphasis on the intersection between cinematic experience and the formation of a liberated national subjectivity through national cinema.

The connection of liberation to aesthetics cannot be separated from the problems of melodrama, as Yi himself admits when he states that cinema must remain in line with popular tastes.[2] An Enlightenment notion of liberation of and through the aesthetic could not fully elevate the negative affects of the melodramatic mode, because it is precisely through melodramatic excess that cinema remained connected to the historical experiences of its audiences and to a recognition of the

limits of Cold War ideology to represent the social realities of the two Koreas. The purpose of this book has been to bring affect into a discussion of Korean film and to develop a method of comparison across the Cold War divide without falling back on culturalist interpretations of aesthetic categories like *chŏng* and *han*. This is a challenge not only to nationalism but also our understanding of melodrama, which too often has assumed a direct translation between affects and the social meaning given to them by narrative and discourse. If I have managed to open up some new ways we might interpret the power of melodramatic representation and ideas in tandem with the more mysterious excesses of affect that pervade the mode, then I will have accomplished my purpose.

On the other hand, the concepts of art cinema in the South and the total work of art in the North also contributed to the production of the most aesthetically interesting and politically complicated films of the 1950s and 1960s. Without the idea of liberation of and through the aesthetic, cinema truly did run the risk of becoming mere entertainment or distraction, unable to provoke deeper reflections on life, politics, and social conflict. Yi Yŏng-il rightly thought that in order to become an art, cinema had to move beyond commercialized sentimentality; his mistake was in reducing melodrama to base sentimentality. As I have shown, attempts at creating a total work of art in the North and an art cinema in the South depended on elaborations of the melodramatic mode. In order to explore both the synthetic capacity and the limits of embodied representations through a popular media on the cusp of becoming art, neither avant-garde could ignore the melodramatic mode. Aesthetic experimentation and melodrama were intertwined and not simply because artistic innovation ran up against the political constraints of ideology and censorship and the economic constraints of commodification and development. They were intertwined because the cinematic avant-garde could not bring about the new without also recognizing and interpreting the pasts of its audiences—the existing everyday affects, memories, experiences, and stories that were the raw material for cinema's representation of experience by experience. Using the term melodrama derisively, as Yi Yŏng-il did, associated this attachment to the past with a backward-looking, regressive, and ultimately feminine sentimentality; instead, melodrama was a style of thinking and mimesis without which avant-garde experiments in synthesis, self-consciousness, fragmentation, and political subjectivity would all amount to hollow formalism. If the purpose of the avant-garde is to transform the social through aesthetics, melodrama is not the obverse of such progress and innovation but a point of contact between cinema and mass historical experiences.

Despite its articulation of moral occults, melodrama offers a kind of corrective to the notion of aesthetic liberation or to fantasies of liberation more generally, because of its persistent negativity. The falsity of the happy endings of many Cold War film melodramas that tell of familial reconciliation, national development, revolution, or romantic love should not be attributed primarily to the failure of

the mode to adhere to realism or its tendency to indulge in fantasies of returning to a state of innocence—this falsity is attributable more to the preceding effective depiction of a degree of suffering that could never be fully redeemed by narrative, language, or, certainly, political ideology. In other words, the falsity of the ending is also a result of the virtual experience of reflecting on the pain of experience. The moods of a film melodrama can certainly cue those virtual experiences, using the linguistic dimensions of sound, image, and story to guide the emotions of the viewer toward an ideological endpoint; however, embedded in those same moods are an excess of affective associations. If the ending feels false, that is because the film both provoked and failed to contain those excesses within the unfolding of the narrative. The capacity of the mood of a film melodrama to undo the film's own ideological premises by provoking an excess of negative psychosomatic affect amounts not to a narrative failure of the melodrama genre but to a virtue of the melodramatic mode—a mode of thinking, experiencing, and representing between language and what it fails to signify.