Shifting towards Optimism: Redefining the 1980s South Korean Democracy Movement Through Cinema

Valerie Lombogia

Abstract

As new historical cinema continues to be released and South Korean historical events are gradually being reinterpreted, it is crucial to study the progression of historical representations in order to understand how these events are rearticulated within changing cultural contexts and also evaluate how media contributes to the preservation of historical memory. In this paper, I intend to do this by analyzing the depictions of the 1980s South Korean movement for democracy (or the Minjung Movement) beginning with the Gwangju Massacre. In comparing the different ways this event is portrayed, I aim to assess how the collective memory of this event has been shaped or even redefined, using Marianne Hirsch's framework of postmemory. I will explain how the film *A Taxi Driver* (2017) marks a significant shift in cinematic representations of the Gwangju Massacre, especially when compared to films released about the same event in preceding decades, *May 18* in 2007 and *A Petal* in 1996. I argue that cinematic portrayals of the Gwangju Massacre have evolved from being a narrative of mourning and victimization to one of hopefulness and heroism over the course of twenty years, with *May 18* indicating the beginning of this progression and *A Taxi Driver* illustrating a more apparent shift towards an optimistic perspective. In addition to these three films, I also examine *1987: When the Day Comes* (2017) specifically in comparison with *A Taxi Driver*. With an analysis of this additional film, I will demonstrate how more recent depictions of the Minjung Movement have also come to focus on heroism and contributed to an optimistic narrative about the formation of the South Korean democratic state.

Introduction

During the twenty-first century, historical events have been a common subject in South Korean popular media. In a list of the highest grossing films in South Korea gathered by the Korean Film Council (KOFIC), at least half of the top twenty films depicted historical events ranging from mid-Joseon dynasty to 1980s democratization, with the highest grossing film being *The Admiral: Roaring Currents* which portrayed legendary Joseon naval admiral Yi Sun Sin during what is known as one of his most outstanding victories in the 1597 Battle of Myeongnyang. According to news outlet Chosun Ilbo, the film sold more than 14 million tickets within the first month of its release in 2014. In the list compiled by KOFIC, there were also several films that portrayed the events leading up to the 1980s movement for democracy such as the 1980 Gwangju Massacre,[1] a historic incident where civilian demonstrators were violently put down

1 Scholars refer to this event by different titles such as the Kwangju Democratic Uprising (Choe, 2019) or simply the Gwangju Uprising (Park, 2022), though the event was renamed as the "Gwangju Democratization Movement" by the government in the 1990s after previously being called the "Gwangju Tragedy," (Lee, 2021). In this essay, the event will mainly be referred to as the Gwangju Massacre.

by the military. This event in particular continues to be a source of intense interest for the South Korean people, as the tragedy is frequently depicted in popular media (Hwang, 2022), some recent examples being 2021 TV drama *Youth of May*, 2012 film *26 Years*, and critically acclaimed film *A Taxi Driver* released in 2017. A number of documentaries centering on the Gwangju Massacre have also been produced in recent years such as *Kim-Gun* in 2019, *Round and Around* in 2020, and *Good Light, Good Air* in 2021. The event even became the main subject in a series of K-pop music videos from the boy group SPEED in 2013.

Each of these works offers varying interpretations of the Gwangju Massacre, depending on a number of factors such as the context in which they were produced, the historical perspectives they focus on, and the specific intentions of the creator. Scholarly discussions on interpretations of media about the Gwangju Massacre as well as the 1980s democratization movement more broadly often reference Marianne Hirsch's concept of "postmemory." Hirsch describes postmemory as the relationship of the new or second generation with traumatic experiences and events of the previous generation — events that happened before the second generation was even born (2008). As time goes on and new historical interpretations are developed, postmemory will continue to fluctuate, thus, postmemory and the shifting depictions of the democracy movement over time are inextricably linked.

As new media continues to be released and historical events are being reinterpreted, it is crucial to study the progression of historical representations in order to understand how these events are rearticulated within changing cultural contexts and also evaluate how media contributes to the preservation of historical memory. I intend to do this by analyzing the depictions of the 1980s South Korean movement for democracy, also known as the Minjung Movement, beginning with the Gwangju Massacre. In comparing the different ways this event is portrayed, I aim to assess how the collective memory of this event has been shaped or even redefined. Although there is some scholarship analyzing film representations of the movement from the 1990s into the early 2010s, there are fewer studies examining this cinema as it progressed into the late 2010s, when there was a surge of new media produced about the Minjung Movement, so I hope to contribute to this gap in scholarship. In this paper, I will explain how the film *A Taxi Driver* (2017) marks a significant shift in cinematic representations of the Gwangju Massacre, especially when compared to films released about the same event in preceding decades, *May 18* in 2007 and *A Petal* in 1996. These are three films that I found that center completely on the Gwangju Massacre and were released approximately ten years apart, each situated in a historical context that will be significant to my discussion of postmemory.

Through my analysis of these films, I argue that cinematic portrayals of the Gwangju Massacre have evolved from being a narrative of mourning and victimization to one of hopefulness and heroism over the course of twenty years, with *May 18* indicating the beginning of this progression and *A Taxi Driver* illustrating a more apparent shift towards an optimistic perspective. To define my application of the term "mourning," I will investigate the ways in which these films *invite* viewers to mourn using themes of victimization and characters who exemplify a state of mourning. As for "hopefulness," I will apply this term as a *perspective* through which both the viewer and characters perceive the events in the films; it is a term I use interchangeably with optimism.

In addition to these three films, I also look to examine *1987: When the Day Comes* (2017) specifically in comparison with *A Taxi Driver*. Although it focuses on a separate event during the Minjung Movement,

the 1987 June Uprisings, there are significant parallels that can be drawn between this film and *A Taxi Driver*. With an analysis of this additional film, I will demonstrate how more recent depictions of the Minjung Movement have also come to focus on heroism and contributed to an optimistic narrative about the formation of the South Korean democratic state.

An Overview of Democratization in Contemporary South Korea

1960s Political Dissent Under Syngman Rhee and Park Chung Hee

South Korea is no stranger to the struggle for democracy with some of the most significant examples in the country's history being the 1960 April student protests followed by the extreme political dissent during the Park Chung Hee regime in the sixties and seventies. In 1960, student protests erupted across the country after South Korea's first president Syngman Rhee attempted to steal another term as president and was heavily criticized for political corruption. This series of demonstrations became known as the 4.19 Student Revolution and resulted in Rhee being forced to step down from his position as president after intense public pressure (Hwang, 2022). Following soon after the overthrow of Syngman Rhee was the establishment of President Park Chung Hee's dictatorship which extended from the 1960s into the late 1970s. Park seized power in 1961, and under his rule, South Korea became one of the most militarized states in the world (Eckert, 2016). Park faced mass opposition during the sixties especially when he intended to normalize relations between South Korea and Japan; these protests reached a peak in June 1964 when the number of student protesters in Seoul amassed to over ten thousand, forcing the government to declare a state of emergency in the city (Hwang, 2022). As he was confronted with increasing resistance, Park enacted the Yusin Constitution in 1972, which not only enabled him to serve as president for life but also gave him the power to suppress all political dissent (Kim, 2010). Although political expression and protests had been severely restricted in the 1970s, the South Korean people's fervor for democracy would eventually come to a boiling point very soon after Park Chung Hee's death in 1979.

1980s Movement for Democracy Against Chun Doo Hwan's Military Regime

The militarized suppression of political protest that occurred during Park Chung Hee's regime laid the groundwork for the events of the 1980s democratization movement, which began promptly after Park's assassination and Chun Doo Hwan's rise to power. In 1979, Chun staged a coup d'état by arresting the country's military chief of staff in order to take control of the state. To suppress national protests to his power grab, he declared martial law in Seoul which eventually extended to the rest of the country in May of 1980 (Kim, 2011). Demonstrations opposing Chun's military rule were taking place across the country, but in Gwangju, a city located in the South Jeolla province of South Korea, resistance was met with an especially violent response. The Gwangju Massacre began on the morning of May 18 when paratroops were deployed to different universities in the city where they brutally beat and captured student protesters. Eyewitness accounts report that civilians, including women and young girls, were stripped down and assaulted by the soldiers (Scott-Stokes & Lee, 2000). On May 21, the conflict between protesters and the military reached its peak when crowds gathered to demonstrate outside of City Hall and troops began using machine guns to slaughter multitudes of civilians (Hwang, 2022). The military retreated later that day after facing armed resistance from protesters, but the troops eventually returned on May 27 to completely subdue the civilian militia,

putting an end to the massacre after ten days (Kim, 2010). Although there is no way to determine an exact number, civilian deaths were estimated from 200 to upwards of 2,000 with thousands more injured (Scott-Stokes & Lee, 2000). The events at Gwangju become remembered as one of the most shockingly violent instances of government repression in South Korean history.

Aftermath of the 1980 Gwangju Massacre

The Gwangju Massacre marked the beginning of the 1980s democratization movement, or the Minjung Movement, but details of what occurred at Gwangju remained mostly unknown to the general public until the 1990s. Any media coverage or information about the incident was strictly censored by the government during Chun Doo Hwan's rule (Park, 2022), but students and citizens secretly spread information which aided in fueling the people's sentiment for democracy throughout the 1980s (Kim, 2011). Footage of the massacre filmed by foreign journalists was secretly compiled into documentaries by underground organizations in South Korea and circulated to raise awareness about the incident (Cho, 2022). These collections of footage, which were referred to as "Gwangju Video," were screened secretly at universities and churches during the mid-1980s, further inciting the people's movement for democracy (Park, 2022). Media continued to be produced about the Gwangju Massacre even after the end of Chun's regime in 1987; these included several independent documentaries which brought more public attention to the massacre as well as fictionalized narratives referencing to the incident such as TV drama *Sandglass* in 1995 and the film *Peppermint Candy* released in 1999.

The Minjung Movement eventually hit its climax in 1987 after public outrage regarding a series of events, the first being the death of Seoul National University student Park Jong Chul in January of the same year. During a time when police often arrested and tortured protesters, Park died of excessive torture during police interrogation. The news of this incident incited the fury of student protesters in particular, as demonstrations surged the following spring (Hwang, 2022). Later that year, Chun Doo Hwan announced another indirect election with plans to name Roh Tae Woo, one of his closest military advisors, as his successor. Public backlash was immediate as activist groups and leaders expressed their opposition, and demonstrations against this decision intensified across the country (Kim, 2006). When Yonsei University student Yi Han Yeol was hospitalized after a fatal blow to his head from a tear gas canister in the midst of a protest, public outroar reached a peak as a million demonstrators took to the streets every day during the month of June (Hwang, 2022). As a result of what is now known as the 1987 June Uprisings, the authoritarian government conceded to popular demands for direct presidential elections at the end of June (Kim, 2020),[2] a decision that gradually brought the democracy movement to a close as South Korea transitioned into a democratized state.

In the decade following the Minjung Movement, conversations about what happened in Gwangju were gradually becoming less stigmatized. After the end of Chun's regime, the government began efforts to compensate its victims. This was initiated by the establishment of the Special Committee on Investigation during Roh Tae Woo's administration in 1988 (Lee, 2021), and in the same year, a hearing was held by the National Assembly during which personal accounts of the repression and violence that took place in 1980 were described publicly for the first time (Kim, 2011). However, no legal action was taken to punish actors involved

2 What also pressured the Chun Doo Hwan regime to institute direct elections were the approaching Olympic games which were to be hosted in Seoul the following year. An American ambassador in South Korea at the time advised Chun against the use of violence to subdue protesters (Hwang, 2022).

until the mid-nineties during Kim Young Sam's presidency.[3] In 1995, the issue of the massacre was brought to the national stage when Kim authorized legislation to formally charge individuals involved not only in the military violence at Gwangju but also the 1980 coupe to seize the presidency by Chun Doo Hwan and Roh Tae Woo, both of whom were arrested and imprisoned in 1997 (Kim, 2011). In the same year, a national cemetery for the victims was built by the government, and May 18 was established as a national holiday to commemorate the victims and their sacrifice for democratization (Na, 2006).

The Framework of Postmemory and the Post Democracy Generation

The prevalence of media depictions of the Gwangju Massacre during the twenty-first century has led to an influx of scholarship about media representations of the event as well as the Minjung Movement more broadly. Scholars have looked to investigate how present-day Korean writers and audiences form a meaningful connection to these events when they were not part of the generation that experienced them firsthand; some of them attribute fascination with this time period to the influence of the affective mode in which the events of the movement have been presented in modern works of cinema. Steve Choe argues that the narrative form combined with the appeal to emotion presented in historical fiction pieces about the movement enable the audience to not only remember the historical event but also develop some level of a relationship with the memories of it, though these memories were never their own (2022). Choe describes an "affective structure" produced in cinema and television that evokes feelings of sympathy, outrage, and sorrow in its viewers, leading them to political action and pursuit of social justice after watching. Similarly, HyeYoung Cho argues that the directors of the documentaries *Kim-Gun and Round and Around* form a connection with the events of the Gwangju Massacre using a different form of narrative created through archival images. Their interest is rooted in the way they are able to not only experience and engage with the historical event through images but also deconstruct and reinterpret this history (2022).

These interpretations of the post-democracy generation's interest in the events of the 1980s democracy movement epitomize Hirsch's concept of "postmemory." As detailed earlier, Hirsch describes postmemory as the relationship of the second generation, which in this case would be the post-democracy generation, with the "collective or cultural" trauma of the previous generation (2012) or the democratization generation. The trauma from these events were transmitted to the second generation so strongly that they almost experience these memories as if they were their own. In her own analysis of how the Holocaust continues to be remembered in works from descendants of its survivors, Hirsch explains how the postmemory generation uses archival materials like photography as its primary medium for the conveyance of trauma. She further describes postmemory as a "structure of inter- and trans-generational transmission of traumatic knowledge and experience," even referring to it as a consequence of recalling traumatic experiences but specifically for the second generation. Thus, postmemory's connection to the past is not through recollection (of the memory) but by "imaginative investment, projects, and creation" (Hirsch, 2008).

3 Although it was Kim Young Sam's administration that legislated the 1995 Special Act of May 18, which sanctioned legal action against individuals responsible for the Gwangju Massacre, this action was seen as a reversal of Kim's earlier opinion that the events of the massacre should be left to "historical judgement," (Kim, 2011). There was some speculation that enacting this legislation had an ulterior motive of drawing attention away from recent accusations that Kim had accepted illegal funds from Roh Tae Woo for his 1992 presidential campaign (Yoon, 1996).

Hirsch's term of postmemory can be applied to media such as TV and film that is based on the traumatic experiences of those who witnessed historical events, thus emphasizing the significance of media's role in conveying history to a generation that did not experience it. This paper centers on how my chosen films function to reinterpret historical events, therefore influencing postmemory, in other words, how modern viewers remember and are affected by these events along with how these events are preserved in collective memory. After contextualizing these films through narrative analysis, I will demonstrate how they contribute to the formation of the collective memory of the post-democracy generation, or postmemory, in the final section of this paper.

Brief Background on Reception of Films

In the first section of this essay, I intend to analyze three films released across three decades, all of which depict their own versions of the Gwangju Massacre. The earliest film is *A Petal* directed by Jang Sun-woo and released in 1996. According to the Korean Film Council's database, the movie itself was very successful at Korean award shows and even won a handful of awards at international film festivals. The next film is *May 18* which was released in 2007 and directed by Kim Ji-hoon. *May 18* ranks 40th on KOFIC's list of highest grossing films in South Korea and is based on real survivors of the massacre whose story inspired the popular protest song "March for the Beloved" (Hwang, 2023). The third film I intend to analyze is *A Taxi Driver* directed by Jang Hoon and released in 2017. It is based on the true story of German journalist Jurgen Hinzpeter who documented the events of the massacre as they happened. This film, in particular, was well received among critics, winning several awards from domestic award shows as well as from international film festivals. According to KBS World, it drew more than 12 million viewers in South Korea less than two months after its premiere, and it currently stands as the 13th highest grossing film in South Korean history.

In the second section of this paper, I will incorporate the analysis of a fourth film titled *1987: When the Day Comes*. This film was directed by Jang Joon-hwan and released towards the end of 2017. Focusing on the events leading up the 1987 June Uprisings, the film won a number of awards from Korean awards shows including Best Film at the 2018 Blue Dragon Film Awards (Conran, 2018) and the Grand Prize at the 2018 Baeksang Arts Awards (Jin, 2018). The South Korean president at the time of the film's release, Moon Jae-in, praised the film after viewing it for the first time, stating that he "cried all throughout the whole movie and was touched by it" (Yonhap, 2018).

An Evolution from Mourning to Hopefulness in Gwangju Films

A Portrait of Gwangju Trauma and Victimhood in A Petal

A Petal portrays the Gwangju Massacre's aftermath by focusing on the grief and trauma of one survivor. The story centers on a deeply traumatized, unnamed 15-year-old girl who begins to follow an abusive drunken man after wandering through the countryside on her own. Her story is told in fragments with scenes flashing between the different people and places she encountered as she roamed in a state of madness. When she sleeps, she is tormented by nightmares of what she experienced during the massacre, and she often has sudden outbursts where she screams and cries throughout the film. The people she meets simply do not know what to make of her and wonder what happened for her to be this way. Most of them reject and abuse her, particularly the abusive man she begins to follow as he repeatedly beats and rapes her out of frustration with her behavior. At the end of the film, she leads the man to her mother's grave where she

has a moment of clarity; the girl recounts the story of her brother who was killed after demonstrating in Gwangju and her mother who was shot down by soldiers at a protest. She is suffering particularly from the intense guilt she feels for letting go of her mother's hand and leaving her behind to die.

A Petal works particularly to convey a narrative of victimization for the survivors of the Gwangju Massacre, representing their innocence through the young girl and depicting her in contrast with the cruelty of the military and the abuse she faces after the massacre. The film begins with real footage of the military's violent suppression of Gwangju protesters, contrasted by the cheerful background music playing "Petal" by Kim Choo Ja, a song about lovers who parted ways. These scenes of violence are juxtaposed with the following scene of the girl singing and dancing to the same song. Later in the film, the girl recalls this scene from the beginning where she was singing, and through a flashback, it is revealed to the viewer the girl was dancing and singing for her brother's friends. This memory portrays the girl during a state of innocence, as the person she was before becoming a victim of

Figure 1. The girl smiles as she sings and dances to "Petal" in A Petal (Miracin, 1996).

the massacre (Fig. 1). This scene provides a brief characterization for the girl; the younger sister who annoys her brother's friends and will sing immediately at someone's request. She narrates this memory with a tone of voice filled with grief, in tears as she recounts her blissful past life. The following scene also highlights the girl's innocence with a dream-like sequence where the story becomes animated in the style of a children's picture book. The girl is voicing over the scenes as she revisits her abandoned home in Gwangju. Childishly, she personifies the different rooms of her house, despairing over how lonely the kitchen must be now that it is empty or how sad the floor might be without her to take naps on it. The girl's narration in this scene are the most coherent and detailed instances of dialogue that she has throughout the whole film. These memories of happiness are the easiest for her to clearly recount and describe, compared to her traumatic memories that she can only process in bits and pieces. As they are situated towards the beginning of the film, these two scenes create a brief image of the girl before the massacre, serving as a point of reference for her clearly deteriorated mental state seen throughout the rest of the story.

The film frequently utilizes juxtaposition to emphasize the girl's victimization as the narrative is told in fragments; scenes cut in between the girl's suffering and her happy past memories. Several scenes depict extremely graphic scenes of abuse where she is sexually assaulted multiple times by the drunk man, and these scenes often appear with little warning; the jarring manner in which slivers of the girl's story are edited together in this film reflect her scattered and delirious state of mind. Even after experiencing the events in Gwangju, the girl entered a cycle of victimization as she continued to face violence from the various people she encountered as well as psychological violence she inflicted on herself. In his own interpretation of *A Petal*, Steve Choe explains how the film's depiction of extreme violence intentionally provokes the emotions of the viewer and, therefore, creates an opportunity for viewers to reflect on the ethics of violence

in cinema, citing scholarly critiques of the film's intense violence (2019). Rather than as an impetus for critical reflection, I will explain how the use of violence in *A Petal* is more related to the historical context of the time period during which the film was released later in my paper.

In her state of mental ruin, the girl is constantly mourning her brother and mother. This can be seen throughout the film when she is able to speak in small bursts and frequently mentions her mother having a hole in her chest or when she speaks familiarly to the abusive man, calling him "brother" in confusion. One scene shows a particularly ominous and unsettling illustration of the girl's mental state where she dreams that she sees herself in the reflection of a window, the innocent version of herself from before the massacre. This reflection suddenly turns into the pale and bloodied face of a ghost who whispers to her, asking what she did to her mother as the girl shrieks and bangs her fists against the glass. This encounter with the ghost symbolizes the girl's guilt for her mother's death and unwillingness to confront her traumatic memories. In both her dreams and waking moments, the girl is agonizing over these memories. This film works to represent the constant state of mourning and guilt that survivors of the Gwangju Massacre experience, something no one else could even begin to understand. While some of the people she meets show her kindness like the owner of the pub who takes her into her care, the girl still eventually runs away. The way the girl leaves those that want to help her yet lingers with the abusive man can be interpreted as the girl seeking punishment for leaving her mother behind. Efforts to help her are futile because her mourning process requires her continued suffering. Through the representation of the mourning girl, *A Petal* seeks to portray the gravity of the Gwangju Massacre's aftermath and invite the viewers to mourn not only the massacre victims who fought and died for democracy but also survivors like the girl who was blameless and had no part in the demonstrations yet will continue to suffer from the trauma of the events for the rest of her life.

Transitioning Towards Hopefulness in May 18

While *A Petal* was focused on mourning the victims of the massacre, *May 18* shows a slight shift towards a more hopeful and optimistic perspective ten years after the release of *A Petal*. This film portrays the Gwangju Massacre from the first day up until the most brutal clash between demonstrators and the military takes place. The narrative works to detail the personal lives and experiences of the civilians involved, focusing primarily on the story of Min Woo, a taxi driver whose younger brother, Jin Woo, becomes involved in student protests. *May 18* aims to represent the people of Gwangju's ability to unite in the midst of their tragic circumstances. Several other characters in the film such as Jin Woo's school teacher and Min Woo's employer were originally against the demonstrations but then have a change of heart and take up arms to fight against the tyranny of the troops, similarly to Min Woo who becomes fully invested in the movement and the civilian militia after witnessing the death of his brother. The religious themes that come up frequently in the film are also indicative of the people's sense of hope and belief that they are fighting on the right side. When Min Woo, Jin Woo, and Shin Ae first witness the military's violence, they immediately seek out the reverend who condemns the soldiers' actions. Later on, even the reverend is depicted joining the civilian militia and asking to be armed like the other civilian fighters. The film also portrays the moments of victory for the civilians like when the civilian militia fights back and successfully drives the military to retreat on the fifth day. In this scene, the citizens smile and cheer; their mood is infectious and arouses the audience to join in their celebration. Though they are brief, these representations of triumph and the sentimental

scenes in which the Gwangju civilians come together illustrate a significant tonal shift when compared to the representation of the massacre in *A Petal*. The people are being victimized by the oppressive military, but rather than surrendering, they are doing whatever they can to fight back. This is how *May 18* begins to show a departure from a completely victimized portrayal of the massacre in *A Petal*, though it is important to note that victimization remains a significant aspect of the film.

While conveying the Gwangju civilians' spirit of perseverance, *May 18* simultaneously places a heavy emphasis on their victimization during the most violent stages of the massacre. On the fourth day of the movement, a crowd of demonstrators amass in front of the City Hall and celebrate as they hear the announcement that the troops plan to withdraw. They sing and shout chants like "Away with Chun Doo Hwan! Withdraw the martial law!" and the victorious background music ramps up as they wait for the soldiers to leave. This scene is further dramatized as the crowd of civilians begins to sing the national anthem. As they are singing, the soldiers suddenly open fire on the crowd. The tune of the anthem, which took on an emotional tone while the civilians sang in unison with their hands on their hearts, now turns menacing as the music continues blaring over the scenes of helpless civilians being mowed down and the sounds of gunfire ringing in the air. It is a pitiful and dystopian-like scene where citizens were asserting their allegiance to their country to which the soldiers responded to by murdering the civilians they had sworn to protect.

Another scene displaying the victimization of the Gwangju civilians comes directly after the soldiers fired on the protesters in front of City Hall. The local hospital becomes overrun with the number of patients coming in, many of them already dead by the time they are being seen by doctors. The head doctor makes the desperate decision to go out with an ambulance and tend to the injured on the site of the fighting. He drives out onto the streets and into the middle of a gunfight, signaling to the soldiers that he does not mean any harm, but as he attempts to rescue a downed civilian, the military fires and kills him. This scene shows how the people are absolutely helpless against the ruthless soldiers who do not hesitate to shoot down even doctors trying to provide medical attention to the wounded. But even more than the doctor, the character that encapsulates the narrative of a Gwangju Massacre victim is the protagonist, Min Woo. From the beginning of the story, Min Woo was never interested in demonstrations or the fight for democracy. He often reprimanded his brother for participating in protests, begging him to stay at home where it was safe. It was only after Jin Woo's death that he became involved in the civilian militia, mostly to avenge his brother rather than fighting for democracy. Even in his final moments, he refused to be labeled as a rebel with his last words being "We're not rebels!" before soldiers shot him down. While democracy was a recurring theme throughout the film and was the main motivator for protesters like Jin Woo, many of the civilians who eventually joined the movement were like Min Woo; they were not rebels or interested in democratization. This was a fight they joined out of necessity in order to survive. But in the fight to survive, they all eventually became victims of the military's brutality.

Although this film depicted a slightly more hopeful image of the Gwangju Massacre in the civilians' will to survive and fight for democracy, the film ultimately concludes with a message of mourning as everyone fighting in the civilian militia dies a tragic and bloody death at the hands of the troops. After Min Woo's death, the following scene shows Shin Ae as she drives through the neighborhoods of Gwangju, shouting in a microphone and asking the citizens of Gwangju to remember them and their efforts as the camera

zooms in on her tear-streaked face. This scene solicits sympathy from the viewers and implores them to remember and mourn the civilians of Gwangju who lost their lives fighting for their freedom. The final scene portrays an imagined version of reality as Min Woo, Shin Ae, Jin Woo, and the other civilians who died during the film pose together for a picture on Shin Ae and Min Woo's wedding day, both of whom are dressed in the attire of a bride and groom. The background music playing over this scene is "March for the Beloved," a song written to commemorate the death of two real-life activists who the story of Min Woo and Shin Ae is based on.[4] The camera zooms in and pans across the laughing and smiling faces of the civilians, recalling the simpler times at the beginning of the film where they lived in peace, but Shin Ae stands out as the only person looking straight ahead with a serious expression (Fig. 2). This scene presents an imagined portrait of what life might have been

Figure 2. Shin Ae stands unsmiling with the rest of the Gwangju civilians in May 18 (CJ Entertainment, 2017).

like if the massacre had never occurred and these civilians were still alive while also representing Shin Ae's position as the sole survivor in the group who will grieve their deaths for the rest of her life. In this way, Shin Ae is presented as the primary figure of mourning by commanding the sympathy of the viewer and inviting them to mourn the victims with her.

Focusing on Optimism and Heroism in A Taxi Driver

A Taxi Driver takes a unique perspective on the Gwangju Massacre, shifting from the conventional viewpoint of Gwangju civilians to outsiders – a Seoul taxi driver and a German news reporter. This representation of the Gwangju Massacre is significantly different from past narratives in that it portrays the events of the massacre in a more hopeful and optimistic light. Focusing mostly on the perspective of Man Seob, a taxi driver from Seoul, this film tells the story of how the driver and German journalist Jurgen Hinzpeter work together to document the atrocities committed by the military and get Jurgen safely out of Gwangju to deliver the news to foreign presses, during a critical time when Gwangju's newspapers were being completely censored and communication outside the city was cut off. The film often depicts the people's perseverance and passion for their cause which can be seen as soon as Man Seob and Jurgen arrive in Gwangju. They run into a truck of student protesters who are ecstatic to find out Jurgen is a foreign reporter that intends to tell their story to the world. Jurgen films the students as they sing: "We fight for justice! Live and die together! We would rather die standing than live on our knees!" This scene depicts a very hopeful and moving image of the students. They are driving through Gwangju's ravaged and deserted streets; many of them are visibly bleeding and injured, but none of this dampens their cheerful, happy-go-lucky attitudes. The image of the students from the viewpoint of

4 These activists were killed during the Gwangju Massacre, and in 1982, a ceremony was held for their "marriage-in-death." This final scene in May 18 can also be seen as a representation of the original ceremony for the activists. "March for the Beloved" was written to honor this marriage, but it later gained popularity as a protest song (Hwang, 2022). It is still sung during demonstrations in modern-day South Korea, see this example of its use during the candlelight protests for the resignation of Park Geun Hye in 2016: https://youtu.be/j3ezBIj1mJw?si=Aqlt2-o_EVERx9Cd.

Jurgen's film camera as he zooms in on their prideful expressions emphasizes the sentimental and hopeful tone of this scene. Even in their current state, they refuse to lose hope or be disheartened.

Later in the film is another scene that demonstrates the Gwangju civilians' resilience. Man Seob and Jurgen, along with one of the university students, drive through a demonstration happening in front of the Provincial Office. Jae Sik, the student acting as Jurgen's translator, rolls down the window and announces their presence as a reporter and driver who are here to document and tell their story. The camera angle gives the viewer the perspective of looking out from the car and directly at the smiling and cheering civilians as they make way for Man Seob's taxi. A close-up shot of Man Seob's expression clearly illustrates his wonder as he looks out at the crowd of people applauding and waving at them while a rising and hopeful soundtrack plays in the background. This scene is a poignant and inspiring image of the people of Gwangju coming together; even as the city is locked down and under military rule, the civilians are smiling and dancing. The demonstration looks like a patriotic celebration as the people wave around Korean flags. Like the scene of the students on the truck, this scene shows how the civilians' spirit will not be broken. It also highlights the diversity of the Gwangju demonstrators, with many different people in the crowd ranging from small children to teenagers to the elderly, contrary to Man Seob's previous impression that the demonstrators were all rowdy and ungrateful university students. We can see that in Gwangju, people of all ages and backgrounds are part of the movement.

Rather than portraying the Gwangju civilians as victims, *A Taxi Driver* emphasizes their heroism not only in the fight against the troops but also through their efforts to spread the truth about Gwangju. In a scene where Jurgen, Man Seob, and Jae Sik are having dinner at the home of a local family, Jurgen talks casually about how he became a reporter for the money. This scene then cuts to the local news station where Gwangju reporters are printing newspapers with headlines proclaiming the truth of the injustice happening in Gwangju, knowing that doing so would risk not only their jobs but also their lives if they were discovered, and eventually they are arrested as the following scene shows the military storming in and shutting down the presses. This scene is juxtaposed with the previous scene of Jurgen by showing how the Gwangju reporters are not doing their job for money but to make their stories known and to fight the oppression of the government who is attempting to silence them. These reporters are emphasized as true heroes in this scene as they heroically seek to report the truth despite the consequences.

The civilians continue to make sacrifices and risk their lives by helping Man Seob and Jurgen deliver the footage outside of the city. In a later scene, the military police realize Jurgen is a reporter and start chasing after him along with Man Seob and Jae Sik. At one point during the chase, Jae Sik is caught and beaten by one of the head officers. Holding onto Jae Sik, the officer calls out to Jurgen and Man Seob who hear him from the balcony of a nearby building. He attempts to barter with them and demands Jurgen's footage in exchange for Jae Sik's life. In a noble act of self-sacrifice, Jae Sik calls out to them in English and tells them he will hold off the soldier. With a shaky voice, he makes what will be his final request: "Go now and show the world what's happening in here." Jae Sik protects the footage and helps Jurgen and Man Seob to get away safely, but in doing so, he loses his life which they discover when they later return to the hospital to find his dead body. Intentionally, the scene of Jae Sik's death is not shown to the audience. The last we see of him while he is still alive is when he makes the sacrifice to hold off the military, and in not showing his gruesome and tragic death, the film preserves

his dignity and image as a hero. The audience will remember him for his final actions and not a bloody image of what happened to him in his last moments. In a similar situation, the Gwangju taxi driver who boarded Man Seob and Jurgen at his house helps them to escape from the military chasing them on

Figure 3. Gwangju taxi driver Hwang Tae Sul sacrifices himself by reversing into the soldiers in A Taxi Driver (Showbox, 2017).

the highway. To stall the last two military vehicles on their trail and ensure that they can safely get away, the Gwangju driver reverses his taxi and crashes into the soldiers, sacrificing his life. In this scene, the driver's taxi speeds out of the frame and the audience does not see the crash but hears the collision in the distance. The viewers are left with the emotional expression of the driver's face and his heroic act of sacrifice to remember him by (Fig. 3). Although they eventually died, Jae Sik and the Gwangju driver's honor is preserved by not showing their death and instead focusing on their heroism.

Overall, *A Taxi Driver* presents a perspective on the Gwangju Massacre that was not commonly portrayed in past works through its emphasis on Jurgen and the role he played in the movement. By focusing the film more on Jurgen's task of documenting events and less on the military suppression of the protesters, the events of the massacre can be seen in a more heroic light. The actions of the protesters were made more intentional because of the incorporation of this objective: helping a reporter in exposing their truth to the world. *A Taxi Driver* reifies the "goal" of the movement to achieve democracy by creating a more specific and tangible means to do so. The perspective of Jurgen's involvement also creates a more optimistic outlook on the massacre by directing the audience's attention to a positive outcome of the tragedy. Jurgen was able to make it safely out of Gwangju and successfully alerted foreign presses of the violence that happened there. The film did not end with the military's final suppression of civilians and tragic loss of life in the way that *May 18* did. Instead, the story skips ahead to 2003, when Jurgen is accepting an award for his work in Gwangju in a democratized South Korea. He acknowledges not only Man Seob but also the citizens who assisted them in his acceptance speech. Rather than fixating on the injustice of the citizens' deaths, the film shows that their efforts were not fruitless as news of the Gwangju Massacre eventually became widespread knowledge and South Korea developed into a democratized state.

What was originally a perspective focused on depicting the oppression and suffering of the Gwangju civilians in *A Petal* now shifted to one that emphasizes their resilience and heroism in *A Taxi Driver.* With this viewpoint, the filmmakers of *A Taxi Driver* not only sought to provide a different viewpoint of the Gwangju Massacre, but they also had an intention to reframe these past events. An event widely known as the one of the most horrific tragedies in South Korean history was reframed in this film to be perceived as a source of national pride through its emphasis on heroism and the Gwangju civilians' contributions to the creation of a democratized state. This sense of national pride was beginning to emerge in the narrative of *May 18* in its depictions of the civilian militia's noble fight for democracy but was overshadowed by the film's focus on the tragedy of their defeat and the ruthlessness of the military suppression, and in *A Petal*, any concept of national pride was completely absent as

the plot concentrated on representing the trauma and suffering of the girl who was a victim of the massacre. These media depictions show a gradual progression towards viewing the events of the Gwangju Massacre through a lens of national pride. In the next half of this paper, I intend to explain the parallels between *A Taxi Driver* and a film about the 1987 June Uprisings which were also regarded as a national tragedy during 1980s democratization titled *1987: When the Day Comes* and how both of these works contribute to a nationalistic narrative of the democracy's formation.

Developing a National Narrative in 1987: When the Day Comes and A Taxi Driver

Released the same year as *A Taxi Driver*, *1987* was directed by Jang Joon-hwan and is based on the true events that led up to the June Uprisings in 1987. The film begins with the death of Seoul National University student Park Jong Chul at the hands of police after being questioned about student activist leaders and follows the story of how the government attempted to conceal the truth of his murder. The second part of the film introduces the story of Yonsei University student Yeon Hee and her uncle's involvement in the pro-democracy movement along with her relationship with Yi Han Yeol, a dedicated student activist at her school.

Similar to *A Taxi Driver*, this film was a contemporary interpretation of a significant historical event during the 1980s Minjung Movement and looked to emphasize the hopeful and heroic side of these events. It does this by recounting the investigation of Park Jong Chul's death step by step, addressing the role of every player involved in revealing the truth. Beginning with the Seoul prosecutor who refused to authorize the cremation of the student's body without notifying his family of his death, the story depicts how the truth about his murder is spread throughout the country. Like a chain reaction, the news is first leaked to reporters who quickly print headlines, evoking public outrage over the student's death. Then, university students mobilized to express their resentment towards the government through mass demonstrations, and as the news gained increasing traction, the police and government became frantic to shut down rumors and suppress protesters. A variety of actors worked together to fight the government's censorship from the forensic examiner who performed Park Jong Chul's autopsy to the prison guard who passed on information about the specific officers responsible for the student's murder to a Catholic activist group. These details are eventually made public at an event commemorating the Gwangju Massacre through an announcement from a Catholic priest after which all the involved police are brought to justice. This form of narrative in which the film focuses on several different characters at a time and their contribution to the plot demonstrates the united effort of civilians from various backgrounds to attain justice for Park Jong Chul. No character was specified as the singular protagonist in this film because everyone played a part in being the hero. *A Taxi Driver* places a similar emphasis on revealing the truth which is done with the help of various Gwangju civilians like Jae Sik who helps translate, the Gwangju drivers who repair Man Seob's taxi, and the family who gives them a meal and a place to stay. The two films are identical in how they represent the community coming together to deliver the truth to the public.

Utilization of a Transformation Narrative in 1987 and A Taxi Driver

In *1987*, Yeon Hee is one of the only main characters who is completely fictionalized, but her role and narrative of transformation in the film represents the importance of holding onto hopefulness. Throughout the story, Yeon Hee is extremely apprehensive of the pro-democracy

movement; in her first appearance, she reprimands her uncle for asking her assistance in passing messages from an imprisoned activist. Her resentment is rooted in her trauma of losing her father because of union activism, so most of her scenes and dialogue are poignant displays of emotion that tap into her traumatic past. When student activist Yi Han Yeol attempts to recruit her to the student movement, she criticizes him with the following line: "You think you can change the world? Your ideals and dreams... Don't you think about your family? Stop dreaming and wake up." During the film, Yeon Hee frequently condemns the protests not because she disagrees with democracy but because she believes there is no point in challenging governmental authority. She remains firm on her stance until the very end of the film when she sees the news of Han Yeol's hospitalization after being struck by a tear gas canister during a protest. The last scene shows Yeon Hee running through the streets after reading the news; the camera zooms in on her distraught expression and tear-streaked face. As she runs, protesters begin swarming the streets. She tries to avoid them, but they begin to fill every block. One protester pulls Yeon Hee up onto a bus, and the camera zooms in closely on her expression as she breaks down in tears at the sight in front of her. The camera slowly pans around her to reveal what must be hundreds of thousands of protesters chanting in unison: "Long live democracy! Down with the dictatorship!" As the camera zooms out, the viewers see Yeon Hee's small figure staring out at the view of the crowd from on top of the bus. Yeon Hee, who so vehemently opposed these activist movements, begins to hold her fist in the air and chant along with the other protesters. There is no dialogue that indicates why Yeon Hee started running, but her confused and anxious expression makes it seem as if she was searching for something. Galvanized by the horrific news of her friend, she dashes through the streets in search of what she can do about this situation, and she finds her answer in the scene of demonstrators. Yeon Hee previously believed the movement was a hopeless cause, but after grasping its full magnitude and knowing Han Yeol contributed to its development, she finally decides to put her faith into it. Her emotional transition into joining the movement is a defining aspect of the film's message to never give up hope.

This narrative of personal transformation is a tool used by the filmmakers to better communicate the heroic and hopeful sentiment surrounding these events and, in turn, the narrative about the formation of the nation. Paralleling *1987, A Taxi Driver* employs an identical storyline of character transformation with the story of Man Seob who went from being hugely skeptical of the democracy movement to someone who risked his life to oppose the autocracy and uphold the truth. Both Man Seob and Yeon Hee have a scene in which they reach an emotional turning point. For Man Seob, this happens when he decides in the middle of the story that assisting Jurgen is too dangerous; as a single dad, he cannot afford to risk his life and decides to escape from Gwangju on his own. Not even Jurgen can fault him for this. As Man Seob begins the drive back to Seoul, he sings to himself quietly, recalling to the viewer the time of innocence at the beginning of the film where he happily sang along to the radio as he drove, but this scene is clearly devoid of the cheerfulness from back then. Without any background music, the silence feels heavy as Man Seob sings, and the camera angle remains fixed on his face as he drives, giving the audience a full view of his facial expressions. Under what seems like a neutral expression, there is an uneasiness to Man Seob's features, and he appears restless as he shifts slightly in his seat. Gradually, Man Seob's face contorts into one of absolute anguish; his voice breaks during his song and tears begin to stream down his face (Fig. 4). As much as Man Seob wished

to return to his life in Seoul, the bloodshed he witnessed in Gwangju weighed too heavily in his mind, and he finds himself unable to go back to being a simple bystander. Man Seob whips his taxi around in a U-turn and begins his journey back to Gwangju to become an active participant of the movement and help Jurgen deliver the truth.

Characters such as Man Seob and Yeon Hee are who the audience can most identify with because they represent outsiders to the movement. In an interview with Screen International, *A Taxi Driver* director Jang Hoon spoke about the way that viewers can relate to Man Seob because of his identity as an ordinary man from Seoul (Noh, 2017). Yeon Hee's ordinariness is emphasized at the beginning of her story arc where she is portrayed as a typical university student whose hobbies include listening to music and flirting with boys. Because of their relatability to the audience, the individual stories of these characters have the most influence on the viewer. This transformation narrative in both *1987* and *A Taxi Driver* serves to instruct the audience on how to feel about and respond to the duty of

Figure 4. Man Seob in tears as he drives back from Gwangju in A Taxi Driver (Showbox, 2017).

democracy; it solicits sympathy from the viewer through depictions of the raw emotions of the individual undergoing the transformation, inviting them to share in their emotions. In his own analysis of *1987*, Choe describes how evoking of moral sentiment in relation to historical events can make the political perspectives of the people at the time more legible (2022), showing how emotion acts as a medium to transfer political views to the audience. As viewers sympathize with Yeon Hee and Man Seob, they also come to acknowledge the heroic virtue in their decisions to "cross" to the righteous side. In both of these films, the appeal to emotion is used to reframe the events of the Minjung Movement as heroic sacrifices that contributed to the formation of South Korea's democracy today, thus, presenting these events as symbols of national pride. Later in this paper, I will highlight other ways in which the self-realization narrative can influence the audience's viewpoint and development of collective memory of these events.

The Prominence of Tragedy in 1987

1987 does differ from *A Taxi Driver* in that themes of victimization and tragedy are purposely highlighted rather than minimized. In the case of *1987*, it characterizes the tragic nature of these events in detail to further emphasize their injustice and the significance of the democracy movement. The film frequently utilizes intense displays of emotion to convey the severity of these events; this is seen clearly in the portrayal of Park Jong Chul's family and their reactions to his death, especially in the scene when the family is first notified of his death only after being led to his altar room at the morgue. Upon realizing the fact of his passing, the mother and sister fall to their knees and let out heart-wrenching cries. The framing of the family as being confused and completely unaware of the situation before suddenly having the news of Jong Chul's death thrust upon them amplifies the emotional impact of this scene and solicits pity from the viewer. Even more intense than this is the scene after the student's cremation. His father and brother are escorted to a remote, icy lake by the anti-communist police where the brother begins to spread his ashes into the water. The camera zooms in on a patch of ice where the ashes swirl around in one spot instead of dispersing, evoking the image of a restless spirit who cannot move on. The father notices this and wades waist-deep into the icy water, sobbing as he

speaks to the ashes of his son and asking why he continues to linger. The frame captures the image of the weeping father in the foreground as he pitifully scrapes at the pile of ashes and places them into the water while his other son looks on in the background (Fig. 5). Close by, a pair of reporters are arguing with the police who are preventing them from approaching the family, but the group falls silent as they witness the father's cries of grief from afar. This is one of the only moments in the film where the plot pauses to focus completely on the sentiment of the grieving family. The significance of this moment is heightened by the reporters who

Figure 5. Park Jong Chul's father as he spreads the ashes of his son in 1987 (CJ Entertainment, 2017).

were initially consumed in a frenzied desire to speak to the family but quickly settle down when they realize that the family deserves space and privacy to grieve.

In *1987*, the disturbing death of Park Jong Chul is portrayed in close detail. His death is further dramatized as the scene is voiced over by the Catholic priest who publicly announces the details of the officers involved in his torture. As the priest reads the name and rank of each police, scenes of the corresponding perpetrator during the torture are shown. The audio of each scene is muted as the priest narrates, and captions appear on the screen spelling out the names of each police. One officer is shown forcing the student's head underwater, and another struggles as he grips his flailing legs. These scenes of torture play out in slow motion with harsh, high contrast lighting, and the color grading appears faded and nearly devoid of color, producing a bleak and chilling tone. The cuts transition into the full scene of Park Jong Chul's water torture inside the Namyeong-dong torture center. A combination of water and tears drip down his face as the officers grip his hair and question him about the location of an activist leader. What follows is an intense scene where the police resume their torture tactics, forcing his head back into the tub as he screams and begs for his life. The camera's perspective cuts from a side view to inside the tub, pointing directly at the student's face as he struggles and chokes under the water. He starts to lose his breath, and his eyes become unfocused; the sound of his gargling voice in the water begins to recede before he utters his last word which is simply "mom." The scenes of Park Jong Chul's death and his mourning family not only highlight the tragedy of his death, but they also purposely target the emotions of the viewer, inviting them to empathize with the feelings of the demonstrators in the film and, therefore, the activists in real life. The sadness and anger that the viewer is provoked into feeling while watching these events unfold channels the sentiment of the protesters who demanded justice for Park Jong Chul's death in 1987. This transfer of "historical emotions" through the medium of film is directly tied to the concept of postmemory and is something I will discuss in the following section of this paper.

With scenes portraying such horrific and tragic deaths, *1987* can be compared to *May 18* which also made no attempt to downplay the tragedy of the Gwangju Massacre. They are similar in their portrayals of victimization, merciless military authority, and grim images of death, but the key difference is that *1987* portrays an end to justify the means. *May 18* ended the story of the Gwangju Massacre very quickly after the violent death of the protagonist Min Woo, concluding on a very somber tone after nearly every character in the film died an unjust death. In comparison, *1987* depicts

the sorrowful death of Park Jong Chul as well as the grief of his family but also goes on to show how his death galvanized protesters all over the country. Hordes of students marched through the streets holding up his photo and chanting "Bring back Park Jong Chul!" while reporters risked arrest to find out and publicize the truth of his murder. *1987* acknowledges that the events leading up to the June Uprisings like the deaths of student protesters were cruel and unfair, but it shows that these deaths were not in vain because they helped to directly contribute to the movement for democracy. In this way, the people's suffering was depicted as a necessary part of the formation of the democratized state that exists in South Korea now; therefore, while acknowledging the tragedy of this event, it is also portrayed as an act of heroism and sacrifice to take pride in.

Parallels Between 1987 and A Taxi Driver

Both *A Taxi Driver* and *1987* presents the fruits of the people's labor in their final scenes. In *1987*, the ending scene arrives at the point of the Minjung Movement that the plot of the film has gradually been building up to which is the peak of the 1987 June Uprisings. In the story, this peak in demonstrations is a direct result of public outcry after Yi Han Yeol is struck in the head by a tear gas canister and subsequently hospitalized. In the true history of 1980s democratization, Yi Han Yeol's hospitalization on June 9 is what sparks the largest demonstrations of the movement which leads Chun Doo Hwan to give in to the citizens' demand for direct elections. This history is acknowledged directly after the final scene where subtitles recount Chun's announcement of direct elections by popular vote at the end of June in 1987. Real archival images are shown throughout the credits, depicting both Park Jong Chul and Yi Han Yeol's funeral marches as well as photos from their childhood. The recognition of this history serves to provide evidence to the audience that the movement was successful as well as solidify the connection between the film and real-life events. *A Taxi Driver*'s ending functions similarly in the way it skips to the future where Jurgen is being awarded as a hero in a South Korea that achieved democratization; rather than lingering on the unfortunate side of the events, the story moves on quickly to demonstrate what came out of them. Through highlighting the advancement of democracy, both films reframe the conclusion of the 1980 Gwangju Massacre and the 1987 June Uprisings in a positive light. What has commonly been perceived as the darkest time in South Korea's contemporary history is reinterpreted as a moment of victory that should be celebrated as the nation would not be the democracy that it is today without the sacrifice of those who suffered in the movement.

Another significant parallel between *A Taxi Driver* and *1987* is the timeframe during which they were released. *A Taxi Driver* was released in theaters in August of 2017 while *1987* was released just a few months after in December. Both films came out in the wake of former President Park Geun-hye's impeachment and the instating of Moon Jae-in as the next president during the same year. As a result of Park's artist blacklist,[5] there were some complications with the production of these films; director Jang Hoon spoke about needing to tread carefully with production and how actor Song Kang-ho, who was blacklisted himself, originally declined the role of Man Seob (Noh, 2017). To consider the impacts of the historical context on the production and interpretations of the events depicted in these films, I will be analyzing them through the framework of postmemory and explaining how each film contributes to the formation of postmemory in the next section of this paper.

5 In early 2017, it was discovered that Park Geun Hye's administration had created a blacklist of more than 9,000 artists who were found to be critical of her regime. For an exploration on the relationship between governance, culture, and creativity focusing specifically on the context of Park's blacklist, see (Kim, 2018).

Forming the Collective Memories of the Post Democracy Generation

Contextualizing and Situating Modern Cinema Portraying the Minjung Movement

A Petal was first released in 1996 during a time when the events of the Gwangju Massacre were just beginning to be publicized and officialized in South Korean history, more than ten years after the incident occurred. Since the end of the Chun Doo Hwan regime in 1987, there had been increasing inquiries to investigate the details of the event and punish those that were involved, but these requests were mostly swept under the rug until Kim Young-sam took office in 1992. Public opinions surrounding these events, particularly from civil rights groups at the time, demanded proper government acknowledgment and compensation for survivors of the massacre. *A Petal* reflects this sentiment in its attempt to confront the viewer with the uncomfortable truth about the traumatic experiences for victims of the event, intensified through the portrayal of an abused, young girl. In 1995, *Sandglass*, which was the first TV drama to depict the Gwangju Massacre, gained immense popularity, becoming one of the most popular Korean dramas of all time (Lee, 2004) Particularly through its melodramatic depictions of the violence that occurred during the incident intermixed with previously unseen documentary footage (Choe, 2022), the show helped to not only raise awareness about the massacre but also convey the real and horrific details of the military's suppression to general audiences. The following year, *A Petal* was released in the middle of growing discussions about Gwangju as a result of media depictions of the event at the time and the efforts of the government to officially commemorate and compensate its victims.

Amidst this whirlwind of events during the 1990s, themes of victimization and injustice were the main focus in discourse about Gwangju as well as criticism for the violence committed by the government against civilians, befitting a time period when victims were still fighting for acknowledgment and legal justice for the event. In this decade following the massacre, collective memory was just beginning to form as an illustration of the events was still in the process of being pieced together through the testimonials of victims, archival footage, and fictionalized media representations. *A Petal* contributes to this illustration of the massacre and the discourse of victimization because its narrative works to accentuate the suffering and trauma of Gwangju victims. In this way, postmemory starts to develop and, simultaneously, be shaped; for the post-democracy generation who were too young to experience or witness the impacts of the event, media representations such as *A Petal* and *Sandglass* assist in constructing this emotional relationship between the post-democracy generation and the memories from the victims of the massacre. As explained by Hirsch in her conceptualization of postmemory, media acts as a medium through which trauma and traumatic experiences is transferred from survivors to the following generation (2008). In this case, the pain inflicted by the massacre was communicated through *A Petal* to audiences as they were beginning to learn about the whole truth of the events in the 1990s. Through this film, postmemory regarding the massacre is shaped to focus on traumatic experiences of violence, loss, and suffering.

Following the Kim Young Sam and Kim Dae Jung presidencies, President Roh Moo Hyun took office in 2003, and towards the end of his presidency, *May 18* was released in 2007. As Seung Cheol Lee notes, *May 18* is able to directly represent the events of the Gwangju Massacre in close detail because of the civilian-led campaign to investigate and reveal the specifics of the massacre as well as government reparation efforts to compensate victims that had been going on over the last decade (2021). At this point, the Gwangju Massacre was already integrated

into public knowledge. With more than seven million tickets sold, *May 18* renewed public interest in the event during the mid-2000s when the volume of popular media about Gwangju was significantly lower in comparison to the preceding decade. *May 18* was also the first film to depict the massacre chronologically from its beginning to its end, indicating the date and time as scenes progressed. In doing so, it painted a more thorough representation of the event compared to previous depictions like *A Petal* which only partly referenced it or even compared to archival footage. Although they were released a decade apart, *May 18* carried similar themes of intense victimization as *A Petal*, showing how the incident was continuing to be regarded as a tragedy and further cementing this idea in the minds of viewers during this decade.

As graphic and intense as *May 18*'s scenes of violence appear to be, it should be noted that director Kim Ji-hoon said he "toned it down" in comparison to the real incident. In a press conference before the film's release, Kim stated that in his interviews with survivors, he learned just how gruesome and violent the massacre truly was, much more than what is depicted in the film (Lee, 2007). In this way, Kim's film acted as a filter between the democratization generation and the post-democracy generation because it did not fully articulate the details of what survivors expressed. This is an example of how postmemory can be altered specifically by those who produce cinema and their intentions such as the consideration of audience palatability, box numbers, and sensationalizing the experiences of real-life people for the sake of sales. As a result, traumatic experiences can be transferred through cinema with differing intensities.

Both *A Taxi Driver* and *1987* were produced in the midst of the Park Geun Hye administration's cultural blacklist in 2015-2016, and by the time both films were released, there had been a shift in political power following Park's impeachment and Moon Jae In's ascension to the presidency in 2017. During the final months of Park's presidency, millions of South Korean citizens participated in candlelight protests calling for the president's resignation on the basis of political corruption. On the sixth Saturday of demonstrations, organizers and media reported approximately 1.88 million participants in Seoul and 2.32 million nationwide (Chang, 2018). Park was eventually forced to step down and was removed from office in March of 2017. After previously facing complications with release because of pressure from the Park administration, *A Taxi Driver* was able to premiere in August of the same year, and *1987* released later that year in December. With the backdrop of candlelight protests, the successful impeachment of a corrupt president, and the election of a new president, audiences could draw parallels between the movements against Chun Doo Hwan's military rule in the 1980s with the 2016 movements calling for Park Geun Hye to resign, making the events of the films feel more palpable and connected to the present.

The impact of these films was not only amplified by the political events of 2017 but also the historical background of both Park Geun Hye and Moon Jae In. As the daughter of late dictator Park Chung Hee, Park Geun Hye was a symbol of the period of authoritarian rule led by her father in the 1970s which set the stage for the military rule in the 1980s. In stark contrast, Moon Jae In was a liberal politician with a background as a human rights lawyer during the Minjung Movement. Moon spoke to the press during a screening of *1987* in early 2018 where he mentioned that the film was a reminder of his fight in the 1970s against the Park Chung Hee regime, when he was jailed for participation in a pro-democracy campaign in 1975 (Yonhap, 2018). Moon himself can be seen by viewers of both *1987* and *A Taxi Driver* as evidence of the progress South Korea has made since the events of the Minjung Movement; someone who was once a humble

activist as depicted in the films has now ascended to the position of president. The sentiment expressed in these films could also influence the political views of viewers to see Moon Jae In in a more positive light. Upon its release, *1987* was also well-received among other politicians who had taken part in the June Uprising, and scholar Hieyoon Kim notes that the endorsement of the film from these politicians further validated the film's representation of the historical events (Kim, 2020), which is particularly meaningful coming from the democratization generation who experienced these events. All of these factors work in conjunction to develop postmemory by enhancing the themes of heroism and hopefulness seen in *A Taxi Driver* and *1987* and legitimizing each film's perspective of these historical events.

Shaping Postmemory through Depictions of Emotion and Violence

As detailed earlier in this paper, *A Taxi Driver* and *1987* make use of a transformation narrative to communicate ideas about nation formation to the audience, but in doing so, it also functions as a tool to shape postmemory. Because the characters of Yeon Hee and Man Seob are presented as outsiders to the movement, members of the post-democracy generation can relate the most to their characters at the beginning of the film and are consequently influenced towards the spirit of democracy by the narrative of self-realization. This narrative form uses emotions as a vessel to transmit the political sentiments of the time period. The raw emotions portrayed by the characters, such as Yeon Hee's tears in the final scene of *1987*, entreat the viewer to empathize with these emotions, intensifying the transfer of memories. The narrative of the nation being conveyed in these films is that the tragic events of the Minjung Movement like the Gwangju Massacre and the death of student activists Park Jong Chul and Yi Han Yeol are ultimately acts of heroic sacrifice that contributed to the democracy that South Korea is today. As the films shifted from a narrative of mourning to optimism, their contributions to forming postmemory were also adjusted to be reflective of these ideas, showing the link between postmemory and media depictions of historical events.

One of the most significant points of comparison between the way *A Petal*, *May 18*, and *A Taxi Driver* portray the Gwangju Massacre is the depictions of military brutality. In the scenes where soldiers are suppressing demonstrators, all three films are similar in that they emphasize the violence and inhumanity of the soldiers. Each film has identical scenes in which troops attack civilians indiscriminately whether they were involved in demonstrations or not; this is seen in *May 18* when Min Woo along with a group of civilians were simply standing in the vicinity of protesters after leaving a movie theater but were immediately attacked by soldiers. One of the victims is a high school student who tries to explain to the soldier that he is not a protester, but they murder him regardless. In *A Taxi Driver*, there are multiple scenes where several soldiers gang up on a single civilian and beat them excessively, beyond what is necessary to incapacitate them. They are shown viciously attacking whoever they run into including a schoolgirl and an elderly man. There is one scene in particular where Man Seob and Jurgen are running from soldiers but spotted by one of them. Like the rest of the soldiers, he wears a gas mask which covers all of his face, obscuring any trace of emotion or humanity. Especially with a lack of dialogue, the soldier gives the impression of a mindless machine, raising its weapon to attack anything that moves. Similarly, the soldiers in *A Petal* gather in groups to beat down protesters and fire into crowds without hesitation. Across three decades, depictions of the violent nature of the soldiers in these films have remained relatively unchanged, reflecting how sentiment

towards the military at the time continues to be one of hostility. These representations reinforce both the military and the government's position as the oppressors during the massacre while also highlighting the innocence of the demonstrators. Postmemory is shaped by these types of media depictions to foster a collective resentment of the military and the authoritarian regime at the time, along with testimonials and traumatic experiences shared by Gwangju victims. This sentiment contributes to the opinion of the general public that this event remains a dark time in South Korean history (Kim, 2011), contradictory to the attempts of more recent filmmakers to portray the events in a more optimistic light.

Reflections of Postmemory in Contemporary South Korean Culture

The exorbitant violence exercised by the military state has become a defining characteristic of not only the Gwangju Massacre but also the Minjung Movement as a whole. A recent controversy regarding TV drama *Snowdrop* (2021) represents how this sentiment is still alive among the post-democracy generation in the twenty-first century. The drama is set during the democratization protests in 1987 and tells the story of a North Korean spy who takes a group of university students hostage (Choe, 2022). At the time of its release, *Snowdrop* received mass criticism for what Korean netizens saw as a distortion of history because of its failure to "reflect the brutality of the authorities at the time" (Lee, 2021). A petition to halt broadcast of the show posted on the presidential office's online bulletin (Cheong Wa Dae) also stated that the portrayal of a North Korean spy in the storyline undermined the value of the democracy movement as many activists were wrongly tortured and murdered under espionage allegations. According to the news outlet Korea Herald, the petition received more than 300,000 signatures. In a Reddit post that received almost 4,000 likes, one netizen described the pain they felt as "a fellow Korean" while watching what they believed was a conservative portrayal of the military police and cited *1987* as a more appropriate depiction of the police's brutality.[6] This extreme response from netizens shows how sensitive these events still are even for the current generation of Koreans and serves to exemplify postmemory as people who may not have experienced these events are offended on the behalf of those who participated in the movement. What is particularly interesting is the Reddit comment that refers to an alternative piece of media, *1987*, that they believe properly represents the movement. This sentiment demonstrates the post-democracy generation's capacity to decipher which works appropriately depict history that they never experienced, epitomizing postmemory's aspect of the "transfer of traumatic memories."

Postmemory of the Minjung Movement has taken other contemporary manifestations, one of the most significant examples in recent memory being Chun Doo Hwan's grandson Chun Woo Won's public apology to victims of the Gwangju Massacre and disparagement of his late grandfather's regime. In March of 2023, Chun arranged a meeting with the bereaved families and victims of the massacre at the May 18th Memorial Cultural Center in Gwangju, during which he formally apologized to all victims of the massacre and to the people of Gwangju (Shin, 2023). He referred to his grandfather as a criminal and murderer and thanked the people for giving a "precious opportunity to an ugly sinner like me." Referring to his grandfather, who died without ever apologizing to the victims, Chun added that he "committed such a great crime" and that he was "sorry for not apologizing any sooner." On the same

6 This line was quoted from this post on online forum platform Reddit, accessed March 20, 2024, https://www.reddit.com/r/korea/comments/rjri40/why_the_kdrama_snowdrop_is_extremely_problematic/.

day, Chun visited the May 18 National Cemetery, being the first in his family to do so (Shad, 2023). In this historic moment, Chun took responsibility for the actions of his grandfather and apologized for them as if they were his own mistakes. He referred to himself as a "sinner" when he was not even alive during the time of Chun Doo Hwan's regime. For Chun Woo Won, it appears the guilt and trauma of that period have transferred so deeply to the point where he felt he needed to apologize and make amends for something he had no part in. This situation serves as an extreme example of postmemory where the second generation strongly identified with the memories of the previous generation, exemplifying Hirsch's point that the process of the second generation "inheriting" such powerful and vivid memories can run the risk of their own being displaced by those of the previous generation (2008).

A combination of several factors such as personal family stories, archival images, and history as recorded by historians can influence postmemory but media depictions of history in particular have a profound impact on postmemory and vice versa. It is inevitable that the experiences of the second generation are to be shaped to some extent by the previous generation's experiences, and this sentiment is clearly captured in the following quote from Hirsch: "These events happened in the past, but their effects continue into the present. This is, I believe, the experience of postmemory and the process of its generation" (2008).

Conclusion

Through examining cinematic portrayals of the 1980s democracy movement in South Korea, a distinct correlation can be recognized between the evolution of Gwangju narratives over time and the narrative regarding the construction of the nation's current democracy. From the raw anguish depicted in the aftermath of the Gwangju Massacre as seen in *A Petal* to the emergence of a story emphasizing hopefulness and optimism in *A Taxi Driver*, these narratives overall reflect a resilience of the human spirit in conditions of adversity. From this transition towards hopefulness emerged a narrative about the formation of the nation and the democracy that sustains South Korea today, offering a perspective on the country's dark history that represents the tragic loss of life during the Minjung Movement as a heroic act of sacrifice for the betterment of the nation, but we can also consider both the benefits and pitfalls of understanding history through media representations.

These portrayals of a time period in Korean history that are still a delicate issue to many people call into question the ethics of these historical representations, especially the works that so closely follow true events. Particularly with the case of *1987* where nearly every character was named after a corresponding historical figure in real life, these media depictions run the risk of misrepresenting the thoughts and actions of a person that could possibly still be alive or have family who is still living. Director Jang Joon-hwan spoke briefly in 2018 about Yi Han Yeol's mother who had not seen the film and his reluctance to reach out to her about watching it because it would be "stupid" to ask her to "watch her son dying" (Vélez, 2018). The detail with which the deaths of the student activists are re-enacted could potentially trigger traumatic feelings for the families, but for the average viewer, the family's death becomes a spectacle. As we consider the impacts of these films on postmemory and how cinema can manipulate collective memory, it is also important to think about the repercussions of such media that will ultimately be felt by the democracy generation who experienced the trauma of these events. This cinema can aid in preserving history but at what cost?

As Korean media gains popularity on the international stage, the significance of examining

Korean historical cinema from a global perspective is steadily increasing. Scholar We Jung Yi contemplates how films can rearrange and redistribute historical events across both generational and cultural boundaries (2018), prompting consideration about how cultural nuances of history could be re-interpreted by international audiences as well as how emotions conveyed in depictions of historical events could effectively be received. Reflecting on the role of cinema in shaping not only the collective memory of Korean people but also global perspectives on Korea, some further questions emerge such as: How might globalization impact the way future writers and directors depict narratives surrounding Korean historical events like the Minjung Movement? Additionally, in what ways can Korean historical cinema contribute to global conversations about collective memory in cinema? How do the ramifications of Korean historical events as portrayed in cinema resonate with global audiences, and what implications might this have for the way international viewers perceive Korea's contemporary history? Considering themes such as democracy and resilience seen in *A Taxi Driver* and *1987*, these works could easily be situated within the broader landscape of global cinema and prompt discussions from an expanded audience. Ultimately, the themes of these films boil down to universal human experiences such as loss, sacrifice, and perseverance that transcend cultural boundaries.

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